

INTRO: In 1983, Texas brothers Sonny (a.k.a. Icestorm) and Walker (a.k.a. Firewalker) Blaine are scorching earth with their electric blues guitar work. Walker and his power trio, the Salamanders, are in the midst of the Blues Muse Tour, their second, starmaking, international outing. Cilla Mountbatton, a fine if somewhat green practitioner of the British blues school of guitar, and a gorgeous young redhead to boot, is hired on as opening act for the Blues Muse Tour. The tour has arrived in New York specifically to join up for concerts with Sonny's gritty swamp-pop outfit, the Rocket 88s. The big time has arrived, and the Blaine boys are ready to swallow it whole. However, Cilla is less than sure of herself now that she's landed in the big leagues.

WALKER SLID THE KEY into his hotel room door, asking, "Cill, what did you tell that big scary cat, anyhow? He took off awful quick."

"I told him you were my husband, and you were delusional." She smiled at him. "Clint Eastwood complex, complete with .44 magnum. You're dangerously insane."

"Truth often works best, I reckon," Walker answered, laughing. "The insane part, I mean. Not the gun. Despite growing up alongside well-armed rednecks, my guitar's the only thing I know how to shoot. Thank God he didn't call our bluff." He stepped into his room, gesturing for her to follow. "Come on in, have a drink. I'll turn your Dodgers game on."

"In a minute. Let me stop by my room." Though no one was around, she whispered, "I'd like a little smoke. You, too?"

"Sure, darlin'. Bend one on up and bring it over."

Walker went in his room and pulled a bottle of Crown Royal out of a bag. He checked the bathroom and found two paper-capped glasses. He peeked in the hotel's ice bucket, happy to find a few unmelted cubes from an earlier trip to the machine, then he poured the whiskey over the ice slivers, stirring with a finger. He reached into his boot, grabbed his stash satchel, and tapped out just a dash of blow. Needed just a little, to feel frisky enough to entertain the lady. He checked himself in the mirror. Tired, sketchy. If he smiled, mouth closed, she might not notice how crooked his teeth were. Out of the blue, a bad old feeling surfaced: If only he looked like Sonny. He pushed the fretting aside by making a fair Spaghetti Western sneer at his reflection. Making faces in the mirror? Cilla hadn't lied to the big dude in the bar. He really was insane.

Minutes before they came upstairs, Walker had discovered Cilla in the hotel lounge. She was only trying to watch a ball game on TV. Walker was returning from a radio interview, and Cilla's unmistakable head of hair caught his eye as he passed the bar's entrance. A suit was hitting on her.

Eyes fixed on the TV, Cilla grumbled, "Again, no thank you. I buy my own drinks. I don't need another."

"Come on, baby. What are you doing here if you don't want company? Too pretty to be alone."

Cilla said testily, "I was watching the Dodgers and having a drink—get your hand off me!"

Walker sidled up between them, slapping the man's hand from Cilla's thigh. "You got a problem, mister? The lady said leave her be."

Looking incredulously at Walker, the suit rose from his stool—and kept right on rising. Shit.

Where was Sonny when he was needed? He bellowed into Walker's face, "Not your business—" Stopping, the suit gave Walker a scornful once-over. "A fucking drugstore cowboy. Go home to the ranch, peewee. I saw her first."

"Sweetheart, I'm so glad you made it," Cilla cooed, brushing Walker's lips with hers. Walker dared to shoot a smirk up at the big, scary man. Cilla dragged Walker to a stool at the far end of the bar. She grinned, her eyes sparkling, and whispered, "Stay here. Try to look tough."

Cilla pulled the suit aside, whispering, gesturing frantically. Walker couldn't make out her words. The guy gave him a death-maker glare, but threw some bills on the bar and split.

Cilla rejoined Walker, grinning. "My hero."

"Oh, you saved the day, girl," he snickered. "Would have been nothing left of me but a greasy spot, had he not backed down. Let me buy you a drink for leaving me with my dignity, and for keeping me alive."

"After that bit of nonsense, I think I'd rather go up to my room, Walker."

"Well, why not come up to mine? Have that drink? Sonny's suppose to be here. I told him to come up to the room, but if I wasn't there, to wait in the bar. You ain't seen him yet?"

"No. I've been down here about a half hour."

Walker drew a gold pocket watch from his vest. "He's not suppose to be here for another few minutes. Sonny ain't unusually late, but he's never early. Let's go up to my room, so we don't miss him. I know he'd love to see you again."

