

a novel

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*dangerous curves
ahead*

Chapter One

As a Driver's Education instructor for five years, I had seen plenty of bad drivers under the age of eighteen. One girl wrapped the back end of the car around a tree when she stomped on the gas while still in Reverse. Another boy took out four side mirrors of parked cars in one block before I was able to get him stopped. And my favorite disaster driver had to be the boy that thought it was best to turn the wheel almost half way around in order to change lanes, resulting in a near spin on the highway, and the two kids in the backseat throwing up in

the car. It made for an interesting call home to the parents.

After three full semesters of uneventful student driving, I knew my luck was bound to run out. It was a blustery day in February, and I had one of my worst students ever sitting beside me at the wheel of the blue Chevy Lumina with the words “Student Driver” emblazoned down both sides in bright yellow. He was at least in the top ten. His name was Brandon, and he had transferred into George Washington High School at the start of the spring semester. I was assured that he’d had some practice driving, and that he would pass the test with flying colors in May. I really wanted all my students to pass, as this was the last semester that Driver’s Education would be offered through the high school. This was my final time teaching young people to drive, and I wanted everyone to look at me and say, “Wow, all her kids passed. She was an excellent teacher,” or something just as ego-raising.

I was having serious doubts about my teaching ability as we sailed through a red light at a busy downtown intersection, horns blaring at us, and tires squealing in near misses. In fact, I’m ashamed to admit that my first thought was that I was going to die on a Wednesday, and I was wearing underwear that read “Friday” on the front in gold, glittered lettering. Oh, how the paramedics and my mother would laugh.

I shook my head and focused on the situation at hand. I had to get the car stopped before the two girls in the backseat passed out or screamed themselves hoarse.

With a gentle yet firm grip, I reached over and grabbed the wheel, steering us down an empty side street, at the same time stepping on the special brake installed on the passenger side. We slowed to a stop and bumped the curb. Brandon's knuckles were white, as was his face, and he didn't appear to be breathing. I let go of the wheel with shaking fingers and put the car into Park, then removed the key from the ignition.

"So, um, that wasn't...bad," I said, trying to sound encouraging.

Brandon let out a breath that seemed to deflate him, and he went limp in his seat. I half-turned to check out the passengers in back. They had been holding onto their seat belts like lifelines for the past several blocks and seemed to have no intention of letting go.

"Would one of you like to drive us back to school?" I asked. "We need to be heading that way anyhow."

Lisa, the girl sitting behind Brandon, raised two fingers, still clutching her seatbelt. "I'll drive back, Miss Martin," she squeaked out.

I smiled at her and faced Brandon again. "You two can switch places," I said.

Brandon nodded and got out, his face now a bright shade of pink. His shaggy brown hair fell over his eyes, but I knew he wasn't looking at me anyway. I sighed a little as he took Lisa's place in back. Four weeks of

driving with me, and he wasn't getting any better on the road. And from what I'd heard from Mr. Jenkins, the classroom instructor, he wasn't doing so hot there either. It was time for a call home.

Lisa drove us back to school and parked without any problems. I dismissed the kids to go onto their next period class, but asked Brandon to hang back for a moment. He stared at the ground, kicking pebbles with his sneakers, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his coat. February in Iowa can be brutal, and today was no exception. The wind blew my hair all over the place, and I fought to control it while trying to talk to Brandon.

"How do you feel about your progress?" I asked. It was a safe question. Instead of coming right out and saying, "Kid, you suck," which would bruise his already fragile self-esteem; it was a way of letting him express his feelings.

Brandon shrugged and avoided my eyes. This was the response I'd been getting from him since day one, in both Driver's Ed and American History, which I also taught. His grade in that class was slightly better than in Driver's Ed.

"Have you been driving at home with your dad?" I asked.

"My uncle," he corrected me, muttering under his breath.

"Oh, yes, that's right. Your uncle." I gave myself a mental head slap. His father was a touchy subject. "Well, how are you doing with him?"

Another shrug. I grabbed my blowing hair into a messy ponytail and held it, once again cursing the fact that I didn't have the guts to just chop it all off.

"Well," I said, "how about I give your uncle a call and talk to him? See if he can help you out a little bit more?"

