

C
O
B
B
L
E
S
T
O
N
E

P
R
E
S
S

KATE STERLING

Tryst
Managing
MAGGIE



Managing Maggie

By

Kate Sterling

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Managing Maggie

Copyright© 2010 Kate Sterling

ISBN: 978-1-60088-512-9

Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Editor: Leanne Salter

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

Thank you to Emily, for always inspiring me to work harder, and to all my writing friends out there in the trenches who believe in me.

Chapter One

"Take Charge of Your Orgasms!"

Maggie scoffed as she read the title to Sharon Nelson, her best friend and one of the partners in their newly formed Web design business. "As if I haven't been doing that for years now. If I don't, who will?"

Sharon leaned in and pointed to the page. "Hey, now, that double-decker pink vibrator looks like it has some real possibilities." She laughed and amended, "Or should I say, *double-pecker?*"

Maggie tossed the copy aside. "Honestly, can't we get better clients than this?"

They'd taken a few clients with them when they left the design agency where they both worked to start their own business, but when the adult toy site offer arrived, it came with more money than they could afford to refuse.

"Unfortunately, babe, beggars can't be choosers."

"Maybe that's the ad line we should use for this one."

A small cough brought their attention to the open door of Maggie's office, where their other partner and graphic designer, Jason Beckham, stood. All six-foot-four, blond-haired, brown-eyed, broad-shouldered, lean-hipped lusciousness of him.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "I didn't realize you were already in a meeting."

The heat in his face reflected that which Maggie felt in her own. She

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

could never look at Jason without having to turn away after a second; she feared the instant lust his presence evoked would show on her face.

Sharon had no such problem. She just grinned and said, "No problem at all. We're just looking over the new *Pussy & Dong Toys* account."

Maggie forced a smile and beckoned Jason inside. "What can I do for you?"

"I made some changes to the, um...new account...design that I thought you might want to look at."

"The *Pussy and Dong* account, you mean?" Sharon batted her lashes.

Maggie glared at her.

Jason coughed slightly. "Yes, that would be the one."

"Thanks, Jay. I'll be there in a minute," Maggie said.

Sharon grinned as he walked away. "Poor boy. I think we embarrass him."

"We? You mean *you*. Oh, God, how long do you think he was standing there?"

"Long enough to know you haven't been laid in a while."

Maggie groaned.

"Hey, maybe you'll get lucky and he'll volunteer!"

"Stop trying to be helpful."

Sharon bowed. "I live to serve."

"So how about trying to serve up a better line than what P&D's came up with?"

"You mean you don't like *Pussy and Dong's* ads? Honestly, and here I thought you wanted a good dong for your pussy."

"Get out."

"You know, that Jason boy sure has got a cute ass. I'm sure if you just—"

"Get out!"

Sharon sauntered toward the door but looked back before exiting. "Maggie, he's got to be at least thirty. Think about it."

Maggie glared at her retreating friend then went to shut the door.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

She leaned against it and closed her eyes.

Think about it.

As if she'd done anything but that for the last year and a half.

* * * * *

Jason cursed the slight tremble in his hands, hoping it would go away before Maggie arrived. The tent in his trousers needed to go as well.

He squirmed in his seat. Both tremor and tent arrived not long after he'd heard the word *orgasm* coming from her lovely lips. He bit back a groan and took a long swallow of cold water from the bottle on his desk. He'd wanted to take charge of her orgasms from the time they'd met.

She'd made it clear by her attitude that she saw him only as a friend, but his hope of something more renewed when she'd invited him to come with her to start her own agency. Sure, she'd insisted they'd be partners—equals—yet so far, she'd treated him as nothing more than a coworker at best; a younger brother at worst.

His hands fisted. Maggie O'Connell was the only woman who could make him shake with desire. She'd come into the office this morning sporting a white skirt that accentuated her long, toned legs and luscious ass, and a green silk blouse that turned her eyes to emeralds and caressed her full breasts in ways that made him jealous. He took another long swig of cold water, wishing he could pour it over the cock that saluted Maggie every time she went past. He slammed the water bottle down and slid his seat further under the desk to hide his very visible frustration.

* * * * *

Sharon had estimated Jason to be around thirty, but Maggie knew exactly how old he was. She knew because she'd stared at the birth date on his insurance application several times, as if by doing so she could make the number change by an act of will.

She was forty-one; he was twenty-eight.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

A thirteen-year age difference that made her feel like a cradle robber each time she found herself lusting after his tight little ass.

Stop it, you perv, she mentally berated herself as visions of his chinos rose in her mind. Front or back, he looked pretty damned good. She firmly pushed the thought away, took a deep breath, and left the office to see his new designs.

* * * * *

Pink.

That was the word to describe it. His pink ears, her pink face—she was sure it was either pink or bright red—pink dildos, pink paddles, pink bottoms.

Pink, pink, pink.

A sheen of sweat swept across Jason's brow, and Maggie sympathized. Poor boy was probably mortified to have an old woman staring over his shoulder while he pointed out such images as a man running a feather over a blindfolded, naked female who was bound by pink satin cuffs.

"Whenever someone who purchased from the site before opens the page, the top images will be customized to their interests," Jason explained. "For instance, let's say someone bought a flogger. The next time they open this page, they'd see something like this..." He pressed a few buttons on the keyboard, and a new screen appeared.

"Oh, I see. That's great," Maggie said weakly. On Jason's screen was a picture of a woman wearing a thong, bent over a sawhorse. A man appeared to be soothing a flavored gel over her bright pink ass cheeks.

"Good job as always, Jay," she said before turning away, damning the slight squeak in her voice. "I'm sure they'll love it."

Her hands shook as she hurried to the washroom to pull herself together. The images and fantasies that sprang to mind when she looked at his work burned in her brain.

Jason's blond head bent over her naked body, tongue following the trail he made with the feather...his long fingers spreading edible gel on her ass...

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

She splashed her face with cold water and pressed a paper towel against her eyes.

It was no use. The damage was done.

She knew she'd spend another night remembering his beautiful brown eyes—large and dark with ridiculously long blond lashes, a combination she'd never seen before she met him. Only now, she had new fantasies to go with them.

* * * * *

Six weeks later...

Maggie, Sharon, Jason, and their tabloid-loving, twenty-year old receptionist, Amy, celebrated the successful launch of the Pussy & Dong Toys Web site over dinner in one of the city's best Italian restaurants. It had been nearly two months in the making, but their satisfied client paid up and even contracted them to design their brochures.

"Cheers, boy and girls!" Sharon raised her glass of champagne. They'd decided they deserved champagne, or wine at the very least.

Maggie lifted her third glass of wine. She didn't like champagne much, but she loved a good Bordeaux. "You know, when we started, I never thought we'd be creating porn by proxy, but what the heck—it pays the bills!"

"A little porn never hurts. Except maybe for a bit of carpal tunnel." Jason flexed his wrist and grinned.

Maggie coughed as wine went down her windpipe.

"You got that right, honey," Sharon said, slapping Maggie on the back. "Good porn is what keeps my marriage going after twenty years."

"Eww, old people sex!" Amy crowed.

"Watch it, missy," Sharon warned before turning to Maggie. "Can you believe this kid?" She jerked her thumb at Amy.

Maggie sniffed. "Young people. Such a waste of good energy."

"Hey," Amy protested.

"Well, I'll tell you whose not wasting his young energy," said

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

Sharon, wagging a finger at Amy. "Ashton Kutcher. He knows the value of a mature woman."

Oh God, not the Ashton Kutcher/Demi Moore thing. Maggie moaned inwardly. *Damn that Demi Moore for making women like her think they could have guys like Jason.* She inwardly laughed at herself. About the only thing she and Demi had in common was their long, dark hair.

"Just look at Maggie," Sharon continued, snapping Maggie's attention back. "Any man of any age would be lucky to have her. Isn't that right, Jason?"

Liquid splattered across the table as Maggie and Jason simultaneously choked on their drinks.

Jason wiped his face with his napkin. "Absolutely," he said, still coughing slightly.

Maggie glared at Sharon. *I'll kill her, I'll kill her, I'll kill her.*

"See there," Sharon said, unfazed by the death threats Maggie silently projected. "A man of any age knows a good thing when he sees it, and I'm older than all of you, but I can promise you, Clifford Nelson still knows how good he's got it."

"I don't doubt it." Jason grinned and raised his glass to Sharon.

"I still think you all are gross," Amy said. "And Demi Moore ought to be ashamed of herself. She's old enough to be his mother."

"Only if she got pregnant as a teenager. Besides, what does that have to do with anything?" Sharon demanded. "Men have dated women younger than their own daughters for years. It's about time we gals started doing the same. Isn't that right, Mary Margaret?"

Maggie winced when her foot connected with the table's leg instead of Sharon's, which she'd aimed for.

"That's different," Amy said, drawing Maggie's attention away from her sore toes.

Sharon opened her mouth to respond, but Jason spoke first.

"No, it isn't," he said to Maggie's surprise. Apparently to Amy's surprise as well, because she gaped at him open mouthed. "A beautiful woman is beautiful no matter what her age. In fact, it's about time women started dating whoever they want."

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

Maggie blinked as Jason looked at her during that speech. There was nothing significant in that look, was there? Hard to tell since she was on her fifth glass of wine. Her concentration broke when Sharon clapped a hand on his back.

"Now that's what I'm talking about. Let me buy you another drink."

Jason laughed and declined. "I've only had two so far, and from the looks of things, I'm going to have to be the designated driver."

* * * * *

As it turned out, he was, but only for Maggie. Amy called her boyfriend, Joe, and Cliff picked up Sharon. Maggie tried to get a ride with the Nelsons, but her traitor of a friend insisted Jason take her home, claiming there was no room in the family mini-van due to toys and sports equipment.

"Really, I can call a cab. No need for you to put yourself out," she protested as he slid in beside her in his small sports car.

"No trouble at all. Here, let me," he said, as she fumbled with her seatbelt. He leaned over, his warm hand closing around hers as he took the belt from her.

The soft hair of his arm tickled hers as he moved the seatbelt from her shoulder, barely grazing her breast as he drew the belt over to latch at her waist.

She couldn't breathe. The contact was so brief, so light, she knew he couldn't have meant to do it, yet he might as well have run a live wire across her for the reaction it caused. Her nipples tightened painfully, and a sharp current shot from her breast to her thighs.

"Thanks," she managed to whisper.

"No problem," he replied in a voice huskier than she remembered. "Now, where do you live?"

For a moment, she couldn't recall.

Jason knew exactly where she lived, but couldn't say so. Maggie would wonder how he knew, and he already felt like a stalker for

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

gleaning every bit of information he could about this woman who drove him insane with desire.

He hoped she hadn't noticed when his hand grazed her breast. He hadn't planned it—not really, he told himself—but the temptation to touch her, even for a moment, was too great. He checked her face for a reaction. Her eyes were closed.

Such a sweet drunk. He smiled and started the car.

* * * * *

"Come on, Sleeping Beauty, you're home." Jason's voice filled her dream, and she smiled when she felt his arms go around her.

"You feel so good," she murmured.

Soft laughter vibrated above her.

Her eyes flew open. "Oh!" She tried to clear her head, looking around in panic.

Jason gazed down at her from the open passenger door of his car. The cool night air hit her face when he moved back, and she sobered quickly. He reached for her arm, but she pushed him away.

"I'm sorry... It's okay... I'm okay," she babbled as she searched for her purse on the floorboard.

