

Disclaimer: Sex between two consenting adults, who just happen to be women. If it's not for you, don't read it.

This story takes place six months after *A Christmas Carol*, so you may want to read that first.

A Christmas Carol II - Saving The Best For Last
By
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Jackie Stevens frowned when she noticed the woman standing too close to Gabby. Her frown turned to an outraged scowl, when she noticed the woman was eye level with Gabby's breast. *Not on my watch!* Not bothering to question the anger simmering in the pit of her stomach, she pushed her way through the crowded food court, mindful of the six-month old baby attached to her front. Her anger dissipated quicker than air in a popped balloon when Gabby's face lit up with a welcoming smile.

Gabby leaned forward and gave the sleeping baby a light kiss. "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked, placing a hand on Jackie's arm.

Jackie nodded, looking over Gabby's shoulder. "Who's your friend?" she asked softly.

Gabby was momentarily confused before remembering the woman she'd been talking with. It was getting harder and harder to think about other women when Jackie was around. "She works at the Disney store. I was passing the time while I waited for you."

"And what were you doing in the Disney Store?" Jackie teased, trying to peek into the large bag Gabby was holding. Her birthday was in two weeks, and she was fairly certain her gift was in the bag. For the first time in a long time, she was looking forward to celebrating another year on earth.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, you're on a need to know basis." Gabby tightened her grip on the bag. She wouldn't put it past her inquisitive friend to snatch it from her. Jackie had been acting like a little kid, trying to guess what she would be getting for her thirtieth birthday. Gabby hid a smirk, not wanting Jackie to figure out that the present in the Disney bag was for Angel. Jackie's presents were safely hidden at home.

"Excuse me." The forgotten woman tapped Gabby on the arm. "I need to get back, and I was wondering if you wanted to catch a cup of coffee with me sometime."

Jackie's body almost recoiled from the surge of anger that erupted. *How dare you try to get a date with my girlfriend! Girlfriend?* When had she started thinking of Gabby as her girlfriend? They were just friends. The fact that she didn't do, or plan, anything without first considering Gabby or Angel didn't count, right? Friends were considerate of each other's feelings, and they

spent time together. *But they don't spend all their time together, and they certainly don't get jealous when other women show an interest.* Jackie swallowed hard and snuck a glance at Gabby out of the corner of her eye. *Damn! I want Gabriella Renee Jones to be my girlfriend, lover, partner.* Her eyes grew wide, and her knees trembled as the realization sank in. She was grateful Angel was firmly attached, or she might have dropped her. "Excuse me," she said, her voice shaky. "I need to sit down a minute."

"Are you okay?" Worried hazel eyes took in Jackie's sudden pallor.

"I'm fine, Gabby." Jackie gave her a thin smile. "I just need to sit for a minute. I'm going to grab a seat, okay?"

Gabby nodded, looking unconvinced. "I'll get you a drink and be right over."

"Thanks." Jackie looked around, and moved quickly to claim an empty table. "Angel, I'm an idiot." She rubbed the baby's back, still reeling from the new discovery.

"So, about that coffee?" the persistent woman prodded, bringing Gabby's attention back to her. She could tell from the way Gabby had greeted the other woman, that they weren't more than friends.

Gabby reluctantly returned her attention to the short brunette, whose name she couldn't remember. "I'm sorry, but I don't think my girlfriend would like that." She smiled apologetically, wondering when she'd given the clerk the idea she was interested in more than casual conversation.

"Girlfriend? She didn't act like your girlfriend."

Gabby frowned at the look of disbelief on the other woman's face. "She's shy in public, okay? Now I need to go get her something to drink," she said curtly. *And you need to get a clue!*

"You know where I work if anything changes." The woman gave her a wink, then walked away.

"I need to stay away from the mall," she muttered. After picking the shortest line, she bought Jackie a Sprite, then hurried to two of the most important people in her life. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Hearing the obvious concern in Gabby's voice made Jackie feel better. "I'm sure. Thanks for the soda." She took a deep sip, wetting her dry mouth.

"Next time, despite your protest, we'll use the fancy stroller you insisted on buying. You've been carrying Angel around for almost an hour. Admit it, you're tired."

"Maybe a little." She shrugged, hoping the relief she felt didn't show on her face. Here was a less embarrassing way out. The food court was not the best place to blurt out her feelings, letting

Gabby know how clueless Jackie had been. “Next time, we’ll do both. I like walking around with her attached.”

Gabby smiled, shaking her head. “She’s never going to learn to walk, if you don’t let her feet touch the ground.”

“It’s too early to worry about that.” Jackie dropped a kiss on Angel’s soft curls, which over the last six months had darkened to a golden blond. “She’ll learn soon enough. I’ll teach her.”

“I’m sure you will.” The intense pleasure she received from watching Jackie interact with Angel tinged her voice. There was so much love there. If it couldn’t be directed at her, then it was fitting that it should go to her daughter. Gabby cleared her throat. “You ready to go? Someone will be clamoring to be fed in thirty minutes.”

