
THE PUCK CHARMER

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Single Dad On Tap

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SINGLE DAD ON TAP

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“**R**ain, rain go away.”

I push open the heavy pub door, hold my palm out and lift my face to the dark sky. Any second now, those heavy clouds are going to open up and saturate the downtown streets of Boston. I only live three blocks away, but if I hurry, maybe I can make it before that happens. I snort. As if I have that kind of luck. Still, I have no choice but to hoof it on foot, so I tuck my apron into my backpack, step outside and let the pub door fall shut behind me.

“Here goes nothing.”

I hit the sidewalk and start speed walking home. The jiggling of my ass might not be pretty, but I can't run. No, running and I, well... we're not friends. We never have been, which is why I've been curvy for as long as I can remember. I make it one block, almost halfway there, and I'm about to throw up a hallelujah when a bright flash zigzags across the sky, followed by rumbling thunder, and big fat rain drops.

“Well, hell.”

I put my backpack over my head and pick up the pace. Maybe my father was right. Maybe I should take his advice

and borrow a few bucks from my Stanford college fund to buy an old beater for rainy days like these. With my Dad's ill health, he doesn't drive anymore, but at least his trips to the hospital are less and less frequent.

I'm not one to ask others for things, and getting an Uber every now and then to take him to his appointments is a lot cheaper than owning a car. Not that we ever had to rely on an Uber. Jesse, the guy whose lived next door to me since we were kids, and owner of Burgers and Brews Pub where I work, has always been there to lend a helping hand. But he's a single dad, who works all hours running his own business. With those kinds of demands tugging at him, he doesn't need to be taking on my problems.

Speaking of my neighbor...

I turn my head as his vehicle slows next to me on the street. The rain-soaked window slides open, and a little sigh catches in my throat when my gaze lands on his handsome face. I resist the urge to smooth my hand over my wet hair and primp like a love-struck teenager. The effort would be futile. We're friends, and he'd never see me as anything more.

"Get in," he says, and I nod. I step off the curb and my foot lands in a deep puddle. Well, isn't my day just getting better and better. I curse under my breath as he leans over to open the door for me and I slide into the passenger seat. I set my wet backpack on the floor beside my drenched shoe, and push my hair from my face.

"I'm getting your car all wet."

He shrugs and casts me a fast glance. My heart wobbles, the way it always does when I become the sole focus of his attention. "It's just a car."

With so much responsibility on this man's shoulders, I have no idea how he remains so laid back and easygoing. But I guess that's what makes him a great bar owner/bartender. I've known him long enough to know he's given up a lot to

take over the pub after his parents died years ago, when his son was less than a year old. Burgers and Brews was their pride and joy—it's been in the family for generations—and Jesse is loyal to a fault, giving up his dreams so he could keep theirs alive. It's commendable, yet I'm not sure that's what they wanted for him. Not that I could tell him that. It's not really my business. But I hate that the man threw his dreams away.

He glances over his shoulder to check for traffic. "You should have called me."

"It's your day off, Jesse. Besides, I'm a big girl. A little rain doesn't hurt me. I'm not made of sugar, you know." I peer into the back seat. "Hey Lucas," I say. "How are you?"

Lucas doesn't acknowledge me. He rarely does and I've gotten used to his behavior over the years. With high-functioning autism, he has trouble engaging socially. I wait for an answer, but sweet little Lucas, all of five years old, continues to stare at the dinosaur book in his hand.

"Lucas," Jesse says, his voice deep. "Olivia is talking to you." Lucas lifts his head and stares at his dad in the rearview mirror. "Answer her, please."

"I'm good," he says, and goes back to his book.

"I think he's going to grow up to be a writer," I say. "Or a dinosaur." Jesse flashes me a smile. The love he has for his son fills his eyes and spills onto his handsome face. My God, does he have to be so damn good looking? What did I do in a past lifetime to live next to the hottest guy on the planet—one who had a baby with my best friend and has never seen me as anything more than the chubby girl next door? He might be every girl's type, but I've come to terms with the fact that I'm not his.

"He does love books," he says.

I grin. "He takes after his dad." The smile falls from his face and I mentally curse myself. Shit, he's probably thinking

about how he's glad Lucas doesn't take after his mom, Kylie. She up and left when Lucas was closing in on two years old—after his diagnosis. She'd been back and forth a few times, always causing chaos in their lives, but no one has heard from her in the last year. She just ghosted us all.

