

The Ultimate Millionaire

New York Times Bestselling Author
Susan Mallery



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~~Todd Aston III's reputation as a playboy preceded him; he wore power as seamlessly as he wore his custom-cut suits. But Marina Nelson had promised her sister—who was marrying Todd's cousin—that she'd help him plan the perfect wedding. And somehow, between tasting cakes and modeling wedding dresses, Marina discovered that she *wanted* Todd—and that Todd wanted *her*. She was powerless to prevent the inevitable. Yet the harder she fell for Todd, the more she realized that he didn't trust marriage-minded women.~~

Which made her grandmother's offer of a million dollars to whichever Nelson sister married him a big problem...

Look for Susan Mallery's new Fool's Gold trilogy, starting in June with *Just One Kiss* from Harlequin HQN! And don't miss the series prequel novella, *Halfway There*, coming in May 2013

~~New York Times~~ bestselling author **Susan Mallery** has entertained millions of readers with her witty and emotional stories about women and the relationships that move them. *Publishers Weekly* calls Susan's prose "luscious and provocative," and *Booklist* says, "Novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." While Susan appreciates the critical praise, she is most honored by the enthusiastic readers who write to tell her that her books made them laugh, made them cry and made the world a happier place to live. Susan lives in Seattle with her husband and her tiny but intrepid toy poodle. She's there for the coffee, not the weather. Visit Susan online at www.SusanMallery.com.

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[About Barefoot Season](#)

“Would you do it if I beg?”

Marina Nelson was careful to keep from smiling at Julie’s dramatic plea. Of course she was going to agree to help her sister, but not right away. After twenty-four years of being the baby of the family, it was nice to finally have a little power.

“You know I’m busy,” she said slowly. “It’s the start of a new quarter and I have a full class schedule.”

Julie sighed. “Yes, and your work is very important. But so is this. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t. I really need someone to take charge while I’m on this business trip. We have similar taste and you’re organized and I thought...” Julie tucked her blond hair behind her ears and looked sad. “Am I asking too much? I am. I know it’s crazy. I’m the one getting married, not you. So I should do the planning. But this trip to China is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Six weeks of Ryan and I working together before we settle in to being married *and* parents.”

Marina glanced down at her sister’s stomach. Julie was only about three months along and not showing at all. One of the advantages of being tall, she thought humorously—it takes longer to see the bump.

“I can see how a trip to China would be far more thrilling than the messy details of choosing a menu and picking out flowers,” she said, still not allowing herself to smile. “Not to mention deciding on a dress. What if you hate what I pick?”

They were close enough in size for the actual gown itself not to be a problem. Any minor tailoring could be done right before the wedding, after Julie got back.

“I won’t,” Julie promised earnestly. “I swear, I’ll love it. Besides, you’ll send me pictures, right? We talked about that. You’ll upload them into e-mail and I’ll write back with my opinion.” Her blue eyes widened. “Marina, please say yes.”

Marina sighed heavily. “No. I can’t. But thanks for asking.”

Julie’s mouth dropped open, then she reached behind her for one of the small, floral sofa cushions and swatted Marina with it.

“You’re horrible! How could you let me go on and on like that? I was practically begging.”

Marina laughed, then grabbed the cushion. “There’s no ‘practically,’ Julie. You begged. You whined. I have to tell you, I was a little embarrassed for you.”

Julie sighed. “So you’ll do it?”

“Of course. You’re my sister. Just give me a list and I’ll take care of everything.”

“You have no idea how you’re helping. Between getting married and our trip and closing on the new house, my life is a nightmare.”

They sat in Ryan’s study—an uncomfortably modern condo in West Los Angeles. It had a great view and electronic everything, but it lacked color and soul, except for a few throw pillows Julie had contributed. Rather than try to make it homey, Julie and Ryan had decided to buy another house that they both liked. Marina knew that Willow, their middle sister, was going to oversee the minor renovating Julie and Ryan’s new place needed, which left the wedding to Marina.

“I think of this project as practice,” Marina said with a grin. “I can figure out what I want and don’t want should I ever take the plunge.”

“Oh, please. You’ll get married,” Julie said confidently. “The right guy’s out there somewhere.”

You'll find him."

~~Marina wasn't currently looking, but it would be great when it happened. Assuming she could trust herself to fall in love without losing her soul in the process.~~

"Until then, just call me the wedding planner," Marina said. "Now, where's that list of yours?"

Julie reached into her purse, then straightened without removing anything. "There's just one other thing."

"Which is..."

Julie drew in a breath. "Okay, so this is Ryan's wedding, too, and he's a little nervous that it's going to be too girly. He wants a vote in what's happening."

Marina didn't get the problem. "Fine. You two can argue all you want, then e-mail me the compromise. I don't care."

