

Chapter One

The past several months had been rough ones. My brother owed drug money to the Cravens, a local motorcycle gang, and I'd been pulled into some seriously scary circumstances, which ultimately left my sister and her kids in protective custody, who knew where.

Under the watchful eye of DPS Officer, Alex Matthews, who also happened to be my new boyfriend, I had been steadily healing from my wounds. Each day found me more and more in love—but also more and more restless, and ready to get back to work. No matter the amount of trust I had in Alex, I couldn't stand the idea of being a freeloader for much longer, and I needed to know I was making my own way.

Waking up a little after 6:00 a.m., I just barely had enough time to kiss Alex goodbye as he was headed out the door. For someone who'd spent more than eight months getting up at around five o'clock to make it work on time, I was a little irked at myself for not having gotten up much earlier so I could fulfill my desire to fix him breakfast before he headed off to work.

Of course, once he was gone, the long hours loomed ahead of me. At a loss to figure out what I'd do all day, I conversely wished I had stayed in bed just a little while longer. Stretching, I pulled on the shirt I'd had on the night before, and smiled to myself as I remembered how it came to be lying on the floor. The night before had marked not only the event of our first 'real' date, but it was even more memorable for having been the first time we'd made love.

Knowing that I was too awake to even contemplate going back to sleep, I picked up one of the magazines Alex had gotten for me when I was stuck in bed and wandered out the kitchen to fix myself a cup of coffee and a piece of toast.

Once I'd had my breakfast and read all of the articles that seemed even remotely interesting to me—including taking one of those dorky love quizzes—I took a quick shower and got dressed in something more than one of Alex's shirts—which had become something of a uniform for me during my convalescence.

Dressed, but with nowhere to go, when I was done, I made up the bed and tidied up the bathroom. At a loss for what to do next, I wandered back out to the main living areas where I

spent another few minutes dusting and straightening throw pillows and wiping down surfaces that had just been cleaned a couple of days before.

Looking at my watch, I was dismayed to find that it was not even nine yet and I still had about six more hours to kill before Alex would be back home.

Deciding it wouldn't hurt to do some homework in terms of figuring out what classes I might be interested in taking when the next semester started, I went into Alex's office and started up the computer. Even if I wasn't going to be starting for a few more months, it might be good to start looking up courses and schedules in the community college's website catalog. I could check out how many classes I could take while still working as many hours as I could get at the truck stop.

As I looked up the information, I was pleased to find that many of the courses I was interested in were not only available, but fairly affordable as well. Even if I didn't manage to get some kind of scholarship from SmartStop, it seemed like the cost wouldn't break me, provided I dipped into my savings, and was working at least thirty or so hours a week. By the time I'd made notes on everything, and then updated my chart, it was going on 11:30. I just had to fill four and half more hours and then Alex would be home.

Looking down at the desk as I waited for the admissions packet to download, I saw the phone, and it made me realize that I had not spoken to anyone in my family for more than two weeks.

While my family wasn't exactly what you'd call tightknit since my mom had left, Marlana and I normally talked to her once a week or so using Marlana's cell phone. Now, with a phone at my disposal, it occurred to me that I didn't even have a phone number for my mom and therefore, had no way to let her know that we were all okay. Well, maybe not Frank, but me, Marlana, and the boys, anyway. But, I did know someone who might know it—my cousin Ray—and truth was, I owed him a call as well.

Even though we weren't in super close communication since my granny had passed on several years before, I did generally talk to my cousin Ray every two weeks or so, even if it was just in passing. Regardless of the fact that we called Ray 'cousin', I wasn't really sure what relation he was to me because he was actually my Grandma's cousin. But for lack of understanding all of the genealogy involved, we'd grown up calling him the same as granny had, and so for me, he was Cousin Ray.

Picking up the phone, I punched in my cousin's number and waited for him to answer. After a few rings, I heard his raspy smoker's voice on the line. "Hello?"

"Hey, Cousin Ray. It's Lawrene."