Kylie and I became instant friends when she moved here with her mother and stepdad in tenth grade. She was loud, fun and vivacious, and I never knew why she wanted to be friends with the nerdy bookworm. There were times I thought it was to get closer to Jesse, but she didn't need me for that. She was like a damn glowstick and attracted attention everywhere she went. Top that off with a rich stepfather who tried to buy her affection, and in my books, she had it all. I was happy for her, though. I'm just not happy with the way things worked out between her and Jesse. I want him to be happy.

"How was work?" Jesse asks, changing the subject.

"Busy. People have nothing to do but hang out, play pool and drink beer with this wet weather. Plus, tonight is paint night." I chuckle. "People are coming in early to grab a bite to eat beforehand. Dad is there now, eating and drinking and guarding the best seat in the house."

He chuckles. "God forbid anyone who tries to steal Jack's seat at the front of the class." He casts me a quick glance, that dimple on his right cheek toying viciously with my libido. "Like father, like daughter."

I whack him, and wish I hadn't. When my hand hits his taut stomach muscles, ribbons of need reverberate through me, hitting all my girly spots. "I'm not that bad," I say. It's a lie. I am. I'm a nerd, the girl who sits at the front of the class, and take copious amounts of notes. It's not a bad thing, though. All my hard work has paid off, and come September, I'll be attending Stanford's Human Resource Management master's program. I want to be a human

resource consultant and help organizations, plus moving Dad to a warmer climate will be so much better for his rheumatoid arthritis. The cold and damp here in Boston is very hard on him.

Jesse pulls into my driveway and I snatch up my wet backpack. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

“Nah, you’ve been doing so much at the pub, I owe you one.”

“Happy to help.” He’s been such a good friend, always been there for me, and I like being there for him, too.

“Okay, go,” he says, glancing out the front window as the rain slows, like it’s taunting me, daring me to step from the vehicle. “Try to run between the drops.”

I laugh, jump from the car and run. As I hurry up my driveway, another cloud bursts open right over my head and drenches me. Yelping, I dash up the three steps to the old bungalow I’ve lived in my entire life, even when attending Boston University.

I turn and wave to Jesse and Lucas when I reach the covered porch. Jesse backs out of my driveway and pulls into his beside mine as I search my backpack. Where the hell is my key? I put it in there this morning. I specifically remember doing it. I crouch and empty the contents of my bag onto the welcome mat.

“Where the heck is it?”

The wind picks up, and a chill goes through me. I could call Dad, but I don’t want him walking home in this, and I don’t want him to lose his seat. I give a resigned sigh, and spot Jesse and Lucas heading inside their home. He usually has a spare key but last week, I had to get it from him when I couldn’t find mine—and of course I forgot to give it back. This is becoming a bit of a habit. I guess I’ll have to take shelter at their place and wait out the storm. Dad’s old friend Heidi, who he paints, plays bingo and goes to garage sales

with, will drive Dad home after they finish painting, until then...

I dash down the stairs and run to the neighboring house. I rap on the door and a few seconds later it swings open.

“What’s up?” Jesse asks, frowning as he takes in the wet mess that is me. “I thought you were going to run between the drops.”

I point upward. “There was a big-ass cloud itching for a fight.”

“It obviously won.” His gaze drops, and I put my backpack in front of my soaked chest—not that he was ogling me or anything. He wasn’t. But I look like I just came from a wet T-shirt contest and don’t want him to think I’m flaunting or flirting or anything. Not that I’m good at either one of those things.

“I can’t find my key.”

“Again?”

“I know.”

He widens the door. “Then come on in.”

I step inside and a cold shiver goes through me as he swings the door shut. “It’s so weird. I know I put it in my bag.”

He frowns. “You don’t think someone at the pub is going into your bag, do you?”

“I can’t imagine. It was in my locker in your office.” I shake my head. “Maybe I just forgot. My days are all running together.”

“That’s because you’ve been working too hard.”

He’s not wrong. I’ve been working extra hours to save for Stanford. Dad gave up work at the paper when he was diagnosed with respiratory disease, and is living on a pension. He’s offered to help but I’m not taking his retirement money, and this is something I want to do on my own. Besides, I don’t mind helping Jesse out and lightening his load.

“Things should slow down tomorrow after the firefighters’ pancake breakfast,” I say.

“I’ll be there to help out first thing, too.” Gorgeous blue eyes lock on mine as he steps closer and runs his hands up and down my arms to create heat with friction. He’s a smart guy, one of the smartest I know, but he has no idea what his touch and close proximity do to me. Maybe I should be in theater instead of human resources. I’ve gotten so used to acting like his mere presence does nothing to me. Truthfully, I pride myself on my honesty, except for when it comes to my feelings for this man.

“Right now, we need to get you out of those wet clothes,” he says.

