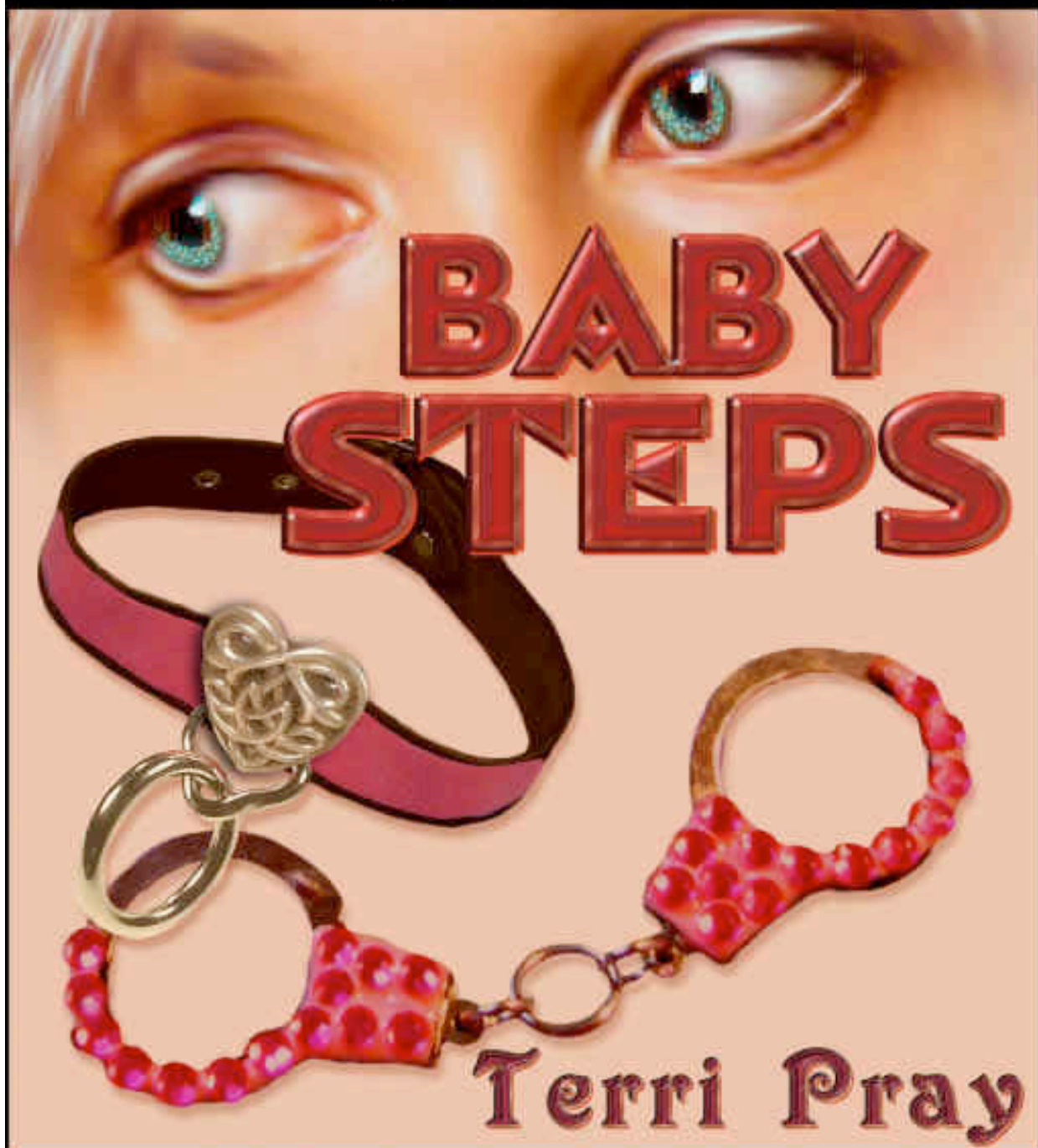


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# **BABY STEPS**

by

Terri Pray

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## Baby Steps

“Have you seen this?” He spread the newspaper out, tapping the small title on page five. “Single Mom finds love in an internet chat room. You use the net a lot these days, maybe you should give it a go?”

