

READY FOR LOVE



CAROLYN FAULKNER

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: 978-1-61258-543-7
Print ISBN: 978-1-61258-587-1

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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CHAPTER 1



When the text came in, it surprised me. I actually checked the name when I read it.

Come rescue me!

If Decker Hale needed to call me to help him, then the end was, indeed, nigh! I couldn't think of any person who was less likely to need help. If he couldn't handle a situation then I wasn't going to be any help at all—except perhaps to stand a bit away from it and laugh hysterically, probably, depending on from what it was that he needed rescuing.

What's going on? You okay? I texted back from the glorious sanctity of my tub. It wasn't sunken, and it didn't have those lovely jets that soothed away your cares, but it was hot, full of bubbles, and there was a box of decadently expensive chocolates along with a moderately priced glass of wine within easy reach, and I was all set to watch some *Orphan Black* and relax after a hellish week at work.

I'm at Simon and Kelly's party, because I said I'd go, and now I'm surrounded by a bunch of kids that can't be more than twelve, if that. I think I could be the father—maybe the grandfather—of everyone else here!

I immediately texted back, *I think you'd have to have been pretty*

sexually precocious to have been anyone's grandfather, although you are old!

Hey, I came to you for sympathy and support, not insults!

**snort* Then you obviously texted the wrong person—have we been introduced?*

Very funny. I'm being coerced into playing some kind of drinking game I have never heard of. Save me.

Frowning, I typed back, *What game is that?* Deck was at least as anti-social as I am, so I wasn't surprised to hear that he wasn't familiar with whatever game it was that they were going to play.

Something called I Have Never Ever?

I actually gasped out loud at his answer. Oh, dear God, what I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall during *that* game!

LOLOLOL Really. Never Have I Ever. Well, that'll be an interesting game for you to play! You should have fun with it!

You know it?

I know OF it.

Spill, woman.

That wasn't going to work with me. Or, rather, I wasn't going to let it work. And it didn't help at all that I could hear him demanding that in his low, husky growl.

But I was immune to the effects of his very definitely masculine—and very distinctly dominant—charms.

At least I liked to pretend that I was.

So all I sent back to him was "..."

Then I let him stew for a while.

It wasn't long before I heard that trill again.

You are so damned lucky that you're not mine, you know.

For which I shall count myself as ever grateful, believe me.

I still need recuing. Come to the party. You can be the den mother.

What does that make you?

An ornery old fart.

He was the very opposite of how he had characterized himself.

Are you sure you don't mean a horny old fart?

*Nah. Too young. Nothing in common. They don't remember M*A*S*H* or the Doobie Brothers or much past what happened three hours ago, I don't think. Just get here before I become suicidal at the stark realization of just how out of touch I am.*

Oh, I could have told you that.

Grrrrrr. Are you coming or what?

Can't.

Why not?

Cuz I'm relaxing in the tub with chocolate, wine and television, and any one of those of those things is a zillion times better pursuit than hanging around a bunch of people who are not as old as my oldest wrinkle!

This time he was the one who sent the "..."

Then, You're in the tub?

Yes.

Right now?

Yes.

Naked?

That is usually how one bathes.

Then he texted something I never expected to see from him.

Do you need someone to scrub your back?

*After I got over the shock and adjusted myself in the tub so that I was no longer throbbing at the thought of him doing what he'd suggested, I shot back, *No, thank you. I have a bath brush.**

*Quick as a flash he answered, *There are other purposes for that instrument.**

No, there are not, I replied flatly.

Apparently, he wasn't going to pursue that any further, thank God, because his next text was back to begging—which I had to admit that I really enjoyed.

Please come. I'll owe you one.

Owe me one what?

Whatever your little heart desires.

I had a pretty good idea what he was hoping I might respond

with, but instead, I looked around the room then questioned, *So you'd be fine with remodeling my bathroom?*

I've never heard it called that before. Is that a euphemism?

No, it's a construction job. You're in construction, are you not?

I haven't actually constructed anything in a while—I'm the boss. But if that's what will get you down here.

No, that's not what I would want. I just wanted to know if you were desperate enough to agree to do that. I sighed heavily, realizing that I was probably not going to see the rest of *Orphan Black* any time soon. But my consolation prize was that I was going to be able to be there to watch and listen to him playing that deliciously revealing game. *All right. I'll be there. But don't expect scintillating conversation.*

I never expect scintillating conversation from you.

And, with that little comment, I'm getting back into the tub.

