


A Touch of Temptation (Harlequin Presents The Sensational Stanton Sisters)

By Tara Pammi

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Back in the headlines...again!

Cool, calm and collected CEO Kimberly Stanton is following hot on the heels of her scandalous sister Olivia. Not only has she revealed her (very sudden!) pregnancy, but she has rocked the international business world with the shock announcement of her marriage to outrageous Brazilian bad-boy-tycoon Diego Pereira!

If rumors of huge blowout arguments, bailout money for Kim's company and dark secrets are already besetting society's most notorious couple, who can say what lies ahead for these two lovers? One thing's for sure—it'll be so much fun watching!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Tara Pammi can't remember a moment when she wasn't lost in a book, especially a romance which, as a teenager, was much more exciting than mathematics textbook. Years later Tara's wild imagination and love for the written word revealed what she really wanted to do: write! She lives in Colorado with the most cooperative man on the planet and two daughters. Tara loves to hear from readers and can be reached at tara.pammi@gmail.com or her website www.tarapammi.com.

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Kimberly Stanton stared at the white rectangle of plastic on the gleaming marble counter in the ladies' bathroom. Terror coated her throat as though it might come to life and take a bite out of her. It looked alien, out of place amidst the lavender potpourri, the crystal lamp settings and the glossy chrome fixtures.

The few minutes stretched like an eternity. The quiet lull of voices outside was exaggerated into distorted echoes.

Her heart beat faster and louder. A painful tug in her lower belly stole her breath. She clutched the cold granite vanity unit and clenched the muscles in her legs, willing herself to hold on.

The scariest word she had ever encountered appeared on the stick.

Pregnant.

No confusing colors or symbols that meant you had to peek again at the box discarded in terrified panic. Simple, plain English.

Her heart leaped into her throat. Her legs shaking beneath her, she leaned against one of the stalls behind her, dipped her head low and forced herself to breathe past the deafening whoosh in her ears.

Her one mistake, which technically she had committed twice, couldn't haunt her for the rest of her life, could it?

But she couldn't change the consequences. She had never been naive or stupid enough to wish it either.

She flicked the gleaming chrome tap open and dangled her fingers under the ice-cold water. The sound of the water hitting the sink drowned out the sound of her heartbeat, helping her focus on her breathing.

In, out. In, out...

She closed the tap. Straightening up, she was about to reach for the hand towel when she looked at the mirror and froze.

She stared at her reflection, noting the dark circles under her eyes, the lack of color in her face, the skin pulled tautly over her bones. Drops of water seeped through the thin silk of her blouse to her skin beneath.

She looked as if she was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. And maybe she was. But she didn't have time now. The breakdown had to wait. She touched the tips of her fingers to her temple and pressed. The cold from her almost numb fingers seeped into her overheated skin.

She had no time to deal with this now. She had to compartmentalize—set it aside until she was alone, until she was equipped to think logically, until the shock making her jittery all over faded into nothing more than a numbing ache.

And when it did she would assess the situation again with a clear head, take the necessary action to equip herself better to handle it. It wasn't as if she didn't have any experience with dealing with shock and pain.

Although why she had chosen this particular moment to take the test when the pregnancy kit had been burning a rectangular hole in her handbag for more than a week was anybody's guess. Or maybe she was having another momentary collapse of her rational thinking circuits.

She had been having those moments a lot lately.

She pulled her lip-gloss out of her clutch and reapplied it with shaking fingers. She ran a hand over her suit. The silky material under her fingers rooted her back to reality.

She needed to get back out there. She needed to circulate among the guests—a specially put together group of investors she had researched for more than six months. Investors who had shown interest in her web startup *The Daily Help*.

She had a presentation to give. She had to talk them through the financial outline she had sketched for the next five years. She had to convince them to invest in *her* startup when there were a million others mushrooming every day.

She had to convince them that the recent scandal about her, Olivia and Alexander had nothing to do with the way she did business. It was a sign of how strong her business proposal was that they had even showed up, despite the scandal.

She straightened her jacket and turned toward the exit. And paused midstride.

Turning back, she picked up the plastic tube, wrapped it carefully in the wrapper she had left on the sink and threw it into the trash. She fumbled when she turned the corner, struggling to breathe past the tight ache in her gut. She placed her hand on her stomach and drew in gulps of air, waiting for the tidal wave of pain that threatened to pull her under to pass.

Striding out of the restroom, she plucked a glass of sparkling water from a passing waiter and nodded at an old friend from Harvard. She was glad she had booked this conference hall in one of the glitzy hotels in Manhattan, even though her tightfisted CFO had frowned over the expense.

