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WHAT THE FUCK had just happened? The snippy girl from behind the bar kissed him. Like, full-on, open-mouthed, kissed him.

“Pretend to be my boyfriend, just for tonight, and your nachos and beer tab are on the house.”

“Is this a—” Colton intended to say, “joke,” but the girl locked her lips on him once more, shutting him up.

So, Colton decided to roll with it. Why the hell not? Seemed like a decent deal to him, free beer and nachos for a little bit of spit swapping? He pulled away. “As much as I want?”

“As much as you want, what?” she whispered, her face flushed, like she was angry.

Weird chick.

“Beer. Nachos.” He wet his lips and was about to say “kisses,” because—damn—the girl might be a harpy but she wasn’t half bad in the kissing department.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” She blinked hard. “No, wait.” It was like she was doing a calculus problem in her head, her eyes rolled up and to the side, and her ruby lips moved silently, like she was figuring something out. “Well, within reason. Like you better be legal to drive home to the Silver Tree Ranch afterwards.”

“How’d you know where I live?”

“God!” She huffed out a breath and rolled her eyes again. Whatever he’d done to piss her off was clearly still irritating her, despite her lusty lip on lip action.

“Is this him?”

A dark-haired beauty leaned on the bar, a hand outstretched. “I’m Jasmine. Ashley and I go way back.”

Ashley. Right. Good thing the friend mentioned her name, because he’d forgotten it and almost called her Brenda again. He shook the woman’s hand. “Colton.”

Ashley gave him a fierce look, trying to convey...something. Who the hell knew what this woman wanted? She turned to her friend and said, “Colt and I had a bit of a fight earlier, so...”

She shrugged. Like that summed up their whole relationship. Which, as far as he was concerned, it did.

“She was snippy,” he offered, helpfully.

She glowered. “You were an ass.”

Rubbing his jaw, he said, “Can’t say I recall that part.”

“We might break up.” Her face was red. Not a sweet blushing red, but a fiery red, complete with nostrils flared and steam spewing out of the ears. Angry-bull red.

He chuckled her beneath the chin. “She’s so funny. It’s why I love her.”

Her eyes went saucer-sized.

Damn. Too far?

“I mean, I don’t *love* her, love her.”

Yes. There was the steam pouring out of her orifices again. This was fun.

He flashed a well-meaning Cross family smile at Ashley’s friend, who watched their interaction with a little pucker between her brows. Leaning toward her, he said, “I love making her *mad*, is what I mean. She’s feisty when she’s mad. And when she’s feisty...?” He whistled high, then low, hoping the friend would catch his meaning. Shit, this was the easiest free grub ever. “So, babe,” he said to Ashley, “about those nachos. I’m thinking a double order for me and the boys at the end of the bar. Sound like a plan?”

“Sure.”

“I’m also thinking a couple more makeup kisses are in order, too.”

Kaboom.

She was like a cartoon character, blowing her top.

Hands up in mock self-defense, he said, “I’ll collect later.” He grinned and then wove his way back down to the end of the bar, looking forward to telling the boys how he’d finagled free food for the lot of them.

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“HUH,” JASMINE SAID, a wrinkle between her brows as she watched Colton walk away.

Ash rubbed the spot between her own brows in response because she could feel way more than a wrinkle there. A chasm.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph. What the hell had she done?

“Well,” Jazzy’s frown slipped away to make room for a huge smile. “He is one hot tamale.” She leaned close and whispered, “How’s the sex?”

Ash choked on her spit. Her sister, very helpful sister that she was, smacked her hard between the shoulder blades. A couple good hard whacks. Then, when Ash finished choking, she leaned down and hissed in her ear, “I told you to *flirt*, not *make out* with the customers.”

Ash gave Beth a meaningful look. At least her sister got her looks. Unlike the dolt she’d chosen to be her pretend boyfriend.

Coughing once more, Ashley said to Jasmine, “Sex is super hot.” So hot, in fact, her whole body swarmed with fire ants at the thought.

