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CAROLE MORTIMER

A Taste of the Forbidden



Carole Mortimer

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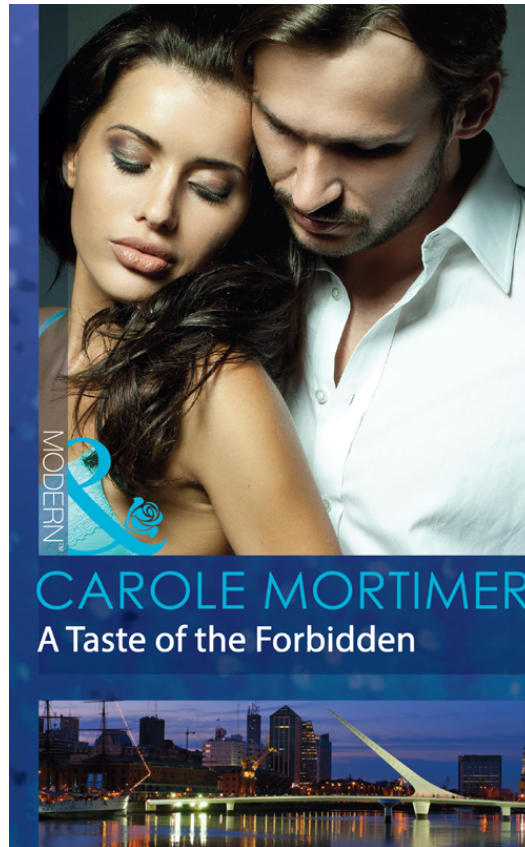
On her boss's orders... For her entire life, pastry chef Grace Blake has been the pinnacle of politeness. Yet less than a day into her contract with enigmatic Argentinian boss Cesar Navarro all of her good manners – and her good sense! – have flown out of the window. Cesar's got his sexy little spitfire of a chef right where he wants her – in his penthouse, at his command! He knows his staff should be off-limits, but Grace has tantalised his jaded palate, and Cesar finds himself ordering something new from the menu – a taste of the forbidden... 'It is always a pleasure to read a Carole Mortimer novel with her spunky heroines and macho heroes. Very humorous and always great fun!' – Victoria, Retired, Belfast

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Содержание

BUENOS AIRES NIGHTS	6
About the Author	7
A Taste of the Forbidden	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	16
CHAPTER THREE	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28



Grace shifted uncomfortably. ‘I believe you’ve more than proved your point.’

Cesar continued to look down at her for several long, tense seconds as his usual reserve warred with the increasing need he felt to taste the fullness of Grace Blake’s mouth.

She was his employee, damn it—a young woman who had simply accompanied her employer to Buenos Aires for the sole purpose of cooking and serving dinner this evening. A beautiful and desirable young woman, but Cesar’s employee nonetheless.

‘So I have,’ he rasped, his jaw tight, and he pushed away from the wall to step back as the lift came to a halt. The doors opened to allow them to step out into the cool entrance hall of his apartment.

Grace followed him slowly on legs that felt decidedly shaky, sure that she must have been mistaken about that brief flare of hunger she thought she’d seen in Cesar Navarro’s eyes a few seconds ago as he looked down at her mouth with those jet-black eyes; it was more likely to have been displeasure rather than hunger.

BUENOS AIRES NIGHTS

After dark with Argentina's most infamous billionaires!

Cesar Navarro and Raphael Cordoba—
two Argentinians with the wealth, magnetism and
ruthlessness to break many a woman's heart ...

Grace and Beth—

two ordinary British women about to make their
first foray into the sultry heat of Buenos Aires nights ...

Read all about Grace and her boss Cesar in:

A TASTE OF THE FORBIDDEN

April 2013

Read Beth and bodyguard Raphael's story,

A TOUCH OF NOTORIETY

May 2013

About the Author

CAROLE MORTIMER was born in England, the youngest of three children. She began writing in 1978, and has now written over one hundred and fifty books for Harlequin Mills & Boon®. Carole has six sons: Matthew, Joshua, Timothy, Michael, David and Peter. She says, 'I'm happily married to Peter senior; we're best friends as well as lovers, which is probably the best recipe for a successful relationship. We live in a lovely part of England.'

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A Taste of the Forbidden

Carole Mortimer



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For my beautiful and loving mum—

I admire you so much—and for my wonderful dad, my own first and forever hero.

I love you both so very much.

CHAPTER ONE

‘NOW, YOU’RE SURE you’re going to be okay here on your own?’

‘Grace, will you stop worrying and just get in your car and drive!’ Her sister, Beth, shot her an affectionate but impatient glance. ‘I’m twenty-three years old, not three, and perfectly capable of living on my own. Besides, we need the money ...’

Yes, they did, Grace acknowledged, only too well aware that the bills, which had accumulated during the last six months of their mother’s illness—when Grace had had to give up her job as pastry chef in one of London’s leading hotels so that she might stay with their mother constantly, and so allowing Beth to finish her Master’s degree at Oxford University—were still waiting to be paid.

Admittedly Beth had now moved back to the family home, and had a job in London working at a reputable publishing company, but there was no way that her wage alone could support the two of them and pay those accumulated bills.

Which was why Grace was now on her way to the wilds of Hampshire for the trial period of one month, with a view to becoming the permanent cook/housekeeper at the English home of a mega-rich Argentinian businessman. Presumably, as Grace would be based in Hampshire, Cesar Navarro employed other permanent cook/housekeepers in the properties he owned in so many other parts of the world ...? Although goodness knew what they were supposed to do with themselves when he wasn’t in residence!

‘I wonder what Cesar Navarro is like in the flesh?’ Beth added speculatively, echoing some of Grace’s own thoughts.

Grace gave a snort as she looked up from checking the contents of her cavernous shoulder bag. ‘I very much doubt I’m going to get the chance to meet the man himself any time soon!’

Her younger sister gave a frown. ‘What do you mean?’

Anyone looking at the two of them, Beth, tall, blonde and dark-eyed, and Grace just a little over five feet tall with long dark hair and blue-green eyes, would probably have no problem realising that the two women weren’t actually biological sisters.

Grace had been adopted when she was only six weeks old, and had remained an only child until she was eight years old, when her adoptive parents had brought five-year-old Beth home and introduced her as her new sister. It had been love at first sight for the two little girls, and thankfully it had been that love and affection that had supported the two of them after their adoptive father died in a car crash four years ago, which had left their mother paralysed and in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. It had been chest complications brought on by that immobility that had finally killed her two months ago.

Grace gave a rueful grimace. ‘According to his London PA, who, as you know, interviewed and employed me—once I had passed the stringent security check, apparently!—I am to make sure breakfast is ready for his man, Raphael, to take up to the dining-room at seven o’clock each morning. Remain out of the main part of the house until after Mr Navarro has left for the day, after which time I’m allowed to clear away and tidy the house—though not his study, apparently, which is totally out of bounds—ready for his return that evening.

‘Evenings will follow the same routine—unless Raphael informs me otherwise, dinner is to be ready for serving promptly at eight o’clock. And finally I have to be out of the house by nine o’clock each evening—after which time it’s no doubt, party, party, party!’

‘Do you really think so?’

‘No.’ Grace grimaced. ‘What I think is that the arrogant Mr Navarro doesn’t want to accidentally catch sight or sound of anyone as lowly as the domestic staff!’

Beth gave a chuckle. ‘He does sound a little ... over the top in regard to his privacy.’

