

Only Her

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Table of Contents:

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two.....	12
Chapter Three.....	18
Chapter Four	25
Chapter Five.....	31
Chapter Six.....	37
Chapter Seven	44
Chapter Eight	50
Chapter Nine	57
Carolyn Faulkner	64
EBook Offer.....	67
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	68
Blushing Books.....	69

Chapter One

Dev took a step towards her as she walked by him – her head held high as always – he had come to expect nothing less from her. But she didn't spare him so much as another glance, and he was startled at how much it hurt when he was the one who had born the brunt of the damage caused by what she had done.

He knew he shouldn't have, but he couldn't stop himself, keeping his eyes focused on her retreating back as he ordered sharply, "Kurt!" his man Friday appeared at his elbow.

Leaning close to him so that he wouldn't be overheard, he said, "I want you to go down to the station and post her bail. I don't care what the amount is."

He had to give the guy credit. He managed to keep most of the incredulousness out of his voice – but not all. "But Dev, you – she –" He decided to take a different approach. "It's likely to be quite high – the city of Las Vegas and the state of Nevada have a tendency to frown on people who embezzle funds from their casinos – cuts into their tax base, not to mention the laws she broke in doing so..."

The stare he fixed his male best friend with had the younger man straightening to attention – as he had when they were in the service together in Iraq – and almost saluting out of habit before he began to back away. "Any amount. Yes, sir."

Stalking over to the hefty Lieutenant he had been dealing with on the investigation, Dev practically ran the man to ground – not that it was much of a race – growling, "You don't need me anymore, do you?" It was more of a command than a question.

That got him a suspiciously blank stare from the man in question. "I don't think so – we have your statement and your phone number, and we appreciate your cooperation."

The tall, imposing man didn't hear him after the first four words as he took his leave of the sordid proceedings, brushing off Alysse's blatant offer of comfort in favor of holing up in his luxurious office with a bottle of Scotch – of a brand that hadn't touched his lips since a few years he'd opened this place.

But it was all he felt he deserved at a moment like this. He should have been celebrating. He should have been cracking open cases of Krystal. But his victory in helping to staunch the flow of cash from his casino gave him no sense of satisfaction. Instead, he found himself aching for the very woman who had managed to perpetrate the whole thing, right under his nose.

And his hands.

And his mouth...

He looked around at this place – which he considered more his first home than the house he owned in one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in town – and somehow, without her, work – for the first time since he could remember – was no longer where he wanted to be.

Less than a half an hour later, his surroundings much more closely matched the caliber of liquor he was drinking, as well as the dark mood he was in, as he sat in the tiny living room of the first place he'd ever rented in the city. At an address that most of his current "friends" would have been horrified to know he still rented, and kept exactly as it had been before he'd made it big. Before *they'd* made it big, with their greedy hands firmly latched to his coattails.

He was more than a big enough man to admit that he couldn't have done it without her – he was the brains of their partnership – and sometimes the muscle – not that she was stupid by any means. She was one of the smartest women he'd ever had the privilege to know.

But she had a way with people that he sorely lacked – and which she never missed the opportunity to point out to him, either, usually with a sharp elbow in his solar plexus accompanying equally sharp remarks made to him about his sometimes bull-in-a-china-shop demeanor.

She cared about people – she probably knew everyone they employed by name, greeted everyone with a smile – even him, when he was on a rampage, which had the annoying tendency to diffuse his bubble of anger – and spread cheer and good feelings wherever she went, all while being an excellent manager in general, and of the cash room in particular.

He'd offered her promotions – Lord knew she'd deserved them over the years. She was his right hand man. He had trusted her like no one else.

She'd turned the majority of them down. Titles didn't mean shit to her. She knew who she was in his organization, even if the plaque on her office still read *Cash Office Manager*.

So he'd raised her salary instead, until she was the second best paid person in the company besides him.

Her self-effacing modesty never waivered that he'd ever seen, and that had made him trust her when most things couldn't have.

And then, when they were closer than they'd ever been, when he was months – probably days – away from asking her a question he had sworn he'd never ask any woman – she'd stuck the knife in deep and turned it, until she'd wrapped his innards around it like pasta around a fork.

Who would have thought that it would come to this, after so many years together, scraping, saving, putting everything they had into the business – even her, before she'd become what she had to him. She'd forgone raises, worked unpaid – and untold hours – without a whisper of complaint, and helped him build this place into the top-notch casino and hotel resort that it was today.

