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JENNIE LUCAS

The Consequences of That Night



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Emma Hayes has gone from making hotel magnate Cesare Falconeri's bed to running his household, including handing out expensive parting gifts to his numerous conquests! But each time it's chipped away at her heart. Until one night, inhibitions lowered, she reaches for what she's always wanted... With one disastrous marriage behind him Cesare vowed never to go there again. But when his indiscretion with Emma has consequences, Cesare must break his own vow – and say I do for the sake of his heir. Now he'll expect his new bride to share his bed, instead of making it!

Emma took a deep, shuddering breath. “I can’t do it. Not anymore.”

“Can’t do what?”

“Work for you.”

The smile slid from Cesare’s face. He shifted his stance, then clawed back his dark hair. “It was a single meaningless night,” he said in a low voice. “I hoped we could just—forget. And things could go back to how they were.”

She shook her head.

“Why?”

Emma had never thought she’d be forced to blurt out news of her baby in the middle of a hotel hallway, but she suddenly knew it was now or never. She took a deep breath.

“That night changed everything for me forever. There’s no going back now because...” She hesitated, trying to find the words. “Because...”

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The Consequences of That Night

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, 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

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CHAPTER ONE

A BABY.

Emma Hayes put a hand over her slightly curved belly, swaying as the double-decker bus traveled deeper into central London in the gray afternoon rain.

A baby.

For ten weeks, she'd tried not to hope. Tried not to think about it. Even when she'd gone to her doctor's office that morning, she'd been bracing herself for some problem, to be told that she must be brave.

Instead she'd seen a rapid steady beat on the sonogram as her doctor pointed to the flash on the screen. "See the heartbeat? 'Hi, Mum.'"

"I'm really pregnant?" she'd said through dry lips.

The man's eyes twinkled through his spectacles. "As pregnant as can be."

"And the baby's—all right?"

"It's all going perfectly. Textbook, I'd say." The doctor had given her a big smile. "I think it's safe to tell your husband now, Mrs. Hayes."

Her husband. The words echoed through Emma's mind as she closed her eyes, leaning back into her seat on the top deck of the Number 9 bus. Her husband. How she wished there was such a person, waiting for her in a homey little cottage—a man who'd kiss her with a cry of joy at the news of his coming child. But in direct opposition to what she'd told her physician, there was no husband.

Just a boss. A boss who'd made love to her nearly three months ago in a single night of reckless passion, then disappeared in the cold dawn, leaving her to wake up alone in his huge bed. The same bed that she'd made for him over the past seven years, complete with ironed sheets.

I know the maid could do it, but I prefer that you handle it personally. No one can do it like you, Miss Hayes.

Oh, boy. She'd really handled it personally this time, hadn't she?

Blinking, Emma stared out the window as the red double-decker bus made its way down Kensington Road. Royal Albert Hall went by in a blur of red brick behind the rain-streaked glass. She wiped her eyes hard. Stupid tears. She shouldn't be crying. She was happy about this baby. Thrilled, in fact. She'd honestly thought she could never get pregnant. It was a miracle.

A lump rose in her throat.

Except...

Cesare would never be a real father to their baby. He would never be her husband, a man who would kiss her when he came home from work and tuck their baby in at night. No matter how she might wish otherwise.

Because Cesare Falconeri, self-made billionaire, sexy Italian playboy, had two passions in life. The first was expanding his far-flung hotel empire across the globe, working relentlessly to expand his net worth and power. The second, a mere hobby when he had an hour or two to spare, was to seduce beautiful women, which he did for sport, as other men might play football or golf.

Her sexy Italian boss annihilated the thin hearts of supermodels and heiresses alike with the same careless, seductive, selfish charm. He cared nothing for any of them. Emma knew that. As his housekeeper, she was the one responsible for arranging morning-after gifts for his one-night stands. Usually Cartier watches. Bought in bulk.

As the bus traveled through Mayfair, the lights of the Ritz Hotel slid by. Looking down from the top deck of the bus, Emma saw pedestrians dressed in Londoners' typical festive autumn attire—that is to say, entirely in black—struggling with umbrellas in the rain and wind.

It was the first of November. Just yesterday, the warmth of Indian summer had caressed the city like a lover, with promises of forever. Today, drizzle and rain had descended. The city, so recently bright and warm, had become melancholy, haunted and filled with despair.

Or maybe it was just her.

For the past seven years—since she'd first started as a maid at Cesare's hotel in New York, at the age of twenty-one—she'd been absolutely in love with him, and absolutely careful not to show it. Careful not to show any feelings at all.

You never bore me with personal stories, Miss Hayes. I hardly know anything about you. He'd smiled. Thank you.

Then three months ago, she'd come back from her stepmother's funeral in Texas and he'd found her alone in his darkened kitchen, clutching an unopened bottle of tequila, with tears streaming down her cheeks. For a moment, Cesare had just stared at her.

Then he'd pulled her roughly into his arms.

Perhaps he'd only meant to offer comfort, but by the end of the night, he'd taken the virginity she'd saved for him, just for him, even when she knew she had no hope. He'd taken her to his bed, and made Emma's gray, lonely world explode with color and fire.

And today, a new magic, every bit as shocking and unexpected. She was pregnant with his baby.

Emma traced her fingertip into the shape of a heart against a fogged-up corner of the bus window. If only his playboy nature could change. If only she could believe he'd actually wish to be a father someday, and even fall in love with Emma, as she'd fallen for him...

The double-decker bus jolted to a stop, and with an intake of breath she abruptly wiped the heart off the glass. Cesare, love? That was a laugh. He couldn't even stick around for breakfast, much less commit to raising a family!

Ever since she'd woken up alone in his bed that cold morning after, Emma had faithfully kept his mansion in Kensington sparkling clean in perpetual hope for his arrival. But she'd found out from one of the secretaries that he'd actually returned to London two days ago. Instead of coming home, he was staying at his suite at the flagship London Falconeri near Trafalgar Square.

His unspoken words were clear. He wanted to make sure Emma knew she meant nothing to him, any more than the stream of models and starlets who routinely paraded through his bed.

But there was one big difference. None of his other lovers had gotten pregnant.

Because unlike the rest, he'd slept with her without protection. He'd believed her when she'd whispered to him in the dark that pregnancy was impossible. Cesare, who trusted no one, had taken Emma at her word.

Her hands tightened on the handrail of the seat in front of her. Here she'd been fantasizing about homey cottages and Cesare miraculously turning into a devoted father. The truth was that when he learned their one-night stand had caused a pregnancy, he'd think she'd lied. That she'd deliberately gotten pregnant to trap him.

He'd hate her.

So don't tell him, a cowardly voice whispered. Run away. Take that job in Paris. He never has to know.

But she couldn't keep her pregnancy a secret. Even if the odds were a million to one that he'd want to be part of their baby's life, didn't even Cesare deserve that chance?

