

# Releasing The Billionaire's Passion

By Elizabeth Lennox

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## ***Chapter 1***

“Mornin’ Uncle Chuck!” Fiona Chandler chimed as she walked into the office and plunked herself down in one of the chairs in front of the large, elegant desk.

Charles sighed, taking off his glasses and laying them on the desk carefully. “I am not your uncle, and please do not refer to me as “Chuck”,” he replied tightly, trying to not grind his teeth as he normally did when this particular woman walked into his office. Especially when she was wearing jeans and a tight top. Not that he had noticed her attire, he told himself as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

He picked up a file folder from the side of his desk, trying to calm down. There was just something about Fiona Chandler that...well, she riled him as no one else could and it infuriated him that she could make him lose his temper so easily. If only his eyes weren’t so drawn to the soft curls that danced crazily around her lovely face, and if her beautiful brown eyes would dim just a tiny bit, he would be very appreciative.

He read through the file, or pretended to at least. It was hard to concentrate on anything when Fiona was near. She just had such an overwhelming vitality that it disturbed his normal icy, absolute control.

And why the hell did she insist on calling him Uncle Chuck? They were in no way related! It was almost as if she were neutering him in some way. He was a man, damn it! And she was a beau...

Charles stopped that thought instantly. Fiona Chandler was a client of his bank. Nothing more! Simply a very important client. He needed to keep that thought uppermost in his mind and stop looking at those soft, red lips or contemplating how much he wanted to kiss her until she couldn’t call him Uncle Chuck or anything other than...

He was doing it again! Shaking his head, he flipped the page of the report he was attempting to read.

Fiona crossed her legs and sighed, wishing she could just lean over his desk and kiss him until he looked at her. Really looked at her! She knew very well that Charles Henson was not her uncle. She called him that only to remind herself that Charles Henson the Third was out of her league and he hated everything she stood for. In fact, if it weren’t for her grandfather’s will, she would never have met Charles Henson. That probably would have been a good thing, she thought wistfully as she stared at the tall, almost painfully handsome man. If only he weren’t so stodgy and set in his ways. If only he would loosen that tie just a little and look up, see her as a woman. She sighed with longing. What could one expect from a banker?

Charles Henson the Third was the epitome of an old fashioned banker. He was cool, reserved, supremely aware of his reputation and that of his bank at every moment. He was freakishly good with numbers. She knew from past conversations she’d overheard that Charles had pulled this stodgy old bank out of a really bad slump when he’d taken over from his father. It was now a powerful force in the international banking industry.

But he was also a man! And the phrase tall, dark and handsome was probably created just for Charles. Since he was a man, didn’t he have needs? Didn’t he need the soft touch of a

woman? He'd broken up with his girlfriend a long time ago! Of course, the stunningly gorgeous Georgette had probably spoiled Charles. There was no way Fiona's more modest curves could compete with Georgette Charding's sultry, Marilyn Monroe type figure.

Fiona shifted in her chair, contemplating a boob job. Yeah, she could most likely get his attention if she had a pair of bodacious double Ds! Maybe then Charles would notice her. Maybe then she could entice him and get him to see her as a woman. And then she could lean over his desk, his eyes would be drawn to her cleavage, and of course she would be wearing a low cut shirt just so that cleavage would be amply visible. She smiled at the idea, liking the possibilities. She could imagine his eyes being irresistibly drawn to her new double Ds....

Fiona sighed, almost slumping into the chair. Her C cup boobs just weren't up to the task of enticing Charles, now that Georgette had ruined him. Fiona didn't even like thinking of the two of them together. It made her stomach ache and her temper flare.

"Thank you for meeting me and I appreciate your promptness," he said with a dry tone of voice, glancing at the crystal clock behind her just to reinforce the fact that she was fifteen minutes late for their meeting.

She grinned and watched as his eyes hardened at her disrespect. At least it was a reaction, she told herself. That proved that she wasn't as completely invisible as she felt whenever she discussed anything with him. "No problem. What's up? Why are we meeting outside of our normal monthly meetings?" Fiona had a love/hate relationship with those meetings. She knew that when she met with Charles, her heart got all excited, her body started trembling, and silly thoughts entered her mind. Thoughts like getting a boob job! The problem was very basic. She was in love with Charles Henson the Third.

