

SAM'S STORY

THEN AGAIN BONUS SCENES

SYLVIE STEWART

1. JUST DOING MY JOB

Sofia: Mamá just asked me if Sam is gay.

Mateo: I've always assumed he was with all of those tight t-shirts...

Eddie: Let's be encouraging, guys. He'll need his family's support when he finally decides to come out.

Sofia: I'll check Pinterest for coming-out party ideas.

Mateo: Great idea, sis.

Me: Ha ha. Shut the fuck up. And don't encourage Mamá or she'll try setting me up again.

Mateo: Don't be shy, bro!

Eddie: Yeah. We're here for you, man.

Me: I'm disowning all of you.

Me: Did she seriously ask you that, Sof?

Sofia: Hand to God. Either bring your secret boyfriend to dinner next time, or get a girlfriend STAT. Lord only knows what she'll do if you don't get on it.

Me: Last I checked, I'm a adult.

Sofia: You think Mamá cares? Bwahaha!

Mateo: Hey, my friend Aaron is single if you're looking. But he's a top—just sayin'.

Me: Laugh it up, man. You're goin' down next time I see you.

Eddie: That's what he said.

I switched my phone to silent and shoved it roughly into my pocket before climbing into my cruiser. I didn't need to read any follow-up texts from my idiot siblings. They'd go on for hours if I responded again. Why couldn't I have been an only child?

Now I just had to wait for my mom's call that was sure to come—all the more reason to keep my ringer off. Where she got the notion I liked guys was beyond me. I mean, sure, I hadn't brought a woman around since my ex and I had broken up, but I'd been busy. My work schedule was brutal for a while there, and I just hadn't met anyone I was interested in. But try telling that to my mother. Apparently, five grandkids just weren't enough.

The morning sun blazed through my windshield and had managed to turn the car into an oven in the short time I'd been in the precinct. This winter heat wave was beyond bizarre. My father would say it was a sign from the universe; I just figured it was global warming coming to bite us in the ass. I yawned and cranked up the air, sliding my aviators in place to shield my eyes.

Most of the time, I didn't mind working nights. I occasionally got to beat a few heads together, and there were always a lot of calls during the first half of my shift. It was the time

between the bars closing and the sun rising that was slow. Most guys hated that, but I didn't. Driving through quiet streets while the rest of the world slept was regenerating, and the downtime left plenty of time to complete paperwork. But I'd been on nights for three weeks, and even I was ready to go back to days.

I pulled out of the lot, my brain switching to autopilot and leading me toward home. I briefly considered stopping at a drive-thru to pick up some breakfast, but that would just mean more time working out later. Not worth it. I wasn't getting any younger, and it was becoming harder to stay in shape. I needed to join a rec-league football team or something. My brother-in-law, Cal, could hook me up, I was sure.

I took a right on Broad Street, passing by some joggers on their way to the county park, no doubt. And that's when I saw her. She was on the other side of the street, dark hair in a ponytail and a dog leash clutched in her hand. The woman's steps were uneven, making me fear she might fall over at any second. Did she need medical attention? Another woman with a child passed by her, and the struggling woman gave a half-wave and then stopped in her tracks, bent over at the waist, and propped her hands on her knees.

Traffic was light, so I crossed the center line and drew my cruiser up beside her. It just so happened that the spot I picked provided a prime view of this woman's ass as she remained bent over. I knew I should probably avert my gaze, but damn! I challenge any man to look away when presented with an ass like that. It was round and perky, and her position had her shorts riding up to the point where every inch of her thighs

was exposed. That was when I noticed her dog eyeing me like the perv I pretty much was right then. Jesus.

I shook my head and cleared my throat. "Ma'am?"

She began to straighten, and her hands went to cradle her head. Shit.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

I was about a half second from opening my door to check on her when she spoke, sounding vaguely annoyed. "Are you kidding me with the ma'am? Do I look eighty? Way to kick me when I'm down."