NO! NO! NO! I'm sorry. You know how I am. Please. I can never resist teasing you. I'll wait by the door. Don't take too long or I'm going to be peer pressured into smoking weed, which I haven't done since I was in my early twenties. My ancient system couldn't take it! I'm skeered!

My muscles are all noodly and relaxed from the water. Give me twenty minutes or so.

This was the weirdest exchange I'd ever had with him. As much as he joked, there was an underlying sexual tone to it that had never been there before, and it gave me pause. Then I shook my head to clear it of that absurd notion.

Luckily for him, I never take long to get ready. I swear, even if I was going to the Academy Awards, I could get ready in under fifteen minutes. Everything was already shaved; I was fresh from the bath. It was summer, so I didn't need hose. All I had to do was to put on a very light layer of makeup—which was all I ever wore, regardless, and more often than not, I went without.

After slipping into a pretty, flirty little polka dotted dress, brushing my hair back into a bun, and adding strappy sandals that

matched the country blue of some of the dots, I grabbed my keys and my purse and headed out the door.



I KNEW SIMON AND KELLY, but not well enough to get an invitation, although I knew where they lived. Kenduskeag Lake was a small enough New England community that everyone knew where everyone else lived, which could be good and bad.

I arrived on their doorstep within less than a half an hour, for which I was inordinately proud of myself, and rang the bell.

I expected one of the hosts to open the door, but it was himself, instead, who reached out a big paw and dragged me into the house, saying, "Bout time you got here—they're just sitting down at the dining room table to play."

"Play?"

Deck looked at me as if I was being deliberately obtuse. "I Have Never Ever or whatever the fool thing is."

"Never Have I Ever—you have some sort of mental block against the name of that game," I quipped, surprised when he let go of my wrist and instead slid his fingers between mine so that he could hold my hand rather than possess it as he dragged me Lord knew where.

Our hosts hadn't answered the door because the room where the table was small enough that, having found their seats early, they were blocked in.

When I entered behind Deck, who was gentlemanly and held out a seat that was next to where he ended up, I realized that I knew almost everyone there, which allayed some of my fears and amped up others.

"Does everyone have access to their liquor of choice, as well as a shot glass?" Kelly asked.

There was a half-gallon jug of tequila between Deck and me, and a generic—if entirely too large—shot glass in front of me.

"Does everyone understand how to play the game?" Simon asked. Almost everyone—of the nine or so of us around the table—said yes.

Deck wasn't shy. "Please explain the rules for those of us who are old and feeble and were young before this game was invented."

Kelly laughed, saying, "We go around the table, and the person whose turn it is says 'Never have I ever' whatever it is that they haven't done. Then, if you *have* done whatever it is that they said they haven't, you take a drink. You get to know a lot about the people around you really quickly."

Of course, being me, I had to nail down the particulars. "Are the statements supposed to only be about sex?"

Everyone seemed surprised I was even asking about that. There was a chorus of, "Yes!" and, "Definitely."

Deck was gentlemanly enough to pour for the both of us, giving me a full shot and himself a smaller one.

I immediately reached out and poured half of the shot he'd given me into his glass.

This made him grin. "Chickening out so soon?"

"If I have any hopes of being able to make it home tonight, then they're going to be half shots."

People were still mostly sober, and the first round was pretty tame. When it came to me, though, I scrunched my forehead and bit my lip as if I was having to think extra hard to come up with something I hadn't done sexually, which made everyone laugh.

"Well," I said by way of explanation. "I'm older than you guys. I've done a lot more, uh, living."

By far, Deck was the one who was staring at me that hardest, which I found the hardest to ignore. Those dark, largely shuttered eyes of his were boring holes through me.

"Okay, got one. Never have I ever had sex on a beach."

That got quite a few people drinking.

Except for Deck.

Instead, he leaned over and murmured, not quite under his

breath, "I have to say I'm surprised to hear that, considering you grew up around the ocean."

I snorted derisively. "Yeah, which means I'm smart enough to know that beach sand gets into *everything*, and there are places on a woman's body that it does *not* belong. I've had friends who did that and weren't careful—and they regretted it severely. They said it was like having a cheese grater between their legs until they could get to a shower." I shuddered—and not delicately. "No, thank you."

That got even him laughing, and he was a notoriously tough audience.

Someone stated that they had never had sex with a person of the same gender. I drank, and Deck didn't.

I was not surprised to see that he hadn't. I couldn't see him on the giving or receiving end of that equation.

"Really?" he asked me quietly.

