

Under the Cover of Love

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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## Prologue

As he leaned against the nearest tree, he could feel the blood flowing even faster from his wounds, despite the makeshift pressure bandages he'd made out of his undershirt and belt. If he didn't find some semblance of civilization in this desolate place, he knew he would bleed out, eventually.

Plain and simple.

He forced himself to stumble on, thanking a deity he didn't believe in that the moon was out that night, and he had at least some light to guide him. Not that he managed to avoid most obstacles – just the ones that might have outright killed him – and the others who had scattered for cover as he had when it had all gone to shit, who were even more lethal to him, he knew, than anything he could find in the forest. His method of getting down hills had been reduced to falling and rolling inelegantly until he was jarred to a stop by a rock or a tree trunk, then having to haul himself up to begin walking again, but at least he was still moving.

Just when he thought he couldn't take another step, he saw a faint light through the trees. Hoping it wasn't some kind of mirage, he headed determinedly for it.

# Chapter One

She came awake with a start, to her painfully thumping heart, to the clear, cold, stark realization that one of her worst nightmares was coming true.

*There was someone in her house.*

She lived alone in the middle of nowhere by design. Anyone who might have visited her lived hours away and would have had the common courtesy to tell her they were coming, via the good old U.S. Mail. As twentieth-century as it was, it was still a much more reliable method of getting hold of her than any form of phone call. Her alarmingly basic cell phone didn't even get texts that she knew of. And Facebook was out of the question, considering that, with her tentative landline connection, the dialup ISP that was the only one available to them was a crapshoot at best and deathly slow. Even when it *was* working, there were no unrecognizable sounds. There was no thumping or bumping that would have been the result of her almost consciously careless housekeeping. She left her enormous, spiked boots deliberately in front of the door, where she could slip into them in her stocking feet when she needed to go out in the winter, but all year they provided what would be a stumbling block to anyone who decided to enter her home uninvited.

She didn't know how she knew that the sanctity of her domicile was being invaded. She just did, somehow.

She had never been surer of anything in her life and wished she wasn't.

And she also had a pretty good feeling that this could be how she died, so she didn't question it much, either. She lived alone, so there was no one she would have to explain her actions to if it was just her own paranoia, no one to tease her about it or be embarrassed in front of for having been a nervous woman.

Although she felt faint and thought she might well throw up, she, nonetheless, sat up in bed as quietly as she could, stiffening her back and grabbing for her father's old Yastrzemski baseball bat that she kept by the bed. Wishing she had left the big TV on last night; it would have provided more ambient light in what was, essentially, the pitch black she was staring out into, straining to hear any unusual sounds.

The path through the house was circular, and she could choose to move in either direction from her bedroom, which stretched the entire width of the end of the house. At least she had that advantage – she knew its layout, whereas her intruder didn't – unless it was someone she knew, but she highly doubted that. First off, she didn't know that many people – although she knew the few who lived here – and secondly, she didn't – she sincerely hoped – know any of that kind of person. Choosing the least likely route, hoping to catch whoever it was unaware, she eased herself off the bed and into her contrastingly comfortable, *silent* slippers.

*Then what?* she wondered, standing there in the dark with the bat up by her ear, leaning on her back leg as if she was expecting to swing into a pitch. She had never been in a fight in her life, much less a fight *for* her life. She lived miles from her nearest neighbor, ten miles from the nearest thing to civilization – a local combination gas station/tiny market/restaurant/taxidermist/hunting and fishing supplier/gun shop/beauty parlor. And even if she was right, nothing would happen, no one would come running to help her, because no one

would have heard her scream – even with the windows open, as they all were since the heat this summer was at least as bad as the cold had been last winter.

The possibility that something like this might happen had not been paramount in her mind when she'd bought the place, but she had acknowledged that it could happen and had done what she could to make the place as secure as possible.

However, she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if someone wanted to get in to pretty much anywhere, and they were willing to spend the time and energy to do so, then they were going to get in.

And this certainly wasn't Fort Knox.

She knew the back door, in particular, which was – as in most houses, the one that she came and went through – distinctly weak at the moment since her cousin's mountainous, ham handed husband hadn't realized that she'd accidentally locked the door out of habit and had tried to barrel through it, ripping the deadbolt clean out of the door frame.

Rob was no lightweight, and he wasn't going to let some stuck door get the best of him, bless him.

And she hadn't fixed it yet, because there were a million other things to do around the house, and this was the country, for crying aloud. Hell, this was even unorganized territory, as far as the state was concerned – it wasn't a town or even a plantation. Who in the hell was out here, besides her and a few other sparsely located crazy people?

A floorboard over one of the joists at the front of the house creaked loudly.

She knew this place like the back of her hand, and she knew where that particular squeak came from – just outside the den the back door entered into.

She was right.

She wasn't alone.

On a big, painful swallow, she forced herself to move.