Cilla wasn't entirely sure she wanted to see Sonny. It wasn't exactly that she disliked him, but she did dislike his sort—too cocksure, far too attractive. His smile alone was as tempting as milk chocolate. She finally said, "Perhaps I'll join you two for a minute."

Walker was still laughing at his own silly posing in the mirror when he heard a knock. He went to answer. No one was there. Walker looked side-to-side down the hall. Not a soul. Walker walked back into his room, puzzled. Maybe he was hearing things. He heard the sound again and realized it was coming from the door connecting the adjacent room—strange. He twisted the handle. Cilla smiled, holding forth a joint.

"Well how about that!" he said in greeting. "Discreet, huh? Didn't know you was right next door."

"Is Sonny here yet?" she asked, spotting the two whiskey glasses.

"Not yet. You like whiskey rocks, right?" He held out a glass to her, jerking his head at the TV. "Turn on the game."

"No. It's all over but the crying for the Dodgers." She took the glass from him, leaning against the wall. "I shouldn't mix my liquor, but what the hell."

"Let your hair down tonight. We earned it." He clinked his glass against hers. "Cill, I been dying to ask. How'd a little English girl like you get interested in baseball? Over there ya'll play with crickets, or some damn thing."

She laughed, sipping her drink. "That's *cricket*. It's an English ball game, goes on for hours."

"So does baseball."

"Not like cricket. They break for lunch, like a job. I never cared for the sport anyway. But, when I first came to Los Angeles, to dance school, one of my roommates was the daughter of a Dodger coach. The girl was a walking Hall of Fame. It was sink or swim living with her. And it was a nice diversion from all the crap that goes along with dance."

“What crap is that?”

“Oh, feeling shame if you so much as think about sweets. The dieting is endless. Painful injuries, too. And nasty competition for parts. It’s a real catfight in the corps. I still love to dance for fun. I do it for at least an hour each morning. Keeps me in shape.”

“And don’t it work well.” Walker smiled and drifted his eyes over her. She crossed her ankles, yanking up her jeans a tad to better cover her middle.

“Um . . . thanks. Ballet is an important base to have in any dance discipline. But I really like more lyrical, sharper stuff, though. You know who Bob Fosse is?” Walker shook his head. “He’s a choreographer—maybe you saw *All That Jazz*?”

“Oh, right. That movie had some real sexy dancing in it.”

“I would like to do more along those lines.”

He smiled slowly. “Yes, indeedy. I’d like to see that. Um . . . can you do that one stretch where you go and pull your leg straight up alongside your body, clear up against your head?”

By the way Walker stared at her, Cilla thought it best to change the subject. “The Rockets are on the bill with us tomorrow, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. It’s going to be great.” Rattling the ice in his glass, Walker sat on a love seat, propping his boots up on a coffee table.

“Maybe for you and Sonny. I have to open for you both. It’s a bit frightful.”

“How’s that, darlin’?”

“We both know I’m out of my league. Walker, I just don’t think I was ready for this tour.”

“Cilla, you’re a fine player. I wouldn’t have asked you to come with me if you wasn’t. You just got to relax a little more, let things flow, you know? Come on, sit. Let’s talk.” He patted the couch beside him. She joined him. He scowled, rubbing his soul patch, gathering his thoughts. After a moment, he said, “Now I been watching you for a few shows, I almost understand why that moron who produced your first record focused so on your voice. Blues is about emotions. You seem to express feelings pretty easy, singing. This sounds macho, but chicks can usually pull real feelings out vocally. Better than most men. It’s why there’s so many women blues singers. But you need to tap into your raw side with that guitar, too. Technically, you’re there. But you’re missing the heat.”

Cilla laughed, staring at her drink. “This from someone named Firewalker? The rest of us have to worry about getting burned.”

“They call Sonny ‘Icestorm.’ His style’s more controlled, but it’s still real lusty sounding. Don’t you think?” She nodded agreement. “My bro says things with fewer musical words than me, but you know just what he means. I can’t do what he does. I just go off.” He laughed.

“He’s sort of a Hemingway to your Faulkner, Walker.”

Walker slapped his cheek. “Sure, I know them. Writers, right? I don’t read books much. But I know my blues. We go for true love, or lowdown lust. Both. Rage, sadness, loneliness . . . all that’s heavy. Real.” Walker reached his hands into the air, like he was trying to capture something invisible. “What’s the damn word I want, Cill? Like, of the earth, fire and water. . . .”