Jackie drained the rest of her drink, and stood up. “I think I have the strength to make it to the parking lot with this big bruiser,” she joked.

Gabby bumped her shoulder. “I hope so. I know I don’t have the strength to carry the both of you.”

“You could always go get the stroller.”

She turned to look at the tall figure walking next to her. “And you would fit how?”

Jackie gave a shout of laughter and slung an arm around Gabby’s shoulder. “I can always count on you to keep me down to earth.”

Gabby snaked an arm around Jackie’s waist, and leaned into her touch. “You can always count on me.”

“I know.” She kept her tone playful, though her emotions were anything but. A big part of her well being for the past eight months had been based on the belief she could count on Gabby – for anything. Jackie hoped Gabby felt the same way about her. And if she didn’t, well, then Jackie had her work cut out for her. She smiled as the beginnings of a plan began to formulate.

“Here goes nothing.” Jackie took a deep breath and pushed open the door to the deli. She scanned the room quickly for a familiar face, and smiled in response to Gordon Jones’s wave. “Thanks for coming,” she said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Whether you like it or not, you’re family now.” He gave her a warm smile. “I already put in your order like you requested.” Gordon pushed the large cup of Coke in her direction. “What’s up?”

“Thanks, again.” She took a sip of Coke to hide her nervousness. Gordon, the youngest of Gabby’s three brothers, was one of the keys to winning Gabby’s affection. It hadn’t taken her

long to figure out that he and Gabby, who were less than a year apart, shared a special bond. “Actually, I’m here to pick your brains.”

Gordon studied the woman sitting across from him carefully. After six months, he’d moved way beyond his initial suspicion that she would get bored with Gabby and go back to the rich crowd she used to hang out with. Now, he saw her as a keeper, someone whose friendship made his sister’s life richer. If she had a problem, he wanted to help. “What about?”

Jackie played with her straw before responding. “Okay. This is hard.” Dropping her head, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We were at the mall the other day when it hit me. You’re probably going to think I’m crazy, but...I’m in love with your sister. And now, I need your help. I mean, you know her better than anyone else. And...well...I thought...” She shrugged, biting her lip.

“You thought right,” Gordon said with a big smile. “I’ll be glad to help. I think you’ll be a great partner for my baby sister.” He didn’t feel the need to mention that Jackie’s admission had won him ten dollars from his wife.

She looked up, her expression hopeful. “Do you...think...I have a chance?”

“Of course. You do have an inside track.”

“Me?” Jackie pointed to her chest, looking dubious. She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Gabby knows all about my lame track record when it comes to relationships.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Gordon grinned. “You’re her babydaddy.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Jackie threw back her head and let out a shout of laughter. “I hadn’t thought about that,” she said once her laughter was under control. “Do I have to buy some bling-bling and get a grill?”

He snorted. “Only if it’s attached to a car. Seriously, we both know material possessions won’t get you anywhere with Gabby.” Gordon leaned back to allow the waitress to place his order in front of him. “Thank you.”

The waitress repeated the process with Jackie. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Thanks, we’re good.” Jackie picked up a chip and nibbled on it. “You can’t be around Gabby very long and not figure out what she doesn’t want. So what I need from you is what she does want.”

“I assume you mean in addition to all that you do for her already?” he asked, reaching for his sandwich. “I think she halfway in love with you already, Jackie.”

“I would love to believe that.” She sighed. “But she’s never given me any sign of that.”

“Or maybe it was so subtle you didn’t pick up on it,” Gordon countered. “And knowing Gabby, she took that to me you weren’t interested.”

Jackie grimaced and hung her head. “And maybe at that time, I was too enthralled with the wrong sort of women to notice.”

“What’s important,” Gordon said, putting down his sandwich and reaching for her hand, “is now you’re not. Give yourself some credit, Jackie. You’ve grown a lot in the past six months.”

“I think I started growing the minute I met her,” she replied softly and squeezed his hand. “Okay.” She took a deep breath. “What do I do to get her to fall the rest of the way?”

“The first step is showing her you’re interested, and balloons,” he said with a satisfied smile. “Gabby adores balloon bouquets. A romantic date wouldn’t hurt either. And for a bribe, I could be convinced to make a batch of her favorite cookies.”

“Anything,” she replied without hesitation. “I’ll do anything for Gabby.”

“And that’s why you have the inside track. You’ve been showering her with support and caring. Trust me, that means a lot to her. Now that you’ve set the foundation, it’s up to you to show her that your relationship needs to be taken to the next level.”

Jackie nodded. “That’s where balloons, cookies, and dates come in. I got you.” She picked up her sandwich and took a big bite. This could work.

“You’ve been quiet all evening. Are you sure you’re okay?” Gabby resisted the urge to feel Jackie’s forehead. They were sitting on the floor in her living room, unwinding after a busy day.

Jackie gave her a fleeting smile, then looked away. “I just have something on my mind.”

“Do you feel like sharing?”

“It...it’s about a woman. I’m trying to figure out how she feels about me.”

