Virgin Mistress, Scandalous Love-Child

Jennie Lucas

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JENNIE LUCAS
Virgin Mistress, Scandalous Love-Child

Аннотация

She’s pregnant – and he’ll take what is rightfully his! In the sultry heat of Rio and its Carnaval, Ellie succumbs to her dangerously charismatic boss Diogo Serrador. But, having taken her virginity, the Brazilian billionaire wants nothing more to do with her – until he discovers she’s pregnant! Diogo will accept nothing less than taking Ellie as his bride.Their marriage is passionate by night but forced and hollow by day. Ellie realises that she’s in an impossible situation: Diogo’s dark past has frozen his heart, but she’s fallen in love with her husband…

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“Obey me, and it will be easier for everyone. Especially you.”

Obey him?

That was what had gotten her into this trouble in the first place. Just off Copacabana Beach, to the rhythmic beat of samba music and the howls of the crowds, he’d looked back at her. He’d taken her in his arms and kissed her with a sudden ferocity that had made her weak. “You’re coming home with me,” he’d whispered against the flushed heat of her skin. “You’re coming to my bed…”

And she hadn’t resisted. She’d thought she was in love with him. She’d dreamed so long of being his, and she’d surrendered to his orders without a fight.

But back then she’d only risked herself. Now she was pregnant. Her baby had to be protected at all costs. If Diogo meant her harm….

“You said you didn’t want to be a father. I accept that.” She shook her head desperately. “Send me back home. We’ll never bother you again. The child will never even know about you!”

Diogo’s dark eyebrows lowered. “Because you have other plans? No,” he said with a curl on his lip. “No baby of mine will leave Rio.”

Jennie Lucas grew up dreaming about faraway lands. At fifteen, hungry for experience beyond the borders of her small Idaho city, she went to a Connecticut boarding school on scholarship. She took her first solo trip to Europe at sixteen,

then put off college and travelled around the US, supporting herself with jobs as diverse as gas station cashier and newspaper advertising assistant. At twenty-two she met the man who would be her husband. After their marriage, she graduated from Kent State with a degree in English. Seven years after she started writing she got the magical call from London that turned her into a published author.

Since then life has been hectic, with a new writing career and a sexy husband and two babies under two, but she's having a wonderful (albeit sleepless) time. She loves immersing herself in dramatic, glamorous, passionate stories. Maybe she can't physically travel to Morocco or Spain right now, but for a few hours a day, while her children are sleeping, she can be there in her books.

Jennie loves to hear from her readers. You can visit her website at www.jennielucas.com, or drop her a note at jennie@jennielucas.com

Virgin Mistress, Scandalous Love-Child

BY
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To Pete, who offered to whisk me to Rio for “research”. Happy anniversary, honey, today and forever.

CHAPTER ONE

PREGNANT.

As Ellie Jensen came up the stairs from the subway, her body was still shaking. She dimly heard taxi drivers yelling curses and honking their horns. Vendors were already setting up hot dog and pretzel carts on the sidewalks. After a long, gray winter, New York had finally surrendered to the brilliant warmth of May.

But Ellie was cold to the bone. She hadn’t felt her fingers or toes for hours. Not since she took the pregnancy test that morning and saw those two parallel pink lines

Pregnant.

She was getting married in six hours, and she was pregnant.

With another man's baby.

Her *boss's* baby.

Ellie stopped dead in front of the Serrador Building. She craned her neck to look up at the thirtieth floor, and panic ripped through her.

Diogo Serrador, the dark, ruthless steel tycoon who'd employed her for the last year, was going to be a father.

I cannot get you pregnant, querida. She still remembered his sensual voice that hot night, riding the hot drumbeat of Rio's *Carnaval*. He'd whispered against her skin, *Do not worry. It's impossible*.

And she'd believed him!

How could she have been so stupid? With her history, how could she have fallen prey to the oldest cliché in the world—an innocent country girl moving to the big, bad city and getting seduced by her arrogant, wealthy, vastly sexy boss?

She should have left the company at Christmas, when Timothy did. At the very least, she should have given notice weeks ago—as she'd promised him she would. But she'd kept procrastinating. As if something would stop her from losing the city she loved. The life she loved. The man she…

She stopped the thought cold.

It had been just a crush. A wild, heart-pounding crush. Then a seduction…

Ellie's heart hurt as she looked up at the brilliant blue sky

above the sweetly singing birds. The air was fresh and warm. The world was new.

But the news of her pregnancy wouldn't make Diogo a father. She knew that already. The notorious playboy had his choice of gorgeous, brilliant women. He took them out, treated them like goddesses, then discarded them like last night's rubbish. If women like that couldn't hold his attention, no wonder he'd forgotten Ellie, a high school dropout with cheap clothes and unremarkable looks!

Diogo Serrador, a decent father?

The most likely scenario was that he'd carelessly offer her money for an abortion.

"Oh…" Covering her face with her hands, she cursed him aloud, causing the pedestrians hurrying past her on the sidewalk to give her a wide berth.

As inconvenient a shock as this pregnancy was, Ellie had already come to love this baby ferociously. This child was hers. *Her family*.

But Diogo had the right to know. Didn't he?

Ellie ground her teeth. She would fling his lie back into his face!

She pushed open the building's wide revolving door and took the elevator to the thirtieth floor. Determination steeled her as she passed the glassed-in offices down the hall.

"You're late," Carmen Alvarez snapped at Ellie as she passed her desk. "The numbers you gave me last night were all wrong.

What's the matter with you, girl?"

Ellie felt the floor move beneath her in a sway of nausea. She'd nearly been sick twice on the subway ride from her tiny Washington Heights studio apartment. She'd been queasy for months. That should have warned her, but she'd told herself her cycle was erratic. She couldn't be pregnant. Diogo Serrador had given his word! *I cannot get you pregnant*, querida.

"Are you sick?" Mrs. Alvarez demanded with narrowed eyes. "Partying all night?"

"Party?" Ellie gave a weak laugh. That morning, when she'd finally been unable to zip up the black pencil skirt or button her close-fitting white shirt, she'd gone to the twenty-four-hour drugstore and bought a test from the pimply-faced teenager at the cash register. "No, not a party."

