

LOVE AT THE TOP

By Susanne Marie Knight

Chapter One

When Jennie Mulligan entered the office, Cassidy Romanelli looked up from behind her metal desk and sighed. Another interruption. One of many this morning. She might as well forget about getting anything done. Another day like this and she'd raise the white flag signaling surrender.

Cassidy dog-eared the spot on the job application she'd been reviewing, set down the red marking pencil, and folded her hands in front of her. "Hi, Jennie."

Her friend parked her plump bottom in the padded chrome-legged chair. From the pleased expression lifting her bright lips, no doubt Jennie'd just heard a scintillating bit of gossip.

Cassidy grimaced. Whether or not she wanted it, she was about to be "treated" to the latest inter-office tidbit.

"Hey," her friend blurted through a wad of ever-present gum. "What's going on?"

A rhetorical question, obviously. With mile-high stacks of applications for the vacant consultant position threatening to topple off the desk, Jennie knew only too well what was going on.

"Work," Cassidy succinctly replied. Realizing she sounded gruff, she explained, "Since Dunkirk, the other personnel specialist, is sick, this job's been dumped in my lap. And I have to get the best qualified list done by Monday. *This* Monday, for goodness sake!"

"Yeah, well..." Jennie leaned closer, whispering, "Never mind that. I've got some juicy news."

Cassidy studied her pale pink-lacquered nails. *She* had been the juicy news seven months ago and, heaven help her, it *still* hurt. "Who's having an affair now?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that." Jennie's green eyes contained a mischievous twinkle. "I just heard. The new head of Haydon-Smith Communications is scheduled to fly in from London. Soon! He wants to get familiar with the American end of the business." Her eyes now widened. "He's coming to see us, Cassi!"

Cassidy yawned. "So?"

Another bigwig to rocket in with his "yes" men, mouthing platitudes, promising the moon, then rushing off to elite society functions. Nothing changed—nothing ever did.

"So, you pea brain, A. E. Haydon-Smith is single! And very, very eligible. He's one of the richest men in England."

Glancing at the overhead clock, Cassidy frowned. Eleven-thirty. Where had the morning gone? She didn't have time to shoot the breeze. "Okay, so you've told me. He's probably an old coot, anyway." She grinned. "If he's such a great catch, you have my permission to marry him."

Fluffing up her fiery red halo of curls, Jennie giggled. "I just might pull it off! You wait and see."

Cassidy rubbed at her eyes but unfortunately, the paperwork refused to disappear. "Old coot or not, you'd think everyone and his brother wants to work for Haydon-Smith. At this rate, I'll never get out of here."

Jennie pursed her lips. "Cassi, not again. You're *not* wasting another weekend on work. No

way.”

Before Cassidy had a chance to react, Jennie jumped up and drummed sturdy fingers against her folded arms. “When are you going to start living again? When was the last time you had a date? Jeez, Cassi, you’ve been divorced for a year already!”

Staring at the ring finger on her left hand, Cassidy still couldn’t get used to its nakedness. “Actually, it’s only been seven months.” She lowered her voice. “Today’s my wedding anniversary.”

As soon as the words were out, she regretted revealing her private sadness.

Jennie laughed.

It was an ugly sound, and Cassidy looked at her friend in surprise. *How could she be so...so callous?*

After clamping her hand over her mouth, Jennie wiggled down into the chair. “Sorry. But dammit, Cassi, someone’s got to shake some sense into you. You’ve got a face and figure to die for, and what do you do with your assets? You sit at home and shrivel up like a prune. You might as well enter a nunnery.”

All this talk gave Cassidy a headache. The constant hum of the central air conditioning suddenly grated, rather than soothed. Was the June sun blazing hot? Or was rain drenching the New York City streets below? Who knew? Her office was windowless.

The mounds of paper mocked her. She’d have to skip lunch. As usual.

“I’ll think about it. The nunnery, I mean.” Cassidy smiled to show she was kidding. “Now, I have to get back to work. If you don’t mind—”

“I *do* mind! Ever since that bum you married took off for parts unknown, you’re like a ghost-girl. I can see you but you’re not really here. You’re so afraid of getting involved again that if Mr. Right ever said ‘Boo,’ you’d run so fast in the other direction, an Olympic gold medalist couldn’t catch you.”

