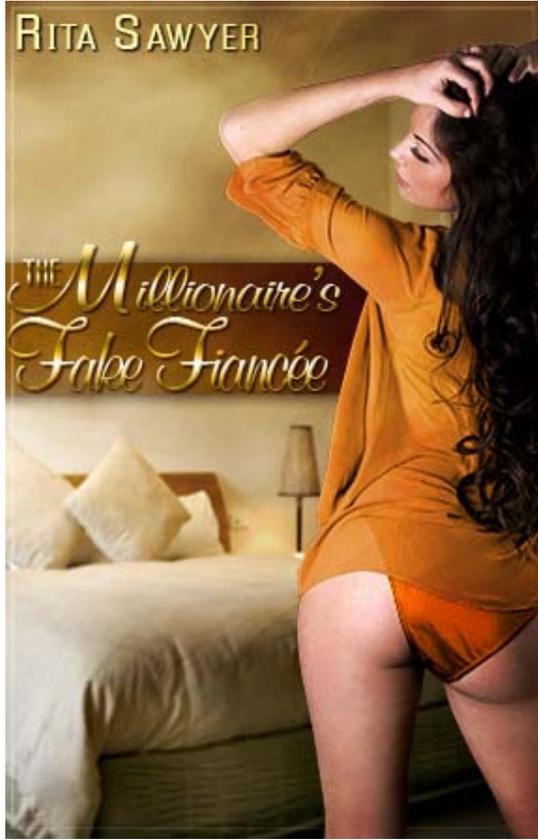


RITA SAWYER

*THE Millionaire's  
Fake Fiancée*



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The Millionaire's Fake Fiancée

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## Dedication

To my family, who always gave me a push when I needed it. Thank you everyone for being there.

Taizer Family Creed:

**GREED!**

It was said that it could be summed up in one word, but that was it. Instead of being “All For One and One For All,” or “You Watch My Back and I’ll Watch Yours,” they were more like, “None For You and All For Me,” or, “Watch Your Back or I’ll Walk All Over It.”

## Chapter One

Heart beating wildly, Harley raced up the steps. Her thigh muscles tightened in protest as she took the stairs two at a time, hoping she hadn't kept her grandfather waiting too long. Her meeting had run late and then her old beater of a car refused to start, again. He would understand of course, but still it bothered her to think of him sitting around waiting on her. She opened the door and stepped into the room, surprised to find him sitting there chatting with a handsome older gentleman. Her grandfather stopped talking and looked up at her, his eyes twinkling with merriment. He held out his hand with a smile.

With a nod to the other man, Harley skirted his chair and rounded her grandfather's desk, leaning down to kiss his soft cheek.

"Sorry I'm late," she whispered softly in the vicinity of his ear.

"Let me guess, your car, if you can call it that, broke down again," he said with a smile, letting her know he was just teasing her.

She blushed and nodded. It was an ongoing teasing that they both enjoyed. Since it was done out of love and pride there were no hurt feelings.

"My granddaughter once promised if I helped her purchase a car, she would drive it until she got every penny's worth out of it, which I believe she has, five times over," he said proudly.

"Yeah, well it got the better of me today." She sat in the empty chair facing her grandfather's desk.

"It's quite alright, I just arrived myself." The man looked at her, offering a pleasant smile.

"Okay we're all here now, so let's get down to brass tacks. Harley, this is Mr. Balker. He's an attorney. Actually I'm hoping he'll be your attorney." Watching the shock swamp his granddaughter's face, Alfred Taizer felt a pang of guilt knowing he'd put her in this awkward position.

"Why would I need an attorney? Did I commit some crime I'm unaware of?" she said with a strangled laugh, looking at their serious faces.

"No, but there are a few things you need to be made aware of, and Mr. Balker can help you through them all." Her grandfather leaned forward and stared at her with a deep intensity.

"Grandpa, you're okay, right?" She scanned his features nervously, looking for any sign of distress.

"I'm fine," he said, easing some of her fears since he'd never lied to her before, not even when it would have saved them both a lot of heartache.

"Then why do I need an attorney? No offense, Mr. Balker." She turned to the man, offering him a small smile.

"None taken. Your grandfather's just being proactive," he said, nodding toward her grandfather.

"Harley, what's said here today will change things, but I want you to know that everything I've ever done was with you in mind," her grandfather said, running his hand over a thick file sitting on the desk in front of him.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Her stomach plummeted. The last time he talked like that he had taken her to see her father, and that had been one of the worst days of her life.

"Here. This will explain everything." He held out the file to her.

"No thanks. You can tell me whatever it is that's so important that I may need a lawyer at some point," she said, leaning further back in her chair.

“Fine.” He opened the file and slid the first sheet in front of her. “This file is a breakdown of everything in your trust fund account. I did mention to you once that I had set it up. You reach the age of majority in August and I just want you to be prepared.”

“I thought you said you were alright.” Ignoring the paper she moved forward, taking his hand in hers.

“I am fine. This has nothing to do with my health.” He patted her hand.

“Then why do this now?” She turned for the first time to the lawyer.

“A trust is set up for many reasons. In this case, it was to secure your assets from the rest of your family,” Mr. Balker explained with a smile.

“But trusts are for rich people. We’re far from rich.” She waved her hand between her grandfather and herself.

Her grandfather cleared his throat, “The amount has nothing to do with it. But it is a nice sum.”

“Okay, to keep the ‘Family’ from attaching themselves to what you’ve saved for my future, you put it in a trust. But we’re getting along fine, so there is really no reason to touch it right now,” she said, trying to be reasonable.

“Precisely. As I said, your grandfather was just thinking ahead. At the age of twenty-six, just four weeks from now, the fund becomes yours. At that point you may use it at your discretion, or not at all. However, it is always best to be prepared in these situations,” Mr. Balker said, in what she was very sure was his most lawyerly tone of voice.

“The problems will come about when the rest of the boneheads we’re related to realize things have changed. They won’t know where the trust came from. I’ve taken care of that, but Harley, you know these people. Your cousins will be all over you asking for loans and investments. And we both can guess what your parents’ reaction will be. If I had wanted, or thought that any of them were worth a penny more than I am leaving them in my will then I would have done something about it. You need to be ready,” he said.

She figured due his disappointment at his children and theirs, he had the right to be a little overprotective when it came to her. “I understand. So exactly how much are we talking about?” she asked, regaining some of her composure picking up the sheet of paper.

“From your grandfather’s income over the past six years alone, he managed to save about thirty-two thousand dollars,” the lawyer said, pointing to a small row of figures on the right hand of the sheet she was holding.

She pointed to a column on the left. “What is all this?”

“Those were deposits made over the years. And these are deductions made from the trust. There were just the two. Your grandfather reapplied those with interest as shown here,” he said, showing her where the withdrawals and deposits had been made.

“My attendance at the Mystery Reader’s Camp and that trip to California to attend the Reader’s Conference,” she said, reading the descriptions next to the amounts.

“What is this?” She pointed to a large number scrawled across the bottom of the sheet.

“That’s the total worth of the fund as of this morning,” the lawyer said, edging back into his chair.

“Four hundred fifty-nine thousand dollars and eighteen cents.” She sprang to her feet as the form dropped to the floor.

“I may have embellished things in the past,” her grandfather said, wiping his brow with his ever-present hankie.

“You lied to me?” she asked, unable to grasp the fact that he would have done such a

thing.

“In the abstract no, but yes I did. I started that account the day you were born. I’ve put a large sum aside by now, but more importantly I invested it well.” He reached a shaking hand for the pen beside the folder.

She shook her head and pointed to the file on his desk. “That’s your money, not mine.”

“Harley I’m seventy-three years old and strong as an ox thanks to the way you’ve taken care of me, like a mother hen. But there is no way I could spend that kind of money and I don’t want to try.” He dropped the pen and getting to his feet.. “If you need to, give it to charity as you see fit. I have donated to a lot of them over the years, including our ‘Family’, but this is yours. I want you to do me favor and just take some time to think it over.”

“Your grandfather is right, Miss Taizer. I thought it would help if I brought this along with me,” Mr. Balker said, handing her another sheet of paper.

“You’ve donated to all these charities in both of our names?” she asked, reading the names of over a dozen causes they’d talked about over the years.

“I made sure you never went without something you really needed, but I didn’t think it was right to give into your every whim. However, when you shared your desire to help, I thought it was the right thing to do,” he said softly, settling back into his chair.

She didn’t know who she shocked more but she threw herself into her grandfather’s arms, crushing the paper between them. He was a good man. Honest and true to his beliefs, with a heart of solid gold.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as he patted her back. “I did mention she might be a little emotional.”

“Understandable. Now, Miss Taizer, when you’re ready there are just a few more things to go over,” Mr. Balker said, leaning back in his chair, waiting for her to get it together.

Wiping her face with the hankie Grandpa stuffed in her hand she took a deep breath, moving back to her chair. “Go ahead.”

“Well, for starters, I need you to sign this disclosure form. It’s very straightforward. It states I explained the fund to you and offered to stay on in your behalf. Your grandfather will remain the executor until your birthday. After that, you, and only you, are allowed to make withdrawals. Also, we need to put some safeguards in place for you if you decide to leave things as they are. Even if it’s just for the foreseeable future,” Mr. Balker explained, handing her a pen and sheet of paper.

Trying to wrap her mind around everything, she read the form looking for any hidden loopholes. Grandpa trusted this man and that was saying something. Trust and love were big issues in Grandpa’s eyes, neither given too lightly. Signing the form, she handed it back to him.

“Mr. Balker, my grandfather trusted you and your firm all this time. I see no need to change that for now,” she said, and Grandpa nodded, approving her decision.

“That’s fine. We’ll need to set up an appointment for you to come in and meet with a security specialist who will help you set up your passwords and things like that.” Looking at her grandfather, he added, “Kasper Drake is the best we have. He oversees the security division.”

“Set it up, the sooner the better, but I’d like him to come here if that’s possible,” Grandpa said with a nod of his balding head.

As the weight of it all started to sink in, her heart began to race. “Grandpa, you’ve managed to keep this a secret from me all these years, can’t we just do whatever you’ve done up until now to keep my mother and father from finding out?”

“They already know,” he bit out, his face going red.

“H-h-how?” she croaked.

“One of them must have wanted to see if they could squeeze me for another loan so they hired a PI to do an investigation. The PI couldn’t link me to the money, but somehow he found out about your trust.” He tapped his pen on the desk in hard little whacks.

“We’re not sure how they came about the information either. Then again, in most cases it’s not really a guarded secret. With the deposits coming from investment firms, your name would have been listed. The security specialists noticed a few inquiries were made into the trust but we don’t give out personal information without permission in the form of several passwords and verifications. So whoever it was got nothing more than the fact you had a trust with our firm. We did, however, immediately report this to your grandfather,” Mr. Balker said, shuffling papers.

“I do have some good news.” Her grandfather opened a drawer and pulled out a large envelope. “I’ve taken the liberty of getting you an early birthday present.”

She took the envelope slowly, turned it over, and stared at it for a minute before tearing it open. She peeked over at Mr. Balker, who looked as bewildered as she felt. Reaching inside, she pulled out a stack of papers with a set of keys attached to them.

“Grandpa?” She held them up, waiting for an explanation.

Mr. Balker cleared his throat and when neither of them looked at him, he rose to his feet. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go call Mr. Drake and set up that meeting.”

“Harley, give an old man a break. Worrying about you driving around in that rust bucket isn’t good for my health.” Grandpa wasn’t above guilt-tripping her into accepting his gift.

“My car—” she started, only to be cut off by his laughter.

“Should, and will, be turned into scrap metal.” He laughed and she couldn’t help but join in.

“Okay, my car may be ready to fall apart in a strong wind, but a truck? Grandpa, it’s just not me,” she said, wondering what he’d been thinking when he picked it out.

“Don’t think of it as a truck. Think of it as a really big station wagon.” His strange sense of humor had her laughing again.

Mr. Balker knocked on the door before re-entering the room. “Mr. Drake will be here at four o’clock this afternoon.”

“Good, that’s good. Now maybe my granddaughter would like to see her new car.” He rounded the desk.

They all walked outside. Sitting where her car had been was a flashy red Chevy Blazer. If cars could talk it would be screaming, “look at me.” She peeked inside the roomy interior. Two seats in front, the seat in the middle was big enough for three, and a large stowing area in the back. *Wow*. Unable to stop herself she opened the door and climbed in, thinking with a smile that her grandfather had really great taste. No burns, rips, or tears in the seats. The dash was uncracked and gleaming. Her nose itched at the odd smell. *New car smell*, she mused, smiling as she ran her hand over the steering wheel.

“You like it?” Her grandfather leaned in the window with an I-told-you-so look.

“It’s wonderful.” She hugged his neck, pressing a noisy kiss to his cheek.

“Go take her for a spin, but be back before four.” He stepped out of her way.

\* \* \*

“Drake, Kasper Michael Drake the Third, security specialist extraordinaire to be exact,”

he said in his best James Bond impersonation, laughing at his own joke.

Truthfully, he was very, very good at his job. Lucky for him not many of the people at the firm he dealt with even knew who he was. He was fine with that. Though he didn't really need this job, didn't need to work at all, he liked being able to focus on his job, not who he was. Besides, the hours were good which gave him plenty of time for other worthwhile endeavors. The only downside was dealing with very special, spoiled, and pampered princesses and sometimes princes. Half of them couldn't remember their passwords, though he thought some of them were faking since they spent most of the time it took for him to reset the passwords hitting on him. If they'd known the truth about him, it would probably have taken twice as long.

Then there were these little field trips he had to take since the trust-fund-babies couldn't find the time to come to him. Turning off the main road he followed the directions, ending up in a modest but well-kept neighborhood. *This can't be right.* Pulling over he grabbed his cell phone and dialed his superior, knowing there had to be some mistake.

"Mr. Balker's office," a woman said.

"This is Kasper Drake. I need to verify an address. Is he available?" He double-checked to make sure he hadn't grabbed the wrong fax.

"Kasper, is there a problem?" Balker got right to the point. No wonder he liked the man, other than the fact he was his uncle.

"You tell me. I'm headed to the Taizer appointment you said was a top priority, but I think you faxed me the wrong address. I've got 76 Stoneybrook Road." He looked around at the houses finding it hard to believe that someone with a substantial amount of money would be satisfied living there.

"No, it's right. As I said, due to the initial unauthorized inquiries, this account is a top priority. Not only that, but the grandfather is a long-time client and friend."

"Alright, I'll check in when we're done." He stowed his phone away after a quick goodbye.

A few minutes later he found his destination. It was the biggest house on the dead-end road but still not as ostentatious as he was used to. The yard was neatly mowed and there were dozens of colorful flowers planted along the sides of the walkway that led to the door. He was about to knock when he heard a loud feminine screech come from the side of the house. Dropping his bag on the porch he raced towards the noise, totally unprepared for the spectacle he found.

He could see arms and legs flailing around underneath a huge, bushy tan dog, but it was the laughter that had him stopping in his tracks. Full and throaty, it beckoned him closer. An old woman came out of the house next door and whistled sharply. The dog's massive head came up and he glanced between the direction of the woman and his prey. Another whistle pierced the air and he was off and running. And Kasper was frozen still.

The woman, yeah he could tell she was a woman now that the dog was off her. Long, curly brown hair hung in and around her face, blocking his view, but nothing could hide her feminine curves. Taking in the whole scene, he figured she'd been working in the garden when the beast decided it was time to play. She had dirt paw shaped prints all over her bright yellow shirt. The faded jeans she wore had little sparkly things going down the legs.

The dog had obviously stepped on each breast, leaving huge prints in its wake, which would have been funny in any other situation, but he was here to work, not play. She pushed her hair out of her face, looking up at him with golden amber eyes. *If she was still around after his meeting with the princess, then maybe he would offer to help her clean up,* he thought with a

smile.

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Harley looked up as she wiped the dog drool off her face, expecting to see her grandfather standing there. *Oh, wow.* That man was definitely not her grandfather. He was at least forty years younger, two feet taller, and built like a Mack truck. Maybe she'd hit her head and had a concussion. *Did a concussion create hallucinations?* She was pretty sure they didn't make your heart race the way hers was.

She was about to ask who he was when her neighbor, Mrs. Tachell, shouted over the fence. "Honey, are you okay over there?"

Scrambling to her feet, she stood on her tiptoes peeking over at the other woman, unaware he was staring at the colorful sequin butterflies on her back pockets. "I'm fine. Bruno didn't mean any harm, he just missed me that's all. I'll come over later for tea and you can tell me all about your trip while we have a nice visit."

"You're such a good girl. We'll see you later," she shouted over Bruno's barking.

Turning back to the stranger, she asked, "Can I help you?"

"Are you really okay?" He ignored her question, and the husky timber of his voice struck a chord deep down inside her.

"Yeah, Bruno's been knocking me on my ass for years." She wiped her filthy hands on her thighs.

"Good, I'd hate to think you'd be sore later without someone around to help you work the kinks out." He flashed her an unexpected, killer smile.

He shifted his stance and his body went from a stiff, to a more relaxed pose. Not that he looked any less intense, just different. It suddenly struck her he had evaded her question. She had no idea who he was or why he was in her yard.

"Since you're okay, I'll be going." He backed away, not taking his eyes off her until he turned the corner and was gone.

"Nice to meet you, too." She sighed, as he turned and walked away.

"Who were you talking to?" Her grandfather looked around the yard.

"Bruno and Mrs. Tachell." *And a mysterious stranger who could have walked right off the pages of GQ, or some other men's magazine,* she thought with a smile.

"Oh. Shouldn't you be getting cleaned up?" he asked, shaking his head as he walked away.

Looking down at herself, she busted out laughing. Bruno had done a major job on her. Hearing her grandfather inside talking to someone, she bolted into the house and up to her room to change.

## Chapter Two

“Please have a seat Mr. Drake. My granddaughter will be with us shortly.” Alfred Taizer showed him into the living room.

“Call me Kasper,” he said, taking a seat on the couch.

Choosing to sit across from him gave Alfred the ability to observe him carefully. Balker had said the man was the best, and his Harley deserved no less. Mr. Drake casually looked around the room, probably trying to get a read on them. He wouldn't find anything in this room. It was mainly for show. Anything personal he kept locked away from prying eyes in his study.

“Mr. Taizer, I assume you have questions about my background.” Kasper looked him in the eye, which Alfred took as a sign of respect.

“It's Alfred. You do know what they say happens when you assume, don't you?” he asked with a smile.

“Yes, sir. I ‘make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*’.” They both laughed at the old adage not many people used anymore.

“Believe this, when it comes right down to it, you wouldn't have made it past the door without my checking you out first. Your other clients I checked with had nothing but high praises for you. The ones of the female variety were especially glowing.”

Kasper couldn't help but cringe.

“I take it a few of them have expressed interest in a little more than your security expertise.”

Kasper really didn't want to get into all of that so he nodded, hoping he'd let the subject drop.

The old man laughed. “Well that won't be a problem with my granddaughter.”

Kasper wondered what the old man meant by that. Was she unavailable, or did she possibly go in the other direction? Either of those options would be good for him. The last thing he needed was another prima donna looking at him like he was Prime Rib and she was starving. He just wanted to get her linked into the system and hopefully never see her again. The first step in that was going over the program with her and setting up a meeting for her to come into the office once she filled out the paperwork. *If things went smoothly, he could be out of there in less than hour*, he thought, looking up when Alfred spoke.

“Finally, here she is.” Alfred got to his feet and she walked to his side. “Kasper, it's my pleasure to introduce you to my granddaughter, Harley Taizer. Harley, this is Kasper Drake. I'll just step out so you two can get right down to it.”

It was the woman from the garden. No longer covered in dog prints, she had changed into a pale pink sweater set and straight black skirt that stopped at her knees. The outfit did nothing for her figure, but he assumed she knew that. It wasn't bad, just staid and boring compared to the bright playfulness of what she'd worn earlier.

He had no idea why she chose to hide her curves like that. Most of the women he'd come into contact with wore designer labels, doing whatever they could to showcase themselves. Most of them were probably thinking that money attracted money. It made him wonder what she was thinking.

He did like that she'd pulled her hair back into a long thick ponytail that brushed her shoulders. It gave him a chance to really look at her. Up close, she seemed younger than the twenty-five he knew she was. High cheekbones accentuated her face, making her eyes stand out even more than they should have. Her features were an odd combination that resulted in a

stunning appearance, not beautiful. Too many women these days were beautiful. She was unique.

“Thanks, Grandpa.” She kissed the old man’s cheek before turning to him, extending her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Drake.”

“Nice to meet you too, and please call me Kasper.” He held her hand a little too long, although he didn’t realize it until she laughed, giving it a tug.

“Um... Do you want to work in here, or would my grandfather’s study be better?” She glanced at the bag by his feet.

“We can go over the basics here. But we’ll need to make you an appointment to come into the office so I can log you into my secure internet access to get everything finalized.” He took his seat on the couch, pulling a file and pad of paper out of his bag.

“Okay.” She sat across from him.

He gave her the basic overview of how the program worked, stressing the importance of password protection. Normally, to speed things up he would have given her the security questionnaire to fill out and bring in with her, but he began asking her the questions before he even realized his intentions.

“It would probably be easier to go over all this if you sit over here.” He fought back a smile when she got up and joined him.

*Now, that was just stupidity in action*, he thought, as her scent, light berry and something else he couldn’t put his finger on, teased his nostrils, making him want to lean over and sniff her neck. That would inevitably lead to tasting, nibbling... He shifted on the couch, making room in his suddenly tight pants, hoping he was discreet enough that she didn’t notice.

“Name of your employer?” he asked, looking over at her.

Pulling her ponytail over her shoulder, she played with the curls. “I’m a librarian at Ellisberg Community College, but I prefer never to be contacted at work, so can you make sure that’s noted.”

*It fits*, he thought, scribbling it into the allotted line. Most women just laughed at that question.

Moving on to the question that was burning in the back of his mind, he watched her carefully. “Marital status?”

“Single,” she answered, as a pretty pink blush crept across her cheeks, much like earlier when he was talking to her out in the yard.

“Any plans to change that in the near future?” he asked, his pen hovering above the pad.

“Excuse me?” she said, those eyes widening, growing darker, making him wonder how they’d look filled with raging passion.

“If you’re planning on adding access for someone, within say, the next year or so, I can put the codes in now, but leave them un-activated,” he explained, grateful for his ability to think quickly.

“Umm... No. I won’t be adding anyone.” She shook her head.

*Good*, he thought, running through a few more questions, inconspicuously noting little things that told him a lot about her. Most importantly, she was single, not seeing anyone seriously. She’d never make a good card player either. Her eyes would give her away.

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*This sucked worse than sour pickles*, she thought, trying not to let her attitude get the better of her. She’d changed quickly, grabbing the outfit Mrs. Tachell had given her for her

birthday since she planned on heading over there as soon as she was done. The outfit wasn't quite hideous, but it was close.

*Damn it.* She hadn't been thinking about impressing anyone. If she had been, she would have put on the black off-the-shoulder shirt that emphasized her shoulders and breasts. Oh, and her favorite red hip-hugging skirt. Grandpa always grimaced when she wore that one. It was just her luck that she was sitting here with the sexiest man she'd seen in a long time looking like a fashion disaster.

What a crying shame too, because he smelled so good. It was a clean, invigorating, and unquestionably masculine scent, but not overwhelming. It teased, making her want to get closer. God help her, she wanted to snuggle right up against him. Looking at him sitting there all stiff and rigid, she rejected that idea right away.

He didn't come off as the cuddly type. She was pretty sure there wasn't a soft spot on his entire body, but she wouldn't mind stripping him bare and searching for one. He looked over at her and his green eyes, deep and sparkling, seemed to be boring into her. Could he read her mind? Or was she just hoping he could?

He continued his questions with a quirk of his brow. "So is this your permanent address?" "I've lived here all my life." Did he find that hard to believe, she wondered? She tipped her head closer to peek at the pad he was scribbling on.

He rubbed his chin for a second before dropping the pad onto the table. "Why don't you just tell me exactly what's going on here?"

It irked her that it was more of a command than suggestion. Narrowing her eyes, she gave her attitude a little bit of the tight leash she'd been keeping it on.

After all, he'd asked for it, she thought, breaking it down for him. "As far as I know you came here to set up the security access for my account."

He shot to his feet and began pacing the room. His fierce scowl made him look dangerous and hotter than hell. Unable to stop herself, she mentally stripped him of his dress shirt, striped tie, navy slacks, and shiny black shoes. She replaced them with a tight black t-shirt, jeans tight and worn out in all the right places, and work boots. His dark wavy hair literally topped off the image. Mmm... Now that was more like it. It was an image she was sure would be starring in her dreams.

"That's not what I meant," he growled, looking down at her.

Smiling, she responded with her best sweet and innocent tone. "Really? Then why don't you tell me what you did mean."

Dropping into the chair, he snatched the pad of paper slamming down on his lap. "Forget it. Let's just get this finished."

Everything went fine for about five minutes. He asked his questions and she gave him short and concise answers. She sat there watching him scribble on the pad. His hand was big and she found herself wondering how it would feel stroking her bare back. Feeling the heat blooming on her cheeks she reined in her wayward thoughts. Luckily, he hadn't noticed since he kept his eyes on the pad. Things were progressing nicely, and she'd already begun focusing on what she'd planned to make for dinner, when he posed his next question.

"Who do you want listed as next of kin?" He tilted his head up; making her think the question sparked his interest.

"My grandfather. Oh, and I want him to keep his access in case of an emergency," she said, already regretting letting her temper slip, no matter how slightly.

He made an indecipherable sound, to which she asked, "Is there a problem with that?"

“Most people choose a parent, or both of them.” One broad shoulder lifted and fell, but his gaze remained on the pad.

Leaning back against the cushion, she crossed her legs, swinging her foot and feeling defensive, knowing she probably looked it too. “I’m not like most people.”

He mumbled something that sounded like, “Tell me about it.”

She noticed he took a minute to check out the little bit of thigh she accidentally exposed.

Feeling bold, she leaned forward. Folding her arms, she rested them on her knee, which pushed her boobs higher. “Sorry, I missed that.”

Shaking his head, he cleared his throat and reached up to loosen his tie. “I’ll speak to Mr. Balker about your grandfather keeping his access, but I don’t foresee it being a problem.”

“Good. Kasper, is it okay if I ask you a something?” She gave him a small smile, unable to hold back the curiosity any more.

“Sure,” he said calmly, but she noticed the way his neck stiffened and his fingers whitened on the pen.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“I’ve been with MacKinerny & Blithe for the past four years.” He looked relaxed for the first time since she’d entered the room.

“How’d you get the job? Did they recruit you from some special college like in the movies?” she said with a wink, and when his hearty laugh rippled through the air, she felt something deep inside her quake.

Ooh... *He should do that a lot more* she thought, biting back a sigh. His whole body seemed to relax and he leaned back into the chair. She really didn’t want this meeting to end on a bad note.

“I’m sorry if I got a little testy. I’ve had a strange day,” she said softly, hoping he’d turn out to be the understanding type.

“I’m a good listener.” His voice softened, deepening to a more sultry tone and making her wonder how it would sound as he whispered in her ear.

God, she was a sad case if a guy she just met could make her so emotional. His tenderness made her want to spill it all, almost. Nobody but Grandpa knew the whole story. It wasn’t that it was a secret. Anyone who wanted to know could have found out just by asking her parents. She would never volunteer the information unless it was life or death. Well, not seriously, but it was a good analogy.

“It’s nothing really. I guess I just don’t handle change well,” she admitted, lowering her eyes to her hand as she twisted the sapphire ring she always wore.

“Not many people do. But I want you to know if there’s anything I can do to help all you have to do is call.” For the first time since he started the job, he really meant it.

She smiled and it struck him that even though admitting her flaw was hard, accepting his help would be even harder. He decided it was time for him to go before he did something stupid.

“Can you come into the office on Friday around four thirty?”

She nodded.

Reaching into his shirt pocket and pulling out a business card, he turned it over and did something he’d never done before. Why he couldn’t say, there was just something about her that drew him in. He wanted her. Plain and simple, yet more complicated than he wanted.

Holding out the card he said, “These are my home and cell phone numbers. If you need anything between now and then, call me.”

She gripped it with her fingers and tugged, but he refused to let go until she looked at

him. "Harley I mean it, anything, anytime, you can call me."

"Okay." She blushed, nodding and he figured she got the message without him actually saying it.

Stuffing the pad into his bag he started for the door. She came around the coffee table, tripping over nothing, and surging into him with a loud, high-pitched squeal followed by "umph". He dropped the bag, his hands wrapping around her arms, steadying her.

"Sorry." If she hadn't looked up at him with those wide eyes, her hands pressed against his chest, he might have made it out of there without touching her.

But now that he'd touched her, he didn't want to let go. He wanted more. No woman had affected him like this. She was like a shot of whiskey burning through him.

Pulling her closer, he let his hands move over her back. "I'm not."

Her breathing quickened at his touch. If she had given an ounce of protest, he would have let her go. She leaned closer to him and a delicate sweet scent drifted off her, teasing him. Other than the information she'd given him, he knew nothing about her. That didn't take away the gnawing desire he felt. Maybe the unknown had something to do with her allure.

"Kasper?" she said his name softly, and he felt it caress his soul.

"You feel it too, don't you?" he asked, not sure what he wanted her answer to be.

Her nod was all it took. He couldn't hold back the smile as he lowered his head.

"Oh." She sighed, moving up onto her tiptoes to meet him.

His mouth brushed hers gently, barely touching. Once, twice, before closing in over hers. His lips were soft and warm. They teased as his tongue traced the seam of hers asking for entry, which she gave instantly. She moaned, her hands fisting in his shirt. He abruptly pulled back, taking a deep breath as he held her an arms length away until she was steady on her feet.

She looked for some sign of what he was feeling, but his face was blank. She needed to say something. "Um..."

"I'll see you Friday." He grabbed his bag and was gone.

"A love 'em and leave 'em type, just what I need." She dropped onto the couch with a laugh, wondering if she'd be able to think of anything but him until Friday.

### Chapter Three

He'd kissed her, breaking every rule he had about not getting involved with clients. Now he knew why. Two days of lunging every time the phone rang, hoping it would be her, had him cursing all women. After years of being hit on by some of the most beautiful, influential women, and a few men, he made his move on one who couldn't even be bothered to call him.