‘With his billions he’s probably used to getting exactly what he wants when he wants it.’ And beggars couldn’t be choosers; despite having excellent references from her last employer, Grace had found it difficult to secure another job as a pastry chef in London this past six weeks of looking, most places put off by the fact that she hadn’t worked for almost eight months. Out of desperation Grace had finally signed on with an agency, and been offered this month’s trial employment—very well-paid trial employment!—at Cesar Navarro’s estate in Hampshire.

‘Mmm.’ Her sister grinned. ‘But you do get your own cottage in the grounds of the estate to live in.’

‘Just another way of ensuring Mr Navarro’s privacy, I expect,’ Grace dismissed ruefully.

‘Never mind, sis, I’ll pop down one weekend and keep you company for a couple of days,’ Beth consoled.

‘I have a feeling I’m going to need company by that time!’ She gave a husky laugh as she gave Beth a final hug before leaving. ‘In the meantime, you’ll call me on my mobile if you need me ...?’

‘By the sounds of it you might be the one who needs to call me—often!’ Beth gave a rueful shake of her head.

Grace thought over those unusual demands of her future employer as she made the drive down to Hampshire. She had heard of Cesar Navarro, of course—who hadn’t heard of the multibillionaire Argentinian businessman, aged in his early thirties, who not only had homes in most of the capitals of the world, but also seemed to own half the businesses in that world? Well ... maybe half the world was a slight exaggeration—a quarter was probably more realistic!

His empire included high-tech businesses, extensive media, airlines, property, hotels, vineyards—the man seemed to have a finger in so many pies Grace wondered how he ever found the time to do anything but work.

Maybe he didn’t?

Having had to wait a couple of days to hear whether or not she was being offered a second interview—while that security check was being carried out, no doubt!—Grace had gone online and looked up information on the elusive Mr Navarro.

Reclusive probably better described him, she had realised after reading the little information there was available on him; aged thirty-three, the eldest of the two children born to his wealthy and now separated American mother and Argentinian father, he had grown up in his father’s country, then gone on to Harvard University before establishing his own business at the age of twenty-three.

A business empire that had now grown to such mega proportions it necessitated Navarro travelling extensively in his private jet or helicopter, and staying exclusively in those private homes he owned all over the world when he did so.

There had been several photographs on the website of when he was younger, revealing him as being a strikingly handsome youth. Even then his face had been all harsh aristocratic angles—piercing dark eyes, high cheekbones, and sculpted lips, with a square jaw and determined chin. But, without exception, every one of those photographs had shown his swarthy face as being grim and unsmiling.

There had been two photographs available of him as an adult, one obviously a posed photograph, and the other taken from a distance as he was stepping from his jet onto a helicopter at some private airfield—and in both he had looked just as strikingly handsome but even grimmer!

He had appeared an inch or two taller than the equally dark-haired man walking beside him across the tarmac, the darkness of his suit emphasising the width of muscled shoulders and a lean body, with overlong and slightly tousled very dark hair—from the wind of the rotor blades of the helicopter?—the harshness of his aristocratically handsome features still dominated by those piercing dark eyes beneath equally dark brows.

Considering his incredible wealth, and those harshly hewn good looks, Grace couldn’t understand why her future boss wasn’t also the biggest playboy on the planet, photographed with a different beautiful woman on his arm every evening—a woman who would share the privacy of his

bed later that night—rather than guarding his private life to the point of obsession in the way that he did.

Unless ...

Maybe there was a reason Cesar Navarro had never been photographed with a beautiful woman on his arm? The same reason he kept his private life very private? And maybe that dark-haired man stepping onto the helicopter with him wasn't simply another one of his PAs, as Grace had assumed he must be?

Now wouldn't that be a crying shame: mega-rich, still single in his early thirties, with arrogant good looks enough to make any woman's heart flutter—and all for the private edification of another man!

Grace gave a chuckle at her wayward thoughts, only for that chuckle to slowly fade and be replaced by a frown as, having followed Kevin Maddox's instructions, she now found herself approaching the entrance to the estate where she was to live and work for at least the next month.

Huge wrought-iron gates were set in a surrounding wall that was at least twelve feet high, with two huge men dressed in matching black suits standing either side of them, their hair military-style short, their stances watchful, the expression in their eyes hidden by black reflective sunglasses—and the sun wasn't even shining on this overcast September day!

One of the men approached Grace's car as she braked in the driveway and wound down the window.

'Grace Blake?'

'Er—yes,' she answered uncertainly, relieved that she was expected, considering the level of security, but a little concerned as to the reason for that high security; she had been led to believe, in the telephone conversation she'd had with Kevin Maddox yesterday, that his Argentinian employer wasn't due to arrive in England until some time tomorrow ...

The burly security guard gave a terse nod after checking out the back seat behind her. 'If I could just take a look in the boot of your car ...?'

'The boot of my car ...?'

'If you wouldn't mind.' He stood to one side as Grace got out of the car and opened the boot for him. He insisted on checking the contents of her suitcase, too, before stepping aside to speak softly into the small radio attached to the lapel of his jacket, and seconds later the huge iron gates began to slowly open.

'The first turning to the right will take you to your cottage,' he instructed Grace abruptly before resuming his post beside the now open gates, his stance once again alert and watchful.

Grace edged the car forward until she was on a level with him. 'Er—I was told Mr Navarro wasn't arriving until some time tomorrow?' It would be just her luck to have arrived after her new employer!

His mouth tightened. 'No.'

'Oh.' She gave a puzzled frown. 'Is there usually this much security even when he isn't in residence?'

'Yes.'

'Oh,' Grace murmured again; she couldn't see it but she felt the coolness of the assessing gaze now levelled on her from behind those dark sunglasses. 'Okay. Thanks.'

'First turning on the right,' he repeated tersely, once again facing forward.

Grace's stomach gave a definite dip as she accelerated the car onto the driveway and saw the gates slowly closing behind her in the driving mirror. She felt, if she didn't see, the security cameras she was sure were now levelled on her as she drove slowly down the tree-lined driveway and turned to the right to approach the cottage Kevin had told her was to be her home for the next month, at least.

And Grace, totally used to doing what she wanted when she wanted, was already starting to have serious doubts that she would be able to live in this security prison for longer than that month's trial period ...

'I will accept no excuses, Kevin,' Cesar rasped impatiently as he strode forcefully into the cavernous hallway of his English home the next day, a little tired after having worked for the whole of the flight over from Buenos Aires, and in no mood to deal with any setbacks in the deal he had flown to England especially to complete. 'If Drey-fuss does not—What are these?' He came to an abrupt halt beside the table standing in the middle of the hallway.

Kevin winced as he looked at the decorative vase of flowers. 'Er—lilies?'

Cesar's jaw tightened. 'The minute we finish our conversation I want them removed,' he snapped before continuing on down the hallway to his study.

'Of course.' Wisely, the other man didn't so much as question why as he trailed behind him.

Cesar waited until he was seated behind the huge mahogany desk in his study before pinning the younger man with the darkness of his gaze. 'I am sure I have made it more than clear that there are never to be flowers inside the house?'

Kevin grimaced. 'I apologise. I must have omitted to mention that to Miss Blake ...'

Cesar arched a dark brow. 'The new housekeeper?'

'Mrs Davis retired—'

'I am well aware of that. I believe I gave her a cheque on her retirement.' The firmness of his mouth quirked derisively.

'Yes, you did,' Kevin confirmed, having been responsible for the delivery of that cheque. 'I obviously sent Miss Blake's file to Raphael for his approval.'

'Obviously.' Cesar nodded tersely. 'You have a copy of that file with you now?'