Oh God.

As my mind envisions exactly how I’d like to remove them, my body warms all over.

Get it together, Olivia.

I might have had the hots for him since I was a teen, but he doesn’t think about me like that. No, to him, I’m the girl next door, his buddy, friend-zoned forever. No way would I ever try something and risk rejection or awkwardness between us. Having him in my life as a friend is better than not having him at all. Not to mention his ex was my best friend.

“I’m just getting Lucas something to eat and settled. Why don’t you grab some clothes from my dresser and jump into a hot shower.”

I peer around his shoulders and spot Lucas at the kitchen table. “Are you sure I’m not interrupting?” Routine is very important to Lucas, and I don’t want to do anything to disrupt it.

“Of course not.”

Even if I was in his way, cutting into his precious time

with his son, and messing with their routines, he'd never turn me away. He's seriously one of the nicest guys I know.

My teeth chatter when I say, "That sounds perfect, actually."

"Head on up. Lucas is just having a snack."

I nod and he turns sideways to clear the path. I walk past him in the narrow entranceway, my body brushing his. It's all I can do to swallow a moan as I bump his hard muscles and revel in the way his heat wraps around me.

I dart up the stairs and walk to his room. During college, he lived in an apartment, but after his parents passed away, he moved into their home to singlehandedly raise his son. I step into his bedroom and take a breath, my heart somewhere around the vicinity of my throat.

It's been a while since I've been in here, and the once messy bedroom, clothes on the floor, and football trophies everywhere, is now clean and stark, giving an un-lived-in feeling. I understand he has to keep his space clean and minimal for his son's sake—everything in order helps Lucas keep a calmness in his chaotic life. Jesse does an amazing job caring for his son, but it does beg the question, who the hell is caring for him? From the looks of his room, this man isn't living, he's simply going through the motions of getting from one day to the next. He needs more, he needs something for himself. That much I know. But he hasn't been with anyone since Kylie. I hate that she bolted and broke his heart.

Pushing those sad thoughts down, I step up to his dresser. My hand goes to my stomach as I take in the silver frame showcasing a picture of father and son. Emptiness takes up residence inside of me. Two years ago, the doctors told me my chances of conceiving were slim to none. Thanks to my painful endometriosis, and the severe scarring on my tubes, movement of egg and sperm through the tube is near impossible. If I ever get married, it would have to be to a guy who is

okay with no kids. Not that I see marriage in my future. I have to get over the crush on the man whose room I'm in before I can move on.

I tug open Jesse's dresser and find a pair of sweats and a big T-shirt. I glance over my shoulder to make sure the coast is clear before I bring them to my nose and inhale his fabric softener. Pathetic, I know.

God, I am such a creeper.

Footsteps sound on the stairs, followed by Jesse's voice as I make my way to the main bathroom and shut the door behind me. I strip off, not an easy chore when my jeans are soaking wet. I finally get undressed and hop into the shower, turning the spray to super-hot. I revel in the heat and lather my body with Jesse's body wash. Now I'm going to smell like him all night, which probably isn't a good thing. No, it will just have my thoughts going in a direction they have no right going.

Once I'm warm and clean, I step from the shower and reach for a towel. Before I can get my hands on it, the bathroom door flings open and hits the wall with a thud.

"Jesus," I yelp, and nearly slip on the floor.

Jesse comes racing in behind Lucas, yelling at him to stop, but alas, it's too late. My hot neighbor comes to an abrupt halt, his eyes wide and horrified as he stands behind his son, gaping at my nakedness.

Dear ground, please open up and swallow me whole.

He grabs Lucas by the shoulders and turns him around, and gentleman that he is, he pinches his eyes shut.

"Sorry," he says quickly. "I don't think he realized you were in here and he got away before I could stop him."

I snatch the towel and wrap it around my body. "It's okay," I say, even though I'm completely and utterly mortified. "It was an accident."

With his eyes still closed, he points. "There's a towel."

“Yeah, I know.” Clearly this man does *not* want to see me naked. “I’m covered.”

He peels one eye open, and his gaze drops to take in the fluffy blue towel tied around me. Relief washes through him and his shoulders relax.

“I uh...I’ll let you get dressed,” he says. “I’m going to read Lucas a story and get him settled in. Why don’t you meet me downstairs when you’re done.”

“Sure,” I say, except if I get there first, I plan to run all the way to Canada.

Holy Mother of Hotness!
I tug on my hair—and adjust my pants—as I pull the bathroom door shut and take Lucas back to his bedroom. I always knew Olivia was well built and curvy, but seeing her without clothes, getting a up close and personal view of all her gorgeous nakedness is not something a man can erase from his memory—ever. The gentleman in me forced me to close my eyes, but my traitorous cock however, encouraged me to stand there and drink her in. My God, those breasts, those sweet pink nipples...

