

---

RESCUE ME

---

CAROLYN FAULKNER



Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2021  
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Carolyn Faulkner  
Rescue Me

eBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-108-9  
V2

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design  
This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or  
the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

---

## Chapter 1

---

She had relegated him firmly into the "friend zone".  
Will Stevens sighed heavily, eyes travelling to her door for the hundredth time since he'd arrived. He sat there in the front seat, looking at it longingly. What had he let himself come to, anyway? He was practically mooning over her—it was embarrassing! Not that any of those realizations stopped him, of course. Instead, they were becoming uncomfortably familiar states of being for him.

It wasn't like her to be late, which was definitely a point in her favor, as far as he was concerned, one of the many in the pile of reasons why he liked her. But then, he was a little early.

Hell, he even blushed a bit—although he was alone and she would never know to what he was admitting—he'd gotten to her neighborhood a half an hour ago, choosing to sit in the parking lot of a small corner store for twenty minutes instead of arriving so tellingly early.

He forced himself back to his phone—not that there was anything going on this early in the morning. Hell, the birds weren't even up yet!

Then the corner of his eye caught a movement, and he

turned to watch a slender arm reach out and put a reasonably sized suitcase on the front stoop first, then a smaller, bright pink flowered bag, then a laptop case.

He'd been on these things before with other women, and they tended to bring veritable trunks full of highly impractical clothing for a three-day trip, but then, he knew her well enough to know she wasn't that type.

Will was out of the car before she'd gotten the other things out, intending to help her with them. But by the time he got there, Anna Novak had already closed the door behind herself, extended the handle of the roller case, looped the handles of the smaller bag and the laptop over it, and was busily lifting all three down the stairs.

He hustled, his own arm already outstretched to take the stuff from her, but she gave him one of those looks that told him he was overreaching with her—yet again—and she damned near body blocked him instead of surrendering the load to him. "I can get it," she said, knowing it came out more defensively than she'd intended, but—for some odd reason—she found his gentlemanly tendencies invasive rather than kind.

"I don't doubt that you can," he responded mildly. "I was just going to heft it because it's probably easier for me to do so."

Her, "thank you," came across every bit as awkward as she thought it was, and she didn't yield her burden to him, even lifting it into the side door of the van, behind her seat, around and in between multiple pat and kissing sessions with his big, fluffy golden retriever, as well as the veritable mountain of pet carriers of all shapes and sizes.

"Hi, Max! You are the very best boy, aren't you? The very bestest of boys!!" Max loved the somewhat high-pitched tone she used with him, tail wagging furiously as he shed freely all

over her suitcases while she bent her head to whisper to him softly as he joyously licked her face.

Will got behind the wheel, baldly wishing to himself that she'd ever be as affectionate with him as she was with Max, then realizing with a vague feeling of disquiet that he found himself in the humiliating position of being jealous of his dog! It wasn't as if he was the egotistical type, really, but it was a bit of a blow to know—quite definitively, because she'd told him several times—that she preferred his dog to him. And that it wasn't even a close contest, either!

But the awful truth was that he was perfectly okay with shamelessly using his dog to get closer to her if that was what it took. She was a tough nut to crack, but he had no doubt at all that she was worth it.

Anna couldn't help remarking with a lopsided grin on her face, "A white panel van with no windows. Straight outta Ted Bundy's playbook."

Luckily, he got her undoubtedly skewed sense of humor and chuckled deeply. A considerable interest in all things serial killer was one of the many things they had in common.

The sound of his laugh was almost as disturbing to her as his mere presence, but she forced that traitorous thought to the back of her mind—with all of the zillions of others about him she had whenever he was around.

"Yeah, but he had a couch in the back, didn't he? And he'd pull it out in front of a girls' dorm, with a fake cast on his arm, trying to get girls help him quote 'move it', unquote?"

"You're right about that," she agreed, climbing in and settling herself into the comfy passenger's seat.

"You all set?" His gaze fell on her as if he was cupping her cheek and tilting her face up to his so that he could look down at her from those disturbingly intense eyes of his.

Her gaze immediately wandered from his. "I think so."

"Paper turned off?"

She snorted. "Who takes a paper nowadays?"

"Point taken. Everything off and unplugged that can be?"

Anna gave him a quizzical look. "Uh, yeah? My neighbor is getting my mail, and I stopped ordering from Amazon a couple weeks or so ago, so nothing's going to pile up outside my house. I have two lights on a timer, and the same neighbor has taken my cat to her place. All my windows and doors are locked, too." She fastened her seatbelt and added a little testily, "I have left my house before, you know."