"Um, yes, well, that's not exactly the plan. Ryan wants a representative to be with you for all the important decisions. The food, the cake, the band, the decorations, the flowers."

"A representative? Like his mother?"

Marina had never met the woman. No doubt she was perfectly lovely, but another opinion could seriously slow the process.

Julie tried to smile and failed miserably. "Actually, no. More like Todd."

"Todd? As in Todd Aston the Third, all around rich guy and jerk?" Marina couldn't believe it. "Anyone but him," she muttered.

"He's Ryan's cousin and they're as close as brothers. You know that. Todd is the best man and he offered to help. Do you hate me now?"

"No, but I should." Marina sighed. "Todd? Yuck."

Nearly six months ago, the three sisters had been introduced to their maternal grandmother for the first time in their lives. Grandma Ruth had been estranged from her only daughter, the girls' mother, ever since Naomi had run off and gotten married.

Now Ruth was back and she wanted a relationship with her daughter and granddaughters. In addition, she had a burning need to connect her family with her second husband's family through marriage.

In a moment of dinner conversation that Marina was confident would go down in family history she'd offered each of her granddaughters a million dollars if one of them would please marry Todd Aston the Third, her nephew—or maybe great-nephew, no one was sure—through marriage.

Julie had fallen in love with Ryan and Willow had found Kane Dennison, which left only Marina for toady Todd. Talk about bad luck.

For reasons she was still trying to figure out—maybe it had been a momentary brain injury—Marina had agreed to one date with the obnoxious Todd.

It's not that the guy wasn't good-looking—at least, that's what Marina had heard. She'd never actually seen the man. He was also wealthy and successful in his own right, rather than just inheriting from Mommy and Daddy. Ryan liked him and Marina thought Ryan was okay—especially after he'd shown the good taste to fall for her sister. But Todd?

His idea of a significant relationship was to date the same woman twice in the same week. He went out with models. How could she ever have a serious conversation with a man who dated women who were paid to starve for a living? It violated the female code.

Plus, initially he'd tried to break up Julie and Ryan. Marina thought that was pretty low.

"I'm not asking you to have his baby," Julie said. "Just work with him on the wedding. Besides, it won't be too bad. He's a guy. He'll get bored at the first meeting with the florist and disappear. You'll have to deal with him once. Twice at the most."

"I don't want to deal with him at all," Marina said mournfully. "He's everything I don't like in a

man.” Talk about emotionally useless. Or so she imagined.

~~A sound came from the doorway. It sounded like someone clearing his throat. When Marina looked up she found a pretty good-looking guy leaning against the door frame.~~

He looked more amused than annoyed, but based on Julie’s gasp and sudden blush, Marina was willing to go out on a limb and figure this was the infamous Todd Aston.

“Ladies,” he said with a nod. “Ryan let me in and said you were meeting in here. I’ve shown up for wedding duty. I’m also accepting a humanitarian award at the end of the month. Perhaps the two of you would like a shot at writing my bio for the event. It would certainly be entertaining.”

“Oh, man,” Julie muttered. “I’m sorry. That all came out more harshly than I meant it to.”

Marina studied him. He was the walking, breathing definition of tall, dark and hunky. Great face with soulful eyes and the kind of mouth that made a woman dream about being taken against her will. Broad shoulders, a muscled chest and jeans skimming over narrow hips and yummy thighs. All in all a great package. Too bad Todd’s personality was stuck inside it.

He smiled at her. “You must be Marina.”

“I am. Nice to meet you, Todd.”

“Nice?” He raised one eyebrow. “That’s not what I heard. You’ve already decided I’m an ass. Or is it an idiot?”

She shifted on the sofa, feeling just a tiny bit uncomfortable. “You go out with models. Their airbrushed perfection in magazines make regular women feel bad about themselves.”

“Because of that, models shouldn’t be allowed to date?”

Logic? He wanted to use logic in a discussion about the objectification of thin, young women in modern society?

“Of course they should be allowed to date,” she said smoothly. “I’m simply not interested in someone who’s interested in them.”

“Right,” he said folding his arms over his chest. “Because you assume that if they’re beautiful they must be dumb. Therefore I like dumb women.”

“I didn’t say that, but thanks for clarifying.”

His mouth twitched as if he were holding in a smile. “I don’t date dumb women.”

“You should probably make up your mind about that,” she told him.

“I’ll get right on it.”

“If you two are finished...” Julie pointed to the chair opposite the sofa. “Okay, then. So, we should get started with all this. The wedding.”

Todd strolled across the room and took the seat offered, then pulled a PalmPilot out of his shirt pocket. “I’m ready.”

Marina looked at him. “You’re actually going to participate?”

“Right down to the organic seed we’ll be throwing at the happy couple when they head off on their honeymoon.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “We don’t use rice. The birds eat it and it’s bad for them.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. “Someone’s been spending a little too much time on the Internet.”

