

Chapter One

Bernie groaned as she pulled into the Taco Bell drive-thru. “Idiot. How could you forget your lunch on day one, *one*, of your freakin’ diet?”

She had pledged to herself that she wasn’t going to get fast food anymore. Partly because of the fact that she was morbidly obese, well by her own standards, and partly because she had spent four-hundred dollars in the last month eating out and strongly needed to curtail it. Unfortunately for her diet, and budget plans, she had left her hardboiled eggs and broccoli sitting on the kitchen table, and Taco Bell was calling her name.

Bernadeeeeeete, I’m your only looooooove, the only one who geeeets youuuu...

“Okay, okay! I’m here, shut up.” She peered at the menu, as if she hadn’t already memorized it, and when the fuzzy voice came over the intercom, she ordered a combo number three with extra sour cream, (crunchy because the sour cream made the soft shelled tacos all soggy), with an extra-large sweet tea. Next, was the gordita meal deal, with Doritos and another sweet tea. A request for nachos with extra cheese followed, and she finished her binge-worthy order with an order of cinnamon twists. She figured she might as well excel at something and being a big fat failure was the one thing she could do. With a vengeance.

Bernie had intended to park and eat in the sunshine, but when she glanced at the clock, she realized that she would have to eat on the road to make it back to work on time. She pulled her bright red convertible out into the road, trying to inhale her tacos, get to work on time, and get her playlist playing. She missed the stop sign, the cop following behind her lights flashing, *and* the “25 MPH School Zone” sign. It wasn’t until the sirens turned on that she even glanced in her rearview.

“Faaaawk!” Her overstuffed mouthful of taco fell out, the sour cream spilled out onto her sweater, and her stomach clenched. Pulling over quickly, she grabbed the cup of iced tea from its holder, and attempted to rinse the bits of lettuce and taco shell from her mouth. She frantically used a napkin to wipe at her sweater, but it was to no avail. Those grease stains were not coming out of the hot pink knitted fabric. When she glanced up and looked out the window, her eyes widened. *Breathe Bernie. Breathe. Oh my god, that man is hot! H-A-W-T hot. Fuck. It is so my luck I have to face him covered in grease and sour cream, like a little piggy.* Ogling him, she

decided he was probably six feet even, about six inches taller than herself. She stared at his perfectly cut and styled spiky black hair and piercing blue eyes. He looked muscular, but tall and slender, not the “thick” kind of muscles. His look was reminiscent of a mix between Adam Levine and Uncle Jesse from Full House. If she hadn’t been so scared she might have giggled or allowed herself more time to daydream about his sexy... sexiness.

She rolled down her window and tried to put on her saddest, most innocent face and a slightly affected southern accent. Guys always fell for a southern belle.

“Good afternoon, officer. How are you today? Did I do something wrong?” She emphasized the last word and gave him pouty lips and big eyes.

He didn’t look amused. In a short no-nonsense tone, he barked out, “License and registration please, ma’am. Do you know why I pulled you over?”

Biting her lip, Bernie said as innocently as she could, “Oh no, sir. I was just trying to get to work. I work at the elementary school and the kids *really* need me back in time. Whatever did I do?”

He blinked, and said again, “License and registration please.”

Bernie blushed and leaned over to the glove box. It was jam packed with sauce packets, napkins, straws, and mints. She could feel her entire body flaming red as she dug through all of her junk to find the registration. And it wasn’t there.

“I... I’m really sorry, officer. I have no idea what happened to it. I just got this car...” *Nine months ago* her conscience pricked. “...from my parents and I don’t have everything situated yet. Oh, my license?” Biting her lip again she looked around as if trying to find it. The reality was, she had lost it months ago and just hadn’t made the time to get a replacement. “It must be in my other purse. I can give you my social and stuff. I’m really sorry, sir. I’ll make sure to remember it in the future. But um, why did you pull me over? What did I do?”

The officer raised his eyebrows, and she thought she saw a flicker of amusement cross his face.

“Ma’am, it seems to me that you have offense piled upon offense today. First off, you failed to stop at the stop sign at the intersection of Broad Street and Elm, then you failed to pull over after I followed you for a few miles, then you were going fifty in a school zone. Now you do not have your license or your registration. How can I even be sure this is your car, miss? You might be a fugitive on the run from the law.”

Bernie's heart plummeted. She was sure he was teasing, but the way he said it made her feel simultaneously scared and aroused. "N-no, sir! This is definitely my car! My parents gave it to me as a college graduation gift back in May!"

She had not thought his eyebrows could go any higher, but she could be wrong. They looked like they were flush with his hairline now. "May? Young l... ma'am, it is February, that is not 'just' got this car." He actually appeared to have lost his cool demeanor for a moment. He ran his fingers through his hair and then took a deep breath. He pulled out a notepad and ordered more calmly, "Give me your social please."

She complied, her voice shaking, and he stalked back to his squad car. Bernie was left in silence. She fiddled with the radio, on, off, on again. She looked listlessly at her food, her appetite gone, and took a sip of her drink. She had a hard time swallowing. She thought about her "novels" and the fate those heroines would have faced if this had been them and giggled a little. When the officer reappeared though, the expression on his face wiped all glee away from hers.

"Ms. Douglas, are you aware that you have ten warnings instead of speeding tickets, and several unpaid parking citations from the last year? How you still have your license, I don't even know, but I can assure you that today will not be just another warning."

Bernie's eyes widened and her lip trembled, a wild thought came to her mind and she blurted it out, "Please don't give me a ticket, Officer..." She glanced wildly at the nameplate on his shirt "...Jackson. If I get a ticket, my husband will spank my butt!"

Officer Jackson looked taken aback for a moment. She saw his eyes glance towards her left hand.