"Then it's some man," the older woman said. "I've seen this before. Wait right there." Holding up her finger in warning, the executive secretary answered the phone. "Diogo Serrador's office," she chirped brightly, turning away.

One of the other junior secretaries crept up to pat Ellie's shoulder.

"Did you see Mr. Serrador's picture in the papers this morning?" Jessica said in a sweet Southern drawl. "He took Lady Allegra Woodville to the benefit last night. She's so elegant and beautiful, don't you think? But then she comes from an upper-class background, just like he does. Blood will tell, my mama always used to say, class—" she looked over Ellie with hard eyes

“—or trash.”

Ellie ground her teeth. She never should have confessed her infatuation for Diogo—or her heartache after Rio.

Jessica saw her job simply as a way to pass the time until she found a rich husband, and she’d long ago set her sights on Diogo. Ellie had been trying to warn the girl with her own heartbreak.

Instead, Jessica had spread malicious rumors all over the office. Ellie was now despised by all the staff as a gold-digging slut. Ellie—a slut! She, who’d never even kissed a man before. Diogo had swept her up into his arms in Rio!

Thank God she’d finally given up on her dreams. She’d finally realized that her grandmother was right. Her heart wasn’t hard or modern enough to survive city life. She’d given up. *Given in*.

Three weeks ago, she’d finally told Timothy yes.

He had left his prestigious job as Diogo Serrador’s general counsel at Christmas, abruptly deciding to be a simple country lawyer in their small hometown. He’d pressured Ellie to leave with him, but she’d refused.

But after today she would never have to see New York again—or Diogo. She would be married to a safe, respectable man who loved her. A man she could trust.

Assuming Timothy still wanted her when she was pregnant with another man’s child.

Mrs. Alvarez hung up the phone and turned to face Ellie. “I don’t know what you’ve been doing in your spare time, but your work has been unacceptable. This is your last chance—”

Diogo's deep, accented voice interrupted her, booming through the intercom on the elegant dark wood desk. "Mrs. Alvarez, come at once."

A thrill of panic raced through Ellie at the sound of his voice, causing her heart to nearly leap out of her chest.

"Yes, sir," the executive secretary replied, then released the intercom button. Her critical eyes traced over Ellie's pale, sweaty face and shapeless dark dress. "I need you to create a new SWOT analysis on Changchun Steel in dollars." When Ellie didn't move, she said sharply, "Get going, girl."

"No," Ellie whispered.

Mrs. Alvarez turned back with surprise and anger in her eyes. "What did you say?"

Shaking but determined, Ellie faced down the older woman. "I need to see him."

She looked dumbfounded. "Certainly not!"

"Let her go," Jessica muttered under her breath. "Once he sees her in that dumpy dress, he'll fire her for sure."

Ignoring her hurtful comment, Ellie started toward the office door.

"Stop right there!" Sputtering in outrage, the older woman stepped in front of her, pointing at Ellie in an angry staccato as she spoke. "This is the last *straw*. Whatever you might think you've earned on your *back*, you're nothing here. I've had it with your incompetence. Your *insolence!* Collect your things. You are *fired!*"

Desperately, Ellie pushed past Mrs. Alvarez into the private office of her billionaire boss.

Diogo Serrador was having a week from hell.

After a year of nonstop work and millions of dollars spent, his hostile takeover bid for Trock Nickel Ltd. had just failed.

Because he'd lost his ally on their board of directors.

Because he'd missed an important appointment.

Because his junior secretary had written down the wrong time.

And it was only Ellie Jensen's most recent mistake. For the last few weeks, he'd seen her work performance fall to ridiculous levels. He'd seen her come in late. Leave early. Take long lunches and spend far too much time hiding out in the bathroom.

Crying, probably.

Cursing under his breath, Diogo got up from his desk and paced in front of the curved wall of windows that revealed the skyscrapers of southern Manhattan and Battery Park. For an instant, he leaned his forehead against the cool glass, staring across the New York Harbor to the distant Statue of Liberty silhouetted against the pale morning sky. In spite of Miss Jensen's inexperience, and in spite of the way he'd hired her—sight unseen, on his head lawyer's recommendation—she'd been promising enough for him to take to Rio for an important deal when Mrs. Alvarez had been ill. Ellie Jensen had been on her way to becoming a valuable asset in his office.

Too bad he'd made the mistake of seducing her.

Diogo ground his teeth. *Biskreta*, he never should have taken

her to Rio. He should have fired her at Christmas, along with his treacherous ex-lawyer.

His body went tense just remembering the gleam in Timothy Wright's pale, feral face when Diogo found out what he'd done. "You should thank me, Mr. Serrador," the man had said slyly. "I saved you millions of dollars."

Thank him? The man deserved to burn in hell.

Diogo should have fired Ellie, too. Why trust a woman who was Wright's friend? But Diogo's conscience hadn't allowed him to fire her. Hadn't thought it fair.

And perhaps, he forced himself to admit, he'd liked having her in the office. Unlike many of the other secretaries, she'd always acted cheerful and kind. She hadn't stooped to gossip. She'd added brightness to his office.

Until he'd slept with her.

Diogo ground his teeth. He'd known the girl was fresh from the country, but since she was twenty-four years old, it had never occurred to him she might be a virgin. If he'd known, he never would have touched her. Virgins were off-limits. They took lovemaking far too seriously. They saw it as a *relationship*. Plus, they were usually boring in bed.

But Ellie Jensen had been so sweetly stunning. With those china-blue eyes, that angelic white-blonde hair, and the curvaceous body of a swimsuit model, he'd naturally assumed she had experience. In the heat and lust of Rio's *Carnaval*, he'd acted on impulse. Ah, and it had been such a night… His body

got hard just thinking of it.

But no, he was done. There were many beautiful women in the world, and he had no interest in breaking little innocent hearts. Or encouraging naive little farm girls that they might be the ones to tame him.

He heard a scuffle outside his office door. Irritated, he turned and pressed the intercom button a second time. “Mrs. Alvarez? What is the delay?”

The door was abruptly flung open, banging loudly against the wall. He looked up, his jaw hard. “Finally. Please take a letter—”

But instead of his competent executive secretary, he saw the bane of his existence. The woman whose beauty and innocence had just cost him a billion-dollar deal.

“I need to talk to you!” she gasped, struggling with Mrs. Alvarez. “Please!”