“Internet, bridal magazines, whatever. When it comes to wedding planning, I’m your guy.” A challenge brightened his dark eyes. “I’m in this all the way. Are you?”

If he thought he could scare her off, then he was in for a wild ride. “I’m in. And just for the record, I define stubborn.”

“Me, too.”

Ha! No way. He might think he was all that, but Marina was more than willing to take him on and win.

Julie sighed. “I thought you two might not get along, but I never considered this might become a competition. Listen. We’re talking about a wedding. My wedding to Ryan. We need help, not a Las Vegas-style show. Bigger is not better. Don’t be too creative. Let’s just make it low-key and elegant, okay?”

Marina felt Todd’s gaze shift to her. She stared right back at him and refused to be the first one to blink. “Julie, have I ever let you down?”

“No,” Julie said slowly, as if she didn’t want to admit it.

“So trust me.”

Julie gave them each a copy of her list. Todd scanned his, then turned his attention back to Marina Nelson.

She was blond like her sisters, only her hair was darker—more honey-gold. She was about an inch taller than Julie, with the same curvy build. They were obviously sisters and could almost have passed for twins. The main difference—aside from hair color—was the “I’m willing to take you on, big guy” attitude in the set of her chin. Julie was far more agreeable.

Todd had a rule when it came to women—why work hard? There were plenty of attractive females more than happy to come on to *him*. Some of it was due to his success as a businessman, some of it was his looks. Most of it was about the family fortune.

Whatever the reason, he rarely had to go searching for company. His romantic life was an ongoing series of short-term relationships with minimal commitment and effort on his part. That was how he liked things.

Marina was going to be anything but easy and he wasn’t even trying to get her into bed. But Ryan had asked for his help, so he would put up with the overly verbal Nelson sister for the sake of his cousin.

He was even willing to admit—only to himself—that he was looking forward to taking her on. It had been a long time since a woman had done anything but let him get his way. Working with her would be good for his character, even if he did plan to win in the end.

“Basically we have the invitations done and that’s it,” Julie said as she studied her own copy of the list. “Grandma Ruth offered her house for the wedding and Ryan and I agreed it’s an amazing place. But there are decisions to be made. It’s a winter wedding. Do we want to risk the outside thing? It could be seventy-five or it could be raining.”

“She mentioned something about a ballroom,” Marina said. “On the third floor. Want us to check that out?”

“I’ve seen it.” Todd kept his attention on Julie. “It would easily hold three or four hundred. A few less if you’re interested in a sit-down dinner.”

“We are,” Julie said, making a note.

“But the guest list isn’t nearly that big,” Marina told him. “It’s about a hundred.”

“Ryan said it was closer to two hundred.”

Marina turned to her sister. “That many?”

“It keeps growing.”

“That’s a lot of tables.”

“I know. So I need you to check out the ballroom and see how it would be. Is there still room for dancing with all the tables in place? Where would the band go? I’m torn. Being outside would be great, but I’m not sure I can trust the weather, and I won’t need to be stressed about one more thing.”

“We’ll decide that first,” Marina said, taking notes. “That will affect all the other decisions. What’s next?”

“Flowers, favors—nothing stupid, please—food, entertainment, a photographer and my dress. Oh, and you and Willow have to pick out bridesmaids’ dresses.”

Ryan was so going to owe him, Todd thought humorously. “Tuxes,” he said.

Julie stared at him. “Oh God. You’re right. The guys need tuxes.”

“I’ll take care of the dress myself,” Marina said, smiling at him. “The dress is purely a girl thing.”

“Do you plan to get a say in the tuxes?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He waited while she began sputtering.

“Wait a minute,” Marina said. “A bride’s dress has to be something special. She’s only going to get married once.”

“I could say the same thing about Ryan. He’ll want to look good and you don’t trust me to make that happen. Why should I trust you?” Of course he had no real interest in the wedding gown, but fair was fair.

Julie waved her hand. “I don’t care who goes to the bridal shop. Just find me an amazing dress. Nothing fitted at the waist, of course.”

That’s right, Todd thought. Julie was pregnant.

He knew Ryan was excited about being a father. While Todd never intended to marry, he liked the idea of having kids. The lack of wife would complicate things, but didn’t make the situation impossible.

“I can’t believe you want a say in the dress,” Marina muttered.

He leaned toward her. “Think of all those models I’ve dated. Some of their fashion sense must have rubbed off on me.”

“Did you talk about fashion much?”

“We didn’t talk at all.”

He heard her grind her teeth together and nearly laughed.

“Willow works for that nursery,” Marina said as she ignored him. “I’ll ask her for recommendations on the florist front.”

“Good idea,” Julie said.

