

# COLONEL DADDY

MILITARY DADDIES  
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

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-394-6  
Print ISBN: 978-1-63954-395-3

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## CHAPTER 1



"I COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE PROUDER OF YOU, COLONEL HEATH Forrester," she whispered into his ear as she gave him a quick hug, after having actually managed to pin on his silver oak leaves without drawing blood from either one of them. That was something akin to a miracle, considering how clumsy she was on the best of days, much less when there were thirty some odd people watching her do it.

As much as he wanted to hug her back, he was in uniform and mindful of how the military felt about public displays of affection, so he managed not to—barely. It was such a rarity to have her be physically affectionate like that that it truly was a test of his character that he managed to resist the urge to pull her to him. Then he snorted to himself. Fuck the military, he didn't know how she'd react to it if he hugged her, and frankly, despite how long it had taken him, a mustang who had begun his career as an Airman Basic, to earn the rank he was currently wearing—even if it was just Lieutenant Colonel and not full bird. He was much more concerned about her than military etiquette.

Even though he knew that she knew better, Carrie

Leighton had never been one for letting military protocol get in her way, but she kept her hug brief and almost sterile, for which he was weirdly grateful.

Then she moved away, and as others came forward to congratulate him and some of his attention was necessarily diverted from her, he fell into old habits, keeping an eye on her without really thinking about it. He watched her slowly fading away from him, through the crowd of well-wishers until she was on the outer ring of them, then up against the wall, taking small, deliberate steps towards the door.

He'd been amazed that she hadn't begged off doing this for him entirely, but she hadn't, and he guessed that was something to cling to—but not much, really.

She hadn't been herself since the very nasty divorce she and his former best friend had gone through. Since he'd cheated on her, and at least had had the good grace to feel ashamed about it, the only thing he'd really gotten out of it was the side piece he'd been two timing her with. Carrie had gotten pretty much everything else—as well she should have.

He'd gotten custody of her, in a way, although not quite in the way he most wanted to. Considering how that asshole, Daniel, had treated her, he thought that that was a very good bargain. Daniel had reached out to him after she'd confronted him about his infidelity and they had separated, but he'd only done it once.

In some ways, his best friend could be a very smart man, except when it came to his wife, apparently. Ex-wife, he reminded himself with no small amount of relish.

Even as folks—his sisters and friends and coworkers—were still offering him their congratulations, he began to ease himself towards where she was stealthily making her way towards the door.

Finally, before she actually bolted out the door—as he knew she wanted to do—he actually broke away from the

remaining few who were standing in front of him with a polite, if somewhat abrupt, "Excuse me," to head her off.

When he got there, her hand was already on the doorknob.

"Hey, you're going to come to Nickerson's, right? That's where everyone's going for a smallish party."

Heath could see that he'd caught her unaware, and he knew that she was silent because she was searching for a way to tell him "no" in a way that wouldn't cause offense.

Taking a step towards her, he watched her eyes widen for a split second then saw her force herself to relax. She'd been left so fucking skittish by how shittily that wanker had treated her that he'd spent the better part of the past two years just trying to maintain the barest of relationships with her. He didn't mind that he was doing most of the work. He wasn't eighteen any more, or even thirty-eight. Heath could—and was—playing the long game, but reactions like that did try his not necessarily infinite—even with her—patience. He'd certainly never once given her the impression that he expected more from her than she wanted to give at the moment, but sometimes she still looked at him like she looked at pretty much all men—as the enemy, who was out to do her dirty and hurt her deeply.

He'd never been unfaithful to any woman to whom he'd made a commitment, and he certainly didn't intend to start with her when she meant the world to him. He'd been there for her when it had happened, he'd held her hand through all of it, watching her pick up the pieces around her, straighten her back, and get on with her life, and he was at least as proud of her for doing that as he was to have her to pin his new rank on him this afternoon.

But he wanted more from her—a lot more—and he was a bit stymied about how to approach that subject with her without sending her screaming from him. She'd never so

much as looked at another man—he absolutely would have noticed, since he was very often looking at her, however covertly—during or since her marriage.