And it wasn't just a silly infatuation masquerading as love. Nope. Unfortunately for her stubborn, stupid and silly heart, she was truly and one hundred percent in love with the man. She thought he was brilliant, loved talking to him, and knew he had the patience of a saint because he was more than willing to answer any and all of her questions. Some questions she just made up so she could spend more time with him. He also had a dry sense of humor that never failed to make her laugh. His observations about life and the world were spot on from her point of view, and she found him endlessly fascinating.

Unfortunately, she knew he considered her a duty. An obligation to her dead grandfather who had left Charles as the executor of his will. Charles didn't see her as a woman, as someone he could seriously think of in relationship terms. He saw her as an assignment – a monthly box to check off, and a tedious one at that. Fiona was the woman he had to lecture every month about her spending habits and job prospects. Having to explain financial matters to her always seemed to make him rub the bridge of his nose, a sure sign of his irritation.

Fiona had tried desperately hard to figure out all these banking issues so he would take her seriously. She'd actually taken some math classes, nothing complicated, just some basic math classes that she'd hoped would help her remember all of the high school math she'd tried so hard to forget after passing the class. And every few months, she'd make a valiant effort to stop overspending so he didn't have to lecture her about balancing her checkbook. Unfortunately, she failed. Miserably! Some months, she'd done a fairly good job and only spent a few pennies over her balance. But other months, she'd forgotten and had blown through her

cash. Those were the worst months. She'd had to endure many questions and long lectures about the extensive list of items she'd purchased, about how she needed to subtract those amount from her balance every time she spent anything.

During every one of those lectures, she sat in this chair in front of his desk while her mind created elaborate fantasies. Of course, Charles was the star participant! And oh goodness, the things that she had him do! Those lectures actually turned out some of her best stuff!

She sighed as she watched him, her eyes taking in his strong jaw, his black hair and long, black lashes. She knew that they hid golden eyes that changed to amber whenever she said something to irritate him. Which was often, she thought with increasing panic. The man just didn't get her. She was sure that, to Charles, she was like a tiny splinter – near the surface enough to see and irritate, but deep enough that it drove a person nuts trying to get it out.

Fiona represented everything Charles was not. He was organized and meticulous, brilliant at math and all things having to do with numbers. She suspected that he didn't really have a heart. Inside that muscular chest, beneath those layers of perfectly tailored wool, was a calculator instead of a vulnerable organ to pump blood.

But oh, when he looked at her with those golden eyes, her insides just melted.

If only he could see her as a woman instead of a gnat he needed to swat. Well, perhaps that was too harsh of a statement. He probably didn't see her as a gnat. She was more of a bumblebee that buzzed around him, irritating him until he had to leave the vicinity.

Fiona, on the other hand, saw Charles Henson the Third as the hottest thing on two legs.

Well, when he wasn't looking down that very good looking nose at her from his too-tall height, that is. Yes, a man that brilliant should be short, she thought. And fat. Fiona tilted her head, considering the man's broad shoulders and long legs as he paced in front of her. Yep, a man with Charles' brilliance should be short, fat and squirrely. He needed to give the rest of the men in the world a chance. But alas, Charles was about three inches over six feet with the lithe body of a swimmer or a long distance runner. And he was so charming! At least, she thought so when he wasn't lecturing her on her spending habits or trying to get her to invest her inheritance in various stocks and bonds or mutual funds.

Hmmm...she wondered what he would look like in a bathing suit. She imagined his chest covered with muscles and an abdomen rippling with more of them. And his legs were so long, she suspected that he really did run. Fiona had no idea what his butt might look like because she'd never seen the man without a suit jacket on. Which was really a crime, she thought. The man was built! He should show it off a bit. He should advertise!

Shaking her head, she pushed those silly thoughts out of her mind. The idea of Charles Henson the Third showing off a tight butt was almost humorous. Or it would be if she weren't so interested!

"Are you even listening to me?" Charles asked, interrupting a very nice fantasy about Charles in a bathing suit. Or out of one, actually.

She looked up into his golden eyes, realizing that they were now a dark amber color. That meant trouble! "Of course!" she exclaimed, sitting up straighter in the leather chair and looking at his chin. She needed to get this interview over with before she started panting at the idea of running her fingers over his....

Stop! Fiona blinked and actually shook her head this time. Her fantasies were really getting out of control lately!

All he had to do was look at her and she was mush. What would it be like if he actually kissed her? She thought about his lips, those firm, always disapproving lips descending towards her. Fiona could teach him how to kiss, she thought. She could teach him a whole lot of stuff, actually. He probably wasn't a good kisser because he was too busy reviewing tedious things like spreadsheets, but she could teach him. Goodness, the things she'd like to teach him...