A loud burst of laughter, and the stomp of people climbing to the top deck, made Emma glance out the window. She leaped to her feet. “Wait, please!” she cried to the bus driver, who obligingly waited as she ran down the bus stairs, nearly tripping over her own feet. Out on the sidewalk, buffeted by passersby, she looked up at the elegant, imposing gray-stone Falconeri Hotel. Putting her handbag over her head to dodge the rain, Emma ran into the grand lobby. Nodding at the security guard, she shook the rain off her camel-colored mackintosh and took the elevator to the tenth floor.

Trembling, she walked down the hall to the suite of rooms Cesare occasionally used as an office and a pied-à-terre after a late evening out in Covent Garden. Cesare liked to be in the thick of things. The floor wasn’t private, but shared by those guests who could afford rooms at a thousand pounds a night. Trembling, she knocked on the door.

She heard a noise on the other side, and then the door was abruptly wrenched open.

Emma looked up with an intake of breath. “Cesare...”

But it wasn’t her boss. Instead a gorgeous young woman, barely covered in lingerie, stood in his doorway.

“Yes?” the woman said in a bored tone, leaning against the door as if she owned it.

A blade of ice went through Emma’s heart as she recognized the woman. Olga Lukin. The famous model who had dated Cesare last year. Her body shook as she tried to say normally, “Is Mr. Falconeri here?”

“Who are you?”

“His—his housekeeper.”

“Oh.” The supermodel’s shoulders relaxed. “He’s in the shower.”

“The shower,” Emma repeated numbly.

“Yesss,” Olga Lukin said with exaggerated slowness. “Do you want me to give him a message?”

“Um...”

“There’s no point in you waiting.” The blonde glanced back at the mussed bed, plainly visible in the hotel suite, and gave a catlike smile. “As soon as he’s done, we’re going out.” Leaning forward, she confided in a stage whisper, “Right after we have another go.”

Emma looked at Olga’s bony shape, her cheekbones that could cut glass. She was absolutely gorgeous, a woman who’d look perfect on any billionaire’s arm. In his bed.

While Emma—she suddenly felt like nothing. Nobody. Short, round and drab, not particularly pretty, with the big hips of someone who loved extra cookies at teatime, wearing a beige raincoat, knit dress and sensible shoes. Her long black hair, when it wasn’t pulled back in a plaited chignon, hadn’t seen the inside of a hairdresser’s in years.

Humiliation made her ears burn. How could she have dreamed, even for an instant, that Cesare might want to marry someone like her and raise a baby in a snug little cottage?

He must have slept with her that night out of pity—nothing more!

“Well?”

“No.” Emma shook her head, hiding her tears. “No message.”

“Ta, then,” she said rudely. But as she started to close the door, there was a loud bang as Cesare came out of the bathroom.

Emma’s heart stopped in her chest as she saw him for the first time since he’d left her in his bed.

Cesare was nearly naked, wearing only a low-slung white towel around his hips, gripping another towel wrapped carelessly over his broad shoulders. His tanned, muscular chest was bare, his black hair still damp from the shower. He stopped, scowling at Olga.

“What are you—”

Then he saw Emma in the doorway, and his spine snapped straight. His darkly handsome face turned blank. “Miss Hayes.”

Miss Hayes? He was back to calling her that—when for the past five years they’d been on a first-name basis? Miss Hayes?

After so long of hiding her every emotion from him, purely out of self-preservation, something cracked in her heart. She looked from him, to Olga, to the mussed bed.

“Is this your way of showing me my place?” She shook her head tearfully. “What is wrong with you, Cesare?”

His dark eyes widened in shock.

Staggering back, horrified at what she’d said, and brokenhearted at what she’d not been able to say, she turned and fled.

“Miss Hayes,” she heard him call behind her, and then, “Emma!”

She kept going. Her throat throbbed with pain. She ran with all her heart, desperate to reach the safety of the elevator, where she could burst into tears in privacy. And start planning an immediate departure for Paris, where she’d never have to face him again—or remember her own foolish dreams.

A father for her baby. A snug home. A happy family. A man who’d love her back, who would protect her, who’d be faithful. A tear fell for each crushed dream. She wiped her eyes furiously. How could she have ever let herself get in this position—with Cesare, of all people? Why hadn’t she been more careful? Why?

Emma heard his low, rough curse behind her, and the hard thud of his bare feet. Before she reached the elevator, he grabbed her arm, whirling her around in the hall.

“What do you want, Miss Hayes?” he demanded.

“Miss Hayes?” she bit out, struggling to get free. “Are you kidding me with that? We’ve seen each other naked!”

He released her, clearly surprised by her sharp tone.

“That doesn’t explain what you’re doing here,” he said stiffly. “You’ve never sought me out like this before.”

No, and she never would again! “Sorry I interrupted your date.”

“It’s not a— I have no idea what Olga is doing in my room. She must have gotten a key and snuck in.”

Hot tears burned behind her eyes. “Right.”

“We broke up months ago.”

“Looks like you’re back together.”

“Not so far as I’m concerned.”

“Now, that I believe,” she choked out. “Because once you have sex, any relationship is pretty much over where you’re concerned, isn’t it?”

“We didn’t just have sex.” He set his jaw. “Have you ever known me to lie?”

That stopped her.

“No,” she whispered. Cesare never lied. He always made his position brutally clear. No commitment, no promises, no future.

Yet, somehow many women still managed to convince themselves otherwise. To believe they were special. Until they woke alone the morning after, to find Emma serving them breakfast with their going-away present, and ended up weeping in her arms.

“I really don’t care.” Emma ran an unsteady hand over her forehead. “It’s none of my business.”

“No. It’s not.”

She took a deep breath. “I just came to...to tell you something.”

The dim lighting of the elegant hotel hallway left hard shadows against Cesare’s cheekbones, the dark scruff of his jaw, and his muscular, tanned chest. His black eyes turned grim. “Don’t.”

Her lips parted on an intake of breath. “What?”

“Just don’t.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“I can guess. You’re going to tell me all about your feelings. You’ve always shared so little. I convinced myself you didn’t have any. That I was just a job to you.”

Emma almost laughed hysterically in his face. Oh, if only he knew. For years, she'd worked for him until her brain was numb and her fingers were about to fall off. Her first thought each morning when she woke—was him. Her last thought before she finally collapsed in bed each night—was him. What he needed. What he wanted. What he would need and want tomorrow. He'd always been more than a job to her.

"It kept things simple," he said. "It's why we got along so well. I liked you. Respected you. I'd started to think of us as—friends."

Friends. Against her will, Emma's gaze fell to the hard planes of his muscular, tanned chest laced with dark hair. Wearing only the low-slung white towel wrapped snugly around his hips, he was six feet three inches of powerful, hard-muscled masculinity, and he stood in the hallway of his hotel without the slightest self-consciousness, as arrogant as if he were wearing a tailored suit. A few people passed them in the hallway, openly staring. Emma swallowed. It would be hard for any woman to resist staring at Cesare. Even now she... God help her, even now...