“I know a photographer,” Todd told her.

Marina widened her eyes. “Does he take pictures of people with or without clothes?”

“Both. You’ll enjoy looking at her work.”

“I don’t care about naked,” Julie said. “Does she do weddings?”

“They’re her favorite.”

“Good. Put her on the list. Marina, nothing too artistic. Just regular pictures.”

“Gotcha.”

They went over a few more things, then Julie left to find the dress pictures she’d torn out of magazines.

Todd turned his attention to Marina. “I think this is going to be fun.”

“Oh, me, too.”

“You don’t like me much.”

“I don’t know you.”

“You don’t want to.”

“Actually I haven’t decided that. Amazingly enough, you haven’t been on my mind at all.”

One point for her side, he thought. “You didn’t say nice things about me before. I heard you.”

She tilted her head as she stared at him. “You have a reputation which, personally, I think you enjoy. But people form impressions based on that notoriety.”

“You think I’m shallow.”

~~“I don’t think you’ve ever had to work very hard at anything but your company.”~~

“Still, you agreed to go out with me. One date. You promised. Aunt Ruth told me.”

Her gaze narrowed. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

She might be uncomfortable with the idea of dating him, but he was the one who had to live with the reality of his aunt offering her granddaughters each a million dollars if one of them would marry him. It made him feel like a loser. What the hell was so wrong with him that a woman had to be paid that much money to make a commitment?

Not that he wanted to get married, but it was the principle of the thing.

Fortunately Julie and Willow were both out of the picture, which left only Marina. He would have refused even a single date with her, but Aunt Ruth had looked so happy at the thought and although he would rather face medieval torture than admit it to anyone, he was a sucker when it came to his aunt Ruth.

“It’s only one date,” he said. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“It will be three hours that will seem like a lifetime?” But there was a flash of humor in her eyes as she spoke.

“The wedding,” he said. “We both have to be there, we’re both in the wedding party, which means it wouldn’t be much fun for anyone else we brought.”

She nodded slowly. “We will have just spent all that time arranging the event, so we’ll have plenty to talk about.”

“We can have lots of champagne.”

She grinned. “Always a plan. All right, Todd Aston the Third, I’ll be your date for my sister’s wedding.”

Grandma Ruth's three-story Bel Air mansion was just as awe-inspiring the second time Marina pulled in to the stone covered circular driveway. It was massive and out of place—this was Los Angeles, not eighteenth century England. But the rich lived different lives, Marina thought as she climbed out of her aging import. Lives with live-in staff. Her idea of help at home was a package of premoistened glass cleaning towelettes.

She glanced at the double door leading into the house and decided to wait until Todd showed up before going inside. Okay, sure, she shouldn't be intimidated by her grandmother's maid, but she was. So what? She had other positive attributes she could focus on.

Less than a minute later, a gleaming silver Mercedes pulled into the driveway. The car was a sporty two-seater model, the kind that cost as much as the national debt of a small third world country.

The guy who climbed out of it was just as impressive. Tall, well tailored and sexy enough to encourage smart women to make some really stupid choices. She would have to make sure she didn't fall into the category. Fortunately he wasn't her type.

"Marina," Todd said with a grin. "I thought you would have already scouted the house and made the decision."

"We're a team, Todd. I totally respect that." Or she would as long as it suited her.

Speaking of suits, his was dark gray, with a subtle pattern in the weave of the fabric. His pale blue shirt contrasted with the deep burgundy tie. While she preferred a more casual look, he wore his power extremely well. She, on the other hand, looked like a college student with a limited budget. Although her skinny jeans had zipped up with no problem, which made this a very good day.

She collected her digital camera and a small notebook, then followed him to the front door. "I have about an hour," she said as she checked her watch. "Then I have to be back at UCLA for a class."

"What are you taking?"

"I'm not. I'm interpreting." She glanced at him. "I'm a sign language interpreter for deaf students. I specialize in chemistry and physics, mostly the upper division classes."

He raised his eyebrows. "Impressive."

"It's not that hard for me. I've taken all the classes myself, so I understand the material. I have three advanced science degrees. Eventually I'm going to have to pick a Ph.D. program, but I'm not ready yet. I already knew how to sign, so I decided to do this for a couple of years."

His eyes widened. "Three advanced science degrees?"

She loved people underestimating her. "Uh-huh. It's less impressive when you know I started college at fifteen."

"Oh, sure. It's practically ordinary. You're pretty smart."

She smiled. "Smarter than you, big guy."

He laughed. "I'll remember that."

He knocked on the front door and when the maid answered, he greeted her by name.

"We're here to see the ballroom, Katie," he told the woman in uniform. "Then check out the backyard."

The maid nodded. "Yes, sir. Your grandmother told me you'd be stopping by. Would you like me to show you upstairs?"