Gabby ignored the jolt of pain. She’d foolishly thought that because of their growing closeness, there was a chance she could win Jackie’s heart. It hurt to be wrong. *This isn’t about you*, she told herself sternly. Closing her eyes briefly, she exhaled silently. “Tell me about her.” The smile that lit up Jackie’s face almost made her cry.

“She’s beautiful, inside and out. And when I’m with her, I feel so special like I can do anything and everything.” Jackie sighed and rubbed her palms on the top of her thighs. “The problem is that she’s nothing like the women I’m used to dating, so I don’t know how to approach her.”

I can do this. Gabby thought about the support Jackie had given her over the past six months, and found the strength to be a good friend. “Whatever you do, keep it simple at first. Like a couple of flowers and a hand written note. That should let her know you’re interested.”

Jackie nodded. “That should work. She doesn’t seem interested in what my money can buy her.”

“That’s a good thing, Jackie,” she said dryly. “This one sounds like a winner.” Gabby managed a smile, somewhat consoled by the fact that she wasn’t losing out to an unworthy opponent.

“Thanks, you’re the best. I guess I should go so you can get some rest. The little pixie will be up before you know it.”

Gabby nodded, blinking her eyes rapidly. “I don’t say it often enough, but thank you for all that you’ve done for me, and for Angel. I’m glad that you’re finally getting over your disappointment with Stephanie. You’ve probably been bored with just me and Angel for company.”

“Never.” Jackie put a hand on Gabby’s thigh and squeezed. “I could never be bored with you to keep me on my mental toes. What I’ve gained from hanging out with you and Angel is priceless. Don’t ever doubt that, okay?” She reached for Gabby’s chin and lifted her head. “I’m here because I want to be here, not because I don’t have anywhere else to be.”

“I know. It’s just…” She bit her lip and closed her eyes, hoping it would stop the tears. “I’m being foolish. It’s…” She shrugged, not wanting to say what the problem was.

“Any time you want to talk, I’ll be there.”

“I know.” Gabby wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, and watched as Jackie unfolded her long legs and stood. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning, right?” she asked, suddenly afraid everything was changing.

Jackie held out her hand. “Of course. You owe me breakfast, and Angel and I have our day all planned out.” Her smile was warm and caring. “Come on, walk me to the door.”

Gabby returned the smile and let herself be pulled up. “You know you don’t have to take Angel the whole day if you need to take care of some things,” she said, thinking about flowers and hand written notes. “She’ll be fine with me at the office.”

“Nope. You have clients scheduled all day, and I promised Lisa she could spend some time with Angel. If I can’t come through, *you* have to go explain.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” she replied, shaking her head. Gabby didn’t want to have anything to do with disappointing her four-year old niece, who thought the sun rose and fell on Angel. Then she’d have Lisa, and her oldest brother Keith to deal with. “I forgot you had a play date. We’re set then.”

“Good.” Jackie unlocked the front door. “Uh...I’ve been thinking...you know, about what you said earlier. I don’t think she’s in to flowers. What other kind of simple gift do you think I should get?”

“That’s a little tougher. Maybe a magazine that she likes to thumb through, but never thinks to buy. Or even a book and a piece of Godiva chocolate.” Gabby was amazed any sound made it past the huge constriction in her throat. Who knew being a good friend would be so hard? “Simple, remember?”

“Thanks. I’ll remember.” She dropped a quick kiss on Gabby’s cheek, and unknowingly left behind a very distraught friend.

Gabby locked the door, ignoring the tears coursing down her cheeks. But she couldn’t ignore the tightness in her chest, which was akin to pain, as she felt her carefully constructed fairy tale crumbling. For the past few months she had let herself believe. Believe that Jackie could come to care for her as more than a friend. Believe that they would continue to get closer until Jackie realized they belonged together.

She leaned against the door, needing the support it provided her trembling legs. How could she hope to compete with the new woman in Jackie’s life – the one who was so unlike the girlfriends that had come before her? She couldn’t. Gabby closed her eyes and prayed their friendship would weather this crisis. No matter what happened with the new woman, Jackie would need a good friend. And then there was Angel. A bittersweet smile touched her lips. Jackie and Angel needed each other. For her daughter’s sake she would find a way.

After a quick check on Angel, Gabby trudged to her bedroom, absently wiping away tears. She slid between the sheets, but sleep was the farthest thing on her mind. The past six months played before her in an infinite loop. In a short amount of time, she and Jackie had created some very special memories. She used a corner of the cotton sheet to wipe her face before turning on the bedside lamp and reaching for the diary she kept nearby. With a melancholy smile, she read through the entries from the time she’d met Jackie. How could Jackie not see, that after all they’d been through, they belonged together?

When a tear drop hit the page, Gabby closed the book with a snap. Reminiscing was only making matters worse. It was better saved for later, when time with Jackie was cut short. Muffling a sob, she thought about how her life would change. She wouldn’t have her friend on stand by, ready to drop everything and come over at a moment’s notice. She wouldn’t have Jackie to share all the milestones in Angel’s life. She wouldn’t have Jackie there for the little things that she’d come to count on. *I can get through this. I have to get through this.* Gabby took a deep cleansing breath and let it out slowly. Turning off the lamp, she settled on her back and clasped the diary in her arms.