Narrowing her gaze, Cassidy stood and savagely pushed her hair behind her ears. “Thank you for the therapy session, Ms. Mulligan. You’ve saved me a bundle of money.”

Jennie got the hint. She held out her hands in a placating manner. “Okay, okay, so I was out of line and I’ll make it up to you over lunch.

Cassidy firmly maneuvered her friend to the other side of the door. “I’m too busy. Really. Give me a buzz tomorrow. Maybe we can have lunch then.” She probably wouldn’t have time tomorrow, either. But she had to say something.

Not waiting for a reply, she stepped back and clicked the door shut. Finally, she was alone. Cassidy sat down at her desk and rested her head on the pile of applications. Her shoulders slumped, her eyes watered, and she blinked back tears. Darn. Tears always flowed too quickly nowadays. Reaching for a tissue, she erased any telltale signs of sorrow.

Time heals all wounds. Or so the saying goes. But just how much time was needed? When would she get over losing Bruce? When would she stop...missing him?

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Walking down Broadway to the park by City Hall, Cassidy shielded her eyes from the bright sun. She changed her mind. Her office’s four walls had seemed to close in on her. She had to escape to the outside, to the sunlight.

When her stomach rumbled, she stopped at a street vendor’s stand and bought a steaming hot pretzel and a Coke. Not much of a lunch, but it was better than being stuck in her office. As she waited for the pretzel, her forlorn image reflected back at her from a corner store’s window.

Taking stock, she dismissed her flyaway light brown hair as mousy, her beige business suit as adequate but boring, and beige pumps as serviceable but unexciting. She appeared as inviting as a week-old piece of white bread.

She sighed. What had Jennie said? A face and figure to die for? Maybe to some, but obviously that hadn't been enough to keep Bruce interested. Cassidy was a failure as a wife, as a woman. But still, why had he told her, repeatedly, that she was *everything* to him; that he loved her to distraction? And God help her, she'd believed him.

The truth was, he'd loved her as long as no other woman had been in the room. And *that* hurt. It still hurt.

Men. Who could understand them?

She looked at her reflection again. Was she washed-up at age twenty-five? Or was that washed-out?

After thanking the pretzel man, she put on her purple framed sunglasses, then crossed the street to the park. A gust of wind rustled through the maple trees to welcome her. The cool air dancing over her skin felt wonderful, especially after standing in the blistering sun. She sat down on an empty wood-planked bench, and bit into the pretzel. The coarse salt burned her mouth, and she coughed...and coughed.

From the opposite bench, a man asked, "Are you all right?"

Unable to speak, she nodded, then popped open her Coke can and took a swallow. However, instead of easing the tickle, the soda's fizzle seared a path down her throat. The hacking increased. Goodness, she was coming apart at the seams!

Moving quickly, the man sat beside her and pounded on her back. The heavy hammering chased away the coughs *and* her breath. "Th—Thank you," she stammered.

After inhaling deeply, she looked up and met his dark blue gaze. He smiled. At least she thought he smiled. His lips were hidden in a heavy black beard, the kind a sea captain might envy.

He reached for her hand and repeated, "Are you all right?"

Dark swirls of hair decorated his large hands. His warm clasp sent shivers up her arms. Pleasurable shivers.

He was about forty, and the size of Mr. America. Her hand was swallowed by his, and she gently extracted it. "Y—Yes, thank you very much."

In addition to a beard, her rescuer had thick, unruly black hair in need of cutting. He wore frayed blue jeans and a baggy, denim shirt ripped at the shoulder. His rubber thongs revealed feet smudged by street grime. His loose shirt couldn't hide his broad shoulders, nor the jeans disguise his muscular thighs.

A shiver of apprehension rocked her. He wasn't a vagrant, was he? Why was he helping her? What did he want?

She slid further down the bench. "I, er, I must be going." Her half-eaten pretzel fell to the pavement.

His blue eyes, so clear before, clouded. "Of course. I understand."

He sounded extremely formal and impersonal. Picking up the pretzel, he dropped it in a trash can, then returned to the park bench across from hers. His previously open expression now appeared shuttered.