*Damn it.* He shouldn't have kissed her until he had a better read on her. It wasn't like him to make rash decisions, which should have told him right off that she was going to be trouble. Still, he couldn't bring himself to think of it as a mistake. From the beginning, he'd thought she was different. Could he possibly have been so off? It didn't fit, and he'd be damned if he'd just sit here and pretend it did. He wanted answers, and he was going to get them, one way or another. Signing off of his computer, he grabbed her file and stomped out of the room.

\* \* \*

Alfred knew Charles Balker was a smart man. It was one of the reasons he'd thrown so much business his way over the years. Going over his will was a lame excuse, but it got him into the office without drawing too much attention. Just knowing his greedy family was watching Harley made him want to whisk her off into the night, but Balker had sworn it would be a huge mistake. He'd said this Kasper Drake would know how to handle them. But if Kasper was reacting to his meeting with Harley anything like she was, then they had a lot to talk about before he let the man have unlimited intimate access to her.

"Alfred, she needs to know now," Charles repeated like a broken record.

Ending Charles' plea with a shake of his head, Alfred moved on to more immediate issues. "I want to give her a few days to absorb things. Your man Kasper, you're sure he can do this?"

"Do what?" came the strident question from the doorway, followed by an angry growl and the slam of the door.

Alfred spared the man a sideways glance, knowing anything more would be showing too much of his hand. Charles, however, jumped from his seat so fast you would have thought a spring stabbed his stiff ass. Like a hunter sensing the weaker of the prey, Kasper stalked the other man around his desk. Alfred would have laughed, if the situation hadn't been getting increasingly out of hand.

"My granddaughter is in some trouble," he said, pleased when Kasper turned on him.

Hands clenched, the man seemed to grow larger before him. "Where is she?"

"She's at work and before you rush out of here to rescue the damsel in distress, there's a few things you need to know." He motioned to the chair next to his.

Kasper's chest felt tight and his throat dry. What the hell was wrong with him? Sitting in the chair, he rolled his shoulders, forcing himself not to crack his knuckles. *Focus.* The old man wasn't freaked out, but he wasn't relaxed either. His uncle, on the other hand, looked like he was one step from panicking.

"Mr. Taizer, I want to know what the hell is going on. Right now," he demanded, stabbing his finger into the arm of the chair.

"I told you to call me Alfred. Harley has some *issues* from her past that are sneaking up on her with the intent of wreaking havoc on her life. I refuse to let that happen." He watched as Alfred nodded at Balker, who pulled a file out of his desk.

“What is it, an old boyfriend?” He took the file and when neither man answered, he flipped it open, quickly perused the info, and groaned. “Shit. Why wasn’t I told about this the other day?”

“About a month ago, you did the initial review. We didn’t find anything on our end, but we’ve been watching the account daily for activity since then. That latest attempt was just this morning,” Balker explained, fiddling with his tie clip.

“She knows about the first inquiry. She’s also aware of who and why. Truthfully, the who didn’t come as much of a surprise,” her grandfather said, the muscle in his jaw ticking, showing he wasn’t as calm as Kasper originally thought.

“Why haven’t they come to you?” Kasper asked, tapping the file against his knee.

“Two reasons. One, I would have told the greedy vultures to go straight to hell. Two, that money is Harley’s. I’ve given those materialistic fools more than enough over the years.” Alfred said, with a conviction that impressed Kasper.

“To make matters worse, Alfred bought her a brand new car for her birthday.” Balker acknowledged Alfred’s glare raising his arms in frustration, waving them in the air.

“She needed it,” Alfred explained, and Balker nodded in agreement.

Kasper rubbed the back of his neck. “In order to help her, I need to know everything, and so does she.”

Alfred’s pocket chose that minute to start ringing. He excused himself, moving across the room to take the call.

“How far are they willing to go?” Kasper asked Balker, wondering if the threat was physical, as well as emotional.

“He’s not sure. I don’t think they’ve ever given Harley much thought,” his uncle said, glancing at Alfred.

*Shit.* Remembering the look on her face when asked about her next of kin, he cringed. He must have come off as a real jerk. Okay, an uninformed jerk, but a jerk nonetheless.

“When did she go to live with Alfred?” he asked, keeping his face blank.

“The day she was born, but she belonged to him before that.” Balker shook his head, emitting a harrumph.

“Where is she now?” Alfred’s worried tone silenced both Kasper and Charles.

Alfred’s face turned red, as his cheeks puffed out. It was obvious something was wrong. Kasper wished he could hear what the other person was saying.

“I could care less about that, woman, where is my granddaughter?” Alfred seethed, squeezing the cell phone so hard his knuckles turned white.

Kasper was surprised the phone didn’t snap in two. He watched Alfred nod. His instincts told him things had just taken a turn for the worse. She needed someone to keep an eye on her, at least until they got this situation resolved. He had no problem stepping in and being the one by her side.

“Keep her there. I’m on my way.” Snapping the phone shut, he turned to Kasper. “There was an incident. If you’re free right now, I’d like you to come with me.”

Harley couldn’t stop her hands from shaking. Taking slow deep breaths hadn’t helped. She’d never come that close to striking someone, and that made her even more furious. For the second time this week, her emotions almost got the better of her. Maybe Grandpa was right. If she took a vacation for a little while, it would give her a chance to come to terms with the changes in her life. More importantly, it would help her to avoid any more spectacles like this.

Not forever, but at least until she decided how to deal with them.

She hated scenes, especially ones that involved her. Knowing her co-workers had been witnesses made her feel like she was going to throw up. She needed to get out of there, but that wasn't going to happen any time soon. Her boss was clucking around outside her office like a worried mother hen.

Dropping into the chair, she closed her eyes, trying to think of something that would take her mind off her troubles. She groaned as her rebellious mind conjured up her other problem, and not the tame business version, either. Nope, her wicked subconscious pulled out the rougher, sexier specimen she'd created. Mmm... Kasper Drake could be a delicious distraction, but he was also another dilemma she wasn't sure how to handle. Why couldn't he have been the nerdy, academic type she was used to?

*Because if he had been, you wouldn't have given him a second thought,* a little voice in her head teased. Okay, so she'd been playing safe. There was nothing wrong with that. She could admit that she hadn't been ready to take a risk with her heart. And now, with so much going on, she still wasn't sure the timing was right.

Following Alfred into the building, Kasper let the man take the lead for now. A woman, short and stout, with hanging cheeks reminding him of a bulldog, stood a few feet away, nervously wringing her hands. Spotting them, she rushed over. Kasper looked around noticing that a few others were blatantly watching them.

"Abigail, I'm sorry for my harshness earlier," Alfred said gently, patting her shoulder. "Where is she now?"

"She hasn't left her office. Alfred, who was that evil woman?" Abigail asked, her voice full of concern.

"We'll talk about that later. Right now, we need to see Harley," he said, deflecting her question like a pro as they headed for Harley's office.

A quick knock was all the warning Alfred gave her as he pushed open the door, entering the room. Wanting to give them a moment alone, Kasper hesitated before following him in. She was lying across one of those huge overstuffed chairs. Her head was resting on one of the arms, her legs thrown over the other. It was her bare feet that caught his attention, her toes specifically. The nails were painted a bright orange color that matched the stones winking at him from the ring on the second toe of each foot. Looking over the rest of her, he was surprised to see they matched her shirt perfectly.

Alfred gave her shoulder a shake. "Wake up, sweetheart."

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled, which sucked all the air from Kasper's lungs. The unschooled, sleepy smile struck him like an arrow to his heart. Would there ever come a day when she would look at him like that?

"Grandpa, what are you doing here?" She sat up, sliding her feet into the black, low-heeled shoes beside the chair.

"Abigail was worried, so she called me. I brought Kasper along so we could all talk." He inclined his head toward Kasper, and Kasper couldn't help frowning when her smile slipped.

"Why? Grandpa I think we can handle things just fine on our own." She got to her feet.

"I think we could use some help. I think I should have done something about your parents long ago. I will not have them harassing you." He pulled her into his arms for a hard hug.

"Can we talk about this at home?" she said against his chest.

Kasper decided it was time for him to put in his two cents. "I'll be going with you."

Pulling out of Alfred's embrace, she turned on him with narrowed eyes. "I can find my

way home on my own.”

“Harley,” her grandfather warned in a low, fierce tone.

She closed her eyes for a second. When she opened them, she was once again under control. “Sorry. Mr. Drake, I assure you that really won’t be necessary.”

Ignoring her, he turned to Alfred. “I’d like you to follow us as closely as you can.”

“Fine.” Alfred gave Harley a look Kasper couldn’t understand.

Grabbing her purse off the hook on the back of the door, she turned back to them with the worst fake smile Kasper had ever seen. Alfred walked over, opened the door, and paused to kiss her on the cheek before he exited. Kasper watched her chin rising and body stiffing with each step he took toward her. He wanted to promise her he wouldn’t bite, but he wasn’t sure it was a promise he’d be able to keep. He motioned for her to go first, closing the door behind them.

Following her out of the building, he began to put the final pieces of the puzzle into place. His conclusion was that Harley wasn’t a good girl by nature, but by practice. She had shown glimpses of her temper, and then quickly apologized. He’d also seen the way she looked at him when she thought he wasn’t looking. She saw something she liked. The burning question was, why was she hiding the real her?

It was like her choice in clothing. The funky jeans and t-shirt, the beyond ugly skirt and sweater combo, and today’s sleek blouse and trousers. Which one was the real Harley Taizer? Going by the toenails and rings, he was going with funky. She pressed the button on her key chain, unlocking her car.

Lights flashed and beeping came from her cherry red Chevy Blazer. He could have been an ass and demanded she let him drive, but for some reason, he climbed in on the passenger side without a word. She pulled out slowly, checking the mirror, making sure her grandfather was behind them. They needed to get a few things straight between them before they sat down with her grandfather.

“How much do you know?” she asked calmly, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Not enough. Your grandfather came to me because he thinks you need help.” He turned up the radio and started pressing the station buttons.

“If you’re done playing with that, could we talk?” She slapped his hand away from the controls.

“No thanks. Don’t you like rock n’ roll?” he asked, reaching for the “Seek” button.

She gave him a minute to find something he liked. He started singing with the radio, so she reached over and shut it off. She groaned when he starting humming the rest of the song. *Why wasn’t he talking to her?*

“What made my grandfather think you could help?” She added something just short of a snort, hoping to get a rise out of him.

He just glanced in his mirror. His silence wasn’t helping matters. *Why were men so stubborn?* She took a deep breath before trying again.

“Listen, my grandfather may think he knows what’s best for me, and I’m woman enough to admit that in a lot of cases he’s right. However, that doesn’t mean I’m going to let you two go through with whatever your stupid plan is.”

He made a noise that sounded like a smothered laugh. Harley counted to ten, looked over at him and he did it again. He’d gone from kissing her, to ignoring her. Just as well, she thought, turning the radio back on twice as loud. He reached over and snapped it off. Shrugging her shoulders, they finished the ride in silence.

Grandpa pulled into the driveway right behind her, and they walked towards the house

with Kasper trailing behind. Grandpa hung his coat by the door and headed for his office. Kasper closed the front door and followed him. Kicking off her shoes, she headed for the kitchen, which happened to be in the opposite direction. She wouldn't dignify their he-man attitudes with her presence. Grabbing a soda, she took the stairs up to her room. Setting her drink on her desk, she began booting up her computer.

Going to her dresser, she grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, dropping them onto the bed. She undid her trousers, letting them slide to the floor, and kicking them aside. She had her shirt halfway over her head, when she heard the door slam behind her. She jumped, emitting a little squeal as she turned her head. She was surprised to find Kasper standing there staring at her. Yanking the shirt the rest of the way off, she held it to her chest, spinning around. He smiled and it infuriated her.

"Get out." She pointed to the door with her hand that happened to be holding the shirt, exposing herself.

Gasping, she quickly covered herself again, waiting for him to leave. His eyes flashed as he leaned back against the door, crossing his arms over that broad chest. Unable to stop herself from looking, she lowered her eyes to his zipper. Seeing that he was aroused made her heart race. Feeling her nipples harden, she turned her back on him, reaching for the t-shirt she'd tossed onto the bed to try and hide her reaction from him. His tie flew past her head, landing on the bed next to her pants. She was tempted to look over her shoulder, but couldn't bring herself to do it. Sticking her hands into the shirt, she began to slip it over her head, only to be stopped when he grabbed her wrists, pulling her arms back down. He stood so close; she had to tip her chin up in order to look him in the eyes. He had a good three or four inches over her own five-nine.

"Kasper?" she asked, wondering if he really thought this was a good idea. She wasn't so sure.

He just smiled before pressing his lips to hers. This time, there was no gentleness in his kiss. It was a hard, punishing meshing of their mouths. His tongue demanded entry and she sighed, giving it without thinking twice. Though he was kissing her, and he had her hands trapped in his, there was too much distance between the rest of their bodies. Every time she moved to close it, he would make a growling sound and move away. Finally, he pulled his mouth from hers, but not until both of them were panting for air.

"You should have called." He backed towards the door.

"Kasper—" she said, her heart pounding in her ears, as she grabbed onto his shirt to stop him from leaving.

He shook his head, lowering his eyes to the floor, as he peeled her hands off. "Get dressed and come downstairs."

"But I—"

"Harley, your grandfather is very upset, even though he's acting more like he's angry. Just get downstairs. You have three minutes." He looked at his watch, and then back at her, and with a nod, he was gone.

She stood there staring at the door unable to move. Her mind, however, was spinning. He'd seen her practically naked. Okay, so some women wore less to the beach, but still she wasn't used to men barging into her personal space, kissing the breath out of her, and then walking away.

And how dare he tell her what to do? *If he thought she was going to let him boss her around, he was in for some mighty big surprises.* She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her shirt over her head. Standing, she grabbed her pants, knowing that he was right about one thing.

She needed to go downstairs and deal with her grandfather before this all got out of hand.

## Chapter Four

Kasper dropped to the steps, putting his head between his knees. He should have knocked right away, but her back had been to him and he wanted a minute to check out her personal space. How was he to know she was going to drop her pants right then? He couldn't tear his eyes from her bare legs. They led to an ass that clearly had some shape to it, and womanly hips a man could hold onto. When she started pulling up her shirt, his dick had surged so hard against his zipper, he was surprised it was still intact.

Seeing her standing there with her arms above her head, wearing nothing but bright orange panties, cut high on the thigh, barely covering her ass, and a matching bra, he'd lost it. Stepping over the imaginary line and into her room, he cursed himself for a fool. She'd turned around, gasping when she saw him standing there. Her lace-covered breasts heaved with her gasp, and their hardened nipples poking into the fabric made his palms itch, begging him to touch her.

He'd never entered a woman's bedroom without an invitation before, but there was always a first time for everything. And he'd always left if he was asked to, which hadn't happened since he was in high school. Shit, that was the second time he kissed her without an invitation. It didn't matter that she hadn't put up a fight once he got started. Well what did she think would happen when she looked at a man that way? She'd gotten a good enough look to know he was up for anything she had in mind. She made him react without thinking and that could be dangerous. God, he could have taken her right there. What the hell had gotten into him?

*Fuck! She must think I'm some kind of animal,* he thought ruefully. The last thing she needed in her life was someone who couldn't control himself. Actually, he thought, smiling as he got to his feet, maybe that was exactly what she did need. Someone to show her it was okay to let go once on a while. She certainly hadn't wanted to let him go.

Harley quickly logged into her computer. She punched in "top ten vacation sites for singles" in the search window and hit "go." While the information was loading, she slipped on her shirt and pants, quickly grabbing a thick pair of socks from the basket by her bed. Reading the list as she stuck her feet into the socks, she found a resort that looked good to her and hit "print."

Printout in hand, she headed for Grandpa's study. They were sitting there waiting for her. She knew she needed to do this before either of them got started.

Taking a deep breath, she placed the paper in front of her grandfather. "I'm taking your suggestion. I'm going to go away for a few weeks until I get things together."

"That's not a viable option anymore," Kasper said with a shake of his head.

"Excuse me, Mr. Drake; I don't think you have any say in this. Grandpa, to be honest you don't either." She softened her blow with a smile.

"I know that, but if your *mother* has her way, you'll be handing over that money the day you hit twenty-six." He said the word "mother" like he'd just swallowed a mouthful of vinegar.

"*Harley*," Kasper said, giving her a wink as he crossed his arms across his broad chest, "you are not going anywhere. Alfred, don't you think her mother will follow her on her little trip, or worse, send someone else?"

Fine, he wanted her grandfather in on how close they were. No problem. "Listen, Kasper, just because you kissed me doesn't mean you get a say in this. Grandpa, where I'm going she won't be able to follow me."

"Harley, I don't think I like the idea of you taking a vacation alone right now." Grandpa

shook his head.

Kasper shot to his feet, pulling the paper out of her grandfather's hand. For a big man, he sure could move quick. She sat in his seat with a smile. *Take that*, she thought, giving herself an imaginary high five. He read the paper, crushing the edge in his hand and tossed it onto her grandfather's desk before rounding on her.

"H-he kissed you?" Her grandfather swiveled his head between them as her barb registered, hitting its mark, saving her from whatever Kasper had been about to say.

"Twice," she said, digging Kasper a hole she hoped he wouldn't be able to get out of. She didn't know exactly what she expected his reaction to be, but the slacked jawed surprised expression wasn't even close. Nor was his questioning of her behavior.

She watched her grandfather's mouth open a close like a fish gasping for air before he managed a raspy, "And you let him?"

"He didn't exactly ask my permission." She ignored Kasper's loud groan.

"Damn it! This doesn't help, you know." Her grandfather turned on Kasper, who merely nodded. "You two will have to deal with that later."

She wanted to lie and say there was nothing to deal with, but Kasper's smile said it all. She figured that he was taking her grandfather's willingness to stay out of it, as approval.

"Harley, your mother and/or father, hired someone to do the investigation. What makes you think they won't hire someone to follow you?" Kasper shot the first of several holes in her plan.

"Honey, what did your mother say to you? Exactly, don't leave anything out." Her grandfather cast a knowing look at Kasper.

"I asked her what she wanted, and she said since you are getting old, it was time to start planning your estate."

"The greedy bitch." He seethed, waving her on.

"She said they had been planning on telling me to ask for the house so I could sell it, giving her and my father the profits."

"Did she say where you were supposed to live?" Kasper asked in a low tone.

Shaking her head, she went on with her story. "She said you didn't give her enough for me. And since I've had such a cushy life, I should give whatever you're leaving me to her."

"It doesn't sound like she has all the information," Kasper said, filing away her comments about her so-called cushy life, and wondering what kind of agreement Alfred had made to get his granddaughter.

"She's too lazy to be the brains behind this. My son, on the other hand, is just as lazy, but he's smart. I always said if his mother had just let me have the boy, things would have been different, but your grandmother was just as greedy as my daughter-in-law, with a double dose of stubborn thrown in. Thank God you're nothing like them," Alfred boasted, smiling at her.

"What do you mean by 'he's smart'?" Kasper wanted to know as much as possible about his opponent.

"He looks for advantages. When he met his wife, an only child, and learned her daddy owned a big car dealership, he couldn't marry her fast enough." Alfred looked at the floor shaking his head.

"So he married her for the money." Kasper grimaced, wondering for the first time if Harley though he was interested in her for the money, which she wouldn't once they really got to know each other.

"Yes and no. When she turned up pregnant, her father demanded it," Harley filled in

before her grandfather could answer. “Look, I really don’t care why they want the money, or how they plan to get it. I’m a big girl and I can deal with it.”

“Harley—” they shouted in unison as she slammed the door.

“The girl has spirit.” Her grandfather laughed, surprising Kasper, since he thought she was hiding it from the old man.

“She hides it well.” Kasper rolled his eyes.

“I have to tell you, I love pushing her buttons,” Alfred admitted with a laugh.

“I think I’m going to enjoy locating those buttons.” Kasper wondered how long it would take to find them all.

Alfred cleared his throat. “Now, about this kissing... She didn’t seem offended.”

“No sir, she didn’t.” He smiled, remembering the way she melted in his embrace, trying to get closer.

\* \* \*

After a night of the hottest, most erotic dreams of her life, it was obvious to her that passion was another one of those pesky emotions she was going to have to work on controlling. That, and ignoring the gorgeous man she was surprised to find sitting in her kitchen at seven o’clock in the morning, drinking coffee with her grandfather, and looking so comfortable you’d think he did it every day. Kasper’s eyes went wide, giving a boost to her ego.

Thank God, she’d chosen to get dressed before coming down. Even better that she’d picked a flirty yellow and green tie-dyed skirt that ended mid-thigh and tight, yellow tank top that showed a lot of skin.

“Morning, beautiful.” Her grandfather lifted his cheek for his customary morning kiss.

“Morning. The coffee smells great.” She groaned, rolling her eyes, and trying not to laugh at Kasper’s goofy grin as he emulated her grandfather’s position.

“Harsh,” he said, and she snorted in response.

“Grandpa, I was thinking about taking the day off.” She poured herself a large mug of coffee. “Mmm... this is wonderful.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you like it,” Kasper said, puffing out his chest like a proud chipmunk that had scored a huge nut.

Giggling, she choked a little.

Her grandfather leaned over and patted her on the back. “You okay?”

“Swallowed it wrong,” she fibbed, wiping her mouth with a napkin. Looking at Kasper, she asked, “What time did you get here?”

“He never left. We got caught up in watching a movie and he fell asleep on the couch,” her grandfather explained, glancing at Kasper who was shaking his head.

“I’m not going to start our relationship with a lie. As a matter of fact, I promise to be as truthful with you as I can. We decided I should stick around and see if you were willing to talk this morning,” Kasper said calmly.

“Relationship?” She dropped the muffin she’d just picked up onto her lap.

“I think you two should talk. I’ll see you after class,” her grandfather said, leaving the room.

“So we’ve jumped from a couple of kisses to a full blown relationship.” She laughed nervously. “We barely know each other.”

“I plan on changing that.” He winked.

He was too much, she thought, carrying her cup to the sink. “I still think it’s too soon to call anything that happened between us a relationship.”

“Okay, when I finally take you, what would you like to call it then?” He followed her to the sink.

“What makes you think you’ll be the one doing the taking?” she asked, her wayward tongue getting ahead of her brain.

Suddenly, he gripped her waist, pulling her back against him. His erection was unmistakable as he rocked his hips against her ass. She moaned loudly, dropping her head back against his shoulder. With a slight nudge from him, she tilted her head, sighing as he began nibbling on her neck. Against her will, her shoulders rose and she shivered. She’d never been driven to the point where she really let herself go, but she pretty sure she was getting close. This was absolutely insane. They barely knew each other, yet their bodies seemed so in tune to each other. Needing to support her weak knees, she pressed her palms to the counter.

His left arm moved across her shoulders, holding her in place, while his right hand slid down her thigh using his finger to raise her skirt, bit by bit. Finally reaching skin, it was his turn to moan. Loud and rough, the sound filled the room. Having him react so fiercely made her feel powerful, though he was in complete control at the moment. His hand cupped her mound, his fingers creating a delicious friction as he rubbed her through the thin layer of cotton and lace her panties provided. She couldn’t stop herself from squirming against his hand. His other hand moved to her breast, squeezing as he lightly tugged on the hardened peak. It wasn’t enough, yet it was too much.

“Not only am I going to take, you’re going to let me,” he growled in her ear.

“Now,” she whispered, half plea, half question.

Physically, she was ready. He could feel how wet she was, her panties were drenched. Her ragged breathing made her breast rise and fall against his arm. It was possible he could get her off right now, but something perverse in him had him holding back. He wanted more than her body, he wanted all of her.

“Do we have a relationship?” he asked, guessing she wouldn’t be ready to admit it yet.

The rapid shaking of her head told him he was right. He slid his hands back to her hips as he eased his body away from hers. She fell forward, dropping her head on her arms, putting them in a position many a man would crave. Letting go, he had to turn away. It was one of the hardest things he’d ever done, and he hoped he wouldn’t have to do it again. He walked to the doorway giving her some space, and himself a few minutes to get his body under control.

“Okay, you proved your point. We’re attracted to each other,” she admitted softly.

Somebody started pounding furiously on the front door while leaning heavily on the doorbell making her jump. Harley sighed shakily and turned, heading for the door. He followed, hot on her heels, and from the look she shot him over her shoulder, she wasn’t surprised. If anything, she looked relieved to have the backup.

## Chapter Five

Harley opened the door and came face to face with her father. Stunned by his appearance she faltered, taking a step backwards right into Kasper's hard chest. Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, he tucked her safely into his side, giving her a reassuring squeeze. The man looked at the way his hand was stroking her shoulder and his face turned an interesting shade of purple.

"Can we help you?" Kasper asked, noticing the family resemblance right off.

Not to her, but to Alfred. It was the eyes and chin that gave him away. He was tall, thin, and fit. Mildly handsome, but that could be the navy blue power suit giving him a helping hand. What was the man doing here?

"W-where is A-Alfred?" he choked out, trying unsuccessfully to see over Kasper's shoulder into the house.

"Your *father* is out for the day." Kasper smiled, watching the other man's mouth open and close like a fish.

Kasper waited for him to acknowledge Harley. Maybe say "hello," but the man seemed more focused on him. Harley was stiff under his touch, but outwardly, she hadn't shown any signs of distress. Leaning down, he kissed the top of her head, earning a smile that seemed to irritate her father even more.

"Who are you?" the man asked, and Kasper got the feeling he was being sized up by his opponent.

"Kasper Drake." He didn't bother to extend his hand.

"And, as of five minutes ago, my fiancé," Harley said with a smile, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Al-Alfred approves of this union?" he asked, finally looking at his daughter.

"Actually, he's the one who introduced us." Kasper preferred to stick to as much of the truth as possible.

In his present state, with his eyes bulging and his face beet red, Harley almost expected steam to begin whistling out of his ears at any moment. He looked away from them, taking a few audible ragged breaths and running his hand through his hair.

He turned back, giving Kasper a twisted smile before saying, "He's doing this just to spite me."

"It couldn't possibly be that he's doing this for her happiness?" Kasper narrowed his eyes at the other man.

"Everything he does is for her benefit, but that's going to change. There's not a day that goes by that I don't regret my decision," he professed loudly, nearly spitting on them as he spoke.

"I think you should go, and not come back unless you're invited." Kasper spoke in a tone that demanded no negotiations.

"This has nothing to do with you," her father said angrily, before stomping off toward the brand new black Cadillac sitting in the driveway.

"What decision?" Kasper asked, but she just shook her head.

"Man, he's gotten old," Harley said, watching him speed off.

"When was the last time you saw him?" Kasper ushered her back into the house.

"Umm... I think I was sixteen or seventeen. He was with my mother at a restaurant downtown." She shrugged her shoulders, acting as though it didn't matter, but her voice was tight, like she was struggling with her emotions.

“So, future Mrs. Drake, do we have a relationship now?” He waggled his eyebrows, trying to lighten the mood.

Her cheeks turned an attractive shade of red. “I’m sorry, I have no idea where that came from.”

“I once heard someone say that if you rattled off something without thinking about it, that deep inside your subconscious, very deep in your case, you’ve been thinking or wondering about it.” He rocked back on his heels with a smug smile she wanted to knock off his pretty face.

“Thinking about something like that could give a girl nightmares,” she teased playfully.

His smile widened as he shook his head, taking a step towards her. Instinctively, she stepped back. “And you could give a guy a complex with all that negativity, but I—”

“Have an ego that can deal with a little deflation.” She laughed, picturing him with a shrunken head.

“You haven’t answered my question.” He stalked her around the room with a sexy glint in his eyes.

“Oh, did you ask me something?” She put her finger on her cheek batting her eyes, her inner imp escaping before she could stop her.

“Harley, have you ever had a spanking?”

“Never,” she said, tilting her chin up, her imp taking a defiant turn. The look on his face sent a sudden surge of heat through her whole body.

He reached for her, his laugh a hearty, rough sound that made his face look softer and more touchable. “Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” She realized instantly that it was the worst thing she could have said.

He shifted to the left, giving her the briefest indication of his intent, just before he lunged at her. Feinting to the right, she took off running. He followed her down the hall, his laughter egging her on. She took the steps two at a time and ran into the bathroom, closing the hallway door behind her.

Opening the other door, she emerged into her bedroom and screamed. “Yaaaah!”

Kasper stood there rubbing his hands together, and wearing a cocky smile. “Thought you could get away, did you?”

“How did you know there was another door?” She held her hand to her chest, trying to still her racing heart.

“Honey, I’m paid to notice all the details. I’ve noticed a lot about you. Like the way you make those little noises when you’re excited. Or the fact that you’re not really the good girl you work so hard to be.”

“And here I assumed you were a computer geek.” She teased, smiling.

“Your grandfather says if you assume things—” he started, but she jumped in finishing for him, “I make an ass out of u and me. Yeah, I know, it’s one of his favorite sayings.”

They laughed as he pulled her into his arms, backing her into the wall and pinning her there with his body. “Now it’s time for my answer.”

She released a shaky breath. “What exactly would this so-called relationship entail?”

“Exclusivity for starters. Pretend or not, I don’t share—ever.” He breathed, “I…want to…get to…know you,” trailing kisses along her shoulder to that sensitive spot right below her ear, taking time to nibble on the curve of her neck.

“Mmm… I think you just want me.” She surprised him by grabbing the belt loops at his waist, holding tightly as she rocked her hips into his.

“All of you,” he demanded, taking her mouth in a hard breath-stealing kiss.

One of them was going to give in, and he'd be damned if it was going to be him. If she caved, maybe they'd both be getting lucky tonight. If not, he'd definitely be sleeping alone. Either way, nothing was going to happen until she initiated it. Well, nothing other than some really extraordinary kissing. Slowly he eased his mouth from hers. Leaning back, he took a deep breath.

“Well?” he asked, watching her eyes flutter open.

Guilt assailed him. How could he ask her to make a choice like this when he kept confusing her? He didn't want her making a decision when she was feeling overwhelmed. He wanted her to be thinking clearly. She sagged against the wall when he stepped away. Pressing her trembling fingers to her lips, she looked up at him. She seemed so shaken by his kiss; he had to take it as a good sign.

“Don't answer now, take your time and think about it. Knowing how good you kiss, I know I'll be spending a lot of time wondering what else you're good at.” He winked, hoping that teasing her would lighten things.

