

FOLLOW THE HONEY

'SWEET&DIRTY BBW ROMANCE' Book 4

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Chapter One

Lesa Bruer crouched in the inky shadows of a pickup truck. And not just any truck—this was Pete Vanko's classic 1954 Chevy, rebuilt and lovingly restored, painted a deep metallic bronze.

At nearly one a.m., with only the stars and a fingernail moon shining down on the eastern Washington countryside, the January night was dark and cold. But in the glow of the yard light from outside the open shed, the truck's sleek, rounded lines were visible.

For a long, aching moment Lesa stared up at the dark, faintly gleaming hulk, inhaling the scents of gasoline, leather upholstery, and a faint whiff of shaving cologne from the open window.

God, the cab of his truck smelled just like him, the woodsy, spicy scent that blended with the pheromones given off by a big, muscular, virile male wafting on the air, enticing every woman within his reach. As if his blond, bearded Russian looks weren't hot enough, he had to smell like walking sex as well.

She tipped her head down, blowing out a breath. Focus—she needed to focus on something else, *anything* else. Such as the way he'd betrayed her.

She braced her left hand against the door, the metal smooth and cold as ice under her palm. A rock bit into her knee through her jeans. The small pain brought her back to her surroundings. To the ground under her feet, frozen hard in winter's chill.

Across the drive loomed Pete's big farmhouse, where he was probably lounging snugly by a fire, drinking one of his own micro-brews. Thinking himself safe from any of the people he stomped on, in his hard-headed drive toward what he wanted.

In Lesa's right hand, she clutched a key, so tightly that one sharp edge dug into her palm. Her hands were nearly numb with cold—she wore her warm parka and boots over jeans and a sweater, but she'd forgotten her hat and gloves in her car.

The sharp pain in her hand loosed the fiery ache of tears pressing behind her eyes. She sucked in a breath that turned to a shaky sob, and then fell to her knees, head bowing, long hair falling about her face as she gave a low keening of grief.

She was such a failure. She couldn't even do what she came out here to do—exact her revenge on Peter Vanko.

Everyone at The Hangar Brewpub & Grill knew he loved this truck, that he'd worked for months to restore it from a rusted hulk he'd found in an old barn. Now, though she couldn't see well in the darkness under his carport, Lesa could picture the deep, glowing bronze of the truck's body, the faint, red The Hangar's red-white-and-blue emblem on the doors.

Pete drove into Airway Heights six days a week, just before ten a.m., one arm on the steering wheel, blonde hair pulled back in a short ponytail below the baseball cap and aviator sunglasses shadowing his handsome, bearded face, his broad shoulders relaxed as he cruised the small-town roads. And five of those days, he passed her tiny, rented house just off the main road as she was walking out her front door, having fed the stray cat that had taken up residence under her back porch, and swept the snow away from her front porch and walk.

At first she'd waved a little shyly, but stopped after a few days, because while he nodded back, he did so with a smirk that said he found her amusing.

But she'd thought he liked her a little. That he at least respected her willingness to work hard and do whatever it took to help keep The Hangar's business thriving and growing.

But clearly he neither liked or respected her—because today, without any warning, he'd walked into the office and told her that she was fired. She shuddered, remembering.

She'd taken her lunch break at one o'clock, sitting at the end of the bar nearest the kitchen to eat one of Pico's delicious burgers and a salad. Pico had made it just the way she liked it, the meat juicy and a little pink in the middle, the bun toasted on the grill, and laden with lettuce, tomato and dill pickle. Joe added a side of crisp, leafy salad with creamy blue cheese dressing, and three little paper cups of ketchup, because he knew how much she liked it.

Both cooks had teased her while she ate, making her laugh and nearly spit out her food.

"She prolly thinks she's too good for us now," Joe called from the counter where he was prepping burger patties for the dinner rush.

"Yeah, she's management now," Pico agreed, giving Lesa a mock pout.

"That's right," she called back, once she got her mouthful of salad chewed and swallowed. "Everyone knows the bean counter is the queen of any establishment."

Joe held up a huge ring of raw, sweet onion. "Here, gotta crown for ya, queenie."

Lesa wrinkled her nose. "Nothing but the best for me, sir. If that's my crown, I demand it be deep-fried to crispy, golden goodness."

"That'll make your hair smell interesting" Streak put in from behind the bar, where he was slicing limes. "*Eau de* onion, every man's favorite."

She finished her last bite of burger and wiped her fingers on her napkin, then sighed. "You're right. I shall remain crown-less."