When he'd spoken, she'd caught a hint of an accent, probably British. His obvious disappointment over her unfriendliness pricked at her conscience. She'd hurt his feelings, and that made her feel wretched.

Indecision gnawed at her. Should she do something for him? A good deed for a good deed?

After all, he *had* helped her. Maybe he needed someone to talk to. *And who cares about clothes? Clothes don't make the man.*

For some reason, Jennie's words resurfaced. "If Mr. Right ever said 'Boo,' you'd run so fast..." Not that this man was Mr. Right by any stretch of the imagination. But he was attractive, in a crinkled sort of way.

Cassidy straightened her shoulders. How could she make amends? Looking at the sheer size of him, she had an idea. She walked over to his bench. "I'm sorry. That wasn't a proper thank-you, was it? Could I buy you some lunch?"

The man's piercing gaze caused her to flush. Somehow she felt vulnerable standing in front of him. She adjusted her sunglasses, grateful that her eyes were hidden. Maybe he wouldn't notice her embarrassment.

Under his bushy beard, he slowly smiled. "It would take more than one of those pretzels to fill me up."

She felt the flush deepen. "No, I didn't mean—"

"Of course you didn't. You are kind. However, I've already eaten." Resting his elbows against the back of the park bench, he lifted his eyebrow as if daring her to contradict him.

His urbane, polished voice was at odds with his bohemian attire. He puzzled her, and she could never resist the challenge of a good puzzle.

He shaded his eyes from the sun, then looked up at her. "Do you always have such a nutritional lunch?"

She laughed. How wonderful it felt to let loose! She'd almost forgotten how to smile, let alone laugh. "Sometimes I splurge and have a potato knish."

"A what?"

His bewildered expression forced her to grin again. Inhaling deeply, she made a decision. She was about to take a chance, but what the heck? That was what life was all about. "You should try one. It's delicious. Come on, I have fifteen minutes left on my lunch hour. Let's walk and I'll get you a knish."

The sunlight caught in his twinkling blue eyes. He rose, then gave her a subtle nod. "That's the best offer I've had all day."

Her gaze traveled up the impressive length of him. Without trying to, he towered over her. A tiny shudder vibrated down her spine.

I hope I'm not making a big mistake.

Skirting a flock of bread-pecking pigeons, they headed for Broadway. They must have looked like such a strange couple, her dressed for business and him dressed for...for what? The beach? The Bowery?

She frowned. Maybe she was too hung up on appearance. Critical Cassidy. She turned her attention into learning more about this man. "You're from England?"

"Britain."

Not exactly a fountain of information, but he intrigued her. Although she prided herself on not being inquisitive, she couldn't help asking, "What brings you to New York?"

His eyes flickered. "I'm on...on holiday."

A vacation? She didn't believe him. Who would go on vacation dressed as he was?

Romanelli, you're judging him again.

She said a silent apology, then stopped at another street vendor's stand to order a knish.

"Two," her companion insisted. "I'll eat mine if you'll have one, also. I'd offer to pay but all I have are shillings." From his pocket, he produced a handful of gleaming silver coins.

Her stomach rumbled again. "Okay, I guess I *am* hungry." And maybe eating together would

break the ice a bit.

Eating while they walked, he quickly finished the knish. "It's quite good, actually. Crunchy crust and soft potato filling. Perhaps I'll go back later and have another."

That brought to mind his money situation. "You'll need American money," she reminded. "I could give you—"

"I'll procure some today." With a paper napkin, he wiped potato crumbs off his beard.

A chill raced down her backbone. Procure. What an odd word. It conjured up bank robbery, theft, pick-pocketing.

She threw her napkin into a nearby trash can, disturbing a small swarm of flies. "Do you have a place, um, to stay?" Visions of him sleeping in a subway station rose unpleasantly before her.

He stopped walking—right in the middle of the sidewalk. A disgruntled woman bumped into him and tightened her lips, probably getting ready to give him a piece of her mind. Craning her neck, the woman looked up at the size of him, gulped, then hurriedly walked around.

He didn't seem to notice. "Yes, I have a place to stay. Why so many questions? Are you a detective? Or just a nosy Parker?"