“Let’s see—*elemental*, maybe?” she suggested.

“Yeah. Elemental. Unstoppable, juicy feelings.” He laughed again, looking sheepish. “I ain’t making no sense. Maybe I should read that Hemingway and Faulkner.”

“Maybe so,” she said, laughing. “But you do make sense.”

“Now, that night when you came over after you had it out with Jackie. You played for me, and you was cooking with gas.”

“I was . . . overwrought that night.” She tittered, squirming slightly beside him.

“You got to learn to tap into that stuff.” He brushed his fingertips across her breastbone, sending a tremor through her. “Got to, like, almost hook it to a switch right here. Think of it like an effect you plug into your amp. Learn to put it out there. Risk.”

“Risk.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Well, I can try to piss you off royally every night before you take the stage. You’ll go out there mean and tear them up!” He laughed and reached over to hold her hand. “Sweet girl, I hope this don’t hurt your feelings.”

“Not at all. I need to learn from you. This is the best classroom in the world.”

“I’ll teach you whatever I can. Glad to. Now, where’s that smoke?” She took her hand from his and offered him the joint to light. He took a pull that choked him a little. “Can’t hold my smoke no more. This reminds me of when Sonny and I was kids. We smoked dope a lot then. Guess it’s true what they say. Leads to harder stuff.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I indulge in other things now and again, but this is my one real vice,” she confessed, taking it from him and doing a toke. She held it for a moment, then said, on the exhale, “That’s one reason I had such a tough time staying thin enough to make my dance instructors happy. I’m forever fighting the munchies.”

“I wouldn’t worry if I was you. Your pounds are in exactly the right places. Women stay too skinny these days. You’re built like a lady should be.” He leaned in closer to her, putting his arm around her shoulders, as he took back the joint. “Did you like that I put *I’ll Take Care of You* on my first record?”

Cilla looked away, staring at the dark TV. Would have been wiser to let Walker switch on the game. “Yes. It was lovely, Walker. I always liked that song.”

“It’s the one we slow danced to after that party, you remember?”

“Of course I do.”

“I think about that night a lot. I was hoping you would hear it and know I meant it for you.” He put the joint in an ashtray and pulled her close. “Just to think of you makes me crazy.”

She held herself stiff, but allowed him to kiss her. When Walker started to run his hands up and down her back, she shoved away and walked toward the TV. “Stop that.”

He followed, grabbing her hand. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I kind of thought you felt the same. Guess I let my ego fool me.” Chuckling, he let her go, ducking his face down behind his hat. “Stupid, huh? You’re such a refined and classy lady. What’s the likes of me thinking? Nothing but a homely white-trash Texan.”

She turned to him, her eyes shiny with tears. “Don’t. You’re not the only one who thinks about our dance. When I heard that song on the record, I hoped you were remembering me. But I can’t do this. Walker, this may be my first big tour, but don’t forget. I’ve been around musicians all my life. You’ve got a wife back home. I’m no groupie.”

Walker protested, “Of course you ain’t a groupie! I don’t think of you like that at all. Come sit back down with me. Let’s talk.” She shook her head. “Come on, now. Just talk to me. I ain’t going to try nothing.”

She perched on the very edge of the couch, her knees tightly pressed together. He leaned back

into the fabric, yielding space to her, emptying his glass. “Fact is, I ain’t even been living with Vada since the benefit show. Got home and found her with some young buck who seemed to think he was me. They was nearly naked in my own damn bed.”

“Is that the truth?” she asked, her voice wary. It sounded a little too convenient.

He nodded. “I swear it. I almost hit her—I shook her real hard. Then we calmed down, tried to talk it out. But then she . . . well, she said something ugly. She knows just how to hurt me.”

“That’s too bad, Walker.”

Walker held up a hand. “I know what you’re thinking. I’m trying to pull one of those ‘my wife don’t understand me’ lines on you. I’m not. I don’t know what’s happening with my marriage. We been together a long time, and especially since we got hitched, it ain’t been pretty at times. I know that’s no comfort, Cilla, but it’s honest as hell. I promise I’ll be honest with you.”

“Well, then. I should also be honest with you.” She said nothing for a long time. She could feel him watching, waiting attentively. “I never talk about this. The truth is, I just don’t. . . .” She paused, searching for words. She finally mumbled, “I don’t date men anymore.”