Maybe what had happened between her husband and herself had put her off men for good. Hell, he didn't know.

What he did know was that it was asking more than he probably had a right to from her, but he did want her to come to the small, cozy bar just outside the gate shack, even if she only stayed for an hour or so. He just liked having her around, liked being able to keep a weather eye on her. When she had a little to drink and let her hair down a bit, she was great fun. He had to admit, though, that that carefree, slightly mischievous girl had been missing for quite some time.

Still, he very much looked forward to seeing her smile readily again, and perhaps tonight would be the night that would happen. Maybe it would even be the night he'd finally grow a pair and tell her how he felt about her. Who knew.

When he could sense that she was going to decline his invitation, he pre-empted her refusal. "Don't tell me no, Carrie," he said softly, with just the slightest touch of firmness.

Her eyes grew even bigger at that, and he wondered if he'd just blown it with her entirely in the space of five words. He knew a bit about what she liked—probably more than he should, and certainly more than she would likely be comfortable knowing he knew—but then her ex had always been the kiss-and-tell type.

And the truth was that he'd known that Daniel had been unfaithful to her on more than that last occasion, too, but he hadn't felt that it was his place to tell her that, despite the fact that he knew it was a ticking time bomb.

As much as he'd wanted her from the first day he'd laid eyes on her, he maintained a strict code of not interfering in his friends' lives. And if he tortured himself with the idea

that he had taken the cowardly way out by doing so in her case—despite feelings of much more than lust she stirred in him every time he was in the same room with her, even when her then-husband was present—then that was probably no more than he deserved.

He'd been in combat, but he could face that more easily than the idea that she might find out what he'd known and ruthlessly jettison him from her life. That would kill him as surely as any IED or bullet, but it would absolutely be her right to do that, and he would be hard pressed to argue with her about it, although he was certainly going to if it came to that.

He'd never been a particularly religious man, but that possibility had him praying fervently every time it crossed his mind.

Heath tried to live as honorably as possible. It might sound ridiculously hokey in this day and age—a fact with which he was perfectly comfortable—but he did. He was human, though, and although his dedication to trying to do the right thing had kept him from letting on to either of them about his feelings for her, he'd wanted her desperately for a very long time, and there was always the possibility that that might well trump any of his usual more altruistic tendencies. There was certainly much more of a danger of that happening since the divorce, although he was always on the edge of being both on guard against it and looking for the right time to broach the subject with her. He was used to walking a fine, torturous line every time he was near her.

Wanting to soften what he knew must've sounded to her like an order, he continued, "I'd really like it, even if you just made an appearance. You don't have to stay forever." He could hear that he'd gone from sounding just slightly Dommish to practically groveling, and he hated himself for it.

It surprised him when her face softened quite a bit. "Of course. Do I have time to go home and change?"

"Absolutely. I have civvies I'm going to change into in my office before I head over."

"See you there, then." Carrie turned towards the door, then back to him, saying in a very heartfelt tone, "Congratulations, Heath. Nobody deserves this more than you do."

When he might have reached for her—regulations be damned, for once in his life—she scooted out the door, which was probably a good thing for the both of them.



AS HEATH TURNED BACK to join the people who had taken time out of their days to come to the ceremony, Carrie leaned back against the door and heaved a huge sigh of relief while her heart very nearly beat its way out of her chest. That was a close call. She still had goose bumps from when he'd given her that very low, deep command, and she couldn't seem to keep herself from replaying it over and over again in her mind as she headed home.

As she surveyed her wardrobe, she chose a cute light-blue, pleated denim skort with pink and navy blue roses decorating it, paired with a sleeveless light cotton pink shirt. It showed a bit more skin than she usually did—top and bottom—but Randy Brooks was in San Antonio, which meant it was hot and humid.

She ditched her usual comfy sneakers for a pair of gossamer navy blue flats with velvety rose cutouts and headed back out the door feeling better about herself than she had in a while, and she knew exactly to what to attribute that. Or rather, to whom to attribute it.

