

Darcee's Temptation

Fiction

Merril Mushroom

2006

Darcee began to realize she was in serious trouble, that notions of rebellion were growing beyond her control, during the President's speech. She and her co-workers were crowded together in the workplace auditorium for mandatory daily socialization, all eyes on the huge teevee screen, watching the image of Our Benevolent Leader, the President of GovCentral. He was flinging words to his public like great faux pearls that promised nothing beneath their shiny surfaces; yet the people were scooping them up through their ears and stringing them in memory to recall when they needed something to believe in.

Behind the President, a backdrop of perfectly coordinated color patterns was combined with carefully orchestrated music. This stimulated the people's senses, causing the release of specific hormones that plucked the strings of their emotions. Those watching the teevee expressed their feelings vigorously—shouting, weeping, laughing, cheering—as they responded to the experience of light and sound that had been engineered so meticulously by media technicians in order to set the appropriate mood of the moment.

Ordinarily, Darcee would have been among those who were so influenced, would have been one with them in her attentions and responses to the screen; but something had happened to her three days earlier, something she never could have anticipated, something which had captured all her attention and caused her to think and speculate in ways she never had done before, so that never again would her life be the same. And this was on her mind.

She glanced sideways at her co-workers. They were all neatly dressed in their uniforms with the strap of their Phone holsters properly showing at the vees of their collars in compliance with the law, watching the screen, eager for the next show. Darcee usually looked forward to this part of the workday, when all employees were required to take a twenty minute break from their jobs, coming out from cubicles to tend to their physical needs, then assembling in the auditorium to watch the teevee together. This was the minimum required human contact under GovCentral's laws of socialization, and, for some, this was the only time ever that they spent in the company of other people.

Darcee actually enjoyed spending some brief time with others. She earned extra points by having after-work dates with co-workers but spent as little time as possible in the outside world. She met her dates in the safety of her home. She used her Phone to place orders for delivery to her home of most items she needed to live. She went outside only to travel to her workplace and back, and only because such trips were required by her employers. People who did their work from their domiciles and never went outside at all tended to develop anti-social psychological problems that sometimes flared into violent behavior, and then they had to be put down, which was a waste of an otherwise perfectly good worker. Although Darcee obediently made these required trips, this was very difficult for her, unlike mingling with her fellow employees in the security of their auditorium. During the journey between her home and workplace, she was forced to be among strangers. She constantly was exposed to the nearness of street persons, especially those of the underclass who had to be outside—some, even, who wanted to be outside. Being among these people caused Darcee to feel anxiety that sometimes bordered on panic and was relieved only

when she reached the safety of her cubicle at work or her solitude at home. But that was before the incident which changed her life, the experience she had three days earlier.

Three days earlier, while on her way to work, Darcee had been stricken by an attack of diarrhea. She had no choice but to stop at a public restroom, something she had not done since she was a small child when her mother took her. An underclasswoman was exiting a stall, and Darcee stopped in the doorway, afraid to go further. All her stereotypes about public restrooms in general and underclasspeople in particular came flooding in on her. She recalled chilling tales told by her mother when Darcee was young, tales designed to frighten children into obedience, tales of what might happen to a middle-classer who went into a public restroom—how one never could know what sort of pervert might be lurking there nor what they might do to the unwary. But the woman made no attempt to molest Darcee. She cleaned her hands, fixed her hair, adjusted her clothing, and went out the door. But before she was gone, Darcee had seen the strange and awful sight.