“Miss Jensen,” he bit out scathingly, then paused when he got a good look at her.

Her blond hair was pulled back in a disheveled ponytail, and there were dark hollows beneath her eyes as if she hadn’t slept. Her forehead had a pale sheen, as if she’d been ill. She looked truly awful, and her rumpled sack dress made her look as if she’d gained twenty pounds overnight. What had happened to his neat, tidy, cheerful junior secretary?

Inwardly, Diogo sighed. He should have expected this. The girl no doubt intended to tearfully confess her love for him, then beg him for a commitment.

Exactly what he'd wanted to avoid. He would have liked to keep her as his lover for far longer than a one-night stand, but he'd denied himself the pleasure. He'd purposefully ignored her, hoping that she'd realize they had no possibility of a future.

It had been difficult for him, working in the same office. Seeing her in her cubicle, he'd often wanted nothing more than to drag her back to his office and make love to her on his desk, against the wall, on his leather sofa. But he'd held himself back. He'd tried to be *noble*.

And this was the result.

Three months without a woman in his bed, and now a blown billion-dollar deal.

"I'm sorry, sir," the furious Carmen Alvarez panted, still pulling on the girl's sleeve. "I tried to stop her—"

"Leave us, Mrs. Alvarez," he said shortly.

The older woman's jaw dropped. "But, sir—"

He gave her a look that immediately caused her to back out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Diogo placed his fingertips on his wide, dark wood desk. "Sit down, Miss Jensen."

The girl didn't move. Folding her arms, she looked up at him bitterly. "I think you should start calling me Ellie, don't you?"

Ellie? He would never be so unprofessional to refer to a member of his staff by first name. Mrs. Alvarez had been his executive secretary for ten years, but he wouldn't dream of calling her *Carmen*. But then…he'd never taken her body in the

heat and madness of Rio's *Carnaval*, kissing her in the street amid the collective madness of lust…

He pushed the thought aside.

"Sit down," he repeated, and this time the girl obeyed. Her knees trembled as she sank into the leather chair across from his desk. She hugged herself, looking unhappy, almost ill. It made him feel uneasy. The look in her eyes troubled him. Made him feel guilty.

He resented the feeling. *Maldição*, he hadn't known she was a virgin! If he had, he never would have touched her!

Still. Best to have it out now. Obviously his silence hadn't given her the message. Nor had the fact that he'd taken out other women—although that had been for charity benefits and business engagements, hardly pleasure.

He would just have to be brutal. Inform her that he had no intention of ever settling down with any woman, no matter how sweet or pure or good in bed she might be.

With any luck, Ellie would accept his decision. She would return to being a competent secretary. He had to give her the chance…. Although, if a different member of his staff had made a billion-dollar mistake, he would have fired the person without thought!

But he couldn't do that to Ellie. Not after he'd seduced her in Rio on a whim. Not after he'd unthinkingly debauched the innocence of the only purely good-hearted girl he'd met in New York.

He looked down at her.

"What do you wish to discuss with me, Miss Jensen? What is so important that you nearly started a fistfight with Mrs. Alvarez?"

She swallowed. "I need…to tell you something."

"Yes?"

He waited, bracing for her to blurt out that she loved him, that she couldn't live without him, that she wanted them to move in together, or some other such nonsense. He'd heard it all before.

Instead, she said, "I… I'm leaving you." She licked her lips. "Resigning. Effective immediately."

Relief rushed through him. Then…

Sharp regret.

Regret? Ridiculous. He was just surprised, that was all. And rather sorry to lose a competent secretary.

And yet…

He sat down heavily in his chair.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I understand why you want to leave. I'll write you a recommendation that will get you hired by any firm in the city."

"No." She shook her head. "You don't understand. I don't need your recommendation. I'm getting *married*."

He stared at her, shocked.

"Married?" The center of his chest went cold. "When?"

"This afternoon."

That soon? His hands tightened. "That's fast."

"I know."

He took a long breath. All these months, she hadn't been heartsick over him. He hadn't hurt Ellie at all by seducing her. Since then, she'd just been distracted by a hot new romance. Diogo should have been glad.

But something like cold fury went through his body. For no good reason, he had the sudden urge to punch the man who would soon have Ellie Jensen in his bed every night, doing his bidding and moaning his name. Giving him her body…

He ground his jaw. "Who is he?"

Her posture went straight in her chair. "Do you really care?"

"No." He clenched his jaw. "I don't."

She stared at him for a long moment.

"You really don't, do you?" she whispered. She shook her head. "Women are interchangeable to you. Useful only for organizing your schedule, making your coffee or warming your bed."

Warming his bed? If he'd followed his own desires, he could have had her in his bed every night for the last three months. Diogo tried to remember why he hadn't. Something about being noble. He cursed under his breath. He should have just enjoyed her. Now he'd lost the chance—forever.

He'd been replaced so easily!

Diogo had never had the experience of being left by a woman he still desired. This was his reward for doing the right thing? To see his prize carried off by some other man?

He leaned forward in repressed fury, placing his fingers on his desk. “Useful, Miss Jensen? Hardly. Your distraction over your love affair has just caused me to lose the Trock deal—”

“I told you, call me Ellie!” she cried. “And I’m not finished!”

Feeling like a saint, he folded his arms and forced himself to wait.

She rose slowly to her feet. There was a sheen of tears in her eyes. She seemed to sway with emotion.

“I’m sorry about the Trock deal, Diogo. But there’s something you need to know.” She spoke so softly he could barely hear. “I’m…having a baby.”

The coldness in him spread, turning to ice. A baby?

Ellie was pregnant. With another man’s baby.

For a second, he couldn’t even breathe. He heard the echo of a woman’s voice long ago, pleading in Portuguese. “*Will you marry me, Diogo? Will you?*” And later, a man’s voice in the same language. “*I’m afraid she’s dead, senhor. Beaten to death…*”

“Diogo?”

Ellie’s voice brought him back to the present.

Pregnant. That certainly explained the weight gain and the pallor and all the time she’d been spending in the ladies’ lounge. She hadn’t been suffering tears of unrequited love. It had been morning sickness.

Pregnant. Ellie had been in bed with another man. Her legs had wrapped around his as she pulled him down on her naked body with an ecstatic cry of joy. How many times had they made

love for her to get pregnant? Three times a week? Three times a day?

