

Love Will Find A Way

by Carolyn Faulkner

It was not unusual for Jason to call her early on a Sunday morning and ask her to come in to help with something. Heck, if it weren't for the overtime she accumulated on a regular basis she'd never be able to pay her bills, Kate mused, not bothering to apply her usual light layer of makeup. It's not as if Jace hadn't seen her in all her rumpled, just-out-of-bed glory. Not the fussy, primpy type, she quickly donned a pair of faded, just washed jeans and pulled a "Body by Ben & Jerry's" T-shirt on over a beautiful matching set of high cut briefs and lacy aqua blue bra. After running a brush as quickly as possible through her long mass of errant red-gold curls, she decided against using the curling iron to touch up her bangs. A quick spray of her favorite scent – L'Air du Temp – and she was out the door, grabbing in one well practiced movement both her car keys and a handful of change for sodas later.

Her sporty metallic blue Celica eased into her assigned spot minutes later, and she bounded into the office, noting she had beaten Jason for the umpteenth time in a row. On second thought, she wouldn't need the change. Per their standing bet about beating each other to work, the drinks would be on him. The Hadley Brothers, Esq. offices were located in a remodeled Victorian home, and Jason had tried, in decorating, to retain the homey feel. He had achieved that goal, Kate felt, although she regularly bemoaned the necessity of chopping up yet another old house into offices or apartments. As it was Sunday, the first thing she turned on after the lights was the boom box she kept hidden in her bottom drawer, full of heavy metal CDs not meant for clients' ears. Steven Tyler loudly rhapsodized about the benefits of sex in an elevator as she let herself into Jace's office and habitually straightened his "piles".

She stepped back into her own office – really not hers, but she'd gradually usurped it over the past few years after Mathew left -. Don't go there! Ruthlessly, she squelched even the thought of Jason's over-bearing (rugged), domineering (muscular), arrogant (sexy-as-hell) brother. He'd exiled himself to Chicago, and Chicago could have him, Kate thought irrationally.

Anxious to occupy her thoughts with something other than the tall, dark, and brooding subject of her more sensual dreams, she went to what was laughingly referred to as the "break room" – a more likely description would be "closet", but it sufficed - and put on a pot of coffee. As usual, she sang along with Steven on every word of her favorite songs – unembarrassed at her atrocious singing abilities, and even swaying or moving her hips in time to the beat, which was just about as close to dancing as she got as dancing made her too self-conscious.

As she and the singer reached a loud, emotional crescendo, she screamed when she heard a loud "harrumph" from behind her. Coffee grounds in the scoop she was holding flew everywhere, as she rounded, can in hand, ready to threaten Jason with bodily injury for sneaking up on her like that, then promptly dropped the can at the sight.

Matthew Pierce Hadley was not known for his sense of humor – although she knew he possessed a wicked wit and appreciation for puns and plays on words in particular – but there he stood, not four feet in front of her, hands folded across an impossibly broad chest, trying unsuccessfully to fight an outright grin. She tried not to notice how the fabric of what must have been a \$1000 suit pulled slightly to accommodate his burly, muscular frame. Kate swallowed hard, suddenly wary and without an intelligent thought in her head.

She was grateful for the opportunity to bend legs that she didn't know would hold her up to clean the coffee off the floor. He didn't offer to help, making things worse with his silent inspection. Mentally, she gave herself a pep talk, took a very deep, slow breath to calm her rapid pulse, and went back to making coffee. If he wasn't going to say anything, neither was she.

Joe Perry's blaring guitar licks ceased seconds later, and she knew he was in her office. Somehow, that was in itself a violation, but she stayed put, waiting for the coffee that she certainly didn't need to keep herself awake any more. She'd be lucky if she slept for the duration of whatever stay he intended – hopefully, a mercifully short one.

On her way out of the break room, she gave herself another pep talk, straightening her shoulders and gritting her teeth, repeating incessantly the mantra that she wasn't going to let him get to her – their ill-fated affair had been over for years, and he no longer had any affect on her. Yeah, right. Her determination slipped some when she found he had made himself comfortable on the overstuffed sofa in her office, but she didn't glance at him once as she proceeded to bring up on her computer some documents she was working on.

"You didn't get me a cup?"

Here five seconds and already ordering her around. How typically Matthew. He barked orders – as if he were still in the Marines – and expected that the world would obey. Kate barely spared him a glance while typing . . . badly. One eyebrow skyward, sarcasm dripped from every word, "Funny, you don't look like your legs are broken."

He left and she took her first full breath in what seemed like hours, slumping behind the computer until she heard him walking back. She could see out of the corner of her eye as

he divested himself of his suit coat, and unbuttoned his cuffs, rolling them up like he was going to chop wood or something, then settling down again, facing her, on the near side of the couch. Kate knew his gaze had settled on her the moment he entered the room, and it made her that much more nervous. The document she was typing would need so much help from Spell Check that it'd probably wear it out.

"You let your hair grow." Oh, God, he had the deepest, softest growl . . .

It wasn't the comment he really wanted to make, but then he wasn't doing what he really wanted to do, either, or she'd be sprawled underneath him this moment on the couch - Don't go there, he thought, his body coming to instant attention at his thoughts. But the comment had the desired effect – the incessant clicking of keys ceased. She had yet to look him in the eye, except that first, startled moment. He watched interestedly as she opened a drawer of the desk he used to use and pulled out a ring of fabric. His gaze followed her graceful movements as she gathered that glorious hair in a ponytail then twisted it up at the back of her neck, securing it with the elastic. It was a dig at him, because she knew how much he loved her hair to be long and loose, but her movements only heightened his body's response as she arched her back, thrusting her breasts forward with every turn and twist. He adjusted his position to hide his condition, smiling to himself at her pique.

Suddenly, his ears were assailed with more of that awful banshee wailing about a rag doll, but he hadn't seen her touch the boom box, which was on the edge of her desk. No, the sounds were coming directly from the computer. He snorted. Outfoxed, but not for long, as he scanned the room and found the socket the computer was plugged into, and casually pulled the plug from behind her.

"What the hell!!!!" Kate was staring at a suddenly blank screen. None of the lights were lit on her brand new computer!!! Jason was going to have a fit if she'd killed this one, too. "Sonofabitch." She was reaching for her phone when she saw him standing there, twirling the plug between his thumb and forefinger. For some reason, her thoughts fixated on that picture, and related it to how it felt when he twirled various parts of her anatomy in just that way. Suddenly, the room was completely devoid of oxygen. She felt flushed all over, and dammit, she wasn't going to take it any more!

"Are you out of what little mind you possess? Hello, can you say 'lost computer files', or is that too many syllables?"

"I hope the ones that get lost are the ones with that screaming whatever on it –"

"I was working on a document!!!"

"Not for long enough to have accomplished anything, and if you're smart, you have a copy on a disk. If you're not smart enough to back up your work, let that be a lesson." He literally watched her back come up, which was new. Two or three years ago, she would never have considered raising her voice to him, much less using profanity of any sort, knowing that he disliked it from males – including himself – and especially females. Now she was practically yelling at him, and he had a feeling that if she thought she could shoulder the weight she would have physically removed him from her office. Interesting.

Just when she thought he could not possibly be any more infuriating, he proved her wrong and topped himself. She managed to surprise him again by making a grab for the plug, but missed. "Give me the fucking plug." His eyebrow rose at the profanity, but he didn't move to comply.

"No more Aerosmith," he countered.

Sinking back into her chair (his old chair), she nodded, her forehead resting on her fingertips. She heard the beep of her computer starting but didn't move.

"Got a headache?" he asked, still in position at the end of her desk.

She knew that melt-butter, sensuous tone better than she ought. Kate straightened, addressing the computer. "Yeah, if I give you two aspirins will you go away?"

Before he had a chance to reply, Jason burst into the office as if he expected to have to deter a potential nuclear holocaust. "I-I, uh, hoped to beat you two here."

Kate got up, giving Matthew an exaggeratedly wide berth, saying, "Soda's on you today, Boss."

"Thanks for coming in, Kate."

"No problem."

Kate went into Jason's office, where he usually briefed her on whatever it was they were doing working on a Sunday. To her consternation, Matthew followed her in. It was as if he owned the place, she snorted to herself.

Kate settled herself on the near edge of the couch, and Matthew immediately took the other end. His close proximity made it hard for her to concentrate on what Jason was saying, but his body language was an interesting clue. There wasn't much that made

Jason nervous, but he was pacing like a caged cat.

He glanced sheepishly at Kate. "I bet you're wondering why he's here."

She raised her eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

Jace came to sit on the coffee table in front of her. "We – I'm in trouble, Kate. I mean, the practice is. Money problems."

Kate leaned toward Jason, patting his shoulder comfortingly. "I know it's been lean around here lately, Jace, but – "

Matthew grimaced at the cozy familiarity the two shared. She hadn't looked at him like that since - .

"Lean is putting it nicely, Honey. It's failing, and -," he decided to spill the beans all at once, like ripping off a Band-Aid. "Matthew has agreed to come back and be my partner again for a while. He can infuse some cash into the business and help me get back on my feet." Kate looked shell-shocked, and he hurried on. "I need your help in this as much as I need his, Kate. I need you to work for the both of us."

The two men watched as she suddenly got up and went over to the window behind Jason's big desk. She peered up between the blinds furtively. "What are you looking at, Kate?" Jason was afraid to ask.

She turned her head back and forth, as if scanning the sky for an airplane. "I'm looking for the pigs. They must be flying if you expect me to work for him."

Kate heard Jason's heavy sigh, and Matthew's impolite guffaw. "I take it that's a 'no'?" Jason's voice was soft with defeat.

"Got it in one," she answered, just as softly, almost hesitantly as she realized that this would really be the end of a fabulous working relationship. And, dammit, she really didn't want to leave. If he'd partnered with anyone other than his brother – anyone short of Attila the Hun – she'd have made any sacrifice to help him save the firm. Hell, she felt that it was just as much hers as his.

But on Matthew, there would be no compromise. She wouldn't – she couldn't – emotionally, handle working with him. It would destroy her, as it almost had once before. They were combustible together, sexually, but oil and water when it came to what they wanted out of life. Kate was too old fashioned and conservative, and wanted a husband

and children. Matthew wanted the sex with no entanglements, emotional or otherwise.

"I'm sorry, Jason," Kate began to walk slowly out of the office as she spoke.

"My resignation will be on your desk tomorrow morning. I'll call tonight and see if Amy would like the position." Amy would mow over her mother for a chance to be close to Jason on a daily basis, but he couldn't seem to see that. She was at least as competent as Kate, and had filled in for her on the rare occasions that she'd been sick.

Kate walked stiffly out of the office, barely stopping to grab her purse while high tailing it out of there. She drove straight home, only to sit in her car in the driveway of her small Victorian house and bawl uncontrollably for several minutes before she could gather herself together enough to slouch inside. There had been a time she had sworn she'd shed her last tear over Matthew Hadley, but apparently she'd been premature. History was repeating itself, much to her horror. With no one's comforting arms around her, she hugged a couch pillow, sobbing, until Pooky - her Rotweiler mix - realized that her beloved mistress was distressed, and came to lick away the tears with warm, wet strokes of her agile tongue. Not to be outdone, Butch, the mighty Boston Terrier, launched himself into her lap, a small black and white wiggling bundle of unconditional support.

Surrendering to the gentle, heartfelt ministrations of her menagerie – minus Tasia, the Siamese brat-cat who was probably asleep on "their" bed – Kate slid onto the floor and let the pack comfort her in the best way they knew how – togetherness.

Several hours later, she had thrown herself into cleaning the apartment in her rattiest attire – torn gray sweats and a too big t-shirt that read "Of all the things I've ever lost, I miss my mind the most." She was sweaty and tired and cranky and still a little weepy, but the house was spotless, every knick-knack in her vast and varied collection that was displayed artfully about the house – Lladro, hardback copies from her favorite authors, and various types and sizes of candy dispensers – had been dusted, polished, or scrubbed to within an inch of its life. Those that can, do, and those that are emotional basket cases, clean.