"Fiona? You aren't listening, are you?" Charles snapped.

Fiona jerked up straighter in her chair. "Yes. Of course," she lied. "Go on."

Charles sat back in his high, leather chair, looking at the woman. Her brown eyes and her curly brown hair were distracting. Couldn't she contain that hair? He knew of several very good stylists who could...

What the hell was she wearing on her feet? Red cowboy boots? Good grief.

Shaking his head, he leaned forward again, his finger running down the report. "As I was saying, your checking account is severely overdrawn. I took the liberty of transferring funds..."

Fiona heard that! Those were fighting words! She snapped to attention quickly with that declaration. "You did not!" she gasped, sitting up straight and glaring at him. "Tell me you didn't transfer my grandfather's money into my checking account!"

Charles looked up, startled by her vehemence. He pulled his wire rimmed glasses off and looked at her carefully. The normally flighty, fun-loving Fiona was practically bristling with anger. "I believe that is what your grandfather would have wanted," he explained. He actually hadn't transferred the money from her grandfather's account. He'd covered her overdrawn checks himself. He still wasn't sure why he'd done that, but he'd been watching her account ever since their first meeting after her grandfather's funeral. Whenever he saw that things were getting low, he just... fixed it.

It wasn't like she spent enormous amounts of money. The woman was actually fairly frugal and generally lived within her means. She just seemed to pay no attention to timing – when money was going out and when it was coming in – which got her into trouble.

"Why do you have such a problem with using your grandfather's money?" he asked carefully. And why should he even care? He should be treating Fiona as if she were just another client. So why did he take such a personal interest in her account? He had clients who transferred billions of dollars in and out of this bank on a regular basis. He himself had about a dozen accounts, each with billions of dollars or yen or different currencies that he shifted rapidly when exchange rates would make it profitable. And yet, every day, he checked Fiona's tiny checking account with a few thousand dollars in it. He made sure that she had money to cover the rent and groceries, that she was being careful.

Fiona Chandler was a mystery. He couldn't figure her out, nor could he figure out why he took such special care of her.

"I just..." she stumbled, not sure how to explain to someone so calm and in control as Charles how she felt about her inheritance. An inheritance that she refused to touch under any circumstances. Her grandfather had been the most distrusting, disapproving, horrible man she'd

ever met. He'd given her that money in order to control her, to teach her responsibility and make her "live her life properly, as a well-brought up lady should" in his words.

Well, she wasn't going to give in to that man's extortion. He might be dead, but she was still her own person. He'd lived his life on a rigid schedule, never veering away from his plans by even a minute. Fiona had been his only living relative by the time he'd passed away, and they'd fought with each other about everything! How she should live, what she should wear, what university she should attend, the classes she should take. The man had tried hard to control her with money and his disapproving tone. And Fiona had fought him every step of the way.

Fiona preferred to live her life with as much energy as possible. She wanted to grab onto everything, experience life and happiness on a deeper level than someone who lived life via a minute by minute schedule ever could. She loved laying in the park, looking at the clouds or riding a roller coaster. She loved talking with strangers, finding out what made other people tick, why they chose one thing over another. She could have a fifteen minute discussion with a stranger in the grocery store over how to pick oranges.

People were fascinating to her. Her grandfather had hated it when he'd find her conversing with a stranger after church or during parties. He would lecture her before and after every social event, telling her who she should talk with or be seen with, and give her a list of appropriate topics to discuss – all of which started and ended with the weather and a person's job.

Her grandfather had hated her choice of careers. He'd demanded that she become a lawyer or a business person. He'd refused to pay for her college tuition unless she buckled down and did as he'd ordered. So she'd worked three jobs to pay for college, taking the classes she wanted instead of those he prescribed. And she'd graduated with honors! Not that he'd congratulated her in any way.

Charles seemed like her grandfather in so many ways. It boggled her mind that she was so intensely attracted to him. But there was just something about the man that pulled her eyes, tugged at her heart and...yes, created strange, unsettling sensations deep down inside of her.

Why was she so hung up on him? Why did Charles fascinate her as no other man ever had?

"Fiona?" Charles prompted.

Fiona jerked back out of her fantasies and focused on the man sitting in front of her, wishing she could walk around his desk, run her fingers through his immaculate hair and kiss him until he was groaning with need. Need for her!

What had he asked? Oh, yea! Her grandfather's money. "I just prefer to live my life on my own terms," she finally explained. She was pretty sure he wouldn't understand but she couldn't help that. Charles was almost as stodgy and rigid as her grandfather. So why was she so impossibly in love with him?