Anger rushed back in force, careening over the numb shock like raging water filling a dry riverbed. Ever since they'd returned from Rio, he'd been celibate as a monk, striving night and day to bring the Trock deal together. And while he'd been blaming himself for taking the poor, sweet, innocent girl's virginity, she'd nonchalantly gone from his bed into a hot love affair with another man. As if her night with Diogo had been a mere stepping stone to bigger and better things.

She was pregnant.

Engaged.

And getting married in a hurry.

Suddenly, he saw the whole situation in a new light.

He sucked in his breath. He turned to face her, and his lip curved into a sneer.

"Ellie, you've got quite the act going, don't you? Playing the part of a sweet, innocent girl. But when you realized that giving me your virginity wasn't going to pay off, you quickly moved on to the next man, didn't you? You *accidentally* got pregnant. I assume he's very rich? Congratulations."

Her jaw fell open. She stared up at him in shock, her eyes large and limpid and blue as a summer storm over the Atlantic.

"You think I got pregnant on purpose?" she whispered. "That I'd force a man to marry me with a baby?"

"I think you're clever," he said coldly. "All this time I've

thought you were so different from the rest—but you're just better at the game. *Biskreta*, you're the most accomplished little actress I've ever met."

"How can you even think that!"

"I'm just curious to know who the poor fool is," he said ruthlessly. "Tell me. Who's the idiot who got caught in your trap?"

He saw tears in her eyes. He steeled his heart against her fake tears, which she no doubt manufactured at will. He wouldn't let her play him for a fool. Never again! For three months, he'd worried about her feelings. He'd even denied himself her bed because he'd been trying to protect her. And all along she'd just been angling for a diamond on her finger!

Her blue eyes glittered at him through a prism of tears.

"You think only an idiot would marry me?" she choked out.

"That's right," he said coolly. "Only a fool would marry a woman who deliberately trapped him with a pregnancy."

The tears spilled over her lashes.

"Such a poised little actress," he murmured acidly. "Such a fine performance."

Looking up at him, she gave a harsh laugh, shaking her head through the tears. "*You'll* never get a woman pregnant, will you, Diogo?" she bit out. "You've made sure of it!"

"*Sim*, it is true." He bared his teeth in the semblance of a smile. "I've never met a woman I could trust longer than it takes to seduce her."

She sucked in her breath.

"And that's all you have to say to me?" she whispered. "After you seduced me and took my virginity? After three months of silence, you have nothing to say to me—but insults?"

An unwelcome shiver of emotion went through Diogo. He pushed the feeling aside. Ellie Jensen was a gold digger. It was ridiculous of him to be so surprised about it. The city was full of women who were just pretending to have a career while they tried to find a rich man.

"I do have one question," he said acerbically. "Why are you still here in my office? You've quit your job without notice. Fine. You've become such a bad secretary, I'm glad to see you go. So why are you still here? Are you afraid your marriage bed will be unsatisfying, and you're already angling to take a lover? Sorry, but I don't date married women."

She wiped her tears savagely. "You're disgusting!"

"No, *querida*. That would be you. As my employee, I respected you. But I was wrong." Wrong about so many things. First about Timothy Wright—now about Ellie. Suddenly weary, Diogo rubbed the back of his head. "Go, Ellie. Just go."

She drew back, like an ominous dark cloud rolling against the earth before the storm.

"Don't worry, Diogo," she said softly. "You'll never see me again."

Her lovely blue eyes stabbed at him with accusation. He felt troubled in a way he couldn't explain. But the moment was

interrupted by a knock at the door. A security guard stood heavily in the doorway.

"Miss Alvarez called me, Mr. Serrador."

"Yes. Show Miss Jensen out," Diogo said, turning away. "Get out, Ellie. Good luck."

"Good luck," she repeated in a tight voice. "Goodbye."

He looked up, but the door had already closed behind her. Alone in his office, he took a deep breath and leaned his head in his hands. He tried to work, but couldn't. After an hour, he gave up. He called a gorgeous actress and asked her to lunch.

It was only halfway through his martini and steak that it occurred to him that Ellie's child might be his.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS THE PERFECT day for a wedding.

As Ellie stepped out of the hired limousine, sweet- scented blossoms from the village's cherry trees floated through the warm spring breeze, as lush and fragrant as her pink-and-green bouquet. She could hear the sound of birds singing in the cloudless blue sky, soaring high over the white clapboard church.

It was the perfect day to start her new life as a happy wife and mother-to-be. The perfect day to forget Diogo Serrador's existence.

So why did she feel so miserable? Why had she cried for the last six hours straight, all across the Pennsylvania highway and through her hour at the hairstylist's?

"Steady," her grandmother said gruffly, taking her arm as they

reached the doorway of the white church. Lilibeth's gray, bushy eyebrows quivered as she looked up at her taller granddaughter. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Ellie muttered. But she wasn't ready at all. She'd left Timothy eight messages on the trip from Manhattan, but he hadn't answered his cell. He was likely getting in his last billable hours at his new, thriving private practice before they departed for their Aruba honeymoon.

Timothy was determined to be rich for her, he said. He didn't believe Ellie when she said she didn't need to be rich. All she wanted was to feel safe.

Safe, and to never have her heart broken again.

But she couldn't marry Timothy without telling him she was pregnant. She *couldn't*. She had to give him the option to back out of their marriage. Her hands tightened. Part of her even hoped he *would* back out…

"Careful—your flowers!" her grandmother protested.

"Sorry." With every minute that passed, Ellie's heart was pounding harder and faster. She was starting to feel dizzy. Her voice was a squeak as she said, "You promised you'd find Timothy first?"

"Are you really sure?" Lilibeth Conway squinted at her doubtfully. "It's bad luck for a man to see his bride before the ceremony."

"Please, Gran!"

Her grandmother sighed. "All right, all right. It's your day."

She pushed her into a tiny antechamber inside the church, past the ushers and last few arriving guests. “Wait here.”

Ellie waited. And waited. She paced, staring out the tiny window.

In the distance, she saw the rolling hills and green forests. But it wasn’t all beautiful. She could see the stacks of the old, abandoned steel mill. The boarded- up storefronts. Flint, Pennsylvania, was only four hours from Manhattan by car, but felt like a world away.