The next morning, Jackie awakened at the first hint of light. Instead of getting up, she turned onto her back and folded her hand behind her head. This afternoon, she would take the first step

in her campaign to woo Gabriella Renee Jones. The book she'd special ordered for Gabby was due in today. After she picked it up, she would go to the grocery store and buy some balloons. That should be simple enough to appease Gabby's frugal streak. Sometimes it was challenging having a friend who didn't want to help her blow your money on them. But thankfully that didn't fully apply to Angel. Gabby hadn't blinked an eye when Jackie had shown up for dinner the day after Christmas with the top of the line stroller and car seat. Nor had she complained too loudly when the truck with the baby furniture showed up a day later. Jackie smiled. She was still working to convince Gabby that she needed a safer vehicle. If she had her way, Gabby and Angel would never want for anything while it was in her power to give it to them.

Staring at the stark white ceiling, she wondered again why it had taken so long for her brain to catch on to what her heart had surely figured out. Thinking back, some part of her must have known on Christmas Eve when she's sought out the comfort of Gabby's company. *Yeah, I missed out on some clues.* The biggest one being that she hadn't made it through a day since then without wanting to spend time with Gabby and Angel. Rubbing her chin, Jackie wondered if she'd still be clueless if she hadn't caught the store clerk staring at Gabby like she was a full course meal. No matter how it happened, she now saw clearly what had been in plain view – a love to last her a lifetime – and she wouldn't let it get away.

Glancing at the alarm clock, Jackie sat up and slid her legs over the side of the bed. She looked around the room thoughtfully. Here she was six months later, still stuck in a place she despised. It was past time to put the condo on the market and look for something better. An image of herself sitting on the porch with Gabby while watching Angel chase after a puppy, crystallized in her mind. *Yeah, that's what I want.* Energized, she pushed off the bed and headed for the shower.

Jackie was towel drying her hair a short time later, when the phone rang. She raced to her bedroom, grabbed her cell phone from the night stand, and answered without checking the caller ID. "Hey, Gabby."

"Jacqueline?"

She almost dropped the phone at the sound of her mother's voice. "I'm surprised to hear from you so early, mother. What can I do for you?"

"I had the most disturbing conversation concerning you last night," Patricia Stevens replied, her voice dripping with disapproval. "Is it true?"

Jackie gritted her teeth. Her mother would never change. "I wasn't there, remember? Perhaps if you informed me as to the nature of your conversation, I could respond to your question."

"Don't take that sarcastic tone with me, young lady. I'm sure you know *exactly* what I'm referring to."

“God, Mother with you it could be any number of things.” She let out a silent sigh and rubbed her forehead. “I don’t have time to play ‘guess the infraction’ this morning. I have important matters to take care of.” The unspoken *unlike you* hung between them.

“Are you dating some poor... girl?”

“Poor by your standards, rich by mine. Did the gossips also tell you I’m helping her take care of her young child?”

“This will not do, Jacqueline. Your father was beside himself when he found out about this. Why can’t you see she only wants your money?”

“Because that’s the only reason she would want to be with me, right? Isn’t that what you’ve always told me?” Jackie gave a bitter laugh. “You need better informants if that’s the crap they fed you. And as for my feelings concerning your husband being beside himself... I’ll let you finish the rest of the sentence.”

“You won’t be so high and mighty when she takes you for every penny you have. I’m telling you now, do not come crying to me when it happens. You should know those people are not trust worthy.”

“Trust? You don’t know the first thing about trust!” Jackie retorted. “I almost feel sorry that you live in a world of no trust.”

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for me, Jacqueline! Feel sorry for yourself. You’re the one who’s the laughing stock.”

“Yes, but thanks to all the money Grandmother left me, I don’t have to worry about that,” she said slyly, knowing it would throw her mother for a loop. Patricia was still seething that her mother had left her considerable estate to Jacqueline. “Goodbye, mother. I simply must go.” She disconnected without giving her mother a chance to respond. Jackie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Talking to her mother was always a no-win situation. One of these days she was going to get smart and block the number.

A little over an hour later, Jackie pulled into Gabby’s driveway and studied the house. It was charming, but even Gabby would have to admit it was too small for the three of them. She made a mental note to call her real estate agent later. Jackie climbed out of the car, retrieved the errant thrown newspaper, and made her way to the door.

When Gabby opened the door, she had a squirming Angel in her arms. “Hey,” she said with a wan smile.

Jackie noticed the puffiness around her eyes right away. “Hey. Are you okay?” She gave both of them a gentle kiss to the forehead. “If you were feeling bad, you should have called. I would have gladly spent the night holding your hand.”

"I'm over it," she replied, and stepped back for Jackie to enter. "You're just in time. I've got the waffle iron heating up."

