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LOS ANGELES TIMES

The New York Times Bestselling Author

JENNIFER
CRUSIE

*Fast
Women*

A Novel

Fast Women

Jennifer Crusie

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Fast Women

Jennifer Crusie is the author of *Tell Me Lies*, *Crazy for You* and *Welcome to Temptation*, as well as the award-winning author of nine romances. She teaches writing and literature at Ohio State University.



Also by Jennifer Crusie

Welcome to Temptation

Crazy for You

Tell Me Lies

For Valerie Taylor

because she tells me when my scenes are boring,
my syntax is twisted, and my characters are jerks,

because she reminds me that I always think
my career is over in the middle of each book,

and because she writes truly wonderful stories
and then lets me read them first.

Keep dodging those trucks, honey.

My Thanks To

*Clarice Cliff, Susie Cooper, and the
Walking Ware Designers*
for designing pottery that amazes and delights
me every time I see it.

eBay

for having everything in the universe for sale
sooner or later, thereby making research much more
fun than it used to be.

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for writing *Crazy Time*,
her brilliant, compassionate study of
divorce and recovery.

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without snickering and for being the only
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for perfecting the art of friendship and the craft
of unconditional cheerleading, and for putting
up with an inordinate amount of e-whining
and cyber-moaning.

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make it possible for me to write without drink or
drugs, although not without chocolate and
french fries with vinegar.

And Meg Ruley
for protecting me from everything, including myself,
and for negotiating a damn fine contract
while she's at it.

Without the help of these fine people,
I couldn't have written this book,
nor would I have wanted to.

ONE

The man behind the cluttered desk looked like the devil, and Nell Dysart figured that was par for her course since she'd been going to hell for a year and a half anyway. Meeting Gabriel McKenna just meant she'd arrived.

"Yes, I think you better look into that," he said into the phone with barely disguised impatience, his sharp eyes telegraphing his annoyance.

It was rude to talk on the phone in front of her, but he didn't have a secretary to answer the phone for him, and she was a job applicant not a client, and he was a detective not an insurance salesman, so maybe the regular rules of social intercourse didn't apply.

"I'll come up on Monday," he said. "No, Trevor, waiting would not be better. I'll talk to all of you at eleven."

He sounded as if he were talking to a fractious uncle, not a client. The detective business must be a lot

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better than this place looked if he could dictate to clients like that, especially clients named Trevor. The only Trevor Nell knew was her sister-in-law's father, and he was richer than God, so maybe Gabe McKenna was really powerful and successful and just needed somebody to manage his office back into shape. She could do that.

Nell looked around the shabby room and tried to be positive, but the place was gloomy in the September afternoon light, even gloomier because the ancient blinds on the equally ancient big windows were pulled down. The McKenna Building stood on the corner of two of the city's prettier thoroughfares in German Village, a district where people paid big bucks to look out their windows at historic Ohio brick streets and architecture, but Gabriel McKenna pulled his blinds, probably so he couldn't see the mess inside. The walls were covered with dusty framed black-and-white photos, the furniture needed to be cleaned and waxed, and his desk needed to be plowed. She'd never seen so much garbage on one surface in her life, the Styrofoam cups alone would -

"Yes," he said, his voice low and sure. The light from his green-shaded desk lamp threw shadows on his face, but with those dark eyes closed now, he didn't look nearly as satanic. More like your average, dark-haired, fortysomething businessman in a striped shirt and loosened tie. Like Tim.

Nell stood up abruptly and dropped her purse on

the chair. She went to the big window to open the blinds and let in a little light. If she cleaned the place up, he could leave the blinds open to make a better impression. Clients liked doing business in the light, not in the pit of hell. She tugged once on the cord and it stuck, so she tugged again, harder, and this time it came off in her hand.

Oh, great. She looked back, but he was still on the phone, his broad shoulders hunched, so she shoved the cord onto the windowsill. It fell off onto the hardwood floor, the plastic end making a sharp, hollow sound as it hit, and she leaned into the blind-covered window to get it from behind the chair that was in the way. It was just out of her finger's reach, another damn thing out of her reach, so she pressed harder against the blinds, stretching to touch it with her fingertips.

The window cracked under her shoulder.

"I'll see you on Monday," he said into the phone, and she kicked the cord behind the radiator and went back to sit down before he could notice that she was destroying his office around him.

Now she had to get the job so she could cover the tracks of her vandalism. And besides, there was that desk; somebody needed to save this guy. And then there was her need for money to pay for rent and other luxuries. *Somebody needs to save me*, she thought.

He hung up the phone and turned to her, looking tired. "I apologize, Mrs. Dysart. You can see how much we need a secretary."

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Nell looked at his desk and thought, *You need more than a secretary, buddy*, but she said, "Perfectly all right." She was going to be cheerful and helpful if it killed her.

He picked up her résumé. "Why did you leave your last position?"

"My boss divorced me."

"That would be a reason," he said, and began to read.

His people skills needed work, she thought as she stared down at her sensible black pumps, planted firmly on the ancient Oriental rug where they couldn't walk her into trouble again. Now if he'd been Tim, he'd have offered her sympathy, a Kleenex, a shoulder to cry on. He would have followed that up by suggesting the purchase of some insurance, but he would have been sympathetic.

There was a spot on the carpet, and she rubbed at it with the toe of her shoe, trying to blend it in. Spots made a place look unsuccessful; it was the details that counted in an office environment. She rubbed harder, and the carpet threads parted, and the spot got bigger; it wasn't a spot, she'd found a hole and had managed to shred it to double its size in under fifteen seconds. She put her foot over the hole and thought, *Take me, Jesus, take me now.*

"Why do you want to work for us?" he said, and she smiled at him, trying to look bright and eager, plus

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the aforementioned cheerful and helpful, which was hard since she was middle-aged and cranky.

