

*RomanceDivine*



Mary Suzanne

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## **Darling Rebel**

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By  
Mary Suzanne

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*Darling  
Rebel*

Mary Suzanne

# One

A fierce north wind blew crystal snowflakes across the porch and into the open door where Sasha Jardane stood. Sasha compared Chicago winters to living in a deep freeze; yet she loved the flamboyant city and had no desire to live anywhere else.

She stepped onto the porch and moved toward the long white pillar several feet from the entrance. She looked toward the intersecting streets for any sign of her friend's car. Joe was late. He had called earlier about picking her up and meeting another couple at a nightclub in the city.

Sasha stepped back into the house and closed the door. She shook the sticky flakes from her long, auburn hair and felt the wet droplets touch her face. When she glanced up, she saw her father walking down the staircase.

Mike Jardane wore a dark suit and tie, his silvery hair setting off the bronze coloring of his skin. He was a striking man, making Sasha wonder why he hadn't married again after losing her mother years ago. He owned one of the largest



newspapers in Chicago, and until recently, he'd presided over the enterprising business as its president. A month had passed since he'd instructed the Board to hire Mitch Jenner to manage the newspaper, leaving him time to pursue other interests.

"Where's Joe?" Mike asked, joining her in the living room.

"He should be along any minute." She ran her hand across her thick brown sweater and over her designer jeans in a smoothing gesture while she thought about what she wanted to say. "There's something I want to discuss with you."

"What is it?" Mike didn't miss the determination lining her face.

Sasha hesitated seconds before answering. It was hard to know how to begin, but there was no better time than now to tell him of her plan. "I've decided to get a job."

Mike shook his head. "You don't have to work, honey." He removed a glass from the bar and filled it with amber liquid. "We've already discussed this before."

"I know, but you haven't fully heard me out. After putting so much time into college, I'm just wasting my degree staying at home. I want to make my mark in the world."

"Okay, let's hear it. What are you interested in doing?"

She took a deep breath gearing up her courage before beginning. "I overheard you talking to someone about a reporter's job at the newspaper. Since I majored in journalism, I have the right qualifications."

Sasha knew she'd always had a drive to write. A job at the newspaper would be the perfect chance to test her skills in her chosen field. She watched him closely for any signs of softening in his attitude.

"That's not possible. I'm sure Mitch Jenner will want someone with experience to take the cub reporter position."

She realized this was going to be harder than she first thought, but she'd always had a stubborn streak. "You can talk to him for me." A pleading look covered her face.

"I haven't met Mitch Jenner yet, even though I recommended him to the Board after reading his resume." He shrugged, "How would it look if I interfered and demanded he put my daughter on the payroll?"

"Please, Dad, I could always use mothers' maiden name on my application. No one would have to know we're related. Give me this one chance to prove myself."

"You make everything sound so simple. I know you've taken on more responsibility since your," he paused, "rebel phase, but this is something that will be hard to pull off."

Sasha knew exactly what he referred to by her *rebel phase*. A younger Sasha participated in every protest or march for equality, much to her father's irritation. She only hoped her past didn't continue to haunt her.

"There shouldn't be any problems." She saw the indecision race across his face.

He was silent, studying the whiskey in the glass, considering his daughter's future. "If I agree, you can't tell anyone your identity."

She flushed with her victory, but hid her reaction.

"I don't want Mitch Jenner to know. He's done a capable job running the newspaper and I don't want to lose him."

"I'm not going to tell a soul." Excitement lit her eyes, "There's something else I want to discuss with you."

"Go ahead," he took a drink, steeling himself for the next onslaught. "I'm listening."

"I'm going to rent an apartment closer to the newspaper." She'd barely spoken the words when she noticed him

shaking his head. "Please, don't say anything until you've had a chance to think it over."

"You've never lived away from home, and I don't like the idea."

"I'm twenty-three; it's about time I tried making it on my own," she crossed her arms, holding her ground. "I've already made an appointment to see an apartment tomorrow."

He sighed; he'd known this day was coming. "It looks as if you've made up your mind and nothing I say will change it."

"Thank you so much." She threw her arms around his neck, "You won't have to worry about me."

The ringing of the doorbell was a welcome sound. She was sure if they discussed it any further, he might change his mind.

Mike released her and held her at arms' length, studying her features. "You're determined enough to succeed." He smiled at her, shaking his head in defeat. "If you don't get a move on, Joe may leave you at home tonight." Mike watched her walk through the hallway to answer the door.

She opened the door, and greeted Joe with a smile, "Come in and visit dad while I get my coat."

Joe Fields stomped the snow off his shoes and walked into the room. His brown gaze lifted to where Mike stood. "How are you, Mr. Jardane?"

"Couldn't be better; it's nice to see you again, Joe."

A few seconds later, Sasha reentered the living room with her coat draped over her arm. "I'm all set."

"Have fun tonight, but be careful," Mike cautioned, walking them to the door.

"We will." She kissed his cheek.

Sasha felt Joe's arm circling her waist when they

stepped outside. He held her arm until they made it across the icy patch and she was safely seated in his car.

She looked at the snow alongside the road and the gleam of the streetlights on the icy streets, "Do you think we should forget going out tonight?"

"Joan and Steve are already at the nightclub waiting for us. I called and told them we'd be running a little late." Joe shrugged, "But hey, if you don't want to go, we can cancel."

"I guess it'd be silly to change our minds at this late date," she answered as he turned off the side street and drove to the interstate.

When they walked through the entrance of the club, Joe raised his head to see over the top of the crowd. "There they are," he said after spotting Joan and Steve.

Joan must have been watching, as she waved once she spotted them.

The dimly lit room echoed with the sounds of voices and laughter. Sasha didn't miss how Joan and Steve added their fair share to the ruckus. As they approached the table Joan's voice rose to greet them. Sasha glanced around, feeling self-conscious about her friend's shrill tone. She had known Joan since childhood, so there were times when she ignored some of her shortcomings. She often made excuses to stay at home when Joan wanted her to go out for the evening. On the times that she did go with her, Joan wound up drinking too much and getting into an argument with someone. Sasha sighed, this looked like another one of those nights.

Sasha frowned at Joan's loud tone and she glanced around at the tables near them. A strange sensation flooded through her when her gaze collided with a set of piercing, black eyes. The stranger frowned as Joan's voice continued to rise. Sasha quickly dropped her lashes and looked away.

Sasha felt uneasy from the brief eye contact with the man. She couldn't shake the feeling as she tried to concentrate on her friend's conversation. Something told her not to look across the aisle again, but she ignored her instincts, and her gaze traveled back to the stranger. The quick peek was all she needed; he was watching again, but the frown was gone and irritation had taken its place.

Her best bet was to ignore the man; she didn't know him, and nothing would bring her mood down tonight. The happy thoughts that she'd soon have a job and a new apartment raced through her.

Sasha threw caution to the wind and decided to join her friend's lively discussion. Yet three hours after arriving, she couldn't help noticing Joan had become louder.

Sasha saw the manager of the nightclub weaving his way through the crowd. Frustration lined his face as he approached their table. "I've had several complaints about the noise. I'm going to have to ask you to quiet down, or take your rebel rousing somewhere else," he said angrily.

"Oh, is that so?" Joan shouted. "Where do you get off pinning a name like rebels on us?"

Sasha realized Joan was drunk, and she knew that an embarrassing scene was imminent. It would be easier to leave than to stay and argue the point with the man towering over them.

"Joe, are you ready to go?" Sasha reached for her coat from the back of her chair.

Joe nodded his head and stood.

"You don't have to leave because of what some old fuddy-duddy has to say." Joan's voice carried around the room. "We have as much right to stay as anyone."

Sasha's cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but she

knew from past experience that Joan couldn't be shut up. "I'll call you tomorrow." When she turned away, Sasha's eyes moved slowly toward the stranger. She couldn't come up with a logical explanation why she should be looking at him. His gaze locked on her, and she felt an icy shiver race down her spine; she looked away quickly.

Sasha settled into Joe's car, "I'm glad we left when we did."

"From now on, I'm not going to meet them anywhere," Joe said, slowing the car for a red light. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I'm driving into the city to look at an apartment."

"You're going to move?" His head snapped to look at her, "What did your father say?"

"He was against the idea at first, but I convinced him it was time I tried making it on my own." She smiled her victory smile, "I'm also planning on getting a job."

"You don't have to work. Look at the fancy car he bought you."

"I want to work, and that fancy car, as you put it, was a college graduation present. My purpose in getting a job is to be independent."

He shrugged his shoulders. "If that's what you want then you should do it. Will you need any help moving in?"

"No, I can manage, but thanks for the offer."

They drove the rest of the way to Sasha's house in silence.

"Don't get out, Joe," she said reaching for the door handle and stepping onto the snowy sidewalk. "I'll give you a call when I get settled into my new place."

"You'd better." He lifted his hand and waved as he drove away.

As Sasha prepared for bed an unexpected vision of the stranger popped into her head. Judging by the man's expression, she knew he considered her as rowdy as her friends. She wondered what he'd thought when the manager had called them rebel rousers. That name was in her past, and Sasha hoped it stayed there.

Something about the stranger intrigued her, compelling her to glance in his direction more than once that evening. And the looks he'd given her had her shuddering inwardly. She eventually dismissed him from her thoughts, knowing she'd never see him again.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning she awoke early, excited to start the day. Sasha dressed in jeans and a sweater, noticing in the mirror how her deep green eyes danced with enthusiasm. She powdered her nose before running a brush through her long auburn waves.

She walked down the stairs and smelled the aroma of coffee in the air. When she entered the kitchen, Mike folded his morning newspaper and placed it on the table.

"Good morning," he greeted her, kissing her cheek.

"Morning, Dad." She returned his kiss before walking to the cabinet for a mug. "I'm going to get an early start today."

"Don't be in too big a hurry driving. From the news reports, the snow's made the highways dangerous."

"I'll be careful," she murmured, raising her mug and drinking the warm brew.

"I'll probably be late getting back." She stood and picked up her handbag and coat.

"No hurry. You have all day."

Sasha nodded as she made her way through the hallway and out to her car. Just as she reached the city limits, she came to a busy intersection. When she looked up, the light suddenly changed from a green to an amber color. In a matter of seconds, the light blinked to red.

*"Oh darn!"* She muttered as a car shot across her path, barely missing her by inches. She slammed on her brakes to avoid a crash and saw the driver of the other car.

A shock hit her. The man behind the wheel was the same man she saw the night before in the lounge. The loud blasts of horns from the other cars trying to pass her in the congested street brought her back to the present. She stepped on the gas and shot across the street.

Butterflies danced in her stomach over the incident. How could such a coincidence happen to her? She couldn't believe she was seeing the same man twice in less than twenty-four hours. She took a deep breath and continued to her appointment at the apartment complex.

Sasha fell in love with the apartment on sight. After giving the manager her name, he looked at her curiously and asked if she was a relative of Mike Jardane. When she told him she was indeed Mike's daughter, he told her he would waive any need for references from her and she could put a deposit down. It seemed her father's name followed her everywhere, but once she started work, no one would be the wiser. She'd be just Sasha James. Sasha gave the man a check and took her key before heading back home.

She forgot the earlier incident at the intersection as thoughts of the fast-paced developments filled her head. Already, she had rented an apartment, and her next step involved employment. When she arrived home, she went up to her bedroom to begin packing.



Later that afternoon, she carried all but one suitcase to her car. Her father walked in as she struggled down the staircase with the last piece of luggage.

"I take it you liked the apartment," he remarked, removing the heavy case from her hand and placing it in the trunk of her car.

"It's a great place."

"I'm glad you're happy with it." He draped his arm casually across her shoulder walking toward the house. "But I'm going to miss you."

"Don't worry. You'll probably see more of me after I move out than when I lived here. I hired a mover to stop by this afternoon to take some of the heavier boxes to my new place."

Mike nodded as they walked into the warmth of the living room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning she and her father sat at the breakfast table. Sasha felt a little misty-eyed knowing this would probably be their last breakfast together for a while. "I'm going to be leaving in a few minutes."

"I have a surprise for you. I've had your application approved and you can start work on Monday morning. You'll still have to go to Mitch Jenner's office so that he can talk to you, but that's always been a formality."

"Oh, that's wonderful." The hesitation she'd had earlier about leaving vanished.

"You really are enthusiastic about working." Mike smiled after watching her response, "I guess I should have realized that earlier." He stood and lifted his brief case. "I'd

better leave before I'm late for my meeting. Once you get settled in at your new place don't forget to drop in now and then."

"You couldn't keep me away," her words trailed off watching him walk to the door.

Sasha finished carrying a few things out to her car before leaving for her new – independent - life.

At her new apartment she carried everything inside and unpacked in her bedroom. Her mind kept drifting to her new job. She noticed how her hands shook from the thought of such an undertaking. Why was she so nervous; usually she didn't let these things bother her? This was what she wanted to do all along, wasn't it? There wasn't anyone at the newspaper that could prove she and Mike Jardane were father and daughter. She had to stop procrastinating and not worry so much because independence was the most important factor in her decision.

# Two

The following morning Sasha dressed in jeans, sweater and her comfortable boots before walking from her apartment. She looked across the lot watching a black car just arriving. She frowned realizing this was the same black car she'd almost wrecked at the intersection. Before she could reach her car, she glanced over her shoulder at the man getting out.

His back was to her as he leaned inside to get something out of the front seat. She turned her head and speeded up hoping to reach her car before he turned around. From the corner of her eye, she saw his head shifting in her direction.

"Hold on a minute," he called out, his crisp voice commanding in the morning stillness.

She couldn't move watching his long strides eating up the short distance separating them. When he reached her, she tried masking her unease by staring boldly at him. What surprised her was when he reached out and gripped her shoulders.

"Who taught you how to drive?"

She felt his grip tightening on her and anger flowed through her. "Take your hands off me!" she demanded. In that instant, all thought for her personal safety vanished. But just as quickly, another thought registered with her. There was no telling what this man intended. Fear instantly replaced her anger. She held her breath awaiting his next move.

His eyelids suddenly narrowed, "You're the woman I saw in the nightclub Saturday night."

She couldn't believe she'd made this much of an impression on him. While they stood facing each other in silent combat, she got a closer look at her antagonist. She studied his straight nose, the firm chin with a hint of a cleft and the full lips curved in a downward slant. His dark hair hung low on his forehead giving his face a roguish appeal. When her emerald eyes did finally reach his, they were bright with anger. The fear she'd felt for her safety quickly dissolved.

"This is the last time I'm going to ask you to get your hands off me!"

"What will you do if I don't?" Instead of releasing her, he continued to hold her effortlessly.

"You'll be sorry!" she challenged.

A surge of indignation swept through her when she felt him hauling her against his chest. She gasped as the air left her lungs on impact. When she saw his head slowly dipping toward hers, a frown covered her features. She wondered if he intended to kiss her, but she didn't have to wonder long when his lips suddenly possessed hers.

She felt his kiss wash over her. A million lights lit up in her head as she squeezed her eyelids tightly closed. The sound of bells ringing filled her ears and she wondered what caused the sensation. This wasn't what she wanted to feel, but

she couldn't stop the tantalizing sensations. Eventually, she felt her sanity returning. She'd enjoyed the kiss too much and she didn't even know his name. *What is wrong with me? I shouldn't be allowing a stranger to kiss me so intimately.* Aiming her boot, she felt him flinch when her toe met his shin.

His hands fell away from her and he reached down to rub the sore area. "I ought to put you across my knee!" His eyes ran the length of her. "Dressed in your rebel garb again, I see."

Mitch discovered she had a quick temper. He found it impossible to look away from her smooth, creamy features. She had so captivated him that his thoughts whirled chaotically with no chance of stopping them. He shook his head to clear it and knew that striking out at her was the only defense he could use against the emotional sensations boiling away inside him.

"There's no doubt about it. You have to be one of those young rebels who are always demonstrating over some cause or another. Isn't that what the manager at the nightclub called your group? A bunch of rebels?"

Sasha couldn't believe what she'd just heard. How had he remembered what the manager had called them? Yes, in the past, she'd acted a little irrationally, but those days were behind her.

"What are you talking about? I'll have you know I work for a living." *Well, almost*, she added silently. "I don't have time to demonstrate."

"You could have fooled me." Mitch frowned, reaching down to rub the sore spot again.

"You don't have the right to judge me!"

"I guess you don't like hearing the truth, do you?" he taunted her.