Stop!

Do *not* think about her like that.

Truth be told, it's not the first time I've noticed her innocent sexuality. But as a girl who is completely career-driven, her sights set on Stanford, she's completely oblivious to the men around her, blind to what others see in her, and how she commands the attention of a room the second she walks in. I've caught more than one guy at the bar eyeing her with want. But she gives off unattainable vibes, whether she realizes it or not. Is she holding out for someone in particular?

I'm not sure, but Christ, when she sashays around in those form-fitting jeans, and a tight T-shirt that displays ample breasts ...well, my friends, that's what fantasies are made of. At least mine are. Yeah, it's true. I've jacked off a few times with her on my brain. But it's wrong. I can't think of my friend like that—a girl I've known and lived beside forever—and she doesn't think about me like that. In fact, when her best friend Kylie hit on me in college, it was Olivia who encouraged me to go for it.

We step into Lucas' room and I work to wipe the image from my brain, although I'm afraid it just may be burned into my retinas forever now. How I'm going to meet her downstairs and play it cool is beyond me, but I have to. No matter what, I can't start anything with Olivia. Our lives are on different paths, and she's headed to California for school in a few months. She has dreams to fulfil, and she'd only come to resent anything or anyone who tampered with her ambitions.

“Okay buddy, which book do you want tonight?”

Lucas growls, and holds his hands up. “Dinosaurs.”

“Of course,” I say and laugh. My boy has an obsession with prehistoric animals. “Which one?”

He runs to his massive bookcase and grabs one of the many books on dinosaurs. “This one.”

I tug his sheets down and tap the bed, but I'm momentarily distracted when the bathroom door opens and the stairs creak.

Be cool, dude.

Lucas jumps into bed, and I pull the sheets up. I crack the book and for the next thirty minutes I read it to him numerous times until his lids grow heavy. I set the book down, and my heart pinches as I kiss him goodnight.

It's not right that he's growing up without a mom, and on one hand I'm angry that Kylie just up and left—causing chaos in our life whenever she returned home for a visit—yet on the

other, she had dreams she wanted to fulfill in Hollywood. She grew to resent us both, and when I took over the bar instead of going to med school, she took off for bigger and better things. I guess we just weren't enough, and the way I see it, two is better than three, if that third person harbors resentment. While I hate that Lucas is motherless, he does have my grandmother, and Olivia. They both adore him. I hope that's enough for him because right now, I'm not interested in bringing another woman into our lives. If Kylie ever materializes again, I'd have to think long and hard on whether I'd even let her see Lucas again, especially if she's just going to blow in and blow out again. Right now, my focus is keeping my son happy and healthy and turmoil free, and keeping my business running, and that's all I need.

The front door creaks open and I slip from Lucas' room and descend the stairs two at a time. I spot Olivia standing on the stoop with her palm up.

"Going somewhere?"

She turns, her eyes wide. "You startled me."

The second I see her vivacious body in my clothes, my dick swells. I take one breath and then another, and resist the urge to push her up against the wall and bury myself in her.

Man, I need to get out more often.

"Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you."

Her eyes narrow as I continued to stand there and take in her body. In a self-conscious gesture, she folds her arms across her chest.

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

Oh, yeah, something is definitely wrong. Because I shouldn't be wanting her like this.

I scrub the scruff on my face. "No, it's just strange seeing you in my clothes. Caught me off guard is all."

"I've been in your clothes before. Remember when I was here for your birthday and spilled juice all over my dress?"

“Yeah, but you were eight, and we were almost the same size then.”

She lifts her arms and lets them flop to her sides. “Kind of big now, huh?”

“Yeah,” I say, as I think about climbing in there with her.

Don't make this awkward, dude.

“I put my clothes in your dryer. I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all.”

She crinkles her cute little nose. “They should be ready soon and I can get out of these.”

“No hurry,” I say, enjoying the view far too much. “Come on. Your dad won't be back for a bit, so let's hang out.”

“It's been a long time since we just hung out,” she says.

She's right. It's been a long time since it was just the two of us. As kids, our dads were great friends—she lost her mom when she was small—and my mom took her under her wing. When they died, the loss was hard for her too. But she hung out here a lot, and even though she was a couple of years younger, we always got along. By the time high school hit, we both went off and did our own thing, and in my last year of college, I hooked up with her best friend, and that's what brought us back together again. Olivia was there all through Kylie's pregnancy, and often times it was just her and me when Kylie was resting or out with her parents, who had no trouble showing their disappointment when I took over the bar instead of going to med school. I guess if I didn't make more of myself, I wasn't good enough for their daughter.

