

LINKED

Judy Serrano



Black Rose Writing

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Author's Notes

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Reviews for *Linked*

“I was totally drawn to this story and read this book in a day. I didn’t just want to find out what happened with Daphne. It was like I needed to know.”

– Gina Butler, *Gina’s Library*

“Wow Judy Serrano has done it again! *Linked* was a fantastic book to read and I was totally hooked by it from the start.”

– Rachel Simons, *Stressed Rach Reviews*

“Fast paced, action packed, and romance laced, *Linked* will have you mesmerized.”

– Jodie Baker, *Uniquely Moi Books*

“Watch out Laurell Hamilton and your Anita Blake series. Judy Serrano is in town and she has gangster vampires.”

– Patty Foltz, *Way2Kool Designs*

“*Linked* is mixed with romance, mystery, suspense and drama! You cannot go wrong when you read a book by Judy Serrano. Her stories are easy to get lost in.”

– Stephanie Fatta, *Beauty Brite Book Reviews*

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Chapter 1

The blood was pulsating through my veins and when I looked down, my hands were shaking. All that schooling and relentless training still did not prepare me for what was coming next. What would I say, and how would they react? All the uncertainty was driving me mad. Sometimes I doubted my very own motives. I took this job out of necessity, not out of a passion for my craft, and with every passing day, I grew just a little more disheartened.

I am a substitute teacher and this is my very first parent-teacher conference. Sometimes the meager pay that I bring home for this incredulous journey hardly seems worth it. I earned my degree, got my certification and couldn't find a job as a teacher. So, the principal promised me a teaching position if I would just do this one last thing... be a long-term sub for a high school English class. This has not been my finest hour. The teacher I replaced had already made a mess of things and the students were failing left and right. One of the moms called and demanded to know why her little Michael was failing. *Maybe if he did his homework...* is of course what I wanted to say, but now I have to face her and tell her why little Michael is my least favorite student in the class.

I got all my papers together and sat back down at my desk when Michael walked through my door. "Michael," I started. "What are you doing here?"

Just then a very handsome man walked in behind him. He was about 5ft. 10, blond and blue-eyed, wearing faded jeans, and a button-down, powder blue sports shirt. When he smiled, my knees went weak and I'm sure my face flushed. "I'm Charles Cross," he said, putting out his hand to shake mine. "My friends

call me Charlie." He smiled. "You look surprised. We do have an appointment today, don't we? I hope I didn't get the date wrong."

"I'm sorry, I was expecting Michael's mother," I told him. "And yes, we have an appointment. I'm Daphne Foster."

"She was unavailable," he continued. "So now I guess you're stuck with me." He pushed Michael ahead of him so that he would move farther into the room. I'm sure my face was still red.

"I don't mind," I told him. Little did he know that my insides were doing summersaults. "Please, sit down." I motioned to the two chairs that I had strategically positioned in front of my desk.

"I understand that you're not even really a teacher yet," was his icebreaker.

"I'm certified," I replied, trying not to sound too defensive. "I have just been unable to find a full-time position yet. But I assure you, Mr. Cross, I am more than qualified to teach your son's class."

"Good to know," he answered, sitting back and starting to relax. "Michael is generally a good student," he continued, "but he appears to be carrying a 60 in your class. Tell me what you think the problem is so that I can help him fix it."

Michael was staring down at the floor with his baseball cap on backwards. I'm sure if he was standing up, we'd both be able to see his boxer shorts peeking out beneath his sagging pants. "For starters," I bravely began, "he can lose the baseball cap." Michael sneered at me. "He's not allowed to have it on during school hours, yet he always walks through the door with it on his head. This is a continuous waste of my valuable time, since we seem to need to argue about its importance, daily." Charlie laughed, which frustrated me a bit. "He hasn't turned in one homework assignment since I've been here and he is very disruptive during class."

"Well, Miss Foster," he responded in a condescending tone, "sounds to me like you have a problem with my son."

"Mr. Cross," I replied, trying to conceal the agitation in my voice, "you are the one with the problem." He sat up, giving me his full attention. I must admit that I began to feel my blood pressure rise. "I suggest that you get a handle on this boy before I fail him and do not underestimate me, because I will do it."

“Miss Foster, do you know who I am?” he asked. Michael smiled at this point and looked me square in the eyes.

“I don’t care if you’re Obama’s long lost son. He doesn’t do his work, he fails... pretty simple, really.”

He stood up and motioned for his son to stand. “I suspect that you will change your mind.”

I stood up at that point and put out my hand. “Thank you for coming in to see me, Mr. Cross... Michael.”

“Daphne.” My name glided off his tongue like music. “Such a beautiful name.” He shook my hand. “The pleasure was all mine.”

When he walked out the door, I had to sit back down. My knees were still failing me even though I wasn’t sure if he was threatening me or hitting on me. After my conference, my next class was Michael’s. He came in with no baseball cap, pants pulled up and he swaggered through the door without saying a word. He sat down in the back of the room and said nothing, all through class. When the bell rang I called him over. “Thank you, Michael.”