"I've got your purse if that's what you're looking for," he said, lifting the bag. He held out a hand again, and she took it, unfolding herself from the low-slung seat.

When they reached her door, she motioned for her purse. "Thanks for the ride. You really didn't have to do it."

"I did, and it was my pleasure. Here, let me get the keys."

Once more, she felt the warmth of his hand over hers, and she leaned against the porch wall for support as he opened the door.

"Thank you." She reached for the key then stopped in surprise when he followed her into the house.

"Let me just make sure everything is all right," he said, finding the light switch.

She blinked at the sudden brightness. "I'm okay now. You don't

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

have to stay."

"I'm only going to make sure you get to bed safely."

She flushed. Whether more at the hint she couldn't take care of herself, or the image of him in her bedroom, she wasn't sure. "I can take care of myself," she insisted.

"I know you can," he said softly, "but I'd never let you go in at night alone without checking for intruders first. I need to know you're safe before I can leave."

"Oh." *Damn, why did he always make her knees go weak?*

She followed as he made a quick check of the house. "Looks like it's all clear. Now, let's get you to bed."

He placed a hand on her back, and her mouth went dry.

"I...I can manage."

"I know, but I'll feel better knowing you're safely tucked in when I leave."

Oh, God, he was killing her.

God, she was killing him. Standing there, staring at him with those large green eyes, her dark hair slightly disheveled from her nap in the car. She looked so soft, so vulnerable.

His chivalry was in deep danger.

Get hold of yourself, man! She's drunk. Jason took a deep breath and led her back to her room. "Let me know when you've changed and are in bed."

She gave a small smile and went inside.

Jason stood in the hallway, cock hard and balls aching, trying to think of anything other than Maggie undressing.

Keith Richards in the shower... Dick Cheney and Madeleine Albright in a sixty-nine...

Sixty-nine...

Fuck. His cock twitched as he pictured his tongue deep between Maggie's thighs, her long legs over his shoulders. He rubbed a hand across his crotch to ease the ache.

It didn't help.

"I'm ready," Maggie called from behind the door.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

So was he.

Maggie's breath caught when Jason's tall frame filled the door to her bedroom.

She'd spent the last several minutes in the bathroom, telling herself it meant nothing that she'd cleaned up, changed underwear, brushed her teeth, and put on the green silk teddy. She wasn't trying to seduce him, and couldn't even if she tried. He was too young, too gorgeous.

But...what was it he'd said at dinner...?

She gave a tiny shake of her head as the light played tricks on her eyes. His pants weren't bulging in the front, they couldn't be. Surely, he was only staring wide-eyed at her like that from embarrassment.

He probably didn't expect to see me looking like an old cougar on the prowl.

She jumped onto the bed and pulled the blankets over her, suddenly embarrassed. "Well, as you can see, I'm fine now. You can go home and stop babysitting this old woman." She gave him a weak smile.

He didn't return the smile.

"Maggie..." he started, his voice deep, husky.

"Really, it's okay. You can go now." She waved her hand to shoo him away.

He didn't shoo.

He crossed the room in three short strides and kissed her hard on the lips, taking advantage of her slack-mouthed shock to plunge his tongue deep within, stroking and twirling until she was breathless.

As suddenly as he began, he stopped. "Goodnight," he whispered hoarsely.

He was gone before she could speak.

Chapter Two

"Hot sun, hot dogs, hot guys, hot damn! The sweet sensations of baseball season are upon us," Sharon exclaimed, rubbing her hands.

Maggie rubbed her temples. "What are you shouting about?"

Sharon waved a flyer under Maggie's nose. "It's baseball season, and guess who's playing for Callahan's Bar and Grill?"

"Pete Rose?" Maggie drawled.

"Even better. Our very own Mr. Jason Beckham. See here." She pointed to the roster. "Better still, he'll be playing against those losers at Midtown Graphics."

Just the sight of his name caused Maggie's stomach to flutter. *Jason*. She'd been avoiding him all day.

"And you came about this information *how*?" She looked at Sharon with suspicion.

"Snatched the flyer from his desk. Game's tomorrow night. You coming?"

"I'll pass. Little League's not exactly my thing."

Sharon's eyes widened then narrowed. "*Little League*? And since when have you passed up an opportunity to sit on a bench and check out the players' cups?"

Maggie shrugged. "Maybe I've matured. Unlike *some* people."

"Oh, puh-leeze," Sharon crowed. "Nobody likes checking out baseball butt better'n you. Except maybe me."

Maggie laughed in spite of herself. It was true. She and Sharon had

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

spent many a summer sitting by dusty fields calling encouragement to the players. *"Bring it on home to Mama! C'mon, sweet cheeks, can't you pitch better than that?"*

The fact that Sharon's husband occasionally joined them didn't deter their enjoyment in the least—they just loved tight asses in uniform no matter who was around. In fact, that was how Sharon met Cliff; he used to play in a town league.

Sharon's voice broke her reverie. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you did the drunken nasty with Jason last night, and now you're avoiding him."

"What?"

"You heard me. Seems like you two have been avoiding each other all day. What happened when he took you home?"

"Nothing. Don't be ridiculous."

"Uh-huh. Then how come you're not looking me in the eye."

Maggie looked up and prayed her face wasn't red. "Nothing. Happened."

"If you say so. Then you're going to the game with me?"

"Oh, for crying out loud."

"I'll take that as a yes," Sharon said, grinning as she turned to go.

Maggie slumped in her chair once Sharon left. Her friend was partially right. She *was* avoiding Jason; but worse, it seemed he was avoiding *her*.

She groaned. Her head hurt, she was embarrassed, and she needed to pee. But going to the bathroom meant walking past his office. Maybe she'd get lucky and his door would still be shut. He'd barely mumbled a good morning to her this morning before shutting himself in his office. She hadn't seen him since.

She peeked out of her office. It was safe; his door was closed. She went into the hall, turned, and walked right into his chest. He caught her arms as she barreled into him.

"Oh, um, hi. Sorry about that. Didn't see you. In a hurry." She laughed weakly.

He didn't speak, nor did he release her arms.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

"Oh, and thanks for the ride last night. I hope I didn't do anything too embarrassing," she babbled, trying to pull away. "I don't really remember anything after we left the restaurant."

He dropped her arms, and his eyes narrowed. "Oh, really? Nothing at all?"

"Nope," she lied, her voice chirpy. "Not a thing." She ducked into the bathroom before he could speak again.

* * * * *

The game was already underway when Maggie arrived. She made a quick trip to the concession stand, then carefully balanced her soda and foot-long chili cheese dog as she walked across the bleachers to sit next to Sharon. Amy sat on Sharon's other side, wearing cut-off shorts and a bikini top, yelling obscenities at Midtown Graphic's pitcher.

"What's the score?" Maggie asked, surreptitiously scanning the field for Jason.

"If you'd come with me on time, you'd know," Sharon snipped.

"Give it a rest. I told you I had something to take care of." *Like buying shorts that hide my thighs.* She glanced at Amy's perfect legs with a tiny pang of envy. The only thing that made her feel better was the fact that Amy had the tiniest little pot belly. She silently acknowledged her own pettiness with a wry smile then turned to Sharon.

"So, who's winning?"

"Scoreboard's behind you, but so far, it's three guys with extra large cups on Midtown's team, versus five on Callahan's. However, Midtown's got two new medium cups with the best asses I've seen in years, so at this point, it may be a tie."

"No tie," Amy chimed in. "I know for a fact that at least one of those large cups on Midtown is a fake."

"Which one?" Maggie and Sharon demanded in unison.

"Number twenty-three. He probably had to stuff it with a washcloth and use safety pins to make it stay on."

"Girl, get out!" Sharon laughed, and so did Maggie.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

"No joke. Oh, look, there's Jason. *Go Jay-son!*" Amy yelled, waving wildly as Jason stepped onto the field.

Jason grinned before taking position. As he prepared to swing, the pants of his uniform caressed his legs, outlining his hard thighs.

Sharon whooped and Amy screamed as bat and ball connected with a resounding *crack*. Maggie just stared dry-mouthed as he ran across the field, powerful muscles rippling the fabric of his uniform.

He stopped at second base, removed his hat, and wiped sweat from his brow. Maggie felt her own sweat beading in more places than her forehead.

A few hours later, it was over. Official score: Callahan's nine; Midtown seven. Ladies Delight score: Callahan's five, Midtown two.

Maggie put on her sunglasses as the game broke up. She didn't want anyone to see her eyes as she checked out the fit of Jason's uniform. There was no doubt in her mind the bulge in the front was all Jason and not a cup.

Definitely, Most Valuable Player.

He grinned and waved when he spotted her. She smiled and waved in return, her hands trembling slightly. Her lips tingled in memory of his kiss.

"Hey, Jay, think fast!" one of his teammates called.

Jason spun, but not in time to catch the ball whizzing straight for Maggie. She didn't have time to duck before it connected with her forehead.

* * * * *

Too bright.

Maggie tried to open her eyes, but the light was too bright. She moaned in pain.

"Do you need something? Water, something for pain?"

Her eyes flew open, and as quickly as she sat up, she fell back again, thumping against her pillows in agony. What the hell was Jason doing in her bedroom?

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

"Maggie, are you all right? Do I need to call the doctor?"

She breathed deeply and slowly pried her eyelids open. He was still there.

"What are you doing here?"

"Someone needed to stay with you when you came home from the hospital, so I volunteered to take over for Sharon. You shouldn't be here alone with a concussion."

She must have really been out of it if she couldn't remember that little detail. "How long have you been here?"

He smiled. "Long enough to know you snore. It's the real reason I woke you, not the concussion."

She frowned, and he laughed. "Don't worry. It was cute."

"If you don't watch it, I'm going to give *you* a concussion."

"As long as you kiss it and make it better, I won't complain."

Maggie peered at him from under nearly closed eyelids. Good Lord, he wasn't really flirting with her, was he?

Ugh. Even disheveled and sleep deprived, he still looked good. And here she lay concussed, probably bruised and smelling bad. She really needed a drink of water.

She tried to move to turn down the brightness of the lamp by her bed, but he moved before she could. "What do you need?"

"Light's too bright. And I'm thirsty," she whispered, noticing a pitcher of water and a glass on the bedside table. She smiled when she realized he must have placed it there. *Always so sweet, so thoughtful.*

He turned down the light, and her smile faded when he put an arm around her, lifting her slightly from the bed. He didn't give her the glass. He held it to her lips as if she were a child, his hand tender against her back, his eyes full of concern.

She made a weak waving motion. "Thank you," she mumbled, embarrassed. Embarrassment turned to shock when he gently laid her back and sat on the bed next to her, taking her hand.

"Maggie, I'm so sorry about this afternoon. I feel like such an idiot."

She frowned. "Why?"

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

"I should have caught the damn ball instead of letting it hit you in the head, that's why."

"You didn't know that was going to happen."

"Still." He rubbed his forehead. "Maggie, I..." He broke off and groaned.

He stilled when she put her other hand over his. It was an unconscious move, meant only to comfort. She didn't even realize she had done so until he looked down at their hands. She started to pull away, but he put his other hand over hers.

"God, Maggie. Don't you know how I feel about you?" His voice was hoarse.

"Jason..."

"Please, don't say anything. Just listen."

Maggie could barely breathe. Her pulse beat faster, intensifying the pain behind her eyes, but she hadn't the will to make him stop.

He stroked a thumb over the back of her hand. "If I could trade places with you, I would. I can't bear the thought of you being hurt."