Brandon coughed and shrugged again. The bell rang, signaling the end of second period. The students began pouring out into the halls, heading toward their next class. We could hear them through the doors, it was so loud.

"You better get going. I'll give your uncle a call later," I said, forcing a smile. "Everything will be okay, and I'll see you seventh period."

Brandon spun on his heel and entered the building, leaving me to stand alone outside. I looked at my watch. Third period was my planning period, so I was free for fifty minutes. Making sure no one was watching, I edged away from the doors and around the corner, where I pulled out a pack of cigarettes and stared at it with longing.

What can I say? Teaching kids to maneuver through busy streets in two tons of metal made me antsy. I shook one out and held it between my fingers. I had officially quit on New Year's Day, and I hadn't caved yet, but if there was going to be a time to do it, now was that time.

"You know, smoking will kill you."

Thinking it was the principal about to reprimand me for smoking on school property, even though I wasn't, I jumped and tossed the cigarette to the cement, stomping on it until I ground it to smithereens. I whirled around to

see my fellow teacher and my best friend since we were six years old, standing behind me, a smug smile on his face.

“Yeah? Well, so can driving with a bunch of sixteen-year-olds,” I said, annoyed that he had scared me.

“That bad, huh?”

I nodded. “What are you doing out here anyway? You don’t smoke,” I said.

“Nope. But I knew you had just gotten back, and I wanted to make sure you were sticking to your promise to quit. Just trying to hold you accountable.”

I scowled at him. Jeremy Lipton taught freshman Algebra and Advanced Calculus, something I could never do. I can't even balance my checkbook. In fact, he does it for me, something that embarrasses my mother, who is immaculate with hers, down to the penny.

Jeremy and I became friends in first grade, when we were sent to sit in the hallway for eating paste. We went through the rest of our school years together, even dated for a short while during senior year, until it became too weird. It was like dating a sibling, and that was just icky. So we remained friends. He was hired at George Washington the year before me and recommended me to the school board when an opening for a history teacher occurred. The catch was that I would have to teach Driver’s Ed as well, something I had thought would be no big deal, but boy oh boy, was I regretting it now.

“Which kid was it today?” Jeremy asked.

“Same one. Brandon Archer. I don’t think he’s a bad kid, just a bad driver.”

“Have you talked to his parents?”

“He lives with his uncle, remember?”

Jeremy nodded. “Oh, yeah. How could I forget? So what are you going to do, Melinda?”

I blew out a breath and stomped my feet to keep warm. “Call his uncle I guess. See if he can work with Brandon more at home. The girls in his car are going to snap one day if he keeps driving like this.”

“Good luck,” Jeremy said. He knew that calling parents could be tricky. Either they wanted to work with you, or they wanted your head on a platter for daring suggest that their kid could use some improvement.

“You came out here just to make sure I wasn’t smoking?” I asked, tilting my head to look at him. “Don’t you have a class?”

“Study hall,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I left one of the kids in charge while I took a potty break.”

“Smithson would have your ass if he knew,” I said, naming our hard-nosed and annoying principal.

“But who would ever tell him?” Jeremy asked, smiling. He checked his watch. “See you later.”

I waved him away and stayed outside for another couple of minutes, letting the cold air wash away my craving for nicotine, then went inside and headed for my classroom. I passed the biology lab and caught a glimpse of Brandon sitting at his desk, his head resting in his arms

on the table. He looked kind of sad, which made me feel bad for him.

In my room, I hung up my coat in the closet and pretended to be productive for the next half hour. This consisted of checking my email, reading the newspaper, and laughing at the comic strips. After I finished that, I dug out the guardian contact forms that each student filled out and found Brandon's.

I had first been told by the principal that Brandon was a special case, but capable of being in a public school. I wondered what that meant, and then I found out that Brandon Archer was the only son of the big-shot Hollywood actor, Garrett Archer. So what the hell was he doing in Cody, Iowa?

Not that Cody is a bad place. I was born and raised here. It's just different from Los Angeles, California. Located along the Mississippi River, Cody has a population of about 32,000 people, and isn't exactly well known. We experience all four seasons, sometimes within the same week, and while we're proud to put on our annual Fourth of July and Christmas parades, we don't host gala events like the Oscars.