"We can find it. Thanks."

Marina smiled at the other woman, then followed Todd across a huge foyer and up a wide, curving staircase.

“So how big is *your* staff?” she asked as they reached the second floor and walked along a long, carpeted hallway. There were dozens of paintings on the wall and pieces of furniture that were probably impressive antiques, if she knew anything about them.

“Five live-ins, six dailies.”

“What?” she asked. She’d only seen his house from a distance—and it had been bigger than this one—but still. “What do they do?”

He turned to her, touched his finger to the tip of her nose and smiled. “Gotcha. I have a housekeeper who hires people to keep the house clean and take care of the grounds. She comes in three days a week. I’d rather not have any staff, but the house is old and big and I’m not willing to deal with it, so she does.”

Okay, one housekeeper *was* better than five live-ins.

They took a second staircase that flowed into a landing that was bigger than Marina’s apartment. A wall of ornate doors opened into a ballroom the size of a football field.

She stepped into the center of the room and turned in a slow circle. There were gilded mirrors on the walls and dozens of sparkling chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The parquet floor gleamed and reflected the sunlight from the windows.

The walls had been painted a neutral pale beige, so any color theme would work.

“We’re talking about tables of either eight or ten,” Todd said as he pulled out his PalmPilot and pushed a few buttons. “We can fit as many as thirty tables in here and still have room for people to get around.”

Marina did the math. “Can we fit twenty-eight tables and still have room for dancing and the band?”

Todd looked at her. “Orchestra. Not band. Julie said elegant. Bands aren’t elegant.”

Maybe not, but she’d never been to a wedding with an orchestra. “You think the L.A. Philharmonic is available?”

He grinned. “I’d have to check their schedule, but I was thinking of something a little smaller. I have a group in mind that I’ve heard play at other venues.”

Venues? So while the rest of America went to the mall, the über rich had venues? “What sort of venues would these be?”

“Mostly fund-raisers. A couple of weddings. I’ll find out where they’re playing in the next couple of weeks and we’ll go hear them. They’re great. Trust me.”

Trust him? Not yet.

She put down her notebook and began taking pictures of the vast space. “I really like this room,” she said as she turned slowly to get every angle. “I’ll e-mail these photos to Julie as soon as I’m done with class.”

“There’s more,” he said and led her to a series of French doors. He unlocked the first one and opened it, then motioned for her to lead the way.

She stepped out onto a wide balcony that overlooked the property. Although if one couldn’t see where the fence line was, did that make it an estate?

The grounds were stunning. She could see the terrace and the pool and the gardens beyond.

“This would give us extra space,” he said as he joined her. “A place for people to get some air. We could put lights in the garden for the view.”

“I like it,” she said more to herself than him. “Anyone can get married in a backyard, but this is incredible. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

She turned back to the ballroom where she could imagine the tables and guests and flowers. Tal

about making some memories.

“So you prefer the ballroom?” he asked.

“I do, but it’s Julie’s choice. Let’s go downstairs and take some pictures of the garden so she and Ryan can decide. Once we know which way they want to go, we’re free to start making other arrangements.”

They made their way back downstairs, then stepped out onto the manicured terrace. It looked more like the grounds of a five-star hotel than someone’s home, she thought as she took pictures, not sure how she felt about her grandmother living here.

Something of her confusion must have showed because Todd asked, “What’s wrong?”

She pocketed the digital camera and tucked her notebook under her arm. “I keep thinking how strange this is—that a grandmother I never knew about was alive and well about fifteen miles from where I grew up. That this is her world and I can remember times when we didn’t have enough money to have meat with dinner.”

She shook her head. “I’m not complaining. My mom was great and my sisters and I always had plenty of everything we needed. Money was tight, but that’s how it was with most of our neighbors. I’m okay with that. But now, to find out there’s a whole other way of looking at things, it’s strange.” She looked at him. “I’m not explaining myself well and this is more information than you wanted.”

“Of course this is different. For what it’s worth, Ruth regrets all the years she was apart from you and your family. Her husband, my uncle, was a hard man. He didn’t believe in forgiveness. Ruth simply didn’t have the strength to stand up to him.”

“That’s what she said.”

“It’s true.”

Great. So it seemed she came from a long line of women who surrendered heart and mind to the men. All the more reason not to get involved.

He looked at her. “You should try to understand what Ruth went through.”

Todd Aston the Third being sensitive? “Okay, now I’m freaked out on two different levels. The contrast between what I’m used to and this, and your emotional perception.”

“I’m a man of great mystery.”

That made her laugh. “Of course you are. Wealth, power and mystery. You should put that on your business cards.”

He led the way around the side of the house toward their cars. “I’m way ahead of you, Marina. I have it tattooed on my back.”

