
LIEUTENANT DADDY

CAROLYN FAULKNER



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

©2022

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
Lieutenant Daddy

eBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-253-6

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

As the haunting strains of "Taps" faded into the wind, and the black-garbed widow dabbed at her eye with a matching handkerchief, her bleary-eyed gaze couldn't help but settle—granted, for a fleeting second—on the man who stood across from her while the coffin of her late husband was lowered slowly into the ground.

Standing at attention as he was, he did every inch of his six-foot-two-inch Marine dress blues proud—back impossibly straight, impressively wide, muscular shoulders filling out the uniform as if he belonged on a recruitment poster—instead of at a small, poorly attended funeral. And she knew better than most that there was absolutely no need for him to suck in his stomach. He'd had an eight-pack when she'd known him, and Mrs. Major Kevin Kennedy—widow of the deceased—couldn't imagine that he'd put on even so much as an inch of anything but muscle, even though it had been a bit more than a decade since she'd seen him without his shirt on.

If he hadn't changed—and she doubted that he had—his hair would be cropped close to his skull beneath his hat, there would be no piercings and no tattoos anywhere on his body, and

he'd be just as much of a stickler for rules and regulations—doing things the "right" way—as he always had been.

Angela—Angie—Kennedy watched as surreptitiously as possibly as he joined with the rest of the color guard in the process of formally folding the flag that had been draped over her husband's coffin, which he then formally presented to her. The three shells that were expended in the gun salute, which she knew represented duty, honor, and sacrifice, were tucked into a fold of the flag.

"On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Marines, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service," he intoned gravely in his beautifully deep baritone, before saluting the flag, taking a step back, executing an about-face, and walking back to take his place in the color guard.

She hadn't even gotten a chance to thank him, and that was the end of the service.

Angela took a deep breath, hugging the flag to herself as the eight or so people in attendance—all of them being what remained of Kevin's small family, which was still bigger than hers—and a few family friends hugged her.

"It was a beautiful service." That from his older sister, Lucy, and done entirely for the benefit of their audience.

"I'm so sorry this had to happen to the two of you." Ricky—Rick—Trombetta said, while giving her an inappropriately tight hug.

She was surprised he hadn't tried to cop a feel. Angela wouldn't have bet he would've been able to resist, since he never had before. She'd never said anything to Kevin about his best friend's behavior—not because she thought that her husband might go wild with jealousy and wreak havoc on the man he had been tight with since high school, but precisely because she pretty much knew that that wouldn't even cross his mind to do.

Much worse than that, even, was the idea that had come into

her head early, based on the behaviors her husband began to display almost immediately after they'd been married, which she'd seen no indications of prior to then—that he might want to encourage his best friend, rather than discourage him.

Angie forcibly turned her mind away from such things, lest she dwell on them and become even more depressed than she already was.

Kevin hadn't specified anything in regards to his funeral, except that he wanted there to be "full military honors". He'd done a tour in Afghanistan, after all—before booking it out of the military as soon as his hitch was up—and no one begrudged him that recognition.

She knew it was expected that she'd host some kind of gathering after the service, but she had less than no interest in doing so. When Lucy had discovered—much to her consternation, since Kevin was the apple of her eye in much the same way as he had been the apple of their mother's eye—that her sister-in-law didn't plan to do that, she had immediately stepped in, not to kindly take that burden from the widow's shoulders, but to make certain that Kevin got the full measure of grief she felt he deserved from the handful of people who attended.

Assuming the mantle of "chief mourner", which Angie was only too happy to cede to her, she spoke to those who were in attendance. "If you don't know me, I'm Kevin's older sister, Lucy Kennedy Southgate. I'm having a small get together at my house—622 Rentnor Place—to remember Kevin, and all of you are welcome to attend, of course."

Angie was already walking towards her car. She'd arrived alone, and she intended to leave that way. Frowning fiercely, Lucy let her go, each woman thinking that she was glad she was finally shed of the other.

Lucy wasn't the only one who watched her slim, delicate shoulders and stiff back as she walked to her car. The fact that she was engulfed in the traditional black only made her look smaller to his eyes. Lieutenant Iorec—"York"—Randolph Ellis couldn't keep his eyes off her, as usual. He'd thought that more than a decade later, his attraction to her would surely have faded, but he was quickly proven wrong—and not just slightly wrong, but very much so. Lt. Ellis didn't like being wrong, especially not about himself, and definitely not about Angela.