Until a few weeks ago, Brandon had been enrolled in expensive private schools and tutored at home when necessary. When school wasn't in session, and sometimes even when it was, Garrett would haul Brandon around the world to promote his latest movies. But Brandon was shy and hated the publicity, and his grades suffered. Garrett had thought it would be best to get his son out of

LA and into a more stable lifestyle. So he got in touch with his younger brother, Charlie, and foisted Brandon on him. Charlie Archer, single, never-been-married, had no children, and not expecting to gain a teenager. Charlie moved here to Cody, and so far, he hadn't set foot inside the school, but I had heard about the huge house he was renting and the big-ass black pickup truck he drove. The gossip going around among the single female teachers was that Charlie was quite attractive and an entrepreneur of some sort, something to do with restaurants, but since he never seemed to venture out, no one could find out anything more about him, like his favorite food or color or what he looked for in a woman. You know, the important stuff.

I picked up the phone and dialed the number Brandon had written down. After four rings, I got the answering machine.

"You've reached Charlie and Brandon. We're not home right now, so please leave a message and we might call you back. Ciao!"

I frowned at the "we might call you back" thing and muttered "Smartass!" right after the beep sounded. I froze and coughed.

"Um, hi, this is Melinda Martin, Brandon's Driver's Ed and history teacher. If you could please call me back at the school sometime today or tomorrow, I'd like to talk to you." I left him my direct number and hung up.

I could feel myself blushing. I had called a total stranger a smartass, and he had it on his answering

machine. Sometimes I could be so smart. After I rolled my eyes at my blunder, I couldn't help but think that Charlie Archer had a pretty sexy voice for a smartass.

Chapter Two

“You’re late,” I said as I opened the door to let my older sister Claire into my house.

She threw a paper bag at me and shrugged out of her coat. “The line at the grocery store was insane. The things I do for you and your stupid addictions.”

“They’re your addictions too, and they’re not stupid,” I said. I led the way to the kitchen and set the bag on the table, pulling out a nice, cold carton of Ben & Jerry’s Cherry Garcia ice cream. “This is heaven.”

“Heaven packed with a million calories,” Claire said. She dug around in the silverware drawer for spoons. “Jeremy’s not here yet?”

“No. He’s picking up the pizza. What’s up with you guys being late? Don’t you remember you’re not supposed to be late on TV night?”

Claire followed me into the living room where we took our usual seats; she on the couch, and me in the cushy armchair with my fuzzy blanket. Jeremy always sat on the floor, right in front of the TV so he could jump up, or wave his arms to block the screen until Claire or I screamed at him to move his fat butt out of the way. It was like this every Wednesday night, when we gathered at my house to eat a fattening dinner and watch our current favorite TV show, *Smallville*. Or as Jeremy referred to it, *Jailbaitville*, but whatever.

“It’s about Clark Kent as a teenager, before he became Superman,” I would say, and Jeremy would respond with, “Right, teenagers. Kids who could be our students. It’s gross to lust after these people.” And I would say, “But technically, the kids are being played by actors over the age of eighteen, so we’re still okay.”

Then Jeremy would pull my hair or give me a Wet Willie. We are so mature for being thirty-four years old.

Claire got sucked into the show the same way I did. The lead actor was hot, so we drooled over him and ate ice cream every week, which wasn’t good for our hips, but we didn’t care. At least not enough to stop doing it. There were no longer any new episodes, but I had purchased all of the DVD boxed sets, and we had gone through them about four times so far. I was positive they would revolt at some point soon and want to watch

something else, but until that happened, Clark Kent would continue to grace my television screen.

“So what’s happening this week?” Claire asked, taking a big bite of ice cream.

“As long as Clark takes his shirt off, does it matter?”

“Not at all.”

I licked my spoon clean and ignored the extra pound that I could feel attaching itself to my butt.

“I drove past the old movie theater on my way over,” Claire said. “It’s been bought.”

I sat up straighter. “By whom?”

Claire shrugged. “Don’t know. But the ‘for sale’ sign is gone, and it’s been replaced with a new one that reads, ‘Cinema – Coming Soon!’”