She gasped and he laughed at her shocked expression. “Get your mind out of the gutter, or bedroom, as the case may be. I was talking about cooking, vacuuming, or doing dishes.”

“You're a male chauvinist.” She pushed herself off the wall, a fresh spark gleaming in her eyes.

“No, just a typical male. I'll clean if I have to, but who wouldn't want to have someone do it for them?” Not that he did housework, he had a cleaning lady that came in twice a week for that.

“Any other flaws I should be made aware of before I make my choice?” She tilted her head.

“Nope, can't you tell? I'm practically perfect.” He held his arms out to the side, letting her look her fill.

The loose khakis that showed off his tapered waist adequately concealed the firm ass and thighs she'd felt earlier. And the plain white, button-down dress shirt that stretched across his broad chest begged her to rip it off. Not to mention those penetrating eyes, and ruggedly handsome face, topped off by the mop of dark, wavy hair she wanted to run her hands through.

“I'm happy to see you agree. I have a few calls to make. I'll be in Alfred's study if you need me.” He turned towards the door, letting her check out his ass, too.

“And modest. You know, you don't have to stay. I'm okay on my own.” She lowered her gaze to the floor, still embarrassed by the earlier visit by her father.

Using his finger, he tipped up her chin and pressed a sweet kiss to her nose. “Listen and listen good. Whether or not we go forward on a personal level, I'm sticking around until I know you've gotten rid of the bloodsuckers.”

Her laugh was high-pitched. “That could take years.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it. You know something sweetheart, most arranged marriages last lifetimes. Your grandfather picked out the perfect man for you,” he teased, heading for the door.

“Yeah, well just so you know, he's always said how much he can't wait to have two or three great-grandsons,” she yelled, as he hit the hallway.

“I'm not a man to refuse a challenge, so be careful what you ask for.” His voice drifted off into laughter.

The man was dangerous. He had the ability to make her forget everything but him. She

wanted him, that was plain to see, but she was having a hard time figuring out why he wanted her. Beyond the obvious physical connection they had, was there anything else? Did they have anything in common? *Food, books, movies were all a big part of peoples' lives*, she thought, dropping on to her bed, staring at the ceiling. Could two people have a relationship if they had none of those in common?

Other than being good at making coffee, she had no idea if the man cooked at all. Her cooking was passable, but nothing to write home about. Was he joking about not cleaning unless he had to? If things did progress, he'd have to agree to move in here, because she'd never leave Grandpa all alone. God, what was she thinking? For crying out loud, the man put the strangest ideas into her head. She closed her eyes, picturing her garden and thinking about other flowers she could plant.

\* \* \*

Alfred molded young minds as a profession, but it was also his passion. Looking out at twenty or so young faces, he smiled, feeling in his element.

"So you see, history tends to repeat itself unless those involved learn from their mistakes."

"I've learned from mine," a familiar, unwelcome voice said from the back of the room. His good mood plummeting, Alfred mumbled, "I wish."

He wondered what his son was doing there. Knowing whatever it was couldn't be good; he decided not to submit his students to what he figured could be a very tacky public display.

"Class, that will be all for today. Study chapters three through six for Friday," he called out, as they all packed up and left the room.

Watching as the biggest disappointment in his life headed his way; he wished for the billionth time that things had turned out differently. He wasn't his spitting image, but there was enough of a resemblance that most people made the connection. His eyes watered and he blinked furiously to keep the tears at bay. He should have been his legacy.

That part of his life was over. Some things could never be changed. Harley was his legacy now, he reminded himself. She was his pride and joy. His ex-wife, son, or daughter in-law's greedy ways would never touch her.

"Afraid to talk in front of your students? Don't want them to know you bought your granddaughter?" His son's snide remark cut right to the quick.

"I had hopes that you'd change your mind, given the time to do so. I gave you chance after chance, but you threw them all away because you're an idiot," Alfred said, letting him know just what a fool he thought he was.

That calculating smile he'd grown to hate over the years spread across his son's face. "So there would be no trouble if someone was to tell the Dean that you bribed your son and daughter in-law into having a child neither of them wanted, and then paid thirty thousand dollars for them to sign all parental rights over to you the day she was born?"

"First off, he knows all of it. What would you have done if I hadn't offered to pay all those expenses you kept complaining about, and hadn't given you that money?" Seeing the spite flash in his son's eyes, Alfred's own anger spiked.

"None of that matters anymore. I know that somehow you managed to squirrel away all that money for *her*. Rightfully, it should have been mine. I'm your son, damn it!" he yelled, slamming his hand on the podium.

“When it gets you something you want, and according to your mother, I have two daughters as well,” Alfred scoffed, knowing she’d had her share of gentleman friends, so there was a good chance they weren’t his. “Well, it doesn’t matter where that money came from, it’s hers. You’ll never get your hands on it. By the way, I want you and her mother to stay the hell away from her.”

“Her fiancé issued me a similar warning. I will go wherever I damn well please. Neither of you have any hold over me.” His words were filled disdain.

Alfred’s head reeled. Looking at his son’s twisted smirk made him sick to his stomach. Harley had no fiancé. “Maybe we don’t, but Harley’s no pushover. She won’t give you what you want.”

“We’ll all just have to wait and see,” his son declared in a singsong tone as he left the room.

Alfred threw his books and papers into his satchel. He didn’t care who knew the truth, but it would crush Harley if people knew that her parents had never wanted her. The Dean of Finance waved in his direction and Alfred nodded, rushing to his car. He had to get home and make sure Harley was okay, and find out what this fiancé nonsense was all about.

## Chapter Six

Kasper spent a few hours clearing his schedule so he could give Harley all his undivided attention. He needed to do was call his uncle. Taking a seat at Alfred's desk, he picked up the phone and punched in his number. After a few quick words with the secretary, he was put through.

"Kasper, damn it, what the hell is going on?" His uncle asked, his concern clearly evident.

"Everything's fine." He tried to assure him, but his uncle wasn't easily pacified.

"No, it's not. Your father called here this morning. But that's neither here nor there. You better not be playing with that girl, you hear me." His voice grew stronger with each word.

Kasper took a deep breath keeping his tone calm as he replied, "I'm not playing with her. And don't worry about my parents. I'll call and talk to them."

"Just do me a favor and keep me in the loop," his uncle said in a pleading voice.

Kasper laughed, knowing that sitting on the sidelines must be killing his uncle. "I will. And Charlie, thanks for the assignment of my life."

"Boy, you deserve it," he said, laughing as he hung up.

He laughed himself, and as he checked Alfred's computer, he was pleased to find it had a basic internet connection. Logging onto his system, he quickly checked his account, transferring enough into his checking to last at least a month. He'd just finished his call to make arrangements with the cleaning lady to come in only once a week, since he didn't plan on being there that often, when Alfred walked in.

Red faced, and a little panicky, he poked his head into the room, glancing around. "Where is she?"

"Up in her room. Alfred, what's wrong?" he asked, following him up the stairs.

He said nothing as he rushed to her door, knocking until she opened it. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Grandpa, what's wrong?" Harley gripped his hand, tugging him into the bedroom and into her desk chair.

"I should have known he was just trying to get my goat." Alfred shook his head.

Kasper folded his arms across his chest. "Who?"

"Her father. As soon as he said she had a fiancé I should have known he was full of bull, but I guess I panicked." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiping his sweat-covered brow adding, "I mean, Harley would have told me something like that. Wouldn't you, sweetheart?" Alfred looked up at her for confirmation.

Kasper looked over at her, too, waiting to see how she talked her way out of this. She looked at him, her eyes wide, her mouth hanging slightly open. Damn it, she was actually speechless. Had she thought it wouldn't get back to him? It would have been funny, if her grandfather weren't so worried.

"Of course she would, if she had known. I told him I was her fiancé, hoping it might help to dispel his thinking he had the upper hand." He took control, and the blame, as well.

"He did say you told him not to come around anymore." Alfred seemed to relax a bit. At least, his face wasn't as red.

"I figured he didn't know me, so my sudden appearance would throw a monkey wrench into whatever plans he may have. If nothing else, it gives the three of us time to come up with a plan of our own." He glanced over at Harley with a smile.

Getting to his feet, Alfred slapped him on the shoulder. "You're quick on your feet. He'll

do well, won't he darling?"

"Oh yes, he'll do just fine," she said, and Kasper hoped she meant as more than just her protector. He wanted to be her lover as well.

"And as I told Harley, I'm not going anywhere until this is all taken care of." He braced himself mentally and physically for her dismissal, smiling when it didn't come.

"Then I guess we'll just have to play the engagement angle to the hilt. You can stay in the guestroom. You'll probably want to get some clothes and stuff." Alfred turned to Harley. "Was your father terrible to you?" He pulled her into a tight embrace as he waited for her response.

"Has he ever been anything else?" she answered with a sad smile and moist eyes.

"No, I wish he had been for your sake, but I've just about given up on him." Her grandfather patted her back.

It was a truly loving little family Alfred had created for her. Kasper found himself wishing their fictitious engagement were real. What would it be like to belong with them? Probably nothing like the cold, formal house he'd grown up in. His parents had given him the best things money could buy, but not enough of themselves, in his opinion. It may have had something to do with the fact he'd been a surprise baby. Coming later than most, he knew he must have disrupted their lives.

Knowing they loved him in their own way, he took what they offered, never asking for more. Though at times when he was younger, he yearned for them to hug him for no reason at all. If he'd thought it would have done him any good, he would have begged for it. Some people just had a hard time showing their emotions.

Or they tried to hide them, like Harley did. She was lucky to have Alfred, because he could see that her grandfather wouldn't let her get away with it for long. Going by the love in her eyes, she knew it too. He grinned, thinking back to her earlier comment about Alfred wanting great-grandsons. He would be delighted to have children raised in a loving environment like this.

"Well, you've got me and I'm starving, how about we go out someplace nice for lunch?" Harley said, as her stomach growled loud enough for them all to hear.

"I could do with a bite to eat," Kasper said, willing to do whatever he had to, to get to know her better.

The way Harley and Alfred bickered about where to go had him fighting back a smile. Kasper felt like he was being brought into the fold when they let him have the deciding vote. So they'd be having Italian instead of Chinese. To be honest, he really didn't seem to care either way. Her grandfather was extremely pleased, since he got his way.

"So about this engagement angle, how do we go on from here?" Alfred asked, as they pulled out of the driveway.

Harley turned in her seat, looking back at him. "What do you mean?"

Alfred shrugged his shoulders. "If we expect your parents to believe it's true, we need some type of showing to make it seem more real."

"You're right. They aren't going to believe it just because I said so." She sighed, feeling dejected.

"Let me handle everything," Kasper said with a smile that she wasn't quite sure she trusted, but her grandfather just nodded in agreement.

Kasper was oddly silent for the rest of the drive. Once inside the restaurant, he excused himself, leaving her alone with her grandfather. The timing wasn't perfect, but she wasn't sure when they'd have another private moment, so she needed to talk with him while she could.

Covering his hand with hers, she gave into the roller coaster of emotions that had been

rocketing through her. “Grandpa, what do you really think of Kasper?”

“He comes well-recommended. Or are you talking about what I think about him as a possible counterpart for you?” He turned his hand over, enclosing hers.

“Both. It’s just... I don’t know what to make of him. He makes me feel...impulsive.” She wished she could explain it better.

“I always knew someone would come along and rock that controlled façade you use to keep people at bay. I know you haven’t known him long, but do you think he could be the one?” he asked, giving her hand a shake.

“How would I know? He’s cocky and brash, and so damned handsome, he makes me do and say things I shouldn’t.” She blushed at her curse, something she tried not to do around her grandfather.

With a wink, he let her hand go. “He brings out your passionate side. There’s nothing wrong with that. Passion is a good thing under the right circumstances. You did enjoy his kisses, right?”

“Grandpa.” She laughed, feeling the heat spread across her cheeks.

Kasper slid into the chair next to hers, leaned over, and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. “So what have I missed?”

“Nothing,” she said too loudly, and too quickly, earning a bout of laughter from both men.

A waitress came to take their orders. Alfred chose lasagna, Harley eggplant Parmesan, and Kasper got the traditional spaghetti and meatballs. They ate and laughed. Alfred told stories about her childhood that had him laughing and her blushing. Kasper had fed her tastes of his food, while helping himself to bites of hers.

By silent understanding, they all tended to stay away from anything having to do with her parents. A busboy cleared their empty plates, while the waitress offered desserts. Kasper chose a simple slice of chocolate cake, her grandfather the peanut butter cheesecake, while she went with a raspberry swirl cheesecake pie.

Again, Kasper insisted on feeding her little spoonfuls of his cake, locking their gazes together momentarily, but refused any of hers, since he didn’t like cheesecake. *Strike one*, she thought, mindful that she was learning things about him. Like the fact that she could tell he was up to something. What, she had no idea, but he was oozing with anticipation.

They had almost finished, when a waiter approached the table carrying a silver bucket draped with a white cloth. Harley was about to tell him he had the wrong table when he smiled, nodding at Kasper. Lifting the linen napkin, he uncovered a bottle of champagne. A waitress placed three elegant chutes on the table, whisking away their dirty plates. The loud pop of the cork made her jump, and everyone in the place turned and looked at them. She laughed, watching as the waiter filled their glasses.

The waiter and waitress moved back as Kasper got to his feet. He moved his chair back, lowering himself to one knee beside her. Pulling a small black velvet box from his pocket, he looked up at her and winked.

“Harley Marie Taizer, will you marry me?” he asked, opening the box and revealing a stunning tear-shaped diamond.

The room filled with oohs and ahhs. How had he pulled this all together so quickly? Everyone seemed to be waiting with baited breath. Not only did this have to be done, but also she really, really wanted to do it. To be his, even if temporarily, would be worth any heartbreak that would undoubtedly come later.

“Yes, Kasper, I’ll marry you.” She laughed when he stood, pulling her into his arms and twirling around in a circle.

Rounds of applause filled the air. A camera flashed, reflecting off the glass and mirrors around the room. Putting her back on her feet, he took the ring from the box and slid it onto her finger. He lowered his mouth to hers, his lips were soft, but firm and demanded her submission and his tongue’s playful teasing begged for participation. All at once, she wanted to give him both. She moaned against his lips. His chocolate flavor, mixing with the raspberry from her cheesecake, was a taste she’d never forget.

Then he slowly eased back, raising her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers right below the ring. *A perfect fit*, she thought, wiggling her fingers, wondering how he knew. It didn’t matter that none of it was real, because she would pretend right along with everyone else, and lock these memories away some place special to think about when she was old and gray.

“Do we have a relationship now?” he asked, wrapping her in his embrace.

She tilted her chin up so she could look into his eyes. “For now.”

“Congratulations.” Her grandfather patted Kasper on the back, obviously enjoying playing his part in their mini drama.

“Thank you,” Kasper said, letting Harley go so her grandfather could hug her.

He’d gotten her to agree to a relationship. How long it would last, only time would tell, but he was voting for forever. It didn’t matter that they’d met less than a week ago. He was a good judge of situations and this was one he knew was right. He just needed to get her to see it.

People they didn’t know took turns giving them congratulations and wishing them good luck. Quite a few made sure to tell him what a lucky son of a bitch he was, as if he didn’t already know. He glanced at the newspaper photographer who was still snapping away, hopefully getting some great shots. He’d have to make sure he got copies for himself and Harley.

It was done. He’d set a chain of events in motion that would bring about major changes in both their lives. He felt a twinge of guilt that she was totally unaware, but things needed to be done and there was no time to waste with explanations. Tomorrow would either bring them closer together, or push them apart. He was hoping for the latter.

## Chapter Seven

Kasper dropped Harley and Alfred off at their house, promising to return in time for dinner. The excuse Alfred had given him of going to get his clothes was perfect. He pulled into the parking lot behind the local newspaper, *The Registrar*. His contact was waiting by his truck. He climbed out, taking the man's offered hand.

"Are you sure you want this in tomorrow's edition?" Perry asked, taking the sheet of paper Kasper held out.

"Do you want a free month's rent?" he retorted with a knowing smile.

"Damn straight," the kid said with a huge smile, yeah, he was still a kid at twenty-three, compared to Kasper's thirty.

Kasper nodded, knowing the kid's pregnant wife, Angie, would find a good use for the fifteen hundred bucks they'd save. "Good. I want it as big as you can get it. Oh and I want copies of those pictures. All of them. I'll pay double your rate."

"Man, you really want this bad," Perry said, shaking his head.

"Dude, it's not a matter of wanting, I need this bad." He hoped it was going to do more good than harm.

"Consider it done. I'll leave a copy by your door in the morning," Perry said, with a cocky smile Kasper envied.

"Actually, drop it off here," he said, taking back the paper and pulling a pen out of Perry's pocket, scribbling Harley's address on the back.

"Cool." The kid nodded.

Pulling out his wallet, he fished out a couple of fifties, knowing he was pushing it. "Can you get a couple dozen roses too?"

"Man, you're so whipped." Perry laughed, nodding as he stuck the money in his pocket.

"This, from the guy who walks a little, white fluffy dog with pink barrettes," Kasper teased, knowing how much Perry's wife loved the mutt.

Would he be willing to make such concessions for Harley? *Please*, he'd wear the damn barrettes if it made her happy. He watched Perry stride into the building with a confident swagger. His photos were always great, but it was the way he seemed to catch his target without them being aware. They weren't those patent pictures of people looking into the camera with a huge smile. No, his photos had a realistic quality that was special. *That kid was going to go far*, knowing he'd do his damndest to see it happen. Come to think of it, maybe he could hire the kid.

\* \* \*

Groaning, Harley rolled over blindly, slapping at the beeping alarm clock. She could take another day off, she thought, covering her head with the pillow. Including yesterday, she'd only taken three personal days in the six years she'd worked at the campus library.

Tossing the pillow across the room, she sat up. She wasn't going to let her lack of sleep, or the embarrassment of one little messy scene keep her away from her job. She took pride in being the youngest full-time librarian on staff. She worked hard and earned the respect of her peers, as well as the professors and students. She wasn't going to let her mother steal that from her.

Grabbing her robe off the hook by the door, she tugged it on, deciding coffee was the first

order of the day. Halfway down the stairs, she heard the doorbell ring. It was quickly followed by Kasper's voice, which told her he must have been waiting for whoever it was. Following the strong aroma that had finally permeated her foggy brain, she walked into the kitchen.

Her body and mind still on autopilot, she stopped beside her grandfather, leaned down and kissed his cheek. Going to the cabinet, she took out her favorite mug, and filled it to the brim. Joining her grandfather at the table, she lifted the cup to her nose, breathing in the rousing scent. Her grandfather's laughter had her looking up.

"What?" She cocked her head to the side.

He shook his head. "Looks like Kasper wasn't the only one who had a rough night."

She groaned, taking a big sip of her coffee, savoring the subtle hint of vanilla. If Kasper had a rough night, she was sure it had nothing to do with her. Last night after dinner, they'd moved into the living room, where Kasper and her grandfather were soon deep in an intense conversation about baseball fundamentals and which teams they thought had a chance this year. Not interested, she excused herself and went upstairs and took a luxurious bubble bath, then turned in early.

"Good morning," he said in chipper tone, as he entered the room.

Shrugging her shoulders, she glanced at him from behind her cup. "Is it?"

"I take it you're not a morning person. Maybe these will help." He pulled a bunch of roses out from behind his back.

They were red, long-stemmed, and absolutely gorgeous. Her smile was unstoppable. He leaned down, handed her the bouquet, but held it just out of her reach. He cupped her cheek and brushed his lips across hers, laying the flowers in her hands. He loved the delicate blush that bloomed on her cheeks.

"Thank you." She raised them to her nose, inhaling their delicate perfume.

"You're welcome." He handed her grandfather the newspaper before slipping into his chair.

Alfred snapped open the paper. "Back in my day, a man only bought flowers if he was apologizing, or courting."

"Really? Then I guess I should choose which one it's to be. Harley, sweetheart, would you consider joining me for a movie tonight?"

"I'd be honored," she said with mock seriousness.

"Is there anything specific you'd like to see?" he asked, taking a bite of his piece of toast.

"Like this," her grandfather chortled, jumping to his feet waving the paper in the air, looking mighty spry for a seventy-three year old.

"What is it?" Harley chased him around the room trying to snatch the paper from his hands.

"You?" her grandfather said, looking at Kasper as if he was seeing a ghost.

Glancing back at him, she saw him nod. "Yes sir."

"*Him*" *what?* she thought, reaching for the paper, only to have her grandfather yank it out of reach again. Damn it, he was playing with her.

Hands on her hip and her voice taking on a cold edge, she stood right in front of him. "Listen, old man, if you ever want fresh blueberry cobbler again you better give me that."

He laughed wholeheartedly, his eyes watering with his mirth. He handed her the paper, giving her hand a squeeze before letting go. Taking a deep breath, she opened the pages. What she saw knocked the air right out of her lungs.

*Millionaire Wanted By Millions Is Officially Off The Market*

*It was this lucky reporter's great pleasure to have been in attendance at Dominic's Restaurant on Eighth Avenue last night, when Kasper Michael Drake the III got down on one knee and proposed to a Miss Harley Marie Taizer.*

*Mr. Drake is the son of Ethel Bartholemule Drake and Kasper Michael Drake the II. Mr. Drake's father is owner of The Drake Property Conglomerate. The younger Mr. Drake is employed by Mackinerny & Blithe.*

*Miss Taizer is the granddaughter of Doctor Alfred Taizer, professor of history at Ellisberg Community College. She is employed as a librarian at the campus library.*

*When asked about a wedding date, Mr. Drake's comment was, "Soon. Very soon."*

Harley looked at the three photos that accompanied the article. The first was of her seated with Kasper kneeling, staring up at her. In the second, the largest off the three, he had her in his arms, her feet dangling off the floor. The third was one of her, Kasper, and her grandfather, all smiling at the other patrons.

Big hands gripped her arms, but she barely heard Kasper's deep voice. "Harley, breathe." The edges of her vision went fuzzy; she felt herself swaying, and then nothing.

*Shit.* Kasper caught her easily, since she practically fell into his arms. Scooping her up, he carried her into the living room, laying her gently on the couch. Alfred followed, placing a wet cloth on her forehead. He paced nervously, making Kasper feel even guiltier for throwing them such a big twist.

"Harley, honey, open your eyes," he said, loudly patting her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered and he heard Alfred sigh behind him. "That's it, baby. Open up and let me see those beautiful golden eyes."

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. He was so relieved; he lost control and pressed his lips to hers. A mistake on his part, since she shoved him so hard he fell onto the floor, landing on his ass with a loud thud.

"You son of a bitch." She surged to her feet, glaring down at him.

"I guess I deserved that." He slowly rose to his feet, holding up his hands in surrender.

"Well you got it and I suspect there's more to come," Alfred chuckled, thankfully leaving the room, giving him the privacy to apologize and grovel if need be.

He moved to help her sit back down, holding up his hands when she stepped back. "Let me explain."

"Everyone who reads that paper today is going to think we're engaged, and that you're a mil-millionaire." She waved her arms in the air.

"We are, at least, we are as far as anyone else is concerned. That includes your parents. And I am." He smiled when she rolled her eyes in disbelief, which was okay; they'd get to that later.

"That was your plan. You could have warned me. Knowing my father checked out Grandpa, what's to say he won't check you out too?"

"He'd be a fool not to."

"So everything in that article will check out?" she asked, moving closer to him.

"Perfectly," he said, since everything Perry had printed was true.

"Wow, you must have some good connections." She smiled.

“The best.” He reached out and ran his finger along her nose. He wasn’t sure if it was his touch, or her smile that brought a little bit of color to her cheeks, but seeing it made his heart clench. Pressing the point that he was telling the truth about his financial status was probably the prudent thing to do, but he didn’t. Maybe with a little time it might not seem like such a big deal. Besides, he wanted to let her adjust to being engaged first.

“So what now?”

“We start by finishing breakfast and then I’ll get you to work.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they walked back into the kitchen.

Alfred didn’t say anything, just slid a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of her.

\* \* \*

Across town, Ethel and Kasper Drake, Senior had just sat down to breakfast when the phone rang. Hilda, the housekeeper, rushed into the room waving the morning paper in the air. Kas lowered his head, groaning at her dramatics, but Ethel sensed there was something wrong.

“Hilda, what’s going on?” she asked, rising to her feet.

“It’s Kasper,” she said, spreading the paper open on the table. “He’s—, good lord, it’s true.”

“Oh, my gosh. Kas, you have to see this,” Ethel waved her husband over.

With a sigh, he got up and walked over to the women. Glancing at the paper, he asked with a hint of pride. “What’s my boy done now?”

“He’s gotten himself engaged,” his wife answered happily.

Not liking the headline, he growled. Sure people knew they had money, but he was careful to keep the figures private. Willing to let that go for now, he read the details, running the names through his head and not recognizing them. Academic types, he thought, wondering how his son had met them. It didn’t matter; he’d know everything about her and her grandfather by noon. Hopefully, the girl would make his son happy, and that was the most important thing.

“I’ll find out where this girl lives. I think we should stop by and introduce ourselves this evening.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her breathless. It was rare show of emotion, but one he couldn’t hold back, knowing they hadn’t ruined him completely. His son had finally fallen in love.

\* \* \*

Fern and Patrick Taizer were taking the news in a different way. Learning the daughter they’d never wanted had earned herself a mighty trust fund wasn’t bad enough, now they had to read along with the rest of the county that she had landed one of its most influential bachelors of the century. Fern stomped around shouting that her husband had to do something, while he poured himself a scotch.

“Your father had something to do with this,” she screeched, ripping the crystal decanter out of his hand, and throwing it against the wall.

Patrick stared at the shattered glass, wishing it had been as hard as his wife’s heart. Then it would still have been in one piece. He hadn’t linked the man he’d seen her with the other day with The Drake Conglomerate. Damn his luck, nothing had gone right since the day he met Fern. He should have listened to his father’s warning.

“What do you expect me to do about it?” He dropped into the leather recliner he’d had

for years.

“We need to go see her. We’ll just tell her she won’t need the trust since she’s marrying into that much money, so she can sign it over to us.” She stood there tapping her foot in a way he’d learned meant she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Fine, we’ll go over tonight.” He got to his feet and headed for the door.

“I’m going shopping so I’ll meet you there at six o’clock,” she shouted, her voice carrying down the hall. *And halfway around the block*, he thought with a grimace.

“Fine,” he hollered back.

“And don’t you dare be late,” she screamed, loud enough to be heard even though he slammed the door so hard that it rattled the windows on either side.

## Chapter Eight

Harley slipped into the passenger seat, closing her eyes, enjoying the peace for the first time since Kasper had escorted her to her office door this morning. Then again, the kiss he'd laid on her was part of the reason she hadn't had a minute to herself all day. Well that, and the newspaper announcement.

"Rough day?" he asked, squeezing her shoulder.

"Everybody chose today to stop by and say hello," she said, smiling when he laughed.

"Curiosity can be a good thing, you know." He put the car in gear. "Since you're beat, how about we skip going out to the movies and curl up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn and a movie instead?"

Man, her grandfather was right. *He might be the one*, she thought, looking at his profile. "That sounds divine."

"Really? Then why don't we stop and pick up a couple pizzas?" He glanced over, winking, before turning back to the road.

"Mmm... No cooking, no dishes." Laughing, she twisted in her seat to face him.

Thirty minutes later, most of which they spent getting to know the basics about each other, pizza boxes in arms, they walked into the house, laughing at something Kasper said.

Her grandfather looked up with raised eyebrows. "What are you two doing here?"

"We picked up pizza for dinner." She motioned with the boxes towards the kitchen.

"I thought you two were going out tonight." He stared at them, waiting for an explanation.

Harley shrugged and smiled. "Change of plans."

"It happens." Alfred watched her go into the kitchen. Once she was out of hearing range, he turned to Kasper. "You want to fill me in?"

"She had a rough day. Lots of questions from curious people, that's all," he said, slapping Alfred on the shoulder.

The sound of a car pulling up outside had them both going to the window. Kasper recognized the car from the day before. It was her father's, which led him to believe the woman who got out of the passenger side was her mother. He thanked his lucky stars that Harley looked nothing like her. The pinched, sour looking face got harder, colder with each step that brought them closer to the house.

Alfred groaned, squaring his shoulders. "Looks like it's about to get rougher."

Kasper nodded, wishing it weren't true. "I'm guessing they saw the paper. Don't worry, I'll handle everything."

"I'll follow your lead, but if either of them says anything to hurt her I can't promise to hold my tongue."

"Understandable," he agreed as the doorbell pealed.

Kasper looked toward the kitchen, then back to the door. "Stall while I get Harley."

Harley opened the box, inhaling the mouthwatering melted cheese, green pepper and onion smell. The nectar of the gods, she thought with a smile. Briefly, she considered waiting for Kasper and her uncle to join her, but her stomach overrode any other part of her that would have. Lifting a piece of pizza, she ignored the dripping cheese, bringing it to her mouth.

Biting down, she closed her eyes, sighing as the flavors exploded on tongue. *Mmm... So good.* Enjoying the tang of the sauce, the texture of the cheese, the perfect thickness of the crust, she let out a little moan of pleasure.

“That is the sexiest site I’ve ever seen,” Kasper said from the doorway.

“Me eating is hardly sexy.” She laughed, shaking her head.

“Baby, everything you do is sexy, but I was talking about the look on your face. Total bliss.” His voice went rough and his smile wicked.

“Kasper,” she admonished with a shake of her head. “Who was at the door?”

“Your parents.” He rushed to her side, easing her into a chair. “Breathe, Harley. It’s going to be okay, I promise. You just follow my lead.”

“I can’t lie. I mean, no one would believe me, I’m a terrible liar, ask Grandpa.” The sexy smile he flashed her didn’t help to soothe her nerves any, so she punched him in the shoulder.

“Sorry. Don’t worry, we won’t be lying.” His smile turned softer and his eyes warmer as he took the pizza from her hand, bringing it to his mouth.

She cursed when the doorbell rang again. “What the heck, is he making them wait outside just to piss them off?”

“Come on, let’s go get this over with. I can’t wait to curl up on the couch with you and watch a movie.” His wink told her he was looking forward to the cuddling more than the movie.

“I have the perfect movie too.” Grabbing his hand, she tugged him into the hall.