The doorbell distracted her from her last chore, dusting. Endust and dirty dust rag in hand, she asked, "Who is it?"

The growl answered for him. "Let me in." No 'it's me,', no 'may I come in', just a bare command.

Kate took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, then resignedly opened the door, knowing that he would never go away on his own, and that it was quite possible that, if she

refused, he would simply kick it in. Facing imminent unemployment, she didn't need to have to pay to get her front door replaced. Matthew stalked into the living room, then turned to look back at her. He had obviously taken the time to change from his atrociously expensive suit into well-worn jeans and a black polo shirt. Kate closed the door then resumed dusting as if he wasn't there.

"What kind of stupid grandstand play was that at Jason's office?"

Trust Matthew to cut to the chase. "It wasn't a grandstand play. I meant every word I said."

She gave him her back and continued wiping the oak furniture, but Kate knew his chin had jutted out abnormally, as it always did when they fought. "You mean you're going to cut and run when he needs you the most?" He knew he'd struck a nerve when the rag stopped moving for a few seconds, then resumed. The "again" in that sentence remained unsaid between them.

"Amy is extremely competent, likes Jason, and knows the office routine. She'll fit in fine."

There came an inarticulate growl from behind her, but she kept right on dusting. "Are you going to stop that and talk to me?" Patience had never been one of Matthew's virtues.

Kate glided by where he stood like a granite statue, massive arms folded over massive chest, to kneel in front of the oak coffee table. "I have nothing to say to you," she looked directly at him for the first time since he'd gotten there, all cold and disdainful over the tops of her glasses. "I think we said everything we ever needed to three years ago. I know I haven't anything to add."

He should have been loads more patient. More understanding. More sensitive. But when it came down to it, in the big bad real world, it was eat or be eaten. Matthew wasn't a man to stand around and watch, and he'd never done a very good Alan Alda impression. As the thought was forming in his mind, he found himself kneeling in front of her, throwing the rag and Endust into the middle of the floor and pulling her warm, soft body to his. Matthew's mouth found hers unerringly, bending her back slightly so that she had to lean against him for balance. His body became instantly capable, and it was as if the past three years had never happened. They'd always been like wildfire together, and now was no different. He knew her body would recognize its master.

Kate struggled to get out of his embrace more out of reflex than truly wanting to be released. She'd almost – almost – forgotten how overwhelming he was physically, and

how completely her body responded to his masculine demands. He quelled her slight rebellion easily by tightening those muscle-bound arms gently, and deepened the kiss.

She was drowning in a sexual need that was so profound it was achingly painful. This was what he had always been able to do to her. With him, she was always on the edge, as if just a look, just a touch from him could set off the fireworks he always roused in her body – and vice versa.

Slowly, Matthew lay back on the plush mauve carpet, carefully taking both their weights so that she was lying half ontop of him, never disconnecting their eager mouths. If the phone hadn't rung at just that moment, Kate knew with a distinct clarity that she'd've ended up in bed with him, no questions asked.

"Saved by the bell," she muttered under her breath, running to catch the call before the answering machine. She didn't care if it was a telemarketer, whoever it was she was going to spend a good long time on the phone with them.

"Hello?"

"Kate?" It was Jace.

"Hello, Jason."

"I just called to tell you that Matt's on his way –"

Kate snorted indelicately.

"Oh." He sounded so defeated. "A day late and a dollar short again, huh?"

"Yup."

"You two fighting?"

"Uh, no. Not yet," she blushed furiously at what they had been doing.

"Well, I'll let you go. You know I want you to reconsider, don't you?"

"I know, Jace."

"Will you think about it, please?"

Kate couldn't say anything, not wanting to give him false hope.

"Well, I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Kate gave a deep, heartfelt sigh after hanging up the phone. "My little brother calling to warn you that the Big Bad Older Brother was going to come and blow down your door?" Matt asked wryly, propping his back against her sofa and stretching his long legs out before him as he watched her avidly.

"Something like that." She didn't turn around, not wanting to face him after almost surrendering totally in his arms a few minutes ago. The man was like an addiction in her blood. To her horror, she realized that she was breathing quickly, her nipples were stiff, aching peaks, and she wanted nothing more than to throw herself back into his arms.

Instead, she stood up, saying, "Leave, Matthew," keeping her back to him in a very discourteous manner.

Matt rose with more grace than one would think that big body would afford him, taking her stiff little back and bent head into consideration when he spoke in a gentle but hoarse tone, "I'm going, Katy." He was the only person who had lived through calling her that. She much preferred Kate or Katherine. "And if you insist on leaving the firm, just remember that I expect you to work every single day of your two week notice, which starts tomorrow. If you miss one day, I'll make sure no one within a hundred mile radius will hire you." An involuntary shudder ran through her. Matthew never made idle threats, and he had reams of friends and family in the area. All of Kate's hard work and great reputation would count for nothing if he decided to poison her to the legal community around town.

Whirling, Kate stalked angrily up to him, standing toe to toe with the big man. "Do you flatter yourself to think I'd goldbrick just because you'll be there?"

The muscle was working in the side of his jaw, a sure sign he was pissed, and the softness of his voice was itself a warning, "I hardly think it's a compliment that you can't tolerate me any longer than two weeks. I just wanted you to know where you stood."

He had to hand it to her, she wasn't backing down. He liked her newfound self-confidence, even if it made her get in his face. As long as she recognized who was boss in the end.

"I've never been confused about your domineering, high-handed tendencies, Mr. Hadley." So now they weren't even on a first name basis, huh? He thought. With their previous level of intimacy, she could rightfully call him "lover". "I don't intend on allowing you or anyone else to bully me ever again."

He considered her thoughtfully for a moment, then strode to her door, throwing out a parting shot as he left. "But you are letting me bully you, Katy-girl, right out the door. Think about that."

Kate was so infuriated that anger flushed over her entire body. She thought steam should be coming out her ears, like it did in cartoons. She hefted a Lladro statue in her right hand experimentally, wondering what the smashing of Spanish porcelain would sound like against the solid wood of her door, but then she realized with horror what she was thinking and doing, replacing the angel figurine on the side table gingerly. What that man drove her to was downright criminal!

Chapter 2

Matthew cursed himself as he drove toward his rented condo. Why had he let the course of his conversation with Katy deteriorate so badly that he ended up threatening her? Why? Because she drove him crazy, that's why, and had done so since his little brother had hired her when their dependable, reliable secretary Peggy ended up having a not so dependable or reliable pregnancy, and spent seven out of the nine months in bed in order to keep the baby. But it was more than that, much, much more.

Sparks had flown the moment he'd seen her, not just because she was so young and eager, so innocent and willing, but because he'd wanted her beneath him on sight, wanted to hold and control that effervescence for himself. Kate was the exact opposite of Matthew, in personality and background, looks, almost everything. He'd had the proverbial silver spoon. His grandfather had helped build the town where they lived. Matt's mother and father had had two children, of which he was the eldest, and despite the finest schools and every thing being the best money could buy, he had never felt particularly close or loved, except by his brother. His father, more often than not, was too busy to take time for his sons, except when it was necessary to discipline them. Matthew was determined that his children – when and if he ever had any – would never feel that they were unloved, regardless of their misbehavior. Children were not naughty, their behavior was, and that was never a reason to withhold love; to the contrary, it was a

reason to love them even more demonstratively – through hugs and kisses and discipline.

Matthew – and Jace – had certainly had enough of the discipline on the receiving end of their father's leather belt; it was love that was sorely missing from either parent, who were too involved in their social duties to see to their parental ones. He very much wanted to be a parent, eventually, knowing he could do a thousand percent better job at it than his father had.

As a result of his strict but emotionally bereft upbringing, Matt was largely a loner, usually on the outside of things looking in. Women flocked to him, especially as he attained an impressive size and musculature, but they were empty encounters, leaving a dissatisfying taste in his mouth afterwards, until he began to live more like a monk than the millionaire playboy many made him out to be. He knew that he was not a particularly attractive man in the classic sense – he was a little too ruggedly built and big, looking like he couldn't possibly have a genteel bone in his body. Several horrible early experiences with gold diggers only served to reinforce a burgeoning belief that all women saw him as a walking, talking wallet, and were out for what his wealth could get them. Some of them would even put up with his little "quirk" in order to trap him into marriage. Never again would he commit his heart. His money, his body, even his undivided attention for a while. But never his heart.

Despite this, he loved women, and was a very generous lover, in all ways. Matthew showered his women with diamonds and orgasms, but guarded his heart and emotions rabidly. He found that his money afforded him more latitude than a poor man would have to exercise his particular interest – spanking – but more often than not, his partner was not someone who enjoyed the pursuit, but was merely accommodating him in hopes of a big payoff. One of the biggest and best emotional payoffs Matthew'd ever found was cradling a well-spanked woman against his chest, rubbing her back, feeling salty wetness on his lips as he kissed her cheek. He often thought that he'd give his entire fortune to really feel that connection with a woman who was truly his own, but frankly despaired of ever finding her, sadly realizing that it was unlikely he'd trust her if she walked up and lay herself over his lap.

But Kate – poor, orphaned Kate - was one big open emotion, wanting to include everyone, even him, in the circle of her sunshine. She was old fashioned and innocent, a breath of fresh air to a jaded Matthew. Though she was obviously new to the legal arena, she learned quickly, and never shied from pulling long days, racking up overtime with either Jason or himself when there was an important trial. As she was fond of saying, she had no life, and Matt knew he could call on her anytime to assist him with whatever needed to be done. Though she'd just moved to town several months before, a lot of the people there knew her, and knew she'd been job hunting. She'd made fast friends with

the owner of the local used bookstore, having made several trips there in just the first few weeks, and enjoyed chatting with Sarah, who usually tended her own desk on Saturday mornings.

People responded to Kate's genuineness. She seemed always to be having a good time, even if it was grouching about work or prices in the supermarket or whatever, her humor, attitude, and animated facial expressions invited others to join in the fun with her. Their more emotional clients had an immediate, comforting shoulder to cry on – Kate treated them as if their problem was the only one in the world worth worrying about - and she always seemed to have candy in her pockets for the little ones. She reached out, physically and emotionally, to everyone, but, after she'd worked for them for several months, Matt found himself wanting to curb that natural tendency a little and get her to spend some of that single-minded glowing attention on him.

He enjoyed her sense of humor and intelligence, even if he didn't share her choice of music – loud, blaring heavy metal. They occasionally ran into each other at the movies, and, if he couldn't locate her at home on a Saturday morning, he knew enough to call Keeler's Bookstore – more often than not, she was there, or Sarah knew where she could be found.

Despite what his body screamed at him every time she was in the room with him, he did his best to keep things on a professional level. He steeled himself against the soft scent of her perfume, denied himself the pleasure of taking her out on Secretaries' Day in favor of giving her a nice bonus, and generally tried to keep his attraction to himself, keeping himself alone and separate, silently jealous and covetous of every joyous, open part of her. Entirely unsure of how an advance might be received, and having been burned before, he worked himself into the ground, which, consciously or unconsciously, made a lot of overtime with Katy necessary. Damned if he did, etc.

Late one Sunday afternoon, when Kate had been working for them for a while, they had spent most of the afternoon huddled in his office trying to get ready for a particularly nasty trial, he was so tired he sat back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Kate, would you get me a cup of –"

"Coffee?" she supplied, grabbing his big paw and wrapping it around the handle of a steaming mug of Green Mountain Breakfast Blend, black – no sugar, no cream.

"How did you know that's what I wanted?" he asked no one in particular, sipping the hot, rich beverage appreciatively.

She sank back into her former position, Indian-style on his big red leather sofa, papers

spread out in neat disarray around her. "I'm puh-sychic," she revealed with a grin, then blew an enormous bubble, which popped loudly. "What you really need is a Mr. Coffee I-V, Boss."

"Just how old are you, anyway, Missy?" he sounded like an old fart even to himself, but her bubble gum blowing and pony-tailed hair made him feel like a felon for what his body was thinking.

Kate turned to him with a surprised look. "I'm twenty-two, no –three. Today, as a matter of fact. That's why I told you I can't stay much later than five, 'cause Sarah's taking me out to Joe Schmoe's." He knew of Joe's – it was the most popular hangout in town.