“My dad...” he started. “Never mind. Just forget I said anything.” He turned and walked out. I was never more anxious to go home. I felt somehow unsafe.

I ran to my car and high-tailed it to my apartment. I dropped my keys twice, trying to get the door unlocked. I felt as though there were eyes on me, weighing me down somehow, and when I looked up, Mr. Cross was standing in the corner of my balcony, right beside my front door.

I was startled and let out some kind of embarrassing noise. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

“My son can be a problem... I won’t deny that.”

“Then fix it,” I told him, still very aware that he was uninvited, staring me in the face with contempt.

He laughed at my bravado. “His teachers fear me, as they should.” He walked over to me and I took a step backwards. “You... you are nothing more than an overpaid, substitute teacher. Why can’t you just pass the boy? You have no real, personal investment in him.”

“I have a personal investment in all my students. And I would appreciate it if you didn’t show up at my door, uninvited, Mr.

Cross.”

“I will be sure to wait for an invitation next time, Miss Foster.” He put his hand on my face and ran a finger down the side of my cheek. I shivered. He smiled, knowing how tense he was making me. “Daphne. Such a lovely name.” He walked away and headed down the stairs leaving me speechless and paralyzed.

He was ridiculously handsome and I was attracted to him on so many levels. I’ve never considered myself to be unusually pretty. With my long, dark, straight hair and skinny body, I couldn’t imagine anyone laying awake at night thinking about me. I suppose my dark green eyes are my best feature, or so I’ve been told. This kind of attraction was not something familiar to me and being so close to someone that handsome was something I was not used to at all. Men like that usually keep their distance. The other side of my ego was furious with him for showing up at my door uninvited and touching me that way. And he has a wife. At least I think he does. I guess I should be grateful that he wasn’t inside when I got home.



When morning came I drove back to the high school. I unlocked my door only to find the room full of daffodils. I was shocked but knew, without even a glance at the card, who had sent them. I opened the card that had been left with a single daffodil on my desk. *Miss Foster, I will be waiting for my invitation.*

“Holding out on me, Miss Foster?” When I looked at the door it was my best friend, Janice Moore. She was the English teacher responsible for getting me this long-term sub job in the first place. “Come on, give it up,” she continued. “What’d you do to who to get you all those flowers?” She was smiling mischievously at me.

“You know I didn’t do anything to anyone,” I reminded her. “It’s a parent, that’s all. Nothing to write home about.”

“A parent?” she repeated. “Daphne, you know you’re not allowed to date a parent.”

“I’m not dating him,” I answered, starting to get a little

annoyed. "I think he's trying to bribe me into passing his demon son."

She giggled. "That's quite a bribe," she continued. "Who's the boy?"

"Michael Cross," I told her. Her face paled instantly. "What?"

"Charlie Cross. He's the parent?"

"Yes, so what?"

"Oh my God, Daphne. You have to pass Michael. Apologize to him and give him an 80."

"I will do no such thing."

"Daphne..."

"Cut it out, Janice. You're starting to scare me."

"You don't know who he is?" she asked. "Really, you don't know?" I shook my head. She closed the door behind her and moved closer to me. "He sent you all these flowers?"

"Yes, Janice," I blurted. "Now spill."

"He's in organized crime, Daphne. He's a dangerous man. Pass his kid and move on."

"Organized crime?" I asked, almost laughing. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. Although I wish I was."

"I don't believe this." I think I was seeing spots by this time. I almost had to sit down. "I came home last night and he was outside my apartment waiting for me."

"What?"

"I know," I continued. "I think he wants to ask me out."

"He's very married, Daphne. Did he mention that?"

"I was supposed to meet with his wife yesterday but ended up meeting with him instead. It just snowballed from there."

"I'll tell you what," she offered. "We'll go out for a drink at O'Malley's after work."

"How is that going to help?"

"We'll find some men to wash the thought of that egotistical hunk right out of your mind."

I laughed. "Sounds like a plan." The truth was that I was actually wondering how long it would be before I forgot about him. There was something quite distracting in his eyes. Even the

way he ran his finger down the side of my face reached me somehow. It stirred my curiosity.

As the day progressed there were a million inquiring little minds, asking where the flowers came from. I noticed Michael sending me a quiet smile, as though he knew that his dad had sent them.



We hurried on over to O'Malley's as soon as we were able to escape from work. "First round is on me," Janice offered. "Two beers." The bartender took our money and we sat at a table in the corner.

"So, tell me more about Mr. Cross," she started. "I'm sure you noticed that he's not hard on the eyes."

"I noticed," I answered, trying to keep the giggle that was trying to escape out of my throat. "I don't know what it is about him but he makes my knees weak."

"Uh-oh," she said. "I smell trouble."

"You need to get your own romance thing going on. How long has it been, Janice?"

"Too long," she said laughing. After we talked for a while, we looked down at our empty beers and she signaled to the waitress that we were ready for two more. She approached with two beers in her hands and put them on the table.