"Yes," he answered laconically as he pulled out of her driveway. "But I also know that it's been a while since you've been gone as long as we're going to be, and I want to make sure that your mind is at ease about home. And it's always good to say out loud what you've done, so that you know you've done it and you don't spend the whole trip worried that you left the iron on or something."

"Well, that's easy because I don't own one. But I'm fine about going."

"I'm glad."

"Now, the choice of travelling partner does leave a lot to be desired..." she teased. "But, unfortunately, I wasn't given much choice."

He lost his battle to keep his eyes on the road as he shot her a sidelong glance. "Yes, well. I don't often pull rank, but since this is the organization's first venture so far away, I wanted to be part of it. I'll just want to make sure that everything is safe before we start doing any kind of regular runs down there."

"Sounds like a viable excuse."

Will's eyebrows rose at that. He wasn't sure if she was serious, or if she was calling him out, as if she suspected that the only reason he was doing this trip was to be with her.

For once in his life, he didn't push it, and just kept quiet.

"I thought we'd get some drive-through breakfast before

heading out and putting some miles behind us if that's okay with you."

"Who's open this early?"

"McDonalds."

"Oh, hell yes! I love Mickey D's breakfasts, but I don't often treat myself to one. This trip, all dietary bets are off."

"Good, so do I." He grinned facetiously. "But then, I can eat anything."

He loved her glare and had always been amazed at how she was able to use such a low, sinister register when she was such a small woman. "And you know that I really cannot tell you how much I hate you for that."

Will grinned unrepentantly. "Yes, I do know!" he teased.

Anna rolled her eyes. "I'm already fat enough that I should really just take the sausage and egg McGriddle and the hash brown and just apply them directly to my ass."

Oh, dear God, had she actually just said that out loud in front of him? She wanted to clap her hand over her mouth, but she didn't want to call any more attention to her blunder.

Still wearing that stupid grin, Will cleared his throat, then wondered out loud, without looking at her, "I assume that me saying I would be only too happy to help you do that would be considered horribly sexist of me?"

"Horribly."

"What about if I said that you're merely nicely curvy and not fat, as far as I'm concerned?"

"Ditto."

"Okay. Well, anyway, I figured I'll drive the first stretch. We'll drive for a while, take a break, walk the dog, get some snacks, then drive for a while longer. Lunch will be catch as catch can—something easy and fast, so we can get back on the road quickly. After lunch, you can take over driving. You told me you're comfortable with doing some of it?"

"Yes, of course. I absolutely want to do my share."

"Great. We'll try to do six or so hundred miles a day, and long about that point, I'll start looking for a place for us to stay, preferably somewhere that has a reasonable facsimile of an actual restaurant nearby, where we can actually sit down to eat. Head to the hotel first, load in, take care of the dog, eat, come back to the hotel and collapse." He gave her a quizzical look. "Does that sound like a reasonable agenda to you? Anything you'd change or don't like the idea of?"

"Nope. Works for me."

Yet another thing he liked about her—she was incredibly easy going about most things. Some of the women he'd been with would have given him an hour-long lecture about why no one should ever eat at McDonalds, but wouldn't provide him with any acceptable alternatives and would complain the entire time that they were hungry.

Not Anna.

Oh, there were things about which she could definitely be touchy, but that was almost always something about her dear departed husband, who seemed to be a combination of Paul Bunyan, St. Francis of Assisi, and Jason Momoa. It was great to hear about a couple who had been so much in love, but Will was of a mind that she was stuck in the past with him rather than living the life she had left to its fullest.

She was much better about that kind of thing than when he had first met her, and he'd done his best to help her with it—even when she seemed not to want to be helped, necessarily. But she had a bit to go, and he intended to be there for that, too—and beyond, if he could manage it.

They were at the drive-up window already, and he turned to her. "Is that what you really want—a sausage and egg McGriddle and a hash brown?"

Anna was amazed that he'd remembered what she'd said. "Yes, please, and a large diet—and shut up."

She knew that he was about to tease her about ordering



those two things that were full of calories, then ordering a diet soda, and he smiled broadly at her attempt to pre-empt his inevitable comment.

"I just want to point out that I didn't say anything about your order. Not one word."

"You didn't have to," she growled back at him.