She didn't care to listen to anymore of his insults. Swinging away, she quickly got in her car and fumbled nervously with the key.

"I hope you watch where you're going this time," he called out to her.

She spared him one quick glance and saw how he'd cupped his mouth circling those same lips that had excited her moment's ago. A quick desire to feel them again overwhelmed her, but she pushed the notion aside. Sasha gunned the motor to muffle out anything else he had to say. When she ventured a glance in the mirror, she saw him standing in the same spot watching her. She deliberately spun around the corner with tires screeching. Once she lost sight of him, she slowed to a safer speed.

She drove through the busy streets, and her thoughts continued to dwell on the impossible man. Shaking her head to erase the image didn't work: it wouldn't go away.

When she finished her grocery shopping and drove back to her apartment, she noticed the black car parked in the same spot as before. Apparently, he lived in the same building.

While lying in bed that night, Sasha's mind drifted to the next day. The thought kept pounding through her head that she had to succeed and prove to her father she'd left all her foolish activities behind. Come tomorrow, she'd find out the extent of her motivation.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Monday morning, Sasha finished her shower and sorted through her closet, choosing a two-piece beige suit for her first day on the job. She slipped on matching high heels. As she glanced in the mirror, her thoughts were on how she

appeared professional and *not* the rebel as the stranger accused her. Sasha didn't understand the part about the interview since she already had the job, but her father insisted this was how they did things at the newspaper.

At nine, she hurried through the revolving door of the building. She made her way to the receptionist occupying the desk in the lobby. "I'm here to see Mr. Jenner."

"His office is located on the fifth floor," the woman pointed to the elevators across the lobby.

"Thanks," Sasha turned toward the elevator, her high heels clicking across the marble floor.

As the doors slid open on the fifth floor, she took a deep breath and stepped out into the hallway. She made her way to Mitch Jenner's office, took a deep breath and tapped lightly on the wooden panel.

"Come in," she heard an attractive voice answering her knock.

She pushed the door open and her gaze settled on the man sitting at the desk. A sinking feeling formed in the pit of her stomach; Sasha couldn't believe her eyes. She continued to stare at the stranger that had given her so many problems the last few days.

She felt she might as well kiss the job goodbye if it was up to him to hire her. Her mouth was dry, it was hard to form words. She felt like a fool standing, staring at him, unable to say anything.

"What are *you* doing here?" Mitch stood and walked around the desk. He stared at her with narrowed eyes as he folded his arms across his chest.

This was the first time he'd seen her since their disastrous meeting on the parking lot, but he felt the familiar upheaval her presence caused, turning his world topsy-turvy.

He wasn't sure he liked the sensation filling him.

"I'm here to fill the reporter's job," she finally managed to say.

"Is that so? Well, I'm afraid you're too late. I have someone else in mind for the position." Why had he said that? He already knew she had the job.

"How could that be?" Her lips tightened and her shoulders dropped. "It wasn't available until today."

"You don't have your facts straight." His searching look didn't miss how white her face became. Shame washed through him for putting her through this, but he couldn't help himself. He didn't have an answer to why he kept taunting her. Another thought suddenly filled his head, *I'd like nothing better than to take her in my arms and wipe away that look.*

"I counted on that job," she murmured, interrupting his private thoughts.

The heavy atmosphere between them bristled with tension. The seconds slowly passed stretching into what seemed like minutes.

"If you're that intent on getting the job, I could reassign the new employee to the copy room," he said, again feeling foolish over making up the story.

She didn't miss the stiffness in his voice. "Thank you for reconsidering," she said lightly, because she certainly didn't want him changing his mind. She had to hide any antagonism she felt for this man.

"Go down to the fourth floor and see Mark Sanders." From the expression on his face, it looked as if he already regretted his weakness in not telling her to hit the road.

"I will." She backed toward the door and made a hasty exit.

She slumped against the elevator wall, shutting out



the annoying elevator music. The Mitch Jenner hurdle was out of the way; now she had to face Mark Sanders. She knew the meeting with the other man had to be better than the one she'd just had with Mitch Jenner.

When she walked into the room on the fourth floor, she saw a man looking to be in his middle thirties sitting at a desk. He tapped away on an old typewriter, but looked up as she entered. She noticed how friendly his blue eyes were when they met hers.

"Hello, I'm Sasha James." She felt thankful she'd remembered to use her mother's maiden name, instead of Jardane.

"And I'm Mark Sanders." He stood and extended his hand.

"Mr. Jenner told me to report to you for work."

"You must be my new cub reporter." He reached up and pushed his hand through a lock of wavy blond hair. "Welcome aboard, Sasha."

"Thank you, you're very kind," she murmured gratefully.

"You can use the desk with the computer. Now, me, I prefer my old rickety typewriter. Been using it so many years, I couldn't even think about getting rid of it." He smiled at her astonished look glancing at the machine that looked to be one of the first typewriters ever made.

"If that's what you're used to," she said with a chuckle.

He smiled as he began explaining the job to her, his blue eyes noting her beige suit. "Wear something more comfortable tomorrow. A pair of jeans and a sweater will do around here."

"As long as it's all right," she said, remembering Mitch Jenner's opinion on her clothing in the parking lot that day.

"It's more convenient to feel comfortable." He picked up a folder and handed it to Sasha. "I want you to read these notes. Check out how I've worded the story."

"Okay," she answered, lifting the first sheet and scanning the contents. "This is very good."

"It takes practice, but you'll catch on."

"Will I have a chance to write a story?" Excitement stirred in her.

"Of course, you will. Just let me know when you've finished reading."

Sasha became so engrossed in the articles, she lost track of the time. The only sounds in the room were the occasional tapping of the keys on Mark's typewriter and the ticking clock. When he touched her shoulder, she looked up in surprise.

"Let's go around the corner and grab a bite to eat."

"Where did the time go?" she asked, neatly stacking her work on the desk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Right after lunch, Mark received a call about a story across town. Sasha grabbed her handbag and followed him to his car. When they returned, Mark handed Sasha his notes. "I want to see what you can do with the story."

"Oh, thanks, Mark," she said excitedly, carrying the notebook to her desk.

Sasha took her time and worded the story carefully. When she placed it on Mark's desk, she was anxious, waiting to see what he thought of her first attempt at writing a story.

"Hey, this is good for a beginner. There are only a couple of changes, but they're minor. Did you do any writing before?"

"I majored in journalism in college." She shrugged, "I guess writing has always been a passion of mine."

"Well, this is good," he handed the copy to her with the two places marked.

"Thanks, Mark." Sasha felt pride sweeping through her from a seasoned reporter praising her.

"As soon as you type it, you can put your name on the byline."

Sasha was elated with the chance to prove herself as a reporter. Turning on the computer, she began typing the story.

When she left for the day she was in a happy mood. She decided not to call her dad and hoped he'd read her story on his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark's phone rang the following afternoon, and after answering, he looked at Sasha. When he hung up, he gave her a grin. "Go upstairs and see the boss. Mitch saw your story and wants to talk to you about it."

She rolled her eyes, "Of all days to wear my boots and jeans."

"Don't worry about it. Go ahead and get yourself up there before he calls again."

She nodded and walked into the hallway. After a quick stop in the restroom to check her appearance, she stood nervously in front of Mitch's door. She tapped lightly and heard him telling her to enter.

When she stepped inside, his eyes swept her from head to toe. The longer she stood under his watchful eye, the more nervous she became.

"Well, well, well," he eventually said, breaking the

strained silence. "You adapt to any situation, even to being a reporter."

This woman looked sexier every time he saw her, especially with the tight fitting jeans and sweater. He had known that first day in the parking lot that she could arouse feelings in him he didn't know he possessed. He had to keep his wits about him today, before he gave away his secret thoughts.

Sasha shifted on her feet, "Uh-Mark was a big help to me." She watched his black eyes traveling slowly over her sweater and jeans again. Sasha noticed how his inspection lingered on the boots that had kicked him.

"Dressed the same, I see," he said, his voice low and non-managerial. Mitch was irritated at his lack of control in looking anywhere but at the beauty standing in front of him.

Sasha purposely ignored his reference to her clothing. As she continued to look at him, it occurred to her that he was waiting for her to sit, and she hastily slid into one of the chairs near his desk.

"Was there something else you wanted to discuss with me?" She watched his bronzed hand move a stack of papers to one side of his desk. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his elbows.

"I always like to talk to new employees, especially if they've written a column after only one day in our employment."

"As I explained, Mark helped me with it. If there isn't anything else, I should be getting back to work."

"I'll let you know when I've finished our discussion." His eyes narrowed. Mitch wasn't ready to dismiss her that easily. He was having trouble simply sitting at his desk and not walking around the wooden interference to get even

closer to her. "As long as you work at the newspaper you'll have to stop your demonstrations." Why in the world had he said that? He saw the look of confusion line her face, but he felt as confused as she did. The words were popping out of his mouth without him giving any thought to the contents.

"Why do you keep bringing up demonstrations?" She stood.

"I'll tell you when you can leave," he said. His telephone rang and he picked it up, but his gaze remained glued to her.

Sasha sank down on her chair. While she got comfortable, she could feel his dark gaze continuing to watch her every move. She wished he would give his full attention to the telephone conversation and not her. He was making her nervous, but she figured that was his intention.

"Stop fidgeting." He reached up and covered the receiver with his hand as he spoke.

"I'm not fidgeting."

"No, I didn't mean you, Cynthia," he said into the phone. "I have an employee in my office, so I'll talk to you tonight." He hung up before looking at Sasha again.

"I'm sorry if I interrupted your call." She moved forward on her chair.

The call wasn't a business one, this she could tell by what he'd said. She felt curious about what type of woman Mitch Jenner would choose to see in his personal life. Judging by his personality, he'd probably only date *the perfect* woman.

"You didn't interrupt my call," his shrewd dark eyes studied her face.

Sasha's thoughts worked overtime as she mentally prepared herself for the next round with her new boss. She felt surprised when he picked up the phone again. Her coveted

gaze strayed to his well-shaped mouth that had covered hers so possessively in the parking lot that memorable day. The smile curving his lips drastically changed his features and the small show of emotion made him even more handsome. Awareness shot through her as she continued to watch him. A yearning to feel those same lips on hers filled her and she couldn't explain the reason. Eventually, he finished his call and looked across at her again.

"Is there anything else you need?" She nervously uncrossed her leg.

"No, but I don't want you to forget our discussion."

"I won't." Without saying another word, she walked out of the room and closed the door softly.

When she returned to her office, her cheeks felt warm from the unusual meeting with her boss. Mark looked up as she closed the door. "How did everything go?"

"Not too well." She sighed deeply.

"Why not?" He furrowed his eyebrows and waited.

"If you've got a few minutes, I'll explain."

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

She began telling him of her first meeting with Mitch Jenner in the nightclub, and went on to explain how she'd almost wrecked his car. When she got to the incident in the parking lot, her cheeks flushed remembering Mitch's kiss. That was the only part she left out of her explanation.

Mark burst out laughing when she finished her story. "Is that all? I'm sorry for laughing, but I don't understand the part about demonstrations."

"It's because of what the manager in the nightclub said about our group that night. He called us a bunch of rebel rousers and I guess Mitch heard him."

"Don't look so down. You probably won't see him for

a while now that he's already talked to you today."

"How can I avoid him? He lives right next door to me."

"You're letting this worry you too much. Come on, we'll have lunch." He waited for her to collect her handbag.

"What are you doing Friday night?"

"I don't have anything planned."

"Have dinner with me." Mark offered the invitation as they walked down the hallway.

"I'd love to."

"I'll pick you up at eight."

\* \* \* \* \*

On Friday evening, Sasha walked through the lobby, her thoughts preoccupied with her new job and her date that evening. Suddenly, she bumped into someone blocking her path. Raising her golden tipped lashes, her eyes met Mitch's dark stare.

"Excuse me." She tried to move past him, but his grip on her arm held her in place.

"What's your hurry, Rebel?" he asked softly.

He'd called her Rebel. She couldn't believe he was still on this demonstration kick. Instead of showing any irritation with his name for her, she looked at him without expression. "I'm not in any hurry."

"Since we're neighbors, I thought we might have dinner tonight." The thought of spending an entire evening alone with her excited him beyond control. He could see his unexpected invitation startled her.

"I'm sorry," she blinked, "but I have a date tonight."

"I can imagine who your date is, the guy you were with in the nightclub." Mitch felt anger striking him when she'd

refused his offer. He mentally pictured the man she'd entered the club with and he didn't have any good thoughts about the stranger in Sasha's life.

"No, it isn't," she answered, feeling his fingers loosening their grip on her. "If you'll excuse me, I have to be going."

He stepped out of her way. As she walked to the door, she felt his gaze following her. *Damn it! , Why did I accept a date with Mark?* She felt an overpowering urge to be with Mitch, but she couldn't explain it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark picked her up at eight and they drove across the city to the restaurant. On the way, he questioned her. "I saw Mitch talking to you in the lobby. Is everything all right between the two of you?"

"Oh, sure, he just asked me out tonight."

"He did?" His brows rose. "I thought he dated Cynthia exclusively. It may be over between them."

"I don't think that's it. I heard him talking to her on the phone the other day in his office."

"You never can tell about Mitch's private life."

At the restaurant the hostess showed them to their table. Sasha's gaze slowly drifted around the packed room taking in the surroundings. She didn't miss the dark familiar head of Mitch seated across the table from a blonde. It hadn't taken him long to find another date. She quickly looked away before he looked up and noticed her interest.

Throughout dinner, Sasha to keep her gaze from wandering toward Mitch; she felt her anger rise as she watched Mitch kiss the tip of the blonde's nose. She didn't know where her anger came from, since there wasn't anything



between her and Mitch. *He's my boss and nothing else.*

After finishing dinner, Mark walked her to the car and she felt her tense state easing. The evening had begun so lighthearted, but now she felt dejected, with no explanation possible for her sinking sensation.

"Why don't we stop at a club and round off the evening?" Mark leaned his head into the passenger side before he closed her door.

"How about giving me a rain check for later?"

"You have a deal." He walked around and joined her in the car.

# Three

*M*ark kept Sasha busy by giving her several stories to practice on. When they did interviews, he told her to take notes and put the articles into her own words. His confidence in her allowed her creative juices to flow. She handed Mark the finished stories and when he told her to deliver them to the printer, she felt she'd accomplished the first step of her goal.

Right after lunch that day, Mark received a call from Mitch. As soon as he replaced the receiver, he turned to her. "I have to leave on a special assignment, but I know you can hold things together until I get back."

Sasha felt a moment of panic, swallowed and decided this was her chance to prove herself. "Thanks for your vote of confidence, Mark. I'll make sure everything runs smoothly."

She watched as he gathered his notebooks and placed everything into a leather briefcase. When he got to the door, he turned and smiled at her, "You'll do all right."

"Good luck on your assignment." Sasha kept her tone

even, refusing to let Mark see her obvious case of nerves.

"Thanks, and I'll see you in a few days." He waved to her as he exited.

Now Sasha was alone in the office to fend for herself. There had always been Mark to turn to with questions she needed answering, but she was going to have to make decisions on her own until he returned.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she reached her apartment door, she heard the sound of footsteps. She turned and saw Mitch standing behind her.

"How did your day go without Mark?" His eyes met hers.

"I didn't run into any problems," she answered, turning the key in the lock and pushing the door open. Before she could enter her apartment, he moved closer and touched her arm lightly.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

She felt her heart skip, her knees tremble. Since the first time he'd asked her out and she'd refused, Sasha doubted whether he would ask her again. She didn't want him to see how eager she was to go out with him, so she let several seconds elapse before answering. "What time do you have in mind?"

"I'll be over at eight."

"See you then."

Her legs felt wobbly as she entered her apartment. Once inside, she leaned her head against the closed door smiling in anticipation at the thought of spending an evening alone with Mitch.

\* \* \* \* \*

At seven-thirty, she slipped into a green knee length dress that matched her eyes. After zipping it in place, she twirled in front of the mirror, watching the slight flaring of the skirt. When she finished putting on makeup, she made her way into the living room to wait.

The doorbell rang and she had to calm the fast beat of her heart before answering. Her breath caught in her throat when she looked out and saw how handsome Mitch looked. His dark blue suit and matching silk shirt brought out the deep tanned coloring of his skin. A shock of black hair dipped low on his forehead at a rakish angle and he lifted his hand to push it aside.

"Would you like to come in?" Again, her heart felt like it filled her throat.

