

Never Say Never

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

"You want me to do *what*?" The triple lime G & T halted halfway to pearl pink lips that had formed a slight "o" of shock.

He leaned forward, as she – out of long habit – leaned back, away from him, saying in that perpetually annoying calm, cool tone of his, "You heard me."

"I-I..." She shut her mouth before she became the raving lunatic she had a hunch he thought of her as.

But then, in her own defense, seconds ago, he'd said something that couldn't have been more preposterous.

Could it?

"I want you to come live with me."

They weren't dating.

They weren't even friends.

They were nothing more than long time acquaintances. They barely tolerated each other's presence.

Well, that's how she felt, anyway.

How she *wanted* to feel.

She'd buried everything else she might have felt for him beneath carefully cultivated layers of indifference, which nowadays could easily morph into animosity, considering what was going on between him and her aging father, who could never seem to recognize any kind of fault in Trent.

Her father hadn't been mean about it, and he hadn't really neglected her. He'd just developed a bit of a blind spot when it came to the eager young man who had become his protégé, his golden boy, and another one for his daughter, who he apparently couldn't see would have done anything to have gotten the kind of attention and the approval he freely lavished on a stranger. This, of course, didn't help how she responded to Trent in the least.

And he had to know it. She'd never been particularly subtle about her distaste for him, especially when she was younger, which had resulted in, on two separate occasions – one when she'd barely turned eighteen, and one not long after she'd graduated from college and come home – situations in which he had given her even more acute and distinctly uncomfortable reasons not to like him.

And tonight was rapidly getting to be the third strike, as far as she was concerned, especially after *that* remark.

After taking a big swig of her drink, she put it down and met his eyes. "I don't think I'm going to dignify that – that question or remark or indecent proposal or whatever the fuck it was supposed to be – with an answer." Stevie reached down to grab her purse, half rising out of her chair, but found the hand that had remained on the table neatly trapped against it, long fingers encircling her wrist, his hand draped casually, in a way that would appear almost loving to any nosey-body diner who bothered to look, over hers.

But she had no doubt at all that he wouldn't hesitate to cause a scene if she pushed him.

And she'd still end up exactly wherever it was that he wanted her to be at the end of it.

He was *that* type of person. He got things done, in whatever way was necessary. In *his* time, and in *his* way.

Always.

"I think you'll want to reconsider your stance when you hear what I have to say."

Still turned away from him, Stevie sank back down, still unwilling to acknowledge defeat. "What? What is it that you want from me?"

"At the moment, I want you to face me and calm down."

"You do realize that those two actions could be considered by some – most namely me – to be mutually exclusive?"

Nothing.

And she knew he'd wait her out until she either obeyed him or gnawed her own arm off at the elbow, so, with a put upon sigh, she did as he asked, as he, of course, expected she would, which grated on her to no end.

He was sitting there, staring at her, with no expression on his face at all. She couldn't read him like she could most people. He kept almost every aspect of himself carefully under wraps. She'd known him for more than fifteen years, and she barely knew anything about him. She'd spent seven seconds chatting with a stranger in the doctor's office and come away knowing more about that person than she did about this mysterious man who had so effortlessly held her father in his thrall for entirely too many years.

Not that he'd done anything nefarious, necessarily. He – and thus her father and the family company – had done really well in Trent's capable hands. Her father was old enough that he'd been easing out of the CEO's chair, slowly, granted, for some time, and no one had really seemed to notice, which was exactly how everyone wanted a transition like that to happen.

She bore him no ill will about that. She'd never wanted to go into the family business. She was a teacher. It was what she'd always wanted to do.

Unfortunately, he was nowhere near as accomplished or polished at social interactions, at least not with her, anyway. All he ever seemed to do was put his foot wrong, and Stevie wasn't at all sure that he was trying very hard not to.

When they had spent several long minutes silently staring at each other, and heartily wishing she didn't feel the compulsion to, Stevie nevertheless couldn't resist prompting him eventually. "And?"

"I was waiting for you to give me your answer."

"My answer."

"Yes. I told you that I wanted you to come live with me."

"I know. And I had to wonder if perhaps there was a woman – or a guy – standing *behind* me that you knew well enough to want to ask them to do that."

He sat back in his chair, his absurdly long arms allowing him to continue to maintain his hold on her hand. "You and I have known each other for almost two decades."

"Fourteen years, three months, twelve days and..." she looked pointedly at her non-existent watch.

That got her a rare smile. "Should I be flattered that you remembered our meeting that precisely?"