“Movie and ice cream?” I ask.

She grins. “Only my favorite way to wind down.”

“I know.” I pick up the remote and hand it to her. “Find us something. I'll grab the ice cream.”

She stifles a yawn as she plops down on the sofa and tucks her legs in behind her. Damn she looks good enough to eat. I stare for a moment, and she angles her head.

“Jesse? Is everything...okay?”

“Yeah, just ah, things on my mind.” Things I have no right to be thinking about. “Ice cream is on the way.”

I dash to the kitchen, grab the small tub of ice cream from the freezer and momentarily think about shoving the tub down my pants. I need to cool the fuck off. Two spoons in one hand, the tub in the other, I step back into the living room to find her, legs stretched out, on the sofa. She tugs them back and sits up.

“Rocky Road. Mmm, my favorite.” She licks her lips and ah, yeah, that messes with my ability to think with clarity.

I gesture toward the TV. “What did you find?”

“A romantic comedy.”

I groan. “Seriously. We can’t watch something with car chases and buildings blowing up?”

“No,” she says with a tip of her chin. “You need to expand your horizons.”

She turns up the volume. “How many times have you seen this one?” I ask as Jennifer Lopez gets her shoe stuck in a grate.

“Hush,” she says and digs her spoon into the ice cream. My heart beats a little faster as she slides the spoon into her mouth and makes a sexy bedroom noise that teases my cock. Okay, maybe ice cream was a bad idea.

“Good, huh?” I ask. Shit, was that my voice?

“Delicious.”

As I consider something else I’d like to see sliding between her lips, she settles against me and digs her spoon in again. Since I’m not a total masochist, I turn my focus to the TV. She moans again and my gaze slides her way. Yeah, okay maybe I am.

We go silent for a long time, and polish off the ice cream as the movie comes to an end. A small sigh escapes her lips.

“What?” I ask.

"I love the way he looks at her."

I chuckle, and take in the wistful look spreading across her pretty face. "You're a true romantic at heart, aren't you?"

She shrugs. "Maybe." She gives a heavy sigh. "I wish a guy would look at me like that," she says quietly, to herself—like I wasn't meant to hear it. Oh, but I did hear it.

"Yeah?" I ask. "Anyone in particular?"

As if she said too much, her eyes widen and she inches away, pressing her back against the arm of the sofa.

She shakes her head fast and blurts out, "What? No." Her forceful protest makes me think she's not telling the truth.

I grab her legs and put them on my lap. It's not something I haven't done before, but this time, and I can't explain why, it feels more...intimate. "So, you *do* like someone. What's his name?"

"It's nothing. No one," she says, but I'm not about to let it go. I care about her, and I'd love to see her find the love of her life, a guy who will treat her the way she deserves to be treated.

"Come on, you can tell me," I say, and push down the strange niggling feeling of jealousy.

She makes a move to sit up, but I squeeze her legs and hold her down. She takes a fast breath, a hint of color crawling up her neck. Whoa. Either she likes it when I restrain her, or she really doesn't want to talk about this.

Do not think about restraining her, dude.

Do not think about tying her down and having your way with her.

Dammit, I'm thinking about it.

"It's nothing...no one," she says again, with a dismissive wave of her hand this time. "Can we please talk about something else."

"Nope," I tease. "I want to know all about lover boy."

She rolls her eyes so hard it nearly gives me a headache. “Lover boy? Are you twelve?”

“Sometimes,” I joke. I’m well past puberty, but my dirty thoughts aren’t.

“Look there’s nothing to tell. I’m invisible to him.”

I open my mouth, but she turns her head when a car door slams next door. She tugs her legs away and jumps up. “Looks like Dad is home.”

I stand and walk her to the door as she slides her feet into her damp work shoes. “Thanks for letting me hang out.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” That sexy pink color moves into her cheeks, as I lean toward her. Unable to help myself, I run the hem of her T-shirt between my thumb and finger. My knuckles brush warm, soft skin, and my throat dries. I’ve been able to stifle my want for this woman for a long time, but seeing her naked, all that beautiful creamy skin, must have snapped the last thread holding me together.

Stop flirting, dude. She is not the girl for you.

She blinks rapidly, and furrows her brow. “No, what?”

“You’re still in my clothes.”

Her head jerks up. “Oh right. I’ll change.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I casually roll one shoulder. “You can get your clothes tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay,” she says and looks like she’s about to bolt. Not that I blame her, I’m very close to crossing a line here, and she obviously doesn’t want that.

