
HER GENTLE GANGSTER

Gentle Series - Book Four

CAROLYN FAULKNER



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2021

All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Carolyn Faulkner
Her Gentle Gangster

eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-607-6

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-558-1

vi

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or
the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

"**S**top proposing to them!" Victoria pointed out matter-of-factly. "You do know that, nowadays, it isn't necessary to be engaged or married to someone before or after you sleep with them? Or do you need to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twenty-first century? Or even the latter decades of the twentieth?"

Not many people would talk to him that way, in that tone of voice, but there she was, all five foot nothing of her, taking him to task as if he couldn't just reach out and ruthlessly silence her.

But he would never do that to her. He couldn't—wouldn't—ever knowingly harm a single hair on her head, and she knew that, which is why, coupled with long acquaintance, she knew she could do so and get away with it scot-free. And he was glad she felt so safe with him.

Many people didn't—or couldn't—for various reasons.

No, if he were going to do anything to try to discourage her from speaking to him like that, it would be to reach out and tug her over his lap to give her the spanking she'd sorely needed since they were children. Well, since she was a child,

anyway. He was a bit older than she was—eight years or so—but even back then, he knew that she was thoroughly spoiled, could be monumentally stubborn and was used to getting her way.

Whereas, in the household in which he was raised, neither his parents, nor his sibling, for that matter, would ever hesitate to correct him, lovingly but strictly, whenever they felt it was necessary.

But little Victoria Higgins rarely heard any kind of rebuke, much less felt a sharp swat on her behind, from her parents. He knew for a fact that she'd never been physically corrected in any way. He'd heard his parents despairing of that fact occasionally and had listened with much more interest than was proper the older she—and he—got.

Still, she stopped short just shy of being blatantly bratty. No, she was more than smart enough to know that she could get what she wanted more easily than courting the possibility of making anyone angry. He had been on the bubble about whether or not that was a calculated move on her part, but he came to know, even early on, that she was basically a good kid—just one who had been handed almost everything she wanted and of whom not much had been expected.

But she was also surprisingly adaptable and malleable about most things and conformed easily to those who surrounded her. And that, along with the fact that she'd been an incredibly cute little girl, who had turned into an incredibly cute woman, was her saving grace.

Her parents "let her eat cake" sensibilities in regards to rearing their little darling could easily have rendered her lazy, dependent or entitled, but somehow she'd managed not to be any of those things. In fact, she was almost too independent—to her own detriment, as far as he was concerned. And, in the end, he had to admit to himself, although never to anyone else, that he was as bad as her parents in wanting to make things

easy for her, now that she was a graphics design artist who was struggling to set up her own business.

Victoria, who had spent quite a bit of time at his parents' house, was apparently well aware of the fact that his parents were much less tolerant of children who exhibited churlish or stubborn tendencies, and she altered her behavior accordingly. Whereas she never hesitated to say "no" to her parents if they were trying to feed her something she didn't like or get her to do something she didn't want to do—which was the behavior to which his parents had objected—she never once balked at eating anything Mama Donato put on the plate in front of her, nor did she hesitate to complete every task that might be assigned to her.

He frowned for a moment, thinking back to all of the times his parents, who would usually treat everyone in their home as a guest, treated Victoria as if she were a child of theirs, instead. He wondered if they had done that deliberately, so that she would see that not all adults could be charmed or impressed into doing her bidding.

He certainly wouldn't put that past them. Unfortunately, he couldn't find out the answer to that question, as his pop was gone, and his mother was in the best home for Alzheimer's patients that someone of his considerable means could find that was close enough for him to visit easily.

As it was, he merely raised an eyebrow at her, a subtle gesture that, nonetheless, could—and had—set the grown men who were standing before him to shaking in their shoes. Roman Marcus Donato took a sip of the middling whiskey in front of him. "Are you intimating—none too subtly, I might add—that I'm old fashioned?"

Both of her eyebrows rose to her hairline. "If you have to ask that question, then I was entirely too subtle."

He gave her a look that, at one time, might have made her heart jump, but she was over that now. She'd had a horrible

crush on him when she was a girl, but not anymore. They were friends—good friends—best friends, however unusual that must've been for a man in his particular position, but it was the truth. And she knew it was the nature of his position that was probably responsible for his less enlightened view.

