

Sweet Talk (Buchanan-Renard, Book 10)

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An FBI agent and a lawyer are falling in love-and making a federal case out of it in #1 New York Times bestselling author Julie Garwood's hot romantic thriller.

When Special Agent Grayson Kincaid first encounters Olivia MacKenzie, she makes quite an impression. The beautiful, tough young attorney has stumbled into the middle of an FBI sting operation and reduced it to chaos. Olivia has ticked off the wrong guy. He's FBI. But Olivia is even more intimidating. She's IRS.

Olivia is on the trail of an elaborate Ponzi scheme for her own very personal reasons, and her investigation has enraged some ruthless people and endangered her life. She's no stranger to tight situations, but she's smart enough to know when to call for help, especially if that help is tall, dark, and handsome.

Together, Grayson and Olivia make a great team to fight corruption, but they're also fighting an intense attraction-the one battle they're bound to lose.

Julie Garwood is among the most critically acclaimed-and popular-romance authors around, published in thirty-two languages worldwide with forty million copies of her books in print. She is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of numerous novels including *Wired*, *Fast Track*, *Hotshot*, *Sweet Talk*, *The Ideal Man*, *Sizzle*, *Fire and Ice*, *Shadow Music*, and *Shadow Dance*. She lives near Kansas City.

The Pips were at it again. The four girls had vanished from the unit dragging thousands of dollars' worth of equipment with them and causing quite a commotion. The staff was frantic, desperate to find them before word of their disappearance leaked out. The only person not concerned was the man who held their futures in his hands. He insisted that the restless, mischievous adolescents had not escaped. They were pulling just another silly prank, no doubt orchestrated by Olivia MacKenzie, the ringleader. From the minute he'd looked into those gorgeous, sparkling blue eyes, he'd known she was going to be a troublemaker and a fighter.

He couldn't have been more pleased. Olivia gave the other Pips-Samantha Pearson, Jane Weston, and Collins Davenport-strength and a voice. Until she'd entered the program, the girls had been sullen, lethargic, and even borderline suicidal. And who could blame them? They spent most of their days in forced isolation, locked away from family and friends and the rest of the world. Members of the staff were constantly telling them how fortunate they were to have been chosen for the experimental program. Nurse Charlotte even insisted they were blessed.

The girls scoffed at the notion. All of them had a disease that, thus far, no drug had been able to conquer, and none of them felt the least bit fortunate to be human pincushions, subjected to a tremendous and sometimes unbearable amount of agony. The Pips were forbidden to call the wonder drug cocktail that was pumped into their veins poison, but that's what all of them believed it was. Excruciating pain followed each infusion, and by evening their bodies were covered with blisters from the tops of their heads to the bottoms of their feet. No, none of them felt blessed.

Though the youngest of the group, Olivia was the strongest and the toughest, and she

had quickly stepped into the role of protector. Once she had gained her new friends' trust, she began to chip away at the boredom and, more importantly, the anger and the fear.

Pranks were Olivia's specialty. Within two weeks of her arrival, the nurses and the doctors grew hesitant to open their lockers for fear of what was going to jump out at them. Nurse Charlotte developed a twitch in her left eyelid after a rubber snake sprang at her, delighting the Pips to no end.

As the girls became more fearless, their repertoire of mischief grew. Each had a favorite trick.

Jane, the artistic one in the group, had a flare for design. She could sit for hours with a notepad and pencil drawing shapes, then connecting them into beautiful mosaics. She loved symmetry and color, so when the others suggested they TP the nurses' station, she objected. She thought that would be too crass. Instead, she decorated the space from ceiling to floor with streamers of every color of the rainbow.

Samantha, or Sam as she was called by her friends, was the adventurer. She was unafraid of risk, but she wasn't reckless. She went about each of the pranks methodically. Every situation was patiently examined and carefully planned to achieve the desired result. It took her a week to collect enough lime Jell-O to fill all the specimen cups. After warming them in the nurses' microwave for a few seconds, she slipped the little beakers of green liquid onto the lab cart and sent them downstairs for analysis. The girls laughed for days remembering the sight of the red-faced nurse on the phone apologizing and trying to explain the mishap to the lab tech.

Olivia had found it easy to bring Jane and Sam into the fun, but Collins had been more of a challenge. Because she was the most sensitive, it took her the longest to conquer her depression; but once she did, she was game for anything. Olivia designated her to be the decoy in their adventures. When the girls wanted to slip by the staff unnoticed, Olivia would send Collins to distract them. She was blessed with a sweet nature and a soft Southern accent that drew people to her, so when a teardrop or two would fall down her cheek, everyone would rush to console her. Once the tears began to flow, they'd huddle around her and give her their full and undivided attention. A couple of faint sobs, and she had them—especially the men—eating out of her hands. Little did her sympathetic audience know, the other three Pips were behind them, strategically placing furry fake spiders in unexpected spots.