"Well, it's about time you called, girl. I had no idea where you'd got off to, and I ain't seen hide or hair of any of you kids for a while. All I knew was that Marlana asked me to watch the boys for a little bit, cause your brother Frankie brought some trouble down on your heads with his druggie friends. The next thing I know, she's hightailin' it to Victoria, or some such, and you're missing. When I didn't hear nothing and couldn't get ahold of Marlana, I went up ta that store where you been workin', and all they'd tell me was that you'd had some kinda accident or somethin' and they didn't know where you were, or if you was for sure plannin' on comin' back."

"I'm sorry, Cousin Ray. It's been kinda crazy for me, but I'm fine now. I can't really go into all of what happened, but some bikers thought Frankie ripped them off, and then he got mad I wouldn't give him no money, so he beat me pretty terrible."

"So are you with Marlana, now? When they told me that at the store, I went by the house and didn't see no cars or nothing' but I done run by there a time or three since, and it was empty every time. Finally that Mexican woman that lives next door told me they ain't see you all for a week or more so I just been waitin' for someone to give me a call. You know if there was trouble, you coulda called me, girl. I might be an old man, but I got a gun, and I know how to use it, too."

"No, I'm still here in town. I've been stayin' with a friend while I got better. I'm gonna start back up workin' next week though. I'm sorry I didn't call you before. I shoulda known you'd be worried. But everyone is fine. Marlana's still away, and I'm not sure when she's gonna be back. I never thought I say it, especially after sharing a room with them little monkeys for a coupla months—and watchin' over them for forever and a day—but I miss Nicky and Preston more than I ever thought I would. I wish things were right so they could all come home, but because of everything that happened, it's better for her and the boys to stay gone, at least for now."

"That's all good. So long as everyone is safe, that's the thing. So, does your friend have a name, Lawrene? I hope you ain't hooked up with a bad crowd, missy. Of all of the kids, you're the one that's been put together best—gettin' your diploma, and workin' a regular job. You

may've been a little snotty with it now and again, but Annie'd have been so proud to see what a good girl you turned out to be. I hope you ain't throwin' it all down the toilet... you hear?"

Giggling, I couldn't imagine how anyone would mistake Alex as part of a bad crowd. "No, Cousin Ray, I am definitely *not* hangin' with a bad crowd. In fact, I got a boyfriend, and he's with the DPS. Someday soon, I'll ask him to run me by your place so you can meet him. I don't know what he sees in me exactly, but he's a really great guy, and I know you're gonna like him."

"Well, I'm sure he knows a good thing when he sees it, and you ain't no turd yourself, missy. You just make sure you treat each other right, and everything else always turns out. I had that with my Emily for the thirty-five years the Good Lord gave us, and I know that's a fact. Of course, that ain't a lesson your momma or sisters took to very easy, but hopefully you can show 'em how it's done with your man. God knows the lot of them have surely hooked up with some losers over the years."

"Thanks, Cousin Ray. I hope he and I will be as happy as you and Aunt Emily were, and I'll definitely try to do my part. And speaking of my mom, do you have a phone number for her? With Marlana gone, it just came to me that the number is on her phone, and without that, I have no idea how to get ahold of my mom."

When he gave me the number, I wrote it down, and then we chatted for a few minutes longer. We ended the call with my promise to stop by as soon as I could, and to do better about staying in touch.

Though I had not specifically asked Alex if I could make long distance calls from his phone, he had told me I could use it anytime I needed, so I figured he wouldn't mind—especially not if I gave him money for the charges. As I punched in my mom's number, it occurred to me that it was kind of weird that I had gone to school and lived in the same place my whole life, but that I did not really have much of anyone that I stayed in touch with regularly. Deciding that should be another item for my list, I made a note to get me one of those little address books at Wal-Mart next time I was there. That way I'd be sure to have a way to contact folks when I needed to and perhaps start widening the circle of people in my life.

When the line was answered, I could tell that it was Roger, my mom's boyfriend. "Hi, Roger, it's Lawrene. Is my momma around?"

"Yeah, hold on." I could hear him walking with the phone, and then after a quick, 'it's one of your girls, my mom's voice came on the line.

"Marlena, is that you?"

