



JUST A
Kiss

JUST *Us* SERIES

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LINZI BASSET

JUST A KISS

Just Us Series, Book 1



A Romcom Novella

By

Linzi Basset



Copyright © 2024 Linzi Basset - All rights reserved.

JUST A KISS

Copyright © 2024 Linzi Basset

Edited by: Sandy Ebel

Proofreaders: Marie Vayer, Charlotte Strickland

Publisher: Linzi Basset & Cover: Sweet Fifteen Designs

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Linzi Basset has asserted her rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work. All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this eBook only. No part of this eBook may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any manner whatsoever without prior written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, business establishments, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. This book is for sale to adults only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase.

Disclaimer: Neither the publisher nor the author will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury, or death resulting from the use of the information contained in this book.

CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Excerpt: Claimed Bride](#)

[Books by Linzi Basset](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Stalk Linzi Basset](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Dear Reader,

This trilogy comprises the stories of three sisters finding love when they least expected it. Be prepared for a suspenseful, yet humorous, slow-burn chemistry between Daphne and Carter...

Just a Kiss, Book 1.

Kill me now! How am I supposed to understand a word the man says when all I can think of while looking at his lips moving is how badly I want him to get inside my knickers?

Knickers, or panties, as most of you would call it. Yes, I'm that one. The one who uses medieval words and was the biggest nerd at school.

Okay, back to the hunk. There I was, driving and singing along at the top of my voice to my favorite rock band, when all of a sudden, a shrieking siren disrupted my enjoyment.

Speeding, my ass. The needle hardly hugged 75mph!

Ah, okay, apparently, this is a 60 zone. Bad girl. Bad, bad girl!

Daphne Fowler never thought receiving a speeding ticket from the sexiest cop she'd ever seen would turn into a torrid

love affair. Least of all that she would lose her heart to him, especially amid an investigation, both of them became entangled in.

All it took was just a kiss...

Please note: Although the blurb is in 1st POV, the book is written in 3rd POV.

Enjoy and warm regards,

Linzi Basset.

CHAPTER ONE



Just outside of Provo, a city in Utah...

“Just a small-town girl. Livin’ in a lonely wo-o-orld!” Daphne wasn’t concerned that belting out her favorite rock song probably made Suzie, her bright yellow VW Bug, cringe. She was having too much fun, and besides, Suzie should be used to it by now. It was Daphne’s favorite pastime on long driving trips.

“Yes! Love this song,” she shouted, turned up the volume, and slammed her hand along the rhythm of the drums against the steering wheel.

“Oho, you’re in trouble now, Suzie!” she whispered loudly when flashing lights appeared in her rearview mirror. “Maybe he just wanna pass by, so let’s slow down a bit, shall we?”

Checking the speedometer, she let out a sigh of relief. She was still under the speed limit, thank heavens! Easing her foot a little off the gas pedal, she moved toward the side of the road. The road sign they had just passed indicated they were two miles outside of Provo, where she intended to spend the night before heading out to her end destination—Spanish Fork.

“Ah, damn. No such luck, Suzie,” she muttered as the black-and-white SUV with the blue and red warning lights still

flashing stayed behind her. “It’s us he’s after.”

Bringing the car to a stop, she cut the engine and opened the window as a tall, muscular officer with brooding steel-gray eyes stopped next to the car.

“Oh, my,” she whispered. “He’s a hottie, Suzie. A heartthrob extraordinaire.” Daphne’s heart fluttered as she looked up and was immediately enamored by his chiseled jaw and salt-and-pepper hair.

“Morning, officer,” she said, watching his lips move, but all she could make out was a garbled sentence and a couple of words here and there. Not surprising since all she could think of watching his very kissable lips moving was to wonder how they would feel nibbling her throat. Not to mention envisioning how perfectly he would fit between her thighs as he stripped off her knickers and had his wicked way with her.

“I’m sorry, what did you say, officer?”

He leaned closer and promptly stole the little breath she had left. Upon closer examination, she became lost in the silver flashes of his steel-gray eyes. The dulcet tones were soaked in a gravelly undertone that warned her he brooked no nonsense from anyone.

“Perhaps if you turned the volume down, you might hear me clearly.”

“Oh! Of course! How inconsiderate of me,” she lilted as she turned down the song still bleating over the radio. “There! Is that better, officer?”

“License and registration,” he commanded in a gruff voice.

“That’s me, Daphne Fowler,” she cooed brightly while batting her eyelashes as she handed over the documents.

He didn’t acknowledge her attempt at flirtation, barely glancing at her.

“Do you know how fast you were driving back there, Ms. Fowler?”

“Oh gosh, I don’t think I was since the needle was below 75 mph before I slowed to a stop.” Another flutter of eyelashes. “I just love belting out Journey whenever it comes on!” An exaggerated giggle escaped her lips—an uncontrolled reaction when she was nervous. This man had an effect on her she hadn’t felt in years. His handsome face held her spellbound.

“Exactly,” he said sternly. “You were going 15 miles over the limit. That’s reckless driving.”

“Oh,” she lowered her eyelids contritely. “I didn’t realize.” Blinking up at him, she offered a tentative smile as she poured on the charm. Her finances were okay as long as she controlled her expenses. An unforeseen speeding ticket definitely would tip the scales unfavorably. “Please accept my sincerest apologies, officer. I just got so caught up in the music. Can you blame me for rocking out to an absolute classic?”

Flashing her most dazzling smile, she prayed he’d let her off easy. *Oh, c’mon, Officer Sexy! Give a girl a break,* she wailed within herself as his expression remained impassive.

“I’m afraid your tendency for losing yourself in music and not paying attention to speeding signs isn’t a good enough excuse for breaking the law, Miss Fowler.”

“How about just letting me off with a warning? I promise I’ll pay attention from now on.” She waved her hand dramatically as he ignored her. “Please don’t throw me in the dungeon, good officer. Have mercy on this fair maiden!”

“It’s sheriff, and this is Utah, not medieval England,” he barked gruffly.

“My apologies, Sheriff,”—she squinted at his name tag—“Scott.” An impish smile curved her lips upward. “Love the salt-and-pepper hair, by the way. Very distinguished.”

He narrowed his eyes at her boldness. “Perhaps spending a night in jail is exactly what you need.”

“Y-You’re not serious,” she whimpered, but on the inside, she smiled. Finally, he showed some reaction to her not-so-subtle attempt at seduction. His threat didn’t bother her since she knew he had no legal right to lock her up. “C’mon, Sheriff Scott, not even a teensy-weensy smile for a distraught woman?”

“If that’s how you act when distraught, I cringe to see you when you’re not,” he grumbled under his breath as he began writing the ticket. Daphne’s gaze drifted to his muscular forearms as he scribbled. She was smitten with this handsome, slightly rough-around-the-edges sheriff. Well, her libido was. Proof was in how her nipples had turned into hard little nubs when he had glared at her. If only he wasn’t so obviously unimpressed by her flirtatiousness.

He's a tough one. Usually, when I open the charm taps, men turn to putty in my hands. Guess I'll have to find the right trigger for this gorgeous gladiator.

“You can settle this at the local sheriff’s office or the one in Salt Lake City. Alternatively, you can use the online link for payment,” he said, handing her the ticket. “Don’t let me catch you speeding in this state again.”

“If it means seeing you soon... I’d be doing donuts in the main streets and stomping on the gas pedal 24/7, Sheriff Scott.”

A frown scrolled over his brow. “Your boldness is going to come back and bite you in the ass someday, Miss Fowler. I suggest you curb your sassy nature. The next stranger who stops you in the middle of nowhere, with not a soul in sight, might just take you up on your offer.” He stepped back, crossed his arms, and tilted his head to the left. “Off you go, and don’t forget my warning.”

“Ah, it warms my heart that you care so much,” Daphne smiled and sighed dreamily as his eyes flashed darkly. “So stern, yet so tempting,” she mused to herself as she started the car.

“I’ll be seeing you, Sheriff Scott,” she called out as she pulled off, smiling brightly at his ominous frown.

The super sexy, totally kissable sheriff had just issued a challenge, and Daphne Fowler, although described as a ditzy nerd, was also very intelligent and one of the sharpest knives in the drawer. As an investigative journalist with numerous awards already stacked up, she was always alert and ready for

action. Once she sniffed out corruption, she didn't stop until she solved the case and helped to bring those to justice who did others wrong.

Sheriff Scott might not be a criminal, but he ticked all the boxes of the perfect man-list that she had engraved in her mind. He'd put himself on her radar, and there was no way she would let him get away. It was hunting time for Daphne Fowler.

“Oh, yes, Sheriff Scott. You will be seeing me again. That is a promise.”

CHAPTER TWO



“Good Lord, please let her just pass through Utah. I don’t need a little snip with an itch that begs to be scratched on the loose in my state.” Carter Scott’s gravelly voice echoed softly back at him as he stood watching the bright yellow VW Bug speed off. “Seems the speeding fine didn’t have much impact on her to follow the law.” Shaking his head, he got into the SUV. “That woman is trouble, with a capital T.”

However, as he recalled the way the beautiful brunette had flirted with him, the ghost of a smile spreading over his face proved he hadn’t been totally immune to her efforts. The hard ridge pressing uncomfortably against the zipper of his pants was unexpected since he was known for his iron control. That the little chit had such an effect on him was a surprise. He never gave in to temptation. He had learned early in his career not to give in to the wiles of women. Besides, he didn’t have time for the hard work and attention a relationship required.

“Except that little curvy feline isn’t after a relationship,” he muttered as he got into the truck and pulled off. “She’s out to get dick, that much she made very clear. Lord help the poor bastard she catches in her web. That woman is sure to wring a man dry.”

Carter only hoped she wasn't out to cause trouble. As the Utah County Sheriff, he took his job seriously. Luckily, his office was situated in Spanish Fork, and the chance of running into her again was scarce. He was only in Provo for a brief visit to his sister and to welcome the new local sheriff to town.

“With all the crap this investigation is unearthing, a distraction like her is the last thing I have time for.”

Carter Scott was born and raised in Utah. As a boy, he spent his summers working on his family's ranch, where he developed a strong work ethic, hauling hay, chopping firewood, and tending to the animals and the land.

He earned an associate degree in criminal justice from Utah Valley University and began his law enforcement career as a patrol officer at the Pleasant Grove Police Department.

Carter worked his way up through the ranks and was eventually appointed chief of police until he ran for Utah County Sheriff. His leadership and dedication to improving law enforcement earned him the role of sheriff that same year.

Apart from joining the Utah County Metro SWAT Team to become the forward operations commander, he also worked on a U.S. Marshals' joint criminal apprehension team.

To improve himself even further, Carter graduated from the prestigious FBI National Academy program in Quantico after completing their intensive three-month training.

“Sheriff Scott, are you there?” The voice sounding over the police radio and filling the inside of the SUV was clear and urgent.

“Go for Scott,” he responded. The call came from the local sheriff’s office since they knew he was in town.

“This is Deputy Sheriff Cooper.”

“What can I do for you, Tanya?” Carter had worked with Tanya Cooper on numerous cases in and around the Provo area. The case they were currently investigating stretched from Salt Lake City all the way to Spanish Fork, maybe even wider.

“We just took a one-on-one into custody who is a potential match on your list in the Black Diamond investigation.”

Carter allocated project names for each investigation, specifically so no one used the name of one of the main suspects when referencing it. It was an additional safety measure to keep information intact to ensure there were no leaks from within the department.

“I’ll be there in ten. Carter out.” With his expression grim, he punched down on the accelerator. They had been searching for a break in this case for almost a year. They had many pieces of the puzzle, but there was always one crucial part missing. He hoped this thug proved to be what they needed to finally make arrests that would stick and end up in a guilty sentence.

“I’ll be seeing you, Sheriff Scott.”

Carter cursed as the sensual promise of the sassy brunette echoed through his mind.

“What the actual fuck?” he growled irritably. She wasn’t his type. He liked blondes. Any shape or size, but his

preference had always been blonde women. Brunettes just didn't do it for him.

That she wasn't rake thin—from what he could see of her, she had the perfect amount of curves to excite him—was irrelevant. He didn't like sassy women who scratched where it didn't itch.

“And that little snip didn't just scratch; she dug in her nails with a vengeance.” His words slammed back at him. “Fucking hell, push those thoughts out of your head, Sheriff Scott, and concentrate on the job. She's nothing but a distraction. You know it... and it'll be best not to forget it.”

But damn, it was difficult to get those pouty lips and the way she had stared at him out of his mind. The fascination she'd had for him had been as clear as day in her eyes. She hadn't even attempted to hide it from him. The seductive invitation had been blatant.

“There you have it. Women like her are on your avoid like the plague list.”

Just like she wouldn't like to be treated as a sex object, Carter also resented being used like a piece of meat. He had no interest in becoming a dick magnet... not even for someone as compelling as her.



County sheriff holding cell, Joaquin, Provo...

Carter stared at the man through the one-way window of the interrogation room. He sat fiddling with the cuffs where he

was chained to the steel table.

“We need to solve this case, Tanya,” he said through clenched teeth. “Sooner rather than later, especially since it has been dragging on for over ten years.”

His office was currently conducting an investigation on the 2012 sex ring case, where charges related to sex abuse had been filed against a therapist. Two years later, they had been dismissed without prejudice. Since new victims were now making similar allegations, Carter had reopened the case. So far, in the ensuing investigation, they had discovered that other victims had previously reported similar forms of ritualistic sexual abuse and trafficking that occurred in Utah County, Juab County, and Sanpete County during the time between 1990 and 2010. He had already confirmed portions of those allegations.

“Let’s hope he has some information we can use, Sheriff. We seem to have hit a solid wall lately,” Tanya said, scanning the arrest report.

“Baker Cowell, forty-four years old, originally from Juab County. Apparently, he’s renting an RV at the Lakeside RV Campground. Been there since his arrival in Provo two years ago. Claims he’s a loner and has no friends or family.”

“Why is he here?”

“Drunk and disruptive behavior.” She handed him the folder. “I phoned you because the moment I logged his details, he was flagged as a sex offender in three states. That was an immediate red flag.”

“You did good, Tanya. For now, let the bastard sweat. Lock him in the holding cell. He’s useless in his current state. Fill his gut with coffee to sober him up. I’ll interrogate him in the morning.”

“Will do.”

“I’m going to use Sheriff Dutton’s office. I want to do some background checks on our perp.”

“You know you have an open invitation to use the office whenever you’re here.” She grinned. “If you need to use the computer, the password is—”

“On a sticky note stuck to the back of the keyboard.”

Carter joined in her laughter as he walked off. Minutes later, he read through pages of information gathered by various police departments and state institutions. The fact that not one of the charges laid against him had stuck or led to an arrest ever since he was listed as a sex offender stood out like a sore thumb.

Instinct warned Carter that Baker Cowell had friends in very high places.

“Yeah,” he sneered softly. “The kind of friends who are the brains behind this sex trade ring and have the money to cover up their tracks. Goddamn bastards!”

CHAPTER THREE



Hines Mansion Bed & Breakfast, Provo, Utah...

“Ahh, sweet relief!” Daphne exclaimed as she stepped into the marble-tiled shower. The lukewarm water streamed down her body as it gently eased the tension of the long drive. She leaned back against the cool tiles and let out a blissful sigh as the water cascaded over her curves to soothe her weary muscles.

After a long day of sweating in the stuffy yellow bug, the shower was a heavenly respite. As steam filled the room, Daphne felt the day’s stickiness and heat wash away. She took her time, enjoying every minute of the water working its magic as it washed away the fatigue and refreshed her spirits.

Stepping out, she wrapped herself in a fluffy white towel. “Hmm, feels like home,” she said as she breathed in the cozy ambiance of the room. With a hearty glass of merlot, she curled up in the plush wingback chair by the window. Her gaze was contemplative as she gazed at the mountains silhouetted against the dusky sky.

Daphne’s thoughts meandered to the stern yet handsome sheriff who had pulled her over earlier.

“Oh, what a vexing knave he was. So serious and brooding, yet ‘twas passion I saw flashing in those eyes,” she murmured as she envisioned him in her mind.

“I’ll warrant that although his manner was brusque, underneath his stony façade lies a heart longing for an adventure in love,” she declared with a dramatic swoon. She sipped her wine, lost in daydreams about the mysterious sheriff.

As clever as Daphne was, she had a tendency to be overly dramatic. As far back as she remembered, she had always leaned toward using old-fashioned and medieval words and phrases. Something she had always been teased about at school. She, of course, had scoffed at the kids who made fun of her, saying it was because they didn’t understand what the words meant. Most of the time, that had been the truth.

“Hmm, Sheriff Scott... mayhap it’s time I learn a little more about you.” With renewed vigor, she unfurled her legs and picked up her laptop. With a pair of purple tortoise shell reading glasses perched on her nose, she logged in and typed his name in the search bar.

“Ah, there you are, you gorgeous hunk.” She all but swooned as a picture of him appeared on the Utah County Sheriff’s website. “Carter Scott,” she read. The name rolled off her tongue like the most decadent dark chocolate. “Hmm, Carter Scott. Such a manly name.” Taking another sip of the wine, she scanned the information on his career. “Impressive, Carter, my love... just like every lickable inch of that muscled body of yours.”

Shifting in the chair with sudden discomfort, she pulled the towel loose between her breasts. They had become swollen and sensitive.

“Tone it down, Missy. You’ve been as hot as a smoldering ember since you first slapped eyes on the man. Teasing yourself into a lust-filled frenzy is only going to exasperate your frustration and set you alight. He’s nowhere near to serve your desires.” She snorted as her words floated back to her. “As if I don’t know that!”

Daphne didn’t classify herself as a nymphomaniac, but neither did she shy away from her sexual needs and desires. However, she was particular about the kind of man she indulged herself with.

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “Not that I have indulged myself for quite some time.” She frowned as she tried to remember when last she had sex—with a man, not her trusted dildo, Big Joe. “Hmm. I can’t even remember. Hell, no.” She took a long sip of wine. A grim smile twitched on her lips. “It’s high time I find a good, hard penis to flush out my pipes again... before they become clogged up like a cobweb!”

A smile of pleasure brightened her face as a video call flashed on her cell phone screen. Folding the towel around her again, she settled deeper into the chair before swiping her finger upward to answer.

“Ah, my delightful little sisters,” she teased them with her normal way of greeting and laughed gaily at their usual choir response.

“Little, my ass.”

“The days of being called little have long passed, big sis,” snickered Bailey, the middle sibling. “We all love glazed donuts too much for any of us to fit into a size two pair of jeans ever again.”

Rolling her eyes, Daphne sipped her wine. “That’s not what I meant, snip, and you know it.”

“Pfft, so, I’m suddenly a mind reader, then?”

“Oh, number two is in a mood, is she?” Daphne asked Riley, the youngest born. In truth, there was only a couple of minutes difference between them since they were twins. Daphne was six years older than them. Their parents never intended to have more than one child but were pleasantly surprised to find out they were expecting twins. For Daphne, growing up had changed after their birth, but once the twins were older, they had become very close and loved spending time together.

“Don’t I know it?” Riley responded as she flopped over onto her stomach. They were in Bailey’s bedroom, getting ready for their weekly movie night, which Daphne would’ve joined had she been home. “Can’t blame her, though. That bitch of a boss of hers has been on her case the entire week. I don’t know why she just doesn’t quit.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bailey smirked. “I suppose you’re going to cover my mortgage and car payments? It’s not the 1980s, Riley. I can’t very well quit until I have another job.”

“Then get off your ass and start looking for one. With your experience and talent, I have no doubt you’ll find something better if you just apply yourself. You know you hate your job

ever since that woman took over when Robert Young got promoted.” Riley ducked as Bailey swung a pillow at her head. “Silencing me isn’t going to change facts, sister dear. That bitch isn’t going anywhere, and as long as she’s in that position of power, neither are you... except perhaps into an early grave from an aneurysm brought on by pure frustration and anger.”

“I hate to be the balancing act here, but I’m with Riley on this,” Daphne said in a soothing voice. “It’s been two years, and the situation at work for you is getting worse by the day. You know what I always say. If you’re not happy where you work, you’re not happy in your life. You’re twenty-eight. It’s time to manifest a positive shift in your life.”

“Kudos for making me feel even worse, Daph,” Bailey bleated. She held up her hands to prevent further debate. “Enough, already. I got the message.” She settled next to Riley on the bed. “So, where in the country are you this time?”

“Provo.” Daphne took a long sip of her wine.

“I thought you said you’re going to Spanish Fork?” Riley interjected.

“I am but decided on the way to spend the night here... especially after I got pulled over by the most titillating sheriff this side of the Mississippi.”

“Oh! Do tell,” Bailey’s eyes lit up. “Is he coming over?” She peered at Daphne’s relaxed body wrapped in a towel. “Especially seeing as you are so inappropriately dressed.”

“I had to take a cold shower when I arrived to cool down my libido. Lemme tell you, that man ignited a fire inside me that is still running on burning embers. Just talking about him has me wet and sticky in my nether regions.”

