

# Lovely Little Liar

By

Patty Devlin

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## Chapter One

"Come on in. It's open!" Charlie yelled louder than she had the previous time, so she could be heard over Brinks' insistent barking, and then continued her task. She was washing down the kitchen cupboards and didn't have time to get the door. Anyone else usually just waltzed right in.

"Damn it," she muttered when the knocking continued. She threw her sponge into the bucket of suds and looked down at her skimpy tank top. She was not fit for company; she didn't even have a bra on and her shorts were her brother's cast-off boxers. Whatever. She wasn't going to be chatting with the visitor long anyway. It was probably a Girl Scout selling Thin Mints. What a misnomer; they didn't make you thinner and they certainly never looked thin on her butt.

"Who's there?" she demanded as she shushed her Yorkshire Terrier and swung the heavy beveled glass door open without waiting for a response. Brinks kept yipping, bouncing up and down, so Charlie bent down, turned to push him inside, and closed the door behind her.

When she stood up again and turned around, one hand flew to her mouth while the other arm came to cover her nips, which had instantaneously hardened to aching peaks. It had nothing to do with the bitter cold. She tried to say something, to ask what he was doing there. When words failed, her hand flew to her messy hair. Oh god, it was awful. It no longer all went back into the ponytail since she'd gotten it cut in the short A-line bob. She'd tried to pull it back to keep it out of her face while she had been cleaning, but she knew there were flyaway strands hanging everywhere.

"Charlene Davis? Trooper Loveanu," he greeted her, and tilted his navy blue hat up with the tip of a finger to the side of the brim. "How is your mother?"

Her breath turned to stone in her chest as her hand came from her topknot to fold over her other arm, covering her breasts. How could she have thought she would be able to get away with it? She studied his intense brown eyes, looking for a sign. Did he know the truth or could he really be concerned? Had he looked her up because he wanted to get to know her? "I- ah..." Her eyes fell to the numbers on the pocket of his shirt. She'd worried about it ever since she'd spoken the lie and he'd asked for a name.

"She died. Didn't she?" He sliced right through her with those sharp espresso-colored eyes, stepped forward, handed her a piece of paper and added, "Four years ago." It was the newspaper obituary. How the heck did he get a copy of it? He crossed his arms over his broad chest and stared down at her for a second, giving her time to explain. She was no longer cold. His stare warmed her to the core and slowly fanned up toward her neck and face.

What the heck could she say? Busted. She never figured she'd see him again. What in the world possessed him to look into her fabrication? She couldn't continue looking at the stern set of his jaw any more. She wanted to back away from him, into the house and lock the door, but at the same time—she couldn't deny that if there was any chance he could be attracted to her... Wait. What was the matter with her? She folded the obit and unfolded it again, wishing he would just drop the ax, give her the verdict. Was he there to take her to jail?

She bit her lip as she looked up again. He was dressed in uniform. If he just wanted to meet her, he probably wouldn't be dressed for work and bearing the incriminating obituary. Was he going to arrest her? She couldn't look up and meet his eyes again; instead she studied the

colorful welcome mat at her feet, toeing the corner. She shivered, standing there half naked in the frigid February air. You'd think there would be steam rolling off him with the fire in his eyes.

"You have nothing to say for yourself?" His deep voice, stern and seductive at the same time, sent tingles down her spine. How could that be? She felt like a little girl as she peeked up at him through her lashes. "You played on my emotions with your sob story. What in the world were you doing driving like that—twenty miles over the speed limit? You didn't pay any attention to that blinking yellow light, which is careless and dangerous. So, if your mother wasn't in the hospital at the end of her life, then what in the world possessed you to drive so irresponsibly? You know what—if you could lie about your own mother, I don't think I want to hear whatever lie you come up with next."

"You would never understand." Charlie's impulsive anger sprang to her aid. "I don't have to talk to you. Do you have a ticket for me or something, *officer*?" She spat the title out as if it were repulsive. "If you do then give it to me and go on, otherwise I am busy." Her palms fisted at her sides until she realized she had left her breasts to hang free, nipples beaded tight in the cold air. She quickly covered them again. Her raw throat ached with unshed tears.

