

Opposites Ignite

Bangers Tavern Romance 2

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A mismatch sparks the hottest flames.

Blue-haired, buxom, and bodacious, server Rosie needs her job at Bangers Tavern, where her work family adores her weirdness and supports her hunt for a tattoo apprenticeship. When too much New Year's bubbly tumbles her into a sweet, shy coworker's bed, she craves more. But guys like Eddie never stick with girls like her.

Strait-laced, soft-spoken, and skinny, barback Eddie has a huge crush on his curvy, tattooed coworker. Their New Year's surprise is a dream come true—until grandma walks in on them. Eddie begs Rosie to fake-date him to appease his old-fashioned family. He's already keeping secrets, so what's the harm in one more? But the longer he pretends with Rosie, the deeper he falls.

Their boss lays down the law: No relationship drama at work, or you're fired. Rosie's everything Eddie ever wanted—but to keep her, he'll have to drop a terrifying truth bomb on his loving but stifling family. And Rosie must trust her bruised heart with the guy who nearly crushed it.

Come back to Bangers Tavern for a steamy, laugh-out-loud, opposites-attract romance that ignites in all the worst ways—and the best!

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Dedication

To Duncan, my HEA

Dear Reader: I began writing this series before the Pandemic of 2020 hit. After much careful thought, I decided not to include references to Covid-19 and our current political turmoil. My purpose in writing this series is to provide myself and my readers an escape from harsh reality, so I've set the Bangers Tavern series in a pandemic-free, alternate contemporary time. My best wishes for the health of my readers as we adapt to our new normal and strive for a more just society.

Chapter One

“Ow ow ow, Turn off the damn light.” Eddie Volkov groaned and threw an arm over his eyes to block the blazing sunshine streaming through the skylight above his bed. December mornings should be mercifully dim and gray, not sharp enough to stab his bleary eyeballs.

The hangover kettledrums in his skull pounded him fully awake. *Not December. January first.*

He held his breath and turned his head. Beside him, soft curves undulated beneath the quilt. A blaze of electric blue hair fanned over his spare pillow. As he wound a curl around his trembling finger, images solidified—hot breath, scorching kisses, moans and pleas and silky tattooed skin. Cloud-soft breasts filling his hands, cushy thighs gripping his hips, pulling him closer, tighter. Bright, dark eyes that saw past his awkwardness and right into his defenseless soul. Those same eyes squinched tight as her sweet, fiery pussy clenched around his cock again and again, his name tumbling from her lips.

Rosie. Here. In my bed. After a year of silent pining, his wish had been granted.

He hadn't dared hope she meant anything by it when she kissed him beneath the mistletoe at work. After all, she flirted with all her customers at Bangers Tavern. But more mistletoe kisses followed in the weeks leading up to Christmas, just quick smooches as if she were sampling him, deciding if he was worth a tumble. He put everything he had into those kisses—not too handsy, not too wet, carefully angling his hips away to hide his insistent erection. Each time, she broke away with an enigmatic smile. Never asked for more, never lingered to chat after work.

Yesterday he arrived at Bangers to find the Christmas decorations replaced by New Year's streamers and balloons. No more mistletoe. And that, he figured, that was that. Time to surrender his stupid hopes and get on with his life.

But after closing time, the whole Bangers crew stayed to toast the new year. River, their head bartender, poured a round of champagne sparklers, and then another. Maybe two more. Who knows? Kiara cranked up the music, and they all danced in a giddy, exhausted scrum, kicking up streamers and half-deflated balloons. One by one, his work family took their leave until only he and Rosie remained, swaying and laughing under the spinning disco ball. With his arms around her lush curves, Eddie forgot his awkwardness and asked for one more kiss. Nothing would come of it, right?

Never in his twenty-eight years was he happier to be wrong.

And here she lay, sleeping peacefully beside him, every glorious, tattooed inch of her heating his bed and sparking new hope. *She spent the night. That means she wants more than a one-night stand, right?* Tickly warmth spread from his chest all the way to his fingers and toes. Burying his mile-wide grin in the pillow, he whispered, “Yessss.”