"Sounds great." Jackie entered, locked the door, then took her two girls into her arms. "I need this after talking to my mother."

Gabby leaned into Jackie's embrace, remembering the promise she'd made to enjoy every second of their time together. "Your mother? I thought you weren't on good terms."

"We're not, but that doesn't stop her from calling me when she feels I've done something bad." Jackie sighed. "It doesn't matter now that I'm with my best girls." She dropped her arms and stepped back. "Let me take the baby while you fix those waffles," she said with an engaging grin.

"Slave driver," Gabby charged, but smiled when she passed Angel to Jackie.

Over breakfast they talked about the coming day, and made plans for dinner. While Jackie cleaned the kitchen, Gabby got Angel washed and dressed.

"Don't forget I'm having lunch with Shane today," Gabby said as she joined Jackie in the living room. "I'll have my cell on if something comes up."

"I remember." Jackie reached for the baby and held her up, making air plane noises. "Ms. Angel and I have a full day planned, so don't worry about us. And tell Shane I said hi."

"Try not to wear yourself out at the playground today," she cautioned slyly. Last week, Jackie had come back complaining of aches and pain after a strenuous day spent chasing kids around the playground.

Jackie hung her head and sniffed. "Yes, mom."

"Go on, you big goof." Gabby lifted her chin. "I know that little kid in you won't let you take it easy." She let go and wiggled her fingers. "I'll be ready with the massage."

"I'll probably need it," Jackie admitted, and gave Gabby a quick squeeze. "Give our angel a kiss and get to work." She smiled.

Yeah, our angel. Suppressing a grin, Gabby put her hands on her hips. "Someone gets a big head when they think they're in charge, don't they, Angel."

"No they don't, mama," Jackie replied in a little kid's voice. Their eyes met and they burst into laughter. "Okay, maybe just a little," she admitted once the laughter died away.

Gabby wrinkled her nose. "It suits you. Bye, bye, Angel. Mama loves you." She stroked the dark blond curls and placed a kiss on a soft cheek. "Bye, bye, dictator. Mama loves you, too." She messed up Jackie's hair, then gave her a fleeting kiss on the lips.

Jackie smiled, resisting the urge to put her hand to her lips. “Have a good day, and be careful.”

“Back atcha.” She walked them to the door and waited until they drove off before making her way through the kitchen to the garage.

“So, how are things on the home front?” Shane asked as soon as the waiter left with their order.

Gabby managed a smile. “Remember when you promised to help me take care of Angel?”

Although Shane nodded, she looked confused. “Like that’s going to happen. I’d have to wrestle her from Jackie’s cold dead arms first.”

“Maybe not.” Gabby chewed on her bottom lip and rubbed the condensation on her water glass. “It seems she’s found a potential girlfriend.”

“No!” Shane stilled Gabby’s hand. “I can’t believe it. Are you sure?”

“You should have seen her face lit up when she talked about her. This one’s special, Shane. I...I hope I can get through this with our friendship intact.” Gabby closed her eyes against the sting of tears. “Sorry. I told myself I wasn’t going to cry any more.” She pressed her fingers against her eyelids.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie. We’ll get through this. You know Michael and I have your back, right?”

She nodded and took a sip of water. “It’s so hard. I want to be supportive of her...” Blinking her eyes rapidly, Gabby blew out a sharp breath. “I messed up and let myself believe there could be an us. I...I just don’t understand why I’m not enough for her. Especially since she’s practically lived at my house for the past six months.”

Shane eyed her friend compassionately. “You know we’re friends and I love you, right?”

“That doesn’t sound good.” She wiped her eyes with a shaky hand.

“Maybe she’s looking elsewhere because you haven’t shown her how you feel about her,” Shane suggested gently. “Let her see that you want to be more than friends. Drop Angel off with us and take her out on a date.”

Gabby shook her head. “How would that look? Me asking her out *after* she’s already told me she’s interested in someone else. It makes it seem like I only want her because she wants someone else.”

“Then don’t think of it as asking her out,” Shane countered quickly. “Tell her you’re at loose ends because your best friend demanded that you hand over your baby. You know she’ll believe

that.” She could tell her friend still wasn’t convinced. “You have to do something, Gabby. You don’t want to spend the rest of your life wondering what if. Come on, take a chance. Jackie is worth the risk.”

“Why do you always have to be right?” Gabby rubbed her forehead with her free hand. “I have to at least take a shot. But what do I do? It’s been so long since I’ve thought about this dating stuff. I guess I could take my own advice and start with something simple, huh?” She look to Shane for encouragement, and received it in the form of a nod. “Okay, I’ll see if she wants to go hang out at the book store, Saturday night. She’s mentioned wanting to go for open mike night.”

“Perfect. I’ll expect my godchild no later than six.”

“Six? They don’t start until nine.”

“Why would I want to see her after she’s asleep?”

“Oh...yeah. I see what you mean. Six then.”

“And I think you should borrow my car. It’s much sexier than your van.”

Gabby laughed, shaking her head. “Uh, uh. That would be too obvious, don’t you think?”