She and Timothy had both grown up poor here. Returning this past Christmas as a wealthy lawyer, he’d been welcomed back to town like a hero. Timothy had already bought the nicest mansion in town and was fixing it up for her. He was spending money all over Flint, hiring carpenters and cleaners, sparing no expense. He would do anything, he’d told her, to make her love him. Anything.

But before they could marry, she had to tell him she was pregnant. Then let him decide if he still wanted to marry her.

Was it even fair to marry him like this? She took a deep breath. In spite of all his assurances that she would grow to love him, the idea of being his bride somehow felt…wrong.

But her instincts were plainly screwed up. Ellie’s short-lived affair with Diogo had proven that. The night Diogo had taken her in his arms in Rio, it had felt so *right*. When he’d kissed her on the street, amid the explosion of music and bright color, she’d felt truly *alive* for the first time in her life.

Passion was dangerous. She had to try to learn to make choices with her head, not her heart.

Taking care of her mother over her long years of illness, Ellie had spent many dark nights yearning for adventure in far-off lands. For the hot kisses of scandalous men. But Diogo's hot embrace had seared her to the core. He'd arrogantly changed her whole life—and he didn't even care.

She'd wanted to tell him the truth—but how could she? Even just knowing *half* of the truth, he'd assumed the worst about her, that she was a calculating gold digger who would use an innocent baby to trap a man into marriage. He'd coldly and cruelly insulted her.

He didn't know her at all—and he never had!

"Ellie." Timothy's voice was muffled through the door, but she could still hear his affectionate exasperation. "Don't you know we've got three hundred people waiting? What do you want to talk to me about?"

"Timothy." Her whole body was still shaking from remembering what Diogo had said to her. She forced herself to take a deep breath. To steady her hands. She had to forget Diogo. She had to erase him from her mind completely and try to be glad that she would never see him again. She licked her dry lips. "Will you please come in here?"

"No—it's bad luck!"

"That's just a superstition!"

She heard him laugh. "It's taken so long to convince you to

marry me, I'm not taking any chances."

Was she supposed to shout out her pregnancy confession through a door, to the shock of his ushers and the last guests walking into the church? "Please. I really, really need to talk to you!"

He paused. Then he spoke, and his voice glowed. "Whatever you have to say, I'm longing to hear it. Just wait a few minutes more, and you can tell me every day for the rest of our lives."

Horrified, she realized he thought she finally meant to tell him she loved him. Her forehead broke out into a cold sweat. This was getting worse and worse. "Timothy, you don't understand—"

"*Wait*," he said firmly.

She had no choice.

"I'm pregnant!"

There was a pause. Then the door flung open.

Timothy's pale, thin face was ghostly white—but he looked like he was breathing fire. He slammed the door closed behind him and grabbed her wrist.

"How is that possible," he ground out, "*when we have never slept together?*"

His eyes were so hard through his wire-rimmed glasses, his face so wild and different from his usual placid expression, that she backed up a step.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It was a mistake. I never meant to hurt you…"

"Who's the man?" he demanded, his slender hand tightening

around her wrist.

She shook her head desperately. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll never see him again.”

“*Who is he?*”

“You’re hurting me!”

He tossed her arm aside. “So that’s why you suddenly agreed to marry me? Because you were pregnant and your lover had deserted you?”

“No!”

“But you made a mistake if you planned to pass this baby off as mine,” he sneered. “Even I’m not stupid enough to believe you’re pregnant with my child, when you never let me touch you!”

“It was a mistake!” she cried. “The worst mistake of my life! I just found out I was pregnant this morning. I never intended to deceive you!”

“Right,” he said sarcastically. He ran his hand through his blond, thinning hair. “Sure.”

She watched him miserably. “I understand why you want to call off the wedding. It’s probably for the best…”

He looked at her sharply. “What do you mean? I’m not calling anything off.”

“But…”

“You’re not backing out. Pregnant or not,” he said in a hard voice, “you’re going to marry me. Today.”

She swallowed. “And the baby—”

His lip curled. “I’ll take care of it.”

He threw the door back with a bang and stalked out.

Take care of it?

Timothy was willing to be her baby's father?

He was truly willing to help her raise her child?

Dazed, she stumbled out of the room. She'd thought, really thought, he would call off the wedding. But he hadn't—so that meant…

She was getting married. Right now. In just moments, she would be Timothy's wife—for the rest of her life. She heard the string quartet finish Pachelbel's "Canon in D major." He'd spent a fortune on this wedding, inviting the whole town to see them wed like some kind of royal coronation. As if to force everyone who'd ever treated them badly to see them crowned king and queen of the town.

Lilibeth came toward Ellie, reaching up to kiss her cheek before pulling the gauzy veil over her face. "I couldn't help but overhear!" she said joyfully, her lips pressing an air kiss of her signature orange lipstick. "Pregnant! Oh, Ellie, I'm so happy for you, my dear!"

Happy that Ellie was marrying a man she didn't love?

Happy that the man she *had* loved was a selfish, critical, amoral bastard who didn't deserve to be any baby's father?

"But, Gran…" Ellie said softly. "I don't love Timothy."

Her grandmother's eyes widened, then narrowed. "You will," she said briskly. "You're going to have his baby."

The doors to the nave opened, and the wedding march rolled

over her like a wave. People turned around in the pews, craning their heads to see her.

Standing alone at the end of the aisle, Ellie's body trembled. Her wedding bouquet shook in her hands as if an earthquake moved beneath her feet.

"Walk," her grandmother whispered with a smile, taking her arm.

Feeling numb, Ellie walked forward with Lilibeth at her side.

This felt so wrong. But how could she trust her own feelings? Her instincts had only steered her wrong. She'd fallen in love with the worst possible man in New York. Surely, she was marrying the right man now?

And she'd already treated Timothy so badly. She couldn't humiliate him further by running out of the church… Could she?

Flowers and candles were everywhere. She could feel the sharp eyes of the society matrons on her, hear the whispers of people she'd known since childhood. Old Mrs. Abernathy, who'd told her she'd never amount to anything. Candy Gleeson, the former cheerleader, who'd mocked her shabby clothes in high school and called her Stork because she'd had such a thin, ungainly body. They all now watched with envy, believing the fairy tale.