'Of course.' Kevin opened his briefcase and removed the appropriate file before handing it to him. 'She's a little young but her references were excellent, and as I said, the security check on her panned out.'

Cesar opened the file, his brows rising as he immediately saw Grace Blake's date of birth placing her as being only twenty-six years old. 'A little young ...?' He eyed Kevin speculatively.

Kevin looked uncomfortable. 'Her references were excellent.'

'So you said ...' Cesar sat back in his chair and regarded the younger man with narrowed eyes. 'Is she also beautiful?'

Kevin flushed. 'If you think for one moment I would let the way she looks influence me—'

'So she is beautiful,' Cesar drawled mockingly. 'She also does not appear to have been employed for the past eight months ...?' he added after another glance at the file.

'No. Well. Her mother was very ill, and so she gave up her job to nurse her—'

'I do not believe I asked for details of her private life, Kevin.' A nerve pulsed in the tightness of his jaw.

'I was merely trying to explain—No, of course you didn't.' The other man nodded as Cesar simply continued to look up at him. 'I'll talk to her about the flowers as soon as we've finished here.'

'See that you do.' Cesar's jaw was still tight as he closed the file on Miss Blake with a firm snap before putting it to one side to be read more thoroughly later.

Raphael was still outside bringing himself up to date in regards to the security here, but Cesar had no doubts that when the other man returned he would very quickly ensure that the young and beautiful Miss Blake knew exactly what Cesar would and would not accept from his employees.

Grace was putting the finishing touches to the dessert she was preparing for Cesar Navarro's dinner when Kevin Maddox strolled into the kitchen. 'How nice to see you again, Kevin,' she greeted him warmly.

She had heard the helicopter arrive about fifteen minutes ago, and had hoped that Kevin would have accompanied Mr Navarro. He was someone she considered as being relatively normal, after the

past two days of feeling as if her every move were being watched, either from behind those reflective black sunglasses worn by the numerous security guards that constantly seemed to be on duty, or the cameras she had discovered both in the house and the grounds, and no doubt watched over intently by even more security guards in that room full of monitors she had discovered in the basement of the house when she went exploring earlier today!

The cottage she had been given to stay in was more than adequate, luxurious in fact, but the inside of the main house was breathtaking, with its elegant antique furniture and statuary, ornate ceilings and gleaming glass chandeliers, beautiful paintings—all originals, no doubt!—adorning the pale silk-covered walls.

As for the kitchen ...!

If she ignored the two security cameras placed strategically in two corners of the room, and the fact that she had to key in a code to get in and out of the back door, then it was possible to appreciate that the mellow oak units gave the room an old-fashioned appeal, at the same time as it was a chef's delight, with every conceivable appliance necessary to produce the sumptuous cordon bleu meals she was expected to cook for its owner.

But getting in and out of the estate was every bit as much of a nightmare as Grace had thought it might be. As she had learnt when she went to shop for food in the nearest town this morning. Security out, security in, with all of the shopping bags being checked before the same guard from yesterday—Rodney, he had deigned to tell her was his name when she made a point of asking—would allow her and her car back inside the grounds.

Either Navarro was completely paranoid, or he had some really serious enemies. Neither of which possibility particularly appealed to Grace.

Kevin Maddox's homely good looks, short blond hair and deep blue eyes were like a breath of fresh air after only twenty-four hours of living in this goldfish bowl!

'Something smells good.' He nodded approvingly.

Grace nodded back, wearing her usual 'uniform' for working in: a crisp white blouse and pencil knee-length black skirt, with her long dark hair brushed back and secured in a ponytail so that it was out of the way as she prepared the food. 'Carrot soup, followed by grilled sea bass, minted new potatoes, with sautéed Mediterranean vegetables. And for dessert—'

'Ah.' Kevin gave a grimace as he looked down at the rich chocolate mousse Grace had been decorating with dark and white chocolate swirls when he entered the kitchen.

Her expression turned to dismay as she saw Kevin's expression. 'Mr Navarro doesn't like chocolate?'

'Mr Navarro doesn't eat dessert.'

Her eyes widened. 'What, none at all?'

'Nope.'

'But I specialised as a pastry chef!'

'I realise that.' Kevin shrugged. 'But you also did a cordon bleu cookery course in Paris before you specialised.'

'That isn't—' Grace broke off her impatient protest as she realised it was pointless; for the moment she needed this job, and if Cesar Navarro didn't eat dessert then he didn't eat dessert. 'Is there anything else Mr Navarro doesn't like to eat?' She picked up the glass dish of chocolate mousse and placed it in the refrigerator.

'I didn't say he doesn't like dessert, only that he doesn't eat it,' Kevin drawled ruefully.

'No doubt he's afraid of middle-aged spread—Sorry, I shouldn't have said that.' Grace sighed.

'No, you shouldn't,' Kevin agreed evenly. 'But while we're on the subject, he doesn't like the flowers in the entrance hall, either. Although, again, that's my mistake.' He grimaced. 'Mrs Davis was here long before I started working for Mr Navarro, and so knew of all his personal quir—preferences. I should have told you about them at our second interview,' he corrected his lapse briskly.

Grace frowned at Kevin Maddox. ‘He doesn’t like the lilies?’

‘No.’

‘Then what flowers does he like in the house?’

‘He doesn’t.’

She blinked. ‘Does he have an allergy? Hay fever, something like that?’ She knew how awful that could be—depending on the pollen count, her sister, Beth, could suffer dreadfully with hay fever during late spring and early summer, and then again in the autumn at harvest time.

‘Not that I’m aware, no.’

Grace gave a frustrated shake of her head. ‘Then what’s not to like about having flowers in the house?’ The long-stemmed pink lilies were absolutely beautiful, and they had smelt divine when she was arranging them in the vase earlier today.

Kevin shrugged broad shoulders. ‘Experience has shown me that it’s best never to question Mr Navarro’s instructions.’

‘When he says jump people just ask how high, hmm?’ Grace guessed shrewdly.

Kevin gave a wry chuckle. ‘That pretty much sums it up, yes.’

‘And on this occasion he wants me to remove the flowers from the entrance hall?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay.’ She shrugged.

Kevin gave a sigh of relief. ‘Apart from these few minor hiccups, how are you settling in?’

She wasn’t. And now that Cesar Navarro had actually arrived, bringing yet more restrictions with him, she wasn’t sure she wanted to, either ...

The set of rules she had been given before she arrived, and the level of security once she had got here, were all alien enough, but Grace could actually feel Cesar Navarro’s presence in the house now. A dark and arrogantly brooding presence that seemed to pervade the entire estate. Kevin Maddox certainly wasn’t as relaxed and congenial as he had seemed at their two interviews, or during their telephone conversation yesterday, and no doubt Rodney, and his group of security cronies, were on even higher alert now that their boss was in residence.

How did people live in this way? How did Cesar Navarro live this way? Constantly shielded, in a protective bubble, set apart from the real world? Grace had no idea, but it certainly wasn’t a lifestyle she would ever want for herself. Not that she would ever be rich enough, or important enough, to need to bother!

She gave Kevin a bright, noncommittal smile. ‘The cottage is lovely, and this kitchen is amazing.’ She looked about her appreciatively.

‘That’s good.’ He nodded, obviously pleased with her answer. ‘Raphael will be down shortly to check on Mr Navarro’s dinner.’ He gave a glance at his wristwatch as he straightened. ‘Time I was leaving.’

‘You don’t stay here when Mr Navarro is in residence?’ It was impossible for Grace to keep the disappointment from her tone.

Kevin shrugged. ‘No one ever stays in the main house but Mr Navarro and Raphael.’

