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Darn Near the Perfect Man  
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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.



DARN NEAR THE  
PERFECT MAN



CAROLYN FAULKNER



## CHAPTER 1



"YOU. ARE. DRUNK," I declared as neutrally as I could manage.

His somewhat bleary blue eyes rested on me like the caress they always seemed to be as he drawled slowly and deliberately, "Possibly."

That was likely the closest thing to agreement I was going to be able to get out of him. Collin Somerset was no fan of appearing weak, even to me, his oldest friend.

"Well, the party's over. I'd really like to get you into bed before I leave," I said, rising in hopes that he would follow my lead but knowing better than to expect him to comply that easily.

No, instead, he chose to give me a lopsided smile, lowering his lids to half-mast and not appearing anywhere near as drunk as he had five seconds before. "Promises, promises," he drawled teasingly.

I put my hands on my hips and gave him my best glare. "You know what I meant."

He sighed somewhat dejectedly. "Yes, I do, and although I'm fine, I suppose you're right." Collin stood, slowly

unfolding all six-foot-five of himself and doing so with more grace than I could have mustered even if I were completely sober, which I was not—nor have I ever had a graceful bone in my body.

Still, once he had risen to his true height—seeing that he was barefoot—he began to wobble and weave a little.

Slipping his arm around my shoulders, keeping a hold on his wrist as I did so for leverage, I let him lean on me as much as I thought he could. Thankfully, he didn't have a huge need for me and was aware enough that he managed not to give me too much of his weight, or we both would have ended up in a heap on the floor.

If he was truly too drunk to walk, then he was better off stretching out on the couch for the night, since there was absolutely no way I could carry the man or even come anywhere near doing so.

Luckily, his bedroom wasn't too far away, and I got us both there without killing either of us, which I counted as a win. If he landed on me, even at my not particularly small size, I'd be a goner.

I hadn't foreseen the way he very nearly took me down with him when he fell onto the bed, though. I ducked out from under his arm at just the right time, and he landed there by himself, looking up at me as if he were both bemused and disappointed to find that he'd arrived there alone.

"Scootch up to the pillows," I ordered, patting his legs, frankly amazed when he obeyed me. Not that he noticed, thankfully. He was too busy furrowing his forehead and applying all of his attention to the task at hand—trying to get his big fingers to work the buttons of his dress shirt—and I was too busy trying not to laugh at him as he did it.

It was strange to see him struggling at something so easy. He always projected an air of being in charge, of being

strong, able to tackle anything. Somehow, I found the sight more than a bit unsettling, for reasons I wasn't interested in examining any further.

Instead, I whirled around, facing away from him, pretending to look for something—anything—so as not to betray how uneasy I was just being in his room with him like this, especially with him in the process of undressing.

"Silly?" I heard him ask from behind me. "I can't seem to get the buttons to cooperate, and I don't want to sleep in my dress shirt."

He knew how much I hated that nickname—from the moment he'd bestowed it on me when we'd met decades ago, in grade school, even then deliberately spelling it the wrong way—which, of course, was the only reason why he continued to call me that, as well as "Prissy," on occasion. That was the one that inevitably earned him a smack, not that he ever really noticed it, and it certainly didn't function as any kind of deterrent, either, unfortunately.

"Priscilla," I corrected automatically, turning around to come to the head of the bed, where I sat down gingerly, brushing his big—usually quite adept—hands away and unbuttoning them myself as quickly and efficiently as possible.

He wore a mischievous grin as he asked, while searching my eyes, obviously hoping mine would meet his at some point, "I've always wondered what it would be like for you to undress me, but you've never been willing to take me up on my offers to be your sugar daddy."

That was probably one of the most dangerous things he'd ever said to me. Hoping to prevent him from musing any further along those lines, I stood immediately at that, turning my back to him again. "And I never will take you up on that offer." I looked at his shirt. "They're mostly done. If you have to, take it off over your head."

I could hear him doing just that, then there was more commotion behind me and I knew he was undressing himself. The man slept in the nude—I had discovered that fact myself, unexpectedly, years ago. And I had no interest that I was willing to come to grips with at this moment, to myself or him, Heaven forbid, in reconfirming that fact, so I vacated the room and went into the kitchen.

Moments later, I returned with a large glass of water, peeping through the crack in the door to make certain that he wasn't just lying there nude. I wouldn't have put that past him in the least. Not because he wanted to make any kind of statement towards me or even make me in the slightest uncomfortable—which was something I had managed not to let on to him, I hoped—but only because he, unlike myself, was entirely comfortable with his body.

Who wouldn't be, with a physique like that?

But he was under the covers, up to his waist, anyway, so I presented him with the glass. "Drink all of this."

