

Etta's Surrender

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

He'd never noticed that she'd worn any particular fragrance before, but whatever it was she had on now was driving him absolutely crazy. He was too much of a workaholic to be this uncomfortable at work. It was worse than when he was sixteen, because unlike then, he now knew what he was missing.

In more ways than one.

As she moved confidently and competently around his smallish office, turning and twisting around file boxes, bookcases and various and sundry other obstacles with the grace of a ballet dancer, all he could think about was what that luxuriously long, reddish gold hair looked like spread beneath her on his pillow as he sank himself into her. He remembered how her body had arched into his, unconsciously offering up those pristine breasts with tips that, as they'd become more and more swollen, changed from a demure pink to a deep rose as they bloomed too enticingly for him not to have eagerly dipped his head to them.

When she leaned over him, just slightly, to put the folder he had just asked for on the desk in front of him, the very breasts he was fantasizing about brushed against the rigid muscle of his left arm, and he just about felt himself lose complete control at the innocent contact. In fact, it was just that much worse because *she* seemed so damned cool and collected about it – just the way he knew he should be. It was as if that night – despite what had been said and done between them – hadn't made much of an impression on her and she preferred to forget all about it. She hadn't even mentioned it, giving absolutely no indication that she remembered anything about what had happened between them, when he'd spent the entire weekend being tormented by every single second of it, replaying exactly what had happened in a particularly torturous fashion multiple times a day, all while also contemplating exactly what he was going to say and do to her when he saw her on Monday morning.

Unfortunately, none of the grand, passionate gestures he'd envisioned had come true. It had been a very typical, average morning for them, and she was all business, as usual.

The hand on the arm he'd jerked away from that searing, intimate contact had landed in his lap – frying pan into fire. As casually as he could, he laced his fingers together and rested

them in a way that he hoped concealed the blatant evidence of his desire while maintaining a respectful distance from it at the same time. He had no interest in unmanning himself, which would be particularly ignominious since she apparently wouldn't even have noticed if he had.

"J.D. was here and said to remind you that you two have a lunch appointment."

"He damned well knows I don't have time for socializing right now!" It came out as much more of a growl than he had intended, and he saw her eyes become even more shuttered than they had been. And as much as he didn't like it when he frightened her – intentionally or not – at least it was *some* kind of reaction.

"Would you like me to call him and tell him that?"

"Yes, in exactly those words, please."

She slid the enormous pile of folders that needed to be filed into her arms and headed for the door. "Sure thing, Boss."

He sighed, knowing she had an ornery, stubborn streak that reared its ugly head at times like this and she was very likely to do exactly as he'd told her to.

Despite the fact that having given in to that compulsion was exactly what had gotten her into trouble Friday afternoon, which had lead to what she apparently considered to be the debacle of their one night together.

Before he could think better of it, or at least moderate his chiding tone a bit, he issued a warning in that very same growl to her retreating, slim back, "You know better than that – or at least you should after Friday."

Because he'd watched her so avidly, he noticed the barely perceptible hitch in her step, which was the only betraying sign that she had heard him as she closed the door behind her and he heaved a sigh of what should have been relief, but he was too damned wound up for anything that subtle to have much of an effect on him.

He had to fight the urge to shove everything off his desk in a grand, supremely angry gesture, or do something even more foolish, like punch the wall as he might have when he really was sixteen and frustrated almost beyond his ability to control himself. But he was too old now to do something that was just going to cost him money to repair in the first case, and probably send him to the hospital with a broken hand in the second. Lord knew he couldn't afford either the hospital bill that a trip to the emergency room would incur or the exorbitant amount fixing the wall would run him.

At least not until he won the case he was working on now, which was garnering a certain amount of press attention and interest. It was an Internet copyright case for a big company, one he'd been lucky enough to get his teeth into, all thanks to his friend and fellow barrister, J.D. Montgomery.

And that was what he should have been thinking about, of course, something that was hopefully going to make him a shitload of money instead of a woman who was acting as if she barely knew he was alive. Frustrating, since she had allowed him complete and absolute access to her body only a little more than forty-eight hours ago.

But dutifully returning to the task at hand, bringing up the brief he was working on on his computer and staring at it for several long minutes only had his mind wandering back to that very night...

* * *

Theirs was an unusual working relationship, but then Etta St. James wasn't your typical woman – definitely wasn't *his* typical woman, although he wasn't sure that he even had one any more, considering his monk-like existence since his parents had died in a car accident more than five years ago when he had inherited custody of Charlie, his chronologically older, but mentally challenged brother. Not only had his brother stopped learning at about the level of an eight year old, but he also had several chronic medical conditions that sent him to the hospital with alarming – and bankrupting – regularity.

Not that he had one ounce of resentment towards the position he was in. In fact, he had volunteered to take Charlie when his parents revised their will long about the time he had graduated from law school – years later than he might have if they had been well to do, like J.D.'s family, since he'd had to go part time at night while working full time to help pay for Charlie's medical care.