She smiled weakly. "Why, because I remind you of your mother?"

"Stop right there. Don't make this into a joke."

She blinked at the harshness of his voice.

"Do you think I haven't noticed how you make jokes when you're afraid or uncomfortable?" He dropped her hands and ran one of his own through his hair, rippling the tawny waves.

"I—" He heaved a sigh. "God, forgive me." He stood and moved away from the bed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't do this now."

"Don't go," she said softly and reached for him. He stared at her, brows creasing over dark, tormented eyes. He sat on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes when she rubbed his back.

She had to bite back a moan of pleasure as she ran her hands over the shoulders she'd longed to touch but had never dared to before.

He drew a ragged breath. "Maggie, you don't know what you do to me."

"Tell me."

He gave a short laugh. "I could *show* you, but if I do that, you'd

surely fire me."

She laughed too. "I'll take my chances. Besides, I can't exactly fire you since I'm not your boss. We're equals, remember?"

"Do you truly see us equals?"

"Of course."

"Then *this* is what you do to me." He turned, roughly pulling her hand against the heat of his erection.

Her fingers clenched in reaction, cupping him against her palm. She closed her eyes against the hot desire that coursed through her, pushing back the dull ache in her head and filling it only with visions of the man before her.

"Jason," she moaned, caressing the hard length of him through the fabric. He claimed her lips with his own, tenderly sliding over the soft skin. He murmured her name, breath warm against her mouth, and she arched against him.

"Oh, God," he moaned, gently extricating himself from her arms. "We shouldn't be doing this. You're hurt and probably don't even know what you're doing."

"I'm fine," she insisted as she reached for him, though both knew she lied. The concussion pain was still there, but the ache gathering between her thighs rapidly gained precedence.

"No, you're not, and I've waited for you too long to let this be less than perfect for you." He gently caressed her face then dropped a quick kiss on her nose. "I won't take advantage of you when you're injured and on medication. But I'll be happy to show you all the ways you get to me if you remember any of this when you feel better."

Chapter Three

Maggie remembered.

She'd been more nervous than a crook in the IRS office when she returned to work, but Jason had been nothing more than courteous since he'd left her home. He called and dropped by with soup and flowers but hadn't said another word about that night. Now she wondered if *he* remembered, or if she'd just dreamed it.

A glance at the clock showed her it was after five. Sharon and Amy had waved goodbye earlier as they passed her office; Jason hadn't left yet. She firmly told herself she needed to stay late to catch up on the work she'd missed while she was out. It had nothing to do with hoping Jason would stop in before he left...maybe finish what they started the week before. No, that wasn't it at all.

She jumped when he rapped on the doorframe, startling her out of her daydream. Her heart did a little happy dance at the sight of his face in the doorway. She tried to make it settle down and beat normally, but the sexy, dimpled smile he wore didn't help.

"Hey, would you be free to come to my place this evening?" he asked.

"Go to your place?" Damn. Since when did she channel Marilyn Monroe's voice?

"I've got some project ideas, but I left the stuff at home."

"Oh. Um, sure," she said, hoping she didn't look as disappointed as she felt. Then, in a rush before her courage faltered, she asked, "Would

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

you like to have dinner first?"

"Are you offering to cook for me?" He cocked his head to the side and gave her a crooked grin that sent a rush of heat straight to her core.

She laughed and managed to make it sound natural. "Sorry, no. Just wondered if you'd like to grab a bite to eat first. I'm starving."

As they locked up and left the building, Maggie wondered how she'd manage to convince him of her hunger since her stomach was filled with butterflies.

Happy, dancing, *mating* butterflies.

Dinner passed quickly. As always, he managed to amuse and amaze her with his wit, intelligence and attentiveness, noting her needs even before she did. When the waiter passed by, he stopped him to refill her glass though Maggie hadn't even noticed it was almost empty. When she laughed until she cried at his jokes, he dabbed her eyes with his napkin, a hot, yet tender expression in his gaze that made her tremble when she remembered it.

She gripped the steering wheel of her car as she followed Jason home, curiosity and anticipation coursing through her. When they finally arrived and he led her inside, her nerves were ready to snap.

She didn't know what she had expected, but the neat little townhouse surprised her. It was clean, homey, and comfortable. In fact, it was so well coordinated, she mused as they took off their shoes at the door, that if she didn't know better, she'd think he was married or gay.

She tried to appear calm as he led her to the plush gray sofa that faced a fireplace—a fireplace he set to glowing with the light of several candles.

"That's nice," she said, motioning toward the display he'd just created.

Jason smiled. "It's too warm for a full fire, but I like the atmosphere. Would you like some wine? I find it helps after a long day at work." He took a bottle and two glasses from a nearby bar.

"Are you saying we're slave drivers?" she teased.

"I'd be your slave any day." He grinned as he handed her a glass then sat in a chair across from her.

Maggie took a sip to keep from replying. She didn't trust herself to speak after the images that just ran through her mind. "This is nice," she said finally as he watched her over the rim of his glass. "So, you said you wanted to show me some of your new ideas?" She tried for businesslike and ended up with slightly nervous.

"Yes, but do you mind if we just relax a bit first? I've got some sinful chocolate mousse we could have for dessert if you'd like."

"No, thanks." *I'd just like a nice big bowl of you.* Maggie smiled at her thoughts, then felt her face flush when she caught Jason's gaze.

His eyes bore a wicked gleam, as if he read her mind. He stood and walked toward a stereo that sat in one of the shelves flanking the fireplace. "How about a little music to unwind?"

A few moments later, soft jazz filled the room and Maggie took the opportunity of Jason's distraction to admire his sexy behind. He looked over his shoulder and raised his brows when her gaze flew up to meet his.

Damn, caught checking the goods. She nearly jumped when he walked over and sat next to her on the sofa. She did jump when he brushed his fingers gently across her temple.

"How's your head?"

His deep voice was soft, and heaven help her, so seductive. He lightly smoothed the tips of his fingers down her cheek, stealing her breath for a moment.

"It's fine," she whispered.

"I'm glad," he murmured. He leaned in, his lips the merest touch against her brow, then stood suddenly. "So, are you ready to see what I've got in mind?"

"Huh?" She was still trying to catch her breath from the touch of lips.

He chuckled. "Remember, the project?"

Damn. That was why they were there, wasn't it?

"Yes, of course," she said briskly, standing.

"Then follow me."

They climbed a flight of stairs, and he gestured toward a closed door. He motioned her to the front and reached around her to open it,

revealing a large bedroom.

She took a step backward and connected with his chest.

"In here," he said, putting gentle pressure on her shoulders to guide her forward. He shut the door behind them, and she gulped. The focal point of the room was a large bed.

A large bed covered with an array of Pussy & Dong's merchandise.

"Um...Jason...what's this?"

He led her closer to the display. "I thought it would be helpful if we actually *saw* the merchandise rather than just looked at photos," he said. "That way, we'd have better ideas how to market them."

"Oh." One word was all she could manage.

He picked up a pair of fuzzy pink handcuffs and tickled her cheek with them. "After all, how could you write effectively about something if you haven't done your research?"

How indeed? Maggie couldn't have replied if her life depended on it. Her mouth had gone completely dry. The sight of Jason holding the handcuffs from her fantasies caused every bit of moisture in her body to take a sharp turn south, landing right between her thighs.

"Take these, for instance," he said. He pulled her wrist toward him and clasped a cuff around it. "See how soft that is? It doesn't hurt a bit, does it?"

"No, but I hope you have the key," she said, finding her voice at last.

He chuckled and bound her other wrist before answering. "They're around here somewhere..."

Before she could protest, he picked up a fluffy feather and tickled her chin with it. Maggie's knees nearly buckled when he put the feather down, picked up the pink leather flogger, and turned to her with a devilish grin.

"What are you doing with that?" she cried, pulling back.

"Relax, Maggie. I won't hurt you. See..." he dragged the soft leather strips up her arm and across her neck, brushing her skin lightly. A clear mental image sprang to mind of him doing the same thing across her ass, and her already moist panties dampened more.

"So, you ordered all this just for *research*, did you? And I suppose you read porn magazines for the articles?" She tried humor to diffuse the electric currents of desire shooting through her body. It didn't help.

"I do." He grinned.

She laughed, but it ended abruptly when he moved behind her, putting his hands around her waist and his mouth next to her ear. "Do you know what articles I like best, Mary Margaret?" he asked, his breath warm against her neck.

"Let me guess. Sports?" She felt the vibration of his deep laughter from her neck to her clit.

"I do try to improve my game," he said and nipped her ear gently.

"Jason," she gasped. His game needed no improvements.

He spun her around and pulled her against him, her cuffed hands dangling between their waists.

It was the pressure of his hardened cock against her hands that did it. She moaned and moved her fingers to cup his balls through his pants. He pushed her back toward the bed, and with one arm swept the toys to the side, scattering several to the floor to make room for them to lie down.

He laid her on the mattress and pulled her bound arms wrists over her head. "It's time for us to mix business with pleasure. Time to finish what we started."

She opened her mouth, but he cut off her reply by covering her lips with his own. When his warm, wine-flavored tongue stroked hers, she didn't even remember what she'd been about to say. Desire burned through her skin as his hands skimmed over the fabric of her blouse, tracing the outline of her torso and breasts. His hands slid over her hips, cupping her ass, and she brought her arms down to capture his head between them, bound wrists behind his neck.

"Jason," she said on a breath, pulling him closer. Their mouths met and mated; her hips moved against his, shamelessly rubbing against the bulge in his pants to alleviate the ache between her legs. "Please, take the cuffs off. I want to touch you."

He pulled back and raised her arms over her head once more. "Not yet. I want you completely at my mercy," he murmured against her lips.

"I already am," she groaned.

His smile was pure male satisfaction. "Then let's get this off, shall we?" He pulled back and quickly unbuttoned her blouse, nearly tearing it in his haste. He removed his own shirt as quickly, and Maggie's nipples hardened painfully against the fabric of her bra when she looked at him.

He was beautiful. A perfectly sculpted, golden god.

Her body moved to receive his touch as he bent over her, his long fingers tracing the satin straps of her bra. "Jason..." His name was a plea on her lips as she pressed against his hands.

He slid his fingers under her bra to stroke the soft skin, teasing the rosy peaks until she thought she would scream before his tongue finished what his fingers began. She moaned as he drew the sensitive flesh deeply into his warm, moist mouth, his tongue teasing the peak of one while his hand played with the other. He took turns with her nipples until she bucked against him, her arms coming down once more over his head, pressing him to her breast.

The sudden air was cool on her breast as he moved his mouth away. "I told you to keep your hands here," he said, pulling her arms up.

She moaned in frustration when he moved off of her and stood. She tried to sit up, but he pushed her back.

"Stay there," he commanded.

Maggie blinked. She'd never heard him use that tone before. It sent a thrill of excitement through her, along with a wave of uncertainty. This was Jason? Sweet, *young* Jason? Her eyes widened as he pulled a strap from behind the headboard then quickly latched it through the cuffs at her wrists, rendering her unable to pull her arms down.

"Where did that come from?" she gasped.

"I told you. I planned on testing *all* the merchandise."

From the way his dark gaze traveled her body, she knew she would be part of the sampling.

He closed his eyes briefly and raked a hand through his hair. "Tell me now, Maggie, if you want me to stop."