Vicky was closer to Rome than to anyone else on the planet—including all of her girlfriends. She never hesitated to tell him things that even her closest female friend didn't know, especially the sexual things, for some reason. One would think that she would think twice about sharing the intimate details of her life with him, but, especially by the time they were both grown, they had become so close that they told each other everything.

She knew about all of his women—even the ones he'd never brought home to Mama and Pop—as well as how conflicted he had been about assuming the mantle of the family business that had been handed down through generations of Donatos.

And he knew all about the men she dated. Unlike him, she wasn't the marrying kind, as she'd informed him occasionally—usually when pointing out his tendency to want to marry anyone he became involved with—much to both his secret chagrin as well as his even better concealed relief. Rome also knew that, although she never let any of them off the hook without making certain that she got hers before they departed, she remained, overall, sexually unfulfilled.

And that was something he was definitely, quietly happy about, while at the same time wishing he didn't know anything about what she liked in bed.

When she'd confided to him what her interests were, he'd almost lost her, because she'd misinterpreted his frown and unusually long silence—which were only evident because of how surprised he was to hear that from her. That was to say nothing of his deep, valid concern for her safety or his love for

her. She'd interpreted his response as one of disapproval and had told him to fuck off six ways from Sunday while storming out of his house in high dudgeon. Unfortunately, just as he was up and following closely behind her, intent on catching her and telling her that she was wrong, one of his associates had interrupted him quite urgently. It was then several days spent cleaning up a particularly bad mess before he could knock on the door of her tiny studio apartment to try to explain.

"Vicky, it's me. Let me explain."

No reply.

But he knew she was home. Her car was in the driveway, she worked from home, and he knew she couldn't afford to be anywhere else, frankly, because, stubborn brat that she was, she refused to allow him to give her the seed money to start her business.

Rome was standing on the tiny doorstep to her apartment, above the house of a very nice little old lady, which looked as if it was going to collapse at any given moment beneath what was his not inconsiderable weight. Not that he was fat—there wasn't a spare ounce on him—but muscles added more weight than fat, and he had more than enough of them, considering that he not only ran five miles or so every day, but also got in some boxing whenever he could. His ability to do that depended on whether he could get a sparring partner who didn't worry that he might take offense if they actually made contact. His reputation had a tendency to precede him.

He was holding a bag of Chinese food from her favorite place that contained all of her favorite dishes. "I have food from the Mee Lam Lau." Like an idiot, he swung the bag at the door a bit, hoping the smells that were making his mouth water would waft through it to her.

The girl could eat—to the point where she could damned near keep up with him, yet she was less than a hundred

pounds soaking wet, he'd swear. Her nerves ate it all up for her, Rome guessed. For someone who portrayed herself as a confident young woman, he was probably the only person on the planet who knew that bubbling beneath that brash, confident exterior was a seething cauldron of tension, fear and insecurity.

He still heard nothing.

There was a slight hitch of hesitancy before what he did next because he would be using what he'd learned about her from the very conversation that had landed him here, but he had a sneaking suspicion it would likely work, and that was all that counted to him at the moment.

"Victoria."

Rome possessed a deep, resonant bass that sounded very classically dominant, and he knew it. That, coupled with the fact that he almost never called her by her full first name, would, if she truly were submissive, let her know that he meant business.

And, from her spot—standing utterly still, barely breathing, in the middle of her living room-slash-bedroom-slash-kitchen-slash-dining room from the moment she heard his car door slam—it had the exact impact he intended it would. Her breathing became ragged and her entire body flushed hot.

At least at first.

There was no way she could not have reacted to what he'd said—even suspecting, as she did, how very deliberately he'd said it. She definitely was submissive. She'd known it all her life, it seemed, and even though she wasn't his and would swear up and down that she didn't want to be his, she responded helplessly to him, as she'd known deep down she would if he ever turned his potent brand of domminishness on her. In a way, that was all she craved in life, but in another way, it was the thing she feared most.

She was halfway to the door before she caught herself

obeying him, and by then, she could smell the food with which he was trying to entice her. She hated that the bastard's approach was working, from every damned angle.

Vicky hadn't eaten much in the past five days or so—since she'd lit out of his house like a scalded cat. Being on the outs with him, which was a surprisingly rare thing, had never sat well with her at all, and eating wasn't the only thing she hadn't done very much of since she'd last seen him. Sleep had eluded her, too, so she knew she looked like death warmed over as she sighed and reached for the doorknob, knowing that at some point, he'd lose patience with her and force the issue.

