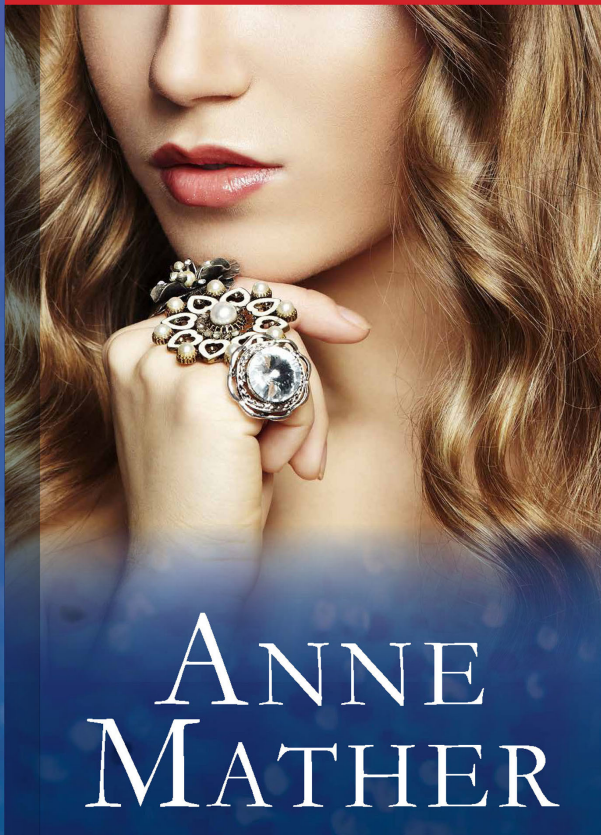




ANNE MATHER

MILLS & BOON™



**The Brazilian
Millionaire's
Love-Child**

Anne Mather

The Brazilian

Millionaire's Love-Child

Аннотация

Mills & Boon are excited to present The Anne Mather Collection – the complete works by this classic author made available to download for the very first time! These books span six decades of a phenomenal writing career, and every story is available to read unedited and untouched from their original release. Isobel will never forget the night Alejandro took her innocence... His body left a lifelong impression on her – but that's not all. The Brazilian millionaire will never know he has a daughter... Until three years later, when Isobel is led right back to Alejandro—and she's shocked. He's a changed man. He's still utterly sexy, but a terrible car accident has left him scarred, brooding and bitter. What's more, he's deliberately lured Isobel to Brazil because he knows all about his child...

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Mills & Boon is proud to present a fabulous collection of fantastic novels by bestselling, much loved author

ANNE MATHER

Anne has a stellar record of achievement within the publishing industry, having written over one hundred and sixty books, with worldwide sales of more than forty-eight MILLION copies in multiple languages.

This amazing collection of classic stories offers a chance for readers to recapture the pleasure Anne's powerful, passionate writing has given.

We are sure you will love them all!

I've always wanted to write—which is not to say I've always wanted to be a professional writer. On the contrary, for years I only wrote for my own pleasure and it wasn't until my husband suggested sending one of my stories to a publisher that we put several publishers' names into a hat and pulled one out. The rest, as they say, is history. And now, one hundred and sixty-two books later, I'm literally—excuse the pun—staggered by what's happened.

I had written all through my infant and junior years and on into my teens, the stories changing from children's adventures to torrid gypsy passions. My mother used to gather these manuscripts up from time to time, when my bedroom became too untidy, and dispose of them! In those days, I used not to finish any of the stories and *Caroline*, my first published novel, was the first I'd ever completed. I was newly married then and

my daughter was just a baby, and it was quite a job juggling my household chores and scribbling away in exercise books every chance I got. Not very professional, as you can imagine, but that's the way it was.

These days, I have a bit more time to devote to my work, but that first love of writing has never changed. I can't imagine not having a current book on the typewriter—yes, it's my husband who transcribes everything on to the computer. He's my partner in both life and work and I depend on his good sense more than I care to admit.

We have two grown-up children, a son and a daughter, and two almost grown-up grandchildren, Abi and Ben. My e-mail address is mystic-am@msn.com and I'd be happy to hear from any of my wonderful readers.

The Brazilian Millionaire's Love-Child

Anne Mather



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CHAPTER ONE

‘WHO is that guy?’