She stared, mesmerized by the man before her. His tan, muscular chest was lightly covered with golden hair a few shades darker the hair of

his head. It swept in a silky V down the middle of his chest and faded to nearly black as it tapered into a line above his waistband. His eyes were dark and heavy-lidded with passion, his face more serious than she'd ever seen. For all her fantasies, the reality of a half-naked, obviously aroused Jason was more than she'd ever imagined. He was undeniably a grown man, and he was offering her a choice to stay or to leave.

He could be hers, if only for tonight. She licked her lips, still tasting his kiss upon them, and shook her head slightly. "I don't want you to stop."

His breath came out as if he'd been holding it. "Thank God, because I don't want to."

He claimed her lips again while his hands moved between them, unclasping the front hook of her bra, then moved down further to undo her slacks. He pulled back, and she raised her hips so he could slide them off, taking pants and underwear at the same time. He sat on his heels at the foot of the bed and removed her socks. He cradled one of her feet in his hands, his thumbs stroking the arch until she moaned. He lightly kissed the tip of each toe before stroking the curve of her ankle with his tongue, then slowly moved his lips up her calf. When he pushed her legs apart to kneel between them, she reflexively tried to close them, feeling too open, too exposed.

"Don't hide yourself from me," he said, his strong hands moving her knees apart again. "You're beautiful. I want to see all of you."

The softness of his hair tickled her inner thighs as he moved higher, kissing every bit of skin he came in contact with along the way. When he reached the apex of her thighs, he blew softly against her, his breath warm and gentle. "So beautiful," he murmured.

Maggie gasped as his mouth came down on her exposed folds, his tongue teasing them apart, softly stroking upward, each stroke firmer as he came to her sensitive clitoris, nipping and sucking until she sobbed.

"God, Jason. *Please!*" She bucked against his mouth as he slipped one long finger, then another, inside of her.

He continued his assault on her tender flesh until her thighs tightened around his head, her hands straining against the cuffs that

bound them as her inner core clenched around his fingers. When every muscle in her body strained to the point of shattering, he pulled his fingers out of her slick heat and plunged his tongue where his fingers had been.

Her control shattered. She cried out incoherently, the headboard banging against the wall as she jerked and pulled at the restraints, her body a willing slave to the orgasm that shook her.

Once she came back to earth, she saw Jason draw back to undo the button of his pants. "Please, Jason, let me," she whispered. "Untie my hands so I can touch you."

He moved from the bed and stood, and Maggie was pleased to see he seemed as shaken as she. His hair lay about his head in mussed waves, and his body trembled. She watched as he jerked open the nightstand and pulled out a set of keys, as well as a condom package. As he put the key into the cuffs, he leaned over and kissed her deeply.

Maggie drank him in. He tasted of wine and sex, passion and promise of more to come. She pulled him to her with shaking arms as soon as her hands were free and plunged her fingers into the silken waves of his hair. His hands moved over her shoulders, pushing down the open shirt and bra she still wore, and she moved back so he could remove it. When his fingers went once more to his zipper, she put her hand over his.

"Let me." She stroked the soft, curling hair that trickled over his abdomen, tracing the line where it disappeared under the top button of his trousers. He moaned when she slipped the fingers of one hand under the waistband and stroked the hard bulge through front of his pants with her other hand. He was so thick and hot, it took all her willpower not to beg him to fuck her *now*, but she wanted to prolong his pleasure as he'd done hers.

"Lie back." She pressed her hand to his chest and moved over him, eager to taste him. She kissed his strong jaw and ran her tongue along the cords of his neck, reveling in the salty taste of his skin and the slight stubble that tickled against it. She inhaled deeply of his warm, musky scent—a mingling of clean sweat, sexual arousal, and the faint citrusy remains of his cologne. He buried his fingers in her hair as she made her

way downward. She traced the path her fingers had made across his chest with her lips, stopping only to rake her teeth lightly over his hardened nipples. He jerked upward, and she smiled before soothing the sensitive flesh with her tongue. She blew softly over the moistened skin, watching goose bumps form across his golden skin.

He was so gorgeous, so damned sexy, she wanted to imprint the image on her brain forever.

When she made her way back to the waistband of his pants, she put her mouth over the fabric and blew hotly into it, causing him to moan and clutch at her shoulders.

"God, you're driving me crazy," he groaned as she cupped his balls through the fabric and slowly pulled the zipper down. His erection strained above the waistband of his underwear, the tip visible and dark with arousal.

She took a moment to admire the contrast of tanned skin against the white cotton briefs then plunged her hands into his pants, cupping his hard ass through the soft fabric. She brought her mouth down to where his erection peeked over the rim of his briefs and licked the soft rim of his cock, and he bucked against her mouth. Encouraged, she rolled her tongue around the edge, licking up across the head, and tasted the salty bead of moisture at the tip. His moans fueled her desire, and she couldn't wait any longer. She jerked his briefs down, and his cock sprang free—long, hard and thick.

It was beautiful.

She quickly pulled his pants down the rest of the way, and he kicked them free. When she would have removed his socks, he impatiently hooked a toe under the fabric and kicked free of them as well. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her back up to him, fiercely claiming her mouth in a kiss. She tried to pull back to finish what she'd started between his legs, but he flipped her onto her back, trapping her beneath him.

"I want to taste you. I want to take you in my mouth," she protested as he pushed her knees apart with his legs and moved between them.

"You will. Right now I just want to look at you," he whispered.

She gazed up at him, her breath catching at the look on his face. He gazed at her with an expression that mirrored the awe she felt.

"You're so beautiful," he said. "More than I even imagined."

Tears threatened to swell. He looked at her with eyes that reflected how she felt; his words were those she might have said to him. Could he really feel the same way?

He skimmed his fingertips over her breasts and smiled. Maggie smiled back. He made her feel beautiful. Her heart filled with gratitude and the acceptance that, try as she might have to fight it, she'd been falling in love with this man for the past year and a half. And now he was before her—real, warm, and naked—and looking at her as if she were the most wonderful sight he'd ever seen.

She reached for him, and he leaned down to meet her. She stroked her hands over his back, its muscles warm and smooth beneath her fingers. Her mouth sought contact with him everywhere, while he kissed her face, her hair, her neck. His body rose and fell over hers as he covered her with his hands and mouth, their legs intertwined. His cock was hard against her thighs, moving near her entrance but to her frustration not going in. She tried to reach for it, but he moved her hand away, taking his cock and rubbing it against the wet folds of her sex. He slid it up and down, bumping against her clit until she thought she'd go crazy from wanting.

"Fuck me now, Jason!" she begged.

"Oh, I'm going to fuck you, my little Maggie. Right now, and again and again until you won't be able to leave here."

His words unleashed her. She clutched at his shoulders, trying to pull him down to her. He reached over to the nightstand where he'd left the condom, and she took it from him as his fingers fumbled with the wrapper. He watched her through half-closed eyes as she unrolled it over his erection. She squeezed the hard length of him as she brought the lubricated sheath over his hot flesh. He was so thick and hard, her pussy clenched and her nipples peaked painfully from a jolt of desire.

Once he was sheathed, he tenderly laid her back, kissing her so

gently she nearly wept. She opened her thighs wide for him, and this time he obliged, slipping inside her waiting core with maddening slowness, stretching and filling her an inch at a time. He slid the head of his cock in and out until she moaned and arched against his hips, aching to feel all of him.

"Do you want me, Maggie?" he asked.

"You know I do."

"What do you want? Tell me," he said, a long finger now between them, flicking over her clit. "Do you want me to fuck your sweet pussy? Because that's what I want to do."

"Yes, please. *Yes!*" She moved her hips toward him.

He grabbed her ass in both hands and pulled her hips to his cock, plunging into her so hard and deep she cried out from the momentary pain of it. He covered her mouth with his own and began rocking gently back and forth, his tongue mimicking the movement of his hips.

All pain forgotten, she moved with him, arms and legs wrapped tightly around his body. The sounds of their sex filled the room, accompanied by their moans of pleasure. Jason grabbed her tightly around the waist and flipped them over so she straddled him. With one arm, he held her close, her breasts pressed against his chest, and she felt him moving the other arm around the bed. She tried to pull back, but he held her tightly. When he let go, she sat up, still astride him, and saw that he held a pink, penis-shaped dildo in one hand. Her eyebrows flew up, and his lips quirked into the crooked grin she loved so much.

"And what do you plan to do with that?" she asked, amusement and excitement buzzing through her.

"This."

He flipped a switch, and the dildo hummed to life. He brought the vibrating cock to her clit while his own cock twitched inside of her. She jerked against the twin sensations, her thighs clenching around him.

"I want to watch you come on top of me," he said.

His words were her undoing. She leaned back, her hands grasping at his legs, fingers digging into his muscular thighs as she straddled him. She ground her pelvis against his and rode him slowly, then faster and

faster as the vibrator hummed between them, until her control shattered. She screamed his name as she came hard against him, gasping and shaking as spasms rippled throughout her body.

Jason threw the dildo down and pulled her to his chest, his mouth grinding against hers as he bucked up into her, his legs capturing hers between them. He rolled them over suddenly, not breaking contact. He pulled back only long enough to reach down and spread her legs wide, drawing her knees up with his arms. He plunged into her so hard and fast, she braced her hands against headboard as it pounded against the wall with the rhythm of his strokes.

"Maggie!" he called out hoarsely as his own orgasm overtook him, sending him shuddering and spent over her, where she welcomed his heavy weight and the sweat that dripped off of him.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked after a few moments, moving up onto his elbows, his now slackened cock still inside her

She shook her head, still too weak to speak. She pulled him back down to her and softly kissed his neck, while she caressed the damp hair at his nape.

He gathered her close, rolled them onto their sides to face one another, and softly kissed the top of her head.

Maggie closed her eyes and tried not to think about tomorrow. Tried not to think about how they'd act at the office. She didn't want to think beyond the next breath.

As her passion-soaked skin began to dry, she shivered.

"Cold?" he asked, wrapping his arms and legs around her.

"A little." She nodded her head against his chest.

"I'll warm you," he said, rolling on top of her.

Maggie was shocked and thrilled to feel him growing hard against her once more. Must be one of the advantages of a younger man, she thought. It was one advantage she was willing to take. She smiled and cupped his ass cheeks in her hands, squeezing the firm flesh. She'd wanted to do that since the first time she saw him from behind.

"What are you grinning about?"

"You've got the greatest ass I've ever seen."

"Ditto. Now let me see yours again. I look forward to spanking it often." He wiggled his brows at her.

"Oh, you wish, big boy." She laughed as he turned her around, and then moaned when he rubbed her back, kneading the skin slowly, making his way to the cleft of her cheeks. He bent and kissed the hollow at the base of her spine, his hair soft against her back. He spread her legs with his knees, and she felt something soft being dragged between her thighs.

The flogger.

"What are you doing?" she asked, rising up.

He gently pressed her back down, kissing the nape of her neck. "Relax, beautiful. I won't hurt you. Much..." He chuckled wickedly.

He rubbed the handle of the flogger between her legs, spreading her sex open with the tip of it. She arched on the bed, and he laughed softly. He reached down and pulled her hips high in the air, the flogger handle still toying with her clit, while his cock sat poised at her moist entrance.

"Do you want some more?" he asked.

She pushed back against him in answer, and flinched in surprise when he snapped the flogger straps against her ass.

"I asked you a question, Maggie. Do you want some more?"

"Yes!"

"How much more?"

"All of it," she begged.

"You can have all of me. All you have to do is ask."

"I do want all of you."

Her words caused his cock to jerk and his heart to jump.