But somewhere along the way – he didn't know how or when – something had gone wrong. Not normally the type to blame himself first, Dev still figured he must've done *something* – he didn't know what, but he intended to find out as soon as he could see her. Perhaps he had snubbed her somehow, or paid too much attention to a pretty cocktail waitress?

But Anna wasn't like that. She'd never been shallow like that, never been possessive or jealous of him in any way, even now, when she certainly had reason to.

Not that he'd given her any real security to hold onto in their relationship, despite how long they'd been together, although together was a relative term. Sex was still somewhat new between them – still hot and raw and the reason he sported a bulge in his pants most of the time nowadays – even more so than he had in his youth.

They still didn't really live together technically, they didn't celebrate anniversaries of any sort, and there were definitely no mushy declarations of undying love between them. She'd known better than to expect that of him from the start, and that if she did anything that smacked of that, he'd have excised himself from her life with ruthlessly cold precision. Dev was deathly allergic to commitment. She knew that, and she wasn't the whiney type, anyway.

Although she probably never knew – and now never would know – that – despite all of the chances he'd been offered over the years – from showgirls to strippers to society matrons and runway models alike lately – he'd never once – since that fateful night when they'd finally gotten together – felt even the slightest compulsion to sleep with anyone else.

She kept him more than satisfied – hell, she kept him practically dead from it, in a good way.

And, although he couldn't be absolutely sure about her end of things, he was pretty certain that she hadn't had anyone besides him since then, either.

He took a tall glass from the cupboard, not bothering with the nicety of ice, filling it to the brim and dropping his considerable – if trim – bulk onto the cheap sectional sofa.

Not since that night. The night, she'd somehow managed to surprise the hell out of him – and he didn't surprise easily at all. He thought he'd known her pretty well back then – knew things about her that she probably hadn't told anyone else, thanks to their tendency to talk over their day in what started out as his tiny, shabby office with a bottle of tequila to split – no frills- between them.

But what came out of her mouth that night floored him.

And got him rock hard at the same time.

"Would you like to have sex with me some time, Dev?"

It was the first time Anna had ever seen him speechless. His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

He closed it, and then opened it again while she giggled at him.

The softly posed question boggled his only somewhat pickled mind. It couldn't be the booze that was the impetus in her case, though, he thought. She hadn't had very much, and, besides, she had a truly amazing capacity for one so small of stature.

It was the first time he'd seen her blush, and he decided he liked the undertone of dusky rose on her skin. It brought out her eyes. And she was smiling – her hand over her mouth, at least trying not to laugh at him.

Sort of.

Not doing a very good job of it at all.

They were at his place, which, dump that it was, was still better than where she was living, which had always concerned him, although he'd never told her. She lived in a very bad part of town, and he had taken to escorting her home most nights just to make sure that she got there in one piece, considering their days often didn't end until well after midnight.

Despite their close friendship, they didn't sit together – ever. She sat on the cheap sectional couch part at the top of the U, and he sat at a right angle to her left, and they shared the square coffee table in the middle, although his big feet took up most of it and what little space was left was housing scattered Chinese takeout boxes, tequila, and shot glasses.

He leaned slightly towards her, forearms on his thighs, drink still in his hand. "What happened to the idea that you couldn't possibly sleep with someone you don't love?"

Anna shrugged. "Perhaps I've changed my mind. I've been alone for a long time, as you know. I miss...the closeness." She gave him a cheeky smile. "And I think I'd like to let someone else's fingers do the walking for a change..."

Damn, he was hard enough already! He didn't need that mental image – especially if it was some other man's fingers touching her...there.

But, as usual, he said the wrong thing, and in a very wrong way. "And you've decided to choose me for your first venture into one night stands?"

He probably hadn't meant for it to come out the way it did. Maybe she was oversensitive because she was so nervous about saying anything like that to him. She didn't know what he *had* meant to convey with his little question, but what it *sounded* like was as if she'd asked him to do something he couldn't possibly see as anything but an odious, loathsome chore. As if she intended to press gang him into servicing her, and he would just have to try to live through the unimaginable horror of it.

Dev watched her face fall drastically from the usual open, almost always smiling countenance he was used to a tightly closed, carefully blank face, those usually generous lips a grim line, complexion several shades whiter than it had been before he'd spoken.

