
MADDIE AND DADDY

CAROLYN FAULKNER



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.

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Prologue

When he walked into the room, he could tell she was sobbing, although he could also tell that she was doing her best to make sure he didn't see that she was, swiping the backs of her hands surreptitiously across her eyes and sniffing just once, quietly.

Her iPad, a gift from him a while ago that had lit up her precious little face, was lying near the end of the bed, and he knew instinctively that she hadn't done as he'd asked. Or, more likely, she'd tried to—because she was, at heart, always a good girl who did her best to obey him, despite the occasional lapse—but she'd seen something in the course of trying to do so that had upset her.

So he lay down on the bed, stretching his considerable length out diagonally across it, effectively cutting it in half, deliberately leaving her little choice—if she decided to move—but to end up closer to him, because she knew that, once he lay down on the bed.

Instead, she curled herself into a ball, presenting her back to him as she tried to make herself appear as small as possible, as if she would have preferred to disappear entirely, which he

knew was exactly what she would—almost always—prefer, even when she was being big.

Not that he was about to let her continue to do that. They'd progressed well beyond that by now. Once he'd sat down on it, she wasn't even allowed to get off the bed without his permission, which was why she wasn't running away from him, as she had tried to a few times before—hence the rule.

"What is it, little one?" he asked, his voice soft and affectionate, not demanding and never judgmental in the least.

After a longish pause, her weepy, just barely above a whisper reply reached his straining ears. "Nuffin', Daddy," and he knew that she was only answering him because she had to; another rule he'd implemented—and against which she chafed mightily at times—because she was sometimes very reluctant to tell him things, even things he really should know. She could, politely, tell him that she didn't want to talk, but he was, of course, free to ignore that request. Over their time together, he'd become pretty adept at pulling things out of her, which was something he never minded doing. She was the center of his life, the focus of every bit of his attention—just shy of being more so than she should be and interfering with his work. And far from preferring to ignore her when she got like this, as he knew other men had, even to the point of growing angry with her for her behavior, he had found that he loved to work on the puzzle that she could be, and he always, eventually, got whatever it was that was bothering her out of her. One way or the other.

Usually, she was smart and quick and funny and loving, and he found himself endlessly intrigued by her sometimes subtle, sometimes more glaring mood swings. He thought they probably had their beginnings in the not so good things that had happened to her when she was younger—having been largely ignored rather than actively raised, to her considerable detriment. To say nothing of the fact that he thought he was

probably the only person in her life who had ever endeavored to take the time to try to get her to talk about things when she felt this way.

But this time around, he was raising her the right way, although he didn't intend that she was ever going to get much bigger than between three and five or so, and she spent the majority of her time more in the two to three year old range. When she was upset like this, though, she could be even younger.

He inched himself closer to her slowly, so as not to startle or alarm her, tetrising his legs up to mirror hers, so that, when he eventually got to her, they'd fit together perfectly, as they always did, despite the disparity in their sizes—his big spoon to her little one—wrapping his big frame protectively around her.

Her long, naturally colored hair was still in the braids he had done for her this morning. With his outsized hands, he had never expected to be adept with hair, but it seemed that he had a bit of a talent for it. He genuinely adored getting her ready for the day every morning, especially brushing and arranging the hair he was having her grow out.

When he'd first told her that was what he wanted her to do—that he didn't want her to get her hair cut regularly, as she had been—she had just said, "Okay," and it had kind of floored him.

"Really? You don't care?" he'd asked, pretty amazed at her lack of reaction. He'd known women who wouldn't have hesitated to tell him to go to hell if he suggested something like that to them. He should have known her better, though. She wasn't at all the type of woman who was fussy about her looks.

But she'd just shrugged. "I think it looks better shorter—frames my face nicely. But if that's what you want, I'm fine with it."

It was already well past her shoulders, and he had learned

how to put it up in a pony tail and pigtails, and even do it in a French braid, because, at some point, he'd heard her exclaim over how pretty someone else's looked, and he considered it part of his role to remember small things like that about her.

"Maddie," he breathed, watching her stiffen a little as she reacted to his voice still being gentle, but with the slightest touch of steel behind it this time. Undeterred, he reached out to play with one of the braids, weaving the soft length through his big fingers, careful not to tug.

His little girl had a very sensitive scalp.

She had very sensitive everything, he thought, forcing himself not to dwell on the intimate pictures of her that flooded his mind at that thought.

"No, Daddy, please," she whimpered, curling up even tighter, as if that was going to save her from his patient prodding.

Finally, he could bear it no longer, and he reached out to hook an arm beneath her legs and another around her shoulders, pulling and turning her inexorably into the warm cocoon he'd formed with his body. He held her there gently when she tried to struggle away, not doing anything active to suppress her efforts, simply holding her tight and letting her exhaust herself in a futile effort to escape the strength of his muscular arms.

