

Embraced

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

Meagan O'Reilly was too exhausted from her three day drive to look where she was going while she tried to drag the last of the big suitcases through the screen door of her best friend's old style ranch house. As she struggled with a big valise in her left hand, she blindly reached into the house to throw the small travel bag onto the floor, to be dealt with later. Much later. Next year sounded like a good idea to her.

But as she reached into what should have been the blank air of the enormous kitchen, her fingers were rudely crunched up against a wall that she knew couldn't be there. She flexed her fingers, realizing that it was a solid, warm, flesh-wall – as unyielding as the brick kind (and just about as smart, she thought to herself...) but much, much sexier. Craning her neck back, while still maintaining a death hold on the suitcase, her eyes confirmed the identity of the owner of the chest she'd run into, and she snatched her hand back as if it had been stung.

Mandy Costas – her best friend from college whom she visited religiously in Texas for two weeks every summer during Meagan's summer vacation from teaching fifth grade – had three brothers, each slightly more muscular and intimidating than the other. Her knuckles had rubbed up against the biggest of them all, of course; the one she knew, and liked, the least.

When she took her hand back, she realized that he'd relieved her of the smaller bag, and, within seconds, she was being crowded right back out the door as his big bulk overwhelmed her smaller frame, reaching past her to lift the huge suitcase as if it weighed nothing. He deposited it next to the eat-in table. "Anything else?" He growled, and it came out sounding gruffer than he intended, but he always reacted to her like that. She aroused him. There was no other way to put it. He went for well-rounded women – not fat but proportioned more toward the fifties – the Marilyn Monroe-look rather than the more current, Kate Moss, one-good-wind-would-knock-her-over-look. Meagan's red hair had always been long and it had what he assumed to be natural waves and curls – she never smelled of that nasty permanent solution Mandy was always using – but then he'd never had that much opportunity to smell her, either. Since he was going to be home for the next two weeks while she was here, he was going to have a hard time keeping himself from wrapping his hands up in her soft tresses. He supposed she was pretty but not beautiful, pleasant looking but not a knockout. It was her personality that attracted most people to her. Meg had an easy way with the grumpiest of people, himself included. She made you want to laugh at life along with her, and he sure needed that sometimes. If he could just get her to stop going out one door as he was coming in the other...

"One more thing, but I'll get it."

Meg took as much time as she dared getting Butch's stuff together. Finally, Yorkie in tow, she entered the kitchen, having no other excuse to avoid the seething, masculine, hunk of man in the kitchen.

Set free by his mistress to explore his summer home, Butch immediately wiggled over to see if Barrett was friendly. "I hope you don't mind the dog. I usually bring him down, but you're not usually here."

He seemed absorbed in the dog. "Sit," he commanded firmly, and Meagan almost complied herself with the authority in his tone. It made one want to obey – or else. Her mother's

heart fluttered with pride when Butch complied immediately. “Good dog.” Meg had to turn away momentarily as Barrett scooped up the little dog carefully in one large paw, afraid that her tongue was lolling out of the side of her own mouth, just like the dog’s. “What’s his name?”

What the hell was that damn dog’s name, anyway? Every rational thought had fled her brain as her mind concentrated on the play of muscles just beneath the worn t-shirt he was wearing. She knew they had a light layer of soft hair covering them... “Uh - Butch.”

A grin spread across his face, and Meg caught her breath. Barrett would never be considered classically good looking, but who the hell cared? From the time he’d first been introduced to her about six years ago, he’d become the prototype for every romance novel hero she ever read about. He was 6’3” and weighed a good 230 at least. With short, raven black hair, steel gray eyes, and muscles on his muscles, you would think from the looks of him that he was all brawn and no brain. But Meg knew from Mandy that though he’d had to quit high school to take care of the four of them when their parents died unexpectedly, Barrett had gotten his GED and gone to college, majoring in business, and now had his masters in the same subject. Brawn and brain. Meg almost felt like he’d been built to her personal specifications, and it scared the bejeebers out of her. Mandy had quickly absorbed the fact that for some reason, Meg didn’t like her oldest brother, and always invited her down when he wasn’t going to be there. It had worked like clockwork – the most time she’d ever had to spend in the same house with him was less than a day, until now. He didn’t look like he was planning to go anywhere soon, damn it.

“Butch. I like that.” Well, at least he appreciated the irony.

“My next dog is going to be a Great Dane named – ”

“Tiny,” he supplied, and they both laughed.

“Or FiFi, or Pooky, or something else specifically designed to give him a doggie identity crisis.” The object of their discussion had snuggled into the crook of Barrett’s arm as if he’d been surgically attached there, and Barrett held him with firm and tender confidence. He was a man aware of his own strength, comfortable with his physical abilities. He enjoyed animals – and – given half the chance – he’d love to enjoy this one’s owner, but she rarely let him within 15 feet of her for some reason. She couldn’t be afraid of large men – he’d scouted Mandy out on that and as far as she knew, there’d never been any sort of abuse in her family. Hell, Mandy confided, Meg had never even been spanked!

