

Chapter One

Idly moving loose chunks of gravel rock around with the toe of my shoe, I checked my watch for about the twentieth time in about the same number of minutes. My half-sister Marlana had promised to give me a ride home, but she had not shown up, and it was not only colder than tits on a boar hog, but it was getting late and I did not want to get stuck walking along the highway in full dark.

Shivering in my layered sweatshirt and work issued SmartStop fleece pullover, I shifted my tote bag from one shoulder to the other as I contemplated whether or not I should just start off for home. If I was going to have to make the twenty-five-minute walk, I'd just as soon get started sooner rather than later. But, if Marlana did show up, she'd be pissed if I wasn't waiting, and that would probably mean I could count on walking anywhere I needed to go for at least the next week or so. Unfortunately, it was just as likely that she forgot about me as it was possible that she had gotten held up and was running late.

After waiting a few more minutes, I finally decided to just start making the trek home. I had been at work since 6:00 a.m. and I was more than ready to get off my feet, and to eat.

Always thankful when there were left over deli foods to be trashed, this had been an especially fortuitous day for me because I'd scored one of my all-time favorites; a roast beef and Swiss. On most days, I could count on being able to leave with the usual couple of dried out hotdogs, but it was rare when the sandwiches did not sell out. When they didn't, it was normally only the egg salad or tuna fish left over. Today though, not only was I lucky enough to be in possession of a meaty and delicious sandwich, but I had either dessert or breakfast covered as well, because I had also been able to scavenge a couple of donuts before they got trashed. Other than the chips and Sprite I'd had at lunchtime, I had not eaten since the morning before, and my bounty was tempting me from deep within my carryall.

As I made my way out to the road, I made a concentrated effort to look nowhere but at the ground right in front of me. The truck stop where I worked was notorious for Lot Lizards who trolled the dark macadam looking for lonely truckers who were willing to part with a few bucks for a little humming or strumming, and I did not want to have to deal with anyone who might think I was looking to supplement my income.

Sadly, the same could not be said for the majority of the other women in my family; most of whom had, at one time or another, spent time strolling their skanky selves through this very same lot. While I'm not quite the prude they all accuse me of being, I do still have some measure of my own personal value, and that price tag is more than the twenty or so bucks I might make slurping off someone's love stick, or doing the nasty with some sweaty stranger. Thankfully, it was still just light enough for anyone who was looking to make out that I was wearing a SmartStop uniform, and to, hopefully, clearly interpret that I was not looking to do anything more than make my way past the rigs.

Walking along the shoulder of the highway, I tried to stay as far to the edge of the concrete as I could. As luck would have it, the road leading to my house was right off the

highway on the same side as the truck stop, so I did not have to risk crossing the six lane road, nor did I have to traverse the deep gully that separated the north and southbound traffic. I had never actually walked in the deep ditch, but it didn't take a brainiac to guess that it had to be full of bugs, snakes, and all kinds of yucky vermin. Another benefit of not crossing the road meant that I was walking against traffic rather than having the cars approach from the back, which makes me a little nervous. On the downside, now that the speed limits had increased to 70 mph, seeing the approaching cars did not feel terribly safe. While common sense says that if you get hit by a car or a truck doing anything over thirty-five, the results are probably the same as if they're going faster—for some reason, vehicles whizzing by at seventy just seem a whole hell of a lot scarier than when they are going fifty-five.

At twilight, I tightened the scrunchie around my light brown pony tail and started to jog a little so I could try and reach my turnoff before the sun finished setting. I really hated having to walk along when each passing set of headlights would temporarily illuminate me, somewhat like a spotlight on a gazelle in front of a pack of lions. Not only was I afraid of those faceless drivers, any of whom might be a raging lunatic cruising for his next victim, but the bursts of light really messed up my vision. From pitiful experience, I can tell you that there is little worse than finding yourself ankle deep in road kill—not to mention the amount of cleaning it takes to get the mess off your shoe.

Because of my fear of not being able to hear what was going on around me, I never used my MP3 player when I walked home, but that did not stop me from making music in my head and humming along as I went. Just as I was finishing up my own slightly mangled rendition of Train's *Drive By*, a car pulled to the shoulder slightly in front of me. My heart raced even more than it had been doing from my light jog, and I all but slowed to a snail's pace as I approached the idling vehicle.