“Huh,” Jasmine said. Did the fact that this was the second time she had said *huh* mean that her friend was dumbstruck by her choice of boyfriend? If so, maybe this wasn’t such a mistake after all.

“You guys have an interesting...” Jazz twisted her ponytail around her finger as she considered how to finish her sentence. Instead of finishing, she opted to change the subject. “How long have you been together?”

“Oh,” Ashley said, swiping her hand across her lips, intent on removing any lingering bit of Colton Cross from her mouth. “Not long.” Only the understatement of the century. “I doubt it’ll last.”

Beth snorted.

“Why do you say that?” Jazz asked.

Ashley turned to pour some drinks. Over her shoulder she said, “We’re too different.”

“How so?”

She shrugged. “We want different things. We have different philosophies on life. You know, the kind of thing that makes a long-term relationship impossible.”

For the first time that evening, Jasmine’s bubble of happiness wavered. She blinked at Ashley, a serious expression stealing over her features as Ash slid filled glasses to Jazz. “So then...” Her friend passed the pints of draft to the patrons waiting. “Why?”

Sticking her head between them, Beth answered for Ash. “Because the sex is so damn hot, she can’t keep her hands off of him.”

And for the millionth time, Ashley wished she was an only child.

Thankfully a rush of customers made it difficult to talk about the subject of her fake boyfriend anymore, and when the nachos were ready, fifteen minutes later, Ashley took them herself to the end of the bar where Colton was surrounded by his buddies.

“Here you go,” she said, sliding the platter close before turning to go.

“Hold on a sec.” He grabbed her wrist, holding her in place.

Ash’s automatic response was to tug, but Colton was stupidly strong. “What?”

The sinful grin, that all the women in Half Moon were talking about, flashed across his face. “I’m of a mind to collect.”

“Collect what?”

“A couple more kisses.”

After a glance over her shoulder to see if Jasmine was watching—which she was—and then a glance over his to see if his friends were watching—which they were—Ash went up on tiptoes, placed her free hand on Colton’s broad shoulder and whispered in his ear, “No.”

This did not deter him. He released her hand only so he could slip his arm around her waist and pull her in tight against him. “If you were my real girlfriend, we’d be kissing right now,” he said in a low voice, just for her. Then he waited to see what her response was to that.

She wedged a hand up between them, placing her palm flat against his chest—was it normal to have such hard muscles hiding behind a button-up shirt? No. She didn’t think so—and pushed. There was no give whatsoever. “But I’m not your girlfriend. We’re just pretending. Remember?”

“Oh, I remember. But, you want to put on a show.” With a tilt of his chin, he indicated Jasmine. “So let’s put on a show.”

“How’d you know?”

Using his knuckles beneath her chin, he tilted her head up. “There’s only one reason a woman wants a fake boyfriend.” He ducked down so that he was a mere inch away from her mouth. His warm breath made the wisps of hair that inevitably escaped the ponytail holder tickle her cheeks.

“What’s that?” There was way too much breathiness in her whisper for her liking.

“To make her friends jealous.” He waited a half second, his eyes glued to hers. When she didn’t move, didn’t shove, didn’t object in any way, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her.

This was not the kiss she’d expected. She’d expected something for show, him bending her over the bar, making slurping noises as he pretended to make out with a passion he didn’t feel.

That was not what this was. This was slow. Leisurely. Like he enjoyed getting to know her mouth. Like he wanted to explore her lips, the inside and outside of them. Not to mention deep inside her mouth. His big hand cupped the back of her head, and he tilted her—gently—one way and then the other, as he slanted his mouth over hers. When he finally pulled away, she was left, lips parted, panting.

“That ought to do it.”

She blinked once, twice, three times before coming back to herself, suddenly cluing in to the fact that the whistles and catcalls were because of the show they’d put on.

Oh shit.

What had she done?

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“WHAT THE HELL was that?” Colton’s brother, Dillon, asked, giving him a dirty look.