Fearful of waking her, he scooted closer. His painfully hard cock throbbed inside his—check that, no shorts. *I just slept naked beside the most beautiful girl on the planet. Happy New Year to me.* His inner caveman begged to grasp her tight and bury himself inside her. But no, that would be creepy. He needed her wide awake before asking for another round. And maybe she didn’t even like morning sex. Maybe she’d want to pee first, or brush her teeth, or unsnarl her hair. Did he have a spare toothbrush? Should he make coffee? Pancakes? Eggs?

Shit and double shit—his parents expected him for New Year’s brunch. What time? He twisted to reach for his notebook. Not there, on the corner of his nightstand where he always left it. Had he dropped it somewhere? Left it at the bar? The hangover drumline kicked up the tempo as he searched his fuzzy brain.

Whose idea had it been to come back to his place? Memories dissolved and ran like watercolors, leaving a blurred puddle of sensations—breathless whispers, giddy laughter, lingering gazes, tracing the swirls and lines of her tattoos with his lips and tongue. Glorious. Heavenly. Perfect.

Totally worth losing the notebook. He turned back to Rosie’s sleepy-soft body, gingerly slid his arm around her middle, and nestled his chin into the sweet-scented crook of her neck. For the first time in as long as he remembered, he didn’t give a damn about checking his morning to-do list. Who needs daily goals and affirmations when you have a goddess snoring softly in your ear? He pressed his lips to her temple and surrendered to sleep.

“Ow.” Something sharp and scratchy poked the crook of Rosie’s neck. She yawned and stretched, and the pointy thing withdrew with a raspy mumble. *What the...?* Her eyes flew open, then squinted against the piercing sunlight. A warm hand closed on her breast.

Where am I? She sucked in a deep breath and scanned the room. The bed smelled foresty, like cedar and moss. Light streamed through a window in the slanted ceiling. Atop the old-fashioned brass bed, a blue and red quilt covered her and—she bit her lip and turned her head. *Eddie.*

The rotten-sock taste in her mouth and the throbbing behind her eyes left no doubt. Definitely too much booze last night. Nothing wrong with partying on New Year’s Eve, but she’d partied herself right into a sweet, shy co-worker’s bed. That’s why she seldom drank much—more than two drinks, and buh-bye inhibitions. Now what?

Shame tightened her queasy belly. Dawn, her boss at Bangers Tavern, had warned her, after their first mistletoe smooch, “Eddie’s got it bad, kiddo. Tread carefully, okay?”

“Got it bad? Is he sick?” Sure, Eddie was skinny, but with a wiry muscularity that reminded her of Michelangelo’s David, and bright chestnut eyes that held hers for long, heart-thumping moments. At work, she’d sneak glances at his shoulders and biceps and crunchy little butt as he hefted beer kegs. No taller than her, he seemed strong enough to lift a car.

“Eddie’s tender-hearted,” Dawn had told her. “I got no problem with you flirting with customers. Carpe diem, I always say. But workplace romance screws with my staff. Don’t toy with Eddie.”

But why did Dawn hang mistletoe from the bar’s ceiling if she didn’t want people to kiss? Eddie would wait until the boss was in her office, then find some excuse to linger beneath that clump of green, his eyebrows flicking up in a flirtatious question. *You wanna?*

Damn it, she did wanna. His crooked smile was so tempting. And his lips were so soft, his kisses so sweet—unlike the slobbery mauling she got from most guys she dated. Desire simmered under his cool surface, making her want to dive deeper.

New Year's Eve served up the perfect excuse. When the bar staff toasted the new year, it was so easy to land in Eddie's arms. So easy to keep dancing as their coworkers filed out, leaving them alone beneath the kitschy disco ball, its dizzy sparkle whirling them around and around.