Damn, a man that big shouldn't have a lethal giggle. It was entirely too disarming for what she'd thought—now hoped—was her non-existent libido.

Everything about this man was dangerous—with a capital D—to her general peace of mind. He reminded her entirely too much of her beloved husband, and that was not a good thing. At least, that was what she kept telling herself, anyway.

How could she have been so stupid as to agree to go on a dog rescuing mission with Will Stevens? What was she thinking?

The answer was that she had volunteered to go when she'd brought up the conditions she'd heard about last time she'd Skyped with a friend of hers, Karina Worth, whose brother owned a cattle ranch in southern Texas. Karina volunteered at a shelter in a nearby town. The poor cats were packed in—two or three to a cage—and the dogs were no better. She saw the atrocious conditions with her own eyes through her friend's pictures. Karina also told her about how there were always stray cats, kittens, dogs and puppies hanging around their facility—and pretty much everywhere else—for which they simply didn't have room.

And, in response, Anna had mentioned the fact that Maine had a dearth of cats and dogs in their ASPCAS, Humane Societies, and Animal Welfare Leagues, and the two hatched a plot to see if the place where Anna volunteered might be able to do something about that overcrowding.

So, big mouth that she was, Anna brought up the terrible conditions, sharing the pictures around with everyone, at the

last staff meeting for the Emma Stevens Rescue League—of which Will was the founder and main patron. She pushed for them to go the extra mile—lots of extra miles—to Texas, to help transport some of those poor, unfortunate animals north. Since it was her friend who'd brought the situation to her attention, she volunteered to be among the first people who went down to help.

But then he'd chimed in, saying that he wanted to go, too.

As much as she hadn't wanted to, she'd laid off pushing for them to go down after that, much to her embarrassment, only because she was pretty sure that she didn't want to spend all of that time—at least four days down and possibly more coming back, depending on the animals—alone with him. Or perhaps she wanted to a bit too much, really.

Instead, she'd thrown herself into helping with other much shorter trips down to Florida and Alabama, taking care of the animals that were brought in, fostering many of them herself.

Honestly, the work was a godsend to her and a balm for her tortured soul. And Will knew that probably better than anyone else.

He passed the big bag of food over to her and got them headed south on I95.

Without thinking and purely out of a long-ingrained habit, Anna immediately opened it, took out her own things and put them on the dashboard, then set about organizing his food, marveling the entire time—to herself—at the fact that he could eat this much—five items to her two—and still stay as slender as he did.

Annoying bastard!

After unwrapping his bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit, which was about four inches tall, his sausage and egg burrito, and his egg, cheese and ham McMuffin, she whipped out a rectangle of non-adhesive, non-slip webbing from the pink bag that was behind her and put it on the most level part of

the dashboard nearest him, laying all of the neatly opened sandwiches out there, along with a napkin.

"Oh. Thank you for doing that." He reached for the burrito immediately, very much liking the way she'd left everything in a nice, neat, almost spill-proof packet.

"Welcome." He'd gotten an enormous coffee rather than a soda, and she raided the elaborate console between them for non-sugar sweetener, of which she poured two, swirling it around in the cup, then putting it back in the drink holder.

"Again, thank you."

"Again, welcome."

When she went to put the two hash browns on the same webbing as the sandwiches, he stopped her. "Can I ask you to do something else with them for me?"

Puzzled, and wondering what she might have forgotten to do, she nonetheless replied, "Sure."

"Put the hash browns in the sandwiches."

"Put the hash browns in... the... sandwiches," she repeated back to him, as if he was particularly slow.

He chuckled. "Yes. It gives me one less thing to handle, and honestly, it tastes great that way."

"Uh-huh." She could not possibly have sounded any more skeptical about what he was saying, but he didn't take offense. Still, she shrugged and did as he asked. "Whatever blows your skirt up."

Will laughed. "Well, I am Scottish, and I do have a clan tartan and an actual kilt made of it, I'll have you know. I don't just have that, though, have the entire outfit, as a matter of fact."

Well, she could have lived without knowing *that!* And now she'd never get that undeniably sexy image out of her head, no thanks to him.

There was a traitorous part of the back of her mind that wanted her to ask him if he had a picture of himself dressed

like that, but she managed to beat it into submission before the words burst out of her mouth. It wouldn't do at all to let this man know that she was becoming more and more attracted to him, even though she was more on guard against that very thing than she had been in her entire life.