"Now you're going to ruin it." His eyes became flinty. "You're going to tell me that you care. You've rushed down here to explain you still can't forget our night together. Even though we both swore it wouldn't change anything, you're going to tell me you're desperately in love with me." He scowled. "I thought you were special, but you're going to prove you're just like the rest."

The reverberations of his cruel words echoed in the empty hallway, like a bullet ricocheting against the walls before it landed square and deep in her heart.

For a moment, Emma couldn't breathe. Then she forced herself to meet his eyes.

"I would have to be stupid to love you," she said in a low voice. "I know you too well. You'll never love anyone, ever again."

He blinked. "So you're not—in love with me?"

He sounded so hopeful. She stared up at him, her heart pounding, tears burning behind her eyes. "I'd have to be the biggest idiot who ever lived."

His dark gaze softened. "I don't want to lose you, Emma. You're irreplaceable."

"I am?"

He gave a single nod. "You are the only one who knows how to properly make my bed. Who can maintain my home in perfect order. I need you."

The bullet went a little deeper into her heart.

"Oh," she whispered, and it was the sound someone makes when they've been punched in the belly. He wanted to keep her as his employee. She was irreplaceable in his life—as his employee.

Three months ago, when he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her passionately, her whole world had changed forever. But for Cesare, nothing had changed. He still expected her to be his invisible, replaceable servant who had no feelings and existed solely to serve his needs.

Tell me this won't change anything between us, he'd said in the darkness that night.

I promise, she'd breathed.

But it was a promise she couldn't keep. Not when she was pregnant with his baby. After so many years of keeping her feelings buried deep inside, she couldn't do it anymore. Maybe it was the pregnancy hormones, or maybe the anguish of hope. But emotions were suddenly bleeding out of her that she couldn't control. Grief and heartbreak and something new.

Anger.

"So that was why you ran away from me three months ago?" she said. "Because you were terrified that if I actually woke up in your arms, I'd fall desperately in love with you?"

Cesare looked irritated. "I didn't exactly run away—"

"I woke up alone," she said unsteadily. She ran her trembling hand back through the dark braids of her chignon. "You regretted sleeping with me."

He set his jaw. “If I’d known you were a virgin...” He exhaled, looking down the gilded hallway with a flare of nostril before he turned back to her. “It never should have happened. But you knew the score. I stayed away these past months to give us both some space to get past it.”

“You mean, pretend it never happened.”

“There’s no reason to let a single reckless night ruin a solid arrangement.” He folded his arms over his bare chest, over the warm skin that she’d once stroked and felt sliding against her own naked body in the dark hush of night. “You are the best housekeeper I’ve ever had. I want to keep it that way. That night meant nothing to either of us. You were sad, and I was trying to comfort you. That’s all.”

It was the final straw.

“I see,” she bit out. “So I should just go back to folding your socks and keeping your home tidy, and if I remember the night you took my virginity at all, I should be grateful you were such a kind employer—comforting me in my hour of need. You are truly too good to me, Mr. Falconeri.”

He frowned, sensing sarcasm. “Um...”

“Thank you for taking pity on me that night. It must have felt like quite a sacrifice, seducing me to make the crying stop. Thank you for your compassion.”

Cesare glared at her, looking equal parts shocked and furious. “You’ve never spoken like this before. What the hell’s gotten into you, Emma?”

Your baby, she wanted to say. But you don’t even care you took my virginity. You just want me back to cook and clean for you. Anger flashed through her. “For God’s sake, don’t you think I have any feelings at all?”

He clenched his hands at his sides, then exhaled.

“No,” he said quietly. “I hoped you didn’t.”

The lump in her throat felt like a razorblade now.

“Well. Sorry. I’m not a robot. No matter how inconvenient that is for you.” She fought the rush of tears. “Everything has changed for me now.”

“Nothing changed for me.”

Emma lifted her gaze to his. “It could, if you’d just give it a chance.” She hated the pleading sound of her voice. “If you’d only just listen...”

Cesare’s eyes were already hardening, his sensual lips parting to argue, when they heard a gasp. Emma turned to see an elderly couple staring at them in the hotel hallway. The white-haired man looked scandalized at the sight of Cesare wearing only a white towel, while his wife peered at him through her owlish glasses with interest.

Cesare glared at them. “Do you mind?” he said coldly. “We are trying to have a private conversation.”

The man looked nonplussed. “I beg your pardon.” He fled toward the elevator, pulling his wife with him, though she shot Cesare’s backside one last look of appreciative regret.

He turned back to Emma with a scowl. “Nothing can change for me. Don’t you understand?”

It already had. He just didn’t know it. Emma swallowed. She’d never thought she’d be forced to blurt out news of her pregnancy in the middle of a public hotel hallway. She licked her lips. “Look, can’t we go somewhere? Talk about this in private?”

“Why? So you can confess your undying love?” His voice was full of scorn. “So you can tell me how you’ll be the woman to make me love again? How you’ve imagined me proposing to you? How you’ve dreamed of standing next to me in a white dress?”

“It’s not like that,” she tried, but he’d seen her flinch. It was exactly like that.

“Damn you, Emma,” he said softly. “You are the one woman who should have known better. I will not change, not for you or anyone. All you’ve succeeded in doing with this stunt is destroying our friendship. I don’t see how we can continue to maintain a working relationship after this...”

“Do you think I’ll even want to be your housekeeper after this?”

His eyes widened, then narrowed.

“So much for promises,” he bit out.

She flinched again, wondering what he would say when she told him about the far worse promise she’d unknowingly broken—the one about it being impossible for her to get pregnant.

But how could she tell him? How could she blurt out the precious news of their child, standing in a public hallway with him staring at her as if he despised her? If only they could just go back to his room—but no. His suite was already filled, with a hard-eyed blonde in skimpy lingerie.

Everything suddenly became clear.

There was no room for a baby in Cesare’s life. And Emma’s only place there, as far as he was concerned, was scrubbing his floor and folding his sheets.

Cesare’s expression was irritated. “If things can’t be like they were...”

“What? You’ll fire me for caring? That’s your big threat?” Looking at the darkly handsome, arrogant face that she’d loved for so long, fury overwhelmed her. Fury at her own stupidity that she’d wasted so much of her life loving a man who couldn’t see a miracle when it was right in front of him. Who wouldn’t want the miracle, even if he did see.

How could she have loved him? How could she have ever thought—just as he’d accused her—that she could change his playboy nature?

He exhaled, and moderated his tone in a visible effort. “What if I offered to double your salary?”

Her lips parted in shock. “You want to pay me for our night together?”

“No,” he said coldly. “I want to pay you to forget.”

Her eyes stung. Of course he would offer money. It was just paper to him, like confetti. One of his weapons, along with his power and masculine beauty, that he used to get his way. And Cesare Falconeri always got his way.

Emma shook her head.

“So how can we get past this? What the hell do you want from me?”