Charles had no response to that comment. It made no sense. Everyone lived within a confined set of rules. Living outside of rules caused chaos. Well, looking at Fiona's curls, he accepted that the woman practically defined chaos. Not that he disliked her curls. He lov...Damn it!

He refused to think about how soft those curls would feel in his hands, about how delicate her skin probably would feel. He cleared his throat and pushed his glasses back on, looking down at the file instead of the painfully beautiful woman in front of him. "Anyway, about your checking account, you need to watch your balance more carefully and be sure to enter checks you write in your checkbook. It will save you a lot of heartache if any checks bounce." Not that he would allow that to happen, he thought. He'd watch out for that but he wanted her to be aware, just in case she needed something and couldn't afford it.

"I don't balance my checkbook," she stated as if that were the most obvious thing in the world. She knew he'd gone to great pains to explain how to balance her checkbook on more than one occasion but...she just couldn't do it. It simply wasn't in her genes.

Charles stared across the desk at her, not sure what to say. Or think. "I'm sorry?" he responded.

Fiona shivered, feeling his deep voice all the way down to her toes. It was always like this with Charles. She loved his voice, the way his eyes could turn hot or cold, depending on what he was feeling inside. Most people probably didn't notice, but she did. She noticed everything about him. Like how he took a deep breath to calm himself down. He even leaned back in his chair again, probably counting to ten.

"Well, you're going to learn." He glanced at his watch. "I have a meeting in two minutes so meet me back here at noon. We'll go through the basics again over lunch." With that, he stood up, jerked his cuffs down and walked out of the office, leaving her staring after him with her mouth hanging open.

And her eyes silently damning the suit jacket that hid his butt!

Charles sat through the next meeting, impatient to get back to his office. He told himself that he wasn't excited to see Fiona again. He was simply concerned about the state of her checking account. It was ridiculous that a woman of her age didn't know how to balance a checkbook. She was...what was she...twenty-five?

She was damn well going to learn how to do it this time!

Charles focused on the current meeting, pushing Fiona out of his mind once again. What was this pompous blowhard talking about anyway? Charles looked up from his papers. It was one of his biggest clients, demanding a two point three percent loan on his project. He'd been going on and on about trading relationships and subjects that were completely irrelevant to the issue. After twenty five minutes, Charles stood up, impatient with the discussion. "Linden, your business is down fifteen percent over last quarter. You slashed your sales team by fifty percent last month instead of cutting your other indirect expenses. And worst of all, the three products your company launched last year failed miserably. All of this means you don't have the ability to fix the sales loss. So no, I'm not revising your loan to two point three percent. In fact, if you can't make this month's payment, I'm enforcing paragraph twenty-three, section six which allows me to bump up the rate to four point one percent." He nodded curtly to the others in the room, all of whom were sitting there, astonished with their mouths hanging open. Charles then left the room, more than ready to show Fiona how to balance her check book.

And take her to lunch. The woman obviously didn't eat enough. She was too thin, he thought. He'd take her out to Antoine's, that pretentious French restaurant that served food with thick sauces that Georgette loved. That would add a few calories. He felt momentarily guilty about taking Fiona to his ex-girlfriend's favorite restaurant, but what was a man to do?

He was supremely glad that things hadn't worked out with Georgette, and relieved that she was now married. She was more than lovely. She was intelligent and beautiful and they were alike in so many ways. But he just never felt anything for her. He wished he had. He wished Georgette had been the one that stirred his blood and fired his passions. A picture of the lovely Fiona slipped into his mind, but he banished that image once more. Georgette was exactly the kind of woman he should have married.

He walked back into his office and looked around. When he didn't see Fiona, he stepped back out to his assistant. "Where did Ms. Chandler go?" he snapped, irritated that she wasn't waiting for him. But when had she ever been on time?

Lizzy Benson, his fifty year old assistant who was efficiency personified, turned around with her normally pursed lips. "Ms. Chandler left right after you. She said she had to get to work."

Charles mumbled a curse under his breath. Fiona didn't have a job! He was about to stomp out of his office to track her down when he stopped short. Did she have a job? There had been no deposits into her account other than smaller cash deposits and a few transfers.

Charles rubbed his forehead, trying to figure this woman out. "Lizzy, find out where Fiona Chandler is working and give me the address," he said and went back into his office, burying himself in paperwork just to get the lovely Fiona out of his mind.

