

The Banished King

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design

977 Seminole Trail #233

Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Faulkner, Carolyn

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-571-0

Cover Design by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Chapter 1

"C'mon, Mitzie, find a place and go potty already. You're not planting the Eiffel Tower, for crying out loud, and Mommy has Kevin Spacey and the second season of *House of Cards* waiting for her on Netflix." She blew out a breath of air that was so cold that it had been almost painful to inhale in the first place.

She really should have a scarf over her face—any temperature colder than about ten degrees Fahrenheit was prime for causing an asthma attack, but she wasn't one for being a sissy about things. She'd use her inhaler when she got back in, if she absolutely had to. The thermometer in the dining room had read about five below a few minutes ago, and she was standing out in her pasture in her winter jammies and not much else.

Usually the dog was pretty good about doing her business and coming right back in—she wasn't any more of a fan of the cold weather than her mistress was. But tonight she seemed especially restless—something didn't smell right or whatever and she was spending more time tugging at the end of the leash as if she wanted to be let loose to cross the big pasture and head into the woods at the far right corner and whining, rather than accomplishing any real goals.

Sometimes she was more of a distraction to the dog than a help, so Fiona stopped nagging and looked up at the clear night sky. It was so dark and black out—there was so little light pollution out here in the boonies—that it was hard to tell where the Earth ended and the sky began. The stars looked particularly brilliant for some reason, and, despite the dire consequences, Fiona took a big breath full of the clean, stark air.

Something caught her eye—and a few seconds later her ear—when she saw a flash across the sky. She was a fan of watching meteor showers, but she knew that none were expected in this area again until summer, so she was delighted to be seeing an unexpected stray—only this one was much, much bigger than any she'd ever seen, and it got much more so the longer she watched it, as if it were an object coming close to landing on the Earth rather than just flying into its atmosphere and burning out.

The dog was pretty much forgotten—not that that mattered much since, even if Fi had dropped the leash, Mitzie would just head for the door to whine about going back in where it was warm.

Fiona couldn't believe what she was seeing as she watched a fiery ball of something—Lord knew what it was—streak across the sky and land—with a loud crack not unlike a gunshot, which wouldn't even raise an eyebrow in these parts—followed quickly by a low but unmistakable groan of pain that she doubt anyone but she had heard.

She owned ten acres that encircled her house, and state forest lay beyond that. Whatever-it-was that had just landed was either on her land, or no-mand's land. She practically dragged the poor dog back into the house, whether her toilette was done or not, crammed her into her cage—lest she get into the Kleenex or decide to chew on a cat—and stood staring at the phone.

She really should call the authorities. It didn't look like a plane, but whatever-it-was that had fallen from the sky, it seemed that there was at least one person that had

gotten hurt as a result. But she quickly decided against that, partially because she knew that if it was anything interesting, the government was just going to screw it up and take it over, and also because she was going to be the first person on scene, regardless. Even if she called 911 right now, it would take at least forty-five minutes to an hour for them to get to her, and a Lifeline helicopter would still be at least thirty minutes. She'd go and assess the situation and then, if she deemed it necessary, she'd call her closest neighbor, Bodie Ramsay, and he could make the call.

So instead, she dressed as warmly as she could in thermal underwear that would cover her from neck to wrists to ankles. She didn't own any fancy ski pants or the like—since she neither skied nor snowmobiled—so she put on her heaviest pair of jeans, a turtleneck, and a thick fleece sweatshirt over that. Grabbing her biggest Maglite and throwing it into a duffel bag that already contained bandages, Neosporin, rubbing alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, antibacterial swabs, safety blankets, and other first aid items, she commandeered a gallon of water from her stores as well as a fire extinguisher and a snow shovel, just in case she got stuck, which, considering how much snow was on the ground and the fact it was likely she was going to go a bit off road, was a very sane precaution.

