

Through The Wall - Excerpt

By

Keri Ford

Chapter One

Summer in the south was like living in a sauna 24/7. You had to be part fish to breathe in the high humidity. Anybody with even a little sense wouldn't be outside in this mess, but Stephanie Faulkner was out there melting away, anyway.

And not for the sizzling burgers, that was for sure.

While the frozen margaritas were nice, it wasn't those either. The kids running around were cute, but they were sweaty and none belonged to her in any related fashion. Only one thing persuaded her to brave August in Arkansas for a backyard barbeque.

Parker Madison.

He was her friend and neighbor. Their apartments were mirror images, their headboards sharing the same wall. From the moaning, screaming, yelping, and pleading she heard through that wall at night, until women left in the wee hours of the morning, Stephanie knew the man had some stamina and skills. And damn it, she wanted her world rocked by more than her vibrator. Parker could do that, without a doubt. Not only did he apparently have god-like abilities, the man was built like one, too.

Images of his muscular body and all he could do with it provoked the drinking of four margaritas already—drinks that were more José Cuervo and less lime. Somewhere between salting the third cup and mixing up her fourth, she decided tonight was the night she was going to ask.

Yes, ask Parker Madison to rock her world.

And this wasn't like those other times where she was going to ask and then chicken out. No ma'am. This time, all the way or nothing.

She licked the last bit of salt from her now empty plastic cup and eyed the fine piece of hardened, tanned flesh prowling through the crowd. Yes, prowling. Parker took long strides, his

eyes always searching and looking around; his mouth perfectly kicked up in this little grin that made the butterflies in her belly smile.

Ah, Parker Madison. How had she known the man for so long and not realized all this? Her thoughts darkened as her ex-husband's face intruded. She kicked him out of her head. She would *not* have her day ruined with thoughts of the cheating bastard.

She'd rather lust after Parker, and returned to watching the man who'd haunted her dreams—both the nighttime and daylight ones. When a woman thought sex, she thought Parker Madison. The two just went hand in hand like socks and shoes. Only less smelly when things got sweaty. She giggled. Oh, Lord, too much José if she was giggling.

She cleared her throat, threw her shoulders back, and tugged her halter top straight. Serious. She needed to be a serious-sexy-woman. Cute wedges, short ass shorts and a halter top equaled serious-sexy-woman. At the very least, Jim Nolan, the neighborhood man-whore who was rumored to be so desperate he laid a girl carrying the flu, had thought so and told her as much. Stephanie shuddered and wished for a little more to drink to permanently kick that out of her memory.

As the muscular hunk of beef shifted through the crowd, she didn't need a drink to forget about old man-whore-what's-his-name. To wet her dry throat...yeah, a drink would have been handy. And to cool her blood. Man-whore forgotten.

“What are you doing over here off to the side and waiting by the gate?”

Stephanie started and glanced over as her friend, Jessie McBride, leaned on the gate next to her. “God, I didn't hear you come up. You scared me.”

Jessie grinned. “With the way you're studying something, a snake could have bitten you and you wouldn't have noticed.”

“I'm waiting for Parker.”

“Looked like you were doing a lot more than waiting. You're going to do it, aren't you?” Jessie shifted until she faced Stephanie. “You're going to ask him out finally. I honestly don't know how you've waited this long. I mean, hell you two are in his garage all day, every day, mostly alone for how many hours?”

“Eight. And not every day.” Just six, but that seemed like too small a thing to point out. Also, they typically saw each other at some point on Sunday, too. “Customers come in too. And

the phone rings off the hook. And the paperwork. Really, it would be useless to try to start anything there.”

Jessie raised her brows. “You’re blabbering.”

She stared into her empty cup. Wasn’t it just half full a few seconds ago? “I might be slightly drunk.”

“Good. It’ll make asking him out easier. What are you going to suggest? Not much here to do in town. Get him to take you to Little Rock for some fun.”