Spotting an elegantly dressed couple she’d never seen before standing in the entryway with her grandfather and parents, she looked at Kasper, who just smiled. They were older than her parents, yet younger than her grandfather, which put them in their sixties. She came to a sudden halt, causing Kasper to ram into her and she almost fell forward. His hands grabbed her hips, steadying both of them, but his loud “umph” had everyone turning to look at them. Returning their stares, she had to admit her parents’ permanent scowls were no surprise.

The other couple wore softer expressions. The woman was tall, about five-seven and thin. A classic beauty, like she’d seen in all the old movies of the nineteen forties and fifties. She wore her deep brownish-red hair streaked with gray in a short cut that surrounded her face, giving her a youthful appearance. The small smile that tilted the corners of her mouth was a fragment of the happiness Harley could see in her shining eyes.

The man was much taller, six feet or so. His broad shoulders were encased in a gray suit that exuded power. He didn’t smile, nor did he scowl. The blank expression was one she’d seen on Kasper’s face from time to time. That was her first hint, but it was the eyes that gave him away. The shape, color, and way they saw everything, but showed nothing. Apparently, it was a family trait.

“Mom, Dad.” He let go of her long enough to shake his father’s hand, and kiss his mother’s cheek.

Harley saw the longing in the woman’s eyes, and couldn’t help but wonder what it was for. Kasper came back to her side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders in a protective and a bit possessive embrace.

“Why don’t we move into the living room?” Grandpa, the ultimate host, suggested with a wave of his hand.

Their tidy little group moved into the room. Her mother sat stiffly in one of the chairs, with her father choosing to stand a few feet away. Grandpa sat in his trusty old recliner. Kasper’s parents sat side by side on the couch, the couple a total contrariety to her parents. They weren’t holding hands or touching in any way, but from the way their bodies leaned in toward each other; Harley sensed a deep connection between them.

“You really are rich,” she said softly, noticing the diamonds and rubies at his mother’s neck, ears, and wrist.

“We can talk about that later,” he whispered next to her ear, before kissing her cheek.

Once everyone was seated, Kasper took the lead as he’d promised. “Well, we had planned to do this a little differently, but since you’re all here, Mom, Dad I’d like to introduce you to my fiancée, Harley Taizer. Harley, these are my parents, Ethel and Kas.”

“Harley, it’s lovely to meet you,” his mother said with a friendly smile.

“A surprise, but a pleasure none the less,” his father said, his voice sounding so much like Kasper’s it was a little shocking.

“Thank you. It’s a pleasure for me to meet you both as well. This is my grandfather, Alfred Taizer, and my mother, Fern, and father, Patrick.” She hated having to give them the titles, but wishing there were something else to call them that wouldn’t have been rude was useless.

Standing there, watching as the round of pleasantries was exchanged among them, she debated offering some type of refreshments. It would have given her a chance to get to know his parents, but on the flip side, it would give her parents an excuse to linger, which is the last thing on earth she wanted.

“So when is the happy occasion?” her mother asked, her voice full of disdain.

“We haven’t set a firm date, but sometime within the next year.” Kasper tugged her down on the loveseat beside him.

“Lovely,” Kasper’s mother said, making her mother’s eyes narrow with spite.

“And where do you plan on residing after the wedding?” This came from her father, who no doubt was hinting that he was expecting the house to go to him at some point.

“We haven’t really discussed it in depth, but Alfred has hinted he’d like us to stay on here with him. I can rent my place out without any trouble,” Kasper said, and though she was surprised that he had talked about it with her grandfather, she refused to let it show.

“A man with your means could do much better than this.”

Harley gasped, staring at her mother. Did the woman truly have no bounds she wouldn’t cross?

“I happen to think it’s a charming home, full of historic value.” Kasper’s father had come to their defense.

“And love,” her grandfather added.

“Perfect for children,” his mother chirped, Harley noticed the pinkish tinge cross her cheeks.

Did she want grandchildren? Maybe she was hinting that it was the reason for their engagement. Their *fictitious* engagement Harley reminded herself, looking down at the gorgeous ring on the third finger of her left hand.

“Oh, Kasper, you gave her Nana’s ring,” his mother chimed in a happy, yet reserved tone.

“Yes, it seemed to suit her perfectly,” he said, raising her hand to his lips for a quick kiss.

“It looks quite lovely on such a graceful hand.” His father nodded his approval.

“Thank you.” She blushed profusely at his compliment.

“This is absurd. She’s well below your social stratum.” Her mother leapt to her feet. “A year from now, you’ll cast her off and move on. For her own protection, I demand her trust be signed over to her father and me for safe keeping.”

Harley looked at the floor, grimacing. Feeling Kasper stiffen at her mother’s blunt demand didn’t help either. Her grandfather made a strangled noise, but Harley was too embarrassed to look up. Why did they all have to show up at the same time? She felt the tears well up and fought to hold them back. She hadn’t let her parents make her cry in years and she’d

be damned if she was going to now.

“Excuse me? Did you just accuse *my son* of being a gold digger?” Mrs. Drake said in a forceful, yet refined tone of voice that had Harley and everyone else looking at her as she rose gracefully to her feet.

Kasper squeezed her hand so tightly it hurt. Just by looking at him, she could see his normal calm demeanor was cracking.

“Why else would a rich, powerful man like him want a plain, ordinary girl like her?” Her mother’s arm shot out, pointing at her as if she’d committed some heinous crime.

Kasper’s mother took a step towards Fern. “How dare you? My son would never do anything so unscrupulous. If he proposed to that girl, it’s damn well because his feelings are involved, just as I suspect hers are.”

“I think my wife is just trying to protect our daughter’s interests.” Her father sounded calm and reasonable, proving what a great actor he could be when he wanted to.

“That’s understandable. That’s why her trust will be divided among whatever children we have. I plan on supporting my wife.” Kasper’s chauvinistic side peeked out again.

The girl that finally snagged him was going to be one lucky and satisfied woman. She wasn’t going to think about that now. For now, he was hers. So why not let herself bask in his attention? He was staring at his mother with a look she’d yet to see on his face. It was a cross between shock and love.

“You don’t owe them any explanations,” her grandfather said, his voice harsh.

“No, he doesn’t, but you do old man. How could you do this to your own son? I’ve seen a copy of your will. You’ve given everything that should have rightfully gone to him, to *her*,” Fern snarled, showing her teeth like an ugly, rabid dog. An apt description, Harley thought.

Kasper’s mother gasped, shaking her head, looking like she might be ill. His father and Alfred shot to their feet. His father reached out, taking her hands, easing her back down into her seat. Harley let go of Kasper’s hand and moved to sit by his mother.

“Harley, honey, would you take my mother into the kitchen and get her a drink? Maybe some of that apple tea you’ve got stocked in the cabinet.” Kasper got to his feet, joining Alfred and his father.

“Mrs. Drake, would you like some tea?” She rose from her seat, holding out her hand.

“That would be lovely, dear,” she said, her voice so soft Harley was surprised she heard her.

Wrapping her arm around her shoulders, she ushered Mrs. Drake into the kitchen and into a chair.

“Just let me get these out of the way, unless you’d prefer pizza to tea,” Harley joked, reaching for the boxes.

“Actually, pizza sounds smashing,” Ethel said, sniffing loudly. “It smells wonderful. Did you go to Angelica’s?”

“Kasper insisted.” She grabbed two plates and served each of them a slice.

“He always does. That boy’s independent, stubborn, and the best thing that ever happened to me. I think you’ll be good for him.” She took a bite of her pizza.

Harley couldn’t get past the fact that a woman this elegant ate pizza. She looked more suited to champagne and caviar. She swallowed, and then looked Harley right in the eye, all signs of the fragile woman she’d been with two minutes ago were gone.

“Now, why don’t we have a woman to woman talk? I think we both could use one.” She dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin.

*Shit*, she'd walked right into this. First rule of meeting the parents should be "*don't get cornered alone.*" And what had she gone and done? She'd actually set herself up for the perfect inquisition. A private place where they could talk while all the witnesses were busy elsewhere. Ethel had said she thought she'd be good for Kasper, but would she change her mind, warn her off marrying her son, after she knew all the details about her?

## Chapter Nine

Kasper waited until he knew she couldn't hear him, and turning to her mother, he had to force himself not to yell. "I'm going to tell you both this once. Harley is mine. I protect what's mine. She's not giving you anything, just like you've never given her anything."

"You don't know anything about it!" Her mother seethed, her face going beet red. It was a wonder her head didn't explode.

"That's where you're wrong. Alfred and I had a long talk when I asked him for permission to marry *his* daughter." Kasper purposely left off the "grand" to prove a point.

"He may have coerced us into signing over our parental rights, but he never adopted her. She's not his daughter." She stomped her foot, vibrating the floor.

"It's not as if you care. You just want the money. It's not happening." Alfred's voice broke in, strong and clear, making sure he got his point across.

"Besides, Alfred didn't coerce you. Coerce means force. He offered you a way out by paying you to do the right thing." Kasper's disgust poured out with each word.

"I think you should be going. And I would recommend you don't come back without an invitation," Kasper's father said with a deceptively calm voice, laying a hand on Kasper's shoulder.

"Like father, like son," her father scoffed.

To which her grandfather added sadly, "It's not always the case."

"Thank God. I don't think I could've survived living with a miser like you. It's no wonder your wife left you," Alfred's daughter-in-law taunted.

"Yet, you're so jealous of the way he raised your daughter," Kasper's father said, cocking his head to the side.

"I'm not jealous of anything about her," her mother declared with a shake of her head.

"Fern, we're leaving." Facing three imposing men all at the same time wasn't something Kasper would do, and it looked like it was the only thing he and Patrick Taizer would ever have in common.

"But—" she started, looking like she was going to put up a fight.

"But nothing, I said we're leaving." He walked past the men barely looking at them, but Kasper felt the anger radiating off him.

Kasper stood in the open doorway, watching them climb into their car. That was raw, but he also thought they gave up a little too easily. He knew his father and Alfred were standing close behind him, most likely waiting to see what he did next. Tires squealing, the Taizer's car peeled out of the driveway. Seconds later, he saw the faded black pickup truck discretely follow them. Satisfied the next step in his plan was in motion, he closed the door.

"That seemed a little too easy." Alfred echoed his thoughts.

"Your mother probably isn't ready for us to join her just yet, maybe you gentlemen would like to fill me in on how much trouble those two are going to cause," his dad said, one corner of his mouth tipping upward in a crooked grin.

"Let's take it into the study," Kasper said, leading the way.

\* \* \*

"So your grandfather raised you all by himself?" Ethel asked, taking a sip of the orange soda Harley poured for her.

“Since the day I was born.” She nodded with a smile, knowing her childhood hadn’t been traditional, but better than most kids had.

“Well, I have to say he did a wonderful job. Probably better than Kas and I,” she said with a small smile.

“Mrs. Drake, I think all parents probably feel that way from time to time, but Kasper is such a wonderful man you must have done something right,” Harley said sympathetically.

“Honey, call me Ethel please. In our case, it’s true. You see, Kasper was a surprise. I had been told children weren’t possible. Kas and I had finally resigned ourselves to never having children, when I was in a severe car accident. Things were touch and go for a while. The doctors were just as shocked as I was to find out I was pregnant. I was thrilled.”

“How did Mr. Drake handle the news?” she asked curiously, her pizza now forgotten.

“He was happy, furious, and scared. You see the doctors weren’t happy and they recommended we terminate the pregnancy, but I refused. It was a very rough ordeal, but I had to have faith that everything would be okay.”

“That shows him how much you love him.” Harley said over the lump in her throat.

“I’ve never told him. It was hard enough trying to bond with him. I spent the first year of his life getting over my injuries and the added trauma of giving birth.” A lone tear rolled down her cheek.

“I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you.”

“I think it was worse for my husband. His mother came to help with Kasper and basically took over, leaving him feeling left out. When I came home, I tried to take the reins back, but Kasper had grown accustomed to her way of doing things, so we stood by and let her make the decisions.”

Harley smiled. “But that was for his benefit too.”

“Yes, but it backfired on us. When she left, we tried to get close to him, but he was so independent, wanting to do everything himself. It was as if he didn’t need us. I spent years wanting to scoop him up and hug him, but I was afraid. He grew up thinking we were cold, and I guess our reserved attitudes didn’t help. I was afraid that because of us, he would never risk his heart. That’s why we were so happy to hear about your engagement.” His mother reached over and patted her hand.

“It’s not too late. If my mother or father had ever made an attempt to change, I would have been thrilled.” She sighed, feeling the weight of her words sink in her stomach.

“I hope you’re right, but for now I think it would be best to ease into it. I was hoping to enlist your help with that.” She covered Harley’s hand with hers.

“How can I help?” she asked, willing to help Kasper see how much his mother loved him.

“Well, I was hoping we could become friends. Maybe have dinner a few times. Gradually letting him see we’re not as unfeeling as he thinks we are.” Her gaze was silently begging her to agree.

“I would love it.” Harley smiled, liking the idea that she could help him while he helped her.

\* \* \*

Kasper paced the study while Alfred explained his stunted relationship with his son, and about his supposed daughters, as well. He’d paid to support all of them when they were younger, but had no contact with them at all since their mother’s passing about ten years ago. They did

have a few children he thought might approach Harley when they heard about her trust fund. It wasn't a simple story, and most people wouldn't know how to react, but he gave his father credit for not passing any judgment. Sitting there, listening intently, processing everything in his analytical mind, he took the time to consider everything before even speaking. Harley was trapped in the kitchen, probably sitting quietly, having weak tea with his mother. He'd have to make this up to her later.

"So other than proposing, what are your plans?" His father glanced at him.

"For now I'm sticking to her like glue, and I have someone doing the same to her parents," he said, hoping he'd be able to keep one step ahead of them.

"Balker said you were the best, I'm glad to see he was right."

"Yeah, well uncles can be a bit biased." He enjoyed the look of surprise his bombshell brought to Alfred's face.

"And is this engagement real?" His father garnered his attention, pinning him with a knowing stare.

"Yes. She thinks it's a temporary thing, but I don't plan on letting her go without a fight."

"Do you love her?" Alfred asked staring at him intensely.

Kasper knew the importance of his answer and took a few minutes to carefully choose his words. He'd wanted her from the minute he'd seen her, so that had to count for something. But did he love her? Could you really love someone after knowing them for less than a week? In this case, the answer was a resounding "yes." He knew he loved her and he was going to do everything he could to show her.

"Love is a complicated word," he said, not wanting to discuss this with them right now.

"Good enough for me. Now, tell me what I can do to help," his father said, and though he couldn't tell what it meant, he saw something flash in his eyes.

Knowing her father's greedy nature could be his downfall; he pulled a personal information sheet out of a folder lying on the desk and handed it to him. "Dig, and dig deep. I want to know what he owns. I won't do anything to hurt him unless he makes me, but I wouldn't mind having a little leverage."

Kasper Senior didn't even look at the paper; he just folded it and slipped it into his pocket. "Okay I'll do that for you if you do something for me."

His father had rarely asked him to do anything unreasonable so he had no problem agreeing. "Name it."

"Allow your mother the honor of throwing an engagement party. Think of it as showing a united front." Turning to her grandfather, his father asked, "Alfred, don't you agree?"

"I do." Alfred answered, then he gave Kasper a crooked smile. "Don't you think Harley deserves it?"

That was all it took. Of course, she deserved it. After all, getting engaged was a big deal. They should celebrate the occasion. He wanted her to have memories to remember this special, yet unconventional time in her life.

Maybe he'd even get to dance with her, close and slow, he thought with a smile. "I'm all for it."

Getting to his feet, followed by Alfred, his father slapped him on the shoulder. "Leave everything to me."

Harley's laughter echoed down the hall as Alfred opened the door. "I think it's safe to rejoin the ladies."

Kasper trailed behind the older men, resisting the urge to brush past them to get to her.

The closer they got, the slower they seemed to walk. Finally, they entered the cozy little kitchen to find Harley and his mother laughing hysterically. He'd heard his mother laugh over the years, but never so unrestrained.

It made her look soft and young. Harley must have unlocked something in her that he never had been able to reach. He should be jealous, and maybe he was a little, but he was too dumbfounded for it to register. His father walked over, leaned down and kissed her smiling lips, astonishing him even further.

Had he missed something? His parents didn't go in for public displays of affection. Placing his arm around her shoulders was the closest his father had come. He knew they loved each other; their devotion was plain enough to see. They'd never had a harsh word or argument as far as he could remember. In his whole life, he could count the number of times he'd seen them kiss on his fingers. Some people just weren't physical creatures. He knew and accepted it as a fact of human nature.

"Kasper, take a breath," Harley said, tugging on his hand.

His mother's smile fell a bit. "Are you alright?"

Nodding his head, he pulled Harley up, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm fine. Everything's good."

"Yes, it is," Harley said, a delicate blush spreading across her cheeks.

His father cleared his throat, tugging on his tie. "Your engagement announcement was quite unusual and unexpected. We've been fielding questions all day. I'd wager a tidy sum that Alfred has, as well. I was wondering if we should have some type of formal announcement issued."

"Dear, that would be redundant, but if Harley and Kasper wouldn't mind, we could host a little get-together to celebrate." His mother fiddled with a napkin as she looked over at him, her eyes clouded with doubt.

Did she expect him to refuse? They may not have a very open relationship, but he'd never refused her anything. She'd cared for him, and raised him to be the man he was today. If nothing else, she deserved his utmost respect. But she had his love too. And given the chance, he'd find a way to show her.

Looking down at Harley, he raised his eyebrows in question and whispered, "I think it would be fun."

She smiled and he turned her in his arms so they were both facing his parents. "Mom, if you're sure it wouldn't be an imposition, we'd love it."

"Stupendous. We should be going so you can finish your dinner." She rose to her feet, smiling up at his father.

Harley took his hand in hers, linking their fingers as they walked his parents to the door.

Turning in the doorway, Ethel flashed them a brilliant smile. "Harley, would you like to join me for lunch tomorrow? We can make a preliminary guest list and discuss a few venues."

After Harley agreed and promised to call her in the morning, Ethel's husband put his hand on her lower back, ushering her to the car. He was strung so tight she was surprised he hadn't snapped yet. He opened her door, and she climbed in, waving goodbye to Kasper and Harley one more time, while he rounded the hood.

"She's a lovely girl," Ethel said, as he slid behind the wheel.

Kas nodded distractedly and she patted his thigh. "Darling, what is it?"

"How much did she tell you?" he asked, covering her hand with his.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. “Everything, and in turn, I spilled all my secrets as well.”

“What if she tells Kasper?” He glanced at her briefly before focusing back on the road.

“We should have told him years ago,” she said softly, shaking her head.

“He’s in love with her, even if he won’t admit it. Her parents are a big problem though.”

Kas deftly changed the subject, she thought, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

“From what Harley said, they’ve always been a problem for Alfred, but totally ignored her.”

“Well, they’re not ignoring her now. If they hurt her, they’re going to hurt him, and that’s something I just can’t allow.” His crisp, cut words showed how angry he was.

“Kas, what are you thinking?” she knew he wouldn’t sit idly by and let someone, anyone, attempt to hurt their son in anyway.

“He has plans of his own, but I would feel better if you and I checked out which strings we could pull.” He pulled into their driveway, cutting off the engine.

“Great minds think alike.” Reaching across the space between them, she grabbed his jacket, tugged, and pressed her lips to his.

“Woman, you’re dangerous.” He smiled before taking her mouth in a vigorous kiss.

## Chapter Ten

Kasper had been really quiet since his parent's departure. Giving her a wink and a nod, her grandfather excused himself, claiming he was tired so he was going to turn in early, leaving them alone. Kasper had asked for a real relationship and she'd agreed, so why not start off as she meant to go on?

"Want to tell me what's bothering you?" She watched him from under her lashes as she reached for another slice of pizza.

"Sorry. I guess I sort of zoned out." He offered her a smile, but didn't really answer her question.

A sucky and scary thought hit her like a ton of bricks, practically knocking the air from her lungs. "Have you changed your mind?"

"About what?" He looked lost.

"About us," she croaked, forcing herself not to look away.

"No!" he shouted, jumping to his feet, his chair clattering to the floor. He dug his hands through his hair, leaving it askew. "Jeez, I mean, look how hard I had to work to get you. I mean to get you to go along with this. Do you seriously think I'd just give up without a good reason?"

"I hope not, but a good relationship needs communication and your answer seemed like an evasion to me."

"I didn't mean for it to seem like that."

And she believed, so giving him a second chance, she smiled. "Then tell me what you were thinking about."

"Damn it. I was thinking about your parents and my plans to keep them from getting their grubby hands on your money."

She sighed, shaking her head. "That money has been nothing but trouble."

"No, it's more than the money. Your mother told you herself that she wanted the house to start off with. Finding out about your trust fund was a bonus for them." He took her hand and pulled her to her feet.

"They'll never get their hands on this house," her voice had a shrill edge that she hadn't been expecting.

"No they won't, I promise." He hugged her tightly against his chest, his scent, fresh with a hint of spice, enveloped her, making it hard to think clearly.

"Are we okay?" he asked.

"We're fine," she said softly, with a nod of her head.

Needing a change of subject for now, she leaned back looking up at him, telling herself not to get lost in the heat radiating from him. "So do you want to watch the movie on the TV in the living room, or the one in my bedroom?"

"Whichever one you're more comfortable with." He let her slip out of his arms.

Picking up their dirty glasses, she walked over and put them in the sink, and looking over her shoulder at him, she winked. "As long as you'll be my pillow, I'm sure I'll be comfortable."

"I don't know if that's a compliment, or not." Rubbing his hand across his chest, he smiled. "I'd like to think I'm too hard to be considered a pillow."

She let her inner tease shine through. "Don't worry. I remember how hard you can be."

Walking up behind her, he used his body to cage her in against the counter. "Are you going to tell me what we're watching?"

"Nope," she said, reaching behind her, rubbing her hands on his thighs, and smiling when

he press his bulging zipper against her backside in response.

A wiggle of her hips had him growling against her ear. Knowing they were roaming into dangerous territory didn't stop her from turning in his arms so they were face to face, and sliding her hands slowly up his chest to his shoulders. Taking time to revel in the way his muscles rippled under her touch was as much torture for her as it seemed to be for him.

"Darlin', if you actually want to get around to watching a movie, we better cool it," he said, though his body pressed her harder against the counter, his hands gripping her hips making it impossible for her to move.

Pulling his head down to hers, she licked his neck before whispering. "Okay."

Shuddering, he took a huge step back. "I think, for sanity's sake, we should stick to the living room."

"Alright, chicken, why don't you zap us a bag of popcorn while I get things set up." She headed for the door.

"Jeez sus," he muttered, searching through the cabinet, finally finding a box of microwave popcorn in the last place he looked.

This woman had more facets than a ten-carat diamond. She could be anything from moment to moment. She'd keep him on his toes, he thought, knowing he was probably wearing a goofy grin. Taking the steaming bag out of the microwave, he wondered what he was in for.

Would she choose some cheesy romance? It was possible, but so was a loud, fast-paced action flick. He hoped she wasn't into foreign subtitles. He could see her totally getting into a playful comedy. As long as there were no hot, wild sex scenes, he should be okay. Though that theory may not be true since, a mere look or the slightest touch from her seemed to be enough to set him on edge.

Most people could be firmly put into a category. He wondered what group she'd put him in. Did she find him hard to read? It was a double-edged sword. He wanted her to know exactly what his intentions were, yet he needed to know he was able to pull back if he had to.

"You coming, or what?" she shouted, and his dick, which had finally stopped trying to burst free, took another leap towards his zipper.

The image of him sinking deep inside her flashed in his mind. Harley, writhing beneath him, bare skin against bare skin. Finally losing himself inside her warmth. He was going to lose it if he didn't have her soon, he thought, reaching down and adjusting his now raging erection. Grabbing the bowl of popcorn and a few sodas, he counted his steps to the living room, hoping the mental chore would occupy his head, both of them.

He stopped short, bobbling the sodas. She'd changed into a pair of red and black flannel pajama pants and tight black ribbed t-shirt that said, "HOT DAMN" in bright red letters across her ample breasts. She patted the empty spot next to her on the couch with a coy smile. It was an invitation most men would have begged for. Stiffly, he moved to the coffee table setting down his bounty. Pulling his cell phone from his back pocket, he laid it on the corner table. Lowering himself gingerly to the cushion, he slid back, giving his jeans a discrete tug so they wouldn't cut off any circulation.

"If they're too tight, you could always take them off," she said, fiddling with the remote.

Leaning his head back against the cushion, he closed his eyes. "Harley, you say the damndest things."

She looked at the almost pained look on his face. "It's you. Normally I have some authority over my mind and body, but with you, my control is shattered," she admitted, wondering if her confession would make him feel better.

“I noticed that. Your grandfather told me pushing your buttons would be fun.” He laughed, drawing her to his side, leaving his arm resting across her shoulders.

“He did, did he?” She smiled, knowing it was her grandfather’s favorite past time.

Nodding, he gave her nose a quick kiss. “Now, what did you choose for our viewing pleasure this evening?”

She clapped her hands and the lights went out. Snuggling up against him, she powered up the DVD player. The music came on and the credits started. Grabbing the bowl of popcorn, she propped it on his lap.

“You’re shittin’ me. A western. It never even crossed my mind that you’d choose one. No woman I know likes westerns,” he said.

“*McLintock* is not just a western,” she shot back a bit defensively, probably due to the fact she’d just been compared to the women in his past.

Looking at her with interest, he said, “Really?”

“You’ve obviously never seen it before. It’s a John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara film. It contains romance, comedy, and action in a great western setting. More importantly, I picked it specifically for you.” She stuck her hand into the bowl, picked up a few kernels, and brought them to his lips.

They settled into a cozy silence. He laughed at all the right places. So relaxed, all her stamina drained, she couldn’t stop her yawn. Kasper moved the bowl and eased her head down to his lap. She tried to focus on the movie, but his hand playing in her hair proved to be too much of a distraction. His fingers rubbing her scalp soothed her into deep sleep.

She was right, the movie was great. Looking down at her peacefully sleeping, he smiled. How could her parents ever have, however briefly, considered not bringing her into this world? Her parents were two of the biggest asses he’d ever had the displeasure to meet. A flick of his wrist told him it wasn’t too late to give Perry a call for an update.

He answered on the first ring. “Dude, I really don’t like these people.”

At least they agreed on that much, but they probably had different reasons. “Why?”

“She’s a yeller. So loud, I could hear her from where I parked in a neighbor’s driveway behind a row of hedges. The closer I got to the house, the more I wished I had ear plugs.” Perry laughed, making Kasper shake his head.

“What about the old man?” he asked over the laughter.

Perry’s laughter died too quickly in Kasper’s opinion. “The man’s a drinker. I would be, too, if I had to live with her, but I think he takes it too far.”

“That’s too bad, but it’s good to know. Now I just need to figure out what he plans on doing,” Kasper voiced his thoughts out loud.

“Start with this. He had some guy here from a security firm ‘Alliance First’. Guy’s name was Wallace Virrally,” Perry said, proving how good he was.

“I’ll get in touch with him tomorrow. Hey, by the way, would you and Angie be interested in going to a party with some big time shakers and rollers and intellectual types?”

“Sure. What’s going on?”

Kasper could practically hear the wheels spinning in his mind. “My engagement party. My mother’s planning it. She and Harley are getting together tomorrow to start the guest list.”

“You’re not inviting these yahoos are you?” Perry asked, his phrasing showing his age.

“And give them a chance to humiliate her in public, on what should be one of the most special nights of her life? Not in their dreams.” He wasn’t about to give them access to some really influential people who’d be attending the party.

“It would probably be considered a really big snub,” Perry responded, suddenly serious.

“I hope so. They need to know I’m not playing games,” Kasper said firmly.

“I have a feeling having some extra security wouldn’t be amiss.” The kid had brains, Kasper thought with a smile.

“I agree. Call me if anything else pops up. Oh, and tell Angie I said hello.”

“You got it.” Perry hung up. No good-bye, or small talk.

Thankfully, his version of sleeping beauty hadn’t budged. Scooting out from under her, he slid his phone into his pocket. After a quick trip to the kitchen to get rid of their snack mess, he stood there staring down at her. She was tantalizing. Scooping her up into his arms, he carried her upstairs to her bedroom. Laying her across the bottom, he folded back her blankets, shifting her under them.

“Don’t go.” She wrapped her fingers around his wrist.

“Okay, I’ll stay a while.” He sat on the edge of the bed.

“All night. I want you to sleep here.” She sounded a bit groggy, but her eyes were alert.

“Just sleep, right?” He offered her a teasing smile.

She nodded and he rose, toed off his shoes, watching as she scooted over to make room for him. He put his cell phone on her nightstand, and taking off his shirt and jeans, he tossed them onto her the chair by her desk. Crawling into her crisp sheets was a strange sensation. Sure, he’d slept with women before, but not without sex being part of the equation.

Wasting no time, she curled right up to him. She tossed her leg over his. In response, he put his arms around her, letting her use his shoulder as a pillow. Closing his eyes, he laid still until her breathing evened out. Then he just lay there, holding her. Feeling her soft skin under his hand, smelling her sweet, fresh scent, wanting her with the fiercest desire he’d ever felt. A desire he was sure would be the end of his single, carefree lifestyle. It kept running through his brain that once he had her, once they took each other to the edge and back, no one else would ever do. That it was the reason he’d kept pulling back at the last moment. It was hard to admit, but true.

The question was, how long could he hold out against the woman who superseded the woman of his dreams?

## Chapter Eleven

Harley woke up wrapped in Kasper's arms, feeling safe and warm. Her backside was molded to his front in a spooning position. His breath warm and moist on her shoulder, one hand barely touching her breast. The other was resting low on her belly, where it was a little too round. Being held like this made her shudder. It was a good shudder, the type she hadn't experienced in quite a while. She smoothed her hand back and forth on the heavy thigh that was draped over hers. He was holding her ass snugly against his erection, which was poking her tenaciously.

The slight knock on the door had her jumping and him groaning, possibly in pain. She rolled, peeking over his shoulder at her grandfather. He was standing there wearing a silly grin. *Oh man, sometimes he had the worst possible timing.* Giving Kasper a hard shake, she sat up.

"Morning, Grandpa." She smoothed her shirt down.

He put his finger to his lips in a shushing motion. "I just wanted to let you know I'm going over to Beverly's for our weekly breakfast."

"Oh, is it after seven already?" She glanced at the clock.

"Yeah, but don't get up. You probably want to sleep in." He waggled his eyebrows playfully.