“I’m just saying...” Shane shrugged. “You would look good in the driver’s seat. Now, do you need to borrow some clothes? I have a skirt that would go great with your long legs.”

“Your skirt wouldn’t even cover my butt.”

Shane grinned. “I know. Work with me, Jones. We’re trying to send her a message.”

“Not that message,” Gabby replied with a mock scowl. “What if I finally wear that low cut red blouse you bought me?”

“Oh, yeah. That ought to make her sit up and take notice.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Maybe even drool a little.”

“Hey. How was your day?”

“It’s already getting better.” Gabby put down her backpack and reached for the baby. She held Angel close, kissed a slobbery cheek, and breathed in the clean baby scents. “It helps to look into her sweet innocent face.”

“Rough day, huh?” She rubbed Gabby’s back, wishing she could make all the ugliness that Gabby saw on a regular basis go away. “I’m sorry.”

Gabby leaned into Jackie's touch. She refused to think about the time when she wouldn't have the soothing comfort. "Don't be. Having you here helps, too." She squared her shoulders. "But enough about me, how was your day?"

"It was great. Instead of going to the park, we hung out with Monica and Lisa, and then the other kids when they came home from school." Jackie's smiled, bemused. "Big families are kind of fun."

"Only kind of?" Gabby teased. "Did you get overwhelmed by the clamoring for attention?"

Jackie's stomach tightened at the look of open affection in Gabby's gaze. She wondered if it was something new, or something else she'd been too blind to see. "Uh...surprisingly, no. Monica says I have her undying gratitude because I helped with homework. Apparently it's the bane of parents with school aged kids."

"Unfortunately, that's only applies to the ones who care enough about their children's education. I see more and more who don't." She stifled a groan as one particular mother she'd seen that day came to mind. "But we aren't going to talk about that. Any idea what you want for dinner?"

"When you called to let me know you were running late, I took the liberty of stopping by the deli and picking up dinner."

"You're wonderful." Gabby leaned her head into Jackie's chest. "Do I have time to take a quick shower?"

Jackie kissed the top of her head. "There's enough time for you to take a soak while Angel and I watch the news."

"You spoil me." Gabby gave her a quick kiss on the lips before passing off the baby. "But I only need a quick shower. You've had Angel all day, surely you need a rest?"

"No way. I had to share her with Lisa and Monica. In retrospect, I'm not sure who was worse."

"Probably Monica. She is the one who wanted five kids." Gabby retrieved her backpack.

Jackie watched her go with a goofy grin on her face. "She kissed me on the lips again, Angel," she said softly. "Do you think it means something?" She certainly hoped so. It would make the giving of the book and balloons that much sweeter.

When Gabby entered the living room, thirty minutes later, Jackie and Angel were sprawled on the sofa. Jackie was watching cartoons, while Angel was trying to put her foot into her mouth. "This is the news you were talking about?"

Jackie grinned sheepishly. "I forgot how repetitive the local news is. Ten minutes of that is all I can stomach."

“I understand. What say we go hunt down dinner? I’m starving.”

Dinner was a light hearted affair. Jackie ensured their conversation never touched on anything serious by giving the humorous details of her day. Angel assisted by throwing in an occasional grunt from her high chair.

“How was your lunch with Shane?”

“Good. That reminds me. Are you busy Saturday night?”

Jackie shook her head. “What do you have in mind?”

“Shane was complaining that she never gets to see much of her godchild, so I told her she could baby-sit. I thought we could go to the open mike at the bookstore. That is...if you don’t mind?”

“No. Not at all,” Jackie was quick to assure her. “If they don’t mind us dropping Angel off earlier, we could go to dinner first.”

Gabby smiled in relief. This was easier than she’d thought it would be. “I have strict orders to have her there by six. I hear there’s a new Italian place three blocks from the bookstore. Would you want to try there?”

“Perfect.” Jackie sat back with a satisfied smile on her face. “Should we dress up a little? Too bad it’s summer, or I could wear my leather pants.”

Heat suffused Gabby’s cheeks as she remembered how well those pants hugged Jackie’s behind. “Why not. I can’t remember when I last had a night out.”

“You’ve got yourself a date.” As soon as Jackie finished the sentence, her cell phone buzzed. “Excuse me, I’m expecting a call.” She pushed her chair away from the table, and moved to the other side of the kitchen before answering the phone.

With a heavy heart, Gabby grabbed their dirty dishes and put them in the sink, trying hard not to listen to what Jackie was saying. Her heat sank when she heard Jackie arrange to meet someone tomorrow. What a way to go from happy to devastated in sixty seconds. Forcing a smile, she returned to the table and grabbed a couple of empty containers.

“That was my real estate agent. I’ve been trying to get in touch with her all day,” Jackie explained as she helped Gabby clear the table. “I decided this morning it was time to put my condo on the market and look for something more to my liking.”

“Do you have anyplace in mind?”

Jackie shook her head. “I’ve been meaning to do it since Christmas, but since I spend so much time here, it hasn’t been a priority.”