It wasn't as if she didn't know he was much stronger than she was, and that in a physical contest like this, she would always lose.

But she always tried, in response to what she knew now, from him, was the bad thought lying in wait in the back of her mind that one day he wasn't going to make the effort to annoy her into responding to him. That one day, when she struggled to get away from him, it was going to be that one time too many—when she became the bother she was always terrified

of being in his eyes—and he was going to totally devastate her by doing the simple and easy thing of walking away.

That afternoon, however, apparently wasn't that time.

As he held her, he bestowed tender kisses to the top of her head, her temples, her neck—wherever he could reach.

"You know you can tell me anything, baby girl. Right?" he murmured against her hair, not caring in the least that this had to be the millionth time he'd told her that. He'd gladly say it as many times as was necessary for her to believe it.

She sighed, although not impatiently. More disbelievingly, although it had certainly been true thus far. Even when it was something she was terrified for him to know, he'd been his usual unfailingly loving, affectionate, supportive self. But still.

Like her fear that eventually he was going to let her go, the fear that, at some point, she was going to say something to him—reveal something about herself—that was going to make him reject her in the most painfully humiliating manner possible. And, considering how much he already knew about her, that would be ridiculously easy for him to do and was also constantly lurking in the back of her mind, despite his many, repeated, heartfelt assurances to the contrary.

Even his unflagging solace stirred up more neuroses than it soothed. She was broken. Too broken for the likes of him, really.

Maddie knew that he was deeply saddened at the idea that she didn't think she'd ever not be waiting for the other shoe to fall in this relationship. And she knew exactly where that size zillion clodhopper was going to fall—right onto her head, when she least expected it, and, more likely than not, when she was least likely to be able to handle it, which was rapidly becoming always around him. He'd created such an intricate web of love and understanding around her—subtly, insistently worming his way past all of her carefully erected and main-

tained walls, such that she no longer had many—if any—defenses against it. Against him.

She always lost to him, and yet, somehow, he always made her feel as if they were both winning when she did finally surrender herself to his will.

And it seemed as if it had been that way between them from the beginning.

Chapter 1

"**M**onkey butt," he heard her whisper from behind him, feeling the soft weight of her hand lying hesitantly, for the briefest of seconds, on his elbow. Without missing a beat in his conversation with one of his vice presidents, he reached out and found that hand—unerringly, somehow—using his careful but firm grip to slowly maneuver her so that she was standing beside him, easing her out of her comfort zone a bit, deliberately, but providing a safe place next to him and his warmth and strength to back it up as he slid his arm around her waist and drew her closer against him.

"Erin, have you met my best girl? This is Madeleine Nickerson. Maddie, this is my newest VP, Erin Porter."

Maddie forced herself to properly shake the hand that was offered, knowing that he knew how much she didn't want to do that and feeling him squeeze her just a bit, showing his support in recognition of that fact.

"It's very nice to meet you," she murmured softly, meeting the other woman's eyes briefly before looking away, feeling like a troll standing with a Disney Prince and Princess.

"Oh, wow, you're Maddie! I've heard a lot about you." Her broad smile seemed genuine.

"My condolences." The response slipped from her lips automatically as the man next to her frowned slightly at her tendency towards self-deprecation.

But Erin laughed. "Oh, no, everyone loves you, and we all know how special you are to Zar. He sings your praises all day, every day."

Was that a blush on her best friend's tanned, sexily stubbled cheeks? It was hard to tell in this light, but she thought so. "Then your ears must be hurting—he's violently tone deaf—and you must also be bored to tears—"

This time there was a firmer, more insistent squeeze around her waist. "Nonsense, Maddie. And I hope I'm not quite as single-minded as that, Erin." His tone was a bit censorious to both of them.

Although she was still wearing a smile, Erin looked suitably chastised. "Of course not. Oh, there's Kennedy. I've got to talk to her about the arrangements for the move. It was very nice to meet you, Maddie."

"Nice to meet you, too," she replied softly, because she knew she ought, as the exquisite blonde moved almost hurriedly away from them.

Zar pulled her to stand in front of him, holding onto her hands when she would have reclaimed them and making her feel like a three year old standing in front of her stern Daddy, especially considering how much taller he was than she.

"Don't say it," she whined, twisting back and forth nervously, although she had no hopes of freeing her hands unless he allowed it, and she knew him well enough to know he wouldn't.

The man who was looking down at her didn't think she was aware of how much she did actually look like a little girl

who was nervously shifting on her feet, anticipating a spanking.

One of those eyebrows rose. "I don't think I have to, do I? You already know what I'm going to say about what you just said."