“Well, do something about it. Get dressed and go find your sheriff,” Riley giggled. “There’s nothing as exciting as a hottie in a small town, right? And since when does a Fowler sister wait for a man to come to her? You’re damaging our karma, sis. Go, grab the man by the dick and lead him astray.”

“Yep, this time, I’m with Riley. Get off your ass, Daph. Since neither of us has had the pleasure of a horizontal boogie in quite some time... have one for each of us as well. If we can’t do the fucking, at least we can enjoy the telling afterward.”

“Hey! I don’t kiss and tell,” Daphne protested, all too aware of the tingling between her legs that was testament of her juices trickling from her girlie bits. Anticipation was a bitch! She smiled sadly. Especially knowing there won’t be a chance of feeding her lusts.

Not tonight, at any rate. The sheriff’s office was already closed, and she had no intention of running around town asking about him.

“Since when?” Bailey’s voice yanked her attention back to them.

“Since this one is a man... a real man with bulging muscles and a face that would make both of you swoon and drool over him like Hoover, our old dog, did over a bone.”

“Ah, so you’re already possessive of him,” Riley said with sparkling eyes. She nudged Bailey. “Look at how red her cheeks are. Our sister is besotted with a man!”

“I’m not besotted with him,” Daphne protested but couldn’t keep the smile from lurking on her lips. “I lust after him... big time! Mark my words, Fowler sisters, before I come back home, Sheriff Carter Scott is gonna be taking a very vigorous journey between my legs!”

“That’s the spirit! There’s hope for us.” Bailey winked at her. “In the meantime, there’s always the dependable Big Joe. I’m sure you didn’t leave home without him.”

“How do you know me?” Daphne laughed with them. “As soon as you let me go, I’ll be humping that rubber dick like there’s no tomorrow.”

“With the vision of the super fuckable Sheriff Scott in your mind, right?”

“As sharp as always, little sis. You hit the nail on the head!”

CHAPTER FOUR



The next morning...

“Ugh! Agh!” Who knew orange juice could be a worse choking hazard than a crumb? Of course, had she been prepared to slap eyes on the sexy Sheriff Carter Scott just as she took a sip, she might not be struggling to draw a breath. But then, she had no way of knowing he would look yummiier in tight jeans and a flannel shirt. *Flannel? Good Lord, Daphne, since when does a checkered flannel shirt excite you!?*

“Oh, shit!” With a muttered cry, she ducked sideways in an attempt to hide as her continued croaking coughs drew the sheriff’s attention. The move started out haphazardly, so it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that apart from hitting her head against the edge and instead of folding double to play hide-and-seek behind the table, she found herself flat on her buttocks on the hard, wooden floor. The hard jostle as she landed invited another flurry of coughs to echo through the soft din of conversation around her.

“Oh, fr-freaking h-hell,” she stuttered as her face bloomed bright red with embarrassment. “Perfect, Daphne, make a total fool of yourself, why don’t you?”

“You okay down there, Miss Lovebug?” The deep guttural tones floated from the tall man towering over her, the very same one she was attempting to avoid.

Daphne’s chin lowered, and she covered her face with her hands. “Ugh! Could this day get any worse?” she mumbled.

“What was that? Do you need me to call the ambulance?” The dulcet tones were soaked in amusement.

“Does it look like I need an ambulance?” she snapped as her hands fell to her lap to glare at him. The heat in her cheeks turned the color of a crayfish on hormone treatment as she detected the mirth glimmering in his eyes. “Why don’t you rather be a gentleman and help me up?”

“Assumption is the mother of all, don’t you agree?”

Daphne was all too aware that they had become a spectacle that held the animated attention of the other diners. Still, the big, bad sheriff just issued a challenge, and if there was one thing she couldn’t resist, it was a man who tested her resolve.

“So, are you saying you’re not a gentleman?” With her chin inching a tad higher, she folded her arms over her chest, deliberately pushing her cleavage higher. No doubt she looked silly sitting on the floor with her legs stretched out and her back straight as an arrow.

“My mother would be insulted to hear such an allegation.” His eyes dutifully dropped to eye her assets. “She prides herself on having brought us boys up with morals and good manners.” A ghost of a smile came and went as she narrowed her eyes.

“And yet, here I am, still sprawled indignantly on the floor.”

“The assumption is that I would help you up.” He mirrored her action by crossing his hands over his chest. Contrary to hers, which had been intended to flaunt her assets in his face, his move brought her attention to the bulge in his tight jeans. The warning growl emitting from deep within his throat and forcing her eyes back to his proved that had been the last thing he had intended.

Well, boohoo to you, Sheriff. You flaunt your junk in my face, I sure as hell am going to ogle it and wonder just how big that man tool of yours is. The thought once again caused a rosy glow to embrace her cheeks.

“See, I got the impression yesterday that you’re a highly independent, feministic femme fatale. I would hate to insult you by assuming you need a man’s help to...” A Cheshire grin broke through. “Ah, obviously, I was correct in hesitating to offer my assistance,” he ended dryly as she jackknifed to her feet so quickly, it was a surprise his back didn’t go into a spasm as he was forced to retreat a step.

Breaching the space between them, she went toe-to-toe with him. A stiff finger stabbed his chest. For a second, her brain froze as she encountered hardness—absolutely no give, just pure, unadulterated, lickable muscles that rippled under her touch. When his one eyebrow inched higher, she cleared her throat and willed the telltale blush to behave that suddenly seemed to bloom at his command.

“Now, you listen well, Sheriff Scott, just because I know what I want and am not shy to go after it doesn’t make me a feminist... now a femme fatale, on the other hand...” A sly smile curved her lips as her voice turned syrup-sweet and seductive. “If that’s a turn-on for you, I’d be happy to oblige in some roleplay.”

“Pity there isn’t a law against what you’re attempting to do since it would give me the utmost pleasure to put you behind bars.” Shaking his head, he pulled out her chair and gestured at it. “Please, sit down before you cause an indecent public disturbance, which would force me to act on.”

“Oh! Are you going to break out the cuffs, Sheriff? Are we gonna do some *bondage play*?” Her voice lowered into a husky whisper at the end.

“Hmm, keep going, Miss Lovebug, and before you know it, you’ll be a visitor to the artfully decorated private rooms of the PPD.”

“Miss Lovebug?” The frown was so deep, it almost drew her perfectly formed eyebrows together in a straight line as she realized it was the second time he’d called her that. It would be humiliating if he couldn’t even remember her name. “Do you have any idea how insulting that sounds?” Once again, her arms snapped over her chest. She was so affronted, it didn’t register that his eyes meandered over the enticing upper curve of her breasts. “Do you even know my name, Sheriff Scott?”

“I might have a couple of gray hairs, but my memory is as intact as that of an elephant.” With a grin, he saluted her as his words, which left a pleased smile on her lips, chased after him.

“Do us both a favor and behave for the balance of your visit... Miss Daphne Fowler.”

He does remember my name! Good. At least, that means I made an impression on him.

Gmphf, you sure did. Let's just hope it's the kind of impression you're after.

What else would it be?

Who knows, he might think you're a hooker looking for a new territory to start selling your wares.

Oh, shut up!

With pleasure. Just don't come crying to me when you end up in the slammer.

There were times that Daphne wished her inner voice wasn't as vocal. This was one of them—trust her own self to try to sabotage her sexual fantasies!

The past year had been exceedingly busy insofar as freelancing work was concerned, and because of that, Daphne was now in a state of sexual frustration she hadn't experienced in a long time. She never had trouble finding a suitable partner to ease her lusts, and as she told the elusive sheriff, she wasn't prone to shy away from pursuing a man for said needs.

Since Robert Gould, her ex-fiancé, had cheated on her with her best friend of over ten years, a couple of months after their engagement, Daphne had no interest in any relationship other than a physical one.

Love led to heartache. Once had been more than enough for her. Now, all that mattered and required all the energy she had was her career.

“And Sheriff Carter Scott checks all the boxes of the next man who the honor of fornicating with me is bestowed upon.” As the words floated back to her, she caught sight of the very man striding out onto the balcony of the Hines Mansion Bed & Breakfast. “Damn, he truly is one hunk of a man,” she murmured.

Hugging and kissing a gorgeous blonde wasn't what Daphne wanted to witness at that moment, but there it was. He openly expressed his infatuation with the petite woman.

“Damn, he's taken. What a pity.” She might be a femme fatale, as he claimed, when the circumstances demanded it, but she never interfered when a man was already committed to another. The all too fornicatable sheriff wasn't available to scratch that itch deep inside her, after all.

“Ah, well,” she sighed dramatically and muttered sotto voce. “I guess you win some, and you lose some. Hopefully, I'll have better luck with the next hunk I meet.”

Suddenly, the scrumptious breakfast lost all its appeal.

CHAPTER FIVE



“Okay, Sydney, spill. Who’s the bastard they locked up last night?” Daphne placed the call on speaker as she scanned the rest of the emails in her inbox. This one had immediately caught her eye. She had numerous sources who reported on all potential perpetrators that might be associated with the case she was investigating.

Sydney Kent was one of the more reliable hackers she had worked with over time. When he gave her intel, she knew she could trust its authenticity without concern of being scammed.

“His name is Baker Cowell. He was brought in on drunk and disorderly conduct. My source says he hasn’t been interrogated since the sheriff, who is investigating the same case you are working on, wanted him sobered up first.”

“What made him a person of interest in a sex ring case?”

“He’s listed on the sex offender list. Apparently, there have been numerous sightings and charges laid against him after he was added, but none ever stuck. He was never officially charged or ended up in court.”

“Are you saying none of those claims were ever investigated?”

“Oh, the detectives went through all the motions, but for some reason, every single case was thrown out. Either the docket disappeared, evidence was tampered with, or the person who laid the charge withdrew the case. In every instance, he was released within hours of being arrested. Huge red flag here, Chicca.”

“You’re right, and certainly worth looking into. It seems I’ll be staying in Provo a little longer than intended.”

“Good, because I managed to decrypt the IP address where your anonymous tip about the child sex ring came from.”

Daphne’s interest was piqued. That the investigation she was busy with started around the same time as when the Utah County Sheriff’s office commenced digging into the exact case had been pure coincidence—or so she had thought—until that anonymous email. The pen in her hand did a rat-a-tat rhythm on the desk.

“Do tell.”

“It came from the Utah County’s office.”

Daphne turned cold. “Can you be more specific, Sydney? Did it come from someone at the Utah County’s office, or...”

“Nope, it came from *the* man himself. The email was sent from Utah County Attorney Bob McCarthy’s laptop, the location at the time—from his office.”

“Holy freaking shit,” Daphne exhaled slowly.

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Sydney’s voice carried a twinge of caution.

“I’m not sure what it means other than that the report leaked about his claimed involvement in child sex trafficking might be more than an allegation. The timing, though... it’s puzzling since I got the tip a week prior to the shit hitting the fan where he publicly attacked the Utah County Sheriff’s office about using him as a steppingstone in a political race.”

“Puzzling is the wrong word. It just doesn’t make sense, period,” Sydney said. “Why would he bring it to an investigative journal’s attention? Wouldn’t he rather steer clear in an attempt to keep the information from going viral?”

“Except if it wasn’t him. What if someone else used his laptop to send the email? Someone who knows he is guilty but is too scared to speak up?”

“Very possible.” Sydney took a measured breath. “This has just put this entire case into a completely different ballpark, Chicca. I hope you realize that.”

“Yes, it sure does.”

“No, that’s not how you’re supposed to react. You’re supposed to say, yes, Sydney, you’re right. I’m gonna pack it up and head back home.”

“Come now, Sydney. How do you know me?”

“This shit is dangerous, Chicca! You could get killed. If the county attorney is part of the shitshow, you can bet your cute ass that there are other, even more powerful people involved. You need to get the hell out of there.”

“You’re overreacting. Don’t worry, Syd. I promise I’ll be careful.”

“Well, if you’re going to be hardheaded about this, at least approach the sheriff handling the case. Offer your support. Sell him on the roles you’ve played in assisting many investigations to catch the culprits. You’re a politician’s worst nightmare when it comes to criminal injustice. At least if you work with them, it’ll give you some protection and set my mind at ease.”

“I thought Provo’s new sheriff is only arriving next week.”

“True, but he’s not the one who instigated the investigation, or didn’t you watch the news conference that was held in Provo last week?”

“I actually didn’t. I was busy wrapping up that case in Idaho. So, who’s McCarthy’s arch-enemy?”

“It’s the sheriff from Spanish Fork. His name is... wait, lemme check. I’ve got it here somewhere. Ah, yes, Sheriff Carter Scott.”

“Sheriff Carter Scott? Are you serious?” Daphne’s heart skipped a beat. Just the thought that she now had a legitimate reason to stay longer and more so, approach the attractive sheriff, made her libido break out in a spirited Lambada.

“Yes, Chicca. Carter Scott is well known for his drive to rid Utah County of egregious crimes. He made it clear that he takes victimization of children at that level very seriously.” The sound of his fingers tapping on his keyboard sounded in her ear. “I just emailed you the link to the press conference article and podcast.”

“Thanks. Ah, I’ve got it. Carry on.” Daphne scanned the article briefly as Sydney’s voice droned on.

“When Scott was interviewed about McCarthy’s claim that he was using the case to further his own political career, Scott laughed it off. Everyone in the county knows he has no interest in promoting himself for a higher political position since he loves being the county sheriff. McCarthy failed miserably in the attempt to intimidate the sheriff. In fact, Scott made it abundantly clear that he wasn’t backing down. He refused to allow anyone to abuse their authority and public podiums to distract, bully, and equivocate the facts of the investigation. Said that he fully intends to find everyone involved, have them prosecuted, and close the child sex ring down for good.”

“I knew there was a reason why I was so attracted to him,” Daphne said under her breath as she finished reading the interview. A man with morals and integrity was her kryptonite.

“You’ve met him?”

“Damn, why do you have such fine hearing?” she mumbled irritably.

“Comes with the territory, my dear,” he scoffed. “I don’t exactly do legitimate work all the time, so I have to keep my ears close to the ground to stay out of jail. It’s become second nature.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. In the future, I’ll know to be careful when you’re around.”

“So, do tell. What are you and the hot sheriff up to?” Sydney whistled. “Hm-hm-hm, just look at those bulging arms. Oh, my poor heart.” He chuckled. “Well, if he’s not into you, give me a holler. I’ll be there in two ticks to try my luck.”

“I’m afraid we both lucked out. He was all over a pretty blonde this morning at breakfast. I’m afraid he’s taken... more so the pity.”

“You can say that again, Chicca.”

“Keep digging, Sydney. I want to know everything about Bob McCarthy. His itinerary, his movements for as far back as you can track, his spending, his bank accounts. Find me what time he shits during the day. No matter how inconsequential something may seem, check it out. Somewhere, somehow, he must’ve slipped up.”

“On it, Chicca. You just stay out of trouble.”

“Of course, I’m the epitome of being cautious.”

“Gmphf,” he snorted. “You’re the epitome of walking the tightrope, Chicca, and that’s what worries me. Also, stay out of the sheriff’s pants. You can’t afford to get caught in a love triangle. Concentrate on why you’re there.”

“You’re such a spoilsport. Besides, if the man invites me into his pants, sexy blonde or not, who am I to deny him?”

“One of these days, you’re gonna be—”

“Oh, stop being such a wet blanket, Syd. I was just pulling your leg. You should know by now I’m not that kinda girl, especially after what Robert did to me.

“I know, babe... just saying. Don’t let a pretty face and bulging muscles distract you. I don’t wanna be the one to come there and identify your dead body.”

“Goodness gracious, Syd, that went dark rather quickly.” Her voice quivered at the vision his words evoked in her mind. “And grim... very grim.”

“Reality is grim, Chicca, especially when there is an alleged sex ring right on your doorstep.”

“Yes, I guess that’s true.”

“Gotta go. Keep me in the loop, Chicca, and promise me, if there is any sign of you being in danger, you’ll head back home.”

“I promise. I have no intention of dying this young.”

“None of us do, but life has a way of changing direction when we least expect it.”

“I’ll be alert, Syd. Please send me the Provo sheriff’s office address. Talk soon.” Daphne ended the call to prevent a full sermon on fate and destiny that he tended to ramble on about when given half a chance.

“Well, Sheriff Scott, ready or not... your right-hand man, or rather woman, is on the way.” She chuckled as she imagined the look on his face when she waltzed into the county sheriff’s department, where she was relatively sure she’d find him. The thought made her jump to her feet and gather her notebooks and bag.

“I better hustle if I want to be there when he interrogates Baker Cowell.”

Even though she was filled with confidence in her own abilities, she wasn't all too sure Sheriff Carter Scott was going to be happy to see her... especially when she made her intentions known. Not many officers of the law liked to work with a nosy investigative journalist, no matter how good she was.

“Oh, he definitely won't be.” A crooked smile flashed over her face. “I might just have to woo him a little... Blondie or not, I'll do everything I need to be at the frontline of this investigation.”

CHAPTER SIX



The next day, Utah County Sheriff's Department, University Ave, Provo...

Daphne stepped into the elevator, her high-heeled boots echoing through the space as they clicked her purposeful stride on the tile floor.

“Well, here goes nothing,” she muttered as the doors slid shut, fidgeting with the notebook in her hands. “No, stand firm, woman. You’ve got this,” she scoffed at herself as thoughts of the handsome Sheriff Carter Scott flitted through her mind like butterflies. She could just imagine his chiseled jaw and steely gray eyes gazing at her intently as she stated her reason for the visit.

“Focus, Daphne.” She squared her shoulders with determination. “Keep your wits about you and remain professional.” Easier said than done. The darn man was just too tempting to keep her thoughts from wandering... to all the lustful things she wanted him to do to her. For one thing, she wouldn’t mind him taking off her knickers, pushing her back onto the desk, and—

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Daphne, stop it! You’re gonna smell like a whore walking into a church after a tumble in the alley by the time you get to his office.” The telltale trickle

from her nether regions warned her that it might already be too late. The elevator dinged open.

“Okay, show time.” Daphne strode purposefully down the hall, her boots announcing her arrival with each step. Knowing she needed all the help she could get, she had taken the time to dress up for the momentous occasion—her favorite pair of designer jeans hugged her curves perfectly, and the peach-colored cashmere sweater complemented the silky chestnut tresses of her hair. A bit of mascara and lip gloss completed the look. She wanted to impress the dashing sheriff but also demonstrate she was no ditzy maiden.

As the sheriff’s office came into view, Daphne straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Confidence is key,” she told herself. “Manifest yourself, girl! Channel your inner lioness and approach your query with courage and conviction!” She envisioned herself as a brave knight on a noble quest for truth.

Her courage nearly faltered, however, when she entered the reception area and was met with a stern frown from the woman seated at the front desk. The receptionist’s beady eyes focused on Daphne over her spectacles in a most judgmental fashion.

“Halt, wayward traveler!” the gaze seemed to say. “You shall not pass!”

Daphne valiantly resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Clearly, this sentinel was determined to guard access to the sheriff at all costs. Well, Lady Daphne the Dauntless would just have to rely on her wit and charm to win the day. She pasted a bright smile on her face and sallied forth.

“Well met, good woman! I come in search of the valorous Sheriff Scott...”

Daphne was surprised as the older woman—Claire Vermont, as the tag on her shirt identified her—rolled her eyes. Irritation presented itself in the annoyed grunt escaping her lips at Daphne’s endeavor at humor. It seemed she was used to women attempting to invade the sheriff’s office when the dashing Spanish Fork’s Sheriff Carter Scott was visiting.

A change of tactic was needed. This wasn’t the kind of woman who would fall for charm. Although Daphne preferred not to lie, there were times when the end justified the means.

“I’m afraid Sheriff Scott is unavailable.” Claire tapped a stiff finger on the page of the diary in front of her. “Especially since you don’t have an appointment.”

“Oh, of course,” she chuckled. “We don’t want the already grumpy knave to become even more cantankerous, right?”

“Lordie me, it’s one of those,” Claire mumbled under her breath as she straightened in the chair. “As I said, you don’t have an appointment, so...” She gestured toward the door.

“I’m sorry,” Daphne leaned closer and conspiratorially whispered, “I didn’t make an appointment since this is supposed to be a surprise. I’m in town on business from New York, and when I heard that he’s also here, I thought to pop in and say hi to my cousin, but if that’s inappropriate, I’ll just drive out to his house later—”

“You’re his cousin?” Claire’s frown turned so deep that her eyebrows formed one single line.

“Yes!” Daphne smiled brightly as she stuck out her hand. “Daphne Fowler.” She tilted her head sideways as she suppressed a smug smile at the receptionist’s clear disbelief. She leaned in closer as if sharing a secret. “He’s never mentioned me, has he?”

“No, can’t say that he has,” Claire said, still not convinced.

“I’m not surprised.” She plastered a sad look on her face. “Big C,” she laughed. “That’s what I called him as a kid, and I guess it stuck. My cousin takes his job too seriously. I think he’s forgotten how to have fun.”

Claire’s eyebrows remained locked in a skeptical position, creasing her forehead like tractor tracks across a field. She glanced between Daphne and the solid wooden door leading to the sheriff’s office, clearly debating with herself. With a shrug, she pivoted on her stylish boots to head for the elevator.

