

Her Knight in Faded Denim

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

"Stuck?"

Marissa Hamilton was entirely unsuccessful in biting back the first sarcastic comment that came to mind. "Was it the snow almost up to the roof or the hazard lights that gave it away?" Probably not the smartest thing to say to the Samaritan who pulled up behind her, not five minutes after she managed to bury her little sports car in a snow bank that was only slightly larger than her would-be rescuer.

She bet he had no problems whatsoever getting around in that wannabe Hummer he'd parked to one side, well off the road, and in the same blasted snow bank – although it was no threat to such a huge, four wheel drive vehicle.

Apparently, he had little appreciation for sarcasm. When she got a good look at his face, Marissa knew instinctively that she had better learn – quickly – to curb her tongue, and she also knew that she was doomed to fail miserably at that goal, as always.

Besides, she didn't know the man from Adam. It was hardly as if he was going to take her to task. At least, not in any way she would find particularly interesting, like any of the heroes in her favorite spanking romances would. She was never quite that lucky, somehow, in real life.

To say nothing of all of those bothersome personal safety rules one was supposed to consider in a situation like this – being a woman alone and all.

After sneaking a second quick peak while he stood there, she decided he wouldn't fit the bill as a Dom at all, anyway. Much too...just *too*. Too big, too brooding looking – he would give Mr. Rochester a run for his money – and very pointedly asking too damned many pertinent questions!

"Shovel?"

She had the grace to flush as she fidgeted in the tiny seat and answered, "No."

"Salt?"

She wouldn't have thought it was possible, but her flush deepened until she felt practically faint. His voice was impossibly deep and just a tad hoarse, and his breath smelled faintly, but pleasantly, of coffee and cinnamon.

"Sand?"

Marissa grimaced and answered ungraciously, feeling the pressure of her full body blush concentrating in an area she really wished it hadn't in front of this man but still unable to keep her eyes from rolling. "If I had all of that, I wouldn't still be stuck, now would I?"

One thick, black eyebrow buried itself beneath a hank of hair of the same color that fell across his forehead. That was it, no other words or gestures, although that simple movement was more than enough for her to feel most thoroughly scolded, somehow, for her churlishness. He had stopped to help her of his own accord, and she was sounding bratty and ungrateful for his efforts.

Which he hadn't even really made, yet. Except to stop, her naughty side reminded cattily.

"Cell phone?" he asked, after a long, uncomfortable moment.

Her mind went blank. "Why on Earth would I need a cell phone if you're going to dig me out?" she asked, then had to restrain herself from putting her own hand over her mouth. Instead, she literally bit her own tongue and tried to refrain from looking at him, although it didn't last long. Despite how off kilter this man of few words had managed to make her feel, she didn't seem capable of *not* looking at him.

Until she saw the expression on his face. It had the barest hint of a smile, but one that his temper had gotten a hold of and twisted, so much so that she began to fiddle with her fingers in her lap. And Marissa Hamilton wasn't given to nervous habits. She gave them to others, but didn't succumb easily to them, herself.

He stood, straightening out from where he had crouched next to her window, and she had to gulp. He was huge – the well-worn shearling coat he was wearing only adding bulk to someone who had absolutely no need of it. He wasn't fat in the least, though, she could see; he hadn't bothered to button the coat against the bitter cold – as natives were wont to do – and she could see his broad, flat belly being hugged by a disreputable black t-shirt. Better than that, he turned without a word to go back to his SUV and treated her to a marvelous side mirror view of a lovingly defined, well-muscled butt as his well-worn jeans clung to every curve.

That made her hands fidget for an entirely different reason as she flushed even hotter than before, suddenly grateful for the arctic blasts of air coming through her open window.

Then, of course, he proceeded to produce every item he had found her sorely lacking. A real shovel, not one of the useless small collapsible ones she probably would have bought when she got around to it, a bag of kitty litter, which she knew functioned just as well as sand for traction, and a jug of salt. All of which he applied liberally, along with not a little of his own effort, starting with the shoveling first.

As much as she was thoroughly enjoying the sight of him bent over beside her, Marissa wasn't about to let him do it on his own. She might not be a lot of help, but she certainly wasn't afraid of hard work. And for some unknown reason, it became important to her that he not think she was quite the lazy ditz he probably already thought of her as.

So she opened her car door and extended one expensively clad – with, as her girlfriend liked to call them, a "fuck me heel" – foot out towards the snow.

"Get back inside."

It wasn't a request – wasn't phrased or said in a polite manner in the least. It was said with the intention that she obey, as if this man was quite unused to couching his orders for anyone's benefit, least of all her.

Of course, Marissa's first instinct was to do exactly the opposite of what she'd been told. She hated being ordered around by anyone, altruistic or not. She thought she had done damned well in holding her foot exactly where it was, instead of just getting the rest of the way out as she had originally intended.