Mr Navarro and Raphael?

‘Is Raphael just over six feet tall, with a masculine build, probably aged in his late twenties or early thirties, with dark hair and blue eyes?’ she prompted, describing the man she had seen with Navarro in that photo.

‘That pretty much describes him, yes,’ Kevin confirmed cheerfully. ‘How did you—? Ah, here he is now ...’ He turned as the other man entered the kitchen.

Yes, it was indeed that same dark-haired man.

Mr Navarro and Raphael.

Maybe Grace’s previous thoughts on that subject weren’t too far off the mark, after all?

Oh, well, live and let live had always been Grace's motto; two of her closest female friends in Paris had been a couple. In fact, they still were, the three of them having kept in regular contact since Grace had returned to England four years ago.

Not that Grace had chance to learn anything more about Raphael, or their employer, once Kevin had introduced the two of them and then taken his leave.

Raphael was kept busy going efficiently to and fro between the kitchen and the dining-room during the next hour as he served Cesar Navarro himself, the sternness of his expression not encouraging after the first couple of times Grace had tried to engage him in conversation and received only a grunt in reply.

Consequently, by the time Raphael gathered up the silver tray on which Grace had put the pot of strong black coffee—Navarro's personal brew, brought with him from Argentina, of course!—she was feeling more than a little exhausted, from all of her work today, as well as the strain of trying to engage the taciturn Raphael in conversation. So much so that she didn't even demur when Raphael curtly told her she was dismissed for the evening as he left the kitchen with the coffee tray.

Grace felt too weary to leave immediately, instead sinking down onto one of the four stools about the cream marble-topped breakfast bar. If this evening's tension, along with that restrictive security, was an example of how the next month was going to be, then she didn't think she was going to make it through the trial period. No matter how good—or welcome—the pay was!

CHAPTER TWO

'DIOS MIO!'

Grace shot to her feet at the first sound of that harshly surprised voice, feeling the colour draining from her cheeks as she looked across the shadowed darkness of the kitchen at the tall and imposing—and instantly recognisable!—figure of Cesar Navarro. He stood silhouetted in the kitchen doorway, those equally recognisable black eyes glittering across at her with piercing intensity.

Having finally recovered after Raphael had dismissed her, Grace had decided not to return to her lonely cottage just yet but to wash and clear away the last of the dinner things, rather than having to deal with them first thing in the morning.

Against her boss's instructions, she now realised.

Instructions that Kevin had informed her no one ever questioned—or disobeyed?

To make matters worse, she had once again been sitting at the breakfast bar, this time with only the light on over the cooker to break the stilled darkness, and enjoying the chocolate mousse Kevin had earlier told her Navarro didn't eat.

She swallowed hard. 'Mr Navarro ...'

'Miss Blake, I presume?' His voice sounded dark and husky in the still of the night, his accent having a slightly Transatlantic twang to it; no doubt courtesy of his American mother.

Grace ran the dampness of her palms down her black pencil skirt, wishing—oh, God, how she wished!—that she had gone back to her cottage as she was supposed to do. So much for her assertion to Beth of doubting she would set eyes on Cesar Navarro any time soon! As it was, Grace was probably not going to be given any choice about whether or not she wanted to complete the whole month's trial period.

'I—' She moistened the dryness of her lips. 'I have no excuse. I shouldn't be here. Kevin—Mr Maddox told me that I had to be out of the main house by nine o'clock, and Raphael dismissed me earlier. I just—it was still early, and I didn't want to go back to the cottage and be alone just yet, and I thought, or rather I decided to clear away so that I didn't have to do it in the morning,' she finished lamely.

Cesar had showered and gone to bed an hour ago, but having read through some business papers for that hour, he had then decided to come down to the kitchen for a glass of juice before going to sleep. He certainly hadn't expected to see the young woman Maddox had engaged as cook/housekeeper of his English home when he got there!

Grace Blake's file stated she was twenty-six years old, and yet she looked much younger than that as she stood in the beam of light given off by the single bulb over the cooker, standing only a little over five feet in height, her frame petite in a plain white blouse and black skirt. The sable darkness of her hair was pulled back and secured in a ponytail, leaving her ivory-skinned throat and make-up-less face fully exposed. And it was, as Cesar had guessed earlier this evening, a beautiful face: blue-green eyes surrounded by thick, dark lashes, with a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her short, straight nose and high cheekbones, her cheeks slightly hollow, as if she had recently lost weight, her lips a perfect bow above a stubbornly determined chin.

Cesar's mouth thinned as he stepped further into the dark shadows of the kitchen. 'Correct me if I am wrong, but you seem to be eating ... chocolate mousse,' he drawled after glancing towards the glass bowl sitting on the breakfast bar, 'rather than clearing away?'

'Yes. Well.' Those ivory cheeks blushed prettily. 'I finished clearing away, and I—I had already made the mousse for your dinner before Kevin—Mr Maddox—told me that you don't eat dessert.'

He arched haughty brows. 'And so you decided to eat it yourself?'

‘No! Well ... yes.’ She grimaced uncomfortably as the half full glass bowl on the breakfast bar mocked her denial. ‘But only because I was feeling—’ She broke off with a wince. ‘Again, there’s no excuse, and I apologise.’

‘Because you were feeling ...?’

‘I’m used to living in London, you see, and the cottage is quite a distance from the main house, and on its own, and it’s so quiet that I—Oh, to hell with this!’ All the tension went out of the slenderness of her shoulders as she sighed heavily. ‘Why doesn’t someone just shoot me now and get it over with?’

Cesar’s brows rose even higher. ‘Shoot you?’

‘Yes.’ Grace Blake grimaced self-derisively. ‘Just bring in Rodney, or one of his cohorts, and have them shoot me now.’

‘You are referring to my chief security guard here?’

‘If he’s the same Rodney standing guard at the main gates, then, yes, that’s him.’ She nodded. ‘I thought he was thawing towards me a little when I spoke to him earlier today, but I’m sure that if you were to tell him that I stole and ate your chocolate mousse, then he’ll be only too glad to dispatch me—or whatever it is they call shooting someone in security guard jargon.’

Cesar couldn’t decide whether to laugh—something he did all too rarely—at this young woman’s unusual and forthright manner, or do as she suggested, and call for Rodney—but only so that the other man might escort her back to her cottage in the grounds, rather than shoot her! ‘You seriously think that Rodney would shoot you because you have eaten a chocolate mousse belonging to me?’

She grimaced. ‘I seriously think he would do whatever you told him to do, no questions asked.’

Cesar hid his surprise at her statement behind hooded lids. ‘I believe cold-blooded murder is illegal in this country.’

‘Any sort of murder is illegal in this country,’ she corrected pertly. ‘But, with the level of security you have here, I doubt very much if you were to hide my body in the woods behind the house that anyone would ever find it.’

Cesar doubted very much that he had ever had a stranger conversation in his life. Strange, and yet somehow compelling at the same time. In as much as he had no idea what Miss Grace Blake was going to say next.

‘You were about to tell me how you were feeling before you ate the chocolate mousse?’ he prompted as he stepped fully into the beam of light.

Grace couldn’t speak at all as she got her very first look at Cesar Navarro ‘in the flesh’, as Beth had put it. Good grief, the man was—Well, he was—The only word Grace could think of at that moment was *breathtaking*.

He was at least a foot taller than her own five feet three inches, the darkness of his overlong hair still in that rakishly tousled style—naturally so, judging from the slight wave in that midnight darkness—and those dark and glittering eyes were surrounded by the longest, thickest lashes Grace had ever seen, on a man or a woman, his cheekbones high in that swarthy face, his nose thin and aristocratic, with sculpted lips—sexily sculpted lips!—above a square and determined jaw.