“I’m sorry I bothered you. Oh! Please don’t tell him I was here. As I said, I want to surprise him.”

“Ms. Fowler!” Claire’s voice rang out just as Daphne’s finger hovered over the elevator call button.

Daphne suppressed the desire to pump a fist of victory into the air, but she didn’t waste time walking back to the office. It was a challenge to keep back the smug smile tugging at her lips.

“Yes?” With her hands clasped innocently in front of her, she trotted back to the desk. “You called?”

“I guess since you’re family, it’s okay.” Claire gestured to the door. “He’s using the sheriff’s office for the time being.

Our newly appointed sheriff hasn't arrived yet. Carter is currently in a meeting with the mayor. You can wait inside. I'm sure he won't be much longer."

"Oh, are you sure?" Daphne blinked in faux surprise. "I truly don't mean to impose."

"I'm sure it's no trouble," Claire replied briskly. "In fact, I'll arrange for some coffee to be brought in while you wait."

"Now, that would be delightful. Thanks so much." Daphne made a beeline for the office before Sheriff Scott's self-appointed bodyguard changed her mind.

"And that, dear Daphne, is how it's done." With a self-satisfied smile, she settled into a deep bucket chair in front of the window to wait.

Now to convince the stubborn sheriff to let her join the case. She had her ways of being persuasive when she wanted something.

"And I definitely want in on the action. This story is huge."

CHAPTER SEVEN



“There’s a surprise waiting for you.”

Carter grunted at Claire’s announcement as he walked toward the office thirty minutes later than intended.

Sebastian Kirk, Provo’s mayor, stood squarely behind the Utah County Attorney, Bob McCarthy, who was demanding his resignation in lieu of him being implicated in the ritualistic sexual abuse and child sex trafficking investigation. Kirk used every opportunity possible to force Carter to drop the case, but there was nothing he or anyone could say that would change his mind. He took this matter very seriously. That such a heinous crime happened under the noses of the community for so long, where their children were victimized, was incomprehensible to Carter.

“You know how I feel about surprises,” he grumbled but waved away her intended response. He visited Provo often enough for her to know by now he abhorred anything that would disrupt his day.

That the package he had expected to find waiting on his desk turned out to be the enticing brunette sprawled in the bucket chair caused a check in his stride. She was slouched low with one leg hooked over the arm of the chair, swinging it gently back and forth. Humming a lively tune, she scribbled in

a notebook that was perched precariously on her raised leg. “Hmm,” she cooed as she sipped on what he perceived to be coffee since the deep-roasted aroma of the beverage filled his nostrils as he drew a breath.

Since Kirk already took up so much of his time, he didn’t have more to waste on chit-chatting with the bothersome woman. More specifically since she had made her intentions toward him abundantly clear. Fighting off a woman with an overactive libido wasn’t new to him, but there was something about Daphne Fowler that had resonated with him from their first meeting. It was disappointing that she proved to be one of *those* after all.

Patience was a virtue, he reminded himself as he pushed his hands into his pockets and studied her. He had expected more from her. Professionalism, for one, rather than using feminine wiles to get her way.

Her reputation as a radical investigative journalist preceded her, so he had known who she was the moment she had mentioned her name. Nonetheless, he had done a thorough background check on her, which was why her presence here today didn’t come as that much of a surprise. He had read numerous of her articles over the years and was well aware that she had played helpful roles in cracking open many of the investigations she had assisted in. It was commendable, but the last thing he needed was a nosy and over-eager reporter looking for her next big story, especially since there was already too much public opinion in their findings.

“It appears you’re lost. This isn’t the public library, Miss Lovebug.” He kept his tone even but ensured a tinge of sharpness warned her not to push her luck.

“Oh, freaking moss balls,” she cried. The unexpected deepness of his voice gave her such a fright that instead of taking a sip, the cup toppled, and the coffee spilled all over her soft peach-colored sweater. Glowering at him, she jumped to her feet. “Now look at what you’ve done!”

“Me? Not sure how you came to that conclusion since I’m standing way over here.”

“Damn it! This is cashmere, and it’s ruined now. Not to mention, it’s one of my favorite sweaters,” she wailed as she pulled at the wet jersey clinging to the roundness of her breasts.

“Well, that is a pity.” The snort of disbelief from her was testimony that she had little faith in the authenticity of his offered sympathy. Suppressing a grin, he turned sideways and gestured toward the door. “I guess that means you need to get back to the B & B, pronto. Who knows, if you get it washed before it dries, you might be able to save it.”

“Ten points for effort, Sheriff Scott.”

One eyebrow inched higher. “Effort to do what, Miss VW Bug?”

“Daphne,” she said through clenched teeth. “My name is Daphne. Please use it, and you know what for.”

“I’m confused. Using your name or...”

“Tsk,” she negated his pretend confusion. “The effort to get rid of me. I’m not leaving until I do what I came here to do.”

“Which is what exactly?”

With hands on her hips and one foot tapping on the carpet, she was the epitome of confidence—and not to mention annoyed. An emotion flashed a warning in her eyes that she was slowly losing her patience.

“Come now, Sheriff Scott. You’re a clever man. I wouldn’t lose a bet that you already ran a background check on me, right?”

“Your name is a regular on the front page of national newspapers and magazines, Ms. Fowler. Doing a background check would’ve been a waste of time.” She didn’t have to know she had hit the nail on the head. No need to boost her self-confidence further, especially since he had done it to satisfy his own curiosity over who the woman behind the career truly was.

“So, you know why I’m here.”

“Do I?”

The rhythmic toe-tapping on the carpet quickened, followed by a drawn-out exhale before she continued with thin lips.

“My sources inform me that you have a person of interest in custody in the sex ring case you’re investigating. I would like to offer my assistance, Sheriff Scott.”

“I appreciate the offer, but since we’re only in the beginning stages of gathering information, you would impede rather than assist. So, thank you, but no thank you.” His eyes narrowed. “You really should be leaving Provo, Ms. Fowler.”

“Provo was always intended to be a one-night sleepover, Sheriff Scott. I’m actually on my way to Spanish Fork.” The hesitation was marked. “I believe that is your dominion, isn’t it? Where the actual investigation originated?”

“I have a very low tolerance for manipulation, Ms. Fowler. I suggest you tread very lightly.”

“Ah, the big, bad wolf is marking his territory, isn’t he?” She tilted her head sideways. “Don’t worry, Sheriff. I have no intention of stealing the credit. All I want is to help you find all those cretins who are doing such horrible things to innocent children.”

“You’re sadly mistaken if you believe I started the investigation to make a name for myself, Ms. Fowler. I couldn’t care less about receiving credit for cracking open the case and making arrests. All I want is to see justice done.”

“Then it’s a done deal!” She smiled so widely, her lips almost stretched right around her face. “We’re exactly on the same page, so working together makes perfect sense.”

“To the contrary. The only sensible thing to do would be for you to pack your bags and hit the road back to Salt Lake City.”

“Be practical, my dear sheriff,” she cooed as she walked closer.

Carter's gaze locked on her swaying hips as she approached him. He felt the vision of wrapping his large hands around those rounded curves like an electric shock coursing through his body to zap his cock with a thousand volts. It had been a while since he got an instant chubby—and a stiff one at that. He was hard-pressed not to reach down and adjust his jeans for a more comfortable fit.

She stopped mere inches from him, so close, he could feel the heat of her breath against his lips as she breathed the words out in a husky voice.

“Why won't you let me help?”

“What exactly are you offering to help with, Miss VW Bug? The investigation or easing my hard cock?”

Her eyes flared, and her breath stuttered as a becoming rosy blush blossomed over her cheeks. It was evident the little chit wasn't used to a man being one step ahead of her.

“Well, you know what they say about women, Sheriff?” She cleared the croak in her throat before continuing.

It offered him immense pleasure that he had managed to unsettle her. The little miss was way too forward for her own good.

“We can multitask.” Her fingers fluttered over the buttons of his shirt to trace the buckle of his belt. “And I've been known to be an expert multitasker.”

“I'm sure you are, except I would question your motives, my dear Ms. Fowler.”

“You don’t trust me?” She leaned back to stare at him in pretend shock. “Whatever did I do to deserve such a harsh reaction?”

“I don’t trust reporters. Period.”

“Hmm, I guess it’ll be up to me to change your mind. You know...” The sooty length of her eyelashes fluttered enticingly. “Prove to you that you shouldn’t judge all books by the same cover.”

“You’re wasting your time, Daphne.” The deep tenor of his voice darkened. “I’m not the kind of man to fall prey to feline seduction, so you might as well stop shooting your pheromone-filled breaths at me.”

“Believe me, big man, I’m not the kind of woman to waste time on such an ineffective measure of seduction. You can trust me, Carter. I don’t play games. I just... act.”

Before he could guess her intention, she hooked her fingers into his shirt, yanked him closer, and locked their lips together. She wasn’t a passive participant, waiting for him to take charge. Oh, no, like the fiery reporter she was, her actions in seducing him were more so... red-hot even.

For a few moments, he allowed her the victory, then the desire to make her quiver and shake in his arms took charge. His mouth was firm and demanding. It represented the man he was, hard and powerful. His tongue plundered her mouth as with the first sweep, he turned her inside out. The kiss was crammed with lascivious promise and unchecked famine. Her passionate moans spilling out from between their interlocked lips were music to his ears. She swayed as her body turned

weak, held upright only by his strong arm circling her waist as he pushed his tongue deeper inside the recess of her mouth.

When he lifted his head long moments later, the silence was shattered only by her laborious breathing. He watched her through hooded eyes.

“Trust is a fickle thing, Daphne. You may talk the talk, but I only allow those who walk the talk to gain my trust and my unconditional faith. Offering your very delectable body as a bargaining tool isn’t placing you in a favorable position for either.”

Even though his words weren’t meant as an insult, he took pleasure in watching the rosy blush heating her cheeks. Goading her was easier than he thought it would be. Her reactions were even better to watch—not only to his words but to his presence. He kept her pressed close, deliberately encroaching on her space. He suppressed a smile as her breath puffed loudly from her lips when her hardened nipples brushed against his chest.

“What the devil is going on here? Sheriff Scott!? Your cousin... well, I’ll be... I have no words,” Claire’s indignant blubber from the door broke them apart. Carter frowned as her words registered.

“That’s what she told you? That she’s my cousin?”

“Well, yes,” Claire said hesitantly as she glowered at Daphne, daring her to deny the truth.

“I’m surprised at you, Claire. I distinctly remember telling you years ago already that the only family I have is my mother

and two brothers. No aunts, no cousins, nephews, and only one niece, who you already met.

“It completely slipped my mind. I’m sorry, Sheriff Scott. Believe me, I will immediately set this right.” Without further ado, she grabbed Daphne’s arm and wrestled her to the door. “Be a darling and bring the intruder’s things, won’t you, Sheriff?”

“No!” Daphne protested and did her best to slam on breaks, but the woman, although older and smaller than her, was all wiry strength. Desperate, she looked back at Carter. “I’m not done talking with you. I have much more to tell you.”

“I think you’ve said enough,” he drawled as he followed the two women down the hallway and down the stairs, carrying Daphne’s handbag, coat, and notebook. “Besides, I already gave you my answer.”

“You’re wrong. For Crickey’s sake, Claire, stop pushing me! I am trying to talk to Carter,” she huffed as she slapped at the hands clamped around her waist.

“It’s Sheriff Scott to you, young lady,” Claire scoffed, unperturbed at the spectacle they were causing as she marched her through the entrance hall of the building. She only released her once she stood on the pavement outside the offices. With her hands planted on her hips, Carter couldn’t help but compare Claire to one of the British Queen’s guards. Her stance said it all. Daphne wasn’t going to get past her back into the building again. “There. Now, stay out!”

“This is ludicrous,” Daphne protested but took the older woman’s warning to heart and didn’t move. Her eyes

narrowed as they locked on him. Carter didn't bother hiding his amusement, which, of course, triggered the reaction he expected... indignant embarrassment.

Waiting for the bomb inside her to explode, he leaned against the entrance with unabashed pleasure coursing through him. It had been ages since he had such a lively and rewarding encounter with a woman... and he wasn't even referring to the kiss.

“Gmphf! Go ahead, you cad! Enjoy my humiliation, but know this. It's not gonna stop me. You wanna throw down the gauntlet, Sheriff Scott, I'm in. Taken or not, intended or not, you just issued a challenge, and I never say no to one of those... especially not if a sexy hunk of a man is the prize.”

Her eyes glimmered with anticipation, which in turn triggered a frustrated groan from deep within him. He should've known this would be how she'd react. It was in her DNA. Daphne Fowler lived and breathed challenges. He, whether he liked it or not, had become her latest conquest.

“I accept, Big C,” she purred as their eyes caught and held.

“Don't bother. There is no challenge or game. Whatever you intend, I'm not interested, Miss VW Bug. So, why not go your merry way?”

“Hmm, the dashing knave doth protest too much, me thinks,” she purred in a clear voice. “Be ready, Scotty, I'm coming for ya.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



County Sheriff holding cell, Joaquin, Provo...

Since Carter hadn't denied the capture of a perpetrator, Daphne was relatively confident that their intel was spot on. To ensure she didn't miss out on the interrogation, she headed directly for the Provo holding cells. She wanted to be there before he arrived.

"Yep, you're not going to sideline me, Sheriff Scott. I'm locked and loaded, especially after that kiss. Oh, that kiss!"

Clasping one hand over her heart, she replayed the experience in her mind. Never had she felt as raw and devastated—the passion and lust he awakened when he took control of the kiss was still humming through her body. The hardness of his body...

"Lord, it felt so good."

It was little wonder her ovaries were still doing a fiery tango inside her!

"Freaking idiot!" she snapped crankily as a loud honk next to her shook her from her daydream and caused her to bump her head against the door. Rubbing the throbbing spot, she glowered at the driver of the truck. He pointed at her with a circle motion, indicating she should open her window.

Looking around, she relaxed when she noticed numerous people loitering around in the area.

“Yes? May I help you?” she said politely, lowering the window in a narrow slit.

“I’m unlikely to attack you in broad daylight, missy,” the young man said with a broad smile. When she noticed him wearing a deputy badge on his uniform, she rolled down the window all the way.

“One can never be too cautious,” she defended herself.

“Very true, and you should keep doing it.” He gestured at the sign in front of her car. “I just wanted to warn you that you’re parked in the sheriff’s spot. It’s a fineable offense here in Provo.”

Daphne’s eyes jumped ahead. “Flipping hot tamale,” she mumbled as she started the car. So much for staying covert until she could surprise Carter and walk into the building directly behind him.

“Thanks for the warning, Deputy. I owe you!” With a wave and a smile at the young man, she reversed quickly and parked next to a large GMC truck. She had to crane her neck to keep an eye on the sheriff’s parking bay, but that was preferable rather than being caught in the act of spying on him. It wasn’t something she would ever admit to him, but he had the uncanny ability to make her feel like a fumbling, incompetent twit at times.

“Where the devil are you, Sheriff Scott?” Had she realized he would take his time getting here, she could’ve gone to the B

& B to change first. Instead, here she was, uncomfortable and smelling like a coffee pot of all things.

“So much for the pricey perfume I used this morning,” she mumbled, sniffing at her wrist. The fresh, flowery bouquet soothed her irritation, but not for long. As soon as she lowered her arm, all that wafted into her nostrils was the strong smell of darkly roasted coffee beans. “Ugh! Who would’ve thought I’d ever cringe at the decadent aroma of my favorite beverage?”

With an impatient mutter, she quickly made a call to Sydney.

“I’m still waiting on that intel about Bob McCarthy,” she said in response to his chirpy greeting.

“Cranky this morning, aren’t we?”

“Sorry, but I desperately need some ammunition to get the grumpy sheriff to agree that I assist with the investigation. Is there anything worthwhile yet?”

“Oh, very much so. I just cracked open encrypted communication on the deep web. The exalted attorney McCarthy is the one who got Baker Cowell exonerated before he was even charged every time.”

“Why would he do that? Surely, he should realize such information could sink his career? Supporting and aiding someone listed on the sex offender list would stand out like a bear with a sore tooth.”

“True, except he has never defended or interfered through the courts. His involvement has always been behind the

scenes. Unfortunately, Attorney McCarthy forgot that nothing on the dark web ever disappears completely. At least not for someone as efficient as me.”

“Do you have something concrete to send me? Sheriff Scott isn’t the kind of man who’s going to act on hearsay.”

“Sending it to you as we speak. So, tell me—”

“Oh! He’s here. He just arrived! I have to go. Talk again soon.” Daphne ended the call as she slumped down in the seat. She felt like a private investigator on a sleazy stakeout, but it wouldn’t do for the sheriff to notice her before she got inside. The security was so tight, she knew there was no way she’d gain entrance without his assistance.

Of course, Daphne forgot how the bright yellow VW Bug stood out in the parking area amid black SUVs, trucks, and police vehicles. However, if Carter noticed it, he didn’t show it as he got out of his SUV and strode purposefully toward the gated entrance.

With her back hunched over, she got out and ran after him. Since she didn’t want to alert him to her presence, she stayed on her toes, and with her arms held out for balance, she must be looking like a ballerina doing comedy photo shoots in the middle of the street.

She caught up with him just as he opened the glass-paneled door. Instead of walking through, he came to an abrupt halt, which forced her to freeze mid-stride.

Oh, Lord! I must look like a stalking snow man caught in the act.

“You do know glass has a reflection, Miss Lovebug?”

“Ah, shit,” she muttered, belatedly realizing he must’ve spotted her as they approached the door.

“Hmm, quite a good look on you, I have to say.” Amusement sparked to life in his eyes as he turned to look at her, frozen in the same position—one leg still hovering in the air, her arms lifted as though she was about to jump him, and her body hunched forward. “Perhaps you should just remain as you are until I’m done... for your own good, of course.”

“Don’t be silly,” she finally managed to pull herself together, dropped her arms, and lowered her leg. “I’m going inside with you.”

“So, you thought spooking me would be the best way to gain access inside the building?” He planted his hands low on his lips and leaned in closer to whisper loudly, “And then what? Do you honestly think you’d be allowed to interview any of the prisoners without the necessary authorization?”

“Well, no,” she cleared her throat. This wasn’t going anywhere near how she had envisioned it would. Being caught in the act like a half-crazed witch, the least of them! “I was hoping you would’ve realized by now that I would be an asset in your investigation.”

“An asset?” His brows drew together in a dark frown. “Come now, Ms. Fowler, be honest. You’re here for one reason only.”

“I am? Well, do tell, Sheriff Scott.” She crossed her arms, and her left foot automatically started tapping out her

annoyance. “Why am I here?”

“For your next big story. To have another accolade to put on your shelf as the fearless reporter sticking her nose in where it doesn’t belong... or sure as hell not wanted.” He leaned so close, their breaths mingled in the space between them. “You don’t know half of the shit that’s going on, but you insist on digging in your heels. Get this through your head, Daphne. I don’t want or need your help. Now... git!”

“You’re wrong, and I’m insulted, to say the least. For one, I am resourceful.” She tilted her head at his dubious look. “You don’t believe me? Well, I know the perpetrator you’re about to interrogate is a man by the name of Baker Cowell—a listed sex offender and suspected numerous times of sex trafficking. I’m not after an accolade, Sheriff Scott. Yes, I’m after the story, but only because I want to see justice done.” The tapping of her toe increased. “Do you even wonder how I know about this case? Why I’m here so early in the investigation?”

“Everyone knows about it since Bob McCarthy’s press conference the other day.”

“True, except your investigation and who it implicates was brought to my attention via an email a week prior to that.”

Carter straightened. A dark shadow crossed over his face. “From whom?”

“I don’t know. All I’ve been able to confirm is that it came from the Utah County’s office.” She hesitated to gauge his reaction. “To be more specific, from the personal laptop of none other than Bob McCarthy.”

Muttering a string of expletives, Carter grabbed her arm and pulled her along inside.

“Slow down! I don’t have stilts for legs like you,” she protested as she had to run to keep up with his long strides. He, the darn bully, chose to ignore her plea, and she had no choice but to keep jogging next to him lest she be dragged by her heels. They were already drawing enough attention as everyone stopped to stare at the spectacle. She refused to turn into the joke of the day and look like a puppet he was slugging along.

“That was totally unnecessary,” she complained indignantly as she straightened her coat when he released her once inside a small conference room.

“You’ve become like an unwanted itch, Ms. Fowler. One that I just can’t get rid of, no matter how much Benadryl cream I slap on.”

“Well, some itches are good to scratch,” she said with a secret smile. “You just need the right—”

“Lord help me,” Carter muttered as he pressed his fists on the table and appeared to be praying for strength.

“Not to sound facetious, but I’m closer than the Lord, and I promise you, I’m quite adept at scratching certain... itches.” Her response was tongue-in-cheek, but the dark look he shot at her quickly doused the heat rising inside her loins. Being alone with him in the small room made her imagination run rampant, not to mention igniting her libido. She held up her hands in defeat. “Okay, you’re right. Certain itches are a serious matter. I shouldn’t joke about it.”

