

THE SUPPLICANT



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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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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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-726-4
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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PROLOGUE



"—*A*nd I thought he was going to pound me right through the mattress and the floor beneath it! I was seriously worried I was going to end up crashing down into the apartment beneath. Wouldn't that give old Mrs. Kingston something to talk about?"

Her best friend nudged her ribs hard with her elbow, but it was all Arden could do to keep from blushing. She wasn't at all sure she was able to pull it off, and she knew that the sight of her pink cheeks would only egg Sylvia on.

"But then I guess you can tell what a great time I had with him by the fact that I'm still walking funny two days later."

Everyone else was laughing uproariously at that and offering their own lurid stories of their weekend conquests. Everyone except Arden, who was quietly happy not to have anything to contribute—especially since that was the moment *he* decided to make his appearance, with that deep, rumbling baritone that disturbed her more—and in more ways—than she cared to admit.

He made her tremble in a way that only one other man in her life had, and she found that wholly unacceptable and annoying in

the extreme, blaming him as much as she did herself for her reaction.

He wasn't even mad to find them there—far from it. She almost wished he was, it would be easier to understand and cultivate a dislike of him if he was an asshole.

"Good morning, everyone. I hope you all had a great weekend."

Loch Frazier, head of the ever-expanding empire of Frazier, Inc., practically had to duck through the door into the break room where his employees had gathered to chat and grab coffee before starting work. Greeting each of them by name as he made his way through the blatantly admiring sea of them, he asked after them and their families—flawlessly remembering the names of their significant others, their children or parents or whatever their hobbies were and managing, somehow, to sound as if he actually cared about each one of them as he did so.

At least, that's what they thought. His employees were true devotees of what could only be called his cult of personality. Somehow, he managed to inspire a deep, abiding loyalty in people. Many of them had been with him from the start—from when he'd been working on his software from a tiny room in his tiny apartment. And, although he was also known by his detractors as a slave driver, he had made sure that those who had stuck with him—through what was, in the beginning, thin and thin—were amply rewarded for their work and their fealty to him once the company began to turn a profit.

In fact, he was far from the only multi-millionaire to have arisen from the computer and marketing genius he had shown in building his business. Those who had left his employ—in his good graces—had done so with large, lucrative severance or retirement packages that included both stock, which continued to split in a truly meteoric rise, as well as health care benefits for those retiring that were the envy those who had left larger companies that showed considerably less tangible concern for their former employees.

Unfortunately, Arden had never understood what it was about him that held so many people—people she considered to be relatively intelligent—in rapt adoration of him. If anything, she preferred to avoid him, if at all possible. In fact, just the sight of him made her uneasy enough that—as soon as she caught sight of him—her cheeks blushing even brighter red for some unknown reason at the idea that he had probably overheard what Syl had said. She kept her eyes carefully averted from him, sliding off the counter she was sitting on and grabbing her purse, intending to escape as quickly as possible, saying, "And that's my cue to leave this den of iniquity."

To her horror, Loch stopped in his tracks at her words, staring down at her and murmuring, his voice having the same effect on her as if they were alone and he was whispering it into her ear, "You needn't go because of me, Ms. Valenti."

She smiled nervously up at him, looking down again quickly and heading towards the door. "Thank you, Mr. Frazier, but, since I'm not an employee, I'll let you get to work."

He smiled and it was a disgustingly pleasant thing to behold. "Well, you're welcome here any time."

"Thank you."

She would have ducked out, but Syl's voice bellowed from the back of the room, caused her to stop before she was able to make a clean getaway. "Remember, it's 'Feed a Starving Artiste' night. General Tso and I will be over at seven. You have Netflix fired up and we'll catch up on *Luke Cage*. Have plenty of drool towels around, please." She didn't bother to suppress a sexual shiver at the thought that embarrassed Arden yet again.

"Okay. Have a great day, everyone!" She was very aware of how squeaky her voice sounded and equally as glad that no one could see how red her face was as she accidentally caught Loch's eye and he set her heart to racing at a dangerous pace when he very slowly, very deliberately winked at her.

CHAPTER 1



The music was so loud that her ears hurt, and she could feel the bass literally vibrating beneath her feet and up her legs. The crush of people was suffocating, but having claimed a large table for their group helped a bit to keep the masses at bay. The rest of the group—minus one big hunk in particular—were on the dance floor, gyrating wildly to the beat that was rapidly giving her a headache. She felt like a stick in the mud—and knew she was acting like one, too—but she'd claimed a chair that faced the dance floor and the stage, and she wasn't going to give it up until she decided to leave.