Barrett had tucked that tidbit of information into his steel-trap mind for future reference. No, it couldn’t be his size; he’d heard her laughing and joking with his brothers more than once, and, though he was the largest of the three, they weren’t small by any stretch of the imagination, but she inevitably clammed up when he appeared. He’d racked his brain – trying to think if he’d insulted her somehow, and even asked Mandy, who hadn’t met his eyes, but shook her head. He wasn’t about to ask Mandy to betray a confidence, so he left it at that. But it’d bothered him all the same.

He watched her from beneath hooded lids; lazily scratching an appreciative furry chin and enjoying the view of her jean clad bottom. She had a big suitcase in either hand and the travel bag over her shoulder, as if she thought he wasn’t gentleman enough to carry them to her room, when suddenly she was doubled over by a violent coughing spasm. Barrett dumped the dog and quickly got up, removing her hands from the two big bags. That cough sounded bad; a worried frown creased his forehead as he guided her to the chair he’d vacated. “Sit,” he said for the second time since she arrived, and she, like her dog, obeyed him without protest, too busy fighting for breath to argue.

Just what I need, Meg thought, is to cough a lung up in front of him. Tears streamed down her face, and she doubled over, very, very close to retching. Recovering from pneumonia can be fun.

“Drink.” A cool glass of water was pressed to her lips, and she took a small sip, which seemed to soothe the raw ache in her throat and lungs. He left the glass on the table in front of her and disappeared, returning to hand her piece of hard candy. “Suck,” he commanded succinctly, but not without a grin, and despite herself, Meagan giggled, which set her off again.

“You – sadist – don’t – make – me,” breath, “laugh!”

He squatted in front of her, wearing that wonderful smile, and Meagan knew what all the romance novelists meant when they wrote “her heart skipped a beat.” His overwhelming nearness wasn’t helping her breath, but the candy helped her control the urge to cough, and soon she was feeling almost human. Broad, work-roughened hands had somehow landed on her denim knees; she could feel his warmth right through the material. Giving herself a mental shake, she tried to get up, but instead found herself pressed back into the chair with little or no effort on his part. His strength amazed her. “Don’t. Stay still for a minute. I’ll take your stuff to your room.” Mandy was right. Even Barrett’s usual voice more often than not said that he expected to be obeyed; disobedience would result in dire consequences. Mandy had been subject to those exact dire consequences since their parents had died when Barrett was sixteen and Mandy was a mere four. Despite the fact that he never hesitated to tan her bottom good when she needed it, Mandy – and all the rest of the siblings – thought the sun rose and set on Barrett’s massive shoulders.

Meg couldn’t help but grin at the sight of her tiny, eager little puppy following adoringly at the booted heels of the cowboy giant. Against her better judgment, she leaned her head back against the chair, coughing slightly, trying to relax, until suddenly, she felt airborne, and realized that he’d snuck up and lifted her into his arms. Her head tucked all-too-naturally into the curve of his neck, and, realizing how easily she could completely surrender to him, Meagan began to struggle.

Her weight felt amazingly good in his arms, warm forehead pressed to the side of his neck and one smallish hand over his heart. Until she started to wiggle. “Enough.” One word rumbled from deep in his chest, and his arms contracted slightly around her in warning, keeping her still and safe against him. Meg remained tense but quiet as he deposited her gently on the bed in what she’d come to think of as “her room.” It was the bedroom next to Mandy’s that she’d taken over on every visit. He’d pulled back the covers and piled 3 pillows on top of each other, knowing that lying flat would be the worst thing for her.

Meg had hoped that he’d see that she was comfortable and leave. No such luck. A glass of water appeared on the nightstand, as well as a handful of hard candy for future needs. “I have a bowl of it on the desk in my office. Feel free to restock whenever you need it.” She’d never been in his study before, and didn’t intend to start now.

Maybe if I close my eyes, he’ll go away, she thought, only to feel the side of the bed sink under his weight. “Bronchitis?” he asked, tucking the covers over her.

Eyes still closed, “Pneumonia.”

He swore softly under his breath. “And you drove by yourself down here?”

One eye opened to glare at him. “I’m almost fully recovered. It’s been 2 weeks.”

A low, warning growl issued from deep in his chest. “So fully recovered you nearly passed out on my kitchen floor from a coughing fit.”

“I just got off the steroids and antibiotics. I’m a lot better than I was.” She closed her eyes again, realizing for the first time just how tired the trip had made her.

He had a frightening flash of her alone on the floor of her small bedroom, passed out from a coughing fit, and a small shudder passed through him. Grimly, he stated, "If you were mine, I'd wait until you were more fully recovered and blister your bottom good." His aggressive words were at odds with the way his hand stroked tenderly over her forehead, delving into the mass of thick red hair in a soothing, rhythmic motion meant to hasten her to sleep.

Meg drew a deep, cough-free breath. "Lucky for me, I'm not yours." He watched her yawn and continued to pet her softly, hypnotically. He knew the exact moment when she finally surrendered to sleep, her body relaxing completely, rosebud mouth slightly opened.

Unable to resist, he pressed his full lips to hers in a Prince Charming kiss. "Unlucky for me, Sweetheart." Barrett grabbed up the startled dog, who was accustomed to sleeping next to his mistress, and tucked the whining pooch under his arm. "I know how you feel, Pup. I'd rather be in bed with her, too."