He had been horrified to realize that his parents were dead set against him taking care of his brother once they were gone. They didn't want to saddle him with that responsibility – or the inevitable, incurable debt that would result.

It was the first time he could remember out and out arguing with them, and they all found it quite upsetting, but eventually he managed to convince his parents that he was being absolutely straight with them. He could not – would not – countenance the idea of his brother in any kind of a facility, even if they could have afforded the better kind. It might come to that eventually –

years down the road, he fervently hoped. But MacDevitt Pierce was determined to give Charlie as close to a normal life as was possible, and he had visited enough state run facilities himself to know that it would only be a matter of weeks if the his brother was locked up in one.

In return for making him Charlie's guardian, they had extracted a solemn promise from him that – if his feelings changed, he wouldn't hesitate to do what needed to be done. None of them wanted Charlie to be where he wasn't wanted, where he wasn't active and stimulated and lovingly cared for, least of all Mack, but he understood his parents' reasoning and gave his word without reservation or hesitation.

Unfortunately, having his brother living with him limited his social life quite severely. Despite his considerable sex drive, he had never liked the bar scene – didn't drink much himself, and, despite the release, wasn't in favor of hookups. But he'd had women he thought he'd prepared for the situation – that he'd been dating for a couple of months and with whom he had been completely straight about Charlie's situation – actually get up and leave the moment he'd turned his back and gone into the kitchen to get them drinks once they'd met Charlie.

Some had simply left on the first date after he'd told them – excused themselves to the bathroom and never reappeared – which he preferred. He knew it wasn't an easy situation for anyone to deal with. He'd just had more practice, and, of course, he loved Charlie *with* all his annoying quirks. But at least the ones who bolted immediately didn't shine him on, then turn coward when actually faced with reality.

On the other hand, Etta had never batted an eyelash at Charlie. She listened to him – really listened, unlike most people who tended to nod and smile but not really hear what he was saying. She'd caught onto his odd pronunciations and sometimes creative sentence structure quickly, chatting easily with him on the phone – often spending more time on it with Charlie than he did. They talked about his favorite Red Sox and their chances of making it into the World Series that year, how his cat, Jupiter, was doing, and who was likely to be chosen as the next American Idol. When Mack had had a family emergency and had to fly to California to be with an aunt that was dying, Etta had volunteered to help and had moved into their house – not wanting to uproot Charlie, which she knew would upset him. When he got home, Mack was regaled with tales of how 'awesome' Etta was for months afterwards. Charlie had talked about how she sang to him and played games with him and made much better pancakes than he did – they had cinnamon in them and were in animal shapes, and why couldn't Mack do that?

But it wasn't Charlie that was making them work late nights and weekends, although he was bearing the brunt of it, since he saw much less of both his brother and Etta when they were constantly at the office.

Last Friday had been no different than the eight or so previous Monday through Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. They'd both arrived early, and, after working straight through without a break, by the middle of the afternoon, they were toast.

At that point, they knew they would be worthless for a couple hours unless they took time away from this wonderful, horrible, God awful and God awfully important case. It was four, and they agreed to reconvene at six, and, if tonight was like all the others, they wouldn't leave until sometime around eleven.

"Chinese?" Etta asked, standing for the first time in hours and indulging in a subtle, but much needed, full body stretch.

"Yes, but tell them we don't want their f—" He actually colored realizing what he was about to say, then changed his terminology immediately, "effing chicken wings. Tell them they can charge us whatever they effing want for the substitution, but we want extra egg rolls instead. And tell them I want my stir-fry hot, damn it. As hot as they can effing possibly make it."

She'd almost smiled when he'd corrected his language in front of her. He was that type of man. It wasn't as if she hadn't heard – hell, used – those kinds of words. But Mack was like that – peculiarly old fashioned in a lot of ways that she hadn't realized she'd appreciated until recently.

The office was so small that she was more of a glorified secretary than the paralegal her degree declared she was, but he was the one who brought coffee for her most mornings, and made it in the office when they needed it, and she was grateful to be working in her chosen career field, even if she did end up doing secretarial crap, too. When they worked late, he always walked with her to her car, despite the fact that they lived in a podunk town in New Hampshire where the worst crime was the speeding through downtown that the tourists did all summer on their way to recreate in the White Mountains and in the fall to see the foliage.

He watched out for her in a lot of small ways that she knew she shouldn't enjoy – as a liberal feminist, but she did. Secretly, anyway, she took a lot of pleasure in those tiny gestures.

More than she knew she should.

She didn't bother to shut the door between their offices – it was rarely closed, anyway, so he heard her ordering for them as he reached for two cans of soda for them to have with dinner from the small refrigerator he kept in the office.

And she did it verbatim as he had said it to her; only she didn't bother to clean her version up as he had for her.

It had been a long time since he'd blushed. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time anyone had made him blush. But she had succeeded, in spades, which didn't help her cause in the least.

