

Serenade

by Alison Clifford

"I spent the last year learning to play the guitar so I could play you this."

He smiled and sat down—uninvited—next to me.

"I don't think..."

"Shh," he said, strumming his guitar.

"But I don't..."

"Nah, ah," he said, wriggling the guitar on his lap, adjusting the position. "My turn."

"But.."

He frowned at me and shook his head. I glanced around for help, but everyone else in the café was smiling as if this was a good thing. Cute, romantic even.

And I had no idea who this guy was. Never seen him before. No idea.

"I don't want you to..."

"Shh!"

I stared at the woman behind me who'd just shushed me.

"He's starting," she whispered, leaning close.

And he was. No longer looking at me—thankfully—he strummed that guitar as if his life depended on it. Everyone's attention was on him, and then he turned his head towards me, cocked it to one side like a puppy, and sang.

My face glowed as I wriggled down in my seat, my heart racing as something like panic swept through me. His voice reminded me of my neighbour's husky, yowling at something in the yard.

I could take no more.

I grabbed my bag and leapt out of my seat, knocking the guitar as I did. A wave of groans and sighs chased me from the café.

"Don't leave me..."

His wail reached as I made it out of the door. I stopped, anger replacing embarrassment in an instant.

"I'm not leaving you because I was never with you!"

"But I love you!"

The eyes of the customers bore into me and I could hear the muttering begin. Enough.

“What’s my name?” I demanded.

He regarded me for a long moment and then smiled. “Sunshine of my heart,” he replied.

The audience sighed. One lady went so far as to clasp her hands over her heart.

I wanted to vomit.

“Nope. Wrong. I’m going now.”

“Don’t be so cruel,” someone said.

“Cruel? How would you react if a complete stranger came up to you and serenaded you?”

“It’s sweet!”

“It’s creepy, not...” but guitar-man interrupted me, starting up again.

I turned to leave, but a woman blocked my way. “At least give him a chance.”

The hostility of those sitting around me hit like a wave. I pushed The woman out of the way. “Let me go.”

She grabbed me and we fell to the floor as chaos broke out around us.

The police officer choked as I came to the end of my story, lifting a hand to cover a smile.

“It’s true!”

This time he didn’t try to hide the grin. “All this from a guy with a guitar?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t see what happened after the lady landed on me.” There were at least a dozen people milling around, many sporting bandages or bright red abrasions, and all looking at little stunned. Debris was scattered outside the café and at least two windows were broken. “And it was all a ploy, you said?”

The officer nodded. “Your guitar man made off with the days takings—or he would of if someone hadn’t used his guitar to slow him down.” He watched as an ambulance pulled away. “You played right into his hands, but it worked out for the best.”

I put a hand to my bruised ribs. “For the best?”

The officer gave me a smile and walked away to join his colleagues near the ruin of the café. My attempt to escape had triggered a mini-riot, and the robbery had failed. I looked down at the hand protecting my injury and then back at the café. "I guess so."