

Cupid's Dilemma

By Fiona Wilde

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Chapter One

For the cupids, this was the best time of the year. Heck, for the very traditional cupids this was the only time of the year, or at least the only time of year that really mattered. Adorma sometimes remarked to his companions that given all the emphasis on Valentine's Day, they should just hibernate - like bears - from the end of July until the end of February. But his supervisor, LaMour, pragmatically pointed out that there was more to being a cupid than matchmaking. There were arrows to make and love spells to write and bows to restring. LaMour was right, of course, but his preaching was always enough to send Adorma out for a much-needed smoke.

That's where he was a week before Valentine's Day when LaMour came over with a thick file.

"There you are," LaMour said. "I've been looking all over for you."

Adorma leaned back against the cloud he was floating beside. Wisps of cloud fragments broke away and floated up to join the cigar smoke already spiraling through the air.

"I really wish you would top that nasty habit," LaMour said, nodding towards the stogie.

"I could have been anything," Adorma growled. "Minotaur. Kracken. Griffin. Instead I'm stuck forever in the body of a winged baby with a half-inch winkie. How about letting me have my simple pleasures."

"We've been over this before. It doesn't look good a cupid to smoke!" LaMour responded.

"Neither does stubble on my baby face, so quit bitching or I'll stop shaving. Then you'll have a bearded, smoking cherub to deal with instead of just a smoking cherub."

"Fine," seethed LaMour. "But don't think this won't come up on your performance review."

"What if it does?" Adorma asked. "You gonna fire me? In case you haven't noticed, the Cupid's Union gets more alluring every year. Piss me off too much and I'll go to another company, a unionized one with better benefits like Romantica. Paid vacation. Laser sites on the bows...."

"OK.." said LaMour. He hated it when Adorma brought up the unions. "Smoke your filthy cigar. Just please try not to do it around the mortals. It can be very distracting for a couple falling in love to have to stop and seek out the source of some phantom smoke smell."

“That’s not why I’m here, anyway,” LaMour continued. He held out the file. “We’ve got some problem cases here and I was hoping you would consider taking on.”

Adorma smiled wryly. His other ace in the hole was the fact that he was one of the best cupids in the business. Perhaps the best.

“Unmatchables?” he asked LaMour.

“We’ve tried two years in a row,” he said. “And nothing. Not even on Valentine’s Day.”

“And let me guess. You’re breaking down and admitting that I’m the only one in this organization that can do it..”

“What is this? You want to hear it? Is that it? You want to make me say it?”

Adorma grinned. “It would help.”

LaMour rolled his eyes. “OK, Adorma. No one else can do it but you. Happy?”

Adorma took the file. “Almost,” he said. “I’ll expect a raise if I take these on. And I want June off.”

“June??” LaMour tried to control his anger. Next to Valentine’s Day the month of June was the busiest time for cupids because the pinnacle of the wedding season. Cupids roamed the reception halls, shooting tipsy bridesmaids, groomsmen and guests already half drunk on romantic feelings from virtue of the setting alone. It was easy work, but the schedule was a bitch. Adorma hated it.

“I’ll give you half of June off.”

“No deal,” Adorma said, holding the unopened file out to LaMour. His supervisor scowled.

“Fine. Take June then.” LaMour conceded. He glowered at Adorma in silence. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Adorma said.

LaMour raised an eyebrow. “Just like that? You don’t even want to look at the cases first?”

“I don’t need to. I’m the best. You admitted it yourself.”

Now it was LaMour who was grinning. “Well, just so you know, your getting a raise and June off is conditional on matching these.”

“Piece of cake,” Adorma said.

LaMour snorted and turned away, his little wings beating frantically to haul his chubby baby body into the air. Adorma started to tell him he needed to lay off the Valentine's candy but decided against it. Instead he opened the file. The shock of what he saw sent him whizzing after his supervisor.

"Hey!" he called, but LaMour ignored him. "HEY!!"

LaMour turned. "Yes, Adorma?" His tone sounded innocent. Too innocent.

"Brats?" he asked, shaking the file in his face. "*Brats?*"

"You said you could handle anything, Adorma."

"Brats are different, LaMour. This isn't fair. Brats are alone because no man can handle their drama and willfulness. There are hardly any men left who can make decent mates of them. You know that. A hundred years ago it wasn't so hard. You just matched a brat up with a strict guy and after a couple of good spankings she straightened right out. With the right kind of handling, brats could actually make good wives. They were passionate people. The problem was finding a man that had what it took to turn a brat into a decent partner.

"Look, Adorma. I know they're a pain in the ass, but they deserve love just like everyone else. And what is our job?"

Adorma's chubby cheeks turned red. "Don't patronize me, LaMour. I know what our job is. It's to make people fall in love. And not just any love, but lasting love..."

"Right. And we don't discriminate..."

"I know," Adorma agreed. "But...brats?"

"Do you want June off or not?" LaMour crossed his chubby arms and glared at Adorma, who was puffing on his stogey as he looked down at the file.

Adorma wanted nothing more than to drop the file and watch the papers disintegrate as they fluttered down to earth. By the time they got below cloud level, the cherub paper would turn to dust. But then he thought of June and how much fun it would be to go hang with the leprechauns who always welcomed him for gambling and booze. He could stay shit-faced drunk for the whole month. No more showing up for weddings with a hangover. His aim sucked when that happened and last year he'd gotten written up for accidentally misfiring twice at the same reception. It had taken LaMour calling in an elite cupid sniper to straighten things out after the groom had fallen in love with his new mother-in-law.

"Fine, I'll do it," he said.

"I knew you would," LaMour winked. "Good luck." He turned and fluttered off.

"Yeah, well fuck you very much," Adorma replied under his breath. Then he popped the stogie into his mouth and zipped off to find a cloud where he could settle in and do some research. If he was going to get June off, it was going to take a lot of work.

He opened the file. The first case was one Lauren Kapetchney, age 33. Her photo was attached. She was pretty, which meant she was trouble. Adorma knew that most women who looked as pretty as Lauren should already have a man. If she didn't, it was because she was such a terror that they had just decided her beauty wasn't worth the tradeoff. Adorma stared at the picture. Long blonde hair, bright beautiful eyes, great smile. She must be the devil.

He searches his memory for available, unattached men who might be up to the task of taking on someone like Lauren. Adorma wasn't about to aim his arrow at just any man. He was an ethical cupid, even if he did smoke like a chimney. He wasn't going to get some perfectly decent guy love-drunk on a woman who was going to make his life hell. He'd known cupids who had done just that; they'd go back and regularly hit the guy with Cupids Arrow, blinding him to the reality of the woman he was with. The man would be in love, but never really happy because deep down under all those good feelings he'd know his partner was really just a shrew. And yet he'd be powerless to stop loving her. And it did no good to hit her over and over. She'd love him but she'd still disobey and drive him crazy in the process. Because with brats, Cupids Arrows were never enough. What brats really wanted was to be tamed, and that was only something their men could give them.

Unfortunately, the brat-taming kind of men Adorma needed to match to these Unmatchables. They were in exceedingly short supply. Finding one would be a chore. But finding....the exasperated cupid leafed through the file - finding three would be practically impossible, wouldn't it? He began to wish he'd not been so cocky. He should have looked at the file, negotiated things with LaMour. Now it looked like he was about to not only give his supervisor the last laugh, he was going to end up working the month of June.

Surely there had to be something he was missing. Adorma collected his file and fluttered down to a lower cloud, one a little more dark and misshapen than the others. His cloud. He flew directly into it and disappeared from view. Inside he tossed the file on his cluttered desk and went to the battered pink file cabinet where he kept records on his share of humanity looking for Love.

Cupids read quickly. They have to. A lot of people are looking for love. As he leafed through the files, however, he got more and more frustrated. "No," he said, looking at the file of a twice-divorced football player ready to give love just one more chance. "No," he repeated when he came to a handsome but hopelessly romantic science teacher.

Romance was good, but he was looking for someone stern, someone who blended Love with a mix of no-nonsense old-fashioned values.

Adorma thought that in the good old days - and by good old days he meant the Victorian era - men and women had known their places. In the good old days home and family meant something and the idea of Bonding for Life was so popular that people didn't just feel the effects of cupids' arrows, they started to actually see cupids. Adorma chuckled when he remembered the first time his friend, Desiro, had recognized his image on a Victorian postcard. Even though he knew he wasn't supposed to, he took it and raced straight up to the main office, where he slammed it down on the desk of the Head Cupid, Mr. Heartner.

"How could they?" he asked. "How could they?" He turned, pointing to his pink baby's bottom. "My ass is not nearly that fat!" And then Desiro, who was vain, burst into tears.