That was when I knew she was okay, and there was no helping the smile forming at her comment. Then she turned and I got my first good look at her face. If I'd thought her ass was nice, it was nothing compared to her face. She was downright gorgeous. Her delicate nose was framed by high cheekbones and a wide generous mouth, which just happened to be scowling in my direction. And her eyes—they were a deep shade of blue that flashed with irritation.

"I apologize, *Miss*." I forced a seriousness as I stressed the change in my address. "I obviously need my vision tested."

Her shoulders straightened and she tried hastily fixing her hair. I fought my grin.

"Sorry, Officer. I was in the middle of... stretching." Her voice switched to silvery and a bit breathy.

It was no use. My smile got away from me again. "Well, I didn't mean to interrupt your... stretching. You just looked like you might have needed some help. It's my duty and privilege to look after our fine citizens, after all, *Miss*..." Yeah, I was laying it on thick, but there was no way I was leaving

without this woman's name. I'd worry about police protocol later.

She looked expectant for a beat and then proclaimed, "Oh! Watson. Jenna Watson." Her hand went to her chest, drawing my eyes there as well. Thank God for the reflective lenses on my sunglasses, because I couldn't help but let my gaze linger there a moment too long. Damn, she had a banging body.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Watson," I managed to utter. "Do you need me to give you a lift home, or are you going to stretch some more?" I was pushing my luck, for sure.

Her eyes sparked at my comment, causing my dick to twitch in my pants. I wanted nothing more than to see every single emotion those eyes could reflect.

What was I doing? Here I was in uniform, totally hitting on a random woman who was just trying to walk her damn dog.

Reinforcing my thoughts, her chin lifted and she assumed a more formal tone. "I'm going to continue my jog, Officer. Thanks for your concern, but I'm just fine."

But her attitude just turned me on more, especially when she made a shooing gesture, trying to usher me away. I was clearly way too tired to exercise good judgment in this situation. It was time to leave her alone. Probably for good, if I were being honest.

"Alrighty, then." I forced myself back into cop mode. "You take care, Miss Watson." I checked the traffic before pulling back onto the street. But I couldn't resist one final comment as I rolled up the window. "Don't forget to drink plenty of fluids."

I didn't need to look back to know there was fire in Jenna Watson's eyes as she watched me drive away.

2. I CALL INTERFERENCE

I ran a hand through my hair for what was probably the hundredth time in the span of a few short hours. This woman would be the death of me. I hadn't stopped thinking about her since the night of the drug bust at Big J's—okay, since the day I spotted her “stretching” on Broad Street, if I was being completely honest.

When the call about the hit and run with possible injury had come through earlier, I hadn't even paused to think. I drove my cruiser straight to the scene, somehow knowing that Jenna was involved. And I'd been right. The sight of her lying motionless on the pavement was burned into my brain. It was a wonder I managed to put my car in park before jumping out to check on her.

Jenna Watson was a disaster waiting to happen, but I couldn't seem to help myself—I wanted in on whatever that might mean.

I parked my Jeep Cherokee on the curb in front of her house and got out. The damn painting kids were still there, and I made sure to give them all a stern look on my way up the walk. This woman drew men like flies, so why wasn't I smart enough to just leave her alone? I shook my head at myself.

Her sister's car was still in the driveway, but thinking Jenna might be resting, I knocked lightly on the door instead of ringing the bell. Jill opened it seconds later, a shit-eating grin resting on her lips.

Fuck. Me.

"Come on in, Officer." She stepped back and gestured for me to enter.

Against my better judgement, I took her invitation. Jill and Jenna shared similar looks, but Jill was more angular while Jenna leaned toward lush and curvy. I knew which I preferred.

"Hi, Jill. Is she doing okay?"

She nodded and closed the door behind me. "She's fine. Just resting in her room, thank God. I was afraid she was going to fall over." The grin was gone when she turned back to me.

"It's good that she's getting some sleep—adrenaline will only take you so far."

She waved me along to the kitchen. "I was just going to fix her something to eat for when she wakes up. Then I have to get going. I'm working in a couple hours."

"Oh yeah? What do you do?"