Gabby didn't believe she could feel any lower – she was wrong. “I guess you're looking now because you won't be spending as much time here?” She turned her back to Jackie and rinsed off the dishes.

“What do you mean? Are you getting tired of me?” Her laugh fell flat.

“I figured you'd be spending most of your time with your new...friend,” Gabby forced out, her voice raw with unshed tears. “Hey, it's okay,” she added quickly, with a forced laugh. “Angel and I understand that we can't monopolize your time anymore.”

Jackie heard the tremor in Gabby's voice. “I'll be right back, don't go anywhere, okay?” She left before Gabby could respond.

Gabby unclenched her hands and took a deep breath, then turned quickly at the sound of something hitting the floor. She smiled through tears when her daughter's head lolled to one side. “It's time for you to go to bed, sweetie.” After drying her hands, she crossed the room and removed Angel from the high chair. Holding the baby close to her heart, she told herself everything would be okay.

Jackie stood in the doorway and cleared her throat. “Is this simple enough?”

“Huh?” Gabby's eyes widened as she took in the balloons floating above Jackie's head. “What's going on?”

“I was wondering if this was simple enough for you.”

Gabby's breath caught in her throat when realization dawned. “Me? I'm the one who makes you feel like you can do anything?” She bit her bottom lip to still the trembling, expecting to wake up alone at any moment.

“Who else?” Jackie moved to stand in front of the two most important people in her life. “I was going to give these to you after we put the baby to sleep, but when I heard the hurt in your voice I couldn't wait. I needed you to know you're the only one for me.”

Gabby thought the smile playing around Jackie's lips was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen. Her heart tightened in her chest as she blinked at the tears beading in her eyes. This was what she'd hoped for. “I love you, Jacqueline Stevens.” She cupped Jackie's chin and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Knowing you want me touches me in all my secret places.”

“I love you, Gabriella Renee Jones.” As Jackie moved to take them into her arms, Angel yawned and wriggled. Jackie smiled and stroked Angel's soft curls. “I'll finish cleaning up the kitchen while you get her ready for bed.”

“Hurry.” Gabby's voice was breathless. “I have plans for your lips later,” she promised with a siren's smile.

“I hope so.” Jackie’s eyes gleamed with promise as she bent her head and gave Gabby a taste of things to come. When she finished, they were both panting and needy. “Keep that thought.”

“Don’t worry. It’s been on my mind too long to slip away.”

Angel was sound asleep by the time Gabby laid her in the crib. She smiled down at her Christmas miracle and gave silent thanks, as she had every night since that fateful day. Gabby sighed in contentment, and leaned back when Jackie’s arms slipped around her waist.

“I think Lisa wore her out today,” Jackie said softly. Pushing aside Gabby’s hair, she kissed her slender neck and thrilled at the resultant shiver. She trailed her mouth to Gabby’s ear. “I’d like to wear you out.”

“Why, Ms. Stevens, that’s the best offer I’ve had all day.” Gabby turned, her eyes glazed with desire and held out her hand. “Bedroom. This is one night I don’t want Angel to wake up.”

She grasped Gabby’s hand and followed blindly. They stopped in the center of the room and turned to face each other. Jackie ran the back side of her hand down Gabby’s cheek. “I’d like to take my time with you.

Gabby nodded and rested her forehead against Jackie’s chest. “I can’t believe this is actually happening. If it’s a dream, please don’t pinch me.”

Jackie placed butterfly kisses along the nape of her neck while she maneuvered a hand between their bodies. Pinching Gabby’s nipple, she asked, “Does this count?” The resultant moan was all she needed. She took a step back, then in a smooth move, pulled Gabby’s shirt over her head. Her breath caught in her throat as she filled her hands with firm round breasts. “Beautiful,” she whispered, and massaged them gently. “But not as beautiful as your heart.”

Gabby threw back her head as Jackie rolled her nipples between her thumb and forefinger. It had been so long since she’d felt the touch of another. “So good,” she murmured, and sucked in her breath when a warm mouth closed over her taut nipple. She grabbed Jackie’s shoulders, afraid her knees would give way. “So good.”

“You certainly are.” Jackie switched to the other nipple, giving it the same thorough attention. She slid her hand between Gabby’s thighs and cupped her possessively.

Gabby’s hips jerked convulsively. “Bed now,” she managed to get out while her hands pulled on Jackie’s tank top. “I need to be skin to skin.” They undressed quickly, then moved to stand by the bed as if their movements had been choreographed. Gabby’s eyes darkened as she made no move to hide her perusal of Jackie’s naked body. The sight before her was more than she could have imagined. She took in the small rounded breasts with the tight, pink nipples, the slightly curved stomach, and the hint of golden curls. When she looked up, she couldn’t help but notice that Jackie was studying her body in the same intent manner. Gabby stretched out on the bed and smiled. “See anything you like?”

Jackie's reply was to straddle Gabby's hips. She looked down at her soon to be lover, her violet eyes blazing. "I like everything I see." Lowering her head, she kissed Gabby softly, then with more urgency. "I love you," she whispered brokenly, and gasped for air.