Carrie always felt better when she was around Heath. It had been true since she'd met him and had quickly realized—



with a dull, thudding, sick feeling in her stomach—that she'd married the wrong man. But she'd made a commitment to Daniel, and she wasn't the type who could simply throw that away, even if he'd given her even the slightest indication that he was interested in her, which he hadn't, of course.

So she'd stayed with Daniel, who, when he wasn't deployed on a tour in Afghanistan, was TDY (Temporary Duty) more often than not.

If it hadn't been the calls she made to various TLF (Transit Lodging Facilities) or hotels he was supposedly staying while he was gone that went unanswered—no matter how late she called—it would have been finding an earring in his ditty bag, or the flowers that his last mistress—the one for whom he had left her—had delivered to the house for a reason she preferred not to know that clued her in to what her husband was doing when he was away from her. Or even not so far away from her, as it turned out.

Most people would say that she had buried her head in the sand about it, and they were probably right. She'd never really gone looking for evidence that he'd cheated on her, but then, more often than not, she hadn't had to—it slapped her in the face. Carrie had never so much as gone through his phone or tried to get into his emails. It might have been naïve, but she wasn't the type to go looking for reasons to make herself miserable. They were slapping her in the face occasionally, anyway.

She didn't necessarily love him anymore, but if he hadn't done her wrong like that, she would have stayed married to him. She liked him—he was still the funny, adventurous, interesting man with whom she'd fallen in love, and they had a pleasant enough life together. Because of his job, early on in their relationship, they'd gotten to travel to lots of different places on the government's dime. It was a lot of time alone—and if he hadn't been fucking

different girls in every port, apparently—she'd have been fine with that.

His salary had grown considerably once he'd gotten his degree and gone to OCS, enough so that she'd been able to quit the jobs she'd picked up on the economy around every base they'd been stationed at and stay home to concentrate on pursuing her dream of becoming a writer of horror novels.

If she could say one good thing in his defense, it was that Daniel had always supported that dream of hers. She'd contributed to more than her fair share of the finances while he was enlisted and going to school, often having both a full and a part-time job to help make ends meet. But not long after he'd become an officer, he'd told her to quit her job and write full time instead of just occasionally, when she had a moment when she wasn't working or being with him. That also left her more able to travel with him, although he offered to let her avail herself of the opportunity to do that less often, the longer they were married.

She got it—he preferred to be with other, usually new, women. She should have thought about all of the connotations of it when he'd told her while they were dating that sometimes men liked to "get a little strange". Carrie had thought he'd been referring to letting his hair down and being less of a conformist.

When Carrie finally pulled into the parking lot, which was much busier than it usually was, even on a Friday afternoon, she consciously forced herself to stop mulling over bad memories that only made her sad.

As if he'd been waiting and watching for her—which, of course, he had—Heath stepped off the huge verandah, which was one of the restaurant's biggest draws, and came to meet her halfway.

"You look gorgeous, Ms. Leighton," he complimented warmly.

She curtsied, then laughed at herself, taking his breath away with her big, genuine smile. "Thank you."

On impulse, he offered her his arm, and she only hesitated a second before tucking her hand into his elbow. Heath smiled down at her, feeling better than he had in a very long time.

Luckily, Heath and Daniel worked in different areas, so although the people he worked with likely knew about what had happened between herself and her husband, they weren't a sea of familiar—pitying—faces.

They'd already commandeered three or four of the tables on the verandah, and although she had only intended to stay as long as one drink lasted her, she had so much fun and quickly felt so comfortable with the people around her—which was unusual for her regardless of the disintegration of her marriage—that it was well past dark and people were beginning to head home before she looked at her phone for the time.

"Holy crap, it's ten-thirty!"

She and Heath were practically the only two left, and he turned from thanking some friends for coming to see her looking at her phone in astonishment.

"Oh, dear. It's way past your bedtime," he teased. "Are you going to turn into a pumpkin on me?"

She gave him a frown. "Been a while since you've revisited the Cinderella story, huh, Colonel? She didn't turn into a pumpkin—the carriage did. She just left a glass slipper behind and ended up back in rags."