Now he felt like twelve kinds of a heel for forgetting her birthday. "Well, happy birthday, Katy." He watched her wrinkle her nose at his use of her least favorite nickname and grinned.

"Thank you, Matthew."

"You're very welcome. I'm sorry I didn't realize it before now, I'd've gotten you something."

Kate's attention turned to the pages in front of her suddenly, embarrassed. "That's really not necessary."

"I realize that, Katy. At least take tomorrow off with pay. I'll be in court all day, anyway, and Jason's gone."

Kate hesitated. She'd probably need the day off to recuperate if Sarah wasn't exaggerating the effects of her parties. "But what about the Tucker case?"

"I'll beep you if I need anything."

"Well," another grotesque pink bubbled popped loudly. "I would kinda like not to have to worry when I get in tonight . . . "

Matt's head jerked up in alarm. Should he say something, or keep his fat mouth shut? In the end, his possessiveness won out. He'd tried not to pry, tried to be discreet, but it was a smallish town, and if she'd been the type to sleep around, he thought he'd probably already know about it. No one ever had anything bad to say about his Katy, except that she could occasionally be a little headstrong, especially when she got together with that wild Sarah Keller. "That's not what I meant, and you know it, young lady," his tone was

much harsher than he would have preferred, making her head snap around, eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

"Excuse me?"

He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry about how that came out, Katy. But you have to think about how your actions reflect on the firm." That's good, he thought. Very good. "It doesn't look great if our secretary is out carousing till all hours of the night, or dragging herself home from someone's bed at dawn . . . "

Her blush was full bodied. Even her hair was blushing. Did he know about her raging crush on him? She'd thought she'd kept it well under wraps. Hell, not even Sarah knew about it. She thought Kate couldn't stand the all-too-masculine-and-muscular Mr. Hadley.

If her face got any redder, he worried she might have a stroke. Well, in for a penny, as they say. "If I found out you stayed out later than, say, twelve-thirty, that might call for a birthday spanking."

Apoplectic looked like just what it sounded like, he found. Katy swallowed so convulsively she swallowed her gum, choking for a few seconds, then standing quickly to gather her papers and leave, not looking at him again.

"Have a good time. Remember your curfew," he called just before the door banged shut. He laid his tired, hot face on the blotter on his desk, banging his forehead a couple of times against the hard wood for good measure, trying to come to grips with the risk he'd just taken. He felt like he'd lain his guts open in front of her, and, in reality, he had. She touched him like no other woman, without will or effort, apparently entirely unaware of the sunshine she brought into his life. He was instantly suspicious, but achingly hard.

All night, Kate watched the clock anxiously. He was just kidding, wasn't he? The thought of that sexy hunk of man taking her over his knee . . . Mmmmmm-mmm. She shivered all over, though the room was much too warm. It was her deepest, darkest, most secret desire, and there he went and promised, uh, threatened her with it. How could he have known?

She drew a deep breath, coughing a little at the smoke in the room. The answer was, he didn't know, and he had only been teasing. A little wistful sigh escaped her, then the big chocolate cake with chocolate icing was wheeled out, and she finally forgot to be concerned about big, bad Matthew Hadley.

When Bev, the night's designated driver, dropped her off at the door to her small house, a mildly tipsy Kate finally remembered what Matthew had said to her earlier in the evening. A birthday spanking. Hmmmmm. She didn't see his silver XJS parked anywhere around, but when she stepped onto the porch, she a huge shadowy figure pushed away from the dark corner where she had her patio furniture set up.

"MMMMMMMatthew!" she greeted, liking the way the "mmmm" sound hummed along her sensitive lips.

He watched Kate stride unsteadily toward the stained glass front door. "You're drunk, Katherine Elizabeth Fontaine."

He'd used her full name. Coming from him, it should have sounded ominous, but it just made her giggle as she fumbled with her keys in the lock. Sighing exasperatedly, he took the keys from her and opened the door himself, assisting her inside with a firm hand on her elbow.

With a grand theatric turn, Kate pulled her arm away from him, saying dramatically, "Uh-hand me, Sir. I'm not as think as you drunk I am."

Patience, man. Matt drew a steadying breath, and made himself to home in her little house, flipping on the kitchen light to take out the jug of cold water she kept in the fridge and pour her a large glass, then rummaging in her bathroom medicine cabinet for a couple aspirins. He presented both to her, saying, "Take these, and drink this."

Katherine stared at the glass in her hand. "But I'm not thirsty."

Matt closed his eyes, literally praying for patience. "Take the aspirin, they'll go a long way toward calming the headache you're going to have in the morning. Drink the water because a hangover is caused by an imbalance of electrolytes – "

"Electrolux?" Katy piped up with a giggle. "What do vacuums have to do with a hangover?"

"Drink," he growled, holding the glass up to her lips. Like a good little girl - for a change - his Katy obeyed. When the glass was empty and the aspirin on its way to her stomach, Matt helped her sit on the couch next to him, turning her face to his with the tips of his fingers on her jaw. So much for his innocent, old fashioned girl. "Honey, do you remember what I said to you before you left the office this afternoon?"

He might as well have thrown a bucket of cold water over her. Oh, cripes. Still a little

fuzzy around the edges, Kate had just taken a huge leap toward sobriety. He had to be kidding.

Matt could see that she knew exactly what he was referring to, and also knew that the chin he held in his fingers had since ceased to sway gently and was rock still. "Honey, what time is it?"

Katy didn't want to look at her Mickey Mouse watch. "I don't know."

"Obviously not." He brought his gold Rolex up to her face. "One twenty-seven. AM."

Think fast, girl. You do not want this man to spank you. Do you? "But it's only 12:27 AM central standard time."

Matt unsuccessfully stifled a grin. He had to give her points for thinking fast, even in her inebriated condition. The words were soft and conversely comforting. "Did you think I didn't care enough to mean what I said?"

His phrasing struck her, and she met his unwavering gaze. "Why would you be concerned about what time of night a grown woman came home from her birthday party, Matthew?"

"I wouldn't care about just any grown woman, Katy. I care about you."

"Well, thank you, Matthew, but —"

He pressed his big, thick finger against her lips gently. "No buts." Matt leaned his shoulder against the couch, his blatant masculinity at odds with the flowery, feminine pattern of the upholstery. "You grew up in an orphanage, didn't you?"

What an odd conversation she was having with her employer. "Yes."

"And were you spanked there?" He emphasized the word 'spanked' crisply, as if it were a physical stroke of his hand on her up-turned bottom.

Katy would have looked away, but his fingers firmly captured her face. She blushed most becomingly as she answered in a soft, embarrassed voice, "Yes."

"How many times, sweetheart?"

"Three."

"And when did you get to the orphanage?"

"My parents died when I was six, and there was no one to take me."

His heart broke for the poor little girl that she was, alone, abandoned, unwanted. If he could, he would have born that pain for her so that she would never have known it. "Why were you punished, baby?"

Katy squirmed, not liking the fact that she liked the subject of this conversation. It was an entirely improper topic for a boss to discuss with his secretary.

"Answer me, Katherine Elizabeth," in just the right stern, affectionate tone.

She smoothed the skirt of her black velour scoop-necked dress as if she were brushing away the cautionary thoughts that plagued her. "The first time was when I was six, for saying a bad word."

"Go on."

"The second time was when I was eleven, for punching one of the boys on the playground because he was teasing a cat." Matthew could well see that. Both he and Jace knew that, given no monetary or environmental restrictions, Katy could easily become one of those women who have seventy or eighty cats, only Katy would never be able to limit it to just cats. Many was the time that she found a stray around work and had to take time to go home and get the little ball of fluff settled in her house, at least until she could find what she deemed a suitable home for it. Somehow, they always ended up adopted, thankfully or she'd be up to her armpits in fluffy, orphaned critters.

"And the last?" he prodded gently, watching her fidget.

This was, to her, the most shameful time. "I was fourteen, I got caught cheating on a test."

His "tsk" speared Kate's sensitive heart, and although she didn't want to care that much, she hoped she hadn't disappointed him too badly. "Were you over someone's lap?"

"No, over a desk or over the back of a chair."

"How did the spankings make you feel?" he asked, genuinely wanting to know.

"They hurt," she answered quickly, not really wanting to go any further.

Matt smiled. "They're supposed to hurt, that's the whole point. Did you feel forgiven, afterward?" She shook her head. "Did you like the spankings?"

"Like them?" she asked a little too incredulously. "Not hardly."

"Did someone hold you and dry your tears?" Her snort of derision was answer enough.

Before she had time to think or protest, he had her over his lap, with her soft, voluminous dress up bunched at the small of her back, and her panties and hose down to mid-thigh. Katy struggled belatedly, but Matthew had a firm hold of her wrist, with his well-muscled arm restraining her across the small of her back. "Well, Miss Katherine. I can assure you, that my spankings are something all together different."

Chapter 3

Dear God, dare he believe that he had found her – his own woman – right under his nose? She was struggling as she lay fetchingly over his lap, bare bottom dancing even before he branded it with his palm, but frankly, he'd expected much more of a protest – the usual feminist rhetoric, at the very least. But Kate had been raised very simplistically, by extremely religious people, who taught her to believe that the man was in charge, despite her general feminist tendencies. She believed in marrying forever, didn't sleep around, and would expect her husband to be the head of the family.

"Matthew?" her voice was high pitched and little girlish counterpoint to his husky, firm whisper.

"Yes, Katherine?" He let his big hand cover the curving slope of her soft cheeks. How many times had he pictured just this scene in his mind while he was alone and lonely in his big bed?

"Y-you're not really going to spank me, are you?"

Her answer was the flat of his hand stinging the entirety of her bottom in one stroke. His fingers kept their tight grip on her wrist as he rained smack after sharp smack down onto her defenseless bottom. Matthew was so caught up in the idea that he was finally fulfilling a year plus long fantasy that he didn't even lecture her. Well, next time, if she didn't press charges . . .

Katherine had forgotten how much a spanking really hurt, but Matt seemed determined to remind her. He brought her quickly past the "jerk-a-lot-and-cry-out-and- maybe-he'll-go-

easy-on-me" stage, past crocodile tears to genuine sobs as Kate kicked her feet and wailed under the strict, unforgiving tutelage of his relentless palm as it cracked down on her over and over, leaving red fingers in bold relief on her taut white skin.

"Puhhhhhhleeeezzzzzzz! Nooooo mooooooorrrre!" Kate was amazed when that stopped him. She tried to get up, but he clamped his arm down quickly.

"Stay put, Sweetie. I'm not done with you yet." She could not have been more mortified by her position – naked from the waist down, bright red bottom on display over the tree trunks of his legs. Worse than that, she was sure there would be a wet spot on his pants; she knew she was dripping wet, and this thought made her struggle even more. Ten more very hard, very deliberate handprints appeared on her newly reddened bottom as she roared in pain. "Quiet." One word, softly spoken. She complied immediately.

"How many minutes late were you, Katherine Elizabeth?"

Past the point of humiliation, she snuffed loudly then answered in a tiny voice, "Uh, I-I" sniff, sob "I think twenty-seven."

"Good girl. That's exactly correct. And since it was one twenty-seven, you only get twenty-seven more spanks. If it had been two twenty-seven, you'd've gotten – "

"Fifty-four?" she squeaked, craning her head around to see the truth of it in his eyes.

"Exactly." He counted for her, knowing that the full-out, bottom-enflaming smacks he was delivering would probably render her largely incoherent, and he was right. Matthew kept the strokes timed perfectly, never quite letting her recover from one stinging slap before delivering another, ripening not only her bottom but also most of the way down the tender flesh of the backs of her legs.

When he finally stopped at twenty-seven, she was mid-scream, all of her breath expelled in a wordless cry of pain. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her into her own bedroom, cuddling her next to him spoon-fashioned on the queen sized bed. With his brawny arms around her, and the same hand that had seared her bottom seconds ago stroking the hair away from her eyes gently, Kate tried to control her sobs unsuccessfully. It had been years since her last spanking, years since she'd allowed herself to cry like this, not for lack of wanting to, but rather because of inopportune circumstances, but now he had brought her well beyond that cool control.