All of him.

He wanted all of her. And not just tonight.

He playfully flicked her upturned rump until her rounded cheeks turned a sweet shade of pink and she writhed beneath him. When her flesh quivered, he softly caressed her back with the soft strips of the flogger and smoothed a hand over her warmed cheeks. Her back arched, and she cried out his name.

He paused for a moment to admire the beautiful woman beneath

him. The scent of her—her soft perfume and damp arousal—inflamed him. He'd waited so long to have her just as she was now, naked, her soft skin covered in a light sheen of dew, her body pliant and submissive beneath him.

Maggie. His chest and loins tightened. *His Maggie.*

He bent down to kiss her neck as he drew a thumb through her glistening folds. He moistened it well in her wet core before he stroked it up to the little rosebud between her cheeks. She moaned and moved forward, but he wrapped an arm around her waist to draw her back. He pressed slightly with his thumb, and the tip of it slid in, invading that most private spot of hers.

"Jason," Maggie gasped. A fine sheen of sweat broke over her body.

Her shocked reaction sent a roaring pulse of pure satisfaction and possessiveness through him; he could tell no one had done this to her before.

Before she could recover, he plunged his cock deep into her wet center, her slick core gripping him so tightly he nearly lost control. She screamed his name again, and he'd never heard a sound more wonderful. He buried his cock to the hilt, the fingers of one hand playing against her clit, the thumb of his other hand tucked into her ass, pumping into her.

It was time Mary Margaret O'Connell knew she belonged to him.

He fucked her until they were both dripping with sweat and gasping for air; until she clenched around him, crying out as spasms rocked her body. Only then did he allow his own release, shouting her name as he collapsed against her back.

Maggie trembled from head to toe, aftershocks of an orgasm so powerful she was dizzy. Never had she given in as completely as she had tonight.

Jason tossed back the blankets, sending the remainder of the toys to the floor, and wrapped the sheets around them, the solid warmth of his body against her back. She lay against him, content and spent until she felt the extra wetness between her legs.

A chill shook her that had nothing to do with the room temperature.

They'd forgotten a condom that time.

It was unlikely she'd get pregnant, she reminded herself. She'd never been able to conceive with her ex-husband, even when she was younger. The doctors said it was possible, but unlikely. It never happened, and after ten years of marriage, her ex had left for someone younger who could give him the children he wanted. He now had two beautiful boys, so obviously the fault had been hers.

"I need to go." She pulled away from his arms.

A look of hurt confusion crossed his face. "It's too late for you to leave now. Stay here."

She looked at the clock, unable to face him. It was only a little after ten. "It's not that late, and I don't live too far. I'll be fine." She moved to stand, and he pulled her onto the bed.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Yes, I am," she said firmly. "We still have to work tomorrow, and I need to go home."

"Fine then. I'll just get some things and come with you." He sat up and reached for his clothes.

She took a deep breath. "No. I need to go home alone." She got up and looked for her clothes.

"What's this about?" He pulled on his pants and walked toward her, his face and tone expressing displeasure. She quickly grabbed her clothes and headed for the open door of the master bathroom. He reached her before she could close the door.

"Jason, please. I need to get dressed."

He stared hard at her for a moment, then nodded and backed away.

Maggie quietly locked the door and found some tissue to clean the evidence of their passion from between her legs. Tears dripped down her face, and she swiped them away with trembling hands, cursing herself for the world's biggest fool. What made her think there could be anything between them? She was too old for him. *Too infertile*. He should be dating someone his own age, starting a family. She opened the tap on the sink and splashed cool water on her face, then dried it on one of the thick hand

towels.

What have I done? she silently asked her pale reflection.

She dressed quickly, ran her fingers through her mussed curls, and straightened her shoulders. She had to be strong.

Jason stood by the door, dressed and arms folded, when she came out. She wanted to run.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded, hoping he was only dressed because he was walking her to the car and not because he'd try to come home with her.

When they reached the front door, she stopped and turned. "Thank you for tonight. It was..." He raised his brows, and she faltered. "Well, it was very special."

"Yes, it *was* special. It's also not over."

"Jason, please..."

He put a hand on the door, his arm pinning her between him and the door. "Fine. I'll let you run away tonight. But. This. Isn't. Over." He opened the door and walked with her to her car. "I'm going to follow to make sure you get home safely—and don't argue," he said when she opened her mouth to protest.

She had never seen him like this. He made her a little nervous, but also—and she scolded herself for it—more than a little excited. She drove down the darkened streets, so shaken by the night's events she was almost glad he followed her home. She wasn't quite so glad, however, when he insisted on coming in. She tried to close him out, but he pushed past her and strode through the house.

"Look, I'm sure there are no intruders," she yelled after him. "You can go home now." She stood seething at the door as he went through every room before returning.

"It looks safe. Goodnight, Maggie." He nodded curtly then left without looking back.

Maggie closed the door behind him and leaned against it for support. How would he act at the office tomorrow?

Chapter Four

Maggie knew it was cowardly, and berated herself for it, but she decided to call in sick. She used her best sore-throat whisper to convince Sharon that she might have the same flu Amy had the week before, and asked her to relay the message to Jason that she wanted him to take their chatty, two o'clock client since she'd be unable to speak. She figured that would keep him busy through most of the afternoon and evening, between the commute to the client's office and the long-winded speeches he'd have to endure.

She congratulated herself on the scheme and went to shower and change. The doorbell rang just as she stepped out of the shower. Her heart jumped in panic until she remembered it was only noon and she was expecting a package from UPS. She quickly pulled a robe on over her damp skin and went to the door.

It wasn't United Parcel.

Damn, damn, damn! Didn't your mother teach you not to open the door without checking first?

"Jason, what are you doing here?"

"I think the better question is, what are *you* doing here? You don't look or sound sick to me." His face was a study in displeasure as he pushed open the door that she tried to keep partially closed.

Maggie moved to bar him from entering. "I'm sorry. Now is not a good time for me to have company. I was just getting dressed."

"Going somewhere?" His brows rose. "I hope it's back to the office,

since you're obviously feeling better."

Her temper flared. "Excuse, me, Mr. Beckham, but I believe that I am the boss at Graphic Designs. I can come and go as I please."

His dark eyes glinted. "I see. So it's back to that, is it? Funny how that *we're partners* stuff disappears when you want your way."

She huffed. "We are partners, but—"

He shocked her into silence when he grabbed her arms and pulled her roughly against him, his face a breath from hers. "You may be the boss in the office, Ms. O'Connell, but you have a bit of a learning curve ahead of you when it comes to trying to be the boss of *me*. I let you go peacefully last night—"

"Let me?" She tried to twist out of his grasp, but he held firm. "What do you mean, *let me*?"

"Yes, Maggie, I *let* you get away with leaving last night, but I'm not going to let you shut me out now. In fact, I'm going to give you the spanking you deserve."

The mention of spanking brought a mental image of the pink flogger, and she squeezed her thighs together to stop the instant flood of desire. The hardness of his chest pressing against her breasts didn't help, either. "I think you need to leave now," she said coldly, hoping to cool the heat gathering between her legs.

"And I think you need to learn a valuable lesson about responsibility."

"What?" she sputtered.

"You ran out on me last night because you were scared about what happened between us."

"I did not!"

"And you lied about being sick to avoid seeing me in the office this morning," he continued, ignoring her protest. "And don't think I didn't see through your little scheme about pawning me off on Mr. Gilbert, either."

Maggie swallowed, then blustered, "Shouldn't you be with him now? I'd say it's irresponsible of *you* to keep a client waiting when you know how much we need the business."

Jason's face turned hard as granite while his voice went deadly soft. "Oh, no, Maggie. I'm not as immature as you are." She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off. "You see, I made other arrangements, too. Sharon was only too happy to go in my stead when I told her I wanted to check on you, but I thought it best to send Amy."

"Amy?" she cried. "What the *hell* were you thinking sending Amy to a client?" She struggled to pull back from him, but he didn't let go.

"Unlike you, I know that people often have more to offer than surface appearances—"

"If you're insinuating that I'm shallow—"

"Nothing of the sort. I'm merely pointing out the fact that you can't see beyond Amy's youth and inexperience to recognize that she has a way with customers. There's more to her than you might have realized."

In a burst of fury, she brought both her arms up and broke free of his hold. She moved back then whirled around to face him, pointing a finger at his chest. "I have been in this business a lot longer than you, and I know what I'm doing. You had no right to send Amy out like that, and I can't believe Sharon would have let you."

He glanced down at the finger pointing at his chest then back at her face. "As a matter of fact, she agreed it was a good idea."

"I don't believe it." Maggie snatched her hand back, fisting her hands on her hips.

"Believe it. Sharon, at least, can see beyond her own nose and prejudices—"

"Prejudice!"

"Yes, prejudice. You keep trying to play up your experience, when in fact you're overlooking valuable resources right in front of you."

She seethed. "I said it before, and I'll say it again. You need to leave. *Now*."

"Not before we talk about us."

"There is no us," she said flatly and turned her back, her tone at odds with the deep ache in her chest when she spoke the words.

"Liar." Jason strode over, tossed her over his shoulder, and started carrying her down the hall before she got out the first squeak of protest.

Maggie pounded his back with her fists, but it had no effect on his muscled form. He merely tightened his grip and kicked her half-closed bedroom door open the rest of the way.

"If you don't put me down this instant, you're fired!"

His laugh was humorless as he strode into the room. "You can't fire me, we're partners. Remember?"

He dumped her unceremoniously on the bed and pinned her down when she rose to leave. "You aren't getting up from here until we have a few things straight, young lady."

His sneered *young lady* only infuriated her more. She tried to bring her knee up to his groin, but he anticipated the move and pinned her legs with his.

"Get off me!" She struggled against his grip, but he pinned her hands above her head. She tried to tell herself that her quickened pulse and uneven breathing was due to anger, but the increasing warmth between legs told another story.

Jason's eyes darkened with arousal. He moved his lips to within a breath of hers. She gasped when he moved one of his hands to her throat, slowly trailing his fingertips over her frantic pulse, then further down to where her robe now gaped from their struggle.

"Tell me again there's nothing between us, Maggie," he murmured against her lips as his hand slid beneath the robe. When he brought his other hand down from her wrists, she tried once more to let sanity win and push him away.

He merely grabbed her arms again, his hands pinning them just above her elbows. He lifted back slightly to look at her face.

"You want me, and I want you. Why are you fighting it?"

"I'm too old for you, damn it!"

"Is that what you really think? That I'm too young for you? Not man enough to handle you?"

"Yes! No! It's not..." Maggie's mind whirled. She couldn't think through her conflicting emotions. "I'm too old for you," she repeated, stubbornly trying to hold on to the reason why it was not a good thing she wanted nothing more right now than to open her legs and receive him.

"Well, I know you're not too old for *this*." He swiftly pulled them both up to a seated position then turned her over his knee.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" She tried to rear up when he lifted her robe and exposed her backside.

"What I said I was going to do. Teach you a lesson. A lesson in responsibility and truth." His hand came down with a resounding *smack* on her bottom.

"Damn you, let me go!" She kicked and tried to squirm free, but her strength was no match for his. His arms were long toned from sports and held her down easily as his hand now gently stroked the flesh he'd warmed.

"Admit that you ran away last night because you were afraid of just how good we are together. That's the real reason you're using excuses to hide from work. To hide from me."

His fingers dipped slightly into the crevice of her ass cheeks, and she squirmed in embarrassment and desire. "Let me go," she insisted.

