Sensible Housekeeper, Scandalously Pregnant

Jennie Lucas

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JENNIE LUCAS
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Аннотация

The Housekeeper What right did Argentinian billionaire Rafael Cruz have to demand her in his bed? Housekeeper Louisa Grey had managed his homes impeccably. She had dressed soberly, behaved courteously, barely even smiled. She'd catered to his every appetite – except…The Boss Oh, no, his virgin housekeeper did not flirt…but their simmering attraction meant Rafael had never been so close to losing control. And if there was one thing he was good at – besides seduction – it was taking charge! The Baby? But now they'd never be able to go back to being just boss and employee…

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“Am I working for you now?”

Rafael ground his teeth. “No. You know you are not!”

“Then who am I to you?”

“Here you are my mistress. Beyond this island you are the best servant on my staff. I could not manage without you.”

“Perhaps it really is time for me to move on,” Louisa said slowly.

“No, you won’t go and work for any other man. You belong to—*with*,” he corrected himself, “me.”

Then he reached up and kissed her.

His kiss was hard and deep, a plundering of her mouth, as if he’d held something back for far too long. She could feel how he already wanted her again.

“You belong to me,” Rafael whispered. “Say it.”

“Never.”

Sensible Housekeeper, Scandalously Pregnant

By

Jennie Lucas

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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 small children, 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

Dear Reader

Have you ever felt as if no one appreciates your hard work, the way you always put other people first?

I think every woman has felt taken for granted at some point in her life. I know I have. Have you ever wished that your boss, boyfriend or husband would finally notice everything you do, and treasure and adore you for it?

Louisa Grey has worked hard all her life. For the last five years she's spent every waking hour taking care of her tycoon boss's needs while ignoring her own. Then she makes a dreadful mistake: she surrenders to his seduction.

When she finds out she's pregnant, she knows she's on her own. Her playboy boss will never wish to marry her and raise their child. This ruthless, arrogant billionaire will never fall to his knees and beg his housekeeper to give him her heart.

Or will he…?

Speaking of appreciation, as I mark my tenth book for Mills & Boon® I want to thank you, my readers. I hope you enjoy this story as much as I loved writing it—the story of a hardworking woman finally rewarded beyond her wildest dreams.

Jennie

To Kimberley Young, the best editor in the world. Thanks for making my first ten books the best they could be!

Chapter One

THE gray sky dripped rain like mist, fine as cobwebs, across the dark minarets of Istanbul as Louisa Grey cut the last autumn roses from the garden. Her hands, usually so steady, trembled around her pruning scissors.

I can't be pregnant, she told herself fiercely.

Can't be!

Could she…?

Abruptly Louisa sat back on her haunches, wiping her forehead with her sleeve in the cool twilight of early November. For a moment, she stared at the red and orange roses of the lush garden of the old Ottoman mansion. Then her hands fell into her lap. She felt the weight of the pruning shears against her gray woolen skirt.

Blinking fast, she turned her head blindly to stare out at the red sunset shimmering across the Bosphorus.

One night. She'd worked for her ruthless playboy boss for five years. One night had ruined everything. She'd fled Paris the very next day, demanding a job transfer to his neglected home in Istanbul. She'd tried to put their night of passion behind her. But now, a month later, she had one terrified thought. One question that kept repeating itself in her mind. Every day, the question became louder and more afraid.

Could she be pregnant with her boss's baby?

“Miss? The cook’s taken ill,” a girl said in accented English behind her. “Please, may he go home?”

Louisa’s shoulders instantly became steel-straight. Pushing her black-framed glasses up on her nose, she turned to face the young Turkish maid. She knew she must reveal no weakness to members of her staff who looked to her for leadership. “Why does he not ask me himself?”

“He’s afraid you’ll say no, miss. With so much to be done for Mr. Cruz’s visit—”

“Mr. Cruz is not expected until the morning of the dinner party. Tell the cook to go home. We will manage. But next time,” Louisa added sharply, “he must ask me himself and not send someone else because he’s afraid.”

“Yes, miss.”

“Also tell him he must be completely well by the day of the party, or he will be replaced.”

With a timid movement like a curtsy, the maid departed.

Once Louisa was alone, her shoulders sagged. Leaning forward, she gathered two fallen roses from the grass and placed them in her basket. She picked up the pruning shears and rose heavily to her feet. She forced herself to go through the household checklist in her mind. The marble floors and chandeliers were sparkling clean. Her boss’s favorite foods had been ordered to arrive fresh from the markets each day. His bedroom suite was ready, needing only these fresh roses to sweeten the dark, masculine room for whichever beautiful starlet

he might choose to bring home with him this time.

Everything must be perfect for his visit. Mr. Cruz must have no reason whatsoever to complain. No reason, Louisa thought as she clipped the stem of the bush's very last rose with rather more force than necessary, to speak to her alone.

She heard the wrought-iron gate open with a long scraping sound behind her. She'd have to get that oiled, she thought. She turned, expecting to see the gardener, or perhaps the wine seller with the large delivery of champagne she'd ordered for the dinner party.

Instead she sucked in her breath as a towering figure stepped from the shadows. Except this man didn't just step out of the shadows.

He *was* the shadow.

"Mr. Cruz," she whispered, her mouth suddenly dry.

His eyes glittered in the twilight as he looked at her. "Miss Grey."

His deep, husky voice echoed across the garden, causing her heart to pound in her chest. She clenched her fingers tightly around the basket and pruning shears so her suddenly clumsy hands wouldn't drop them. He was three days early. But when had Rafael Cruz ever done what was expected?

Handsome, ruthless and rich, the Argentinian millionaire had the darkly seductive charm of a poet—and a heart like ice.

Tall and broad-shouldered, with a latent power in his thickly muscled body, he stood out from all other men with his strength,

his masculine beauty, his wealth and his stylish appearance. But today, his black hair was tousled. His usually immaculate black suit looked rumpled and his tie was loosened and askew at his neck. His jawline was dark with shadow below his sharp cheekbones and Roman nose. Light gray eyes stood out starkly against his tanned olive skin.