Not that that the idea of him seeing her at her worst had ever really bothered her. He'd seen her sick and hung over and bloated and cranky and depressed and sad and every other possible horrible iteration of female humanity, and yet here he was, like the stubborn, annoying, pain in the ass that he was, doggedly trying to get her to give him a chance to explain himself.

As much as she hated giving in to him—it just seemed like it was probably a bad precedent to set with a man who was, in his own way, also very used to getting exactly what he wanted out of life—she knew he wouldn't hesitate, at some unpredictable point, to bust the door down then blithely have someone come fix it, since he would have achieved his goal. And he'd stay there with her until the door was fixed to his satisfaction, too. He'd probably replace it with some steel-reinforced thing she could barely open.

Vicky both objected to his protectiveness of her and reveled in it at the same time, while wishing she wasn't doing either.

He always won, somehow, dammit. Not speaking to him on a daily basis—telling him every little thing that happened in her life while he actually paid attention to her, no matter how busy he was, and she endeavored to do the same for him,

although he was much less willing—able—to talk to her about his work. She understood that.

But she had always caved, even though she knew that if she sounded, even slightly, as if she was going to cry, he'd do anything within his power to get her to stop. He didn't panic about it, like most men did, though. He'd just fold her into his arms, holding her against his chest and soothing her, squeezing her tightly to him, no matter what else was going on in his life at the moment. But she'd never tried to manipulate any man that way, least of all Rome. She never wanted to resort to that kind of thing with anyone. If someone didn't want to be with her, she had absolutely no interest in trying to convince him that he did.

Memories of how wonderfully he unhesitatingly supported her at times like that—even though she knew it must've been quite the opposite of his upbringing—flooded her mind, making her feel even guiltier than she already did about running out on him.

But she retained just enough of the contrarian that she didn't open the door so much as just unlock it, as if to say, if he came in, he came in. If he didn't, he didn't. It was no skin off her nose either way—although that food smelled friggin' wonderful and was making her stomach growl. To say nothing of the fact that it was going to take everything in her not to just run into his arms the moment she saw him.

Still, she could order some herself—but no, she couldn't. She didn't have money to spend on eating out.

No sooner had she turned the locks than he filled her doorway. Not that she was paying attention to what he was doing. Vicky's back was to him as she stood in the tiny kitchen.

For his part, Rome knew how this worked. He didn't acknowledge her at all, either. Instead, he shrugged off his coat, hanging it on what she euphemistically called the "hall

tree," then brought the food to the coffee table, where he began to unpack all of its salty, crunchy, sweet goodness.

With an ease of long association, they each knew their roles and went about them in silence. Vicky got him a beer and herself an off brand "diet cola", bringing them along with paper plates, low sodium soy sauce, salt, black pepper for her and cayenne for him, as well as real utensils. She refused to use the plastic ones and even kept a real set in her car, in case she ended up eating something there that would call for them. She offered him a piece of paper towel as a napkin as she sank onto to the couch where he was already sitting while fiddling with the remote.

Upon discovering that she only had five channels—all local and thus free, he noted—he used the smaller DVD remote, which was velcroed conveniently to the TV remote so neither of them would be easily lost, to turn it on and push play.

Woke Up This Morning filled the silence between them as they became immersed in Tony Soprano's agita filled exploits while they filled their bellies with fried rice, egg rolls, General Tso's, spicy cashew chicken—hot enough to burn his tongue off—and fried dumplings, all of which they quietly split between them, except the cashew chicken. Vicky's sense of self-preservation wouldn't allow her to touch that stuff the way he ordered it.

The irony of what they were watching wasn't lost on either of them, nor was it when they watched any of the Godfather movies, or Casino, or Goodfellas.

They ate in silence, wordlessly exchanging condiments and eating from each other's containers, him, snagging one of her egg rolls, and she, as he'd expected, scarfing a couple of his dumplings.

When they were both sated and sitting much closer together than they had been when they'd started out, he rose

and brought everything into the kitchen in one acrobatic trip, without managing to spill anything. Spending summers working as a waiter—up from busboy—in his grandfather's restaurant sometimes stood him in good stead.

When he returned to the couch, though, he reached for the remote and paused the program as he sank down onto it, facing her.

Vicky, who had been facing him as they watched TV, turned to sit more normally, facing away from him.