Kim didn't think an evening in her company's premises—a large open space in the basement of a building in Manhattan, unstructured in every way possible—would encourage confidence on the investors' part.

She checked her Patek Philippe watch, a gift from her father when she had graduated from Harvard, and invited everyone to join her in the conference room for the presentation.

She felt an uncharacteristic reluctance as she switched on the projector. Once she concluded the presentation she was going to be alone with her thoughts. Alone with things she couldn't postpone thinking about anymore.

It happened as she reached almost the end of her presentation.

With her laser pointer pointed at a far-off wall, instead of at her company's financial forecast on the rolled-out projector screen, she lost her train of thought—as though someone had turned off a switch in her brain.

She searched the audience for what had thrown her.

A movement—the turn of a dark head—a whisper or something else? Had she imagined it? Everything and everyone else faded into background for a few disconcerting moments. Had her equilibrium been threatened so much by her earlier discovery?

The resounding quiet tumbled her out of her brain fog. She cleared her throat, took a sip of her water and turned back to the chart on the screen. She finished the presentation, her stomach still unsettled.

The lights came on and she smiled with relief. Several hands came up as she opened the floor to questions. She could recite those figures half-asleep. Every little detail of her company was etched into her brain.

The first few were questions she had expected. Hitting her stride, she elaborated on what put her company a cut above the others, provided more details, more figures, increasing statistics and the ad revenue they had generated last year.

Even the momentary aberration of a few minutes ago couldn't mar the satisfaction she could feel running in her veins, the high of accomplishment, of her hard work bearing fruit.

She answered the last question, turned the screen off and switched on the overhead lights.

There *he* was. The reason for the strange tightening in her stomach. The cause of the prickling sensation she couldn't shed.

Diego Pereira. The man who had seduced her and walked away without a backward glance. The man whose baby she was pregnant with.

She froze on the slightly elevated podium, felt her gut falling through an endless abyss. Like the time her twin sister had dragged her on a free-fall ride in an amusement park. Except through the nauseating terror that day she had known that at some point the fall would end. So she had forced herself to sit rigid, her teeth digging painfully into the inside of her mouth, while Liv had screamed with terror and laughter.

No such assurance today. Because every time Diego stormed into her life she forgot the lesson she had learned long ago.

Her hands instinctively moved to her stomach and his gaze zeroed in on her amidst the crowd. She couldn't look at him. Couldn't look into those golden eyes that had set her up to fall. Couldn't look at that cruel face that had purposely played with her life.

She forced herself to keep her gaze straight, focused on all the other curious faces waiting to speak to her. It

was the most excruciating half hour of her entire life. She could feel Diego's gaze on her back, drilling into her, looking for a weak spot—anything that he could use to cause more destruction.

At least he'd made it easy for her to avoid him, sitting in one of the chairs in the back row with his gaze focused on her.

She slipped, the heel of one of her three-inch pumps snagging on the carpet as she moved past him. Just the dark scent of him was tripping her nerves.

Why was he here? And what cruel twist of fate had brought him here the very same day she had discovered that she was pregnant?

Diego Pereira watched unmoving as Kim closed the door to the conference hall behind her, her slender body stiff with tension. She was nervous and, devil that he was, he liked it.

He flicked through the business proposal. Every little detail of her presentation was blazing in his mind, and he was impressed despite his black mood. Although he shouldn't really be surprised.

Her pitch for investment today had been specific, innovative, nothing short of exceptional. Like her company. In three years she had taken the very simple idea of an advice column into an exclusive, information-filled web portal with more than a million members and a million more waiting on shortlists for membership.

He closed his eyes and immediately the image of her assaulted him.

Dressed formally, in black trousers that showed off her long legs and a white top that hugged her upper body, she was professionalism come to life—as far as possible from the woman who had cried her pleasure in his arms just a month ago.

He had even forgotten the reason he had come to New York while he had followed her crisp, confident presentation. But the moment she had realized he was present in the audience had been his prize.

She had faltered, searched the audience. That seconds-long flicker in her focus was like a nervous scream for an average woman.

But then there was nothing average about the woman he had married. She was beautiful, brilliant, sophisticated. She was perfection personified—and she had as much feeling as a lump of rock.

A rock he was finally through with—ready to kick out of his life. It was time to move on, and her little nervous sputter at the sight of him had gone a long way toward pacifying his bitter resentment.

He walked to an elevator and pressed the number for the tenth floor. When he reached her suite he pulled the gold-plated keycard he had bribed from the bellboy from his coat pocket.