"Would I lie during a drinking game?" I asked, batting my eyelashes at him and wishing I'd had something for dinner besides chocolates, which did nothing to absorb the alcohol I was consuming.

"I don't think I've ever heard that story."

"I'm damned sure you haven't," I replied, my posture not inviting any further questions about the matter.

I think after five or six rounds I'd only missed like, two shots. Someone had said they'd had sex in public. I noted with interest that he drank on that one, and I didn't. Then the subject of STDs came up, and neither of us drank—and I was surprised by how many of the younger people who did.

Suddenly, it was my turn again, and I said, "Never in a car."

Deck actually leaned away from me in his chair and gave me the once over. "*Never?*"

"Oh, hell no! I am a creature of comfort all the way! Give me a nice hotel room with a king-sized bed, room service and an in-room Jacuzzi, please." I snorted. "In a car? No, thank you."

Needless to say, Deck downed his shot.

It got more interesting the more inebriated everyone became—bad behavior was fessed up to—sleeping with a good friend's boyfriend or fiancé—the boss's wife—leaving evidence of encounters to be found in unusual places.

And then the fetishes surfaced.

And Deck's eyes rarely left me. If I thought about it—and I didn't want to any too closely—I would have realized that he was keeping track of all of the things I was confessing to having done.

And if I'd been paying more attention to him, I would have noticed that he'd barely ever had to refill his glass, which meant that he was nowhere near as experienced as I would have pegged him to be.

When someone said they'd never been spanked, though, I did notice that he took one of the few shots he'd had.

But then, I'd already known that about him.

I thought it was best if I left the game before I got so drunk that I couldn't manage to get home by myself, so I rose, thanked everyone for a most informative time, and grabbed Deck's hand.

"Where're we going?" he asked, rising docilely at my behest, which surprised the crap out of me.

"To wherever the food is. I need to eat something carby—bread or rice or something—to absorb all of that alcohol."

"Are you telling me that you're drunk?" he said from his great height behind me.

Suddenly, he stopped short, and I lost my hold on him, very nearly crashing into the buffet table that had been set up at the back of the kitchen.

"I am *not* drunk," I said, trying to sound as sober as I could, which was never a good thing when one was, actually, drunk. Then I turned around to glare at him.

"Fine. I'm pretty drunk. That's why I'm going to have some food before I drive home." Before I could reach for a plate, he was tugging me down the table, taking this and that and building me a plate, then handing it to me.

And there was nothing on it that I would have turned my nose up at, and it came to me in a flash that this man knew entirely too much about me.

Especially after that game.

Handing me a plate of food with a fork was downright Pavlovian. I automatically began to eat, whether I wanted to or not.

As I did so, I watched him look covertly around the room, then he took my hand and brought me out onto the back patio, which was largely deserted because all of the action was inside, where he took a seat on the beautiful old fashioned porch swing, tugging me down next to him.

I sank down next to him—which was a bit of a challenge because he was taking up two thirds of the seat—giving me no choice but to be in close contact with him the entire time, especially as my arm brushed up and down his as I raised my fork to my mouth, mowing my way through about half of what he'd given me. It would have taken me three days to get through all of it, and I didn't want to make myself sick.

I hadn't noticed that he'd made a plate for himself that was piled higher than the one he'd given me, and, as he devoured every bit of it, I had to marvel—although not for the first time—at his capacity for food.

Not that there was an ounce of fat on him. There wasn't. He was just a big man—and he burned as many calories as he took in. I could see the buttons of his dress shirt straining to contain his chest muscles, and his bicep flexed, smoothing the wrinkles out of the fabric with every mouthful.

When I realized I was staring, I searched frantically for somewhere else to look, my eyes landing on the beautiful hydrangeas that were in bloom all around us.

"I'm not kidding, you know. I'm not drunk." For some unknown reason, I felt it needed repeating.

"I believe you. I'm not going to let you drive yourself home, but I believe you."

"Do I sound drunk?"

"No, but I don't think I've ever seen you inebriated. Better safe than sorry."

The fact that I wasn't more ticked off by his high handedness was a definite clue that I most was probably a bit polluted.

"How'd you end up here tonight, anyway? I didn't think parties were your thing."

He grimaced. "They're not. But Simon's a good friend, and he's my right-hand-man at work, Kelly's really nice—it's a social obligation, you know? Every once in a while, you have to suck it up and go to a party, as much as you might not want to."

"And you called me because?"

Deck shrugged. "I thought you'd be a fun addition. I was bored." I didn't miss the sidelong glance he threw me. "You came, didn't you?"