And now he slept beside her, sunlight glinting off his wavy brown hair, glossy lashes fanned across his cheekbones, dark scruff shadowing his razor-sharp jaw. So pretty, so vulnerable, so one hundred percent wrong for her. Clean-cut guys like Eddie never stuck around with girls like her. God knows she'd bashed her head against that brick wall enough times to learn her lesson.

Breath held, she gingerly removed his hand from her breast and wriggled toward the edge of the bed. Eddie sighed and squirmed into the space she'd vacated, nuzzling her pillow. *No*, she corrected herself, *his pillow*. *Gotta get out of here*.

Rising on unsteady legs, she turned back for a final look. Sleep melted his solemn daytime expression into peaceful sweetness. His bare shoulders rose on a shiver. As she bent to tuck the quilt around him, her boob brushed his arm.

"Huh?" His eyes fluttered open. His brow rumped, then smoothed as a bleary smile spread across his pillow-creased face. "Good morning," he croaked and pushed up on his elbow. His gaze sharpened as it raked over her naked body. "Wow."

"Yeah. Wow." She waved a limp hand over the bed. "Last night was, uh—really something." She shuffled backward, stifling the impulse to cover her bits. After all, he'd seen every inch of her. He'd sampled it all, too. Twice, if she recalled correctly. The details were still kind of blurry, but she remembered lots of giggling, Eddie's silky hair tickling her inner thighs, the slap of flesh on flesh, and a climax so powerful she nearly blacked out.

Eddie's gaze held hers. "Last night was spectacular." The quilt slipped down, baring his lean chest, tight little pecs dusted with chocolate brown hair, and ab muscles that bunched as he sat up.

She stepped back and bonked into the bookcase, which rattled.

"Easy now." He sprang from the bed, dashed to her side, and reached past her to steady the wobbling shelves. His arm brushed her shoulder.

She was a sucker for muscular forearms, and Eddie's were superb. She bit the inside of her cheek. *God help me*.

He shuffled closer until his hard belly brushed her soft one. In bare feet, they stood eye to eye. His fingertips skimmed down her sides before he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his forehead to hers. "I can't believe you're here."

His cock pulsed against her thigh, firm and getting harder, raising goose bumps on her skin.

"You cold?" He snatched up the bedspread and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Babka's quilt," he said, tucking it under her chin. "Warm you right up."

"Babka?"

"Short for Babushka. Russian for grandma." His fingertip traced a bird design that reminded her of the Chinese phoenix her own Maa Maa Chu embroidered on the pillowcases she gave Rosie. "For your trousseau," she'd said with a hand-pat. Fat chance of that.

"It's beautiful." Rosie clutched the quilt, fighting the urge to wrap it around both of them like a horny burrito. How tempting to tumble back into bed, fully awake and aware. Just one more time before she put a gentle end to this delicious mistake. But that would just increase the chances of hurting Eddie. Better to rip off the Band-aid.

She cleared her throat. "Listen, I'd better go. I've got a family thing." *Total lie*.

“Yeah, me too. Brunch with the fam.” His eyebrows flicked up, his lips parted, and for a moment she was sure he’d ask her to join him. But he only tilted his head and surveyed her as if searching for something—maybe the words to give her a polite brush-off.

Which was fine. Perfect, even. Never mind that sinking feeling in her stomach. If Eddie saw this as just a casual thing between friends, then she had nothing to worry about.

“Better get dressed.” Pretending confidence she didn’t feel, she handed him the quilt and set off in search of her clothes. It felt weird bumbling around his pristine apartment in her birthday suit, but the low whistle behind her proved he liked what he saw. Funny how many skinny guys went for big, curvy girls like her. Despite fashionista propaganda, she never found herself without male admirers for long. Still, those first naked moments could be awkward, especially since they’d also be their last naked moments.

Soft footsteps padded behind her, and a fingertip traced the spiral tattooed on her hip. “So much artwork on your skin. I could look at you all day, Rosie.”

She snatched up her sweater and held it to her chest like a shield. Eddie faced her, eyes hooded, his thick, ruddy cock pointing skyward. Her gut clenched like a fist as she forced the words out. “Look, Eddie. You’re sweet.”