And were those tears he saw in her downcast eyes?

If she had anything to do with it, he'd never know. Anna rose immediately – although not hurriedly, trying to do her best to make him think nothing was amiss – and gathered her things.

"I-I withdraw the question. I'm feeling tired and I have a bit of a headache. You have a good night." She warbled the last few words unsteadily, her back to him as she headed for the door.

But as she grabbed the knob and pulled, it was stopped abruptly less than half way open – not enough that she could actually get through it, although she did manage to slide one sandaled foot into the crevice between the door and the jamb, as if she could use that toehold to feed herself through the impossibly small space.

Anything to get away from him after she'd humiliated herself like that in front of him.

She was small and thin, but not that thin, luckily for him.

It was, of course, his big paw on the door above her head that was preventing her from escaping him. He was applying a gentle pressure, letting her know quietly that he wanted to close it, and that he didn't intend to let her go.

And what Dev wanted, Dev usually got. Eventually. He was a very determined man, and she had been careful to avoid letting that laser like focus land on her in any way that could possibly be construed as a romantic, until now. They were great friends, a fantastic partnership as boss and employee, and she knew that he would do anything for her – and she hoped that he knew that the reverse was also true.

But she had watched the parade of women she knew damned well shared his bed, came to know him well enough that he'd told her outright that he could see no reason whatsoever to marry, and that he had no intentions of finding himself in the situation his father had, tied to a woman he hated.

She had taken that warning to heart.

And Anna had her own scars, too. She had been burned badly in her first marriage and hadn't been in the market for any kind of relationship for quite some time, preferring to pour her considerable talents into his casino. She had spent so much time there, she had begun to think of as hers, too, although it wasn't legally, of course.

But what she'd said to him was the God's honest truth. Although she'd known it was a long shot, he was the man she trusted the most in the world, and if she was going to have sex with someone she didn't love for the first time, she thought it might be best to start with someone that she at least knew well – and still liked.

A lot.

More than she was willing to admit to anyone, including herself.

But she hadn't expected his reaction. Laughter, she could have dealt with. Incessant teasing was a given. But his outright disdain for the idea – well, she wasn't sure she was going to be able to recover from that.

Given his attitude, she wondered why he bothered with this unnecessary grandstanding and heartily wished she had of a more athletic bent, and then she would have been able to get away from him, as she desperately wanted to.

Probably. At least, she might have had a better chance at it, anyway. The man was damned fast for someone of his size, and he kept himself in fighting shape, as if he thought he was going to have to face a physical challenge every day, as he had during his time in the military.

Anna couldn't bear to be in his presence for a second longer, but no amount of pulling on the door budged him in the slightest.

And he was entirely too close. Disturbingly so. She could smell his familiar aftershave – one that, when she smelled it in a store or on another man she always thought of him – his warm, tequila breath blew down onto her hair, and she could feel the warmth he radiated even though they weren't touching. Goosebumps rose unbidden all over her body, along with nipples that had been too long dormant.

Except around him.

"Move your foot, Tink." The command in his voice wasn't easy for her to ignore, despite the childish nickname he'd bestowed on her from the first time he'd met her, when the Head of Personnel – all one of her in that department – had brought her up to meet him during the process of interviewing her for her first position as a dealer.

Dev had insisted – and still did – on meeting everyone who worked for him. If they made it through all the hoops to his office, they were going to be hired. Even back then, no one wanted to be the one who wasted his time.

For reasons she could no longer remember, she had made the mistake of mentioning that her full first name was Annabelle.

From behind an unprepossessingly small desk that he dwarfed but still managed not to look cartoonish at, somehow, he had fixed her with the intense look he had since become legendary for using on his subordinates, and said without cracking a smile, "No, you look more like a *Tinkerbelle*, I think."

She'd smiled and told him that had been her family's nickname for her because of her slight resemblance to the character – and she'd been Tink to him – among other much less complimentary variations and monikers – ever since.

As they stood there and she remained stock still, declining to do as he'd asked, his other hand came up to cup not her shoulder, not even the small of her back, but her *bottom* firmly, and with no small amount of both threat and promise in that very personal touch.