Matthew just let her cry it out, holding her, "shhhhing" comfortingly in her tiny ear, loving the way she clung to him as the only solid thing in her world, though he was the

direct cause of her upset. He could feel the heat of her broiled cheeks even through his jeans, threatening to roast his rampant erection. He allowed himself to kiss the vulnerable spot where shoulder became neck, kissing gently upwards to her ear, tightening his arms reassuringly every few minutes as her hiccoughed sobs slowed. "Next year, maybe I'll be able to give you a birthday spanking instead of a punishment spanking," he whispered against her ear, rolling her gently onto her back, still warm and safe in the circle of his arms. Swollen and red eyed, runny nose, blotchy skin and all, he thought she was the most beautiful, sexy sight he'd ever seen. "Now let me give you a present," he muttered hoarsely against the skin of her belly, and before Kate knew it, he had parted her legs and locked his warm wet mouth over the most sensitive part of her.

Her indrawn breath and the embarrassed jerking of her body incited him as he curved his forearms beneath her sore bottom and firmly held her open to the loving ministrations of his lips. Kate had never felt anything as exciting as what he was doing to her; the combination of the painful, relentless spanking and the arousing, firm strokes of his tongue as it rasped her clit brought her to the edge almost instantaneously. Her embarrassment and shame at her response was no help in suppressing it. It was uncontrollable. As he began to gently insert two fingers into her pussy, they were coated immediately by her slick wetness and he smiled to himself, knowing that he hadn't been wrong in what he'd done. But he encountered a barrier that he hadn't been expecting and pressing against it experimentally made her jerk away from him. Christ, she was a virgin!

The thought excited him unbearably, and he redoubled his efforts to pleasure her, carefully interpreting her responses, knowing she was very close to orgasming. To drive her over the edge, he moved his hands so that they cupped her still sore bottom and squeezed. Kate jerked away from those torturous palms and drove the most intimate part of her more completely into his eager mouth. She screamed her pleasure over and over, unable to stop herself. Matthew drank in each moan as if it were food to a starving man, continuing to suckle at that tender bud until she shuddered and tried to move away. Not about to let her get away, he levered his body up and over hers to position his swollen manhood at her entrance. Matt was a big man, all over. He had some qualms about her ability to accommodate him, but he had to be inside her, had to claim this woman for himself before anyone else discovered what a treasure she was. Deliberately leaning mostly on his own hands, his mouth captured hers as he slowly, relentlessly pierced her maidenhead by the shear force of his own weight. Kate's cry of pain was smothered against his lips, and he almost echoed it with his own, seated so tightly to the hilt inside her, Matt thought he would come without moving a single muscle until a single tear rolled onto his lip.

He lifted himself up onto his elbows. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I wish it didn't hurt you." His remorse was truly heartfelt. Now that she his well-spanked woman, all he wanted was to

pleasure her.

Kate swallowed hard and sniffed, eyes firmly shut as if they could block out the pain. She felt as if she'd been split in two. Invaded and taken. Stretched and completely filled. Emotionally and physically raw and vulnerable.

"Look at me, Katherine," he commanded, not wanting her to be able to hide from him in any way. Slowly, she opened her eyes and met his. He locked eyes with her as he moved very deliberately within her, noting each response, knowing immediately when the feeling had changed from pain to pleasure. She was an open book to him, and he reveled in her uncontrolled responsiveness.

Matt made sure that the quest for his own orgasm pleased her unbearably, using any and all of the tricks he had learned or just read about to make it good for her, and was rewarded by another scream and storm of tears seconds before he gave his own hoarse shout of relief, pouring himself into her, claiming her as his own. He buried his head against the soft velvet that still covered her breasts, breath heavy and labored. He knew he should roll off her, but wanted to remain seated in her forever. Kate shifted restlessly beneath him, and he moved a little to the side, still keeping her close with an arm around her waist when she would have left him.

Her voice was broken, whether from the spanking, the orgasm, or the loss of her virginity, he wasn't sure, "I-I want to get up," She pushed futilely against his thick, hairy arm, which he then flexed gently, drawing her back to him against her will.

"And I want you to stay. So you will stay," he whispered sternly into her ear, wrapping his big, broad body around her much smaller one.

"But what if I'm bleeding? I don't want to ruin my sheets." Kate was immediately sorry she'd said anything as his paw probed gently but insistently between her nether lips. He examined his fingers and saw a small amount of pink fluid on them.

"Stay," he warned, running to the bathroom to return with a cool wet wash cloth. Matthew settled himself at the end of the bed with the cloth in one hand and reached for her ankle with the other.

"I can do it." Kate was much too embarrassed to have him washing her down there. She could barely come to terms with the idea that she'd just let him make love to her with his mouth, then claim her with his body, much less let him wash her clinically, as if he were a gynecologist, or something. There would be time enough for regrets tomorrow.

"Lie back, Katherine," his tone was far from harsh, but still brooked no disobedience as he inexorably parted her legs and proceeded to clean her up with the gentle touch of a nurse. "There." He put the washcloth in the hamper, then, on returning to the bed, divested her of her dress in one quick motion, leaving her completely naked. When they came together again, her sore backside to his furry front, they were both vulnerably exposed.

"I can't believe you were a virgin, girl."

She turned as much as his arms would allow. "I've never met anyone I was particularly attracted to."

"Until now," the arms contracted as he supplied the words for her.

"Until now," she repeated softly. "Besides, I was raised in a church orphanage. I've always been pretty conservative – "

"I'm a corrupting influence, huh?"

She reached back to rub her bottom. "Sexually, yes, but you sure do spank a mean bottom."

Matt clenched his arms again and cuddled his lips against the side of her neck. "I loved spanking you. And I will do it again. And again. And again. As often as you need it." He felt Kate shiver and her nipples spiked against his forearms.

"Go to sleep, Birthday Girl," he whispered into the darkness. He knew it wouldn't take much for Kate to get to sleep, but he was a different story. Matt couldn't believe what had just happened, questioned his good fortune suspiciously while he rejoiced in it. It was just too good to be true that this young, beautiful girl had pretty meekly submitted to a good old-fashioned over his knee spanking – crying very real tears during the process – then proceeded to let him take the precious gift of her virginity. He couldn't be that lucky; there had to be a catch somewhere. But until he found it, he intended on enjoying himself and her to the fullest. She was his old-fashioned girl.

When he finally slept, it would set a pattern for them – his big body imposed itself on her smaller one, even in sleep making her conform to his will. One breast filled a broad hand to overflowing, its taut pink tip protected against the palm. His dominance of her was bone deep, something that their two psyches recognized, even if the waking two might fight valiantly against it.

Chapter 4

Katy woke around 8:30 the next morning and stretched automatically, then inhaled sharply at various aches and pains occurring in unfamiliar areas – namely her butt and between her legs. Her inner thigh muscles also hurt as she got up and headed for the bathroom, stopping a minute at the vanity mirror to worry and wonder if she'd done the right thing.

Oh, he was a fantastic lover all right. And he certainly seemed to enjoy the same predilection that she had – spanking. But what would – could – come of it? She had not given herself on a whim. Her affection for Matthew had grown exponentially as she continued to work for him. If she hadn't felt that there was something of the equivalent on his end, she would never have let him into her bed. The nuns had instilled chastity well enough in Kate that she'd held off all these years. But she also knew that Matthew had issues from his past regarding his money and several women who had tried to part him from it, in none too subtle ways. He may not be gorgeous, but his dominant demeanor, his self-confidence, and his generosity were more than enough to attract droves of women, and it wasn't as if he was Quasimodo, either. On top of that, he had money to burn, and had been burned as a result.

She was just stepping into her panties and bra after having taken a long, hot shower when the doorbell rang. Kate threw on a silky flowered robe, belted it tight, and padded barefoot to the door. Two dozen beautiful red roses muttered darkly, "Katherine Fontaine?" The deliveryman couldn't be seen from behind the huge bouquet.

"Yes," she accepted the vase, and tipped the delivery guy, then put them in a place of honor on the small round dining room table. The card read:

My Exquisite Katy,

No signature, no other information, but they had to be from Matt. She didn't want to interrupt him at the courthouse, but left a message instead on the voice mail at the office, thanking him for the beautiful flowers. If, somehow, they weren't from him, she was in deep trouble!

Since he'd unexpectedly given her the day off, she had nothing planned, and was just going to veg around the house for the day. At 10 o'clock, when she was sitting cross-legged on the sofa in a pair of well worn jeans and a light sweatshirt, engrossed in the latest Stephen King novel, the bell rang again.

This time it was a dozen lavender roses, the buds closed tightly with baby's breath almost

overwhelming them. This time, the card said:

I am forever in your debt

She made another call and thanked him again, telling him how beautiful the bouquet looked on the end table next to the window, so that the sun shined on the delicate purple petals.

The deliveries came every hour, on the hour. Pastel pink roses were next, with a card that read:

For last night.

Well, that confirmed who was sending them at least, she mused, starting to have to look for a place to put the flowers. The variegated cream with fucia tips roses were next, then yellow, apricot, sherbet orange, fucia, cream, then, finally, two more dozen red ones. The cards composed a message:

My Exquisite Katy:

I am forever in your debt

For last night.

Would you

Do me the honor

Of meeting me

For Dinner at La Boheme

Tonight, Seven PM

Longingly,

M

She had left 9 other messages for him, thanking him for the flowers, telling him well before the second two dozen red roses came that she was going to have to move out to accommodate the flowers. Her small house now smelled like a rose garden. When she

called him after getting what she assumed was the last delivery accompanied by the card signed in a boldly stroked "M", she said just one word. "Yes."

Kate had never had the money to afford a place like LaBoheme, and when she arrived in her slinky little maroon dress, she definitely felt outclassed. But then she saw Matthew there, leaning against the left pillar of the entranceway, looking big and brawny enough to be holding up the building himself. He smiled broadly when he saw her, held out his hands to her in welcome, and all worries about inadequacy left her. He bowed, kissing her hand, then presented her with a single red rose, which she carried into the restaurant. Their table was extremely secluded, and she knew he had planned it that way.

Dinner was fantastic, the food was terrific and the service was excellent and completely unobtrusive, but Kate might as well have been eating Grape Nuts in front of her TV for all she noticed the food or her surroundings. Her entire focus was Matthew, and she was his.

He'd ordered a light dessert wine, and toasted her with it before replacing his glass on the table in front of him. "Are you all right?" Matthew's gaze caught hers, and held it, almost by force of will.

The dinner conversation had been very casual and easy, but Kate knew that he was referring to how she felt after her spanking and their lovemaking, not casually inquiring after her health.

She cleared her throat nervously at the intensity of his stare. "I'm – I'm fine, thanks."

"Good," he growled low, making her giggle. "Are you laughing at me, little girl?"

"Yes," she admitted unrepentantly, biting her lip hesitantly. "You're so big, I've kind of always pictured you in my mind as the Big Bad Wolf. When you growl like that, it only reinforces the mental picture."

"Big Bad Wolf, huh?"

"Yes."

Matthew leaned closer to her and whispered lewdly, "Is he the one that said 'the better to eat you with'?" Her fire-engine blush made him laugh, and comment into her ear, "Your face is as red as your bottom was when I got through with it last night," making her blush even more.

"You're mixing your fairy tales, Matthew. That was Little Red Riding Hood. I was thinking of the Three Little Pigs."

He frowned thoughtfully. "That wolf really got around."

Later, after dinner and after another explosive sexual encounter during which Matthew refused to join their bodies despite her protestations that she was fine and didn't hurt a bit, they cuddled spoon fashioned and he murmured, "Don't lie to me about how you feel, Katherine. I'm big enough as it is, and it might well still be somewhat uncomfortable for you to accommodate me once you've healed. I saw you wince when you sat down at the dinner table."

She had the grace to bow her head. He amazed her with his attentiveness, and she was still very shy about their level of physical intimacy.

"We never dated, just kinda jumped into bed as a result of someone's naughtiness. But we're going to date now, regularly. Very regularly," he added. "And you're going to learn to obey me, one way or the other." He felt her shiver at his words, and knew what he said was right for the both of them.

