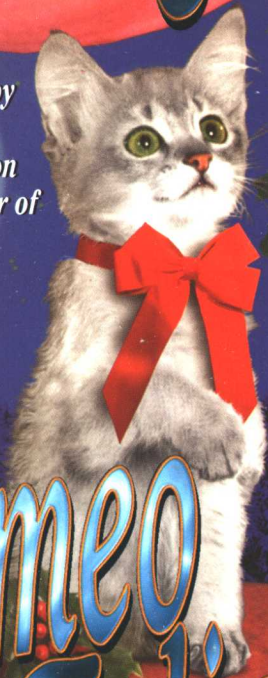


Annie Kimberlin

*In time for the
holidays—puppy
love and heart-
warming passion
from the author of
Stray Hearts,
Lonely Hearts,
and Away
in a Shelter!*



Romeo & Julia

*"Annie Kimberlin's
books are good for
the heart and soul!"*

—Stephanie Mittman,

Bestselling Author of A Kiss to Dream On



Hartley, Ohio, is a town where everybody knows each other's business. For its residents, there are few things that happen slower than falling in love . . . but when it happens, it's forever.

JULIA

Liz Hadley was a cat person, and since she didn't currently own a kitten, there was nothing that she wanted more. The stray that had been found in the snowy library parking lot was perfect; she couldn't wait to go home and cuddle.

AND ROMEO

Still, the arms that held the cat weren't so bad, either. The man her coworkers called Romeo apparently also had a soft spot for all things furry, though it appeared to be the only soft spot on his entire body. The man had the build of a Greek god and his eyes were something altogether more heavenly. And in the poetry of his kisses, the lovely librarian found something more profound than she'd ever read and something sweeter than she'd ever known.



52341



¥18.00

0 71145 00550 2

ISBN 0-505-52341-8

\$5.50 US
\$6.50 CAN
\$12.95 AUS



Romeo & Julia

Annie Kimberlin

LOVE SPELL BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

LOVE SPELL®

October 1999

Published by

Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.

276 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10001

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ISBN 0-505-52341-8

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Printed in the United States of America.

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For Mark, who helped me rescue a scrawny starving teenage cat.

My deepest regards to Julia Child, who has been an inspiration for so many women. Many thanks as ever to Laurie, and to Pam Baker, and to Sonja, who shared with me the story of her rescued Newfoundland and allowed me to use him as the basis for Burl. Thank you to Joyce who asked me for a school bus driver. And finally, thank you to all the fine folks at CML, none of whom is an Attila.

A portion of the author's royalties supports THE COMPANY OF ANIMALS, a nonprofit agency that distributes grants to animal welfare agencies providing emergency and ongoing care to companion animals throughout the United States.

Write to Annie at P.O. Box 30401, Gahanna, OH 43230.

Romeo & Julia

Chapter One

“Liz, you really need to get a new cat.”

Liz Hadley kept her eyes on the open *Almanac* on the desk in front of her and pretended that the statement didn't stab her in the heart. Focusing her eyes more firmly on the words on the page—the large-print edition they kept at the reference desk—she scanned down the list. She resorted to the same-old same-old answer she'd given so many times before. “One of these days I'll get a cat. When it's the right time. Aha. Here it is.” She pressed the hold button to reconnect to the patron. “Ma'am, according to the current *World Almanac*, the population of Brazil is 169,806,557. Yes. Is that what you needed to know? You're welcome. I'm glad we could help. Good-bye.”

But this time, unlike the times of the same-old same-old, her friend and fellow librarian Cecily scowled at

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her. "If we all waited until it was the right time, we'd never do anything. Your life is boring. All you do is read and cook. Not that I mind you cooking, of course, since we at the library reap the benefits. And eat them."

"My life isn't boring," Liz corrected her. "It's pleasant. It's uncomplicated. It's the way I like it, and the way I intend it to stay."

Cecily groaned. "You really need a cat, and you need one now."