His face crumpled in slow motion.

A sickly rush of regret forced the words out faster. “And hot. Any girl would be lucky to call you hers.”

His chest rose and fell on a shuddering breath. Damn it, couldn’t he make this easier on her?

“But I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Merciless, his dark gaze. His lips pressed into a thin line. “Why not?”

Okay then, honesty it is. “Because we work together. And if...*when* this falls apart, we’ll have to face each other every day.” She cleared her throat to chase away a wobble in her voice. “The Bangers crew is like family to me. I need work to be a place where I’m safe, you know? Where I can just be myself and do my job and not have anyone hammering at me to be something else, someone else.”

“I don’t want you to change, Rosie.” His palms stroked down her sides. “I just want you.”

“Yeah, now. But later when things go south?” She stepped out of his embrace. “That’s how it works, you know. At first, it’s all, ‘Baby, you’re perfect just as you are.’ Later, it’s ‘Why can’t you be more this? Do more that? Not be so damn...much?’ ” She raked her fingers into her hair—or tried to. Last night’s romp had left a huge snarl on the back of her head—and in her gut.

His hands dropped limply to his sides, then tightened into white-knuckled fists. “It’s because of my size, isn’t it?”

Woah, where did that come from? “Eddie, I—”

His brows drew together. “I’ve seen you at work, flirting with those guys.”

“What guys?”

“Huge, all of them. Guess I’m just not your type, huh?” His erection bobbing, he trudged past her and around the bookcase that served as a room divider.

Heart hammering, she stood rooted to the floor. Did she go for big guys? She’d never really noticed. At five-seven, she was taller than some guys, shorter than others, wider than most. So what? Life was hard enough without beating herself up over her size.

Apparently, she’d just triggered a flare-up of Eddie’s comparisonitis. *Shit on a flaming stick.* “Eddie, look.” She stepped around the bookcase and bonked right into him, his face red, his arms full of her discarded clothing.

He pushed the bundle into her arms. “Save it. Better this way. Let’s just chalk this up to a drunk mistake and go back to the way things were.” Turning away, he muttered, “Dawn was right.”

She dropped the clothing and planted her fists on her hips. “Wait, she talked to you too?”

Arms crossed, he nodded. "Shoulda listened. Now, would you please put your damn clothes on? Hard to talk sensibly when you're all..." His gaze raked her from head to toe, then he groaned and turned his back.

"Fine." She yanked her tights up one leg, then nearly toppled over when she lifted the other foot. "You didn't mind looking last night."

"Goddammit, I always like looking at you, Rosie." He huffed. "Should've kept that to myself."

So much for sparing his feelings. She was no damn good at this emotional tippy-toe stuff. She zipped up her short skirt, wiggled into her sweater, and stuffed her panties and bra into the pocket of her coat. Hopeless to comb out her sex-snarled hair, so she tugged her knit beanie over the mess. "For the record, Eddie, I like looking at you too. Don't try to hijack this discussion, okay? We both know that messing around with a coworker is stupid."

"Tell that to Charlie and River." Brushing past her, he threw open his closet and pulled out a perfectly pressed T-shirt and flannel pajama pants.

"That's different."

He whirled on her and glared. "How, exactly?"

Good question. Charlie came back to Tacoma in December to care for her dad, whose leg was mashed in a car crash. She stepped in to cover for their absent head server and ended up staying. Now she and River, Bangers' hot blond bartender, were a giddy, giggly couple, despite the occasional squabble at work.

"Here's how." She ticked off on her fingers. "Charlie does website design, so she doesn't need her job at Bangers to survive. And River's a fantastic bartender, so if they break up, any bar would be glad to have him." Whereas she would never find another boss like Dawn, who let her schedule shifts around her search for a tattoo apprenticeship. She needed all of that—her work family, her flexibility, and the damn good tips she earned at Bangers. She couldn't afford to screw this up.

Eddie's chin dipped, and his voice lost its sharp edge. "You're a fantastic server. Any bar would be glad to have you."