"Why, so you can continue your silly pretense of not wanting me because I'm supposedly too young?" Jason slid a long finger into her wet slit, sliding it easily in and out of her, proving how much she did want him.

"I said *I* was too old for *you*!" She gasped, arching her back.

He added a second finger. "What's the difference?"

"I...I...can't have children," she cried, shocking herself.

Jason stilled. "Is that what this is all about?" He sounded astonished, and his face mirrored his surprise when he pulled her up to sit on his lap. "That doesn't make any sense."

She turned her face away. She hadn't felt so ashamed since her husband left her.

Jason tenderly turned her chin toward him. "Why do you think that would be an issue?" he asked softly.

"Because." She sniffed, trying to hold back the tears that threatened. "You're young. You've never been married, never had a family. You deserve both."

He stiffened. "And you think I can't have that with you?"

"I know you can't."

"Why not?" his voice hardened.

"Because..."

"Because, why?"

He frowned, and she trembled. She was a mass of conflicting emotions: fear, shame, anger, desire. How was it that he made her feel all those things? How was it that this man—this *younger* man—managed to make her feel so vulnerable and so desirable at the same time?

"It...it just wouldn't work, that's all," she said stubbornly and tried to move from his lap.

Once more, his arms tightened. "How do you figure that? I've wanted you since we met, and now that I have you, I'm not letting you go."

Her heart jumped. "You have?" she whispered, astounded by his admission.

"Of course, I have. Look at you. You're talented, beautiful, smart, and the sexiest damn woman I've ever seen."

Maggie snapped her mouth shut when she realized it was gaping. She thought she'd been alone in her feelings all this time.

"When you offered to have me join you and Sharon, I hoped you'd finally see me as a man, not just some younger guy you worked with. I've been biding my time, but my patience is ending. Last night was the best night of my life, and I'm not letting it go—not letting you go."

"I had no idea..."

"Now you do. So you'd better get used to the idea, Mary Margaret O'Connell, or I'll have to spank it into you." His grin created a flash of white teeth and dimples in his tanned face, and brought a wicked twinkle to his dark eyes.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Jason—"

"Shh..." He cut her off with a kiss.

It was a gentle nibbling, a soft press of his lips to hers that increased in tempo and fever until her passion rose to meet his. She whimpered and clutched at his shoulders. He pressed her back to the bed, his hands roaming down the opening of her robe, pulling it aside to

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

expose her skin. He gently spread her legs and found the warm, moist softness his fingers sought.

She gasped and arched upward to greet his hand, his fingers skillfully playing within her depths. He pulled back abruptly, and she moaned first in frustration, then in desire, as he quickly pulled out of his clothes. In an instant, he covered her body with his own once more, thrusting forward without ceremony, their bodies connecting with the finality of her submission.

For Maggie had submitted.

In that moment, she didn't care about anything but the man whose mouth plundered hers with such sweetness, and whose body gave such pleasure. He was everything she'd hardly dared to admit she wanted—strong, intelligent, funny, kind, sexy...and deliciously dominant.

Maggie moaned and bucked against him, their lovemaking savage as each worked out their need. When he put a hand between them to press against the top of her cleft as he thrust within her, she came apart. She cried out his name, her nails raking his back as spasm after spasm shook her. His hoarse shout signaled his own completion a moment later.

They lay sweating together in the aftermath, their harsh intakes of breath the only sound in the room. He rolled to the side, taking her with him, then stroked the damp hair back from her brow and touched his forehead to hers.

"I love you, Maggie," he murmured against her hair.

She trembled in his arms, her breath catching on a sob. "I love you, too," she whispered. And right now, that was the only thing that mattered.

Chapter Five

The next two weeks passed in a sensual blur of happiness. Jason's kindness, his humor, his sexual as well as emotional maturity, kept her fulfilled on every level. She managed to convince him, albeit reluctantly, to keep their relationship secret for the time being, but things were going so well, she decided to confide in Sharon. She was on top of the world and wanted to share her happiness.

* * * * *

"I'm pregnant. By Jason."

Amy's words nearly brought Maggie's heart to a stop. She couldn't speak; couldn't breathe past the sudden, crushing pain in her chest. For a moment, she even wondered if she might actually have a heart attack. She hadn't been sure what to expect when Amy asked her to lunch so they might speak privately about a serious matter. She'd thought maybe Amy was leaving the company, or wanted a raise, but that she might be pregnant by Jason certainly didn't enter her mind.

Once she caught her breath, she could only stutter, "How...when?"

"Saint Patrick's Day, when everyone was out of town except me and Jason. You and Sharon had gone to Cliff's parents house, Joe had that two-week seminar in California, and it was just me and Jay, and well...Joe and I hadn't really been getting along," she added that last a bit defensively, as if she expected to be judged. "Anyway, I asked him if he'd

like to go out for a drink after work. There were a number of pubs having specials, and well...we got wasted...and...."

"And one thing led to another," Maggie said, quietly filling in the blank.

"Yeah." Amy hung her head for a second before looking up with tear-filled eyes. "I love Joe, I really do. I don't know what came over me. It was a stupid mistake."

"How can you be sure it's not Joe's?" Maggie's voice held more hope than her heart did.

"Because, Joe and I are always careful, and I'd already had my period when he left. I haven't had another since that night."

"But still... What makes you so certain Jason is the father?"

"I'm too far along for it to be Joe's, and Jason's the only other person I've been with."

"So, you've seen a doctor then." Maggie's heart sank further.

Amy nodded. "I haven't had an ultrasound yet, but he said from the date of my last period and the size of my uterus, I must be between three and four months along."

"But if it's four months, then it could be Joe's, right?" Maggie grasped at whatever straw she could.

"It can't be. Like I said, I had my period when Joe left, and he and I...well, like I said, we hadn't been getting along, and hadn't been together for a while before that. Or even for a while after he got back. It's got to be Jason's." Amy burst into tears. "Oh, Maggie, what am I going to do?"

Maggie shook her head helplessly. She had no idea what *she* was going to do, much less Amy. "I don't know. But why are you telling me this and not Jason or Joe?"

Amy blew her nose in her napkin before answering. "I'm sorry. It's just that I was planning on telling Jason, but then I needed to talk to someone else first. A woman. Someone who might understand."

"I still don't get it. Not that I mind," she lied quickly when a look of hurt entered Amy's eyes. "It's just...what about your mom? Or your girlfriends?"

Amy scoffed. "My mother would never understand, nor would my

friends. They'd just tell me to lie to Joe or to get rid of it before he found out. I needed to talk to a mature woman, and you and Sharon are the only ones I know."

Maggie winced at the *mature*, but Amy didn't seem to notice, because she continued talking.

"And honestly, I don't think Sharon would get it. She's happily married and would never cheat on Clifford. I just couldn't face her."

Maggie smiled through her pain and patted Amy's arm. "It's okay. What do you want me to do for you?"

"Oh. I...well...I guess I just wanted to let you know. I mean, I don't know what's going to happen when I tell Jason and Joe." The girl started crying again, and Maggie handed her an extra napkin. "I was afraid of how weird it might get at the office, too, so I felt I should let you know."

Maggie nodded, struck dumb. She felt as if she were really seeing Amy for the first time. For all that the young woman had just destroyed any dreams Maggie might have had, she had to admire her for trying to take responsibility for her actions and do the right thing.

"I'll be here for you, Amy," she said. "Just let me know if you need anything." It was all she could do. Part of her wanted to hate Amy and Jason, but in all fairness, she and Jason weren't together then.

And now they couldn't be together ever again.

* * * * *

"Hey, beautiful, how was lunch? I see Amy didn't come back with you. You didn't fire her, did you?" Jason grinned and closed the door of Maggie's office behind him.

He walked toward her, and she stood quickly. She didn't want to be trapped behind her desk. "No, I didn't fire her, nor do I intend to. She isn't feeling well."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm awfully glad to see you." He moved to take her in his arms, but she turned away.

He frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm really busy, and I don't think this is appropriate at work."

"Hey, we're the bosses, remember? We decide what's appropriate or not. In fact, I think we should institute a kiss-at-work policy." He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him.

"Stop it!" Maggie shoved him back.

Jason went very still. His gaze pinned her in place as she tried to calm her shaking hands. "What's wrong?"

"You need to talk to Amy about that."

"Amy?" He appeared genuinely puzzled. "What's Amy got to do with this?"

"Just talk to her." For the moment, anger overrode the pain, and she clung to it like a shield. How could he have forgotten his one-night stand with their secretary? How could he have been so damned irresponsible?

She tried to march past him to the door, but he caught her arm.

"I'm talking to *you*. Tell me what Amy has to do with you pushing me away."

Tears welled in her eyes, and she looked away. She nearly blurted, "Does Saint Patrick's Day ring a bell?" but held her tongue. This was between him and Amy. And poor Joe.

"Just talk to her, Jason," she said quietly. "You two have a lot to discuss."

"I think it sounds like you and I have a lot to discuss."

"Yes, we do, but now is not the time."

"Fine. We'll go to my place after work."

"Not tonight. I can't."

He took her by the arm. "Maggie, don't shut me out. Whatever you think is wrong, I'm sure we can fix it."

She only shook her head and pulled away. "Later. We'll talk later."

* * * * *

"What did you say to Maggie?" Jason snarled into the phone.

"She told you?" Amy's voice had sounded fearful when she answered, and now it was positively terrified.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

"She didn't tell me anything other than I needed to talk to you."

To his surprise, Amy burst into tears. He felt bad for yelling at her, but what the hell had she done to get Maggie so upset? "Amy, calm down and tell me what's wrong," he said more calmly.

She only cried harder for several minutes, and Jason started to panic. "Please, for God's sake, calm down. Where are you? Do you want me to meet you somewhere?"

"No... Yes," she finally hiccupped. "Yes."

"Just tell me when and where."

Chapter Six

"That's impossible." Jason shook his head in disbelief. God, what must Maggie have thought, if this was what Amy told her?

"I'm afraid it is possible." Amy sniffed. "It can only be yours."

"It can't be, Amy, we didn't do anything!"

"Have you forgotten Saint Patrick's Day?" she cried.

"No, I haven't, but apparently you have."

"I did not forget getting wasted and taking you home with me. I remember kissing you and you helping me get undressed and into bed."

"Yes, we took a cab to your place because neither of us were in any shape to drive, but we didn't have sex. You're mistaken."

"We must have—it's the only explanation!"

"It's not the only one. I'm telling you, nothing happened."

Amy cried harder. "How can you say that? So what, are you just going to abandon your responsibilities?"

"No. Because I *fulfilled* my responsibility. We took a cab to your place, I made sure you got in bed safely, then I crashed on the couch. Nothing. Happened. I don't know who you've been fooling around with, but it wasn't me."

"I wasn't fooling around with anybody! You were the only one."

"God damn it, are you out of your mind? Nothing happened!"
Why the hell was she trying to pin this on him?

"Then explain how I can be three months pregnant," she insisted.

"Only you would know the answer to that, because we did *not*

have sex. I don't take advantage of drunk women." Jason's mind flashed back to the night he took Maggie home from the restaurant. If he were ever going to take advantage of a tipsy woman, that would have been the time.

Maggie. His heart ached to think of her now and what she must think of him.

"And what makes you think the baby isn't Joe's?" he asked, suddenly wondering why she was so sure it had to be someone else's.