He shifted his weight, took his hat off and rubbed his hand over the stubble of his dark, short-clipped hair. He started at his temple and ran to the back of his head where he stopped and rubbed his neck a moment. Then, with a sigh, he brought his free hand down to his gun belt and rested it there while he tapped his hat against his thigh.

"You know, I really hoped you had a good excuse. It broke my heart to see you crying that day. I wanted so badly to pull you out of that car and into my arms to comfort you, rules be damned. When you drove away, I couldn't stop thinking about you all day. I finally looked up your mom's name at the hospital you told me so I could send flowers."

"I don't want to hear this!" she snapped. Wait. What was she saying? Of course she did. Did he say he wanted to hold her? Oh god, he was so tall and overwhelmingly near to her—had he stepped closer?

"Well, I would really like to hear why you went so far—it wasn't just a lie."

The big man before her seemed blurry or maybe her eyes were getting watery. She swiped at them, trying to stop the tears from falling. How did she tell him the truth? She couldn't. He would never understand—it was too stupid.

"I don't have to tell you anything. If you're here to arrest—" she began, her lip trembling, "—me or something, then just get it over with." She lifted her head, holding it high, trying to be brave.

"Honey, I am not going to arrest you, but I am going to have to give you a ticket. I can see you won't be honest with me. I really hoped that somehow you would help me understand." He turned away and headed for his car.

Crap. She watched his back as he retreated. He seemed like a nice guy, too, but he would hate her when he found out she really didn't have a good reason for speeding; she hadn't even been late for work. Just like Alex always said, she acted reckless and immature—and then she told the worst lie in the history of ever. She tried not to stare at him when he walked back.

"This ticket is for driving twenty miles over the speed limit, which is four points on your license, by the way. I did not include completely ignoring the yellow light, which would add more points. So, I'm letting you off with a warning on that one. I just want you to really understand how dangerous—"

"I got it already, okay? I'm sure you have other people you can lecture all day. I have things to do." She reached behind her for the doorknob.

He shook his head, his mouth drawn tight in a smirk. "You are something else. I really hoped for more. The best thing for you would be if someone took you in hand and gave you a well-deserved spanking."

"Oh, you too! For the love of Pete. I'm sure a spanking would just take care of the world's troubles. It's no wonder you don't have a ring on your finger!" She dove through the door and slammed it closed behind her. She made it as far as her mother's ugly old sofa in the living room and slumped down right in the middle where the crack between the two large cushions met, right where the supports were caving, and pulled her knees to her chest. She reached for one of the tattered pillows and pulled it between her knees, hugging it, and then finally opened the ticket. She swiped at her eyes; she couldn't see any of the writing. Her tears wouldn't stop. She reached for Brinks.

"Oh, shit!"

A knock sounded at the door at precisely the same time she realized her tiny friend was missing. He must have snuck out when Charlie had come in. Her feet slapped against the hardwood floors of the old house as she stomped back to the door and swung it wide.

She barely looked or focused on the mammoth day-wrecker as she reached to snatch Brinks out of his arms. The poor dog whimpered at the abuse and the officer pulled back.

"Hey, hey, calm down..." His voice was softer this time, more soothing. He turned his body sideways, as if protecting him from Charlie. She was crushed—she'd never intentionally hurt Brinks.

The officer reached for her and stroked her arm, "It's going to be all right, sugar." His kind words caused her to cry harder. "Shhh, it's not that bad."

"I didn't mean to hurt Brinks. Ple-ase give him back."

"There you go, sugar." He handed her the tiny dog and stepped closer, rubbing his hands up and down both of her arms. "Are you home alone?"

"Yes! I'm an adult. I can stay alone." Why did everyone always treat her like a kid? Wait, did he know Alex?