“One more thing.”

She grips the doorknob tighter. “What?”

“If you really want the guy, I say go for it. Make him notice you.”

Make him notice you.

As I tie my apron around my waist, Jesse's parting words from last night continue to ping around in my lust-rattled brain. It's all I could think about in bed. That, and the way his knuckles brushed my stomach when he ran the cotton T-shirt I was wearing between his fingers. Did something happen between us last night, or am I just imagining things? I tossed that question around until the wee hours of the morning, which is why I'm standing here trying to stifle a yawn as the firetrucks pull into the pub's parking lot.

Today, the firefighters will be giving demonstrations to the community. Burgers and Brews will be providing the pancakes, and donating all the profits. The whole event is to raise funds for the hospital's burn unit. It was something Jesse's family started years ago, and I'm happy to see my boss carrying on with the very important cause.

"Ooh, I do love a hot firefighter," Tara says as she steps up next to me and curls a long strand of hair around her finger. Tara is a few years older than me. She's gorgeous, funny and

quick, and I'm not sure what her story is, but she's definitely anti-marriage. *Why eat the cake when you can sample different icing every weekend?* Her words, not mine.

"Who doesn't," I tease. Yeah, after catching me staring at Jesse a time or two, it's better for her to think I have the hots for one of the firefighters. I don't want anyone at the pub getting the wrong idea—or rather, the right idea. The last thing I want is for rumors to spread and threaten the long-standing friendship we have.

"Which one do you like?"

"I think you mean, which one don't I like," I tease, and it brings on a laugh.

Colin, who grew up two blocks over, climbs from the cab of the truck. He's a nice guy, and I like talking to him. A gorgeous woman dressed in short shorts and a tank top walks up to him and a smile spreads across his face. I watch the exchange; study the way the woman is flirting with him. I'd probably look like a chimpanzee jacked on Red Bull if I moved my hips and arms like that. But this woman is pulling it off and it seems like Colin appreciates her efforts.

"Oh my God," Tara says, her eyes going wide. "You like Colin."

"Of course, I like—"

My words die on my tongue when Jesse steps up to us. He puts his mouth near my ear and says, "Looks like your secret is out."

Oh, crap. I should correct him—tell him I like Colin as a friend only—but maybe letting him think I have the hots for the hot firefighter is better than him figuring who I'm really into.

I take in Jesse's grin as he hands me a paper cup filled to the rim with coffee. He's always so thoughtful, such a gentleman. Is it wrong of me to wish he wasn't always a nice guy? To wish he'd take me in the back room, tear my clothes from my

body and ravish me? Those erotic images instantly heat me up, and deep between my legs, my clit quivers.

Oh boy!

"Thanks," I say gratefully and take a much-needed sip, wishing it was ice water and I could pour it over my head.

"You looked like you could use a cup." His eyes narrow, take me in, and I try not to fidget under his inspection. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," I lie. "Just a bit tired today. The rain pounding on my window kept me up."

"You should go for it," Tara says and my gaze jerks to hers.

"Go for what?" I blurt out quickly. God, is my attraction to Jesse that obvious?

She flips her hand over. "Go for Colin."

"Oh," I say, my head bobbing. "Right."

She arches a manicured brow. "Who did you think I meant?"

"Colin. I thought you meant Colin." The truth is I'm a wallflower, a book nerd. Even if I did like Colin, I'm not the kind of girl a popular guy like him would go for. "I'd have to be on fire for him to notice me," I say, putting an end to the conversation. I'm about to walk away when Tara grabs my arm and produces a lighter.

"Here you go," she says with a grin.

"Ah, she's not setting herself on fire, Tara," Jesse says.

"No, but maybe she could start a small fire in her backyard, or better yet, her bedroom. Then once she has him there, they can set the sheets on fire, if you know what I mean."

"We all know what you mean." Jesse crosses his arms and shakes his head at the ludicrous suggestion. "And she's not doing any of that. Fires can easily get out of hand. It's a bad idea."

“Bad ideas.” She breathes deep and a wistful look comes over her as she exhaled. “Don’t you just love them.”

“No, I don’t, and that’s not how to get any guy’s attention.”

He’s right. Nothing good can come from a bad idea. My gaze goes back and forth between the two of them as they discuss my lack of love life.

“I’m right here,” I say. “I can hear you both.” I take another big sip of my coffee.

Ignoring me, Tara frowns at Jesse. “Why are you cock blocking, Boss? You want her for yourself or something?”

I nearly choke on my coffee as Jesse’s head rears back.