Walker’s eyes widened. With a nervous laugh, he exclaimed, “Wow! You’re a lesbian? I didn’t have a clue.”

She shook her head, laughing low, tears leaking from her eyes. The laughter quickly turned to sobs. He laid a hand on her back, telling her not to cry. “If I were a lesbian, I could *feel*. Look at me!” She stood up, running her hands down her body, as if modeling an outfit. “Men think I’m so hot. But it’s a joke. It’s like that part of me, my sex, is paralyzed.” She shook her head, covering her face with her hands. “Nothing moves me that way.”

“That ain’t so. Have you—”

She cut him off. “I’ve tried everything. Read every book, watched every movie, tried all sorts of humiliating things. I’ve talked to shrinks and MDs. Nothing helps. It’s always been simply horrible. Usually painful, too. A couple of times, I couldn’t even . . . it’s like I’m dead-bolted down there. It’s way beyond not . . . you know, no orgasm. It’s no wonder my playing is passionless. *I’m* passionless.” She kept crying. “Frigid, is what Jackie called it. Too bad your brother is known as Icestorm. That would be a far superior name for yours truly.”

Walker considered her for a time while she wept. He finally said, “Listen here. There’s just no such thing as a frigid woman. All’s wrong is you got yourself tied up with fear and shame.”

She stalked into the bathroom, blowing her nose and wiping her eyes. “How would you know there’s no such thing as frigid?”

“Because . . . I just do. I mean, the doctors say you got all your parts and stuff, right?” She nodded, her back to him. “Well, see? Might could be if someone’s a psychopath and don’t feel nothing, maybe they could be frigid, but not you. You’re chock-full of feelings. Cill, it is like playing guitar. Learn to tap into that side of yourself, is all. Risk opening yourself up. Don’t be so scared.”

She grabbed a few clean tissues and sat back next to him. “I am scared. Scared of never feeling anything. Now I just avoid it. I haven’t attempted anything in, like, two years. I keep busy with other things. But then I see couples together, happy?” She sniffed, voice low. She sounded more ashamed than sad. “It hurts to be alone, Walker. Really alone. Unable to connect on such a basic level with anybody.”

She shredded the tissues, balling them up in her hands. “I swear, the only time I ever really felt

anything at all was that night with you. I've wondered sometimes, if Kyle and the others hadn't come back just then. . . ."

"See? I knew it. Both of us was real turned on that night. The way you kissed, the way you looked at me, the way your body smelled, Cilla. You wanted us to be together. You just need someone you're real attracted to taking his sweet time with you. And you need to not push. Feelings will happen at their own pace. I'm willing to bet you never told any of your lovers about this."

"God, no. And *lovers* is too strong a word for the men I've tried to . . . well. After the way Jackie reacted, I swore I'd never say anything again."

"Jackie sounds like a fucking prince!" Walker took the shredded tissue balls from her and threw them aside. Then he held both of her hands in his tightly and smiled at her tenderly. "But see, talking about it's the only way to get over it. Cilla, I ain't no prize. I never even graduated from high school. I ain't a high-class man, like you deserve. I know I'm married, and I can't tell you what's going to happen with Vada. Neither her or me have been faithful spouses, but, until now, our flings never meant nothing. This ain't fair to you or Vada either one, but the fact is I think I love you already."

Cilla opened her mouth to protest, but Walker shushed her.

"Girl, I think you are fun and super classy, and smart, and talented, and the most beautiful thing in the world. And a lady guitar player, too? I never even dreamed I'd meet such a thing. Now, I know I ain't nothing to look at." He winked at her. "I aims to please, given half a chance."

She smiled a little. "Well, Walker Blaine, you're not conventionally handsome. But you do have a certain . . . *je ne sais quoi*—"

"Oh, damn, I might as well give up now if you ain't even going to speak English. It's hard enough with you talking London and me talking Texan. There, leastwise I made you laugh." He dropped to his knees before her, still holding her hands. "Cill, I'll be patient. We'll just fool around some, if you want. I won't do nothing until you're begging me to. You understand? Let me help you—take care of you."

She smiled at him, laying a hand against his cheek. "Oh, Walker. You are such a great guy. God knows I'm tempted."

"Risk, Cilla. Come here." He led her to the bed. He lay down beside her, running a hand through her hair, giving her slow kisses on her neck. He whispered sweetness in her ear.

