

# Learning to Drive Him Crazy

By

Misty Malone

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Table of contents:

Chapter 1 .....	5
Chapter 2 .....	17
Chapter 3 .....	29
Chapter 4 .....	40
Chapter 5 .....	53
Chapter 6 .....	65
Chapter 7 .....	77
Chapter 8 .....	87
Chapter 9 .....	98
Chapter 10 .....	109
Chapter 11 .....	120
Chapter 12 .....	131
Chapter 13 .....	141
Chapter 14 .....	152
Chapter 15 .....	163
Chapter 16 .....	175
Misty Malone .....	192
EBook Offer .....	193
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	195
Blushing Books .....	196

# Chapter 1

Alana Carpenter turned her car a little too short. The tire went up and over the curb. "Shit," she murmured, giving the steering wheel a slap of frustration. She straightened the wheel and drove on down the road.

"Language," John Humphries, the licensing examiner said.

Alana risked a quick glance at him, then returned her eyes to the road. "I know I have a wee bit of an accent," she said, "but surely you can tell what language it is I'm speaking. That's English."

The examiner chuckled. "Yes, ma'am, I know it's English. I meant that you should watch your language. While you're taking your driving test is probably not the best time to be cursing."

"It's also probably not the best time to go up and over a curb, but I couldn't help that, either." Alana winced, wishing for once that she could just keep her mouth shut.

"Excuse me?"

She felt her face flush. "I'm sorry. I'm frustrated, but I shouldn't have said either of those things."

"I understand. Go ahead and pull back into the parking lot, please."

"Yes, sir," she said quietly. Once she pulled into the spot he indicated, she turned off the engine. "I really didn't mean to say that. I'm sorry."

"I understand," he repeated.

"So did I fail my driving test now because of that?"

"No," he answered.

Her hopeful grin was short-lived.

"You failed your driving test because of your driving, not because of your language. Although I wouldn't give either of them a passing score."

Alana was furious at the sudden tears that sprang up. She turned away from him and blinked rapidly, wishing them away. She heard the click as he opened his door. A few more minutes, and she'd be free and clear! She sniffed, blinking more. Damn, but one tear escaped and trailed down her cheek. She wiped the moisture away, hoping he hadn't seen it.

The examiner remained in the car, with the door still open. "Ma'am, are you okay? I'm sorry if I upset you. I didn't mean to."

"Would you please stop calling me ma'am," Alana snapped. "I told you my name's Alana. Ma'am refers to a lady older than the person speaking, and I hate to burst your bubble, but I'd guess you to be the elder between us."

He didn't respond right away, but she saw his eyebrows shoot up and he was fighting a smile. Alana hoped he'd just get up and leave. She heard his pen scratching on the paper form. She stole a glance and saw the word "Fail" scribbled at the top. He removed the top copy—of course, it was in triplicate—and handed it to her. "You can try again in a month," he reminded her. "Alana. I was taught to refer to all women as ma'am. Over here the term refers to any lady you don't know well, not just older women. I was merely being polite."

"Oh," she half whispered. "Sorry."

She swiped at the few remaining tears, then putting on a brave face, she turned to him. "So could you tell me what all I did to fail my test, please? I promise I'll try to control my temper better."

She studied him as he glanced down at the paperwork still in his hands. He was good looking— damn good looking, for that matter.

"Could I buy you dinner," he said, looking as surprised by the offer as she was. "I'll talk to you about your test—go over everything with you then."

"If I say yes, and have dinner with you, will it help me pass my test next time I come in to try?" She flashed him her brightest grin.

He shook his head, and it looked like he was trying hard not to smile. "The next time you take your test I won't be the one testing you, so no, it won't. I might be able to give you some pointers that would help, though."

"Dinner sounds nice," she said. "And I would really appreciate any help you can give me on my driving."

"Good. I'll pick you up at six-thirty." He glanced at his watch. "That's in an hour and a half. Will that give you enough time?"

She was confused and assumed he could tell that from the expression on her face, but she didn't care. She was not one to fret much about makeup or clothes. She might not even change at all. "Just how bad do you think I look?" she asked.

"What?"

"You can give me four hours, but I'm not going to look much different. This is what I am, take it or leave it."