"Grandpa." She covered her face, listening to his laughter drift off down the hallway.

"A weekly breakfast with Beverly, as in like, a date?" Kasper said, making her jump and squeal.

"More like a meeting. And Beverly is our neighbor, Mrs. Tachell. They have breakfast with a few other professors, then play eighteen holes of golf, all under the pretense of discussing their students. How long have you been awake?" She pushed him onto his back, hovering over him.

He raised his arms, folding his hands behind his head. "I woke up about five minutes before you tried to unman me."

"That was an accident. Did I really hurt you? I could always rub it to make it feel better, or maybe a kiss would do the trick." She licked her lips.

She never saw it coming. One second she was teasing, the next, she lay trapped under him. She probably shouldn't have laughed at the serious look on his face, but she knew she wasn't in any danger, so she let it loose. He closed his eyes, making a low, deep growling noise. It was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard.

"I think it's time we take our relationship to the next level." She raised her hips until she had him firmly between her thighs.

She could tell by the strain on his face he wanted to, but he pushed himself away. He sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows rested on his knees, holding his head in his hands. Why was he fighting it so hard? Wasn't he the one who said their getting together was inevitable? She didn't like playing games, so he had a choice to make.

"I'll take that as a no, but let me tell you something, Mr. Drake, if this is just some sort of game you're playing, you can stop now." She scrambled out of the bed, running into the bathroom, slamming the door and flipping the lock. Spinning around, she did the same to the one that entered into the hall.

"Damn it, Harley, open the door," he shouted, knocking lightly, which turned into an angry pounding when she didn't answer.

"Harley, I'm not playing games. Can't we talk about this without you getting all feminine

on me?" he said, with one last pound of his fist.

Feminine, she thought, standing there tapping her foot in pace with her racing heart. What else was she supposed to be? Not that this had anything to do with male or female. It had to do with sexual frustration. If she was a guy, and he swung that way, and was treating her the same way, she probably would have decked him, and then walked out. Either way, it all boiled down to him being a tease.

Unable to hold her temper in check any longer, she leaned her head against the door and shouted, "I may be feminine, but you are a jerk and a tease."

"I may be a jerk, but I'm not a tease," he said from behind her, making her scream.

"Get out," she squeaked, pointing at the now wide open door.

He stood there shaking his head, at least he'd slipped on his jeans, she thought, knowing it would have been harder to resist him in just a pair of boxer briefs. "Not until you hear me out."

"Fine, you have three minutes." She glanced at the digital clock radio.

"You're not going to make this easy are you?" he asked, suddenly smiling and adding, "Hey, this our first fight."

She didn't bother to reply. Her foot started tapping again of its own free will. There was nothing even remotely funny about this. She would not smile. She wouldn't let his smile distract her. No matter how many flips her stomach took, or how flimsy her knees felt, she wasn't going to let him know that he could get to her that easy.

"This relationship is new. I don't want to rush it," he said, rubbing the back of his hand across his chin.

*Smart guy, not.* She pulled her hair into ponytail, wrapping an elastic band around it. "If we'd met in a club, or at a party, how long would it have taken you to try and get me into bed?"

"Truthfully, probably the first night, but then I might not have ever called you again," he said with a laugh. "Believe me, when I first saw you wrestling with Bruno, man, I wanted to be that dog. I've thought of little else since."

Watching the way his eyes coasted over her body, she wanted to believe every word he said. She knew this was one of those cases where actions spoke louder than words.

"So you want me so bad that you turn me down when I offer myself to you? Yeah, that really makes a lot of sense," she said sarcastically.

"For crying out loud, I just want you to be sure. When you're ready to give this relationship a real chance, then we can move on," he said, throwing his hands in the air.

"I have to tell you, your caveman attitude is so attractive." Her words dripped with disdain. "Our engagement may be phony, but I committed myself to a relationship with you, however temporary. Now you have to let me decide how, and when, I move on to the next step."

"There is no 'I' in this. It's 'we' or nothing at all." He crossed his arms over his chest, staring at her as if he was expecting her to disagree, which she was considering pretty hard.

"Fine. Then *we* should decide, not *you*," she said with a nod. The look of surprise on his face was priceless.

"Okay, we'll take a vote. I'd like to get to know the real you first. Not the good girl who doesn't get mad, or flirt, or say what she's thinking because she's afraid of hurting someone's feelings, or wears a butt ugly outfit to make a neighbor happy. Don't look at me like that, your grandfather explained just about everything. What he didn't, I figured out on my own." He stepped toward her, and like the chicken she was, she retreated, which turned into a game of cat and mouse.

"What about you? You acted strangely around your parents. Do you want to tell me about

it?” She turned the tables right back on him as he stalked her around the room.

“You’re right, there are issues there, but I have no problem sharing them with you.” His eyes locked on hers and she knew he was waiting for her to allow him the same access to her psyche.

“So you’re saying no sex until I spill my guts.”

“No. I’m saying— Shit, I don’t know what I’m saying. This is all new to me. All I know is, if we don’t work something out soon, all this—,” he waved his hands between their bodies, “—may cause irrevocable damage.”

She smiled, liking the fact that he wasn’t sure of himself. It put them on even footing. “We wouldn’t want that to happen. How do we decide how far are we’re allowed to go and when?”

“Can we discuss this over breakfast? I think I’d feel better with a table between us.” He smiled back at her.

“You sure you want to try my cooking?” she asked.

“Maybe we should go out.”

“Chicken.”

“More like a self-preservationist. I’ll go get ready. See you in the kitchen in thirty.” He laughed as he walked out the door.

Who was she kidding? he thought, ducking into his room. Didn’t she have any idea how close he’d come to taking her during the night? Holding her in his arms all night, her soft, warm, supple body enticed him. Conscious or not, she’d taunted and teased him. It was the best and worst form of torture anyone could have come up with.

A tease. *Shit*. That was something no one had ever accused him of before. Too direct, maybe a little single-minded, abrupt, but never a tease. He could be just as friendly as the next guy. There were times some women had even considered playful, under the right circumstances of course. But to think that he wouldn’t follow through was just plain crazy. The problem was, it was kind of true. Damn it, he was either going to have to *put out*, he grimaced at the term, or keep her at a distance.

Yeah, like that was going to happen. She was right about one thing though, if he expected her to open up, then he had to give her the same candidness. If he was afraid of what she might learn, that was his issue to deal with.

Pulling a clean shirt over his head, he caught the smell of coffee in the air. He didn’t think she was the type who needed a boost to get her day started, so maybe Alfred was back already. At the top of the stairs, the aroma of bacon wafted up to him. Mouth watering in response, he wondered if he’d be able to snag a piece or two while he waited for her.

“It smells great in here,” he said, walking into the kitchen.

“Thank you,” Harley responded, putting the plate of bacon on the table.

Harley refused to acknowledge she was trying to impress him. Growing up, weekday mornings had been hectic, so a bowl of cereal or jellied toast was the likely fare, but the weekends were special. Working side by side, Grandpa had taught her to cook a “suitable meal,” as he called it.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I made my favorites.” She motioned to the table with a sassy smile.

His gaze roamed over the table. Next to their empty plates, was a platter of French toast and pancakes, another with bacon, ham, sausages, and a pitcher of orange juice. When he looked

back at her, there was something in his expression she couldn't quite read. Her nerves, which were already stretched tight, felt as though they'd been plucked.

"I know you wanted to go out, but I figure a lot of what we'd be talking about should be said in private," she said, instead of telling him she liked having his undivided attention

He walked over, pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "Good thinking. I would've helped you, though."

"Nah, I believe in taking turns. I cooked, you can do the dishes. Next time we'll switch. Can you cook?" she asked, sitting in the chair he pulled out for her.

"Enough so I won't starve." Taking his own seat, he flashed her a smile.

Small talk was a waste of time, so she decided to jump right in. "Exactly how rich are you?"

Pausing with his fork mid-air, he stared at her. "Very. I'm sorry about the way things happened earlier. I would have rather dealt with your parents privately."

"I would rather not have dealt with them at all. You know it's kind of a cliché. Growing up I always wished they'd come here to see me, or just call and ask if I was doing all right. Even if it had been bad attention at least it would have been focused on me." She spoke before she thought about it. Somehow he had a way to make her stop thinking.

"Harley, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you were better off without them."

"Realistically, I knew that deep down. Grandpa reinforced it all the time, but as a little kid, you don't always think about what's best for you. And we don't always know all the reasons behind other people's actions. Still some actions can be very telling."

He closed his eyes, giving his head an almost imperceptible shake. "I know my mother and father can come across as a little... cold, would be an apt description, but I also know they love me and each other."

She toyed with her food, feeling a little guilty that she knew so much he didn't. "Sometimes people have trouble showing their emotions."

"Or hiding them," he said with a chuckle that had her blushing from equal parts anger and embarrassment.

Ready for a change of subject, she shoved her plate aside, and leaning on her elbows, she grabbed the first topic that popped into her head. "About my trust fund, I really liked your idea about saving it for my kids. Can I really do that?"

"Mmm..." He nodded, taking a bite of the French toast he'd slathered in syrup. "How many?"

"Huh? How many what?" she asked, unable to tear her eyes off his mouth as he licked the extra syrup off his lower lip.

"Kids. I remember you said your grandfather wants a couple of great-grandsons, but how many do you want and what kind?"

"A couple. At least two, maybe three. I'd love a little girl." *With vibrant green eyes that changed their shade with her mood like yours*, she added silently. "But boys would be nice, too. Either way, they'll never, ever doubt how much they're wanted or loved."

He nodded, smiling like a fool. "Three's a good number. I think all girls would be a little hectic when they got older, so two boys and a girl sounds like a plan, just in case anyone asks if we're planning on kids in the future."

"What are your plans for the future?" she asked, kind of hoping she was putting him on the spot.

"I'm hoping to find the woman, settle down, and have a few kids. I like my job most of

the time, so I'm not planning any changes there. How about you?" He reached over, pushing her plate back in front of her.

Taking the hint, she picked up a piece of bacon, nibbling as she contemplated her answer. "I never really thought much beyond finishing school and getting a job. Then I was offered the position at the library. Now I'm just taking some time to enjoy my life."

"Your grandfather mentioned that he thought he was holding you back romantically. He's afraid you're not looking for love because you don't want to leave him all alone."

"That's why you made the comment about us living here after we get married. Where do you live now?" she asked, realizing he was right. Though they might have a chemistry that was off the charts, they barely knew each other.

"I own a nice little building by Aster Place Park," he said, naming one of the pricier neighborhoods in town.

"How little?" She pictured all those fancy houses with their wrap around porches and immaculate gardens.

"Small in comparison to others on the same street. I bought an older building, and renovated it into three units. I live in one, and I've rented the others out to two very nice young couples." He got up and began clearing the table off, rinsing the dishes, putting them into the dishwasher—not really answering the question, but giving her another peek into his cautious mind.

He had to know that after he dealt with her parents, breaking this phony engagement wasn't going to be easy. "Between the newspaper article and this engagement party your mother's going to plan, everyone is going to be expecting some sort of announcement. Most likely a wedding date."

"Would marrying me be such a bad thing?" he asked, taking her plate from her hands, their fingers brushing and sending tingles up her arm.

## Chapter Twelve

Kasper's face was blank of emotion, but his eyes shone with a sincerity that scared her. To tell him the truth would have been so easy, except for the fact that she'd be setting herself up for major heartbreak. Something she'd been avoiding for as long as she could remember. Thankfully, the ringing of his cell phone saved her from having to answer him.

"You should probably get that." She backed away.

He took the phone from his pocket and flipped it open, pressing it to his ear, his eyes not leaving hers for a second. "What's up, Perry?"

Watching him, she saw the spark in his eyes die. Whoever this Perry was, it was quite obvious whatever he was saying wasn't something Kasper wanted to hear. She'd only known him for a little over a week, but she was learning how to read him. Like any two people getting to know each other, there was a lot to learn. The only difference was their schedule was a bit more crushed. After all, engaged couples were expected to be very attentive to each other.

Kasper closed his eyes and growled a deep sexy sound that should have scared, rather than aroused. "When?"

Intent on giving him some privacy, she began inching her way towards the door.

"Hold on a second. Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"I...to the bathroom," she said, bolting from the room before he could see the lie echoed in her eyes.

"Damn it. Sorry about that," he said, turning his attention back to his newest problem.

"I take it I called at an inopportune moment. I just thought you'd like a heads up." Perry chuckled on the other end.

"Definitely. Who did the interview?" he asked, knowing a big name would make it more credible.

"Sasha Lourdes. No breaks there, she's the one every other paper uses as a fact checker," Perry said, reading his mind.

"Do you know who they interviewed?" Kasper hoped they'd luck out there.

"Her parents, a few of her co-workers, I think they requested an interview with your parents, and boss too," he said, and Kasper was glad he couldn't see him cringing.

"I'll keep my ears open, but knowing how much credence your name carries, you could ask for pre-approval and the editor would probably jump to see that it gets done," Perry suggested.

Though it was true, Kasper wasn't sure he wanted to go that route just yet.

"Doing that might make them think we're looking to hide something. Are you going to be out and about today?" he asked, thinking a preemptive strike might work in their favor.

"Tell me when and where." he said, getting the picture even without his camera.

"I'll get back to you on that as soon as I have a destination." He ended the call as he went in search of his lovely, lying bride-to-be.

He found her sitting in the yard surrounded by patches of colorful flowers. He watched her run her hand over the blossoms, her fingers ruffling the silky petals. This was her place, he thought with a smile.

"Beautiful," he said, feeling something peaceful come over him.

"They are. I planted them all myself." A proud beaming smile crossed her face, lighting up her eyes.

“They suit you,” he said, realizing that for her, they were a part of her real personality trying to break free.

“You’ll have something to talk about with my mother. She spends hours toiling about in her garden.”

Getting to her feet, she wiped her hands on her butt, drawing his attention to the generous curves. “I guess I should go give her a call.”

“I have to go run some errands, but maybe when I get back we can go for a ride. I’d like to show you where I live,” he said, placing his hand on her lower back, walking her into the house.

“That sounds great.” She smiled up at him, clearly relieved he wasn’t pressing her for an answer to his earlier question.

\* \* \*

Ethel wrung her hands beneath the table. So much was riding on this meeting. Her son had actually come to her for help. Well, not for himself, but for Harley, which was just as important. She needed to pull this off without any glitches.

Harley entered the restaurant looking around nervously. With a quick wave, Ethel had her attention. The girl was absolutely lovely. Kasper had made such a wonderful choice.

Rising to her feet, she pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Harley, I’m glad you could make it.”

“Me too. This place is amazing,” she whispered, looking around the room surreptitiously.

“It’s one of my favorite places to celebrate,” Ethel said, resuming her seat as the waiter arrived to take their drink order.

“Are we celebrating?” Harley asked, hoping her face didn’t show how surprised she was.

“Of course we are. It’s my first outing with my daughter in-law,” she said with a smile, reaching over and softly patting her hand.

The gesture was so loving and unexpected that Harley had trouble holding back the sudden tears that stung her eyes. After ordering them both mimosas, she launched into her plans for an informal, yet elegant engagement party to be held in two weeks time, at their country club, if she and Kasper agreed of course. Pulling a thick binder from her bag, she put it on the table between them. They looked over invitation samples, stopping only long enough to place their orders.

“Harley, dear, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I know a lovely boutique where we could find the perfect dresses. I’d love to take you there.” The tender look in her eyes was too much for Harley to refuse.

“That would be wonderful.”

The rest of their lunch was spent making a list of all her grandfather’s colleagues to be invited, her coworkers, and their close friends. Kasper was going to drop off his list later today and the invitations would be delivered by Monday afternoon. They decided on the wording with ease.

*Mr. & Mrs. Kasper Michael Drake II*  
*and*  
*Dr. Alfred Taizer*

*Invite you to join them on Saturday the 5<sup>th</sup> of May*

*to help them celebrate the engagement of*

*Kasper Michael Drake III  
and  
Harley Marie Taizer*

Thankfully, the question of adding her parents to the guest list was never even brought up. Ethel did say she had already called a caterer who was well known, and just happened to be a not too distant relative, and she was thrilled to accept the booking. The guilt started creeping in on her at that point. Fighting the urge to break down and tell Kasper's mother the truth, she just smiled and nodded.

Before she knew what was happening, Kasper's mother had paid the bill and they were on their way out the door. Amid a group of people milling about outside the door, a few flashes went off. It wasn't surprising due to the upscale area, but she found herself looking around trying to spot anyone worth having his or her photo taken. Not spotting anyone, she climbed into Ethel's waiting car.

A few minutes later, after some small talk, the car pulled to a stop in front of a swanky little shop. The driver opened the door, helping her, then Ethel, out of the car. The shop's door opened before they reached it and a very pretty young woman around her age threw her arms around Kasper's mother.

"Aunt Maybell said you might stop by," she chimed in a deep sexy, husky tone that was totally mismatched to her petite pixie like looks.

"Tillie, it's my pleasure to introduce Harley Taizer, Kasper's fiancée. Harley, this is my best friend's niece, Tillibrand Forrester," It was hard not to notice the girl's smile falter upon learning who she was, and Harley wondered if she had wanted Kasper for herself.

Harley was about to make up some lame excuse to get out of there, when recognition of her name sank in.

"Oh, my God. You're Ty Lily. You designed that wedding dress that was plastered all over the tabloids a few months ago," Harley said, only half-believing she was standing before one of the world's most sought after designers.

"And one of Kasper's many admirers." Ethel gave Tillie's arm a firm shake.

"Sorry. Why don't we step inside and you can tell me what you're looking for." She motioned to the door, her megawatt smile returning full force.

She was going to shoot Kasper. He should have warned her about this. He had to have known there was a possibility that something like this might happen. Looking at some of the delicate silk creations hanging on the racks, she thought of a better punishment than shooting him.

Kasper paced from room to room waiting for Perry to check in. He glanced at his cell phone sitting on the desk willing it to ring. He walked over and picked it up and scrolled down to Perry's number. His finger was hovering above the call button when it rang.

"Well?" his rough voice demanded.

Perry laughed, taking a few seconds before answering, "I got what you wanted and a bit more."

"What? Never mind. Can you get them in today?" he asked, his anxiety getting the better of him, as he wondered why the jerk was yanking his chain.

“No, it’s too late, but I can get them on the website today and they’ll definitely go out in tomorrow’s edition.” Perry added, “I’ll send over copies to you. Same place?”

“I guess it’ll have to do. Yeah, same place. So did you ask Angie about the party?” He hoped she’d agreed to attend and that she and Harley would hit it off.

“Dude, she was so excited I was afraid she’d go into labor. Then she started whining about having to wear a tent to one of the most exclusive events of the year. Man, I can just imagine how twisted she’ll be the night of the party.” Perry chuckled, evidently taking his wife’s swinging moods in stride.

“I’ll take care of the tent.” He knew his mother would help him choose something stunning.

“I don’t know if I like the idea of another guy buying my wife clothes, or anything else for that matter,” Perry said, and Kasper could sympathize, since he’d hate the idea of any man buying anything for Harley with or without his permission.

“Just think of it as me buying something for the baby. If she gets stressed out it wouldn’t be good, right?” he asked, knowing Perry would see things his way. “And Angie will never know it was me. Let me take care of everything.”

“Fine.” He sighed in defeat. “So am I allowed to ask what you did to Sasha that made her go after you?”

“Let’s just say a brash young man once had the nerve to turn down an invitation to join her for a weekend of fun in the sun.” He’d never forget the angry sparkle he’d seen in her eyes.

Retribution had only been a small thought niggling in the back of his mind. He hadn’t given her enough credit to carry a grudge this long.

“Man, you really bit it on this one,” Perry said in a very somber tone.

“If it was only me, that would be alright, but she’s not fighting fair when she drags an innocent woman and my family into it,” he said, his anger putting a bite in his words.

“Man, I hope this will all be over soon,” Perry said.

He hoped the kid was right, but not before he got things between Harley and him straightened out. Not wanting to think about it, he switched topics. “By the way, good catch on the security guy. I ran a check and he has a questionable background. It looks like he had a habit of giving out security codes to anyone who had enough cash. I’m guessing he’s the one they’ve been having do their investigating. I’ll be having a talk with him.”

“Do you think she’s in real danger?” Perry asked, voicing the question that had been bouncing around his brain all morning.

Unconsciously, he started rapping his pen against the desk. “I don’t know, but I don’t like it. Now with the articles and the engagement party, things are bound to get worse.”

“Does she seem worried?” Perry’s tone held more than idle curiosity, he sounded as worried as Kasper felt.

“More like irritated. Then again, she doesn’t know everything. Her grandfather kept her pretty sheltered when it came to her parents. I think it’s time I sat down and explained a few things to her.” He knew she wasn’t going to like what he had to say one bit.

“Well, if you need any help, give me a call. I’ll be at the paper ‘til six. After that, you can catch me on my cell,” he offered.

Though it felt good to have some backup, he knew he’d never allow Perry to get into a really dangerous situation. “Thanks, hopefully it won’t come to that, but I’ll give you a buzz and let you know how things turn out.”

He walked to the window as he ended the call. They were out there right now, plotting

against their own daughter. And if that wasn't bad enough, now his enemies thought they were going to take their shots at her too. Instead of protecting her, which had been the plan all along, he was going to cause her more headaches. But she'd be much happier in the long run. That was the important thing. He needed to focus on his main goals. One, protect her from her greedy parents. Two, show her she couldn't and didn't want to live without him. Three, love and cherish her for the rest of her life.

Turning from the window, he flipped open the thick file on his desk. Patrick Taizer's portfolio wasn't bad, per say, it just wasn't very liquid. Other than a few thousand in his checking and savings accounts, all his money appeared to be tied up in the two car dealerships, and very risky stocks. It seemed like the man was hedging his bets in hopes of a big payout. Rubbing his chin, he read through the next few pages.

Was there a reason he needed the money? Maybe he had a sweet young thing on the side. Or was he hoarding it all, hoping to take it with him when he died?

Her mother, he thought, lifting a photograph out of the file, was another story. She was just being spiteful. Damn, Fern had once been young and beautiful. What a waste, he thought, dropping the photo to the side. From what he'd been able to gather, she had a sizable bank account in her name only. She owned a third of the dealerships. And from the looks of the stocks and bonds, her father had left her set for life.

So why, if they both had plenty of money, did they think they needed Harley's? They didn't seem to be in any legal trouble, yet that could change if they didn't back off soon. It was obvious they didn't want to have anything to do with Harley or Alfred. There had to be something he was missing.

Turning to the next page, he smiled. It looked like her aunts and cousins weren't going to be an issue after all. Things were just as Alfred thought. If they did come around, he had enough proof they weren't due any of her money, or Alfred's for that point. He'd have to make a copy for him. He'd paid enough for someone else's responsibility. It would be nice to give him some peace of mind.

The next person in the file was Alfred himself. His background check just verified everything he had told him. He'd become Harley's legal guardian the day she was born. He'd raised her in a middle class life style, though with his income, he could have raised her in a more well to do area. Instead, he chose to put his money away for her future. He really, really loved her with all his heart.

Closing the file, Kasper came to two conclusions. First, Patrick Taizer was a fool for not learning from his father. Second, Alfred Taizer was an extraordinary man. He only hoped he would be half as good to his kids as Alfred had been to Harley.

Scratch that, he hoped he and Harley could do as good a job with their kids.

## Chapter Thirteen

Harley shook her head, thinking about all the boxes and bags Mrs. Taizer's driver had loaded into her truck. Where was that euphoric high women supposedly got from shopping? And this was just the beginning, she thought, with a sigh. Thanks to Ethel and Tillie's insistence, she'd not only found the perfect dress for the engagement party, but one for the wedding too. Not to mention the sexy ensemble Tillie had put together for the wedding night.

Everything had fit almost perfectly and Tillie swore with just a slight adjustment here or there, they would. The colors she'd chosen had complimented her hair and skin. It was no wonder the woman was in such high demand. What a shame, she thought, wiping away a tear that had escaped. Hopefully Kasper would be able to explain why it all wouldn't be needed without hurting anyone's feelings. She hadn't been able to come up with a reasonable excuse, other than the truth, which she wasn't allowed to use.

Maybe when this was all over, she'd have to find herself a man for real. The question was, would her heart be up for it? Pulling into the driveway, she both hoped and feared that Kasper was inside waiting for her. Stopping a few inches behind his car, she flipped down her visor to check what little makeup she'd worn. Satisfied she looked presentable; she climbed out, screeching when she looked up to find him standing on the deck watching her.

He didn't say a word as he walked over and took her keys from her trembling fingers. She started to step away, but he shook his head.

Leaning in, he kissed her cheek then whispered, "We have an audience, time to play our parts."

Forcing a smile that almost brought on tears, she responded, "I have stuff in the back."

He nodded, rubbing her arms. "Why don't you head inside, I'll bring it right in."

"Thanks, and Kasper, we really need to talk," she managed to say before rushing into the house.

*Shit*, Kasper thought, as he lowered the tailgate. There was no sense wasting time wondering how the heck she'd found out. He'd just have to reassure her that everything would be okay. Looking at the dozens of packages carrying his mother's favorite logos, he couldn't hold back his laughter. Apparently, his mother had inducted Harley into her shopping circle today.

Loading his arms as he'd watched the staff do over the years, he managed to get everything. Closing the tailgate took a little ingenuity, but he managed. Walking into the living room, he found Harley pacing about the room almost frantically. Dropping everything onto the couch, he rushed to her side, only to have her step away. Okay, so it was more like she jumped away.

"I'm sorry," she said shaking her head. "I need to be thinking clearly and we both know when you touch me, that's not possible."

"Look, I know none of this is easy to deal with, but we need to stick it out." He stayed as still as possible, trying not to spook her.

She waved her hands around and he watched them get more erratic as she spoke. "I've made such a mess out of this. Your mother and her friend's niece were so nice to me, and all I did was stand there and lie to both of them."

"Sweetheart, please sit down. We'll work this all out. I swear." He realized she hadn't heard and that now was positively the wrong time to tell her about the upcoming exposé.

“No! We don’t have time. You have to call your mother, or Tillie, or both, and cancel the order.” Her squeaky high voice tore a ragged gouge through his soul.

Unable to take it anymore, he walked over and scooped her up in his arms. Never once thinking how she might react, he walked over to the recliner and sat down. When she curled up on his lap, resting her head on his chest, he let out a shaky breath ruffling her hair.

“What order? What did my mother do?” he asked, holding back a wave of anger he wasn’t expecting to feel.

His body actually shook with the intensity of her eruption of tears. “I... She... It... Oh, God.”

“Baby, please just tell me and I’ll take care of everything.” He sounded like a broken record even to his own ears.

“It was... She took... I...” she sobbed, her body shaking against his.

He rubbed her back in big circles hoping to soothe her enough that she’d at least be able to breathe without taking those big gulps of air. He felt her tears soaking his shirt. He was an ass for forcing her to go through with this. Whatever had happened today had ultimately pushed her beyond her limits. His mother was supposed to help him out, not make things worse.

What the hell had happened today? Perry would have told him if he noticed some incident occur, wouldn’t he? Something must have transpired after he’d left. God, he wished she’d stop crying so she could tell him what was wrong, so he could fix it. He was one sorry son-of-a-bitch. How could he even think like that when she was a puddle of misery sitting on his lap?

Eventually her hiccupping sobs softened, then subsided all together. Her breathing was coming in a deep, even rhythm. From that, and the way she’d gone limp like a piece of cooked spaghetti, it wasn’t hard to determine she’d cried herself to sleep. He sat there just holding her for a few more minutes while he went over his options.

Moving gradually, he managed to get to his feet with her balanced in his arms. Carefully navigating the stairs, he made his way to her bedroom. After gently laying her on the bed, he sat on the edge and smoothed her hair away from her tear-streaked face. He was supposed to be here to spare her as much pain as possible, not cause her more, however inadvertently it might happen.

His guilt spiked, sending him to his feet. Going into his room two doors down, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed his mother’s number. Listening to it ring, he rolled his shoulders, easing some of the tension out of them.

“Hello, Kasper,” his mother said cheerfully, which only confused him more.

“What happened this afternoon?” he asked, cringing at the accusatory tone his voice had taken on.

“We had a lovely lunch and did some shopping. Why? What’s wrong?” she asked, and though he hated her worried tone of voice, he had to tell her, hoping she’d help shed some light on things.

“I don’t know. Harley came home upset. When I asked her what was wrong, she burst into tears. Could something have happened while you were shopping?”

“I really don’t think so. Well, maybe she was a little in awe when Tillie insisted on helping her choose one of her one-of-a-kind wedding dresses. Then we assembled her wedding night trousseau. But really, Tillie is so gifted it would have been a shame not to take her up on the offer. But she seemed fine when we parted.”

He sucked in breath. *Shit*. She’d said she had to stand there and lie. Even he would consider choosing a wedding dress for a fake engagement a pretty big lie. That must have been

the order she was talking about canceling. Not that she'd had a choice, with his mother and Tillie pulling the strings. *Man, she must hate him right now.*

"Well, she's sleeping now. Maybe she'll be up to talking when she wakes up." He didn't want to tell his mother that it was her little shopping trip that had caused Harley's breakdown.

"Would you like me to come over there? Maybe I could help somehow." The concern he could hear in her voice surprised him.

Was it possible the reason she hadn't been physical or cuddly with him was because deep down she had really wanted a daughter? *Where the hell had that come from?* He shook his head. She'd shown him she loved him plenty of times. He should be psyched that she was taken with Harley, not jealous.

"No. I think we'll be okay, but I'll call you if I need you," he said, keeping his options open since he had no idea how things were going to go.

"I'm sure she's just worn out from everything that's been happening." Her calm, soothing tone had him smiling.

"Thanks, Mom. I appreciate everything you did today, I know Harley will too."

"Anything I can do to help. If you'd like, I can call that Sasha woman's boss and express my extreme displeasure that she's attempting to do some sort of exposé on my future daughter in-law." Her tone was still calm, yet the soothing quality had been replaced with a hard edge.

"No, I think that would probably just add more fuel to the fire." He wasn't surprised she wanted to give Sasha a piece of her mind, she'd never liked her.

"Yes, that's what your father said, too. You men always think so clearly in these situations. Just call me later and let me know how she is." Her sarcasm wasn't wasted on him, but she didn't know everything, and he wasn't going to tell her until everything was resolved.