She looked up at him, her heart full of grief. What did she want? A man who loved her, who would love their child, who would be protective and loyal and show up for breakfast every morning. She whispered, “I want more than you will ever be able to give.”

He knew immediately she wasn’t speaking of money. That was clear by the way his handsome face turned grim, almost haunted in the dim light of the hallway. He took a step toward her. “Emma...”

“Forget it.” She stepped back. Her whole body was shaking. If he touched her now, if he said anything more to remind her what a fool she’d been, she was afraid she’d collapse into sobs on the carpet and never get up again.

Her baby needed her to be strong. Starting now.

Down the hall, she heard the elevator ding. Glancing back, she saw the elderly couple hesitate in front of the elevator, obviously still watching them. She realized they’d been listening to every word. Turning back to Cesare, she choked out, “I’m done being your slave.”

“You tell him, honey,” the white-haired woman called approvingly.

Cesare’s expression turned to cold fury, but Emma didn’t wait. She just ran for the elevator. She got her arm between the doors in time to step inside, next to the elderly couple. Trembling, she turned back to face the man she’d loved for seven years. The boss whose baby she now carried, though he did not know it.

Cesare was stalking toward her, his almost-naked body muscular and magnificent in the hallway of his own billion-dollar hotel.

“Come back,” he ground out, his dark eyes flashing. “I’m not done talking to you.”

Now, that was funny. In a tragic, heart-wrenching, want-to-burst-into-sobs kind of way. “I tried to talk to you. You wouldn’t let me. You were too terrified I’d say those three fatal words.” She gave a bitter laugh. “So here are two words for you instead.” Emma lifted glittering eyes to his. “I quit.”

And the elevator doors closed between them.

CHAPTER TWO

I'M DONE BEING your slave.

Cesare's body was taut with fury as the elevator doors closed in front of Emma's defiant, beautiful face. He could still hear the echo of her scornful words.

I want more than you will ever be able to give.

And then she'd quit.

Cesare couldn't believe it.

It was true that in the past few months, he'd thought once or twice about firing Emma rather than face her again. But he'd promised himself he wouldn't fire her. As long as she didn't get silly or ask for a relationship. After all they'd been through together, he didn't want to lose her.

He'd never expected this. He was the one who left women. They didn't leave him. Not since...

He cut off the thought.

Turning, he stalked back down the hall, passing a wealthy hotel guest, a heavily bejeweled white-haired lady dressed in vintage Chanel, holding a small Pomeranian in her arms. An entourage of three servants trailed behind her. She glared at him.

Ah. Cesare's lip curled in a mixture of admiration and scorn. The wealthy. He hated them all sometimes. Even though he himself had somehow become one of them.

Returning to his suite, he realized he had no key. And he was still wearing only a towel. At any moment someone would snap an embarrassing photograph, to add to the rest of his indiscretions already permanently emblazoned all over the internet. Irritated, he pounded on his own door with the flat of his hand.

Olga opened the door, still in her lingerie, holding a lit cigarette.

"There's no smoking in this hotel," he snapped, walking past her. "Put that out."

She took a long puff, then snuffed it out in the bottom of a water glass. "Problems with your housekeeping staff?" she asked sweetly.

"How did you get in here?"

"You sound as if you're not glad to see me." Pouting, Olga slinked forward, swaying her hips in a way that was no doubt supposed to be enticing. He almost wished it were. If he'd still been attracted to her, maybe he wouldn't have made such a mess of things with Emma. Because he couldn't go back to thinking of Emma Hayes just as an employee, no matter how he wished he could. Not when every time he closed his eyes, he remembered the way she'd felt beneath him in the hot breathless hush of night.

Don't worry. I can't get pregnant, she'd whispered, putting her hand over his as he'd reached for a condom in his bedside stand. It's impossible. I promise you...

And he'd believed her. Emma Hayes was the first, and only, woman he'd ever slept with without a condom. In his whole life.

The way it had felt—the way she had felt...

Cesare ground his teeth. His plan of dealing with the aftermath had not gone well. After three months apart, he'd convinced himself that surely, cool, sensible, emotionless Emma had forgotten their night together.

But she hadn't. And neither had he.

Damn it.

"You haven't been photographed with any other women for ages," Olga purred. "I knew that could only mean one thing. You've missed me, as I've missed you."

Looking up, Cesare blinked. He'd forgotten she was there.

She gave him a sultry smile. "We were good together, weren't we?"

"No." Cesare stared at her. "We weren't." Picking up the designer clothes and expensive leather boots she'd left in a neat stack by the bed, he held them out to her. "Please get out." In his current frame of mind, he was impressed with himself for managing the please.

Olga frowned, licking her red, bee-stung lips. "Are you kidding?"

“No.”

“But—you can’t send me away. I’m still in love with you!”

Cesare rolled his eyes. “Let me guess. You’re having some sort of crisis because your bookings are down. You’re ready to give up the difficulties of the modeling business and settle down, marry rich, have a child or two before you devote the rest of your life to shopping for jewels and furs.”

Her cheeks turned red, and he knew he was right. It would have been funny, but this had happened too often for him to find it amusing anymore.

Her long lashes fluttered. “No one understands you like I do, Cesare. No one will ever love you like I do!”

Crossing the suite, he opened the door, and tossed her clothes and boots into the hallway.

“Cara,” he drawled, “you’re breaking my heart.”

Olga’s eyes changed from pleading to anger in a moment, leaving him to feel reasonably assured that her so-called love was worth exactly what the sentiment usually was: nothing, a breath of wind, once spoken, instantly lost.

“You’ll be sorry!” She stomped past him, then stopped outside the doorway, wiggling her nearly-bare bottom at him. “You’ll never have all this ever again!”

“Tragic,” he said coldly, and closed the door.

His suite went quiet. Cesare stood for a moment, unmoving. He felt weary as the emotion of the past hour came crashing around him.

Emma. He’d lost her. She’d acted like all the other women, so he’d treated her like one.

The trouble was that she was different.

Maybe it’s for the best, he thought. Things had gone too far between them. It had become...dangerous. Scowling, he dropped his towel and pulled a black shirt and pants from his wardrobe. The pants were slightly wrinkled, and the shirt had been oddly ironed. They didn’t even have the right smell, because Emma hadn’t been the one to wash, dry and fold them.

But it wasn’t her laundry skills he missed most. He looked out the window. The lights of London’s theater district were already twinkling in the dusk.

Cesare had always liked the environment of hotels, the way the faces of the people changed, the sameness of the rooms, the way a man could easily move out of one hotel and change to the next without anyone questioning his constancy, or thinking there was a flaw in his soul.

He’d known Emma Hayes’s value since she’d first joined the housekeeping staff of his hotel on Park Avenue in New York. She’d been in charge of the penthouse floor, where he stayed while in the city, and he’d been so impressed by her work ethic and meticulous skills that she’d become assistant head housekeeper within the first year, and then head housekeeper when he’d opened the Falconeri in London. Now, she supervised the staff of his Kensington mansion. Taking care of him exclusively.