But before she could decide whether she wanted to obey him, he was there, towering over her and leaning against the car door to close it until she had no choice but to retract her already nearly frozen foot before it got chopped off.

"I want to help," she whined, immediately regretting having said it.

His response was immediate and annoyingly firm as his gaze settled on her highly impractical shoes and then up to gaze at her almost accusatorily. "No boots."

Marissa adjusted herself in the seat when she really didn't need to, but this stranger's piercing gaze had her all twisted up inside, somehow, as if he'd taken stock of her and found her considerably wanting, and she was far from used to that.

"No jacket. No hat. No gloves." Each ticked off item seemed to tick him off just that much more. She could see how hard he was gripping the edge of her window, although she couldn't see why her lack of the proper accoutrements managed to get him so riled up.

"I have a cell phone," she piped up in her own defense, her voice sounding pitifully weak and unacceptably female, somehow, in the presence of all of the testosterone oozing from the mass of muscles next to her. "But it's – it's not charged," she added with severe reluctance.

"Fat lot of good it'll do you like that," he said. Then adding, "Ma'am," as if he'd just now remembered his mother's long ago – and long forgotten, apparently – admonishment to do just that when speaking to a woman he didn't know. "The cold and snow here are not to be ignored, if you don't mind my saying so."

She minded, but was smart enough – however rare that impulse was in her – to hold her tongue. This man might not actually be a Dom, but he had all of the autocratic, take control of a situation and anyone in it makings of one. The thought – however unpleasant it might have been to Marissa intellectually – had her wanting to squirm in her seat even more so than she already had in front of him. Everything about this man – even how annoying he was being with his damned preparedness and two word phrases that were practically accusations – seemed to have her lady parts in an uproar, and that was the last thing she wanted.

But they never seemed to listen to her – that was part of what had brought her here, to the hinterlands smack dab in the dead of winter – and they were positively rioting right now. She could feel her panties moistening, feel the familiar, much too pleasant swelling and softening of her most intimate areas, and was none too happy that he was the one who was inspiring such an instantaneous reaction.

Especially since he seemed to think that she was a bit of a dim bulb for having gotten herself into this predicament.

"I know that," she began, her raw desire for him making her sound more impatient than she intended.

"Doesn't seem that way to me, ma'am. Winter's not a tourist season up here," he stated with a pointed look at her Tennessee license plate. "And you were just damned lucky that I was close by."

The bald truth of it was that he had been behind her for a while, watching her fishtail that little cracker box of hers all over roads that would be plowed out when all one of Barry Henderson – the solitary employee of the Department of Transportation for the entire island – got to them. He knew Barry had been up since before the snow began to fall heavily, some ten hours ago, and he'd done the best he could to keep up with the main routes, but secondary streets, like the one they were on now, were lucky to get a lick and a prayer in snow this bad.

As naïve as she was about the roads and how to drive on them in snow, he had to admit – as reluctantly as possible – that she was a little thing, and if they had met under other circumstances, he might have made more of an effort to be civil. Cordial, even, if the time was right.

Whom was he kidding? That attitude of hers screamed out for an adjustment of just the kind he'd be more than happy to deliver – except to a stuck up little city girl like herself. He liked his woman a damned sight more natural than her. She was a looker, he had to give her that, but then if you put Mrs. Murphy's pig in shoes, clothes, hair and makeup whose combined cost was probably more than he made in a year, it would look a damned sight better than it started out, too.

And he knew from personal experience that he'd rather have the pig. They were a lot less high maintenance, less demanding, and tasted pretty damned good roasted low and slow with a ton of good homemade barbeque sauce on it.

As always, though, his junk apparently trumped his brain and his stomach in this situation, despite dire warnings from both about how unsuitable she was. He was at full mast in jeans that weren't very forgiving about his condition. In fact, since he hadn't intended on seeing anyone on his way into work this morning, they were almost obscenely tight and showed him in all his glory in stark relief against the buttery soft denim.

But they were his only pair of clean jeans until he could do a wash tonight, and what did he care if she became aware of his...state of affairs? He was going to help her and then be on his way with a point – or twelve – on the plus side. That didn't happen to him very often, and he knew he needed all of the good karma he could get.

William "Dodge" Perkins straightened away from her car window – away from those big green eyes and that spicy, floral perfume she wore – and turned back to the job at hand, growling under his breath bad temperedly, "Stay put. I'll have you out shortly."

He was as good as his word. She was able to back out of the snow bank within the next ten minutes or so, and as she'd sat and waited for her knight in faded blue jeans to dig her out, she had realized just how right he had been about him being behind her and stopping to help. She'd been there for almost a half an hour now, and he was the only other car she'd seen.