“You’re married. You should know what a kiss looks like.”

Dillon arched a brow.

“Or, is that what happens once you knock ‘em up? No more face sucking?”

With arms crossed over his chest, like he meant to intimidate him, Dillon said, “Don’t be an ass. That was Beth Ozark’s sister. The sweet one. Definitely not your type.” He glanced over his shoulder, then indicated that direction with his chin. “Seems to me if you want a plaything, Brandi’s more your speed.”

Colton shifted to get a look at the other sister. Short skirt, tight top, nice hair, pouty lips. Their eyes met, and she gave him a dark, questioning look. Colton lifted his pint in salute.

And drank.

What was everyone’s problem? So, he kissed a girl. Big fucking deal. It wasn’t like he’d started it. He took another deep drink of his beer, finishing half, thinking about the kiss. The sister had tasted good. Fresh. Not fresh as in innocent, because she’d kissed him back like she’d done it plenty of times before. Done it, enjoyed it and meant to do it again.

He meant fresh, as in the way the grass smelled after a spring storm.

So why was everyone giving him a hard time?

“Nachos are on me,” he said, indicating the platter with a wave of his glass. “Actually, the whole tab’s on me.”

“What’s up with you?” Angus, a friend and rival bull rider from Billings, asked. “You worried you’re going to lose in the ring this weekend and feel like making good on our bet, early?”

“Naw,” Colton said. “This is the last nice thing I do before I kick your scrawny ass this weekend.”

A combination of laughter and groans followed by five hungry guys, demolishing a plate of chips, cheese, salsa and hot peppers. “But I’m cutting you off in a half hour. I don’t need a bunch of sorry-assed, hung-over rodeo clowns blaming your shitty rides on me tomorrow.”

“You talk big. Too bad it’s all coming out of your ass.”

Colton grabbed the last bunch of chips off the plate just before Rider, a calf roper from Butte, had a chance. “Sorry,” Colton said with a smile. “Too slow. Hope that’s not shades of things to come.”

“Ahem.”

He shoved the whole handful in his mouth and chomped.

“Um...excuse me.”

The guys around him grew quiet, their knowing smiles making him turn. Ashley was standing behind him, a very serious expression on her face.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?”

He removed his hat and ran a hand through his hair. “Sure.”

Her eyes roved from his face to the faces of the men behind him. “Not here.” Angling her head toward the back exit, she said, “Outside. If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind one bit, darlin’.” Draping his arm across her shoulders, which caused her to stiffen, he maneuvered them through the crowd to the back door, opening it so she could pass through first. On the other side of the door was a couple groups of smokers, leaning up against the side of the building, looking up as they passed, but not paying much attention to them.

“Over here.” Tugging on his sleeve, she pulled him toward the alley and the quiet side of the building, out of earshot.

“You angling for another kiss?” he asked once she’d stopped and turned to face him.

She scowled. “No.”

He stepped closer. “You want something else?” She was tiny, seemed even smaller looking up at him in the dark. “Something more?”

She shook her head hard. “Of course not.”

He took another step, moving her until she was backed right up against the brick of the building. Colton didn't know why he did it, exactly. Probably because he was enjoying making her mad. "Then what are we doing here, sweetheart?"

If making her mad was his reason for lording his size over her, his action had the desired effect. She threw her head back in exasperation and gave him a shove. "Oh, my God. You've got to stop calling me that."

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes. I'm *not* your sweetheart."

He propped a hand on the wall above her head and leaned. "But I thought you wanted to be my sweetheart. Just for tonight."

She wet her lips and his gaze dropped. While she may not be a beauty queen, Ashley sure as hell had nice lips. Particularly in the dim light where her tongue had left a bit of a sheen after licking.

"About that..."

"Uh-huh?" He forced his gaze up from her mouth.

"Um..."

Except then she started chewing on her lip and his gaze dropped right back down.

"C'mon. Spill."

"You know how I asked for just tonight?"