Disheveled as he was, today he looked barely civilized, half-brutal. And yet he was somehow even more handsome than she remembered.

A month ago, Louisa had been in his arms. For one night, he'd taken her body, he'd passionately taken her virginity—

She cut off the thought and took a deep, steadying breath.

"Good evening, sir." Her voice betrayed nothing of her emotion. It was dignified, almost cool—the perfect manner for the valued servant of a powerful man. Her training held her in good stead. "Welcome to Istanbul. Everything is in readiness for your visit."

"Of course." His lips curved into a sardonic smile as he came closer to her. His dark hair was windblown and damp. "I would expect nothing less from you, Miss Grey."

She tilted her head back to look up into his brutally handsome face.

There was something dark in his gaze. Something indescribably weary. The smoothly ruthless playboy looked strangely troubled in a way she'd never seen before.

Against her will, worry and concern for him smothered her

heart as the mist deepened into rain, splattering noisily against the dark trees above.

"Are you…are you all right, Mr. Cruz?"

He stiffened.

"Perfect," he said coldly. He clearly resented her intrusion.

Louisa tightened her hands against the basket handle, furious at herself. What was she thinking? She knew better than to ask a personal question. If her ten months of house management training hadn't taught her that, living for five years as Rafael Cruz's housekeeper in Paris certainly should have!

He never showed his feelings. She'd tried to do the same. It had been easy for the first year or two. Then somehow, in spite of her best efforts, she'd started to care…

Looking at him now, all she could think about was the last time she'd seen his face, the night she'd realized she was hopelessly, wretchedly in love with her playboy boss. She'd been sobbing alone in the kitchen when he'd come home unexpectedly early from a date with yet another impossibly beautiful woman.

"Why are you crying?" he'd asked in a low voice. She'd tried to lie, to tell him she just had something in her eye, but when their eyes had met she'd been unable to speak. Unable to move as he walked directly to her. He'd taken her in his arms and she'd known, down to her bones, that it could only end in her own heartbreak. And yet she couldn't push him away. How could she, when she loved him, this untamable, forbidden man who could never truly be hers?

In his penthouse near the Champs-Élysées, against the backdrop of the sparkling city and the Eiffel Tower lit up like a beacon in the night, he'd exhaled her name in a growl. He'd grabbed her wrists and pushed her against the kitchen wall, kissing her so savagely that all she could do was gasp out his name in the first shock of explosive, mutual need and the joint hunger of their embrace.

She'd wanted him with desire she'd repressed for years. But how could she have ever allowed herself to surrender, knowing it could only end badly?

And that was before she'd even started to worry she might be pregnant…

Don't think about it! she ordered herself desperately. She couldn't be pregnant. If she were, Rafael would never forgive her. He'd think she'd done it on purpose, that she'd lied to him!

She licked her lips. "I'm…glad you're well," she faltered.

His dark slate eyes traced her face, lingering on her mouth before he abruptly turned away, slinging his overnight bag over his shoulder. "Bring dinner to my room," he barked.

He stalked into the house without looking back.

"At once, sir," she whispered as the rain fell faster. Heavy droplets pounded against her face and body, plastering her hair to her head and smearing her glasses.

After her boss disappeared into the mansion, she was able to breathe again. Protecting the basket of roses from the rain with her gray woolen blazer, she fell into step behind the two male

assistants carrying his suitcases from the limousine now parked in the carriage house.

The fading ribbons of sunset streaked red across the low clouds as Louisa entered the grand foyer of the nineteenth-century mansion. She carefully wiped her feet before noting her boss's wet footprints across the marble that would now need to be meticulously recleaned. Her eyes followed the dirty footsteps up the sweeping stairs. She saw his dark head and broad-shouldered back disappear behind the landing to his bedroom suite.

The house felt so different now he was here. Rafael Cruz electrified everything. Especially her.

The men followed him up the stairs with the suitcases, and once she was alone, Louisa leaned against the wall, her legs sagging with relief.

Their first meeting was over. It was done.

It seemed that Rafael—*Mr. Cruz,* she corrected herself angrily. His first name kept sneaking into her mind!—had already forgotten all about their night of passion in Paris.

Now if only she could do the same.

Her eyes looked again toward the second-floor landing. But why had he seemed so troubled? Something was very wrong, and she knew it had nothing to do with their one-night stand. Women were interchangeable to him. Easily forgotten. Completely replaceable. No woman could ever touch Rafael's heart.

So if not for a woman, what had brought him to Istanbul

three days early—and in such a black mood? She stared up the empty stairs toward his room. She suddenly yearned to know what troubled him. Yearned to offer him solace, some kind of comfort…

No!

She stomped on the thought angrily. Every woman thought Rafael needed comforting. It was part of his seduction, something he used ruthlessly to his advantage. Women were drawn by his brutish, brooding charm, imagining him a modern Heathcliff with a darkly haunted past. They all yearned to comfort the world-weary Argentinian millionaire with the handsome face and whisper of a broken heart. Louisa had already seen endless women delude themselves into thinking they, and only they, could save his soul. Only Louisa knew the truth.

Rafael Cruz had no soul.

And yet she loved him. She was a fool! Because she, of all women, knew the kind of man he really was—cold, ruthless and unforgiving!

Swear to me you can't get pregnant, Louisa, he'd said to her that breathless night. I cannot get pregnant, she'd said.

If it turned out she'd lied to him…

I'm not pregnant, she repeated to herself furiously. *It's impossible!*

And yet, she was afraid to take the test that would tell her for sure. She told herself she was just late. Very late.

Leaving her wet shoes at the front door, she carried the basket

of roses into a little mudroom near the large modern kitchen. She filled an expensive crystal vase with water, then arranged the roses carefully inside it. She cleaned the pruning shears and put them away in their drawer. Going up to her room upstairs, she removed her wet clothes, replacing them with a new gray skirt suit as plain and serviceable as the first. She tidied her brown hair back into a severe bun, dried the rain off her glasses with a towel, then gave a single glance at herself in the mirror as she passed. She looked plain and orderly and invisible—just as she wished.