He entered the suite and closed the door behind him.

The subtle scent of lily of the valley assailed him instantly. It rocked him where he stood, dispensing a swift punch to his gut more lethal than the ones he had taken for half his life.

His lungs expanded, drawing the scent of her deep into him until it sank once again into his blood.

His body pulsed with remembered pleasure. Like a junkie getting his high.

He studied the suite, with its luxurious sitting area and mahogany desk. Her files were neatly stacked on it, her sleek state-of-the-art laptop on top of them. Her handbag—a practical but designer black leather affair—lay near the couch in the sitting area.

The suite was everything its owner was—high-class, flawless and without an ounce of warmth.

He turned at the sound of a door on his right.

Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it. A sheen of sweat danced on her forehead.

He frowned, his curiosity spiking.

Her glistening mouth trembled as she spotted him, her hands moving to her midriff.

There was a distinct lack of color to her skin. Her slender shoulders quivered as she ran the back of her hand over her forehead.

He looked at her with increasing curiosity. Her jacket was gone. A V-necked sleeveless white silk blouse showed off her toned arms. The big steel dial of her designer watch highlighted her delicate wrist. A thin gold chain dangled at her throat.

The shadow of her breasts beneath the thin silk drew his gaze.

He swallowed and pulled his eyes up. The memory of her breasts in his hands was cutting off his breath more effectively than a hand choking his windpipe. The feel of her trembling with pleasure in his hands, the erotic scent of her skin and sex—images and sensations flooded through him.

He could no more fight the assault than he could stop breathing.

Her eyes flared wide, the same heat dancing in those chocolate depths.

She was the very embodiment of perfection—always impeccably dressed, exuding the sophistication that was like a second skin to her. Yet now she looked off-balance.

He reached her, the slight sway of her lithe figure propelling him toward her. "Are you okay, *gatinha*?"

She ran her palm over her face, leaving pink fingerprints over her colorless skin. Stepping away from him, she straightened the already immaculate desk. Her fingers trembled as she picked up a pen and moved it to the side.

She was more than nervous.

"No, I'm not," she said, shrugging those elegant shoulders. The frank admission was unusual. "But that's not a surprise as I just saw *you*, is it?"

He raised a brow and sliced the distance between them. "The sight of me makes you sick?"

Her fingers clutched the edge of the desk, her knuckles white. "The sight of you reminds me of reckless stupid behavior that I'd rather not remember."

He smiled. "Not even the good parts, where you screamed?"

Pink scoured her cheeks. The slender set of her shoulders straightened in defense. She moved to the sitting area and settled into a leather chair. "Why are you here, Diego?"

He watched with a weird fascination as she crossed her legs and looked up at him.

The nervousness he had spied just moments ago had disappeared. She sounded steady, without a hint of anger or upset. Even though the last time they had laid eyes on each other she had been half-naked in his bed, her face bereft of color as he had dressed and informed her that he was done with her.

There was no reproach in her tone for *his* behavior a month ago.

Her calm composure grated on him like the edge of a saw chipping away at wood.

She drove him to be the very worst of himself—seething with frustration, thrumming with desire—whereas she remained utterly unaffected.

He settled down on the coffee table in front of her and stretched his legs so that she was trapped between them. He flipped open the file next to him against his better instincts, to finish what he had come for. "Your proposal is brilliant."

"I don't need you to tell me that," she threw back, her chin jutting out.

He smiled. The confidence creeping back into her tone was not a surprise. When it came to her company his estranged wife was a force to be reckoned with. "Is that your standard response to a potential investor?"

She snorted, and even that was an elegant movement of her straight nose. "It's my standard response to a man who I know is intent on causing me maximum damage."

Diego frowned. "Really? Have I done that?"

She snatched the proposal from his hands and the scent of her wafted over him. He took a breath and held it fast, the muscles in his abdomen tightening.

Droga, two minutes in her company and he was...

He expelled it with the force of his self-disgust. Pleasure was *not* the reminder he needed.

"You already had your revenge, Diego. After I walked out on our marriage six years ago you refused to divorce me with the express purpose of ruining my wedding to Alexander. Then you seduced me and walked out four weeks ago. Isn't that enough?"

"Seeing that you went back to your life, didn't even falter for a second, I'm not sure."

Something flickered in her molten brown gaze as she spoke. "I propelled my sister and Alex into a scandal, putting everything Alex has worked for at risk."

"Again, *them*—not you. From where I stand nothing has gotten to you. Apparently nothing *ever* gets to you."

Users Review

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