Trying to cover all her bases she perpetuated the lie. "I... I'm pregnant and my ring doesn't fit right now. And if I get a ticket he'll be really mad! Please! Can't you just let me off? I swear I will drive five below the rest of the school year. No more speeding. No more running stop signs. I'll find my license and registration, and I'll never do this again. Ever!"

Officer Jackson's face darkened. "I know when I'm being lied to Ms. Douglas, and you have not only not said a truthful word from the moment I pulled you over, but you aren't even very good at it. This is insulting to me and embarrassing to yourself for no good reason. I can assure you that a man baring your ass and taking you to task for the plethora of bad behaviors you've exhibited today would not be a deterrent for me in writing you several tickets. You have

racked up so much punishment today that paying a simple ticket, or even twelve, is not going to suffice. You're going to need to report to court at the nearest opening. And, if you're visibly pregnant at that time, I will tell the judge I was overly harsh and ask for leniency. But, if you are not pregnant, as I am sure you're not, then at that time, I will ask the judge to be as severe in his sentencing as he can be."

Bernie felt her face go pale and then blush crimson red. She reached shakily for the summons and avoided eye contact with Officer Jackson. Mumbling something incoherently, she waited until he waved her on before driving away slowly and carefully. When she got to the school parking lot, she was already twenty minutes late and didn't even care. She had never felt so angry, and ashamed, and turned on. Oh my god, was she turned on. She was tempted to call in sick, just so she could go home and replay his words and tones and facial expressions over and over until she found release. But she was the only counselor on duty at Briarwood Elementary and she knew some of the kids had been having a hard time lately and would probably need to talk. So, she grabbed her tea and nachos and cinnamon twists and went inside. Being a counselor for kids was the only thing in life she felt like she was actually good at. Kids didn't care if your dress size was in the double digits or how much money you made or who you were dating; they just needed a listening ear, a compassionate tone, and someone to love them. And she did love them. Dearly.

Meanwhile on the other side of town Officer Levi Jackson was on his own lunch break. He was meeting his brother Judah, the senior pastor at a local church, for lunch. He ordered his customary roast beef and cheddar hoagie with extra onions and an extra-large fries, then carried his tray over to the table where Judah was already sitting and sat down.

Judah glanced at Levi and then bowed his head to pray grace over their meal. When he looked back up, he had a serious twinkle in his eye. "So, little bro, what's up? You definitely have that look in your eyes today. Did you give some pretty blonde a ticket, and your number?" he teased as he bit into his sub.

Even though Levi was quite tall, Judah towered over him at six foot five, and he was built like a linebacker.

Levi groaned, the “little” joke never getting old, and said defensively, “She was ginger, not blonde, and, no, I did not give her my number. I did give her a pretty serious summons though...”

Judah’s mouth quirked and he asked slightly ribbing, slightly probing, “But you wanted to give her more?”

He had on his pastoral counseling tone and Levi gave him a look. “I am here to hang out with my bro. Can we just hold off on the psychoanalysis? How about this, I promise to tell you what happened if you promise to listen as my brother, maybe my friend, and nothing else? Yeah?”

Judah grinned at him, but nodded.

Levi continued, “Okay, so I was actually on my way to meet you when I noticed a car race right through a stop sign, so I turned my lights on and followed it. Bro, in the time I was following her, she was weaving, speeding, not even paying attention to the damn road. She didn’t even notice *me* until I turned my siren on. So, I go up to the window and ask her for her ID and registration and, Jude, I swear, she turned on the subby vibe the second she rolled down her window. She was pouting and pleading and ‘yes sir-ing’ all over the place. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to spank her or kiss her. We did this whole song and dance where she couldn’t find any of the paperwork I needed, and the whole time she was flirting with me. Then, as if it wasn’t enough that I had this adorable, sweet, curvy woman trying to tug at my heart strings, she tells me that she can’t get a ticket because her husband will...” He lowered his voice, but his tone was loud and clear, “Spank her! Dude... Spank. Her. She wasn’t wearing a ring. That girl has never worn a ring, and I have no idea what was going on in her head to make her blurt that out, but it took every drop of self-control I had not to demand she get out of the car and explain herself to me.”

By this point Judah was laughing outright. Face red, knee slapping, laughing.

Levi was far from amused at his brother’s reaction. “Bro. Get a grip. This isn’t funny. I... I lost my cool, man. I told her that I hoped some man *would* bare her ass and take her to account for it. I don’t lose my cool, Jude. I am a professional. I do my job; I don’t let pretty little girls in sports cars bend me to their will, and I certainly don’t dream about spanking them ‘til they cry, and then kissing them ‘til they beg. Even if they do have impressive... breasts and big pouty lips

and red hair and green eyes and..." It was well known in the Jackson household that Levi had a serious "thing" for redheads and curves.

Judah laughed even harder at his brother's face and tone. "Man, you have it bad. I haven't seen you this worked up since Ellen Parker tried to hitchhike home after prom senior year." Trying to sound more serious, but still grinning, he continued, "What was it about this specific girl in this specific sports car that you think has you all worked up?"

Levi shook his head. "I don't know, man. I really don't. She was just so... innocent. You'd think being blatantly lied to, especially about something like that, would make me never want to see her again, but I just keep replaying it over and over in my head. This is the first time in three years of being a cop that I am excited to go to court just so I can see her again. Oh! I forgot to tell you, she said that she is pregnant, but everything in her face said that was beyond untrue. She almost looked like she wanted me to call her bluff. The courts are really packed though and they probably won't even take her case until at least June..."

Judah still grinned like a Cheshire cat, but took compassion on his brother and changed the subject to share a story about his elderly secretary and her antiquated ideas of what a minister should be doing.