“The email... are you saying it came from McCarthy himself?” Carter chose not to indulge her in favor of returning his focus to what had brought them to the secluded room in the first place.

“Not necessarily. Most of us leave our laptops on our desks during the day when we go out for lunch, to the restroom, or, in his case, even to court. Anyone could’ve used it to send the email. Point is, someone wanted me to know about him. I believe it’s a person who either knows or suspects he is involved.” She smiled victoriously as the frown on his brow dissipated. “So, now do you agree that I can be a part of your investigation?”

“No, I don’t. All it proves is that exploring the allegations, which not only exploded suddenly but also opened a Pandora’s Box, was the right thing to do. From this point on, no one can be trusted.”

“Come now, Carter. Surely, you don’t suspect me?”

“I don’t know you, and since I have trusted others who are implicated in this shit show, I’m on the fence about you. Until you can prove otherwise, everyone is a suspect.” He waved off the protest jumping to her lips. “Don’t bother. More words aren’t going to change my mind.”

“Maybe this might do the trick.”

Daphne breached the distance between them, and like before, she took the kiss she so desperately wanted. Now that she’d had a taste of his delectable lips on hers, it seemed she couldn’t get enough. Once again, Carter wasn’t a passive

participant and kissed her back, although he was the one who broke it off and stepped back.

Eyes flashing, he growled softly, “You shouldn’t have done that, Lovebug.”

“Well, I did.” She pushed out her breasts as a sign of bravado. “So, Big C, what do you intend to do about that?”

“Take you up on your offer.”

“You... ehm...” He completely took the wind out of her sails with his unexpected and colloquial response. “Y-You are?” No doubt with her lips pursed as she gasped in surprise made her look like a fish out of water.

“Indeed.”

Daphne wanted to yell in frustration when he didn’t elaborate but instead opened the door. One eyebrow inched higher.

“Well? Are you comin’?”

CHAPTER NINE



Daphne was a good girl—she truly was—for the first fifteen minutes of the interrogation.

“C’mon, Baker, you’ve given us nothing.” Her resolve to do as Carter had instructed before entering the room to keep quiet cracked. She finally couldn’t curb her irritation any longer. Ignoring Carter’s warning look, she sallied forth. “You’ve been playing Ring Around the Rosie with Sheriff Scott. I, for one, am getting bored.”

Baker Cowell cast a lazy eye her way, looked her up and down, and then back at Carter.

“So, is this good cop, bad cop time? She doesn’t look like a copper.” He snorted as his eyes roamed over the stained sweater. “If anything, I’d say she’s a little ditsy. Definitely not the kind of woman with steel in her veins that would make me shiver in my boots.”

“I don’t need steel in my veins, you decrepit criminal. You have no idea what—”

“That’s quite enough, Ms. Fowler,” Carter warned darkly.

“Oh, I am only getting started, Sheriff Scott. If this little pipsqueak thinks he can insult me and—”

“I believe it’s time you and I have a private talk, Ms. Fowler,” Carter’s gravelly voice resonated through the room. Daphne had no choice but to follow him as he summarily got up and walked out.

“Okay,” she immediately began as the door closed behind her. “I know I overstepped, but that man is being a—”

“This isn’t your interrogation. I warned you to keep quiet,” he growled angrily.

“But I—” Daphne swallowed the protest under the icy warning in his eyes.

“It’s done. I refuse to have your eagerness to assist interfere with the success of this investigation. You will wait for me in the observation room.” He narrowed his eyes dangerously. “Be there, Ms. Fowler, nowhere else. I won’t be pleased if I have to come looking for you.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Ten bags of salt, sir!”

“Go. Now!” He pointed to a closed door.

With a cheeky salute, she pivoted and with a “Gmphf!” stomped in the direction he pointed. “But let it be known, Sheriff Scott, I’m not happy about this. Not one little bit.”

“Believe me, neither am I.”

Daphne had a sneaky suspicion they weren’t in agreement about the same topic. Head held high, she walked into the observation room, only to be startled by the presence of a female deputy.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize anyone was in here.”

“It’s a requirement that someone always oversee an interrogation.” The dark blonde woman smiled. “Yes, even if it’s the sheriff. I’m Deputy Sheriff Tanya Cooper of the Provo precinct,” she introduced herself.

“Daphne Fowler,” she responded as she shook the proffered hand.

“Ah, the infamous investigative reporter.”

“Hardly infamous.” Daphne laughed as she took the chair next to Tanya. “So, I’ve been sequestered here for the time being.” She looked around the dark and dreary room, devoid of anything but the two chairs. “Not as exciting as being on the other side of the glass panel, though.”

“True, but at least we get to watch a master at work.” Tanya looked at her sideways. “You might think he’s not pushing hard enough, but he’s already obtained a couple of leads during the time you were there.”

Daphne looked at her in surprise. “I must’ve been too focused on the obvious information to notice. What leads, if I may ask?”

“You may, but I prefer that you ask Sheriff Scott himself. It’s up to him whether he feels it appropriate to share information with you.”

“But I was in there with him,” Daphne protested as she opened her notebook, hoping to convince Tanya to share what she had missed.

“It sucks, doesn’t it?” Tanya smirked but in a friendly way. “It took me years of watching to read between the lines and

watching his reactions to responses.” She got up. “I’m hungry. Can I get you something?”

“Oh, yes, please. I missed breakfast this morning.” Daphne had been in such a hurry to catch Carter before he interrogated Cowell that she had skipped the most important meal of the day... for her at least. She needed a carb-filled brekkie to kick-start her day. No wonder her attention span was wavering, and she had missed crucial information while inside the interrogation room.

While the Deputy Sheriff was out, Daphne leaned forward to watch Carter. It didn’t take long to notice how precise every action of his was. Every gesture, every nod, and every word he formed was done with a specific outcome in mind.

“Damn! Tanya was right. He’s brilliant.”

“I’m sorry,” Tanya said as Daphne was visually startled by her return. “I’ve been called out, but Deputy Sheriff Flint will be here shortly to take over.” She handed her a steamy corn dog. “Not really the healthiest snack, but apart from it being all that was ready, these are delicious.”

“I love corn dogs, and I haven’t had one in ages. This is gonna be *sooo* good.”

“Enjoy,” Tanya said with a wave, then she closed the door behind her.

Daphne moaned in food ecstasy as she took the first bite. Her attention drifted back to the two men on the other side of the thick glass panel. She was highly impressed with Carter’s patience as he continued to interrogate the man.

“Crickey, but this is damn good,” she mumbled around another bite. Closing her eyes, she savored the explosion of different flavors in her mouth.

“So, you’re still here?”

One minute, she took her eyes off the man for one lousy minute, and once again, he managed to catch her in a highly compromising, not to mention unfeminine, position. Of course, as luck would have it, his unexpected arrival ended in another embarrassing situation for her—twice in one day.

As was her usual way, she had been sprawled low in the chair, chomping away on the corn dog.

“Ah, freaking moss balls,” she cried in fright at his gruff voice. The scramble to straighten in the chair ended in the opposite—her slipping off and landing flat on her buttocks on the floor... again! Her legs were all over as she attempted to catch the corn dog before it fell to the floor.

“Hell, no! Not today, you’re not,” she grumbled as she caught it just in time. It would be an epic disaster if such a delicious delicacy went to waste. The sound of Carter’s deep, rumbling laughter froze her in place—on her knees and elbows, clutching the precious corn dog between her hands. She looked up as the sound of mirth coming from his lips curled around her loins and triggered a lust so profound, she started to tremble. All she could do was stare in awe.

Dearie me, just look at him. I could eat him up!

He turned into a Greek god when he laughed. His entire demeanor changed. He became relaxed as he morphed into the

most gorgeously rugged handsomeness she couldn't wait to devour.

Remember, he's taken, Daphne. The voice of reason brought her back to reality. Indignantly, she pushed upright and gathered her legs as she waved the precious snack at him.

"Laugh at me again, Sheriff, and I'll stuff this corn dog sideways into your mouth."

"I'd like to see you try," he said as his rolling laughter ended in a deep chuckle.

"You should be more careful, Sheriff. I thrive on challenges such as those." With a snort at his continued amusement, she stuck out her hand. "C'mon, since it's your fault I'm once again flat on the floor, the least you can do is help me up."

Daphne didn't find it at all funny that it took him the time she needed to regain her composure and dignity to swallow his mirth.

Piqued, she hid her embarrassment behind a chilled, "You don't seem to be making any progress with the interrogation."

His smile negated the effect she was after. "I work at my own pace, Daphne. Do not interfere again, or—"

"I know more than I originally told you," she cut him off, desperate to regain a modicum of professionalism.

"Do tell."

"Do not patronize me, Carter Scott," she snapped. "You've had your fun at my expense." She waved the corn dog in front

of his face like a knight in a sword battle. “Now, it’s time to pay attention.”

“As I said, I’m all ears.” This time, he wiped all signs of a smile off his face.

“That’s better.” Since she needed to replenish some of the energy her tumble had expunged, she took a large bite of the corn dog. “Hmm, so good,” she mumbled before she continued in a muffled voice, “McCarthy is the one who keeps getting the charges against Cowell dropped. Mark my words, Sheriff, before the morning, one way or the other, he’ll be out of jail.”

“He’s already leaving.”

Daphne stopped chewing. “He’s what?!” Her hands landed on her hips, the corn dog sticking out toward him like an accusing finger—a very large, swollen one.

Carter shrugged. “He was only detained for drunk and disruptive behavior, which is a misdemeanor, and we’re not even going to charge him. Deputy Sheriff Cooper only kept him locked up because of being a sex offender and of interest in the case.” A frown creased his forehead. “How do you know about the connection between them?”

She placed the corn dog on the plate and wiped her hands. This time, it was her turn to shrug. “Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell thee no lies.”

“This isn’t the time to— Where do you think you’re going?”

With his angry exclamation chasing her, she skipped past him to quickly walk down the hallway.

“Daphne Fowler! Get back here.”

Ignoring the order, she sped up. Once outside, she turned into a sprint to get to her car. It was time Sheriff Scott realized she was more than a ditzy reporter.

With a bright smile, she waved at him as she passed him by when he came charging out of the building.

“Eat that, you big bully!” The echo of her words reminded her what had caused her second embarrassment of the day.

“Damn! I left my corn dog behind.”

CHAPTER TEN



Later that evening, Hines Mansion Bed & Breakfast, Provo...

Back in her room at the cozy bed and breakfast, Daphne berated herself for her forward behavior with Carter earlier. What had come over her, openly flirting with the handsome sheriff?

At the same time, Daphne prided herself on being able to predict how a man would react to a blatant dare. Her action earlier had been exactly that. Daring, perhaps even an open invitation for Carter to show she was interested in pursuing him, which was why she had been berating herself ad nauseam ever since.

“The man is in love with another woman, Daphne, or did you happen to forget the intimate scene at breakfast?”

Listening to her own voice only served as another devil’s pat on the back. Acting so completely against her own beliefs and morals was something she had never done before. She paced the creaky wooden floors, awash in regret. But something about Carter had sparked an irresistible chemistry she couldn’t deny. Those soulful eyes, that muscular frame... he awakened desires in her no man had before.

Daphne knew she should respect his commitment to the petite blonde, but the heart-pounding exhilaration of that charged moment in the observation room overwhelmed her senses. The way Carter had gazed at her lips... she was sure he was about to kiss her again.

“Ugh! You’re such a bad girl. Here you are, hoping he would take the hint and come knocking on your door.”

Well, not physically knocking, but at least phone or show some sign the next time they met that he was also attracted to her. With a groan, she collapsed onto the four-poster bed. She had to stop indulging these fantasies. Carter was taken, and she refused to be a home-wrecker. Still, spending more time with him made her pulse race with longing. The thought of never seeing him again after this case awoke an acute ache inside her.

“Ah, well, like I said, you win some, you lose some. This one is just such a sorrowful loss,” she wailed in self-pity. “Get a grip, Daphne,” she muttered. “You’ll help him solve this case and move on, like always.”

But the memory of Carter’s hard lips under hers pierced her heart. She had never lost her head over a man this way before. Fate was cruel, teasing her with this charming, heroic man she could never have. With a sigh, she could only hope these unrequited feelings would fade in time. In the meantime, she would savor every moment with Carter before walking away from him forever.

“Oh Lord, stop the melodrama already!” she snapped at herself. “It’s not as if you’re in love with the man. He’s a sex

magnet, that's all it is. Get the devil over it."

With her voice still floating through the room, she jumped up to answer the knock on the door.

"Oh!" Her heart skipped a beat. "You're not from the kitchen bringing my food."

"Indeed, I'm not." The dulcet tones of Carter's voice found resonance inside her, awakening the desires she had just managed to get under control.

"Uhm... wh-what are you doing here?" Daphne retreated as Carter boldly stepped inside and closed the door behind him. His muscled presence made the room suddenly shrink to half its size.

"It's time, Lovebug."

"T-Time? For what?" Daphne couldn't retreat further as the next step brought her against the wall.

"To take the first step."

"Carter, stop talking in riddles. Just tell me why you're here."

"I'm here to continue what you started, so if you're not ready for me, you better chase me out right now because once our lips meet, that's it. I'll be making you mine."

"I... you... but what about..." Her eyes darted back and forth as she desperately tried to keep her wits intact.

"What about what?"

"The blonde? I saw you hugging and kissing a blonde the other day."

A dark chuckle escaped from deep within as he stepped closer. With a moan, she closed her eyes as his muscled frame trapped her against the wall. She couldn't see his face, but her lips connected with his neck. The urge to bite the vein right there overwhelmed her. She was about to sink her teeth in when his voice once again stopped her.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lovebug,” he breathed against her neck. A shiver tracked down her spine.

Startled at the deep growl, Daphne pushed against his chest. She gasped as he stepped back, startled at how gorgeous he was in his fully aroused state.

“It would be incest if I had a thing with the petite blonde.” His smile gentled the harshness of his earlier warning. “Nadine is my niece.”

“Oh... I thought she was...”

“No, she isn't... and it's time. Choose, Lovebug... now.” He leaned in and kissed her, immediately sweeping his tongue inside her mouth. Grasping her hand from where it rested against his chest, he nailed it to the wall at the side of her head with his fingers. Held captive, she stood vulnerable against the rush of sparks erupting along her nerve endings.

Daphne reveled in Carter's groan that filled the room. It rumbled from deep within his chest as his fingers curled around her chin. At first soothingly gentle, then, within a heartbeat, they turned to inflexible steel.

The kiss was relentless, forceful, yet so absolutely perfect that she was left questioning her sanity and fighting for

oxygen. Daphne was overcome with an equal measure of light-headedness and lust as he pressed his hips into hers, blatantly flaunting his erection.

“I’m waiting, Daphne. Are you going to be mine?”

Daphne couldn’t breathe, let alone speak, as the kiss was more than the demand of ownership. Every touch and slide of his tongue against hers was soaked with the sweetness of passion—a million loving thoughts condensed into a moment.

“Yes... hell, yes, please, Carter.”

“Good.” He released her and stepped back. “Pack an overnight bag. We’re going to my mountain lodge in Powerhouse Mountain.

“But why? I’m ready now! We don’t need to go to your house. We can—”

“No, we can’t make love here.”

“I don’t understand. Why in the devil not?”

“Because, Lovebug, I’m going to make you scream, and since I have a reputation to uphold in town, we have to—”

“Well, hell, Sheriff Scott, you should’ve led with that. So,” she grabbed her coat. “Well, what are we waiting for?”



Carter’s mountain lodge in the Powerhouse Mountain range. Springvale, midway between Provo and Spanish Fork...

“Come on, love. Don’t be shy. I am going to lick every inch of your skin tonight, so you might as well get naked and

join me,” Carter said from where he was already waiting in the hot tub.

Confident in her skin, she didn’t hesitate and quickly undressed. His eyes scrolling over her nakedness caused a thrill of anticipation to rush over her, especially as he licked his lips with luscious intent.

“Ooh, this feels absolutely wicked,” Daphne sighed as she settled beside him, and the warm water of the hot tub swirled around her naked skin. Secure on the heated enclosed glass pane patio staring out to the stars added to the allure of the moment.

“You have no idea what wicked means, Lovebug,” Carter murmured into her hair as he drew her close. She sighed as she leaned back against him, reveling in how comfortable they were with each other... naked and vulnerable out in the open.

“Hmmm, this feels like heaven. Your hard, naked body. So hot.”

Daphne broke out in goose flesh as he pressed his chest against her back. Her breath caught in her throat as he trailed his fingers over her shoulders and arms with feather-like touches, tracing a line toward her breasts. He turned her around in his arms and pressed his lower body against her as his hard arousal throbbed against her soft belly.

“Carter, are you sure no one—”

“We’re alone up here, love. No one ever comes this far up. Besides, it’s private property. People here respect that.” He smiled darkly. “You have completely captivated me. I’ve never

wanted anyone more than I want you right now, Daphne, and I'm not waiting any longer."

His words combusted in her mind as she leaned back into his arms and boldly cupped his buttocks. The words, "Yes, please, Carter," caused his cock to distend shiny and taut.

"Mmm. You smell wonderful. This is so luxurious. I wouldn't mind staying here with you forever. I wish this night would never end."

Daphne sighed as he pressed his face in the fragrant wet tufts of her hair. Lost in thought, she let go and surrendered to the dream of being captured forever in the amber of a crystallized moment.

"I'm not running away, Carter." Daphne smiled into his eyes and stroked his chin. "In fact, I need it, too. The tension in my body is killing me."

"You've got me wound up so tight in the short time I've known you, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to go slow. I'll try to savor the moment, but I'm starved for you. Don't expect any restraint from me." He studied her intently. "Are you ready for me?" With a carnal growl, Carter reached down and slid a finger inside her. "So lovely down here."

"I didn't think you were the waxing poetic type. Need some direction to get going faster, Sheriff?"

Daphne had become so adept at hiding her feelings for so long, she didn't really know how to open up completely to a man, especially in intimate situations. She would clam up and default into a mechanical mode. The result was forced. The

attempt at free play and unconscious thought disappeared behind an anonymous mask... until his lips covered hers with a tender kiss that assuaged her anxiety and acknowledged her feelings.

“Easy does it, Lovebug. I changed my mind. We’re gonna skip the fifty-yard dash and run the five-thousand-meter marathon. You’ve got nothing to lose with me except the demons hounding your mind. You can relax, love. I have no intention of hurting you... or running away, ever.”

“Oh, Carter.” She understood immediately that she didn’t have to hide anymore. If she gave her heart over to him unconditionally, it was with the knowledge that he was the one man who had the ability to hurt her more than she had ever been hurt before. He had the power to destroy her. It was the way she loved. It was all or nothing. Daphne felt her heart beat painfully in her chest. Life had taken a hard left turn. One she hadn’t expected. She didn’t know if she was ready for the intensity the look in his eyes promised.

She trembled as her mouth opened into his kiss. Suddenly, the past days fell away and vanished. She felt assured of his commitment—even if only for this night. She savored the first taste of a sweet, enduring love without expectations. No looking back.

Locked in each other’s embrace, they swayed and turned, lost together, veiled in gossamer breezes that rustled and soothed their sunbaked skin in a nocturnal balm.

“Ohh,” she moaned as he enticed her with bites and lashes, punctuated by feints and probes until her thirst had become

unquenchable. She turned into his kiss and drank eagerly from the passion she so desperately needed.

Daphne's eager hands pulled and tugged impatiently as she freed his cock from his shorts and stroked him taut. She was overwhelmed with powerful emotions as the world around them threatened to fall away.

"Carter, please. I need you." She was lost to him. She hooked a leg around his waist and drove herself against his shaft, grinding her swollen nethers up and down his length.

His marionette hands tickled her hips with feather-light strokes that dipped and grazed, scuffed and swirled to soothe and tease the soft vacancy of her skin. Her mind was unable to process the pleasure that followed each caress. It felt as if her body had a transitory paralysis, where it was only him, his touch, and his warm breath that moved her.

"You're so lovely, and you smell like heaven... honeyed nectar," he whispered as he nibbled on her ear.

Daphne trembled, unable to move as fear trumped the desire to seduce not his body but win the emotions she sensed were tightly protected inside his heart.

A bolt of fear ripped through her, but he threaded his hands beneath her shoulders to soothe the ache that sat clumped upon her shoulders.

"Don't. No negative thoughts," he whispered, nuzzling her cheek. "No thoughts of past hurts. Leave it where it belongs and look to the future... with me. This is our moment, Daphne

Fowler. Leave the ghosts of the past where they belong. Live in the moment with me.”

“You might regret saying that, Carter. I might never want to let go of you,” she whispered as she pressed her mouth to his for a kiss wrought soft and hard and mixed with love and hope.

“I doubt that, Lovebug.”

The warm kisses on her eyelids and circled caresses traced on her back soothed the torment and swept the cold surge of remembered heartache to the back of her mind, drowning all her doubts as he firmly embedded his very essence inside her heart.