“Prob’ly just as well,” Streak said, looking out the big windows at the parking lot out front. “‘Cause here comes the former queen, and she’s jealous enough of you, I’d say.”

“A-and, time for me to go.” Carrying her plate, Lesa ducked into the kitchen and stacked it in one of the bus trays inside the big restaurant-sized dishwasher. She washed her hands at the sink there, and then hurried into the office.

. her glass of diet soda sitting on the narrow counter to one side of her desk, where even if it tipped over, it couldn’t spill on her keyboard or any other tech. She was taking advantage of Pete’s absence to peruse the help manual for The Hangar’s on-line bookkeeping system. She planned to print herself a cheat sheet of keyboard commands and slip it into the desk’s top drawer where she could use it when needed. Somehow she was able to memorize dinner and drink orders for a table of seven, but not the program’s annoying key-plus and key-minus commands.

When the man himself strode into the office, she jumped in her seat the abruptness of his appearance, but kept her eyes on the screen as she highlighted, copied and pasted the section of page she wanted.

Then he stopped in front of her desk, and waited until she looked up. Lesa flinched at the forbidding scowl on his handsome face, and her lunch knotted in her stomach. “What’s wrong?”

“Clean out your things, and go. You’ll receive a paycheck for the next two weeks, but I don’t want you in this office anymore.”

He hadn’t bothered to say this privately, either. He’d left his office door wide open, so everyone else there—the two grill cooks, the two waitress-barmaids, and Marta, the former bookkeeper--who just happened to have dropped by before they opened for the day--could hear.

Stunned as if he’d slapped her, her breath frozen in the icy void that was her chest, Lesa had barely been able to form the single word, “Why?”

In answer, his angled jaw clenching, eyes going even icier, Pete had flung two sheets of paper on the desk between them. Two balance sheets, showing costs for the same list of brewery and restaurant supplies. Only they didn’t match. On one sheet, the costs were higher, several amounts circled in red.

Shaking her head, Lesa looked up to find him watching her with the closed, pitiless glare of a man wronged by a trusted employee.

“But I didn’t,” she’d fumbled, her voice numb with shock. “I—I wouldn’t. I’m not a ... a thief. I’m not!”

“There’s no one else it could have been,” he’d said, his deep voice cold and clear.

Of course there was, and she was standing in the office doorway watching, her eyes wide, but when Lesa had opened her mouth, Pete had preempted her.

“You expect me to believe one of them did this?” he'd demanded, his face tight with disgust, indicating their silent audience with a wave of his hand. "People I know much better than you? Not happening, so don't bother giving me that wounded, innocent look. Just get your things and go.”

In shock, Lesa had cleaned the drawer of her desk, grabbed her coat, purse and the picture of her with her two younger sisters, and stumbled out to the parking lot, past the wide-eyed stares of her fellow employees.

Pico and Joe, the two cooks, had given her looks of wounded sympathy. Bett had sneered, while Sylvie looked away, face pinched as if Lesa had betrayed her personally.

Marta had watched Lesa's every move, her cheeks flushed, gaze avid.

Lesa's own face had burned with humiliation, her eyes blurred with tears as she stumbled out of the brewpub into the bitter chill of the afternoon wind off the snow-covered prairie. She'd fumbled on her coat and stumbled home in a daze of misery, unable to believe how quickly her dreams had exploded in her face.

It had taken her the rest of the afternoon and evening to figure out what had happened, but she'd finally done it. She knew who'd embezzled the money from the brewpub, and she knew why Peter Vanko had been so ready to believe she was to blame.

Because the embezzler was his former bookkeeper—had to be. Marta, who strutted through the brewpub in the latest fashions, on stiletto heels, her hair and makeup always perfect. Who spoke with a Russian accent as pretty as she was, and often lapsed intimately into her native tongue with Pete, and with his older brother Stick.

Marta, who had been Pete's lover, at least when Lesa had started working at The Hangar.

Until the last few weeks, when they'd all seen Pete ignoring the redhead while she cast wounded looks his way, and then flirted under his nose with other attractive men. To Lesa's secret relief, he hadn't seemed to mind. But he must have, if he didn't want to believe Marta had stolen from him.

But Lesa had finally deciphered the strange look on Marta's face earlier today—it had been a mix of guilt and relief, as if she couldn't quite believe she'd gotten away with her crime. And who had more opportunity, and was angry enough to steal from Pete Vanko, than the woman he'd just tossed away like a used bar towel?

Now, crouched in the cold and dark, Lesa wept for the unfairness of it all, and especially for the fact that she couldn't even exact her revenge.