My slowness was not a result of being concerned that I might be walking up to a chainsaw wielding maniac, but rather because I knew who was waiting ahead, and I was not eager to deal with him. Inevitably, regardless of how slowly my feet dragged, I eventually made my way even with the car just as the driver's side door swung open and a tall uniformed officer unfolded himself from the seat of the late model DPS patrol car. Shutting the door, he idly leaned up against the car as he waited for me to take the final steps in his direction.

Having determined that I would try and play things off through false bravado, I nodded in his direction as I made to pass by him on the opposite side of where he was standing.

"Not so fast there, Laurie," he drawled. "I think that you and I need to have a little talk. I definitely recall warning you about walking along the highway not more than three days ago, so you can just imagine how surprised I am to see you here now, little girl."

Great! Not only had I been tagged to work an extra half shift, leaving me exhausted, achy, and hungry, but I just had to run into Officer Do-Right. Looking over in his direction, over the top of the car, I contemplated making a run for it. Debating the dubious possibility of successfully evading him, I was left with the sad realization that he could eventually catch up with me—either on foot or by car, so I resigned myself to listen to whatever he had to say. I just hoped he'd make it quick so I would not lose the little bit of daylight I had left.

"Good evening, Officer Matthews. Fancy seeing you here," I threw out. "I'm tired to the bone, and trying to make it home before dark, so I hope you don't mind if I don't stop to chit chat."

"Actually, darlin', I do mind. And chatting isn't exactly what we're gonna be doing now, is it, Lawrene?" he told me as he rounded the back of the car, effectively cutting off my line of escape, had I still been inclined to take my chances and run for it.

Frozen to the spot, his words ran over me like icy water. I caught that he used my full name, rather than the shortened version—Laurie—as he usually addressed me. And if the tick in his jaw was any indication, his warning to quote, unquote 'blister my behind' if he caught me walking on the highway, might not have been the idle threat I'd fervently hoped it had been. No doubt, the three or four sharp swats he'd given me when he had cited that warning should have been a good indication that his words might not have been without some teeth. Scared to face whatever he might have planned, I stayed rooted to the spot, not even making a move for my own self-preservation.

Trembling, I tried to muster enough dignity to face him head on, reminding myself I was an adult woman, not a little girl. Finding my voice, I set about making certain he understood that. "Look, Officer, I'm a grown woman, and I can walk whenever and wherever I damn well please. This is America, and if I wanted to walk along the highway, in the dark, or even with a blindfold on, I could. And so long as I'm not breaking no laws, it ain't none of your business what I do."

Of course, since I'm not a total dumb-ass, I wouldn't ever do such a thing, but I figured examples would help make it clear that I was free to make my own choices, regardless of his personal opinions.

"Well, sweetheart, it seems that you and I disagree on that point. I'm off shift, and right now, this is me, Alex Matthews talking to you, not Officer Matthews. And Alex Matthews has made it his business to try and keep you safe from your own, sometimes less than wise, choices. As far as being a woman, I'll agree that you are definitely that, but some of the things you do seem to point in another direction."

Circling around behind me, Alex pulled open the passenger door and with a grip on my elbow, proceeded to steer me into the car, saying, "And the best way I know to deal with stubborn little girls is to drum it into their behinds so they will think before they do dangerous things... like walking alone along the highway."

"No fucking way! I ain't getting into no cop car. I didn't do nothin' wrong. I'm just walking home, that ain't against the law," I yelled. Twisting around, I tried to break free from his grip before he could manhandle me into the seat.

"Lawrene, I'm gonna tell you this just once—settle down. I'm not arresting you, and I just told you I'm not on duty. But, like it or not, you and I are going to have a discussion about this, and I'd think you'd rather be at home than getting a bare assed spanking on the side of the road."

Gasping, I was so thrown by his blunt proclamation that I scarcely noticed as he managed to get me seated and belted into the car. Fuming, I unbuckled the seatbelt and waited for him to round the car. Though I wouldn't have minded a ride home, especially now since the sun was all but gone, there was no way I could have him driving up to my trailer in his patrol car.