"I will," he agreed, knowing it was more of an order than a request.

"Goodbye, dear."

"Bye, Mom." He tossed the phone onto the bed, wishing there was some way he could kick his own ass.

Heading back down the hall to Harley's bedroom, he thought of all the names she should be calling him. Easing the door open, he stood there staring, wondering what he'd done right in his life that led him to her. Then he prayed whatever it was would keep them together.

"Are you going to just stand there, or are you going to join me?" She rolled over to face him.

"I didn't want to wake you," he said, walking over and lying down beside her.

"I'm sorry I freaked out. I'm all right now, but there's something I need you to do for me." She tangled her feet with his.

Reaching over, he put his hand on her hip, pulling her closer. "Name it."

"Call and cancel the order for my wedding dress," she said, turning an alarming shade of red.

"I'll take care of everything." He smiled when she burrowed her face into his neck.

She slid her hand down from the belt loop she'd been playing with, brushing it over his fly. His cock surged in response and let her know he was up for whatever she had in mind. He couldn't help but think this could either turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to him, or the worst. He sighed, releasing a shaky breath when her hand slithered under his shirt, inching her way higher.

Running her fingers across his nipple had him ready to pounce, then she said, "Mmm... You smell good. Have we talked enough to move on to the next phase of this relationship?"

Using the last of his functioning brain cells, he managed to groan out, “Harley, I’m afraid if we do this I’ll never be able to let you go.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?” She used the same words he had this morning.

“No, but is that something you could handle?” He rolled until he was on top of her.

“I think so. No, I know I could.” She opened her thighs wider, letting his settle between them.

“Even if it lasted forever?” He rested his forehead against hers as he rocked his hips, pressing his rock hard erection against the heat he could feel seeping through her panties.

“Forever is a long time. Do you think we’ll be able to keep each other satisfied?” She helped him tug his shirt off, tossing it somewhere behind him.

“I think—” he yanked her shirt off “—that,” there went her bra, “we’ll have a lot of fun trying,” he said, just before he covered her mouth with his with a brief, teasing kiss.

“Please don’t stop this time,” she pleaded, her words coming out in a gasp.

“No chance,” he said, their fingers tangling, bodies bumping, breathing fast and ragged as they struggled to get naked as fast as possible.

“You know, if you keep laughing, you’re libel to give me a complex,” he joked, with his fingers and lips smoothing all over her naked skin, finding every little ticklish spot, making it impossible for her not to laugh and squirm.

It was an easy enough problem to fix. Once they had her naked and him in just his jeans, she wrapped her legs around his, and with all her strength, she pushed against his shoulders, rolling them both until she was on top of him. Staring down at his stunned expression, she gave him a wink.

“Aren’t you just full of surprises?”

She just smiled as she raked her nails gently down his chest. Crawling down his body, she pressed kisses along his chest and abdomen. She couldn’t help stopping every so often for a nibble or two. When she reached his waistband, his hands fisted in the sheets. Instead of popping the button and lowering the zipper, she molded her hand over him, applying pressure as she rubbed back and forth.

“Is this your way of punishing me for taking it slow?” he hissed, his hips rising with her touch.

Undoing the button with a flick of her fingers, she let her hand dip below the elastic of his underwear. He groaned when she ran her thumb over the head of his penis. Dropping her head onto his stomach, she burst out laughing.

“Honey, let me tell you the last thing a man wants to hear when a woman is stroking him is laughter,” he said, as his hand covered hers, holding it in place, which just made her laugh harder.

“Trust me, it’s not you.” She pressed a kiss to his navel, muffling her uncontrollable laughter.

His hands locked on her arms, lifting her off him as he slid out from under her. She rolled onto her back watching him get to his feet. Standing beside the bed, he stared down at her. He folded his arms across his chest, obviously looking for an explanation.

Lying there in a fit of laughter, she forgot all about her nakedness. “I’m so sorry, this has never happened before.”

“That really doesn’t make me feel any better.” He reached for his shirt at the end of the bed.

She grabbed his arm, pulling him back onto the bed straddling his hips. “Wait, let me

explain.”

“This better be good.” He pouted like an angry little boy ready to take his ball and go home, or in this case, his balls.

“Have you ever read a romance novel?” she asked, settling herself right on top of his erection.

“Excuse me?” he said, a look of total confusion on his face, yet his hands settled on her hips, holding her in place.

“I grew up reading them and I’ve been helping one of the professors gather a selection of works for one of her courses on the evolution of romance novels. Anyway, I had the most absurd thoughts pop into my head.” She pressed a kiss to his chin.

“And my dick brought them on?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Yes and no.”

“Could you be a little more specific?” One of his hands slid down to cup her ass.

“Have you ever heard of ‘purple prose’?” she asked, smiling when he shook his head.

“Let me give you an example. ‘His rigid staff of manhood pressed insistently against the apex of her aching passion cove.’”

His laughter shook her body causing the most fantastic friction between them. She fell forward onto his chest enjoying the deep rumbling sound vibrating in her ear. Mmm... He really did smell good, kind of spicy, with a light citrus kick.

“Give me a few more examples.” His laughter finally subsided.

“‘Her lover’s tool of pleasure oozed with his sensuality’. Oh, this is a good one. ‘Her honey pot gleamed with her essence.’” She winked at him.

“I figured you for an intellectual type.” He flipped her under him.

“I’m not a snob. I read all genres. Romance has something special though. It has its own genres within the genre.” She reached around and sticking her hands under his pants, giving his buttocks a good squeeze.

Within minutes, he was finally naked. Gloriously naked. She smiled when he pulled a few condoms out of his wallet before tossing it on the floor with his jeans.

With a mock seriousness, he asked, “Does my manly rod meet with your approval?”

“It is a fine physical specimen, but do you know how to wield such an impressive instrument?” She reached down stroking his cock.

“You can let me know later.” He leaned down, his lips taking hers.

His tongue slid past her lips, easing into her mouth and tangled playfully with hers. She tightened her fingers around him and quickened the motion of her hand. He groaned, as he reached down and seized her wrist. Slipping from her grasp, he lowered himself between her thighs, out of her reach.

“I want to make this good for you, so stop distracting me.” He laved one of her nipples, before closing his mouth over it completely.

“I, distract you?” She hated that her words came out as surprised instead of cocky.

“I told you, I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since I saw that dog slobbering all over you. He’s one lucky dog.” He kissed his way up her breast to her neck.

He was heavy, but the weight felt good. The way he touched her was different from the men she’d been with before. Granted, there had only been a few. But those times had seemed rushed and finished too soon for her to really enjoy it. Kasper seemed intent on taking his time. Touching her, tasting her, turning her on so high that she was ready to self-combust.

“So now you want to slobber all over me?” she teased, squirming as his hands and mouth

closed over her breast. “Kasper!” She gasped and arched her back, pressing her breast harder against his hand and tongue.

He didn’t answer. He just kissed his way down her belly. His hands teased as they slowly followed, finally settling on her hips. He paused his ministrations and looked up at her. For a second, she thought he was going to stop, then he smiled and she knew he wasn’t done.

She pushed herself up on her elbows. “Kasper, what are you waiting for?”

He looked down, running his hand from her hips to her thatch of auburn curls, before returning his gaze to hers. It was odd, but the way he was watching her watch him made everything she was feeling more intense. His fingers slipped through her curls, finding her slit. She should have been embarrassed at how wet she was, but it seemed to get him more excited. If he didn’t do something soon she was going to scream.

“Kasper, please,” she pleaded, dropping back onto the bed.

With one hand, he continued to play with her, fighting the urge to dip inside, knowing if he did, he wouldn’t stop until she came apart in his arms. His other hand was busy trying to roll on the condom as fast as possible. Once it was on, he leaned forward rubbing the head of his cock against her swollen nub, groaning when she lifted her hips trying to pull him in. She growled, grabbing his hips, and looking up at him. He could see the plea in her eyes, but needed to hear the words.

“So demanding.” He chuckled as he lowered himself, taking a berry red nipple into his mouth.

He suckled hard, enjoying her moans of pleasure. Her hands were roaming all over his back, down to his ass. Those short nails digging into him urged him to take hard and fast, but he still held back.

“Kasper, I can’t take anymore of this teasing,” she panted, writhing beneath him.

Good, because he was so close he could probably set them both off with one long, hard stroke. Pulling back was no longer an option, though he’d do it if she asked him to. Releasing her nipple with a loud pop, he had them both laughing. He’d never laughed so much in bed before. It was pretty amazing, the feeling he got from it. He moved up, pressing a kiss to her smiling lips. The problem was the movement lodged his aching cock right at her entrance. He groaned, fighting the wet heat that was beckoning to him.

“Kasper, please,” she whimpered, trying to raise her hips, but his weight held her in place.

“Please what?” He smiled as she finally figured out what he was waiting for.

He should have known she wouldn’t just say it. Not her. She smiled up at him, sliding her hips from side to side, torturing them both.

“Oh, Kasper,” she trilled, her voice high and whiny, “Take me, please. Take me, I’m yours.”

He figured if she wanted to play, then he was more than up for it. Slowly he slid inside her mere inches, but God, it felt so good. She wiggled, so he pulled back, earning a glare that would have shriveled many a man into having performance issues. Luckily for him, it just made him harder, knowing she wanted him that much. The glare turned into the sexiest pout he’d ever seen. It was enchanting and he leaned in, meaning to kiss her. *Fool.*

She waited until they were nose to nose, when she pinched his ass. He jumped. The forward motion had him sliding deeper inside her. From her laughter, he was sure the shock he felt must be mirrored on his face.

“Naughty girl.” He pushed himself in as deep as he could get, settling himself there with

a groan filled with satisfaction. “Babe, you feel so good.”

“Flattery is so unnecessary at this point. Now, please move.” She laughed when he shook his head wildly.

“Kasper,” she sighed, her eyes locking on his though he wasn’t sure she was thinking any clearer than he was.

He began rocking slowly. As her moans grew longer and louder, he increased his thrusts. He pulled back until he was almost completely out of her before plunging back in. She gasped, her legs wrapped around him, her hips rising, allowing him to go deeper. He couldn’t hold back anymore. Their movements were frantic and their moans filled the room.

Harley felt it coming, and every muscle tightened. Her body bowed beneath his. She felt so full and she was on the edge, so close, but yet so far. He rolled them over so she was on top, giving her complete control. Laying her hands on his hard chest, she pushed herself into a sitting position, rocking her hips back and forth. He groaned, reaching up and cupping her breasts in his hands. That lasted for about two minutes before she found herself under him, screaming as her release surged through her whole body. His shout followed her scream by seconds proving just how compatible they were.

He was right though, there was no going back now. They could only go forward. And for her, that meant admitting, at least to herself, that sometime during the past two weeks, she’d fallen in love with Kasper. She couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment, but it had happened all the same. Snuggling back against him, she smiled when his arm tightened around her waist.

“I could get used to this,” he said, kissing her neck.

“You did warn me, but I don’t think I’d like my grandfather to find us like this.” She wiggled out of his embrace, slipping on her robe as she crossed the room.

“But I wasn’t done yet.” He followed her into the bathroom.

Their eyes locked on each other in the mirror above the sink. His lecherous smile sent a carnal zing through her that was hard to disregard. His hands appeared on her shoulders drifting slowly down her lapels, brushing over the crest of her breast. He slipped one hand down to the sash, which he opened with a slight tug. Pulling the robe open, he bared her to his view and settling one hand on her breast, the other on her hip; he leaned forward and caught her earlobe. A wicked gleam shone in his eyes as his gaze roamed over her body. Her skin heated, reacting as if he’d actually caressed her.

“Kasper,” she whimpered, reaching behind her, grasping his thighs to keep her upright.

Her head dropped back against his shoulder, but she was unable to tear her eyes off the image in front of her. His big hand slid across her belly, then lower. His fingers dipping into her curls, brushing lightly and making her want to beg for more. She should be embarrassed at the way her sex wept for his touch. Clenching her thighs together provided no ease of the building pressure.

“Like that, do you?” He gently rolled her nipple between his index finger and thumb.

She nodded, murmuring something incoherent. Obviously, that was enough for him because he spun her around, lifting her off her feet and pinning her between the wall and hard body. He took her lips in a rough kiss, pushing his tongue into her mouth demanding a response. Digging her nails into his shoulder, she wrapped her legs around his waist. He slid inside her with barely any resistance and her body welcomed him, as it did no other. She’d think about that later, right now, all she wanted to do was focus on how good he felt inside her.

“Harley baby, you’re gonna be the death of me,” he said, his hand holding her ass lifted

her higher as he hammered into her.

“Then we’ll both die happy.” She bit his shoulder to keep from screaming.

“Promises, promises.” He surged deeper, sending her higher and higher until she shattered, and he exploded seconds after she did.

## Chapter Fourteen

Alfred noticed two things as soon as he entered the house, well, three really. It was quiet, too quiet. There was a pile of boxes and bags that looked like they'd been tossed onto the couch. And no mouth-watering smells were coming from the kitchen.

Harley always tried out a new recipe on Saturday. He had to say, the girl definitely had skills in the kitchen that she hadn't inherited from him. Setting the bag of golf clubs by the door, he walked over to the couch and read the name on the boxes. He didn't recognize it, but he'd bet money it was some place expensive. Damn, it was about time the girl splurged a little, he thought, heading for the kitchen to scrounge up something for them for dinner.

\* \* \*

Harley rubbed the towel roughly back and forth over her head. Grandpa would be home soon and she hadn't even started cooking yet. She tossed the towel to the floor and reached for her brush. Looking in the mirror, she froze. Would anyone else notice the changes she did? Sticking out her tongue at herself, she began running the brush through her hair a little rougher than she usually did.

"Let me do that," Kasper said, coming up behind her and taking the brush from her hand.

His strokes were much more gentle. Harley had to fight not to close her eyes and sigh in utter bliss. His fingers ran through her hair, following the path of the brush. She'd just had the man twice and yet just his touch had her craving another taste.

"Do you smell that?" he asked, tearing her from her thoughts of ravishing him again.

She scrunched her nose at the acrid scent drifting into the room. "Something's burning," she called back over her shoulder, dashing out of the room.

"That's what I thought," he said, hot on her heels.

Halfway down the stairs, the smoke alarm started going off. Spotting the smoke pouring out of the kitchen, she ran down the hall. Her grandfather was standing by the open door waving a towel. Grabbing the broom, she whacked at the alarm until it opened and the battery fell out, almost hitting her on the head. Kasper entered the room, waving his hand in front of him, but there was a smile on his face as he moved across the room and opened the one and only window. Turning on the fan over the stove, she peeked into the pan of what looked like bubbling tar. The man may be a great teacher and loving grandfather, but he was total disaster in the kitchen.

"I guess we're ordering take-out," her grandfather said sheepishly.

"It would probably be better to go out, that way the place can air out." She realized she'd spoken out loud when both men started laughing.

"Sounds good to me," Kasper said, then after looking in the pot, he turned to her grandfather and added, "Um... were you feeling like anything particular?"

"Not anymore. Why don't you two choose," her grandfather said, shaking his head.

"Let's go." Harley grabbed her keys from the counter just as someone began knocking on the front door.

"I'll get it. Beverly probably saw the smoke and thought you were burning the house down." She dashed down the hall, whipping open the door.

"Oh, hello. You must be Harley. I'm from *The Registrar*. My name is Sasha Lourdes," a very attractive, buxom brunette said, offering her hand.

"Hello." Harley shook her hand, wondering what the woman was selling and how long it

would take to get rid of her.

“Your picture really doesn’t do you justice, you’re actually quite lovely.” Sasha’s smile was friendly enough that Harley felt comfortable and offered her one in return.

Hearing footsteps coming down the hall, Harley glanced over her shoulder, giving Kasper a quick smile before turning her attention to the woman again. “Thank you. Is there something I could help you with?”

“Sasha, why are you here?” Kasper said from behind her, his tone anything but friendly.

“Kasper, how lovely to see you. This is wonderful. I can wrap this all up in one trip,” Her tone was way too cheerful in Harley’s opinion.

Holding her smile in place wasn’t easy. The fact that they obviously knew each shouldn’t bother her, but it did. Really, just because they’d had sex didn’t mean that all the women of his past would disappear, but it also didn’t mean she wanted to meet them all.

Looking between them, trying to figure out what she’d missed, Harley asked, “Wrap what up?”

“I’m doing a brief piece on your engagement for the society page.” Sasha tossed her hair over her shoulder with a smile aimed directly at Kasper.

“Sorry, but we already promised an exclusive photo session to Perry Stevens.” He draped his arm around Harley’s shoulders.

“That’s fine. I’d just like to ask you both a few questions.” Sasha ran her fingers across the neckline of her blouse, and the light caught on the jewels adorning her fingers and wrist, making them sparkle.

Harley could sense that Kasper didn’t want to talk with her, but turning her away would just give her more to speculate about. Still they didn’t have to give her anymore than they wanted to.

“I guess we can give you a few minutes. You don’t mind do you, baby?” she asked, giving him a bump with her hip, and she couldn’t help notice Sasha’s smile fall for the first time.

“Not at all. Why don’t you come in.” He moved closer into her side so Sasha could enter.

“Thank you. I promise this won’t take long.” She stepped into the living room, stopping short when she spotted the pile of packages. “Oh, I see someone’s been doing some shopping.”

“I’ll run these up to the bedroom.” Kasper scooped everything up with ease.

“Please have a seat,” Harley said, motioning to the couch.

Sasha settled herself on the couch, not even trying to hide the fact that she was taking in every little detail in the room. Reaching into the bag she’d put on the floor by her feet, she pulled out a note pad and a small tape recorder.

“Okay, first off you and Kas have only known each other for what, three weeks? Don’t you think that’s kind of quick to announce an engagement? Then again, he has been living here for almost two of those weeks. I mean you barely know each other,” Sasha said. In other circumstances, Harley would have found her attention to detail remarkable, but in this case, it was merely a nuisance.

“For some people three weeks can feel like a lifetime,” her grandfather spoke from the doorway.

“Ms. Lourdes, I’d like to introduce you to my grandfather, Professor Alfred Taizer. Grandpa, this is Sasha Lourdes from *The Registrar*, she’s here to do a piece on our engagement.” Harley enjoyed the surprised look on Sasha’s face.

“Mr. Taizer, it’s nice to meet you.” Sasha got to her feet, offering him her hand.

“It’s always a pleasure to meet a beautiful woman.” He raised her hand, kissing her

fingers, which brought a blush to her cheeks.

Yup. Her grandfather was the ultimate charmer, she thought, as he joined Sasha on the couch. Kasper entered the room, barely sparing Sasha a look as he sat on the arm of her chair. Harley hoped she could keep things headed in the direction she wanted.

Glancing at her pad, Sasha shook her head. "So have you chosen a date yet?"

"Not yet. We haven't discussed where we'd like to honeymoon, but once we decide where we'd like to go, we'll be able to set a date." Kasper took her hand in his, giving it a squeeze.

"Yes, so much does depend on the season." Sasha glanced back at her pad then at Kasper. "As I was just saying, I have it on good authority that you've moved in here."

"You always did have good sources. I assume you won't be printing the exact address," he said, and there was no doubt it wasn't a request.

"You know me better than that." She flashed him a look that was a little too intimate for Harley's liking. "Mr. Taizer, do you live here as well?"

"I do. Have for over fifty years," her grandfather said proudly, getting to his feet when knocking sounded from the back door. He smiled, shaking his head. "I'll bet that's Beverly."

Glancing at her pad, and then looking at Kasper from beneath her long lashes, she asked, "It's a lovely home. Do you two plan on living here after you're married?"

"As Kasper said before, we haven't finalized any plans yet. Since you two seem to be well-acquainted, why doesn't he contact you with all the details once they're set?" Harley got to her feet, letting Sasha know the interview was over.

Leaning forward, putting the recorder and pad into her bag, she gave Kasper a view down her shirt, no doubt intentionally. Getting to her feet, she slid the bag onto her shoulder and followed Harley to the door. That seemed to go a little too easily, she thought, when Sasha suddenly came to a halt and turned to Kasper. The gleam in her eye was no figment of Harley's imagination.

Placing her hand on his chest, she looked up at him and smiled. "Kas, honey, do you still have my number?"

"I'll send a statement to you at the paper." He used his thumb and index finger to lift her hand off his chest, dropping it like it was a dirty rag.

"Whatever." She stomped her way out the door with another annoying flip of her overly teased hair.

Forcing herself not to slam the door, Harley took a deep breath and closed it softly, though the palm of her hand was probably imprinted with the design of the knob. Walking past him, she huffed out her breath, not really caring if he heard her or not.

Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her over to the door. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She looked at a spot on the wall above his right shoulder.

Grabbing her chin, he tilted her face so she had to look at him. "Tell me another one."

"What difference does it make?" she asked, wanting to sock in him the stomach so bad she had to clasp her hands behind her back. "My grandfather is waiting."

"No, he's not. He's chatting it up with Beverly. Now tell me what's bothering you." He grasped her shoulders when she tried to walk away.

"Old girlfriends?" she said, and punched him in the stomach like she'd wanted to.

"Oomph." He grabbed her hands before she could hit him again.

Jealousy was so ugly and petty, and in this case, a sign things were headed in the right direction. How could he have missed it? Was he an asshole for being happy she was jealous?

Damn right, but it felt so good he didn't care.

"She was never a girlfriend, not even close." He backed her against the wall, holding her hands on either side of her head.

"Sure. And those heated looks she was sending you were just my imagination running wild." She leaned as far against the wall as she could, so being the jerk he was, he pressed closer.

"I didn't say she didn't want be. I wasn't interested back then and I'm not interested now." He eased his hips against hers, the spark of anger in her eyes changed to something else for a few seconds before it was back.

"And Tillie?" she asked, her whole body stiffening.

"We were kids, thirteen years old when my mother introduced us. Trust me, nothing ever happened there either." He frowned when she growled and dropped her head against the wall with a thud.

She mumbled something incoherent, shaking her head, making him wonder if he really wanted to know what it was. "At the risk of incurring more personal injury, would you mind repeating that in English?"

A deep blush covered her cheeks. "Yes, I would actually." She groaned, her body losing some of its stiffness.

"Harley, talk to me." He spoke the words he knew most men would never utter, but every woman claimed they wanted to hear.

Well, except for this one, he thought, when she cringed. He felt like laughing. It was a feeling she seemed to bring on a lot. She was sweet, sassy and he was falling deeper and deeper. He knew he was risking more than it was wise to, but she'd stolen his heart. He had no choice but to fight to create as many strings between them as possible.

Momentarily focused on his thoughts, Harley was easily able to squirm out of his embrace. She began to pace the hall, shaking her head. Folding his arms tightly across his chest was the only way to stop himself from grabbing her again. She really was bringing out his caveman side.

Throwing her hands up in the air, she stopped pacing, looked him in the eye and took a very visible deep breath. "I'm just wondering if these beautiful, sexy women are the type you've turned down, how am I going to compare to the ones you have hooked up with?"

That was a low blow. "I haven't hooked up since high school. I have had my share of meaningful relationships, which I already told you I want ours to be."

She had the good sense to look contrite. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to sound like that. I guess I'm just tired."

Rubbing his chin, he narrowed his eyes. "Really? I would have said you were jealous."

She placed her hands on her hips and tapped her foot furiously. She was getting angry again. Hah, he thought, fighting back a smile. Either she was slipping, or he was getting better at reading her. He was going with the latter. Little by little, he was learning more and more about her.

"You would like that, wouldn't you? Me getting all territorial over you. That's so typical. Men claim they don't want clingy women, and then they get all mad if their woman doesn't show any signs of possessiveness."

"Are you my woman?" he asked, walking through the door she opened.

"Harley, I hope you two don't mind, but I invited Beverly to join us for dinner," her grandfather called, as he and Beverly enter the hallway.

Sensing her relief at not having to answer his question, Kasper smiled. Yet, he wanted to

make sure she knew he wasn't planning on letting her off the hook. One way or another, he planned to get the answer to his question.

Leaning closer, he whispered, "This conversation isn't over."

## Chapter Fifteen

Harley flopped onto her back, staring blindly into the dark. Sleep tonight seemed beyond her grasp. She'd done the unthinkable. She'd fallen in love with Kasper Drake. More than one person tonight had mentioned how in love she looked. Oh my God, did he see it too? Covering her face with a pillow, she screamed, thinking back on his indulgent smile earlier at dinner.

Beverly had insisted they have dinner at Michelle's, a popular family restaurant. It was commonly frequented by many of the people who either attended, or taught at the college. A steady stream of people stopped by to congratulate her and Kasper on their engagement, most meeting him for the first time. He pulled out all the stops, charming them all, including her.

Oh, she'd done no less, playing her part as the devoted fiancée. Worse, she almost fell for their act herself. She admitted to herself that they had a relationship, fleeting as it may be. The sex between them was mind altering. He was the best thing to come along in years and she was unequivocally in love with him.

She knew it was crazy, but it was true. She was going to have to tell Kasper, that much was a given. It would be best to tell him before they went any further. He'd made it a point to be honest with her and he deserved the same from her. Then again, maybe she should wait a while, make sure of his feelings before she risked her heart.

Her eyes felt heavy, so heavy. She closed them, snuggling into the mattress. I wish he were here, she thought, hugging her pillow tight.

Kasper hoped she was in there lying awake, her body craving his touch. It would only be fair, since he was lying here rock solid, aching for her. He wanted to go into her room and sneak into her bed, but he wanted to give her some space and time to think about his question before demanding an answer. He knew how he felt.

It was totally irrational, but he loved her. Everything about her drew him in. All the time people said love knew no bounds of time, age, or color and he'd thought them fools. But he'd been the fool all along. Foolish not to believe that love could strike like lightning. No warnings just, BAM!

He was being one hundred percent honest with her when he said he wasn't sure he would be able to walk away once he had a taste of her. Hell, he'd never be able to get rid of this craving for her. And lying here in the dark, waiting for morning, was just a waste of time, he decided, throwing the covers off.

Might as well get some work done, he thought, sliding on his jeans. Grabbing a few files from his bag, he headed down to Alfred's study. Reaching over to boot up the computer, he noticed a picture of Harley that hadn't been there the other day. Entranced, he picked it up for a better look.

She was sitting on the couch wearing a tight yellow t-shirt and pair of shorts. Her lightly tanned legs were pulled up, with a thick book resting against her thighs. Her long auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She was totally engrossed in whatever she was reading. She looked so peaceful. No one could tell by looking at her that there was such turmoil in her life.

Placing the picture back where he found it, he logged into his email account, hoping he'd find the information to help her solve some of her more pressing problems. Between his contacts and his father's, things should be dealt with before long. And then, she was going to have to deal with him one on one.

Seeing an email from Perry that he didn't expect, he clicked on it first.

*From: Perry@Registrar.net  
To: KasDrakeIII@TDPC.org*

*Pics up. Also, Angie said it's a go. I'm sending this from the office. Your friend came ripping in, blathering on about the "crude little mouse he's planning on marrying." I just thought I'd let you know her article has been pushed up.*

*Later, Gator.*

*P.*

"Shit." He opened another tab to the main search window.

Typing in the paper's URL, he brought up their site. Yesterday's news was there in front of him. He searched the titles looking for a mention of him, her, his mother, anything that would lead him to the pictures.

"Fire On Elm Takes Three Homes, No Lives." That's good, he thought, moving on. "Elevator Falls Fifteen Feet, No Injuries." What a wild ride that must have been. *Jeez, Perry, what'd you do, write it in code?* He scrolled down. Then he spotted it. "Exclusive: Ty Lily Draws Another Notable Bride To Be." A photo of his mother, Harley and Tillie shaking hands, all wearing huge smiles, accompanied the article.

There were a few more, taken inside the shop. Harley looked shocked, but happy. Then came the photo that knocked him flat. Harley holding a wedding dress in front of her, looking in the mirror. It was so up close and clear, as if Perry had been standing in the shop with her. Below it read, "Seems Like Wedding Bells Could Be Ringing Sooner Than We Thought."

Harley was going to freak out, there was no doubt about it. On the upside, it should really take some of the wind out of Sasha's sails. Minimizing the screen, he was about to hit the reply button on his email when he noticed the paper clip indicating there was an attachment. He clicked on the button and sat back waiting for the item to download.

He closed his eyes, leaning back in the chair. He was sure there was a way they could work this to her advantage. He just had to figure out what it was. He stretched his arms above his head, feeling the pull of the muscles and the pop in his lower back. Strung tighter than a noose, he thought, steepling his fingers, exerting just enough pressure to crack his knuckles. If his mother were there, she would shake her head in consternation. It was a habit she abhorred, but he still did it. Maybe he was hoping she'd scold him like she did when he little. Smiling at the thought, he turned back to the computer and almost fell off the chair.

At first, he thought Perry had e-mailed him a racy ad. One of those lingerie style things that was designed to drive men wild. But it was Harley, through and through. Standing there wearing a blood red nightgown that covered just enough to make him want to rip it off and see what was underneath. Her smile was worse. It made him wonder if she was imagining him doing it too.

Reading the note erased the panic in the back of his mind that someone could have seen her like this.

"I snuck in the back. Trust me. No one else saw this, but you. I left the memory card in your sock drawer inside your hideous argyle socks."

Damn, he was really going to have to do something about the kid's talent. It was truly wasted at *The Registrar*. Looking back at the picture, he wondered how Angie would feel about

him moving into the fashion arena. Once this situation with Harley was dealt with, they'd all have to sit down and have a serious talk. Closing the image, he turned back to his e-mail.

Harley groaned, pulling the pillow over her head. The sun had definitely risen. She'd never noticed the way it reflected off the mirror and slashed right across her bed. Then again, she usually closed the curtains. She must have forgotten last night.

"Girlie, are you getting up, or are you going to sleep the day away?" Her grandfather's voice barely penetrated the thick pillow.

"I prefer to sleep for hours, not minutes," she said into her pillow, which muffled about every other word.

"Good. Good. I'll see you in a few minutes. I'll start the coffee, and if you're not in the kitchen in ten minutes, I'll start the bacon." His voice grew fainter, along with his footsteps.

Taking a deep breath, she tossed the pillow at the window. Pushing up onto her elbows, she squinted, looking around the room just to make sure she hadn't wandered during the night. Man, how she'd wanted to go crawl into Kasper's bed and have her way with him. Almost as badly as she wanted to close her eyes and go back to bed.