Anna sat back in her chair as she took a bite of sandwich, then a bite of hash brown, realizing—only because of him—just how inefficient that was. But instead of saying that to him, she pointed out, "But your accent is English." And pretty faded, which was a fact she mourned whenever she heard him speak.

"Yes, but me da is Scottish," he said in a perfect brogue.

"Ah. A mixed marriage. Presbyterian and C of E, I'd guess?"

"Spot on. And you'd be surprised at how many people—even then—still considered it to be just that."

"Horried, but not surprised. My grandparents were Methodist and Catholic, and they were considered a mixed marriage. They couldn't adopt—not that they ended up needing to."

They both shook their heads, neither of them able to comprehend that kind of prejudice in the least.

Of course, before she finished her breakfast, she had to try out his way of eating by breaking her hash brown in half and stuffing it into the sandwich. Of course, she discovered that it was, indeed, more practical—and more delicious—although it was so big, it was hard to fit into her mouth!

"This is good!"

"I'm glad you like it, but good on you for trying something new, even if you didn't like it."

Another glare from her. "Are you insinuating, sir, that I'm fussy about food?"

His innocent act definitely needed work. "Moi? Would I insinuate that about you?"

"Toi."

"Well, you're wrong."

That got him a disbelieving frown.

"I wasn't insinuating that you are fussy about food. I was out and out saying that you're fussy about pretty much everything."

Anna opened her mouth to deny it, leaving it open for a bit, then closing it quietly on a deep pout, which got him laughing again.

It was hard to feel insulted on two counts. First, she'd made him laugh, and second, he was not at all wrong.

"Well, I never!"

"You've been married, so that's a lie."

"Will!" Why were humans not given the ability to hold back a blush? She desperately needed to be able to do that, especially around him.

"Yes?"

It was a reflex to want to do what she would have done if it had been her darling husband teasing her like this—as he often did—which was to smack his shoulder with the back of her hand. Granted, in both cases, it would have been like a mosquito swatting a bull, but still. It made her feel better. But she managed not to do that with him, although it was much too close for comfort.

The van was surprisingly quiet for a while, until he asked, "I didn't piss you off with that bit about you being fussy, did I?"

She gave him a brilliant smile that made his breath catch abruptly. "Of course not. But I prefer to think of myself as 'discerning', thank you very much."

His guffaw made her smile even broader. "Oh, 'discerning' is it? And the spoiled rotten part? Is that just 'overly indulged'?"

"Hey. It's not my fault I was spoiled as a child; that was my parents."

"Yes, but you told me your husband spoiled you terribly, too." Will saw her stiffen and immediately wished he could retract the comment, worried that he'd gone too far.

She had been turned in her seat, sitting more on her hip, so that she could face him better, but his words caused her to move—not away from him, exactly, but to settle herself back into the seat so that she was staring straight ahead.

Anna's voice was tight, as if she was fighting back tears when she answered him. "He did, not that we had much money, but he spoiled me in a lot of ways that didn't involve money and meant a lot more to the both of us—especially me." Her tone was even softer when she continued as she looked down at the floor of the van, "I never cared much about money or material things in regard to relationships. I was much more concerned with how he treated me and how I saw him treating others."

He desperately wanted to reach out and take the hand that he could see was balled up on her thigh, but he didn't want to make things any worse than they already were.

"I'm so glad you got to have that in your life," he murmured softly, keeping an eye on her as surreptitiously as he could manage, wondering if she really was crying.

"Thank you."

If she wiped tears off her cheeks, he was going to have to pull the van over and take her into his arms, just to hug her and comfort her, but she didn't. Will wasn't sure whether that was a good or a bad thing. He ached to hold her in his arms, especially when she became upset like that, even purely platonically.

The more time he spent with her, the more time he wanted to spend with her. She brought out a softer side of him

that he didn't often show to most people, without ever trying to do so.

But even now, he was never even sure she really wanted to be with him, preferring most often to be by herself.

She was still so broken, so utterly devastated, even though it had been years since her husband had died. Will was absolutely sincere about what he'd said—he was glad that she'd found a true love. But he couldn't help but be a bit jealous, too.

He'd never had that kind of love, and even in regard to just dating a woman, he'd never had to compete with a ghost for her affections, and he was finding that it wasn't at all easy to do.

But then, he'd rarely taken the easy way to anything in his life, and he would do whatever it took to get her to believe that she could have a second chance at love—with him.