## **Chapter 2**

“Yes, Fiona,” he snapped when his cell phone rang a few days later. He was still irritated that his investigators hadn’t discovered her job. She walked dogs occasionally. But other than that, she left the house only to meet her friends. And she did too much of that, he thought as he glanced at the report on his desk.

There was a slight pause before she started talking and Charles instantly regretted his harsh greeting. “I’m going to buy a house. Should I go through your bank to finance it or should I find someone else who doesn’t mind that I don’t balance my checkbook?”

Charles stared at the phone, thinking this must be some sort of joke. “A house? What kind of a house?”

She sighed. “One with four walls, a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen. A normal house. Sort of like the kind other people buy,” she teased and he could hear the laughter in her pretty voice.

Charles pinched the bridge of his nose at the mention of Fiona in a bedroom. He instantly pictured her on a bed. Naked. “Yes. Right.” He stood up and walked to the windows of his office that looked out onto the Mississippi River. The swirling brown water never ceased to fascinate him, so he’d kept the headquarters of his bank here despite the crazy humidity and heat. “Where is this house?”

Fiona bit her lip, not wanting to give him any information. “Look, why don’t I just call your mortgage department. I don’t want any special services just because I know you.”

Charles gritted his teeth, digging deep for patience. She’d damn well better get used to dealing with him about anything having to do with financial matters! There was no way he would allow her to deal with anyone but him! He didn’t want anyone taking advantage of her. She was too soft, too trusting and damn too naïve. “Fiona, give me the damn address.” There was no way in hell he’d let her go through the mortgage branch. They’d stamp rejected on her mortgage application before she even stepped out of the building. Besides, he’d put a flag on her accounts. Any time she called the bank, no matter what branch or department, she was instantly transferred to him. So there was no way she could even call the mortgage department and talk to a representative there.

Fiona spat out the address of the precious home she’d been so excited about. “Why? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to drive to your place, pick you up and we’re going to look at this house together.” He didn’t wait for her to respond but simply ended the call and walked out of his office. “Cancel my appointments this afternoon,” he told Lizzy.

The older woman peered at him over the top of her glasses, stunned speechless. Cancel his appointments? The man never left the office before seven o’clock in the evening. What was going on?

Charles wasn’t sure what he was thinking. His only objective was to figure out what Fiona was doing. She was so beautiful and sweet, he could just picture some disreputable realtor trying to sell her a bad house. He’d find out exactly what was going on and make sure that the realtor never had the ability to hurt his Fiona again.

“His” Fiona? Where the hell had that thought come from?

He pressed his foot to the accelerator and sped up, determined to get to Fiona before she did something she might regret.

When he walked up to her apartment, he was ready to tear the realtor apart, already having made him out to be a lecherous swine with bad intentions and illegal financing terms. But her sweet smile when she answered the door calmed him down. She looked so young and yet, so...

“Where’s this house?” he demanded, his voice extra gruff because he couldn’t think of her in those terms. She was a client, damn it! And he was supposed to protect her. “Let me see it.”

Fiona pulled back, her eyes suddenly wary. “I don’t think I want you to see the house,” she said. “You’re in a cranky mood. You’ll mess up the spirit of the house.”

Charles stood outside her apartment, his hands fisted on his hips and waited. He was actually waiting for her to explain that statement. It was so utterly ridiculous to think that a house had any sort of spirit. It was a building. It didn’t have moods or auras or whatever she was talking about. But she simply stood there, staring back at him as if she was making perfect sense. She even nodded once for emphasis.

He shook his head and stepped back. “Right. Grab your purse and let’s go.”

Fiona bit her lower lip, trying to decide what was going on. Why was he always so cranky lately? “Charles, you’re not going to like it,” she said. “I think I should just go to another...”

He moved closer, looking down into her startled brown eyes. “Fiona, if you even utter the idea of going to another bank, I think I’ll have to turn you over my knee and spank your adorable bottom. Do you understand?” he practically growled.

Fiona’s mouth dropped open but, after a pregnant moment where she stood a few inches away from his incredibly tall body, she nodded her head even though her eyes were still wide with shock. She completely dismissed the possibility of him spanking her. Charles would never stoop to anything so uncivil. No, her whole mind was focused on the fact that he thought her butt was...what was the word he used? “Adorable”?

He thought her butt was adorable! Wow!

Charles watched in fascination as her entire face beamed. It started off slowly, but the transformation was...amazing. Startling.

He was confused by her reaction and not sure what to make of it. “What just happened here?” he asked, his voice husky and he was unable to tear his eyes away from her beautiful features. He told himself to move back, to give her space. But he couldn’t move. Didn’t want to move. She was just so damn beautiful!