"I'd like to, but we don't have that much time. We'll miss our reservation."

She nodded her head and reached for her purse.

As they walked across the parking lot, she saw him glancing at her sports car. "Nice car," he said in a conversational tone.

"Yes," she answered, waiting for him to open the car door for her.

"How do you manage the rent and owning a new car on what we pay you?" *I can't figure it out, but something doesn't add up here.* Hers was definitely a pricey car.

"I'm on a budget," she hedged.

"I'm still trying to remember seeing your application for employment cross my desk. I review every one of them, but this has me puzzled."

"You may have forgotten about it," she said, silently hoping her answer would stop his persistent questioning.

"You may be right. I meant to tell you the other day that I thought your article was well written, but we were arguing again and I never got around to it." A grin curved his lips.

Sasha sighed softly. At last, he'd changed the subject about her car. "Thanks, but Mark deserves most of the credit again."

"Mark's an excellent reporter," he agreed, lapsing into silence.

After negotiating several turns on the busy street, he pulled into the restaurant parking lot. When they entered the building, a hostess immediately led the way to their table. Mitch ordered wine from the restaurant's list and topped Sasha's glass off with the heady dark liquid. She lifted the glass and took a sip needing the power of the grape to relax. Sitting across from the handsome Mitch created a stir of emotions in her that she couldn't control.

It wasn't long before the waiter arrived to take their order. Mitch took the liberty of ordering for the both of them and the waiter complimented him on the excellent selections.

"Do you have lunch with Mark every day?" Mitch noticed her frowning the minute the words were out of his mouth. The question popped out of him before he could stop it, but something prodded him on to find out the answer. He couldn't understand what was happening to him. He had to stop himself from asking the question again, because she was taking so long in answering him.

"We usually do."

"Mitch," a low, husky voice spoke from behind Sasha and she turned to the voice.

The blonde she'd seen Mitch with at the restaurant

moved gracefully to him. Sasha's gaze swept the black gown hugging the blonde's body. Now that she saw the woman up close, she noticed her flawless skin and doll-like beauty.

"Hi, Cynthia," he greeted her, standing and making the introductions. *Damn, I don't understand why she had to show up tonight. I thought I told her I'd check back with her later in the week.* He didn't feel up to listening to her idle chitchat two nights in a row. Mitch knew he had occupied a lot of her time lately, but since meeting Sasha, she just didn't hold the same interest for him.

Sasha smiled at Cynthia, but received only a slight smile in return. Cynthia's gaze remained on Mitch as if he were the only person in the room.

"Where have you been all week, Mitch?" Her gaze narrowed suspiciously, glancing at Sasha.

"I've been busy." He looked behind the blonde, across the busy restaurant. "Are you alone?"

He knew better than to look for someone with Cynthia. She had dated him exclusively for the last two months, but he silently hoped she wasn't alone because if she were, he'd have to invite her to join them.

"Yes," she answered, "I am," her eyes widening in anticipation. The seconds dragged by while Cynthia stood patiently near the table.

"We've already ordered," Mitch sighed, "but you're welcome to join us."

Sasha knew if he had said it like that to her, she would have taken the hint that she wasn't wanted. It didn't look as if Cynthia had noticed his hesitant tone.

"I'd love to," Cynthia accepted quickly, not wasting any time in claiming the vacant chair next to him.

Sasha rolled her eyes, *This is going to be a long*

*evening if I have to listen to Cynthia tell Mitch what she'd been doing all day.* Mitch tried acting interested, but Sasha noticed his gaze straying in her direction more than once. She couldn't tell what his private thoughts were, so she lowered her eyes and gave her attention to the drink in her hand.

The evening seemed endless, until Sasha felt like screaming out her frustration. The blonde Barbie interloper spoiled an otherwise pleasurable night. How often did Sasha get the chance to date her handsome boss? When Mitch suggested they leave, the only sensation Sasha felt was relief.

On the ride home, Mitch noticed how quiet she was. "I'm sorry about Cynthia," he apologized, breaking into her silent thoughts. "I didn't have any idea she was going to show up at the restaurant."

She nodded without saying anything. This seemed to satisfy him after the tense filled evening they'd just spent. She stole a glance at Mitch. Each time she looked at his handsome profile, she felt her heartbeat quicken. A tremble developed in her hands and her pulse raced.

When they reached her apartment, she turned to him. He lowered his head unexpectedly and his lips caught hers in a fiery kiss. She responded instantly. His tongue tenderly parted her lips gaining entry into her mouth. Heat swiftly filled her body.

Gently pushing her against the doorframe, he molded her body to his, causing her emotions to accelerate. She unconsciously reached up and circled his neck, letting her fingers comb through his thick, black hair. The sensuous heat of his mouth made her weak with desire.

The bright headlights from a passing car brought Sasha to her senses. She felt her sanity slowly return in those few seconds. Pulling away, she lifted her green eyes and saw the

disturbed look filling his face from the passionate kiss. A warm glow enveloped her heart.

"Good night, Mitch," she whispered, in a voice that trembled. She turned away and pushed the door open.

"Good night, Rebel," he said.

Mitch stood near her door until she disappeared inside. He felt his body shaking with desire for the green-eyed beauty. *I have to stop this*, he thought. No woman had ever made him feel as helpless as Sasha James did, and he wasn't certain he liked the sensation. Walking slowly toward his apartment, he resolved to try harder to keep his emotions under control the next time he saw her, but he knew one look from her would have him melting again. When he entered his apartment, he headed straight for a cold shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sasha entered her bedroom and turned on a light, bathing the room in a warm glow. A smile lined her features *Mitch called me Rebel*. At any other time, she would have been furious over his use of that name. Tonight, she still felt the warmth from his passionate kiss lingering on her lips. She caught the reflection of her face in the mirror. A dreamy look radiated out to her. This man had cast a spell over her without really trying and she felt it with such intensity, it was disturbing.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Monday evening, Sasha called her father. After the tenth ring, she hung up feeling disappointed. She'd just started toward the kitchen to prepare a snack, when she heard the doorbell.



Opening the door, a smile lit her eyes. "I've been trying to call you this evening," she told her dad, going into his arms for a hug.

As she glanced over Mike's shoulder, she saw Mitch walking on the graveled path near her apartment, watching the scene unfolding. A strange look filled his eyes.

"Aren't you going to invite me in, baby?" Mike Jardane asked, unaware of anyone listening in on their conversation.

"Yes, come in." She quickly closed the door on an irritated looking Mitch.

"I came by to see if you'd have dinner with me; we'll celebrate your new independence tonight."

"Why don't you fix a drink while I get ready?"

Sasha went to her bedroom and removed a dress from the hanger, forgetting her earlier unrest about Mitch. Her sole thoughts were not to keep her dad waiting. She showered and dressed in record time returning to the living room where her father waited.

"You're beautiful, honey," he told her, reaching for her coat and draping it across her shoulders.

"You're looking very handsome yourself," she said, feeling his light grip on her arm as they walked to his car in the parking lot.

As he drove off the lot, Sasha realized she'd missed their daily chats. She intended making up for that tonight.

When they reached the restaurant and ordered, she spent the next hour telling her father all that had happened to her since starting at the newspaper. When she paused to catch her breath, she smiled. "I'll bet you're getting tired of listening to me rattle on all evening."

"No, I've missed our little talks," he said, returning her smile.

"Did you happen to notice my article in the paper?"

"I'm sorry I missed it."

"Well, you're in luck. I saved a copy for you to take home with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, Sasha walked out of her bedroom and handed Mike the folded newspaper. "Read it when you have the time."

"I will as soon as I get home. Good night, honey."

"Good night, dad." She kissed his cheek and stood at the door watching him walk toward his car.

After his car pulled away, she made her way to her bedroom and undressed. She pulled a robe around her and had just tied the belt in place, when the doorbell rang again. Apparently, her dad had to come back for something.

# Four

Mitch's dark unsettling look met hers when she opened the door. "I see you finally made it home," he rasped, pushing his way in without an invitation.

"What do you think you're doing?"

He didn't bother answering as he moved past her into the living room. "Now, I see how you can afford this place, not to mention the expensive car." Mitch's tone held a sarcastic ring, but he couldn't help himself. "He must be very wealthy to give you everything you want."

"You only think you know about my private life." Her eyes narrowed and her lashes snapped. *How can he make these condemning statements without knowing the facts of the situation?* "Please leave, Mitch," she turned and walked toward her bedroom.

She felt the heat of his body as he followed her into the room. When his hand touched her shoulder, she jumped. His hand moved slowly down her arm in a caressing gesture. Sasha pulled away and stumbled forward, landing on the bed.

As she hit the mattress, her robe opened and she clutched the front closed with trembling fingers.

"If it's a raise you want, you'll get it," he said, standing over the bed and staring down at her. Mitch felt his insides shaking. He continued to devour the supple curves revealed to him. His heart beat out of control, pounding so loudly, he thought she might hear it.

Her eyes widened, and when she opened her mouth to speak her pink tongue flicked at her lips, "Would you please leave?"

He knelt down unexpectedly on the bed. Before she could slide away, his arms trapped her. His mouth came down on hers; a raging fire consuming him. He wanted her, needed her and found he couldn't stop from possessing her lips hungrily. The intoxicating, sweet taste of her mouth ignited a blazing heat in him.

His hands roamed her smooth body until reaching her round, firm breasts. His searing lips trailed heat to the jutting curve of her chin and back to the hollow of her scented throat, lingering and causing a shudder to pass through her body.

She felt her heartbeat quicken from his gentle caresses and there was no way to slow it down. She heard his harsh, labored breathing.

"You're so beautiful," he growled, between kisses. His voice was so rough with emotion that Sasha felt her heart skipping a beat. She loved the sound.

He pulled away the tiny strip of robe still covering her. His mouth lowered to her exposed breast, gently covering first one and then the other nipple between his lips. For the longest time he continued to suckle each breast bringing waves of desire through her body.

She was consumed with her need for him. The inferno

of desire ignited her, coursing through her with only one objective in mind; Mitch needed to quench her fire and satisfy her every need. Only his lovemaking could fulfill her. His hands slowly made their way down her body, finding the moist, silky folds between her writhing thighs. Each caress had her wanting more.

When his mouth trailed down, she again felt on fire as his tongue licked across her stomach with moist swipes. She opened her legs, yielding to the sensations he created. His tongue began exploring her wet heat and it didn't take long for Sasha to feel a climax erupting in her body from the feast he made of her warm pussy. His mouth moved again slowly across her stomach tracing his earlier path until reaching her neck and to her ear. He captured her earlobe between his teeth and gently nibbled. Sasha grabbed at him and started unbuttoning his shirt. Her hands moved to his slacks and released the zipper. She delighted in feeling his cock, and knew he wanted her as much as she wanted him. She placed her lips across his hard length and felt the spasms wrack his body.

Mitch groaned and tried lifting her into his arms, but she wasn't finished pleasuring him. After a time, he reached for her and raised her as if she didn't weigh anything. She felt his hair-roughened chest pressed tightly to her breasts and could feel his heartbeat racing madly. He continued to feather her throat and lips with kisses that made her writhe, wanting more from him.

Slowly, he spread her legs with his knee and gently thrust into her waiting sex. He felt the obstruction, but it didn't register in her mind. He pushed forward, possessing her completely. Her whimper of pain was mistaken as encouragement. This was the first man she'd ever made love to, but the art of lovemaking came naturally to her. Her hands moved slowly

across his back and her nails probed into his muscled shoulders, pulling him even closer to her. At first, she felt pain from Mitch's rhythmic movements, but that soon diminished in her excited state. She began matching his strokes, experiencing an explosive sensation shooting through her body.

A climax winged through her so strong, she shuddered uncontrollably. Warm sweaty droplets trickled from his body to hers, and hers to his, and she felt his tongue licking away the moistness. As he possessed her again, there was no holding her back. She gave, until she felt drenched with saturation. Mitch held her in his arms and she felt the forceful release spewing from his body into hers.

She lay nuzzled in his arms, feeling the rapturous sensations still buzzing through her head. Sasha glanced at Mitch from lowered lashes and saw he was watching her. His eyes were clear now as he continued to study her face. She was curious whether he thought she'd been too easy in accepting his lovemaking without any protest.

When he spoke, she didn't expect the question. "Who was the man you were with tonight? He's too damned old for you."

All the passion she'd felt quickly died and irritation took its place. This wasn't what she'd expected him to say. She wanted him to say something romantic after the intimacy they'd just shared. "It's none of your business!"

The thought of Mitch finding out her father's name sent a chill racing through her. Her identity could be out in the open. She had just started her career and didn't want it ruined by saying the wrong thing.

"From now on you belong to me." Mitch cupped her chin in his hand and turned her face to his. "And as long as you work for the newspaper, I'm going to insist your personal life change."

She slid across the quilt with lightning speed and stood alongside the bed. Her hands trembled as she clutched her gaping robe together watching as he slowly stood. She felt at a disadvantage having to look up into his face.

"I belong to no man," she uttered, without thinking how her words sounded. "I'll live my life the way I please."

"We'll see about that, Rebel," he gave her another one of his narrow looks. For several seconds he continued to study her. "Have you shrunk?" She didn't miss how his brows rose as his gaze swept her from head to toe.

"I-I don't have any shoes on," she answered, losing some of her steam.

"Oh, so that's it," he murmured, his mood changing instantly. He forgot his ultimatum as amusement glowed in his eyes. The sound of his chuckle filled the room. "You don't have your rebel boots on tonight. I knew there was something different about you."

"Just go!"

"Calm down, I'm leaving." She saw him raise his hands in surrender to silence her. "Believe me, we'll discuss your social life later," he told her.

Sasha watched his long strides as he left her bedroom. Even though she felt angry with him, she still found watching his tall muscular body exhilarating. She followed him out into the hallway and before leaving, he brushed the tip of her nose with his lips. As soon as he stepped across the threshold, she locked the door behind him. She walked into the shower, turned on the tap and let cool water rain over her, bringing clearer thoughts to her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she entered the office the following morning, she found a note propped against her computer. Mark's assignment was going to take several more days to finish. He cheered her up when he put a postscript on the bottom telling her that he knew she could do the job without him. Before she became involved in work that day, the telephone rang. Picking it up, she listened to the familiar voice of the caller giving her lengthy details on a story. She recognized the caller immediately as the person that always called Mark. She jotted down the information and thanked the woman. Excitement stirred in her with the challenge to write the story and submit it that evening.

Several hours later, she pulled the last sheet of the finished story from the printer. After proofreading it and making sure she'd covered all the details, Sasha delivered it to the print room downstairs. She walked back to her office with a spring to her step.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later, Sasha sorted through her messages when the telephone rang. As she picked up the receiver, she was shocked at the cold sound of Mitch's tone. "Get upstairs on the double," he snapped over the line before slamming the receiver down.

She stood clutching the phone in her hand. *I don't know what I could have done now.*

When she reached his office, she stood outside his door until she got the courage to raise her hand and knock.

"Come in," he barked.

As she stepped into the room, she didn't miss the anger covering his face. "You wanted to see me?"



"Yes, I need to know one thing," his voice was a cold monotone. "Who gave you permission to write that article the other day?"

"No one," she admitted. "Mark was gone when I received the call, so I thought it was all right." She shifted on her feet and held her breath.

"For your information, the story isn't true and the paper has been threatened with a libel suit."

She folded her arms over her chest, clenched her teeth and tried to remember how his eyes had looked at her while they'd made love. His eyes were cold and hard now as he waited for her answer. *So much for thinking he cared about me.* "There must be a mistake. This person always calls Mark and the information has never been wrong in the past."

"Some sort of mistake, you say?" he leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving hers. "I want the name of this reliable source."

"I can't tell you," she said, looking him square in the eye. "You've been in the business long enough to know that a reporter never reveals his or her source to anyone."

"You're going to tell me, though." He leaned his hands on the desktop and eyed her, waiting.

At that moment, Mitch felt like reaching across and taking her in his arms. The memory of making love to her was so vivid that he had to restrain himself from doing something impulsive. He had the business to think about, and had to keep his emotions under control.

He didn't miss the defiant look on her face. It didn't appear as if he was going to make any head way with her. No, he'd tried to go that route before without accomplishing anything. This was the most stubborn female he'd ever encountered in his life, and there was no point in continuing the

argument. "If you don't tell me-you're fired. Which is it to be? Are you still refusing to tell me?"

"Yes, may I leave now?"