“What on earth for?” Carol tried not to roll her eyes as she read the headline again. She had been expecting some sort of comment like that ever since her son had opened the newspaper. The last time he’d brought a paper to the breakfast table it had been to point out an advert for a singles bar opening up; the time before that it had been the personal ads, now this. “And since when do I need parenting classes? Another two or three years and you’ll be out on your own. Personally, I think I’ve done a fairly decent job of raising you so far.”

“It’s not a parenting room, but a help room, and well...don’t you need someone in your life? I mean someone your own age?” He set the paper down and shifted in his chair, obviously searching for a more convincing argument. “Someone to spend time with, go out to the mall or something?”

“Instead of hanging around with you?”

“I didn’t exactly say that.” Color flushed over his cheeks. “Sorry, Mom, I guess that didn’t come out too well.”

“Most kids would be thrilled if their mom spent a little time at their games, but I see things have changed. I had no idea going to three games in the past two months meant I was *hanging around* with you.” At least he had the good grace to turn almost completely red at her words. “Before you go trying to pair me off with a total stranger, maybe you’ll be relieved to know that I do have a date tonight.”

Watching his jaw drop was almost as entertaining as seeing her son turn beet red.

“You...you have a date? When did this happen and when were you going to tell me about it?”

“Last night, and strange, I thought I had long outgrown the need to run my dates past anyone else. Especially when that someone is my sixteen year old son.”

Carol smiled, easing the sting from her words. "He's someone I've been talking to for a while, even had coffee with, just tonight will be our first official date."

"Not that David from your office, please don't tell me you're dating him. The man is a louse." Brian shoved the newspaper out of the way.

"No, not David." Did he really think she had that poor taste in men? "It's Michael. You know him, Julia's Dad."

"Mr. Bowman? You're dating Mr. Bowman?"

"I'm going on one date. I haven't committed to anything else just yet." That wasn't quite the truth, but the reality of the situation wasn't something she felt comfortable explaining to her son. Or anyone else, just yet.

"But he's Julia's pop. You can't." Brian pushed back out of his chair. "She's my best friend. It would be too weird."

"Are you going to eat your breakfast or would you prefer to continue to come up with reasons why I can't go out on a date after you've been trying for the last year to get me to do just that?" She reached for the newspaper, keeping her voice calm and cool. "Or would you prefer that we sit here and make a list of all the men in town that I'm not allowed to even think about dating in case it would feel too weird for you?"

He at least had the good manners to look embarrassed. "I guess that did come out weird. Sorry, Mom, It's just, Julia and I have been friends for years."

"I'm well aware of that. Have you ever thought that Michael and I are as comfortable with each other as you and Julia are?" It had to be hard for him, she could see that, but it was long past the time when he needed to realize that if she dated someone, it would be because she wanted to. "Michael is a good man, a good father and we have a lot in common. I'm not rushing to marry him, Brian. We're just going on a simple dinner date. We'll take a walk, do a lot of talking, but that's all. Nothing is going to happen between him and me that you should be concerned about."

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"So how did he take the news?" Michael handed her the coffee cup, slipping onto the couch next to her.

"Not very well at first, Sir, then he calmed down. I can see his point in a way. It would be odd for me if my mom had started dating my best friend's father." She looked over the rim of the cup as she spoke, her back leaning against the foot of the couch.

With the way Brian had reacted to the thought of a simple date, she didn't even want to think about what he would have said if the truth had come to light. There were some things she just was not ready to discuss with her son, no matter how

worldly he thought himself to be. It would have meant answering far too many questions about the sort of relationship she'd had with his father.

Michael reached down, running his fingers through her hair, tugging softly on the loose curls that brushed against her shoulders. "Well, he would have something of a shock."

"So would your daughter, or so I imagine." She leaned back into his touch, shivering. Despite the fact they were taking things slowly, she still could not help but feel nervous. "Thank you, for being patient with me—about this I mean."