“Okay, enough,” I say. “I’m not setting anything, or anyone, on fire, and I’m not his type anyway, so can we all please just get back to work. I have a million pancakes to make.”

“That’s crazy. You’re hot, Olivia. You’re every guy’s type.” While I appreciate her vote of confidence, I’m smart enough to know I’m not. Guys like thin girls, and I’ve been through enough fad diets to know I’ll never be gracing any magazine cover. Not that I want to. Men might not notice me, but over the years, I’ve come to accept my curves. I haven’t learned to love them yet, but they’re here to stay, so hopefully one day, we’ll be best friends. No one has filled that role since Kylie left.

Tara snaps her finger and looks me up and down. “Get it, girl.”

“What I’m getting is a headache.” I’m about to step away when Tara’s hand on my arm stops me.

“And that’s why you need to get laid.” She glances at Jesse. “And I know you agree, Jesse.”

“I...what?” He swallows. “I never said that.”

Tara stares him down. “You never *not* said that, either.”

Is this conversation really happening? “Okay, now I really do have a headache.”

“Wait,” Tara says, “I got it. I know how to get him to notice you without this.” She flicks the lighter before shoving it back into her pocket.

“I’m not—”

“I know guys.” She winks at me. “I know how they think.”

“Really now?” Jesse asks, and raises a skeptical brow. “This I want to hear.”

“Yeah, you guys are easy. So, here’s what you need to do, Olivia.” She leans into me conspiratorially. “Show him you’re the hottest girl in town. More than friendship material.”

My jaw drops open. “Uh...” I mumble, not even knowing what to say to that.

She shrugs easily. “Guys want what other guys have.” Jesse opens his mouth, but she reaches over and pinches his lips shut. “I suggest you and Jesse pretend you’re an item.” She chuckles. “He’s the hottest ticket in town, you know, right?”

Oh, I know, but I don’t say that.

“I don’t think—” Jesse tries to say between his pinched lips.

“That’s right, guys don’t *think*,” Tara says. “You two pretend you’re an item. Laugh, flirt, kiss in public, and act like happy lovers. Once Colin sees you in Jesse’s arms, believe me, he’ll take notice and it will open up all kinds of possibilities for you.”

“Why would he ask me out if I’m with someone else?” I toy with the plastic lid on my coffee cup, needing something to do with my restless hands. “I don’t get it.”

She stares at me like I might have a tumor, then shakes her head. “Don’t you see? Being with Jesse is just to get him to notice you. Then you guys can stage a breakup.” She lets go of Jesse’s lips. “I know you want to help her out, Boss. I

mean, you want her to find someone as much as I do, and Colin is one hell of a catch if you ask me.”

One, no one is asking her, and two, when she phrases it like that, it leaves Jesse no back door to escape this insane plan. He’s a good guy. The best guy I know, and he’d do anything for those he cares about. But no way would I let him do this, and honestly, I can’t imagine he’d agree anyway.

I open my mouth to give him an out, when he blurts out, “I’ll do it.”

My jaw falls open, and I stare at him like *he’s* the one with the brain tumor. “You can’t be serious.”

He shrugs. “It worked in that romantic comedy you made me watch last night.”

“That’s not how real life works, Jesse.” Real life is messy, and complicated, and I’m not about to play with anyone’s emotions—mainly mine. My God, if I had to pretend to be Jesse’s girl, have him touch me, show public displays of affection, it would be emotional suicide at best.

“Well we’ll never know if we don’t try, right?” he says.

I angle my head, spot Colin coming our way. Tara makes a squealing sound. “Here he comes.”

I wince at the high pitch in her voice and before I even realize what’s happening, Jesse slides his arm around my waist and tugs me to him. My body meshes with his, and shivers of need zing through me. I pray to God he doesn’t feel it. His Caribbean blue eyes lock on mine as his head dips, his lips closing over mine.

Dear God, what is going on here?

I’m not sure, and my brain is releasing so many endorphins, I’m not able to think about it with any sort of intelligence. Nope, all I’m able to do is revel in the sweetness of his mouth, the softness of his lips, and the small moan climbing out of his throat. Here I thought I was good at acting. This man could win an Oscar for this performance.

From the corner of my eye, I briefly catch Colin cast a glance our way as he walks past and heads inside the pub. Jesse's hands tighten around my back, and mine slide to his shoulders, taking pleasure in his muscles.

What the hell am I doing?

Tara's chuckle snaps some sense back into me. I break away, and pray to God I don't look or sound as breathless as I feel.

Tara grins. "Wow, for a second there, I didn't think you two were pretending."