"I'm a server at Bistro Eleven." She opened the refrigerator and peered inside while I glanced around the kitchen. Not a single thing out of place. I found myself pleased for some reason at the notion that Jenna was a neat freak.

“Nice. I’ve never eaten there, but I’ve heard good things.”

Jill pulled her head out of the crisper drawer and turned to me with her dark eyebrows raised. “It’s an excellent place for a first date.”

I was beginning to suspect Jill and Sofia would get along perfectly—they clearly shared the interfering sister gene. But, this time, it could work to my advantage.

Pausing, I tried to formulate a careful response. Jill shut the door and came over to lean into the kitchen island across from me. “Look, Sam. I’m no idiot. You’ve got a giant boner for my sister.” I nearly choked at her bluntness, but she drove ahead. “As well you should—she’s a total catch.”

My eyes were still watering from her initial statement, but she appeared to be waiting for confirmation, so I said the first thing that came to mind. “Well, not right *now*.”

“Huh?” Jill’s brows drew together.

Still not at my best, I glanced down quickly at the front of my pants and back up to Jill.

“Eww.” She made the same face my niece made when I mentioned boys. “I should hope not! God.”

My face went hot. Why the hell was I talking to this woman about boners? “Sorry—forget I said that.”

Jill’s eyes widened comically. “I’ll try.”

“Shit.” My hand went back to my hair, scrubbing through it again. This wasn’t going well at all.

Jill released a heavy sigh, as if dealing with me was utterly exhausting. “Okay, loverboy. Have a seat.” She motioned for me to sit on one of the barstools. Once I did, she placed both hands flat on the granite between us and held my eyes. I felt

like a school kid about to be lectured. “As I was saying, I know you like my sister.”

This time, I just nodded instead of acting like a douchebag.

Jill nodded in return. “The thing is, she’s probably not gonna go out with you.”

My face fell a bit at that. I mean, I’m not a conceited asshole, but it still stings when a woman shoots you down. Or when her sister does it for her.

“Aw, wipe that kicked puppy look off your face, Officer.”

My expression turned to a scowl. I pitied the poor sap who ended up with Jill.

“That’s better.” She laughed. “What I mean is, Jenna is gun shy. She hasn’t dated anyone since her cocksucking ex left her.”

Her words summoned an unfamiliar urge to punch a man I’d never even met. That was new. “And how long ago was that?” I managed, my hands tightening into fists where they rested on my lap.

“Two years.”

I considered that while I tried to let the tension go. My breakup with Emberly had only been a little farther back than that, but we hadn’t been married or had kids. I had to imagine two years really wasn’t all that long in the grand scheme of things for Jenna. Was it?

“Too long,” Jill said, as if reading my thoughts. She flipped her dark hair over her shoulder and pinned me with a speculative gaze. “And I think you’re just the guy to break that dry spell.”

My eyes narrowed with confusion. “Uh, you just said she wouldn’t go out with me.”

She shooed my comment away with her hand. “Details. Bottom line is she likes you. More than she’s willing to admit.”

“Oh yeah?” I couldn’t help the idiot smile I was surely wearing.

Jill’s lips curved as she nodded and leaned in. “Lady boner... big one.” She held up her hands, leaving about a foot between them.

Color me impressed.

“You’ve gotten under her skin just as much as she’s gotten under yours. But she thinks she’s not ready,” Jill continued with a shake of her head.

“So what do I do?” It felt like I was consulting the high priestess of dirty talk for relationship advice.

“You just go along with whatever she suggests. Even if you don’t get it at first, you will.”

My hand went to the back of my neck. “This all sounds a bit cryptic, I gotta be honest.” I had to be nuts for listening to this woman.

“It’s my job to look out for my sister and protect her, even if it’s from her own damn self. She doesn’t know it yet, but she’s about to fall for you, Sam Martinez.” She cocked her head and quirked a brow, clearly pleased with herself.

I leaned back in the barstool and let that sink in. Jill did know Jenna a hell of a lot better than I did. Maybe I should give her advice a chance after all.

Not appearing to need a response, Jill turned back to the refrigerator to prepare Jenna’s meal.