And date they did, every night for the rest of the week and thereafter almost every night. Some times they ended up in bed, more often than not she ended up over his lap for something or other at some point in the evening. They stayed in, they went out, they saw first run movies in the theatres and stayed home and rented others, but somehow, they always ended up at Kate's house. She'd barely ever been inside his, although she knew where he lived. Matthew said her house was much more of a home than his was. Kate was a homebody, and enjoyed enormously having someone to take care of. Matthew found he enjoyed having someone take care of him. He called her "June" after June Cleaver, not realizing how close to her true heart he came with that name. Kate was an anachronism, and would have been quite content to marry, stay home and have babies, in that particular order. Not wanting Matt to feel trapped, she never expressed those particular longings, although they manifested themselves in the way she took care of him.

One Saturday morning, when they hadn't really made any plans to do anything, he got up early to surprise her with a road trip, but when he got to her house, she was gone, although her car was still in the driveway. He tapped on the door, and neither of the ferocious attack cream-puffs barked or whimpered, so he surmised Kate was probably out walking them in the nearby park, and did manage to find her there a few minutes later, being walked by two eager-beaver dogs.

"C'mon," he hurried her back to the house.

"What's the rush?" she asked, putting the dogs inside and closing the door to face him.

"You're going to be late to your own kidnapping," he commented wryly, hoisting her up over his shoulder to deposit her carefully in his front seat.

He folded his big body behind the driver's seat, and turned on the engine, then stared at her pointedly. Kate looked around her, then remembered that she hadn't buckled her seat belt. Grumbling all the way, she fastened it, and, as if by magic, the car began to back out of the driveway.

"You keep pissing and moaning about that seat belt, little lady, and I'm going to give you another belt altogether to worry your pretty head about."

Kate gulped, knowing he meant what he said. He never made idle threats, especially about spankings. She had first hand experience. "Yes, Matthew." Her meek tone could use some work. A lot of work. Generally, it just came out sounding sarcastic.

Matt threw her a sidelong glance, and watched her sigh disgustedly and pull at the shoulder strap. "You know you're to wear your seat belt at all times, Katherine, whether you're a passenger or the driver. If I find out you're not, I'm going to whup your butt good."

"I think I've heard this before," she said, definitely leaning more towards sarcasm.

"And you're going to hear it again until it sinks into that empty space between your ears, Katherine Elizabeth. I care about you. It's my rule you'll have to follow. End of discussion. Capiisce?"

"Yes," came the small, quiet reply.

Sometimes, he over did it in the dominance department, he thought. She could be very sensitive occasionally, and he hadn't quite gotten the knack of reading her exact mood. Matt thought that ability might come with time and careful study.

"Earth to Katy," he changed his voice so that it sounded like he was speaking into a crackling microphone. "Earth to Katy. Come in, Katy."

She couldn't help but grin.

They were at a stoplight, and he leaned over, pretending to be peering into her ear. "Ah, just what I thought," he pronounced, relaxing back into his own seat.

"What?" He had her curious.

"There's a little sign in there that says 'Space for Rent'." Kate smacked him a good one, not that she ever had any hopes of inflicting real damage on him. He just snickered snidely as he drove. "Aren't you curious about where you're being kidnapped to?"

"Yes, of course."

It turned out, he was took her to Cade's Cove in the Great Smokey Mountains National Park. Matthew knew that, with her love of animals, she'd get a real kick out of seeing all the wildlife. It was early enough in the morning when they got there that the 11 mile loop road wasn't bumper to bumper like it probably would be later on in the day. They made a slow, lazy circuit, taking time to park and get out to walk with a large herd of deer that were grazing in an open field. Katy's childlike joy at this unusual experience was a delight to him. They spotted a rare, lone red wolf, then came upon a place where there were four or five cars parked, and spotted what everyone else was eagerly stalking - a bear near the road, which everyone seemed to have abandoned their cars to gawk at.

Matt was just about to comment over his shoulder to Katy about how stupid some people were to get so close to a wild animal when he heard her car door open. He just barely reached over in time to grab the tail of her sweatshirt. "Where the hell do you think you're going, woman?" He none too gently hauled her back into the car, reaching across to swing the door shut firmly.

"I want to go see the bear up close and personal. Lemme out."

This woman desperately needed a keeper. "No. Look, but don't annoy. That's a wild black bear, Kate, not a teddy bear."

"Duh. I know that."

"Great. Now you also know you're not getting out of the car because you could be attacked by that bear, don't you?"

He could see the pouty expression drip over her face as she assume the typical thwarted-brat posture, arms folded over her chest, lower lip dragging on the floor. "I'm not about to let that bear attack me, Matthew. I'm not stupid, you know."

Matt ignored her posture and pulled her against him to watch the patient bear amble slowly into the deeper woods, away from the avid tourists. "And I would never think you were stupid, baby. Just headstrong sometimes."

"Humph," Kate snorted, stiff as a poker in his arms.

His voice rumbled through his chest and into her back as much as it came through her ears. "If you don't stop pouting, my lady, I'm going to put you over my knee right here and now. I'm sure the tourists would love to get some close-up shots of that."

Again, she knew he'd do it in a heartbeat, and, although she was still unhappy that he hadn't let her get really close to the bear, it was nice to know he cared. "Somehow, the list of things that will get me spanked is growing."

Matt grinned. "It's not like I have to look very hard to find reasons, girl. You keep handing them to me on a silver platter. It's about time someone took you in hand, Katy. I'm glad it's me." She was glad, too, and her kisses relayed the message very nicely.

Lunch was at the Bel Air Grill in Pigeon Forge, where they ate thick milkshakes, huge burgers and fresh, hot orders of homemade fries – well, he ate his and most of hers, but whatever. She napped a little on the way home, the bellyful of food making her sleepy. Matthew was glad she'd enjoyed herself; he'd known that Cade's Cove would practically be a religious experience for her, and it was.

Chapter 5

Matthew and Kate spent the better part of the next year in each other's pockets and the rest of the town spent not a little time speculating when the engagement announcement would be forthcoming; Matthew was a good man and deserved some happiness after the disastrous relationships he'd had in his youth, and Kate was everyone's favorite and seemed to glow with happiness when he was around. Kate had a huge love of the theatre, and, when he could, he would get her tickets for her the latest plays. He indulged her as much as she would let him, but there was an unusual bone of contention between them – the atrocious disparity in their incomes was a problem for the both of them. Matt wanted to take care of her, and he did in almost every way, except financially.

Most couples argued about money due to the lack of it. Kate and Matt argued because he had too damned much of it. Every other aspect of their relationship was beyond fantastic. They fit together like two peas in a pod – Kate's basically submissive nature complimented Matt's thoroughly dominant one perfectly. His rules for her behavior were refined and changed throughout the course of their relationship, and he was Kate's

undisputed boss, at work or not. That was something Kate never questioned, even when she was bottom up getting a thorough, painful spanking.

But the majority of the women Matthew had been intimate with – not that that number was particularly large – were quite content to sit back and let him spoil them. It was not unusual for him to buy them whatever it was they had "oohed" or "ahhed" over while they were shopping. In fact, with some women, it was downright expected. The first time he'd done that with Kate – they'd been to a mall in the area, and she'd window shopped at the jewelry stores as usual. That evening, she found a diamond bracelet on her dinner plate.

"What's this?" she asked, hoping against hope that it wasn't a gift from him.

Matt put his napkin in his lap. "I saw you were admiring it in the window at Kelsey's, and I bought it for you."

This was the bracelet she had been drooling over – and she knew the price tag was well over three thousand dollars. She picked the trinket up and put it onto his empty plate. "Take it back."

"You don't like it?" He was confused; the light was slow to dawn in his thick head.

"No, Matthew, I love it. Who wouldn't? But it's not right for me to accept gifts like this from you. You don't need to buy me."

He was dumbstruck. No one he'd dated before would have thought twice about taking the bracelet. It's not like he couldn't afford it. "I'm not trying to buy you, Katherine. I just know you liked it, and I wanted to get you something nice."

Kate took his hand in both of hers, knowing that he had some sort of mental block about this particular subject. It was as if he expected her to use him as some sort of sugar daddy, and that it was fine with him. Like he didn't think he was worth anything better. Or perhaps he liked the emotional distance that type of relationship afforded him. No real bonds or commitments. To Katy, it felt like prostitution.

"I know that you have only good intentions, Matt. The next time you want to do something nice for me, buy me a hardcover book from my favorite author." He scoffed. "Donate twenty-five bucks to the Humane Society. Take the dogs to the groomers. But nothing expensive." Their eyes locked, hers earnest and his confused, both stubborn. Nothing was resolved.

hair. He knew that paddle was going to be a great asset, but he also knew it really hurt her a lot, and thus didn't try to stifle her sobs. Kate was a very emotional person, he'd discovered, and she tended to keep a lot in. Between the harsh spankings and mind-shattering orgasms Matt delivered to her on a very regular basis, there wasn't much time for things to build up any more. He liked to wear her out with both a spanking, then a long, thorough lovemaking session.

Matt had been spending more time on line, and had decided that there were several other things he would like to incorporate into their relationship – he'd like her to be accessible to him at all times, spend time in the corner before and after a punishment, maybe have more of a scheduled bedtime – she was addicted to the Internet, he swore, and would often find her up at all hours surfing the Net. A lot of these things would require that they be together on a more permanent, twenty-four hour a day basis, and it was just on the tip of his tongue to ask her to move in with him. He'd love to have her with him all the time.

Now, it was true that they never spent any time at his house. It was a huge old behemoth that he didn't particularly like; it had been the family home for generations. Kate's house was a home. His was a mausoleum. His place had the advantage of seclusion, though. He'd just been waiting for the cops to knock at the door because the neighbors had complained that Katy was screaming the house down while he warmed her bottom for something or other, or brought her to the heights of ecstasy. Hmmmmmm. Which would he rather not have to explain to the nice officer? he grinned.

A plan came into his mind, one that would take some mulling over. What if he offered to keep her? She had this weird thing about not letting him buy her stuff, which annoyed him to no end. Didn't everyone have his or her price – especially women, he thought jadedly. But what if he could get her to live with him on a permanent basis? He'd certainly be willing to give her a generous allowance – hell, she could quit the firm, if she wanted – although they would sorely miss her. The idea of having her all to himself every night and weekend made him rock hard. Being able to reach over in bed and know she'd be there – because he'd limit her computer usage, damn straight. Hell, he could wake her up with a spanking in the morning; she was definitely not a morning person and he was sure he could cure her of the morning grumps by setting fire to her naked bottom first thing, then loving her to death afterwards, while she was still sniffing and sensitive, and eager to please. This idea was sounding better and better.

Matt had never lived with any of his lovers. Maybe that was his own sense of personal space, maybe it was just a subconscious method of keeping gold diggers at arms length, but he had no such reservations about inviting his Katy to live with him. Hell, if she didn't like the Museum, as he derisively thought of the old place, then they could look for a new house. He didn't much care, as long as she was there with him.

In three weeks, they would have been dating for almost a year, and Matthew intended to pop the question to her then. Well, not the question, but his question. He told her to keep that night open, then planned an extravagant, elegant, romantic evening, to end in the master suite at his house, which he had had completely redone to be more modern and appealing, with a huge sunken Jacuzzi tub and sky lights. Dinner would be catered at the house itself, where he could give her the grand tour before seating her in the formal dining room. The skeleton staff would have the night off, and the food would be catered by La Boheme.

Kate's head was spinning, and not just from the expensive French champagne he kept refilling her crystal wineglass with. She'd never been in his house before, and knew her eyes were round as saucers at its austere elegance. It didn't fit him very well, though there was an imposing portrait of him staring down from above the mantle in the drawing room, looking very much the lord of the manor.

She was not quite modern enough to keep herself from hoping that he might pop the question tonight. They'd been pretty much inseparable for the past twelve months, and she knew she was head over heels in love with him, and fancied that he was as emotionally involved as she was. All in all, this could be a night that would change her life forever.

And in the end, it was.