True. Apple Trail was a charming little town filled with mom and pop stores and little else. Luckily, Stephanie wasn’t interested in a date-date. “We already do movies and dinner all the time.” She studied her friend. If there was anyone to ask for advice on being naughty, it was Jessie. “I’m going to ask for more.”

Jessie flicked grains of salt off the rim and into her plastic cup. “More what?”

Just a little spice was all she needed. Nothing raunchy or overly kinky, but some spice. Was that too much for a girl to ask? She didn’t think so. She crossed her fingers and hoped he wouldn’t either. But man, if she couldn’t even say it to her friend, however would she get it out to Parker?

She steeled her spine. “I am going to ask Parker for sex.”

Jessie’s mouth dropped in mock horror. “You slut.”

She nudged her with her elbow. “Shut up. You’re supposed to give me advice to make this easier.”

“Then I suggest you make your move before that ‘ho,” Jessie tilted her head toward the crowd, “has him under her fingernails again.”

Stephanie glanced up to see Parker’s ex-of-the-week stop and whisper something in his ear. All the tequila in Stephanie’s belly rolled and threatened to come back up. Oh man. She stared at the tree-line in the far distance to settle the liquor. The tops swayed in the breeze though, making her sway with them. She dropped her gaze back to the ‘ho wrapping her hands around Parker.

She groaned. “I thought they broke up? I hadn’t seen her in a week.”

“I’m past ready for that chick to go back to college. Rumor is it her daddy’s not to thrilled to have her running around either. She keeps flirting with his customers and he’s losing

business. Wouldn't surprise me if she was shipped off to her momma's in Louisiana for the last of the summer."

Claire—the 'ho—was a red-head made of sugar, spice and lots of silicone and doctor-tucking skill. Stephanie didn't care where the hell the woman went, so long it was away from Parker. The pickings for new women must be getting slim for him, because she was by far the trashiest Stephanie had ever laid eyes on.

And it wasn't because of the cosmetic work the woman had undergone. Her nose, boobs and tucked up ass were not bad additions. However, there wasn't a doctor alive who could correct the woman's language. *Fuck* was as fine and dandy a word as ever. Doesn't mean it should be used every other breath. Furthermore, neither should *bitches* and *ass* and certainly not all in one sentence. Geesh.

The ex flattened her hand across his stomach, giving Stephanie a moment of panic. It wouldn't do at all if Parker took the woman home. Not only would it throw a huge, wicked kink in her plans, but she wasn't sure she could listen to another night of her screaming. She had a particularly high-pitched, gasping yelp. At first, Stephanie had thought Parker had bought one of those yippie dogs. Then his headboard started banging on the wall and the woman had managed to squeeze out Parker's name along with some of her favorite obscenities.

Yippee, indeed.

Parker said something, making the girl laugh. Alcohol induced jealousy churned. It was a troublesome reoccurring thing lately. With each new woman Stephanie could hear gasping Parker's name through the walls, her fingers dug deeper in her palms, and the green-eyed monster reared its ugly head.

She had no claim to Parker. They'd been friends for a long time, but they weren't friends *like that*. Being friends *like that* never even came up between them. She licked her suddenly dry lips. At least, not yet. And it never would if that woman didn't get her hand off his stomach and quit whispering things in his ear.

Parker laughed, the sun touched his slightly-too-long blond hair. She sighed. She'd had her hands in his hair before. What a waste of time as she'd shaken the golden locks and commented on him needing a haircut. A haircut. Yeah that was her. What an idiot. She should have yanked him to her while she'd had the chance. Pressed her breasts to his hard chest.

Aligned her groin against his... Her gaze dropped to the place in question. She swallowed. Perhaps she should have stopped at three margaritas.

There was a fine line between sexy and trampy. Case in point, the red-head draped over him: tramp. Her standing over to the side leaned back on the fence: sexy. In her opinion anyway.