In an attempt to keep the Pips calm and in their beds, their specialist, Dr. Andre Pardieu, gave each of them a deck of cards and took the time one afternoon to teach them how to play poker. They were quick learners. By the end of the month the Pips had taken him for more than three hundred dollars. They used the cash to buy pizzas and cake for Nurse Kathleen's birthday and a few other fun items to torment the staff.

After spending several weeks in the hospital, the Pips fell into a routine. Monday was poison cocktail day, and they were too sick to play any pranks. Tuesday, they were still too ill to do

more than lift their heads off their pillows, but by nightfall the blisters would disappear, and they would begin to feel human again. They decided that Wednesday would be orange wig day; Thursday would always be freak-out-the-nurses day, and on Friday, as a compliment to their doctor—they all had a crush on him—they would speak his native tongue, French, which was a real trick considering the fact that only Olivia understood the language. Weekends were spent on target practice with their water guns, working jigsaw puzzles, and doing crosswords. Olivia's aunt Emma was what Dr. Pardieu called a coconspirator. She sent Olivia the water guns and wigs and other novelties. Whatever her niece requested, she got.

Dr. Pardieu also had a routine. Each morning when he walked into the unit, he greeted the girls the same way: "Bonjour, mes petites pipsqueaks."

And they responded, "Bonjour, Docteur Pardieu."

Olivia came up with a new idea one Thursday. After the doctor had made his rounds, she suggested a game of hide-and-seek to torment the nurses. She had broken into an empty storage closet the week before and discovered the rectangular room had enough space to fit all of them. It was at the end of the newly constructed south wing, which would be dedicated and opened for patients the next month.

The girls crept down the hall behind Olivia and slipped into the dark closet. They sat on the floor with their backs against the walls, two facing two, and stayed quiet while they strained to listen for every sound. The scent of disinfectant hung in the air around them. They could hear the supervisor calling their names as she clipped along the gray-and-white tile floor, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking with each step. When the sound faded, Olivia reached up and switched on the light.

All of them squinted against the sudden brightness.

"She's gone," Sam whispered, trying to stifle her laughter.

"Maybe we shouldn't stay here," Collins said. "We don't want her to keep looking for us."

"Are you kidding?" Olivia said. "Of course we want her to look for us. That's how we roll."

Jane was the most law-abiding of the four and whispered, "What if she calls the police? We could get into serious trouble." She was twisting the tube on her IV while she fretted.

Sam rolled her eyes. "She won't call the police," she said. "You worry too much."

"She could call our parents," Jane suggested then.

Olivia shrugged. "My mother has caller ID. As soon as she sees it's the hospital calling, she won't pick up. My disease is too stressful for her."

"You're joking, right?" Sam asked.

"No, I'm not. Mom has trouble coping."

"What does your father think?" Collins asked the question. "He's never come to visit you," she remarked, a tinge of sympathy in her voice as she reached over and patted Olivia's hand. The girls could always count on Collins for emotional support.

"None of her family has visited," Sam said.

"They're busy," Olivia answered with an indifferent shrug. "Mom flies back and forth between our homes in San Francisco and New York City. My parents have a strange marriage," she added, sounding very grown-up. "Mom adores him. She's . . . dramatic about it. I don't know how else to explain it. She doesn't have room for anything else in her life."

"Or anyone else," Collins said. Like daughters, she silently added.

"What about your father?" Sam asked again.

"Oh, he likes the adoration. At least he used to."

"No, I mean how does he cope with your illness? Is it too stressful for him, too?"

"Not really. He ignores it. Sometimes I think he pretends I'm at a sleepover. He used to call every week to see how I was doing. The last time I talked to him he asked me if I was having a nice time."

"Seriously?" Sam asked. She couldn't comprehend anyone being so oblivious. Her own family had taken her illness pretty hard, especially her four older brothers. Though they constantly reminded her that she was tough and could whip this thing, she knew on the inside they were worried.

"Seriously," Olivia insisted. "He loses track of time. At least that's what my sister, Natalie, tells me. She's always defending Mom and Dad. Nat would come see me if she could, but she's finishing college, and by the time she got off the plane here, she'd have to turn around and go back. She's ten years older than I am," she added.

"She hasn't called here in a while, has she?"

"She's very busy, too," Olivia responded.

"I talked to your sister once," Collins said. "You were getting x-rayed and couldn't come to the phone."

"Do you know this is the first time you've talked so openly about your family?" Jane remarked.

"Why is that?" Collins asked.