Stevie sighed. He was hopeless. "But I *don't*. I was just trying to be funny."

"Oh." He didn't seem to be particularly hurt by her admission, not that she'd thought he would be, but then she certainly hadn't expected him to ask her to live with him, either, so this was uncharted territory.

"If I was going to remember that day, I'd have to equate it to something more like Pearl Harbor or 9-11..."

His eyebrow rose as he took a sip of his whiskey, Johnny Walker – even in a place like this – on the rocks. It was one of the few things she knew about him. He'd grown up poor and hadn't changed his tastes much now that he wasn't any longer. "That bad, huh?"

Stevie cleared her throat. It was on the tip of her tongue to answer him with complete and utter honesty that she looked back on the day she was introduced to him as the day she began losing her father, as well as her heart – and with it her not inconsiderable libido – to him.

But that wouldn't have been at all prudent so she kept her mouth shut.

"So, you have to know what my answer is going to be to such an absurd...question."

She didn't mention that he hadn't really put it as a question or a request. Trent was one of those people who, even from early on, when he'd first come into her father's, and by extension, her life, expected to be *obeyed*.

That was what had put her radar up about him, initially. And it had never gone down since. The man was an Alpha through and through. And she had realized early on that was the kind of man that got her motor running the fastest.

That *he* was the one who *got* it running – got it fucking blasting off into outer space – was why she'd had to be so guarded, so careful around him all the time, so as not to let that show. Stevie knew that if he got even the tiniest whiff of the arousal that was always so prevalent, so prominent around him, she'd be lost. She'd become just one of the crowd of women that seemed to constantly surround him, even before he'd made it, not that he'd ever let any of them distract him.

That aloofness, the almost serene, serious demeanor, attracted women like flies to honey.

Adding the fact that he was enormous and just shy of gorgeous didn't hurt a bit, either. And she was firmly in the midst of that camp, too. He was somewhere around six-four or five – she'd never been able to really pin that down and wasn't about to ask him – with a broad, muscular but not overblown physique, but one that was unmistakably masculine. She shifted uneasily in her chair, remembering that was especially true when he was wearing a Speedo, classically Y-shaped, chest muscles lightly covered with hair, tanned and toned, and filling out the religion-revealing suit to a positively obscene extent.

But tonight, he was in one of his usual expensively tailored business suits that clung in all the right spots and had her shifting uneasily in her chair all evening. His sometimes-unruly mop of hair – somewhere between black and brown with just the slightest bits of gray starting to fleck his temples – was nicely tamed, and damned if he didn't have the most wonderfully defined jaw line when it was accented by such a closely trimmed beard.

If he just smiled more, he'd be absolutely GQ gorgeous, not that that one deficit deprived him of female companionship in any way.

"I know your first impulse was to run away from me, but then you've always done that. Although I have to admit, I was hoping that, by now, at least, you would've become somewhat comfortable around me."

There was no question posed, so Stevie took a page from his book and kept her mouth shut, for a change. Unlike him, she wasn't known for being calm, cool and collected. Taking the big last swallow of her drink, she held it up with her free hand, mentally counting the seconds before their almost too attentive waiter lifted it out of her hand.

"May I get you another?"

"Yes," she answered immediately.

"No," Trent countered softly at the same time.

And there was no doubt in her mind that, even though the young man left with her empty glass, he would *not* be returning with a filled one.

High handed bastard.

"So what could I do that would get you to accept my suggestion?" he asked, squeezing her captive hand gently.

Stevie's eyebrow rose as she snorted a bit. "How long did you say you have?"

He smiled in a way that let her know he didn't find what she'd said all that amusing.

Still, any kind of smile on that face...damn...was a horrendous distraction, making Stevie cross one leg over the other, clamping her thighs tightly together in self-defense, wishing she'd worn a pad or something – even though she had no real reason to – because she didn't want to leave a big wet spot on the seat.

Why did she have to be attracted to this man? Why couldn't she just hate him for stealing her father away from her and leave it at that?

"And what if I had what you might consider to be a valid impetus for it?"

Stevie'd had just about enough of this ridiculous conversation. There was nothing he could say that would get her to agree to live with him, in any capacity. And she had no delusions that he was suggesting any kind of platonic relationship.

He was entirely too highly sexed for that, if the sheer number of women he'd purportedly fucked was anything to judge by, and granted, it might well not be. But she'd been horrendously jealous – and just as horrendously mad at herself for being so – of each and every one of them.