Although he couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from her, a telltale muscle jumped in his jaw as he continued to stare after her, long after her car had disappeared down the narrow, windy cemetery road. Anyone who knew him would have taken heed at that unmistakable outward sign of his consternation, but no one here knew him that well anymore.

More than anything, he wanted to tear himself away from the color guard detail for which he'd volunteered and go chase after her, as if he was still the randy teenager that he'd been when they were together. But he couldn't, and that only made that ticking muscle get just that much worse.

But there was a job to be done, and he wouldn't have gotten where he was if he'd spent his time shirking his duty. So he did his best to put her out of his mind—further annoyed that he had only ever been partially successful at trying to do that—and kept having to remind his wandering brain to concentrate on the task at hand.

The sooner they got done at the cemetery, the sooner he could see her again.

Angie was standing at the kitchen window, gazing unseeingly out into the back yard, when she heard a knock at the door. There was no doubt in her mind that it was most definitely the big bad

wolf. But this one wasn't going to huff and puff and blow her house down.

No, he was much more likely to blow away the carefully constructed façade she'd kept around her like a protective cloak for these past thirteen years, and along with it, what little mental peace she'd been able to eke out of her marriage. Or he'd blow her hard won composure entirely and—as soon as she let him through the door, he'd either back her up against the nearest wall or lay her—carefully—beneath him, right there in the foyer.

And damned if she didn't have to acknowledge to herself that she would let him do that to her, too. Any protests she might make would sound pitiful and disingenuous, and he'd ignore them anyway, so she'd keep her mouth shut, at least until he expertly opened it for her with his own.

She walked slowly over to the door and pulled it open, saying softly and without meeting his eyes, "Lieutenant," even though he was no longer in uniform. The fact that he wasn't wearing the trappings of his rank and position didn't soften his stance in the least. He stood there in very much the same manner he had stood by her husband's graveside—at attention. Tall. Proud. Unyielding. And not the slightest bit less distracting.

"Angela."

Then she committed the cardinal sin, one she knew she'd come to regret at some point, either now or in the near future. She stepped aside to let him into her house—into what had been their house, hers and Kevin's.

But she got most of the next things that happened surprisingly wrong.

Once she opened the door, he didn't wait for her to invite him in, but instead stepped into her house, immediately reaching out to draw her into a hug she hadn't seen coming. He wasn't a hotheaded, hot-blooded teenager any longer, and the thought flitted through her mind that she wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not.

Angie had forgotten what his hugs could be like. She was so much smaller than he was that he automatically bent his knees, which allowed him to bring her just that much closer to the heat and strength of the core of his body. He took his time, as he always did with things physical, and especially anything that involved her. It was one of his very conscious, very deliberate hugs, not the stiff, polite, formal thing it probably—definitely—should have been. The difference between his embrace and Rick's at the cemetery was night and day. Nothing York did was in the least inappropriate; he had absolutely no prurient intent. All he wanted, and all his carefully strong arms around her conveyed, was a desire to comfort, as a big, gentle hand rubbed slowly up and down her upper back. He didn't even touch her bra straps where they lay beneath her shirt to either side and below his hand.

It wasn't too long, it wasn't too short, it wasn't too intimate or too standoffish, and it definitely wasn't a chance to cop a feel.

He was now—and always had been, except when she needed him not to be—a consummate gentleman.

It was perfect, just like he was.

With that disconcerting thought, she took a step away from him, his arms falling away from her immediately.

"Would you like to come in?" she heard herself asking, knowing it wasn't a smart thing to do.

His infinitely sharp eyes—that she knew would take in absolutely everything about her even in a quick glance—found hers. "I don't want to intrude on your grief."

She shrugged, wrapping the worn cardigan she'd thrown on against the chill when she'd gotten home around herself while crossing her arms over her chest. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please, ma'am."

It was the "ma'am" that got her. She'd already turned away from him, headed for the kitchen, but she turned back as she continued to walk—and he continued to follow her, hands

behind his back—and gave him a small, lopsided grin. "Did you just 'ma'am' me, Lieutenant?"