"It's your fault for letting yourself be seen," Heartner chided. "We've warned you that when feelings for love and family are as strong as they are now the risk is high that some romantic swain or his beloved will catch a glimpse of you. In your case, you allowed yourself to be seen by an artist."

"It wasn't a very good artist," said Desiro, his reedy voice shaking in anger. Desiro was one of the more vain cupids.

"Get over yourself," said Heartner. "It's one picture. It's not like it's going to become a popular art trend."

Of course, he was wrong. More and more couple saw cupid and more and more cupids appeared on postcards, Valentine's cards and even in paintings. It wasn't the first time they'd been depicted; but they'd never become so prevalent. But then again, romantic love had never been quite so strong.

Nor, Adorma thought, had men been more masculine and women more feminine. The lines were blurred now. Matches were harder to make, especially matches involving bratty women who needed strong men.

He was about to slam the cabinet shut in exasperation when something caught his eye. A folder marked "Jarvis, S." It was the photo sticking out the top that got his attention. Jarvis, S. (the S stood for Simon) was wearing an old-fashioned Victorian era suit. For a moment Adorma worried that he'd forgotten to update his files and had accidentally left a bygone one in with the current batch. But as he read the file he realized that Simon Jarvis was a docent at a Victorian house-turned-museum in the very town occupied by a certain bratty Lauren Kapetchney. He checked further. They were the same age and had similar educational backgrounds; she was a history major who now worked as a researcher for a textbook company. They both liked to work out. And they were both matched in attractiveness, lack of split ends and Whiteness of Smile.

Adorma pulled the file and laid all the information on the table. Then he pulled Lauren's and laid it beside Simon's. And this is how cupid magic begins. It's not a whole lot unlike a human job. Ducks need to be in a row. P's and q's need to be in order. I's need to be dotted and t's...well, you get the picture. And that's just what Adorma was good at - planning. While much of his work involved getting people all emotional, he himself tried to be very professional and even a bit detached from his subjects. The initial meeting was crucial. Adorma needed to get them in a position to meet each other. He checked the files. Simon was a morning person. The afternoon would have to do. Simon worked from 11 until 6 at the house, and he cut a fine figure in his suit. Adorma decided that seeing this tall, handsome man in Victorian attire might intrigue a fellow history major. Apparently the house made quite a big deal out of Valentine's Day, which was fast approaching. Good. That would put them both in a romantic mood.

But it would still take more than that. Cupid's Arrow was most effective if shot at the moment of maximum interest. And Adorma wanted to make something caught sparked a mutual interest. For men, this was easy. A beautiful girl was all it took and get a guy's interest. And a handsome man was usually enough to get a woman's. But a brat was different. A brat, for all her brattiness, needed something more. A brat needed some hint that the man she'd just met might be the one. Not just the one to love her and cherish her and keep her, but to give her the kind of structure she needed. Adorma knew these kinds of beginnings were as unusual as the partnerships they would generate. A real brat would tell herself she was repulsed by an old-fashioned man. She would tell herself that he was a jerk, a cretin, a chauvinist. She would tell herself that he was a knuckle-dragging mouth-breather who needed to join the modern era. She would tell herself she hated him, even as the sweet dart from Cupid's arrow dissolved itself in her heart and she suddenly realized she absolutely could not stop thinking about the man.

Because Cupid's Arrow, in addition to sparking attraction, did something else: It made a brat begrudgingly realize that the one thing she told herself she didn't want was the one thing she'd always been looking for.

Chapter Two

The alarm on Lauren Kapetchney's iPhone began to buzz, the sound getting progressively louder by the moment. She reached for it, her head still under the covers, and considered breaking it into pieces. For a smart phone, it wasn't very smart to wake her up in the middle of a deep and pleasant dream.

Now she couldn't even remember what it was about although she tried very hard to recall it. She only knew it made her feel happy and safe and secure. Pulling her knees up to her chest she sat there trying to drag it to her subconscious. No use.

She got up, showered, and got dressed while taking bites from a bagel spread with cream cheese. Because she always got up late she'd developed a knack for this sort of morning multi-tasking.

It was a beautiful day, and an unusually warm one for a February that had gotten off to a brutally cold start. Lauren wasn't relishing a day of editing instructional text on the 1867 Reconstruction Act, but that was her job. And she did love history, even the boring aspects of it. She'd always found something comforting in history and wished more people appreciated the bygone traditions and customs that had become lost in a modern age dominated by cell phones, computers and reality television. In an uncertain world you could never be sure of what to expect, but you could always be relatively certain of what had happened.

Lauren's office was in a nondescript building in an office complex that abutted the grounds of the university where she'd earned her degree. She'd tried to make it an extension of her tidy apartment. A birdfeeder hung outside her window. Framed artwork hung on the walls surrounding her desk. Her screensaver scrolled through photos taken from her annual trip to Europe.

Lauren sat down at her computer and started her workday as she always did, by checking her email. The first was from Richard, an assistant professor of art who had taken her on four dates. She'd been avoiding committing to a fifth since the last one two weeks ago. She couldn't put her finger on what it was about Richard that she didn't like. He was nice enough. Well, perhaps too nice. They always ate where she wanted to eat, watched the movie she picked. If they entered a political debate he'd quickly and politely back down. He always struggled to see her point and she'd taken to provoking him in hopes of getting him to stick up for himself. But Richard remained solicitous, meek, boring.

The other emails were forwards from friends who regularly sent her political messages and offers from lingerie companies. "Valentine's Special!" the headers screamed. Lauren frowned. She worked out, ran three miles twice a week and kept herself looking great. But she didn't have any need for sexy lingerie with no one around to appreciate how she looked in it. She hated to admit it, but she was jealous of her friends and co-workers who talked of nothing else but their plans for Valentine's Day. She knew Richard would jump at the chance to take her out again, but she was sick of watching him moon over her. She

wanted a man, not a deferential metrosexual. She clicked off the advertisement. Maybe next year.

“Hey!”

Lauren looked up to see Millie Smith poking her head in the door. Millie was her boss and usually spent her day emailing Lauren from her office just down the hall.

“Hey yourself,” Lauren replied.

“What are you doing this afternoon for lunch?”

Lauren felt herself getting nervous. “I didn’t really have plans. Why?”

“I thought we’d go out and then if you’re up for it go here.” She walked over and handed Lauren a flyer from Crane House.

“They’re doing a guided Valentine’s tour. It’s supposed to be awesome.”

Lauren wasn’t sure what to say. Millie Smith, while an agreeable supervisor, had never been exactly what she would term friendly. In the six years she’d worked for the company, Millie had never asked Lauren out to lunch.

Lauren looked up from the flier. “It kind of seems like a tour for...couples.”

“I know,” Millie replied. “But it’s not just for couples. And it looks like it would be fun for anyone who appreciates history.”

Lauren glanced back at the flier. “I didn’t even know you liked this sort of thing.”

“I usually don’t,” Millie said. “But I found that flier on my desk this morning and for some reason it’s been all I could think about it. And I thought, how nice would it be to take a co-worker? And you were the first one to pop into my mind! Weird, huh?”

Lauren wanted to say it was more than weird. It was practically creepy. But instead she smiled and said, “Sounds like fun.” What she really meant was that going to Crane House on a nice day sounds more fun than editing book copy.

“Great!” Millie said. “I’ll come by right before lunch. I’m so excited. I just wish I knew why.”

Lauren shrugged. She had no idea why. But someone in the room - someone she could not see - did. Adorma was sitting on a bookshelf above her, wishing anything he could have a cigar. But he needed to concentrate on work and right now everything was going as planned. His Cupid’s Whisper had inspired Millie’s desire to go to Crane House, and to take Lauren with her. Adorma knew from experience how hard it was to say ‘no’ to

one's boss when one is put on the spot. It was exactly why he was in some bratty book editor's office at that very moment instead of taking a smoke break on his favorite cloud, the one that overlooked the nymphs' bathing pool.

He looked at the clock on the wall. Cupid's had a poor concept of time, probably because they were immortal. He was afraid to leave because he had to be with Lauren when she went to Crane House for her first meeting with Simon. He watched her work, remembering centuries before when he'd matched a woman who looked a lot like her to a woodsman named Lars.

It had been a different time then, and he'd been working the European sector. The woman, Angelica, lived in the black forest with her family. The family was poor but respectable. Angelica was a beautiful girl who rose each morning to milk the cow, feed the chickens and spend the rest of the day helping tend to her younger siblings. Even then Adorma could see that her talents were wasted. She was smarter than all the village elders put together, and she seemed to know it. This gave her little respect for the system that kept women subservient, and she regularly rebelled.