After donning her best and warmest winter jacket—which she normally eschewed—her warmest leather gloves with mittens over them, a butt ugly shocking pink fisherman's knit cap over the long hank of hair she had tamed into a semblance of bun and her best boots with winter tread—i.e., spikes for ice and grip on snow—she threw the bigger items into the back of the minivan, which already contained such basic emergency items as a tarp, a small amount of emergency food stores that wouldn't freeze, another shovel, and some kitty litter for if she got desperate.

It wasn't too hard to find where it had landed—or to get within the general area, but there was just no road that was going to let her get anywhere near the exact spot where it had impacted. She could still clearly see with her flashlight that there was a plume of smoke rising from probably more than a mile in, and she was already on the closest road available. There was nothing for it but to shoulder a big backpack full of everything she could carry—including the tarp at the last minute, thinking there might be a body to cover. Before she left, Fiona took a big breath of inhaler that she then zipped into the pocket of her parka and set off towards she knew not what.

And it was slow going. The snow in spots, where there had never been any January—or subsequent—thaw, was well over her knees, but she persevered, worrying all the time that her clumsiness and lack of athleticism might well cost someone their life.

She found that the clearing whatever-it-was had created, when she finally arrived at the site, was much bigger than she'd expected. But there was no plane. There was no pod. If this was a UFO, then there was no 'O'.

Instead, there was a man, lying in the center of an enormous circle of leveled trees. He wasn't moving. Since the initial moan she'd heard just after the sound of the crash itself, which she had ascribed to him, she hadn't heard a sound other than the occasional owl or the wind in the evergreens.

As soon as she made the clearing, she took out the collapsible shovel she'd brought and held it up on her shoulder, just in case. She had an uneasy feeling about this entire situation, and the tool would make a reasonable dent in anyone, if she only just connected.

But nothing and no one bothered her as she carefully sidled her way towards him and finally came to stand over him.

The first thing she noticed was that he hadn't a stitch of clothing on him.

Hmmm, she thought. She wondered what the stacies would say about an Unidentified Flying Pervert. She laughed out loud at her own malapropism and relaxed some. It was glaringly obvious that he wasn't an alien—just a freakishly well-endowed human male, apparently. It was almost a letdown. It would have been the first exciting thing to hit this town since... well, since it became a town only about ten years ago.

That there was no reason for him to have been in the middle of her heretofore untouched woods, in the middle of a considerable area of flattened timber, which was going to play hell with her profit margin the next time she had loggers in, or way to account for the sounds she heard, Fiona didn't persevereate. Since he was so obviously human—if a well blessed one in several glaring ways—there would naturally be a logical explanation that he would be able to give her when he woke up as to why he'd ended up where he was.

Fiona did her best to ignore his nudity, trying to remember the ABC's of assessing a patient from her EMT Basic days long ago, and also trying to keep in mind that his skin was exposed to the snow in below zero temperatures. She needed to act fast.

A meant Airway first. She had to determine whether or not he could breathe, kneeling in the snow to put her ear next to his mouth. She thought she could feel the fine hairs around her ear moving but she wasn't sure, so she took off her glasses and put them in front of his mouth and they did fog up, but she also noted that his breaths were shallow and quick, which addressed the second item, B, for Breathing.

Quick and shallow meant the onset of shock, which wasn't at all surprising.

C was for circulation. Fi scanned him quickly, first with her eyes—deliberately not avoiding those areas that were more uncomfortable for her to address because he could have been bleeding there, too—then she followed that by a quick pat down, during which she *definitely* avoided his more delicate areas.

As far as she could tell, nothing was broken, which was hard to believe, considering what she believed to be his fall, but that didn't mean that he wasn't suffering internal injuries. But there was no blood coming out of his ears, eyes or mouth, which was a good sign.

As soon as she finished her basic assessment—during which, when she rolled him towards her to clear his back of any overt injuries, she realized just what a hard time she was going to have moving him alone.