"Because it's embarrassing. I'm tired of making excuses for them," she blurted. "My family's dysfunctional. You're right, Sam. None of them has come to see me, and I don't think that's normal. Do you?"

All three girls shook their heads. "Exactly," Olivia said. "Aunt Emma is the only normal one. She doesn't like my father much, but I think it's because of the way my mother acts around him. Emma tries to hide how she feels when she talks to me, but I know. Once I heard her tell my mother she thought my father was shrewd with money but he was a nincompoop when it came to his family. She also said he was one of the most charismatic men she'd ever met."

"What does that mean?" Collins asked. "That he's smooth?"

"Polished, charming," Jane suggested. "Charismatic isn't a bad thing."

"My aunt made it sound bad. I wasn't supposed to be listening to the conversation, so I couldn't ask her what she meant."

"I don't know any charismatic men or women," Sam said. "At least, I don't think I do."

Olivia decided to change the subject. She wanted to talk about something else for a while. "If I get to grow up, I think I'd like to catch criminals. No matter how talented and clever they might be, eventually they all make mistakes," she said. "And they always get caught."

If-I-get-to-grow-up was a morbid game the girls played every now and then, though never in front of Dr. Pardieu, because they knew he would make them stop. Each time Olivia played, she changed what she wanted to become if she got to grow up. Last week she thought she wanted to become a chef. The week before that she was certain she wanted to become a physician just like Dr. Pardieu. The week before that she was determined to become a newscaster.

"You could become a detective or an FBI agent," Collins said enthusiastically. "It would be cool to carry a gun. Maybe I'll become an agent."

"You're a klutz, Collins," Jane said. "You'd shoot yourself. And besides, you'd probably cry every time you had to talk to a crime victim."

Her friend wasn't offended. "I probably would," she admitted.

"If I get to grow up, I'm going to become-" Sam began.

"A pilot," the other three Pips said in unison.

"Yes, a pilot," Sam agreed.

"Honestly, Sam, don't you ever think about any other careers?" Jane asked, clearly exasperated. "Why are you so stuck on being a pilot?"

"Let's see," Sam began. "My grandfather was a pilot; my father is a pilot; my four brothers are pilots . . ."

"And that means you have to be a pilot?" Collins asked.

"It's in my blood," she said with a shrug. "I have to fly."

No one argued with her. Then Jane said, "If we didn't have this horrible disease, we probably would never have met. Each one of us lives on a different side of the United States. Sam lives in Alaska; Olivia lives in California; Collins lives in Louisiana, and I live in upstate New York."

"I think fate would have pulled us together, no matter what," Sam said.

"It would have been nice if it hadn't been a terminal disease that brought us together," Olivia said.

Collins drew her knees to her chest. "My bum's getting cold."

"Mine, too," Olivia said.

The girls shifted to get closer to one another for warmth.

They didn't speak for a few minutes, and then Olivia broke the silence. "Aunt Emma thinks my father is going to leave my mother. She thinks that's the real reason he purchased the apartment in Manhattan." She had been worrying about the possibility that her parents would split up, and now that she'd told her friends about her family, she decided to tell them the rest. She felt closer to the Pips than anyone. Maybe it was because of what they were all going through together: shared laughter and shared pain.

"Divorce?" Collins asked in a bare whisper, as though the word would sting if she said it any louder.

Olivia nodded. "It will be a real nightmare if it happens."

"Why would your aunt give you such a worry?" Sam wanted to know. "You have enough to deal with. You don't need any more problems."

"Before I came here I made my aunt promise me she wouldn't keep anything from me, but I know she does sometimes. I want to know what's going on back home . . . the good and the bad."

"Divorce isn't such a big deal," Jane commented with a shrug. "You'll get through it."

"That's kind of callous," Sam told her.

"I'm being honest. My parents fought all the time. Everything got better once the divorce was final."

"What did they fight about?" Collins wanted to know.

"My big brother, Logan, mostly," she said. "Logan was getting into all sorts of trouble with drugs and alcohol. It's a miracle he graduated from high school. Mom protected him, made excuses for him. Dad cut him off, refused to give him any more money, but Mom would sneak some to him. Dad got sick of fighting all the time and left. That gave Logan the freedom to do what he wanted, and my mom would just give in. He even talked her into trying to up the value on my life insurance policy. Ghoulish, right?"

"Depends," Olivia said. "Who gets the money if you die?"

"Logan."

"Then, yes, it's ghoulish."

"The insurance company wouldn't do it. I'm a bad risk," Jane said.

"You should stay alive just to spite your brother," Sam said.

"I plan to," she replied, smiling. "So, you see, Olivia, my family is as wacked as yours."

"I don't think so," Olivia argued. "I could tell you stories that would turn your hair gray."

"We don't have any hai..."

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