I rubbed a hand over my mouth as I considered everything she’d told me. Then I came to a decision. I’d do whatever

Jenna wanted, as long as it meant I had a chance with her. My feet hit the wood floor.

“You go on and get to work. I’ll take care of the food.”

Jill turned, that shit-eating grin back in place. “Whatever you say, Officer.”

I took a tomato from her outstretched hand, wondering exactly what on God’s green earth I had just signed up for.

3. THE WATSON GIRLS

I was thinking of buying that dog a giant ribeye. Sure, the mutt was a scoundrel and probably deserved every bit of the scolding I could hear coming from the hall bathroom, but if it weren't for Rufus, I wouldn't be back on Jenna's couch. Back in the game.

"I'm pretty sure Mom's going to strangle him." One of the mini-me versions of Jenna looked to her twin where they both stood in front of the giant Christmas tree.

This one put a hand on her hip. Had to be Eileen. "No way. She's a sucker for his puppy eyes."

The girl who had to be Kate turned to me. "What do you think, Officer Martinez?" Her hair and face were the spitting image of her mother, but her eyes were a lighter blue—and full of concern.

"Your mom couldn't hurt a fly. She's just upset because he worried you all. She'll forget all about it by tomorrow." I leaned

back into the couch and crossed my arms, hoping to convey the right degree of confidence concerning the dog's fate.

Kate considered this while Eileen moved on. "So, you live close by, huh?"

I nodded. "That's right. Just a couple neighborhoods over." Was it my imagination, or were the twins moving closer? It was hard to tell because neither of them had stopped moving their feet since joining me in the living room.

"We've got two houses," Eileen informed me. "Kind of."

Kate, apparently at peace with her dog's wellbeing, joined in, balancing on one foot while holding her arms out to the sides. "Yeah. We live here most of the time, but sometimes we stay with our dad and his new wife."

I tried not to panic at the minefield awaiting me in this line of conversation. "Well, that sounds... fun." *Really, Martinez? That's the best you can do?*

Eileen's eyebrows spiked. Was she mocking me? Damn.

"So, do you girls play any sports?" I had to move this conversation to more comfortable territory.

"I play soccer," Eileen volunteered. And, yup, she inched forward some more.

"I do gymnastics. It's, like, really hard." Kate's expression was deadly serious as she switched to her other foot. Fighting a smile, I bit my lip and assumed an appropriately impressed expression instead.

Thanks to my nieces and nephews, I was practiced at talking to kids. But none quite as old—or wily—as these two.

"Sounds challenging." I nodded again.

They closed in a couple more inches, Eileen sending her

sister an unimpressed look before turning her identical blue eyes back to me. “I’m the goalie. It’s one of the most important positions on the team.”

Kate’s mouth morphed into a frown. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.” One hair toss later and she was striding from the room.

I looked to Eileen for explanation, but she just rolled her eyes.

Damn, Jenna was going to need back-up when these girls hit their teens.

“Anyway.” Eileen didn’t miss a beat. “You’re a guy, so you probably like video games, right?”

I couldn’t help the smile this time. “Uh, it’s been a while, but I used to be pretty good, I guess.”

“You should definitely play Minecraft. It’s. The. Best.” Eileen’s eyes pinned me, but I was saved from responding as Kate swept back into the room. I couldn’t help but notice her hair had been brushed and she was now wearing a bright yellow bow.

That got another eye roll from Eileen, and they simultaneously stepped even closer. Soon, they’d be sitting on my lap—there was nowhere else to go.

Just then, Rufus tore through the room, a damp mass of wild brown fur. He ran circles around the couch a couple times before squirming on his back in the middle of the rug. Both girls watched him with wide identical smiles.

“Your dog is nuts,” I informed them, which made them both giggle and nod before getting back to business.

Kate tossed her hair again. “Did you know I can do three

cartwheels in a row? I would show you, but there's not enough room in here." She gestured to the space between the couch and the tree.

Before I could respond, Eileen jumped in again. "My friend Megan said I'm the absolute best redstone engineer in our grade. That's a Minecraft thing, if you didn't know. I could totally have my own YouTube channel if my mom would let me."