She gave him the same details she had given Maggie. Jason sat silently as Amy quietly wept. His anger morphed into a disquieted concern as it dawned on him that she truly believed what she was saying. He knew there was no way the baby was his. He'd had too much to drink also, but he still remembered that night very clearly. Sure, they'd shared one drunken kiss when she'd tried to pull him onto the bed, but then he left her alone.

Didn't he?

He shook his head. Of course, he did.

"I don't know what is going on, Amy, but we'll get to the bottom of it. When is your next doctor's appointment?"

"I have an ultrasound appointment two weeks from Friday."

"I'd like to go with you. Are you going to say anything to Joe before then?"

"I don't know." She sniffed. "I just don't know how to tell him."

Jason considered. He didn't approve of her keeping secrets from Joe, especially one as important as this, but on the other hand, there was something else going on here—he could feel it in his gut—and he wanted to make sure she got the help she needed.

"Ok, listen. Here's what we'll do. You try to hold on until the ultrasound, and I'll go with you. After that, we'll figure out what to say to Joe."

* * * * *

After the third voicemail message, Jason had enough. He stood on

Maggie's doorstep, willing to pound on it all night until she answered.

"I'm not going anywhere, Maggie, and unless you want to call the cops to take me away, you'd better let me in," he yelled through the door.

It opened a crack. It annoyed the hell out of him to see the chain still attached and Maggie's face just peeking through.

"Not now," she whispered. "I just can't talk about it right now. Please go away." Her eyes were swollen and red.

He cursed under his breath. "Now is the best time. You have to know that I did not sleep with her."

"She seems pretty certain you did."

"She's mistaken," he said flatly. "Now please, open the door."

She hesitated for a moment then finally unlatched the chain. He waited for her to move back before going through.

"Maggie, please, you have to listen—"

"I'm not sure there's much to talk about," she interrupted.

"The hell there isn't!" he exploded. "I did not sleep with Amy, no matter what she thinks. If she's pregnant, it is not my child."

"Then why is she so certain it is?" she asked quietly. "What really happened on Saint Patrick's Day?"

"We did go out—for a friendly drink, nothing more. We had a bit too much and took a cab back to her place. I did help get her in bed, and checked her house, just like I did for you when you'd had too much to drink."

A look of pain flashed in her eyes, and he wondered if she was also remembering their first kiss. "The difference is that I didn't want to sleep with her, as I did with you."

She made a little noise in her throat and turned away. He softly put his hands on her shoulders, and she made a little flinch that cut straight through his heart. He ignored the pain and her protest, and gently turned her around. "For God's sake, if I were ever going to take advantage of a drunken woman, it would have been you. I don't know why Amy thinks this baby is mine, but I swear to you, there's no way it is."

Tears filled her eyes, and he pulled her close. He couldn't bear her pain or the thought of losing her. "Please believe me. I'm telling you the

truth."

She gently extricated herself from his arms and looked away.

"Talk to me, Maggie. Tell me what's going on in your mind."

What was going on in her mind? How could she even begin to tell him?

She took a deep breath and tried to start. "Jason...please, sit down." She motioned to a chair, but he took her hand and led them to the sofa instead. She tried to move to the chair—she didn't think she could do what she needed to do with him so close—but he held her fast. The pain in his eyes mirrored her own, she was sure.

"Jay," she said softly, "even if this baby isn't yours, I think this was our wake-up call."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you before that I probably couldn't have children, that I was too old for you—"

"Stop it right now. We've gone over this already."

His voice was cold, final, but Maggie's idea of what was finally settled between them was world's away from his. She held up a hand when he would have continued. "I know what you said, but you're a young man, you deserve to have a wife and kids—"

"With you!"

"No, not with me—"

"I can't believe you're saying this. You're just upset over Amy—"

"Of course I'm upset about Amy."

"It's not my child!"

"It doesn't matter."

"*Doesn't matter?* How can you say that?" He pulled her to his chest.

"Don't you dare," Maggie cried as he bent his head toward hers.

He dared. His lips claimed hers in a swift, punishing kiss.

She beat at his shoulders, angry and appalled at the wetness that so quickly gathered between her legs, and angrier still with herself as she stopped trying to push him away and began to cling to him instead. Just as nearly every bone in her body turned to mush, he pulled back.

"How can you say the facts that I did not sleep with Amy and she

is not pregnant with my child mean nothing? How can you turn your back on me—on *us*— so easily?”

“I’m so sorry, Jason. I never meant to hurt you. I never realized—” She broke off, unable to speak.

“Never realized what? That I would love you? That you mean the world to me? Did you think this was just a fling? Did you lie when you said you loved me?”

“No! God, no.” Tears sprang to her eyes, and she looked away.

“Then what?”

“I didn’t realize how much I might ruin your life.”

“Ruin my life?” Disbelief filled his voice.

“I know you don’t believe it now, but I’ve been through this before. My ex-husband left me because he wanted children of his own—”

“I am not your ex-husband,” he snarled.

“I know. You are so much better than he was, which is why you would try to make it work with us, but it won’t work. And I won’t let you try.”

“I can’t believe you.”

The sadness in his voice nearly threatened her resolve. “I’m so sorry. It’s for the best if we end this now.”

“I disagree.”

She shook her head. “It has to be this way,” she repeated, perhaps more to convince herself than him.

“Is this what you really, truly believe?”

“Yes.”

Disbelief, anger, and deep disappointment crossed his features in quick succession. “Then I suppose you’re right. We have nothing more to say.”

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Maggie still wondered how she would live without him. She stopped herself every day from running to him, begging him to take her back. And just when she was about ready to throw

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

everything to the winds just to have him again, Amy asked if she'd accompany her to the ultrasound, and all the reasons why she'd left came crashing back.

"I thought Jason was going with you," Maggie said.

"He is, but I don't want to ride with him. He's been so...weird...lately." Tears filled Amy's eyes. "I know he's upset about the baby, but he seems so depressed that I don't think I can handle the guilt. Not between him and keeping this from Joe."

"Then why don't you just drive yourself?"

"Jason is insisting that he take me because he doesn't want me driving alone. He's afraid I'm too emotional right now." Amy sniffed then looked considering. "You know, I never realized just how stubborn he can be."

Maggie felt a sad smile form on her lips. She knew exactly how stubborn he could be. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I'll have time this afternoon. Isn't there anyone else who could take you?"

She tried to not feel guilty at Amy's crestfallen expression, but it was difficult. The girl had that abandoned waif look down pat.

"You're the only other person alive besides Jason who knows anything about this. *Please*, Maggie," she begged.

Against her better judgment, she nodded. "All right, but I'll just drive you there and drop you off. If you need a ride home and Jason won't let you take a cab, you can call me."

Amy's gratitude just added to Maggie's discomfort.

* * * * *

"Get out of the car and come in with us." Jason's tone brooked no arguments.

Maggie had feared his response when he found out she was taking Amy, but to her surprise, he had actually seemed pleased. At the moment, however, she was anything but pleased.

"I told Amy I'd drop her off." She glanced to where their receptionist stood near the entrance of the building and lowered her voice.

"I think I'm doing enough here, don't you?"

"Look, this isn't easy for me either, but there's one thing I'm sure of, and that is I'm not the father of Amy's baby. I think it would help you to know that definitively, as well. Although, why I should care what you think, I really don't know."

She huffed her indignation, but he continued speaking before she could say anything.

"Besides, I think it would mean a lot to Amy to have you there. She seems to think a lot of you."

She looked back at Amy. The girl's eyes were pleading, and she made a little waving motion with her hand, beckoning Maggie to come with them. Cursing herself for ten kinds of fool and the biggest glutton for punishment, Maggie pulled the car door handle. "Fine, but I'm doing this for her."

Jason nodded and moved out of her way, and then the three of them went inside.

Maggie's head swam. She blinked away tears when the nurse called for Jason and Amy to follow her to the back. The waiting room where she sat was full of women in various stages of pregnancy, most with their significant others. A smiling man put his hand on his wife's extended belly, and Maggie had to take several deep breaths to stave off the nausea and dizziness she felt. As the minutes ticked by, the feelings grew worse.

God, what kind of fool was she to be sitting here waiting, while the man she loved was viewing the ultrasound of the young woman who might be pregnant with his child?

She couldn't take it anymore. She had to get some air. Before she could stand, Amy and Jason returned—Jason's face grim, Amy's wet with tears. When Amy came running toward her, Maggie stood quickly.

"Oh, Maggie, you won't believe it!" Amy cried as she launched herself around Maggie.

Only Amy's grip around her shoulders kept Maggie from falling over. She'd stood up too quickly, and the room spun.

"It's Joe's baby! I'm only two months along, can you believe it?"

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

Maggie saw Jason's accusing glare just before the world went dark.

Chapter Seven

"Ms. O'Connell, can you hear me?" A disembodied woman's voice filled Maggie's woozy head. She didn't recognize it. "Did she hit her head when she went down?" the voice asked.

"No, I don't think so," replied a worried sounding male voice. That voice she knew.

Jason.

Consciousness came quickly then. They were in the prenatal clinic. With Amy.

With Amy who said her baby belonged to Joe.

Maggie opened her eyes to see a doctor, a nurse, Jason and Amy all peering down at her. She moved to get up, unbelieving that she had actually fainted. "I'm okay, now. I'm all right." She tried to wave them aside.

The doctor, whose nametag identified her as Natalie Bronson, and the nurse she'd seen earlier, helped her to her feet. "I'd like to check you out just to be sure," Dr. Bronson said.

"I'm fine, really. Just stood up too fast."

"Let her make sure you're all right," Jason said.

She knew that tone. There was no way she'd get out of there without a fight if she didn't do what he wanted.

"All right, but I'm telling you, I'm fine now."

"Well, let us be the judge of that," Dr. Bronson said to Maggie before turning to the nurse. "Kathy, please find us an available exam room

while I go check on my next appointment.”

Maggie sat in a cold exam room, feeling foolish as she waited for the doctor. She’d dutifully let her blood pressure and pulse be taken, and had even been talked into giving up a urine sample, but she’d protested when Kathy mentioned the possibility of further testing. Maggie knew nothing was wrong with her, other than the emotional exhaustion of the day. She was considering jumping down from the paper-covered exam table when there was a tap at the door.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Bronson asked, then came in when Maggie said it was fine.

“This is all unnecessary,” Maggie said. “I feel really foolish, and I don’t want to take time away from your other patients.”

Dr. Bronson’s eyes were kind and her hand gentle as she laid it on Maggie’s arm. “May I call you Maggie?”

“Yes, of course.” Her heart rate sped up the tiniest bit. Why was the doctor looking at her like that?

“Maggie, did you know that you’re pregnant?”

The world started to go dark a second time. She gasped for air, and Dr. Bronson supported her as she guided her head between her knees.

“Deep breaths, sweetie,” she said kindly as she rubbed Maggie’s back. “I’m going to take this as a no.”

“Oh, God. It can’t be!” Maggie’s hands and voice shook.

Dr. Bronson took Maggie’s hands in her own. “Is this bad news?”

Was it bad news?

“I...it’s...well, it’s a shock,” Maggie stuttered.

The doctor smiled. “Yes, I can see that. I think you might need to rest here another minute before you venture out again. You can use the room. I would recommend, however, that you see your doctor as soon as possible. And if you don’t already have an OB/GYN, I can recommend someone.”

Maggie shook her head. “There has to be some mistake,” she said more firmly. “I can’t be pregnant.”

“The urine test was positive, but we can do a blood test to be sure, and I could examine you if you want.”