Which, she determined, was at least an hour from now, if she was going to appear even slightly polite. They hadn't even gotten to gift giving yet, and it was Syl's birthday bash she was attending. She could hardly duck out early without insulting her best friend, even if the only man to whom she'd had any kind of reaction in ages—negative or positive—was sitting across the table from her. He'd been eying her all evening, only somewhat covertly, but she had no doubt that she was right, since every time he so much as glanced her way, every inch of her skin seemed to come alive in a very disconcerting way.

She did clean up reasonably well, she supposed, even if she was in the only "nice" outfit she owned. Most of her clothes were ancient jeans and t-shirts, all decorated in various shades of paint splatters that never seemed to come out, no matter how often she washed them, but then, she had never much been into dressing to impress. Luckily, in her profession, that kind of thing didn't matter much, and the love of her life couldn't have cared less what she was wearing. The less, the better, as he would have said, in fact, waggling his eyebrows lasciviously at her and probably twirling a fake, Snidely Whiplash mustache at her.

Putting her head down, Arden tried ruthlessly to squelch the direction her brain automatically went in—to stem the tide of tears that flooded her eyes at the merest fleeting thought of him, of the whole world she'd lost when she'd lost him.

And, by concentrating so hard she blotted out everything and everyone else around her for a long moment, in a manner she'd had to learn the hard way—for self-preservation—she did manage not to let those tears overflow, blinking them back until they were gone.

But when she raised her head again, proud of herself for not having given in to the overwhelming wave of grief, she realized that Mr. Frazier was no longer sitting across from her, but rather had taken—not one of the seven other unoccupied seats, but rather, the one right next to where she was sitting. The imposing sight of him surprised her, and she couldn't prevent herself from starting a bit.

Of course, hoping a man like that wouldn't notice her small movement was entirely too much to ask from an unforgiving universe.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you, but I hate shouting across the table and I did ask if it was all right."

Arden was sure he had. He'd probably asked when she was preoccupied wrestling with her own feelings, and when she'd bowed her head, he'd taken that as her assent.

There wasn't really a graceful way to get out of it now, either. She could hardly get up and move away from him, she supposed, without appearing to be downright impolite. Although it might be interesting to see if he followed her around the table if she did, she mused, in a sort of perverse, adult version of musical chairs.

"No, it's fine," she lied blithely. "I just was off in my own head for a moment. Sorry."

"No need to apologize. Please don't let me make you feel uncomfortable."

It wasn't quite an offer to move, but then she didn't know if she would have taken him up on it if he had. She didn't want to be thought of—especially by him, for some unfathomable reason—as a ninny.

"Although I have a feeling that this entire evening is making you feel uncomfortable, so me sitting next to you should barely register," he continued astutely.

The problem was that he was dead on—she hated this kind of place, but it was in Syl's blood. She might have been in her mid-thirties for the third year, but she hadn't slowed down a bit.

Arden, on the other hand, had never once sped up in any way in her forty-plus-too-many years—she had never been able to match her best friend's pace and had long since stopped trying.

But worse than that, he was dead wrong about him not being a blip on her radar, because all kinds of klaxons were going off at his nearness—not just in her head, which she could have dealt with much more easily. But in her body, too, as if they had decided to join forces against her.

It had been almost four years since her life had ended—well, that was what it felt like, anyway, even to this day—since the dearest man in the world—a man who, though he certainly had been up close and personal with her foibles for the past fifteen odd years of marriage, thought she could walk on water and nail Jell-O to walls—had left her.

Frowning fiercely, she chastised herself for thinking of it that

way. It wasn't as if he had wanted to go. The cancer hadn't been anywhere near polite enough to ask. Perhaps if it hadn't been so damnably quick, if it hadn't been so unexpected, she might feel differently, might have been able to let go of the pain more easily and find the happiness he had told her multiple times during his lightning fast decline that he desperately wanted her to discover when he was gone.

But she just couldn't, and she'd already made peace with the fact that she was going to be alone for the rest of her life.

Her family and friends, however, were nowhere near as resigned to her fate as she was.

And, apparently, she could now rank her own mind and body along with them, as they were on full alert at the presence of this highly masculine, almost threateningly potent man.