Pete Vanko had humiliated her in front of her fellow employees, and the entire town. Lesa didn't bother to kid herself that the news wasn't all over Airway Heights by now. She'd have to leave, and find a job somewhere else.

And she liked it here, damn him. She'd had plans and dreams.

She sucked in a long, shaky breath, and then froze as she heard a low, chilling sound in the shadows, the growl of a large dog. Very slowly, she turned her head.

“G-good dog,” she managed, her voice thick. “Good girl, Dima.”

A bulky, dark shape materialized in the narrow space between the truck and the side of the garage. As hot, moist breath assaulted her, Lesa lifted her hands, not knowing what to expect.

With a deep groan, Pete’s big dog moved closer, crowding her against the wall, and proceeded to lick Lesa’s chin and ear with her long, wet tongue.

Dima was part German Shepherd and part who-knew-what. She was white, with touches of black and brown, and despite her forbidding size and looks, very friendly to people she knew. She often accompanied Pete to work, wandering the non-public areas, the brewery and office and the graveled sweep behind the building or snoozing on a dog bed in Pete’s office.

The office Lesa had shared, for two short weeks. Dima had quickly spotted a sucker and interrupted Lesa on a regular basis to be petted, her big head on Lesa’s arm until she gave in and gave the soft fur and good rub.

“Sh-sh,” Lesa pleaded now. “Quiet, girl. I’m g-glad to see you, too. Or at least I would be, if—oh, never mind. Let me out of here. I have to get going.”

“Now why,” drawled a deep voice from behind her, “Would I want her to let you out?”

Lesa gasped, horror stiffening her shoulders. As her hands went lax, Dima seized the chance to lick her other cheek, panting happily as if she couldn’t believe her luck in having Lesa down on her level.

A light shone into Lesa’s eyes, blinding her. She winced away from it, pushing at the dog’s big head as she gave Lesa’s cheek another wet swipe.

“Dima, heel,” Pete ordered.

With a regretful whine, the big dog backed away, leaving Lesa crouched alone. She held up one hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the big flashlight, doing her best not to give into the humiliation that burned through her all over again. “Could you turn that thing off?”

“Sure.” His deep voice was heavy with irony. The flashlight flicked off, and an overhead light sprang on.

Swiping her wet face with the end of her sweater sleeve, Lesa peered cautiously around her arm.

Peter Vanko stood, one hand on the high wooden bed-rail of his truck, the other holding a big flashlight. He was tall and broad, filling the narrow space with an expanse of muscle and brawn, encased in faded jeans and a soft, brown corduroy shirt, the tails hanging loose. His hair was messy, as if he’d been running his hands through it.

He regarded her with a dark, indecipherable look on his bearded face. She flinched as he moved, but he merely bent toward her, and held out one hand. “Come on. You can’t sit out here all night--you’ll freeze.”

She gave one hunted look over her shoulders at the dark night beckoning beyond the circle of light, and discarded with deep regret the idea of making a run for her car. He’d catch her in only a few steps, and that would be even more humiliating, if possible.

Ignoring the large, capable hand held out to her, she scrambled to her feet.

His mouth quirked, in derision or regret. Her cheeks burning even hotter, Lesa looked down as she stepped toward him. His hand, palm up, barred her way.

She hesitated and then dropped the cheap, stamped key into his palm. It glinted in the light, ugly proof of her intent.

His hand closed around it, and he turned away, walking ahead of her toward the lights of the big house across the short walkway.

“Why didn’t you do it?” he asked over his shoulder.

She stared at the wide, green painted steps as she walked up onto the broad, covered porch. “Decided I wasn’t angry at your truck.”

He snorted. “As if a bitch would let that stop her.”

“Don’t call me a bitch.” It might be the common way for bikers to refer to women, but she did not like it

“Don’t act like one, and I won’t.” He held the screen door open for her, and she walked through the open door, trying not to breathe as she passed him. Too late, as his scent, spicy, musky, quintessentially male filled her nostrils.

She stepped into his house, warmth reaching out to envelop her. They were in a big, country kitchen, lamplight soft on a big granite island and surrounding cupboards and counters.

“Why didn’t you do it, Lesa?” The heavy oak door closed behind them the lock snicking with finality. “A few strokes of your pretty hands and you could’ve trashed my custom paint, cost me hundreds of dollars to get it re-done.”

She whirled, eyes wide. A confrontation, yes, she was prepared for that. But being locked in with him ... that was a new twist. Did he intend to—to punish her in some way? She’d heard bikers didn’t mind getting physical with women.

He stepped forward, looming over her, the soft lamplight glinting off his blonde hair. “Answer me.”