She hated it when men were right. Somehow, it just went against the societal grain, as far as she was concerned, especially in the mood she was in, having just broken up with a man who had so seemed like her perfect match...sort of, anyway.

No time to dwell on the folly that had been her relationship with Dean Lovell. The behemoth had packed away all of his equipment and come to lean over the driver's side window, effectively blocking what little light the winter sun could generate through the thick clouds.

Marissa rolled down her window and gave him a big smile as she offered him a fifty-dollar bill. "Thank you so much for your help. I appreciate it. Please take this for your time and effort."

He managed to look thoroughly affronted at her offer of remuneration, conveying his disdain with a mere flicker of his eyes. She retracted the money immediately, somehow knowing he wouldn't accept it but unable to think of another way to repay him that didn't involve the both of them being arrested for indecent exposure.

To say nothing of the damage from frostbite to very delicate parts of their persons.

He didn't protest about the money. He didn't really even acknowledge it. Instead, he said something for which she was entirely unprepared.

"Get out of the car."

A fissure of fear ran down her spine.

And not a good one at all.

Was he carjacking her? Right here in the middle of Podunk, Maine? That hardly seemed likely – why would he have bothered to dig her out?

But he wasn't waiting for her to work it all out. He had her door open and was reaching inside to lift her out of her seat before she'd even begun to process his demand.

Marissa opened her mouth to protest his highhandedness – indeed, had her fist drawn to punch him, if need be – until he asked, "Where are you going?"

"What?"

He was carrying her through the snow that – even on the road was probably a foot or so deep – as if he barely registered the added burden of her weight, his steps slow and steady until he'd brought her to his truck.

"Where were you going?" he repeated, with all of the enthusiasm of a man who wasn't fond of having to do so.

Was she being kidnapped, was that it? Marissa wondered. What exactly was this man's game? And where was he taking her? She was so wrapped up in trying to understand what he was doing that she answered him without much thought, "To Sophie's house."

That earned her a short but hard, appraising glance from her mode of transportation.

"Keys are in the ignition," was all he said once he'd deposited her, with surprising care. And only after he'd scraped away as much snow as he could with his booted foot – in front of the driver's side door of his big vehicle, then turned to trudge back to her car while giving her slow, deliberate instructions as if she was a bit tetchy. "Follow me, then, slowly. When you want to stop, pump the breaks slowly, and start long before you might if the road was clear. If you get into a skid –"

"I know how to drive in the snow!" she almost yelled, wishing she could recall it when her pronouncement stopped him in his tracks. "I grew up here, for crying out loud!"

He turned and gave her a look that had her bottom cringing and her genitals dancing, even from that distance.

"Then you have even less of an excuse not to have everything you may need in your car, don't you?"

Marissa's legs clenched together unconsciously at his tone and she desperately wanted to hurl a searing protest back at him, but since he was continuing his deeply annoying habit of being right, the only thing she could come up with was a childish, "Oh, yeah?" that she wisely kept to herself.

And she'd finally decided, especially after that not so subtle scolding and a look that said she should stop whatever she's doing in her tracks if she ever meant to sit comfortably again, not to taunt her savior. Or the man who had apparently decided that it was his duty to make sure that she made it to Sophie's in one piece.

But she did take an inordinate amount of pleasure watching him try to shoehorn his way behind the wheel of her tiny car. He shrugged out of his voluminous coat, affording her a wonderful view of the sheer breadth of his shoulders, which obviously owed no debt to his coat whatsoever, and another tantalizing glimpse of what she considered a nearly perfect ass.

Just right for grabbing onto when she'd already tugged the corners off the fitted sheet during a particularly steamy session in bed, she thought. Her randy mind conjured thoroughly x-rated pictures to go with the words. Herself laid out on his bed, naked, waiting for him to ravish her, the unbearably pleasurable, intimate feeling of the first time he took her fully, climaxing – loudly, which was the only way she knew how, while his mouth did unspeakable things to that most sensitive area between her legs...

Marissa shook her head, hoping to clear it of the sensual cobwebs that seemed determined to get her into all sorts of trouble, but still managed to enjoy thoroughly the sight of him folding, spindling, and mutilating himself into the driver's seat.

But once there, he didn't waste any time, and she realized that she – in her slim miniskirt – was well behind in the curve. After several attempts at a more modest approach – since she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his eyes were on her every movement – she scrambled up into

the seat with more enthusiasm than grace, she was quite sure. But it got the job done with a minimum of flashing him...she hoped.

Soon, they were wending their way towards her sister's house. Slowly. Excruciatingly slowly. It was a thirty-five mile an hour zone, and they were doing twenty, if she was lucky. Although Rissa did her best to pay attention to the road – heaven forbid, she should rear end her own car, for crying out loud – but also found herself soaking up the almost frighteningly masculine ambiance in his truck.