She took a drink of her plain diet soda—the one and only drink she could afford in this place, frankly. And even it had been mind-bogglingly expensive—she'd been nursing all night, he'd noted. "You're...not wrong," she allowed on a drawl, studiously watching the band, although she wasn't seeing any of them. All of her—more than she could even remember feeling with her beloved—was concentrated on the man seated next to her.

And he wasn't even touching her.

He was, however, sitting there, manspreading wildly as if his knees had never met each other and looking as if he owned the joint, not a carefully cut, short black hair out of place. He was dressed in an expensively casual outfit of oxford shirt, surprisingly not unbuttoned to his navel, but there was still no mistaking the peek of dark chest hair that showed in the small V anyway, jeans that were undoubtedly designer and worth more than her house, probably, as well as a leather jacket that was probably quite pricey in its prime but that now looked as if it had seen better days.

And it all looked absolutely gorgeous on him. It was the perfect outfit for a successful man who was going out with some of his

employees—well put together and obviously not from Walmart, but not in-your-face rich looking, either.

"I don't think Syl would care if you snuck out early."

Arden had to chuckle at that. "Yup. Syl knows me well enough to know that I've already got my escape planned, and I did from the moment she let me know where she was having this shindig."

Damn, his throaty chuckle played hell with her nerves, skittering warmly along them, igniting what few he hadn't already, simply by his nearness.

What was going on with her? She didn't react like this to men—never had! Even her husband had complained—once they'd gotten together—that she'd been much too reserved while they were dating, almost wary, taking two steps back for every one he took towards her. Luckily for her, he'd considered wooing her to be a challenge that he was more than up for.

Unfortunately, she had a feeling that Loch Frazier would have much the same reaction—not that she'd ever allow him to pursue her in any way.

"Would you like a real drink, Ms. Valenti?" He wondered if she didn't indulge at all, for whatever reason. "It's on me."

For once, she gave him her full attention, and he had a feeling he was being judged and found lacking, although he wasn't sure exactly why, but he did like a puzzle. She was warm and pleasant and funny with everyone but him, and—although there was only curiosity involved—no emotion—he was mildly interested in why he seemed to put her back up by his mere existence. There was something about her—he couldn't quite put his finger on it. She wasn't spectacular looking, in fact, she was older than most women he'd been dating lately, the majority of whom looked like models. Arden was much more age appropriate for him, although he thought she was a couple of years younger than he was, perhaps.

Maybe it was the delicate air of hurt around her, although that was hardly something he usually found intriguing. She was a small thing, and so obviously still deep in the grips of grief from the loss

of her husband. He'd never lost anyone he'd loved, personally—probably because he'd never really loved anyone—but he found himself grappling with the most unfamiliar impulse to pull her onto his lap and into his arms to hug her and hold her and tell her that everything would all be all right.

But that warred with another impulse that was at least as powerful—if not more so—to then flip her onto her back and remind her what it was like to be made to scream a man's name while convulsing violently around him.

At those two disparate thoughts, he took a sip from his own rocks glass.

"That's not necessary. I'm fine with my soft drink, but thank you."

"It might help you enjoy yourself a bit more. I'd be glad to drive you home, if it comes to that."

Arden snorted. "One drink is not going to incapacitate me. There was a time when I'd drink you under the table without batting an eyelash."

His eyebrow rose. "I would pay serious money to see you do that." He signaled to the nearest wait person, who happened to be a young lady who practically gushed all over him, which was something that apparently made *him* feel uncomfortable.

Arden had a hard time not grinning like an idiot at seeing him so discomfited when he always seemed as if he was so in command of himself and everything—and everyone—around him.

"The lady will have a drink, please." The insecurity vanished as if it had never been when his eyes settled on her. "Order anything you'd like."

She hesitated—disliking being maneuvered into accepting a drink from him—but he gave her an expectant look that, for some reason, she allowed to goad her into obeying him, then surprised—and impressed—him by ordering a well-regarded but relatively inexpensive glass of whiskey, neat.

Before the waitress left, he murmured, his eyes still on Arden,

"Make that a double, please." He was rewarded quite simply and completely by the sound of her laugh. She looked more relaxed already, which was his goal.

The young lady was back in record time, obviously hoping to curry favor with him, which set Arden's teeth on edge, for some reason. But beyond a polite, "Thank you," he ignored the poor girl in favor of looking as if he wanted to devour her whole.