The thought of her grandfather cooking had her scrambling out the bed and hurriedly dressing. Without the time to put herself together, she chose her old faithful, comfy Sunday morning attire. A pair of baggy gray sweatpants and a purple t-shirt. He may as well meet the real her, she thought, pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

She stopped by Kasper's open door and peeked in. His bed was empty, but it looked slept in. Figures, she thought knowing that for most of the men she knew, nothing interfered with their sleeping or eating. So what if he was interfering with her sleeping, eating, and basically her ability to function on every level?

Hearing her grandfather rattling pans had her moving faster. Out of self-preservation, Kasper should be stalling him. As she hit the bottom step, she thought she heard a strange noise coming from her grandfather's study. Pausing, she waited to see if she heard it again, but there was nothing, so she chalked it up to her imagination. Glancing back over her shoulder as she sped down the hall, she wondered what could have made the light buzzing sound.

"Eight minutes. Not bad." Her grandfather chuckled, putting two slices of bread into the toaster, a feat equal to his culinary talents.

"How about I whip us up a couple of omelets?" she asked, opening the fridge, gathering the eggs, milk, butter and vegetables she'd need.

"Sounds good. Should I wake Kasper?" he asked, his eyes twinkling as he smiled devilishly.

Shrugging her shoulders, she gave him a weak smile. "I stopped by his room, he wasn't there."

She grimaced as his rumble of laughter had her spinning around so fast she dropped the two eggs in her hand onto the floor. "Crap. What's so funny?"

"Come." He held out his hand, and curiosity getting the better of her, she place her hand in his.

"Ssh." He pressed his fingers to his lips as he slowly led her down the hall.

The study door was slightly ajar. The noise she thought she heard earlier was definitely coming from in there. It was louder now. Her grandfather eased the door open, and then stepped aside so she could see. A shirtless Kasper was asleep behind the desk. Not wanting to disturb him just yet, she quietly moved into the room, rounding the desk to get a better look.

He was slouched down, balanced precariously in the chair. His head was lolling back, his

ass barely on the edge of the seat. His feet were resting on the edge of the desk. His arms hung limply over the arms of the chair, almost touching the floor. She assumed the loud buzzing snore he was emitting had a lot to do with his uncomfortable looking position. Maybe he hadn't slept as soundly as she thought. She picked up the pen lying on the desk.

She moved to his bare feet, taking a second to note how long his toes were. Her friend Emily had toes like his. She called them monkey toes. Stifling her giggle, she lightly touched the pen to the bottom of his foot. Nothing. Slowly she ran it towards his toes leaving a long red streak behind. A toe or two moved when she hit his arch, but that was all. She looked over at her grandfather and shrugged. He waved her on, expecting her to come up with something else.

"Kasper," she said softly, laying her hand on his shin and giving him a little shake.

Nothing. She looked back at her grandfather, but he was gone. Feeling bolder now that they were alone, she ran her hand up to his thigh giving it a squeeze. Still nothing. She smoothed her finger over his belly watching his muscles quiver under her touch. Still, he didn't wake up. She moved on, resting her hand on his chest as she leaned over and blew in his ear. Nothing. Wow, he was a sound sleeper.

*Well, shit.* Talk about an opportunity of a lifetime. Leaning down, she brushed her lips across his. His response was another snore, so this time when she kissed him she ran her tongue along his bottom lip.

Kasper hadn't thought he'd be able to hold out long enough for her to make a move. Thankfully, she hadn't noticed the change in his snoring, or the tic in his cheek. Not allowing his body to react to her touch was pure torture. It was easier with Alfred standing there, but once he was gone, all his good intentions followed him out the door.

She lowered her mouth to his, briefly touching her lips to his. Come on, he thought, knowing she could do better than that. When she came in for a second taste, he was strung so tight that when her tongue touched his lip he lost it.

"Mmm..." he groaned, as he grabbed her by the waist.

He sucked her tongue into his mouth, taking advantage of her surprise. Unfortunately, his position wasn't the greatest and he slid off the chair. Pulling her close, he controlled their descent so that he took the brunt of the fall.

Expecting her to pull away, he eased his grip, losing it completely when she pushed him onto his back, straddling his hips. He wondered if he looked as stunned as he felt. Not that he really cared. He just wanted her to keep doing that kneading thing with fingers, pressing those hot little kisses along his collarbone. She suddenly stopped. Sitting up, straddling his hips, she looked down at him. Groaning, he let his head drop back to the floor with a thud.

She poked him in the ribs and asked, "How long were you awake?"

"From the minute you stepped in the room." A guilty smile spread across his face.

"What were you hoping would happen?" She settled herself right on his straining zipper.

"I don't know, but this was going pretty good until you stopped," he said, his hands on her hips, his thumbs digging in a bit.

Climbing off him against his will, she straightened her clothes, heading for the door. "Yeah, well I have to go cook breakfast. And you might want to get your butt in gear, we're having lunch with your parents today."

"I want scrambled eggs," he yelled after her.

Her laughter echoed down the hall. "You'll have a veggie omelet and like it."

Kasper looked at his crotch. He'd bet anything she'd done that on purpose. Revenge sucked, he thought, adjusting himself into a more comfortable position, even though he deserved

this for leaving her unfulfilled before. A cold shower would do wonders right now, he thought as he gingerly got up from the floor.

Looking down at the desk, he was glad he'd closed her file before dozing off. He'd learned a few things, some helpful, some not. Her parents had never tried a physical assault. Then again, there had never been so much money at stake. They liked the behind the scenes back stabbing. Their favorite tactic was trying to sway people into agreeing with their point of view by discrediting their opponents. Stooping low enough to use whatever dirty trick they could think of.

While he had been raised, and preferred, to fight fair he wasn't afraid of getting down and dirty. More importantly, he knew when it was time to make his move. After all, patience was a virtue, not that he had much.

The problem was, this was more Harley's fight than it was his. Arming her with the information he'd dug up would be a good start, but helping her use it to her best advantage would be the icing on the cake. Hopefully their wedding cake.

He knew it all depended on whether or not he could make her understand that he loved her for the complicated mess she was. Not for her trust fund. Obviously not for her family, though Alfred was pretty cool, he thought with a smile. He needed her to believe in their love as much as he did. Because he was sure of two things: he loved her, and she was at least halfway in love with him. It shouldn't take much more for that extra little push. He gathered up his files and headed upstairs to get dressed.

"KAASPERR!" Her scream had him flying over the railing and down the hall.

"What?" he asked breathlessly.

She didn't speak, just held the morning's newspaper up for him to see. *Shit... shit...shit.* This day was just getting better and better.

## Chapter Sixteen

Kasper gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "It'll be fine."

She nodded with a nervous smile. Had her outing with his mother really been that terrible? She was probably still thinking about the pictures in the paper. She hadn't said much after he finally got her calmed down, and then the anger took over.

"Kasper, Harley," his mother said, rushing towards them, kissing his cheek before pulling Harley into a big hug.

Jealousy surged through him. His father clapped him on the shoulder, before hugging Harley himself. Had they not been in a public place, he might have worked up the nerve to say something, but instead, he just swallowed his misery and smiled.

"Come on boy, your mother and I have some surprises in store for you two this morning." They followed the women across the hall into their country club's dining room.

Harley was seated between him and his father, across from his mother. The waitress brought them their drinks, salads, and bread sticks. His father must have ordered for them.

"Harley dear, I have a little something for you." His mother handed her a large gift bag.

Taking the bag, Harley shot a nervous look his way. She peeked inside as if she were expecting something to jump out at her. She pulled out a thick book. It looked like a scrapbook of some kind. She turned it for him to see. Their names were embossed across the top with *Our Wedding Plans*, and underneath there was a picture of them. It had to have been one of the ones Perry had taken, but how had his mother gotten her hands on it?

"I took the liberty of putting in the clippings about your engagement, and the ones from this morning's paper." His mother patted his hand.

"Thank you so much." Harley slid it gently back into the bag, placing it on the floor between them.

"Yes. Mother, it was extremely thoughtful." Kasper hated that he sounded so stuffy.

"I'm glad you think so. Also, the party is all set." His mother said, pulling out the planner she never went anywhere without. "Now, have you two discussed a date yet?" she asked, and they both shook their heads.

"Ethel, don't rush them. Besides, it's my turn to present them with a little gift." He handed Harley a thick manila envelope.

Harley opened it, pulling out a sheaf of papers. She looked from the sheets to Kasper's father. Then she looked at him, then back at the papers. He looked at his father, who just smiled.

"I believe you now have the upper hand against your parents. I wouldn't want my future grandchildren to have to worry about them bothering their mother." He waved the waitress over and ordered a bottle of champagne.

A teary-eyed Harley handed him the papers.

Kasper was amazed. His father had really pulled out all the stops on this one.

"How did you manage this?" he asked curiously, since he hadn't been able to find anything this good.

"Your mother is an amazing woman." He raised her hand to his lips for a loud smacking kiss, which had his mother blushing and giggling like a schoolgirl.

Unused to them acting like this, he was worried they were giving Harley a false impression. "Okay who are you two and what have you done with my parents?"

His mother turned away, but not before he saw the tears. He froze, not sure what to do. Had he hurt her feelings? He looked at his dad, who looked a little spooked. Harley, however,

got up and walked over, leaned down and hugged her, rubbing her back.

“Did I miss something?” he asked softly, noticing they were attracting attention from the other diners.

“You know, for someone who’s so good at reading my every nuance, you miss a lot.” Letting go of his mother, she grabbed his hand, pulling him out of his chair. “Come with me.”

She figured he only followed her because he was too stupefied to do anything else. Harley opened a few doors, peeking behind them, looking for a private place to talk. Finally, she found an empty room. She pulled him inside, closing the door behind them.

It was painted in a soft pink color and one wall was lined with mirrors. Spotting a few chairs and a couch, she was tempted to tell him to sit down before she spilled the beans. Taking a deep breath, she decided the best way to handle this was like removing a Band-Aid adhesive bandage, just rip it off and deal with the pain.

“Do you know why you’re an only child?” she asked, wondering just how much he already knew.

“Because my parents had the perfect child so they saw no need to try again,” he said flippantly.

“No. It’s because your mother almost died having you.” She felt terrible when his jaw dropped.

“What do you mean she almost died? How do you know that?” he croaked, grabbing her arms and giving her a panicked shake.

“Do you remember your grandmother living with you when you were little?” she asked, hoping her question would help with the harsh truth behind the reason for it.

He nodded, his grip easing a bit. “Yeah, she was there for a while. Then she just up and left. She never even said goodbye. Every time I saw her, she’d barely acknowledge me.”

“It wasn’t like that. She came to help your father with you until your mom got home from the hospital, but even then, she basically ran the show. Your mother was afraid that by trying to take the reins back, it might hurt you, so she let her keep making all the decisions. Your grandfather was the one who finally made her come home. I think that everyone was trying to love you, but at the same time, they didn’t know how to,” she explained, laying her hands on his chest, feeling his heart racing under her palm.

“What does any of this have to do with my mother crying?” He glanced over her shoulder at the door.

“She’s trying to win you back. I think she would give everything she has just to have you say you love her and give her a hug.” She reached up, taking his face in her hands.

“I would too,” he said, his eyes filling with tears, wrenching her heart.

“What are you waiting for?” She pulled out of his hands, whipping open the door.

He didn’t move, just stood there, staring out the door. “I’m scared.”

“Aren’t we all? I’m right here with you.” She smiled when his father walked around the corner, his mother in tow.

Kasper looked at his dad, noticing for the first time how his eyes softened when he looked at his mother. His mother was looking at him very much the same way right now. He walked right up to her, wrapped her in a hug so fierce he lifted her right off her feet.

The tears were flowing freely. Kasper helped his weeping mother over to the sofa, kneeling in front of her. He put his head in her lap and bawled like a baby while she ran her hand through his hair. Suddenly feeling like the intruder, she was she headed for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” his father said, pulling her against his side as he

closed the door.

“I really think I should wait outside. This is a private family moment,” she said softly, not wanting to intrude where she didn’t belong.

“Which you’re soon to be. Stay. My boy needs you. We can all see it, even if you can’t,” he whispered in her ear, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Kasper asked, his voice rough from his tears.

His mother’s lip trembled, but it was his father who spoke. “We wanted to earn your love, not receive it out of guilt.”

“I needed you to show me how to show you,” he said, looking up at his mother’s tear stained face.

She nodded, wiping the fresh tears from her cheeks. “I know I let you down, and you’ll never know how sorry I, we, are. Not a day has gone by that I haven’t regretted not fighting harder.”

“Okay, enough of all this. We’ve been garnering enough attention as it is. Can you imagine what the talk will be like if we all walk out of here red and blotchy,” Harley said, wiping her own tears.

“Not to worry. If anyone asks, we were checking out flower arrangements for the reception. Ethel and Kasper are allergic to lilacs. Hmm... Looks like they don’t do so well for you either,” his father said with a smile.

“Reception?” they all said, turning to look at him.

“For the wedding. I have waited for my son to find the perfect woman for him, and now he has. I want you to have the perfect reception on me. Pick a date and the club’s ballroom is yours.” He smiled so brightly Harley didn’t have the heart to tell him the truth.

Ethel jumped to her feet, running into her husband’s arms. He blushed profusely, but hugged her just as tightly. Harley wondered if her parents ever acted that way about each other. Was it even in her genes to have a full and loving relationship? She hoped it was. And if her lucky stars were shining down on her, she’d find a way to have it all with Kasper.

That was the problem with loving him, he made her yearn for more. She’d hoped a day would come when she found the person she wanted to spend the rest of her days loving, but now that it had, she was feeling the urge to run as far and fast as she could. His slid his hand down her arm into her hand. It was warm and strong, like an anchor holding her in place. He smiled down at her, lacing his fingers through hers.

The door burst open and a dozen giggling girls flooded into the room. One of them noticed them and said, “Oh sorry, we must be in the wrong room.”

“Actually, we were checking out the amenities. It’s all yours.” Kasper replied, pulling Harley closer.

“Does that mean you approve?” His father looked at Harley, her eyes wild, mouth hanging open, and never had she looked more beautiful.

“We’ll need to think about it, but yeah, I think it would be perfect,” Kasper said, leading them from the room.

They reached their table to find a bewildered waitress standing there looking around. They took their seats as if nothing was amiss. Well, all of them except Harley. She looked stunned. It should have been reversed. After all, he’d just learned he could have lost his mother before he even had a chance to know her. That bit of knowledge was a hard blow.

Who knew his mother had been afraid to show him how much she loved him. Her tears had washed all the hurt out of his heart. Now would be a time for making amends. He wouldn’t

let a day go by without showing and telling her how much he loved her. As a matter of fact, he thought, sneaking a glance at Harley, he was going to make sure everyone in his life knew they were loved and appreciated.

“So, Kasper, how about I get us a tee time for later this week?” his father said, steering the conversation, most likely trying to give his mother a few more minutes to collect herself.

“That sounds great. Let’s make it a foursome. I’d like to invite Alfred, and Perry, a friend of mine.” He ignored Harley’s stare.

“Harley does your grandfather play?” his father asked, and as he expected, her inner good girl rose to the surface.

He sat back and listened as his parents pelted her with innocent questions about her childhood. Most of it he’d already heard before. He wasn’t surprised by her stellar grades. Or the fact that she hadn’t traveled much, but yes, she’d like to. When his mother asked her about joining her garden club, he saw the excitement light up her face.

He could tell she was on the fence, though she really wanted to accept. “That’s a great idea. Your group could use some fresh blood. I was thinking about another member for you. She’s the wife of a good friend. She can’t do much now, since she’s very pregnant, but with the two of them you might actually come in first place in the county’s Best Dressed Yard contest.”

“It’s all for charity,” his mother explained, blushing. “You choose a property that needs a little, or sometimes a lot, of TLC and fix it up. The local businesses all contribute supplies. And the county commissioner and his staff get together and vote. The past five years we’ve come in third place.”

“Not bad for a bunch of old broads,” his father teased lovingly, as he reached over and patted her hand.

She giggled, swatting at him playfully. “Thank you, but I would really like to win just once. We’ve chosen that disastrous lot beside the Children’s Hospital. I had thought maybe a butterfly garden, but I don’t have the first clue how to start.”

“I’d love to join. It sounds like a very worthwhile cause,” Harley said with a smile that shook something deep inside him.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Harley sat on her bed staring out the window. Was she really mercenary enough to force her parents out of her life for good? She took the fact that she was having such a hard time deciding what to do as a sign that she was nothing like her parents. They wouldn’t have thought twice about using this to their advantage. She knew she had her grandfather to thank for that.

“He’d know the right thing to do,” she said to herself, leaning against the headboard, spreading the forms out on her bed.

Bothering him with this was going to be her last resort. She was an adult. She could and would handle this on her own. A light tap sounded on the door as it opened. Kasper came in and joined her on the bed, pulling her against his side.

“Hey, I know this is rough, but I’m here to help if you need it. Maybe you could just bounce your thoughts off me. Sometimes it just helps saying things out loud.” He kissed her head, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

“I don’t know what I’m thinking. If I use this, it could really hurt them. If I don’t, I’m stupid, because it seems to be the answer to all my problems.” She leaned her head to the side

when he began kneading her neck.

There was nothing remotely sexual in his movements or tone. He said and did nothing to persuade her to do things his way. Surely, he had opinions, but stubbornly he kept them to himself. She wished she could see his face.

“Go on.” He moved lower, easing all the tension out of her muscles.

“Then there’s you and your family. I’m happy you’re going to work things out, but I’m jealous too. I wish I had parents like yours.” She sighed, hoping he could understand where she was coming from.

“I always knew they loved me. There were times when I wanted to yell and scream to get a rise out of them, but my grandmother always said, ‘big boys don’t act out’. I loved that woman, but I wish she hadn’t been so cold.” He pulled her back against his chest.

“I had Grandpa, but I knew it was hard for him to deal with my parents. It would serve them right if I...” A scary thought barged into her head without permission.

“If you what?” His hand slid up her nape into her hair.

She sighed, dipping her head forward, silently asking him to keep going. “Mmm... I don’t know. My trust fund will be settled in a little over a week. I wonder if I can just hold out until then.”

“No, you can’t. You know your parents won’t let this go without some type of fight.”

“I know, but I’m not sure about my other options. I don’t want to cause any more problems for my grandfather. I know deep down that no matter what I ultimately choose to do, he’ll be on my side. They’re going to lose, but so am I,” she said softly, hating to admit it *almost* felt wrong to defend herself like this.

“Listen, whatever your final decision is your grandfather and I will be here for you. Take a few days and think it over.”

“And if I’m still torn?” she asked, kind of hoping he’d offer to take care of it for her, but wanting him to show his faith in her by telling her she could handle making such a hard choice.

“I think you’ve already made your choice and you just need to come to terms with it.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Harley's life was getting somewhat back to normal. She went to work, came home, cooked dinner, and spent the night watching TV or reading. The only major difference was Kasper shadowed her every move. She'd worried that she was stinting his reputation for leading a playboy life style, but lying on the couch watching old movies seemed to be fine with him.

It was late Thursday afternoon when all hell broke loose. Harley was busy helping Professor Kyle with her research on purple prose. They'd spent the morning going over many genres, but they were knee deep, literally, in historical romance when her boss, Abigail, burst into the private study room they were working in.

"Abby are you okay? What's wrong?" Professor Lillian Kyle asked, her long black ponytail swinging back and forth as she rushed to the older woman's side.

"I'm okay," she huffed, trying to catch her breath. "I just wanted to give Harley the heads up that her fiancé is here. He's waiting in your office."

"Oh, he's really early." Turning to Lillian, she smiled apologetically. "Would you excuse me for a few moments?"

"You can't go yet," Abigail squealed, the high pitch of panic ringing in her tone.

"Why not?" Harley asked, surprised by the way the usually timid Abby stood in front of the door, barring her from leaving.

She hemmed and hawed a bit, glancing over her shoulder at the door, then at Lillian before blurting out, "Everyone out there is talking about you. They have been all day."

Groaning, Harley dropped into her chair as her mind ran wild thinking of what could have possibly happened now. She managed to croak, "Why?"

"Well, there's no way to break this to you easily," she said, pulling a newspaper out of a file she was holding.

Harley couldn't help grimacing as she read the headline and accompanying byline.

*"Wedding Bells In the Near Future for Real Estate Magnate's Son"*  
*By Sasha Lourdes*

*This news has set a certain faction of women's tongues wagging. Mr. Kasper Drake the Third is considered by most to be the catch of a lifetime. However, little is known about the lucky woman who was able to reel him in. So, in the name of human interest, this reporter set out to find out a bit about the mysterious Harley Taizer.*

It was impossible to put the paper down. Reading the horrible things her mother had been quoted as saying had been harsh. From the accusations that maybe she was pregnant and Kasper was just doing the right thing, and the way she accused her grandfather of basically kidnapping her. It was the final push she needed to make up her mind about how best to use the gift from Kasper's father.

Tossing the paper onto the table, she let out a growl that echoed in the small room. Suddenly her throat felt really dry. The air grew thicker, she could tell because it was harder to get it in. She looked up at Lillian and Abigail's worried face and tried to smile, but it came out as a sob.

"Dear, take a deep breath. It's really not as bad as it seems. So what if that trashy woman

is a talker. No one who knows you is going to believe any of that malarkey,” Abigail said, and though Lillian looked utterly confused, Harley knew exactly what the older woman meant.

“Talking trash is her job,” she laughed, Lillian joining her.

Abigail threw her hands in the air. “Didn’t I just say that?”

Lillian scooped up the paper. Harley held her breath, waiting for her reaction. “The green eyed monster is usually a little bit more subtle. So have they dated? My bet would be not. For a woman to act this petty she must be really, really jealous.”

“Is it that obvious?” Harley asked, blowing out a deep breath.

“To me it is, but then again I’ve been reading all these romances so now I know what to look for,” she said in serious tone, though a teasing smile was twitching at the corners of her mouth.

“And that man of yours looks like he should be gracing the covers of one of those books.” Abigail fanned her face dramatically.

“Mmm...” Harley said, thinking, *you should see him with his shirt off.*

“I can’t wait to meet him.” Lillian smiled.

Insecurity struck sharp and fast. Did she really want to introduce a tall, thin raven-haired beauty with perfect features and sun-kissed skin to her fake fiancé? To be fair to him, she had to admit she hadn’t seen him look at another woman when she was around. She sure hadn’t noticed anyone but him. At the least, introducing them would be a test of sorts.

“Good, because I’d really like for you two to accompany me back to my office.” She got to her feet, gathering her stuff before she could change her mind.

With Abigail and Lillian marching along beside her she felt secure. People knew from the looks on their faces that no nonsense would be tolerated. Besides, with the vibes they were projecting, no one would dare approach her. It was like she had her own mighty warriors protecting her.

Smiling at the thought, she opened her door, dropping everything to the floor when Kasper swept her into his arms, pressing his lips to hers. Entranced by the way his mouth teased hers as it plundered; she fell against his hard chest with a load moan. He pulled away slowly, looking over her shoulder where she knew her boss and friend were standing. Where she got the courage to peek over her shoulder, she’d never know, but it was worth it to see their rapt expressions. Mouths hanging open, eyes wide, obviously surprised that she would act so wantonly.

“Sorry about that, ladies,” he said. Harley noticed the light blush on his cheeks.

After seeing them in such an intimate embrace, she figured introductions were definitely in order. “Kasper, I think you’ve already met Abigail, and this is my good friend, Dr. Lillian Kyle.”

“Nice to meet you both,” he said, wrapping one arm around her shoulders as he offered his other hand to the women.

Harley stood there unable to wipe the sappy smile off her face while they all chatted. Kasper never let his arm slip from her and his eyes never drifted below Lillian’s shoulders. She leaned into his side, accepting the stack of folders Abigail had scooped up from the floor.

“The reason I stopped by early is that my mother called and asked if we’d meet her at the club to go over the final arrangements for our engagement party this Saturday night. I assume you’ll both be attending,” he said, offering her friends a genuine smile.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Lillian chimed in and Abigail nodded in agreement.

“Great.” He turned to Harley. “Are you ready to get going?”

“Sure, just give me a second to put this away and grab my bag.” She walked over to her desk, opening the drawer where she kept her purse, shoving the files in its place.

Minutes later they were headed out of the parking lot, when it struck her that he hadn’t mentioned the article. Had he not seen it yet? Was that the reason for his mother asking to meet with them? Maybe after hearing *her* mother’s accusations, his mother had reconsidered and decided she wasn’t worthy of her son after all.

“Stop worrying so much. You’ll get wrinkles.” He gave her hand a squeeze.

She couldn’t wait another second. “Did you see today’s paper?”

“Yes. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. Especially after the way you put Sasha in her place.” He reached over and turned off the radio.

“What ever happened to truth and accuracy in reporting?” She stuck her tongue out at him when he burst out laughing.

Holding up his hand, he shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t conceive a woman with your spunk believes everyone plays fair.”

“I don’t, but I was hoping that she’d play nice to get on your good side. Now I’m not so sure you even have one.” She batted her lashes playfully.

“Smart ass. She’d rather see me strung up from the tree on the country club lawn. I’ve known her family forever and she’s the only one with that holier-than-thou attitude. Her cousin is married to a friend of mine and they couldn’t be more different,” he said, pulling onto the road that led to the country club.

“Kasper... Um... your mother, would she have read the paper?” she asked, wishing she hadn’t sounded so pitiful.

“I know she did, but I have it on the highest authority that she was furious on your behalf. She went as far as to demand that your mother be struck from any committee or group that would possibly accept her as a member.” He looked over at her and smiled.

She smiled back, surprising him yet again. He was relieved she was taking this so well. That damned article had unmistakably been a hatchet job. He knew the people that he and his parents were acquainted with wouldn’t pass judgment on Harley just on Sasha’s say so. They’d check her out for themselves before making a decision. Besides, most people kept their distance around Sasha unless there was no other way. Harley was obviously going to be one of them.

Though distant cousins, he knew she would see the resemblance between Sasha and Angela and he hoped it wouldn’t cause any problems. If she gave Angie half a chance, he figured they’d probably become great friends. Something he guessed they could both use. Not that they both didn’t already have friends, they did. It was just that he knew a lot of people who had trouble after they got married because they didn’t have any married friends to do things with. Good gravy, he was really getting ahead of himself.

One reason for her good attitude could have been his impulsive greeting. Man, he hoped it had something to do with that body rockin’ kiss they’d shared in her office. He been so lost he almost hadn’t noticed the other two women standing by the door. It was a good thing one of them had twittered a little or they might have gotten even more of a show. Meeting her friends had been nice. He hoped he’d made a good impression, because he might need their help later on.

Pulling to a stop in front of the valet booth, he glanced over in time to see her biting her bottom lip nervously. “What’s wrong?”

“I was just wondering how many people around this dog and pony show place read her column?” she said, masking her fear with sarcasm.

Tapping her on the nose, he forced himself to keep his voice light and easy. “First off, after the wedding,” he paused and gave her an exaggerated wink, “you’ll be a member, so get over the ‘I don’t fit in here’ crap. Second, whenever I’ve seen her around here, which is really rare since she’s not a member, people give her a pretty wide berth. I’m guessing they don’t want to be associated with her.”

He decided to let her stew on that for a few minutes. Climbing out of the car, he rounded the hood, forcing himself not to look at her. Opening the door, the valet offered her his hand. The simple, innocent gesture sent a surge of jealousy through him that was totally unexpected. He must really be losing it if the sight of some young kid holding her hand set his mind reeling, he thought, walking over and offering her his arm as he held out the keys to the valet.

Proving he wasn’t that bright, the kid looked torn between hold her hand or taking his Mustang for a ride. In the end, the hot rod won out. Not even bothering to hide his smile, he tucked her arm in his, leading her into the club’s main entrance. His mother, who was waiting for them, rushed forward taking time to crush each of them in a fierce embrace. He took a moment to revel in the glory of being with two women he loved beyond reason.

Of course, he still needed to find a way to let them know. His mother chatted non-stop, leading them toward the largest of the three function rooms the club rented out, giving their members a healthy discount. She stopped at the closed door and turned to face them.

“Now I wanted you to get an idea of what I was aiming for, so I had them set up a few tables. The flowers are samples of what I was thinking of using, but my florist can accommodate any changes you want.” She wrung her hands nervously.

“I’m sure we’ll love everything you’ve chosen. I just want to thank you for going through all this trouble,” Harley said, still looking like she was waiting for someone to tell her that she wasn’t allowed there.

## Chapter Eighteen

A young blonde in a pink suit, holding a thick file, rushed down the hall towards them. “Mrs. Drake, I see your party has arrived. Shall we get started?”

“Yes.” She stepped back so the woman could open the door, then followed her inside.

Harley froze on the threshold. A gold runner led to a table beyond the parquet dance floor. Set to seat eight, the table was gleaming with what she feared might be real crystal. Formal China settings were peeking out from behind the flower arrangements that draped over the edge of the table in a stunning cascade of white, purple, and little golden flowers. Two unlit candles stood in each one, just waiting for someone to come along and set the mood. She’d never seen anything quite like it.

“I didn’t want the whole thing to look too virginal, so I chose a light purple and gold as accents to the white. And I absolutely hate red carpets, so we went with gold there too,” Ethel said, taking a quick breath before launching into a detailed description of the flowers.

Harley was sure she heard Freesia, Alstroemia, and Dendrobium, but she had no idea which ones were which. Ethel said something about the color purple being associated with good judgment and spiritual fulfillment. The gold was to signify joy, and stimulate creative and intellectual energy. She found it hard to believe Kasper’s mother was into all that crap, but who was she to question anybody else’s choices?

“As you can see, I had the same flowers done in a slightly different style on the individual tables.” Ethel motioned to a table that was decorated just as beautifully, but less grandiose than the head table.

The same flowers surrounded a white candle about six inches high and four inches wide. The flowers were designed to look like they were flowing out of the candle’s base. The plates and glasses weren’t as ostentatious as the ones on the head table, but she didn’t think anyone would really notice. Everything was gorgeous. Ethel had already moved on as she began rattling off everything she’d chosen for the buffet.

This was crazy. Everyone was going to expect them to follow through with the wedding after his parents hosted such a fabulous engagement party for them. She’d be called a fool and worse if she called it off. He was going to have to be the one who ended things. And soon.