She'd never wanted Rafael to notice her. She'd prayed he wouldn't. After what had happened at her last job, invisibility felt like her only protection. But somehow, it had failed her. Somehow, he'd noticed her anyway. Why had he taken her to his bed? Pity? Convenience?

She took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. Then she carried the vase of roses into the kitchen.

Almost immediately, her spirits lifted. The kitchen, along with the rest of the mansion, had changed quite a bit in the month since Louisa had arrived here. Her constant attention, working eighteen-hour days to hire staff and oversee cleaning and remodeling of the once-faded house, had turned it into a well-run home. Louisa gently touched the polished wood of the door frame, smiling down at the colorful, gleaming mosaic floor. Overseeing this mansion's restoration to its former glory had been a huge amount of work, but had given her a great deal of pleasure.

Once, it had been neglected. Now it was loved. *Treasured.*

Louisa set her jaw stubbornly. So she wouldn't allow one moment of weakness to force her out of this job she'd loved with such passion for five years. She'd been a convenient woman for Rafael to take to his bed, nothing more. She loved him, but she would try her best to kill that love.

She would do her job. Keep her distance. *Try to forget how he'd taken her virginity.*

She'd forget the way his lips had pressed against hers, so hot and hard and demanding. She'd forget the sensation of his powerful body pressing her to the wall. Forget his strength and the dark hunger in his eyes as he'd lifted her up in his strong arms, and carried her without a word to his bed…

Louisa stood for a moment, alone in the kitchen. Then she started. What had she been doing here? Right. Making his dinner. The cook had gone home sick. She only hoped he had the same hideous stomach flu she'd had in Paris six weeks ago, so he'd be right as rain in three days, in time for Rafael's birthday dinner. She could make simple dishes, but she was no chef. Her cooking skills tended more toward baking cakes and brownies than preparing *chimichurri* sauce for flank steak or preparing a piquant *cazuela de mariscos,* a seafood stew in tomato broth, for a party of twelve!

But like the captain of a ship, she had learned to do nearly every task that running a vast home required. She quickly put together a simple but delicious sandwich using sliced ham and

her own freshly homemade bread from the well-stocked pantry. She looked down at the tray and carefully smoothed the linen napkin beneath the silver utensils. She hesitated, then added a small bud vase, in which she placed a newly budding red rose.

There was nothing wrong with adding a rose, she told herself. It was not the act of a lover, but of a housekeeper who cared about details. Nothing had changed. *Nothing.*

She summoned a maid. "Take this tray to Mr. Cruz, please."

The newly hired maid shifted weight from one foot to the other as she picked up the tray. She looked nervous.

With an inward sigh, Louisa patted her on the shoulder encouragingly. "Do not be afraid. Mr. Cruz is…a kind man." She was surprised a lightning bolt didn't strike her dead for that lie. "He will not hurt you." That, at least, was true. He liked his homes and businesses to run smoothly, so he did not ever seduce members of his staff—ever.

At least not until a month ago, when he'd thrown Louisa against his bed and ripped off her clothes. When she'd reached for him so urgently as he fell upon her naked body, and they both were devoured by their hunger and urgent need—

No! *No!*

"Please take it at once," Louisa choked out.

With a nod, the maid took the tray and left the kitchen. But Louisa had barely started washing up the dishes when the girl returned, covered with ham and Dijon mustard smeared down her apron and the rose hanging precariously from her newly wet

hair!

"What happened?" Louisa gasped.

The young maid looked close to tears. "He threw the tray at me!" She held the silver tray in one hand and a cracked plate in the other. The accent of her schoolgirl English thickened in her stress. "He says he'll only have you serving him, miss!"

Louisa sucked in her breath.

"He *threw* the *tray?*" Louisa was shocked at the thought of her boss losing control. For heaven's sake, what had happened? Had he lost a business deal? Lost a lot of money? What was wrong with him? For him to be so violent and uncivilized as to actually *throw a tray—*

Louisa's eyes narrowed. Whatever had happened—even if he'd lost the entirety of his fortune—that gave him no excuse to be vicious to a member of her staff! "Give me the tray, Behiye. Then go home."

"Oh, no, miss, please don't sack me—"

"You have just been given the rest of the week off with full pay." She gave a brief smile, covering up her internal rage. "A vacation courtesy of Mr. Cruz, who regrets his brutish behavior very much."

"Thank you, miss."

And if he doesn't regret his behavior yet, Louisa thought furiously as the girl left, *he soon will.*

Louisa's rage built to burning point as she tossed the ceramic plate, once a beautiful specimen of antique İznik blue-and-

white porcelain, into the trash. She washed the silver tray and reassembled the entire meal on a new plate, grimly adding a fresh rose in a silver vase. She made another sandwich, exactly the same as the first, and carried it up the sweeping, curving stairs to the second floor.

She gave a single hard knock on his bedroom door.

"Enter," his voice said harshly.

Still furious, Louisa pushed open the door. Then she stopped.

His bedroom was dark.

"Miss Grey." She heard his low, sardonic voice unseen from the darkness. "So good of you to follow my orders."

His voice was deep, combative. *Hostile.*

Peering into the darkness, Louisa saw him sitting on a chair in the shadows, in front of the cold fireplace. She set down the tray on a nearby table and, crossing the room in her sensible two-inch heels, she pulled down a switch to turn on the small lamp.

A circle of yellow light illuminated the darkness, revealing a bedroom that was masculine, Spartan and severe.

"Turn that off," he growled, his gaze whirling on her. The blast of angry heat in his gaze nearly caused her to stagger back.

Then, straightening, Louisa clenched her hands into fists. "You won't intimidate me like you did poor Behiye. How dare you attack a maid, Mr. Cruz? *Throwing a tray at her?* Have you quite lost your mind?"

His eyes narrowed as he slowly rose to his feet.

"It is none of your business."

But she stood firm. “Oh, but it is. You pay me to oversee this household. How do you expect me to do that when you terrorize the staff?”