But it was probably what he was wearing—or, rather, what he wasn’t wearing—that surprised Grace the most.

In the photograph she had seen of him he had been the height of understated—and, no doubt, expensive—elegance, in a perfectly tailored dark suit and white shirt, with a meticulously knotted silver tie at his throat. This evening he was dressed in a fitted black tee shirt that defined the muscled width of his shoulders and chest, leaving his equally muscled arms bare, and clinging to reveal the flat contours of his stomach—not an ounce of that middle-aged spread in sight!—with loose-fitting grey sweat-pants sitting low on the leanness of his hips, his long and elegant feet completely bare on the terracotta floor tiles.

Was he dressed for going to bed, or working out in the gym in the east wing of the house, which Grace had also discovered when she went exploring earlier today? He certainly didn't look all hot and sweaty, which he surely would have if it were the latter. Probably the former, too, if he hadn't gone to bed alone ...

Whatever the reason for his casual clothing, his presence in the kitchen seemed to have sucked up all the air in the room, making it difficult for Grace to breathe, and his lean and muscled frame looked immense in the confines of the darkened kitchen, so much so that she felt sure he must rival in muscle any and all of the security guards he surrounded himself with.

'What a waste ...' Grace heard herself murmur—and then winced as she realised she had spoken completely without thinking; just because she suspected that this man and Raphael were involved, there was no reason for her to say it out loud. In the circumstances, it was the last thing she should have said!

'Miss Blake?' Cesar prompted tersely.

'Nothing. Absolutely nothing.' She gave a firm shake of her head. 'What was I feeling before I ate the chocolate mousse?' she repeated desperately as she saw the way those dark eyes had narrowed speculatively. 'Homesick, if you really want to know, and a little lonely. And chocolate always has a way of making things seem a little less bleak, don't you think? No, of course you don't, because you don't eat sweet things. Why is that, by the way?' She looked up at him questioningly, and then wished she hadn't as she felt a decided click in her already tense neck.

Something that would become an occupational hazard if she had to stand and have too many conversations with this man. Which clearly wasn't going to happen, because he was going to have Rodney shoot her and hide her body in the woods—

And you're becoming hysterical, Grace, she admonished self-disgustedly. Unfortunately that realisation in no way helped to dispel those feelings, if her next comment was any indication, or the way in which she appreciatively eyed the muscled expanse of Cesar Navarro's chest when she made it. 'It certainly can't be because you're afraid of putting on unnecessary pounds.'

No, Cesar acknowledged ruefully, he really didn't have any idea what Grace Blake was going to say—or do!—next. Nor was he about to explain to this strange young lady that he had given up eating desserts because he considered them unnecessary frivolities. 'Did you perhaps drink some of my wine, too, this evening, in an effort to dispel those feelings of loneliness?'

'Certainly not.' She looked indignant at the suggestion. 'I rarely drink, and never when I'm at work.'

'I am glad to hear it,' he drawled dryly.

She blinked, obviously unsure as to whether or not he was being sarcastic. 'I'm just a little tired, that's all.'

And a lot emotional, was Cesar's guess.

He straightened. 'In that case, perhaps it would be better if we were to continue this conversation in the morning.'

Those blue-green eyes widened. 'Am I still going to be here in the morning?'

'As opposed to being "dispatched" and buried in the woods behind the house?' Cesar murmured softly.

Colour once again warmed her ivory cheeks. 'Maybe that was a little hysterical of me.'

He arched mocking brows. 'A little?'

Her eyes snapped with temper. 'Well, you would hardly have security guards here in the first place if you didn't intend for them to protect you, should the need arise!'

His mouth thinned impatiently. 'I do, however, draw the line at asking them to shoot outspoken cook/housekeepers. Even temporary ones,' he added abruptly.

'Oh.' Her guilty gaze dropped from meeting his as she obviously accepted that summary of her conduct so far this evening.

‘Unless you are suggesting I might be in need of protection from you?’

Grace’s breath had lodged somewhere in her throat as the sultry huskiness of his tone brought to mind—totally inappropriately!—thoughts of running her fingers up that broad and muscled chest to his tousled, just-had-sex hair, as she brought his mouth down to hers and—

Oh, good grief!

She must be feeling lonelier than she had realised if she was having thoughts of kissing Cesar Navarro, of all men. If she was having thoughts of kissing any man she had just met!

Oh, she’d had her share of boyfriends over the years, but none of those relationships had been in the least serious. She certainly hadn’t been so bowled over by the sheer sensuality of any of those men that she had fantasised about kissing him within minutes of meeting him!

She wasn’t fantasising about kissing her new boss, either! What would be the point, when his sexual inclinations obviously lay in a different direction?

‘No, of course not,’ Grace assured him briskly. ‘As you say, perhaps it would be better if we finished this conversation in the clear light of day.’

He continued to look down at her with those brooding dark eyes for several long seconds, before slowly nodding his head. ‘I will call for Rodney—so that he may escort you to your cottage, not “dispatch” you,’ he snapped his impatience as Grace’s eyes widened in alarm.

She breathed a sigh of relief. ‘I’m quite capable of walking back to the cottage unescorted.’

His mouth tightened. ‘It is late, and very dark outside.’

Grace grimaced. ‘And there are so many security guards out there that there’s no way anyone from outside could possibly get in and attack me!’

Cesar’s eyes narrowed. ‘You seem overly concerned by the presence of my security guards?’

‘Perhaps just curious as to the need for so many of them?’

His mouth tightened. ‘I am not in the habit of explaining myself. To anyone.’

‘Least of all temporary employees.’ Grace nodded. ‘It’s the cameras everywhere that give me the creeps.’ She glanced up at one of those cameras in the corner of the kitchen, the pulsing red light showing that it was a live feed. ‘You do realise that someone in the basement is watching the two of us right now?’

‘But they cannot hear our conversation,’ he assured her impatiently.

‘Which is probably as well!’ Grace grimaced. ‘My remarks haven’t exactly been polite,’ she admitted ruefully as Cesar raised questioning brows.

No, this young woman’s conversation had been far from the politeness he was used to, Cesar acknowledged derisively. So much so that he found Miss Blake’s conversation strangely . . . refreshing, after years of stating his wants and needs and knowing they would be immediately satisfied; Grace Blake gave the impression she didn’t do anyone’s bidding unquestioningly.

As evidenced by the vase of pink lilies, which had adorned the table in the entrance hall earlier today, but which now stood in the middle of the kitchen table.

‘It seemed a pity to waste them,’ Grace defended quickly as she saw where the darkness of Cesar Navarro’s compelling gaze now rested.

His jaw tightened. ‘My instructions were for them to be—’

‘Removed from the hallway,’ Grace put in quickly. ‘And, as you can see, I have removed them.’

‘And instead placed them in the kitchen.’

‘Well . . . yes.’ Her cheeks burnt with colour. ‘I only bought them this morning, and I couldn’t bear to just throw them out when they’re so beautiful. The perfume is absolutely divi—’ She broke off as he continued to look steadily down the long length of his aristocratic nose at her. ‘Maybe I could take them back to my cottage with me? Or would you consider that as stealing from you, too?’

‘And, again, punishable by death?’ he drawled dryly.

‘I’ve already admitted I may have let my imagination wander a little on that one.’ Grace winced at his obvious derision.