"Don't you mean *our* friend Megan?" Kate's hands went to her hips and I wasn't sure how I was going to referee if this turned into a fight. These girls were a handful—not unlike their mother.

Thankfully, I didn't need to worry. "Give the man a little breathing room, would you?" Jenna's voice rose over the girls' and I took her in as she entered the room. She was a mud-stained, sodden mess. And she was absolutely fucking adorable.

There was no way to repress my grin. "It's fine. I'm actually learning a lot." I gave the girls a wink, and I swear Kate batted her eyelashes at me. Shit.

"You want to stay for dinner, Officer Martinez?"

"You can call me Sam," I said, at the same time as Jenna spoke, "No, he..." We both stopped, and our gazes met. Shit. I probably should have gotten permission to let her kids call me by my first name. Oh well. But why was she rescinding the dinner invitation? Now that I was back in, I wasn't leaving. So I leveled Jenna with a stare intended to communicate everything I couldn't say in front of her kids.

After a few beats, she smiled and I felt it in my chest. “We’d love to have you stay for dinner if you’d like, Sam.”

I was pretty sure my eyes were telling her I’d like to have *her* for dinner, but I had to cut that shit out. For now, at least. If the flush on her face was anything to go by, she received my message loud and clear.

“Okay, girls, let’s get dinner started then. You invite the man, you’re gonna pitch in.”

Jenna set the girls to a few meal-prep tasks while she grabbed a quick shower. The thought of her naked just a few yards from me was making my dick start talking, so I forced my mind to other topics. Finally, I just excused myself and went to the pet store to get the damn dog a harness. He wasn’t escaping again if I had anything to say about it. And, okay, I couldn’t resist picking up a Santa hat for the mutt too. After all, I owed him. Turned out I was a complete pushover.

On the drive back to Juniper Court, I impulsively dialed my sister’s number.

“Hey, I was just thinking about you,” she greeted me.

“Oh, yeah?” My tone was laced with caution since there was a fifty-fifty chance this was a trap. It wasn’t my first day being her brother.

“Yeah. Monica asked me why you don’t have a wife.”

I knew it. “Nice.”

“Actually, I got that wrong. I believe the question was, ‘If Uncle Sam is so old, why doesn’t he have a wife or something?’”

I barked out a laugh. “Even better.” I took a left onto Broad and headed toward Jenna’s street.

“I thought so.” My sister did nothing to hide her mirth. “So, what’s up?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you after that.”

“Oh, come on. You know you can’t keep anything from me.”
Sort of true.

I relented. “I just spent the last few hours with Jenna... and her kids.”

The squeal that followed just about ruptured my eardrum. “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God! I knew it would all work out.”

My car pulled up in front of the Watson girls’ house and I put it in park before switching the phone to my only working ear. “I don’t know if I would say that, but it’s definitely headed in the right direction.” I felt my smile grow wider.

“I’m so happy for you, big brother.” Sofia sighed on the other end of the line.

“Thanks, Sof. I gotta run. I’m back at Jenna’s.”

“Well, I want the whole scoop later, okay?”

My response was immediate as I opened the door and stepped from the car. “Yeah, sorry. Not gonna happen.”

Sofia tsked. “Well, what the hell am I supposed to tell Mamá then?”

I froze. “Don’t even think—”

But she had already hung up.

I stared down at my phone and then up at the house with its inviting front porch and colorful array of holiday lights. Calling my sister back wasn’t worth it; she’d do whatever she damn well pleased. So, with a shake of my head, I shoved the phone in my back pocket and started for the front door. There

was little I could do to control the future, but there was one thing I was pretty damn sure of.

Mine was waiting for me behind the door of that house.



THANKS FOR READING SAM'S SIDE OF THE STORY!

For Jill's story, grab your copy of *New Jerk in Town* from the *Carolina Kisses* series.

Also keep your eye on your inbox! Sofia and Cal's story, *About That...* is FREE for my newsletter subscribers.

If you enjoyed *Then Again*, check out the Carolina Connections series.

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