As though released from a spell, Darcee dashed into a stall to take care of her need. When she finally was relieved enough to relax a bit, she replayed the image of the underclasswoman in her memory to confirm what she thought she had seen in that one brief instant of staring—one brief instant when Darcee could not help but glimpse the woman's Phone holster as she adjusted her clothing. Darcee was sure the holster had been empty. The underclasswoman was not wearing her Phone! Under the law, she was a criminal. People were required to wear their Phones at all times to maintain contact with GovCentral. That law was for the good of the people, to keep everyone safe. Worse yet, the woman was wearing an empty holster, adding intent-to-deceive to the crime of Phonelessness. Worst of all, the woman had seen Darcee notice and looked her directly in the face, her green eyes unmistakably flashing a message. But Darcee didn't understand what the message could have been, and then, the woman was gone, leaving Darcee's emotions a tangle of revulsion, attraction, curiosity, and terror. The piercing gaze of those green eyes with their mysterious message had haunted Darcee's thoughts ever since.

Darcee snapped back to present-time reality. She was in the auditorium at her workplace watching teevee with her co-workers. She was safe. There was no underclasswoman here. People were wearing their Phones. The screen was showing close-up views of the current massacre in Zandibia. Behind the scenes of dismembered bodies, soft music played, and Darcee knew by her own emotional response that the spectrum of light from the screen and the sound of the music were manipulating her nervous system, causing her, along with the others, to feel grateful that they, themselves, were not in Zandibia, that they were safe and secure in the arms of the government of the great nation in which they lived, and that they owed their everlasting loyalty and allegiance to GovCentral and their President.

Suddenly, she realized that Dean was standing close to her and rubbing up against her. They occasionally dated, so the contact was okay, though not the best of manners; but no one could accuse Dean of having the best of manners. "Hey," Dean whispered against the side of her head, "want a date tonight?"

"Sure," Darcee whispered back, wondering if this would be considered consensual fraternizing were they to be overheard. "My place?"

"Of course." Every time Dean and Darcee dated, they always went to Darcee's place. That way, Darcee could order the food and Dean could freeload. Darcee didn't mind. She was never without enough to eat, the sex was okay, and Dean was fairly tolerable.

Now, the teevee was showing a commercial for the latest in furniture, a chair custom-designed to provide the most comfort possible for any individual. The emotional overtones emanating from the ad were of deservingness and entitlement, of being kind to oneself; of desiring to buy oneself this wonderful new piece of furniture. Again, Darcee's attention strayed. She looked around at her co-workers. Many were fondling their Phones, showing at the vees of shirt collars. The sense of security thanks to GovCentral was almost palpable. Darcee's hand fell upon her own Phone, and she experienced the usual rush of relief that always filled her when she touched it. Even though she knew that this feeling was chemically induced by the material of the holster itself; she trusted it, depended on it, sometimes actually craved it. This sense of well-being was enhanced by the knowledge that friends and loved ones were only a Phone call away, and were she ever to be in need, her Phone immediately could summon those who would help her. She could be located and identified at any time and under any circumstances by her Phone number, and she was comfortable in her trust that no matter what dangers might be lurking, her Phone would keep her safe by linking her to GovCentral.

The teevee screen went dark. Socialization was over, and the employees began their orderly exit from the auditorium. Darcee entered her own cubicle and was embraced by the familiar sense of welcoming that made her job precious to her. Now, she would do her work and earn her pay. Later, Dean would come with her to her home. She would not have to go outside alone. They would eat food. They would watch the teevee. They would have sex. Life was good. She stroked her Phone holster one more time, then bent to her job, but she had difficulty concentrating on her task. She was glad that Dean was coming for a date that night to get her thoughts off that underclasswoman in the restroom with her empty holster, give Darcee something else to focus on. She didn't want to think about it any more, had no further interest in that truly repugnant demonstration.

Darcee never before even had considered the possibility that a person could be Phoneless. Phonelessness was illegal, dangerous. Phones were meant to be worn at all times. Yet, since she'd seen that underclasswoman, the idea of going Phoneless now intrigued her to the point of obsession. She sighed loudly as she remembered her shameful act of disobedience—that she had gone back to that same restroom the next day, without diarrhea, deliberately, in secret hopes that she might spot the same woman again. She'd even peered at other underclasspeople, snooping their privacy, scanning to see if any of them seemed to be wearing an empty holster, but all of them had their Phones in sight.