Jessie shook her cup and loosened the last of her frozen margarita from the bottom. "You're going to owe me a free oil change for this."

"For what?"

But Jessie was already walking away. "Claire! Hey, girl."

Claire looked up from Parker and waved.

"It's hot as heck out here and getting late. I'm headed over to Michael Bill's place. Braves are playing and he's got some people coming over tonight. Come with me?"

And just like that, Claire peeled her hand off his chest and the nausea in Stephanie departed. Michael Bill were magic words to having a good time. Jessie turned and winked.

Stephanie waved a two-finger thanks. "I'm throwing in a set of windshield wipers!"

She laughed. "You better!"

Parker swaggered to her looking all rugged and waiting to be tossed in sheets. Okay, maybe two drinks would have been plenty. Oh, what the heck. Two, six or none, it wouldn't have mattered. In the past few months Parker always looked ready to wrestle naked. The alcohol went back to warming her blood. Need shuddered through, wetting her female department.

She leaned against the gate, hopefully looking cool, as Parker drew closer. He looked up. Surprise flashed on his face, but he smiled as he focused on her. Oh, the things the man was probably capable of. She didn't know a lot about sexual variety. Her ex-husband had kept things very...civil. From what she'd heard through the sheetrock, Parker was anything but vanilla.

Sex with Parker must be like winning the Triple Crown, Super Bowl, and World Series all in one night. Things she'd been uncertain about in the past, she wanted to get down and do with Parker.

And get dirty even.

Sweaty and twisty and panting for air.

She shivered and pushed hair from her face. *Wow*. She was not supposed to be the tramp here, but man, she couldn't help it. She thought of him at night when she could hear his grunts. In the mornings as his shower ran, she thought of getting in there with him. During the day while

she balanced his books and ran the front office of his garage, she wanted to walk into the shop wearing a trench coat and get busy on a radiator.

A few times, though she'd never admit it and could barely admit it to herself, she'd used her vibrator along with his noise in the evenings. Oh yes, she had. Heat flamed through her face. Thankful for the August sun, he probably couldn't tell.

His stride was long and smooth. Sure and confident, exactly like him. "Stephanie! When did you get here?"

Parker's arm snaked around her shoulders and hugged her against his side. As usual, he looked glad to see her. She hoped he was super happy because he, too, laid awake thinking of doing the dirty with her. Then again, he could just be glad to see her because he was Parker and good to her. Either way, she leaned into him as he pulled her close.

See, this was something else about Parker. Any other man standing outside in August would be sweating and smelling like pig that had been rooting around in the mud. Not Parker. She could still smell the crispness of his soap and the spice of his deodorant.

She dropped her head against on his shoulder as she'd so often done. Only now, as she'd been doing for the past six or eight weeks, she imagined her head there while gasping for air. Pictured his big, coarse hands on her naked skin, gripping her hips. His big brown eyes stared back at her and she swallowed down her fear. It was time to get this out there and confront it.

She wanted scintillating sex.

Parker knew how to give it.

Doing it together seemed the natural choice.

Parker had always been there for her and she trusted him. When they'd walked in and caught Riley in the act, Riley had tried coming toward her with explanations rolling off his tongue. Parker had punched his childhood friend in the mouth and ever since then, he'd been beside her through thick and thin. If he said no to this sex idea, she was confident they could go back to their routine. It would be a silly request and nothing more, chalked up to the fact she hadn't been laid in over a year.

Oh, and her four margaritas.

Ha! Finally having four made some sense. "Hey Parker. I came looking for you."

He stared down at her, waiting, expecting more. And...there was more to say, but it lodged in her throat. It was just sex. And it wasn't the man in question causing all these nerves, it

was the act itself. The last man she had stretched horizontal with, she'd married. Said man had since left her for her best friend and moved five hours west. But Stephanie was over that. Mostly. The sting wasn't so bad anymore. Mostly.