“Nothing,” she replied happily, a bounce to her step as she practically vibrated with that crazy energy that always seemed to surround her. “Thank you.”

Charles blinked when she stepped back and grabbed her purse. A moment later, they were walking down the hallway together and Charles still didn’t understand what had changed her lovely features from worried to happy in the blink of an eye.

“It’s a two bedroom, one and a half bath cottage style house over on Clairmont Street. I liked that area because it is close to the waterfront. I also heard that someone is buying up the land on the other side to make a really nice development. So this sounded like a good investment.”

Charles knew exactly what was going on with the waterfront area, since his bank was financing the Alfieri Properties project that was going to tear down the abandoned warehouses and build up a whole new community. It was a massive project, but Charles had complete faith that Dylan Alfieri would get the job done profitably.

He held the door to his black sedan open for her but when she didn’t step into the passenger seat, he looked back at her. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Fiona stared at the magnificent car. Of course it was the top of the line luxury vehicle, but this baby had a bit of kick to it. The sleek, black lines of the Maserati impressed her. She would have thought he’d drive something traditional and sedate, more banker-ish, like a Mercedes or a Lexus.

Fiona shook her head, unaware of the way her curls danced around her delicate features or the instant impact those dancing curls had on Charles’ imagination. This car indicated the man had much more underneath that conservative exterior than she’d realized. “Nothing at all,” she smiled up at him and slipped into the supple leather seat.

Charles almost slammed the car door closed as he tried to get his body back under control after that smile. Damn! What the hell was going on with him? She was just a client. A client he needed to take an unexplainable, special interest in so that he knew she was okay, but still, just a client.

It was a short ride to the house Fiona had in mind, but Charles asked her questions about why she wanted this house over another house, the design, the neighborhood. Most of his questions, she couldn’t answer. She finally sighed and looked up at him, confused with his interrogation. “Charles, I don’t know what the school system is like,” she told him with exasperation. “Good grief, I just love the house. It feels good and with a bit of care, it could be a beautiful home.” She didn’t want to go into the issue of future children because the idea of any man touching her other than Charles made her skin crawl. Which effectively meant she’d never have children. And that was okay. Almost.

“It’s right there,” she told him, pointing to a small cottage style house about three houses down from the corner. “Isn’t it adorable?” she asked.

Charles parked in the gravel driveway and stared out through the windshield at the building. It was more mess than home, with weeds growing through the cracks in the cement, a broken window in the basement, no landscaping to speak of, and a decidedly sad look about the whole thing. Only Fiona could think of this house as a happy place because, in his mind, it looked like a candidate for being demolished.

“Fiona...” he started to say but she was already out of the car and hurrying up the sidewalk to greet some guy. When she wrapped her slender arms around the man and even kissed his cheek, Charles saw red. Whipping out of his car, he came around, unaware of his hands fisting, ready to punch this guy who had dared to touch Fiona.

She spun around, that bright smile stopping him. But just barely. "Charles, this is Reggie Duncan. He's the realtor who showed the house to me yesterday."

Charles looked at the man, who immediately understood that he was in trouble. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Henson," Reggie said nervously, extending his hand to Charles.

In return, Charles looked at Fiona's hands, still wrapped around Reggie's arm, then back up into Reggie's eyes. The silent warning was received because Reggie cleared his throat and stepped back, forcing Fiona to release his arm. "Um...yes, well..."

Fiona didn't understand what was going on, but one moment Reggie was his usual effusive self and the next moment he was having trouble clearing his throat. Looking up at Charles, she suspected that it was his fault and she glared up at him. "Be nice," she whispered to Charles as Reggie walked up the sidewalk to unlock the front door.

Charles didn't respond in any way other than to put a hand to her back and lead her up the cement stairs. "Tell me again why you want this house," he commanded.

Fiona looked up at him with worry in her brown eyes. "Why? Is it bad? Is something wrong with it?"

Charles looked down at her and something inside of him twisted with the decreased happiness in her brown eyes. "The driveway would need to be repaved, costing you about ten thousand dollars. The sidewalk needs to be jackhammered out and replaced because there's no way you can fix those cracks. The roots of that tree," he said, pointing to the large maple tree on the front lawn, "have grown up underneath and pushed the cement out of the earth. That's going to cost another ten grand." He proceeded into the house as Reggie nervously opened the door and stepped back. "Not to mention, there are probably a lot of electrical and plumbing issues that need to be addressed." He looked over to the realtor. "Is the kitchen updated with new appliances?" When the man didn't respond quickly enough, Charles snapped, "I'm taking that as a no. And what about the bathrooms? Has an inspector come in to check out the plumbing?"