But she didn’t just keep Cesare in clean socks. She kept him in line. Unlike other employees, unlike even his friends, Emma wasn’t overly impressed by him. She’d become his sounding board. Almost like...family.

How could he have let himself seduce her? He needed her. He could always count on Emma. She always put his needs first. She never even asked for time off. Not until three months ago, when she’d abruptly left for a long weekend.

The Kensington house had felt strangely empty without her. He’d avoided coming home. On the third night, he’d returned from an unsatisfactory date at two in the morning, expecting to find a silent, dark house. Instead, he’d heard a noise from the kitchen and felt a flash of pleasure when he realized Emma must have returned early.

He’d found her sitting alone in the dark kitchen, holding a tequila bottle. Her black dress was wrinkled. Her eyes had dark smudges beneath them, as if she’d been crying, and her long black hair was unkempt, cascading thickly down her shoulders.

“Emma?” he’d said, hardly believing his eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I just came back from Texas,” she whispered, not looking at him. “From a funeral.”

He’d never seen her drink before, he realized—not so much as a glass of champagne. “I’m sorry,” he said uncomfortably, edging closer. He didn’t know anything about her family. “Was it someone you loved?”

She shook her head. “My stepmother.” Her fingers clutched compulsively around the bottle. He saw it was still unopened. “For years, I sent money to pay her bills. But it never changed her opinion. Marion always said I was selfish, a ruiner of lives. That I’d never amount to anything.” She drew in a shaking breath. “And she was right.”

“What are you talking about?” he said, taking an instant dislike to this Marion person, dead though she might be.

Emma flung an unsteady arm around to indicate the immaculate, modern kitchen. “Just look.”

Cesare looked around, then turned back. “It’s perfect,” he said quietly. “Because you’re the best at what you do.”

“Cleaning up other people’s lives,” she’d said bitterly. “Being the perfect servant. Invisible like a ghost.”

He’d never heard her voice like that, angry and full of self-recrimination. “Emma...”

“I thought she’d forgive me in the end.” Her voice was muffled as she sagged in the kitchen stool, covering her face with a trembling hand. “But she left me no message in her will. Not her blessing. Not her forgiveness. Nothing.”

“Forgiveness—for what?”

She looked at him for a long moment, then she turned her face toward the shadows without answering. She took a deep breath. “Now I’m truly alone.”

Something had twisted in Cesare’s chest. An answering pain in his own scarred heart, long buried but never completely healed. Going to her, he’d taken the bottle from her hand. He’d set it on the kitchen counter. Reaching out, he’d cupped her cheek.

“You’re not alone.” His eyes had fallen to her trembling pink lips as he breathed, “Emma...”

And then...

He’d only meant to offer solace, but somehow, he still wasn’t sure how, things had spiraled out of control. He remembered the taste of her lips when he’d first kissed her. The look in her deep, warm green eyes as he covered her naked body with his own. The shock and reverence that had gone through him when he realized he was her very first lover.

She was totally different from any woman he’d taken to his bed before. It wasn’t just the alluring warmth of her makeup-free face, or her total lack of artifice, or the long, dark hair pulled back in an old-fashioned chignon. It wasn’t just her body’s soft plump curves, so different from the starvation regime demanded by starlets and models these days.

It was the fact that he actually respected her.

He actually—liked her.

Everything about Emma, and the way she served him without criticism or demand, was comfort. Magic. Home.

But if he’d known she was a virgin, he never would have—

Yes, you would, he snarled at himself, remembering the tremble of her soft, tender lips beneath his, the salt of tears on her skin that night. The way she’d felt to him that night...the way she’d made him feel...

Cesare shook his head savagely. Whatever the pleasure, the cost was too high. Waking up the next morning, he’d realized the scope of his mistake. Because there was only one way his love affairs ended. With an awkward kiss-off, a bouquet of roses and an expensive gold watch, handed over by his one indispensable person—Emma herself.

He clawed back his short dark hair, still damp from his shower. His jaw was tight as he remembered the stricken expression on her pale, lovely face when she’d seen Olga in lingerie, standing

in front of a bed which had been mussed, not with lovemaking, but from his hopeless attempt at sleep after a night on the phone with the Asia office. Of course Emma wouldn't know that, but why should he be obligated to explain?

What is wrong with you, Cesare?

Nothing was wrong with him, he thought grimly. It was the rest of the world that was screwed up, with stupid promises and rose-colored illusions. With people who pretended words like love and forever were more than sentiments on a Valentine's Day card.

He'd told himself Emma had no feelings for him, that their night together had been just an escape from grief. It meant nothing. He'd told himself that again and again. Told himself that if Emma tried to call it love, he'd break in a new housekeeper—even if that meant replacing her with someone who'd have the audacity to expect tea breaks and four weeks off every August.

But he'd never expected that Emma herself would just walk away.

Cesare looked out into the deepening autumn night. She'd done him a favor, really. She couldn't be his friend and his lover and know all his household secrets. It was too much. It left him too—vulnerable.

You are truly too good to me, Mr. Falconeri.

Cesare rubbed the back of his neck. He didn't deserve that. He had been a good employer to Emma. Hadn't he done everything a boss could do—paying her well, respecting her opinion, giving her independence to run his home? For the past few years, as they'd grown closer, he'd resisted an inconvenient desire for her. He wasn't used to ignoring temptation, but he'd done it, at least until three months ago. And as for what had happened that night...virgin or no—the way she'd licked her full pink lips and looked up at him with those heartbreaking eyes, how could he resist that? *Christo santo*, he was only a man.

But for that momentary weakness, she was now punishing him. Abandoning him without so much as a by-your-leave.

Fine. He growled under his breath. Let her quit. He didn't give a damn. His hands tightened. He didn't.

Except...

He did.

Cursing himself, he started for the door.

* * *

Emma wearily climbed out of the Tube station at Kensington High Street. Making her way through crowds of early evening commuters, she wiped rain from her cheek. It had to be rain. She couldn't be crying over Cesare.

So he'd never given her a chance to tell him he was going to be a father. So she'd found him in a hotel room with his ex-girlfriend, the lingerie model. So Emma was now all alone, with a baby to raise and nothing to help her but the memory of broken dreams.

She was going to be fine.

She exhaled, shifting her aching shoulders. She'd phone Alain Bouchard and accept that job in Paris. He'd give her decent hours, along with a good paycheck. She needed to be more sensible, now that she'd soon be a single mother.

Passing a shop selling Cornish pasties, she breathed in the smell of beef and vegetables in a flaky crust, vividly reminding her of her father's barbecues in Texas when she was a child. Going to the counter, she impulsively bought one. Taking the beef pasty out of the bag, she ate it as commuters rushed past her. Tears fell down her cheeks as she closed her eyes, savoring every bite. She could almost hear her father's voice.

Let me tell you what I know, kiddo. You're going to make it. You're stronger than you think. You're going to be fine.