Mitch noted how she tilted her head at a rebellious angle. "No, I'll tell you when you can leave." He walked to the window and stood staring at the traffic below. Suddenly, he turned from the window and walked to her. Reaching out, he grabbed her shoulders.

She pulled away, her eyes wide with rage, "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm trying to make you come to your senses! I'm not going to ask you again; tell me the truth."

"And as I said before, I'm not telling you. If you've already fired me, you can't tell me when I can leave or if I have to stay."

Mitch dropped his hands, "You're free to go." He turned toward the window again.

For some reason, he couldn't watch her walk from the room. The emotions racing through his body were almost his undoing. The thought that she would soon be gone didn't set well with him. He didn't know if he could face the idea of her disappearing from his life. The thought that this may be the last time he ever saw her burned through him. He felt physically ill with the thought. Hearing the door closing across the room brought his head up, but he was too late to see her disappearing into the hallway.

Sasha didn't waste any time in walking to the elevator. In her office she made her way across the room to get a box out of the cabinet. She began packing the personal items that she wanted to take with her.

While she worked, a tear slipped down her cheek, but

she reached up and angrily wiped the moistness away with the back of her hand. There was no figuring Mitch out and she wasn't in the mood to try today. He had made his position clear and probably wouldn't change his mind. If he could fire her without giving it a thought, then their night of lovemaking had meant nothing to him. *I've been a fool in letting my emotions run wild when it came to him.*

Before packing everything away, the telephone rang. She felt like letting it ring, because she no longer worked for the newspaper. Her thoughts drifted to Mark, remembering how helpful he'd been to her, so she lifted the receiver.

# *Five*

"Sasha, I've reconsidered my decision about firing you. You have every right to protect your source," there was silence on the line. "I shouldn't have been so stubborn."

She couldn't believe she actually heard him right. "What happens if a lawsuit is filed against the paper?" She had to ask, but she wasn't certain she wanted to hear the answer.

"We'll wait and see if they do. Now that we've gotten that out of the way, you can get back to work."

"I've already started." The next sound she heard was the line going dead on his end.

Sasha picked up the notes of the story in question and glanced through them. Everything she'd written looked correct to her. She knew she could rely on the woman that called the story in. There was nothing else for her to do, but wait. She opened her desk drawer and placed the notes in a safe spot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, she called her father and hurried through her explanation about the possible lawsuit.

"I'm certain Mitch can handle the situation. From reviewing his record, he's been through this before. If you feel your story's correct, stand by your decision to protect your source."

"Thanks, Dad, I appreciate your understanding."

"How about coming home this weekend? It gets mighty lonesome in this big house without you around."

"I'd love to." She smiled at the thought of spending time with her father.

\* \* \* \* \*

The events of the day made for a restless night's sleep. Mitch's dark, smoldering visage haunted her dreams, but on the point of discovering what he was about to say to her, she woke up drenched in perspiration. The next morning, she felt tired and listless.

Her mood lifted when she saw Mark at his desk typing away. "It's good to see you back."

"I'm glad to be back. I always hate those long assignments, but someone has to do them. How has everything been going for you since I've been gone?"

She hesitated as she stirred her coffee, "Have you heard about the story I wrote?"

"Yes, but don't look so worried. Everything has a way of working out."

\* \* \* \* \*

The weekend with her dad slipped by much too swiftly,

and on Sunday evening, she sat across from him on the ride into the city. With the traffic light that night, it didn't take long to reach her apartment. Her father carried her suitcase, and followed her into the apartment.

"I'll be back to see you in a few weeks, honey." He drew her into his arms.

"I'm happy that you've finally hired a housekeeper," she said glancing up at him. "Brenda Jones is her name, right?"

"Yes, it's Brenda, and she does keep me company."

"Good, and now I won't worry so much about you." Sasha reached up and kissed his cheek. She stood in the doorway, watching him as he walked to his car and drove away.

She started to close the door when she caught sight of Mitch outlined in the moonlit night. How long had he been standing watching the scene between her and her dad? Sasha didn't have any idea because this was the first glimpse she'd caught of him. He walked up the gravel path and came to an abrupt stop in front of her.

"Hello, Mitch." She bit her lip as he silently nodded and walked off toward his apartment.

Inside her living room, Sasha shook her head as she walked to the couch and sat in the darkness for several minutes. The sound of glass breaking filled the quiet. Without hesitation Sasha rushed to Mitch's apartment.

# Six

Sasha entered Mitch's apartment without knocking. She saw him at the sink, blood trickling from his hand. "What did you do?"

"Aw shit, I was clumsy and broke a heavy baking dish. Will you drive me to the hospital?" He wrapped his hand in a thick towel.

"Of course," she walked to him and draped his coat across his shoulders.

Sasha didn't waste any time driving to the nearest hospital.

In the emergency room, a nurse ushered Mitch to another room. Sasha made her way to the waiting room and found a seat where she could see the nurse's desk.

She felt the butterflies racing in her stomach, wondering how seriously he was injured. Sasha wasn't aware of how much time passed, but eventually she saw a nurse at the door. "Are you with Mr. Jenner?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Sasha answered.

“He’s waiting for you at the front desk.”

Sasha arrived at the nurse’s station and saw Mitch waiting with bandages covering his hand. He held it protectively near his side. Without saying a word, he walked with Sasha to her car.

Mitch wasn’t in a very talkative mood on the drive home, and Sasha put it down to what had happened that night. The silence continued between them, making the ride uncomfortable. Feeling the hair raise on her neck, she turned and found him staring at her.

"Why did you go away with him this weekend?" His question startled her.

Mitch could have kicked himself. That was the last thing he wanted to ask, but he'd blurted it out and there was no taking it back. Just the thought of her with the other man caused his insides to shake with anger. She was bewitching and Mitch saw how the older man could easily fall under her spell. Sasha James had certainly changed his life in many ways.

Mitch heard her deep sigh and waited impatiently for her answer. He felt the anger seething through him as he stared across at her silent figure. When she pulled down their street, she still hadn't answered him. He looked across the parking lot and spied Cynthia’s car parked near his. *Oh, lord this is all I need.*

Sasha frowned at Mitch. “You have a visitor.”

Cynthia didn’t waste any time in rushing to Sasha’s car. "I've been waiting for you, Mitch."

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight,” he mumbled as he got out.

“What did you do to your hand?” Cynthia grabbed his hand and held it to her cheek.

"It's a cut," he murmured. *Why did she show up*



tonight? He'd had a talk with Cynthia last week and made it clear he wanted to cool their relationship. Especially, since he'd made such passionate love to Sasha and he couldn't get her out of his system. He hated the thought that he may hurt Cynthia, but he didn't have a choice.

"Good night, Mitch," Sasha broke the silence.

"You don't have to hurry off, Sasha. Why not come over for a while?"

"It's getting late." She turned and walked to her apartment. Inside, she pulled the drape back and looked out the window. She watched Cynthia trailing behind Mitch to his apartment and Sasha couldn't explain the depression clouding her thoughts now.

Suddenly she was struck with the cause of her depression. She loved Mitch; the signs had been there all along. Sasha paced the floor, listening to every little noise next door. She glanced at the clock at least a dozen times and saw only a half hour passed. The agonizing thought that they were alone pounded in her head. She'd had enough and picked up her coat. He'd invited her over and this was the perfect excuse to join them.

As she walked to his apartment, she came face to face with Cynthia. "Hello," Sasha greeted her.

"Oh, hello," Cynthia responded in cold, clipped tones.

Sasha saw the anger sparkling in Cynthia's blue eyes.

"Am I keeping you?"

"No," Sasha nodded at Mitch's door, "I'm going next door to check on Mitch."

"He's doing fine. I just left him a few minutes ago."

"I'm going to make sure anyway. Good night, Cynthia."

Sasha tapped lightly on Mitch's door, and when she

heard him tell her to come in, she stepped inside. She saw him lying on the couch with his arm resting across his chest.

Mitch smiled to see her. "Is it okay if I don't get up?"

"Sure, just stay where you are. I wanted to check on you before going to bed. Do you need anything?"

"Nothing that I can think of," he said, but he knew he'd like nothing better than to have her warm body cuddled close to his. Instead, he said, "On second thought, there's a bottle of ibuprofen in the bathroom cabinet."

"I'll be right back," she said.

When she returned to the living room, she walked to the couch and looked down at him. He'd fallen asleep. She tiptoed into the bedroom and removed a quilt from the bed. Sasha placed the cover over him and switched off all the lights, except the one in the bathroom. She clicked the lock in place when she left.

Sasha was busy at the office, and the next days passed swiftly. On Friday, she glanced up to find Mark looking at her.

"Since you've worked so hard this week, I'd like to take you out to dinner tonight," his smile made his blue eyes sparkle.

"You don't have to do that, I love the work."

"But I want to." He noticed her thoughtful expression, "Do you have any idea what's wrong with Mitch? He's been in a bad mood all week."

"He had to get some stitches in his hand and I guess it's still painful."

"Oh," he shrugged his shoulders and continued with his work.

That night, she finished brushing her hair. Hearing the bell, she opened the door and smiled at Mark. "Come in."

"You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she murmured, as a red flush colored her cheeks over her private thoughts. She wished it could have been Mitch standing at her door, instead of Mark. Sasha wanted, she needed, to hear those words coming from Mitch's lips.

As they drove across the city, Mark kept a lively conversation going. He explained what they were going to cover the next week on a special assignment and what her part would be.

At the restaurant, the hostess started leading them to a table when a familiar voice stopped them. "Mark," Mitch's deep voice echoed in her ears. "We have plenty of room at our table. Why don't you join us?"

Sasha quickly looked and saw Cynthia sitting across from Mitch. A long white candle flickered in the breeze from an overhead fan. Sasha looked at Mitch's hand and noticed he could move it with ease now. She was taking in everything, while her heart was breaking.

"Would you like to join them?" Mark saw Sasha's strained features and gently squeezed her arm for support.

Sasha nodded, but inside she felt the opposite; there was no way she wanted to join them. Seeing Mitch with the blonde brought a new set of emotions racing through her. After sitting, Sasha looked up, and her wide green eyes met Mitch's across the flaming candle. His gaze locked onto her and she found it impossible to break eye contact. Sasha didn't miss the burning intensity filling his dark brooding stare, and she wondered what message he was trying to convey to her. Was she really seeing the silent message of desire blazing out to her? "What would you like to drink, Sasha?" Mark interrupted her silent thoughts.

"What, uh, whatever you're having," she said.

Mark shrugged and turned to the waitress to give the order.

The quiet at the table was unnerving for Mitch. He didn't know why he'd let Cynthia cajole him into a dinner date. He knew he'd rather be alone with Sasha, but here she was - with Mark. He was angry, but he didn't know at whom, at Mark? At himself? The last time he saw Sasha was the night she'd driven him to the hospital. He should have called and thanked her for her help that night, but... The only reason he had for yielding to Cynthia was her persistence in showing up every day at his apartment. Tonight, she'd done it again. Rather than offending her, here he sat, when he'd rather be entertaining the red haired beauty across the table from him.

"I should have called and thanked you for the ride to the hospital, Sasha," Mitch tipped his glass in tribute across the table at the silent Sasha.

"I didn't know you'd taken Mitch to the hospital," Mark said, lifting his drink.

"Yes, she did," Cynthia placed her hand on Mitch's. "But I've been going by his apartment every day to make sure he's all right."

Sasha felt a jolt in her chest hearing Cynthia's words and watching her claim her prize. No wonder she hadn't seen Mitch or heard from him. He'd been busy entertaining the busty blonde that had her chair pulled so close it looked like she was sitting on his lap. She couldn't understand Mitch. He'd shown such passion and desire for her, and now it was as if that night never happened.

Sasha found the evening lasting forever. Once the waiter served the food, she couldn't do justice to it. She pushed it around her plate and finally placed her napkin over

it. Eventually, after a nerve-racking hour, it was time to leave.

"I'd like to check out the new nightclub," Mark suggested, holding Sasha's coat for her.

"I'm all for it," Mitch said.

This wasn't what Sasha wanted to do, but she didn't want to spoil the evening for the rest of the group. She'd have to keep her emotions in check and hide how upset she was that Mitch was with Cynthia.

"Is everyone ready?" Mark asked. "I can take my car."

"Good idea, since we came by cab this evening," Mitch stood and helped Cynthia with her coat.

In the car, Sasha felt the silence stretching unbearably. Mark's attention remained with the traffic, and the other two didn't attempt to make conversation. The atmosphere felt stifling, and when Sasha saw the lights of the nightclub in the distance, she braced herself for the remainder of the evening.

When they entered the club, the deafening noise greeted them in the foyer. Mark took Sasha's arm and pulled her safely to his side as they made their way through the crowded aisle. There was one empty table near the middle of the room and Mark didn't waste a second in claiming it. A waiter took their order.

Sasha's gaze traveled the room slowly and she spotted Joe Fields standing nearby. He was talking to a group of people, but she didn't recognize any of them. She didn't need another problem tonight; if Joe were to join their group and mention her last name to Mitch, her true identity would no longer be a secret.

"Let's dance," Mark suggested, interrupting her worried thoughts.

She hesitated, but she knew she didn't have any excuse for not dancing. "All right." When they reached the

crowded floor, the band began playing a fast number. She matched her steps to Mark's and found the act of dancing relaxed her. As the final note of music echoed, what she'd dreaded the most, happened.

"Sasha," Joe called her name. "Wait up a sec."

"I'll be with you in a minute, Mark." Sasha put her hands on Mark's chest, "Joe's an old friend and I haven't seen him in a while."

"Sure, I'll meet you at the table." He nodded, and walked away.

The band started playing a slow song and Joe pulled Sasha into his arms. He looked confused as he stared into her strained features. "Is something wrong?"

Sasha stole a glance to her table, "Will you do me a favor?"

He furrowed his eyebrows, "If I can."

"I work with the two men at my table and they both believe my name is Sasha James. I've been using my mother's maiden name because dad wouldn't agree to me working at the paper unless I did." She nodded at the table, "If they find out, my career is finished."

"Don't worry. I'll keep your secret. Come on, give me a smile, you look as if you've lost your only friend."

Sasha smiled up at Joe, "Thanks for your help."

"Anytime, sweetheart," he answered, just as the music stopped.

When they reached the table, Sasha quickly made the introductions. She noticed how Mitch's eyes narrowed when he saw Joe holding her waist possessively.

"Do you want to join us, Joe?" Mark offered.

"No thanks." Joe released Sasha. "I'll see you later, honey." He lightly brushed her lips with a soft kiss.

"Yea, see you later," she murmured.

Another slow tune vibrated through the room and she felt her arm gripped in a gentle hold. "Let's dance." Mitch's warm breath fanned her ear.

He walked her to the dance floor, pressed her tightly to his chest, and felt her melt against him. "You're very popular tonight." His unexpected words spoiled her euphoric feeling.

"You've got a lot of room judging me and my friends!"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't spend the last few nights alone," she answered, nodding her head toward Cynthia.

Sasha noticed how he didn't bother answering. His grip only tightened on her, pressing her more firmly to him.

"She's just a friend."

"And so is Joe."

She felt his smooth lips brush her forehead and move slowly down to nuzzle her ear. Despite her anger, Sasha could feel the tingles of excitement rush through her at his soft touch. She couldn't help molding her body to his. Instead of moving to the music, they remained in one spot swaying to the sensuous intoxicating beat.

Much too soon the song ended, but Mitch took his time releasing her. Sasha slowly lifted her head and gazed into his slumberous eyes; he could mesmerize her with a look. She blinked her eyes and eventually came to her senses.

When they reached the table, Cynthia didn't look too happy about the way the evening was turning out. Sasha watched the blonde lift her drink and swallow down the contents in one gulp.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm ready to call it a night," Mark spoke up.

"Yes, me, too," Sasha agreed with him.

"If you don't mind, we'll catch a ride with you," Mitch said, glancing at Mark. "It will save having to call a cab."

"Sure, there's plenty of room."

Sasha sat in the front; not once did she glance toward the back, to Mitch and Cynthia. After Cynthia gave Mark her address, it didn't take him long to reach her apartment complex. Mitch walked Cynthia toward the foyer of the building. They disappeared into the lobby and Sasha wondered what was taking place between the two; was he kissing her or just making sure she was safely in her apartment?

She realized she didn't have a hold on Mitch. She couldn't tell him who to date or how much attention he should give them. Glancing toward the building again, the subject of her thoughts came walking toward the car. She couldn't tell by looking at his face whether he'd had any intimate moments with *the blonde*.