This earned her more than one trip across her parents' knee. Her mother was especially embarrassed when her daughter deigned to disagree with a villager.

"How many times must I tell you to speak when spoken to?" she asked, reddening her daughter's poor bum with a breadboard. Angelica cried over the maternal lap, her fists balled up defiantly as she silently vowed to speak her mind when she felt like it.

"You will never find a husband if you continue this rudeness!" her mother spanked harder, her daughter's full buttocks jiggling with each blow of the board. Angelica kicked her feet and wailed in spite of herself.

"Stand up!" Angelica complied, her red-rimmed eyes fixing on her mother's.

"Don't you understand that if you do not hold your tongue you will never find a man?" she asked her daughter. "Your father and I are getting old. One more hard winter and we may be gone. If we do not find you a husband then you may starve, for we cannot continue to feed you and ourselves!"

It was a sad but true reality, and at the Department of Cupids, Angelica's case was given top priority. It was given to Adorma who, even then was developing quite the reputation for success.

And unlike in Lauren's case, Adorma knew right away who would be just perfect for Angelica. Lars was three years older, and like Lauren the eldest in a large family. Even though he was but a simple woodcutter, he was smarter than many of the villagers. And while he enjoyed the warm comforts of a female body on a cold night, the simple-witted, docile females of the village failed to hold his interest. Adorma knew that Angelica

would hold his interest. He also knew that Lars would not allow Angelica to become the shrew that she would become with a lesser man.

Getting them together was easy enough. Each day, Angelica went to draw water from the village well, just when Lars was coming through with firewood for the villagers' hearths. He'd seen Angelica before and thought her pretty, but today as they met eyes Adorma fired two arrows in rapid succession. His aim was perfect. Lars walked over.

"Can you spare a drink of water for a thirsty man?" he asked.

Angelica smiled. "Of course." She put the bucket down and took the ladle hanging beside it, filled it with water and offered it to the woodcutter.

"You're the old tailor's daughter," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Does he still practice his trade?"

"When he can. His fingers are stiff now."

"My coat could use a mending. Does your family need wood?"

"Everyone needs wood," she said. "Silly question."

"Impertinent answer," he replied. "You're a rude slip of a girl, aren't you?"

"So my mother tells me."

"She should do more than tell you. She should beat your bottom a bit."

"She does, sir, but it does no good. I'll stand down to no one." Angelica met his eyes with a level gaze.

"Not even a good man if he had your best interests at heart?" Lars longed to reach out and touch her face.

"If he were true, perhaps. And perhaps not."

Lars smiled. "Come lass, and let me walk you home."

He did and Adorma followed to make sure his dart did not fall out. It did not and the woodcutter and the tailor's daughter fell deeply in love. And they stayed in love, which wasn't always the case. Poison in the heart can cause Cupid's dart to work its way back out. But fortunately for Angelica, Lars was not the kind of man to allow her to become so angry that poison could grow in their relationship. If she was impertinent, he put her over

his knee and spanked her until her round bottom was as red as the sun sinking over the distant mountains. And because he kept her in line while valuing her as more than just a simple woman, Angelica gave her husband what she thought she could never give any man: respect. Thanks to Adorma, they lived happily ever after.

Now as Adorma fluttered after Lauren, who was on her way to lunch with Millie, he hoped for another Happily Ever After to add to his credentials. She and her boss at a small café around the corner from the Crane House and then headed there to see the decorations.

It was Simon who greeted them for the tour. He was taller than Lauren by a head and shoulders and looked incredibly handsome in his period suit. His curly hair, just a shade darker than Lauren's gave him an almost boyish look. But his handsome face was very mature and serious as he approached the women.

"Welcome to Crane House, ladies," he said.

"We're here for the tour," said Millie Smith.

"Well right this way," he said. Lauren listened carefully as Simon gave a brief history of the house, which had been a private residence until the seventies, when a couple had bought and restored. He pointed out the honey oak doors and trim, the chair rails, the historically correct wallpaper and trim.

The couple who built the house, Dr. Robert and Rebecca Crane, had raised seven children there.

"Even with their large family and busy life, the Cranes never lost their sense of romance," Simon said. "In fact, they hosted a Valentine's Day party each year and Mrs. Crane designed Valentine's cards. Some of Mrs. Crane's are on display in the local history museum, and reproductions are for sale in our gift shop."

"Gratuitous advertising. How romantic," Lauren said sarcastically.

"Excuse me, Miss?" Simon stopped, along with the other tour-goers who had joined them, and looked at Lauren. His attention shocked her.

"No excuse necessary," she said coolly. "I was talking to my friend."

He looked disapprovingly at her. Lauren suddenly felt uncomfortable and then irritated for feeling uncomfortable.

Simon turned and continued the tour, directing his followers to pay close attention to the artwork.

“Mrs. Crane painted this picture of cupids after her oldest daughter was proposed to in this very parlor. She fancied she saw them in the house on a regular basis.”

“If I saw a flying baby in my house I’d smack it with a flyswatter,” Lauren said.

Adorma, who had been fluttering along, bow at the ready, felt his chubby cheeks flame candy-heart red with anger. If anyone needed to be smacked, it was this obnoxious little brat. Simon was looking at her again, and she was returning his gaze with a sort of arrogance that could only mean one thing; she was challenging him. And Adorma, who relied on instinct, loaded two arrows and shot them - zing, zing - one after another.

Lauren’s heart began to thud. God, but the man was handsome, even if he was all ga-ga over some stupid flying baby in a painting.

Simon’s heart began to pound in synch with hers. How could someone so pretty be so completely obnoxious. She obviously needed a lesson in manners. Were this truly the turn of the century and she were his wife, he’d excuse the two of them from present company, take her upstairs and turn her over his knee for a proper spanking.

But it wasn’t the turn of the century. It was February, 2011, and spanking a tour-goer - even if she deserved it - could get a docent fired.

“Miss....”

“Kapetchney,” she finished for him.

“I appreciate your commentary, but the other tourists here may not. So if you would refrain from interjecting your comments I shall promise to hear all that you have to say after the tour. Agreed?”

Lauren wanted to tell him no, that she’d say what she damn well pleased. But instead she just nodded, even though she managed a smirk along with it.

“Now that was interesting,” Millie said as the tour ended. “It makes me realize how little I know about this era. I’m going to go to the gift shop and pick up a couple of books before we head back to work.”

“Great, I’ll meet you out front then,” Lauren said as she pretended to examine an odd-looking bench. But what she was really doing was waiting for Simon Jarvis without looking too obvious about it.

“That’s a courting bench,” he said when he finally appeared at her shoulder. She jumped a little at the sound of his voice.

“It’s unusual,” she said.

“It allowed couples to sit side by side without actually touching,” he said. “There were lots of rules in the Victorian age.”

“Sounds stuffy,” she said.

“You disapprove of rules, Miss Kapetchney?”

“Not if they make sense,” she said.

“Well if you know anything of history,” he began, but she cut him off.

“I actually know quite a bit,” she said. “I majored in history.”

He raised an elegant eyebrow. “Really. That’s intriguing. I apologize if I implied any ignorance. I just assumed by your demeanor on the tour...”

She crossed her arms defensively.

“Assumed what?”

“That you were either bored with the subject or rude.”

Lauren’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“I could report you to your supervisor for insulting me,” she fumed.

“You could,” he said agreeably. “Or you could join me for dinner. I assume the absence of a ring means you are unattached.”

“You assume a lot, sir,” she said.

“If I’m wrong, I’m sure you will correct me,” he replied.

“You’re right on this count,” she said. “I’m...between boyfriends.”

“Aah,” he said with a bit of a smile. “There’s a new French place downtown. It’s gotten excellent reviews. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“Wait a second. I didn’t even say yes!”

“You didn’t say ‘no,’ either,” he replied with a wink. “I will need your address.”

Lauren regarded him for a moment and then reached into her handbag for a notepad and pen. She scribbled her address on a sheet of paper and ripped it off.

“Here,” she said, feeling slightly embarrassed at being so easy. Part of her wanted to tell him no, but he was so gorgeous...

Simon took the paper. “Great. You’re not too far from where I live. I look forward to seeing you.”

She turned, and he watched her go. Simon had seen a lot of beautiful women in his lifetime but never had he been so instantly drawn to one as he was to Lauren Kapetchney. Even now he couldn’t stop looking at her as she walked away. She was fit and he liked the way her skirt swayed when she walked. She had an hourglass figure; he liked that, too.