His answering grin was rueful. "Occupational hazard, you know. And I'll point out that it's technically not wrong, either."

She tilted her head quizzically. "Are widows still 'ma'ams'?"

His brow furrowed sexily. "Think so."

Sexily? she thought. *Is that even possible?* Then she gave him a surreptitious once over as she rummaged in her cupboards and decided that it damned well was, for him, anyway.

York was gratified to see that she used a Dark Magic k-cup for him and a Donut Shop one for herself, then handed him a hot mug of unadulterated coffee.

"You remembered," he complimented as they headed for her living room.

"It's not hard to remember; it's the same coffee and same lack of adulteration that Kevin preferred."

His, "Oh," was decidedly underwhelmed, and she was surprised to realize that she had to suppress a smile at his obvious disappointment.

Angela took her usual seat in her recliner, expecting him to sit somewhere on the couch that was next to it, not right next to her, as he did. He was distractingly close, but she couldn't let him know that he was distracting her.

"So, what brings you here?" she asked after taking a sip of her coffee.

"I just wanted to make sure that you were all right. This morning couldn't have been easy for you."

"Thank you, but I'm fine," she answered primly, not looking him in the eye.

That was just like Angela, to downplay any kind of attention to herself, even when she was the grieving widow—and a lone one, at that.

"I recognized most of the people who were there. They all

seemed to be either Kevin's friends or Lucy's or their families. Was no one there for you? Where are all of your friends?"

She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised that he was the one who noticed that and certainly the only one who asked her where her own support group was.

Angie stared down into her coffee for a minute, debating about whether or not to tell him the truth, but then she said what the hell and met his eyes. "I told them—not that there's a huge amount of them—not to come."

She'd never really been all that social, so the fact that she didn't have a raft of friends didn't surprise him, but the rest of what she'd said certainly did. "Really? Why?"

He didn't really have the right to ask that question; he didn't have the right to ask her any questions, not that that had ever stopped him.

She put her mug down on the coaster on the table to her other side, then turned back to him, immediately beginning to wring the hands that were in her lap, looking at them, not him. "I..." she started, then stopped and began again. "Frankly, York, I wanted as few people as possible at the service, and my friends all heeded my wishes. Understandably, Kevin's sister felt differently. Still, he wasn't a particularly popular person, and most of the people in attendance were more her friends than his, except, perhaps, Rick."

He nodded, keeping his expression neutral when she mentioned Rick. He'd been an odious and unpleasant teenager, and he knew from the few friends he kept in touch with who had remained in the town in which they'd all grown up that he hadn't done much changing over the years. "Yeah, I noticed that, too." Leaning forward, he asked in a very careful tone, "But why didn't you want many people at your husband's service?" York had his suspicions, but he wanted to hear the reasons for her unusual request from her.

Those busily knotting fingers stopped abruptly, and she met

his eyes, saying in a very tight but utterly dispassionate voice that he barely recognized as hers, "Because, as horrible as it sounds, I find it very hard to do anything that even somewhat resembles mourning my husband. Most of my friends understand me and know why I feel that way, so they were perfectly fine with not going to his service."

York took a deep breath upon hearing her highly unusual confession and leaned back. She looked so tense and unhappy that he very much wanted to pull her onto his lap, to hold her and cosset and cuddle her, to tell her that everything would be all right, but he didn't think she'd appreciate him doing that, so he kept the hands that itched to hold her clenched tightly together.

"Well, sometimes it takes a little while—"

Her "No" was flat and uncompromising.

"So, your marriage was an unhappy one, then."

He was unprepared for her to vault out of her chair and begin to pace, but he knew she only did that when she was very bothered by something. She stopped unexpectedly and stared at him. "I don't know why I'm telling you any of this."

"Because you know me, and deep down, you know that I only want what's best for you," he answered with utter confidence and honesty. "You know that regardless of what's gone on with us in the past, I have always been—and I will always be—on your side."

Her eyebrow rose questioningly. "Do I, though? Do I really know that?"

"I would hope that you would, because it's the truth."

Angela put her face in her hands. "I don't know what I know or what I think anymore. My life is just so fucked up. I can't even believe it. How the hell did I even get to this point?"