He cleared his throat and squirmed a bit. Good. It was right that he should feel a bit off-kilter. She certainly did. "I think you look absolutely fine just the way you are," he stammered. "I didn't know if you left work early and had to go back in before you go home, or if you had any other stops you may have to make. Again, I was just trying to be polite, in case you had some errands you had to do first."

"Oh." Open mouth, and insert the other foot. She really did have to learn to think before she spoke. Then her grin returned. "You're going to have to stop that, trying to be so polite. It confuses me."

That made him smile. It was a killer smile, too, warm and friendly.

"Six-thirty will be fine. Thank you," Alana said, showing that she did have better manners, when she remembered to use them.

"Do you have a way home?"

"Yes, a friend brought me here today. This is her car."

"Okay. I'll see you at six-thirty then." They'd been walking toward the building as they talked. He opened the door and held it for her. "And you look fine just the way you are," he repeated. "I wouldn't change a thing." He handed her paperwork to the front desk receptionist before disappearing behind an office door.

Her friend Kelli bounced out of her seat, tucking her eBook reader back into her large handbag. "So how did it go? Are you driving us home, or am I?"

"You are," Alana answered dejectedly.

"So, what went wrong?"

Alana groaned, wishing Kelli would leave it alone at least until they were in the privacy of the car. She quickened her pace.

"Don't have to get all huffy," Kelli mumbled.

Alana opened the door and slung her purse into the back seat. She slid inside then, and focused on tightening the seatbelt. It took a bit of maneuvering, as the examiner had adjusted it to fit him—and he was a lot bigger than she was. It gave her enough time to clear her mind. She plastered on a big, phony smile and faced her friend.

"Sorry, Kelli. What did you ask?"

"You heard me. What happened?"

"I'm not real sure what went wrong," Alana answered. "Other than I went up and over a curb. I asked if that's why I failed, but he said no. He's taking me out to dinner tonight and said we'd go over everything then."

Kelli's eyes opened wide. "Everything? What all did you screw up, Alana? The test is only like ten or fifteen minutes. How could you have screwed up that many things?"

"I don't know, but thanks for making me feel so much better," Alana snapped.

"Sorry." Kelli was blissfully silent for a few moments. It didn't last. "Wow! I can't believe you get to go out for dinner with this guy. Did you look at him? He's gorgeous! The day certainly wasn't a waste of time if you came out of it with a dinner date with him!"

Alana stopped to think a minute. She'd been so nervous about taking the test, then disappointed that she didn't pass, she'd hardly noticed what he looked like. Well, she had noticed he was handsome, but at the moment she couldn't even remember if his hair had been light or dark, or what color his eyes were. "I didn't really notice much," she said sheepishly. "I guess he was rather good looking, though."

"How could you not notice that? When you said you didn't pass, I figured it was because you were concentrating on the hunk sitting in the seat next to you instead of your driving. That guy could be on the cover of any romance novel. Tall, dark and handsome is an understatement. He's got to be over six feet tall, with the kind of thick dark brown hair that makes you want to run your hands through it. How could you not notice?"

"Sorry. I had other things on my mind. I was really nervous."

"Well, I bet you notice tonight." Kelli paused, but not because she'd run out of things to say. Alana wouldn't be that lucky. She loved Kelli—they were best friends—but she really didn't feel like talking.

"You may have screwed up your driving test," Kelly offered, "but don't screw up the dinner date. He definitely looks like a keeper."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. And how do you know he's a keeper? You don't know anything about him," Alana said defensively.

"I repeat, did you see him? He's drop dead gorgeous, and he obviously has a job. What's not to like about him?"

"Really? That's what's important to you, good looks and a job?"

"Not just that, but those two things are both very important." Kelli thought a moment. "I wonder how much he makes giving driving tests all day."

"I don't know," Alana answered shaking her head. "But it shouldn't matter to you. He's not yours, so paws off!"

The friends giggled, and all was right between them again.

Kelli pulled into the apartment complex and parked in front of Alana's apartment. "Okay, okay, I'll lay off for now," she said playfully. "But if you blow this dinner date like you blew your road test, he's fair game!"