Carter sighed against her delicate mouth. “I love these,” he murmured as he leaned closer to teeth on the sulky pink of her lower lip and whispered his palms over the taut, dark flesh of her nipples.

“Carter, you’ve got me all hot and wet. I’m already on the edge. Don’t make me wait.” To confirm her request, she reached down between them and gently stroked the already-engorged knob of his cock.

The smile on his face was warm and loving as he brushed back the thick, wet tufts of hair that clung to her shoulders.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

Daphne’s heart filled to bursting at the tender adoration she read in his eyes. She grinned that cheeky smile, which he returned with a roguish grin that tugged at her heartstrings.

“No, and I have to say, Sheriff Scott, it was well worth the wait.”

His hand wandered into the wet strands of her chestnut mane and pulled her head back to stare at her.

“You don’t need to be told. All you need to do is look in my eyes, and you will know all.”

Daphne laughed gaily, wondering if what he hinted at was a roller-coaster ride of a life, never knowing where the next weave of track would take them.

“Then I’ll be gazing at you constantly in the days to come, my handsome knight.”

He pressed his turgid length against her swollen folds and slowly pushed inside, watching her all the time. The acceleration of her heart rate had nothing to do with the fear of losing her heart way too fast but rather with how desperately she needed his possession at that very moment.

“Daphne,” he whispered her name as they became one, limbs entwined and hearts fused, while they swayed to the rhythmic sounds of each other’s deep murmurs of love and sweet passion.

His mouth lashed the traps of her shoulders with long, deep kisses, dosing her with ragged breaths as she gasped for air. The passionate discourse of their moans drifted off, pushed into the topgallants of a large Bishop pine that stood sheathed in its scabbard of resinous bark.

He thrust more deeply, plunging into her until her screams and his hoarse cries washed over them in tumultuous waves of

ecstasy, drowning them in the final demand of a climax.

“Again. Do it again, Carter,” Daphne demanded a while later when she managed to draw a breath.

Carter grunted out a tired laugh. “The sweetest honey is loathsome in its own deliciousness. I’m beat, love. I need a moment or sixty to recover. I’m not a young buck anymore,” Carter puffed in a jagged voice, pulling his spent body upright.

Daphne laughed and kissed his neck while he buried his face in her hair. She loved his smell, rich and earthy. His arms tightened around her so completely, she gasped for breath.

A sigh escaped her lips to record the fragile nature of their immediate presence. She forced thoughts of negativity from her mind. It was time she stopped living in the past. Judging every man who managed to spear through the thick wall she had secured around her heart by Gold’s standards had to stop. No more was she going to expect the feeling of happiness that had the brevity of a burst of sunlight only to disappear, just as quickly, behind a cloud. Today, she locked away that part of her life. Now, she looked to the future. To the euphoria bestowed upon her by a man who, with such confidence, knew how to manage the addictive tease of its ephemerality.

“You were right, Sheriff Scott,” she said with a cheeky smile and a rosy tint to her cheeks. “You made me scream.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The next morning...

Daphne awoke to the smell of bacon teasing her nostrils. For a confused few seconds, she blinked as she focused on her surroundings. It took a couple of minutes for her memory to settle into place as she looked around the unfamiliar room.

“Hmm, what a night,” she sighed at the end of a lazy stretch. A soft groan escaped from her throat as she felt the lingering ache in muscles she hadn’t known even existed.

“Coffee.” Carter appeared around the sofa and held out a steaming mug.

“Morning,” she croaked sleepily as she pushed upright, ignoring the blanket that slipped down to reveal her perky breasts to his gaze. She, hussy that she was, although still somewhat sleepy-eyed, hungrily drank in the vision of an Adonis who, she hoped, would give in to the hungry lust she made no effort to hide from her gaze.

“Behave, Lovebug. There will be no morning sex. Drink your coffee. We’re going for a hike before breakfast.”

Daphne took a sip before dragging up the blanket to cover herself. She looked through the window.

“A hike? Don’t you think it’s a bit chilly for an early morning hike? We don’t want my girlie bits to freeze, you know.”

“Don’t worry. Nadine left one of her thick down jackets and snow boots here. You’ll be all cozy and warm.”

“Hiking isn’t in my portfolio of activities, Sheriff Scott. Now,”—she looked around the stylishly decorated open room—“if you have a treadmill standing around somewhere, I’ll be too happy to trod on that.”

“Who wants to walk on rubber when you can enjoy the beauty and wonders Mother Nature has to offer?” Carter remained unperturbed at her continued protesting murmurs as he rushed her through the coffee and getting dressed.

“Ready?” he asked ten minutes later as he zipped up the jacket and pulled the hood over her head.

“No, I’d much rather curl back on the sofa and wait for your return.”

“Now, where’s the fun in that for me?” He opened the door, smiling when she gasped at the cold rush of air blasting against her face. “Better cover up with that scarf, Lovebug. Let’s go.”

Daphne shivered as Carter led her out into the snow-covered forest surrounding his mountain lodge. The icy air stung her cheeks, and she burrowed deeper into the puffy down jacket.

“Remind me why we’re out here at the crack of dawn when we could be warm in bed?” she grumbled, her breath

fogging.

Carter chuckled, his hand clasping hers firmly, so she didn't slip on the icy path. "To enjoy the beauty of nature, of course."

Daphne surveyed the silent, snowy woods dubiously. She was a city girl through and through. The only *nature* she enjoyed was a well-manicured park.

They crunched through the fresh powder, their boots leaving deep prints. The winding trail dipped and rose over rocky terrain. Daphne frequently stumbled on hidden roots and stones.

"Is this what you mountain men do for fun?" she panted, sweat beading her forehead despite the cold. "Hike until your lungs explode?"

"Aw, come on, it's not that bad," Carter cajoled with a grin. He seemed immune to both the cold and the challenging terrain.

Daphne just emitted a strangled wheeze in response. They had only been hiking for ten minutes, but each step already felt like torture. She'd be lucky if she survived this wilderness trek.

"Please tell me there's a Starbucks around the next bend," she implored. "My kingdom for a caramel macchiato!"

Carter laughed heartily at her dramatics. "Almost there, just over this ridge."

Daphne lasted another five minutes of silence before she once again submitted to verbal protest.

“I think we’ve hiked far enough for my first day. We should go back before the snot in my nose freezes and I die due to a lack of oxygen.”

“Nope. I can still see my house, which means we’ve hardly walked a mile.”

“A mile!” Daphne exclaimed. “Good Lord, it feels like five already. Believe me, stumbling over rocks and maneuvering a very uneven path is hard work. I won’t need to exercise for a week after this!”

She cried out in surprise as the next moment, Carter pinned her against the thick trunk of a pine tree.

“What are you... ohh! Lordie me. Carter, stop! You can’t do that,” she exclaimed as she clawed at his arm, not being very effective in stopping his hand from slipping down the front of her leggings to rub a finger against her clit, setting it to throb almost immediately.

“No? Just who is gonna stop me, little Lovebug?” he growled in her ear as he slipped a finger inside her wet channel. “Definitely not your eager body, right?”

“Right,” she gasped as shards of pleasure exploded inside her when he pumped two fingers inside her while toggling her clit with his thumb.

Nudging her chin up for a kiss, he lingered as if to savor the familiar scent before closing the gap that separated their lips. A sense of calm washed over her as he brushed his fingers over her eyebrows and murmured as if to himself,

“You are so beautiful and so passionate. I truly am a lucky man.”

“Carter... I... ooohh!” she screamed as he pumped deeper, faster, and pushed her over the edge. Ripples of pleasure washed over her as she climaxed. Clinging to him, she rode the wave, gasping for air as he continued to feed the orgasm, forcing her to come... again and again.

“Let that be a lesson, Ms. VW Bug,” he growled into her ear. “I react instinctively to a buzzing bee irritating my ears.”

Daphne smiled saucily as he withdrew from her and fixed her clothes. Her eyes danced with glee.

“Oh, I’ll be sure to remember that, Sheriff, especially when I have an itch that needs to be scratched again.”

Carter’s brows gathered in an ominous frown as she laughed gaily and skipped away, satisfied at the thunderous expression on his face.

Let that be a lesson, oh high and mighty sheriff. Now, you’ll never know whether or not I hadn’t been planning for this exact outcome!

Not that she could ever have conjured up he would have such a reaction, but she was glad she now knew. Sheriff Carter Scott had just unknowingly handed her an entire seductive arsenal to ploy him with.

Carter soon caught up with her. Without a word, he dragged her against him and planted a hard, passionate kiss on her lips.

“Don’t think you outwitted me, Lovebug. Remember, I always give as good as I get. Now, you owe me one.”

“And I’ll be too happy to pay any debt you demand, oh high and mighty lord.” She laughed as he wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Oh, thank the Lord!” Daphne cried in relief twenty minutes later when the lodge finally reappeared through the trees. Her legs shook like jelly as Carter led her gratefully back inside to the warmth and comfort of his beautiful home.

“Don’t expect me to thank you for taking me on a hike,” she said as she caught him watching her with an expectant smile. “I’m going to need a year to recover from this ordeal!”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Mid-afternoon, a few miles from Carter's house on the way back to Provo on the Springville Road...

The sun shone brightly overhead as Daphne and Carter drove back to Provo, still basking in the afterglow of their intimate time together earlier. As the miles flew by, Daphne felt as if they had formed an unbreakable emotional bond, their souls intertwined.

“Hold on!” Suddenly, Carter slammed on the brakes. “Holy shit,” Carter cursed as he yanked the steering wheel sharply to the right to avoid hitting the young girl, who suddenly ran out of the forest and jumped into the road right in front of the SUV.

“What— Oh no! Look out!” Daphne screamed as the SUV veered, and her body lurched forward against the seatbelt. She threw her hands out in front of her, fingers clawing at the dashboard in desperation. “Oh God,” she whimpered with her heart hammering against her ribs as adrenaline flooded her system.

With a shriek of tires on the tarred road, the SUV shuddered to a stop mere inches from the massive tree directly in its path. For a brief moment, the world seemed to stand still, nothing audible except Daphne's ragged breathing.

“Did we hit her? Carter? Did we hit her?” Daphne managed to gasp, her gaze fixed unblinkingly on the tree looming before them. Her fingers remained locked on the dashboard despite her brain urging them to let go.

“No, but something’s wrong with her. She hasn’t moved from the spot.” Carter’s voice was tense but steady. Gently grasping her rigid hand, he asked, “Are you okay, love? Did you get hurt?”

Shaking her head mutely, Daphne slowly dragged her focus back to the interior of the vehicle. “I’m fine... it’s j-just...” she stammered, her entire body beginning to tremble in delayed reaction.

Carter firmly clasped both her hands and gently pulled them free of their death grip on the dashboard. Daphne clung to him, the dopamine draining from her system and leaving her shaken.

“Th-The little g-girl. Wh-Where is she?” Daphne managed to ask through chattering teeth as she clung to him when her entire body began to shudder from delayed shock.

“Relax, Daphne. Breathe. C’mon. In and out,” Carter soothed, patiently guiding her through slowing her frantic breaths. “Good. Keep breathing. I’m going to check on the little girl.”

“Th-That’s good.” Daphne nodded jerkily, still struggling to calm her pounding heart. “Y-You go.”

With a brief nod, Carter stepped out of the SUV, and moved cautiously toward the little girl where she still stood

like a statue in the middle of the road. As Daphne watched through the windshield, she noticed the child's eyes grow wide with fear, how her small body became tense as she visually shuddered upon Carter's approach.

"Are you okay, little one?" His voice floated back toward Daphne as she looked on silently, all the while willing her body to stop trembling.

The little girl took a faltering step back, her face etched with raw terror as she gazed up at Carter's tall, muscular frame looming over her. Though he spoke in a gentle, soothing tone meant to calm her, she only seemed to become more panicked.

"Oh, no. Stop!" Daphne called out as she quickly jumped out of the SUV and rushed over. A gentle hand on Carter's arm stopped him in his tracks. "Let me. She's obviously scared of men," she said softly.

Carter stepped back with an understanding nod. Daphne turned to the frightened child. When the girl eyed her with open suspicion, she crouched down to her level.

"It's okay, sweetie. No one's going to hurt you. We're here to help. You have nothing to be scared of. We're going to take you home," she murmured in a soothing voice as she opened her arms invitingly.

"Y-You're not gonna take me back to th-that place?" The fear in the girl's voice was palpable. Daphne looked over her shoulder at Carter. *That* place could only be where the girls were kept until they were well-groomed for whatever dark future was in store for them.

“No, honey. My name is Daphne, and this is Sheriff Carter Scott. I promise you, all we want to do is take you to safety.”

After another moment of hesitant trembling, the young girl rushed into Daphne’s embrace. She clung to her with her thin body wracking with sobs.

“I w-want to go h-home,” she cried brokenly.

“I know, honey. I know.” Daphne enveloped her in a comforting hug while gently stroking her hair. She had a hard time keeping her own tears at bay. “Shhh, it’s alright. We’ll take you home.” She continued murmuring calming words until the child’s tears slowed.

As the young girl lifted her face, Daphne saw an ocean of relief and trust in her red-rimmed eyes. The raw fear from moments before was gone, replaced by a fragile hope as she kept her small arms wrapped tightly around Daphne.

“What’s your name, little one?” Carter’s deep but tranquil voice wrapped around them. Still, the girl cringed, and her arms tightened the hold she had around Daphne’s waist.

“It’s okay. You can trust him. He’ll never hurt you.”

“M-My name is L-Lisa.” She looked briefly at Carter. “Lisa Whittle.” Refusing to release the stranglehold she had on Daphne, she was forced to walk to the SUV in a hunched-over position since Lisa was too big for her to carry. Daphne judged her to be around twelve years old. “Can we go home now, please, Aunty Daphne?”

Daphne felt emotion clog her throat at the child’s complete faith in her—this scared young girl seeking safety and comfort

in her embrace. She hugged her closer, wishing she could shield her from whatever had caused such heart-wrenching terror.

“We’ll have to go to the precinct first, but then we’ll take you home,” Carter interjected gently. He smiled as fresh tears formed in her eyes. “Don’t worry. It won’t take long. I just need to get your parents’ details and prepare them for your return.” He hesitated, obviously loathed to keep asking questions, but Daphne knew it was necessary. “How long have you been in... that place?”

“I’m not sure. W-We were locked up in an underground dungeon. B-But we counted the days with marks against the wall. Today was the seventy-fifth day.”

“We? How many others are there?”

“I’m not sure.” She started crying again. “Th-There were many rooms, and I never saw the others, just heard them. In our room, there were f-fifteen girls.”

“Okay, no more questions,” Daphne said as Lisa became more agitated. “Let’s get her in the SUV. She’s freezing.”

“Damn, I should’ve done this sooner.” Carter immediately took off his thick jacket and handed it over. His expression was brooding as he watched Daphne help the distress child put it on. “Come, let’s go. There’s some water and some energy bars in the car.”

Daphne got into the back of the SUV with Lisa since she refused to release the stranglehold she had on her. Once Carter started driving, her fear seemed to increase as she kept

glancing around and clawing at Daphne's waist. Talking didn't seem to help, so as a last resort, Daphne started singing the lullaby her mother used to sing for her at night.

On the way, Carter made contact with social services and arranged for Sandra Baker, a social worker who was his mother's best friend, to meet them at the Provo sheriff's office.

When Daphne looked down at Lisa, she had fallen asleep, with one hand clutching Daphne's and the other still wrapped around her waist. The emotions flooding her mind at being another human being's emotional and physical crutch was beyond anything she had ever experienced.

Over the years, and with all the investigations she had done, her main focus had been the bad. How to expose the criminals behind the scenes, how to crack open their deviousness and make them pay for their crimes. This was the first time she came into direct contact with a victim of the kind of monsters she had made her life's work to eliminate. It opened a myriad of dreams and wishes she had blithely pushed to the back of her mind over the years in pursuit of a successful career.

That of finding a loving man... a father for their children. Her own happily ever after with the white picket fence completed the picture.

"Is she on the list of child abductions in your investigation, Carter?" She kept her voice low so as not to wake up the young girl.

"Yes." His voice was grim, and from how his jaw was clenched, it was evident he was struggling to keep his anger at

bay. “At the local annual summer fair in Provo. Her parents agreed for the first time ever that she join her friends that night instead of participating in the events with them. There were four girls taken that night.”

“I can’t wrap my mind around this. Just how many girls are they keeping locked up below ground? Fifteen, Carter! She said there were fifteen in the room she was in... and there were more.” Tears spilled over as visions of the fear and despair the girls must live with every single day flooded her mind. “We have to find them. We just have to.”

“We will, love. Now that we have Lisa, at least I have confirmation my suspicions are spot on. We have a rough idea which area to search. Once she’s calm and ready, she might even help us find that damn place.”

Daphne stroked Lisa’s hair. It felt brittle and had very clearly not been washed in a while.

“How can anyone who has their own daughters do something like this to a child? What is this world coming to, Carter?”

“It’s not the world, love. It’s greed. These men are blinded by the dollar signs flashing in front of them. To them, these girls are tickets to a money train with a never-ending demand.”

“That is so sick!”

“We will stop them if that’s the last thing I ever do. I will find that hellhole.”

“And I’ll be right there alongside you.”

“No. This has just become too real. You will stay out of this, Daphne. It’s not safe.”

“Forget it, Sheriff Scott.” Daphne brushed off the feeling of belonging that washed over her at his words. Caring and concern was evident in his eyes as he glanced at her over his shoulder. She smiled grimly to soften the sting of her words. “Besides, I’m a grown woman. I don’t fit the criteria. They have no interest in someone like me.”

“I can’t believe you’re that naive. Child grooming and trafficking are only part of a much bigger operation. Do you honestly think they don’t have a vested interest in all aspects of the sex industry that could enrich them?”

Daphne remained quiet. She knew Carter was right, but it didn’t dilute her resolve to help put an end to at least this one trafficking ring.

No matter how my emotions are opening to you, Carter Scott, no one—not even you—is going to stop me from doing my bit. I am going to be there when the bastard in charge is caught!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Utah County Sheriff's Department, University Ave, Provo...

“Mom! Dad!” Lisa’s young voice, filled with relief and excitement, rang out through the vast expanse of the double-volume area. The young girl sprinted across the lobby with tears streaming down her cheeks. Carter had called ahead on the way over, and Deputy Sheriff Tanya Cooper had ensured her parents were waiting upon their arrival.

Turning at the sound of her voice where they stood waiting at the front desk, their faces lit up at the sight of their beloved daughter.

“Oh, my baby!” Lisa’s mother cried as she rushed forward and swept Lisa into her arms. She clung to the girl tightly, as if afraid she might disappear again.

“My sweet girl, you’re safe, you’re here,” she sobbed while stroking Lisa’s hair.

The big man by her side didn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around both his wife and child. The love and devotion for his daughter shone brightly from his gaze.

“We were so scared, so worried,” he said in a voice thick with emotion. “But you’re here. Thank God you’re alright.”

Lisa buried her face in her mother's shoulder for a long moment before looking up with teary eyes.

"I missed you so much," she said. "I just want to go home."

"We're taking you home, sweetheart," her father assured her in a gravelly voice as he kissed the top of her head with tears of joy and gratitude streaming down his face. He lifted his head to look at Carter. "Can we leave now, Sheriff Scott?"

"I wish I could say yes, but it's imperative that she goes to the hospital first for the necessary check-up and tests." Carter glanced at Tanya. "I'm sure Deputy Cooper explained why."

The expression on the hulk of a man's face turned stony. Daphne had no doubt he had murderous thoughts racing through his mind as he nodded. His arms tightened around his daughter.

"She did. I just wish it wasn't necessary. That it's all a misunderstanding."

"I'm afraid not." Carter squeezed his shoulder. "Let's not discuss this now. Rather get her to the hospital so you can take her home. She's exhausted, and the next hour or so is going to be trying. The sooner it's over, the quicker she can get some sleep." He gestured at Tanya. "The deputy will escort you to the hospital."

Daphne's sisters always called her a crybaby, but only because she had such a soft heart. Seeing the heartfelt reunion and witnessing Carter's gentleness with the family triggered a swell of emotions within her. Though she was overjoyed about

Lisa being found and reunited with her family, it also reminded her of her own longing for connection and unconditional love. Yes, she had a soft heart, but neither of her sisters was aware of the childhood misery she had suffered—being pushed aside in favor of her beloved twin sisters—that had left her feeling lonely and misunderstood.

The twins were the complete opposite of her—always happy, outgoing, and front leaders of everything they took on from when they were little. Although she was now outspoken and daring, growing up, Daphne had always been the quieter one. At six years older than her siblings, she was inadvertently excluded from all activities since her parents felt she wouldn't have an interest in being part of whatever endeavor they tackled.

That her own parents were so dismissive of her sensitive nature had festered over time into feeling non-existent to them. Luckily, her sisters made up for their parental shortcomings. They loved their big sis, and the three of them had become inseparable over the years. Now, Daphne couldn't envision a week going by without spending time with them. They were each other's yin and yang. Maybe the thought of what she would do should one of them disappear was what caused the hot tears to spill uncontrollably down her cheeks as she observed the tender scene before her.