“No way would someone try to make it into a theater again. They’d never be able to compete with the Multi-Plex. It’s why the place shut down in the first place,” I said as I stabbed the carton of ice cream.

“I know, sweetie, I know,” Claire said in a soothing voice.

The Cody Theater had been open since before I was born, and it introduced me to my first love: Superman. I have a slight obsession with Superman and Clark Kent, and it all stems from my first movie viewing experience at the theater. I was five, and the theater was showing older movies in the afternoons at cheaper prices. My mom took me while Claire was in school, and I sat in the plush red seat, holding a container of buttered popcorn, mesmerized, as awkward and nerdy, but still cute, Clark

Kent tried to keep secret from Lois Lane the fact that he was a superhero who could fly. The idea that such a man existed had ruined me romantically, since I was always on the lookout for a real-life Clark Kent to fly me away. So far, I had been unsuccessful, but I still held hope.

The single screen Cody Theater had closed its doors three years ago when the twelve screen Multi-Plex with stadium seating had been built on the other side of town. It just couldn't compete with that. And now, someone had bought it and was going to try to make it work?

I snorted. "Someone must have a lot of money to blow."

Claire channel surfed while we waited for Jeremy to arrive. He breezed in, just as we gave up on him and had started the DVD player, and took his place on the floor, opening the pizza box and digging in. His big head was already in my way. I threw a pillow at him, and he caught it and propped it under his butt.

"Thank you," he said. "So did you call Brandon's uncle?"

I reached down for a napkin and a slice of pepperoni pizza. "Left a message. I'm thinking he's not going to call me back."

"Why's that?"

"Aside from the fact that he's never set foot inside the school? His answering machine message was kind of snotty."

"So you'll just have to go visit him in person," Jeremy said.

“No way. You know I don’t do home visits. It freaks out the kids more than it helps them.”

Claire shushed us as the show started, and we were silent until about halfway through the episode when we saw skin. Then Claire and I started gushing over Clark Kent, and Jeremy got disgusted with us, hit the Pause button, and went to get a drink.

“Is Piper working tonight?” I asked, referring to Claire’s eighteen year old daughter, my niece. She was a senior this year, and working part time as a counter clerk at the local dry cleaner’s.

“She’s closing, and then tutoring some middle school kids on their science.”

“She’s so smart. She’s going to be number one in her class for sure,” I gushed. I couldn’t help it. My niece was pretty, popular, and a total brain. Everyone liked her.

“I hope so. She needs to get a good scholarship.”

I paused in my ice cream eating and looked at my sister. “What’s up? I thought Beau was going to help out with college.”

Claire twirled her spoon in her hand, looking off into space. “He’s worried about having money for his other kids now.”

“That ass,” I spat. “Piper’s his kid too. His first, I might add.”

Claire had been divorced for almost six years now, after she found out her husband Beau was cheating on her with the cleaning lady. Claire had the misfortune of coming home early to find them having sex on the just

waxed kitchen floor. They were now married with three kids. Beau had been generous with helping out financially with Piper, and Claire made good money doing freelance writing for magazines, so I was surprised to hear she was concerned about paying for college.

“Does Piper know?” I asked.

“I haven’t said anything.”

“She’ll catch on sometime. She’s a smart kid.”

Claire fiddled with her earrings, a frown crossing over her features. At that moment, Jeremy returned with a bottle of wine and three glasses, and we settled down to watch the rest of the episode, followed by one more. By the time it was over, I was giddy and horny as hell.

“No Clark Kent to help me tonight,” I said and hiccupped.

“You need to find a boyfriend,” Jeremy said, poking me in the side as I walked them to the door.

“Sure. Do you know of anyone?” I asked.

I kissed his cheek and hugged Claire tight. “Call me,” she said. “We’ll do something fun this weekend.”

“Sure, give Piper a hug for me.”

My two good friends waved goodbye and walked to their cars. I stood on the porch of my house and watched as their taillights disappeared in opposite directions. Then I went inside tried not to think about the depressing state of my love life.

* * *

Some teachers use the teacher's lounge as a place to unwind, relax, and have a can of Pepsi. Others use it as gossip central station. I've heard some of the craziest stuff while in the teacher's lounge. Most days I avoid it, only popping in to grab my mail or look for Jeremy. I'm not anti-social, but do I need to know that some kid's mom is boinking the basketball coach on alternate weekends? Nope, not at all.

