

A Little Bit Naughty

Chapter One

Leo pushed open the door to The Book Attic and said, “I have sweet and sour pork, hot and sour soup and egg rolls. I really hope you’re hungry.” He stopped dead in his tracks when he spotted Amanda, the owner of the bookstore and his best friend for the past three and a half years, chatting with a customer. A male customer. And the guy was flirting big time. He looked like something out of a magazine with his crisp navy blue suit and neatly trimmed dark hair. Amanda always did go for the corporate types. He looked down at his own worn jeans and black work boots and cringed. He’d forgotten to pound the dirt off. Amanda hated it when he tracked dirt through her store.

He started to head back out the door when he noticed Amanda stepping closer to the guy. She took the book he was holding and held it close to her chest, laughing at something the other man said. Damn, it wasn’t any of his business if Amanda flirted. She could flirt all she wanted, and it still wouldn’t matter. She was a friend, nothing more.

Clutching the bag of food, Leo quickly nixed the idea of cleaning off his boots. He’d run the vacuum later. Instead, he closed the distance between them. Neither of them looked over at him, too wrapped up in their conversation apparently. He rattled the bag of food for good measure, but after a few minutes of listening to Amanda talk about how fabulous some author’s books were, Leo cleared his throat—really loud. The customer looked over the top of Amanda’s head and shot him an angry get lost glare. Amanda turned and smiled, then sniffed the air.

“Mmm, is that sweet and sour pork I smell?”

Leo grinned. Mr. GQ might know books, but Leo knew Amanda. Nothing and no one took precedence over sweet and sour pork. “Yep, your favorite. Want me to take it to the back?”

Amanda headed toward the cash register. “That’d be great, thanks.”

Leo watched out of the corner of his eye as she rang up the man’s purchase. It was tempting to stay and see if the guy slipped her his phone number. Leo reminded himself, again, that it wasn’t any of his business if the pair made out right here in the store.

As he went through the doorway leading to the backroom, he shoved thoughts of Amanda and Mr. GQ out of his head and started setting out their lunch. They had a standing lunch date every Wednesday and Friday. It’d been that way since Leo had first met Amanda. He smiled as he remembered that day. It’d been at the grocery store. She’d grabbed the last box of caramel corn. He’d been miffed because his taste buds had been all set to dig in. Halfheartedly he’d offered up the possibility that they have lunch together and share the box. She’d smiled up at him, and they’d been friends ever since. These days, Leo either brought lunch to her bookstore and they ate in the back, or she came and picked him up at the office of the construction company he owned. Either way, they never missed a date.

As he set out the last of the food, Leo heard footsteps. He looked up just in time to see Amanda coming into the room, a piece of paper clutched in her hand. "He gave you his number?" And why exactly did Leo have the urge to grab it and toss it in the trash?

She blushed and clutched the paper tighter. "Maybe."

He rolled his eyes. "No maybes about it, the guy was staring at you like you were an all-you-can-eat buffet."

She laughed and waved the compliment away. Why did she find it so impossible for a guy to look at her with hunger? After all these years spent telling the hardheaded woman that she had it going on, Amanda still wouldn't listen.

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. "How many times do I have to say it, sweetheart? You're a hottie. Men are always going to hit on you."

She pushed out of his arms and sat at the old, scarred wood table. "I'm slightly overweight, and I have zero fashion sense. Hardly a hottie, Leo."

Leo straddled the chair across from her and waited until she dug into her pork before saying, "It's like when a dog spies a juicy hamburger on the edge of the counter. I don't care how well behaved the dog is. He's going to try and get a taste. And you, sweetheart, are juicy."

She stopped chewing and frowned up at him. Swallowing back a bite, she said, "Are you saying I'm a hamburger? If you're going to compare me to beef at least make it a steak."

He chuckled and dug into his own food. "You're a filet mignon and don't you forget it."

She ate a few more bites of her pork before saying, "Right now I just feel desperate. My mother called earlier."

Leo scowled. He'd never met Amanda's parents, but he hated them for the way they treated their only daughter. They acted as if there was something flawed about her just because she wasn't married and knocked up. It pissed him off to think anyone could possibly consider Amanda flawed. "Did she give you the We're Not Going To Live Forever speech?"

She picked up her egg roll and swirled it around in the sweet and sour sauce, but he noticed she didn't take a bite. "No, this time it was to tell me the annual family reunion is coming up, and she wants to know if I plan to attend. Alone. Again."

Leo had forgotten about the Harding family reunion. Shit. Last year when Amanda had returned from that crappy trip, he'd had a hell of a time getting her out of the depression the event had put her in. Her parents had lectured her the entire damn time. When was she going to marry? When was she going to give them grandchildren? Why did she have live clear across the United States and work in that dreadful little bookstore?

Leo opened the lid on the hot and sour soup and picked up a white plastic spoon. “Don’t go. Skip it this year.” He couldn’t handle seeing them tear down her self-esteem yet again.

She shook her head as she pushed the egg roll through the orange sauce. “I can’t. She’s expecting me to be there. It would be so much easier if I could’ve brought a guy along, but I haven’t dated anyone since Roger and he was such a horrible dud.”

Oh, Leo remembered Roger. “The nose picker.”

She grimaced. “It was so gross watching him eat too. The man had no manners at all.”

Leo dropped the spoon and reached across the table. He plucked the egg roll out of her hand. “Stop drowning the thing and eat it.” He held it to her lips, somewhat mesmerized as she closed them around it and took a bite. She moaned a little, her eyes drifting shut. Watching Amanda eat had turned into one of his favorite hobbies. She did it with such obvious pleasure. Each bite received special attention.