Cassidy tugged on his arm, forcing him to continue walking. "I don't know what a nosy Parker is. But if it's a busybody, okay, I'm a busybody. I just wanted to make sure you had a place to stay."

Maybe she was taking her Good Samaritan deed too far. Shaking her head, she gazed up at him and guessed his height. Six foot five or six?

"Why is that?" Even with his beard, she could tell his smile was lopsided. "Would you let me stay at your flat?"

Her flat. Such a strange way to refer to an apartment. Amazingly enough though, she wasn't offended by his inappropriate question. "No. Of course not."

"Why not? Are you married?"

She snorted. "No! Are you?"

His smile teased her. "No."

A flush heated her cheeks. How did they get on that dreadful subject, anyway? She looked at her watch. Time to head back to work.

From out of the blue, he answered her question. "I'm staying at my sister's."

Knowing that he had a family—a respectable background, she hoped, made her feel better. "That must be nice."

"It's not. I'm sleeping on the couch." He sounded indignant but his eyes hinted at amusement.

She laughed again. She'd laughed more today than she had in a year...or more. "For your sake, I hope it's a big couch!"

At the corner of Barclay and Church Street, she paused and smoothed back her hair. "Well, it's been good talking with you. I have to get back now."

"Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow—in the park." He took her hand and firmly shook it. "Or we could meet for lunch. A proper lunch, of course."

Heat rose on her cheeks again. If she agreed, she'd be committing to a date—of sorts. Her first one since...Bruce.

And what's wrong with that?

Retrieving her hand, she murmured, "Maybe." The way was clear to cross the street, but she was reluctant to move. Did she want to see him again?

Her heart thumped, *yes*. She smiled up at him. "By the way, my name's Cassidy."

He nodded and gave her a wink. "A pleasure meeting you, Cassidy. I'm Smith...Alex Smith. See you tomorrow."

As he waved good-bye, his large hand blocked the sun for a moment. He then turned and walked back towards the park.

After crossing the street, Cassidy followed his progress down the block until he reached Broadway. She lost sight of him in the crowd.

Alex Smith. She smiled. Maybe it was foolish of her, but she liked him. She liked him a lot.

The sun suddenly went behind a cloud, echoing the eclipse from Alex's hand. She shivered. A vague feeling of trouble niggled at her. For some reason, "Alex Smith" sounded like an alias.

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Heading back to the park, Alex Smith scratched at his beard. He could get used to not shaving every day. Too bad he soon had to cast off his vagabond ways and return to the cutthroat world of business. The pity of it was that he had to return on his dead uncle's terms, not his own.

Alex waited for the "Walk" sign to light up, then crossed Broadway. He smiled grimly. Due to the provisions in his uncle's will, he *had* to return to the company. He could resign himself to that. But he'd handle the business *his* way. He did not intend to be a figurehead. And what he wanted, he always got. Always.

He sat down on the park bench he had so recently vacated and let his mind relax. A deliciously different young lady flickered through his thoughts. Different from the class-conscious, money-hungry debs it was his misfortune to encounter time and time again.

He sighed. Quite a pleasant interlude he'd just had. Cassidy had obviously warred with whether she should befriend a stranger, an unmistakably down-on-his-luck stranger. He'd noticed the uncertain expression that had crossed her face before she'd smiled and approached him. Perhaps she'd been acting out of a core of natural kindness. He was glad she'd conquered her fears. He'd enjoyed talking with her, being with her. She'd given the day a certain glow. Now that she was gone, even the sun seemed dimmer.

What a strange sensation not to have a woman fall all over herself to get to know him. Cassidy's smiles had been genuine, not false. And visions of money hadn't danced before her eyes.

His laugh startled the nearby pigeons into flying off in a furious rustle of feathers. Of course she had no idea who he was, or how much he was worth. That was the purpose of his present attire. He wanted to enjoy himself without people seeing him as a walking pound sign...or dollar sign.

Women were always trying to trap him into the wedded state. He had no use for marriage. None whatsoever.

Scratching at his beard again, he glanced at the discarded pretzel in the trash can. Still, if the right woman ever came along...

His heart started beating faster. He very much hoped Cassidy would overcome her understandable reluctance and meet him tomorrow for lunch.