"I love you." Gabby's reply sounded a lot like the promise of forever that it was. She trailed her fingers down Jackie's back and flattened her hands against a firm backside, pressing their centers closer together. "Hmm. And I love the feel of your body against mine."

Jackie braced herself on her forearms, arched her back and thrust her hips forward. When Gabby gasped in delight, she felt the pull all the way down to her clit. Bending forward, she took possession of Gabby's lips, kissing her until they were both gasping and trembling with need. Jackie slowly kissed a path to Gabby's neck and sucked gently, moving enough to slip a hand between their bodies.

"So good." Gabby's murmur was almost incoherent. She spread her legs in encouragement, and if that wasn't enough, said, "More."

With a hum deep in her throat, Jackie parted Gabby's slickened folds, dipped her finger in the satiny wetness, then stroked the engorged clit.

Gabby gripped the sheet in her fists and raised her hips, seeking closer contact with those magical fingers. Any control she thought she had evaporated when Jackie entered her, thrusting deep. She sucked in her breath, wanting the tortuous pleasure to last. Almost against her will, her hips bucked to meet Jackie's fingers, thrust for thrust. "Uh...yeah...yeah." Too soon, she felt the stirring that quickly built until it consumed her. Gabby stiffened her legs, then jerked as a powerful orgasm radiated through her body. She let out a sharp breath and moved her head side to side, almost crying. "So sweet," she said softly once her heartbeat slowed, and opened her eyes.

"So beautiful," Jackie replied breathily. The sight of her lover's pleasure had almost sent her over the edge. She dropped a quick kiss on Gabby's lips.

"But not as beautiful as you." Gabby stroked the beautiful face above her and looked into eyes filled with love. "Let me show you." She pushed against Jackie's unresisting body until Jackie was flat on her back.

"Loosen your hair. I want to feel it against my body."

With a teasing smile, Gabby complied, then positioned herself so her hair draped across Jackie's face. "I didn't know you had a hair fetish, Ms. Stevens."

Jackie's laugh was deep and throaty. "I didn't either." She tugged on Gabby's tresses, bringing their lips together in a gentle kiss. "I have a feeling I'll be discovering a lot of new things about me through you."

Gabby nibbled on her bottom lip. “Together, we’ll explore a lot of different things.” She nipped at Jackie’s neck, then sucked her tender skin. “But now, it’s my turn to explore.” Taking her time, Gabby kissed her way down Jackie’s body, ignoring the insistent hands trying to speed up the process. As she settled in between Jackie’s thighs, she took a deep breath and her nostrils flared at the intoxicating scent. When Jackie tugged on her hair, she raised her head and looked into Jackie’s half closed eyes. “Patience.”

“If it’ll make you faster, I’ll answer to that.” Jackie lifted her hips. “Please.”

“Everybody’s a comedienne,” Gabby muttered, and bit one thigh, then the other. She parted Jackie and stroked her pink, glistening clit with her tongue and her mouth. At Jackie’s urging, she slid three fingers into her silken depths, pulled them out slowly, then thrust in and out, glorying in her lover’s response. She picked up the pace when Jackie’s body began to tremble.

“Oh...Gabby...yes.” Jackie let out a harsh moan as an orgasm overtook her.

When the last of the tremors left Jackie’s body, Gabby kissed her way up Jackie’s body. She turned on her side and propped her head up with her elbow. “You’re so beautiful, Patience.” She looked down at Jackie with a satisfied smile.

Jackie opened her eyes slowly. “I never claimed to have patience or virtue, Ms. Jones.” She gave a contented sigh. “I know this sounds trite, but to paraphrase a song, I’m glad I saved the best for last.”

“That would make two of us.” Gabby kissed her tenderly, then rested her head against Jackie’s shoulder. “I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

Jackie pushed Gabby’s hair aside so she could see her face, and marveled at her good fortune. “That’s good because I’m not going anywhere. You and Angel are stuck with me.”

“Like glue?” Gabby was surprised by a yawn as the busy day caught up with her.

“Like super glue.” She closed her eyes and snuggled closer to her lover. “Like super duper glue.”

Gabby was drifting off to sleep when she remembered the presents. “Jackie, you asleep?”

“Not any more,” Jackie replied, earning a pinch.

“I *was* going to thank you for the book and the balloons.”

Jackie gave a weak chuckle. “You mean what we just did wasn’t my thanks?”

“Smart ass.” Gabby settled more comfortably against Jackie. “But I love you anyway.”

“You’d better.” She tightened her arm around Gabby’s middle. “I think Angel and I are a packaged deal.”

“Huh? Never mind.” She’d figure it out later when her brain wasn’t a clump of mush. As Gabby drifted off to sleep, she sent silent thanks to any deity who was listening. It wasn’t anywhere near Valentines Day, but surely this was the best one she’d ever had.

The End

Send comments, good or bad, to dillonwatson@bellsouth.net