When Carter wrapped her into his strong arms and pulled her against his chest, he inadvertently triggered shudders to wreak through her body. The sobs that she could no longer contain escaped as she buried her face in his shirt. His big hand gently stroking her hair provided comfort and security—

something she hadn't experienced for longer than she cared to admit.

“Okay, that’s a little much love. Come, let’s go to the sheriff’s office, then you can tell me what’s really causing all these tears,” Carter said softly once her sobs subsided somewhat.

Daphne clung to him. For the first time in her life, she was overwhelmed with emotion. Still, she was grateful for his steadying presence. As she walked beside him, she was shaken by the desire to finally unburden her heart of past hurts that had bubbled to the surface. She had always kept it to herself; her own sisters didn’t even know she secretly harbored such torment. Why she wanted to tell all to this man, who she hardly knew, discombobulated her.

Perhaps it was fate that Carter had been the one to catch her speeding on the way into town. The past two days she had spent with him had opened her heart in ways she had never experienced—it was so much more than pure physical pleasure. As an investigative journalist, Daphne didn’t believe in concepts such as love at first sight, but now, she questioned whether what she was confronted with wasn’t just that—instalove. The emotions within her were so strong, she stood vulnerable and raw against their magnitude.

Once Daphne was seated, Carter leaned back against the desk with his legs stretched out in front of him. The look on his face warned her that he wouldn’t stand for backpedaling. She had exposed an emotional frailness that he had homed in

on. The watchful patience etched on his face didn't waver as the silence stretched out between them.

Sighing, she lowered her eyes. "It's really nothing. I just..." One hand fluttered in the air as the words choked her.

"It's not nothing, love," His voice turned gravelly. "After our time together, I hope you know you can trust me... with your life and your emotions. All I want to do is protect you." He leaned forward but didn't move closer. It was as though he instinctively realized she needed that personal space he offered. "Talk to me, VW Bug."

"It's actually silly, and maybe my feelings became... I don't know... elevated because of what Lisa had to endure. Watching the reunion with her parents and the unchecked emotions that flowed between them just reminded me how much was withheld from me once my sisters were born."

"Sisters?"

"Twins." She smiled wryly. "Don't get me wrong, I love them to death, and now we can't go without seeing one another every week, but back then..." She shook her head as she choked up again.

"Deep breaths, love."

"You keep calling me that," Daphne said with awe in her voice as she realized just how many times he had called her 'love' since they left his mountain lodge.

"Would you prefer Honey or Lovebug?" The smile on his face was indulgent without being disparaging.

“No, it’s just that the word love implies... you know?” she said falteringly.

“So, it does.” His expression didn’t give away his thoughts. “You’re digressing. Why do you feel you were neglected?”

“Not neglected in a bad way, although I suppose in a sense it was just that.” She exhaled heavily. “My sisters were born on my birthday, the year I turned six years old. It was also the day my parents stopped paying attention to me. The twins were so beautiful, so dynamic as they grew up that all their time and effort went into them. I suppose they believed I was big enough to fend for myself.”

“As a six-year-old little girl?” Disbelief slashed across his face. “Bullshit, Daphne, and you know it. No parent should use the birth of twins or a second child as an excuse to withhold their firstborn from the most basic requirement of being a parent... love, affection, and care.”

Daphne looked down, tears welling up in her eyes. “You’re right,” she said softly. “I was just a little girl. I didn’t understand why they suddenly stopped tucking me in at night or reading me stories. Why they forgot about my dance recitals and didn’t help me with my homework anymore.” She took a shaky breath as the painful memories came flooding back.

“I had to learn to take care of myself. Make my own breakfast, pack my lunchbox, and get myself to school. God, I was too young to know what was going on, and I was so lonely, even living in a house filled with family. My parents were always too busy with the twins to spend any time with

me. I never blamed them, though. I couldn't because I loved them, too. They were my little sisters, and all I wanted was to be a part of their inner circle."

Carter moved to sit beside her and placed a comforting arm around her shoulders. "That must have been hard for you," he said gently. "No child should have to raise themselves like that."

Daphne wiped away a tear. "I used to cry myself to sleep at night, wishing they would love me again. As I got older, I buried my feelings deep inside. I never told anyone how much it hurt. My sisters had no idea—to this day, they still don't. To the outside world, we looked like one big happy family."

"You did it to protect the twins, didn't you?" he said softly. "You didn't want them to feel guilty that when they were born, you were pushed to the wayside."

She looked up at Carter with glistening eyes. "You saw through me, didn't you? Somehow, you could tell I was carrying this pain."

Carter's jaw tightened. "It's in your eyes, love. From the first time I set eyes on you, I noticed a sadness you try so hard to hide behind a façade of sassiness. You deserve to be loved wholly and completely, not cast aside or forgotten."

Overcome with emotion, Daphne turned and buried her face in Carter's chest, acknowledging that he had become the tap that opened the water trough within her. It seemed she couldn't stop the tears!

“Ah, no, love. No more tears,” he whispered as he wrapped both arms around her. Being held so close and with tenderness, she finally let go of the loneliness and heartache she had been carrying for so long.

“You’re safe now, love,” he murmured into her hair. “I’ve got you. And I promise you’ll never feel unloved or forgotten again.”

Daphne was overwhelmed by the comfort and security she felt in his embrace. She knew then that she had found someone special—a man who truly saw her and accepted every part of who she was. With Carter, the hurt little girl inside could finally begin to heal.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Two days later, Hines Mansion Bed & Breakfast, Provo...

For the first time since she was six years old, Daphne woke up feeling understood—free and light. The burden of hurt that had weighed her down and that she had suffered alone all these years was washed away by telling Carter the painful tale. His understanding, support, and offer to care and protect her more than made up for what she had suffered and carried within her growing up.

“Is that all he offered, though?” she asked the reflection in the mirror as she brushed her hair. “Or is there more?” The movement of her arm became mesmerizing as her mind drifted to the intimacy they had shared at his mountain lodge. The way he had touched her, the soft whispers of praise and comfort... all pointed to so much more than a purely physical encounter. It surely did for her.

“In fact, I have fallen in love with the knave... hook, line, and sinker.” She sighed heavily as she put down the brush. “Yep, no use denying it, young maiden, you have fallen hard for the man. Let’s just hope you’re not reading too much into the situation.”

If Carter didn’t reciprocate at least some affection toward her, she was screwed and setting herself up for heartache...

again.

“No, he’s not that kind of man. He has integrity, and the one thing I’m relatively certain of is that he’s not a player.” The words floating back to her set her mind at ease. He had left Provo and returned to Spanish Fork, his hometown, to delve deeper into the investigation and start the search for the underground compound where Lisa had been held captive. His main concern was to find the other girls who were being groomed in that hellhole. Daphne had chosen to stay behind and intended to follow him after she had visited Lisa to check if she was coping. Her parents had requested she wait a day or two to allow Lisa to rest and recover first. She had been completely drained after the long, intense talk she’d had with Carter after the examination at the hospital.

Daphne couldn’t wait to join him and pick up where they had left off. That she felt lost without Carter’s presence after knowing him for such a short time was more than enough of a sign that she had lost the battle before it even began—the battle of love.

With a dreamy smile and armed with confidence in what could turn into her happy-ever-after journey, Daphne made her way to the dining room to silence her growling belly.

“Same as always, Missy?” Hetta, the owner and chef of the Inn, asked as Daphne walked into the dining room. She was a lovely lady who sparked to life, making her guests happy.

“Not today. I have a hankering for your creamy French toast with cheese, honey, and bacon.”

“Ah, something sweet to spice up your morning, right?”

“Definitely,” Daphne said as she accepted the cappuccino one of the servers placed in front of her. “I’m going to miss your cooking once I leave.”

“Hopefully, not too soon. We love having you here. It’s not always that out-of-towners add so much joy and laughter to the community.”

Daphne just smiled. The laughter she referred to was usually at her expense for all the shenanigans that crossed her path wherever she went. Adding one sexy sheriff from a neighboring town who scrambled her commonsense brain cells turned her into an entire comedy show on her own!

She had just taken the first bite of the delicious custardy toast when a large man sat down at her table. After an initial start when she recognized him, she continued chewing, as if completely unperturbed at his presence—on the inside, her stomach was tied in knots, and she struggled to keep her breathing even.

“Do you know who I am, Ms. Fowler?”

Taking a sip of her coffee, she watched him over the rim of the cup. The thick-rimmed glasses gave his already brooding face a stark and unwelcome look. His eyes flashed dangerously as his lips thinned under her scrutiny. He was clearly annoyed and didn’t appreciate her delay in responding. Placing down the mug, Daphne nodded.

“Good morning to you too, Utah County Attorney Bob McCarthy. To what do I owe this pleasure of meeting you in person?”

“It has been brought to my attention that you’re snooping where you shouldn’t. More so, that you’re aiding Sheriff Scott in his ridiculous investigation that dares to implicate me as a conspirator.” He leaned closer, and his voice lowered into a menacing growl. “I won’t stand for it, Ms. Fowler. I worked hard to build my career and reputation. I intend to run for senate, and no one is going to stand in my way. Most definitely not a nosy reporter and a sheriff looking for a way to advance his own political career by sinking mine.”

“Well, then, if you’re innocent of all the allegations, you don’t have anything to worry about, no? In fact, if you aid the investigation, it will strengthen your success in running for senate.”

“Don’t sprout your clever theories at me, Missy. I see right through you. I suggest you leave town. Your sort isn’t welcome here.”

“My sort?” Daphne clutched the knife as if she was preparing to throw it at his head.

“Incompetent reporters whose only intention it is to sink an honorable county attorney’s career aren’t welcome in Provo.”

“Oh!” Daphne was startled as a big body suddenly circled her from behind and leaned in to place a lingering kiss on her cheek.

“Morning, love.”

Daphne’s eyes lit up as she looked up at him. His smile filled her heart with warmth as much as his large hand cupping her chin did her skin.

“Everything okay?”

“Oh, everything is just peachy...” She looked at McCarthy. “Isn’t it?” Daphne had to muster the laughter that threatened to bubble to the surface at the shocked expression on McCarthy’s face that he couldn’t hide.

“You’re with her?” he barked at Carter. “That’s why she’s here? You brought her here to further embarrass me?” McCarthy’s eyes narrowed on Daphne. “You would do well to remember what I said, Ms. Fowler. Just one mention of any kind associating me with that ridiculous investigation, and your loverboy can kiss the next sheriff election goodbye.”

“Sheriff election?” Carter snorted. “It doesn’t matter either way. See, I’ve decided to run for the Utah County Senate.” His smile turned cheshire-like as McCarthy blew up like a pufferfish. “Do you see the irony in that, McCarthy? You’ll be working for me, so if I were you, I’d be very careful who I threaten in my county.”

“You haven’t heard the last of this, Sheriff Scott. I won’t stop, even if I have to obtain a court order to force you to end this uncalled-for manhunt against me.” McCarthy pushed the chair back so forcefully that it toppled over as he stormed off.

Daphne stared at Carter in wonder, having completely been lost in the interaction from the moment Carter had arrived. One eyebrow inched up questioningly as he noticed her look when he righted the chair and sat down.

“You kissed me.” She looked around, noticing the interesting looks from the other diners. Her voice turned to a whisper. “In front of everyone.”

“So? We’re both adults. As far as I’m concerned, the intimacy we shared the other night was the seal on the start of our relationship. In case you didn’t realize it, I’m not the kind of man who sleeps around, Daphne. When I do reach a point of intimacy with a woman, it’s a commitment I make to her. We’re an item, a couple, attached... call it what you wish, but know this... I for one, am not going to skulk around the corner to steal a kiss or touch you. I will boldly show the world how proud I am to have you by my side and how much I am coming to care for you.”

“C-Care for me?”

“Again with the word games. What is it with you, Lovebug? Or does it come with a journalism career? Care, infatuated...” He smiled gently. “Love... call it what you wish, since all the above apply.”

“L-Love? You love... love—”

“I’m starting to become worried about your vocabulary, love. Perhaps I should invest in buying you an Oxford thesaurus. If you can do no more than repeat words like a parrot, at least put some action to them and show me what you’re trying to say... or feel.”

“Now?” Daphne’s breath stuttered. Her eyes darted around the room. They were now the undisputed center of attention. “Here in front of everyone?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were scared... or are you more bark than bite in general... Miss VW Bug?”

“I’ll show you more bite than bark, Sheriff Scott,” she mumbled as she got up, lifted a knee on the table, and crawled forward until a hair’s breadth separated their lips. “I’m always up for the challenge, my handsome knight... best you remember that.”

Her words were still floating between them when she bridged the small gap and kissed him with all the passion and longing in her heart.

“Ah... so that’s what you were trying to say,” he chuckled as she drew back long moments later, her breathing haggard as, once again, Carter had taken control of the kiss in a most demandingly satisfying way.

She winked saucily. “Indeed, my honey buns. Very much so.”

His brows drew together as his voice turned gravelly. “Now, say the words, love. I need to hear the words.”

“Care, infatuated... love.” She smiled tenderly. “All the above apply.”

Daphne burst out in a delighted, tinkling laugh as the big wolfish man rolled his eyes dramatically.

“Oh Lord. Now she’s a copycat. I’ll definitely have to buy that Oxford thesaurus.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The following day, the Springvale area between Provo and Spanish Fork...

Driving along the I-15 toward Spanish Fork, the sound of rock music blared from the radio, filling the bright yellow VW Bug with the memories of nineties music. As always, Daphne danced along in her seat to the heavy rhythms of the drums as the next song started.

“I’m halfway there-e-e! Yeah, yeah, livin’ on a praye-e-e-r!” Her voice cracked as she attempted to reach a high note while belting out the words at top volume.

“Hey, stay in your lane, mister!” she admonished as she pointed a warning finger at whoever hid behind the tinted windows of the GMC truck that kept inching closer into her lane. “Well, if that’s how you wanna play it,” she snorted as she flicked on the indicator to change lanes. Checking the side mirror, she mumbled irritably, “Oh, c’mon! Move past or slow down. Either way, do one or the other so I can switch lanes. I’m warning you, if this asshole scratches my bug, it’s gonna be your fault! MOVE asshole!”

Fingers tapping on the steering wheel, she realized the darn truck kept the same speed.

“Well, I suppose I’ll just drop back completely and leave the entire freeway open to you two gentlemen,” she grumbled and checked the rearview mirror. When she detected another black GMC behind her, her heart missed a beat. “Freaking moss balls! They’re boxing me in. Hell, and damnation, I’m in trouble!”

Forcing herself to remain calm, she fumbled in her bag for her cell phone and quickly dialed Carter’s number.

“Carter, I’m being boxed in. It looks like they’re going to force me off the road at Springvale,” she said the moment he answered the call.

“How many?” The quiet and calmness in his voice offered her strength.

“Three GMC trucks with tinted windows, so I can’t see how many cowards are inside.”

“Do not antagonize them, love. If they force you off the road, drive into a tree. Don’t let them force you into a situation where you end up in a worse situation.”

“You want me to hurt Suzie?” Her voice turned squeaky. Not because of damaging her beloved VW Bug but from the fear his words awakened inside her.

“Rather than you ending up at the bottom of a ravine. Are you wearing the jacket you had on at breakfast yesterday?”

“It’s on the seat next to me. Why?”

“I want you to put it on. Now, love. Before they get hold of you.”

“I’m trying to keep the bug on the road, and you want me to put on a jacket?” She cursed as she had to yank on the steering wheel to keep the GMC on her left from scratching her precious car. They were steadily forcing her to the far-right lane toward the off-ramp leading past Springvale into the mountains—the same road where they had come across Lisa.

“I attached a tracker under the collar yesterday, Daphne. Wear it, so I can find you. I’m already on my way.”

“A tracker? Why would you do that?” Daphne didn’t know if she was angry or relieved.

“McCarthy threatened you. I don’t trust that man. It was merely a precaution. I wasn’t prepared to take any chances. Not with your life. It’s too important to me.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“The jacket, Daphne. Are you wearing it yet?”

“No, I’m driving—”

“Put it on. Now!”

“Oh, for Chrissake,” she mumbled but grabbed the jacket and haphazardly pushed one arm through the sleeve. “I’m halfway wearing it. Don’t shout at me, Carter,” she said in a small voice when he took a deep breath. “I’m hanging on by a thread already.”

“Just make sure you’re wearing it when they force you out of the car.

“Do you think it’ll come to that? Do you... are they the ones who took all the girls?”

“Maybe, but I don’t know for sure. Just stay calm, love, and whatever happens, wear that jacket! I’m halfway to your location. Concentrate on your surroundings. Stay alert. If an opportunity arises... run like the devil is chasing you.”

“These bastards are the devil. Oh! They’re forcing me off the freeway. It’s happening, Carter. Carter, how far away are you? Carter!”

Her scream echoed back at her as she felt herself lose control of the bug when the power of the three trucks forced it in the direction they wanted it to go.

“Shit, shit!” she cursed as she lost her hold over the cell phone when she clutched the steering wheel and watched it skid across the passenger seat to drop over the side onto the floor. She dragged in a deep breath. “Calm. He said to stay calm, Daphne.”

Yeah... he also said drive into a tree.

“Oh, yes... he did say that,” she whispered as she looked around. They were forcing the VW Bug up a hill, driving over a grassy field, no doubt to push it over into the ravine up ahead—just like Carter had predicted. “Well, boo-hoo. Guess what, buckaroos! It’s not gonna transpire. I happen to have a very clever boyfriend, and he told me to drive into a tree.” She downshifted and slammed her foot on the gas pedal. “And that’s exactly what I’m gonna do!”

The bug might be much smaller than the trucks boxing her in, but she had a spurt of power that they didn’t expect. With a whooping scream, Daphne managed to escape the tunnel they had formed around her. The tree that loomed ahead was bigger

than it had appeared from afar, but it was the closest one. She aimed directly for it, pushing the bug as fast as she could when the GMCs increased speed to catch up with her.

“Ohhhh! Shitty moss balls!” she screamed as she slammed on brakes seconds before the bug smashed into the tree. Luckily, with a lot less impact than if she had kept the same speed, she had raced toward it. Still, the physical force of the collision violently shook her body, leaving her feeling shaken and disorientated. The only thought that kept milling through her head was Carter’s voice. “Whatever happens, wear that jacket!”

She moaned as every movement caused a flash of pain to shoot through her head, but she managed to put on the jacket and zipped it up with trembling fingers just as someone yanked open the door.

“Jesus, you’re one crazy bitch.” A balaclava-wearing man grumbled next to her as he grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the car.

“Correction, asshole, I might be crazy, but I am no bitch. I am a lady,” she croaked. Her throat was so dry, it felt as if she’d been lost in a desert for days. Her head feeling like it was being pounded by a Phil Collins drum solo didn’t help, either. She was completely off-center and struggled to shake off the haziness surrounding her. “Lemme go, you shitfaced cretin!”

The order came out in a weak puff, not at all in the assertive manner she’d intended. The bump on her head against the steering wheel during the crash must’ve been

harder than she had imagined. She felt woozy and unsteady on her feet.

“Behave, and you won’t be hurt,” he growled as he pulled a black sack over her head.

“No!” Daphne felt her chest constrict as everything went dark within the blink of an eye. Panic set in as her sight was taken, which elevated her other senses... fear at the forefront. She kicked out wildly, satisfied when a painful grunt floated toward her as her boot connected with the man’s shin.

“Oww! she cried out as he pulled her arm back and twisted it upward.

“Enough of this shit. Just clip her on the head. We don’t need her screams to draw attention,” another voice grated behind them.

“No! I’ll behave, I promise,” she wailed and forced her limbs to stop the desperate attempt to secure her freedom.

“This is a fuck up. She was supposed to end up in the ravine. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Daphne stumbled when the man holding her arm pushed her in the direction of the parked GMCs.

“Pick the bitch up. I don’t have the patience to drag her,” he growled.

“Careful! You’re gonna break my arm,” she wailed as they grabbed hold of her by the arms and carried her between them to the waiting vehicle. Once they pushed her into the truck, hard hands pushed her head into the seat.

“Keep down. If you move, I’m gonna clip your skull with my gun.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got such a headache, lying down is all I want to do,” she responded. All she could do now was pray that Carter was close and would find her sooner rather than later.

They had barely driven off when Daphne was overcome with a spell of sneezing brought on by the sack covering her head. When it eventually stopped, she said breezily, “Did you know if you sneeze too hard, you could fracture a rib? Not that I would know if it was the sneeze or the accident, but it’s true, nonetheless. I read it on the internet.”

The men in the front of the truck ignored her. Forcing herself to relax, Daphne focused on her increased senses and paid attention to the environment—the sounds, the turns, and the direction they were going in. She counted off the minutes, and since she grew up in Utah and knew the area of Provo and Spanish Fork very well, she soon realized they were heading in the direction of the Powerhouse Mountains—the same area where she and Carter had found Lisa.