Chapter 6

Matthew filled their glasses again – what the hell, it was a very special night, then, with a comical flourish, deposited a silver covered dish in front of a glowing Kate. Figuring it was some type of dessert, she removed the lid as he reseated himself, watching her with delight, thinking ahead to the long night of lust and romance he had planned for them when she said "yes".

A small, ring-sized champagne colored velvet box sat in the middle of the Royal Doulton, ornately patterned plate.

"Open it, Katherine," he commanded with a low breath.

She did, her nervous, cold hands shaking. Kate was hoping he'd not gone and gotten a terribly big, ostentatious ring. She wanted something simple . . .

It would be very hard to fit the gold key she found in the box onto the third finger of her

left hand. What was this? She wondered, turning the key over to see the 24k stamp on the back. "Is this the key to your heart, Matthew?"

He had been hard as a rock the whole evening, devouring her wonderful cleavage framed in sapphire blue velvet with eager eyes. It was his lust that made him growl, "It's the key to the front door, my Katy."

She looked puzzled, and a little lost, but Matthew was so blindly sure of the success of his plan that he couldn't see it, didn't pick up on it. "I don't understand." Kate fingered the key nervously, feeling the edges against the sensitive pads of her fingers.

Matt took her small, icy hand in hers. Here it comes, she thought. He's going to ask me to marry him, and I'm going to shout "yes" from the rooftops! A parchment white envelope landed next to the plate. "For you. I want you, Katy. More than just part time, and just dating. I want you to quit the firm and move in with me, so that we can live together full time. I think you'll find my offer more than generous." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it in a courtly fashion, his actions belying his words.

Kate's fragile heart thudded to her feet. With true dread, she opened the envelope, quickly scanning through the legalese to discern the terms of how he would accept her into his life, the cold, dry, emotionless terms: Matt agreed to pay her a very generous monthly stipend – more than she made a year now, as well as a bonus for each year she stayed with him. There were stock options, IRA accounts, even the same health care plan she had now. At the end of the legal document, the last stipulation was that she would sign away any claim to his assets beyond her salary and "gifts" he could bestow at any time.

Here she was, ready to profess her undying love, and there he was, standing across a chasm of distrust and suspicion, waving his money at her as if it were some sort of enticement. Some sort of bonus prize. He'd never understand that she wasn't in love with his bank balance, that she wanted something much more intimate from him. Perhaps she wanted something he was truly incapable of giving. Depression flowed over her like a cold spring shower. All of a sudden, it wasn't just her hands that were cold. She felt numb from the inside out. She had hoped – against hope, apparently – that he would come to see that she was different from the women he had known previously. That she wanted to be with him, whether he had billions or just the clothes on his back. That he was what she loved, not his money.

But she could see now that she'd been a fool to expect that his lifetime of cynicism, of using and being used in return, and dependence on his sexual prowess was going to be resolved by her pure, innocent love. Blindly, she knew he was waiting for an exuberant

"yes" and undoubtedly expected that she would be undyingly grateful and throw herself into his waiting arms.

Instead, he watched her shrink physically in front of him as if he were about to take his fist to her. She was drawing in on herself, and it was the first inkling he had that he may have made a major blunder.

Kate couldn't quite meet his eyes when she asked in a tiny voice, "Can I have some time to think about it?"

Not liking the turn of events – not at all, he answered by rote, "Of course," but his hungry eyes never left her. All of the life and happiness seemed to drain out of her. She primly placed the solid gold key back in its box and put it on the table between them, where it truly belonged, a solid symbol of their differences.

"If you don't mind, I'm not feeling that well. Could you have Gregory drive me home?" She still hadn't really looked at him as she stood and walked toward the door quickly. Matt caught her arm before she made her escape, hauling her up against the solid wall of his chest and claiming his mouth with hers. She hadn't yet accepted the token of his feelings for her, but her body still recognized its true master, and Kate responded as he knew she would to his probing kiss. She kissed him back with all her might, pressing herself against him, running loving hands up and down the broad expanse of his back in the devastatingly masculine tuxedo.

Kate pried herself out of his arms forcibly, and turned to run out the door and into the back of the waiting white limo. As it was pulling away, Matt tasted saltiness on his lips, and realized that his face was covered with her tears.

It took everything in him not to stop the limo at the gates, not to be there in her apartment when she got home, not to at least call her to make sure she was all right, or at least leave a message on her machine. What the hell had gone wrong? This was not how this night was supposed to end! He heaved a crystal goblet of brandy into the fire in his study, but felt no better for it. He felt like he'd crushed a butterfly. His butterfly. Matthew paced and paced and paced, then paced some more. He stayed up all night, drinking and berating himself, and her. Finally, near dawn, exhausted, he curled himself into the red leather wing-backed chair near the fire with an album of pictures of them that Kate had given to him as a gift. Maybe they would help him see what he had done wrong. Had he phrased it badly? Was the key too much? He'd been trying to be romantic about it.

Nothing helped. Exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep. Things would look better in the morning. Maybe he'd just go over there when he woke and have it out with her. He

wasn't such a bad catch, and she should realize that! His asking her to live with him was hardly an insult – it was a compliment!

Morning came all too bright and early. Unshaven and unkempt, with his tongue scotch-taped to the roof of his mouth, he reached for the cordless phone and dialed her number, heedless of the fact that it was only 6:38 AM on a Sunday morning.

"You've reached 555-8526. Leave a message."

Either she truly wasn't home, or she just wasn't answering her phone. Something unsettling crawled tortuously up his backbone and wrapped around his neck, making itself comfy there and giving him the impetuous to get cleaned up and out, to confront her and get an answer, once and for all.

He showered but didn't bother to shave, that nasty little feeling told him that time was of the essence. The Ferrari suited his mood – red, hot, and loaded with attitude. She was gonna hear him out on this, and he wasn't going to take no for an answer. Hell, they'd practically been living together anyway. All he wanted was to make it official, and she ran off into the night like he'd propositioned her –

Matt slammed on the ultra-sensitive brakes and got the finger and a loud horn blast from the driver behind him before he went on. He'd hit the nail on the head. The little idiot thought he was trying to buy her, or something to the equivalent. He drove, shaking his head. He'd disabuse her of that notion quickly when he saw her. It would only be a few minutes now.

His heart ended up in the same place Kate's had last evening, somewhere around his ankles, when he saw how deserted the house looked. Her car wasn't there, and when he knocked on the door, neither of the ferocious wonder pooches barked. Hell, he couldn't even see Tasia, the "guard kitty".

So, she'd split. Matt plopped back behind the wheel. If he were his Katy in a snit, where would he go? He smiled, it was so easy. To stay with Sarah, her partner in crime. Boy, was she going to get her butt smacked good for making him worry like this, and drive all over town in search of his errant . . . girlfriend. Somehow, that was an ill-fitting title for what she meant to him, but he couldn't stop to think about it now. He gunned the engine, burned rubber, and was at Sarah's little cottage of a house in record time. Matt had absolutely no concern for the fact that it was a barely civilized hour for a Sunday morning, or that he didn't see Sarah's beat up little VW bug in the driveway.

His boots clomped loudly onto the rickety front porch, and, in retrospect, he was sure that

his loud thumping in the screen door woke more people than just Sarah, who practically snarled at him when she opened the door a crack and saw who had risked life and limb to wake her on the only morning she could sleep late.

"What the hell you want?" She'd never taken a tone like that with anyone in her life, but here stood the cause of her best friend's misery, in living color.

Matt was taken aback at the utter lack of civility in her tone, as well as the fact that she was obviously in no hurry to invite him in. "Where's Katy?"

"Gone."

He was thunderstruck. That was one word he'd not expected to hear. "Gone?"

Sarah was yawning hugely, and he pressed his weight advantage and wedged his way in the door. Seeing no real harm in letting him in, especially since Kate wasn't there, she flopped down onto the couch in her housecoat, resting her forehead on the heel of her palm.

After conducting a cursory inspection of the place, he determined that Sarah wasn't lying to cover for her friend. Kate truly wasn't there. But her animals were.

"Where'd she go?"

"Don't know," through another gaping yawn.

Matt grabbed her arm in a painful grip, "What do you mean, you don't know?"

Sarah was immediately wide-awake. Her stare froze him dead in his tracks, and he let go of her. "I meant exactly what I said, dumbass. Kate didn't tell me where she was going and she was in no condition to explain. She brought her babies over to me in the middle of the night last night, asked if I would watch them, and left, although I did my best to get her to at least stay until dawn. She looked like the walking dead, voice all hoarse, face all bloated – her eyes were nearly shut from crying. But she wouldn't listen to me . . ."

Sarah's description made him feel as bad as Kate must've looked. Had he caused her all that anguish? "Why?" The one, simple word was rife with feelings he wasn't sure he wanted to explore, but Sarah was just waiting for the invitation to rip him a new orifice.

"Well, golly whiz," her sharp voice dripped sarcasm. "Just maybe it had something to do with how you never miss the opportunity to make her feel like a prostitute – most

assuredly not last night, you big, dumb jerk!"

Matt sank to the couch, not looking at anything in particular, but not missing a single word Sarah had to say. "You're so stupid, you can't see the hand in front of your face. All that build up you gave her about a special night last night, and Kate's all excited, figuring you're going to give her an engagement ring – " His head snapped up as the shroud of his own self-interested, self-protective motives were violently ripped away. Engagement ring? Of course!!! How could he have been such an idiot!!!

" – and there you go, giving her a solid gold key to your mansion, telling her to quit her job and let you support her like some old fashioned sugar daddy." Sarah rapped her knuckles on his forehead, and Matt barely noticed. "Hello, you've known her for how long – don't you know, Kate's not like that? Weren't you her first? Are you so blind you don't see that she loves you? If it had been a ring in that box, she'd have said yes in a New York minute. Now, I doubt if she'll be back to stay."

No, no. He couldn't absorb what he'd done. In a defeated tone, he asked, "You really have no idea where she went?"

Sarah shook her head, all her anger gone. Matt looked so forlorn and lost, she almost felt sorry for the lout. Almost. He looked almost as bad as Kate had when she drove away. Almost.

He left, driving home much more sedately than he'd driven away, thinking, hurting, and thinking some more.

Chapter 7

The next Monday morning, Matt had no choice but to drag himself into the office, and there it was, scotch taped to Jason's door, an envelope neatly typed with the firm's name. It felt unusually heavy for just paper but he didn't doubt it's origin for a moment, barely making it into his office – thankful that he was the first one there this morning – before ripping out the note and reading the four barren lines of her resignation. The weights in the envelope were her keys to the office. Matt fell heavily back into his desk chair with a defeated sigh.

Yesterday, he'd hired a friend of his who was a private detective to find her. He had to make things all right with her, before it drove him crazy. The friend didn't hold out a lot of hope, especially since he really had no idea where she had gone. When Jason stopped by his office to ask if Kate'd called in, Matt explained the situation, sparing himself nothing. The look he got from his usually adoring younger brother nearly turned him to

stone. Jason's parting words summed up Matt's own opinion succinctly, "You are the biggest fucking idiot in the world."

Tuesday dragged by, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday . . . the days were just reminders to Matt of what he had lost. The temp they hired to replace her – neither brother could bear the idea of actually finding someone to completely fill her position – was adequate, but she was no Kate, as Jason constantly reminded Matt just to needle him. Friday night, Saturday night, no call, no letter, no one had heard from her at all. Very late Saturday, after he'd almost nursed himself to sleep with a very expensive bottle of cognac, his cell phone rang. "Hadley." He was in no mood for the usual civilities.

"Chandler here," came the equally terse response.

Matt sat up and put the bottle on the table in front of him. "Have you found her?"

"Took me a while, but your little chicky has come home to roost – she was on the coast, I found her in a little hotel this morning, and followed her back home."

"Where is she?" a muscle twitched in his jaw.

"1514 King Str – "

"Sarah's house."

"I was just going to get to that."

"Kit?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for finding her."

He chuckled, never knowing the great Matthew Hadley to care one whit about the whereabouts of any particular woman. The urgency and earnestness of his request had startled Kit. "Easy money, Matt."

Matt sighed. "I'm glad of it. Take care, buddy."