“I did not throw the tray at her,” he growled. “I knocked it out of her hand to the floor. She is the one who tried to catch it. Foolishly.”

Spoken like a man who’d never cleaned his own floor. “You frightened her!”

His gray eyes gleamed at her in the shadowy light. “An accident,” he bit out. “It was…careless of me.” Turning away, he set his jaw. “Give the girl the rest of the day off.”

She lifted her chin. “You already did, sir. In fact, you just gave her a week’s vacation with full pay.”

There was a pause in the darkness. “Miss Grey.” His voice sounded suddenly odd, almost wistful. “You seem to always know what I need. Sometimes even before I do.”

The look he gave her made her heart catch in her throat. As if he needed something very much right now and wished she knew what, without him saying a word.

She felt his look with a flood of heat. Against her will, she was reminded of how it had felt when he’d kissed her…No. She wouldn’t think about that night. Couldn’t!

“It’s my job to know what you’ll want,” she said evenly, folding her arms. “You pay me to know.”

The words *you pay me* hung between them, dividing them.

“Yes,” he said in a low voice. “I do.”

He turned away, but not before she caught the stark look in his eyes. The same look she'd seen on his face when he'd first come through the garden gate. It wasn't anguish, exactly, but a flash of vulnerability. Of weariness. Loneliness. But that was ridiculous. How could the most ruthless playboy in Europe ever be lonely?

"You never should have sent the maid," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "I told you specifically I wished for *you* to bring me dinner. Not some maid. You."

He wanted to be alone with her?

Exhilaration flooded through her. Then fear overwhelmed everything. She couldn't allow herself to be seduced again, couldn't!

She kept her expression unmoved, hiding her emotions behind layers of her training as she'd been taught. Formality was her strongest weapon. Her only weapon.

"I regret I did not correctly understand your request, sir," she said stiffly. "I have brought up a newly prepared sandwich for your dinner." She gave him a little bow. "Now, if you please, I will leave you to the peace and tranquility of your own company."

"Stop."

Something in his voice made her obey. Slowly she turned back to face him.

His face was dark. He came close to her, almost touching. "I never should have done it."

"Thrown the tray?" she agreed.

His dark eyes seared through hers. "Made love to you in

Paris."

For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Her desire for her boss threatened everything she held dear. Her career. Her self-respect. *Her soul.*

She forced herself to straighten. "I don't remember any such incident, sir."

"Don't you?" he said in a low voice. He reached down to stroke her cheek. His fingertips were featherlight as he turned her chin to meet his gaze, and she shivered at his touch, at the intensity of his dark eyes. "If you cannot remember it, then I must have been mistaken," he whispered. "I didn't kiss you, then. I didn't feel your body trembling against mine."

"No, you didn't." She could hear the rasp of her own breath, was choked by the frantic beating of her heart. "It never happened."

He leaned forward. "Then why," he said, "have I thought of nothing else?"

Her knees shook. She was so close to surrender. So close to acting like all the others, to flinging herself at him. But there could be only one end to that. She'd seen it played out too many times.

Rafael Cruz was ruthless. He broke women's hearts with careless pleasure.

If she let herself want him—he would be the poison that killed her.

She shook her head desperately. "I don't remember you so

much as kissing me.”

“Perhaps,” he said softly, “this will remind you.”

Lowering his head, he kissed her.

His lips seared hers, scorching her entire body with that one point of contact. She felt his arms around her, pulling her close, closer still until his large, muscular body seemed to surround her on all sides. She was lost, lost in him. His tongue swept hers, causing every nerve ending from her nipples to her earlobes to her toes to sizzle and contract.

He kissed her, and against her will, she surrendered.

Chapter Two

RAFAEL CRUZ had broken many hearts, and he did not feel particularly bad about it.

He wasn't being arrogant. It was simply a fact.

Every woman he'd ever taken to his bed had objected when he'd inevitably ended the affair. They always wanted more. They turned from flirtatious, seductive, powerful women into clingy shrews sobbing for another chance. No wonder he so rarely slept with a woman more than once or twice. Because once he'd possessed them, the women inevitably changed and lost every quality that had originally attracted him in the first place.

He never lied to any of them. He always told them the truth—that their affair would not last long or be based on anything but physical attraction. If women surrendered their bodies and hearts in a way that ultimately caused them pain, well, that was not his fault. They were adults. They made their own choices. He was not to blame.

But he'd sworn long ago never to seduce an employee. Not out of any concern over a workplace harassment suit—he laughed at that idea—but because the fallout would have made his life inconvenient. And Rafael Cruz must never be inconvenienced.

The world was full of beautiful women to fill his bed. But good employees were hard to find.

Louisa Grey was not merely a competent employee; she was

exceptional. She'd become indispensable in his life. She made all his homes run smoothly. After five years, he couldn't imagine his life without her.

She'd never once tried to lure him. Unlike the often clumsy attempts of every woman from his elderly secretary to the cocktail waitress at the bar to gain his notice. Louisa had barely seemed to notice he was a man. *That made him want her most of all.* She was so mysterious. She never spoke of her feelings; never spoke of her past. She had a cool reserve, and hid her beauty beneath glasses and awful clothes.

Still, he'd promised himself he'd never seduce an employee, and he never had once been tempted to break that vow.

Until a month ago.

A mistake. His seduction of Miss Grey had been momentary lapse of willpower. From now on, he had promised himself he would have some self-control.

She was his lead house manager. She coordinated between all his homes around the world. He could not afford to lose her. And women always fell apart when he ended affairs—even previously independent, strong women always turned clingy, whining and desperate in the end. If their night together turned into a full-blown affair, the only end would be the termination of Louisa's employment. Either she would quit, or he would be forced to fire her.

His only hope of keeping her where she belonged—directing his home and satisfying his needs before he was even half-aware

of them—was to keep her at a distance.

But his resolve had disappeared from the moment he saw her today.

He'd had a horrible day. Arriving in Istanbul—too late, too late!—his whole body had been knotted up in tension and grief and fury.