Mitch got into the back seat without saying a word and Mark drove away.

Before reaching her apartment, Sasha touched Mark's arm. "Thanks, I had a wonderful time tonight."

"I'm glad. We'll have to do it again soon."

A heavy sigh filled the back seat. Mitch didn't offer to join in the conversation, making Sasha wonder if his thoughts were still on Cynthia. She erased those thoughts from her mind; they were too painful.

When Mark pulled onto the lot, she reached for the door handle. "You don't have to get out."

Mark nodded his head.

As she walked away, she heard Mitch's steps behind her. She made her way to the door and could feel his presence behind her. When she placed her key in the lock, she turned to look at him.



"Are you going to invite me in for a drink?" he asked softly.

"It's late, Mitch" She still felt resentment toward him for spending the night with Cynthia.

"I won't stay long, and you can throw me out whenever you want."

She knew she was a fool, but her sensible thinking vanished every time she got near him. "All right, come in." He followed her into the living room. "Go ahead and fix yourself a drink. I'm going to change into something more comfortable."

Sasha walked from the room and into her bedroom. She stripped off her dress and placed it on a hanger. Her high heels were the next to come off. As she removed a blouse and jeans from the closet, she heard a noise behind her.

She turned swiftly and saw Mitch standing in the doorway, watching her with smoldering eyes. He held two glasses of amber liquid, but it didn't look as if he wanted the drink after all.

# Seven

Sasha backed against the bed, grabbing her robe to cover her nakedness, as her desire for this frustrating man filled her. Every part of her screamed out for his caresses, remembering the last time in his arms. Love filled her heart, blocking out all sensible thinking.

He placed the glasses on the nightstand. Reaching her, he gently clutched her arms between his fingertips, his tender touch making her sway toward him. The robe slipped from her fingers and dropped to the floor. Mitch gently placed her on the bed.

His mouth traveled to her throat, and down to her swelling breasts, capturing her nipples peaked and standing firm. She closed her eyes, falling deeper under his spell, only wanting to experience his lovemaking again.

She watched him raise his head and lean on his elbow. He gazed down longingly at her body silhouetted by the streetlight shining in the window.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, his breath fanning her throat as he kissed her repeatedly.

Once more Mitch stared into her green eyes, desperately needing to see her give herself to him. He was on fire for her; desire rocked his very soul. Her absence the last few days only made him want her more. He groaned over how weak and helpless she could make him feel.

His mouth covered hers compulsively. He couldn't get enough of tasting her sweet lips and warm scented throat. Mitch was dizzy with need and longed to possess every inch of her delectable body. When she responded to his touch the need felt so great that he feared he might explode.

Sasha unbuttoned his shirt and her fingers reached the front of his slacks, pulling the zipper open. When she lifted her head she saw the tormented look his eyes. In that moment, she knew he needed her as much as she needed him.

"Oh, Mitch," she moaned his name just as he captured her breast between his teeth and gently nibbled the soft, fleshy skin.

"I need you." Mitch tried not to sound pleading, but he could hear his quivering voice filling the room. He felt on fire at her touch.

"Make love to me," Sasha begged, pushing her body to his, feeling the fire as their bodies melded.

He didn't need additional encouragement. His mouth moved slowly down her creamy stomach, until reaching her thighs, spread and waiting for his invasion. When his tongue found her silky folds, he felt her writhing, excited movements. His tongue entered her, exploring, tasting, preparing her for his hardening shaft.

Moving away from her clit, he made the journey up her body, touching and kissing every part. When he reached her breasts, he savored them, licking and nibbling on their sweetness. His next stop was her lips, open with desire and

waiting for his capture. For a time, he held her mouth captive beneath his.

Sasha melted to his caresses, but wanted to give him the same pleasure he'd given her. She slipped from his arms and slinked across his chest toward his flat stomach. He shuddered as her moist, pink tongue traced its way along his warm flesh, finding new territory in her quest to pleasure him. Her lips found his cock and slowly glided across it, making him shudder. She continued her journey across his hard length until she felt his body shaking uncontrollably. Traveling to new territory, she kissed his inner thighs before moving slowly again toward his stomach.

Her tongue created magical sensations for Mitch. He was on fire for her and was feverish with his desire to possess her. His strong arms enfolded her, drawing her into the shelter of his body.

His hand spread her thighs, running his fingertips across her wetness before mounting her. He fought his lustful urges; he didn't want their lovemaking rushed. His need for her was so great, he found himself possessing her with a wildness that startled him. To his delight, her body moved with the same rhythm.

Mitch slowed his thrusts, driving deeply into her, feeling her tightness and wanting her to enjoy it as much as he was. Capturing her hard nipple between his lips he loved the sweet taste. When his mouth slowly moved to her ear, he blew his warm breath against her earlobe, feeling her quiver in response.

He took her lips again, covered them and ran his tongue inside her mouth. Her tongue met his right before the climactic eruption quaked through her body. Mitch couldn't hold on any longer. His pent-up release spewed into her. He

continued to rain kisses across her neck, face and lips. His hand didn't stop the caresses as they both lay back, spent from their heated lovemaking. Eventually, he felt her cuddling close in his arms and still neither said a word; their closeness was enough. It wasn't long before Sasha felt her eyelids grow heavy and close. She drifted off to sleep moments later.

Something woke her in the hours before dawn; it was Mitch's warm body snuggled close to hers. She wrapped her robe around her and walked from the bedroom.

She paced the living room; she'd made a promise not to fall under Mitch's spell, but her love for him had her changing her mind.

Her head was filled with thoughts of Mitch, *and Cynthia*, sleeping together. If only she could take last night back, but did she really want to? *No, I love him too much.*

She stopped pacing and peeked around her bedroom door. He was still sleeping soundly. Even with all her recriminations, she still made her way across the room and crawled beneath the cover next to him. It didn't take her long to fall asleep, cuddled next to his warmth.

The following morning she walked quietly from the room. She stepped from the shower and pulled on the thin negligee she'd carried with her just as the telephone rang. "Yes," she answered softly. "No, I can't go today."

After hanging up, she turned and saw Mitch, already dressed and standing near the fireplace watching her. She felt a flush of embarrassment brighten her cheeks over the thin negligee barely covering the outline of her shapely figure. Even after a night of passion, she still felt uncomfortable over the way his eyes devoured her. Her hands automatically rose to cover her body.

"Who was on the phone?" he asked, his eyelids narrowing suspiciously.

"Joe Fields," she threw over her shoulder as she made a mad dash to the bedroom to find her robe. Joe wanted her to spend the day with him, but she'd refused.

Before she had the chance to walk back into the living room, Mitch blocked her path. "What did he want?"

"He invited me out today."

Mitch's eyes blazed and his jaw clenched, "Go out with Joe and any other guy who happens to ask you!" He stormed out the door slamming it shut.

When Mitch walked the short distance to his apartment, his temper still hadn't cooled down. *Damn her! How could she make love to me, respond the way she did and then accept a date the next day?* Jealousy ate away at him and he didn't know how to control it.

He had no right to tell her what to do and he knew it. He slowly concluded that all she felt for him was desire. It ate away at him, thinking of her giving herself to another man the way she'd surrendered to him. There weren't any promises made between them, only their desire for one another.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mitch hadn't given her a chance to tell him she'd refused Joe's offer. His cold attitude toward her, after their night of making love, brought tears to her eyes. She began to cry and the tears wouldn't stop. He didn't want her seeing anyone else, but he'd never told her he loved her, not even while making love. Sasha made her way into her bedroom and lay down on the same pillow Mitch had used the night before.

She turned her head into the cloth and smelled his

after-shave clinging to the soft material. She breathed the scent in deeply. She clutched the pillow and fell into an exhausted sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

On Monday morning, she stepped on the elevator and Mitch got in close behind her. He moved to the back and stood next to her. "Good morning," he mumbled, his countenance far from friendly.

"Good morning," Sasha hid the hurt behind a forced smile.

Mitch felt his stomach knot at the way she looked at him. He'd never met another woman like her and he couldn't begin to figure out her moods. One moment she melted in his arms, and the next she would hold him at arms' length. That didn't stop the desire burning a trail through every fiber of his body.

When the door opened, Sasha walked from the elevator without a backward glance. Mitch couldn't stop his gaze from following her as her steps quickened. Whatever was on her mind, she wasn't about to discuss it with him.

Mark was at his desk when she entered the office. "Good morning, Sasha," he glanced up from his work.

She threw her purse in her desk drawer and slammed it shut. "I'm certainly happy that someone's in a good mood today."

Mark sat up and pushed his chair back, giving himself a safe distance between them. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing that I can't handle." Sasha didn't feel like discussing what had taken place between her and Mitch; some things were too private. "Do you have any work for me?"

"There's always work. Try and make a story out of these notes."

"I'll do what I can." Her shoulder was lightly touching Mark's when the door to the office flew open and Sasha looked up in surprise.

Mitch stood outlined in the doorframe. She noticed the scowl lining his face as his eyes traveled to her hand on Mark's shoulder. A strained silence filled the room.

"Can I help you with something?" Mark asked.

"I want the notes on the Johnson story." Mitch's brooding stare followed Sasha as she walked to her desk. His gaze lingered on her until she sat.

Mark rummaged through his private files and pulled out a manila folder from the stack. "Here they are."

"Thanks. I'll see the two of you later at the staff meeting." Without another word, he turned and left.

"What staff meeting is he talking about?"

"I forgot to mention it; all the reporters meet once a month and go over any controversial stories before we print them."

"Oh, I didn't know," she murmured, her thoughts returning to the story she'd written and the pending lawsuit against the paper. While she worked, Sasha refused to think about the meeting that afternoon.

They sat at the table in the conference room, Sasha nervously drumming her pencil on the glossy mahogany surface. "I've had a funny feeling about this meeting all morning."

"We have these meetings all the time," Mark gave her a quizzical look. "You can expect them at least once a month. Don't worry so much; it'll give you gray hair."

Silence fell over the room when Mitch walked through



the door. Sasha looked down and made her notepad her sole interest.

"We have several issues to discuss today," Mitch quickly made eye contact with everyone except Sasha, "so I want all of you to pay close attention. We'll discuss a few stories we want to run on weekly intervals."

Sasha only half listened as he read off the articles that were in question. She glanced up to find Mitch's alert stare trained on her. Her gaze met his and memories of how they'd made passionate love played like a motion picture through her brain. She pictured him standing there as he had in the bedroom that night, tanned and muscular just before he began his passionate foreplay. Quickly lowering her head, she tried hiding her private thoughts from him.

Mitch's next announcement startled her. "I want to mention this, but it isn't open to discussion. In case any rumor reaches you, someone filed a lawsuit against the newspaper over an article. Our attorney and the Board of Directors will take care of the issue. I'm only mentioning this to let everyone know that there is an action pending and not to listen to any rumors. We'll provide a statement and press release when we are advised to by our attorney"

Mitch continued to talk, but Sasha didn't hear all of his words. Her heart felt too heavy knowing she'd been the cause of the problems the newspaper was having. *My source was reliable, I know it!*

Eventually, she brought her thoughts back to the present and listened to Mitch answering questions from a few of the reporters about other issues at the newspaper. Laughter occasionally filled the room over something someone said. Sasha only wished she could feel the same lighthearted sensation as the group seated at the table.

*If I hadn't been so impulsive and thought I could write the story without any help, then none of this would be happening.* Again, her thoughts revolved around the outcome. All the workers, as well as her dad stood to lose if the newspaper lost the lawsuit.

The shuffling of papers and the creaking of chairs brought her attention back to the group. She saw several people gathering their material and getting ready to leave. She hadn't heard, or noticed, Mitch had ended the meeting.

Sasha walked with Mark to the door. She felt Mitch's presence before she saw him.

He stopped her with his hand on her arm. "I need to talk to you."

When they were alone he closed the door. "You're not to worry about the lawsuit. We have our best attorney on the case."

"I'm happy to hear that."

He reached for a notebook on the desk and bumped his hand that had the stitches.

She didn't miss the pain which crossed his face. "Did you hurt your hand again?" She reached out and gently touched the scar. Her gaze slowly rose to his and the smoldering light from his eyes had her holding her breath.

"No," his mouth moved to within inches of hers. To her disappointment, he pulled back and walked to his desk. He began shuffling through a stack of papers.

By his actions, she knew it was time to return to work. Making her way to her office, she still felt anxious about the impending suit. The meeting and Mitch's reassurances hadn't helped much.

"What happened upstairs?" Mark asked.

"I don't think he wants me worrying about the lawsuit."

"Oh," Mark said, his brow raising. "You can never figure out what's on his mind."

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening the apartment felt too confining. Sasha paced from one room to another until she couldn't stand her own company any longer. She slipped on her jacket and walked to her car.

Sasha drove through the business district, stopping at a local convenience store to buy magazines and the local papers. Right on the front page, the rival paper in the city had printed a story about the lawsuit. Sasha crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trash.

When she reached her apartment the phone was ringing. Somehow, she hoped it would be Mitch, but to her surprise, she heard her dad's voice on the other end. "I was going to drive out to see you, but I thought you might be gone." Sasha paused, "I needed to talk to you about something."

"If it's about the lawsuit, don't worry yourself over it," he reassured her. "The lawyer is taking care of things."

"Thanks, I appreciate you calling me," Sasha said, with a sigh.

"That's not the reason I'm calling," he chuckled. "I'm calling to tell you my good news, I'm getting married."

"Really! Who's the lucky lady?" Sasha forgot her own problems hearing the happiness in his voice.

"My housekeeper, Brenda Jones, or should I say my former housekeeper," he laughed, "I guess she'll be hiring a housekeeper of her own. We both want you to be in the wedding next month."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'm so happy for you."

"I'll be in touch to see how you're getting along. If you need anything and can't reach me at home, call my cell phone."

"I will. Good night and congratulations." *At least someone is happy*, she smiled as she replaced the receiver. She planned to forget her problems for the present and give her full attention to helping her dad plan his wedding.

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She hadn't seen much of Mitch in the last few days and was surprised when she started to unlock her door and felt a hand touch her arm. She turned and gazed into the eyes of the subject of her thoughts.

"I wanted to invite you to dinner tonight." His eyes took in her shocked expression.

"You do?"

"Yes," his eyes were wide, a hopeful look. "I'll be doing the cooking."

"Really?" Sasha cocked her head. "What time?" She knew she was inviting an intimate evening alone with him, but she couldn't help herself. All she could think of was being near him.

"Seven o'clock." A grin lined his lips.

"Should I bring anything?"

"Just you," he smiled. "I'll make us a couple of steaks. You do like steaks, I hope?"

"Yes, I love them. OK, see you at seven."

At six, Sasha stepped from the shower. She chose a silky black, two-piece slack suit to wear that evening. Sasha felt her stomach churning as she stood outside Mitch's apartment. She waited for several minutes trying to control the

racing of her heart. Eventually, she lifted her hand and tapped lightly.

As Mitch opened the door, his gaze traveled the length of her. He reached out and grasped her hand in his. "You're right on time. Have a seat and I'll get our wine."

Sasha moved to the couch. He filled two wine glasses and offered her one. "Thank you." She accepted the dark red liquid.

"I'll be right back." He placed his drink on the coffee table and walked into the kitchen. "Everything's under control," he called out to her. "We should be eating a succulent steak very soon."

"I didn't know you could cook." To Sasha, he didn't seem the type to spend time in the kitchen.

"I've cooked for years," he said, reentering the room. He walked to the stereo and soon a soft ballad filled the room.

Sasha glanced around the room noting how he'd turned out most of the lights. The soft music, the dim lighting, the wine, all held all the overtones of a romantic evening. She wondered how many women he entertained in his apartment. Just thinking these thoughts brought a pain racing through her heart.

She looked up when Mitch suddenly appeared by her side. "Let's take our drinks to the kitchen? I have to make sure the food doesn't burn."

Sasha nodded and followed him down the narrow hallway. She glanced into the dining room. The table was set with a white cloth and two long candles. In the center, Mitch had an arrangement of flowers. Reaching the kitchen, he opened the oven door and the delicious aroma drifted out to Sasha.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, but you can watch and tell me if I'm doing anything wrong," he laughed easily.

"It's usually the other way around," she responded.

A twinkling light danced in his dark eyes. "Sometimes it is."

As he worked on a salad, she noted his deft movements. "You look right at home in a kitchen."