Alana rolled her eyes. "True loyalty."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Sorry about that. But if your date goes well, could you ask him if he's got a brother?" Before Alana could object, Kelli offered, "Come on, let me help you pick out what you're going to wear and how to do your hair."

"Why do I have to change anything? He said I look fine the way I am."

"That was a man being polite, silly. You need to wear something sexier to go out for dinner. Let's go."

Alana released a long-suffering sigh. She never had been one to get all fussy about how she looked, and she didn't plan on starting now. She generally wore a minimal amount of makeup, and her hair had too darn many curls to do much with it other than leave it down.

In the end, Kelli pointed out that she had a spot on her dress, which Alana hadn't noticed, so she changed into a skirt and blouse, although Kelli thought she should have gone with something more along the lines of a little black dress.

"But I like this skirt and blouse," Alana argued. "It's comfortable and it will fit in just about anywhere we go. What if I wear a black dress and he shows up in blue jeans?"

"He had a suit on for work. I don't think he's a blue jeans kind of guy. I say you go for the black dress."

"I'm leaving this skirt and blouse on. I like it," she said, twirling around. She watched the three-tiered skirt fly out as she spun. "It's a little shorter than some of mine, but other than that, it's comfortable."

"Yeah, at least it's short. That's one thing it's got going for it," Kelli admitted. "And the blouse looks good on you. I still think you should unbutton another button, though."



"That would look slutty."

"It would look inviting," Kelli corrected.

"I'm certainly not inviting him anywhere on our first date, so it's fine like this," Alana insisted.

"Zheesh. No wonder you're still a virgin," Kelli said.

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It is! Alana, you're twenty-four. I don't know how it is in Ireland, but here in the United States, that's practically unheard of."

Alana frowned at her friend. "Actually, I don't know what it's like in Ireland. I've been here since I was twelve. And being a virgin at twenty-four is not common, I know, but it's certainly not something to be ashamed of. I just haven't met the right guy yet. Besides, some men respect that in a woman."

"Yeah, we'll go with that. And why do you think you have to be married to a guy before you can have sex with him? This isn't the 18th century."

"It's a commitment thing with me. I didn't say I have to be married, but I do have to be committed to him. If he's the right man for me, he'll understand that."

"Whatever. He should be here in ten minutes. I'm leaving. All kidding aside, good luck, Alana. Have a good time tonight."

"Thanks, Kelli. And thanks for taking me down there today, too."

"You know you don't have to thank me. Call me tomorrow. I want details!"

Alana went into her bathroom to check in the mirror one more time. She and Kelli were best friends, would do anything for each other, but they really didn't think alike when it came to men. Kelli was always trying to 'catch a good man', but Alana truly believed that when she met the right guy, he'd like her for who she was. She wasn't about to try to catch anyone by pretending to be someone she wasn't. When two people were meant to be together, it just sort of worked for them.

John went home to take a quick shower before his impromptu dinner date. He couldn't seem to stop thinking about Alana. She was a cute little bundle of contradictions. She was a small, petite lady, but had a big personality. When he first met her, she seemed rather shy, but she wasn't afraid to speak her mind. She seemed pretty easy going, but yet seemed to have a rather quick temper. It seemed pretty apparent to him that she had a mind of her own, had an

opinion on most things, and no one was going to walk all over her.

To sum it up, she was a feisty little lady that had a head full of beautiful red curls, and the temper to go along with them. But she also had a wonderful sense of humor and seemed to have a quick wit. And she was from Ireland and had an accent he could listen to all day. She smiled as he remembered her confusion when he warned her about her language. He found himself very much looking forward to dinner tonight.

Checking his watch, he dressed and hurried to his car. Punctuality was important to him, and if she were the old-fashioned girl she claimed to be, and he suspected she was, it was important to her, as well.

Alana had just come back from checking the mirror one last time when her doorbell rang. She opened the door for John and stood staring at him. He wore casual khaki pants and a polo shirt, but there was suddenly nothing casual about her heartbeat. She might have been too nervous to notice him earlier, but she definitely noticed him now! And he filled out that shirt nicely!