Returning from his father's funeral, the father he'd never known, he'd felt so tense his muscles had ached with his rage and failure. His chauffeur had opened the door, and as Rafael had gotten out beneath the drizzling rain, he'd loosened his tie and headed for his house, intending to seek a tall glass of whiskey and perhaps to send his private jet to Paris to collect his latest French flirtation and deliver her to Istanbul. He'd told himself his one-night-stand with his housekeeper had been a mistake that must never be repeated. *It must be forgotten.*

Then he'd seen Louisa in the twilight of the garden behind the mansion. Standing beneath the cypress and fig trees, she'd been holding a basket of freshly cut roses. She looked even more beautiful than he remembered, more sensual and desirable than he could bear. Looking out at the dark waters of the Bosphorus toward Asia, she'd had an expression of wonderment and wistfulness.

Louisa Grey was an oasis of calm and comfort in this chaotic, cold world.

Rafael had promised himself he wouldn't touch her. But when she'd turned to him with her wide, black-fringed eyes, he'd

looked at her slender body beneath those shapeless, ugly clothes. He'd known from that moment that he would have her again, no matter what it cost him.

He'd ordered her to come up to his bedroom. Tense and pacing, he'd waited for her. Then he'd been surprised by the maid with the tray. Later, when Louisa had deigned to come up to his room, she'd defied him as no one else dared. She'd tormented him—provoked him. Finally, when she'd drawn up her shoulders and said in a voice full of bravado, *I don't remember you so much as kissing me,* something inside him had snapped.

He'd seized her.

Now, kissing Louisa was heaven. Her lips were so soft and sweet and yielding beneath his. Her skin smelled like soap and spring flowers. His whole body tightened with the force of his desire.

It was more than desire. He knew this was wrong—forbidden—but he longed for her in a way he'd never felt for any woman. The elusive Miss Grey. When he felt her surrender in his arms, a growl rose in the back of his throat. He wrapped his arms around her more tightly and started to pull her back toward the bed.

With a gasp, Louisa wrenched away from him. "No!"

"Louisa—"

"No." She stumbled back from him violently. "We can't do this!"

He reached his arms out for her. "We must."

She jumped back another two steps. With a shuddering intake

of breath, she put her fingertips on her lips as if she could still feel him kissing her. “I can’t,” she whispered. “I work for you.”

He knew she was right. That just made him more angry, more determined to have her.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said fiercely.

“Oh, but it does. You have a rule, Mr. Cruz,” she said, lifting her chin. Her beautiful chocolate-colored eyes glittered. “You never seduce your employees. That’s the one line you don’t cross!”

He craved her desperately. She was the one tonic that would make him forget everything he’d lost today. But he could not tell her that. He must never appear vulnerable to anyone—not to any woman on earth, let alone one of his employees!

“It is my rule, not yours,” he said coolly. “I can choose to make an exception.”

But she stepped back, out of his reach.

“I choose differently,” she said. “What happened between us in Paris was a mistake. It will never happen again. I can’t lose my career, my reputation, my life,” she whispered. “Not again!”

He frowned, trying to read her expression.

“What do you mean, *again?*”

She blinked fast as she looked away. “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.” He knew little about her past beyond what was spelled out on her résumé. She’d always deflected personal questions with cool, dignified reserve.

She turned to him sharply. “Paris,” she muttered. “I meant

Paris."

"You didn't mean Paris."

"What else?"

Another deflection. He narrowed his eyes. "There was another man before me," he guessed.

"You know there wasn't!"

"You were a virgin. That doesn't mean there wasn't another man." The thought made his shoulders feel tighter still.

She set her jaw stubbornly. "You checked my references. You know all about me."

Rafael didn't know half what he wished he knew. He'd been so impressed by her at the interview that he'd done only the barest measure of due diligence above and beyond what the exclusive employment agency had provided. He never liked to rely totally on underlings. He'd spoken to the wife of her last employer, and the woman had raved up and down the moon about Louisa Grey, calling her "amazing" and a "treasure." It seemed very unlikely that she would have spoken so highly about Louisa if she'd suspected her husband of having an affair with her.

It didn't make sense.

"What are you hiding?" Rafael said, his eyes searching her face. "You never mention family or friends back home. Why? Why do you never want to go home?"

He saw her eyes widen, heard her intake of breath. Then she smoothed her oversize gray woolen skirt beneath her trembling hands. "It doesn't matter." She turned away. "If there will be

nothing else, sir, I will leave you now—"

"No, damn it." He crossed the room in two steps, blocking the doorway so she could not leave. "I won't let you go. Not until you answer me. I…" *I need you,* he almost said, but the words caught in his throat as sharply as a razorblade. He hadn't said them to anyone for years. He'd created his whole life to avoid saying them.

Through the open window, he could see the lights of Istanbul flickering in the dusk. Black silhouettes of minarets plunged like daggers into the dying red sunset. He could hear a muezzin's broadcasted call to prayers echo across the sea.

His eyes locked with hers in the shadowy room. The tension between them changed. Electrified. Desire for her swept through him, negating all else.

"Get out of my way, Mr. Cruz," she whispered.

He could hear the quickness of her breath, see the rise and fall of her chest. "No."

"You can't keep me here!"

Rafael almost shook with the force of his need for her.

"Can't I?" he said softly.

He wanted to bury himself in her so deeply that he would forget everything—everything that threatened to break him apart. He heard the quick pant of her breath. He took a deep breath of her, smelling her fragrance, soap and clean cotton and freshly cut roses.

If he were smart, he would let her go. He would find a different

woman to fill his bed. The pouting French starlet he'd been flirting with for the last few days. Her. Anyone.

Anyone but Louisa Grey.

His eyes fell to her mouth. Her beautiful bow-shaped lips were pink and bare of makeup. Something about Louisa intrigued him beyond his understanding. He wanted her in a way that almost felt against his will. He craved the mind-numbing pleasure he'd felt making love to her. The best sex of his life.