"No, Mom, it's Lawrene."

"Lawrene, is Marlena there with you? Are she and them boys okay? Scott called me to say he was tryin' to get in touch with her, and she hasn't been answerin' her phone for more than a week."

Realizing I should have talked to Alex before I called my mom, I tried to answer her questions, without revealing anything I maybe shouldn't. "No, Marlena's not here. She's gone for the next little while, and her phone ain't workin', but she and Nicky and Preston are good. After Frankie moved in, things were a little... bad, and so she and Scott decided to go to Victoria for a while, but then he broke up with her, and she had to go stay somewhere else."

When she started to talk again, I could make out that she was drunk, or high, or maybe even both—all of which were something of a sure sign that the conversation was not going to go quite the way I'd hoped.

"So she got her a new man, huh? Well, good for her. I never liked that little weasel, Scott. Workin' his little minimum wage job and actin' like he was the King of the house on account of it. She ain't gonna stay young and pretty forever, I told her. You gotta take your opportunities while you can, and a lotta men don't wanna girl that's already got kiddos. That's where you are ahead, girly. You ain't got the boobies or the body, but at least you don't got no kids yet. You should use that to your advantage. "

"I'm actually plannin' to go back to school, Mom. My work has a scholarship that I might get too, and..."

"All that school and stuff ain't got you nothin' but a job at a truck stop, has it? You need to make the most of the assets you got, and find you a man that's got somethin' goin on. Soon as you come offa that high horse of yours, you'll see that men don't care what you got upstairs, if you know what I mean... *ha, ha, ha*... They just want a full belly and a little snatch now and then. You just listen to your Momma, and you'll do just fine, Lawrene. Didja know Rayanne's got her a new beau? He sounds like a kinky fucker, but accordin' to her, he's got all kinds of cash. Not that she sent me none, but she will. She knows to try and take care of her momma."

Fighting against the tears that wanted to break free, I tried to keep my tone steady. Why I had expected anything different was a mystery to me. My mother had never understood me, nor I her. That was something that was not likely to change any time soon—or maybe ever, even.

"That's great, Mom. I haven't talked to her in a long time, but I'm glad she's doin' good. So, um, I just wanted to call and let you know that I was okay, in case you were wondering why you hadn't talked to me in a while."

"Naw. Bad news is the only thing I ever got fast and for free. And you ain't never been one to help your mamma out with a little money or nothin', so if I don't hear from you, I figure it's on account of you figurin' your better'n the rest of us. But in the end, you'll see that your mamma knows best, and it's all about the snatch. Men fight to getta outta one when they're born, and the rest of their life they fight to get back in." As she laughed uproariously at her own rather dated joke, which I'd heard her say countless times before, I waited for a break in the hilarity so I could end the call, hopefully on something like a positive note.

"So, okay then. I guess I better go. I'm usin' a friend's phone, and I don't want to run the charges up, but..."

"Hold up there, Lawrene. You know I was just kiddin' about the money thing, and you bein' a shit, right? Seriously, I sure could use some help if you got a few spare bucks. It's been real tight for Roger and me out here. He ain't been able to find steady work, and his mamma and daddy are tight as popcorn farts when it comes to doling out the dollars. I do what I can, but like I told ya, it ain't no picnic when you don't got a tight ass and firm titties, so if you can help out your mamma, that would be great. Lemme give you the address, so you can send me a little somethin', okay darlin'?"

Rather than explaining that I hadn't even been able to work for a while, and that the last thing I'd do would be to send her money so she and Roger could buy beer or drugs, I just took down the address and hung up as quickly as I could. Not only had I not even gotten a chance to tell her what had happened to me, but it probably wouldn't have made a difference anyway.

I had forgotten how terrible it could be to talk to her sometimes. At least she'd spared me the whole, 'I had been a mistake, and I owed her for not having an abortion' speech. I was well aware, because she'd told me time and again, that she—like my sister Rayanne—kind of blamed me for how things turned out with her second husband. Reminding myself that I had not asked to be born, and that nothing was really my fault, I tried to shake off the icky feelings that had crept in when talking to my mom.