When he'd seen her beginning to unwind in exactly the way he'd hoped she would, Heath had very carefully—and surreptitiously—kept the wine flowing, essentially making certain that her glass never ran dry. He attributed it to just

how relaxed she had become that she had never seemed to wonder why that was, and he was only too happy to pay any amount to see her smiling and laughing as easily as she used to. Knowing her—and he did—she hadn't eating much today, so he also made sure that there was a steady stream of the kind of nibbles she preferred always on the table, and he enjoyed being able to ride that fine line between encouraging her to drink and making certain that she didn't overindulge, without her noticing either of those things. He'd always been caring with the other women he'd been with, but she brought out the caretaker in him, and he liked that she did.

Still, he offered her his hand when she went to stand, and she eschewed it—at least, until she began to wobble a little. He'd anticipated that possibility, since she hadn't gotten up since the last collective female trip to the ladies' room, and left it there for her to grab hold of, which she did without the slightest hesitation.

That was another reason he was feeling quite full of himself as his hand closed gently around hers. He took a couple steps closer to her, so that he could catch her if her legs wouldn't support her. But, as soon as she was steadier on her feet, she withdrew her hand, and he let go of it with a reluctance of which he knew she was entirely unaware. Still, he stayed closer to her than he usually allowed himself to remain as they walked towards their cars, and it was a good thing he had. Apparently, he wasn't quite the expert as he liked to think of himself as in regards to keeping her from getting drunk. The longer she walked, the more unsteady she became, until he felt compelled to wrap his arm around her waist and hold her firmly to his side, subtly changing her course so that she was headed to his car rather than her own.

"Where are we go-going?" she asked, looking up at him a bit fuzzily, but she didn't seem to him to be out and out snookered—just a little more pleasantly relaxed than he had

intended. And she wasn't resisting his efforts to guide her in the least, either, and he was very glad of that.

Reaching for the passenger's side door, he held it open for her, but she paused, giving him a very cute, quizzical look.

His response was very carefully couched in the same kind of gently unyielding tone which he'd used on her earlier. "Well, I don't think that you are really in any kind of shape to drive." He almost added, "Are you?" but decided against giving her that out.

"Oh."

She continued to stand there, looking into his car as if she thought it was a Burmese tiger trap rather than the comfortable leather seat of a Cadillac.

"Let me help you in," he suggested, touching her arm. She complied almost immediately, and he couldn't help the small smile that crossed his face at that. Heath reached for the seat belt, but she took it from him and latched it herself as he closed the door.

When she hadn't said anything after they'd been on the road for several minutes, spending the time gazing out the window, he asked, "Are you feeling all right?"

Carrie turned to look at him, then back out the window. "Yes, I am."

"Just feeling quiet?"

"I guess so."

"Tired?" he offered, adjusting the heat on her side for her when he saw her shiver slightly. It was no wonder she was cold, since she was more exposed than she usually was—enough so that it had been distracting him all evening.

She shrugged. "No more so than usual, I don't think."

Abandoning his attempts to draw her into a conversation, Heath contented himself with the facts that she'd come to the ceremony—not that he'd thought she wouldn't do that, but

still—and to the restaurant afterwards, and now she was letting him drive her home.

It wouldn't have sounded like much to most men, he knew, who prized sexual conquests over almost anything else—as her husband obviously had—but he'd never really been that kind of a guy, especially not in relation to her. He wanted more than that—much more than that—with her.

Heath reversed the process when he'd pulled into her driveway, appropriating her hand and tucking it into his elbow while he opened the door for her—since he'd had a key of his own to the place since just after they'd bought it—and closing the door behind himself.

She was standing right where he'd left her, looking more than a bit forlorn, which was highly unusual for her. He put it down to the alcohol. She was usually so strong and self-possessed that it was a bit startling to see her so vulnerable. But he liked that she seemed to be okay being a bit vulnerable in front of him. It gave him hope. And it tugged on every protective, loving instinct he had, making those impulses damned hard for him to ignore.