But for some reason, she felt a distinct apprehension at the idea of alerting the authorities about him. If he had been obviously dying or hurt, then there would have been no question. There was something about him that gave her pause, or something about how she had apparently been the only one out here who had seen him fall from the sky. She didn't know whether it was about him in particular, or about how she knew she was going to feel stupid trying to explain what she'd seen and his appearance, she wasn't sure. But she knew she wasn't going to be in a hurry to let anyone else know he was here.

Staunch rule following, law and order touting Fiona Miles was going to play this thing as close to the vest as she could, and for a reason that she couldn't quite pin down—that she wasn't sure she even wanted to pin down. It might have been that the sight of

him lying there, naked and helpless and no doubt hurt, inspired feelings in her that she preferred not to examine closely.

Or it could have been the small shiny object her flashlight caught lying under him the first time she rolled him over. It looked like an emerald, at first, but when she examined it up close, it changed colors in front of her eyes as she held it in the palm of her hand. She had no idea what it was, but figured it might be worth something, so she pocketed it.

It took her longer than was probably good for him—although if he did have internal bleeding, the cold would actually assist in that—to get one of those aluminum foil blankets around him—two actually, one for the top of him and one for the bottom because he was so damned big and tall—that made him look like a very large baked potato—and get him onto the tarp she had brought, on which she intended to drag him to her car. How she was going to get him into her car once she got there, she had no idea.

She'd deal with that problem if and when she got him there. Fiona wasn't at all sure the trying wasn't going to kill her, too, in the process.

It was, indeed, a very long and arduous nearly two hours, during which the pristine, nearly virgin, woods heard a lot of language it probably hadn't since it was originally settled, but she managed to drag him back to the car.

Barely.

No sleep for me tonight, she thought, as she took what was probably the fourth or fifth toot off her inhaler in the past forty-five minutes. She didn't think that even the extreme physical exertion would be able to overcome just how nervous and jumpy all of that medicine was going to make her.

Getting him into the car proved to be just as big a challenge as getting him to it, but she persevered, using the tarp to her advantage as much as possible and hauling him in bit by agonizing bit, until she could close the passenger's side door beside him. She didn't bother with the seat belt. She had to drive slowly anyway because of the amount of snow and ice on the rarely used road, and he didn't look as if he was going anywhere.

He hadn't moved once or made any sound since she'd found him. He was well and truly out, and that was probably a good thing.

As she drove onto the main road to turn around, she began to see the big fluffy snowflakes that the weatherman had been threatening. Her first thought was, surprisingly, not that she needed to make sure that she'd laid in enough wood for whatever depressing amount of snow they got, but instead that she was glad of it because it would hide the trail her footprints and his big body had made in the snow.

Back at her house, she found getting him inside to be much less of a chore. She spilled him out onto one of the many heavy-duty carts she used to get various chores done, although she really didn't have one that was heavy-duty enough for him, except the wheelbarrow with which she brought in firewood, but she didn't think she'd be able to lift it enough to get him up the wheelchair ramp and into the house. She used a taller, unfortunately, less steady cart. Although she nearly lost him several times on the way to her room and it had creaked and groaned threateningly under his weight the entire trip, she made it with only once incident, when she'd accidentally cracked his head against the doorway trying to get him into the room.

If he didn't have a concussion already, he probably had one now, courtesy of the woman who was supposedly trying to care for him. Good going, Fi! The score was now Alien—0, Earthling—1.

Rolling him onto her bed was easy enough, in comparison to what she'd already done, anyway, but it was only after she'd done that and put away the cart that she began to wonder if her bed was really the best place for him, although she didn't really have another choice. The cart wouldn't have fit in the door of the only other bedroom, and hers was the biggest bed and bedroom in the house, anyway.

Rolling him over all those times might or might not have been good for him, but it had given her a chance to more thoroughly assess his backside—and to label his butt as pretty damned nice in the process. He had some areas that she could see were going to yield massive bruises eventually, but nothing overtly dangerous.

Fiona covered him with her sheet, a blanket and her warm winter comforter. Then, leaving the door open in case he called out, she went to the spare bedroom, to the box full of what had been her husband's clothes, which she'd kept entirely out of sentiment. But this was an emergency situation and she knew that Nick wouldn't care.