Cesar Navarro's expression was completely inscrutable as he turned to take the kitchen phone from its charger before pressing several buttons. 'I am merely calling Rodney so that he can escort—Rodney? Yes,' he bit out tersely into the receiver while the darkness of his gaze remained firmly fixed on Grace. 'No, there is no problem, but I would like you to escort Miss Blake back to her cottage. Yes, I am aware that should have been the case. Unfortunately Miss Blake seems incapable of following even the simplest of instructions.'

She gasped. 'That's hardly fair—'

'The kitchen.' Cesar completely ignored Grace's protest as he continued to talk to his English Head of Security. 'One minute? I am sure that Miss Blake and I will be able to amuse ourselves for that length of time,' he drawled before abruptly ending the call and putting the phone back on its stand before folding his arms over his muscled chest to once again look down the length of his nose at her.

Grace eyed him in frustration. 'How nice to know that Rodney now thinks I'm some sort of a security risk!'

Cesar raised one dark brow. 'And is Rodney's opinion of such importance to you?'

'It is when he's licensed to carry a gun!'

His mouth thinned. 'You are uncomfortable with that knowledge?'

She grimaced. 'I think intimidated might be a better way of describing it.'

Cesar had lived with this high level of security for more than half his lifetime, and rarely noticed it any more; he had certainly never considered how other people might react to being constantly under surveillance. Not that it mattered to him how Grace Blake felt about it; the security that surrounded him and his family was for a specific reason, and he had no intention of changing it to suit his English cook/housekeeper. His on-a-one-month's-trial English cook/housekeeper ...

'Ah, Rodney.' He turned to look at the other man as he let himself quietly in by the back door. 'Miss Blake is ready to leave.'

'This really isn't necessary,' Grace Blake protested with obvious discomfort.

'I have already explained the reasons I consider it important—'

'Oh, well, that makes it all right, then!'

Cesar's eyes narrowed at her obvious sarcasm. 'Do not forget to take the lilies with you,' he reminded as she turned to follow the silent Rodney. 'Take the vase, too,' he added wearily as she attempted to remove the flowers and immediately dripped water all over the table top.

'I—thank you.' She quickly wiped the table before gathering the cut-glass vase up in her arms, and was instantly dwarfed by both its weight and the height of the flowers.

'Rodney?' Cesar gave the other man an exasperated glance.

'Yes, sir.' His English Head of Security was obviously having the same problem as Cesar had earlier as he took the vase of flowers out of Grace Blake's arms, in as much as it took great effort on his part not to laugh at her disgruntled expression. Evidence, perhaps, that Rodney was, as Grace Blake had thought earlier, thawing towards her?

Understandably so, perhaps, when not only was Miss Blake naturally beautiful, but her forthright way of talking was entertaining, to say the least.

'Goodnight, Miss Blake,' Cesar bit out dismissively as Rodney stood back politely in order to allow her to precede him out of the kitchen.

She turned slightly, her gaze not quite meeting his as she nodded. 'Mr Navarro.'

Cesar waited until she and Rodney had both departed the kitchen, the door locked securely behind them, before his mouth curved into a rueful smile at the strangeness of their encounter.

Grace Blake was not at all what he had been expecting of his newest employee. She was too young. Too beautiful. And far too outspoken!

There was no denying that she was an excellent cook, however; the meal she had prepared for him earlier this evening was as good as anything Cesar had ever eaten in any of the exclusive restaurants he frequented all over the world.

Speaking of which ...

Cesar bent slightly to pick up the bowl of half-eaten chocolate mousse from the marble-topped breakfast bar, ignoring the teaspoon sticking out of it in favour of dipping the tip of one of his fingers into the thick concoction before bringing it up to his lips.

Only to give an involuntary groan as the richness of the deliciously creamy chocolate hit his taste buds, almost—but not quite!—with the same force of the physical pleasure experienced during sex.

Not that Cesar allowed himself to indulge in that luxury too often, either; he preferred to maintain tight control over all areas of his life, no matter what the cost to his personal comfort.

Nevertheless ...

Another dip of the fingertip, a taste, another groan of ecstasy, and Cesar gave up all idea of leaving the kitchen before he had eaten every last temptingly decadent scoop of it.

‘Come in, Miss Blake.’

Grace felt her tension rising as Cesar Navarro responded dryly to her knock on the door to his study at eight-thirty the following morning. The do-not-ever-enter study that she had been summoned to just a few short minutes ago, when Kevin had sought her out in the kitchen for the sole purpose of telling her that Mr Navarro wanted to see her immediately.

Kevin had looked at her questioningly once he had passed on his employer’s request, but if his boss hadn’t confided in the other man regarding the details of their conversation in the kitchen the night before, then Grace wasn’t about to do so, either.

Besides which, Kevin would find out soon enough what the meeting was about—when Cesar Navarro later informed him of her dismissal!

Grace had telephoned Beth last night as soon Rodney had left her alone in the privacy of her cottage, her sister unable to stop herself from chuckling as Grace related every embarrassing detail of that late-night meeting in the kitchen with Cesar Navarro.

Grace had chuckled wryly, too, once she got over feeling so embarrassed about the whole thing, only to wake up at six o’clock this morning in the full certainty that she was going to be dismissed at the first opportunity.

Obviously he had waited until after she had prepared his breakfast before finding that opportunity ...

Grace checked that her hair was secured in its usual tidy ponytail, and smoothed down her black skirt, before quietly opening the door to the study and stepping gingerly inside. Only to come to an abrupt halt just inside the door of the wood-panelled study as she found herself looking across a huge mahogany desk at the same formal Cesar from that photograph she had seen of him online; he was wearing another impeccably tailored suit, in charcoal grey this time, with a snowy white shirt, and a meticulously knotted pale blue silk tie. Only that sexily tousled dark hair was reminiscent of the man she had met in the kitchen the previous night.

Probably not the best of things for her to have thought of when she had obviously been brought here so that he could tell her personally all the reasons why he had decided she was totally unsuitable to work for him!

‘Did you personally make the croissants I had with my breakfast this morning?’

Grace blinked at the unexpected question. ‘I—Sorry ...?’

Cesar eyed her impatiently. ‘I asked if you had made the croissants I ate for my breakfast earlier.’

‘Er—yes.’ Was this some sort of game? Grace wondered, feeling dazed. The one where you lulled your opponent into a false sense of security, and just when they were starting to relax you kicked them in the teeth? Because if so—

‘They were delicious.’ He nodded briskly. ‘As good as anything I have tasted in some of the best hotels in Paris.’

So they should be, when Grace had worked in one of those hotels for over a year, under one of the best chefs in France, once she had completed her cordon bleu course.

‘I’m pleased you enjoyed them.’ She gave a shrug. ‘Consider them a parting gift from me to you.’

Those piercing black eyes narrowed. ‘You are leaving?’

‘Of course I—’ Grace eyed him warily. ‘Isn’t that why you had me brought here, so that you could have the pleasure of dismissing me personally?’

Cesar had wondered, after returning to his bedroom the previous night, if perhaps he had just met Grace Blake at a time when she was obviously feeling vulnerable and homesick, and resulting in that vulnerability making her more verbose than she might otherwise have been. Two minutes in her company this morning and he knew that was not the case; she really was this outspoken all of the time!

He arched dark brows. ‘And why do you believe it would give me personal pleasure to dismiss you?’ He arched dark brows as he studied her beneath hooded lids.

Those freckles across her nose and cheeks were more visible in the clear light of day, her eyes the beautiful clear colour of the Mediterranean Sea, neither blue nor green, but somewhere in between. Her hair was a rich shiny sable, but was unfortunately once again confined in a ponytail at her nape. Even so it was possible for Cesar to tell that it would probably reach almost to her waist once released.