"How long would that take?"

"Not long. I can fit you into my schedule. The lab is downstairs, and we can have the results by the end of the day. I can call you with those later."

"There really has to be some mistake. Even on the remotest chance that I could be pregnant, it would be way too soon to tell. The test must be false."

"Well, there can be false positives, but the tests are so sensitive these days, we can tell as soon as the day you miss your period." The doctor looked at Maggie's chart then asked, "Are your periods regular?"

"Pretty much," Maggie said, then realized she'd been expecting it to start today. "As a matter of fact, I figured it was going to start today. I've had the usual symptoms—headaches, cramps, tender breasts, overly emotional. That's probably why I fainted."

"Been practicing medicine long, have you?" Dr. Bronson teased. "Well, why don't we just do blood test to be positive?"

Maggie considered. She wanted to confirm this one way or another as soon as possible but didn't want to do it while Jason and Amy sat in the other room.

"We can go ahead and draw some blood now if it would be quick, but would it be possible for me to get on your schedule first thing tomorrow? I really need to get my friends home."

The doctor checked, Maggie made an appointment for the next day, then went to find Jason and Amy.

They stood next to Maggie's car in the parking lot.

"For the last time, I'm telling you guys, I'm fine. I just stood up too quickly," she protested as Amy and Jason badgered her about what the doctor had said.

"Besides, what's important is what's going on with Amy." She turned to her. "What is going on?"

Amy flushed and ducked her head. "I'm so sorry, you guys. I feel like such a fool, but I'm so relieved too." She looked back up. "It was a fibroid that made my uterus seem larger when the doctor examined me. Apparently, I missed my periods due to stress, and the...tumor." Her voice

faltered a little, and she looked scared.

"Is that going to be a problem?" Maggie asked gently.

"They said it shouldn't be," she replied with a slight frown. "But honestly, I'm scared. They did say that they'd have to keep an eye on it to make sure it didn't grow and crowd the baby."

Jason lightly placed his hand on Amy's arm. "I spoke to the doctor, too, and she assured me that most pregnancies like yours go on to completion with no complications."

Maggie felt tears welling and blinked rapidly. She was just too darn emotional lately, crying at the drop of a hat, just like...*just like Amy*. She took a deep breath. "Well, that's good news, isn't it? I mean, in spite of that, you must be relieved to know."

"I am. But now what am I going to tell Joe?" Amy asked, seemingly more to herself.

"The truth," Jason said firmly.

Amy's eyes widened. "I can't tell him all of it now. Please, you guys, can't we just keep the rest of this between us?"

"I can't tell you what to do, but it sounds like you and Joe have a lot to work out." Jason spoke to Amy, but he looked at Maggie.

"Please, don't say anything." Amy looked pleadingly between Maggie and Jason.

"I won't say anything," Maggie promised.

Jason frowned. "I'll keep quiet, but I really think you need to have a long talk with him about your relationship. And you need to help him find a way to make it work between you. He's the father of your child and deserves to be with you both."

Amy sniffed and nodded. "Thank you guys so much for everything."

"You're welcome," Maggie said, then turned to Jason. "Would you mind giving Amy a ride back? I need to run some errands before I go home."

His eyes narrowed. "What kind of errands? Do you need something from the pharmacy?"

"What? No! Good grief, Jason, I told you a million times, I'm fine. I

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

just have things to do.”

He nodded, and Amy hugged them both once more before getting in Jason’s car. Maggie noted how Amy’s relief about the baby seemed to overcome her fear of Jason. She couldn’t help wondering how Jason felt, though. The girl had come close to irreversibly changing his life.

She’d certainly changed Maggie’s. But it wasn’t Amy’s fault, she reminded herself. Amy might be immature sometimes, but she wasn’t the woman who slept with a man thirteen years her junior.

* * * * *

Maggie sat next to the phone, jumping every time it rang. She was glad it was Friday. No matter what the test results were, she needed the weekend to recover from today. Her nerves were so on edge, she flinched at every little sound. Her gaze kept moving back and forth between the telephone and the front door, half expecting Jason to appear.

“Oh, Jason,” she whispered and fought the lump rising in her throat.

He had called to make sure she made it home on time but didn’t linger on the phone, which had surprised then saddened her. He might have briefly reverted back to his demanding self at the doctor’s office, but his easy dismissal on the phone when she assured him she was fine indicated he was getting over her. Just when she knew for a certainty she’d never be over him.

The harsh ring of the phone brought her sharply upward, her heart pounding when the caller ID revealed the name of women’s clinic.

“Hello,” she answered breathlessly. Her breath left her again in a *whoosh* when Dr. Bronson gave her the results.

Her life would never be the same.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Maggie sat staring at her telephone as if it might bite her. She’d picked up then put down the receiver a dozen times in the

last few minutes. Once more, she picked it up and squeezed the handle until her hand hurt.

"It's now or never," she said on a breath and hit the number on the speed dial which she hadn't taken off.

"Maggie, are you there?" Jason's voice on the other line nearly had her slamming the phone down again, but his caller ID had obviously identified her.

Oh, why didn't I use privacy manager?

"I'm here." She hated the little break in her voice.

"Is something wrong?"

Boy, was there ever...

They agreed to meet at her house. Maggie didn't trust herself to drive. She'd been on pins and needles at the office and didn't know how much more her nerves could take.

Jason's face revealed his curiosity and trepidation when she opened the door. "This was a surprise," he said preemptively.

"I know. I'm sorry." She led him into the front room. "Please, sit down."

He watched her intensely as she fluttered about, inately checking if he was comfortable or needed a drink.

"What's this about?" he asked abruptly.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't even know where to begin. I feel like such a fool."

He merely raised his brows.

She could see he wasn't going to make it easy on her. He was obviously still angry with her, and she wasn't sure she could blame him. She was angry with herself. Now how was she going to tell the poor guy that once more, he was on someone's Baby Daddy list?

"Just spit it out," he said, sounding bored.

Her temper flared when he looked at his watch. "All right then. I'm pregnant. With your child."

He jumped up from the chair, any pretense of boredom gone in a flash. "Is this your idea of a joke?"

She shrank back from the harshness of his voice and the glare in his

eyes.

Her voice shook when she answered. "No, Jason, I'm sorry. It isn't a joke, though it seems like the universe is playing one on me."

All menace dropped immediately and his eyes grew wide. "I can't believe it," he whispered.

She looked at the floor. "I know, and I hate telling you after all you've been through with Amy—" she broke off when he pulled her to him.

"My God, Maggie..." he murmured against her hair, kissing the top of her head. He pulled back. "What did the doctor say? Are you all right? Is the baby okay?"

He shot off questions in such rapid succession that she could barely follow. She was still dizzy from being pulled so abruptly to him in the wake of such emotional upheaval.

"I...I'm fine. We think the baby's going to be fine—"

"You *think*? Is there some question?" He sounded frantic.

"Calm down, please. You're making my head spin."

He pulled them both over to the sofa and stroked her face. "Do you need anything? A drink of water or something?"

She had to laugh. He reminded her of herself when he first walked in: All nervous solicitousness.

"This isn't funny. What did the doctor say? And wait a minute! How long have you known?"

He practically snarled the last question, and her laughter left abruptly. She looked down at her hands.

"How long?" he insisted.

"Two weeks," she whispered.

"And you're just *now* telling me?"

Her head snapped up. "Hold on! We haven't exactly been on the friendliest of terms lately."

It was the wrong thing to say. Jason glared at her, and she edged away.

Long fingers captured her wrist. "And just whose fault is that?" he asked, his voice dangerously low.

She hung her head. "I know. But I thought I was doing what was right for you."

"No. You did what you thought was right for *you*."

"I really was thinking of you." She gazed up at him, silently begging him to understand.

"That's bullshit. If you'd been thinking of me, you'd know I've been going crazy without you. You'd know I haven't been able to think of anything or anyone but you." The fingers around her wrist began a gentle caress up her arm.

"Oh, Jason," she whispered. "I've missed you so much." She grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him to her, her lips showing him just how much she'd missed him.

Several breathless minutes later, he moved back to stroke the hair from her face. "Now, tell me what the doctor said before I lose my mind."

She took a moment, still shaky from the kiss and the emotional upheaval. "Well, it's my age. She wants to do an amniocentesis in a few months just to make sure everything is all right. In fact, I was going to wait until after that to tell you because—"

"What? You were going to wait a few *months* to tell me about this?"

"But I didn't," she said quickly. "I only thought about it because the test can be dangerous to the baby, and because there's still some chance that something could be wrong with it because I'm over forty. I didn't want to get you upset and then have something happen."

He glared at her for several long seconds. "First of all, I would have been more upset finding out later. Secondly, this is my child, too, and whatever happens, we'll go through it together."

Maggie wept. She didn't want to, but her emotions were too near the surface these days. "I know. That's why I'm telling you now. You deserve to know the truth."

"And as for you being over forty, do I have to remind you that my mother was forty when she had me, and I turned out just fine." He smiled and gently wiped her tears.

She caught her breath. She actually had forgotten that he'd mentioned it one night, back in those glorious few weeks before Amy's

bombshell.

Jason laughed suddenly. "She's going to be so surprised when she hears about this."

She drew back a little as his words threw a wash of cold fear over her. *His parents*. What would they say? He'd told her before that they wouldn't mind him dating an older woman—his mother was five years older than his father—but there was a big difference between a five year age gap and a thirteen year one. "Let's not jump the gun just yet."

His brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to go advertising this pregnancy just yet. I mean, no one even knew we were together, and now... Well, Amy is just now getting herself back together and—"

"—and I don't give a damn about Amy or anybody else. This is about you and me. You, me, and our baby. That's all that matters."

Maggie hesitated. Did he still want her after all this? Or was it just the baby? "I don't know where this is going—"

"Stop right there. There is only one place this *can* go. You are going to marry me, and we're going to live happily every after, and to hell with the rest of the world."

His mouth claimed hers so suddenly she didn't have time to respond in any way other than physically. And respond she did. When they finally came up for air, her lips trembled.

"You don't have to marry me just because of the baby," she whispered, still trying to determine his motives.

He yanked her onto his lap so quickly she yelped.

"So help me, Maggie, if you say one more stupid thing like that I don't know what I'm going to do. I have been going out of my mind wanting you these last several weeks. Going crazy thinking you might be out of my life for good. The only reason I haven't come here before now to give you a sound spanking and an even harder fucking is because it had to be your choice to come to me."

Maggie tightened her thighs against the onslaught of lust his words evoked. When he spoke again, she was amazed to hear hesitancy in his voice.

Managing Maggie by Kate Sterling

"Tell me now, Maggie. Do you still want me for me, or are you only thinking about the baby?"

She turned and sobbed into his chest. "I've missed you so much! I thought I was going to die being apart from you."

The tension left his body, and he tightened his arms around her. "God, I love you." He tipped her face to his, the truth of his declaration blazing in his eyes. "Say you'll marry me."

She didn't say it; she couldn't speak around the lump in her throat. She just nodded, letting all the happiness she felt show in her eyes.

The End

Author Bio

Kate Sterling is a writer, editor and artist with too many ideas and too little time. She'd just about give both of her big toes to take a ride on the Tardis with Dr. Who (Christopher Eccleston version), but will have to settle for having hot fantasies about him that will probably creep into her writing. When she isn't busy fantasizing about the Doctor, she hangs out in middle America with her teenage daughter and their ferocious attack cat. You can find her online at www.katesterling.com.