

By the time five thirty rolls around, the cubicles around me are silent. The boys have long since decamped to the bar. I run a hand over the stack of 10Qs I'm in the process of distilling into recommendations that need to be on Roland's desk before I leave tonight.

If I had the balls to dazzle a roomful of institutional investors all by myself, I could just blow off the sales crew. Unfortunately, I lack them, both literally and figuratively.

Straightening my piles one last time, I give them a goodbye pat. "Don't worry my pretties. I'll be back soon." I'll just have one drink, play nice and then treat myself to takeout from the new Indian place on the way back. I'll still be able to finish up and make it home tonight by ten. Eleven at the latest.

Walking the short few blocks to the Bull and Finch in the brisk spring air clears my head and buoys my morale. I can do this. I already have my choices narrowed down to three: Skinny Brad, Mustache Mark or Short Steve. I swear Rhodes Wahler only hires men with the names Brad, Mark or Steve. To keep them straight, I give them labels.

As I wait for the light to change, I must be positioned where they filmed the opening credits for *Cheers*, because my view of the bar looks exactly like it does on TV, from the big white awnings to the wrought iron gate. Maybe there'll be a cute bartender like Woody to make me a drink.

Unfortunately, when I step inside it's a different story. A few patrons resembling Cliff and Norm hug one end of the bar, but young people in suits fill every other nook and cranny. The Rhodes Wahler guys are predictably loud, so I find them quickly.

Turns out he wasn't kidding about the bet. As soon as the Brad/Mark/Steves spot me, a chorus goes up—half cheers, half groans. Fortunately they're quickly distracted by whatever game's on, and I escape to get my token drink.

On my way to the bar, Hot Steve slips me a wad of cash. Halfway through counting it, a warm, resonant voice catches my attention. "What'll you have?"

"Um." A sweaty mug of beer rests on the bar to my right. That'd make me sleepy. To the left, a pink drink sparkles. I point at it. "I'll have that, please."

A cheer draws my attention back to the guys and I go over my checklist. I'll have to spend a significant amount of time traveling with this partner, so I should definitely evaluate each candidate for bad breath or BO. I wish I could get a hold of their driving records and, at the very least, see if they have DUIs.

Movement behind the bar has me sliding a five across and reaching for the glass that appears in its stead. Bubbles float up through pink liquid, sparkling in the low light. At the stem's base, long fingers and a wide palm press into the wood. I attempt to lift the glass. It does not budge. Clearly, I am not going to win this tug of war.

My gaze roves up a corded forearm to a bulging bicep to wide shoulders to a square jaw stubbled with a Don Johnson—like five o'clock shadow and clear blue eyes lit with challenge.

I nod to the money still on the bar. "Is the drink more than five bucks?"

Full lips press together. The glass keeper shakes his head slowly. "No. I'm just not convinced that this is what you really want."

Oh, for goodness sake. I force a smile as well as a friendly tone. "Isn't the customer always right?"

Left hand still on the wineglass, he leans on his right elbow and rests his chin on his palm. "That's what they say. But when you ordered, it seemed like you really wanted something else."

"Oh, I get it. You just want to hear me ask for a sex on the beach or a sloe comfortable screw. Or is this some kind of up-sell strategy?"

He straightens, hands up, palms facing me. "If that white zin spritzer"—his words drip with distaste—"is what you're looking for, take it. If not, I'll make you something else, no additional charge."

I grip the edge of the bar. How did this get so complicated? "Okay, you're right. I just saw what"—I lean in, lower my voice and tip my head in the direction of the sparkly-bloused woman to my left, whose bangs arch over her forehead in a fashion that must've taken an inordinate amount of time, effort and hairspray to achieve—"she was having and copied her."

I raise a hand to stop him from whisking the spritzer away and tip my head toward the Rhodes Wahler boys. "I'm just here to do a little face time, act like one of the guys. But then I have to go back to the office and work."

I make myself smile to soften my bitchy tone. "It doesn't really matter if I like the drink or not because I'm only going to hold it and then use it to water that plant over there every once in a while." Swallowing the rest of my rant, I slide the five back over the bar and raise the wine glass. "So, thank you for your concern and keep the change."

"Hold on." His firm command pins my feet to the floor and freezes the glass on the way to my mouth. "That wine spritzer is not what you need."

Just like my S.O.B. ex-boyfriend and really every man I seem to encounter, he obviously thinks he knows better. "It doesn't matter. Like I told you, I'm just going to pretend to drink it."

"Whether you drink it or the plant does, the spritzer is not going to work. Give it back."

“Okaaaay. Don’t have a cow.” I set the glass on the bar and cross my arms. “Sheesh.”

He points at me. “Wait here. Do not leave.”

“I said okay.” It’s like I’m on a schoolyard, fighting with a little boy I have a crush on. Not that I have a crush on this guy. There *is* something about him that has me wondering if I should take my sex drive out for a spin for a change, but I don’t have time for crushes.

Anyway, what’s wrong with ordering a wine spritzer? Isn’t that what women drink these days? Curiosity has me craning my neck to watch what he’s creating. I swear I’m not trying to check him out, but he’s bent over getting something out of a cooler, so I admire the view. Faded Levi’s hug blue-chip glutes like they’re made for each other.