She shifted uncomfortably beneath the steady implacability of his gaze. ‘I was very outspoken last night. And rude. And maybe a tad sarcastic. And—’ She broke off as Cesar slowly stood up before moving around his desk, deftly avoiding knocking the single framed photograph; sitting to one side of it, he leant against the front of the desk.

A photograph of Raphael, perhaps?

‘And?’ he prompted softly.

Her eyes were very wide and she swallowed before answering. ‘And I expressed a dislike of the excessive security you have in place here.’

‘Yes,’ he drawled dryly.

She blinked. ‘Yes, I was outspoken? Yes, I was rude? Yes, I was a tad sarcastic? Or yes, I expressed being uncomfortable with the excessive security you surround yourself with?’

‘Yes, you did all four of those things,’ Cesar confirmed tersely.

‘There you go, then.’ She smiled ruefully.

‘There I go what?’ he prompted irritably. Outspokenness was one thing, incomprehension was something else entirely.

Grace eyed him impatiently, more than a little overwhelmed by this man’s close proximity. As she was also aware of how his sheer presence seemed to have once again sucked all the air out of the room. ‘There are all the reasons you’re going to dismiss me!’

‘The reasons I am going to enjoy *personally* dismissing you was, I believe, the phrase you used?’

‘Does it matter?’ Grace gave a heavy sigh at his tenacity. ‘The bottom line is that you’re sacking me. The level of enjoyment you’re going to feel from doing so irrelevant—’

‘To you, perhaps,’ he bit out coldly. ‘I happen to take exception to being accused of enjoying depriving anyone of their employment.’

And that exception was clearly visible in the dark glitter of his eyes, thinned and disapproving mouth, and the nerve pulsing in his tightly clenched jaw!

‘Okay, I’m sorry if—I was obviously mistaken. I spoke hastily. You may not enjoy doing it, but you’re going to do it, anyway,’ she substituted lightly.

If that was Grace Blake’s idea of an apology then Cesar believed she needed to work on her people skills—because she had just succeeded in insulting him for a second time in as many minutes!

‘Better yet,’ she brightened. ‘Why don’t we just take it as said, I’ll go back to the cottage and pack my things, and then be on my way? You and Raphael would probably appreciate not having a third party under your feet all the time, anyway.’

Cesar had the feeling that he had somehow lost control of this conversation some minutes ago. Not a normal occurrence for him: usually when he spoke people listened; they certainly did not attempt to speak for him!

He raised a frustrated hand to his chin as he eyed Grace Blake impatiently. 'Myself and Raphael ...?'

'Don't worry, your secret is safe with me.' She reached out to place a reassuring hand on his sleeve-covered arm before quickly withdrawing it, a blush once again darkening her cheeks. 'Kevin had me sign some sort of privacy contract at the end of our second interview, anyway, no doubt so that you could sue me if I breathe a word to anyone about your private life.' She gave him another one of those bright smiles.

'Myself and Raphael,' Cesar repeated softly. Very softly. The sort of lethally laced softness that family and foes alike knew to beware of.

And which Grace Blake should be very wary of if her comments just now meant what Cesar thought they did!

CHAPTER THREE

ONE GLANCE AT THE COLDNESS in Cesar Navarro's glittering black eyes, and the harshness to his swarthy and chiselled features, and Grace knew that she had said something to annoy him.

Again.

He had that same stillness and coldness of expression that her father had always had when she or Beth had done something wrong; Clive Blake had been a wonderful and loving father to them both, one that never, ever raised his voice to his two daughters—because he hadn't needed to, just that cold stillness enough to tell them he was displeased or disappointed.

As Cesar Navarro's cold stillness now told her he was the former, at the very least!

Grace's feet seemed to be weighted down on the carpeted floor, and her mind had gone blank, making it impossible for her to either flee or remember what they had been talking about immediately before he became the iceman.

Ah, yes, she remembered now; she had been reassuring him as to her complete discretion in regard to his relationship with Raphael—

Oh.

Grace looked up at Cesar searchingly before slowly giving a pained wince. 'You and Raphael aren't a couple?'

One dark brow arched over those glittering black eyes. 'Perhaps you would care to explain to me why it is you ever thought that we were?'

Even his tone of voice was the same as their dad's, Grace acknowledged with another inward wince: soft and reasoning, pleasantly so—before he verbally remonstrated with them for whatever misdemeanour they were guilty of. Except, if her assumption concerning a relationship between Cesar and Raphael had been an incorrect one—and the chilling expression on his face clearly said that it was!—then this was so much worse than a misdemeanour.

If he hadn't been going to fire her before, then he certainly wasn't going to hesitate about doing so now.

Quite irrationally Grace found herself wondering who exactly was in that single framed photograph facing away from her on Cesar's desk. Obviously someone who mattered in his life; he wasn't the sort of man, was far too unemotional, too self-contained, to display a photograph on a whim.

None of which was helping her to find a suitable answer to his question. 'It seemed the likeliest explanation for why a young, mega-wealthy and gorgeously handsome man in his prime hasn't been photographed in the newspapers with the hordes of beautiful women he takes to his silk-sheeted bed every night—' Grace broke off with a gasp as she realised she had just made the situation worse, not better. 'I can't believe I said any of that out loud!'

'I assure you that you did.' Again, Cesar was unsure of how he felt about the directness of this woman's remarks, had no idea whether he should put an end to this now and simply ask her to leave—that decadent chocolate mousse aside!—laugh, or simply put her over his knee and give her curvaceous little bottom the smacking it deserved! 'And did it not occur to you that no such photographs exist because I happen to own, or have influence over, much of the media?'

'Ah.' She gave a grimace. 'Never thought of that. Does that mean that there are hordes of—?'

'Might I suggest that now might be a good time for you to exercise some caution over the things you say out loud?' Cesar eyed her warningly.

The directness of her gaze shifted away from his. 'Sorry.'

He nodded at her grudging apology. 'So, you consider me to be a "gorgeously handsome man in my prime", do you, Miss Blake?'

Her cheeks flushed so red now that Cesar thought she might internally combust. ‘Well, reasonably so,’ she finally conceded awkwardly.

Cesar settled himself more comfortably against the front of the desk, arms crossed over his chest as he realised he was enjoying her obvious discomfort. ‘I had not realised there were degrees to being “gorgeously handsome” or “in your prime”?’

‘Will you stop repeating that as if—as if—?’ She gave an impatient shake of her head. ‘Is Rodney anywhere about?’

‘So that he might take you out into the woods and “dispatch” you?’

‘Exactly!’

There was no longer any choice about it; Cesar couldn’t hold back the impulse he had to laugh at this outrageously outspoken young woman.

Grace’s eyes widened as she heard the husky softness of his laugh, a rich and throaty sound that stirred something to life deep inside her, not a slow or tentative stirring but a roaring, ripping, breaking free of an emotion she had never experienced in her life before.

Desire.

Grace gave a soft gasp as wave after wave of heat swept over her from her head to her toes, lingering and remaining in the swelling of her breasts, the tips becoming aching and engorged with that searing heat, a fiery liquid gushing between the apex of her thighs, dampening her swollen folds.

It was at one and the same time the most pleasurable and yet the most uncomfortable feeling Grace had ever known in her life!

Pleasurable because of that aching and swelling in the most intimate parts of her body, but uncomfortable because it was the enigmatic and reclusive Cesar Navarro, of all men, a man so totally beyond her reach or understanding, who had incited that desire.

Achingly.

Heatedly.

Unbelievably!