"It's not something to be rushed into. Better to take it slowly, make sure you're comfortable with me...and with this." He gestured to the small, comfortably lit den in the basement of his home. "And yes Julia would be more than a little disconcerted to discover just what I get up to down here. However, she knows to respect my privacy, and the lock on the door helps."

That she could well understand. "I doubt you would want her wandering down here and asking interesting questions about why her daddy has floggers hanging in the closet." She tried not to give in to the nervous laugh that threatened to bubble into life.

"Or the rest of the toys for that matter." His hand moved fully away from her hair, the couch creaking as he leaned back against it. "I meant what I said; we'll take this as slowly or as quickly as you feel comfortable with. I know you, trust you, but that doesn't mean I'll push you to move faster than you feel you are ready for."

"It's just been a while, that's all," she murmured into the coffee. "I've not even thought to explore the lifestyle since Eric died." Her stomach knotted at thought of her husband.

"I understand, perhaps more than most would. What you and he had was a rare and beautiful thing, and you're afraid that by even sitting here, at my feet, you're somehow betraying his memory." His voice was warm, a soft welcoming blanket she wanted to sink into.

"Yes. I know it's silly. It's been six years now, and I know he wouldn't want me to sit in mourning for the rest of my life." So why did it still feel odd, as if he would appear, shaking his head, telling her how disappointed he was in her actions? Of all the punishments he had ever had to use on her, that simple sentence still had the ability to reduce her to a quivering mass of tears.

Michael reached down and cupped her chin. "No, he wouldn't want you to sit around mourning for him the rest of your life. Eric was a wonderful man, a dear friend, and I know he was an excellent Dominant. His loss hit all of his friends. How you struggled on after his death amazed us all. We kept a close watch on you, but I think you knew that. No one wanted to make it look as though we were trying to step in where we were not wanted, but we didn't want to leave you to flounder

either.” His thumb brushed over her jaw line. “I didn’t want to leave you like that.”

Eric. Fifteen long years they had been together, including several blissful years before they ever thought of having Brian. It had been a slow journey into a life of Master and slave, carefully hidden under the softer coverings of a traditional marriage. Pet names that had meant far more, whispered orders, looks that turned a request into an order carrying a consequence if she disobeyed. How many pillows had she bitten into in order to keep the soft sounds of her eager submission from disturbing their son who was asleep two doors away?

Then in a moment of pain, they took him from her. Not even through something that had been their fault. Kids, hyped up on drugs trying to get the money for their next fix, a gunshot in a crowded mall, and it had all ended. Just one moment of foolishness and her life had crumbled before her eyes. Only Brian’s existence had stopped her from curling up completely and giving into the tears, with the need to join Eric. Foolish, others would have called her. What would they have known?

He had been her center, her life, her safe place to recover from the stresses of work at the end of the long day. She was not weak, that would have been the first accusation, or brain washed. She had heard that one before now from people who hadn’t understood the ties between a Dominant and his submissive. But with Eric, she had not had to pretend to be someone she wasn’t either. He allowed her to have that softer, gentle side that craved his hand to guide her. He provided a place, a sense of belonging, where she did not have to feel as though she needed to be a dozen different people rolled into one just to get by.

“Carol, I’ve seen people in vanilla marriages crumble after what you went through. Eric would be proud of you for what you managed to do. You’ve kept it together. You still have the house, and look at Brian—a straight ‘A’ student. How many can say that these days?” His soft touch against the line of her jaw urged her to lean further into his hand.

“Not that many,” she admitted, turning to look up at him. “Thank you. I know I did well after he passed away. Just hearing it from someone else helps.”

“That’s understandable.” He sat back up and moved his hand away from her face. “If you’re ready, I think we should begin. Don’t you?”

For a moment, she wanted to cry out, protest that she wasn’t ready, that she needed a little longer, but it would have been a lie. “Yes, Sir.”

“Kneel up here.” He pointed to the space between his feet. “Face me. I prefer to see the eyes of a submissive when I am talking with her.”

Carol moved to her knees and settled between his feet, wondering why such a simple thing left her shaking in fear. It should have been so easy to do. Instead, her stomach knotted, thighs tightened, and she found herself avoiding his gaze.