For a long moment, he simply stood there, halfway between his office and hers. He couldn't believe what she'd done! Prim and proper Etta with that foul language spilling out of her lips as if every other word she said all day was fuck, but she was better than that. He detested the tendency nowadays of doing exactly that and had made the decision not to himself when he'd spoken to her.

Why she'd taken it upon herself to speak like that to Eddie at Chow's Fun Asian Eatery, he'd never know, but he was mortified and embarrassed for her when she didn't seem to be either of those for herself.

But he intended to make sure she never did anything like that again. Not only did it reflect badly on the office, but also worse than that, it reflected badly on her, and he didn't intend to allow either of those things to stand.

“Etta, come in here right now.”

Having dug around in her purse long enough to find her keys, and wishing for the millionth time that they lived in a big enough town to have a restaurant – any restaurant – that delivered, Etta's head went up as soon as he began to speak. It was that tone. He'd never really used it with her before. She'd heard him use it rarely with Charlie when he was being particularly difficult or petulant, and it made the hair at the back of her neck stand on end. She found herself poised on the edge of her seat, as if she was a doe wary of the close presence of a predator, ready to dart away at the first sign of danger.

Despite the warning klaxon that was blaring in the back of mind, urging her to do something – pretend she hadn't heard him, or cry, or preferably run – anything but exactly what he'd commanded, Etta rose as calmly as she could and walked into his office, like she did a million times a day. “What's up, Boss?”

It was worse than she'd thought. He was standing there, all six foot whatever, two hundred plus pounds of him, glaring down at her from beneath a furrowed brow that darkened his already thundercloud face even further.

Etta refused to take the step back that she so desperately wanted to. "Something wrong, Boss?" She was proud of the fact – and not a little amazed – that her voice barely wavered.

He surprised her again by not coming towards her – for which she was truly grateful – but rather walking over to his desk to lean his hips back against it, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yes, something is *very* wrong if you think that I think that it's ever okay for you to use language like that in this office."

She knew her mouth was hanging open and that it probably wasn't a very pretty sight, but she couldn't seem to shut it. She knew very well how he felt about vulgarities – she'd occasionally resorted to them and had always received either a dark frown or an out and out reprimand for doing so. Not only was Mack extremely protective of his small firm's sterling reputation, but he was also somewhat old fashioned about things like that. Etta had mentally lumped that idiosyncrasy in with his other old fashioned but better, as far as she was concerned, impulses.

When her mouth finally closed with an audible click of her teeth, she realized she could barely swallow around the lump in her throat, and she couldn't quite decide whether it was fear or... something she didn't want to examine closely. She was going to go with fear, although it seemed preposterous to her to be afraid of him.

"I was just saying what you..." She hadn't thought it was possible, but his face got even darker even before she'd finished her sentence, so she let it trail off into a soft squeak, since she was going to suggest that he had used similar language himself, which wasn't quite the truth.

"I wouldn't go there if I were you, since none of that language actually escaped my mouth. I censored myself and I expected that you would know better and do so, too." He actually had the audacity to raise his right hand and crook his index finger at her. "But apparently I haven't done a very good job impressing on you the fact that I do not intend to tolerate such language in this office, Loretta Madeleine St. James."

The already insurmountable lump in her throat became a basketball, and her eyes about mirrored that diameter. He'd never called her by her full, real name in the three years she'd been

working for him, nor the four or so she'd known him before he'd hired her. She didn't even think he knew it, but then he would've seen it on her application for this job, she supposed.

"But— but— but—" She clamped her mouth shut again when she realized that all she was going to do with it open, apparently, was babble incoherently. Finally able to swallow, painfully, she quickly decided against trying to actively defend what she'd done and whispered, "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me," assuming that it would be enough.

Etta had already turned away from him and taken a step towards her own office when she felt her arm caught at the elbow as his long, strong fingers wrapped around it.

"Not so fast, Miss Etta. I don't think just an apology is going to suffice in this situation."

Mack used her own momentum against her and whirled her around so that she was coming rather than going, propped his foot up on the stool she used to reach to some of the files that were housed in bookcases that were much taller than she was, and before she could even begin to protest, Etta found herself jackknifed over his knee, dangling there helplessly as he yanked the skirt of her shift dress up around her waist.

"Mack! What are you doing? Are you crazy?" she yelled, struggling valiantly to get away, but as his palm began to make vicious contact with her behind, her words came out as yelps of pain rather than cries of indignation.

He didn't bother to answer her until he knew he'd begun to make an impression on her, which was a big handful of searing swats from his large hand later, when she lost her bravura and annoyance and he began to see tear stains on the carpet beneath her face.

"I'm finally taking you in hand, which is something I should have done the moment we met."

He could be as stubborn as... well, she was when he got something stuck in his head, and no amount of whining, begging or cajoling got him to ease up in the least. In fact, he told her flat out that if she didn't stop trying to wheedle her way out of her punishment, he'd double it.

It was one of the few times he'd ever seen Etta St. James speechless, and figured that it was a sign that, despite any misgivings he might have had about spanking a woman who wasn't technically his, he was doing something right.