She grinned. “I thought you’d have a stick up your butt,” she said before she could stop herself.

“They know how to fix that now. Isn’t modern medicine a miracle?”

She sighed. “You know what I mean. I thought you’d be...different.”

“Unpleasant?”

“Imperious.”

“I can be, if that would make you happy.”

“No, thanks.” She opened her notebook. “Okay, venue research complete. Which leaves us with food, the cake, flowers, a photographer and all kinds of other messy details.”

“The dress,” he reminded her. “We’ll have to look at something off the rack. There’s no time for a custom gown.”

She glanced at him, surprised he would know that. “Let me guess. More bridal magazine research? Although somehow I can’t see you sitting down with a latte and a bridal magazine.”

“I can’t have a latte then. Black coffee to combat all the girliness. It’s about balance.”

Until this moment, she hadn’t thought of Todd as a person. At first he’d been just a name, then he’d been the guy who tried to break up her sister and Ryan. Then an annoyance who would get in her

way about the wedding. But now...

~~“Why do you hide who you are behind your reputation?” she asked. “The money thing. The model thing.”~~

He unlocked his car. “I’ve dated maybe three models in my life, Marina. You need to let go.”

“You’re right. I will.”

“Good.” He sat in his car and grinned. “Of course, two of them didn’t speak English.”

They didn’t...Then how...She glared at him. “You had better be kidding. Not speak English?”

He nodded. “I was simply doing my part to improve American relationships with our neighbors. He smiled angelically. “I know a great caterer. I’ll set something up and get back to you with the details.”

With that he was gone.

Three days later Todd stood in front of the catering office and watched Marina walk toward him. She wore jeans, a UCLA sweatshirt and her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Not someone who dressed to impress.

There was also an air of determination about her that made him anticipate plenty of flying sparks. Planning a wedding might not be his idea of a good time, but so far Marina had been a pleasant surprise. Smart and sexy. He’d been looking forward to seeing her again.

When she stopped in front of him, she put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“I looked you up on the Internet,” she said. “The models in question spoke perfectly good English, albeit with an accent.”

“Albeit?” he asked as he raised his eyebrows. “Are we in a Jane Austen novel?”

“What do you know about Jane Austen?”

“Every good useless male who only dates models knows all about chick flicks and Jane Austen. It’s required. I not only saw *Bridget Jones’s Diary* twice, I’ve seen the special features. Ask me anything.”

She burst out laughing. The sound was light and sexy and made him want to touch her. All of her. Unexpected heat swept through him, startling him with its intensity.

He immediately took a step back, both physically and mentally. He and Marina were on a mission. He was here to protect Ryan’s interests and not die of boredom in the process. If tweaking Marina’s assumptions about him got him through the day, then he was up to the task. But actually enjoying her company—not a good idea. Getting involved with his aunt-by-marriage’s youngest granddaughter wouldn’t be very intelligent.

“This place comes highly recommended,” he said as they made their way to the front door. “It’s supposed to be good food with more choices than beef or chicken. If this is the one we pick, we’ll be able to customize the menu. Or in our case, argue over food options.”

“You think we’re going to argue?” she asked.

“I’m counting on it.”

“I’m a pretty agreeable person, but I’m sure you’re difficult,” she said as he held open the door. “I’ll be flexible on food, but not the dessert thing.”

“What dessert thing?”

She smiled at him. “That we have dessert. It’s one of the great thrills of a wedding. You get dessert *and* cake. How often does that happen in life?”

“Far be it from me to get between a woman and her sugar fix.”

“Pretty and smart,” she murmured. “How impressive.”

“I know.” He turned his attention to the receptionist and introduced them.

“I’m Zoe,” the woman said with a smile. “We’re ready for you. If you’d come this way?”
~~They were led in to a small room set up like a dining area. The table for six had two place settings at one end.~~

Zoe seated them, then pointed out the menu printed on a single sheet by the plates.

“We’ll go in order,” she said. “We’ll start with soups, then the salads and so on. Please make notes or write down any questions.”

She left and then returned immediately with three small bowls for each of them.

“Lovely presentation,” Marina said as she picked the sprig of garnish out of one of the bowls. “Why do they have to put some garden weed on top of a dish? What is it? How do we know where it’s been?”

“The not knowing adds to the thrill of the moment.”

She looked at him, her blue eyes wide. “Are you thrilled?”

She was close enough that he could see a couple of pale freckles on her nose and hint of a dimple in her cheek. Once again he thought about touching her...and didn’t.

“Beyond words.”

“Liar,” she murmured, then took a taste of the first soup. “Split pea with something else. Not bad.”

He tasted it and shook his head. “No, thanks.”

They both passed on the creamy mystery soup, while he liked the chicken vegetable and Marina complained it was too healthy.

“We’re at a wedding. Do we really have to get our five servings of fruits and vegetables in the first course?”