Fiona walked over to Charles and took his hand, immediately stopping him from going into any other potential downsides to her little dream cottage. "Those are all valid issues, but come here. Look at this fireplace," she encouraged, bringing his hand to her chest and almost bouncing with delight. "The tile work on this is amazing. You can't buy tiles like that anywhere. They have to age through time and change color as the fire is used through the generations." She tugged him closer and he felt a pang of regret when the back of his hand was no longer pressed against her soft breasts. "And the mantle is solid wood. Isn't the intricate wood carving amazing? Not many people take the time to carve wood like that. If you see it in houses now, it is most likely clay that is painted to look like wood."

Charles watched as her soft hand smoothed over the mantle, then she looked up at him with hopeful eyes. He couldn't really speak, his mind was completely focused on both of her hands, one which was still in his and the other which was stroking the wood. In his mind, he was picturing her stroking his chest in the same way, her long fingers running over his skin and his body hardened. His mind was blank except for that image.

Fiona saw the strange look in his eyes and thought she was failing to convince him about the beauty of the house so she doubled her efforts. Grabbing his arm and inadvertently pressing her breasts against his bicep, she pulled him into the kitchen. "You mentioned updated

appliances and, yes, that's probably something I'll have to figure out but look at these cabinets. They're solid wood. The hinges are all iron, put in by some guy who wanted to surprise his wife about fifty years ago. And look," she opened several of them and closed them again, "they all work perfectly. I checked."

She grabbed his hand again, pulling him through to the dining room. "And just look at these original hardwood floors," she said, standing in the doorway to the room. "Just think about all of the meals that have been eaten in this room." She sighed as she stared down at the floor. "Generations of families have been fed in this room. The floors are scuffed in certain areas. Feel it and see where there are almost grooves because of the table and chairs that have slid back and forth on the wood over the years."

Charles could honestly say that he had no idea if the flooring was wood or asphalt. The only thing that he understood in his mind was the fact that Fiona was pressing her perfect breasts against his arm. His mind was whirling with ideas on how he wanted to explore her soft, full breasts with more than just the side of his arm. He pretended to look around the room, noticing that the floor was indeed scuffed up but he really couldn't give a damn about the floor when her breast was pressed against him like this.

Fiona continued to hold his hand, dragging him over to stand in front of yet another fireplace. "And here again is another mantle, all solid wood. This fireplace would keep the whole family warm while they ate Christmas dinners, Thanksgiving dinners, birthdays, and just normal family meals." She looked up into his blue eyes hopefully and Charles was not immune to her plea.

He breathed in deeply, trying to get his thoughts together. "Fiona, the house is..."

"Wait!" She covered his mouth with her hand and Charles was hard-pressed not to nibble against her soft skin. Oh, the things he could do to her hand that would make her toes curl. His mind pictured her writhing on his bed just from the things he would do to....

Damn, he had to get control of this lust he was feeling for Fiona. It was hitting him harder than normal today. Well, was there a "normal" when it came to Fiona? Definitely not!

Her soft, brown eyes implored him to not judge just yet. "You haven't even seen the best part." She grabbed his hand once more and pulled him up the old wooden stairs that creaked with their weight. "Wait until you see..." Fiona stopped at the top of the stairs and looked down at him.

"The best part?" He prompted when she didn't go any further. As he looked up into her soft, brown eyes, he wondered what was going on inside that pretty head of hers. Of course, he also wondered what she would do if he pulled her closer, buried his face against those breasts and explored her...

Damn!

"Um..." She hesitated, not sure exactly what to do. Fiona had been about to take him into what would be her bedroom, but the idea of Charles, tall, handsome, amazing Charles being in her bedroom was too much for her.

"Well, you probably don't want to see anything up here. You're right, the bathrooms need to be renovated and..."

Charles sensed something was truly wrong and he didn't like it. "Fiona, what do you not want me to see?" Charles asked, taking the last step on the stairs and towering over her petite figure. She was still holding onto his hand, but his other hand came up, his thumb gently caressing her cheek.

Fiona gasped as the fire from his touch burned all the way down to her stomach. "It's just bedrooms up here," she whispered, wishing she had the courage to put her hands on his chest and stop his forward momentum.