When he knew he shouldn't—he couldn't—stop himself from taking several steps closer to her, rather than the door, which would have been the safer, smarter thing to do. "I should go, but you seem kind of lost, and I don't want to leave you when you're feeling that way."

Carrie turned to him and gave him a soft smile that had his heart catching painfully in his throat, reaching out to pat his arm. "You're very sweet. Thank you for watching out for me tonight."

He knew he should have confessed just how closely he had done that, but he couldn't bring himself to be quite that forthcoming. "You're welcome." Heath swallowed hard as her hand lingered on him. She was voluntarily touching him

longer than she ever had before, and he was ridiculously excited by it, especially at his age.

Before he could stop himself, he took that one last, small step, bringing his body much closer to hers while her hand remained where it was, on his bicep, as if she'd forgotten that it was there as her slightly unfocused eyes rested on his lips, as if she was just discovering them. His own hand came up to curl a finger beneath her chin, lifting her eyes to his as he bent down to gently press his lips to hers in a kiss in which he had to fight with himself not to be too demanding of her.

Heath forced himself to raise his head long before he wanted to, whispering, "I suppose I should say that I'm sorry that I did that, but I won't, because I'm not."

Her eyes staring straight ahead at his chest, she whispered back without the slightest hesitation or tentativeness, "Good, because I'm not, either." She could have knocked him over with a feather.

When he would have pulled her more ardently into his arms, he stopped abruptly, bringing her eyes to his again. "How drunk are you at this moment, Carrie?"

"Why?"

"Because I want you—badly—but I also don't want to take advantage of you."

Her eyes widened, as if she'd never even considered the possibility of what he'd just confessed to her. "I'm a bit fuzzy around the edges, but I'm in complete possession of what little there is left of my mental faculties on the best of d—"

He liked that she was smart and had a good vocabulary—they were kind of prerequisites for her career, he supposed—but sometimes she talked too much, and he interrupted her without the slightest hesitation in favor of kissing her again. This time, much less gently and much more demandingly, letting his arms wrap around her waist to hold her right where he wanted her—pressed full length against him, or as

closely as was physically possible considering the differences in their sizes. One hand came up to splay itself between her shoulder blades as his mouth slanted across hers in a manner that was, perhaps, a bit more forceful than he intended, but she surprised him by opening her mouth in response rather than raising any kind of objection.

Taking full advantage of her unexpected surrender, his tongue plundered her mouth, and she met his advance with one of her own, pressing herself against him, her tongue exploring him just as eagerly. To his great surprise, that was damned near all he needed from her, and he had to work—really work—to keep himself in check, which was something he hadn't had to do with any woman in a long time. It was a blatant testimony to just how powerfully he was attracted to her.

Still, he managed to get a grip on himself and forced himself to back down before things were over before they'd really begun. Taking a step away from her really wasn't something he wanted to do—or even could get himself to do—so he settled for letting his fingers delve into the endlessly enticing, soft curls at the back of her head as he lifted his lips from hers to press them—instead—to her forehead.

He heard her sigh as she rested her cheek against his chest.

"Carrie?"

"Yes, Heath?"

It was either going to get very much better for him—for both of them, he hoped—or very much worse in the next few seconds.

It came out much more gutturally, much more raw than he had intended. "I want you."

She leaned back, but not very far, because he wouldn't let go of her easily now that he'd experienced how terrifyingly hard it made him ache—in many different ways—to hold her



like this. There was no going back from this, and he knew it. He'd never be content just to be her sexless friend now, and yet he fervently hoped that he hadn't blown it to the point that she wouldn't even allow him to be that.

Hazel, only slightly blurry eyes met determined blue ones, and she leaned up on her tiptoes to whisper shyly into his ear, as if she couldn't quite bring herself to say it out loud to him, "I want you, too."

With an uncontrolled, uncontrollable growl, he leaned down and lifted her into his arms, thoroughly enjoying her surprised, "Oh!" at that unexpected move, stalking swiftly down the hallway to her bedroom without once taking his eyes off hers.