But he wasn't having that, reaching out and wrapping his freakishly long arms around her to pull her against his side, enveloping her with the natural heat of his big body. "I want to talk to you, Vicky."

That, too, sounded terribly dominant, and she really wished she hadn't noticed that fact. "Yeah, well, I don't want to talk to you."

Rome had to suppress a smile at how she sounded, but then he became serious. "I'm not asking, Victoria," he informed her, subduing her attempts to free herself from his hold with ridiculous, depressing ease, then resting his chin on the top of her head. His mind was eagerly supplying tantalizing visions of how it wanted him to behave, considering what he now knew about her, and he wasn't having much success at eradicating those starkly sensual images.

Blithely unaware of his inner struggle, Vicky sighed impatiently, knowing he wasn't going to let her go until he was damned good and ready to do so, and no amount of whining or trying to escape was going to get her anywhere.

And, frankly, considering how he'd sounded toward her with the few things he'd said since he'd gotten there, she realized with a start, and for the first time in their long acquaintance, that she likely didn't want to push him too far.

"I didn't mean to imply in any way that I disapproved of

your... interests. Far from it. You know I will always support you getting what you want out of your life."

That was true, she had to admit. He was, unfailingly, her biggest cheerleader in regards to anything she wanted to do. In some ways, he was almost too helpful.

"But I love you, and I worry about you, and putting yourself into that kind of situation has the real potential of back-firing badly, and if you don't know that, if you don't acknowledge that fact and take steps to address it, then it's even more likely that something awful is going to happen."

She craned herself as far away from him as he would allow, in order to meet his eyes. "What am I, an idiot?" She frowned at his gleeful grin. "Don't answer that. I do know that. I am very aware of my own safety, and it's certainly not something I'm just going to casually do with some stranger. I want it to be a part of a relationship, eventually, and although I've waited a long time to actually let myself delve into what that part of me craves, I'm going to take it slow."

"So, you haven't explored any aspects of it yet?"

"No, I haven't." He felt her relax more against him, and Rome released a breath that he hadn't been aware he was holding. "But it's something I'm going to be looking for in a partner from now on. I don't want to keep having vanilla relationships when that's not what I want out of life. I want to be with a man, to love a man, hopefully, who's interested in—"

"Discipline?" he supplied, forcing himself not to shade the word in any way.

"Yes. And there are lots of places online to look, so I'm looking, but I'm going to be very choosy."

"Good." The impulse to offer himself as her teacher was right there, on the tip of his tongue, but he was too worried about what might happen between them if things didn't work out for them on that level—for whatever reason—and he certainly didn't want to lose what they had.

She'd hidden that part of herself from him so completely that he could hardly believe what she'd said—then or now. Apparently, they weren't as close as they would like to think they were, since he was still hiding the same interests from her, but he didn't feel he could spring that on her now. That might look as if he was pandering to her, and that was the last thing he wanted because he knew she wouldn't respond to that idea well at all.

First, he wanted to reassure her that he didn't have a problem with what she wanted. He'd think about the potential ramifications of the both of them wanting the same thing at another time—like late at night, as he'd been doing since the evening she'd made that explosive little confession.

Rome tilted her chin so he could see her eyes. "You promise me that you'll be extremely careful."

Her very serious, "Yes, absolutely," was clearly and seriously stated, not brushed off as if she thought he was overreacting. "If you want, I'll use you as my safe person. I'll give you all the details about where I'm meeting him for the first time—and after, too—and I'll call you at a specified time."

He knew exactly to what she was referring, but he let her tell him anyway, which let him know that she knew it, too. As uneasy as he was about the idea of her doing that kind of thing with anyone—however chauvinistic it sounded to him, and it did—he had to admit that she seemed to be very well aware of the safety precautions she should be taking, and that made him feel a little bit better. He would do anything he could to help her be safe—even some things that she might not want him to do, and that he hoped she never found out he'd done, frankly. But that wasn't going to stop him from doing them. When it came down to it, he was going to keep her safe, one way or the other.

Vicky was talking about safe words and negotiating where things were going and what things were off limits beforehand.

Her Gentle Gangster

Rome had to acknowledge to himself that as flattered as he was that she wanted him to be her safe person, it was going to kill him to do it—much more so than just knowing that she was sleeping with someone. Somehow, this was a much more intimate thing to do, as far as he was concerned, and although he'd never been jealous of anyone she'd slept with, he was already distinctly jealous of whoever it was who got to give her first spanking... spankings.