It did make her feel a little better. Tossing the bag into the trash, she looked out at Kensington High Street. The lights of the shops glimmered as car lights streaked by in the rain.

She barely remembered her mother, who'd died when she was four, but her dad had always been there. Teaching her to fish, telling her stories, helping with homework. When Emma had gotten ill as a teenager, he'd been by her side every day, even as he pulled extra overnight shifts at the factory to fight the drowning tide of medical bills.

Her throat ached. That was the kind of father her unborn baby deserved. Not a man like Cesare, who'd loved once, and lost, in a terrible tragedy, and was now unable to love anyone but himself.

Maybe it was for the best he would never know he was a father. She could just imagine how Cesare's careless lack of commitment would affect a child.

Why didn't Daddy come for my birthday, Mommy? Why doesn't he ever come see me? Doesn't he love me?

Emma's eyes narrowed. No more romantic illusions. No more false hopes. She'd never give Cesare the chance to break their child's heart, as he'd already broken hers.

Pulling her raincoat tighter around her body, she gripped her handbag against her shoulder and went out into the drizzly night, walking down the street and past the town hall. Her footsteps echoed loudly past the expensive townhouses on Hornton Street, in counterpoint to the splatters of rain, until she finally reached Cesare's grand three-story mansion.

It was a palace of white brick, which had cost, including renovations, twenty million pounds. For years, she'd buried herself in work here, waiting for her real life to begin. Trying to decide if she even deserved a real life.

You selfish girl. Her stepmother's hoarse voice came back to her. It should have been you who died.

The memory still caused a spike of pain. She pushed the thought away. Marion was the one who'd ruined her father's life. She'd made a bad choice. It wasn't Emma's fault.

Though it sometimes felt that way. She swallowed. If only her father were still alive. He always had known the right thing to do....

She walked past the gate. Her lips pursed as she remembered meeting Alain Bouchard for the first time six months ago, here in the front garden. He'd shown up drunk and wanting to start a fight with Cesare, his former brother-in-law, blaming him for his sister's death. Fortunately Cesare was away, on a business trip to Berlin; Emma knew he'd never gotten over Angélique's tragic accidental death ten years before.

Emma could have called the police. That was what the rest of the staff had wanted her to do. But looking at Alain's grief-stricken face, she'd invited him into the house for tea instead, and let him talk himself out.

The next day, Alain Bouchard had sent her flowers and a handsome note of apology for his drunken ravings. That was the proper way of showing someone appreciation, Emma thought. Not by throwing expensive jewelry at them, bought in bulk, via a paid employee.

She stalked up the shadowy steps to the mansion, punched in the security code and entered. The foyer was dark, the house empty, gloomy as a tomb. None of the other staff lived in. When Cesare was gone, which was often, she was alone. She'd spent too long in this lonely tomb.

Well, no more. Throwing down her handbag, Emma ripped off her coat and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She was going to pack and leave for France immediately. Before she'd even reached her bedroom at the end of the hall, she was pulling off her knit dress, the pretty dress that hit her curves just right, that she'd bought that very day in a foolish attempt to impress Cesare. Yanking it over her head, she tossed it to the hall floor. She'd wear comfortable clothes on the train, black trousers and a plain shirt. She'd be in Paris within three hours—

A small lamp turned on by her bed. Startled, she turned.

Cesare was sitting in her antique chair with blue cushions by the marble fireplace.

She gasped, instinctively covering her lace bra and panties. “What the hell are you doing here?”
“I live here.”

She straightened, and her expression hardened. “Oh, so you just remembered that, did you?”

His eyes were black in the dim light. “You left the hotel before we could discuss something important.”

“How did you—” she breathed, then cut herself off. He couldn’t possibly know about the baby. And she didn’t intend to let him know now.

Cesare rose to his feet, uncoiling his tall, powerful body from the chair. He looked down at her.

“I’ve decided not to accept your resignation,” he said in a low voice. “I want you here. With me.”

For a moment, they stared at each other in the shadows of her bedroom. She heard a low roll of thunder outside, the deepening patter of rain. Water dripped noisily from her hair onto the glossy hardwood floor.

Her arms dropped. She was no longer trying to cover her body. Why should she? He’d already seen everything. And she meant nothing to him. Never had. Never would.

“I don’t belong here,” she said. “I won’t stay.”

“Just because we slept together?” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “Do you really have to be such a cliché?”

“You’re the cliché, not me.”

“One stupid night—”

“No,” she cut him off. She looked at him, and said deliberately, “I’m in love with you, Cesare.”

Oh, that did it. She saw him flinch. He’d taken the words like a hit. Which was fine, because she’d meant it that way.

His black eyes glinted with fury as he grabbed her shoulders. “You don’t love me. It’s just because I was your first experience in bed. You haven’t learned the difference between sex and love.”

“But you have?”

Cesare didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. The whole world knew his tragic story: how he’d married young, and had been desperately in love with his wife, a beautiful French heiress, before she’d died just three years later. His heart had been buried with her.

She’d known this. And she’d still let herself hope...

Pulling away from him angrily, Emma went to her closet and reached up to the top shelf for the beat-up old suitcase that had once belonged to her father. Tossing it open on the floor, she turned back to her wardrobe to reach for her clothes.

He put his hand over hers, stilling her.

“Emma. Please.”

Just that one word. The word he’d never said to her before. Please. She swallowed, then looked at him.

“Let me go. It’s better for you this way. Better for all of us.”

“I can’t,” he said in a low voice. “There are so few people in my life I trust. So few who actually know me. But you do. That’s why I know—I know—you can’t really love me.”

His words were strangely bleak. Her heart twisted. He was right about one thing. She, of all people, did know him. She knew he was not the emotionless man the world believed him to be.

Emma ached to reach up and stroke the roughness of his cheek, to whisper words of comfort. Her hand trembled. Shadows from the closed window blinds left lines across his dark, handsome face. His eyes burned through her.

But even more: her secret burned inside her, with every beat of her heart. She was pregnant with his child. Her silence in this moment was the biggest lie any woman could tell any man.

“Why ever did you think you couldn’t get pregnant, Mrs. Hayes?” her physician had asked, looking shocked. “Childhood cancer, especially ovarian cancer, can occasionally cause difficulties, yes. But in your case it worked out just fine. I see it’s a surprise, but this baby is wanted, yes?”

“Of course this baby is wanted,” she’d answered. Oh, yes. Emma had believed for so long that she’d never be a mother. That it wasn’t even a possibility. Fighting the same deadly, silent disease years before, her mother had never been able to have another child. Caroline Hayes had ultimately died when Emma was only four, at the age of twenty-nine. Barely older than Emma was now.

“Cara.” Cesare’s handsome face was almost pleading as he gave an awkward laugh. “How many times did we joke about it? That I wasn’t worthy of any good woman’s love?”

She blinked hard. “Many times.”

“So you must see. What you think you feel—it’s not love. Just sex.”