"I do, but that doesn't mean I have to agree with it," she asserted bravely, with a distinct pout.

He looked sternly down at her for a few seconds longer, considering giving her a bit of a lecture about talking herself down, but upon gazing at her dejected little face, he decided to forego it in favor of kissing her hands instead. "So, monkey butt?" Zar repeated the phrase they used when one or the other of them wanted to get the hell out of Dodge. "Are you sure? Have you had anything to eat? Circulated around a bit? Or did you just arrive and find me?"

Avoiding his eyes, Maddie answered a question with another question, "Why do you insist on asking me questions that you already know the answer to?"

Zar sighed. He was a social animal, which was one of the things that had helped him be reasonably successful in business—just over thirty-five and the head of an up and coming Internet concern. Not that money mattered much to him, one way or the other, but he probably wouldn't have to worry about it for quite some time, especially since he lived frugally, anyway. Those areas of his life—his career and finances—were taken care of, if not any other areas of his life, really. Yet.

He and Maddie had met in college, through his myriad friends and her small handful of them, somehow, and, although they were very different people in a lot of ways, they had clicked in other, more important ones.

Balthazar Rochon didn't come from money—and he'd kind of proven that he didn't really need to—but he did come from a wonderfully loving, stable family, who, although they loved to tease each other incessantly, were always fully

supportive of each other. He had a younger sister, whom he adored, and both of his parents were still alive. The first thing he'd done when he'd made any money at all was see to it that his kid sister went to the best of schools and that his mom and dad now lived in much more splendor than they had been able to afford while he was growing up, not that he'd ever felt the lack in any way.

Unfortunately, there was almost nothing about Zar's upbringing that Madeleine could relate to. She had two half-siblings and an addict mother who hadn't bothered to care for any of them, her, least of all. Her neglect of her children was so stark that the families of their fathers had stepped in and taken them from her "care", such as it was, heartlessly leaving Maddie alone with her mother, who didn't know who her father even was, so no such fairy tale rescue was going to happen for her.

She became her mother's mother, caretaking for the both of them practically from the moment she'd become sentient, never knowing when she left for school each day whether she was going to come home to an empty apartment while her mother was off on a bender, or whether she'd have to call 911 because her mother was breathing so shallowly from the drugs she'd taken that Maddie was concerned she might die.

But having learned to be both resourceful and responsible from an early age hadn't helped her avoid the more unsavory things that were visited on her by the circumstances in which she'd grown up. The people—men—her mother often brought home with her were hardly the paternal kind. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Maddie was strong, though, and smart. She liked school and did well in it, making the conscious decision at a horrifyingly early age that she *was* going to go to school—no matter what condition her mother was in.

She wasn't at the top of her class when she graduated high

school, but she was darned close, and her grades were good enough to win her a scholarship to a reasonably good school. She'd had a job—of some sort—since before she was legally able to, saving as much of her money as she could and working her way through college, too, to earn a degree in education.

She knew that being a teacher wasn't going to make her rich, but she was more than okay with that. It was a stable, steady income with pretty good benefits, and that was very important to her after her erratic upbringing. She earned tenure after her second year, and even if she hadn't been doing the fabulous job her boss always told her she was doing in her glowing annual reviews, it would be hard to get rid of her from that point on, and she needed that stability. She'd never had an excess of money, so she didn't know what she was missing, anyway. But she wanted to do for other kids what had been done for her by the majority of the teachers she'd encountered in her life—provide support and education and fun and encouragement, particularly to kids who might not be getting any of that at home.

It was that deeply ingrained toughness, the armor she always wore around other people, and even him, at first, that often took the form of self-deprecating humor that had drawn him to her. It made Zar want to peel each layer away—no matter how many there were—to provide her with both a physical place, as well as an emotional and intellectual one, where she didn't have to protect herself like that, from him, or anyone else, for that matter, as long as he was around.

And from the night he'd been introduced to her, when they'd fallen into a bit of an awkward conversation at first, he'd done his best to show her that she was, ultimately, safe with him.

This evening's party, though, which he'd had to practically extract a blood oath from her that she was going to at least

make an appearance at, had been to celebrate the fact that his company had gotten a very lucrative government contract. They were going to move into bigger, better digs because of it, not to mention that they were going to be hiring tons more people and maybe even going public, to boot.

Zar was going to become even better off than he already was, and he was determined that Maddie was going to share in that, somehow, although he wasn't quite sure, as yet, how he was going to accomplish that goal. She was a staunchly independent creature—even to her detriment at times—and he often wished that she had just the slightest bit of gold digger in her. Making her life a lot more financially secure than her current salary would ever allow her to be, which he was quite determined to do, would be so much easier if she wasn't so damned stubborn about him and his money, specifically, about him spending any of it on her.