There had, however, as far as she knew, been a suspicious lack of long-term relationships in that considerable cadre of females. He'd dated a few women a couple of times, but he seemed to favor one-night stands. Another point against him in her book, although nothing seemed to offset how weak her knees got every time she was around him, or how her nipples peaked as if begging him to touch them...even now...

"Listen, asshole..."

"Language, Stevie."

Just her name, whispered, really, in quiet warning.

But it was enough to make her butt start tingling in remembrance, knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt that she didn't want to give this man even the tiniest reason to think he needed to correct her, because she knew just how he'd accomplish that—in the most painful, most humiliating manner possible.

He'd done it before, and she knew he wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

Hell, her father had practically given him his blessing to do it as often as he saw fit when she'd made the mistake of running to him – her bottom still stinging like mad – to tell him to fire the bastard on the spot the first time he'd done it to her.

The old man had laughed in her face, saying it was about time someone had taken her in hand.

Hating her fears and her desires, and the way they fed off each other when he was around, she nonetheless began again, minus the vulgarity. "I don't know what kind of game you think you're playing."

"Your father is dying, Stevie."

That brought her up short, like nothing else on the planet could have. She sat there, thunderstruck, willing herself not to cry in front of him, biting her lip and staring at her plate.

"I'm sorry to have blurted it out like that." He sighed with something as close to regret as she'd ever heard from him, but then he'd also turned the hand he held over to stroke the inside of her wrist with infinite care, the pad of his big thumb brushing her pulse, stroking her in a manner she found both soothing and teasing at the same time.

Damn him!

"It's not imminent, but it is terminal, and he didn't want you to know; he didn't want to worry you. He has cancer, and it's inoperable. The doctors say he has about twelve to eighteen months, perhaps two years to live, if he's lucky. Six to nine if he's not."

The tears would not be stemmed, but then she was crying them in front of the person in this world that she least wanted to show any weakness to.

"I only told you because I think that there's something that you – that we – could do to make him very happy before he dies."

* * *

Her head snapped up, and he watched those beautiful auburn waves shine in the light. She really was beautiful. Not classically, perhaps, but to him, she was beyond compare.

And he knew as surely as he knew his name that she hated him with a red-hot passion. One he hoped might have developed into something else by now, but sadly, it hadn't, which was partly his own fault, he acknowledged. He'd been too busy trying to save her father's company from the morass it had been in when he was brought on board to put much, if any, time into courting her properly.

And now, it was down to the wire and he was finding his hand pressed, which was not the way he'd wanted to approach her when he was finally able to do so without a thousand other things pulling him away from her.

But he was feeling pressed enough to make that outrageous suggestion that she was sure to turn down, but he felt he had to make it.

"Do you love your father?" he asked suddenly, and he could feel her hand start beneath his where he continued to keep possession of it.

She tugged against the restriction, and, inclining his head just a bit, he lifted his hand from hers. She reclaimed it immediately, looking it over as if she thought he had compromised it somehow – just as he'd expect her to do.

"That's a stupid question. Of course I do."

"But not enough to make a bit of a personal sacrifice for him, in order to make his last months – however many there are – happier? Despite, I might add, the sacrifices *he* has made for *you*?"

Stevie stiffened, understandably. He was pressing all the right buttons, and she was just as surprised at his words as she was ashamed. "What, exactly, did you have in mind?"

He gave her a look she didn't like at all. "You already know."

Stevie pursed her lips. "You want me to go live with you all of a sudden? What good will that do for Daddy?"

He gave her a startled look. "Your father would love for us to get together. It would be the culmination of his dream. He's giving me the business, as you know."

"I do." It was no skin off her nose at all. She bore him no resentment about it whatsoever. In fact, she was glad that the business that bore her family name was going to continue, because she most certainly couldn't have run it herself.

"And, if you and I married... It seemed as if the last of the sentence was dragged out of him, "It wouldn't have to be forever. We could," he paused slightly. "Divorce after...after..."

"Married!" she snorted. "Not fucking likely."

Trent fiddled with his remaining utensils in an uncharacteristically nervous manner. "You're willing to dismiss his potential happiness that easily, then. I must admit I'm quite surprised, but then, the decision is, of course, ultimately yours."

"Damned straight it is. This isn't the Middle fucking Ages where he can sell me or give me away to you in exchange for the business or any other such nonsense."

"I won't tell you again to watch your language, Stevie."

She glared at him, and he just gave her that Zen-like expression right back.

"I want to make it clear to you that your father knows absolutely nothing about what I'm apparently botching up badly here." His eyes darted away from hers for a second, then back again, "He knows nothing about my proposal to you. If he did, he'd probably be as horrified about it as you obviously are. But your father has been wonderful to me, and I would like – I would love – to give him something meaningful in return for everything he's done for me. He loves you."