The pleasure of her body would help him forget his pain. She would be the drug to distract him from his grief and despair. He would ravish her in his bed, hard and fast, until the fire in his blood was sated. Until the pain in his heart was obliterated into ash. Then, and only then, would he let her go…

Rafael looked at her from beneath heavily lidded eyes. He saw the tremble of her body in the shadows.

She wanted to escape him—to deny them both what they both wanted.

But this inexperienced girl was no match for his will. She'd been a virgin when he'd first taken her in Paris. She would not be able to resist him now. He would possess her until he was utterly satiated, until he felt her writhe and shake beneath his body.

Slowly, implacably, Rafael pulled her into his arms.

She tried to resist, but he would not let her go. She trembled, tilting her head back to look up into his face. Tall as she was for a woman, he still towered over her. Her beautiful brown eyes glistened in the faint golden light.

“Please,” she said in a low voice. “Let me go.”

His hands tightened on her. “Are you so afraid?” he said quietly.

She drew a shuddering breath. “Yes.”

He cupped her face. “Of me?”

“No,” she said in a low voice. “If you kiss me again, if you take me to your bed, I’m afraid…”

“Afraid of what?”

She blinked fast, her full lashes black against her pale skin.

“Afraid I’ll die of wanting you,” she whispered.

He nearly gasped.

Reaching up, Louisa put her hand on his rough cheek. “I’ve missed you,” she said in a voice full of anguish. “I’ve missed you so…”

He shook beneath her touch. Taking her hand in his own, he fervently kissed the palm, then pulled her into his arms. Lowering his mouth to hers, he kissed her. Deeply. Hungrily.

He kissed her with all the repressed desire of the month they’d been apart—and of all the wasted years before that.

Louisa trembled.

Rafael’s touch burned her. It frightened her. *Seduced her.*

He kissed her, his powerful lips moving over hers. Guiding her. Giving her such explosive pleasure, causing electricity to sizzle down her limbs beneath her gray woolen suit until she thought she might die of this ache like fire.

Too many years of repressed desire could no longer be

contained. It was all she could do not to blurt out the two devastating secrets that would destroy everything.

She was completely, irrevocably in love with a man who never wanted to be either husband or father. And she might be pregnant with his child…

Rafael's hand on the back of her head, stroking through her hair and the bare skin of her neck, created a spark that seared up and down her body. Her breasts became heavy, her nipples tight. She tingled with painful awareness all over her body. She wanted him so much it drove her to despair.

"Forget I'm your boss," he murmured against her skin. She felt the warmth of his breath, the roughness of his jawline against her cheek. "Stay with me tonight."

She was overwhelmed by the sensuality of his hands on her body, his fingers stroking her back down to her hips.

He pulled back from her and golden light flickered in his dark eyes like the hot flames in hell. "Stay with me," he commanded.

Her gaze fell to his lips. She could barely breathe. She wanted to say yes. Wanted it so badly she thought she'd die. But…

"I can't," she gasped, even as her fingers tightened on his black shirt. She licked her lips. "If the rest of the staff ever found out I'd been your mistress…they'd lose all respect for me."

"It's no business of theirs—"

"I'd lose all respect for myself!"

For answer, he touched her hair. Pulling out the pins that held her hair in a tight bun, he let it tumble down her shoulders. "So

beautiful," he whispered, moving his fingers through the long chestnut waves. He looked into her eyes. "Why don't you ever let it down?"

Her hair? Or her guard?

His fingers felt so deliciously light moving through her hair. She held her breath. Her scalp tingled as he stroked whisper-light touches against her earlobes and neck then cradled the back of her head in both of his hands. He looked down at her.

"You work miracles." He looked around the newly remodeled bedroom with wonder. "No one could ever feel anything for you…but respect."

She exhaled. His words were balm to her.

But she knew how the world truly worked. Her spine snapped straight.

"Reputations are destroyed by affairs like this. No one would ever hire me for a respectable job again."

"Why would you ever leave me?" He lifted a dark eyebrow. "No woman ever wants to leave."

He spoke the words as a joke, but Louisa knew they were true. She also knew that she couldn't possibly remain his housekeeper as his discarded mistress. That she'd already given him her body once was bad enough—it had forced her to flee to Istanbul.

She was still able to work for him, barely. But she did have some pride. If she gave herself to him completely, if she admitted that she was in love with him, she knew she'd never recover from his scorn. She'd never survive loving him, working for him—and

seeing him move on to another woman.

Especially if she was pregnant…

I'm not pregnant, she repeated to herself, but the words had become hollow and metallic. She gritted her teeth. All right, fine. She would take the test. *Tonight.* As soon as she was alone. Then she would know for sure that she had nothing to fear. Or else she'd have some shocking news for Rafael Cruz—the heartless, ruthless, charming playboy—and she'd have to tell him she was going to make him a father against his will.

He would never forgive her. He would never believe something had gone wrong with the Pill, that her cycle must have been thrown off by those two days of bad flu she'd had a week or two before their affair. She'd given him her word of honor she couldn't get pregnant. He'd be furious. He'd think she'd lied.

Or worse: that she'd gotten pregnant on purpose to trap him. Louisa had overheard more than one of his cast-off mistresses plotting cold-bloodedly to get pregnant in a stupid, selfish attempt to marry him. He'd evaded their plots easily. So how would he feel being unintentionally trapped by his own housekeeper?

"You're shivering," Rafael murmured. He pulled her closer into his arms. "Are you cold?"

Unable to answer, she shook her head.

He stroked her cheek.

"Let me warm you," he whispered.

His head lowered toward hers.

"No!" She pushed away from Rafael with strength she hadn't known she had. From across the room, they stared at each other, not touching, in the shadows. The only sound was the ragged pant of her breath. She turned away.

"I need you, Louisa," he said behind her. "Don't go."

Not turning around, she closed her eyes. "You don't need me," she replied hoarsely. "There are women aplenty to fill your bed. You have your pick of them. You don't need me."

"I found him," she heard Rafael say behind her. "My father."

She froze in the doorway. With a gasp, she whirled around.