What hadn't dissipated was a ridiculous, nagging curiosity. This dig had started very small and hidden away. For months, the thought had remained in the back of her head. When she'd found Jake and Crystal together, he'd been doing her from behind over the arm of the couch. They'd been doing the nasty, super nasty-like. He'd had her hair fisted in his hand, forcing her spine into an uncomfortable looking arch. It had looked excessively dirty compared to their missionary sex. After the initial shock and hatred wore off a few months later, Stephanie wondered why she and Jake had never had sex like that. Had he thought she wouldn't have been open to roughing it up a little bit?

Parker squeezed her against his side, hugging her close and then loosened his grip. "Well, here I am, at your service all night long."

That was a loaded statement if she'd ever heard one. If she had ovaries worth some salt she'd yell, *okay!* But she didn't. Instead, she swallowed again and fumbled around for a polite way to ask for dirty-ish sex. She was pretty sure there wasn't one. Well, bock-bock and cluck the walk home or take a risk. She was going to do it. "Parker, I need some help."

He didn't wait a beat. "I'm all yours, doll, ask away."

She nodded and walked, drawing him away from the barbeque and the crowd, steering him toward home. Home was an apartment across the street, so it wasn't much of a walk. Which meant she better get it out before they crossed the double yellows in the middle of the road. She would never voice her question out loud once they were inside the building where all the neighbors might hear. Plus the middle of the road offered the added bonus of being able to run anywhere if he laughed. Like head-first into a car.

He hugged her against his side, gently jostling her. "Never known you to be so quiet."

Parker was right. And she needed this. She pulled in a deep breath, stopped right there in the middle of the dead Sunday afternoon road and stared right into his eyes. "I want rough...er, sex."

He looked at her for a long moment and finally he chuckled. "Funny."

There was her way out of this conversation. She could laugh with him and that'd be it. But she didn't want out. "I'm not being funny."

“Uh-huh. And how much did you have to drink?” He tugged on her hair. “Not like you to drink this much.”

“I’ve only had a few.” And she was feeling darn sober at the moment. “I’m serious.”

His mouth dropped and his arm fell away from her shoulder. His eyes drifted closed as he shook his head. “We’ve never...”

She was in deep now, she wouldn’t back away. The margaritas were a help. *Ding!* Point two for having four. She swallowed and sucked in a deep breath. “I know. I want to. To find out.”

His mouth snapped shut. His jaw tightened, giving her the first sign of just how big of a mistake this might be, but she refused to give up, so she forced onward. He had to at least think about it. “I want something more than plain vanilla. Nothing extreme like cherry blizzard blast, but maybe a little chocolate with syrup.” She rubbed her neck. “And a little squirt of whipped cream.”

Or a big squirt.

He wasn’t looking at her. In fact, he had turned away until his tight jeans curving along his nice ass faced her. The sun blazed down even hotter on the pavement somehow or maybe it was embarrassment burning her through and through. That scent of melting tar? That wasn’t from the hot sun on the pavement but her body catching fire from her blush.

Noise and laughter from the barbeque carried over and echoed off their apartment building and back to them. Which meant, their words could also go back to the barbeque. They weren’t quite as alone as she’d like, especially with a couple of kids coming down the sidewalk toward them.

Sweat trickled down her temple and she shifted her feet, kicking a stray rock from the road. There was no breeze or shade. She was sitting under a heat lamp while her future paced about in front of her trying to figure out if she was indeed serious or drunk off her ass.

Parker stopped and stared up at the bright blue sky. “Why me?”

Liquid courage pushed her on. “We’ve been neighbors for months now. Our beds are on the same wall.” He was turning. She could picture his slack-jawed mouth and yep, there it was, right along with big eyes. Not quite horrified, but then, he didn’t exactly look thrilled. She squared her shoulders and forged ahead. “Well, I think, from what I’ve heard, that is, you could help me.”