So I spend my planning periods and lunch hours in my classroom. My desk sits by two big windows that face the football field, and I watch the kids during gym class when it's nice out. Sometimes, when it's warm and they're out there sweating themselves to death, I want to pass out cups of water as they stumble past my window. But the head gym teacher scares me, so I don't.

This semester, Jeremy and I had different lunch hours, so I was eating alone. I had brought in a dorm-sized refrigerator and a small microwave. The fridge was stocked with cans of Dr Pepper and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups.

That day, I had heated a bowl of my mom's special tomato soup for lunch. Mom worries that I don't eat well enough, so she'll make big batches of my favorite foods and give them to me in freezer ready containers. I swear I would starve if she didn't do that.

I was just bringing the spoon to my mouth when there was a knock at my door and in walked a man I'd never seen before. Trust me, I would have remembered. Holy smokes, he was gorgeous. Tall, over six feet, nice

and muscled without being bulky, with dark brown hair, almost black, that curled at the nape of his neck. He wore wire rimmed glasses that framed bright blue eyes. And his lips. I could go on for a year about his lips, but I won't.

I froze and dropped the spoon. It sank into my bowl and disappeared in the soup, but I didn't care. A real-life Clark Kent had just stepped into my life.

"Are you Miss Martin?" he asked.

I nodded, thinking his voice sounded familiar.

"I'm Charlie Archer, Brandon's uncle," he said, coming toward me.

I squeaked and tried to stand up before pushing away from my desk, banging my hip against the edge. Biting back a curse word, I hobbled around to shake his hand, trying to remember what I'd decided to wear that day. But I couldn't, so I sneaked a glance and saw black pants and a pink cashmere sweater. Good. I looked respectable.

And then I noticed the blob of soup down my front. Beautiful, just perfect.

"Nice to meet you," I said to my dream man, at the same time grabbing a napkin to blot at the soup. "You surprised me. I expected you to call first."

"Well, I wanted to see in person the teacher who thinks I'm a smartass," he said, rocking back on his heels a bit. An amused smile tugged at his lips.

My face flamed and I heard myself laugh. It came out somewhere between a bird twittering and a donkey braying. I snapped my mouth shut and took a moment to compose myself. It was almost impossible, with him

standing so close. I could smell the faint scent of sawdust and paint, smells that reminded me of my dad's workshop.

"I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean it," I stammered.

He smiled, and I grabbed the desk to keep from falling over.

"Don't worry about it. I can be a smartass. But I'm here to talk about Brandon. He's having trouble?"

Good looks or no, when it came to a student's success, I was all business. I suggested we sit down and I watched as he squeezed his broad frame into a student desk.

"I swear these were bigger when I was in school," he mused. Then he looked at me with an expectant expression.

"Brandon seems to be having some trouble adjusting here. I was hoping you could tell me more about his background than I already know."

Charlie raised a hand to stop me. I faltered and stared at his hand. It was huge!

"I'm going to be honest with you," he said. "What my brother told your principal isn't one hundred percent true. Garrett didn't make the decision to send Brandon to me. Brandon did. To his father, he's an accessory, and he can't stand it. So he asked to live with me. The problem is, as soon as I had moved Brandon into my place, the financing came through on the new restaurant, and we had to come here."

"Restaurant?" I asked.

“I live in LA and own and run a very successful restaurant. I have one in New York City as well, and I was asked to bring that fine dining experience here, although tailored to suit the Midwest.”

I almost laughed. Fine dining from LA?

“Our idea of a good place to eat is Red Lobster,” I said.

“Ah, see? I’m here to change that.”

“In Cody?”

“I bought the old theater. I’m in the process of converting it.”

At that moment, I saw red.

“You? You bought the theater?”

He nodded. “It’s in an excellent location, right along the river. The view is amazing. We start work on it this afternoon.”

“A restaurant? You’re turning the theater into a restaurant?”

He looked at me with a strange expression, and I realized I was almost wailing as well as sounding stupid and repetitive. I swallowed and coughed, disappointed to now find him unattractive, just on principle.