"I think it would be interesting to work for a detective agency." *I think I need a job so I can hold onto my divorce settlement for my old age.*

"You'd be amazed how boring it is," he said. "You'll be doing mostly typing and filing and answering phones. You're overqualified for this job."

I'm also forty-two and unemployed, she thought, but she said brightly, "I'm ready for a change."

He nodded, looking as though he wasn't buying any of it, and she wondered if he was enough like Tim that he'd recycle her in twenty years, if after the passage of time he would look at her and say, "We've grown apart. I swear I haven't been interviewing other secretaries on the side, but now I need somebody new. Somebody with real typing skills. Somebody—"

The arm of the chair wobbled under her hand, and she realized she'd been pulling up on it. *Relax.* She shoved it back down again, clamping her elbow to her side to stop the chair arm from moving any more, keeping her foot on the spot on the rug. *Just sit still,* she told herself.

Behind her, the blind rustled as it slipped a little.

"You certainly have the skills we need," McKenna said, and she forced a smile. "However, our work here is highly confidential. We have a rule: We never talk about business outside this office. Can you be discreet?"

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"Certainly," Nell said, pressing harder on the chair arm as she tried to radiate discretion.

"You do understand that this is a temporary position?"

"Uh, yes," Nell lied, feeling suddenly colder. Here was her new life, just like her old life. She heard a faint *crack* from the direction of the chair arm and loosened her grip a little.

"Our receptionist is recovering from an accident and should be back in six weeks," he was saying. "So October thirteenth—"

"I'm history," Nell finished. At least he was letting her know ahead of time that the end was coming. She wouldn't get attached. She wouldn't have a son with him. She wouldn't—

The chair arm wobbled again, much looser this time, and he nodded. "If you want the job, it's yours."

The blind slipped again, a rusty, sliding sound.

"I want the job," Nell said.

He fished in his center desk drawer and handed her a key. "This will get you into the outer office on the days my partner, Riley, or I haven't opened before you get here." He stood and offered her his hand. "Welcome to McKenna Investigations, Mrs. Dysart. We'll see you Monday at nine."

Nell stood, too, releasing the chair arm gingerly in the hope that it wouldn't fall to the floor. She reached for his hand, sticking hers out forcefully to show confi-

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dence and strength, and hit one of the Styrofoam cups. Coffee spread over his papers while they both watched, their hands clasped over the carnage.

"My fault," he said, letting go of her to grab the cup. "I never remember to throw these out."

"Well, that's *my* job for the next six weeks," she said, perky as all hell. "Thank you so much, Mr. McKenna."

She gave him one last insanely positive smile and left the office before anything else could happen.

The last thing she saw as she closed the heavy door behind her was the blind slipping once, bouncing, and then crashing down, exposing the star-cracked window, brilliant in the late afternoon light.

When Eleanor Dysart was gone, Gabe looked at the broken window and sighed. He found a bottle of Bayer in his middle drawer and took two of the aspirin, washing them down with hours-old coffee that had been awful when it was hot, grimacing as somebody knocked on his office door.

His cousin Riley loomed blondly in the doorway, doing his usual impression of a half-bright half-back. "Who was the skinny redhead who just left? Cute, but if we take her case, we should feed her."

"Eleanor Dysart," Gabe said. "She's filling in for Lynn. And she's stronger than she looks."

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Riley frowned at the window as he sat down in the chair Eleanor Dysart had just vacated. "When'd the window get broken?"

"About five minutes ago. And we're hiring her, even though she's a window breaker, because she's qualified and because Jack Dysart asked us to."

Riley looked disgusted. "One of his ex-wives we don't know about?" He leaned on the chair arm, and it cracked and broke so that he had to catch himself to keep from falling through it. "What the hell?"

"Sister-in-law," Gabe said, staring sadly at the chair. "Divorced from his brother."

"Those Dysart boys are hell on wives," Riley said, picking up the chair arm from the floor.

"I mentioned to Jack that we needed a temp and he sent her over. Be nice to her. Other people haven't been." Gabe stashed his aspirin back in the drawer and picked up a coffee-soaked paper. He used another paper to blot the coffee off and held it out to Riley. "You've got the Hot Lunch on Monday."

Riley gave up on the chair arm and dropped it on the floor to take the paper. "I hate chasing cheaters."

Gabe's headache fought back against the aspirin. "If relationship investigation bothers you, you might want to rethink your career choice."

"It's the people, not the job. Like Jack Dysart. A lawyer who thinks adultery is a hobby, there's the bottom of the food chain for you. What a loser."

That's not why you hate him, Gabe thought, but it

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was late on Friday afternoon, and he had no interest in pursuing his cousin's old grudges. "I have to see him and Trevor Ogilvie on Monday. Both senior partners at once."

"Good for you. I hope Jack's in trouble up to his neck."

"They're being blackmailed."

"Blackmail?" Riley said, his voice full of disbelief. "Jack? There's stuff out there that's even worse than the stuff everybody knows about him?"

"Possibly," Gabe said, thinking about Jack and his total disregard for the consequences of his actions. It was amazing what a handsome, charming, selfish, wealthy lawyer could get away with. At least, it was amazing what Jack got away with. "Jack thinks it's just a disgruntled employee trying to scare them. Trevor thinks it's a prank and if they wait a few weeks—"

Riley snorted. "There's Trevor for you. A lawyer who's made a fortune *delaying* the other side to death. Which is still better than Jack, the devious son of a bitch."

Gabe felt a spurt of irritation. "Oh, hell, Riley, give the man some credit, it's been fourteen years and he's still married to her. She cracked thirty a while back and he stuck. He may even be faithful for all we know."

Riley scowled at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about—"

"Susannah Campbell Dysart, the defining moment of your youth."