In retrospect, he couldn’t help but wonder what had gotten into him. Simon didn’t date much; his high standards always meant he ended up disappointed. He told himself that he wasn’t being realistic - that the kind of woman he wanted probably didn’t exist anymore. Because what Simon wanted was a woman who would let him take the lead. He wanted a woman who would adhere to a code of conduct set by him as head of the house. What he wanted was a woman like Rebecca Crane.

Mrs. Crane had deferred to her husband, but she also had possessed a mind of her own. In fact, when the house was being renovated, the owners had come across some dairies she’d written in which she talked about how much she loved her husband, and what a struggle it was to obey him. Simon had read the diaries, and was especially surprised at how casually Rebecca Crane had mentioned one particular aspect that would seemed scandalous today: Dr. Crane regularly spanked her.

At first Simon was taken aback, but as he read the diaries he realized that Rebecca Crane not only accepted her husband’s discipline, but was grateful for it.

“Dr. Crane birched me today, but I cannot deny it was well-deserved,” she wrote in one entry. “Although I try to be mindful of my sharp tongue, sometimes it gets the best of me. I do not like the woman I become when I lose control. I am fortunate that Dr. Crane recognizes this in me and strives to make me a better person, even when the lessons reduce me to genuine tears.”

The curator had decided the contents of the diary may be too controversial, so she had them locked away and made available for review by request only. Simon had read them twice, always marveling at the strong example Dr. Crane set for his family through leadership and the willingness with which his wife and children followed him.

That was the kind of man he wanted to be, but he knew in this modern age it would be difficult to find a woman who would accept a man’s leadership at all, let alone in a manner she may consider extreme. When women came through Crane house he would secretly eavesdrop on their conversations, hoping to catch some wistfulness of tone that would hearken to a hidden desire for the old traditions and customs. But it had not happened.

And curiously enough, he had asked a woman out today even though she had displayed what he'd consider the opposite demeanor of the amenable Rebecca Crane. Even now, Simon Jarvis could not understand just what had possessed him. Sure, Lauren Kapetchney was beautiful, but so were a lot of women who came through Crane House. And he'd never asked them out. She didn't fit the profile of what he wanted. And yet, he'd felt something strong and incomprehensible in his heart when he'd locked eyes with the saucy visitor. It just wasn't anything he could explain.

But fluttering up in the corner was someone who could have explained it, if it would not violate the rules against verbal contact with humans. So the cherub just smiled and puffed on his cigar.

Another docent walked by Simon and wrinkled his nose.

"Have you been smoking?" he asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Simon said, walking away. "You know I don't smoke."

Chapter Three

Adorma was feeling pretty damn good about himself. He'd selected two targets, gotten them together in the same place and hit them like they'd had targets over their hearts. He wanted to celebrate with a couple of drinks, but it wasn't time to sit back on his laurels. Not just yet, anyway. It was time for Phase Two, because anyone who thinks that cupids just Fire-and-Fly obviously doesn't know how real love works.

He was taking her out for dinner. That was good. And for most couples, a good dinner with an attractive member of the opposite sex would be enough to get the ball rolling. But the female in this half of this particular couple was a wild card, a loose cannon, a special case. Lauren Kapetchney was a Brat. And that meant that none of the conventional relationship rules would apply because brats were notorious for acting against their own self-interests without even knowing why they were doing it.

It's not that they were stupid; down deep brats were intuitive and passionate and knew exactly what they wanted. They often just didn't realize it on a conscious level, or if they did they'd find a subconscious way to sabotage themselves. Adorma blamed the evolution, which was generally a good thing except when it came to the sexes. Sure, human women had all the things they deserved in terms of equality these days. But they still wanted a man who could be in take them in hand, even if that meant spanking their backsides red when they needed it. In fact, Adorma was pretty sure that this was what brats wanted most of all. But because they weren't supposed to want it anymore they ended up driving men away trying to get it.

Of course, not all men could be driven away. There was the rare man who actually could rise to the occasion. Adorma was pretty sure he'd found a man that could rise to meet Lauren's defiance. He normally didn't let himself take get personally involved in cases, but after Lauren's baby-smacking comments he was really hoping that Simon Jarvis would spank the daylights out of her. The little brat deserved it.

But once in awhile Adorma made a bad call, or misjudged the compatibility of a couple, the devotion of a woman or the strength of a man. It didn't happen often, but once in a long while - just when Adorma thought everything was going as plan - it just all fell apart. Poof. And in the last thirty years or so, he noticed it was almost always when the female half of the relationship was a brat.

But an entire months long vacation was at stake. June was at stake. And Adorma was not about to sit by and let this match fail. He paced the branch in the tree outside of Lauren's window, watching her get ready for her date. He saw her lay two dresses on the bed - one red and one a pale pink with little flowers on it. Adorma knew a guy liked Simon would prefer something feminine to something that screamed "SIREN!" He wrung his chubby little hands when Lauren picked up the red dress and held it against her shapely body. Then he sighed with relief when she put it back in the closet and chose the more demure one.

He hoped Simon would be punctual. He was, arriving at eight o'clock sharp. Adorma frowned when Simon rang the doorbell and Lauren purposefully kept him waiting for several minutes. He had an extra arrow in his bow just in case. It was against Adorma's practice to double-shoot, but in particularly trying cases when he was sure the couple should be together, he'd give one or the other an extra shot. Just in case.

But Simon and Lauren both had appreciation in their eyes when they finally greeted one another at the door. He led her to the car with his hand at the small of her back. *Good, good.* He held the door to her and she didn't object. *Good, good, good.* She laughed at something he said when he got in the driver's seat. Adorma pumped his chubby fist in the air. *YES!*

The restaurant was romantic. Another bonus. Simon had reserved a table for two in the corner. A pair of tapers burned in a decorative holder in the center. He held his chair out for Lauren and she smiled as she sat down. Adorma made himself comfortable in a nearby potted ficus and tried not to look too longingly at the wine list at the nearby table.

"This is nice," Lauren said. "You have good taste."

"Don't be too generous with your praise until after the meal," Simon cautioned. "I've never eaten here. I can only hope the food is half as good as the reviews."

The waiter came over and gave them a list of specials and then handed them menus. Lauren impressed her date by conversing with the waiter in French and asking if she could substitute the sauce listed for the Mousse de Saumon et Capres.

"I go to Europe every year," she explained. "France is my favorite."

"I've been to England. Once." He ordered in English, taking care to make sure he understood exactly what he was getting. "I'd love to go back, but my job as docent doesn't pay that well."

"Why don't you find something better?" she asked bluntly.

He smiled patiently. "I'm getting my Ph.D. in history," he said. "Eventually I plan to teach. But right now I'm content to scrape because I like the work."

She looked around the restaurant.

"Let's go dutch this time," she said. "I hate to put you out."

He frowned. "My but you're blunt, Miss Kapetchney. And I have no intention of going dutch. I asked you out, and if I could not have afford a meal here I'd have taken you somewhere else."

"Really, I don't mind," she said.

“I do.” He frowned at her. “And I don’t plan to discuss it any more.”

“Are you always this bossy?” she asked.

“I’m not bossy.” Simon’s tone was patient. “But I am decisive and not at all shy about it.”

“Your manner could be viewed as sexist and demeaning,” Lauren said. “Are you trying to insult me?”

“And yours could be viewed as needlessly obnoxious,” he countered. “Are you trying to provoke me?”

They stared at each other across the table and from his potted plant vantage point Adorma was not happy about what he was seeing. Bratty was one thing, but rude was another. And Lauren was being rude. He was relieved when their main courses arrived and they resumed small talk as they ate. And they finally had something to agree on; dinner was wonderful.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said when they’d finished half their meal. Conversation had died away between her and Simon and the only sound had been that of other diners conversing and their own cutlery against the china. “I really did not mean to offend you.” She was not used to apologizing, and it did not come natural to her. She knew it sounded awkward, insincere.

“There’s something you should know about me,” he replied. “I’m very old-fashioned. I open doors, pick up checks and would probably lay my coat down in a mud puddle if it were required. I sometimes feel that I was born in the wrong century, especially where interactions with the opposite sex are concerned. So I will accept your apology if you will accept that about me. If not, then I’m afraid we should just make the most of the rest of our evening and be done with it.”

Lauren gave a small laugh. “Wow. And you thought I was blunt.”

“I’m not being blunt so much as honest,” he said. “I don’t believe in playing games or misleading one’s companion. And I’m not being vain or mysterious when I tell you that I’m not like any other man you will meet, Lauren. I have very defined ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman.”

“So you’re sexist?” she asked.

“I would have said know if you asked me that a year ago. But now I’m not so sure I can escape the word. But I’m also not sure if being sexist is a bad thing.”