"Ah, bless you," he sighed. "You take such good care of me, Sill."

I couldn't help but smile to myself at the compliment. "We have taken care of each other almost all of our lives."

"Yes, but all I've done was intimidate a few assholes for you. You've, actually, physically taken care of me on more than one occasion."

"That's what friends do. They take care of each other."

He finished the water and handed the glass back to me, which I put on the coaster on his nightstand. Then I bent down to try to adjust his pillows, which were askew behind him.

Collin's arms came up and around me as he carefully twisted himself, and before I knew it, I was lying next to him, on my back, as he leaned over me, those muscled arms still lying loosely around me.

Breathless merely at being in what was still a pretty staid position with him, I said, "Collin, let me up."

His words were dark and soft. "I would never hold you against your will, Priscilla." My brows rose at his use of my full name. "But I have to admit that I have wondered why you've never seen fit to proposition me."

What I considered to be the absolute absurdity of that question made me guffaw loudly in his face, which caused it not to shutter itself as I expected and he would be well within his rights to do, but rather to look openly surprised.

"I had no idea that you found me so unattractive," he said casually, his eyes on me.

Dear God, I had no idea how to extricate myself from this situation without either causing him more offense—which was very likely how this was going to go, regardless of any verbal maneuvering I might attempt to spare his feelings—or revealing myself to him in a way that I had literally spent my life preventing, as it would very likely be akin to Armageddon to our relationship, and thus to me.

The bald truth was that I found him so attractive that he was the first thing I thought of in the morning and the last at night. I had rejected every man who approached me but one, whom I now, much less than fondly, referred to, not by his name, but as "The Mistake". I had married him in a fit of depression about the fact that Collin was becoming very serious about a woman I detested. I ended up in a years-long, extremely unhappy marriage, and he ended up living with that awful woman but never actually marrying her.

I know what and who I am, good and bad, and none of those things would qualify me to be loved by him in any capacity other than in the one in which I already, mostly happily, exist—the friend zone, where I have carefully ensconced myself for all of these years. I have outlasted all of his women—the short and long-lived ones—by being his



friend and never even coming slightly close to positing the idea that we could be anything more than that.

Because the reality of the situation is that I am Medusa to his Apollo. He is what every woman in her right mind wants—tall, broad, deep voiced, soft spoken, slow to anger, quick to smile man who graduated with a 4.0 grade point average and double majors in business and classics, a staunch feminist with old world manners who wasn't afraid to display his love of women, animals, or kids. And it didn't help that even though we were both in the middle of our fifth decade on the planet, he still looked like an incredibly potent combination of Jason Momoa, Chris Evans, and a young Paul Newman.

In short, he was darned near the perfect man. Every woman I saw parading through the very bedroom—the very bed—in which I found myself at that moment was a solid ten, some of them were darned close to elevens.

Oh, he certainly had his faults, and I knew them all—he hated to be awakened suddenly, could be a bit too fond of drinking, especially around his friends, and he was stubborn. Collin could also be demanding and intimidating if he had a mind to, which, luckily, was rare. He couldn't seem to bend his standards when it came to a life partner enough to actually choose one to stick to. He wasn't a Lothario, exactly, but I had long since given up hope that he'd fall in love, get married and make a gaggle of gorgeous babies with whomever it was he chose.

But since that had never come to pass, and as much as I tried to want that for him—because I knew it was what he wanted—I couldn't help but feel a modicum of relief about it, too—for which, of course, I felt eternally guilty. I had never, and would never, do anything to disrupt his path to love, and I would have been truly happy for him to have found the right woman with whom he could settle down.

Unfortunately, I am more than flawed enough that I have

thanked whatever God came to mind at the time for that large favor every single night as I crawled into my lonely bed.

No, I could never be what he needed, and I had spent the past years dedicatedly trying to convince myself that being his friend was more than enough for me, and sometimes I even actually believed my own propaganda.

The biggest—and hardest—part of that was learning how to keep my mouth shut about whom he was dating. Sometimes, especially on the rare occasions when he asked my opinion about his latest love interest, I had to bite my tongue until it was damned near bloody, but I knew that it was the right thing to do. Nothing good could come from me criticizing the woman he was sleeping with.

There I was, though, lying in his arms, on his bed, with him looking at me with a bemused expression. Somehow, it looked to me as if his eyes weren't quite as out of focus as they had been, although I continued to attribute his unusual actions to him having drunk too much. No other explanation was viable as far as I was concerned.

Instead of answering his question—which I would never be drunk enough to do—I resorted to our usual teasing. "I had no idea that your ego was that fragile. Do you require that your best friend drool all over you, too, along with the rest of the female inhabitants of the planet?"