When she reached the end of the aisle, Lilibeth handed Ellie into Timothy's keeping. He held her hand tightly, looking down at her face with a strange, almost demented look in his pale blue eyes.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today…”

Compared to the broil of emotions inside her, the ceremony was so civilized. So *hollow*. The minister’s beautiful words had nothing to do with how she felt inside.

She—Timothy’s wife? To love him? Share his bed? Raise his children?

It had to be. Anything was better than to love someone only to be brutally rejected by them again and again. That must be how Timothy had felt, loving her for so long.

She would learn to enjoy his tepid kisses somehow. She would earn his forgiveness for her mistake, even if it took a lifetime. She *would*.

But when she closed her eyes, the memory of her night with Diogo still overwhelmed her. The way he’d ruthlessly spread her virgin lips with his own. He’d taken her innocence carelessly, like a conqueror. All the tenderness of her first kiss, the sweetness she’d timidly dreamed of sharing with a man she could love, Diogo had scornfully swept away, leaving in its place something hot and dark that burned her through, melting her to ash.

She desperately pushed the thought away. Struggling to calm the pounding of her heart, Ellie clenched her hands tighter around the green stems of her bridal bouquet. Pink and white petals fluttered slowly to the flagstones.

“Do you, Timothy Alistair Wright, take Ellie Jensen to be your lawfully wedded wife…”

Even in the midst of her wedding, she couldn’t stop thinking

about Diogo!

The bastard. The lying bastard.

"…for as long as you both shall live?"

Timothy looked at her. Bright light from the soaring church windows shimmered off his wire-rimmed glasses, illuminating his pale, thin face. "I do."

The minister turned to her. "And do you, Eleanor Ann Jensen, take Timothy Wright—"

The church doors opened, banging against the walls.

"Stop!"

At the harsh sound of the voice, the crowd gasped. Ellie whirled around.

Diogo.

He was dressed as she'd left him in New York, in a crisply cut gray suit and blue tie that elegantly clung to his hard-muscled body. But he no longer looked anything like a civilized man of business. His footsteps echoed against the worn gray stones as he stared at her with a ruthless, demanding intensity.

"How dare you come here, Serrador?" Timothy's voice hit a high note, and he furiously cleared his throat. "You have no right—"

"You." Diogo stared at Timothy. Then he gave a hard laugh. "I should have known."

Ellie saw a depth of darkness in the Brazilian billionaire's eyes. Black, she thought with a shiver, black as a coal mine twisting deep into the earth.

“Get out of here, Serrador,” Timothy spat out. “This is no business of yours.”

“Is it?” Diogo turned to her with a searing intensity. “Is it my business, Ellie?”

He knew!

She took a deep, shuddering breath. She couldn’t tell him he was the father of her baby. Timothy might forgive her eventually, but not if he knew that the real father was Diogo. The two men had had some kind of falling out at Christmas, and she still didn’t know why.

But she did know that Diogo Serrador was as hard and unfeeling as the diamond on her finger….

He leaned forward, looking straight into her eyes.

“Is it true, Ellie?”

Biting her lip, she looked away, hiding her face beneath her veil’s thick waves of netted tulle.

He ripped back her veil, and she cried out in shock. His face was so close to hers, she saw him clearly—his angular cheekbones, his rough jaw, his scarred temple, his nose that had been broken at least once.

The facade of wealthy playboy and international steel tycoon was gone. Diogo Serrador grabbed her with the brutality of a Viking barbarian claiming his woman. And a sensual current rocked Ellie’s body like lightning cracking through stone.

“Tell me the truth.”

She shook her head, unable to speak. She felt burned,

electrified by his touch. He leaned forward, his face inches from hers, and she knew he was going to kiss her—right there in the church! While she was standing in front of the minister with another man!

And yet she couldn't lift a hand to stop him. Her knees trembled beneath her. Her bouquet dropped unheeded from her senseless fingers, falling in a splash of pink flowers against stone.

"Tell me, damn you!" His hands tightened on her shoulders. His voice rang through the church. "Am I the father of your baby?"

Three hundred people gasped aloud. She heard her grandmother give a little choked sob. She could feel the stares of the guests. Of the shocked minister. And worst of all, she could feel Timothy goggling at her, pitiful, humiliated fury on his face.

A slow burn went through her, making her cheeks feel hot as flame.

"You have no right to humiliate me like this," she whispered. "You're the bastard, Diogo. You're the liar."

"Him?" Timothy turned on her with a look of rage. "You've kept me at arm's length for all these years—so you could give yourself to Serrador?"

"Ah." Diogo's lips curved darkly upward. His body relaxed, and his gaze glinted with sudden amusement. "So he's never even touched you. Strange way to trap a man into marriage…"

Anger raced through her. "I didn't trap anyone into anything," she spat out. "Timothy loves me. He doesn't care I'm pregnant.

He said he'll take care of it!"

Diogo's eyes narrowed. In an instant, he became a totally different man.

"Take care of it?" He grabbed her arm. "What do you mean, *take care of it?*"

She felt the sizzle up and down her body. How was it possible to be so electrified by his touch—and yet so afraid? She struggled to pull her arm away.

"What difference does it make? It's not your baby. It can't be. You can't get a woman pregnant, right?" she taunted.

His dark eyes seared through her. "I am the father. Can you deny it?"

She couldn't. But she knew Diogo Serrador hadn't come to take responsibility for the child he'd created—he just couldn't bear for any other man to tread on his territory. With the arrogant machismo of a Brazilian fighter, Diogo Serrador believed he had the right to own everything and everyone. To keep them and discard them solely at his pleasure.

He didn't deserve to be a father.

"Answer me." Diogo's hand moved down her neck to the bare skin on her collarbone, to the first swell of her breasts above the white taffeta bodice. The sizzle intensified, causing her breath to come in little gasps. All the faces of guests she'd known since childhood—some watching with shocked pity, others with malicious glee—seemed to whirl around her.

Then she saw her grandmother, chalky white with orange lips.

Lilibeth was the one person who'd always believed in Ellie. She'd baked her cookies on the days her mother was mean. Told her she didn't need a high school diploma to be smart. Supported Ellie during the long years she'd nursed her mother's final illness. Ellie's success had become Lilibeth's.

And now it was all ruined. Lilibeth would never be able to hold her head high in the grocery store again. *Because of her*.