"I can't, Cec. I just can't." Liz shoved the *World Almanac* back onto the ready reference shelf. What she couldn't do was go to the Greene County Animal Shelter and face all those homeless cats. It would be unbearable. Almost as unbearable as losing Skillet had been.

"It's been what? Six months since Skillet died?"

It was six months, three days and about four hours, to be exact. But Liz merely nodded, staring out past the wintered lawn to the parking lot, where a big yellow school bus was just pulling up. Saved by the proverbial school bus. "Your kids are here. Better take off that scowl and put on a friendly face. You don't want to traumatize the little darlings. They'll be scarred for life and never vote for a library levy when they're tax payers."

"And we'll be out of jobs," Cecily said with a grin. "Oh, the pressure of being a children's librarian." She wagged a finger at Liz. "You're not off the hook yet, oh catless cat person. The conversation is just delayed." She waltzed off, her basket of books on her arm, to greet the busload of kindergartners.

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Liz relaxed for a moment, watching the hordes of children, bundled up against the cold, swarm into the library like unruly lambs, only to be herded into the meeting room. She wondered, as she had for probably the millionth time, what her life would have been like if she'd been able to have children or if the adoption had worked out. And she wondered about that three-day old baby girl. And, as she had for probably the millionth time, she told herself to forget it. Children were not in her cosmic picture. To moan and bewail that fact would be pointless. Maybe Cecily was right, she told herself; maybe it *was* time to get another cat.

"Psst!" Kendra, one of the library clerks, frantically motioned to Liz. She had an excited sparkle in her eyes as she pointed toward the parking lot. "Didja see him?" she hissed. "It's Romeo." The clerks had a habit of giving private nicknames to some of the more notorious library patrons. Romeo was famous for his good looks. Kendra motioned to the other two clerks, who were at the checkout desk. Luckily there were no patrons nearby at the moment.

Liz nodded tolerantly and watched with amusement as the bevy of young and nubile clerks flocked to lean over the checkout desk so they could better check out the parking lot. And Romeo. Liz could almost see their pheromones fluttering above them in heart-shaped clouds. They were so young, so one-dimensional. They hadn't yet been kicked in the teeth by life. Well, better let them keep their illusions. Reality would chop them up, mince them up, turn them into puree soon enough.

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"Hiya, Liz." It was Sally Foster, the kindergarten teacher. "What's cookin'?"

"I'm watching the young ones drool over your bus driver."

"Drooling over Alex?" Sally twisted around to watch the clerks. "You ought to get them bibs. Still," she added cheerfully, "a man more worthy of their drool has yet to walk the earth." Then she turned back to Liz. "So why aren't you lusting after him?"

Liz chuckled at the teacher. "Me? I'm too old to have lustful thoughts."

"That's a load of guano. We all have lustful thoughts. It's what gets us through the bad days." She picked up a book from the reference desk. "*Statistical Abstracts of the United States*. Gee. Sounds riveting. I think I'll wait for the movie." She dropped the book and pinned Liz with a curious stare. "So why *aren't* you lusting after Alex? I mean, have you ever seen the guy? He's Greek-god gorgeous to the nth degree. And on top of all that, he's one of the nicest guys I've ever known. If he'd give me just one bit of encouragement, I'd drop Mel in an instant."

"I thought you'd sworn eternal loyalty to Mel Gibson," Liz said dryly.

"I did." Sally shrugged. "But there is something to be said for gorgeous in the flesh instead of on a screen, even in a kilt. One of those bird-in-the-hand sorts of things." She gave a salacious leer. "I'd love to have either of them in my hand."

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"You want a bib of your own? I think I have one here."

"You must be made of stone to not drool over Alex Hogan."

With a smile, Liz shook her head. "I'm not made of stone. I'm just old enough to . . ."

"To what?"

Liz shrugged. "Old enough to know better, I guess."

"More guano."

"Well, I'm almost old enough to be his mother."

"Only if you had a baby when you were ten."

"Say, Sally"—Liz decided to change the subject—"how's Kathryn doing? I haven't talked to her for a couple of days. I keep waiting for her to dump her significant jerk."