Before he could say anything, the hum of an engine revved. She glanced back and saw a truck headed their way. Parker put his hand to her back and steered her off the road, toward their building. So much for being in the street to put her out of her misery should this little chat get any worse. And one thing was for certain, this conversation was surely going to get worse.

Parker was shaking his head again. “No. This isn’t a good idea.”

She shrugged, trying to maintain this casual I’m-so-cool-I-can-ask-for-sex look. “It would just be a couple of... encounters.”

“Encounters,” he echoed with a shake of his head. “No. We’re going to our apartments and we’re going to forget this.”

She shook her head. “I’ve never had anything exciting. It’s always been just a rub over my hip, a stroke down my thigh and that’s it. And that was okay, but I want more. I want to be used and—”

“I don’t want to hear this.” He jabbed his key in the main door and pulled it open for her.

She stopped in front of him and held him there in the doorway. The blast of the air conditioning slapped her with a whole new sense of drive. She could do this. She could push through. Maybe if she put her chest against his, and slid her leg up his thigh, but she hadn’t drank quite enough for those kinds of moves. “What I’m saying is, it was always the same. Eighty percent of the time, I’ve been on the bottom.”

“Not listening.” He put his hand to her back and turned her in the building.

But he was listening. He wouldn’t be wiping at his brow and tugging at his shirt otherwise.

“I’m not asking for a lot, just something up against a door. Or in the shower. I don’t want to be chained up and beaten with a whip. I just want a little something more. I need this, Parker.”

He turned and faced her. His eyes were narrowed. His hands were balled into fists at his sides. “So what, you’ll call after you get out the shower, after just shaving your legs and tell me to come over?”

She squirmed. “I hadn’t really worked out the details.”

“You can’t just decide one day to have wild sex with me.”

“I didn’t.” The words snapped out harder than she wanted, but she couldn’t help it. He’d struck a nerve. It wasn’t like she’d just decided this was a good idea thirty minutes ago. She’d been dithering over it for months. Considered it on those late nights while hearing grunts, groans,

and moans from his bedroom. “Isn’t this every guy’s wet dream? To have a woman ready and willing anytime?”

“No. Not like this.” He looked downright angry.

“You’d have a woman at your beck and call. Anytime, anywhere.” She goaded him, trying to get a little laugh and the Parker she knew back, but he wasn’t smiling. It hit her then. *He already has that.*

Or maybe, worse. She sobered. “You’re not into me that way.”

“Stephanie.”

She shook her head and turned for the stairs, blinking away ridiculous tears. She knew this had been a possibility, but she had just... She sighed. She really hadn’t decided what to do if he said no. “It’s fine. I did just throw this on you all at once. I didn’t consider that you couldn’t think of me in that way.”

“I—”

Footsteps echoed through the old building silencing him, and had her looking ahead to see old Mrs. Colder rounding the white corner. The harsh overhead lights made her silvery hair look bluish and her overwhelming makeup like a kid who had colored her face with highlighters.

Thankful for the interruption, Stephanie hurried past and up the short flight of concrete stairs; the key to her apartment in her hand and ready to go. Too bad having her keys in her hand hadn’t helped her run faster. Parker was right on her heels.

“Stephanie.”

“Forget it.” His rejection pinched harder than she wanted to admit. Which was silly, because quick casual sex was all this had been about anyway. It wasn’t personal, it wasn’t a relationship he turned down, but it still felt like a rejection of her specifically. “It’s what you wanted, right? That’s what you said.”

And tomorrow, she’d play the drunk card and pretend to not remember a moment of it. Score three for the four margaritas. And hey, who knows, she had some pre-mix in the refrigerator—she just might drag the bottle out and finish it off so she *would* forget.

Parker spun her around at her door and leaned over her, around her, covered her. He was a winter coat and she the cold, lonely body beneath it. And boy, she was warming up. His gaze covered her face, seemed to linger on her mouth, but she wasn’t sure. She wasn’t doing much

breathing on her own and it was making her lightheaded. He'd never been this close before, not like this. Not with this heat between them.