Darcee had no idea what motivated her then, but she had gone into a stall to relieve herself, even though she didn't really feel the urge. She was about to rise from the pan when she caught sight of a tiny rim of white showing at the edge of the tissue dispenser on the wall. A pang jolted through her, as she realized this was a foreign substance tucked behind the metal of the holder. It was a piece of paper, and it evidently had been placed there for some purpose. A tiny thrill of fear prickled in her belly, as she understood that this was a message, a message from somebody meant for somebody else.

Darcee reached out a trembling hand, touched the edge of the paper, then seized it between the tips of her thumb and forefinger and drew it from behind the tissue dispenser. The paper was folded accordion-style. Darcee held it for a moment, then did the unthinkable—she smoothed the paper out on her lap and read the message printed there. The capital letters etched themselves into her brain before panic got the best of her, and she stood hastily, dropped the paper into the pan, and watched as it flushed itself out of sight and away. Darcee fled to her workplace then, but the three words that had been printed on the paper flashed in her memory like a neon sign:

ATTEMPT THE IMPOSSIBLE.

Darcee and Dean went together to her home when the workday was over. As usual, Dean wanted to eat right away. Darcee was more than willing to indulge Dean; she was so relieved at the prospect of an overnight date, so she'd have someone to travel with, so she would not be drawn back to the restroom again. She phoned out an order for snacks, supper, and a late night tray, then settled onto the couch next to Dean in front of the teevee to wait for the order to be delivered.

They watched some upbeat news on the state of the economy, then a brief segment of "Family Curse" which was designed to depress the parasympathetics and make the viewers morose. This was followed by a frighteningly arousing, adrenaline provoking, sound and light explosion alerting them to a news announcement of utmost importance.

"Chalk up another win to GovCentral's Finest!" the commentator's voice rang with pride and patriotism. "Almost a full year in the planning, the latest, greatest phase of Operation Sting has netted law enforcers the largest haul ever of criminals."

"Ah, it's the bust of the Phoneless!" Dean whispered excitedly.

"Shhhhhh!" Darcee stared at the screen, as it played a clip of the raid on what was described as a "seething pit of Phonelessness." The guilty parties, primarily underclasspeople, had been rounded up. They were shown stripped to the waist, left naked about the chest, back, and ribcage, to prove that they were indeed without either Phone or holster. The criminals held their arms up, hands over their heads. Then one, a woman, turned to look directly into the cameras with piercing green eyes, and Darcee gave a little scream as she recognized the woman from the restroom.

Dean chuckled, misinterpreting Darcee's dismay as arousal, reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"...shouting epithets from the Constitution of the United States," the commentator was saying, "the criminals are dragged away to be sentenced."

“You’d think they’d give up on that stuff already,” Darcee’s voice trembled with emotion. “I’ll never understand why those criminals insist on invoking the same old Bill of Rights time and time again.”

“That sort of thing was fine,” said Dean, who was somewhat of a history buff, “in the olden days when there wasn’t yet a GovCentral, and folks were struggling for equilibrium, but now, that antiquated, useless document poses a significant danger to our safety and security.” Dean leaned over and kissed Darcee on the lips, bit down on her tongue, and pinched her earlobes.

Darcee really wasn’t feeling erotically stimulated, but she moaned and squirmed anyhow. Then, because Dean wasn’t altogether stupid, Darcee asked, “Have you ever wondered what it might be like to go Phoneless?”

“Phoneless? You mean disconnect from GovCentral? You mean break the law and all, like those criminals?”

“Well, not exactly, I mean just take off your phone for a minute, then put it right back on again.”

Dean shuddered, “That would mean severing contact. That would mean being out of touch, out of reach. That would mean being alone, maybe in danger.”

“But did you ever wonder?” Darcee persisted.

“No, I never did. Now, stop the treason-talk, Darcee, and let’s go to the sex. The workday will be here before we know it.” Darcee leaned back, closed her eyes, and wondered.

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