"I—I—" Ellie suddenly felt faint. "I…think I'm going to…"

She couldn't even finish the sentence before her knees started to give way beneath her. Diogo caught her up in his arms before she could fall.

"Put her down!" Timothy cried furiously.

Diogo didn't even glance his way. His dark gaze held Ellie's, reaching down into her very soul.

"The baby," he said in a low voice. "Tell me."

"No," she gasped.

He glanced at the audience gawking from the pews, then gave a single nod. "*Tá bom*."

Turning on his heel, he carried her down the aisle. He held her so close to his muscular chest that she could feel the beat of his heart.

It felt like some strange dream. The sunlight from the windows shimmered and shone around her, blurring the bright colors of ladies' dresses in the pews. Her ripped veil fluttered forlornly around her, her white taffeta train dragging behind them as he carried her out of the church, stealing her from her own wedding

like a Roman centurion with a Sabine maiden.

"Come back here!" Timothy's voice was a furious squeak as he followed behind them like a yapping terrier. "She's mine, you Brazilian bastard! Do you hear me? Mine!"

Ignoring him, Diogo flung open the tall double doors.

The bright spring sun outside hit her like a slap in the face. Two of Diogo's bodyguards slammed the church doors shut behind them, trapping all the guests inside as Diogo set her gently on her feet.

But she found herself face-to-face with Timothy.

"I can't believe you did it." His wire-rimmed glasses trembled on his nose. His eyes were red and wet, fog¬ ging up the glass. "I waited for you nearly ten years. I did everything I could to win you. And you spread your legs for Serrador, who treats his women like whores?"

Every word was like a stab in her heart. "I…"

"You are mine, Ellie," he cried, reaching for her. "Mine—"

Diogo stepped between them. Carelessly, he tucked his hands into fists, widening his muscular legs into a confident stance that suggested he was ready for anything. Even in his perfectly tailored gray suit, he looked like a warrior who could fight—and kill—at will.

"Ellie's not yours. Neither is her baby. What exactly were you planning, Wright?"

Timothy's face blanched with fear. He backed away.

"Now," Diogo said softly, turning to Ellie. He brushed a

tendril of hair away from her face in a gesture that was deceptively gentle. “You’ll tell me the name of your baby’s father.”

She rubbed her forehead. “You swore on your honor you couldn’t get me pregnant,” she muttered. “Your *honor*.”

Diogo’s dark eyes swept her face, pulling out every secret she’d ever tried to keep, leaving her vulnerable and bare. He tightened his hold on her, causing her to cry out. “I’m the father, Ellie. Say it!”

“I hate you,” she whimpered.

“Say it!” he thundered.

“All right!” she shouted. Tears of grief and rage streamed down her face. “You’re the father!”

Timothy gave a loud, high moan. She turned to him desperately. “I’m so sorry. So sorry…”

She tried to reach for him, but he slapped her hand away. Bitterly, he turned to Diogo.

“Take her, and be damned. She’s filled with your child. It disgusts me. Another whore for you. Another bastard—”

Diogo punched him hard across the jaw. Ellie screamed as Timothy dropped like a stone into the lush green grass.

The Brazilian turned to her, and the rage in his eyes made her draw back in confused fear. He blinked, staring at her. His dark eyes suddenly looked sad, as if haunted by shadows and ghosts of long ago.

Then he abruptly turned away without a word. At his signal,

two black sedans pulled forward on the street. As a bodyguard opened the door, Diogo pushed her gently into the backseat, holding her against the leather as he drew the seat belt over her body. She struggled, but his grip was implacable. His hands were like iron shackles wrapped in silk.

And every accidental brush of his fingertips made her feel fire in her veins. How could she fight her own desire? How? She swallowed, trying to control the pounding of her heart as she glanced through the back window.

"Timothy—"

"He'll have a headache." His teeth gleamed in a feral growl. "He deserves worse."

Why? What had Timothy done? But she didn't have the nerve to ask. She had far more pressing issues to worry about. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the airport." He sat next to her as the driver pulled away. She could feel his thigh pressing against hers through the layers of her wedding dress.

He looked down at her, his eyes black as onyx. Then he gave her the heavy-lidded half smile that had led so many women to ruin.

"Now," he said, "you belong to me."

CHAPTER THREE

BY THE TIME THE PRIVATE plane touched down in Rio de Janeiro, Ellie knew without doubt that Diogo was a soulless barbarian without a drop of mercy.

They'd left from a small private airport tucked in the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania. He'd carried her onto an enormous private plane waiting in a hangar. Ignoring her questions and demands, he'd locked her into a small ensuite bedroom in the back of the plane. She'd been alone since the plane took off. For sixteen hours, she'd had nothing to do but cry and sleep and eat snacks from the small refrigerator. And wonder what he meant to do with her.

Now, you belong to me.

What did that mean?

She shivered, holding her ripped wedding veil tightly in her hands.

Diogo had made it clear he had no intention of getting married. Shown that he did not like or even respect her. And his playboy lifestyle was hardly conducive to being a father.

So why had he kidnapped Ellie? Where had he taken her?

She placed her hands on her belly through the wrinkled taffeta of her wedding dress. In just one day, she'd already come to love this baby more than her own life. To vow that she would treat the little boy or girl—for some reason, she thought it might be a girl—very differently than her own mother had treated her. Ellie would treat her child with love. *Ellie would protect her*.

She clenched her hands into fists. Diogo might think he could still boss her around, but she was no longer his employee. He would soon realize how much had changed between them…

She heard the bedroom door unlock. Diogo entered the small

cabin of the plane, newly shaved and wearing fresh clothes. In his crisp white shirt and tailored black pants, he appeared relaxed and self-confident. He'd no doubt had an excellent night's sleep. Unlike her.

"Welcome to Rio de Janeiro," he said with a smile, holding out his hand. "I trust you slept well?"

She rose from the bed, folding her arms with a scowl. "Rio? No! Take me back!"

"Back to your precious bridegroom?" Coolly, he withdrew his hand. "No. You will remain with me until the baby is born. I thought I made that clear."

Kept prisoner by the most ruthless playboy in the world, in a strange, exotic city? A whimper escaped her lips. She wanted to go home. She wanted her grandmother. She wanted to be a million miles away from this man who'd so carelessly seduced her, lied to her, and lured her into heartbreak.