“Did you guys play tongue twisters growing up?” Again, no response. Daphne grinned. She tended to become very talkative when she was scared, and truth be known, she was shit scared at the moment! “We loved it. The ‘sixth sick sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick’ is believed to be the toughest tongue twister in the English language.” She giggled. “Come on, say it, but you have to do it fast. Let’s hear it. Whose first? No one? Okay, I’ll go. The sixth sick sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick.

The sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick. The sheik's sixth sick sixth sheep's sick. No, that's wrong. See! I told you."

"Shut up!"

"Do you love animals? I love dogs. It's my favorite pet. Wish I could have one at my condo, but it's against the rules. Interesting facts, though. Did you know that a crocodile can't stick out its tongue? And that a shrimp's heart is in its head? Oh, this one is epic! I never knew, but it's physically impossible for pigs to look up into the sky! Isn't that amazing?"

"I said, shut up! You're giving me a fucking headache," Balaclava man one sneered.

"Okay, no more trivia facts, then. I love rock music," she continued as they took a sharp left turn, and as the driver downshifted, by her calculation, she realized they were already driving up the hillside of Powerhouse Mountain. Her breath stuttered. What if the tracker wouldn't be detectable once they got her into the bunker? How would Carter find her then? Those places were usually reinforced with steel, and from the description Lisa had given, it was more secure than Fort Knox!

"So, what do you guys listen to? Wait! I know, R & B, right? Or rap. Yes, I can hear you rapping in that deep, guttural voice of yours. C'mon, rap us a tune!"

"Jesus Christ! Make that bitch shut up. If I have to listen to another wisecrack, I'm gonna lose it!"

"Sorry, but I tend to talk when I'm nervous or scared." She giggled. "Needless to say, I'm kind of overflowing with both."

“Just shut the hell up!”

“Okay, I’ll try.” Daphne’s throat closed up, and even if she tried, she knew she wouldn’t get a word out when the truck rocked to a stop.

“Where are we?” she croaked as she was yanked out of the truck.

“A place where you will soon learn to shut up and do as you’re told.” She could feel his warm breath on her cheek through the layer of material covering her head. “Suffice it to say, although you’re older than the usual ones we bring here, they’ll still get a pretty penny for you.” He snorted a laugh. “Being so feisty and all.”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll let me go. Believe me, my boyfriend isn’t gonna be happy when he arrives and finds me hurt.”

The two men bellowed in laughter. “Dream on, bitch. No one is going to find you here. Not even your dear boyfriend.” Again, his warm breath teased her cheek as he whispered loudly against her ear. “But just in case, who is he? We don’t want to shoot an innocent hiker.”

“Sh-Shoot? You’re kidding, right?” Fear crawled over Daphne like a bad virus, but the fact that they weren’t aware that a Utah County Sheriff was her newly acquired boyfriend made her question whether McCarthy was even involved. Surely, if he was the instigator behind her abduction, he would’ve warned them of her involvement with Carter?

Would he have, though? You know criminals in positions such as McCarthy keep information they could benefit from to themselves.

Damn, why did her inner voice always have to rain on her parade?

“Yes, bitch,” the perpetrator smirked with obvious glee sounding in his voice. “Shoot. So, if your loverboy somehow comes looking for you, he’s going to end up in a shallow grave with a bullet between the eyes.”

Daphne decided it would be wise to shut up and not endanger Carter by warning them of his impending arrival. Hopefully, he was close enough to find the trucks, even if the tracker was undetectable in the underground compound.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



FR 759 on the Powerhouse Mountain, two miles out from Daphne's location...

The black-and-white sheriff's SUV raced along the gravel mountain road, kicking up a trail of dust in its wake. Carter gripped the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles turning white. He was filled with a swirling storm of emotions—anger, fear, determination. Anger at the vile criminals who had kidnapped Daphne and were holding her captive. Fear for her safety, worry that they might have discovered the hidden tracker and already disposed of her. Determination to rescue her and take down the entire trafficking ring once and for all.

Deputy Cooper sat silently in the passenger seat, occasionally glancing over at him. His lips compressed, well aware that his emotions were etched on his face. He hadn't hidden his budding feelings for Daphne. Everyone at the Provo and Spanish Fork offices knew this was deeply personal for him.

His gaze searched the surroundings as he drove. The Powerhouse Mountains had been like a childhood playground filled with happy memories. He knew every inch of it like the back of his hand. However, since he had taken the position as sheriff, there hadn't been time for excursions and hikes like in

the past. Now, that innocence had been shattered by the knowledge that this beautiful place hid such darkness.

As the SUV climbed higher into the mountains, the signal from Daphne's tracker suddenly went dead.

"Shit!" Carter marked the last logged location on the tracker unit the moment the signal went dead. "They must've taken her underground."

"Let's hope that's the case and not that they found the tracker on her," said Deputy Cooper, who had insisted on coming with him.

"It's a microchip tracker. The chances of them finding it are slim."

Carter swung the vehicle off the main road onto a barely visible dirt track. He knew these mountains like the back of his hand. The landscape grew rougher as they approached the coordinates where the signal had cut out. His foot pressed harder on the gas pedal. They drove the last mile in tense silence. The winding mountain road was barely more than a dirt track. Carter expertly maneuvered the SUV around sharp bends, his hands clenched on the wheel. Pine trees pressed close on either side, branches scraping the sides of the vehicle.

"Today is the day we close these motherfuckers down, once and for all." Carter's voice darkened as he thought of the danger Daphne was in. A child would be scared and quickly submit to whatever was expected. Daphne was a firecracker and would fight like the fiery, independent woman she was. Carter's hand rested on his weapon.

“We’ll get her back,” he said grimly. Fear and anger churned inside him, but he channeled it into steely determination. Failure was not an option today. Daphne was coming home.

“You don’t think rushing in now to save Daphne is risking not cracking open the entire syndicate?” Deputy Cooper whispered, voicing the concern that had been nagging Carter’s mind. “Especially since the aim is to catch everyone involved. More specifically, those running the scheme from the top.”

“It’s a risk, yes.” Carter’s jaw tightened as his eyes turned hard as flint. “But her safety is my top priority right now. Her and all those other young girls locked away in there.” His protective instincts toward Daphne raged inside him like a storm. He would tear that place apart with his bare hands to get her back safely. Carter glanced at Tanya. “One way or the other, we’ll get them all, that much, I promise.” His jaw locked. “I refuse to allow one of those bastards to get away scot-free.”

Deputy Cooper studied his stony expression and knew further argument was futile. She just nodded and said, “We’ll get them, Sheriff. One way or another.”

Rounding a tight corner, the tracker coordinate location blinked ahead. Carter quickly pulled off the road behind a thick copse of trees and cut the engine. He did a final check of his weapon, jaw set.

“We continue on foot from here. How long before the FBI Rescue Team arrives?”

“They just confirmed ETA is five minutes max.”

“Warn them not to come in hot with the choppers. We don’t want to spook these bastards.”

Tanya quickly passed on the message over the sat phone to the FBI recovery team leader.

“They’ve identified a hot spot to the left of Daphne’s last location,” she relayed in a hushed voice. “They’ll drop down there and approach on foot.”

“Good. Let’s move,” Carter said tersely. He moved through the woods with a stealth he had learned from years of playing hide-and-seek as a youth with his brothers. “I’m not waiting around.”

Every instinct screamed at him to rush in and find Daphne, but he had to be smart. Drawing on his childhood familiarity with the area, he slipped silently between the trees toward the coordinates. Deputy Cooper followed close behind.

Emerging from the woods, they crouched behind a tangled bramble a short distance from where the three GMC trucks were parked. Carter’s pulse thundered in his ears. Daphne was so close, yet they had to wait, stick to the plan. Patience had never been his strong suit, but today, lives depended on it.

“Rushing in could jeopardize the operation,” Deputy Cooper cautioned in a hushed voice. “The two of us can’t take on this whole compound alone.”

Carter’s jaw twitched. His body was as tense as a coiled spring, ready to burst into action.

“I know, but I’ll be damned if I sit back while they try to slip away.” His protective instincts raged inside him. “We’ll

wait here for the team.”

He lifted his binoculars, scanning the rocky terrain surrounding the mine entrance, but no door or hatch was visible. Deputy Cooper searched as well, to no avail.

“Lisa said she escaped through an underground trench that opened up close to where you found her,” she reminded him. “Since the compound is below ground, logic prevails that the entrance must be concealed.”

Carter nodded tersely while his eyes probed every detail. “Look for anything that seems out of place—a tree, bush, rock formation. Also, run the heat sensor, see if you pick up anything.”

Deputy Cooper slowly swept the area. “Nothing. This place must be reinforced steel. No heat signatures detected.”

Carter cursed under his breath, frustration mounting. “Where the hell is that damn entrance?” he growled in a gravelly voice as his gut twisted with worry for Daphne trapped below.

Hang on, love, we’re coming, he silently urged.

“I don’t detect any CCTV cameras anywhere either,” Tanya said as she looked around. “Which is in our favor. At least they won’t see us coming.”

“Yeah... but first, we need to find the entrance.”

“The FBI will have a K9 unit with them. They should be able to sniff out where they disappeared to.”

“You’re right.” Carter checked his watch. “They should’ve been here already. Check in, won’t you?”

“There! They’re moving in from the other side of the mountain.” Tanya quickly contacted the agent in charge. Within moments, four men in FBI recovery gear arrived at their side.

“I’m Special Agent Cole Beck. Anything to report, Sheriff Scott?”

“We just arrived a couple of minutes before you. We don’t see any sign of an entryway into the underground compound.”

“We’re at the right spot,” Agent Beck said. “We did a perimeter ground depth measurement survey when we did a fly-over. There is definitely a steel structure below ground, a large one.” With a brief look at his team, he gestured to the three trucks. “Cut all the tires. I don’t want them to have a means of escape.” With a tap against his ear, he activated his team’s communication system. “Agent Powell, bring the K9s. We need to find that entrance.”

The three K9 agents immediately zeroed in on a camouflaged spot amid some bushes. Scratching furiously, they exposed a grass-covered trapdoor.

“Bingo,” the lead agent said. He made swift plans for entry and extraction with Carter. “Let’s move. We’re getting those girls out.”

Carter’s heart pounded, and his blood boiled with fury. Finally, the time had come to confront these monsters face to

face, and he fully intended to make them pay. With Daphne to find, he had never been more ready for a fight in his life.

Carter's heart sank as they uncovered the steel trapdoor. A high-tech fingerprint scanner and keypad lock barred their entry.

"Shit," Agent Beck muttered, checking his watch anxiously. "The rear team covering the trench from the mountain road will be in position soon. We need this open now."

"Blow it," Carter said bluntly.

Deputy Cooper looked uncertain, but Carter silenced her protest with a sharp look.

"There are no guards, no surveillance. They don't expect to be found here." His voice turned icy cold. "Blow it. The entrance probably leads to an elevator or stairs down. Minimal risk."

Agent Beck hesitated only a moment before nodding. "You're right, we're going in hard." He turned to his team. "Summers, set the charges. We breach in thirty seconds!"

Carter's heart hammered as he took cover with Deputy Cooper behind a rocky outcropping. He knew it was a risk, forfeiting the element of surprise, but every passing second was intolerable, knowing Daphne was trapped below with those monsters.

His hands tightened into fists as rage simmered inside him. The thought of what she must be enduring fueled his determination. They would pay for this. For every scared girl

ripped from her family. An icy calm settled over him, along with laser focus. Get Daphne out safely. Make them suffer.

A deafening explosion rocked the mountainside. Carter was moving before the dust settled, weapon drawn. Down the sloping passage revealed, then halted at a heavy steel door. Beck signaled the all-clear.

Carter yanked it open, gun poised, Deputy Cooper and the agents right behind him. A dimly lit elevator shaft dropped into darkness. His jaw clenched. No going back now. Let's finish this.

They crowded into the elevator, weapons aimed steadily at the doors as it descended. When it shuddered to a stop, Carter's fiercest battle instincts surged through him. Time to confront the monsters on their home turf.

The elevator doors slid open to reveal two burly guards, caught momentarily off guard. Before they could react, Carter and the agents swarmed them, disarming and cuffing them efficiently.

With the guards subdued, they advanced down a dim concrete corridor lined with heavy doors. Carter's pulse raced, and his senses were on hyper-alert for any sign of Daphne.

They cleared room after room, all filled with terrified young girls in various states of illness and malnutrition. Deputy Cooper radioed for medical teams as Carter pressed on.

Rounding a corner, he heard a familiar voice rising in anger. Daphne! He burst through the door, gun leveled at the

last person he expected to see—a man he had grown up with and who he had deemed as a friend—the well-loved and respected Senator Doug Howell, interrogating a handcuffed Daphne.

“Step away from her,” Carter ordered in a deadly calm voice. Howell spun, shock registering on his face.

“You shouldn’t have come, Sheriff,” he sneered. “You’ll never touch me. I own this county, and you won’t leave this compound alive.” He smirked evilly. “Neither of you!”

“Newsflash, you motherfucker,” Carter sneered as his control snapped. “Everyone outside of this room has already been taken into custody. You are about to join them!” He launched himself at Howell, slamming him against the wall. They grappled violently until Carter landed a punch that flung the senator against the wall and rendered him unconscious.

“Did the bastard hurt you, love?” He raced to uncuff Daphne, who fell into his arms, sobbing.

“I knew you’d find me,” she cried. Carter held her tight, flooded with relief.

“It’s over now. I’ve got you,” he soothed. Howell’s crumpled form lay a few feet away. The hard hit as Carter had smashed his head into the wall had brought the trafficker’s empire to crumble at last. Senator or not, for him and whoever else was involved, justice would be served.

Daphne glanced at the passed-out man as Carter led her outside. “I guess we owe McCarthy an apology.”

“I’m not discounting anyone, McCarthy included, until after Howell has been properly interrogated. Mark my words, like any criminal, he will act true to form and sing like a canary, offering everyone else on a platter, as long as he can cut a deal for himself.”

“I sincerely hope neither you nor the FBI will fall for that kind of crap! He deserves to be castrated and locked up bleeding for what he had put all these poor young girls through.” Tears filled her eyes. “Did you see them? The condition some of them are in.” She covered her face in obvious distress. “Oh God, Carter, there are so many of them!”

“I know, love, but we will take good care of them, I promise. I will ensure there’s a program and support groups with the relevant professionals to monitor and guide them through a recuperation process.”

“That’s good, my love, and I would like to participate in the program. They all need to be treated with love and care.” She leaned into him. “Promise me this won’t happen again. No grown man should be allowed to misuse his position of power to fill his pockets on the back of destroying so many innocent lives.”

“I can’t promise that, Daphne. This kind of thing is as old as time, and the longer it continues, the more clever and deceptive they become. What I am going to do is keep watching and doing my best to keep our community safe.”

Carter tightened his arms around her and held her against him for long moments. The kiss he gave her was drenched in love and admiration.

“Come. Let’s go home, love. It’s been a long day.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Two weeks later, Carter's Mountain lodge in the Powerhouse Mountain range...

“Yoo-hoo! Anyone home?” Daphne’s voice echoed through the two-story great room as she entered Carter’s rustic yet luxurious mountain lodge. Like every time she set foot inside, the space immediately enveloped her in warmth and comfort.

Soaring pine log beams supported the cathedral ceiling. A massive stone fireplace anchored one wall, flanked by overstuffed leather couches and Native American patterned blankets. Antler chandeliers cast a cozy glow over the space.

To one side, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the sweeping valley vista, the jagged mountain peaks framing the view. The walls were adorned with framed topographic maps, vintage ski posters, and black-and-white nature photography.

Daphne wandered through to the chef’s kitchen, admiring the huge farmhouse sink, commercial-grade appliances, and enormous island with barstools lined up around the granite counter.

She wandered upstairs into the lofted master suite that featured a log bed piled high with fluffy pillows and Pendleton

wool blankets. The spa-like bath contained both a walk-in shower and a deep soaking tub.

“Hmm, can’t wait to soak in there again tonight,” she cooed. It had become her most favorite room in the house.

French doors opened onto a wide balcony with an outdoor fireplace. She and Carter had spent evenings out here stargazing, wrapped in thick blankets with Carter’s arms around her.

“Who knew Sheriff Scott was such a romantic,” she said dreamily as she once again walked downstairs.

Every detail in the home reflected Carter’s refined rustic style. The lodge encompassed coziness and luxury, a soothing retreat high in the mountains.

“This is home,” she whispered as she settled on the sofa in front of the roaring fire. Carter hadn’t asked. Instead, he had brought her here directly after the ordeal with Howell. She hadn’t left since, and whether he realized it or not, Daphne had no intention of leaving any time soon.

“You’re home early.”

“You don’t have to sound so disappointed, Sheriff Scott.” Daphne peered at Carter over her shoulder as he strode into the den. “And no, I’m not gonna say, if you want me to leave, just say so. Cause, Honeybuns... Imma not going anywhere,” she drawled.

“I won’t let you leave, so it’s good that you won’t bother.”

“Oh!” she gasped as he jumped over the sofa to wedge himself between her knees, lean in, and kiss her passionately.

“I’m cold,” he complained as he unzipped his pants while he just as efficiently pushed her leggings down. “Ahh... now that’s what I call a perfect and warm homecoming,” he murmured as he slowly thrust his tumescent cock hilt deep inside her.

“Hmm, couldn’t have said it any better,” Daphne cooed.

“Is there anything I could do to make it even better?” he murmured while nuzzling her throat.

“Lemme see,” she pondered over his question for all but two seconds. “The only thing I can think of to improve on it is a little friction.” She wiggled her hips invitingly. “You know... a little horizontal tango.”

“I can’t recall,” he said as he leaned back to stare at her. His eyes glimmered with darkening passion. “Did I ever tell you I won the National Championship for the fiery American tango?” He winked boldly as he snapped his hips sharply against hers. “You know the rhythm? Quick, quick, slow. Quick, quick, slow.”

He reiterated every phrase with a highly effective demonstration. A rich seam of burgeoning lust tore open inside her and wrapped itself snugly around the nerve endings in her loins. Shards of heat spiked through her core.

“I believe we are a perfect match,” she whimpered as she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist, matching his movements.

“You said it, love.”

The sudden and throaty roughness to his voice enthralled Daphne. The expectant look on his face was underscored by his arousal, which was apparent in every flex of his muscled frame.

“Hmm,” she moaned as he kneaded and palmed the softness of her buttock cheeks as he held her at the perfect angle to keep up the tango rhythm. “Yess,” she wailed and arched her back as his hands brushed down her flanks to caress the insides of her thighs. A low guttural moan crawled out of her throat and disappeared into the vastness of the space surrounding them.

“I love those little moans you do, love.” His eyes shone brightly as he watched her every reaction to his seductive manipulation.

“Oh!” she cried in surprise as he roughly pulled her hips to the edge of the sofa and gently bent back her legs.

Daphne swiftly became lost in his raw passion that was in such contrast to the gentle touch of his hands and the promise of unbound pleasure in his eyes.

The world fell away as they indulged in the unbound lust fed by the instant chemistry that had drawn them together from first glance not so long ago. There was no need for concern about the rapid advancement of their relationship as they indulged in the urgent needs of their bodies to copulate.

Afterward, their breathing haggard and worn, Carter pulled her into his arms and cuddled her against his chest.

“Hmm, I like it when you come home early from work,” she lilted as she closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his waist, exulting in his essence flowing unbound into her.

Tilting her head back, Carter kissed her slowly in a meshing of warmth, passion, and need—a need that was borne the moment their eyes had met. He looked into her shimmering eyes, rimmed with a sexually satisfied glow.

“You do make a beautiful addition to my home, Lovebug.”

“Of course, I do,” she said in a snippy voice but smiled lazily to void the unintended sting. Looking into his face, she pressed her fingers against his lips and whispered, “You are my boyfriend, after all.”

“Boyfriend? Don’t you think we’re a little old to be calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Of course not, my love, it’s an ageless tradition.”

“Hmm, perhaps, but I have a preference for something a little more... permanent sounding.”

“Oh? Like what exactly?” Excitement surged through Daphne.

“For a start, fiancé.” He nodded. “Yep, definitely that, soon to be followed by husband, of course.”

“Of course,” she traced his lips. “Except those kinds of positions usually follow after a well-planned and very, very... and I can’t emphasize this enough, very romantically asking of the proper question.”

“Ah... *that* question! Damn, how could I forget.” He flopped onto his back and stretched out lazily with his hands folded behind his head. One eyebrow pitched upward. “So... fire away, Lovebug. I’m all ears. Ask... but be sure it’s very, very... and I can’t emphasize this enough, very romantically done.”

“Tsk,” she smiled as she straddled him. “It seems I’m the one who needs to go shopping for that Oxford thesaurus after all.”

The End.

Be on the lookout for book 2 in the series, *Just A Touch*, the story of Daphne’s sister, Bailey.

EXCERPT: CLAIMED BRIDE



The Bride Series, Book 1

CHAPTER ONE

“Drew Carver was killed in a motor vehicle accident last night.”

Alexander Sinclair didn’t react visually apart from his narrowing eyes. His steely gaze remained glued to the cityscape horizon. He stood in front of large picture windows—his usual spot when strategizing—in his luxurious office in Columbus Circle, New York.