I knew from the set expression on his face that I wasn't going to be able to change the subject that easily. And damn him, he still managed to blush when I said things like that, even after all these years.

One of Collin's most endearing qualities was his unfailing and sincere modesty. Unlike the majority of good looking men, he'd never seen himself as nor acted as if he were endlessly desirable.

The hand that had been at my waist rose to make me look at him. Again, I noted that those stunning blue eyes appeared

to be clearer than they had been mere moments ago, but I dismissed it again instead of realizing that that was a warning sign I needed to heed.

Still, his gaze was as hypnotic as it had always been, especially close up, and I found it impossible to pry myself away—probably just as impossible as it would be for me to get away from him if he decided he wanted to keep me there, despite what he'd said.

Just the brief thought that he might act in any way dominant towards me while I was in that position, was more than enough to make me want to arch myself against him. It was a testament to just how well I'd trained myself not to respond to him in that way that I didn't. But, Christ, my hips were poised to do that, and my entire body ached at the effort to hold myself still!

The big hand that had held my chin released it in favor of cupping my cheek as his expression changed to something I'd never seen from him before, just as he brought his mouth to mine.

Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Klaxons and air raid sirens were going off in my head, and I could feel myself stiffen. My own hand came up to clamp onto his wrist—although it made absolutely no attempt to dislodge his hold on me—and it was too late to do that, anyway.

His lips were carefully pressed to mine, at first—tentatively, almost. I couldn't help but gasp at the idea that this was happening after I had spent so long doing exactly what I'd just maligned the rest of the women on the planet for doing—lusting after him, however secretly.

When my mouth opened beneath his, he took complete advantage, holding me still with incredible gentleness that was just the right amount of firm at the same time. Every bit of me wanted to melt into the kiss, to return it with all of the

built up frustration and fervor of having to suppress my desires after all of these years, but, as usual, I hesitated.

I'd always said that he was almost preternaturally able to sense how I was feeling, and he pulled away, although not far. We were still intimately face to face, his hand still cupping my cheek, the other at the top of my head, slowly caressing my hair.

"Am I barking up the wrong flagpole?" he asked, and I had to smile at the mixed metaphor. "Your pupils are dilated, and your breathing is irregular, but I can tell by the way you're holding yourself that you're feeling wary." His voice became even softer. "Talk to me, honey. Tell me what you're thinking and feeling."

In my head, my mind said what I knew I should say to him. "I just don't want to screw up what we have." In my fantasy, that would result in him letting me up, me tucking him in and heading home to my lonely house.

That was the way things should have happened—the way they had happened between us for forever.

But instead, I heard my lady parts say for me—out loud—to him, "It's just... new, and you know how I hate things that are new."

He smiled, and any residual brain cells I owned departed while waving a white flag. "It is, and it isn't. I mean, we already love each other. We've each seen the other at our best and our worst. There's very little I don't already know about you, and vice versa." He grinned and did a reasonable Captain Kirk imitation. "This is the final frontier."

"If you start quoting Star Trek at me now..." I warned with a slight growl, and Collin chuckled and opened his mouth again, but I pre-empted him. "Star Wars would be even worse."

He gave me a sci-fi nerd's best glare. "Them's fightin' words." Then he lowered his mouth to mine once again,

whispering just before he covered them, "And fighting with you could not be further from my mind at this moment."

Full, sensual lips slanted across mine, and this time my mouth fell open naturally. I couldn't imagine denying him access for one second longer. Our tongues met and caressed each other as he deepened the kiss, wrapping his arms around me and holding me to him, shoulder to knees.

When Collin lifted his head, I felt compelled to ask, even as I knew I might not want to know the answer, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

He stopped in the act of sweeping his hands down over my tummy, towards the hem of my shirt, and said in a tone of voice that made it sound like the most profound vow, "Absolutely. You?"

Without hesitating so much as a nanosecond, I answered, "Yes, please."

With that, I casually threw away all of that time spent denying myself the chance to be with him, even if it was just this once and he was too drunk to really remember it—or worse—he remembered it and regretted it, which would gut me entirely.

Still, some parts of me had apparently decided that I could happily live off this experience for the rest of my life. If it meant at some point in the future, it caused us to no longer be friends, I would be devastated. But to know this man—once—as completely as I had always fantasized about? It would be worth it.

I hoped.

No, I knew it would be. To hell with my father—who was a wonderful man but to whom I wasn't particularly close, unlike Collin. I had spent my life comparing all men to him, and they had—inevitably, every last one of them, most especially the one I ended up marrying—fallen very short of the lofty expectations he created in me.

I just hoped that I hadn't built things up too much in my mind. By now, even he might not meet the high mark I had set for the others in my life.

But I already loved him as much more than a friend, so he was starting from well ahead of anyone else I had ever met.