Alana had always been drawn to what she thought of as "real men." Broad shoulders, strong, charismatic. Not the skinny, wimpy stick figures she always seemed to attract. She thought of him riding around in cars giving driving tests all day and knew his muscular physique didn't come from that. A wild vision of him lifting weights in the back room between driving tests suddenly popped into her head and she giggled before she could stop herself. At the same time, she was horrified to realize she'd been staring at his chest, and just how well he filled out his shirt.

His eyebrows shot up. "Good evening, Alana. You look beautiful. What's wrong—do I have something on my shirt?"

SHE tore her eyes away from his broad chest and brought her giggle under control. "No, you're fine. I'm sorry." She gestured with her arm and stepped back. "Please, come on inside."

He stepped through the doorway, and she closed it behind him.

"What was so funny?" he pressed.

"I'm sorry, John. I just had this funny image pop into my head as I opened the door. I'm sorry I laughed, that was very rude. Please forgive me."

Smiling a bit, he asked, "What was the funny image?"

Her face flamed again as she said, "Oh, nothing."

Curious now, he said, "Your face is too red for it to be nothing. What was the image?"

"You'll think I'm crazy."

"No, I won't. Try me," he coaxed.

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. You look really nice in that shirt," she began.

"But I wondered how you can be so muscular giving driving tests all day. I pictured you going in the back room and lifting weights between road tests."

John chuckled at her words. "I don't really work there, giving driving tests all day. I was moonlighting. You like the shirt, though?"

His lighthearted banter helped to break some of the tension of a first date. She patted his sleeve, trying to ignore the zing that shot through her at the contact. "Yes. It looks very nice on you. So, what do you do for a living? Something that keeps you in such good shape, or do you work out a lot?"

"I'm a police officer," he answered quietly.

Her eyes opened wide as she said, "You're part of The Guard?"

"The Guard?"

"Sorry. That's what they call police officers in Ireland."

"Have you recently moved here?"

"No, I've been here since I was twelve."

"You still have the strong accent. I thought maybe you were new to this country."

"No, not really. And actually, there are very few things I still use the Irish names for. Police officers are one because my father was a member of The Guard." Alana grabbed her purse and a light sweater, and John opened the door. He took her elbow and escorted her out to his car. Still, he continued their conversation without interruption. "So your dad was a police officer in Ireland before you moved here?"

"Yes, he was." She turned quiet for several moments before continuing. "But he got sick and died. We didn't really have any family left there, so when the company mum worked for opened up an office over here, they asked her if she'd come help run it, and here we are."

John took her hand and gave it a squeeze, before opening the car door for her. "I'm sorry to hear about your dad. It must have been hard to lose your father when you were that young. It sounds like you were proud of him."

"I was," she quickly answered. "And I loved him."

He reached across her to snap her seatbelt. Then he walked around to the driver's side and did his own belt as well. "Then to move to another country had to have been challenging."

"Yeah, it was a bit," she agreed. "But we made it."

"That you did. You and your mother should be proud of yourselves."

"We were." She gave him a brief smile, then she sobered again. "My mum was killed in an accident a couple years ago."

He reached over to give her hand another squeeze. "It sounds to me like you've been through more than a lot of people experience in a lifetime. I'm really sorry, Alana."

"I think things happen for a reason. I think my mum and pop missed each other tremendously, and now because of that accident, they're together again. I think that's why it happened after I was finished with college."

John patted her hand, then started the engine. Alana was silent, as she tried to gather her thoughts. "I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head as though the simple action would also clear the air. "I shouldn't have burdened you with all that. I don't know what got into me. I don't normally tell people that, and here I am blurting it all out the moment I meet you. I'm sorry."

He took his eyes off the road briefly as he gave her a sweet smile. "You don't have anything to apologize for, Alana. I've been told I'm a good listener, so anytime you want to talk, I'll be happy to listen. I take it as a compliment that you feel comfortable enough with me to tell me these things. I'm glad you did, I feel like I know you better now."

"Will you tell me about yourself so I know you, too?"