Across the large bedroom, Rafael stood like a statue chiseled in ice. His handsome face was stark and strange, half-illuminated by the window's slanted beam of moonlight.

"You found your father?" she choked out, clasping her hands. "Oh, Rafael, I'm so glad! You've been looking for him for so long!"

"Yes."

His voice was harsh and jagged as a rusty knife. Louisa frowned at him in bewilderment. Why did he not look pleased? Why did he still look so frozen and strange?

Rafael had been looking for his father for twenty years, ever since the Argentinian man who'd raised him had revealed on his deathbed that Rafael wasn't truly his son. His stepfather had told him before he'd died that, the week before he'd married her, Rafael's mother had returned from Istanbul—pregnant.

"Is your father here?" Louisa breathed. "In Istanbul? Have you

talked to him?"

"His name was Uzay Çelik," Rafael cut her off. He looked toward the window. "And he died two days ago."

"Oh, no," she whispered, her heart in her throat. Against her will, she walked back across the bedroom toward him as he stared into the flickering lights across the dark waters of the Bosphorus. "Your investigators found him too late."

Slowly he turned to her.

"They never found him at all. My mother is the one who finally told me. After twenty years of silence, she overnighted a letter to Paris that I received this morning. After he was dead."

The hurt in his voice, the pain like a boy's, caught at her throat. And Louisa could hold herself back no longer. Reaching out, she placed her hand on his back, rubbing his tight muscles and his strong, powerful, hunched shoulders. "Why did she wait so long to tell you?"

He gave a harsh laugh. "To hurt me, I suppose," he said. "She doesn't know that it's impossible. I'll never be hurt again—not by her or anyone."

The bleakness of his tone belied his words.

"But surely," Louisa persisted, "your mother loves you—"

His lip curled. "She sent me a letter and a package that arrived in Paris today." He held up a gold signet ring. "She'd saved it for thirty-seven years, since before I was born. Now she sends it to me. Now, when it's too late."

Louisa's heart turned over in her chest at the pain in his

handsome face. She knew what finding his real father had meant to Rafael.

"I barely made it to the funeral. There were only five mourners, and they seemed to have shown up with the thought of asking surviving family members for money. Debts are all my father left behind. No wife. No other children. No friends. Just debts."

"I'm so sorry," Louisa whispered, desperate to take the pain out of his eyes, feeling helpless. "I'll contact your guests and tell them the birthday dinner is canceled."

His gaze became hard. "Why?"

"Because, because," she stammered, "you're in mourning."

He shook his head. "The dinner party will go on as planned."

"Are you sure? You don't have to do this."

He didn't answer. Instead he looked around the beautiful room. He gave a low laugh. "I bought this palace for my father, for when I found him. Now all I have left—" his hand tightened into a fist around the gold ring hanging on a chain "—is this."

She pressed her hand against his rough cheek, looking up into his face. "If only there was something I could do, if only—"

"There is."

And he kissed her.

His lips were fierce, demanding. She could not stop him or pull away; all she could do was surrender to his strength, and the force of her own desire.

His hands moved over her clothes in the soft circle of pale

golden light amid the shadows. He stroked her arms, her belly. Pulling off her woolen blazer and dropping it gently to the floor, he cupped her breasts through her thin cotton shirt. She gasped. Then, with a soft moan, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

He pushed her back against the bed, still kissing her. He moved with increasing urgency, pulling up her blouse, reaching beneath her silk bra to caress her breasts. Her nipples hardened to small pebbles beneath his muscular fingers as she held him close, aching for his touch. But it wasn't enough…wasn't nearly enough!

With sudden impatience, he pulled open the blouse in a single swift movement, popping the buttons. He ripped her flimsy silk bra in half easily, pushing the cups apart and lowering his head to suckle her.

She gasped, arching beneath his mouth. As he licked and bit one nipple, his powerful hand squeezed the other breast, sending sparks of longing down her body, between her legs.

Lifting his head, cupping both her breasts in his large hands, he gave her a hard, possessive kiss that bruised her lips. But amid the pain was an intensity of pleasure, the need of her own longing that drove her almost insane.

She had to stop this.

She would die if she stopped this.

As he kissed her, she felt the weight of his body, fully clothed and so much larger than her own, pressing her heavily into the

firm mattress. His mouth plundered hers, his tongue tantalizing and mastering her. She felt his powerful hands move down her body. Grabbing her skirt's hemline at the knee, he pulled it up until her legs were bare all the way to her hips.

He continued to kiss her fiercely, holding her body to the bed with his weight. One hand moved between her legs, caressing between her naked thighs. She sucked in her breath. She tried to move, to push him away from her, but she could not. Her mind was no longer in control of her body. Her body wanted what it wanted—*and it wanted him.*

His hand cupped between her legs, and she gasped. He cut off her gasp with a hard kiss, stealing her protest away, leaving her beyond the ability to fight what they both wanted. He moved his hand beneath her white cotton panties, caressing her slick folds like molten heat with a thick finger, caressing her sensitive core with his thumb.

She gasped, arching off the bed.

He pulled away, looking down at her. His eyes were dark.

Then he yanked her panties off her body in a swift movement, tossing them to the floor. Before reason could start to return, before she could remember she should tell him *No, please, we must stop,* he knelt before her on the bed. Pushing her legs apart, he moved his head between her legs and took a long, languorous taste.

She gave a high-pitched cry, gripping the pillow beneath her head with both hands.

Holding her hips firmly, refusing to allow her to move away, he held her to him. He licked her, lapping her one moment and suckling her the next. His tongue flicked inside her. Then fingers followed, with rough sensuality she could not deny or escape.

With all his experience, he knew just what to do. He played her like an instrument. He knew how to make her sing. The pleasure was so intense she nearly wept.