This guy isn’t a sharp-suited swaggering Hot Steve. Instead, he moves with an easy confidence. When he straightens to pour a series of liquids into a glass, his wrist flipping bottles theatrically, I note an even distribution of muscle. Not rangy like a runner, not bulky like a body builder. He’s kind of a JFK Jr. with blue eyes. He’s actually even better looking than JFK Jr., if you can believe it.

He spins to grab a lemon and a knife, shoulders bobbing in time with U2. Bono still hasn’t found what he’s looking for. Just like me. Even so, I’m not sure this bartender is my type. He seems to enjoy standing out in a crowd with his paisley vest over a white button-down and a striped tie loosened at his neck.

Drink in hand, he turns my way, and my heart races around the perimeter of my ribcage. The last time I had this kind of reaction to a guy had to have been during Reagan’s first term. I dive into my handbag and pretend to search for something, hoping to hide the look of lust on my face.

“Try this.” Invitation colors the rich tones of his voice in a way that is not at all irritating.

“You really didn’t have to go to all that trouble.” I’m talking to the bottom of my purse, but he’s waiting for me to take the glass. So I do my best to get things under control before reaching for the drink. Apparently my best isn’t enough, as is too often the case. I literally lose my grip and some of the drink sloshes onto the bar.

I reach for a napkin. “Ugh, I’m such a dweeb.”

“No problem, I’ve got it.” Calmly and efficiently he grabs a rag, wipes the glass and then gently dries off my hand.

“All good?”

I nod. If only he knew how good. How to reallocate the frisky feelings stirred up by this goofily dressed guy? Maybe just focus on the drink. A thick-bottomed squat glass holds

ice and some sort of pale brown liquid that admittedly looks like the kind of thing a Brad/Mark/Steve would drink. “So, what is it?”

He leans on the polished mahogany bar. “It’s my own special recipe, developed for a customer who can’t drink alcohol anymore. It’s barley tea, bitters, and simple syrup with a lemon twist. A new-fashioned old fashioned.” His smile is proud. “You can look like you’re drinking like a big boy but not get drunk.”

My hand itches to touch the light sprinkling of hair on his forearm. Instead, I raise the glass and take a tiny sip.

“What do you think?”

“This is actually pretty good.” I take another gulp, hoping it’ll cool me down. “Thanks, uh...sorry, did you say your name?”

“Will. Will Talbot at your service.”

“Well, thank you very much, Will Talbot. You have provided excellent service. But—” Remembering the reason I’m here, I quickly check out the huddle of my coworkers. Thankfully, all eyes are still on the Celtics game. “This stays between us, right?”

He bows formally. “Be thou assured, if words be made of breath, and breath of life, I have no life to breathe what thou hast said to me.”

“Come again?”

“It’s from *Hamlet*. What I mean is, I won’t reveal your secrets.” His smile reveals a dimple, but only on one side, making it somehow more winning than Hot Steve’s symmetrical ones.

I scan my stalled frontal lobe for an appropriate response. “Oh. Well. Thanks.”

Really, I should just walk away right now, cut my losses. I would, if his big blue eyes weren’t holding mine prisoner. The blue of the sky on a perfect spring day. A blue we’ll hopefully see here in Boston someday soon. It was a long, cold, lonely winter. All I want in this moment is to get closer to those eyes, to those wickedly grinning lips, and... and...

“Everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I was just distracted because...” Panicking, my eyes skitter from brow, to lips, to eyes, to dimple, to dark curly hair, each in and of itself not so special but in defiance of economic theory, the total effect far outweighs the sum of individual parts. Something shiny catches my eye. “Uh, that... thing, on your—you know...” *English language, anyone?* “Tie clip!”

He lifts his tie to peer at the pin. “It’s the logo for the Boys and Girls Club. I got it for volunteering with them for five years straight. I teach after-school classes at the South End Community Center with my company.”

“Ah.” Ever so articulate, I nod like a bobblehead doll bouncing on a bumpy road. Does he teach bartending to kids? Asking seems insane. “Um. Thanks for the special drink.”

“Anytime.”

I should move but I seem to have forgotten how.

“Oh, hey.” He slides a half sheet of paper across the bar toward me. “There’s a community volunteer event there this Saturday. You should come.”

Taking the flyer, I make myself break eye contact. “Cool beans.”

*Cool beans?* What a Joanie. Lifting my drink in salute, I head back to the Rhodes Wahler group, but I’m such a loser I can’t even manage walking. I catch my damn heel on the uneven flooring. With great effort, I keep the drink from spilling, but my lurch gives one of the Marks the excuse to swoop in.

“Whoa there, McFly! How many of those have you had?” Loud Mark hugs me roughly, his thumb brushing the side of my breast. “What a lightweight.”

I clamp my lips into a line. At least he didn’t—

And then he does. He smacks me on the butt. “But you’ve totally got a bodacious ass!”

Swallowing the retort I’d love to make, I glance back to the bartender. His spine stiff, he looks like he wants to pounce on Loud Mark. I roll my eyes dramatically to let him know it’s no big deal and allow myself to be literally manhandled across the room, even though it’s a little embarrassing that the cute bartender witnessed this particular asset bust.

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