Desperate for something—or someone—else to look at besides him, Arden noticed one of the waiters who was bussing a table near them. He was tall and slim, which wasn't usually her type, but with beautiful, almost delicate facial features. "Wow, way to rock the man bun," she muttered to herself.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Loch consider the man for a moment, then dismiss him. "I agree. He's pretty perfect, if that's the type you prefer." His tone was almost too neutral.

"And I suppose you should be the type I prefer, instead?" She didn't usually say such things out loud, but this man made her nervous, and she tended to run off at the mouth sometimes when she was nervous. And the potent drink—that was so much better than she remembered—was only going to make things worse for her in that area.

He gave her an annoying half-smile. "No, not necessarily. I'm not to most people's tastes, but then, I only sleep with very select people.

She wasn't sure exactly how they'd gotten to the point of discussing who they liked to sleep with, and she knew she should simply smile and nod rather than engage him, but instead, she found herself saying, "Well, I don't think I have a type, since I don't sleep around at all—I've only ever had sex with people I loved."

He smiled—not unkindly, but definitely in amusement. "How quaint. Well, you've obviously had a very different life than I have. I don't believe in love, so that wouldn't even be possible for me."

Arden didn't bother to curb how acerbic she sounded. "Somehow, I'm not in the least surprised to hear that. I, on the

other hand, have pretty much been surrounded by it my entire life, and I was lucky enough to experience its truest expression with my husband before he died." She couldn't believe she was having this conversation with him—and she couldn't even blame the liquor, since she was only on her second sip!

"And I'd be willing to bet that you haven't had sex since the last time he touched you." Those dark eyes narrowed on her, making her feel a bit trapped.

She cringed. "It's that obvious, huh?"

"To anyone who bothered to notice, yes."

Of course, *he* had.

"Well, in my own defense—not that I feel I need to defend my choices to you..." he inclined his head in acceptance of that fact "...I pretty much figure I have nowhere to go but down, sex-life wise."

His expression was almost benevolent, flirting with condescending. "You might be surprised. You should try it sometime—sex with no emotional attachment—with the right man, of course. It might be an interesting experience for you. Might well be just what you need, since you obviously don't think that any man who would want to be seriously involved with you would quite measure up. There would, then, be no hurt feelings, no expectations on either end if he didn't."

Gathering all of her courage—liquid and otherwise—Arden turned in her seat to face him, finding her legs immediately trapped between his and knowing she should have been more worried about the inherent intimacy of her position than she was. "And are you suggesting, then, that the person with whom I should explore this idea is you?"

Loch paused for what seemed like a long time, his already intense stare deepening, leaving her just on the verge of apologizing to him for having assumed that. "I'm not sure whether I am or not, truth be told." He curved a big finger over his lips as if deep in thought while contemplating her.

She actually squirmed beneath his stare before stifling the

impulse. "Well, anyway, that's obviously not part of my 'deal', as you put it."

Out of purely morbid curiosity, he asked, "But what—besides love—comprises the rest of it, I wonder?"

He asked as if he was truly interested in her answer, although she convinced herself that he was merely amusing himself, playing with her to pass the time. Arden laughed softly. "I think I gave you the wrong impression, Mr. Frazier. I don't really know you—and you don't know me at all, and it may seem terribly old fashioned, but I'm not really in the habit of discussing my sexual preferences with someone I don't know and care about."

"That's another thing you should try sometime, Ms. Valenti. And don't apologize for being old fashioned—it's an interesting novelty." He seemed to hesitate for a split second, then said, "But perhaps you *should* call me once you decide to let him go and stop clinging to your widow's weeds as if they're going to sustain you for the rest of what you're inexplicably determined to make into a very boring, lonely life."

Furious at his attack, Arden stood, reaching for her coat, annoyed to find that he, too, was standing and holding it for her. There were so many things she wanted to say to him that she couldn't get any of them out, so she settled for glaring at him fit to singe his hair and storming out.

Loch looked at her drink and calculated that she'd not had enough to impair her, so she should be fine to drive. If he hadn't thought so, nothing she could have said or done would have stopped him from getting her home safely, up to and including driving her there himself, if he had to. He'd've sent her home in his own car with his driver, if it was necessary, to know she was going to get home in one piece.

Why he gave a damn about whether or not she did, he refused to examine any too closely.