She felt the first waves of aching fulfillment start to crest, building inside her. Just as her hips started to lift of their own volition against his mouth, just as her whole body started to tremble and shake, he released her. As she cried out in frustration, he rose to his feet. He pulled down his pants. He did not wait to remove the rest of his clothes before climbing on top of her and covering her body with his own. She felt his hardness seeking entry between her legs for one brief second and he brutally thrust himself inside her. A sharp explosion of agonizing pleasure ripped through her as she felt him impale her so deeply. Pinning her with his massive size and weight, he thrust again, more deeply still and her whole body hummed, tense as a bow. The sweet agony coiled inside her, climbing higher…then still higher…until she could not breathe, until she thought she could bear no more, until she thought she would break.

He pulled back and rode her, holding her hips with his big hands to penetrate her so deep and wide and hard she felt split in two. She moaned, holding her hands against the black headboard, writhing from side to side as he shoved inside her again and again.

She had to bite her lip to keep herself from moaning his name, from begging him to not stop, from begging him to love her and never leave…

With a growl, he pushed one last time inside her so deep it shattered her apart into a thousand glimmering pieces. He nearly pierced her heart, and as her world exploded, from a distance she heard herself scream his name.

The next morning, Rafael woke up to find his lead housekeeper, the most prized member of his staff, naked and sleeping beside him in bed.

He nearly groaned aloud. He'd done it. *Again.* After promising himself he'd never touch Louisa again!

Sunlight was shining bright through the tall windows of his bedroom. The dark wood and new furniture, with shining steel fixtures and stark glass lights, had an oddly warm appearance beneath the soft golden light pouring from the windows. Or maybe the golden glow came from the woman now sleeping beside him. She made everything beautiful.

He looked at her lovely face, surrounded by brown hair tumbling over the pillow in waves. A tender smile still curved her pink lips. Sleeping and naked, she looked so vulnerable. So young.

He cursed himself in low, guttural Spanish.

He'd thought he had some self-control. He'd done everything to try to forget his night with Louisa Grey, and the fact that it had been the single most amazing sexual experience of his life.

Which with all his experience, was incredible.

Perhaps that was why he'd been unable to forget. Uninterested in other women. Unable to think of anything else.

He still didn't know why she'd been crying that night in Paris. He'd been shocked when he'd returned from another dull date to find Louisa overcome with emotion. Louisa, who never showed her feelings. He hadn't known how to deal with it, so he'd taken her in his arms. And then he'd done what he'd longed to do for months. He'd kissed her. He'd done more than kiss her. He'd made passionate, reckless love to her—and discovered to his shock that his beautiful, self-contained housekeeper was, at twenty-eight, still a virgin.

Even now, when by all rights he should have been well satisfied, his body tightened at the memory of making love to her in Paris. Of making love to her last night. He felt the heat off her skin as she lay sleeping beside him, naked in his bed, and he wanted her anew.

He looked at her in the morning light. She looked so beautiful. So impossibly young. So lush and desirable.

He'd tried to rid himself of his inconvenient desire for her. He'd allowed her to transfer to his Istanbul house, though he did not want her to leave. He'd busied himself with work in Paris. He'd tried to move on with another woman, specifically Dominique Lepetit, though the truth was that the amoral actress was no longer of any interest to him.

Louisa, however…

With a low groan, he rolled over in bed and sat up, holding his head in his hands. He could still not quite believe he'd slept with her without a condom again, something he'd never done with any other woman. Oh, other women had told him they were on the Pill, but he'd never trusted them completely. In the past, he'd either been well-prepared with condoms, or he'd walked away from the situation. Simple as that. He never wanted to have a wife or child or be pinned down in any way. He took freedom even more seriously than he took pleasure.

Rafael glanced back over his shoulder at Louisa, who was still sleeping peacefully, like a child. He immediately felt comforted. Louisa Grey would never lie. If she'd said she was on the Pill, then she was.

He trusted her. In fact, she was the only woman he trusted. She'd been a virgin the first time he'd taken her, for God's sake. That had been an amazing discovery during an incredible night. And last night had been even better…

He had the sudden memory of her naked body beneath his, the way she'd felt when he'd pushed inside her. The image of her ecstatic face as he'd possessed her as their sweaty bodies pressed together urgently in the heat of the night.

He'd thought the first time he'd taken her, in Paris, had been the best night he'd ever had with any woman. But last night had been even better. Something about the feel of her skin—or the smell of her hair. Perhaps it was the way she moved, the combination of sensuality mixed with innocence. Or her

elusiveness. She always held something of herself back. Always.

Except in his bed.

Whatever the cause, some chemical reaction took hold of his brain whenever he was near her. He, who'd slept with so many women, who had his choice of heiresses and princesses and models, could not stop wanting his housekeeper. Louisa was like a drug to him.

Because she was forbidden?

His smile fell. And he cursed himself anew.

Rising to his feet, he put on a robe and left the well-kept bedroom. He went out to the veranda. He looked down at the garden and the Bosphorus beyond. In a short time, she'd turned this neglected mansion into an exquisite home.

His hands gripped the wrought-iron balcony railing. And now, because of his lust, he would lose her—his most prized employee!

He glanced back at the beautiful woman sleeping in his bed. He had to find a way to return to a simple relationship of boss and employee. But he wasn't sure he could.

From the moment he'd first interviewed her in Paris for the head housekeeper position, he'd been intrigued by her—this pretty young woman who went to some lengths to appear plain, wearing black cat's-eye glasses and oversize, unflattering clothes, pulling her chestnut hair back into a tight bun from which no tendril could hope to escape. She'd left her first position in the household of a financier in Miami, at a very good rate of pay,

because apparently she wished to see Europe.

"You will be allowed no vacations," he'd told her at that first interview. "I need a house manager who will have no other desires other than to smoothly and perfectly run my home."

He'd waited for Miss Louisa Grey, a modern young woman, to tell him he was out of his mind with such expectations and to leave his office; instead, she'd just looked up at him with her cool brown eyes.

"Of course."

"I don't think you understand," he'd said evenly. "You won't be able to leave. Not for vacations. Not for Christmas. And do not think I will eventually transfer you to New York. I like stability in my home life. If you start in Paris you will stay here."

"Fine," she'd repeated, frowning up at him with her brow furrowed.

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