She was starting to enjoy the kisses and sweet talk, to relax somewhat, when there was a loud rap on the door. Walker buried his head in her hair, groaning, "Oh, shit! I bet that's Sonny. This is the story of our romance, huh girl? Knock, knock, who's there? Bad Timing!" The knock came again. "Hold on a damn minute!" Walker hollered, then dropped his face into the pillow, snickering.

Cilla struggled free of his grasp. "We can't simply leave him standing out there." Cilla got up, feeling off-kilter. Walker climbed off the bed, too. He grabbed his hat and poured another whiskey, shaking his head and muttering to himself. She stopped before the mirror and ran a hand through her hair. Satisfied that she looked presentable, Cilla opened the door.

She nearly whimpered when she saw Sonny. He was perfection. He was all decked out in black: leather jacket, touchable cashmere sweater, tight Levi's, his boots. One dark lock hung loose over his smoky eyes, falling from his otherwise flawless 'do. He leaned on the jamb, his emerald earring catching the light. Sonny's face lit up with his bewitching smile when he saw her. She had to look away, feeling the color rise in her cheeks. "Hello, Sonny," Cilla said to the floor. "Walker's been

waiting for you.”

“Hello yourself, sugar.” Sonny entered, tipping her face to his with his finger, kissing her lightly on the mouth. She felt his eyes move over her as he purred, “You look heavenly. But you always do. You been getting a little sun?” He caressed the side of her face. “Got some pretty roses in your cheeks.” He gave her another slow smile, and then spotted Walker. Raising his hand, Sonny cried, “Howdy, Squirt. How you doing?”

“Real good, Sonny.” Walker slapped the hand and then hugged his brother, pounding him on the back. “Ain’t you looking cool? Come in, have a seat. I’m pouring you a drink.” Walker grabbed the ice bucket on the dresser and clinked tiny cubes into a glass.

“Say, Walker, you got any blow?” Sonny said. He grinned at Cilla. “I’m fighting the jet lag something fierce, don’t you know.”

Pouring the whiskey, Walker rolled his eyes at her. “Like he’s got to ask? There’s a bunch in Old Broad’s case. Help yourself.”

Cilla started for the door. “Walker, Sonny, I’ll be going. You two have a nice evening catching up.”

“It’s New York City—party town, girl. Don’t leave,” Sonny pleaded, grabbing her arm as she walked by. He twirled her into his arms, waltzing her away from the door. “We are headed for a big wingding. I’ll die if you don’t come along. Later, Bonnell’s taking us to an after-hours club that plays great old music. No one can dance as fine as you can, Cilla.” He pulled her a little closer, whispering, “You spoil a man rotten. I been looking so forward to seeing you.” He kissed her ear.

Cilla saw Walker watching, grinning. When it rains it bloody well pours. Her cheeks grew hotter still, and that wasn’t all. Sonny hummed *Dance with Me*, playfully stepping her around the room. In one smooth move, she twirled out of his reach and back to the door. “I think I’ll pass. We have a show tomorrow.” Walker extended an arm, holding a mirror with lines laid out. “No, thank you, Walker. That’s the last thing I need right now. I’m off to a hot bath and bed.”

“Okay. I’ll stay and scrub your back,” Sonny offered.

“Sonny, go have fun with your brother. Good night, Walker.”

“Good night, darlin’. We’ll talk more later.” She left through the hallway door.

Sonny slumped into the couch. “Lord God, Walker. Don’t the road agree with her. Is it just my imagination, or has she gotten even prettier?”

“No, I think she has. Do up those lines, finish your drink, and let’s get. I’m sick to death of hotel rooms already. I got more stash in my boot for later. Do we need to bring the guitars and stuff?”

Sonny slapped his hand to his forehead. “Take a damn night off, Squirt. Let’s just go be two guys prowling. If we all go out to a club, we’ll let someone else play, hear? I got to take a piss. Call a limo, huh?”

“Will do.” Walker waited until he heard Sonny close the bathroom door. He tore off a piece of the sanitary paper lid that had been covering his drinking glass and wadded it into a small ball. He opened the door adjoining Cilla’s room. Her side was still ajar. She was in the john, singing, running her bath water. Watching to make sure she didn’t see him in the act, Walker mashed the wadded paper into the latch-hole in her room’s doorjamb. Now he wouldn’t be locked out when he returned.

Grinning and proud of his ingenuity, Walker put on a coat and reached for the phone to call a ride.