Even worse than the utter futility of that desire was the fact that Grace knew, by the way his laughter slowly began to fade, and those glittering and coal black eyes now narrowed on her in speculation, that he was as aware of her unbidden feelings of desire as she was!

She drew herself up tautly. ‘Look, for everyone’s sake, can we just take it that you’ve dismissed me and let Rodney escort me off the premises—before I have chance to say anything else to embarrass myself?’

Cesar felt somewhat bemused. Not only was his employee forthright to the point of embarrassing herself, but all of that honesty came from between perfectly bowed and moistly parted lips. Extremely kissable lips, which, the longer he looked them, caused his shaft to harden and swell in burgeoning desire. Lips Cesar now found himself looking at intently as he became curious to know whether or not they tasted as delicious as the chocolate mousse he had unexpectedly devoured the night before—

Ni en pedo!

No way!

Grace Blake worked for him, and Cesar did not have personal relationships with the women he employed. Even ones he found as interesting and unpredictable—and, apparently, arousing—as he did Miss Blake!

Even if the flush to her cheeks, and the arousal of her nipples beneath her fitted white blouse, now seemed to imply she found him equally physically intriguing.

Which placed Cesar in the dilemma that he was also no longer certain it would be wise for him to put forward the suggestion that had occurred to him the night before.

‘Mr Navarro?’ She looked at him warily now.

Cesar straightened abruptly before moving to resume his seat behind the desk, effectively putting the width of that desk between them, at the same time as it hid the swell of his arousal. ‘You appear to have made a somewhat . . . rocky beginning to your employment with me, Miss Blake—’ He broke off as she gave a self-derisive snort. ‘Exactly.’ He nodded tersely. ‘Perhaps, if you are agreeable, we should attempt to start again?’

What exactly did he mean by that? Grace mused ruefully. Rather than asking her to leave, was he willing to overlook all those embarrassing foot-in-the-mouth things she had said to him, both last night and again this morning, and allow her to continue working for him, after all? If that was the case, then perhaps she had misjudged him and he wasn’t the ruthlessly single-minded—even cold-blooded?—businessman she had believed him to be before the two of them had met?

And even if he was willing to overlook her outspoken familiarity to date, that didn’t mean he was really going to forget those embarrassing things she had said to him—especially that ‘gorgeously handsome’ remark!

Or that Grace was going to be able to forget her completely physical reaction to the unexpected sound of his laughter, either.

She gave a rueful shake of her head. ‘I’m really not sure that I’m suited to living out in the wilds of Hampshire for any length of time.’

‘This estate is hardly in “the wilds” of anywhere, Miss Blake,’ he drawled. ‘The nearest town is only ten point two kilometres away, and there are twenty other people living within the walls of the estate. Yes, I am aware that the majority of them are my security,’ he added impatiently as Grace would have interrupted. ‘But that does not make them any less other human beings to talk and relate to.’

Why was she not surprised that Cesar Navarro knew exactly how many kilometres it was to town, or the exact number of people there were working on his estate?

Grace gave a grimace. ‘They, and the cameras everywhere, make me feel like a goldfish in a bowl.’

‘The cameras are not everywhere, Miss Blake.’ He frowned his irritation. ‘There are none in the bathrooms, for example—’

‘That would be totally paranoid!’ she came back tartly. ‘Besides being a total invasion of privacy,’ she added.

‘You believe me to be paranoid, Miss Blake?’

There was no missing the steely edge to his tone. ‘I’m not used to having my every move watched —’

‘There are no security cameras in here.’

‘This is also the one room I’m barred from entering!’

‘When I am not in it, yes,’ Cesar conceded, still annoyed at the ‘paranoid’ comment. ‘When the study is empty the motion sensor alarm would go off if you were to enter.’

‘Oh, great!’ She eyed him derisively. ‘What exactly do you have in here that’s so valuable I’m not even allowed to come in and dust?’

Cesar breathed deeply through his nose. ‘This is my sanctuary. Somewhere that I come for complete privacy.’

‘To do what, exactly? Do you dance around the room naked on a full moon or something?’

Cesar’s breath caught in his throat, not even the gleam of laughter he could see in those wide blue-green eyes enough to temper his rising incredulity with this woman. ‘Do you ever stop to think before you speak?’ he prompted softly.

‘Usually.’ She grimaced. ‘For some reason, my filter button seems to be on “off” whenever I talk to you.’

He arched a brow. ‘I make you nervous, perhaps?’

‘That’s an understatement!’

‘Would you care to explain what it is about me that makes you nervous?’

Everything would be the answer to that question, Grace realised with dismay. Cesar Navarro was too big, too immediate, too arrogantly sure of himself, too self-contained, the latter to such a degree she was constantly filled with this overwhelming—and uncharacteristic—impulse to try to shock him out of that self-containment. And lastly, he really was too ‘gorgeously handsome’ for his own good.

She drew in a deep breath. ‘I don’t think so, no.’

Cesar’s mouth quirked at the firm finality of her tone. ‘Can it be that you are learning some discretion at last?’

She raised her eyes heavenwards. ‘We can always hope so.’

He nodded. ‘And to answer your previous question— perhaps I just like the feeling of knowing that I could dance around the room naked if I wished to do so?’

‘Really?’ Grace looked taken aback.

Cesar gave a disgusted snort. ‘This conversation really has become too ridiculous!’ He gave an impatient shake of his head as he realised he was now trying to shock her, a dangerous game that could only become even more so.

‘I asked to see you this morning because your comments last night, in regard to the isolation of the cottage where you are currently staying, led me to believe, if you are to remain in my employment, that perhaps you might feel more comfortable occupying one of the bedrooms in the east wing of the house rather than remaining in the cottage?’

Her eyes widened. ‘You’re asking me to move into the main house with you and Raphael?’

Cesar’s mouth tightened at the memory of the relationship Grace Blake had believed he had with the other man. ‘I am suggesting that you might feel less isolated if you were to occupy one of the bedrooms in the east wing of the main house,’ he repeated firmly.

She frowned. ‘That’s a bit of a turnaround from Kevin’s initial comment to me that “no one ever stays in the main house but Mr Navarro and Raphael”, isn’t it?’

‘And was it this remark which helped to convince you that Raphael and I must be ... a couple?’

‘That, along with Raphael’s less than friendly attitude towards me yesterday evening,’ she recalled with a frown.

Cesar’s mouth twisted into a humourless smile. ‘It did not occur to you that perhaps Raphael’s presence here in the main house, and his “less than friendly attitude”, might be for another reason other than the one you have so obviously jumped to?’

‘What other reason?’

‘Think, Miss Blake,’ he drawled.

She shrugged. ‘Well ... he’s with you constantly. Deals with your personal things. Serves your food. Obviously views strangers with suspicion until proven otherwise.’

‘And what does all of that suggest to you, Miss Blake?’

‘That he’s as paranoid as you are?’

Cesar’s mouth tightened. ‘I may have found some of your outspokenness amusing to date, Miss Blake, but I nevertheless suggest you have a care.’

What did it suggest to her? Grace puzzled ruefully. There was the obvious conclusion she had come to, of course—and which Cesar Navarro had very firmly squashed! So what other—? ‘He’s your personal bodyguard!’ she realised slowly.

‘Well done, Miss Blake.’ He gave a terse inclination of his head. ‘Not only is Raphael my personal bodyguard, but he is head of all my security. Rodney, and others like him at my other properties around the world, report directly to Raphael.’

‘Oh.’

‘Indeed,’ Cesar said. ‘He is a black belt in several of the martial arts, and is also an expert marksman from the years he spent in the army.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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