Lauren regarded him. “But how sexist are you? Are you sexist as in you think women should be kept uneducated and pregnant?”

“That isn’t sexist; that’s ignorant,” he said. “And that hardly defines my views. Again, my sexism is the old-fashioned kind. I believe in chivalry, in courtliness. I believe women benefit from the protection and guidance of a decent man.”

Lauren smirked. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, Captain America, but most of us women are pretty good at protecting and guiding ourselves these days.”

“Agreed,” he said. “But I don’t know if you’ve noticed how many divorces there are, or how many frustrated single women wondering where all the good men have gone.”

Lauren opened her mouth to argue another point but found she couldn’t. She’d never consciously entertained the idea of letting a man lead and guide her, but try as she might she could not help but make comparisons between the man across from her and the college professor whom she’d recently taken pains to avoid.

“Your view isn’t exactly popular,” she said.

“I realize this,” he said. “And I realize that not many men - or women - share it. I realize it may destine me to be alone.”

“You could always change your view,” she said.

He looked at her and smiled. “And do what the masses do? Settle? I think I’d rather be alone.”

Lauren moved the food around on her plate.

“And just what do you mean by ‘guidance’ when you say that’s what you would offer a woman?”

“Direction,” he replied confidently. “And a firm hand when it’s required.”

“You’d be violent?”

“Of course not,” he said, his tone bordering on the disgusted. “I’d be no more violent than a caring parent that would correct a child should it need it.”

“Women aren’t children,” Lauren said, shaking her head. She began to piece together what he was saying and found herself intrigued in spite of herself.

“Adults and children operate from the same drivers,” he said. “Everyone responds to a system of rewards or punishments, regardless of age. And everyone needs a leader whether it’s a family or a business. It doesn’t lessen the importance of the members of a household or organization to make them accountable to someone. It just makes everything run more smoothly.”

“And who is the leader accountable to?” she shot back. “Who tells him what to do?”

“Ah,” Simon said, lifting a finger. “This is where character comes into play. A leader must deserve the position, and work to earn it daily. That means he must be above reproach or risk losing the loyalty and respect of his family or organization. To him, that would be a worse consequence than anything he could ever mete out to those who trust him.”

Lauren found herself riveted to what he was saying. She’d never heard any man say anything like this before. And as much as she hated to admit it, Simon’s words were not only resonating with her, they were making him more attractive by the moment. She imagined her old Women’s Studies professor, Lydia Filch, rolling in her grave.

“Your views,” she said, are certainly unusual. “But as people educated in history, we both know things change for a reason.”

“Core values shouldn’t,” Simon said shaking his head. “Things change, but not always for the best. What starts as a positive development can lead us down a wrong path. Take technology for example. We can access information with the click of a mouse, communicate with friends in 120 characters or less in the blink of an eye. But we’ve lost something, too. We’ve become more impersonal. No one writes real letters anymore. Parents have been charged with neglecting real children while they tend crops on a computer screen. That’s not exactly progress.”

The waiter was bringing the check now and Lauren sat quietly, watching Simon, as he took care of it. From the potted plant, Adorma was getting nervous. They’d done a lot of talking, but he wasn’t sure the conversation had been the basis for a deeper connection. Lauren had been curious, and Simon had been almost clinical in his explanations.

Adorma fluttered after them as they got up to leave. Simon was taking her back home and the effects of his dart seemed to be diminishing. Only two things could happen now; something could occur that could activate a resurgence of the special magic he’d shot into each of them. Or he could shoot them again.

Shooting them again was risky and rarely worked. In the cases of couples that just weren’t destined to be together, it could actually cause depression and mistrust in forming future relationships. A second dart was sometimes acceptable if one needed a little help, but it was considered poor practice to hit both a second time.

He hovered over them as they waited for the valet. It had begun to rain and Simon pulled out his umbrella and held it over the both of them. After a few moments the car pulled around the corner. The next moment, Lauren squealed. The valet parker had hit a small puddle by the curb, splashing water on her.

It wasn’t much, but as soon as the young man got out, she began to berate him.

“Are you blind?” she asked as he apologized profusely for what he had accidentally done.

“Miss, I’m so sorry.” The young man’s face was stricken. “I’ll go in and get a towel.”

“No, you’ll go in and get your supervisor,” she said. “Because by the time I’m finished, you’re going to be fired.”

“Lauren, calm down,” Simon said. “It was clearly an error. And he’s quite upset.”

Lauren rounded on him. “Don’t tell me what to do,” she said. “This isn’t Victorian England.”

“No,” he said calmly. “But manners still count. This young man has apologized graciously. I want you to accept it.”

“No!” she said, her eyes flashing. And at that moment Adorma realized that Lauren’s reaction had nothing to do whatsoever with the valet. Her eyes were fixed on Simon, challenging.

Exactly what are you going to do? her expression asked.

The cupid knew this was a make-or-break moment. Lauren was looking for someone to stop her from being a bitch, which was something that had apparently become a bit of a habit.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, taking her by the arm. “If you wouldn’t mind parking my car back in its spot I’m going to go have a word in private with my companion.”

“Are you crazy?” she asked as he took her by the arm. “I’m not walking anywhere in this rain!”

But Simon wasn’t listening. He had Lauren firmly by the elbow and was leading her to a nearby alley. She continued to protest. By the time they were underneath an overhang between the restaurant and another building, she’d added a few choice names to her diatribe.

Simon looked down at her disapprovingly.

“Are you quite finished?” he asked. “Because I’ve had about enough of your behavior, young lady.”

“Young lady?” she asked, indignant. “How dare you...”

“I think you’ve got it the other way around. You’re the one whose behavior is at fault. You were completely rude to that valet for a simple accident. You were more than rude. You were abusive. And then you compounded the matter by being rude to me.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked. “And just what are you going to do about it?”

Simon knew exactly what he was going to do about it. On some level, Lauren - who had all but begged for this to happen - knew it to. And up on the overhang of the building Adorma was more than ready for the show.

Simon spun Lauren around until she was facing the wall, raised his hand and began to spank her bottom. The rain was coming down harder, so people in the restaurant most likely thought some alley cat was protesting the downpour, for she cried out most dramatically at the assault. But Simon was undeterred. His beautiful date was the textbook example of a woman who needed some serious guidance and as he felt the heat rising from her bottom he was sure that even if she never spoke to him again - or pressed charges - she'd always remember this lesson.

Lauren felt tears running down her face before she even realized she was crying. She'd never been spanked and this hurt! When she tried to dodge the blows, he held her by the waist, flipped her dress up and spanked her about a dozen times over her panties. Lauren was howling now as the burning pain suffused her firm buttocks. When he finally let her go, she rubbed her bottom and danced in place.

Simon stood back and crossed his arms. He waited for her to storm away, but she just stood there crying and rubbing her bottom.

“Are you ready to go apologize to the valet now?” he asked calmly, quietly. From the rooftop, the cupid held his breath. He'd immensely enjoyed the spectacle. Now all that remained was the outcome. Did he need to give up? Fire another arrow? Go home and get drunk?

He waited. Lauren sniffed, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffed again.

“Fine. I'll apologize,” she said. “I shouldn't have done it.”

Simon gave a small smile, reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. He handed it to her.

“Dry your eyes a little,” he said. “Then we'll go.”

The rain was coming down harder. She was shivering. He took his coat off and put it over her shoulders. Lauren reached for it, pulled it tight around herself and then looked up at him. Simon could think of nothing to do but kiss her, so he did.

The kiss was gentle, but sincere. Adorma knew what kind of kiss it was. It was the kind of kiss that lit the spark of love imbedded in two hearts by a cupid's arrow. He smiled. June was looking like a sure thing.

Chapter Four

Adorma didn't like to ask for clarification, but when he saw the second case file he was forced to pay a visit to LaMour's office. The head cupid didn't seem particularly pleased to hear of Adorma's success with the first brat.

"So you did it, huh," LaMour said sulkily.

"Perfectly executed," Adorma replied. "But please don't fall all over yourself congratulating me."

"I might be more enthusiastic if I wasn't facing the growing prospect of losing you for the month of June."

"Hey, you agreed!" Adorma replied. He was feeling more confident than he had when he opened the file.

"You aren't done yet, though," LaMour said. "You've got a case left."

"That's why I'm here," Adorma replied. "I think there's a mistake. This particular case..it's a couple. And they're already married."

"Right," LaMour said. "This one's a Restoration."

Adorma looked at his supervisor.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Nope."

Cupid generally specialized in new love. Restorations were rare. So rare, in fact, that Adorma had never even done one.

"This couple were matched by Heartner twenty-three years ago. They were kind of a sentimental favorite of his. Now the love's worn off. He wants a Restoration done ASAP."