"To what point?"

"To the point where I'm the chief mourner at my very recently deceased husband's funeral and I feel absolutely nothing.

I didn't cry—not one, single drop—during the service—even during Taps."

York frowned. "I thought I saw you dab your eye with a handkerchief."

Putting aside the fact that that statement let her know how closely he had been watching her during the brief ceremony, she asked in a non-sequitur, "Do you watch *The Crown*?"

"No."

"Well, suffice it to say that I dabbed a totally dry eye because I thought I ought to—that someone—besides you, of course," she added snarkily, "might be watching me, and I wanted them to think that I was feeling something, even though I wasn't." Angela rubbed her forehead, then sighed heavily. "I always cry at Taps—it's like *Amazing Grace*—but not this time."

She started to hit herself on the forehead, not very hard, but it was still distressing for him to see her doing that to herself.

Suddenly, her wrist was caught, and he used his grip to pull her into his arms. "Stop beating yourself up about it—literally or figuratively. Everyone grieves in their own way and on their own schedule."

Angie took a big step away from him, and he let her. They both knew the truth of it. He let her go.

"No, you don't understand."

"Then explain it to me, A... honey. That's what I'm here for. I want to do anything I can to help you. I'll listen, I'll hold you when you do cry, I'll take care of all of the administrivia associated with his death—use me. I want to help. Talk to me."

"I didn't love him," she blurted out. "I thought I did, early on, but I didn't. Things started going wrong in our marriage almost immediately. I should have long since divorced him. It turned out that we wanted very different things out of life—out of marriage—and I should never have stayed with him as long as I did. But I'm a stubborn cuss, and you know how I hate to give up."

He gave her a small smile. "I think I might have encountered that trait in you, here and there."

York regretted teasing her when he saw her hug herself while she stared out into space as she spoke in a faraway tone, saying things that chilled him to the bone.

"He was a bastard and he hurt me so many times."

She was so wrapped up in her own misery that she missed the unmistakable signs of his anger as he automatically drew himself up to his full height, fists clenched at her words.

"But by the time I was finally ready to actually leave him, he got sick—pancreatic cancer—and I didn't feel I could leave him."

"Of course, you couldn't," he agreed. Then he asked the question he wasn't really sure he wanted to know the answer to, but that at the same time, he couldn't bear to not know. "But how did he hurt you, Angela?"

She wasn't listening to him, staring at the carpet—utterly unable to look away—as if in a trance. "He could be such an asshole, although he did apologize to me in the end. He even thanked me for staying with him through all of it, as if he knew that I wouldn't have stayed with him if he hadn't been sick, although I never mentioned it to him. I didn't mention it to anyone."

That didn't—in any way—mitigate anything he might have done to her, as far as he was concerned. "Answer me, honey." York consciously kept his tone soft, not wanting her to think he was angry at her. "What did he do?"

He might as well not have been there, but he wanted an answer from her. As much as he was loathe to do it, York refused to take no for an answer, even though he knew that her answer wasn't going to make him feel any better, even if it was entirely benign. There was no one for him to call to account. Her husband was dead.

Still, he did want to know what happened between them. It might have been a masochistic pursuit, but he wanted to know

everything he could about her—about their relationship—so he'd know what not to do.

He hadn't realized how unhappy she had been, or he might have tried to do something about it, although it didn't sound as if she would have been willing to leave him, and he didn't much fancy himself a home-wrecker.

York held her against his body as tenderly as possible. She resisted a bit at first, then relaxed against him as if she couldn't bear to be strong another second longer, and he adored how she ended up leaning against him, curling up as best she could against his chest while his arms closed around her.

When she moved back a little to look up at him, he found his lips pressed against hers without the slightest thought behind it, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to kiss her when her husband was barely in the ground. But as much as he wanted to do the right thing, he didn't have it in him to end that kiss. And if the doorbell hadn't rung, there was no telling where they might have ended up.

No, that was wrong, he thought with a slight grimace. She would have ended up beneath him—or astride him—or in any one of the myriad ways he'd imagined taking her over these past very long, very lonely years.

He should never have let her go back then, and he didn't intend to commit the same wrong twice.