"Do you live by yourself?" He reached for her front door and nudged it open farther, directing her inside again. "Get inside. You're not dressed to be out here. Do you want me to come in?"

She stepped inside the door once again and turned to face the dark-eyed, dark-haired lawman. "You don't have to, I'm fine. I do live by myself and I manage just fine." She drew her shoulders up and hugged Brinks tightly to her chest. The little dog licked the bare skin at her neck appreciatively. "Thank you for returning Brinks. Have a nice life."

Charlie backed into the house and closed the door on the man. This time she walked more sedately to the orange velvet sofa and sat down with Brinks sheltered in her arms. He was warm and willing to be hugged and that was what she needed. She had a lot to think about.

She had never felt like that about another man before, not even Jeremy at Senior Prom. Not their prom, but Helmsworth's. They knew that Alex would be watching their prom and watching Charlie so they snuck out to H-town so they could enjoy the night without Alex and his friends hanging over their shoulders the whole time.

Jeremy had kissed her and his hands had caressed her back and her sides, but it hadn't been exciting. It had been something to do, a thrill because she had managed to get past Alex, but nothing special in the sexual department. It definitely hadn't been worth the spanking that

Alex had given her. Spankings—plural. He started before they left the high school in his truck, and when they got home, he used his belt. Alex took his job as the man of the house way too seriously, especially since he was her brother. So what if he was ten years older.

No, this was unique. She had been very thoroughly piqued by the sexy officer. Damn it. Why in the world would she feel all topsy-turvy with a man who treated her the same way her brother did when Alex drove her crazy? She was forever trying to get out from under Alex's tyrannical thumb. This guy had threatened to spank her. Well, he didn't threaten her, but he said she needed a spanking. Of all the freaking nerve!

And that was what was going to happen, if she couldn't figure out what to do. Alex was a cop, too. Not a State Trooper, but a deputy with the sheriff's department. When she'd been pulled over less than a year ago by the city police, he'd found out about it before she even made it home from work. Would he find out the same way now?

Oh! It wasn't fair. She threw the ragged sofa pillow away from her. At twenty-six years old, she shouldn't have to worry about this crap. It just wasn't fair; none of her friends were ever spanked, let alone by their brothers!

At times like this, she cursed her mother. Charlie looked around her with a greatly exaggerated sigh. It didn't matter that there was a crack in the plaster ceiling or raised floorboards in the hundred-year-old hardwood floor—it was *her* ceiling, her floor. If it weren't her home, if her mother hadn't left the house to her, Charlie most likely would have run away a long time ago. She often wondered if that was why her mother had done it.

The previous will, the one that was in place when their father died, stated that the estate would go first to Sherry, their mother, and then to both of the siblings. At some time after that Sherry had changed it, giving the house solely to Charlie. Alex had been given everything else. No, they weren't rich, but he'd been given their father's two project-cars when he'd passed two years before their Mom. Then when she'd died, he'd received the rest: the summer cottage, the CDs, savings bonds and the like.

If only it was as easy as—"It's my house, get out!" But that had never worked with him. Alex had stayed there with her until he married Jenna, and really, Charlie had never minded Alex living there. She simply wished he would understand that after she turned eighteen, she had her own house and most importantly—she'd grown too old to spank. She wished that when he had the desire to spank her, she could simply ask him to go home and he would listen. But no, he still treated her like a child. He didn't trust her to live on her own and it'd been over a year.

Charlie probably could have and would have stayed there pouting on the sofa all day long and wasted her day off if two things hadn't happened. First, Brinks realized a terrible need to empty his tiny terrier bladder, and secondly, while she'd been up she heard her cell phone go off in the bedroom with the ring tone she reserved for work. Work was definitely a good idea. She loved to take an extra shift when they asked. Too bad working in the emergency room happened to be another of the things Alex like to blow up about. It would get her out of the house, give her something to do, and it would give her a reason to stall. So if she had to work, she had more time to delay making the decision of whether she would actually tell him about the ticket or wait and hope he never found out.