"Why doesn't he do it, then?" asked Adorma.

"He's a busy cupid," came the reply. "You know how it is with upper management. Power lunches, meetings, etcetera..."

"I've never done a restoration," Adorma pointed out.

"Then consider this a compliment. Most cupids never get to do one."

“Most don’t want to do them,” Adorma shot back. “Most restorations don’t take. And this restoration involves a brat. Why don’t you just hog tie me and throw me to the minotaur?”

“Such pessimism! Tsk, tsk, tsk.” LaMour smiled broadly. Too broadly. “You’re never going to succeed with an attitude like that. Of course, if you want to give up...” He held his hand out to take the file, but Adorma snatched it away.

“Not on your life, buddy. I’m not a quitter.” He turned and fluttered away. “Make sure you get somebody lined up to fill in for me come June.”

He hoped the air of confidence sounded more convincing than it felt, because Adorma just wasn’t feeling it. The file looked bleaker and bleaker the longer he stared at it.

Lila Kemper, age 45. Married 23 years to one Martin Kemper. They had one child, a son named Ray, who had recently moved out. Lila had always been something of a brat and Ray had been a good match because he was a no-nonsense guy who’d made it clear from the beginning that if she acted out, she could expect a good spanking.

That promise - and cupid’s helping hand - had resulted in an instant attraction. The pair had been madly and happily in love. When Lila needed it, Ray had spanked her soundly. The first time had been when she’d decided to teach him a lesson for not calling home to let her know he was working late. He’d had a good excuse; he’d been in a meeting and could not get out. And this being before the days when everyone had cell phones, such things happened. But his excuse had not been sufficient for his bratty wife. Lila decided the only way her husband would remember to call would be if she turned the tables. So she went out to a movie with her friends and “forgot” to tell him she was going out for drinks later. When she came home at three in the morning, it was to a husband who was stuck somewhere between relief that she was alive and anger that she had not called him.

“Now you know how it feels,” she said. “Maybe you’ll think twice about not calling me when you’re going to be late coming home from work.”

“Wait a minute,” he said, his voice edged with disbelief. “You mean to say that you did this on purpose?”

“How else were you going to learn?” she asked smugly.

“But it was Lila Kemper who was about to learn a lesson. In one deft move, he sat down and pulled her across his lap. She protested as he lifted the hem of her skirt, pulled down her panties and began to spank her plump bottom. Lila had very fair skin and reddened quickly. She also had a low pain tolerance and was soon crying and begging for mercy. But Martin was determined that she never repeat her actions. After thoroughly warming her up with his hand, he reached into the end table drawer and pulled out a stout ruler. When Lila caught sight of it from the corner of her eye she began to beg him not to use it. But he ignored her.

He laid the ruler hard across the middle of her bottom. A deep red stripe appeared over cheeks that were already a lighter shade of red. Lila howled in pain and kicked her legs. Martin brought the ruler down again, this time just below the first line. She was begging now but he kept on spanking her, tattooing a regular series of welts on her helpless backside.

Martin tipped her forward on his lap, causing her legs to stretch out and opening the expanse of skin between her buttocks and the tops of her thighs. He targeted that tender skin now with the ruler, smacking first one side and then the other until it was splotchy red and his wife was bucking in pain.

It wasn't something he enjoyed doing, for although Martin liked smacking a female bottom for fun, causing Lila genuine pain was something he did not because he wanted to, but because he had to. He was determined that by the time he finished, she was going to regret making him worry so much.

By the time he was finished he'd done just that. Lila's fair backside was a mess and she was sobbing uncontrollably. Martin helped his wife to her feet and guided her to the corner, where he instructed her to stand with her hands on her head until he told her otherwise.

It was the most serious spanking he had give her to date and he wondered how she would treat him afterwards. Would she pout? Would she grow sullen? Each time he increased the severity of a spanking he wondered if he'd gone too far. But Lila always impressed him by coming to him later and telling him that she was grateful that he'd not let her get by with misbehaving. And this time was no different. Martin released her from the corner a half hour after the spanking. They both went to bed and she was still sleeping when he left for work. When he came home later she'd fixed his favorite dinner and apologized for her behavior the night before.

Shortly after that, they added maintenance spankings to their routine. Sometimes when Lila needed an emotional release, a good spanking helped. She got one about once a month or so.

But then their son was born and the spankings - both regular and maintenance - began to dwindle. The couple still loved each other but were consumed with other things. Both were working - Martin as a firefighter and Lila as a speech therapist. Their son kept them both busy; they were doting parents. But they began to drift apart as Ray got older. By the time he moved out to go to college, the love between them had all but died. Lila especially was frustrated and found herself feeling hostility towards the man she loved.

Enter the cupid.

Adorma spent some time observing the couple and felt bleaker by the minute. Cupids' arrows work best in the fertile environment of an open heart. But both Lila's and Martin's

were all but closed. Even if he did strike them true he worried that the darts would just wither where they landed.

He needed to find a way to thaw their hearts, and that was best done by reminding them of a time when they were happiest and most in love. The file was remarkably thin on the couple. In fact, Adorma wondered if some of it weren't missing. Or maybe Heartner just was so sure of their Happy Ever After that he'd not bothered to follow up until much later.

Lila had a lunch date with a friend, so he trailed along. She met the other woman, a nurse named Patty, at a sandwich shop not too far from the rehabilitation center where they both worked. Adorma eavesdropped from atop the sneeze guard.

"Did you see that new guy they just hired?" her friend Megan was asking her.

"You mean Brent Cutler, the physical therapist?" Lila smiled. "Oh yeah. He is so good looking."

Adorma frowned. *Not good.*

"Good looking and nice. Apparently he's recently divorced."

"Really?" Lila said, intrigued. Adorma shook his head. *Not good at all.*

"How old is he?" Lila wanted to know.

"Forty-seven," Megan said. "You know, if you're serious about separating and getting back in the game, Lila, this might be a good guy for you to start talking to..."

BAD! BAD! BAD!

The word flashed above Adorma's fair-haired head in bright neon colors. She was already talking about ending her marriage? If that happened it was too late. Hell, it was probably too late already.

"I shouldn't even be thinking about other guys yet." The smile disappeared from Lila's face to be replaced by a somber look. This gave Adorma some hope.

"I mean, Martin and I haven't even been to counseling yet, you know."

"Yeah, but you said last week you didn't think counseling would help," Megan pointed out. "I mean, what's the point?"

Adorma frowned. One of Cupid's biggest obstacle was the Meddling Friend. And he could see that this Megan woman was one of the worst. Often this was because the friend herself had no love in her life. Creating drama in the lives of others gave people like this a sense of purpose.

He decided to pay an emergency visit to LaMour.

“I need information on a human?” he asked.

“Who?” LaMour was reading the inscriptions on candy hearts and laughing at them. He barely looked up.

“A Megan Tindle.”

“Sure.” He turned to his files and then stopped, looking up at Adorma. “Wait. Does this have something to do with the case you’re working on?”

“As a matter of fact it does,” he said.

LaMour stopped. “You know the rules, Adorma. One case at a time.”

“And you know the rules,” Adorma spat back. “Restorations must be approved by committee and not done as special favors for your friends. So don’t give me this bullshit. You want to make this work? Then give me the information on Megan Tindle!”

“Fine. Don’t be such a grump.” LaMour shot Adorma a look and went through the files.

“Here she is. Twenty-seven. Never married. Single....”

Adorma snatched the file away. “Just as I suspected. Lonely heart. Sometimes sad, sometimes miserable. This one looks to be a little of both.”

He looked up at LaMour. “Request to match.”

The senior cupid rolled his eyes. “Sure, whatever.”

Adorma flittered off. Lila and Megan were leaving lunch just as he got back. He darted from tree to tree, bow drawn until they came to a magazine stand. The man who was also waiting there was about Megan’s age. He was chubby like Megan. He looked at her and smiled. She glanced at him and smiled back. Adorma fired.

“Hey,” the man said. “Are you going to get that copy of the New Yorker?”

Megan looked down at the magazine she’d just picked up. “I was,” she said. “It’s the last one. But if you want it..”

He laughed. “No, no,” he said.

There was an awkward silence in which they both stood there, smiling.

“I could lend it to you when I’m finished. I work over at the rehab center.”

“Really?” I was just over there. “My names’s Roger. I’m the new medical supply rep for PharmaTron. We make prosthetics.”

“Really? Wow! Small world...”

The two kept on talking and Lila smiled and walked away, figuring her friend was busy. Adorma felt some relief but not much. Megan was smitten and would have plenty to keep her happily occupied now. But that hardly fixed the situation between Lila and Martin.