"Well, when you mentioned the game—I had to come and see what you'd done and not done."

He chuckled. "Could have just asked me."

I stretched my legs out in front of me, putting my plate on the porch railing. "But where would be the fun in that? How was I to know that you're practically an untouched virgin?"

"I am not," he defended himself much too vehemently. "I'm just a one-woman man. You know that Jane and I met in high school. Except for a couple years break during college, we dated continuously from our sophomore year. I never cheated on her, and even when we'd decided to take a break during college, I didn't do a lot of sleeping around, I confess. I'm just not that kind of guy." His eyes narrowed as he looked down at me. "But that doesn't mean I'm boring in bed."

Choosing to ignore that last comment, I held my hands up in the air. "Okay. Fine. Sorry. I didn't mean to insult your surprisingly delicate manhood. My apologies."

He grumbled, and I knew his feelings were still hurt.

"I'm pretty tired. How about we bounce, as the young folk say?"

he asked, not waiting for me to reply before he stood up and walked back into the house. Simon and Kelly were still around the table we'd left, so we both said our goodbyes and left together.

I began to head for my car, but Deck had a hold of my hand, and I wasn't going anywhere he didn't want me to. Sighing, and admitting in my head that he was right—I probably shouldn't be driving in this condition—I began to follow dutifully after him to his big Mercedes sedan at first.

"Wait, wait. I don't want to leave my car here," I whined, tugging a little against his hold. "Let's take my car, instead."

His guffaw was like a gunshot. "You think I'm going to be able to fold myself into that little thing and still be able to walk when I get out? I don't think so."

I tried not to be offended, because he was right. Neither my ancient little Corolla nor my Porsche could be called "tall person friendly". When we got together, he usually drove, so it wasn't much of a problem.

All I could muster in response was a loud, "Humph."

The hand that had been holding mine slipped casually around my waist as we approached his car and I heard the locks click open as he guided me to the passenger's side, opening the door then turning to take my hand in his again. "How're you feeling? Any better with the food?" he asked solicitously while he handed me into the car, keeping me steady as I did so, being a solid, familiar rock to cling to in stormy seas.

"But what about my Corolla?" I whined as he shut the door after making sure that I was securely buckled in.

"You didn't drive your baby here?" he asked when he got into the driver's side.

"Good Lord, no. She barely ever sees the light of day. Only when it's mild and sunny."

"Which we don't get much of here on the rocky coast, even in the summer. But you can't do that to her—she needs to be driven. Hard and frequently, to keep her in tune."

Parts of me clenched automatically at his words, but I did my best to determinedly ignore them as my eyebrow rose. "We are still talking about my car, aren't we?"

His grin was full of deviltry. "Of course. Cars like that are built to be driven. To be taken out on a deserted highway and let out—given their head, with a firm hand on the rein—uh, steering wheel, of course. They need to be used—"

Wow. I don't think I'd ever heard him talk like that before—about cars or anything else. He'd never really been this way around me. It was a very thrilling, nervous making experience.

"All right, all right. Enough with the car talk, Click and or clack. Point taken. I need to drive my car more. Would you do me a favor and text Kelly that I'll pick up my car later, please? Considering how badly autocorrect fucks me when I'm sober, I can't imagine what the results would be if I texted while I'm drunk."

"We'll come back over tomorrow, when you're sober, to get the car. But I don't trust you as far as I could throw you. I know that car—even though it's a beater—is at least as valuable to you as your Porsche is." He put his hand out in front of me, palm up. "Give me your keys, please."

"What?" I stalled, as if I hadn't heard him.

Wrong move.

He turned his entire big body towards me in the seat, leveling a gaze at me that would have been more than enough to scare me straight, but then he began to speak and the excitement I felt down to my toes grew a million times worse. "You know very well what I just asked you. And you know—better than any person on this planet—that I don't hold with bratting."

There was that hand again.

I pursed my lips, considering my options—of which I had none. Then, just when I had a feeling he was at the end of his patience with me, I reached into my purse and gave him my keys, which he then shoved into his pocket while I pouted in my seat.

Then, his voice much softer than it had been, he admonished quietly, "Don't pout."

I turned my head so he could see the glare I was giving him, and that was when my alcohol marinated mind decided to not only notice, but fixate on just how long his legs were, and I began to giggle.

"What's so funny?" he asked, clicking his seatbelt into place and starting the engine to purring.

"I don't know how, but sometimes, I forget how much of a Jolly Green Giant you are."