This was so hard! She should've listened to Dawn. But she had plenty of time to kick herself later. Right now, she needed to extricate herself from Eddie's apartment.

"Thank you, Eddie. And I'm really sorry. I acted without thinking—my specialty. I never meant to hurt you." *Or myself.*

He tilted his head and regarded her like some tricky puzzle he was determined to solve. "Why did you?"

"Hook up with you?" She shrugged. "I wanted to. I was a little drunk. You're so cute and quiet, and I wanted to see what's behind that brick wall you carry around."

"But you didn't like what you found?"

Her hand twitched toward his. She forced it back down. "I did, actually. A lot. But now isn't the time for me to be starting something with a new guy."

"With me, you mean."

She stomped her foot. "With anyone, Eddie!" She pointed from her chest to his. "See, this is why we could never work. You're so closed off and suspicious. I'm telling you the truth, okay? I like you, just—"

"Just not enough." He raised both palms. "Okay. If that's how you feel, I won't bother you anymore." His voice rasped like a rusty hinge.

Tears blurred her vision. "I'm so sorry, Eddie."

He squared his shoulders and flashed a wry half-grin. "Don't be. Last night was more fun than I've had in a long time. But I really do have brunch with my parents, so let's end this." He lifted his chin and thrust out his hand. "Friends?"

A hot tear dribbled down her cheek. “Friends.” She clasped his hand tight, knowing if he pulled her in for a comforting hug, she’d lose it. She’d take back everything she said and dive in with both feet.

But he just walked her to the door, pecked her cheek, and let her go.

Rather than watch Rosie walk out his door, Eddie turned his back and started washing their dirty glasses. The front door clicked open, then she squeaked like a dog’s chew toy. He whirled. “Rosie? You okay?”

She’d frozen in the door frame, clutching her coat to her chest. On the landing stood his grandmother holding a tray.

“Babka!” He rushed to the doorway and stepped in front of Rosie. “What are you—”

“Surprise, lapochka!” With her ample hip, she nudged him aside and strode through the door, a woman on a mission. “You missed the big family party in Seattle last night, so Dedka and I came down to toast the new year with you.” She set the tray on his kitchen counter and pinched his cheek. “My hard-working boy.” Leaning past him, she winked at Rosie. “Always working, this one. But I guess you know that, Miss...?”

Rosie croaked as if she’d swallowed her tongue.

Babka poked his ribs with her sharp elbow. “Why didn’t you tell us about your new girlfriend?” In his grandparents’ old-school world, overnight guest equaled serious relationship, not one-shot misadventure. What a freakin’ disaster.

“Babka, this is Rosie Chu, my friend from work.” A truthful statement, sort of. Hopefully, he and Rosie could get back to being friends someday, once they moved past this awkwardness—maybe in a few months, when the memories of their dead-end passion faded.

Right, like that’s gonna happen.

Beaming, Babka flung her arms around Rosie’s middle and squeezed tight. “Such a gorgeous girl. Welcome to the family, sweetheart.”

Rosie’s mouth opened and closed like a startled goldfish. “I, er...” Her wide-eyed gaze met his over the top of Babka’s snow-white head.

“Please,” he silently mouthed, then raised his voice. “Rosie was just leaving. She has a family thing.”

Babka grabbed Rosie’s hand and patted it. “Family is so important, especially on the holidays. You’re what, Korean? How does your family celebrate the new year, darling?”

Great. Let the interrogation begin.

“I’m half Chinese,” Rosie said, “but we just have a normal American brunch—eggs, hash browns...”

Babka gave a conspiratorial wink. “To tell you the truth, not many of us Volkovs even speak Russian anymore. But we still like our Russian traditions. I made pelmenyi—little meat dumplings. Chinese people love dumplings, right? Come try one before you go.”

“Babka—”

With a dismissive wave, she trotted to the door. “Oh, I almost forgot.” She pulled his little moleskin notebook from her skirt pocket. “Found this on the landing.”