"You, too."

She was home. Well, not home home, but within reach. He'd call Kit later and get all the

details. But for now, what should he do? Storm over there and play caveman? (That one was getting the most votes from his genitals). Stay home and be aloof? (His bruised ego was campaigning for that) Go over and throw himself at her feet in abject misery? (A resounding "no" from nearly every part of himself, except the shameless part of him that wanted her any way he could have her).

He would go over to Sarah's. Sedately. Slowly. As if he hadn't a care in the world and the fate of his emotional sanity wasn't held in two small feminine hands. And he would apologize. He'd never subscribed to the idea that a real man doesn't apologize, never felt it diminished him in any way. If he was wrong, he was wrong. It wasn't something that happened often, but Matt didn't shy away from owning up to his mistakes. He'd spent the last week beating himself into the ground for not looking at it from her side. Now was the time to admit that to her, and make amends in whatever way he could. He sure as hell wasn't going to offer her any money, he thought wryly, tucking himself behind the wheel of the Jag.

On the way over, he thought of how he'd missed cuddling with her at night, or placing her gently over his big lap, bare bottom up for a spanking, holding and comforting her afterwards. They fit together so well in so many ways . . . Why did marriage have to be so out of the question for them? Hmmmmmm. Something to think about.

He raised his hand to knock politely on Sarah's dilapidated screen door when it swung open before he got the chance, and there she stood, looking small and delicate – somehow much frailer than he had remembered, and it had only been a week. She was frightfully pale, there were deep dark circles under her eyes, and she'd lost weight – he knew every curve and valley of her body and there were fewer curves than there should have been.

"Come in," she stepped aside.

"Where's Sarah?" he asked, expecting her to come storming into the room at any time to defend her best friend from the big bad millionaire.

Kate stood in the farthest corner of the living room, arms folded protectively across her chest. "She's gone to the grocery store."

He nodded, coming to stand about ten feet in front of her. She was looking everywhere in the room but at him. Matt sighed. "I came to apologize. I'm sorry, Katy, I wouldn't have hurt you for the world. I was self-centered and blinded by my own wants and needs. I didn't think about what you might have read into that night." She paced away from him to the other side of the room, still hugging herself. God, he wanted to replace her arms

with his, but he didn't think she'd let him. "I'm sorry." It sounded lame even to his own ears.

"It's quite all right, Matthew. We have different expectations, you and I. I want a husband and marriage and a family. You want a companion and a lover – just someone to spank. There's nothing wrong with either one of us. We just don't see eye to eye on that." He could see her swallow as she recited her cold little speech in a hard, neutral tone, nothing like his Katy's normal voice. "Better we find that out sooner than later."

Matt advanced on her. She sounded like she was writing him off. No way. He stopped inches away from her, and reached out with his index finger to forcibly tip her face up to his. He took in the worry lines, the downturned lips, the tired eyes. She looked like hell. "Marry me," the words were out before he even thought them.

Her eyes grew even bigger for a second, then she walked away. Her answer was quiet, but firm. "No, thank you."

As if he'd just offered her some more mashed potatoes or if she'd like to dance, she coldly turned him down. Flat. It enraged him, all the more because he realized the rightness of it as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "Marry me," he repeated, turning her gently around to gather her against him in his arms.

"No." Just as neutral, just as firm.

He was puzzled. "Because I didn't asked a week ago?"

"Because I don't want your proposal out of sympathy or because you think I expect it. I know Sarah gave you an earful when you came here looking for me. I - don't – want – your – proposal. End of discussion." She'd shut down, withdrawn all that sunny warmth he'd basked in for the past few years. When their eyes met, he saw the defenses he'd caused her to build around herself - her emotions - and cursed himself for it.

Damn the torpedoes . . . She might be able to keep herself wonderfully composed while they were barely touching, but when his arms tightened around her and he lifted her off her feet to meet his demanding, aggressive kiss, he got exactly the response he was expecting from her. Kate might not want to acknowledge it any longer, but her body recognized him and bent to his will. He could elicit a sexual response from her if she were three weeks dead.

But it was different, and he recognized the fact that he'd caused irreparable damage to their relationship. Her arms didn't naturally creep around his neck, and she wasn't

struggling for show. Tears were dammed at their lips and dripped down the side of his cheek. Though it was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life, he gently, reverently placed her back on her feet, kissed the tip of her nose and ran his hand through her crowning glory of hair one last time, before turning sharply to walk out the door.

The next morning, Jason got a call that woke him out of bed. "She's home," Matthew didn't bother with a greeting. "Go get her back."

"But you – "

"Will be starting a firm of my own in Chicago."

Happy about getting Kate back, but unhappy about losing his brother, Jason struggled to take it all in. "But – but you – but she – "

The hardness of his brother's voice startled Jason. "It's over, for now. Take care, Jace. I'll call you when I get settled."

"Yeah, you, too, Matt."

Jason almost thought he dreamed the last sentence he heard; he was sure it wasn't Matt's voice that broke as he said, "Take care of her." Then the phone went dead.

Chapter 8

When Matt got to the office the next morning, it was like a bad replay from several years ago – there was an envelope taped to Jason's door. He already knew what it contained, and he was exactly right. What's more, the office she had been using – his old one – had been completely cleaned out, and she had set her stuff up where it had been before he left – the foyer receptionist's desk. He was surprised she wasn't there already – when they'd worked together, she had always been in early.

Kate had to drive around the block a couple of times to kill time, but she walked into the office precisely at the stroke of 8:00 am, and not one second sooner. Unable to help himself, Matt leaned his broad shoulder against the doorjamb and watched her get ready for the day. She hadn't looked at him once, but when Jason arrived a few minutes later, she gave him a warm, if somewhat wan smile.

He kept the door to his office open, wanting to keep one eye on her. She brought his brother his morning cup of coffee, as had been their routine before. Matt could hear them discussing their day – Jason was going to be in court for most of it. He forced her to be

with him all day in his office, taking dictation and going over his schedule and various case files. Matt watched her covetously, drinking in her every nuance. She looked the same as when he'd left, but her attitude was different, less deferential and more confident. He liked it, but wondered if it would still be as much fun spanking her. Somehow, he knew it would.

Still, she refused to look directly at him. Any conversation was conducted with his chest. It was giving him a complex. To spite her, he began to retaliate in kind, causing Kate to blush furiously when she noticed that he was talking to her breasts. With a scowl, she met his eyes, and he winked. Surprising both of them, they slipped back into their old work habits and got a tremendous amount accomplished; Matt and Kate had always been the "dynamic duo," able to leap tall case files in a single bound . . .

Though he offered to order lunch in for them, she left, claiming the need to run an errand, and he spent the time alone, in thoughtful contemplation. Kate spent the time in an interview for a job she had great hopes of getting, at the office of a lawyer that had always tried to lure her away from Jason.

Alexander Collins was as tall and powerfully built as Matt, but less brooding. He had a quick wit and a ready smile, and was obviously extremely interested in hiring Kate away from the Hadley brothers. The salary figure he quoted her was astronomical, but he added, "You'll earn every penny of it, and more."

Kate asked for some time to make a decision, confiding that he was her first interview.

"I'm sure I won't be your last when people hear that you're leaving Hadley," Alex's voice was a low, friendly rumble. "Keep me in mind, Katy," she cringed at his use of Matt's nickname for her. "Call me anytime if you have any questions." He gave her his card, which she tucked hastily into her briefcase.

The rest of the afternoon passed in relative tranquility, until Kate spilled the contents of her briefcase onto the floor of the office as she left, and Matt bent down to help her get everything together, spotting Alex's card. "So, you're going to work for Collins?" he growled, as Kate snatched the card from his hand. "He's a lech!"

"Where I end up working is none of your concern, Mr. Hadley," she told him primly, then left him there, squatting in front of her desk, thinking.

Jason's treatment of him wasn't much better than Kate's cold shoulder. It was painfully obvious where his sympathies lay. Matt felt as welcome in his own firm – a firm he was trying to save – as e-coli at a picnic, and, as the days went on, and the deadline of Kate's

last two weeks drew nearer, the atmosphere didn't get any better.

Towards the end of the first week, Kate dragged herself into the office at exactly 8 as had become her habit, and the both of them were already there, vulturing at her desk as if she was the only one in the place who could accomplish anything. Matt noticed the listless eyes, dark circles to her knees, and the funny way she carried her head immediately. "Are you all right?" The two of them descended on her, and Matt guided her to her desk chair because she looked like she wasn't going to make it on her own.

"I'm here," she said resolutely.

Jace put his hand to her forehead. "Why don't you go home – you look like death warmed over."

Kate stared pointedly over Jason's shoulder at his brother, who frowned nastily. "I never said you –"

"You said, and I quote 'I expect you to work every single day of your two week notice. If you miss one single day, I'll make sure that no one in a hundred mile radius will hire you.'" Having made her declaration, she leaned forward and put her throbbing head in her hands. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Jason stepped back, looking appalled at what his brother had said. Not surprised, but appalled. Matthew, however, stepped forward and gathered her into his arms. Kate was alarmed to realize that she hadn't the strength to fight him, but instead ended up sinking further into his embrace. Then, for the first time in her life, she fainted.

When Kate woke, there was a cool cloth on her head. Even so, she knew instantly that she wasn't in her own room, or even her own house. It didn't smell or feel right. Someone changed the warmer cloth for a newer, cooler one, and she also knew innately that it was Matt who was taking care of her. "Feeling any better?"

Her answer was to sit bolt upright and clamp her hand firmly over her mouth, looking wildly for the bathroom. Matt showed her the way, and to her utter humiliation, held her head while she proceeded to be sick until there was nothing left but dry heaves. Chills set in immediately, and he bundled her back into bed, with a bucket next to her so that she didn't have to run for the bathroom the next time she was sick. He piled what blankets there were on top of her, then put his sheepskin jacket over that, and cranked the heat. As he piled stuff on top of her, he was dialing his phone and divesting himself of his own clothing, down to t-shirt and pants.

Connor McClain, his personal physician, would be over shortly, and when he described Kate's symptoms, he seemed to be all too familiar with it. "It's going around. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Now, Connor," Matt barked, then cut the phone off, without giving the poor man time to say no. He resumed his perch next to her on the huge hand made bed, looking down at her lying where she would have been for the past couple of years, if he hadn't been such an idiot. All of the opportunities he'd missed with her welled up inside of him. He'd tried to wait to come back until the time was right to ask her again, but he wasn't at all sure of his timing. And now, things had gone all wrong, and she hated him. His all fired impatience had backed her into a corner, and she'd come out swinging. Matt had no doubt at all that she'd had offers from all of the firms in town – her reputation was solid. Collins would be just one of many attorneys trying to lure her to their firms.

What was he going to do? How could he lose her again?

McClain interrupted his morose train of thought by ringing the bell, and he went down to escort him up. Connor eyed him as if he expected Matt to leave for the examination, but he was rooted where he stood. Kate was in no condition to complain. McClain's examination was thorough, and Matt watched and listened carefully.

"You eaten anything unusual within the past twenty-four hours? Seafood? Raw eggs? Uncooked beef?" The list was beginning to nauseate Kate again. "Could you be pregnant?"

"Only if there's a star in the East," she replied with a sickly smile.

Connor grinned and patted her wrist. "I've seen this bug around. It's a doozy. Chills, fever, nausea, vomiting, weakness, headache, muscle aches – "

"D - all of the above," Kate agree, reaching for the bucket. Matt held her head gently, then eased her back under the covers.

"Liquid diet for a day or two, then bland foods after that. I'm going to give you a shot of compazine, which will make you sleepy and keep you from being sick for while, anyway. I'm going to leave a prescription for you that Matt can have filled, more compazine, if necessary and some phenegan." After exposing Kate's hip and injecting her, Connor gave the paper to Matt. "If she's not much better in a couple of days, call me again." He turned back to say politely to the huddled mass under the covers, "It was nice to meet you, Ms. Fontaine."

"Y-y-you t-t-tooo," Kate shivered back.

Matthew sat on the edge of the bed. "I'll be here until you fall asleep, then I'm going to go get your script and some provisions for us. Here's a cell phone – I've entered my number, all you have to do is push send, and I'll answer if you need me while I'm out, ok?"