Hot tears burned at the backs of her eyes and she feared at any moment tears would spill over her lashes. “For you.”

“For both of us. You just aren’t experienced enough to realize it yet,” he said gently. “But someday soon, you will…”

Emma stiffened. Was he already picturing her moving on, finding sex or love with another man? Cesare could imagine this, without it ripping out his heart?

Not Emma. It had nearly killed her to find him with Olga. And even if he hadn’t slept with her—that time—she knew there had been other women. Many, many others. And there would always be.

She ripped her hand away. She didn’t have to live like this. Not anymore. She’d never have to spend another lonely night staring at her ceiling, listening to the noise down the hall while he had yet another vigorous one-night stand with yet another woman he’d soon forget. She was done.

It was like a burst of sunlight and fresh air after years of imprisonment.

“I don’t want to love you anymore,” she whispered.

He tried to smile. “See—”

“Do you realize that I’ve never taken a single vacation in seven years? No personal days, no time off, except for my stepmother’s funeral?”

“I just thought you were devoted to your work, like I am.”

“I wasn’t devoted to my work. I was devoted to you.” She shook her head. “I’ve lived in London for years and still only seen Trafalgar Square from the bus. I’ve never been inside the museums—or even had a picture of myself taken in front of Big Ben.”

He stared at her incredulously. “I’ll call my driver, take you down to Trafalgar Square and take your picture myself, if that’s what it takes. I’ll lower your schedule to thirty hours a week and give you two months off every year.” He tried to give his old charming smile. “Forget our night together, and I’ll forgive your infatuation. So long as it ends now.”

She shook her head. “I’m done working for you.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to change your mind?”

The deep, sexy timbre of his voice caused a shudder to pass through her body, all the way to her fingertips. She forced herself to ignore it.

“I can’t change your nature,” she choked out. “And you can’t change mine. There is nothing either of us can do.” She looked away. “Please ask Arthur to cut my last paycheck. I’ll pick it up on the way to St. Pancras.”

“St. Pancras?”

“I’m taking the train to Paris.” She licked her lips. “For a new job.”

He stared at her.

“You’re not even giving me two weeks’ notice?”

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

Silence fell between them. In the distance, she heard the sounds of a police siren, with its European sound, so different from New York’s.

“It seems I’ve been an awful boss to you these past years.” Something in Cesare’s tone made her look up. From where he stood on the other side of the bed, his handsome face was half-hidden in shadow. “Let me save you the trouble of a trip to the office. I’ll pay you now.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“But it is,” he said coldly. In his long-sleeved black shirt and trousers, he looked sophisticated, like the international tycoon he was. But the power of his muscled shoulders and cold fury in his black eyes were anything but civilized. “Here.”

Pulling a handful of fifty-pound bills out of his wallet, he tossed them toward her. Wide-eyed, Emma watched them float like feathers to the bed.

“Your paycheck,” he said grimly. Reaching back into his wallet, he threw out American money next. “The vacation time you refused to take.” He tossed out Euro notes. “Your Christmas bonus.” Then Japanese yen. “Overtime.” Dirhams and Russian rubles flew next. “The raise I should have given you.”

Shocked, Emma watched the blizzard of money fall like snowflakes onto the bed, a flurry of money from all over the world, pesos and reals and kroner, dollars from Canada and Australia.

Frowning, Cesare suddenly looked into his wallet. Empty. It seemed even billionaires had a limit to ready cash. Pulling the platinum watch off his tanned wrist, he dumped it on the bed, on top of the Matterhorn of money.

“There,” he said coldly. “Will that compensate you for all the anguish you suffered working for me? Are we done?”

She swallowed. Even now, in his generosity, he was being cruel—using his wealth as a weapon against her. Making her feel small.

“Yes,” she choked out. “We’re done.”

“So you’re no longer my employee. As of this moment.”

Head held high, Emma walked toward the money on the bed. Just take it, she told herself. She had earned that money—all of it and more! The money he’d tossed at her so carelessly was nothing to him, barely more than he might spend impulsively on an amusing night out, buying thousand-pound bottles of scotch for all his rich friends.

But still. There was something truly awful about reaching for a pile of money left on her bed. Something sordid.

She tried to force herself forward, then stiffened. She exhaled, pulling back her hand.

“What’s wrong now?”

“I can’t take it,” she said. “Not like this.”

He slowly walked around the bed toward her. “It’s yours. You earned it.”

“Earned it how?” she whispered.

“For God’s sake, Emma!”

She whirled back to him. “I can’t take it off the bed. As if I were your...”

She couldn’t say the word, but he did.

“My whore?” Cesare came toward her, his dark eyes like fire. “You are driving me insane,” he ground out. “If you do not want the money, then leave it. If you are so determined to go, then go. I don’t give a damn what you do.”

“You’ve made that painfully clear,” she said hoarsely.

“And you,” he snarled, “have made it clear that there is no way I can win. You think I’m a selfish bastard, you hate me, you hate yourself for your so-called love for me. You’re sick of the sight of me and you’re using our night together as an excuse to quit.”

She sucked in her breath.

“An excuse?” It was humiliating how her voice squeaked on the word.

“Yes.” Cesare was close to her now, very close. She was suddenly very aware that she was wearing almost nothing and they were alone in her dark bedroom. Her nipples were hard beneath her white lace bra. Her own breathing seemed loud in her ears. His powerful body towered over hers, and she could feel the warmth emanating off his skin. The heat in his gaze scared her—almost as

much as the answering heat in her own body. He said in a low voice, “You’re running away from me like a coward.”

She gasped, “Are you kidding? I’m running like a coward?”

Cesare’s hand reached out to touch her cheek, and as she felt his fingertips against her skin, it was all she could do not to turn her face into the warmth of his caress, even now. “You mean nothing to me, Emma,” he growled. His dark eyes burned through her. “You never have. You never will.”

“Good,” she choked out. “Because I can hardly wait to leave you. I’m so happy that after tonight I’ll never see you again....”

His hand trailed down her cheek, to her neck, to her bare shoulder. She barely heard his harsh intake of breath over the pounding of her own heart. She trembled, knowing she was on the knife’s edge.

Cesare roughly seized her in his arms, and crushed her lips with his own.

CHAPTER THREE

CESARE’S KISS WAS angry and searing. His lips plundered hers, and all her anger and grief and pain seemed to explode beneath the fire of his touch, into an inferno.

He wrapped a strong arm around her waist, holding her tight against him, and his other hand ran along her bare arm, up her shoulder, down her naked back. She felt his body, hard against hers, and against her will a soft moan came from the back of her throat. Her skin felt scorched everywhere he touched. She was desperate to have him closer.

Now.

Her hand cupped the rough edge of his jawline, then moved back to tangle in his dark hair, pulling his mouth harder and deeper into hers.