Relief duked it out with panic as he tucked the notebook into his pocket. If his sharp-eyed grandmother looked between the covers, she’d have questions about his lists of bar equipment, cocktail recipes, sketches of floor plans...

“Both of you, downstairs. Everyone’s waiting.” Babka flashed a grin over her shoulder. “Hurry before Dedka gobbles all the herring.” The door closed behind her with a bang.

Rosie clapped a hand to her mouth. “Herring?”

“With sour cream. Good for a hangover.” No doubt his grandmother was already telling the rest of the family about his new girlfriend. His single status was the source of much consternation at family gatherings, as if he were nearing his expiration date.

He clasped Rosie’s arms. “Look, I know it’s a lot to ask, but could you come down to my parents’ house for just a few minutes?” When her jaw dropped, he added, “They’re really old-fashioned. If they think I’ve had a one-night stand, they’ll be so disappointed in me.” Panic forced his rusty brain wheels into motion. “Please, Rosie, just let them think we’re dating for now. Later, I’ll tell them we broke up.”

Rosie nibbled her bottom lip, a distractingly sexy gesture. Finally, she sighed. “Well, I guess I’m partly to blame for this mess. If a few dumplings will get you out of it, I’m game.”

Relief whooshed through him as he slid his hands into hers and squeezed. “Thank you. Half an hour tops, I swear. You won’t be late for your family thing?”

A grimace flickered over her features. “No big deal. I’ll call them.” She patted her tangled hair. “But I would like to clean up first.”

He gestured toward the bathroom. “All yours. Want a Raf coffee?”

“A what now?”

“Russian style. Kick-ass espresso with vanilla and foamed cream.”

“Yes please.”

He poured her a generous cup from the thermos Babka brought, dug out a spare toothbrush and fresh towels, and left her to her ablutions while he plated a serving of Babka’s coffee cake.

She emerged fresh-faced, her heavy eyeliner gone, her scarlet lipstick replaced by pale pink gloss. She’d pulled her hair into a low ponytail, too. He’d never seen her looking so subdued. She’d even tied a scarf around her neck to hide her tattooed cleavage. Shrugging, she gave him a sheepish grin. “Best meet-the-parents look I can do on short notice.”

“You look great,” he assured her. “Coffee cake on the counter. Helps shield your stomach from the coffee. And the vodka.”

She blinked rapidly. “The which?”

“Just one shot.” He grinned before shutting the bathroom door. “Like Babka said, we Volkovs are big on tradition.”

He blasted himself fully awake with the world’s fastest shower, brushed his teeth, and neatened up his almost-beard, all the while rehearsing what he’d say to his family—if Rosie hadn’t already come to her senses and fled. But no, once he dressed in pressed khakis, a button-down shirt, and shiny loafers, he found her standing at the counter, a fork in her hand and her phone to her ear. “Ma, seriously, don’t wait for me. I won’t be long. Just grabbing a coffee with a friend.”

She ended the call and gave him a head-to-toe glance. “Are you going to church?”

He straightened his tie. “Just saving myself a lecture. Russian tradition, gotta wear new clothes on New Year’s Day. I’m not screwing up your plans, am I?”

“Nah. It’s just Mom and me, my sister and her boyfriend. Nice guy, but insecure. Always sucking up to Mom.” She curled her lip and adopted an oily tone. “Oh, Ms. Callas, your spanakopita is divine.”

“Spana— Isn’t that Greek?”

“Yeah. Ma’s family came over from Rhodes.” She shrugged into her coat. “So, your parents live downstairs?”

“Pretty pathetic, huh? Twenty-eight and still living over my parents’ garage.”

She snorted. “Not as pathetic as me. I’m twenty-five and still in my childhood bedroom. I could never afford my own place without a thousand roommates.”

He took her hand. “I really appreciate this. I’ll do my best to block their questions. Like I told Babka, we’re just friends from work.”

Another snort—a very sexy sound, coming from her. “C’mon, Eddie. Your grandma just saw me braless with a huge nest of fuck hair. She knows.” She reached for the door. “Shall we?”