"I come from a big family. My parents taught us early to do for ourselves."

"How many are in your family?"

"I have three brothers and three sisters, not including me."

"You do have a big family."

"Yes, and there are times when we fight like cats and dogs." He grinned at her. "Just like me and you. The steaks look as if they're almost done."

True to his word, within fifteen minutes they sat at the dining room table. While they ate, Mitch made small talk that kept Sasha entertained.

"Everything was so good," she said when there was a break in the conversation.

"Thanks," he said huskily, the sound sending shivers down her spine. "Let's take our glasses into the living room."

"We have to do the dishes." Sasha said the first thing to pop into her head trying to break the seductive spell he was so adept at weaving over her.

"I'll put them in the dishwasher later," he gently urged her from the chair.

When they reached the living room and he handed her a drink, his fingers lightly touching hers. An electric spark shot through her arm at the contact.

"Thank you," she murmured, sipping the drink slowly and placing the empty glass on the table.

"Sasha," the way he said her name made her shudder.

She glanced up in time to see his mouth moving toward hers. His dark eyes blazed with a fiery spark when he saw her head lift to accept his kiss. Sasha realized the situation could very well be a repeat of the last time they were together.

Instead of stopping him, she met his mouth and her action spurred him on. He began raining soft kisses across her eyes, nose, and cheek, moving his lips to nibble gently on her earlobe, before returning to her mouth. His tongue slowly entered her mouth and tasted her sweetness.

She lifted her arms to his neck and ran her fingers through the thickness of his dark hair. Her emotions were uncontrollable under his sensual assault. Tremors of delight raced through her as he moved to her ear and he nibbled softly on her lobe. She couldn't get enough of his caresses as she moved closer to him.

A thundering noise pounded in her head, but she couldn't identify it. When it kept getting louder, she finally realized it was her heartbeat hammering from her mounting desire. She felt a dizziness envelope her. When he gently coaxed her onto the couch, the thought of protesting never entered her mind.

She was so lost under his spell, that the sound of the doorbell seemed ethereal. Looking up at Mitch, she saw his confused look. He slowly released her mouth and to Sasha it looked like it took a real effort. When the bell sounded again, she watched him shake his head in irritation.

"Damn! Not now."

He stood and Sasha sat up on the couch. Her head still felt dazed. *Saved by the bell*, the silly phrase echoed through her numbed thoughts. She hadn't wanted the bell to save her and she knew it. Her hands shook with a visible tremor as she rearranged her clothing.

Mitch opened the door and Cynthia stood on the threshold. "Hello, Cynthia."

Sasha didn't miss the irritated look lining Mitch's features glancing at their visitor.

A look of astonishment covered Cynthia's face. "I didn't know you had company."

"Would you like to come in?" he eventually asked.

Cynthia walked into the room, noting Mitch's eyes looking at Sasha. She watched Sasha stand and slip on her shoes.

"Thanks for dinner, Mitch, but I really have to go." Sasha reached for her handbag.

"What's your hurry?" he asked, suddenly needing to keep her here. *Why in the hell did Cynthia show up?* Lately, he'd hated the sound of the doorbell, fearing who would be on the other side. He didn't want to hurt her, but soon he was going to have to set things straight about her dropping by unexpectedly.

"It's getting late." Sasha moved toward the door. "I've had a long day."

"Wait, I'll walk you home."

"There's really no need," she told him, but he didn't listen to her protest.

Once the door closed behind them, Mitch grabbed Sasha. "I'm sorry Cynthia spoiled our evening."

"She has a way of doing that." She felt anger stir in her. "It was time for me to leave anyway." Her meaning was obvious.

In her heart, she wanted more than an affair with Mitch. Yet this evening would have ended the same as their other evenings-*in bed*.

Before she could unlock her door, he gently pushed her against it. Covering her body with his, his mouth captured hers in a lingering kiss. She returned his passionate kiss,



delighting in the feel of his muscled body pressed firmly against her.

Lifting her eyes, she witnessed the slumberous expression on his face as he released her. After listening to his ragged breathing, she knew he felt as affected as she did in the moment.

"Good night, Rebel," he whispered softly, compulsively nibbling her earlobe.

Shivers ran through her, "Good night, Mitch."

Back in her living room, the thought of Cynthia next door with Mitch caused Sasha's green-eyed monster to rear its ugly head again. Cynthia had the habit of showing up at the most inopportune times. She walked into her bedroom and prepared for bed. Nothing could be accomplished by fretting over what she couldn't change.

# *Eight*

*M*ark was at his desk pouring over a stack of papers when Sasha arrived.

"What's up?" She glanced at the sheet he was working on.

"There's a banquet we'll be covering tonight."

Sasha raised her eyebrows, "I don't remember you mentioning a banquet."

"I just got word that the Mayor's hosting a dinner party for his daughter. From what I hear, she's a real stunner."

She playfully jabbed his arm, "So, that's the reason you're showing so much enthusiasm about going."

"Sure, she's a knockout, but that's not the only reason we're going. Anything about the Mayor is newsworthy."

"Sounds like it might be interesting."

"I'll be by your place about seven," Mark handed her the work he wanted her to do that day.

Sasha removed the two-piece, rust colored suit she would wear that evening. By seven, she was dressed and the doorbell rang.

"Hi," he greeted her. "Are you ready?"

"All set."

While driving, Mark explained what they had to do that night and it wasn't long before he pulled onto the lot at the banquet hall.

Inside the well-lit room, Sasha's gaze swept the long line of tables up front. Sprays of flowers filled the centers and colorful streamers hung from different points throughout the room. Soon, the room filled with people, and the low murmurs of voices followed. Sasha noted the ladies wearing evening gowns of every shade and style imaginable, and their escorts wearing the standard black tuxedo with bow ties. *Maybe the Lifestyle editor should have covered this one.*

"There's Mitch, with the Mayor's daughter, Felicia," Mark said, nudging her. "Didn't I tell you she's a looker?"

She didn't bother making a comment as anger simmered in her. *Mitch can't make up his mind which woman he wants on his arm.* Sasha felt the need to leave, but she wasn't sure how Mark would react. "Mark, I'm not feeling well. If you can handle it alone, I'd like to leave."

"Sure, I'll take care of things here," he took a moment to study her face. "I thought you looked pale at work today. I can always take you home and come back."

"No, you stay here." Sasha removed her cell phone and called a cab. "I'm going to the front and watch for my ride."

"Sure, yea, take it easy and get some rest."

She nodded. The sight of the brunette and Mitch together made her head ache and tied her stomach in knots.

Within minutes, the taxi arrived where she stood wait-

ing. After giving the cabbie her address, she leaned her head against the seat. Everything was going wrong for her and she needed to hide away.

In her apartment, she undressed for bed and collapsed on the couch. She sat, alone, in the quiet darkness when the doorbell startled her. When she opened the door, Mitch stood, his eyes locked on hers.

"What are you doing here?" She stomped away, returning to the living room.

He followed close behind her. "Now, what's wrong?"

"Not a thing." She didn't want him to know how she'd felt about seeing him with Felicia.

Mitch moved closer, gathering her to this chest. Seconds ticked by without either saying a word. Sasha felt the need to ask about *the brunette*, but his gaze had her mesmerized, all sensible thoughts left her.

As his mouth slowly lowered to hers, her lips parted. She hadn't planned on this happening, but he could persuade her so easily. Hunger rose in her and she yearned for his caress. Sasha forgot about the brunette as his lips continued to possess hers. Her senses whirled out of control when he withdrew his mouth leaving her aching for his touch. He put his arms beneath her legs and lifted her onto the couch while nuzzling her neck with blazing kisses.

The light from the hallway cast a dim glow and she witnessed the passion filling his eyes.

"I want you," he groaned, dropping beside her.

His words thundered through her head. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. She needed to feel his arms and tender caresses, and to belong to him completely. There was an aching need in her for him that she couldn't stop.

When she raised her lips, he didn't need a second

invitation. Like a man possessed, she watched him remove his clothing and her robe. Only seconds passed before her body melted into his. Mitch knew how to arouse her; he slowly kissed her silky skin, while maneuvering her to lie on top of him on the couch. With his hands on her hips, he moved her forward lifting her until his mouth captured her silky folds. His tongue moved with soft swipes across her raised clitoris. His continuous movement made Sasha shudder from the wondrous sensations he created.

An explosive climax rippled through her and she savored the wondrous moment. Sasha scooted down his body, kissing his warm skin until reaching his hard cock. While she possessed his hard rod between her parted lips, her hands continued to trail his taut stomach on down to his muscled thighs.

She slipped back up Mitch's body, pushing his cock deep inside her throbbing channel. The fire burned inside her and she felt the need to put it out any way she could. Pleasure filled her as another heated climax raced through her. Mitch groaned before releasing his hot seed inside her. She leaned forward and passionately covered his mouth with hers.

Resting for a time, Mitch reached for her again and started making love to her with an abandonment that surprised Sasha. It was as if each couldn't get enough of the other. She matched the intensity of his caresses, sending Mitch into heights of ecstasy.

Long after their passionate lovemaking, he held her locked tightly in his arms and fell into a blissful sleep. He woke in the night and felt her body cuddled to him. Mitch quietly slipped off the couch and reached for his discarded clothing.

# Nine

Sasha awoke the next morning, alone on the couch. The torrid lovemaking she and Mitch shared ran through her thoughts and the delicious feeling stayed with her while she dressed for work.

She walked into the office to find Mark already there. "You beat me here again," she smiled.

"I'm sorting through my notes from last night while they're still fresh in my mind." He leaned back in his chair. "You look as if you're feeling better today."

"I am," she stared out the window, remembering the passion she'd shared with Mitch only hours earlier.

"I'm curious why Mitch left the banquet early last night." Mark waited until Sasha turned and made eye contact with him. "He couldn't have stayed more than an hour - after you left."

The ringing of the telephone saved Sasha from having to reply. He grinned at Sasha as he hung up the phone. "Mitch wants to see you in his office."

She nodded, and walked for the elevator.

When she reached his office, Mitch stood as she entered. "Have a seat," he watched as she slipped into the chair across from him. "They've scheduled the court date for tomorrow on the libel suit."

A frown spread across her face. "Oh no, so soon?"

"Don't look so worried because I'll be going with you and you'll meet with our attorney today, he'll brief you on what to expect."

"I'm not worried about myself. It's the other workers job security I'm concerned about." *And my father.*

"We'll take one step at a time."

"Oh," she murmured, her gaze shying away from the lips that had ravaged hers and several more of her body parts the night before. They hadn't talked much when he'd arrived at her apartment; intent only on satisfying each other's needs.

"You-you weave a potent spell, Rebel," he looked around the room, at everything but her. "There are things I want to say-to you, but... In the heat of the moment, I forget everything."

She knew exactly what he meant.

He walked to her, gently lifting her from the chair. He looked down into her eyes and she felt her heartbeat quicken at his closeness. When his lips slowly met hers, she was ready to receive his sweet kiss. The kiss seemed to go on forever; if it were up to Sasha, she never wanted it to end.

He lifted his head and gazed for a long time into her desire filled eyes. "I could have told Mark to relay the message to you, but I wanted to see you." He lowered his head and claimed her lips again. The hungry kiss ravished her mouth, sending her the message that he wanted her now, but eventually, he withdrew. He breathed heavily, "I'd better let you get back to work."

Sasha left the room, her head in a cloud. She even forgot her worry about the court date the next day, but reality soon set in again.

"How did it go?" Mark asked as she entered the room.

"Oh! Uh, the court date is tomorrow."

"Everything will work out." Mark noticed the flush on her cheeks.

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The following morning at eight-fifteen, Sasha walked from her apartment dreading what lay ahead of her. She heard footsteps behind her, and turned to see Mitch striding toward her.

"Hold on a minute," he called out. "You can ride to the courthouse with me."

"All right," she waited for him to catch up.

On the drive, Mitch broke the silence. "I'll be leaving the newspaper in a month."

His sudden announcement brought her head up with a start. Had she heard him right? A sinking sensation quivered through her with the thought she might never see him again. There were so many questions clamoring through her brain that she couldn't think straight.

"Where do you plan to go?" She could barely get the question out.

"I have a job offer in New York." *A good job offer, but can I leave this beauty sitting next to me?* He'd spent many a night wrestling with the thought, and still hadn't come up with a solution. He wasn't sure he could go through with it.

"Haven't you ever considered taking on a permanent job, putting down roots?" she asked, her heart aching.



"I don't know, maybe someday I might." He shrugged his broad shoulders, while a frown tugged at his brow.

"I don't believe I'd like all that traveling around." She remembered her thoughts of a few months ago about never wanting to leave Chicago. That was in the past now, and all Mitch would have to do is offer her the chance to go with him. She didn't know how she could stand seeing him leave.

Glancing up, she saw the courthouse loom into sight, ending the discussion of his personal life. Mitch parked the car, "Are you ready?" he asked.

Sasha took a deep breath, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be." She walked alongside him into the building. Rooms led off into different directions and Sasha's gaze swept the numbers marked on the doors.

"There's the room we want," Mitch pointed and took her arm.

As they walked through the door, she felt his hand tighten on her arm, a reassuring gesture. Before finding a seat, she looked around the room. She felt unease fill her when she saw her father sitting in the back row. Their gazes locked for several, long seconds, but she eventually looked away. She only hoped Mitch didn't look toward the spectator section and see her dad. Mitch would wonder what the same man who'd picked her up at her apartment was doing in court that day.

Soon the room quieted and the judge entered through a side door. Sasha waited nervously for the preliminaries to conclude.

The attorney for the newspaper motioned for her to join him up front. She slipped from her seat and made her way through the wooden gate, dividing the spectators' seats from the lawyers' tables.

The actual court proceedings weren't as long as she'd

expected. She heard her name called to testify. When she finished, the bailiff called the other party involved in the lawsuit. Everything flew by for Sasha and she watched the accusing party leaving the witness chair. The judge made a motion ending the court testimony and gave the jury instructions before they left the courtroom to reach a decision.

Sasha walked through the swinging door and rejoined Mitch. She felt his hand touch hers softly.

"Everything's going to be all right. You look as if you're ready to pass out."

She offered a weak yet reassuring smile, although this was far from how she felt. There was no way she wanted Mitch to know how frightened she really felt. The time passed slowly, but finally they were summoned for the verdict.

The jury reentered the room. Sasha watched the foreman of the jury hand the bailiff the small piece of paper. He gave it to the judge who studied it and asked if this was the consensus of the jury. Assured that it was, the judge stated, "The newspaper is found not guilty."

Sasha felt the heavy weight lift instantly from her shoulders, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She turned her head for a glimpse of her father, but he had already left the room.

Mitch didn't waste any time in joining her and the attorney up front. When he reached her, he drew her into his arms in a warm embrace. Soon releasing her, he held her away from him, and his dark eyes looked down at her. "All that worrying for nothing; it turned out okay in the end."

She nodded her head; she suddenly felt too emotional to speak. The burden she'd carried for weeks no longer existed and she felt lighthearted. Then the dark cloud passed over her, remembering Mitch's words from earlier that morning. She

was going to have to block that from her mind and deal with it when it happened. This morning was for celebrating their victory and she didn't want anything overshadowing it.

"Are you ready for lunch?" Mitch asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," she laughed.

At the restaurant, Sasha realized she was famished. She noticed Mitch's smile when she ordered a full course lunch.

After the waiter left, Mitch looked at her, "Mark mentioned that you'll need a few days off."

"Yes, if you can get along without me?"

What she said could mean two things, Mitch thought silently. He knew he was going to miss her for even three days, so what was he going to do when he went to New York? *I don't have an answer for that one.*

"I'll have someone help Mark with your work," he eventually answered.

To Sasha's relief he didn't ask any questions about why she needed the time off.

"Thanks," she said as the waiter arrived at their table with the food.

After leaving work that evening, Sasha packed her bags for the following day. She heard a car door slam in the parking lot and walked to the window to look out. A lump formed in her throat as she pulled the drape aside.

Mitch walked toward his apartment with a stunning blonde on his arm. How could he jump from one woman to another so quickly? Sasha made her way into the bedroom; her thoughts running along the same gloomy lines. Sleep was a long time coming that night. She wondered who his current date was and why his apartment remained so quiet. The news of his leaving Chicago had been hard enough for her and now...

# Ten

Sasha carried the last piece of luggage to her car and opened her trunk. Hearing footsteps, she looked and her eyes met Mitch's dark gaze.