People in my neighborhood left in cop cars, but they never fucking arrived in one. I could just imagine how that would go over. Everyone already thought I was a little weird—being that I did not drink a lot and I never touched the drugs that seemed to be the best form of recreation in our little transitional park, but now they'd think I was a narc or something. But more than that, now that my brother had come back, I knew that it was dangerous for him to even come close to my house. In fact, right now, my brother Frank was probably sitting at the kitchen table individually cling wrapping little smelly balls of crack before he started his nightly deliveries.

As soon as the driver's door swung open, I had my hand on the door handle, preparing to exit the car after making clear what a poor idea it was for me to be found anywhere near his car.

"Hey, Officer Matthews, er, uh, Alex. You don't wanna be driving me down to my house. My neighbors ain't exactly the most upstandin' people. They see me pulling up in a cop car and you're gonna be planning my funeral tomorrow; but it won't be because I got flattened by a car. I appreciate you bein' worried about me walking on the highway and all, and I promise, I hardly ever do it. Most days my sister picks me up, but I worked extra hours today so she musta got busy and forgot to come get me. So, if it's all the same to you, I'm just gonna get myself on home so's I can have my dinner and get off my achin' feet."

Turning, I went to push the door outward so I could get out and be on my way, but it had no effect. Struggling with the metal tab, I continued to push against the door to no avail.

Leaning across me, Alex calmly pulled the shoulder strap back over my chest, and again secured me with the seat belt before inserting the key and turning over the engine. "Who all lives over at your place, Lawrene? I heard your mom moved away a few months back, but you still have a couple of sisters there, right?"

Putting the car in gear, he flipped on the blinker and started along the shoulder, gradually gaining speed as he entered the roadway.

Overwrought over the fact that he had totally disregarded my very real and very valid fears of arriving home in a patrol car, I just barely registered his question as I struggled to find some way to dissuade him from this course of action.

"Uh yeah, my momma's boyfriend lost his job a little while back and they moved out to Henderson where he's got folks. My oldest sister, Rayanne, don't live here no more either, she went off to Florida to find her daddy's family and we hardly ever even hear from her anymore. So now it's just me, Marlena, and her kids. Oh, and her boyfriend. And my brother Frank just moved back as well."

Looking at the grimace that crossed his face upon hearing my brother's name, I regretted having mentioned that last bit. My brother had quite a reputation in the area, and not for anything good. Though Alex and my brother Frank were somewhere around the same age, I knew Alex had grown up a couple of towns over, so he wouldn't know my brother by anything more than his long rap sheet.

In and out of trouble since he was thirteen, my brother had spent the majority of his thirty-one years inside of one kind of jail or the other, and his current goings-on were likely to land him back in, sooner, rather than later. To be honest, I was actually kind of looking forward to that day because it had not taken me long to tire of his bossy ways.

Always ordering me to cook him up some food, wash his clothes, and fetch and carry whenever we were both home at the same time, he had worn out his welcome pretty quickly. I did not want to see him go back to the pen or anything, but I did want him gone, and I hoped that he'd move on soon.

Even before Frank had come back, my plate had already been overflowing. Between my job, keeping the house somewhat clean, and watching Marlena's kids when she and her man went out at night, there were plenty of days where I was lucky if I got thirty minutes to myself.

Perhaps if Frank and I had been closer growing up, it might not have been so bad when he came back, but having only been around him now and again over the years, it was like having a selfish and demanding boss move into the house. He had plenty of money, but he rarely peeled off any of those twenties to help out with any of the bills. Thinking about the thick steaks Frank would buy and have me cook, I could not help but feel a little resentful that the best meal I could

ever hope for was my past expiration roast beef and Swiss and a couple of stale donuts that I'd most likely end up having to share with Marlena's boys.

Unfortunately, the house had originally belonged to my grandma, and in her will, she'd left it to us all in equal parts. Since I did not make enough money to get my own place, I was not in a position to pick and choose my roommates so whoever wanted to stay could stay, and I just had to suck it up for the time being.