“I can’t do this,” she murmured, barely aware that she had given the doubts a

voice.

“Yes, you can. Trust me, trust in yourself. You know this is what you want. We’ve talked about it for months now.” He spoke softly, without any trace of accusation. “Just focus on what we talked about.”

She wanted to, needed to, but the fears grew the longer she knelt there. “I can’t. I’m not ready to do this again.” Without waiting for his reply, she pushed back to her feet and put a dozen steps between them.

He didn’t speak at first, watching her from the couch for several long moments. “Do you want to kneel?” He smiled, keeping his voice calm, any traces of disappointment or accusations carefully absent from his words.

“Yes.” Carol struggled with the mixed emotions that threatened to have her running for the bathroom.

“So what’s stopping you?” He didn’t move from the couch, but she could feel his gaze following her as she began to pace across the room.

“Fear. Need. The risk that I’ll take that step only to have it yanked out from under me again.” She spoke quietly, wrapping her arms about her body, the thin summer dress tightening across her full breasts. “That I’ll kneel, start to submit myself and something will happen to you.” Foolish, foolish fears. Life was risk, she knew that, accepted that in every other part of her life. Why did it stop her from doing this?

“You were knocked over by a car once. Did that stop you crossing the street again?”

“No.” This was different, more involved. The emotions could carry her to the depths of delight or the pits of despair, if she made the wrong choice. He could be a user, one of those who posed as a dominant in order to get what he wanted—those dark, dangerous, frightening people who had thrived since the advent of the Internet, stalking through chat rooms in search of the unwary. No, that was not fair of her. He had been patient, kind with a depth of understanding she craved. Even now, he just watched, talking quietly, never raising his voice. There was no hint of threat, attack, use of punishment, or accusations. She knew him; Eric had known him. Despite all her fears, he was not like that.

Brian, what would he say if...no *when* he found out? She and Eric had always talked about telling him when the time was right, but that had been different. Eric was his dad, but this with Michael... This what? Kneeling, just once to see if she could, was far from taking a collar again. It was nothing more than a date, a D/s style date.

“You’re making excuses,” Michael said. “I can almost hear them from here, and more than the one you’ve spoken already.” His voice softened. “Is it Brian?”

“Yes.” She wanted to scream at him to get it out of her mind, to let her work this out on her own. Yet, by knowing, wouldn’t he understand her a little better?



“That I can understand.” He smiled when she looked directly at him. “Julia.”

She cursed, silently. How could she forget Julia, even for an instant? “They would never understand.”

“Most children don’t understand their parents.” He folded his hands on his lap, the temptation to move toward her clear in his gaze. “Brian is a well settled teenager. He understands far better than you give him credit for, just as I hope Julia would, but aren’t you jumping ahead a little? Making problems for yourself where there is no need to yet? I’m not asking you to step into a collar or to walk down the aisle with me...not yet, at least.” The smile that touched his lips was only half teasing. “One step at a time, remember?”

“I know.”

“Is this something you still want, Carol? Truly want? Or do you need more time?” he pressed.

“It’s something I want.” More than anything she had permitted herself to want since she had accepted Eric was gone.

“So what’s really stopping you?” Michael moved, but only to hold out a hand to her.

No more arguments, no excuses. She wanted this, needed it and the only one stopping her from taking it looked back daily at her from the polished surface of her bedroom mirror. Carol shook from the soles of her feet upward during the short walk to where he sat.

“Baby steps?” She sank softly to her knees and leaned into his offered hand. A hundred memories rose, fears screamed only to be silenced by the soft touch against her chin.

“Until the day you say otherwise.”

**THE END**

## About the Author

### Terri Pray

Originally from England, Terri Pray now lives in Minnesota with her husband and two children. Her work ranges from sweet romance to wild erotica, horror, and suspense, to fantasy and adventure. With several books in print and more in e-book format, and her fantasy series, Erien, is now the basis of a new D6 Role playing game, it's hard to imagine that this English import has only been writing professionally since 2003.

To find out more about upcoming releases, Terri's other publishers, and currently available books, please visit her website here:

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