To her left was a door that led to the bedrooms upstairs, but also – through another door directly across from it – to the bathroom that, since it was just her, was pretty much an en suite. The doors from her bedroom and into the bathroom were open and lived that way except in winter, when she didn't want to heat the upstairs or unless she was having an infrequent guest – usually family, who spent their time with her insisting that living alone in the boonies couldn't be good for her.

She ignored them, and in one case, she had almost physically thrown out one particularly persistent aunt who thought she knew what was best for her.

And, despite her current circumstances, she *still* didn't.

Her movements slow and furtive, she made her way – much more silently than she would have expected, considering she was no ninja – through the two doors and into the bathroom. She hugged the wall to her left that took her by the tub and along the wall nearest the doorway that opened into the same hall the den did, where she hoped she might catch a glimpse of who – or what was a possibility, she supposed, too – she was dealing with.

Her deliberate, calculated moves also gave her eyes the time they needed to adjust to the darkness. By the time she had decided to lean her head around the doorjamb that led to the rest of the house, she could see at least something, only shapes and shadows, but at least more than that blanketing, unrelenting darkness that seemed to seep into her eyes and her soul. And just as she did it – just as she decided to risk him knowing she was there, risk the element of surprise and peep just slightly around the corner – whoever it was tripped the motion-detecting nightlight that she'd put at the end of the hallway, in the kitchen. Thus giving her a glimpse of something she

heartily wished she hadn't seen. She gasped softly – softly enough so no one would hear. She prayed fervently as she hauled herself back into the relative safety of the bathroom, clutching the baseball bat to her now, not as a weapon, but more as a talisman of some sort that might magically ward the intruder off.

Because magic was exactly what she was going to need against him.

And she had thought her heart was beating hard *before*...

It was definitely a man.

An enormous man, by the looks – tall, broad, and clutching something in one hand that she had to assume was a gun.

Fuck me, she thought.

Her bat might as well have been a toothpick against a handgun. Everyone had said, "Get a gun. Get a gun. Get a gun – even if just for protection against bears or mountain lions."

But she worried that – in a situation such as the one she found herself – the intruder could use it against her just as easily as she could use it.

She was pretty sure she would never be able to, actually, shoot anyone, anyway. And she was damned sure never going to fire at any kind of wildlife.

Hell, she'd shoot a man *long* before she'd shoot an animal.

Animals cause much less fucking trouble in the world, as far as she was concerned. Men, in particular, were decidedly expendable. There was always another fool one behind him to take his place.

Well, she decided, she couldn't just stay there, waiting, dreading, and wondering. She had to be proactive, or he was just going to find her there, shaking herself to death and saving him the need of using his gun. She was sure he would be mighty grateful.

So she gathered what little courage she had around her, moved the bat back into a weaponized position, and took a step that put her entire body within the frame of the door.

Then the nightlight, not detecting any further movement within its range, went out, plunging the both of them into total darkness again.

That was when she felt someone come up from behind her, knocking the bat out of her grip so hard that it clattered noisily to the floor. The intruder gave it a hard kick, which sent it well into the hall, out of either of their reaches. Hers certainly, since his decisive blow just above her wrists had left her hands useless as they tingled numbly. Then he reached around her waist to slam her back against a devastatingly solid male body, his other arm coming up to press the point of a knife to her throat, just under her jaw.

"How many others?" came the clipped question.

"O-others?"

She could feel the unmistakable sting of the tip of the cold blade slipping into her skin, just slightly.

She hadn't been trying to play dumb, but she was finding that, with her life threatened as it was, thinking was the last thing she was capable of in that moment.

"Just me! Just me!" she whispered urgently.

But the knife remained where it was.

"Are you lying to me?"

"No! I live alone."

"How close is your nearest neighbor?"

Should she lie and say just down the road? No, she didn't think that was a good idea – she'd surely lose track of what she'd said to him and trip herself up.

"M-miles. About two miles."

"Are there any guns in the house?"

"No," she lied.

"Good." He could feel her small body trembling against his, could feel the fear that he knew was pouring through every nerve in her body, and as much as he hated inciting it in her – in any woman – he knew he could use it to get what he needed and get out. "Don't try to be a hero. Don't do anything stupid. As long as you do as you're told and don't give me any trouble, all I need from you is to patch me up, give me some aspirin and let me use your phone, then I'll get out of your hair."

The snort came out of her mouth without her thinking about it, as did her comment. "Says the man with a knife to my throat."

She didn't know where the gumption came from to say that, but she sincerely wished it would go the fuck away.

The silence that fell after her little verbal tantrum was horrible. She didn't know if he was just going to slit her throat, right then and there, for being so snarky, or if he was going to take his fists to her...or worse.

Her mind went into overdrive, and she began to go through every little tidbit of information every woman read about how to survive a situation like this.

One tenet came to mind, humanize yourself. Tell your assailant everything you could about you personally – mention kids, husbands, dogs, family, everyone. It was harder to kill someone you knew than a stranger. She had doubts about how the statistics would bear out on that, since she thought she'd also read that most women were killed by men they knew, but she figured it couldn't hurt.