She nodded her head, then regretted the way the movement sent the room spinning and triggered a nauseating headache. Matt kissed her gently on the cheek, saying, "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Truthfully, she dozed while he was gone and barely realized his absence due to the shot she'd gotten. The next time she woke, it was near dusk, and as she struggled out from under the heavy layers of blankets he came to her side. "Feeling sick?"

"No, bathroom." To her intense mortification, he assisted her there, undressed her like she was a little girl. She wobbled even on the pot, so he refused to leave her. Kate wasn't sure she could go with someone in the room, but she did, finally. When she'd weaved her way back to the bed, he stopped her from getting in only long enough to strip her quickly, despite her vehement if ineffectual protests, and put her into a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt of her own. "Where'd you get these?"

"I stopped at your place to get them – nothing I have here would really fit you." Before he pulled up the beautiful pink lace undies and sweats, he lay her over his lap.

She began to struggle immediately. "You're not going to spank me, are you?"

Matt was downright insulted. "Of course I'm not going to spank you, Honey. You're deathly ill! Did I ever spank you when you didn't need it?" Desperately tired, she shook her head once, then lay her cheek down on the cool bedspread. "I'm going to take your temp, then give you some medicine, and tuck you back into bed." After dipping the end of the rectal thermometer into a jar of Vaseline, he inserted it into her bottom. Kate moaned at this indignation, but he rubbed her back soothingly. "I'd've gotten an oral one, Sweetie, but I didn't want to cause another stomach upset." Besides, he was thinking, this was ever so much more intimate . . . Was he taking advantage? Damn straight!

He soothed and stroked her while she lay propped over his lap, her beautiful rounded bottom cheeks exposed with the tip of the glass thermometer peeping out from between them. When he took it out, he found she had a few degrees of fever. Kate tried to struggle immediately off his lap, but he held her still, pressing something else against her bottom hole until the suppository popped all the way inside her. She yelped and kicked, but it

was over before she could stop it. Matt tucked her under the covers again, explaining while he adjusted the bedsheets efficiently, "That was the doctor's prescription, because you'll throw anything else up, Katy."

Sick, tired, and cranky, she continued to whine and complain at him that he was taking entirely too many liberties with her, and stated that she wasn't going to let him do that to her again no matter what.

Matt kissed her patiently on the forehead, saying in a very gentle but firm tone, "Katherine Elizabeth, I will do whatever is necessary to help you get better, and if you fight me, I will remember it and your bottom will pay for it dearly when you're all better." Kate knew he meant what he said. "Would you like a little ginger ale?"

She was thirsty, and nodded. He gave her half a glass of warm, flat soda, saying, "Small sips."

"Blech."

Matt laughed, and cuddled her against him while pushing a remote control button that opened an entertainment center. "I'm going to watch the news, but I want you to go back to sleep if you can. I'll keep it low, you let me know if it's bothering you." He rubbed her back slowly, rhythmically, and she was asleep in minutes. Matt knew that that was largely because of the suppository – Connor had said it would make her sleepy, but it would also settle her stomach.

He woke her once and gave her aspirin to help keep the fever down, hoping that the suppository would help her keep it in her stomach long enough to do her some good. The next time she got up to go pee, he went with her, capturing her again and inserting another bullet of medication into her bottom. Unable to resist, and unhappy that she was being so cranky, he gave her a sharp smack before pulling up her panties and sweats and putting her back to bed. Katherine burst into tears, surprising the hell out of him. One little swat couldn't have been that bad, could it?

Chapter 9

Matt held her as she literally dissolved into tears against his strong shoulder. His arms tightened reassuringly and he let her cry for a while, then whispered against her temple, "One little lovepat doesn't rate all this anguish. What's wrong?" As usual, his tone brooked no denial. He intended to get to the bottom of this. It wasn't at all like her to just fall apart.

"I want to g-go home," she wailed, while conversely burrowing her face into his chest. "I shouldn't be here. T-take me home where I can die in peace."

He said nothing and made absolutely no move to comply with her request, simply holding her and rubbing her back while allowing her to cry it out. Eventually, he heard her deep, even breathing, and realized that she'd cried herself to sleep. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he remembered that when she got sick, she got cranky, and the crankiness increased the sicker she was. That theorem was certainly proving true, he thought wryly, kissing her temple and gently scooting out from under her.

For some reason, though, she didn't want to let go of the idea that she shouldn't be here with him, and it was the first thing she hit him with when he found her awake after going downstairs to get some clear broth and another glass of ginger ale. Matt moved quickly to put the tray on the nightstand when he saw she was up and weaving toward her clothes. "Where the hell do you think you're going, young lady?" his voice was stern; he was pissed that she was so all-fired determined to leave him and try to recover from this thing on her own. No friggin' way was he going to allow that.

Before Kate could even get to where he'd hung her clothes next to his in the huge walk-in closet, she found herself scooped up and deposited flat on her back on the bed, with a large, imposing Matthew leaning down on her. She'd forgotten how big he was, and how intimidating her could look when he was trying. And he was obviously trying now. He could somehow manage to scold her with just a scathing look and no words. That's too damned bad for him, she thought petulantly. They were no longer together, and being her boss gave him no right to – to care for her like this. She didn't want him this close, this intimate. It was hard enough to see him in the office every day and remember the feel of those big callused paws on her soft, sensitive skin, how the guitar-roughened pads of his fingertips rasped over her –

"I want to go home," she stated vehemently, glaring up at him, not backing down one inch.

"No." One word, calmly, implacably stated. No explanations, just the plain truth. And Kate knew that unless he decided to take her home, she'd never get there. He'd beat her to the door every time, especially in her current condition.

Rather than harp on a foregone conclusion, Matt changed the subject. "Are you thirsty?"

Kate wished desperately that she could tell him no, and to go to hell, but she was thirsty, having lost a lot of fluids. Instead, surprising him because he expected her to fight any suggestion he made, she took the cup of soda, downing it in big gulps while he turned to

get the soup.

When he saw what she had done, he thought better of the soup and put it back on the tray. "You will probably regret that bit of foolishness in a short while, Katherine. Just because you're mad at me, don't make yourself sicker."

Her stomach was already beginning to roil against the hasty infusion of liquid, and she hated that he was so damned . . . right. Sickness definitely made her peevish, and if she hadn't been feeling so lousy all of a sudden, she'd probably have given him the finger. It wasn't ten minutes later that she was hanging over the side of the bed, simultaneously vomiting everything from her toes up, and trying to keep him away from her, with out much success on the second part. Though she tried to turn away from his ministrations, he held her head and wiped her face with a warm cloth, then tucked her back into bed. Kate promptly turned on her side away from him, and Matt moved to sit in one of the wing backed chairs near the bow window, turning on the TV low and grabbing some of the work he'd brought in to occupy him while he sat with her.

Kate must have gone to sleep; her body remained in the same position for about three hours. Good, he thought, sleep would do her good. When she stirred, he was there, feeling her forehead. Matt reached behind him and got the thermometer out of the Vaseline jar. When Kate saw what was coming she started to struggle immediately. His lips met her small ear, as he whispered, "We can do this easy, or we can do this hard. It's up to you. But I am going to take care of you, Katy, whether you like it or not is not my concern." She continued to struggle, uselessly using what little energy and strength she had.

Grimly, Matt flipped her over his legs, pulling down her sweat pants and panties in one easy sweep despite her feeble struggles. She did succeed in digging her nails into his thigh before he easily caught her wrists at the small of her back, effectively rendering her helpless. He waited patiently until she wore herself out, not wanting her wriggling and struggling while he inserted the thermometer, wishing fervently it hadn't come to this. Finally, exhausted and shaking from the small exertion, she lay her cheek on the cool comforter, carefully facing away from him. Kate made no other moves while he took her temperature, only whimpering slightly when he inserted not one, but two suppositories into her unresisting bottom. Matt pulled up her pants and panties like he was dressing a little girl, and he was surprised when she complacently let him tuck her back under the warm covers. It was then that he saw the tracks of her silent tears, how pale she was, and the dark rings of burst blood vessels around her eyes. God, he thought, even sick as a dog, she's beautiful to me.

It must be love.

Matt was as good as his word. He did take care of her, despite her resistance to his touch and his ministrations. As she got better, he began to discipline her more physically when she struggled against his aid. More than once he put her to bed to cry herself to sleep with a blazing bottom. But he also kept her fed, entertained and well cared for. They watched movies – which she inevitably fell asleep halfway through – and played games; Matt learned that he should never play cards with her, she inevitably won. He gave her her medicine on a strict schedule, made sure that Connor revisited her after a few days to check her progress, and massaged her sore, aching muscles with a gentle touch that belied his size.

When he let her out of bed to sit in one of the chairs by the window, Kate was amazed to find how weak she felt. Bed changed with freshly laundered sheets, he guided her slowly to a bathtub full of hot bubbly water. She'd complained loudly that she was beginning to be a little ripe, and he decided that a bath probably wouldn't kill her. Matt undressed her like a precious child, ignoring her token murmurs of protest and brushing away her hands to lift her into the tub. Her languorous sigh of contentment was worth everything to him. Kate was so absorbed in the wonderful, warm sensuousness of the bubbly water that she didn't remember to protest as he washed her thoroughly with a soapy hand and washcloth, not missing any intimate detail. Finally, he washed the pile of red-gold ringlets, massaging her scalp slowly, extremely careful to make sure none of the suds stung her eyes as he rinsed her off and bundled her into an obscenely thick and fluffy towel.

Matt dried her as meticulously as he'd done every other step, then put her back between clean sheets in a warmer than usual room, against any chill she might experience. He watched her as she naturally drifted into sleep, wondering how he was going to let her go when she got better and completed her two weeks notice. Honestly, he didn't think he could. I wonder what the penalty is for kidnapping, the thought flitted across his mind, to be replaced by another, much more plausible possibility.

A couple of days later, Kate felt almost human again, if she could just get Matt to see that she was pretty much recovered. He still insisted on making her nap in the afternoon, and did as much for her as he could. It was very sweet. Kate only wished she could simply relax and bask in his attention, but she'd been down that road before and wasn't about to do it again. No, she'd told him that she was going to work tomorrow morning, and, much to her surprise, he hadn't said a word, just gathered as much up that was hers out of the house and took it back to her place.

She would have left that night, but he asked her to stay one more night as a favor to him, and Kate couldn't deny him. She'd enjoyed their time together, too. That'd never been

the core of their problem.

He was in a tux when he brought dinner, freshly showered and shaved, smelling of that sinful aftershave she loved. Matt looked good enough to eat, and Kate was sure that was what he'd intended. In an old nightgown, she felt very under-dressed all of a sudden. There was an apricot rose on her plate, as well as a velvet jewelry box shaped exactly like the one that had contained the gold key to the front door of this mansion years ago.

Kate's eyes flew to his, and his gaze was rock steady as he sat next to her on the bed. "Open it."

She had a hard time not physically backing away from it. "I don't want to."

"Then I'll do it." He pried open the box, and there was a gold heart locket, fitted with a very small key on a long necklace. Matt put it over her head. "Read the inscription."

"The key to Matthew Pierce Hadley's heart, owned by Katherine Elizabeth Fontaine."

Matt handed her an envelope, with a flourish. This was much different from the last time. The papers in the envelope created a foundation, and as far as Kate could tell, Matt was going to give all his money to create the foundation, and would draw a small salary. He'd go from being a multi-millionaire to a salaried employee of his own foundation.

"What's this?"

He had the grace to look down. "The last time I gave you a gift, I was trying to buy you, as altruistic as I thought my motives were. I wanted you – all of you - but I wasn't willing to give you anything of myself in return, except my money. This time, I won't have any money to give, and the only thing I can offer you is myself, my body – my love for all time," Matt tipped her chin up and made her look at him, noting the tears streaming down her face. "Please do me the honor of becoming my wife, Katherine Elizabeth Fontaine?"

Kate was crying too blasted hard to really do or say anything. She crumpled into his arms, clutching the locket and the papers in her hands.

Love does find a way.