She heard his hoarse intake of breath as he cupped her full, aching breasts over the lace of her bra. She was overflowing the cups now, and her belly was starting to get fuller as well. Would he notice? Would he guess? Would Cesare be able to see how he’d permanently branded her body as his, always and forever, without her saying a single word?

“All this time, I’ve been hating myself for a lack of self-control,” he said in a low voice. “Now I can hardly believe I had such restraint.” He lifted his gaze to hers, even as one of his hands slowly stroked her nearly naked body, over her white lace, causing her to tremble with need. “I can’t believe I waited so long.” His sensual lips curved as he cupped her face, tilting back her head. “No other woman has even interested me since that night....”

Her lips parted. No. Surely he couldn’t mean what she thought he meant....

With their bodies so close, standing together beside her bed, she felt his warmth and strength. She breathed in the bare hint of masculine cologne. She felt the electricity of his words, of his touch—the overwhelming sensual force of his complete attention. And Emma’s only defense, anger, crumbled.

He kissed her softly, briefly, butterfly kisses to each of her cheeks, tantalizingly close to the corners of her mouth. But hope, like a fragile spring bud unfolding in the snow, began to build inside her. She could hardly believe his shocking confession.

He’d been faithful....

“There’s really been no other woman for you since our night?” she breathed.

He shook his head, his eyes dark. “Has there been someone for you?”

The question made her choke out a laugh. “How could there be?”

“Does that mean no?”

“Of course not!”

“Good.”

His sudden masculine smugness irritated her. “You admit something, too,” she said sharply.

“What?”

“You didn’t seduce me three months ago just because I was crying. You weren’t just trying to comfort me.”

He stared at her, then said quietly, “No.”

Her soul thrilled at the concession. She gloried in it. “You wanted me, too.”

He spoke a single grudging word, as if it were pulled from deep inside him. “Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Years,” he bit out.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she whispered.

“I was afraid you’d do exactly what you did today.” His hands undid the plaits of her braids, causing her long dark hair to fall down her back. She trembled as his hands stroked her long, tumbling waves of hair. “You’d get some crazy delusion of loving me, and then I’d have to fire you.”

“I am in love with you.”

He snorted. “If you really loved me, wouldn’t you be begging me to stay?”

“Because begging works so well with you.”

Slowly he lowered his head until his mouth was inches from hers.

“It’s just lust, cara,” he whispered, his lips almost brushing hers. “Not love....”

And holding her against his hard body in the shadowy bedroom, he kissed her, clutching her as if he were a drowning man and only she could save him. His lips plundered hers, teasing, gentling, searing.

As they stood together, he slowly kissed down her throat, his fingertips roaming softly over her naked skin. She felt the warmth of his hands cupping her breasts, stroking tight, aching nipples that peeked through white lace.

Leaning back in his arms, she gasped with pleasure and need. Until she lost her balance, and fell back against the bed, his arms still around her, their bodies entangled in their embrace.

The bed felt made of feathers beneath her. Still in her bra and panties, Emma slid against the duvet cover, and felt something sharp and cold beneath her thigh. She pulled it out and looked at the shining platinum face with confusion. “Your watch.”

“Forget it.” Taking it from her hand, he tossed the expensive watch across the room, causing it to scatter noisily across the hardwood floor before it hit the wall with a soft thunk.

She realized what the “feathers” she’d felt beneath her body actually had to be. Twisting, she tried to look beneath her. She was lying almost naked beneath him on a bed of money. “Everything’s still on the bed—”

“I don’t care,” he said roughly, and kissed her, until she forgot about the money, and wouldn’t have cared if she did.

Pulling away, he pulled off his shirt in an abrupt movement. Emma’s throat constricted as she reached out to touch the intoxicating vision of his naked chest, muscular and hard, with tanned skin that felt like silk over steel. She stroked down to the flat six-pack of his belly, laced with a scattering of dark hair. He was flesh and blood, this man she’d wanted so hopelessly, and loved for so long.

Covering her body with his own, Cesare kissed her. She felt his weight crushing her breasts, felt the slide of his warm bare skin against her own. He released the clasp of her bra and pulled off the slip of white lace, tossing it aside. He pulled her panties slowly past her hips, over her thighs, down her legs.

She was naked beneath him. Lying on a pile of money. She shouldn’t be doing this, she thought. Then he pulled off his pants and silk boxers, and rational thought left her entirely.

She gasped as she saw how large he was, how huge and hard. Slowly, he kissed down her body, licking and suckling her breasts. He caressed down the curve of her belly, then kissed her lips in a long, deep embrace that seemed to last forever, until she forgot where she ended and he began. Their bodies fused together in heat, skin to skin, slick and salty and sweet. Moving down her body,

he pushed her legs apart with his knee, spreading them wide with his hands. Lowering his head, he nuzzled between her thighs. She felt his hot breath.

She gasped as, holding her hips firmly against the bed, he spread her wide and tasted her.

She twisted, rocking beneath him. The pleasure was too sharp, too explosive. Beneath the ruthless insistence of his tongue, she trembled and shook, gasping on the bed. Every time she moved, money went flying into the air. Durhams and dollars, pounds and pesos flew violently, then fell back softly like snow, sliding down the naked bodies clutched together on the bed.

The money felt whisper-soft, brushing against Emma's face or shoulder or breast while she felt the hard, bristly roughness of his masculine body between her legs.

"Lust," Cesare said in a low voice.

Their eyes locked over the curves of her naked body. She shook her head.

"Love..."

With a low growl, he lowered his head back between her legs. She felt the heat of his breath on her tender skin, and his tongue took another wide taste of her, then another. Slowly he caressed her, licking her in delicate swirls until her breathing came in gasps and her hands were gripping the bedsheets beneath her, along with fistfuls of yen and euros.

"Lust," he whispered against her skin.

"No," she choked out.

He thrust his tongue an inch inside her. She gave a shocked gasp in a voice she hardly recognized as her own. His hands roamed possessively over her, cupping her breasts, her waist, her hips. Reaching beneath her, he pressed her bottom upward, lifting her more firmly against his mouth, and impaled her more deeply with his tongue. His lips and soft wet tongue suckled the aching center of her need as he moved two thick fingertips inside her, where his tongue had been. She cried out, overwhelmed by the intensity of pleasure.

Her back arched from the feel of his fingers inside her and his tongue swirling over her and she gripped his shoulders as waves of ecstasy started to pull reality beneath her feet, crashing over her. She exploded, and as if from a distance, she heard herself scream—

Rolling beside her, he pulled her into the warm haven of his arms. Emma looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

It wasn't just lust between them. It wasn't.

If he'd only just give her a chance. If only he'd say something that would make her think she could tell him about the baby...

Leaning up, Emma put her hand on his cheek and kissed him in a deep, lingering embrace that left her chin and cheeks tingling from the rough bristles of his jaw. She could still feel his body straining against her. As he kissed her back, holding her tight, breathless hope ripped through her. She could show him he had nothing to fear. That their relationship could be so much more than lust. She knew the man he really was, yes. But she also knew the man he could be....

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