I touch my tingling lips, and struggle to form a coherent sentence. "Of course we were."

"Yeah, yeah we were," Jesse adds, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

I put a shaky hand on my hip. "Jesse and I are friends, Tara, and this was *your* ludicrous idea."

"Ludicrous? I think not." She jerks her thumb over her shoulder. "Did you see the way Colin was looking at you?"

Not really, I was too busy kissing Jesse.

"Yeah, he was looking," I say. "I don't think..." I turn to Jesse. This is such a bad idea, and bad ideas are not good, right? He probably realizes that now, too. I expect to find him edgy, unsure, but no, he's swiping his tongue over his bottom lip like he's savoring the taste of me. What the ever-loving hell is going on? Either I'm being punked, or I'm having some strange sex dream about my neighbor—again.

Tara grins. "This is so going to work." She turns from me, and I swear to God I hear her mumble something about Jack being right.

"What was my father right about?" I ask. They better not have been discussing my love life.

"What?" she spins back around. "I never said anything about your father."

"I'm pretty sure you did."

“Oh, I said, Colin was jacked.” She lifts her arms, and showcases her biceps. “He’s so big and muscular. I can see why you like him.” She winks. “Rumor has it the hot firefighter is great at rescuing kitties.” She does air quotes around the word kitties.

“I don’t have a...” I stop, and groan when my brain catches on to what she’s really saying. “Oh my God, Tara.”

“And don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. I won’t let anyone know you’re...” She pauses to put her fingers in the air before adding, “pretending.”

“Why did you just do air quotes around pretending?” I ask.

She blinks innocently. “Oh, no reason.”

“Time to get back to work, Tara,” Jesse says as he shakes his head.

“Okeydokey.” She flashes us a bright smile before disappearing inside, leaving Jesse and me standing there.

A new kind of energy arcs between us, and his knuckles brush mine. “Hey,” he says. “I hope that was okay. I mean, I was just trying to help out.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” I tell him, working to calm my racing heart.

“I know. Maybe I want to.”

“I feel like a damn charity case.”

“You’re not. Far from it. I think Tara might be on to something, actually. Colin really was taking notice.”

My God, what have I gotten myself in to here?

“We can’t let people think—”

Before I can finish, Colin steps outside, and Jesse pulls me to him again. His lips find mine, and I whimper as he kisses me. This time his tongue slides inside, soft and leisurely at first, but then he deepens the kiss, exploring the depths of me.

My God, I like this. I like it a lot.

But pretending we're a couple to get a guy I like only as a friend to notice me is insane.

Insanely delicious.

Nevertheless, I'm a smart girl and giving up these hot kisses would be foolish, right? Especially when I've been dreaming about them forever and they're so damn perfect. Maybe for the next couple of weeks before I head out west, we could keep on making out in public. Maybe I could simply enjoy this intimacy between us, and maybe, just maybe, it will help me get Jesse out of my system once and for all, and when I move away, I can start fresh. And hey, maybe this is what Jesse needs to. Something to shake up his world, and get him living again. Yeah, maybe I'm doing this for him more than I'm doing it for myself.

Maybe I do have a brain tumor.

His lips leave mine, and I can barely breathe as he glances over his shoulder to watch Colin move toward his fire truck. "Women really have a thing for firefighters huh?"

True. Although some have a thing for the boy next door.

"Yeah, I guess." I narrow my eyes. "Why would you do this, Jesse? What's in it for you?"

He opens his mouth, then closes it again. He glances down, like he's in deep thought and when his eyes meet mine again, he says, "I get to help out a friend."

Why do I get the sense he was going to say something entirely different?

"Too bad the sun is shining today," Tara says, coming out with pitchers of drinking water for the firefighters. "We could have turned this into a wet T-shirt contest. Now that would have raised some serious bucks."

Jesse shakes his head. "This is a family event, Tara."

"Well, I'm just saying. It might not be a bad fund-raising event some evening."

"Count me out," I say, and when I turn back to Jesse, his

gaze has dropped to my breasts. Why do I get the feeling he likes what he sees?

“Yeah, I think she’d win too, Boss,” Tara says, and my head jerks up.

“I didn’t mean...I’m not...” Jesse says, stumbling over his words, but there is no denying he was checking me out. Yeah, clearly this man isn’t getting out enough and has to start dating again. Maybe pretending to be my guy will make him realize he does need a woman in his life. That thought almost makes me snort. What kind of woman wants to stir the libido of a guy she’s crazy about, so he can find himself a new woman? A crazy one! Yeah, that’s me. Next time, though, I need to help him pick someone who will stick around, and care about him and his son as much as I do.