Charles told himself to move back, to give her space again. But he didn't. He seemed to be having this argument too often lately, but there was something in her eyes that drew him even closer. "Show me the bedrooms, Fiona," he commanded softly but with that deep voice that his employees knew not to argue with.

He felt the shiver as it raced throughout her body.

Fiona stepped back, taking a deep breath that wasn't filled with the incredible Charles-scent that she love so much. "Yes. Right." She turned around and looked at the two doors, one leading to the right and one leading to the left. She decided to show him the smaller of the bedrooms, the one she wouldn't be sleeping in. "See? Isn't this a beautiful room?" She walked over to the large windows that looked out onto the front yard and one that looked out onto the side yard. "There's more wood work up here and even crown molding. The closets are big and spacious, and all of the doors up here are solid wood as well."

Charles stood in the doorway, irritated that she'd dropped his hand. He wanted those soft breasts against his arm again and he was having a hard time getting over his resentment towards the house.

"The house seems solid enough, but what are you going to do about the yard?"

Fiona's smile was brighter than the sunshine when she looked up at him. "I'll learn to garden. How hard can it be? I mean, don't you just put plants into the ground and they grow?"

Charles crossed his arms over his chest and leaned one shoulder against the door frame. "I think it's a little more complicated than that." He thought she was cute, being so optimistic about planting things. He could tell her about watering methods, shade loving plants, sun loving bushes, the roots in the front yard from the enormous tree that were going to make digging a hole almost impossible, not to mention how the tree would most likely steal all the water from whatever she planted.

Fiona simply shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I guess I have a new learning experience on the horizon then, right?"

Charles was not immune to her enthusiastic attitude and couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped him. "I suppose that's one way to look at it." He turned around and looked behind him. "What's in the other bedroom?" He walked towards the other door, peering inside. Because he had his back turned to Fiona, he wasn't expecting what came next.

Fiona saw what he was about to do, and jumped into action. "You can't go in there!" She nimbly stepped around his large body, blocking the entrance to the doorway.

Charles looked down at the little woman who was trying to block his way, amused and still so turned on. "You know that I'm going in there, don't you?"

Fiona shook her head, her curls dancing around her lovely features. "You can't. I won't let you."

Charles smiled slightly, intrigued by this mystery. "What is in that room that you don't want me to see?"

Fiona once again started to shake her head, but this time she put her hands against his chest to stop him. "Charles, you are not going in this room."

One black eyebrow went up in challenge. "I'm going in there, Fiona." With that, he wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her up against him. It was a simple task to simply change places with her.

Fiona gasped at the contact with his hard body. Her fingers were reluctant to move away from his chest, which was surprisingly more muscular than even what she'd pictured in her mind. She wouldn't have thought of him as a man who worked out that often, but those muscles were a testament to a consistent and intense workout regime. The man was a workaholic, so when did he have time to work out? But the muscles in his chest were not something that he could come by casually. Oh goodness, her fascination with Charles ratcheted up several more notches.

Charles looked around at the empty room. It looked almost exactly like the other room, but larger. There were double windows on both sides of the outside walls, but other than a closet, there was nothing special about this room. "What were you trying to hide?"

Fiona wrapped her arms around her waist, her mind instantly picturing a big bed and Charles in the middle of it, his conservative suit laying on the ground and his eyes telling her to come closer. She could feel the heat rising to her cheeks and quickly turned away so he wouldn't see her blush and question her about it. The man really wouldn't let any detail get by him.

"It's just another room, Charles. Nothing special about it, and there's nothing wrong with it." But Fiona wouldn't step into the room, not with Charles in it as well. The images swirling through her vulnerable, Charles-hungry mind were too vivid, too erotic.

Charles looked at her suspiciously. Something was going on. Something that he didn't understand. "Fiona..."

"Let's go downstairs and I'll show you the backyard." With that, she turned around and walked down the stairs, feeling a little bit clumsy since she was still trembling after feeling his arms around her waist and her breasts pressed against his chest. "You'll approve of that area, at least. It is filled with lots of trees and shade."

Charles stepped out of the bedroom and watched her walk down the staircase. His eyes sharpened on her sexy butt in those jeans, but he forced himself to look away. She wasn't his. She was a client.

So why was his mind thinking of this particular client in completely inappropriate ways?

Fiona stood in the middle of the backyard, her face turned up towards the dappled sunshine that streamed through the trees. She took several deep breaths, trying to get her body back under control. Charles had muscles. That realization was so tantalizing. She should never have touched him, she should never have let him look in that bedroom. Fiona almost cried as she

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