He poked around the bowl. “Not a lot of fruit that I can see.”

“You know what I mean.” She set down her spoon. “What about tortilla soup? Or a quesadilla? Doesn’t that sound good?”

“You want Mexican food at your sister’s wedding?”

Marina’s shoulders slumped. “Not really, but I could go for some right now. I should have eaten before coming here. I’m really hungry.”

“So you like food.”

She narrowed her gaze. “Yes, some women eat. I eat. Shocking, but true. I also run every day, so I can pretty much eat what I like and enjoy it. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Running with that chip on your shoulder must help with your workout. The extra weight would increase intensity.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. “You’re saying I’m a little sensitive about the food thing?”

“Would I say that?”

“You’re thinking I’m overreacting because you date models and I don’t feel I measure up to the ideal.”

“You’re doing all the talking.”

“I’m not intimidated. Mostly not. Sometimes, maybe a little. But I’d like to point out that these are my skinny jeans. They’ve fit all week and they look fabulous on me.”

“Yes, they do.” He’d admired the curve of her hips and her long legs when she’d first walked up. He was willing to take another look, if that would make her happy.

“I don’t seek approval from anyone but myself.”

“Why would you?”

She smiled. “You’re humoring me.”

“It seems safest. You have some attitude on you.”

“I know. I don’t get it. I’m actually a fairly calm person. I’m not sure what it is about you that

pushes all my buttons.”

—“It’s because I’m so smooth and handsome,” he said as Zoe came in with several salad plates, along with a basket of rolls. “You’re uncomfortable.”

Marina waited until they were alone to respond. When Zoe had picked up the soup bowls and left she said, “I’m not uncomfortable. You have an ego the size of Antarctica. You’re not that special.”

“Of course I am. You researched me. Who was the last guy you researched?”

“The men I know are totally normal. Researching is not required. You make me crazy.”

“Then my work here is complete.”

She shook her head. “Eat your salad.”

He took a bite of the first salad. There were a lot of strange looking lettuces and shavings of things he didn’t recognize. Salad was highly overrated, he thought grimly.

“Think about the guys you usually date,” he said, enjoying the fact that he could get to her. “Scruffy, poor grad students. When compared to me, they don’t have a chance.”

She glared at him. “Oh, right. Why would dating the next brilliant man who will change the course of history by improving the world be considered interesting?”

He picked up a roll and leaned toward her. “They’re nerds. They’re not interesting yet and they’re not good in bed. Admit it.”

Fury darkened her eyes. She opened her mouth, probably to yell at him. He stuck the roll between her lips.

“Not bad,” he said, pointing at the second salad. “I like the blue cheese. What do you think?”

She pulled the roll away and glared at him. “I think you’re a pompous, egotistical ass.”

He tasted the third salad and grimaced. “So you like me.”

“I don’t.”

“Of course you do. But I was asking about the salads. What do you think?”

She pointed at the one he’d tasted third. “That one works.”

He shook his head. “Not a good idea. There’s too much garlic in the dressing.”

“Since when do you know anything about cooking?”

“I don’t.” Could he help it that she set him up with one good line after the other? Sometimes a guy couldn’t help cutting a break. “But I do know about weddings.” He glanced around, then leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “Kissing. Lots and lots of kissing at weddings. You don’t want the guests to have garlic breath.”

Awareness crackled in the room. He thought Marina might get nervous or change the subject, but her gaze never left his. The humor was gone, replaced by a tension that quickly flared into need.

What would it be like to kiss her? What would her mouth feel like against his? How soft? How hungry? How sexy?

Was she the kind of woman who took charge, or did she like to be convinced? The possibilities were endless and suddenly he wanted to explore them all.

“I think you’re overstating the problem,” she said. “I don’t think the garlic is that big a deal, but if it is, we could simply change the dressing on the salad.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” he said and leaned in farther, then brushed his mouth against hers.

There was heat and need. They competed for his attention. Marina didn’t move, but he heard her breath quicken. But before he could take things to the next level, Zoe returned.

“What did you...Oh. Sorry. Should I come back?”

Todd straightened. “No. We know what we need to do.”

Marina felt as if she'd been hit by a truck. Well, that wasn't right, she thought as she blinked to bring the room back into focus. Nothing bad had happened and she certainly wasn't squished. But she was out of breath and feeling a little two-dimensional all the same.

Talk about wow. The heat, the tingles, the need to jump Todd's bones and make him have his way with her. All from a teeny, tiny, innocent kiss. What would happen if he kissed her like he meant it?

A dangerous question, she told herself. Todd was nothing like she'd imagined. He was funny and charming. Too charming. She had to remember that any contact with a woman was just a game with him. That he had the emotional depth of a cookie sheet. She should enjoy the superficial attraction for the momentary pleasure and let the rest of it go. He didn't do relationships and she didn't do anything else.