He pulled into the parking lot of a family restaurant. "Let's go in and order some dinner. Then I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Alana approved of the restaurant he had chosen. It was nice, clean, and respectable, but not too expensive or romantic for a first date. She grabbed her purse to get out of the car, but was startled when he told her to wait. She looked over at him, but he got out of the car before she could ask why. He was at her door an instant later, opening it and helping her out. With his hand on her back, he led her into the restaurant. Almost immediately a hostess showed them to their table and John helped her with her chair.

He sat down across from her and noticed her happy expression. "What's the smile for?"

"You want the truth?"

"Absolutely. I always want the truth," John said.

He looked serious, rather stern, and she felt a tingle run through her. "I'm not exactly sure. I'm not used to such manners." Then she looked into his eyes, the smile replaced with sincerity. "But I like it."

"Good. I'm glad you do, because my mother raised me this way and I'm not sure I could change now if I wanted to."

"I hope you never do. Not many men have such manners any more."

"I'm just an old fashioned man, I guess."

"Nothing wrong with that," she said. "My friend, Kelli, says I was born about a hundred years late. She keeps telling me I need to catch up with the times."

"It sounds like we might get along just fine," he said, with a hopeful look in his eyes.

Over dinner he told her about himself, as he had promised. He said that while he was in college getting his criminal justice degree, he took the training to give driver's license examinations for the state, and worked there while in school. He still filled in for them now and then if they need help and it fit in with his schedule.

She also learned that although he and his brother Cal grew up close by, their parents now lived in Arizona, which was better weather for their mother's arthritis. He'd always wanted to be a police officer, and hoped eventually to make detective.

"So what do you do, Alana, and how have you survived living in Pennsylvania without a driver's license?"

"I work for an event planner."

"What do you do there?"

"I answer phones and do the scheduling and miscellaneous things. To answer your other question, I take the bus or a cab everywhere I go. If I can ever manage to get my license, I'm going out on my own as an event planner."

"A license is all that's holding you back?"

"Yes. Marilyn, the lady I work for, is ready to retire. I think she would have already except for me. She lets me basically do it all except the legwork. You have to go and check on a lot of things in person, see what they look like, things like that, and pick things up and deliver them. I get everything set up, and she does the delivery and drop offs. We usually go together to look at the site and things."

"So all you need is your license. How long have you been trying to get it?"

"I graduated from college two years ago. I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn't have any money to buy a car, so I did the next best thing. I went to work for Marilyn."

"That was a good idea."

"I found this apartment that's close enough I can walk to work. It's a small apartment, but it's cheap enough that I've been able to save money for a car. Once I got enough for a down payment, I got my permit. My friend, Kelli, drove me there today and has been my licensed driver. She lets me use her car to practice, and to take my test. I've tried twice now, but you saw how it went."

"Yeah, I did. Did Kelli teach you how to drive, or has someone else been working with you?"

"That's part of my problem. Kelli's been trying, but she keeps saying she's no teacher, and I really appreciate her effort and she's my best friend and all, but she's right, she's not much of a teacher. She tells me what I did wrong after I did it instead of before."

"That explains some of the things I had to count you down for today."

"Probably. Like what?"

"When you stopped at the stop sign, you were too far back. You need to stop closer to the intersection so you can see oncoming traffic better."

"I was afraid the front of my car would be out in the intersection."

"No, you need to be closer. That's where it helps to have someone telling you these things as you're learning. The same way with your turn signal. You turned them on too far back from where you were turning."

"I did?"

"Yes, you did."

She thought a few moments before saying, "Then I could take the test a bunch of times and still not pass because those are things I didn't know I was doing wrong."

"The other time you took the test and didn't pass, did the examiner tell you what you did wrong?"

"Kind of. He said he took off for a couple of my turns, and the distance between me and another car."

"Were you too close to it?"

"I'm not sure. That's all he said. I was so nervous I didn't even think to ask him."

John laid his hand over one of hers and asked, "Would you let me help you? We can take my car out and I can work with you."

"You would do that?" □

"If you'll let me."

She grinned. "I guess a police officer that moonlights as a driver's license examiner should be qualified to teach me how to drive."

He laughed and assured her, "I think I have the qualifications, if you'll trust me and let me help you."

She looked at him, at the kindness she saw in his eyes and said, "I would very much appreciate your help."

"Good. We'll set a time before I leave tonight."