“Sorry. That place is very special to me,” I said.

“Uh huh,” he said, and the desk creaked as he edged away from me. “Well, um, back to Brandon?”

I sat up straighter. “Yes. He’s having trouble in the Driver’s Ed course, and he’s not doing so hot in American History either. I was hoping you’d be able to work with him at home with the driving.”

“Oh, well, what’s his driving like?”

“In a word? Awful. He can’t control the car, and I’ve had to grab the wheel. If that happens during the final test, it’s an automatic failure. I was told he had some experience driving.”

Charlie snorted, causing his nose to crinkle, and damn, he was cute again.

“Garrett let him sit behind the wheel of his Mercedes, but that’s about as far as it got.”

“Oh. What about his mother?” I asked, keeping my tone light. I had wondered about Brandon’s mother, since Brandon never mentioned her.

Charlie pursed his lips. “She died not long after Brandon was born, complications from the delivery.”

I nodded, feeling bad for asking.

“I’m surprised you don’t know our family history. It’s been major tabloid fodder for years.”

“I don’t pay much attention to that stuff,” I said, and it was the honest truth. I didn’t subscribe to or read entertainment magazines, follow the gossip websites, or watch those celebrity news shows. The extravagance turned me off. That and the fact that I could never keep up with who was hot or not.

“It’s been a month, is it that bad?” Charlie asked, referring to Brandon’s problems.

“It’s not great,” I admitted. “His other teachers have told me he’s barely passing anything. I beat them to the punch by calling you about it. A month may not seem like very long, but if we don’t make adjustments now, it won’t

get any better. He doesn't talk in class, and he hasn't turned in any homework."

Charlie frowned. My insides fluttered because he was so cute. I couldn't deny it.

"I see him doing homework all the time," he said.

"So why isn't he turning it in?"

"I don't know. I'll talk to him."

"Okay, and the driving?" I pressed. "He needs some practice."

Charlie scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'm so busy right now."

I shrugged. "If he doesn't pass, he'll have to go through the state program. Driver's Ed won't be offered in the school after this semester."

A smile crossed his lips, oh his lips, and he looked right at me. I gripped the sides of the desk to steady myself. That smile was dizzying.

"Could he work with you some more?" he asked. "Before or after school?"

"Me? Uh, um," I stuttered.

"Since you're teaching him anyway," Charlie went on. "I'm a terrible driver. I have so many speeding tickets on my record, and I'm not very patient when it comes to this kind of stuff. I can pay you for your time."

"Oh, well, uh, see, I can't use the school's car for after hours practice."

"You can use my car."

"You mean your truck?"

He tilted his head. "How do you know what I drive?"

I said nothing. It was better to remain silent than make an even bigger fool of myself.

“I have a car too,” he said. “Brandon’s familiar with it. Please.”

I sighed because now I was being hit with puppy dog eyes, and I can’t resist puppy dog eyes.

“Well...”

Charlie grinned. “Great! How about we start tomorrow? Drop by the theater around six or so. Brandon will be there, hanging out while I work.” He paused for a moment and said, “That is, unless you’re busy tomorrow night.”

To which I shook my head and said, “No, not busy. No plans at all.”

Wow, could I sound more pathetic?

He stood up, towering over me. I stood too, still staring up at him since he was at least a foot taller.

“Will you tell him or should I?” I asked.

“I will. And what about tutoring him with history?”

It was my turn to raise a hand. “He needs help in more than just history. Let me talk to some student tutors, see if anyone’s available.”

“All right, that sounds great. I’ll see you tomorrow at six then.”

He shook my hand, and I hoped mine wasn’t too clammy or gross. After he left, I had to reheat my soup. While I waited for the microwave to ding, I realized that I had never said the word yes.

Charlie Archer was smooth, I decided. Had to be careful around him.

I took the soup from the microwave and looked around my desk for my spoon. Then I noticed it poking up from the soup. Of course, I reached in to grab it with my fingers, burning myself in the process.

I had to wait for the soup to cool before I could get the spoon, and then I had to reheat it again. By the time I was ready to eat, lunch hour was over. I sighed and put the lid on the bowl and stuck it in the fridge.

Charlie Archer owed me lunch.