"These are from the men at the bar," she told us, motioning her hand to where they were sitting. All we could see were the backs of their heads.

"Thanks," she replied. "Well, Daphne, let's go thank the kind gentlemen for the refreshments."

"Janice..." I warned.

"Come on, now. Everyone needs to feel appreciated every now and then."

I reluctantly followed as we headed for the bar. As soon as we got close enough, my heartbeat increased with such force that I was afraid everyone around me could hear it pounding. I knew where the beers came from and I almost couldn't stand up. "This

is not possible," I blurted.

"Miss Foster," he said, swerving in his stool and looking over at me.

"Mr. Cross," I replied. "Are you following me?"

"Now, why would you think *that*?" he asked. He smiled and his very handsome friend turned around to look at us. He was dark with long, brown hair pulled back into a short ponytail with eyes almost black in comparison to Charlie's. "This is Dante," he started, "my brother."

That took me by surprise. They looked so different. "This is Janice," I said, moving out of the way so that she could see them. "We work at the high school together."

We all shook hands and the men stood up, walking with us back to our table. Two couples were already sitting there; the bar was pretty crowded, but when they looked at Charlie they gathered their things and scrambled to their feet before departing. Charlie and Dante pulled our chairs out for us so that we could sit back down. "That was weird," I told them. "They ran like... I don't know... like they were afraid of you."

"I have that effect on some people," he answered. "But apparently not on you." Janice gave me a knowing look and I smiled.

"Mr. Cross," I started, leaning into him so that no one else could hear me. "What are you doing here?"

"It's nice to see you too, Miss Foster."

"I think we're passed the formalities now, don't you?" I asked.

"Daphne, then." My name played so softly on his lips that I shuddered, and embarrassingly so. He smiled. "Then you must call me Charlie." He kissed the backs of my hands. "I see I already have a positive effect on you."

"Don't read too much into it," I told him. "It's just a chill."

"Or maybe a warm sensation," he whispered, putting his finger on my face and tracing it down to my lips. I swallowed hard and I know my face was yet again bright red.

I looked over at Janice who was having a pleasant conversation with his brother. Then I looked back at him. "Does your wife know you frequent schools to pick up teachers?" I

asked.

"You mean substitute teachers," he answered. I stuck my tongue out at him. "I like when you do that."

"Stop it," I whispered harshly. "Look. I'm sure I'm not the type of woman that you're used to. Especially since I know first hand that you're married, and I think I already mentioned that I don't date married men."

The waitress showed up with four shots of tequila. I looked at him in amazement. "Really?" I asked.

"Come on, Daphne, let go a little," Janice added, shining like a brand new diamond.

We downed the shots and Charlie got a little too close. "I find you irresistible, Daphne." He leaned in so that he was almost whispering in my ear. "I don't know what it is about you, but I must have you." He took my hand and brought it to his cheek.

"What is it that you do, Mr. Cross?" I asked.

"I thought we were past formalities."

"Charlie," I corrected. "Sorry. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a businessman," he answered. "Acquisitions are my specialty."

"And what exactly do you acquire?" I asked. "And please do not say women."

"I do not buy and sell women," he answered, his voice getting suddenly harsh. "But when I see something I want, I go after it until it yields to me."

I pulled my hand away from his face and looked at him. He was most unsettling. "You think I'm just going to fall right into your arms, don't you, Charlie."

"Not into my arms, necessarily," he answered, "but certainly into my bed."

I felt my body shudder again as he grabbed my face with both his hands. The anticipation was threatening my sanity. His phone rang and he looked at it. "I'm sorry, love, but I have to go. Let me give you and your friend a lift home. You shouldn't drive."

"We're fine," Janice answered for me. "You boys go."

"Let's go," he demanded, pulling me by my arm. "No driving. You too, Janice, come along. My men will take your cars back to

you before morning.”

We got up, almost surprised at how obedient we were. There was something authoritative about him. He was right, after all. We did have a little too much to drink. There was a driver waiting outside for us in a black limo. He took Janice home first and then took me to my apartment. Charlie got out, opened my door and pulled me gracefully to my feet. His phone rang again and his face tightened. “Let’s go,” he said, leading me up the stairs. I handed him my keys, he unlocked the door for me and twisted the doorknob, hesitating before pushing it open.

“I don’t date married men,” I told him. “I don’t care how impressive you are. You belong to someone else. I can’t get involved with you. Besides... you’re a parent. Against the rules.”

“I live to break rules,” he answered. He took my face into his hands like he did at the bar. My breath hitched.

“Don’t,” I begged him. “Please don’t.”

He searched my eyes for a minute. “I am still waiting for that invitation, Daphne.” He put his lips to my ear. “But I can wait. I’m a patient man.” His breath in my ear did something to me. He smiled and put his lips dangerously close to mine but did not kiss me. “Another time then.”

Just then we heard a loud pop and an explosion. He threw his body on top of mine, still outside the apartment, until the noises stopped. I forgot how to breathe as I let out the last bit of air that was lingering in my lungs. I heard the screaming but didn’t realize until later that it was coming from my throat.