Although technically she didn't do relationships, either. It was the whole fear thing. She didn't want to get lost in a man.

They sampled several entrées, which were okay and the desserts, which were great.

"Are you going to finish that?" she asked, eyeing his barely tasted dish of chocolate mousse.

Todd pushed the bowl toward her. "You're welcome to it."

She dipped her spoon into the creamy, foamy delight and then savored the burst of rich chocolate on her tongue. He watched her, his expression unreadable.

She wanted to think he found her passion for chocolate fascinating, but no doubt he was comparing her normal appetite to his dates' lack of appetite and finding her just a little odd.

"Finished?" he asked when she'd scraped the last of the pudding from the bowl.

She nodded and they walked out to the reception area. After collecting prices and a brochure from Zoe, they promised to be in touch within a couple of weeks, then left.

"What did you think?" Todd asked as they walked to their cars.

"It was good," she said, "but not dazzling. I want to be dazzled. I think the food should be spectacular, not just good."

He glanced at the price list. "Considering what they're charging, I agree. So we still need a caterer. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I don't cater much, but I can ask around."

"I'll do the same. I'll also check with Ruth."

Ah, yes. Her grandmother. "She does the charity circuit," she said. "At least she's mentioned it. So she should be a great source of information." Marina frowned. "I wonder why she hasn't offered up advice."

"She promised not to meddle," Todd told her. "Don't get too excited—it's not going to last. She's a meddler by nature." There was a tone of affection in his voice.

"So you've forgiven her for coming to me and my sisters and offering each of us a million dollars if one of us were to marry you?"

He winced. "I'm working on it."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "She always had time for me and Ryan. Our parents took off for months at a time and left us behind. Aunt Ruth stepped into the void. When we were with her, it was like family."

Marina didn't know what to say to that. On the one hand, it explained Todd's fondness for his

aunt. On the other, this was the same woman who turned her back on her own daughter.

“You’re thinking about your mom,” he said, surprising her.

“Yes. My mom was seventeen when she fell in love with my dad. That’s pretty young. I can understand her parents being upset with her choice, but there are a lot of options between saying it’s okay and kicking her out forever. How come they didn’t try any of them?” She drew in a deep breath and let it go. “You’re going to tell me it was because of Ruth’s husband, Fraser. I’ve heard it all before. He was a difficult man who ruled his house and didn’t give anyone second chances.”

He was also the only father Marina’s mother had ever known. Her biological father, Ruth’s first husband, had died before Ruth had even realized she was pregnant.

“My mom was Ruth’s only daughter,” Marina said. “She should have tried harder. She should have made sure her daughter was all right.”

Todd surprised her for maybe the third time in less than two hours when he put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “She stood by her husband instead of her daughter. Because of that, she spent the next thirty years regretting her decision, but being too afraid to do anything about it. That’s got to be a hard way to live, for all of you. She’ll never get back what she lost and neither will you.”

She blinked at him. “That was really compassionate and understanding.”

He scowled at her. “I am capable of rational and emotional thought.”

“I know. I just didn’t think you’d bother.”

“That’s flattering.”

Now it was his turn to touch him. She grabbed his hand. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. It’s just the way you’re presented in the local press and how people talk about you.”

Maybe he wasn’t a cookie sheet, she thought. Maybe he was actually a jelly roll pan.

The image made her smile, which made his scowl deepen. “You’re really starting to tick me off,” he muttered.

“I thought you said you had a well-developed sense of humor.”

“I do. You’re not being funny. Whatever you think about me, you’re wrong.”

She was beginning to think that might be a possibility.

He pulled out his trusty PalmPilot and pushed some buttons. “We still need a caterer, a photographer, flowers, a cake, a dress, tuxes. It’s a long list.”

“We’ll get through it. I’ll e-mail Julie the information on this place. At least we know we’re having the wedding and reception in the ballroom. That’s something.”

“Lucky us.”

She stared into his dark eyes and smiled. “Thanks for being so understanding about everything with my grandmother. It helps to talk about it.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll call you and we can set up our next taste testing.”

Then he stunned her by bending down and kissing her. Only this kiss wasn’t about garlic or proving anything. At least she didn’t think it was. Instead it was quick, hot and bone-melting.

His hands rested on her shoulders, holding her in place. His mouth claimed hers with an expertise that made her more than willing to take this wherever he wanted to go. She lost herself in the pleasure of touch and lips and need.

He wasn’t what she expected. *This* wasn’t what she expected. She found herself responding to him in ways she hadn’t expected.

He tilted his head and brushed her lower lip with his tongue. She parted for him. He swept inside, teased into arousal, then pulled back and straightened.

“See you soon,” he said.

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