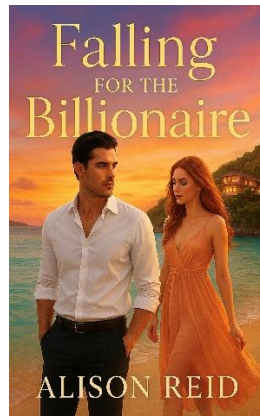


Falling for the Billionaire

by Alison Reid



Julian’s shoulders lifted in a distinctly Gallic shrug—a gesture she suddenly recognised from the portrait of his French great-grandmother. “I already knew most of it and guessed the rest,” he drawled. “And if staying here galls you so much, you can earn your keep.”

She froze. “How?” The word was sharp enough to cut.

“Not the way you’re thinking,” he said, a hint of hauteur in his tone. “I’ve never had to pay for sex, and I don’t intend to start now.”

Aurelia had always thought the expression wanting the ground to swallow you was melodramatic. Now she understood it with painful clarity. Humiliation washed over her in a hot wave; if the floor had cracked open at her feet she’d have leapt straight into the abyss.

Scarlet-faced, she managed, “I didn’t think of anything like that until you... made it obvious what you thought I meant.”

Before she tied herself in further knots, she drew in a shaky breath and forced herself on. “I understand now that you didn’t mean it that way, but I’m afraid I don’t have any skills to pay for my board.”

“Let’s get one thing perfectly clear,” he said, his gaze hardening to metal. “I don’t expect you to pay for anything. My offhand comment meant only that I’m in a bind—and if you’re willing, you can help.”

“I’d like to,” she said softly. “You’ve been very kind to me, and I’m not ungrateful.”

“I don’t want your gratitude,” he said, cool and aloof, a boundary sliding cleanly between them. “The situation is unusual. An old friend of my father’s is arriving soon, bringing his granddaughter. Jasmine is young, very pretty, and I like her—but she’s developed a massive crush on me. It’s becoming embarrassing.”

“They usually are—to both the crusher and the crushee,” Aurelia said tartly. Inwardly, she doubted this was anything new for him.

“This one is edging into something uncomfortably close to stalking. I just read an interview she gave to a fashion magazine—she implied we’re engaged, and that I’m waiting for her to ‘grow up.’”

Rapidly reassessing the girl, Aurelia asked, “How old is she?”

“Nineteen. She’s a model.”

“I’m surprised. I’d have thought you could handle a situation like this easily.”

“Normally, yes.” His voice hardened. “But her grandfather is old. It would hurt him if my lawyers sent a cease-and-desist letter or if I went public with a denial. And I like the girl. I don’t want to humiliate her.”

“Someone must have given her the idea that you were in love with her.”

“Not I,” he said flatly.

Aurelia believed him. With all the women he could have, it seemed unlikely he’d choose someone barely nineteen. “So... how exactly do you think I can help?”

He looked at her, expression unreadable, and said, “You’ve been staying here for several days. It might reinforce to her that I’m not interested in her as wife material if she believes we’re lovers.”

“Lovers?” Her voice shot up an octave, half-squeak, half-gasp.

He rose, taking her hand and bringing her up with him. “Lovers,” he repeated calmly, a cynical smile tugging at his mouth. “As in sharing a bed.”

“As in being your mistress?” Her heart pounded so loudly she could barely hear her own words. She couldn’t look away from his eyes—gunmetal grey, unwavering, and disturbingly warm.

“Mistress?” he echoed, with a faintly mocking lift of one brow. “That’s an old-fashioned word.”

Still holding her hand, he lifted his other and traced the outline of her mouth with one long, sure fingertip.

The touch was pure fire—white-hot lightning through her veins, a fever blooming beneath her skin.

“No,” he went on, voice dropping to something deep and textured. “Apart from that erotic mouth, you’re not mistress material. Jasmine is far more sophisticated. A mistress she could handle. But I want her to believe we’re in love—that this is serious.”

His knowledgeable fingertip smoothed along her cheekbone, soft and devastating. Aurelia struggled to gather her scattered thoughts. “If she’s so sophisticated she’ll know... she’ll know...”

“What will she know?” His voice was amused, and when she lifted her lashes she caught him watching her mouth—intently, hungrily.

A jolt shot through her, hot and electric. “That... I’m not the right sort of person for you.”

It was almost impossible to form coherent sentences under that gaze—under that touch. His voice was a dark velvet thread, his eyes hypnotic, and the slow, deliberate caress along her skin sank right into her core.

“I mean...” she whispered, fighting for sense, “I’m not the kind of woman you’d be attracted to. I blush all the time—my skin shows every emotion—”

Realising she was babbling, she bit off her words. Pull away, she told herself fiercely. Step back. He’s only holding one hand—he’ll let you go...

But Julian’s gaze darkened—an unmistakable flare of male desire.

“You’re wrong,” he said softly. “I find you very attractive. Surely you know that?”

His voice slid over her like warm honey.

“Your skin is like silk... and those blushes you hate?”

His eyes burned into hers.

“They’re charming.”

He released her hand, but before she could seize the moment to leap backward, he framed her face between his palms and smiled down at her.

Even through the dazed fog of his nearness, Aurelia recognised what he was doing—wielding charm and masculine charisma like a weapon, using that devastating presence to persuade her. She should have been angry. She should have recoiled, resisted.

But his smile struck her like a bolt of heat—erotic in its simplicity, its power. It zinged through her with electric clarity, straight to the hidden, aching places she didn’t want to acknowledge.

Then, abruptly, he stepped back. He dropped his hands as if he, too, needed distance. A faint, betraying flush touched his cheekbones—confirmation that his reaction to her had not been entirely one-sided, however physical or inconvenient it might have been for him.

“Trust me,” he said quietly, the steel returning to his voice. “If you agree to this, they will believe we are in love. The men in my family marry for love. And this,” he added with pragmatic calm, “is the least painful—and probably the only acceptable—way for Jasmine to realise that her hopes are nothing more than fairy gold.”

Aurelia hesitated. “Will she be upset?”

His broad shoulders lifted in a brief, resigned shrug. “Almost certainly—a little,” he conceded. “But better a short disappointment now than years wasted believing in something that was never real. Or worse, a public embarrassment when I eventually make my disinterest clear.”

“I suppose so.”

Every instinct for self-preservation shrieked don’t do this, but her better nature—foolish, generous, and gratefully indebted—won out. “Very well,” she said softly. “I’ll do it.”

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