The problem was that she didn't have a husband or a lover, or a kid or even a dog.

"My name is Jenna McInnis. I have a sister who lives south of here, near Bangor. My parents are both gone –"

She heard an impatient sigh from behind her and figured that couldn't be good.

He knew exactly what she was doing and why she was doing it, but he didn't have the time or the inclination now to soothe her fears any more than he already had.

He began to back up, taking her with him, of course, to the center of the room, where, keeping the knife dangerously close to her jugular, he commanded curtly, "Shut up and *don't* move." He proceeded to conduct what was an embarrassingly thorough pat down of her upper body, leaving no area of her person untouched by his platter-sized hand.

At least she didn't sleep in the nude, but her thin, short nightie was little protection against – what *should* have been – the uncomfortable feeling of a stranger groping her.

Then why were her nipples growing tighter by the second?

She'd never hated her highly sexed tendencies, never railed against the evidence of her own body's needs – until now. Granted, it had been quite a while, but that was no excuse. She should be repulsed. She should be nauseated. She should be anything but turned on.

Worse, she knew that he hadn't missed that blatant evidence, either. His hand had paused as it had brushed over each of her breasts, realizing in the same moment as she had, probably, what those peaks meant.

But then he was all business again, changing the position of the knife to just below her left breast, the tip aimed at her heart, and she understood the implied threat without him having to say a word.



This time, his hand explored even more intimate territory, after having skimmed in a very practiced way over her torso, moving all the way down the outside, to her bare foot, then up the inside of her leg. Going so far up as to take the hem of her nightgown with it, and crossing firmly over her, thankfully, panty covered lower belly.

She couldn't help it. She flinched automatically away from his touch, wondering immediately whether that might be the last move she ever made.

"Quiet now," he whispered, and she could feel the knife pressing more tightly against her, although she hadn't felt that same sensation of it slipping into her like butter, so she didn't think it had pierced her skin. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I need to."

With that threatening confession, he surprised her by not touching her more intimately than he might have. Oh, his big hand passed over her mons, but quite lightly, as if he was trying to spare her as much embarrassment as he could.

Yeah, sure. Jenna was certain that was true. The altruistic – what was he? A cat burglar? He hadn't stolen anything yet. He'd broken into her house and threatened her, but that didn't sound particularly poetic.

He repeated the same actions with her other leg, rising then to move the knife back to her throat.

Rising, and rising, and rising – damn the man was tall!

Apparently satisfied that she wasn't wearing a weapon and, having determined that she therefore wasn't much of a threat to him, he let her go.

Jenna moved away from him immediately, inching towards the door to the bedroom, but he was too fast for her, closing both of the doors long before she could get to either of them.

Then he flipped the light on, making her eyes squint until they became accustomed to it enough to wish he hadn't.

Somehow, he seemed four times as big now that she got a good look at him, and closed in, as they were, in her tiny bathroom.

He had to be about six-four or six-five or so, just judging by how close his head was to her low ceilings.

Covered head to toe in dirt, he had a badly blackened eye and a swollen, split lip. His plastered on shirt and jeans both looked as if they had been worn through a day's worth of mud runs, with the exception of a darker, more menacing looking spot on his side where blood had obviously spilled and seeped down the fabric as it went. Despite the belt he was wearing as more than a fashion statement that she deduced was probably holding a makeshift, soaked through bandage over his wounds. Forcing herself to look elsewhere, she was surprised to note that he was wearing cowboy boots, or that's what she thought they might be once someone hosed them down. Besides the area she suspected was hiding a gunshot or a stab wound, she could see several gashes on those thick arms, some that looked as if they might be defensive, some not, and at least as many on his legs through the rips on his jeans.

Even when he wasn't holding a knife to her throat, he looked...menacing. Longish dark hair, piercing blue eyes, a strong jaw covered in stubble that might have been considered sexy at another time, full lips that she had a feeling tended to curl in a sneer more often than not, all moved around by what she would bet was a cut, broad shouldered, slim hipped body...

His sharp tone rudely interrupted her cataloging of his injuries and attributes. "Now. This is how this is going to go. I'm going to sit on the toilet and you are going to gather whatever bandages, antiseptics and antibiotic creams you have, bandage me up, give me a couple aspirin

or whatever you have, hand me your phone and maybe a bottle of water, then I'll leave. No harm, no foul."

He knew she probably couldn't think of it that way – at least not now – but he was doing his best not to have to do anything he might regret. And he'd meant exactly what he'd said – if she cooperated, he'd leave her pretty much none the worse for wear – despite the fact that his body might not want him to leave her in quite such a pristine condition.

Nonetheless, his body did not dictate his actions, so he eased himself down onto the toilet and looked up at her expectantly, tucking the knife away where he could easily get to it.

Nervous beneath his heavy gaze, she set about the task he had assigned her, although she didn't believe a word he'd said about him leaving without killing her first. That wasn't how it ever went in all the cop shows she'd watched. He would kill her because she could identify him.

He kind of *had* to.