It didn't smell like smoke, she was glad to realize, but instead like a heady combination of man and leather. And coffee; she spied a large Dunkin' Donuts cup still steaming in its holder, knowing that was the source of his disturbingly pleasant breath. It was a Spartan cockpit with barely an AM radio and no air conditioning, she noted. This man was a true native Maine-ahh and this was a work truck, she'd be willing to bet, although she'd have been very surprised to find out that he owned any other vehicle. There was some form of electronic communications unit attached to the dash, but it looked more like a CB to her than anything else, although she couldn't imagine why he'd have one of those any more. No one did.

But then she'd bet he didn't follow anyone else's trends or customs, either. That kind of thing would just never be on his radar. She'd also have been willing to bet that he'd been in his job for years, had a wife and at least two kids. The distinct absence of a ring was no proof that he was unattached; especially if he had the kind of physical job she'd pegged him for.

Lucky wife, Marissa thought, almost licking her lips. That man exuded sex but was perfectly content not to dwell on the matter in any way, shape or form. He'd been nothing but gentlemanly to her – if a bit autocratic and closed mouthed, but then that was the Yankee way.

The closed mouth part, if not the autocratic, exactly.

When she wasn't covertly snooping about his truck, Rissa was watching him handle the little Miata, which purred right along under his firm, steady hand like it never had under hers. Not one slip, skid or even sliding stop. He handled that car as she imagined he'd handle a woman – confidently, slowly, and with excruciating attention to detail.

They drove by the boarded up mansions of the super-rich who eschewed the harsh island winters in favor of invading it at will from Memorial to Labor Day, down in the small working – if still quite picturesque – harbor. Then up a slight incline to a house that would be considered quite good sized anywhere else but when measured against the estates they'd passed was unprepossessing at best.

Her sister burst out of the front door as if she'd been staring furtively out of it all morning, which Marissa knew she probably had. Soph was the worrier of the two of them, just like their mom. Rissa figured that probably came with the big sister territory. She didn't tend to worry anywhere near as much as she should.

"Marissa, are you all right?" Her gaze went from the big man who was slowly unbending his legs as he extracted himself carefully from her car to Rissa, who slid out from behind the driver's seat of the big SUV with very little care for her modesty. Until she realized that her moleskin skirt had clung to the fabric of his bench seat, dragging the back of her already short skirt up to somewhere in the neighborhood of her nape.

"Sorry for the peep show," Marissa said, blushing still, again, as she reached behind her to wrestle her skirt into some form of submission.

Which no one had yet been able to do for her, she thought with a quirky smile.

The least and most likely candidate for the position ambled over to them, as the sisters hugged and kissed. "I was so worried! You're late!"

"I know. I managed to get myself stuck, and this wonderful gentleman expended his time and energy to unstuck me, and then he insisted on me following him here."

Dodge leaned a hip against his truck, then proceeded to scold her again, by proxy, as he told her sister how woefully unprepared she was to be driving in this weather. "She was just damned lucky that I happened along, Sophie. With the rate it's snowing and having no emergency equipment in her car whatsoever," he stated with a long glare at Rissa. "She could have had carbon monoxide poisoning in a matter of minutes."

Rissa had forgotten that danger, but just as quickly pushed it to the back of her mind. "Do you two know each other?"

Sophie smiled. "Of course we do. Did you not introduce yourselves, at least?"

Both of them shook their heads. The thought hadn't occurred to either of them.

"Well, allow me to do the honors. Dodge Perkins, this is my sister, Marissa Hamilton. Marissa, this is Dodge Perkins. He's Sonny's boss and –"

"The town sheriff," Marissa finished for her, extending her hand to the man in question. "No wonder you wouldn't take the money. Thank you again for rescuing me." She'd heard Sophie talk about Dodge. He was her husband, the town deputy's boss, and she'd never heard anything but glowing reports about him.

It seemed she couldn't put a foot right with the man, though, whose face had opened considerably at the sight of Sophie, but then shut down cold again when she mentioned the money.

He nodded in acknowledgement and shook her hand politely, but with little enthusiasm, having already moved to open the door to his truck, not so subtly edging her out of his way as he did so. When he'd already gotten behind the wheel, he rolled down his window and said, "If you're going to be staying here any length of time, Ms. Hamilton, you'll want to get a different vehicle and equip it with all of the items you were lacking today. I don't need to be spending my time rescuing fool hardy women."

Rissa's mouth hung open and he was well down the lane before she stomped her foot in the slush – which she instantly regretted, of course – and looked around for something to punch.

Her sister, who knew her, had already made herself scarce, taking several giant steps to the left. "He's right, you know," she teased as they made their way into her house.

That earned her a swat on the shoulder as soon as Marissa caught up with her. "Shut up! Men are *never, ever* right."