She raised her chin. "You can't keep me here against my will. I'm going home the first chance I get!"

"This is your home now." He gave her a lazy smile. "But Rio can be dangerous. You must stay close to me. For your own protection."

But who was going to protect her from *him*?

She looked wildly at the door behind him. "I'm not going to stay with you!"

"You have no money or friends here. You don't even speak Portuguese. I'm curious. Exactly how do you intend to escape?"

“Somehow,” she whispered, but uncertainty raced through her. Everything he’d said was true. How on earth would she get home?

“Forget Wright,” he told her coldly. “He cannot help you. Obey me, and it will be easier for everyone. Especially you.”

Obey him?

That was what had gotten her into this trouble in the first place. In the alley off Copacabana Beach, amid the rhythmic beat of samba music and cries of the crowds, he’d taken her in his arms and kissed her with a sudden ferocity that had made her weak. “You’re coming home with me now,” he’d whispered against the flushed heat of her skin. “You can’t say no.”

And she’d been desperately in love with him then as only an innocent girl could be. All she’d wanted was to be utterly his. To give herself completely. And she’d naively believed that he would give himself to her in return, body and soul.

She no longer believed in those frosted, sugar-coated dreams. She knew better now. She knew to play it safe.

Diogo Serrador was a million miles from safe.

She shook her head desperately. “You said you would never want to marry any woman because of pregnancy. Fine. Send me back home. We’ll never bother you again. The baby will never know you’re her father!”

Diogo’s dark eyebrows lowered. “Because you and Wright have other plans for him?”

She thought of Timothy’s angry words, the hurt in his eyes.

But he'd always been good to her. He'd even offered to take care of her baby. Marrying him would have been such a sensible, respectable choice, but now she'd ruined everything. She suddenly felt like crying. "He's a good man, and I promised to be his wife."

"Forget it," he said with a curl on his lip. "You're not leaving Rio."

He marched her out of the plane.

The rush of jungle humidity and the smell of exotic flowers hit her like a blow in the deep violet darkness of dawn. Clouds were pouring a brutal onslaught of rain, pounding heavily against the leaves, leaving puddles on the tarmac of the small private airport.

A bodyguard held an umbrella over their heads as they descended the steps from the plane. Ellie balanced precariously on her four-inch, white satin heels, her wedding gown dragging through the water as Diogo steered her into the backseat of a waiting steel-gray Bentley.

Giving a calm order in Portuguese to the chauffeur, he leaned back against the supple leather seat.

"Don't do this," she said tearfully. "Please. Let me go back."

"To Wright?" His eyes were dark. "You still love him after he called you a whore?"

Pain wracked through her. She briefly closed her eyes, taking a shuddering breath.

"You wouldn't understand," she whispered. How could he understand her guilt and shame? She was desperate for Timothy's

forgiveness after she'd treated him so badly. "We have known each other since I was fifteen years old—"

He cut her off. "You will never see him again." He reached his arm around her in the backseat of the Bentley, pulling her close to his body. "Now you belong to me."

For one brief instant, she relished the warmth and weight of his strength. Then she caught herself. Horrified at his power over her, she forced herself to pull away.

"You only want me because you think you can't have me."

He looked down at her. "Is that what you think?" he asked huskily. "You think I can't have you?"

"It's what I know." Her heart was pounding in her throat. "You are a liar. A thief. A heartless playboy. I'll die before I let you touch me again."

"Touch you how?" He stroked down her neck, tracing the bare skin of her collarbone. It was like an electric shock down her body. "Touch you like this?"

"Don't." One brief touch of his hand against her skin, and she trembled all over. "Please."

"Please what?" He stroked her cheek to her tender bottom lip, causing heat to race from her lips down to her pregnancy-swollen breasts. Her nipples tightened in a sudden shock of desire as he gently ran his hand down the valley between them.

"Please," she whimpered. She closed her eyes, barely able to breathe. "Please stop."

"That's not really what you want." She felt his hand move over

the smooth taffeta of her bodice, cupping her full—and very sensitive—breasts. Her nipples sizzled with painful sensation.

Gently, he pulled down the fabric. He lowered his head to taste her bare breast. She felt his lips move against her aching nipple, suckling her, swirling her taut flesh with his tongue.

Her whole body reacted. She gave an involuntary gasp as her back arched into his mouth.

He was right. *She did want this.* All her hatred and pain of the past few months had done nothing to end her longing for his touch…

Oh my God, what was she thinking? The chauffeur was driving the Bentley, pretending that he couldn't hear or see anything. Probably because this was normal for Diogo to seduce women in the backseat of the car. Ellie was just another in a long line of his lovers. He would seduce her just to prove his power, make her love him again, then discard her and the baby like rubbish. Diogo Serrador was a selfish, hard-hearted playboy to the core.

Had she lost her mind? She couldn't give in to him. Not like this.

Not ever.

"No," she whispered. With a huge effort of willpower, she shoved him away. "I said *no!*"

Sucking in his breath, he looked down at her. His dark eyes were deep with need…and something more. Some hidden emotion—some secret pain that lured her to believe she could be

the one to comfort and save him…

She—comfort and save Diogo? She fought the ridiculous thought with all her might. He didn't need saving. He was a selfish, lying, coldhearted bastard!

Diogo abruptly released her, leaning back against his seat. "You will soon accept your fate," he said coldly. "Until my son is born, you will submit to my will."

She feared he was right—but what could she do?

Exhausted, Ellie leaned her head against the window. Her long, blond hair had long since fallen out of the sleek wedding chignon. It was a total mess, along with her taffeta wedding gown. As the Bentley traveled the back streets of Rio, following his bodyguards' sedan, she shivered as she looked out at the violet-gray dawn of the passing city.

"What do you intend to do to me?" she whispered.

He opened the *Jornal do Brasil* to the business page. "I will keep you until my son is born."

"To keep me?" Her voice trembled. "As your prisoner?"

Lowering the newspaper, he looked at her coolly. "Whatever it takes."

She swallowed. "And the baby?"

He gave her a grim, humorless smile. "Do not worry."

"How can I not worry?" She exhaled in a rush, and turned to stare out blindly at the heavy rain sheeting the car window. "I'm her mother."

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