"Are you leaving already?" He stood inches from her.

She shuddered as his warm breath caressed her neck. "I-I want to start before the traffic gets too heavy," she flushed from the heat of his presence.

She couldn't look away from his dark intense stare. The urge to invite him along filled her, but Sasha knew that was impossible. The next few days would pass quickly, although she'd miss him.

"Mark said you'd be back on Monday." He frowned as he looked in the trunk at the number of bags.

"I'm planning too. Most of the luggage is filled with gifts."

His lighthearted chuckle broke the smoldering tension between them, "I wondered how you could wear that much clothing for such a short stay."

Sasha saw a relieved look flash across his expression at her answer. Without meaning to, her gaze focused on his mouth. Excitement rose in her, bubbling through her body. How she needed to have those lips pressed firmly to hers and feel the sensual pleasure of his kiss.

Slowly, she turned and walked to the car. She rolled down the window waiting for Mitch to approach. Her eyes lifted to him again.

"Drive carefully." He leaned in and claimed her lips. It seemed so natural, because that was what she'd wanted all along. She moved her mouth provocatively beneath his, savoring the kiss that had to last until her return.

She wanted more, but he wasn't offering any extras that morning. Releasing her mouth, he stood near the car looking in at her. "I'll see you on Monday," he whispered.

"Bye, Mitch." She didn't attempt to leave the lot until he got in his car.

As she started the drive, her thoughts returned to his kiss. *Where's my pride? He cavorts with another woman last night and I let him kiss me today?* Lately, her heart overruled her head when it came to Mitch. Where he was concerned, she had no pride, only love.

When she pulled into the drive at her father's home, he walked out to meet her. "Hi, honey." He kissed her cheek.

"Hi, Dad, it's good to be home." Sasha entered the house ahead of him and walked to the fireplace to warm her hands. "How are your plans coming along on the wedding? I could help with any final things."

"I'm going to take you up on that offer."

"That's the reason I took the extra time off from work."

"I wanted to congratulate you the other day after the trial, but I saw you were with Mitch." He walked to the couch and sat.

"Yes, he drove me to court. Have you heard that Mitch is leaving the newspaper?"

"It was brought up at the last board meeting." He noted the distress on her face. "How have the two of you been getting along?"

"We have our share of spats, but not all the time." She remembered the intimate moments she'd shared with Mitch, and avoided her father's eyes.

"Are you in love with him?"

Sasha realized she couldn't hide anything from him. "Yes, unfortunately, I am."

"Why did you use the word unfortunately?" He patted her arm, "Everything will work out for you." He sounded more confident than she felt.

"You may be right," she said the words, but deep down, she still had her doubts.

He changed the subject after noticing her discouraged expression. "Brenda's coming over for dinner tonight."

"I'm happy for you."

"And I feel happy, too," he said.

Later that evening, Sasha heard voices coming from the living room. When she entered, her father glanced up. "You look wonderful, darling."

"Thank you." Sasha looked at the woman standing near him. A pair of warm blue eyes smiled back at her, and she knew instantly that she was going to be a friend of his new wife.

After dinner, Mike turned to Sasha. "I'm taking Brenda home, so don't wait up for me."

"I won't," she promised.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next two days, Sasha put the final touches on the wedding plans. On Saturday evening, she dressed with care in a blue satin gown. After applying her makeup, she walked downstairs to join her father.

The wedding took place in a tiny church several miles from their home. As soon as Mike and Brenda repeated the vows, the minister pronounced them husband and wife.

Sasha felt happy that everything turned out so well for her father, and the reception lasted long into the night. Before the newlyweds were to leave on their honeymoon, Sasha hugged them good-bye. "I want to wish you happiness." Tears burned Sasha's eyes.

"Thanks honey and we'll call you as soon as we get back," her father promised, before whisking Brenda out the door.

Sasha stood outside with the crowd until her dad's car disappeared around a curve.

The next morning Sasha packed her bag and left by eight. When she reached her apartment she glanced around trying to spot Mitch's car, but his parking space was empty.

After entering her apartment, Sasha walked toward the kitchen just as the doorbell rang. She pulled the door open and Mitch's unsmiling face glared at her. He clutched a folded newspaper tightly in his hand.

"Come in." Confusion lined her face.

He stomped the snow off his shoes and brushed past her to stand near the fireplace. He turned, the newspaper shaking in his hand. "You've lied to me all along!" A muscle worked over time along his jaw line showing his agitation.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why did you tell me your name is Sasha James, when it's actually," he gripped the newspaper in two hands and pulled it open, "Jardane? Your *father* hired you for the job."

Sasha's face drained of all color. "How did you find out my real name?"

"Read this." He thrust the newspaper toward her.

Sasha took the paper between trembling fingers. On the front page were pictures of her father and Brenda, and in the background was a picture of her dressed in the blue satin gown she'd worn that evening. "I can explain." She couldn't hide the nervous tremor filling her voice.

"Go ahead, I'm listening." He crossed his arms on his chest, waiting.

Sasha paced the floor trying to form her thoughts. "My entire life, my father's always been protective of me. I wanted to make my own way and I needed the job to feel independent of him. After pleading for his help to get the reporter job, he eventually gave in." She took a deep breath and noticed he still wasn't satisfied with her answer. "He was against the idea from the start, so I promised him I'd use my mother's maiden name when I applied at the paper."

"You decided to stop your rebel rousing and become a useful citizen."

What he said only made her realize he still thought of her as a spoiled brat. "If that's what you want to think." She sighed with disappointment.

"Your father paved the way for you," he said in disgust. "Now I understand how you can afford a new car," he waved his hand in the air, "and this expensive apartment."

"The car was a gift when I graduated from college. And I pay for this apartment out of my own salary."

"Are you trying to tell me he doesn't help you at all?"



At that moment, Mitch couldn't be sure whether she was telling him another lie, or the truth. She looked sincere, but that could be another one of her acts.

"No, he doesn't," she snapped.

"Since you've lied about everything else, I'm still not convinced that you're telling the truth," Mitch grumbled, his stormy gaze meeting hers. "I'll bet you've had a big laugh on all of us."

"What you're saying isn't true." She crumpled up the newspaper and tossed it aside. "I made a promise to my father and kept it." She didn't like the picture he painted of her: a little rich girl getting her way yet another time from her indulgent father.

"Well, I won't have to see you after next month!" He walked past her and slammed the door.

She made her way into the bedroom and dropped wearily onto the bed. Warm tears rolled down her cheeks. She had planned to explain to Mitch, but at a more appropriate time. Now, he hated her. *My dad gets a happily ever after and I get – shit!* More tears spilled from her burning eyes as she cried herself to sleep.

Awakening with a start, she found the apartment in darkness. She switched on the bedside lamp. Her thoughts returned to the scene that had taken place with Mitch earlier that day.

As she walked into the kitchen, she made her way to the window and looked out at the falling snow. The tiny crystals packed the pavement like sparkling jewels bringing a beautiful white cleanliness to the barren landscape.

She made coffee and sat for a long time trying to resolve her present problems. Mitch would never believe

anything she told him now. She felt certain of this after their argument earlier.

She picked up the phone and dialed Joe's number. She sighed when she didn't receive an answer. Sasha felt like the walls were closing in on her. She walked listlessly into the bathroom and showered. After dressing, she grabbed her coat and purse.

On impulse, she decided to see if Joe was at the nightclub they always frequented. Sasha walked into the noisy room and looked around spotting Joe.

She saw him leaning in a relaxed pose against the wall. He saw her, and smiled as he walked toward her.

"Sasha, what are you doing here?" he hugged her.

"I couldn't stand my own company any more," she shrugged her shoulders.

"I saw your father's wedding announcement in the newspaper."

"Yes, they had a beautiful ceremony." She glanced around until spotting an empty table. "Are you with anyone tonight?"

"No, I'm alone."

"Good, maybe I can hang out with you."

"Sure, let's grab that table over there," Joe put his arm around her waist and escorted her to the table.

After ordering drinks, Sasha turned to Joe. "I feel like dancing tonight."

"I'm always ready to oblige you," he grinned at her.

For the next three hours, she danced almost every dance, enjoying the release the physical activity gave her. Surprise filled her when the band announced their final number of the night.

"The evening's flown by. I'd better call it a night since I have to work tomorrow." Sasha gathered her coat and stood.

"Same here," Joe followed her out of the club onto the sidewalk.

When they reached the parking lot, he kissed her cheek. "I'll call you next week. Tell your dad I said congratulations."

"I will, and don't forget to call." She slid behind the wheel and waved.

The drive home took her twice as long as it normally would have on any other night. She ran into several icy patches and had to slow down even more. As she pulled onto the parking lot, a car drove in behind her. Bright headlights shone through her window almost blinding her, and when she looked up, she saw Mitch's car parked a short distance away.

She got out and hurried across the parking lot, only wanting to put a little distance between them. Her mood had improved from earlier and she didn't look forward to another argument.

"Have you been out on the town again, Rebel?" She heard his taunting question clearly across the parking lot.

"It's none of your business."

"My, but you're in a big hurry," he teased.

"It's late and I want to go to bed." Sasha fumbled in her handbag and removed her key. She put it in the lock but she wasn't quick enough. Mitch stepped past her before she could close the door. She whirled around and found him standing near the fireplace.

"How about the two of us having a drink?" his gaze traveled the length of her.

Sasha heard the faint slurring of his words and the light cast by the lamp revealed his red-rimmed eyes. "You don't look as if you need any more to drink."

"Who are *you* to be judging *me*? I can handle my drinks." He made his way to the liquor cabinet.

"Drink what you want. I'm going to bed," she turned toward her room.

"Alone?" A cynical twist curved his mouth.

"Yes, alone," she said. "You can lock the door when you leave."

Sasha entered her bedroom and quickly changed into a lacy negligee. She crawled beneath the cover and listened to the noises coming from the living room. She heard the clinking of crystal as he returned the decanter of whiskey to the liquor cabinet after pouring another drink.

Closing her eyes, she tried to relax, but couldn't. When she felt the mattress giving, her eyes flew open to find Mitch stretching out alongside her on the bed.

"What do you think you're doing?" Anger replaced her shock.

Before she realized his intention, he rolled over and covered her with his body. His mouth moved swiftly to hers, and with his heavy weight, holding her down, she couldn't move. She could smell the strong scent of alcohol on his breath drifting down on her.

"Stop struggling. You know this is what you want." He captured her chin between his fingers.

"Let me go! You'll be sorry if you don't." She wasn't about to accept his lovemaking in his drunken state. Sasha knew Mitch would regret his actions once he sobered up the following morning.

When she felt his hand slide inside her negligee, she jerked away from his fumbling movements. She was just in time to see his head droop wearily. She moved slowly to the side managing to free herself from beneath him. As she started to crawl from her side of the bed, his arm snaked out and caught her around her midriff. He pulled her close against his

body, and his arm remained locked in place. His heavy breathing told her he'd passed out.

Relaxing under the circumstances was difficult. Every time she tried moving, his arm would tighten around her. Eventually, she gave up the effort of trying to free herself and the warmth of his body drugged her into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning she awoke at six with every part of her body aching from Mitch's heavy weight on her. She slipped quietly from the bed and made her way to the bathroom.

After showering, she reentered her bedroom and her gaze drifted across the room to Mitch. He sat on the edge of the bed holding his head in his hands. When he heard her, he lifted his head wearily and looked across at her.

"Good morning," he moaned, his features wincing with pain when he spoke. "What time did I get here last night?"

His dark eyes swept the length of her. Mitch could feel his head pounding with every movement. He silently questioned himself about why he had thought it was such a good idea to drink as much as he had the night before. If he'd only admit it, he knew the cause was the green-eyed beauty standing across the room watching him with narrowed eyes. His gaze shifted down her snug fitting jeans and the tight black sweater.

"You arrived late and passed out on my bed," she informed him coolly.

"Where did you sleep?" He held his hand to his head again.

"You should know, since you wouldn't let me get out of bed."

"Do you mean I passed up an opportunity to make love to you and fell asleep?" He chuckled and grabbed his forehead at the pain. "I really must have been drunk."

"You were." She reached for her coat. "I'm going to leave a little early this morning because of the weather. I'll see you at work."

"Wait until I'm ready and I'll drive you." He groaned and stood.

"You don't look as if you feel up to driving anywhere," she turned toward the door.

"I told you to wait and I'll take you." His rough words stopped her.

"All right," her eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips. "I'll make some coffee while you shower."

"Try and find some aspirin to go along with the coffee... Please?" he murmured softly, his tone changing.

It looked to her as if he felt a little sorry for himself judging by the look on his face. She smiled at him.

"Now what's wrong?" he ran his hand through his dark hair.

"Nothing," she answered, making her way out of the room.

When he joined her in the kitchen, he looked a little better. She pushed a coffee cup across the counter, "Are you ready for that cup of coffee?"

"Yes," he said, slumping onto a bar stool.

"Here's the aspirin you wanted, but I doubt whether they'll help much."

He gave her a disgusted look and emptied two tablets into the palm of his hand.

Sasha sipped her coffee and felt uncomfortable with the heavy silence. As she glanced up, she caught him watching her.

"Why are you staring at me?" Her voice didn't sound like her own.

"Because you're so beautiful," he answered, without hesitation.

"But I'm a *rebel*, remember." She quickly brushed his compliment aside.

"Yes," he nodded his agreement, "quite true, a rebel, but a beautiful one," he said huskily, his voice sending shivers racing down her spine.

"You weren't very nice to me yesterday when you found out my real name." She brought up the one subject she wanted to forget.

"I know and I apologize." He took a deep breath, "But you should have filled out an application and applied for the job like everyone else."

"Be honest and admit you wouldn't have hired me. We weren't exactly on friendly terms."

"You're right," he admitted. "I wouldn't have hired you." He sat back and drank in her beauty, "And *that* would have been *my* mistake."

She saw him glancing at the clock on the wall.

"We'd better get a move on if we want to get there on time." He walked to the sink and placed his cup in it. Slowly, he followed her out of the apartment.

When they reached the office, he pulled over and stopped near the entrance. "You go ahead and I'll park the car."

As she entered the office, Mark sat at his desk typing a story. "How did your weekend go?"

"Everything was perfect. My father and new stepmother left for their honeymoon right after the reception. Dad couldn't have been happier."

"I'm glad someone is happy," he chuckled. "I felt like running an advertisement in the paper to get you back early. Mitch was a real tyrant to work for."

"He wasn't at all happy with me yesterday."

"Why was that?"

"Because he found out my name is Sasha Jardane."

"You?" He cocked his head and carefully studied her. "You're Mike Jardane's daughter?"

"Yes," she sighed, going on to explain the circumstances behind her secret, and how Mitch found out.

"I'll bet that set him off." He made a whistling sound through his teeth.

"He was furious, but if he'd known in the beginning, he wouldn't have hired me."

"You're right; he wouldn't even have interviewed you."

The ringing telephone interrupted their conversation. Mark picked up the receiver and listened to the caller. Replacing the receiver, he glanced at her. "We've got a story to cover, so grab your jacket and let's get started."

The ride across town took longer than Sasha expected. The wind blew at gale force, piling large mounds of snow in drifts. The car slid sideways more than once on the slick pavement. It looked like the weather was worsening as she eyed several cars already stalled out on the streets.

The story didn't take long, but the ride back to the office was a slow ordeal. Several times, it was scary, as Mark had to swerve around parked automobiles and snowplows.

When he pulled up to the entrance of the newspaper, Sasha said a silent thank you that they'd made it safely.

"I'll park here," he told her, noticing several spots vacant out in front. He glanced at his watch. "Do you realize we've been gone for three hours?"



"With this weather, anything is possible."

After walking into the main lobby, they caught the elevator to their floor. When they reached the office, Sasha sat at her desk and began working the story they just covered.

As she typed, she lost track of time and her surroundings. The important part for her was to get the story typed and to the printer before press time. All other thoughts, including Mitch, fled her mind.

# Eleven

*H*ours later, Sasha leaned back in her chair and looked at Mark. "Since Mitch drove me this morning, I'm going to call and see what time he wants to leave." When he didn't answer, she shrugged her shoulders.

Mark heard her use the phone, but didn't hear her speak to anyone, "Can't get a hold of him?"

"No, but I'll try again in a few minutes."

"I'm going down to the printer with the story." He stood and stretched, "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Sasha nodded and picked up the phone again. She dialed Mitch's apartment to see if he had gone home for something. When he answered, she frowned. "Mitch, I've been trying to . . . , she didn't get a chance to finish her sentence.