Parker leaned in close. His mouth was just there. His breath, scented of beer from the party caressed her cheeks so soft it was like his lips touched hers. Her eyes dropped closed and then he went and pulled back. "You've never made a move or looked like you were interested in me that way." He shook his head. "Damn it, you can't throw something on me like that and expect me to jump."

"Fine." She dropped her gaze. And fine was right because he was right. She'd thrown it on him out of nowhere. They had been friends for a long time. He'd been a friend of Jake's, which was how they'd met. He'd been standing next to her, helping her bring in groceries, when she walked in on Jake and Crystal doing the doggie on her fifteen-hundred dollar couch. Parker had stood by her side through the good and the bad while Jake fought her for every fork, bowl, and pan out of the kitchen. Seven years of friendship and suddenly she wanted to change things. She could see his point. "So we're at a, *you'll think about it and let me know?*"

He straightened and swiped a hand down his face. "I suppose. And you need to think more on it, too. We take that step, things will never be the same."

"They—"

He lifted her chin. "Will never be the same."

Parting bit of advice offered, he pushed off the wall and walked the few feet down the hall to his own door. With him, he took his heat and his...just everything. Too bad he didn't take her pounding pulse.

She hurried inside her apartment and leaned against her front door. For the first time since he walked her home from the barbeque, she felt like she could breathe fully. A talk that was supposed to be casual and off the cuff had become intense in two-point-five seconds flat. With her blood pumping at this rate, she should be stripping.

People made stuff like this work. Friends with benefits for a while and then back to normal on down the line. They were close enough to sustain that. Honestly, she could go for more, but Parker didn't do long-term.

Despite his cut-and-dry thoughts, things between them would only change if they let it. And she wouldn't allow a wedge to form between them. She needed him by her side above anything else.

But she wouldn't lose hope yet for a little excitement. He was thinking about it. She pushed off the door, kicking off her heels and leaving them where they lay in the path to her bedroom. It was a step. Smaller than she would have liked. She had shaved after all, hoping for the full Monty with the possibility of an unfastening-buttons-while-kissing-up-the-stairs event.

While she had thought he hadn't seemed into it, looking back, disinterest wasn't the impression she got. Or maybe the four margaritas were at work here, causing a major case of desire fogging her memory. She stopped and rubbed at her head, trying to piece things together through lime sloshed thoughts and hoped she was getting it all right. There at the end, while standing at her door, he seemed more unsure than against the idea. She was fairly positive about that.

She sighed and hurried to her room where she crashed on her bed. If she was right, and she was, then she just needed something to push him over the line and convince him benefits were a good idea. But *you'll be having sex with someone anyway, why not me?* probably wouldn't be the way to win him over.

The day was over now. She'd attempted all she'd known to get her hands on Parker and there was nothing more to do about it for the night. Tomorrow was another day.

Oh, God.

Tomorrow was Monday. A work day. She'd be in the office of his tiny garage with him only steps away. His arms would be streaked with grease. A rag would be dangling from the back pocket of worn jeans. Sweat would be gathered at his lower back as he worked. That old Razorback ball cap of his would be switched around from front to back—depending on what he worked on. Somehow with all that going on and her desire for sex now out in the open, she was supposed to have a clear head to be able to bill-out piston rods and lube jobs.

Cheeks flaming hot, stomach crappie-flopping, and her thighs twitching, she sat up and ripped her shirt over head and tossed it aside. It caught on the lampshade on her nightstand and she stretched, brushing it off. The top drawer to her nightstand was cracked open, she knew what lay inside.

A grin stole her lips. Perhaps it was time to turn the tables a little. Let him hear *her* for once. She'd never been too vocal, but just maybe she should change that. She pulled Old Reliable out of the drawer and clicked it on. The plastic hummed in her hand. It tickled her palm and brought a giggle on her lips.

Oh, Lord. Not another giggle.

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