"Yep." God, he wanted to touch her lips. Why? He couldn't say.

"Well..."

Now those little lips parted, and she was breathing through them. He could feel her little pants against his cheek.

"See, I'm around all weekend. And, *you're* around all weekend."

"Let me guess," he said, propping his other hand on the wall, leaning in. "And your friend's around all weekend. That about sum it up?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"So...you want me to pretend to be your boyfriend for the whole weekend, is that it?"

She blinked rapidly a few times. "Maybe."

Colton smiled. He couldn't help it. The woman was a weird combination of pissed off, turned on and a little scared all at the same time. The confusion flitted right across her ordinary features. Which was satisfying in a degenerate sort of way.

As much as he was enjoying himself, he wasn't a complete jackass. He eased back a smidge. "So, you want to hire me? Is that it? Like a cowboy gigolo?"

"Yes...no," she quickly corrected. "I'm just asking if you'll do it." She paused to swallow. "You know. Pretend we're together. That's all."

"So, pretend, huh? What exactly does that mean?"

"Well, I'll be at the rodeo and fairgrounds tomorrow, taking pictures. So, if I run into you, you act like my boyfriend."

"Uh-huh."

She waved a flustered hand between them. "And we don't have to do any more kissing, if you don't want."

Colton rubbed his jaw. "Seems like the kissing part is one of the perks."

"Okay, well..." She shrugged. "A little, then." She cleared her throat. "And then tomorrow night, I'll be here again, so if you happen to be here, same thing."

"Right. And then?"

She downright gnawed on her lip. "And then...there's the formal on Saturday night. I'm supposed to be there taking pictures. I assume you'll be there, too."

The truth was, he hadn't planned on going. He'd never gone to Half Moon High because his parents had moved after his and Dillon's oldest brother died. But Colton wasn't about to tell Ashley that. He had a warped need to hear where this was heading.

"Yeah, I'm going," he said.

"So...we go together. That's it. That'll be the end of it, I promise. We could even have a big blowup and break up by the end of the night." Her eyes lit up with a bit of fire and not of the angry kind. Like the thought of breaking up with him gave her pleasure.

Huh.

"So, you get what you want—a boyfriend. What do *I* get out of this?"

"I'll cover your pub tab for the weekend." A cringe flashed across her face...and then it was gone. Interesting. Colton considered her offer, but there was obviously something about it that bothered her. That was fine, he had other ideas, too. "I think the payment needs to suit the job, don't you?"

She got a cute little wrinkle in between her brows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, the tab's fine for tonight. But, what about tomorrow?"

“Umm...more beer?”

“I don’t like to drink much when I’m competing.”

“What then?”

Colton rubbed the back of his neck, and a slow smile inched across his face as he gazed down at her. “You have to do whatever I say.”

“What? No.”

“No?”

“Well, like what kinds of things?”

He leaned right in. “Haven’t decided yet. But I’m sure I can think of something.”

“Well it can’t be too crazy.” She swallowed. “Or illegal.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll like it, I promise.”

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded him. She chewed on one side of her lower lip and then the other. “I don’t know...”

“Hey.” He stepped back, holding up his hands. “You’re the one who needs the boyfriend. I don’t need a girlfriend.” *Don’t want one, in fact*, he almost said. “You don’t like my terms? Find another stooge to play the part.”

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her back, which brought the top of her head to right below his chin. God, she was just a little thing.

“You’re right. Beggars can’t be choosers. So, it looks like you’re it.”

Huh. That sounded suspiciously like an insult.

“I agree to your terms.” She thrust her hand forward to shake.

He took it, and she pumped once before quickly releasing it. She pushed away from the wall and strode toward the back entrance without so much as a backward glance in his direction, as if she had complete control of this situation.

Colton grinned in the darkness because there was a certain amount of perverse pleasure to be found in playing this game with this woman. She thought she knew what was what. Well, he’d show her, and by the end of a pretend relationship with him, she wouldn’t know what hit her.