Sally frowned. "No dumping yet. At least, not that I know of. I wish she would hurry up and do it. I don't think he treats her very well."

The phone at the reference desk rang, interrupting what was, to Liz, an important topic. She grimaced to Sally as she picked up the phone. "Hartley Public Library, reference desk," Liz said in her professional-librarian voice. "How may I help you? The newest Michaelson book? Let's see." She typed a title into her computer. "I'm afraid there's still a waiting list for it. Would you like me to add your name?"

I'll talk to you later, Sally mouthed and wiggled her fingers in farewell. Liz nodded to her friend as she typed the patron's library card number into the com-

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puter. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Sally had wandered over to the checkout desk and was whispering something to the clerks. She was probably giving them a tidbit of information about the object of their collective lust before she joined her class in the meeting room.

Liz glanced at her watch. It was almost one o'clock. The phone at the reference desk rang again. Liz picked it up. "I'm sorry," she told the woman on the other end of the line after doing a computer search. "All our copies of *The Sound of Music* are checked out. Probably because the community theater tryouts are so soon. I can put you on the waiting list."

As Liz was shrugging into her coat, Kendra waltzed into the staff room. "You're deserting us, I see. Like a rat on a sinking ship?" She stopped in front of the file cabinet and pulled open a drawer.

"You're calling me a rat?"

"Only because you get to go home early."

"Only because I put in extra hours at the book sale, and this is the best day the schedule would allow me to take the time off. You know how Attila feels about the schedule. It was handed down to him on clay tablets."

"Our dear director probably pees according to schedule. Where are those wretched volunteer forms anyway?" Kendra muttered.

"Watch what you say, kiddo. You know this staff room is bugged."

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"Hope you have a good book with which to curl up. We're supposed to get bunches of snow tonight."

"Great book. Biography of Julia Child. I can't wait to devour it."

"Aha. Julia. Your hero."

"Yes." Liz swung her scarf around her neck and her book bag over her shoulder. "My hero."

"Personally," Kendra said with an overly dramatic sigh, "I'd give my eyeteeth to curl up with Romeo tonight. Or any night. Or every night. Say, Liz, what are eyeteeth anyway?"

"If you ask at the reference desk, I'm sure they can help you find that information," Liz said in grinning parody of the clerks. Then she reverted to her normal voice. "I'm outta here."

Alex tucked away his notebook and pen and clambered up out of the driver's seat. The new chair plans were great, and he couldn't wait to start on them, but right now it was time to stretch his legs before he turned into an icicle. He pulled the door open and climbed down. Sheesh, it was cold. According to the forecast, Mother Nature was going to throw them a humdinger of a blizzard tonight. Maybe it was a leftover from El Niño. Even the sky looked cold. Alex rubbed his hands together.

His contemplation of the night sky was interrupted by an insistent meow. A cat? Alex liked cats. "Kitty?" he called.

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A skinny mackerel-and-white cat stomped regally over to him, demanding his attention, yelling at the top of its lungs, which, considering the fact that it didn't look full grown, wasn't much.

Alex scooped up the cat. "Hello there, kitty. Where did you come from?"

The cat yelled at him again.

"You don't say. Well, wherever it was, they didn't seem to take good care of you. How did you get so dirty? And what happened to your chin? Looks like you've been kicked." The cat turned on the instant charm—rubbing a dirty head under his hand, purring like a freight engine. Alex felt the purring vibrations go all the way through him as the little cat snuggled more firmly into his arms. What a little cutie this cat was! He held the cat out so that he could look it in the face. "Yeah, I'm a sucker for strays," he said. "And you sure look like you could use a home. And a bath." At least the dirt seemed to be on the surface, rather than caked on, and from all outward appearances, the kitten appeared to be healthy. Its eyes were bright and clear, its expression alert, and its nose looked clean. The little cat yelled enthusiastically.

Suddenly, the cat twisted and leaped out of his arms. What? The cat was making a direct line for a woman who was coming out of the library. It was yelling and screaming like a fan at a hockey game.

The woman stopped stark still and stood silently, staring at the cat.