"Now *there's* a dated reference," he smiled, pulling out into the street.

"How much do you want to bet that there's not a person in that house who would get it?"

"I'll take that bet."

"You only got it because you're old."

He leaned away from me and scowled at me. "You're old, too!"

"You're older than I am."

"By two and a half months!"

"And don't you ever forget it! I will always be younger than you are, and I will always be around to remind you of that fact—loudly and frequently."

He was quiet after that, and I wondered if I had made him angry, the idea of which made me tear up, but the moment we pulled into the driveway and the garage door began to rise automatically, he turned to cup my cheek gently. "Don't move—"

"Hey!" I interrupted. "This isn't my place!"

"No, I brought you home with me so I can keep an eye on you. I think you're drunker than you realize. You can stay in my guest bedroom."

I guess I couldn't complain too much that the man wanted to take care of me—and it wasn't as if I hadn't stayed in that room before.

Then he frowned down at me. "Are you all right?"

I felt myself being gathered against him, into a warm hug. "You look like you're about to cry."

"I'm fine," I said quickly, trying to lean out of his arms, but that was pretty much impossible to accomplish.

"You sure?" he asked, holding me tightly, giving me a concerned look.

"Yes, I'm fine, thanks."

He let me go, and I tried to pretend that I'd had no reaction whatsoever to what he'd done, but the truth was ill-concealed, and I had to settle for being glad that he'd missed it.

"You stay right where you are. I'll be around to open the door for you and help you out. How's your tummy?"

I somehow managed to reply sassily, "Fine, thank you, *Daddy*."

But he just chuckled. "Yet another thing that you should be grateful I'm not to you."

He opened the car door and reached both hands in to me. I wanted to refuse to use them, but I knew that, if I did, I'd end up in a wretched lump at his feet, and he'd enjoy that entirely too much for me to allow him that satisfaction.

He was right—I was drunker than I thought I was.

So, I put my hands in his and let him help me up.

"Why don't you take off those shoes—they're very cute, but I don't want you to fall off them."

He didn't give me the chance to do what he'd suggested. Instead, he went down on one knee in front of me, saying, "Put your hand on my shoulder if you feel wobbly at all." And seconds later, he stood, feminine sandals dangling incongruously from one long, thick, masculine finger while he tucked my hand into his elbow and led me into his house, where I had a sudden attack of dizziness.

And as soon as I stumbled in the slightest, putting my hand to my forehead, I found myself in his arms instead.

And it felt much, much too wonderful.

He took care of me like a child from there, making sure my purse ended up in the room with me, producing an enormous t-

shirt for me to sleep in and then turning around while I slipped out of my dress and into it, handing me a hangar on which to put it and seeing that it ended up in the closet.

"Okay for me to turn around?" he asked, closing the closet door, having kept his back to me the entire time.

"Yes," I said, looking down, feeling terribly shy and vulnerable standing there before him in just his t-shirt and my panties.

And the fact that, when he'd turned to face me, he halted mid-stride at the sight of me didn't help my nerves at all. I could feel his eyes claiming—almost inspecting—every part of me, from the now somewhat messier bun on top of my head to the toes that were buried in the luxurious carpet beneath them. And setting every inch of me on fire because of it.

"Turn around," he commanded softly, and I did so unthinkingly, trustingly presenting him with my back.

Deck took a step or two towards me and I could feel the heat of him behind me. I wondered if he was going to touch me—trying to prepare myself mentally for if he did, although I wasn't at all sure that there was a way to do that. But then he took my bun apart, combing his fingers through my hair to prevent snarls.

"Your hair is beautiful," he breathed, the scents of tequila and cigar reaching my nose.

"Th-thank you."

He reached out and I again tensed, expecting him to hug me or make some kind of sexual move, but instead, he found the corner of the bed sheets and pulled them up. "Let's get you tucked in."

Without looking at him, I got between the sheets, which he then laid over me before darting into the bathroom to get me a glass of water, which he put on the nightstand. "If you wake in the middle of the night, hydrate as much as you can."

Then he stood there, looking down at me—so big and undeniably male that I found myself breathing very rapidly—not from nerves but from pure, animal desire, although I still managed to

keep my eyes from his. I was very sure that if I looked at him, it would be all over.

But I could see that his hands were knotted into fists near his thighs.

And I knew he wanted me, too.

Then, somewhat abruptly, he said, "Sleep well," leaning down to give me a perfunctory kiss on the cheek and then leaving me there, alone, with all those new, exciting, enticing thoughts of him—in a way I'd never considered him before.