He'd never been physically inappropriate with her in any way – verbally, well, that was their preferred mode of communication. They each had filthy minds, and the same woman who had interviewed her – after overhearing one of their exchanges – despaired of ever getting him to see that he should not speak to a female subordinate in those graphic terms.

But he had kept his hands to himself. Despite the succession of hot and cold running beauties that decorated his arm, she kept her mouth shut, for the most part, about them, although he knew better than to introduce any of them to her because he'd hear about them later in the not so subtle jibes she'd let loose on him any time he ended up doing so.

But she was the one who'd begun this little social experiment, not him, and he felt that allowed him a few liberties.

And, at first flush, he intended to disabuse her of her notion and resolved to take steps to discourage her from thinking along those lines about him permanently. Dev didn't think that it was a good idea for them to become involved. It would upset the status quo, and, honestly, he – and his business – were too dependent on their working relationship for him to let sex mess up the longest relationship he'd ever had with any woman -including – and especially – his mother.

His dick, however, had other ideas.

Visions of the wet dreams he'd had about her from the very beginning clouded his mind. Especially the ones where he spanked her, something she'd confessed she was into, late one evening – or, more accurately, early one morning – when they were alone in his office after pulling one of their first all nighters trying to get things in line for the next day, and had had entirely too much to drink.

That abominable hangover had been worth many, many more highly frustrating nights.

Although his blue balls didn't stop him from probing her dirty little mind whenever he felt she was relaxed enough for him to do so without upsetting her sometimes surprisingly modest tendencies in regards to herself. Getting her to admit much more to him than she might have if he had come on to her, pushed her too hard or even taunted, or teased her with what he knew about her the next day.

No, he'd played it cool and kept all of that tantalizing information to himself, usually able to keep himself from being too dominant with her, although he was not always successful in his attempts to dampen his protective tendencies towards her.

And yet, considering what she'd asked of him, the thought that fought its way through all of that Anna-centered-fantasy-porn to the forefront of his mind was whether or not he could tolerate the idea of how he would feel if he turned her down and she found someone else to ask to fuck her.

Someone she would inevitably not know as well, and thus, might put herself at risk in doing so.

Someone else she would let touch her in the ways he had always wanted to.

Someone who wouldn't treat her in the manner in which she deserved to be treated – roughly, lovingly, protectively, dominantly.

They way he'd spent long hours – when he probably should have been working – fantasizing about treating her.

Thus, his hand had hit the door, preventing her from leaving, before he'd even realized he'd gotten up.

And now he stood there, staring down at her while she curled her tiny, frosted pink nailed toes, not having moved so much as an inch, despite the hand that cupped her behind.

"Where do you think you're going? You can't ask a man a question like that and then just run out on him."

Her head shot up, eyes blazing. "I most certainly can if that man responds to my question in tone that makes me think that he regards the idea with the same enthusiasm he'd exhibit if I'd asked him to let Freddie Kruger give him a hernia test."

Ah. At least now, he knew what had upset her. She wasn't given to dramatic displays, or tears, or attention seeking behaviors of any kind, or he would never have become so close to her, but, in replaying what he'd said and how he'd said it in his mind, he could see how she might have taken it differently from how he intended it.

Since she didn't seem inclined to obey him – something she'd definitely have to work on – he removed her choice, sliding the hand that had been fondling her up to wrap his arm around her waist and lift, closing and locking the door one-handed, then walking with her back to the couch.

Their normal seating arrangements no longer applied, as far as he was concerned, so he set her down next to him, instead, and left that restraining arm around her, knowing that her first impulse would be to try to bolt away from him again.

Sometimes knowing someone really well was an advantage.

He leaned forward and handed her the full shot glass she'd left on his cheap, pressed board coffee table. "Drink. It's a sin not to drink a shot that's been poured for you."

She snorted. "Like it's a sin not to finish a bottle of tequila that's been opened?"

He grinned, looking almost like the mischievous little boy he must've been at one time, saying with practiced innocence, "I can't help it if it goes bad." And he downed his own neglected shot.

She was still sitting there, glass in hand, when he murmured just loudly enough for her to hear, "If you don't take that shot right now, Tinkerbell, my girl, I'm going to put you over my lap, flip up your skirt, pull down your panties and make you wish you'd obeyed me when you had the chance."

It was her turn to look stunned.

And – he was gratified to watch her pupils dilate at the center of those beautiful green eyes – aroused, too.