He followed her to work. The rehab center was large, and the staff dealt with people recovering from accidents, strokes or other problems that affected their function in some way.

Lila was walking to her office when a tall, handsome man greeted her.

“Hey!”

She looked up and smiled, flushing a little.

“Hey!” she replied back. “You’re, uh, the new guy. Brent, right?”

“Yep,” he said. “And you’re Lila.”

“I was when I woke up.” She giggled and then felt stupid.

“I have a patient I’m supposed to refer to you.”

He started talking to her about he case, but as Adorma observed them he took notice of Lila’s eyes. They gazed at his strong hands, his broad arms. He knew she was comparing this strong, commanding man to a strong commanding man she once knew - her husband.

“If you’d like, we could discuss this dinner tonight,” he said.

Lila knew she should say no. The man was obviously interested in her, despite the fact that she was wearing a wedding ring. Not that it surprised her. Even though she was full-figured, she was a very pretty woman. Men gravitated to her. The attention hadn’t really been something that had tempted her until just recently. But what could it hurt. It was just a professional dinner, right? And Martin was at the fire station for the evening...

“That’d be great,” she said. “You want to go over to the pizza place around the corner?”

“It’s a date,” he said, and smiled broadly. Lila noticed that he didn’t even clarify the comment to point out that the date was professional. She watched him walk away, wondering if he was a spanker. He sure was built like one. Tall, broad-shouldered, strong,

and he seemed plenty confident enough to get the job done. Lila remembered when she had the same feelings about Martin. Everything about him seemed designed to keep her brattiness in line, from the commanding tone of his voice to the look he'd give her when she tested him to the broad hands that seemed just made to spank her bottom. She missed that. She wished things could go back to the way they were, but the fact was that Martin had changed. He didn't seem to be the dominant man he once was. He seemed almost...intimidated by her and she hated that. It made him less attractive in her eyes. It wasn't something she liked to admit to herself, but there was no way of getting around the truth.

Adorma was listening into her thoughts and as he did he realized that he was not being entirely fair for blaming Lila so much for the decline in her marriage. Yes, she was a brat. But she was a brat with unmet needs. Perhaps if he spent some time eavesdropping on Martin, he may figure out why.

Adorma left Lila at work, hoping that the flirtatious therapist wouldn't do too much to turn her head. He briefly considered firing arrows at both the lustful Brent Cutler and any number of attractive, unmarried staff members that were bound to catch his eye. But Adorma wasn't so desperate to fix Lila's marriage that he was willing to compromise his integrity. He'd seen plenty of men like Brent Cutler. They were handsome, friendly and charismatic. But they were in relationships for a good time, not for a long time. His arrows never stayed long in hearts like that and Adorma didn't believe in dealing with time wasters.

As he zipped off through the halls and out the building he noticed what a beautiful day it was. The weather was pleasantly cool and crisp. The air smelled faintly of chocolate and roses. It was Valentine's weather. He sincerely hoped this would be a good one for Lila and Martin. But something told him he facing one of the biggest challenges of his career.

"Maybe I should have asked for July off, too," he thought. He ran his chubby fingers through his downy curls, hovered in the air and lit a cigar. "I'm getting too old for this shit."

Chapter Five

The firefighters at Station 11 took turns with the cooking. Today it was Martin Kemper's turn. As a general rule, firefighters were good cooks and he was no exception. This afternoon's menu was Yankee pot roast with vegetables and homemade biscuits.

He remembered the first time he'd had to cook for the other firemen. He was so inept that not only was the food inedible, but the other men had to help him put out a fire in their very own kitchen. That night he'd gone home hat in hand to ask Lila to teach him how to cook. She gladly obliged. Lila was a good cook. But then again, Lila was good at a lot of things.

He missed her sometimes when he was at work, but not as much as he used to. Things had become so frosty between them. They never talked. She seemed sad much of the time and he blamed himself. He remembered when they used to be so happy together, but that was back in the day when she'd not been different, but he had too. They'd both been more...passionate, in love and opinions. Hell, they'd been more passionate about life in general. He used to tell her she was a brat, and she was exactly that. Lila simply could not contain herself when she got in a bad or disobedient mood. It had been his job to haul her over his knee and put her back in line. It was something he enjoyed doing, even if he hated to see her cry, because he knew it was exactly what she needed.

The maintenance spankings had been his idea. Martin had noticed how much calmer and less tense Lila had seemed after punishments. And he noticed how for her, tension seemed to ramp up throughout the month. He knew there were times when she provoked him - either consciously or subconsciously - to spank her just so she could get the emotional release a good cry provided. So he decided to start giving her "just because" spankings to defray the tension when it started to build. This gave her the release without giving him the burden of having to spank her too terribly hard.

It worked well. The spankings were a big success. But as their son Ray got old enough to ask questions, they found excuses not to carry through with the punishment spankings. Soon even the maintenance spankings fell by the wayside and slowly, over time, a rift developed between them.

Now that Ray was out of the house, Martin found himself wondering how or if he could reintroduce the old dynamic to his marriage. But there didn't seem to be a good way. Lila had simply changed. She'd become less bratty. A coldness had taken its place, a standoffishness that he frankly found rather intimidating. And it was hard for a guy like Martin to be attracted to a woman he found intimidating. He liked the submissive Lila better. He wasn't sure how you spanked a woman who didn't send any signals that she needed it. He figured that Lila had outgrown her need for a trip over his knee. And that made him sad, because he still enjoyed the way her bottom filled out her jeans, and longed to see it redden under his hand.

For a note-taking cupid, the admission by both parties of a couple that they missed the way their partners used to be was good news. It meant that the love wasn't dead, and that there was some hope of salvaging the little spark of something that remained. But it was up to him to make that spark catch fire.

Catch fire. Adorma pondered just how he might do that. And then it occurred to him.

"No, no," he told himself. "That would be wrong, Adorma. That would be wrong." But he was so close, and the plan was perfect. If he pulled it off right then he could foresee just the kind of emotional reaction that would put events in motion for a full restoration.

He considered running the idea past LaMour but thought the better of it. He'd just find a way to shoot it down, cupid pun intended. No, Adorma thought, this time he was flying completely solo. All he had to do now was wait.

And that's what he did. The pizza parlor was pretty dead just around dark. But it was a Wednesday, not exactly date night. Even so, the owners had done their best to make the place look romantic ahead of Valentine's day. Each table had a wine bottle vase with a red rose sitting inside. Little paper hearts had been cut out and were taped to the window. There was even a paper cupid hanging by the door. It's but was big. It reminded Adorma of Desiro.

Lila arrived first and Adorma didn't like the way she was dressed. She wore a bright blue dress that hugged her generous curves like a glove. Hardly the look for a professional meeting. But if Adorma worried that she was sending the wrong message, it seemed just like the one that Brent Cutler was looking for.

"Wow," he said. "You look just fantastic!"

Lila smiled. "Thanks," she said. "After schlepping around in scrubs all day it's kind of nice to put on some girl clothes."

"Don't you wear them when you go out with your husband?" He nodded towards the ring on her finger. "You are married, aren't you?"

She curled her hand a bit. "Yeah," she said. "But he, um...he works a lot. And we're not really..." Her voice trailed off. "About the patient...."

He smiled broadly, a bit too broadly. It made Lila nervous, but she dismissed her reaction as silly paranoia. Or maybe a bit of guilt.

"Yes. Mrs. Chambers. She was in a hit-and-run last year apparently. She had a bad concussion, and ever since she's had some coordination issues. And she's slurring some of her words." He paused. "But you know what? We can talk about this later. Why don't we talk about you instead?"

The nervous feeling returned.

“Well, I don’t know,” Lila said. “We should really probably talk about Mrs. Chambers.”

“Where did you grow up?” he asked her, ignoring the question.

She paused. “North Dakota,” she said, trying to be polite.

“How long has Mrs. Chambers been slurring her words.”

“You have beautiful blue eyes. And the most awesome hair. A lot of guys prefer blondes, but not me. Give me a brunette any day of the week.”

She looked down and laughed, blushing.

“You’re making this hard,” he said.

He laughed. “So are you.”

She blushed deeper. Outside the window, a certain cupid was getting pissed. It was time to put his plan into action. Taking a long pull on his stogey, he watched the tip glow bright red for a split second before he tossed it into the trashcan. The can had been filled with dry leaves and paper. He’d seen to that. Now it all but erupted into flames. Another trash can beside it caught fire. Sirens sounded in the distance. Patrons got up to go outside, including Lila and Brent Cutler.

The firefighters didn’t take long to dispatch the fire.