“How sure are you it was an accident?”

His deep voice carried to Blake Harper, his friend as well as one of the shareholders in the company. Alex was a property mogul. He was the chairman and majority stakeholder in the Allied Group, a global property development firm he had founded at the young age of twenty-five. The company was best known for developing Time Warner Center, where their HQ was situated, as well as for the new Manhattan Redevelopment Project. According to Forbes magazine, Alex had a net worth of \$5.5 billion. Alex was a philanthropist and a sports team owner too. He had recently bought a large stake in the NY Giants and the MetLife

Stadium in East Rutherford. His generous donations and support to various welfare organizations had made him a sought-after businessman.

“According to the reports, he lost control of his vehicle as he approached the curve onto the Tappan Zee Bridge on Route 287. He went through the rails and into the Hudson river.”

“Don’t tell me. They couldn’t recover the body?” Alex said cynically.

“No. They found his body. He’s confirmed dead—drowned. It seems he was on his way back to New York.”

“Very convenient, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes. I also have my doubts whether it was an accident but the witnesses on the scene couldn’t confirm either way. It apparently happened too fast.”

Alex sat down behind his desk. The dark mahogany surface gleamed in the sunlight streaking through the window.

“Who is the beneficiary of his life insurance?”

It was one of the fringe benefits all Alex’s employees enjoyed—a lucrative pension fund and life insurance, differing with specific job level of each person. Drew Carver had been a top-level project manager at the firm and his beneficiary would receive about five million dollars.

“His wife, Penelope Carver.”

Alex’s brows drew together. “The same woman he claimed was the mastermind behind his fraudulent scheme?”

Blake shrugged. “If he was to be believed, yes but according to rumors I’ve just overheard, they’ve been separated for over a year.”

“Based on what we know, it was probably a front to give their scheme more authenticity.” Alex shook his head. The expression on his face turned dark. “How did we not see him for the con artist that he was, Blake? Normally our instincts are on point. I completely misjudged Drew Carver.”

“He was a pathological liar, Alex. He manipulated everyone by burying his true self-expression and replaced it with a highly developed compensatory false self-confidence. We should’ve caught him earlier. He often came across as grandiose, self-absorbed, and conceited. I only realized it once we uncovered the fraud. He *lived* his lies, believed every word he said as true. We all fell for it.”

“He was reasonably successful with all the projects he handled, so we had no reason to doubt him. The clients preferred to deal with him above other Project Managers. We missed it because those traits never came to light when he was dealing with business. It was only outside of the office.”

“And greed was the final contributor to his fall from grace. He thought he would be far away by the time we found out about it, especially as his reports indicated the deposits by the investors hadn’t been paid yet.”

“Which we had no reason to doubt. It was a stroke of luck that I bumped into Logan Burroughs at the airport. If not for that, we wouldn’t have known the contracts for the development had been signed prematurely and deposits paid.”

“Yeah, Drew was fucking clever, I’ll give him that.” Blake shifted in the chair. “What are we going to do? Drew disappeared with fifty-million dollars. That’s not small change.”

“No, it’s not but at the time we restructured and upgraded our system, it opened a risk of security breach. You do recall that we invested in Crime Insurance four years ago to provide effective risk transfer against internal fraud.”

Blake dragged his hand through his long hair. “I know,” he said. “Still, are we just going to let it go like that? Allow little Mrs. Penelope Carver to live in the lap of luxury on our money? Just because her scheming husband got killed?”

“No, we’re not. The Internal Forensic Team is already busy with an investigation. One way or the other, we’ll track that money.”

“What do we tell the investors?”

“Nothing. They don’t need to know. We go ahead with the project. This time, I want you to take charge. It’s a huge project. One we can’t afford to fuck up.” Alex picked up the folder his assistant had placed on his desk earlier. He uncapped his Mont Blanc. The signature he penned on the contract conveyed the silent fury that was curling deep inside him. “You’ll have to inform his clients of his death and re-allocate his projects.”

“Even the Chi Fung Foundation?”

Alex looked up. “Fuck! I forgot about that. It’s one of our key re-development projects. One, I have personally already

invested a lot of time and money in.”

“Drew was the only one they were prepared to work with.”

“Yeah.” Alex dragged out the word, his expression turned pensive. “Because he was a ‘happily married man’ with a baby on the way. Family is inherently important to Zhang Wei Chén. He wouldn’t think twice before tearing up that contract if he doesn’t like Drew’s replacement.”

“We are the only ones who can handle this deal. Neither one of us is married nor, heaven forbid, have little brats running around our feet.”

“That presents a problem.” Alex replaced the cap on the pen and leaned back in the chair. “Ask Drew’s PA to bring me all the data they have on the Chinese project. Leave Zhang Wei Chén to me to deal with. In the meantime, find out everything you can about Penelope Carver and keep me up to date on funeral arrangements. We need to show our respect to our dearly departed employee and offer condolences to his grieving widow.”



“May his soul rest in peace.”

The somber tone of the priest droned on in the background. Penny had stopped listening when he began singing Drew Carver’s praises. Her ex-husband, who she hadn’t seen in over six months—ever since she’d obtained a restraining order against him. Their two-year marriage had been over for eighteen months already. The same amount of time they had been separated. She’d filed for divorce the day she’d realized

what a scam artist he was, but he had refused to sign the papers. Instead, he'd begun hounding her, calling her, begging her to forgive him and take him back. He had suddenly had an epiphany that he'd been wrong and all that mattered was their love for each other.

Yeah, right, only you never loved me, you asshole. You were in love with my gran's money.

When he realized that Penny wasn't going to budge, he'd finally signed the papers. She had been a free woman a short two-weeks when she'd received the news that he'd been killed in a motor vehicle accident.

Penny had been shocked, but at the time, couldn't dredge up any sorrow over his death.

She still couldn't, even now ... standing beside his grave. Bitterness flooded her as she watched the coffin being lowered into the ground. She'd invested her heart and soul into their relationship. For a year he'd wooed her, treated her like a princess and she'd believed that she had found her soulmate.

Like hell I did. I wasted three years of my life!

She had been so stupid, so much in love that she'd blindly believed all his honey coated lies of love and devotion. When he'd proposed they get married in Gran's hospital room, she never questioned his intentions. Her thoughts drifted back two years.

"Do you know what your gran's biggest wish is, darling?" Drew asked. He kissed the palm of her hand. His eyes were warm and engaging.

Penny felt tears burn behind her eyes. Her grandmother was the only family she had left and was on her deathbed, finally having lost the battle against lung cancer.

“I know what my wish for her is,” she said in a trembling voice. Penny couldn’t envision life without her. The woman had given up so much to support and look after her grandchild after Penny’s parents had died in a boating accident. Penny had been eight years old.

Drew pulled her into his arms. “I know it’s difficult, darling, but you have to be strong for her.” He tilted back her head with a finger under her chin. “The only thing she desires right now is to see you wed.”

Penny frowned. “She hasn’t said anything to me.”

“Because she doesn’t want to push you. How about it, Penny? We are planning to get married at some point, so why not now? At least you’ll get to see how happy it makes Gran Erin.”

Penny chewed on her lip as she considered Drew’s proposal. She wasn’t ready for marriage. Yes, she loved him and wanted to be his wife, but not yet. It was too soon.

“Maybe. But, you know I want my company in the black before we get married. I don’t want to work long hours at the cost of our marriage.”

“Don’t you think I’ll understand and support you, Penny? Isn’t that what marriage is all about?” Drew kissed her deeply and gazed lovingly into her eyes. “I adore you, my Penelope,

and neither of us is getting any younger. Will you please marry me?"

"Mrs. Carver?"

The priest's subdued tone yanked her from her musings.

"Yes, Father?"

He gestured toward the grave. Penny hesitated. Honoring Drew Carver, even in death, was something she didn't want to do. He'd killed any love or respect she had for him when he'd demanded half her inheritance the moment Gran's estate had been finalized. He'd turned into a greedy, uncaring and selfish man overnight. He'd finally admitted why he'd pursued and married her, when she refused to part with her inheritance.

"Why do you think I married you before she died, Penelope? As your husband it's my right!"

"No, Drew, it's not. Gran made sure of that. There's a stipulation in her will that my spouse has no claim to my inheritance, married or divorced, unless I willingly give it to them."

Drew had been furious. She cringed at the memory of his rage exploding. He'd hit her, cursing and accusing her of lying to him.

"I fucking wasted my time. A year! My skin crawled every time I touched you." He snorted. "I hate petite women and you ... without your grandmother's money, you're worthless to me."

Penny shook off the dreary thoughts and walked closer to the grave. She picked up a handful of dirt.

“May your soul fry in hell, Drew Carver,” she said sotto voce as she flung the dirt onto the descending coffin.

Penny turned and strode toward her car, her head held high. She didn’t know anyone at the funeral, apart from Drew’s cousin, who she’d only met once. She had no desire for small talk with any of them. The urge to get as far away from Drew Carver, even in death, was overwhelming.

He’d killed her spirit. The words, that she was worthless as a woman, had stuck in her mind. She’d lost all self-confidence then and hardly ever gone out since. It took her almost a year to realize what she was doing before she managed to pull herself out of the muck of unworthiness he’d buried her under.

Now, finally, she was free. Now, she could live life to the fullest.

“Mrs. Carver, one moment, please.”

Penny stumbled to a halt. “Yes ... *oh.*” Her lips formed a delightful round O as she pivoted around to face the man with a deep baritone dripping with self-confidence and power.

And promptly lost her breath.

She looked at his sinful mouth and couldn’t take her eyes off the full lips that turned up a fraction. The words were already floating at her before she realized he was speaking again. She visibly shook herself.

Good lord, Penelope, get a grip. One would swear you’ve never seen an attractive man before.

Attractive maybe, but this man was drop-dead gorgeous and his voice tingled her nether regions. Entirely

inappropriate, considering they were in a cemetery.

Penny took his proffered hand unconsciously. His fingers locked around hers, completely engulfing them in his own. His eyes flickered with interest when her lips opened in a gasping breath.

“I’m Alexander Sinclair. Drew worked for my company. I’d like to offer my condolences for your loss.” He gestured toward her stomach. “I suppose the shock caused you to have a miscarriage?”

“A what?” Penny silently wondered if he had lost his marbles. She stared at him, still feeling the touch of his skin against her hand, tingling in a crackling frenzy.

“Drew told us you were pregnant,” Alex drawled. His tone was laced with subdued bitterness and incredulity as he made the only assumption he could—another lie. He stared at her with quiet intensity. He didn’t move; hadn’t moved since the moment her soft, melodious voice had tantalized his senses. He found it difficult to wrap his mind around the knowledge that this petite, gorgeous and sexy-as-fuck woman, was a fraud.

“I’m afraid you have been misinformed, Mr. Sinclair,” Penny said coldly.

She’d recognized the realization that dawned after the initial disbelief in his eyes. He was livid. Penny grimaced as he incinerated her with his fiery blue gaze. She couldn’t look away, enraptured by the shade of his eyes—blue—like the sky, right before the sun disappeared; a dark, rich indigo, with

specks of wild colors flashing due to the anger he didn't bother to hide.

His vision cleared seconds before his eyes narrowed to slits. Penny had an uncomfortable feeling that his anger was directed at her, which only enhanced the fascination she had for the drool worthy specimen that he was.

He was tall, dark, and handsome in a magnetic way. He was probably close to six feet, which made her feel even smaller. His dark brown hair was cut short on the sides but were longer at the top, giving him a naturally tousled look. He stared at her, down a straight aristocratic nose that sat over a wide sensual mouth with a lush bottom lip. She licked her own lips as the thought, of what his mouth would feel like, crossed her mind. His tall frame was set off by wide shoulders that filled the dark suit beautifully, probably hand tailored for him. She shivered at the thought of his strong arms, wrapped around her, dragging her against his hard torso. The thought evoked a ripple of excitement inside her throbbing loins.

Damn, this man looks good enough to eat.

Penelope! Concentrate!

“Ahem,” Alex cleared his throat. The gruff sound was soaked with irritation.

Penny jerked her eyes back to his face from where her gaze had inadvertently gravitated toward the slight bulge in his pants. Her cheeks bloomed; caught staring at his crown jewels.

He took a step closer, his deep voice, low and muted, “Were we misinformed, Mrs. Carver, or was your husband?”

She stiffened visibly. The flash of heat directed his way was as sharp as a dagger, cutting through his resolve. Her voice clipped icily.

“I don’t know what you’re implying, Mr. Sinclair, but let me set you straight. Firstly, you should direct your condolences to Drew’s cousin. He might care. I don’t. Secondly,” she held up her hand when his mouth opened. “Drew Carver wasn’t my husband. I left him when I found out...” Her lips thinned. She tossed her hair back. “It took me eighteen months, but the divorce was finalized two weeks ago. Thirdly, I wouldn’t have Drew’s child even if he paid me ten million dollars.”

“How about fifty million, Mrs. Carver.”

Penny’s eyes flashed to the man now standing next to Alexander Sinclair. Equally tall and just as attractive, she’d been too enraptured to pay him any attention until now.

“What are you implying and who the hell are you?”

“Blake Harper, Alex’s partner.”

“You know what, I don’t care who or what either of you are. I don’t owe you any explanation. Drew wasn’t my responsibility and I don’t want any part in the trouble he got himself into. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I—”

“Mrs. Carver—”

“Oh, for goodness sake! Not another one,” Penny snapped and spun around. “What do *you* want?”

She was too annoyed to be intimidated by the mammoth man facing her.

“I’m Agent Mark Farrow, FBI. I need you to come with me.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything wrong.” Penny suddenly felt the world spinning around her.

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Shall we?” He stood to the side and gestured toward the black SUV standing at the curb.

“No, we shall not. Not until you tell me why the Federal Bureau is taking me into custody.” Penny refused to budge. She might be petite, but she knew how to stand her ground.

“I am the senior agent in charge of the Corporate Criminal Fraud division of the FBI. Misuse of corporate property for personal gain and resultant tax violations are seen in a very serious light, Mrs. Carver. We have reason to believe that you were involved—”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I can assure you, Mrs. Carver, corporate fraud has the potential to cause immeasurable damage to U.S. economy and investor confidence. Now, please, let’s go,” Mark’s voice deepened with authority.

“I’ll follow you in my own car, Agent Farrow,” Penny asserted. She dug out her keys from her bag.

“I’m afraid I must insist that you drive with me.”

“Insist all you want. Unless you have a warrant to arrest me, I will follow you. I have done nothing wrong and being accused of criminal activity hasn’t improved my day. Now, let’s go. You’re wasting my time.”

Penny ignored the two men who were watching the interlude silently. From what Blake Harper had said, she had no doubt they knew exactly what was going on.

Which was a hell of a lot more than she did.

If you'd like to read this steamy, suspenseful story, find it here: <https://books2read.com/BS1-ClaimedBride>

BOOKS BY LINZI BASSET

[Louisiana Daddies](#)

Covert Daddy – Prequel

Black Ops Daddy – Book 1

Radical Daddy – Book 2

Dominant Daddy – Book 3

[Grace's Initiation](#)

The Interview – Prequel

S is for Safeword – Book 1

[The Guzun Trilogy](#)

Vadim – Book 1

Vanya – Book 2

Arian – Book 3

Andrei – Book 4

[Decadent Sins Series](#)

Dominant Nature – Book 1

Dominant Desire – Book 2

Dominant Demand – Book 3

Dominant Thrills – Book 4

Dominant Mercy – Book 5

[Castle Sin Series](#)

Hunter - Prequel

Stone – Book 1

Hawk – Book 2

Kane – Book 3

Ace – Book 4

Parker – Book 5

Zeke – Book 6

Shane – Book 7

Danton – Book 8

Billy & Mongo – Book 9

Peyton – Book 10

[*Club Devil's Cove Series*](#)

His Devil's Desire – Book 1

His Devil's Heat – Book 2

His Devil's Wish – Book 3

His Devil's Mercy – Book 4

His Devil's Chains – Book 5

His Devil's Fire – Book 6

Her Devil's Kiss – Book 7

His Devil's Rage – Book 8

The Devil's Christmas – Book 9

The Devilish Santa – Book 10

[*Club Wicked Cove Series*](#)

Desperation: Ceejay's Absolution—Book 1

Desperation: Colt's Acquittal – Book 2

Exploration: Nolan's Regret – Book 3

Merciful: Seth's Revenge – Book 4

Claimed: Parnell's Gift – Book 5

Decadent: Kent's Desire – Book 6

Wicked and Fearless – Box Set, Books 1 – 3

Wicked and Deadly – Box Set, Books 4 - 6

Club Alpha Cove Series

His FBI Sub – Book 1

His Ice Baby Sub – Book 2

His Vanilla Sub – Book 3

His Fiery Sub – Book 4

His Sassy Sub – Book 5

Their Bold Sub – Book 6

His Brazen Sub – Book 7

His Defiant Sub – Book 8

His Forever Sub – Book 9

His Cherished Sub – Book 10

For Amy – Their Beloved Sub – Book 11

The Bleeding Souls Trilogy

Kiss the Devil - Prequel

The Stiletto PI Series

Fierce Paxton – Book 1

Fiery Jordan – Book 2

Billionaire Bad Boys Romance

Road Trip

Rogue Cowboy

Dark Desire Novels

Enforcer – Book 1

Their Sub Novella Series

No Option – Book 1

Done For – Book 2

For This – Book 3

Their Sub Series Boxset

Their Command Series

Say Yes – Book 1

Say Please – Book 2

Say Now – Book 3

Their Command Series Boxset

Romance Suspense

The Bride Series

Claimed Bride – Book 1

Captured Bride – Book 2

Chosen Bride – Book 3

Charmed Bride – Book 4

Caught Series

Caught in Between

Caught in His Web

The Tycoon Series

The Tycoon and His Honey Pot

The Tycoon's Blondie

The Tycoon's Mechanic

Standalone Titles

Her Prada Cowboy

Never Leave Me, Baby

Now is Our Time

The Wildcat that Tamed the Tycoon

The Poet's Lover

Sarah: The Life of Me

Axle's Darkness

Naughty Christmas Stories

Her Santa Dom

Master Santa

Snowflake's Spanking

Box sets

A Santa to Love – with Isabel James
Christmas Delights – with Isabel James
Unwrapped Hearts – with Isabel James

Books written as Kimila Taylor

[Paranormal Books](#)

Guardian's Spell

Zaluc's Mate

Slade: Blood Moon

Azriel: Rebel Angel

Books Co-Written as Isabel James

[Zane Gordon Novels](#)

Truth Untold

[The Crow's Nest](#)

A journey of discovery on the White Pearl

[Christmas Novellas](#)

Santa's Kiss

Santa's Whip

Mistletoe Bride

Poetry Bundle by Linzi Basset & James Calderaro

[Love Unbound - Poems of the Heart](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Isn’t it a universal truth that it’s our singular experiences and passion, for whatever thing or things, which molds us all into the individuals we become? Whether it’s hidden in the depths of our soul or exposed for all to see?”

Linzi Basset is a South African born animal rights supporter with a poet’s heart, and she is also a bestselling fiction writer of suspense-filled romance erotica books; who as the latter, refuses to be bound to any one sub-genre. She prefers instead to stretch herself as a storyteller which has resulted in her researching and writing historical and even paranormal themed works.

Her initial offering: Club Alpha Cove, a BDSM club suspense series released back in 2015, and catapulted her into International Bestseller status. Labelling her as prolific is a gross understatement as just a few short years later she has now been published over a hundred times; a total which includes the other published works of her alter ego: Isabel James who co-authors and alternative penname, Kimila Taylor.

“I write from the inside out. My stories are both inside me and a part of me, so it can be either pleasurable to release them or painful to carve them out. I live every moment of every story I write. So, if you’re looking for spicy and suspenseful, I’m your girl ... woman ... writer ... you know what I mean!”

Linzi believes that by telling stories in her own voice, she can better share with her readers the essence of her being: her passionate nature; her motivations; and her wildest fantasies. She feels every touch as she writes, every kiss, every harsh

word uttered, and this to her is the key to a never-ending love of writing.

Ultimately, all books by Linzi Basset are about passion. To her, passion is the driving force of all emotion; whether it be lust, desire, hate, trust, or love. This is the underlying message contained in her books. Her advice: “Believe in the passions driving your desires; live them; enjoy them; and allow them to bring you happiness.”

Find out more here: <https://www.linzibassetauthor.com/>

STALK LINZI BASSET

If you'd like to look me up, please follow any of these links.

While you're enjoying some of my articles, interviews, and poems on my website, why not subscribe to my Newsletter and be the first to know about new releases and win free books? You will also receive a free eBook copy of *The Interview* and *The Poet's Lover*.

Go to my website, www.linzibassetauthor.com, and while you're there, subscribe to her newsletter:

<https://www.linzibassetauthor.com/subscribe>

Find all my social links and follow me here:

<https://linktr.ee/LinziBasset>

Don't forget to join my fan group, [Linzi's Reading Nook](#), for loads of fun!

Don't be shy, pay me a visit, anytime!