"Where in the hell are you?"

"I'm at the office," she answered in a confused tone. "You didn't tell me you were leaving."

"I tried, but you weren't around." She heard his frustrated sigh. "I thought Mark drove you home."

"We were out covering a story."

"You've got to be kidding," he snapped. "Where's Mark?"

"He's delivering his story to the printer."

"I don't see how he's going to manage to get out a story with everyone gone."

"What do you mean?"

"Most everyone's probably gone. There are blizzard conditions outside."

She looked out the window, "I know it's been snowing, but I've been so busy, I didn't notice."

"Have Mark call me when he gets back." Sasha heard the distress in his voice.

"I will," She hung up the phone.

Mark walked through the door a few minutes later. "I've checked every floor in the building and there isn't anyone here."

"I reached Mitch at his apartment and he said everyone left early. He wants you to call him."

"How could I have been so stupid?" he sighed. "The weather did look threatening, but I didn't think it would turn into a blizzard." He shook his head, "Chicago..." He stared at the phone, apprehension on his face, "I'd better get the call over with."

Mark's face looked flush and he didn't get the chance to say much to Mitch during the call. Eventually, he replaced the receiver.

"What's wrong?"

"Mitch just told me off," he shrugged.

"Don't let it bother you," she consoled him. "We have a warm place to sleep, and we can catch-up on some backlogged work."

His only answer was a nod.

For the next four hours, they worked steadily. Mark had just cleared his desk when the phone rang. Again, he didn't get a chance to say much, so she assumed it was Mitch calling.

"Mitch?" she asked as he hung up.

"You guessed right." He could still hear Mitch's caustic words ringing through his ear. "He wanted to know if we still had heat in the building. There are power outages throughout the city. I think the man protests too much," he grinned wickedly at Sasha. "He's been bitten by the love bug."

"He's just worried about us." She wasn't ready to believe that Mitch loved her. "We'll just have to make the most of the situation."

Mark went to the window; the Chicago skyline had disappeared into a white-out, "We don't have a choice."

Later that evening, they searched the building for bedding. Eventually finding blankets in a storeroom, Sasha walked into Mitch's office and switched on the light.

"Why not sleep in here? There's no sense in going all the way back downstairs."

"At least we'll have thick carpeting." Mark placed the blankets on the floor and walked to the window. "Come take a look at this."

Sasha glanced down at the street. "Phew!" Snow covered Mark's car with only the top showing.

"We're lucky the heats still on. I don't know about you, but I'm glad we have a warm place to sleep." Mark stretched out on the floor.

"Me, too," she murmured, pulling the blanket up to her chin.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning she awoke, stiff from her night on the floor. As she stretched languidly, she saw that Mark was up and gone already. She walked to the window and looked down at the street. The snowplows were at work and traffic was moving slowly along the city street.

She splashed cold water on her face in the bathroom before going in search of Mark. Sasha stepped off the elevator and heard raised voices coming from her office.

When she looked inside, she saw Mitch standing near Mark's desk. He was saying something, but she wasn't in time to hear. Mitch must have caught her movements in the hallway. He looked out at her.

"Get your coat. I'm taking you home," he told her, not bothering to ask.

"Aren't we going to work today?" she frowned.

"*You* aren't."

On the ride down in the elevator, she could feel Mitch's tension. When they reached his car, she glanced at him. "Why are you so angry? It wasn't our fault the city had a blizzard."

"Mark should have had more sense than to take you out on a story in this weather," he glared at her. "Anything could have happened to you."

"Well, nothing did!"

The tense state in the car almost stifled Sasha. She felt relieved when he stopped in the parking lot outside her apartment.

"Thanks for the ride," she jumped out, slammed the door and hurried to her apartment.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next few days flew by and the night of the blizzard faded from her thoughts. Christmas was just around the corner with the holidays fast approaching. Everyone at the newspaper had his or her own special editions to write.

Two weeks passed and Sasha still didn't see any evidence of thawing in Mitch's attitude toward her. She realized his anger wasn't rational under the circumstances.

One morning, she walked into the office to find Mark reviewing a long list of names. "What are those for?"

"This is the guest list for Mitch's going away party."

"What date has he planned to leave?" Sasha tried to hide the depression suddenly overwhelming her at Mark's news.

"His last day will be on the eighteenth, the week before Christmas. Since it's only a week away, we don't have much time to make plans."

Sasha felt her eyes burning with tears. She turned away blinking her lashes to hide her distress. Walking to her desk, she lowered her head and glanced at the work Mark had left for her. She'd hoped for a miracle that Mitch might change his mind about going, but felt that miracle wasn't going to happen. The words on the paper became a blur and she had to look away to focus her eyes. If Mark suspected her low mood, he didn't let on.

Over lunch that day, Mark again mentioned Mitch leaving the paper. "The party's going to be at the banquet hall on the first floor of the newspaper office."

"What date have you picked for it?" Sasha had to force the question past her numbed lips.

"Next Saturday night will be convenient for everyone."

"Oh," she looked down at her food, her hunger leaving her as her world tumbled out of control.

She didn't know how she managed to get through the rest of the day, and she was happy to hear from her father that night. "I wanted to call you about Saturday. We can drive over and give you a ride to Mitch's party."

"I'd appreciate it," she kept her tone light. "What time?"

"About eight," he said cheerfully. "See you then, honey."

*Five days left before Mitch leaves.* Suddenly, it felt as if a giant fist hit her in the chest. The aching pain wouldn't leave her. For the remainder of the evening she couldn't interest herself in reading or watching television. She moped around the apartment in a depressed mood.

\*\*\*\*\*

Saturday seemed endless for Sasha. Finally, it was time to begin getting ready for the party. She dressed and applied her makeup, but her heart wasn't in it. She walked into the living room and placed Mitch's gift of a pair of cuff links and a matching tie clasp on the coffee table. She heard a car pulling onto the lot and looked out to see her father and Brenda had arrived. Sasha picked up her package and walked out to meet them. She smiled a greeting, but deep inside the pain was almost unbearable for her.

"You look different tonight," Mike said thoughtfully.

The sadness showing in her eyes was the only difference Sasha could see. "I don't know what it could be."

At the party her stomach quivered with nervous anticipation. Her gaze made a search of the room looking to see if Mitch had arrived.

Mike claimed a table, and Sasha tried showing an interest in conversation with Brenda, but her mind continued to drift to the one subject occupying it the most: Mitch Jenner.

*One last night to see him before he leaves me for good.* Blinking her eyelids, she tried hiding the moistness coating her long lashes as her father glanced in her direction.

"It looks as if Mitch's going to be late for his party," Mike remarked. He was trying to make light of the situation, but he could see how distressed Sasha looked.

A roar of applause filled the room and Sasha turned her head to see what had caused all the commotion. She didn't have to look far to find her answer.



# Twelve

*M*itch's arrival, with the beautiful blonde holding his arm, made Sasha's heart plummet. This was the same woman she saw visiting his apartment and spending the night several weeks earlier.

He leaned toward the woman, and his lips curved with a grin as he listened to her. The sight of the two of them huddled so close caused a fresh pain to pierce her heart.

From the corner of her eye, she saw his movements as he made his way across the room greeting the guests. She wondered how long it would take him to reach their table. Eventually, Sasha's coveted gaze saw him walking toward them. When he reached their table, he was alone.

"Hello, Mitch," she greeted him, politely, formally, her voice holding an icy edge.

"Hello, Sasha," he returned her formal greeting, his eyes capturing hers, if only for a moment. "Mitch, I'd like you to meet my father, Mike Jardane, and my stepmother, Brenda."

Mike shook Mitch's hand. "It's good to finally meet

you," he said warmly. "I wasn't happy to hear that you're leaving the paper."

"The offer was too good to pass up, but it was nice working here."

"I hope everything turns out well for you." Mike looked at Sasha's strained features and felt the need to keep Mitch at their table a little longer. "Why not join us for a drink?"

"Since I've already talked to everyone, I believe I will," he accepted Mike's offer and took a seat.

Mitch stopped a passing waiter and removed four glasses from his tray. As he handed Sasha her drink, their eyes locked. She felt her pulse rising as Mitch's gaze continued to search hers. It looked as if he was searching for something in their depths, but hadn't yet found the answer.

She bit her lip and looked away, only to spy the blonde sitting at another table with Mark and other members of the staff. The woman seemed to be very talkative and bubbly, totally unconcerned about Mitch sitting with them.

Her father's voice interrupted her private thoughts. "When are you leaving for New York, Mitch?"

"I'm waiting until next week." His glance strayed to Sasha again. "I'll need a few days to settle things before I leave."

His answer sounded vague to Sasha, and she noticed how he studied the amber liquid in his glass. He swirled the ice cubes around in it nonstop.

"I want to make a toast to your future success," Mike raised his glass.

"Thanks," Mitch tapped Mike's glass and swallowed the contents.

Mike nodded toward the front of the room, "There's someone motioning for you to come up front, Mitch."

Mitch nodded and stood.

"Now, that's the type of son-in-law I've always wanted, strong and with a purpose in life. I believe he's very interested in you, Sasha."

"I received the same impression," Brenda smiled warmly at Sasha.

"I doubt that very much," she could barely get the words past the lump in her throat. "We argue constantly when we're together."

"Little disagreements are usually the first signs of love," he said lightly. "Don't let him get away, honey."

She noticed how the voices quieted when Mitch walked to the podium. She watched him, drinking in the sight of his virile masculinity. When he spoke, the words passed over her head, her focus was on the husky tone of his voice. She remembered how he'd uttered passionate words to her in the same tone when they'd made love.

After finishing his speech, someone announced that it was time for dinner. Sasha followed the crowd into the next room. The evening was almost at a close, and she dreaded it. If she weren't around Mitch every day, maybe it would help her heart to heal from the aching pain eating at it.

The crowd mingled after dinner, but Sasha didn't feel up to making conversation and was grateful when her father suggested they leave. On the ride to her apartment, she remained quiet, drawing several curious glances from Mike and Brenda.

As Mike pulled to her door, she got out and looked into the car window. "Good night, Dad and Brenda." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "I'll call you later in the week."

In her apartment, Sasha made her way to her bedroom to change. After fastening the belt around her green satin robe,

she walked into the hallway when she heard the sound of the doorbell. She opened the door and saw Mitch on the threshold, still dressed in his black tuxedo.

"I'm waiting for an invitation to come in, Rebel," he grinned at her. "I thought you might offer a neighbor a drink." He moved into the room, and she still hadn't said one word. Her tongue felt too thick to speak.

She walked to the liquor cabinet and poured out two drinks. When he accepted his, he tapped her glass lightly. "I thought we should have one toast together-in private. This will probably be our last one. Here's to our future."

Sasha swallowed, yet felt like choking. She pretended to toast him as well, but her heart was crying out for him to stay in Chicago.

"I heard you telling my father you were leaving on Friday." The burning tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them away.

"I'd planned on Friday," his tone was vague. "If I don't see you again, I want to wish you luck."

"Thank you," she murmured, almost inaudibly. "Good luck to you, too, with your new job."

He nodded and placed his glass on the liquor cabinet. "Good night, Rebel, and thanks for the drink."

"Good night, Mitch." She turned away, refusing to watch him leave.

She wanted desperately to run after him and confess her love, but he hadn't given her any sign that he cared for her. She feared she would make a complete fool of herself and she didn't want that to happen. Sasha had to be strong when it came to losing Mitch Jenner. In reality, she'd never really had him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day she'd dreaded finally arrived. On Friday, Sasha left her apartment for work and her eyes drifted to Mitch's car parked near hers. Suits and other clothing hung in plastic bags along the back windows. She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned her head.

The day at the office lasted forever. She sighed with frustration when Mark told her they would have to work late that evening. But, then again, she wouldn't have to watch Mitch leaving.

By eight that evening, she and Mark were on the main floor having coffee with a group of other workers. Everyone was working overtime. The room was noisy as usual, but the activity kept her from thinking too much. Suddenly, a hush fell over the room and Sasha glanced around to see what had caused it.

Mitch's long strides ate up the distance between them. When he reached her, he removed the coffee cup from her hand and placed it on the desk.

"You're coming with me," his voice was loud enough to carry to the rest of the group standing nearby.

"What are you talking about?" For the last several weeks, he'd ignored her. She wanted to go with him, but she still had her pride to maintain.

Mitch picked up her handbag and removed her car keys. He tossed them across the room to an astonished Mark. "Park her car in the company's garage tonight and she can pick it up tomorrow."

"I'd appreciate an explanation," her gaze narrowed.

The room had been noisy before, but now you could hear a pin drop. They were all an interested party to the scene developing before them.

"Would you please be quiet?" His lips were close to her ear, "We're leaving."

"Not until you tell me what you want." She moved a short distance away from him, to where she thought he couldn't reach her.

Without warning, his long arm slid easily around her waist and pulled her tightly against him. She felt red flames course through her cheeks as everyone in the room watched his actions in disbelief.

"You'll have to excuse us," Mitch apologized with a grin. "I've always had to use force with Rebel."

As he walked from the room with her clutched tightly to his side, she closed her eyes. The workers burst out with cheers and a round of applause. She heard the sounds of laughter and voices again filling the room before they disappeared into the elevator.

Mitch didn't relinquish his hold on her. As they reached the sidewalk outside, he guided her to his parked car. She got in and sat huddled in the corner watching him walk around to the driver's side.

"Take this." He offered her his jacket.

Sasha wrapped the fleece-lined coat around her shivering body. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to my place to have a long talk," he chuckled as he glanced at her. "You could almost use that coat as a dress."

Sasha didn't comment on his remark, but the same thought had run through her mind. It wasn't long before he pulled onto the parking lot at the apartment complex.

"What's so important that you dragged me away from work?"

"We have to talk, and it has to do with our future," he didn't provide further details.

Sasha followed him into his living room and sat on the couch. He claimed a seat alongside her and draped his arm across her shoulder.

"How come you didn't put the rest of your things in the car?" She looked at his personal items still in the room.

"I've canceled my plans, and it's all because of you."

Sasha's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"Since meeting you, I haven't been able to think straight." He trailed his fingers lightly along the curve of her neck. "When it was time to remove the rest of my things from the apartment, I couldn't go."

"What are you saying?" she whispered, her face only inches from his.

"I'm trying to tell you that I've loved you since the moment I saw you in the nightclub," he answered hoarsely, pulling her pliant body into his arms and burrowing his face in her neck. He held her close for several seconds and then pulled away to look into her face. "When I saw you, I knew you would cause me many sleepless nights."

"You lost sleep over me?"

"Yes. I always talked about taming you, but it was just the opposite. You managed to tame me when no other woman could," he confessed softly.

"Couldn't you have told me this before?" She could barely get the words out in her excitement.

"I had to do some serious thinking," his lips trailed her smooth neck and stopped near her earlobe as he talked. He nibbled gently on the fleshy part, sending a shiver of excitement racing through her.

Sasha pushed him away and locked her eyes on his. "And *who* was the blonde at your apartment last week? She stayed the night with you, and you brought her to your party."

Mitch studied her inquisitive green eyes as a smile lined his lips. "*That's* my sister. She came to Chicago for a job interview, and I offered her my spare bedroom for the night."

All along, she'd been condemning him without a fair hearing. "Oh, Mitch, I do love you," she gasped.

"It's about time you told me," his mouth captured her parted lips.

Much later, they sat talking about their future. Mitch's news that he had bought the newspaper surprised her. Her father hadn't given her a clue that he was selling.

"When did that take place?" Her brows lifted.

"I phoned your dad last week and we had a long talk. We decided to keep the business deal private. I also told Mike that we're getting married."

Her eyes narrowed, "How did you know I'd say yes?"

"My darling rebel, I was almost certain I could make you see things my way," his gentle gaze searched her face. "I *hope* you'll marry me." He didn't seem as confident now as he had a few minutes earlier.

"How about a little more persuasion?" she laughed softly, her heart filled with love.

"I can always oblige you," he murmured gently. Her words were all the invitation he needed. He pulled her tenderly into his arms and covered her mouth with a kiss that promised passion, as well as an enduring love.

*END*



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# About the Author

Mary Suzanne is the pen name for two romance authors. Romance is their favorite genre. They love to weave romantic tales, hoping to bring enjoyment to all who read their stories. The one thing that is a *must*, is that each book ends with a ‘happily ever after’.

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