Leo cleared his throat and let her take the deep-fried roll out of his hand. He dug into his soup and they ate in silence for a while. His soup finished, Leo pushed the Styrofoam cup aside and said, “We’ll figure something out about the reunion.”

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin and sat back in her chair. “What’s there to figure out? I’m going to have to attend this blasted thing. Alone. I’m going to have to sit there and listen to them go on and on about how disappointing I am.”

Leo shrugged. “Take someone with you. It’s just a weekend, Amanda. It’s not like you have to make a big commitment to a guy just to spend the weekend with him.”

Amanda bit her bottom lip and stared at him, as if thinking over his words. “I had thought maybe T.J. would like to go with me,” she said, her voice low, a little unsure.

Leo stiffened. Was she dating someone and he didn’t know about it? “Who’s T.J.?”

“That customer I was talking to earlier. He comes in a lot. He’s asked me out a few times. Today was the first time he gave me his number.” She shook her head. “No, it’d be too bold to ask him to spend the weekend with me in Lake Tahoe. Much too bold.”

Mr. GQ with Amanda for the entire weekend. Now why did the thought of that make him queasy? She took a sip of her cola, and an idea struck Leo. He smiled.

She cocked her head to the side. “Why are you grinning like that?”

“Like what?”

She narrowed her eyes and pointed her finger at him. “You have that look. The one that tells me I’m not going to like what you’re thinking.”

Leo leaned forward, grabbed her finger, and brought her hand to his lips. He placed a gentle kiss on her knuckles before releasing her. “What would you say if I told you I have a way for you to attend the reunion with a man and not have to worry about the guy expecting a single thing from you except a nice little vacation?”

“You do?”

He bobbed his eyebrows and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yep.”

Amanda leaned forward. “How? Who?”

“You’re going to take me, and I’m going to be your soon-to-be fiancé.”

Amanda rolled her eyes and stood. “Have you lost your mind?”

She started to clear away their food, but Leo wouldn’t be deterred. The more he thought of it, the more he liked the idea. “Think about it for a second.

It’s the perfect plan. We’ll play it up. Do the whole we’re so in love thing and your parents will be so thrilled they’ll leave you alone for once.”

“Great idea. There’s just one little problem here. What happens when we get back and they realize there’s no wedding on the horizon?”

Leo stood and moved around the table, helping clean their mess. “So what? People break up all the time. You can tell them I turned out to be a loser.”

After tossing napkins and plastic forks in the trash Amanda stopped and turned toward him. “This could go terribly wrong, Leo.”

Leo closed the few feet separating them and took her by the shoulders. “A weekend in Lake Tahoe with your best friend,” he whispered. “How is that wrong?”

She placed her hand on his chest and looked away. “It’s a lie though. It feels wrong to pretend we’re in love when we aren’t. Besides, I don’t think we can pull it off. They’ll see right through us, then it’ll be even more of a mess. Not to mention embarrassing.”

“See through us, huh?” She nodded and looked up at him. Their gazes caught, held. Leo cupped her chin in his palm. “Let’s see if we can’t make this look like the real deal,” he growled, as he placed his lips on hers. He tasted the sweet sauce from their lunch and something else.

Something warm and spicy.

He tasted Amanda. Angling his head, Leo pressed a little harder. Her plump lower lip tempted him to lick and nibble. He held back, barely. She whimpered and swayed forward, pushing her ample breasts against his ribcage. Ah, hell, that felt good. Too damn good.

Slowly, Leo lifted his head and stared down at her. Her eyes were closed and her lips, those succulent pink lips, were open a few millimeters. Enough that he could slip his tongue between them and take another, deeper, taste of her. Bad idea, he told himself. Christ, this was Amanda. His best friend. The kiss was supposed to be a way of showing her they could make it look real. Under no circumstances was he supposed to get a hard-on. Unfortunately his cock had other plans.

He cleared his throat. "So, still think we can't pull this off?"

Amanda's eyes opened. Awareness settled over her delicate features. She blushed and pushed out of his arms. "Um, yeah, this might actually work."

To give himself something to do, Leo went back to clearing away their lunch clutter. "Good. When is the reunion?"

"This weekend. It's short notice, I know."

"It's not a problem. I just finished up that remodeling job downtown so it's good timing actually."

Amanda brushed at her skirt, and Leo saw it for the nervous gesture it was. The kiss had gotten to both of them. "Oh, okay then. I'll book the flight."

Leo stiffened. "Uh-uh. I'm paying for this trip."

Her eyes widened. "But why? It's my family reunion, Leo. There's no reason you should pay."

This was one point he wouldn't bend on. "I'm paying, Amanda."

She frowned and smacked him on the arm. "I hate when you take that tone. Pay for your half then if you must, but I'm paying for mine." He started to protest, but she held a hand in the air. "Or you can just stay home and I'll go alone. Or with T.J."

No way in hell was she going anywhere with Mr. G fucking Q. Not after that kiss. Leo wasn't letting this woman anywhere near another man, not until he figured out what the hell was going on between them. "Fine. Just remember I'm staying with you in your cabin. We're lovers, after all."

"Pretend lovers, and I can't believe I'm agreeing to this. How do I let you talk me into these things, Leo?"

He heard the vulnerability and Leo couldn't stand it. He closed the distance and wrapped his arms around her. "It'll be fine, sweetheart. Trust me."

She nodded, and Leo let out a breath. He prayed he was right. Because losing Amanda's friendship would be like using a butter knife to cut off his arm.

Not a pleasant thought.

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