Stevie couldn't help giving a soft snort at that.

Trent persisted, understanding the underlying hurt feelings that caused her to doubt that statement. "He does. I know you don't choose to believe it, but he does, and he loves me, too. He understands and is even grateful that you recognized at an early age the business wasn't going to be your path. I was lucky enough that it was mine and that he saw whatever it was he saw in me, enough to take me on even before I'd gotten my undergraduate degree."

Trent paused to clear his throat and take another swig of his drink.

When Stevie's eyes flitted to his, she would have sworn she saw the added sheen of tears and she could not have been any more shocked. That slight brightness was more emotion than she could ever remember seeing him display in all the years she'd known him.

The great Trent Lazenby was a hair's breadth from crying?

The millennium had been reached! He *was* a real boy after all!

Well, sort of, anyway.

"Frankly, Stevie, he's the closest thing to a father I've ever known. I know this is what he wants because he's mentioned it on occasion that he has always regretted that there was – is – such distance and animosity between us, and that he would have loved it if we had fallen for each other. He even waxed poetic once, when he'd had entirely too much to drink, about how he wished the company could continue through us and through our children."

"So your solution to that is what? For us to pretend to fall in love for his benefit? You don't think he'd see through it every time I flinched whenever you touched me?"

Wow, how come she'd never seen that muscle jumping in his jaw?

He caught her staring at him, his eyes locking theirs together somehow. "Oh, but that's just it." Trent leaned forward, his gaze never moving from hers and whispering so quietly, she almost automatically had to lean forward, too, just to hear it, rasping from low in his chest, "You see, I don't think you would. In fact, I think it might well be that the exact opposite would occur."

* * *

For the second time that night, Stevie felt her mouth falling open in an entirely uncouth fashion, so much so that she had to consciously click it closed.

Her mind was racing, and so was her body.

And he hadn't even touched her.

Yet.

Clearly, that was what he intended, though.

Clearly, that was what he meant by that not so cryptic little remark.

Wasn't it?

That he knew she responded to him on a very basic level, one she'd done everything she could to hide from everyone in her life, most particularly him.

Best she just nip this – this whatever it was – in the bud entirely. Shut it down. Tell him emphatically, leaving no room for doubt, that there was absolutely no way she was going to...

His hand covered hers again, and when she tugged, she found it was just as trapped as it had been before.

Retaining possession of it with alarming ease, Trent turned it over, rubbing his thumb, this time, over the very center of her palm while he spoke to her in a voice that belonged in the lusty recesses of a darkly lit, obviously well used boudoir, not a public restaurant. "I recognize and even like to think I understand your animosity towards me, Stevie. I do. I don't condone it when you act disrespectfully towards me, as you've found out firsthand a couple of times." He smiled softly as her entire body flushed so hot she thought she was going to pass out. "But I know from whence it hails, and I can't say as I blame you, really. If the situations were reversed, I don't think I would have acted as overall well as you have.

"But we have the chance, you and I, to do something wonderful for your father. To let him see a dream come to fruition that I know he's had since he met me, even if he doesn't see any progeny before..." He trailed off, not wanting to put too fine a point on it.

Stevie didn't know what to say. What *could* she say, beyond questioning his sanity?

Just for shits and giggles, though, her agile mind decided to play along.

"If I agree to this, and I'm not at all saying that I would, ever, ever do so, then we could just...play house, for his benefit, right? I mean, he would never have to know that we slept in separate bedrooms."

Another smile that she did not like to see him wearing. They didn't quite fit the definition at all. Not at all. This one sent shivers up her spine, and not the good kind, that would ward her away from him, but the kind that made her wonder just what was really on his mind, and if it was the thought of her, splayed naked on his bed, bound hand and foot and waiting for him to...

"He would know because I would touch you and you would, as you mentioned, flinch away. No, nothing would work but that we actually become a couple."

She was so shocked when he finally spelled it out to her that he was easily able to capture her other wrist, too.

"Sleep with me tonight, Stevie. All I ask is that you give me one night to convince you that..."

Dear God. How many times had she masturbated to just this type of scenario, safe and secure, alone and lonely, in the knowledge that it would never, ever come true?

"That what? That you like to hit women? I already *know* that, Trent."

He sat up, just a bit, just enough to lean over the table and rasp something huskily that made her whole body seize.

"That I can make you scream for an entirely *different* reason than I have before, Stevie. And what's more, I think you know it, too."