He *would* have cared that she was now alone in the house with a strange man. Tears came to her eyes when she imagined the exact exasperated expression that would be on his face if he knew the danger she had put—and was—putting herself in. If he was here, and as healthy as he'd been when they'd first met, she'd be in for a session with the paddle, no doubt about it.

She shook her head. He wasn't here now and she was. And she was having the same feeling about this situation as she had had about him when he had been sick and she had barely known him except through letters and texts and emails: as if someone's hands were on her back, as if her actions weren't quite her own, but that they still settled her heart, while somehow making it race at the same time. It was just something she *knew* she had to do. She didn't feel as if she had much choice. And it had certainly worked out wonderfully for her with Nick.

Carrying a pair of jeans, a tee shirt that she hoped was big enough for him—Nick had been bigger when she'd met him than he had been at the end by quite a bit—and a pair of underwear she wasn't even sure why she'd saved, she reentered her room after cautiously peeping around the corner to see that he was still lying right where she'd put him.

Getting him dressed was another adventure in embarrassment she could have done without, but once it was accomplished, she knew she'd feel much less threatened. She supposed it was kind of stupid to feel threatened by someone who was unconscious, but there it was.

Once she got him settled again, all nicely clothed and tucked in, she decided that the prudent thing to do—just in case—was to arm herself. She already had several cans of pepper spray secreted around the place—paranoia had begun to set in since she now lived alone, only she preferred to think of it as "being prepared for anything." It didn't have to be a human intruder—it could be a skunk, a possum or a bear just as easily around here.

And she was well aware that, if she was going to bring out one of Nick's guns, and she was, that she had to be prepared for the fact it could just as easily be used on her. But she decided that she'd take that risk. She didn't put the gun in the room, but rather in one

of the false cupboards at the end of the kitchen that faced the bedroom. She'd know where it was, but he wouldn't.

Having done that, she went back and assessed him again. He seemed a little warm, and she used an ear thermometer that hadn't seen use since before Nick had died on her, but it seemed that the thing was on the fritz—it didn't register at all. She tried it on herself and got ninety-seven point five, which was her normal temp. She really thought he had a fever, and Fi had long since learned to trust her instincts when it came to things like that—which was how Nick had lived as long as he had.

She immediately went to the medicine cabinet, knowing she had just what she needed left over from... Well, she swallowed hard. Just plain left over. She hadn't thrown away very much of the medicine or the medical gear they'd accumulated as Nick's condition had worsened, and she found what she wanted almost immediately.

The label clearly stated that it had expired, but Fiona tended to consider expiration dates on things she needed that weren't perishable to be greatly exaggerated, and had yet to be proven wrong. They were there so that one was forced to buy a replacement for what one already possessed, as far as she was concerned, and she wasn't willing to give Big Pharma any more of her money than she already had over the years—it had not been a small contribution, by any means.

They were acetaminophen that were designed to be taken sublingually, so that they could be given to an unconscious or nauseated patient, as Nick often was near the end, and they would simply dissolve beneath the patient's tongue.

He gave her absolutely no problems about that, although she was aware that having her fingers in his mouth made her just that more vulnerable to him.

Suddenly sitting back to look at him and wonder how she was going to feed him, she realized that she was starving. She made a light snack of cottage cheese and sliced green olives mixed together, along with a bowl of frozen mixed vegetables and brought it into what she was already beginning to think of as 'his' room, bringing with her a straight backed chair which she placed next to the bed up by his head. When she sat down, she felt something solid poking into her from her pocket and remembered that she'd taken that gem looking thing from where he'd landed. It might have some sort of significance to him, and if not, she'd pawn it and add the proceeds to the fuel fund for next year. She tossed it into her jewelry box and forgot all about it.

Then she propped her feet on the bed, turned on the TV and started the second season of *House of Cards* that she had been so highly anticipating.