“Let’s go back inside,” Brent said. “I’d like to get to know you better.”

But Lila felt the uneasy feeling again, stronger this time, and decided to call it a night.

“You know what?” she said. “I think I’m just going to go home. We should talk business at work if we need to.”

“Business?” He took hold of her arm. “You knew it wasn’t just business when you said you’d meet me. Come on. Hot looking woman like you? Husband working nights....”

“Not all night,” a voice said.

Lila and Brent turned to see Martin standing there. He did not look pleased.

“Who are you?” Brent asked.

“I’m her husband. Who the hell are you?”

“Whoa, whoa. I don’t want any trouble.” Brent put his hands up in the air and backed away. He winked at Lila. “Later, babe.”

She stood there feeling awful, guilty, awful.

“What was that all about?” Martin asked.

She sighed. “He invited me to dinner to discuss a patient whose case we’re working on. I’m sorry, Martin. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“My feelings?” Martin said, taking her by the hand and pulling her to the side. “Did you hear the way he was talking to you? See the way he was looking at you? That guy looked like a cat about to pounce on a canary!”

“No, you’re overreacting,” she said. But inside, she realized that her husband had seen the same thing in Brent that she had. Something dark. Perhaps even something dangerous.

“I suppose you’re mad,” she said.

“Damn right,” he agreed. “But not at who you think. I’m mad at myself.”

“At yourself? Why?”

“Because, Lila. I’ve clearly been neglecting you, making you feel unloved. I’ve dropped the ball so much that you’ve gone and done something stupid. And you know what that means?”

She shook her head, even though she had a good idea of what it may mean. And she was hoping they were thinking the same thing.

“I’m going to march your ass home right now and spank you raw, young lady.”

At that moment, Lila’s heart leapt in her chest. And when it did a tiny arrow pierced it. Then a second one took aim at her husband. They locked eyes.

“So you’ll be home later?”

“I’ll be home as soon as my shift is over,” he said. I want you wearing nothing but your pink teddy. No panties. And you’d better have your ass in the corner waiting. And I want the paddle and the strap on the bed.

“Martin,” she began. “It’s been years. Don’t you think it’s a bit much?”

“Who’s in control here?” he asked.

She dropped her eyes. "You are."

"Damn right I am," he said. "Now get home."

Lila could think of nothing else all evening. She showered, did her hair and makeup - no mascara - and donned the pink teddy with the fur fringe. It came to the middle of her shapely bottom, the white cheeks peeking tantalizingly from under the faux fur hem.

She laid the strap and the paddle on the bed and waited. Five minutes before her husband was due home, she went to the corner and put her hands on her head. It seemed like forever before she heard his car in the drive, his key in the lock. She counted each of his footfalls as he climbed each of the twelve steps up to the second floor.

Lila stole a look at him when he walked in. He was so handsome. How could she have forgotten. And he was so strong. He wore his white t-shirt stretched over his still-impressive chest. His hips were narrow in his blue pants.

He went and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Come here," he said.

She walked over, hands down at her sides and eyes lowered. It was interesting how easily she reverted back to a submissive state after so many years. She raised her eyes to meet his.

"We don't have to do this," she said.

"Oh yes we do," he replied. "And we both know it. I don't think there's ever been a more important spanking. Bend over."

She obeyed, feeling the hardness of his thighs beneath her belly. He moved her forward, positioning her on his lap. Lila felt him lift the hem of her short teddy. He rubbed her bottom.

"We're going to start with a hand spanking," he said. "Even though you don't deserve a warm-up I'm going to give you one because it's been so long."

Too long, she thought.

Martin struck her on the bottom portion of her right buttock, watching the springy flesh rebound and turn a dusky pink with each succeeding blow. Lila tried to hold still, but found that she could not. Soon she was whimpering and wiggling. And just when she didn't think she could take another blow, Martin picked up the strap.

"Please don't!" she cried. "I don't think I can take it!"

“You certainly will, young lady,” Martin said. “You put yourself in danger and you did so because you didn’t do what you should have done, which was talk to me.”

“You weren’t talking to me, either!” she said in defense of her actions.

“That’s true,” he replied. “If I had, I’d have let this strap do the talking.”

He raised it and brought it down. Lila squealed and kicked her legs. The sting of it across her already sore bottom seemed more than she could bear. She rocked her hips back and forth as he laid six blows across the bottom half of her backside.

“To the corner with you,” he said. “Stand there with your hands on your head until it’s time for the paddle.”

She began to cry in earnest. She’d forgotten about the paddle. The idea of enduring more punishment seemed beyond comprehension and as she stood there trying not to rub her burning, tender bottom she tried to recall what she’d missed about having Martin spank her. It sure could not have been the pain or the dread or the fear.

Martin walked up and squeezed her bottom. Even though it was sore, his hands cupping her buttocks so possessively made her nipples tighten and tingle. She began to remember why she’d missed being spanked.

“Feeling more like yourself?” he asked.

“I think both of us are,” she said.

“Mmm,” he replied. “You can be such a bad girl, Lila. I think I may have my work cut out for me with putting you back in line.”

“Yes sir,” she said.

He walked away. She wanted to see where he went but instead focused on keeping her eyes trained on the corner as she knew he liked her to do. She was beginning to feel that familiar submissiveness take hold, began to see her husband as she’d seen him so many years ago before life and responsibilities got in the way of their relationship.

She heard him come back into the room.

“Come here.” He was standing by the bed. He’d put a pillow near the edge. She knew what it was for.

Lila walked over and - without being told - leaned over so that the pillow was under her hips. This raised her bottom, opening it. Her heart began to pound with fear and anticipation. Martin began to rub the maple paddle in small circles first around her left buttock, then around her right. He did this several times, the waiting a bit more

maddening with each passing moment. Finally he pulled back and let fly with a sound smack. Lila yelped and stood, her hand rubbing the stinging oval mark.

“OW!”

“Get back in place,” he said, his voice laden with warning.

She leaned forward, her hands shaking now as she clutched the coverlet. Martin reached down and parted her legs. Lila felt open, vulnerable, exposed. He brought the paddle down on the lower portion of her buttock, almost to the inner thigh. Lila wailed and bounced up and down but did not rise. Martin could not take his eyes off the jiggling, reddened bum. He wanted to toss the paddle away, get behind her and sink himself up to the hilt in what he knew was already a very wet pussy. But he knew that it was not time.

He began to spank her methodically with the paddle. Lila shrieked and cried and moaned and sobbed apologies for her behavior. She kicked her legs and pounded the bed with her fists. She rocked her hips back and forth. But she did not get up. She was absorbing the blows, rocked by the pain just as she was being rocked by the deepening feelings of submission to her husband.

“OW! OW! OW! OW!” she cried as he continued to spank. Martin directed the blows lower on her buttocks now, running his hand over the punished skin between sets of three. The heat off her bottom was intense. He’d forgotten how sensual a spanked bottom felt. But he knew Lila was reaching her limit. And so was he.

He tossed the paddle away and warned her not to rise. She laid there, her legs apart, the downy fleece between them sodden with her own juices. He felt his cock straining against the fly of his pants. He’d never found her more attractive, and as Lila lay there with her bottom completely and submissively exposed she’d never felt more submissive or sexy. And she’d never wanted her husband inside her. But she did not ask. She wanted him to decide, wanted to know that he was in control of every aspect of what was happening between them at that very moment.

Finally he walked back over to her and dipped a finger between her legs. It slid in surrounded by hot, liquid silk. Lila moaned and gripped his fingers as he inserted one and two more. Finally, neither of them could stand it no longer. Martin positioned himself behind her and thrust himself deep inside her. Lila gasped, the pleasure so intense she came immediately. It took remarkable restraint for Martin not to join her, but he’d driven her crazy with pain and now he wanted to do the same with pleasure.

He moved back and forth in her, burying his face in her hair as she pushed back to meet his thrusts. His large hands moved underneath her to fondle her full breasts. He turned her over and she wrapped her soft thighs around him, holding him tightly. Their moans of pleasure filled the halls of their empty house. They were finally together again.

“That was wonderful,” she said when it was over.

“The sex?” he asked. “Or everything.”

“Everything,” she said bashfully. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” he said. “We were stupid to let things go as long as we did. But that’s never going to happen again, is it?”

“No sir,” she said. They kissed long and slow. When their lips parted, Lila turned her head to catch a breath and began to laugh.

“What is it?” he asked.

She laughed harder. “God, I must be going crazy...”

“What?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me,” he said. “Or would you rather I spank it out of you.”

“OK,” she said between fits of laughter. “This is going to sound insane but I could swear I just saw a fat little baby fly past our window.”

THE END