“Mom, I have to say everything is absolutely perfect. I wouldn’t change a thing.” Kasper leaned down to kiss her cheeks that had blushed with his praise.

“My only fear is that when people walk in they’re going to think we’ve decided to turn it into a wedding instead of an engagement party,” Harley said, forcing a smile onto her trembling lips.

“I wouldn’t mind it a bit,” he said, soft enough for only her to hear.

Harley looked up at him with an expression that he could easily read. She was good at hiding her emotions, but he was better at reading them. He would have laughed, if it weren’t for the way her nails were digging into the back of his hand. He’d be lucky to get away without major gouges marring his skin for the next week.

Damn, if those marks were in an area less likely to be seen it would be another matter all together. To be honest, he’d spent quite a bit of time thinking about making her lose control. Some place where he wouldn’t have any distractions, leaving him free to drive her completely wild.

Someday very soon, he was going to strip her naked and take his time exploring every delectable inch of her. Just thinking about it had his jeans feeling tighter. A clear sign he needed

to reign in his wayward thoughts, he decided, moving behind Harley so his mother wouldn't notice his condition.

"Harley, dear, if you think we've overdone I can scale things back," his mother said, before looking at the flowers with such a forlorn expression Kasper's heart clenched.

It must have been obvious to Harley, too since her own eyes got misty. "Oh, no. Don't do that. I just never expected anything so beautiful."

A loud commotion echoing down the hall had Harley spinning around, banging into his chest. Recognizing the voices himself, he grabbed her by the arms and held her just far enough away from him so he could look down into her eyes. The panic he saw on her face sent a wave of rage through him he barely managed to control. He looked over at his mother who was wearing a fierce scowl, something he'd only seen her do a few times.

Letting his hands fall from her shoulders, he turned for the door saying, "Both of you stay here. I'll deal with this."

"No!" Harley said, grabbing his arm, pulling on him as if she could really physically stop him.

She couldn't, but the sound of her voice cracking when she spoke had him stopping in his tracks. How could he walk away with her looking at him like that? Anyway, it was too late for him to cut off their unwelcome guest. The abominable Fern Taizer marched into the room followed closely by two uniformed attendants that could easily pass for bouncers in any nightclub. She stuck her hands on her pudgy hips and looked around the elegantly decorated room with clear disdain.

"You better not have spent one dime of your trust on this," she said, loudly adding, "Once his parents find out your real nature this wedding *will never* happen. You won't have his broad shoulders to hide behind for much longer."

Before either of them could respond, his mother walked right up to Fern and issued her own decree. "My husband and I are paying for everything. As for their wedding not only *will* it happen, my future *daughter* will never have to worry about money again. How it must pain you to hear that. I'd like you to leave; we're discussing arrangements that are none of your business."

Fern huffed and puffed, looking ready to blow the place down. Harley's nails were digging in again, but this time his thoughts were focused on how to get rid of her mother with the least amount of fuss. She'd probably love to make a big scene, embarrassing Harley as much as possible. How had she even found out they were here? He opened his mouth, ready to offer to show her to the door, but Harley spoke first.

"Actually Fern," she said not surprising anyone that she didn't call her "Mother," "it's a good thing you stopped by. I've made a few decisions that you and Patrick might like to hear. Be at Grandfather's tomorrow morning at ten a.m. You can go now," she said, her voice strong and calm.

Seeing her put her mother in her place was a powerful aphrodisiac. Hopefully, her standing up to the old bat was a good sign. He watched Fern stand there staring at Harley. Did the woman think she was lying just to get rid of her? He wasn't one for lying, but if it would spare him her company, he'd try spinning a yarn or two.

Fern sneered at Harley, though she figured some people might take it for a smile. "Your father and I will be there promptly at ten." Unable to leave it at that, she glanced at him, the sneer becoming more feral. "I assume since this is a family matter he won't be there."

Leaning into his side, she wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "He is my family. Hopefully his parents will be there as well."

“Count on it.” His mother tapped her foot impatiently.

“Fine. At least this will all be over soon.” She turned and stomped out of the room, followed closely by the staff.

“You know, I find it hard to believe that woman is your mother. Is it possible you could have been switched at birth?” his mother asked, making them all laugh.

“Back to the party. What have you chosen for food?” Kasper asked, trying to get things back on track.

“Typical male, always thinking about your stomach.” Ethel motioned to the blonde who was standing close by, pretending not to be observing though she really had no other choice.

Rushing over, she handed him a printed copy of the menu. They’d chosen to go with a buffet, trying to make sure there was something for everyone. The woman rattled on about how splendid their chef was. He listened, nodding every now and then, but his mind had already moved on.

Harley was right; everything was planned perfectly for a wedding. All their family and friends had been invited. The room was going to be stunning. Plenty of food. Why couldn’t they just hire a Justice of the Peace to do the ceremony? Better yet, his father had a close friend who was a judge, and he was already planning on attending. He could arrange a license with minimal fuss. Thanks to his mother, her dress was already ordered. Getting her into it might take some persuading, but he wouldn’t mind putting in the extra effort.

The rest of the meeting went by in a haze. He couldn’t wait to get her alone and make this engagement as real as the blood coursing through his veins. Surely by now she had to have a clue how he felt about her. He knew she felt something for him. The question was how strong that thing was, and could it be love? God, he hoped it was. Something hit him in the arm hard enough to have him widening his stance to keep from losing his balance.

“You haven’t even been listening, have you?” his mother asked in what he thought might be an accusing tone, but since she’d never used one with him he could’ve been wrong.

“Sorry.” He prayed she didn’t ask where his mind had wandered off to.

She turned to Harley with a huge smile. “Dear, please don’t get discouraged, he’s just like his father and believe you me he’ll be worth all the trouble he brings along.”

Kasper laughed along with them, feeling relieved and sufficiently chided. Trying to stay focused when they started talking about the music for the evening, instead of the way Harley’s linen slacks hugged her hips when she moved wasn’t easy, but somehow he managed. Ignoring her little sideways glances at his zipper was getting more difficult, and with every look so was he.

Had she actually stood up to her mother? *Yes*. The simple word reverberated around her head. Suddenly it occurred to her something deep inside her had changed. She wasn’t embarrassed by her mother’s appearance. She wasn’t ashamed by the knowledge that she hadn’t been wanted. Truthfully, she didn’t care about any of that anymore.

She had more than a lot of other people had, she thought with a smile. She had her grandfather’s love, devotion, and respect, which had been a constant joy in her life. And I have Kasper, for however long he wants to stay, she thought, trying to focus on what his mother was asking the young, frazzled looking blonde woman.

As they walked over to a set of French doors that led out to a private courtyard type area, she perversely added a little extra sway in her walk. Noticing his stiff movements, Harley fought back a satisfied smile. Learning that he had a tendency to become aroused in her presence was a stroke to her flailing ego. And she wasn’t about to complain. Besides, she was getting all hot and

bothered when he stared at her with those intense green eyes.

Kasper might be circumspect, but every now and then, she'd catch him looking. Then there was the low growl he kept emitting. She wondered if he even realized he was doing it. His mother had noticed and cast him a few odd glances, but she didn't say anything.

How could she feel so sexually charged and guilty at the same time? His parents must be paying a fortune for this shindig. She didn't think she would have minded so much, if it wasn't under false pretenses, but she wasn't even sure about that. Kasper's big, warm hand landed on the small of her back making her shiver. Anticipation surged through her body as they moved around the room. She couldn't wait to get him alone. The look on his face gave her the feeling he felt the same way.

Leaving his mother to finalize the details, he led Harley out into the hall. Without any conscious thought, he tugged her into the same vacant room they'd used the last time they were here. Her startled look barely registered as he swooped down, taking her mouth in rough, uncontrolled kiss.

His hand slid down from her back to cup her ass. How he'd managed to keep his hands off her this long, he'd never know. Sighing, she leaned into him, pressing all those feminine curves against him. He needed her now. Pulling away slightly, he looked down, ready to beg if necessary, but her eyes had glazed over in a sensuous haze letting him know she was as lost as he was.

Unwilling to let her go even for a minute, he backed her over to the door using his body to cage her in while he flipped the lock. Her hands were tugging his shirt from his pants. Quick and efficient, but ruthlessly achieving her goal.

Harley had to fight for the air to breathe. He was all around her. Surrounding her with a desire so thick, it swamped all her senses. She'd never done anything this reckless before. Then again, she'd never felt this way about anyone else. Desire or lust, whatever it was called, it really did a number on people. Mix in a little bit of love and you were toast, she thought, thinking it was an apt analogy since she felt like she was on fire.

"Babe, I don't have anything," he growled, pulling his body away, dropping his head to the door with a very loud "thunk."

"You're kidding, right?" she panted, shaking her head.

Growling, he lifted her a little, pressing his hips against the apex of her thighs, torturing both of them. "No."

"I... took you... for one... of those always... be prepared... types," she panted, dropping her head back against the wall and giving him better access to her breast, which he had somehow exposed.

Pulling back, he looked at her and said, "I don't suppose you carry anything."

"No, but I will from now on." She sighed, fisting her hands in his shirt.

"We need to go," he said roughly, his nimble fingers making quick work of the buttons on her shirt.

"You're never reckless are you?" she snapped, feeling a bit peevish, even though she knew she should be proud of his restraint.

His head snapped up, his eyes locking with hers. There was no need for him to speak. His angry glare said it all. It was so predictable that Mr. I-know-you-so-well thought he had her all figured out. Well he had another think coming if he thought for one minute that she'd sit idly by and let him make all the decisions in their relationship. For crying out loud, hadn't they already discussed this? She was more than ready to go for round two.

Catching him off guard, she put her hands on his chest, pushing him away. “What if that’s what I want? Maybe I need a little recklessness in my life.”

“No, you don’t,” he said, reaching for her, but she’d anticipated it and moved out of reach.

“How would you know? You’re always in control.” She wished she could break that reserve just once before their time together was over.

“Control? Are you fucking kidding me?” he said, so loud she knew anyone walking in the hall would have heard him.

“Do you have another name for it? Really, we’ve been in some sticky spots, but you always manage to come away nice and clean,” she finished with a loud growl of her own to match his.

Knowing that her ramblings probably didn’t make much sense to him, she didn’t expect him to answer. Turning away, she reached for the door, only to be spun around again. His face was red and his eyes were ablaze. For the first time those lines she’d read about a lover’s eyes going “stormy” now made sense.

“Don’t think you’re going to spout all that nonsense and just walk away.” He backed her against the wall, gripping her shoulders firmly, but not to the point of pain. “I’ve been walking around semi-erect since the day I laid eyes on you. Keeping myself from ravaging you day and night hasn’t been easy you know!”

Not knowing when it was a good time to back down, she said, “Oh, poor Kasper. Turning down a willing woman because you weren’t ready must have been so hard.”

“Damn it, I didn’t do it for me. I did it because I LOVE YOU!” He took her mouth in a crushing kiss before she could even digest what he’d said.

## Chapter Nineteen

Staring out the window, she tried to work it all out in her mind. He couldn't have meant it. *Could he?* No. Maybe he'd said something else altogether and she just imagined hearing what she wanted to. Besides, he wasn't acting like he loved her. Especially not after the way he'd dragged her to the car, swiping his key off the valet board on the way.

It was plain to see he was really, really angry from the way he practically tossed her into the car and slammed the door. And yeah, it was her fault for pushing him, not that she felt guilty or anything, she thought, nibbling on her lower lip. And to say you love someone just to win an argument was way over the top.

"If you don't stop biting your lip, I'm going to join you," he threatened, sliding into the car, his voice rough and low.

She stopped and sat there, considering replying with the saucy comeback that was sitting on the tip of her tongue, but decided it was in her best interest to keep quiet.

"Good choice," he chided, thinking he had things firmly under control, until she stuck out her tongue. "Cute, but if you do that again I'll come up with a really good use for that wayward tongue of yours."

The heavy silence was eating at her. She wanted to say something, but she wasn't ready to ask the question burning her throat. Talking about something as mundane as the weather would be absurd at this point, so she sat there stewing. Maybe two minutes passed before she was unable to stand it anymore. Reaching over, she closed her fingers around the radio knob.

Kasper's hand covered hers, pulling it away. "Nice try, but we aren't done talking."

"Why bother talking when you make all the decisions?" she said, knowing it was untrue, but he made more than his share so she felt justified in the accusation.

"Go ahead and get it all off your chest," he said softly, never taking his eyes off the road.

"You're just so... ugh." She turned her whole body away from him, looking out her window.

His deep chuckle had her smiling against her will. God, this was insane. Why couldn't she stay mad at him? Suddenly the idea of asking her question didn't seem so bad. Why not now? The answer was simple, she was a chicken.

He stroked his hand down her back as he said her name. "Harley?"

"Hmm," she answered, not wanting to hear the tremble she knew would be in her voice.

"Babe, don't be mad. You had to know things were getting serious. We agreed to a real relationship and seeing where it took us." His tone held no anger, just a hint of sadness.

"I know we did. Why is this harder for me than you?" she asked, wishing she knew the answer.

"Other than Alfred, has anyone else ever said that to you?" Though he didn't say it again, she knew what he was talking about.

"Kasper, it's okay. I know you were just caught up in the moment. I mean, I know what we have is real, but neither one of us expects this make believe engagement to go all the way." She looked at her lap, unable to bear seeing the relief in his eyes.

He slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "That's the last straw."

He jerked the car to the right, skidding to a stop. He jumped out, rounding the hood in seconds and whipped open her door. She recoiled almost into his seat, but he didn't give it a second thought. Grabbing her by the arms, he pulled her from the car and slammed her door shut. A few cars whizzed by at first, but a few slowed to see what was going on. He truthfully didn't

care. He'd lost it and now she was just going to have to deal with the consequences.

"You're such a fool. I never thought anyone could be that naive, or gullible. I've done everything I can to prove it to you, but do you see anything past the nose on your face? No!" he shouted, holding up his hand when she opened her mouth to respond. "I'll have you know that more than half the women I dated never even learned I had parents, never mind had brunch with them. And your grandfather has been introducing me all around town as his soon to be grandson in law."

"It's fake. He's just trying to put on a good show for my parents." She shook her head, wearing a stunned expression that struck him hard and deep.

"Do you honestly think I'd be willing to let my father pull strings for an imaginary engagement?" he asked, slapping his hands onto the car on either side of her, caging her in.

"Kasper, I want to go home," she said, an edge of panic in her voice.

"So do I, but here we are, standing here arguing over the fact that I love you," he growled, pressing his hips to hers.

"That's a sign of lust not love." She shuddered, rubbing her body deliciously against him.

He smiled and she had the good sense to look afraid. "And that ring on your finger says you're mine to anyone who sees it. If you try to back out of this engagement, I'll sue you for breach of contract."

"That's blackmail," she gasped, and smart man that he was, he took advantage of it, latching his mouth to hers.

He plundered until she went lax. There was no doubt in his mind she wanted him. If she needed an excuse to give herself what she really wanted, he was more than willing to supply her with one. She whimpered as he pulled away and he had to force himself not to smile.

"Are we clear?" he asked roughly, not really expecting her to argue, but he was prepared for it anyway.

At her nod, he decided to move forward with his plan before she changed her mind.

"Good, come on."

"Where are we going?" She let him help her into the car and do up her seat belt.

He thought about not answering for about a second before saying. "To see a friend of my father's."

"Am I allowed to ask why?" she questioned, as soon as he opened his door.

"Sure, but I don't have to answer," he teased, earning a half smile.

"Okay, why are we going to see a friend of your father's?" she asked, shaking her head.

Wanting to build up her anticipation, he hummed a little tune before saying, "Because he's a very influential judge and I'd like him to have the honor of officiating at our wedding."

Her silence said it all, he thought, as he counted to ten and was about to start explaining when she blurted, "You can't be fucking serious."

"As a heart attack." He pulled back into the light flow of traffic.

"But why can't we just go on the way we have been?" she asked, getting it out in one long, rushed breath.

He had a strong feeling his next statement was either going to make her want to run screaming, or possibly faint. "I think my parents and your grandfather would rather we be married when our kids are born."

"Kids?" she squeaked.

He glanced over and smiled at her stunned expression. "Yeah, you did say your grandfather wanted a few great-grandsons. I wouldn't mind a few, maybe even a little girl mixed

in there somewhere.”

“I... It... We need to think about this,” she said, shaking her head.

“Why don’t you like my genes?” he teased, laughing when her gaze dropped to his crotch.

She looked up giving him a scathing frown before turning to face the windshield.

“Kasper, you have to slow down.”

“That’s a switch. Wasn’t it you who was in such a big rush a few minutes ago?” he said, noticing the blue lights flashing up ahead.

“Kas, please slow down,” she said again, sounding nervous, which had him glancing over at her as he tapped the brake pedal.

“Harley, it’s okay, I’m not going that fast.” He reached for her hand, surprised when she turned her palm to his, gripping it so tight her nails dug into his skin.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, leaning forward to get a better look.

“What is it, honey?” He slowed to a crawl as they drove past the state trooper who was standing behind a red Mercury Sable with a very angry looking Fern Taizer.

He wasn’t sure what he expected, but her laughter wasn’t it. “Oh, she looks livid.”

“Want me to stop and see if everything’s all right?” he asked.

She looked at him intently. “Um... if I say no, does that make me a horrible person?”

Lifting her hand, he pressed it to his lips, kissing her knuckles. “Babe, I might be looking through rose-colored glasses, but I don’t think you have a horrible bone in your body.”

Giving him her best smile and a wink, she figured she might be able to distract him enough to make him forget about visiting his father’s friend, for at least a little while. “Okay, then how about we go home right now and you can show me just how much you like my body.”

“Nice try, but I like the idea of knowing that your body will be lying next to mine every night.” He sped up to catch up with the cars in front of them.

“We can do that without being married.” She sighed, leaning back against the seat, wishing she could read his mind.

“Mmm... I know, but Harley, even with the best protection money can buy, sometimes surprises come along. Besides, how long do you want to wait to start a family?”

*Family?* They’d talked about it in the abstract, but was she ready for kids? She loved them, but they were a lot of work. Grandpa would be thrilled by any additions that came along. She shook her head needing time to think about it before making such a huge decision.

He was right, of course, but how could she be sure he was really in love? It wasn’t like there was a blood test they could run to see if people were in love. Some people swore it was a state of mind, while others claimed it was a chemical reaction. Maybe it was a sickness. After all, sometimes it walked hand in hand with obsession. Luckily for her, Kasper wasn’t one of the jealous, overly possessive types.

She tilted her head, squinting her eyes. “I guess I could do worse.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling,” he said, with a shake of his head. “Imagine falling in love with someone who refuses to realize it when she meets the perfect male specimen.”

Leaning towards him, she slid her hand onto his thigh, slowly sliding it up to his zipper, which instantly became an impressive bulge. “Well maybe you need to strip down and let her see just how perfect you are.”

“You’re not playing fair,” he moaned, lifting his hips into her hand.

Leaning in close, she purred in his ear, “Oh, honey, all’s fair in love and war.”

“I’m so glad we agree.” He turned onto a street filled with huge houses with football

field-sized lawns.

Pulling into a large circular drive, he cut the engine and beeped a few times. He climbed out of the car, coming around to her side, opening her door and offering her his hand as he waved to an older gentleman who was standing in the now open door.

\* \* \*

Harley wasn't surprised her parents hadn't shown up yet. They had to make everything as difficult as possible. Always looking for the worst, and finding it too. Being late was no doubt their first attempt at intimidating her, she thought while pacing the small confines of the living room. Ethel, Kasper Sr., and her grandfather were sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee and talking about playing golf.

"Hey, you're going to need a new pair of sneakers if you keep going at this rate." Kasper leaned in the doorway, looking way too hot and sexy in a black t-shirt and tight jeans.

She shrugged her shoulders. Laughing, she confessed, "I can't seem to stop."

He took a step towards her, a predatory look gleaming in his eyes. Instinct had her wanting to back away, but at the last second, she stepped forward instead. His smile was so knee melting, she practically fell into his arms. They tumbled onto the couch wrapped in each other's arms.

"Mmm... this is so much better." She sighed as he pressed hot, wet kisses along her neck.

He could have stopped what he was doing to answer her, but she was so happy he didn't. Her fingers slipped between them fumbling with the button on his jeans. He made that sexy growling noise she liked, grabbing her hands and bringing them up to her shoulders, holding them there. She opened her legs, letting him settle between them. His soft growl turned into a loud groan as he pressed his bulging zipper against her aching center. Needing to get closer, she wrapped her legs around his, urging him to move.

"Good lord, she is a shameless hussy." A very angry and unfortunately, familiar female voice interrupted their cavorting.

"Fern, we talked about this. You will keep things civil or you are out of here," her grandfather said, chuckling.

Mortified, she stuck her face in the curve of Kasper's neck. He was trying not to laugh, she could feel it. He failed, she thought with a grimace, as a soft chuckle sounded by her ear.

She uttered a muffled, "Oh, my God."

"What was that?" he whispered, still laughing, earning a slap, which made him laugh harder while he said, "I didn't think you liked it rough."

"Besides, I think all engaged couples should be a little amorous, otherwise what's the point," Kasper's father said, walking over, standing in front of them facing the opposite direction.

Someday she would find a way to thank him, she swore to herself, as they started untangling themselves. And really, it's not like any of them hadn't done worse. Of course, none of them probably had an audience. Smoothing her hands down her jeans, she looked them all over, wondering how such a diverse group of people ended up in the same town. The same room, for that matter.

Her father glanced at his watch. "I have a very important appointment at one o'clock so can we get on with this?"

"Sure, if you'll all have a seat it won't take long." She reached for the thick folder on the

coffee table waiting for them all to get comfortable.

“I’m glad you’ve come to your senses,” her mother huffed, folding her hand in her lap.

“Me, too. First things first, my trust is to stay exactly that, a trust for any children I may have.” She paused for the explosion she knew was coming.

“How dare you call us here just to rub it in? We’ll go to court, no judge will uphold any arrangements once he or she hears our side of things,” her mother said, beginning to rise when her father put his hand on her arm and said, “I don’t think she’s finished.”

“You’re right, I’m not. You two will no longer be making threats or accusations against me, my grandfather, or anyone else I know,” she said, glad she was sitting since her legs felt shaky.

“What would make you think we’d agree to anything you have to say?” her mother asked, easing back into her chair.

“Since I now own your house and the land both of the dealerships are sitting on, you could say I’m holding all the cards.” She noticed her grandfather’s quick glance at Kasper Sr. before she continued, “Grandpa, you could have ended this all a long time ago by buying that mortgage. Yes, I know you checked into it. You should have used my trust.”

“Patrick, what is she talking about? My father left us the dealerships free and clear, and our house was a wedding gift from my grandparents,” her mother said, looking a little pale and confused.

“Things change, and not always for the better. And you always have to have everything top of the line, nothing is ever good enough for you. So I mortgaged a few things, it’s not like we can take it with us when we go,” he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

“You could have thought about leaving it to your one and only child,” her grandfather said angrily.

“Why? She had you giving into her every whim, she didn’t need anything from us,” Fern said, with a wave of her hand.

“Fern Taizer, you are the coldest woman it has ever been my sorry pleasure of meeting,” Kasper’s mother said, sidling closer to her husband as if she was afraid she’d catch her nastiness.

“I still don’t see how any of this is going to stop me from getting what should be ours,” her mother said, as if nothing had changed.

Kasper stiffened beside her, letting her know he was just about done with being nice, so she turned to her father hoping to make him see where she was going with all this. “You haven’t been making enough in sales to cover your payments. I could walk in right now and demand you vacate all three properties. I won’t do that on three conditions.

“One, you keep your distance from all of us. That means no contact at all,” she said, looking at her mother specifically before going on.

“Two, you tone down your lifestyle and pay off your debts. The only ones responsible for your current boatload of problems are you two,” she held up her hand when her father looked like he was about to say something.

“Three, you apologize,” she said, pointing to her father, “not to me, but to your father,” she clarified. She didn’t expect him to care about her one way or the other. “He’s done nothing but love you and hope that someday you’d come to your senses. I see that’ll never happen and truthfully, I’m fine with it, but you owe him one whopper of a request for forgiveness.”

“All of these conditions will be met, or I will begin foreclosing immediately. Did I make myself completely clear?” she said, listening to her mother’s gasping and huffing while her father just sat there looking defeated.

After a few seconds, her mother unfortunately found her voice. “And what are we supposed to do? We can’t control the economy.”

“Actually, I was considering building a few new projects and I would be willing to make you a very handsome offer on one of your lots. If you combine the inventory with the other it should help you get back on track,” Kasper Sr. said, offering her father a lifeline.

“Son, don’t be a fool,” her grandfather pleaded, looking at him with love shining in his eyes.

“We won’t be needing... ” her mother said, before her father cut her off.

“I—we both agree to all your terms. I’ve actually considered selling out and retiring someplace tropical, maybe this is the push I needed.” He rose to his feet, pulling her mother with him. “Alfred, I am sorry for never being the man you always thought I could be.”

“We are not giving up,” her mother said, pulling her hand free.

“Fern, everything we do have is solely in my name. Your accounts are almost empty. Unless you want to end up homeless and divorced, shut up and get in the car. Harley, I know there’s nothing that will ever make up for having parents like us, but I do hope you’ll be happier without us,” he said, following her mother out the door.

“Alfred, dear, are you okay?” Ethel asked, holding her grandfather’s hand.

“I knew I raised her right, but I’ve never have had the strength to do that. For all these years I’d considered how to go about doing it, but never followed through.” He wiped a tear from his cheek, smiling at her. “You did good, honey, real good.”

He held out his arms and she walked into them like she’d done a thousand times before. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what was happening.”

“You did what you had to do. As long as you’re happy, I’m happy.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I think this deserves a celebration. Let’s go order something absolutely unhealthy,” Ethel said, tugging her grandfather and Kasper’s father from the room.

Kasper rose from his spot on the couch, moving up behind her, gently laying his hand on her shoulder. Harley spun around throwing herself into his arms. He just held her tightly, letting her take the time she needed. Knowing that she had his strength and support meant the world to her.

Looking up at him, she blew a chunk of hair out of her eyes. “I was so scared. I didn’t think I was going to be able to pull it off.”

“You handled it like a pro. I think you had a real impact on your father, but I’m sorry to say I don’t think your mother will ever come around,” he said softly, rubbing her back.

“I know.” She hated the twinge of sadness she heard in her voice.

“Well, it’s over now and we have some plans to finalize.” He took her by the hand, leading her into her grandfather’s study.

## Chapter Twenty

Tillie and Lillian bustled around her, primping and prodding. Knowing she would go crazy if she gave it too much thought, she concentrated on the fact that Kasper hadn't cancelled the order for her wedding dress after all. Staring at herself in the mirror, she couldn't wipe the big smile off her face. Tillie and Lillian pronounced her ready to go just in the nick of time.

Kasper entered the room and froze. She looked at him in the mirror, watching the way his eyes roamed over her body. The silk dress was a drape design with thick straps that criss-crossed over her back. It hugged her curves, while giving her an elegant, sophisticated look, one Kasper obviously approved of.

"Well?" she asked, smoothing her hands over her hips.

His smile said enough, but the way he tried to subtly adjust himself, said even more. "I know we agreed that this would be a surprise to everyone, but since I only plan on us doing this once, I couldn't take the pleasure of walking you down the aisle away from your grandfather. He's waiting outside."

"Kasper Drake, you are the sweetest, sexiest man I've ever met," she said, walking over and running her hand down his chest.

"Now that you realize how perfect I am, aren't you happy you agreed to marry me?" he said, tipping her chin up and pressing a quick peck to her lips before heading to the door.

"I guess so." She gave him a wink.

He opened the door, slipping out as Alfred slipped in. He walked over, taking her hands with a watery smile. "He's a lucky man."

Laying her hand on his cheek, she used her thumb to wipe away his tears. "Grandpa, I think I'm the lucky one. First, I had you loving me, now I have both of you. No girl could ask for more."

He gave her a quick hug, and then tucked her arm in his saying, "It was always my pleasure. Now enough sappiness, this is supposed to be a happy day, and that man of yours is probably getting antsy."

Kasper entered the room, smiling at Tilly and Lillian who closed the doors behind him. He walked along the gold runner, stopping in front of the long table where he'd be sitting with Harley, his parents, Alfred and his date Beverly. He noticed the nervous glances some of the guests were casting his way. He found the face he was looking for and nodded. Perry kissed his wife Angela, grabbed his camera and took his position where he figured he'd get the best shots. Angela gave Kasper a huge smile, holding her thumbs up.

He took a deep breath, hoping Harley was ready. "Hello, everyone, thanks for coming. If you'll have a seat, I have an announcement to make."

The room got quiet, except for the sounds of chairs and tableware shifting. His mother rushed over, touching his arm and looking up at him, concern visible in her eyes. He smiled, leaning down and kissing her cheek. His father patted him on the shoulder before taking his mother by the hand, leading her to their seats. Everyone was looking at him expectantly, awaiting his news.

"Harley and I have a surprise for all of you, so if you'll be patient for just a few more minutes, we'll get right to it," he said, as his father's friend, the Honorable Judge Karl Buckman, joined him.

Tilly leaned her head to the door, smiling as she pointed to the DJ. She and Lillian slowly opened the doors as the "Bridal March" began to play. All eyes turned to the door where Harley

stood with her grandfather. The room filled with ooh's and ahh's as Alfred led her down the makeshift aisle. Kasper couldn't have wiped the goofy smile off his face if he tried and Harley hadn't taken her eyes off him once. Alfred kissed her, placed her hand in his, and then took his seat.

Harley barely heard the words, but she must have said, "I do" in the right place, because the next thing she knew, Kasper was kissing her senseless while all of their family and friends clapped wildly.

The End

## Author Bio

Rita lives in northern Maine, near the Canadian border, but has strong family ties in Massachusetts. Along with her loving husband, they're raising three teenagers. One girl, two boys, and a house full of pets. When she's not reading or writing, she enjoys spending time with her family, and fishing.

When it comes to writing, she's always made up stories to entertain her kids. As they grew up, she began writing romances to entertain herself. She's been seriously focusing on her writing for the past two and a half years. Luckily, she has a wonderful supportive family, and friends that are willing to sit there and listen to her ramble on about what her characters have done, or are about to do.

Rita is a proud member of Romance Divas and enjoys visiting the Romantic Times forum. You can visit her at [www.RitaSawyer.com](http://www.RitaSawyer.com).