Sonia Leyton came to where Isobel was trying to stop one of the drunker guests from pouring another bottle of vodka into the punch and nudged her arm.

‘Who is he?’ she persisted, when Isobel seemed to be ignoring her. ‘Come on, sweetie. You must know. You invited him.’

‘Correction—Julia invited him,’ said Isobel shortly, succeeding in blocking Lance Bliss from turning an already potent mix into pure dynamite.

‘You’re no fun,’ he muttered, raising the open bottle to his lips and taking a generous slug. ‘Lighten up, can’t you? This is supposed to be a party.’

‘But not a wake,’ retorted Isobel, guessing what that amount of undiluted alcohol could do. ‘Honestly, if I’d known.’

‘You still haven’t told me who that guy is,’ protested Sonia, her mind fixed on a single track. ‘You might not have invited him yourself, but it’s your apartment. You must know who Julia asked to come.’

Isobel expelled a weary breath and glanced in the direction Sonia was indicating—though it wasn’t entirely necessary. She’d noticed the man as soon as Julia had let him in. Their eyes had met very briefly, and she’d told herself the reaction she’d had was because he didn’t look English. But the real truth was he was the

most disturbingly attractive man she'd ever seen.

Tall and dark—younger than Julia, she suspected—with thick, straight hair that overlapped his collar and fell in a deep swathe across his forehead. She didn't know what colour his eyes were, but she was fairly sure they'd be dark too, complementing rather harsh features that were essentially masculine.

Right now, he was slouched on the window sill across the room, one lean, brown hand resting on his thigh, the other holding an open bottle of beer. But he didn't seem interested in the beer or the party, or in the woman whose arm was draped rather possessively over his shoulder.

'I don't know his name,' said Isobel now, wondering why Sonia didn't just go and ask Julia who he was. Though the answer to that was fairly obvious: Julia wouldn't like Sonia wading in on her territory.

'Damn!' Sonia looked disappointed now. 'I'm fairly sure I've seen him before.' She tucked her elbow into her palm and tapped her lips with a scarlet-tipped finger. 'Was it at the Hampdens' last week? Oh, but you wouldn't know,' she added, giving Isobel a rather scornful once-over. 'You don't like parties, do you?'

'Not parties like this,' agreed Isobel rather drily, half wishing she'd never agreed to Julia's request. But her apartment was so much bigger than Julia's flat, and it would have been churlish to turn her friend away.

'Oh, well, I'll have to go and find out for myself,' remarked Sonia, grabbing a glass and helping herself to a generous measure

of the punch. 'Mmm; is there any alcohol in this stuff? It doesn't have much of a kick.'

Isobel shook her head, not bothering to answer. If Sonia thought the punch was weak, she was obviously used to drinking a far stronger brew. Isobel knew for a fact that Julia had added a full bottle of rum to the mixture of wine and fruit juice she'd prepared. And that was only what she knew about. She wouldn't have put it past her friend to spike the punch with some other spirit.

Now, looking round the room, she could see quite a few of the guests were looking the worse for wear. She'd warned her friend that there were to be no drugs, but she had to wonder if some of the unsteady legs and glassy eyes might be due to more than just a surfeit of spirits.

The music, too, was definitely louder. Someone had substituted hard rap for the rock 'n' roll that Julia had chosen earlier. Watching the guests gyrating about the wooden floor, Isobel felt decidedly old, though she couldn't remember ever behaving so promiscuously, even when she'd been a teenager. And how sad was that?

Nevertheless, she had to live here long after the party was over, and she was well aware that her neighbours in this block of apartments in Mortimer Court wouldn't stand for it if the party turned into a rave. Her immediate neighbour, Mrs Lytton-Smythe, had already protested about the amount of cars blocking entry to the underground garage, and the two doctors who

occupied the apartment below Isobel's had patients to attend to in the morning.

Julia had suggested Isobel invite all her neighbours to the party in an effort to defuse any objections, but that really wasn't a goer. None of Isobel's neighbours would have wanted to attend the noisy binge this was turning out to be.

Sighing, Isobel left the large room that served as both living and dining rooms in normal circumstances and headed into the small kitchen next door. The sound of music was less intrusive here, and she gazed at the debris of empty cans, wine bottles and the remains of the bought-in buffet Julia's guests had only picked at earlier. A glance at her watch told her it was already after midnight, and she wondered how long her friend expected the party to last.

Isobel was tired. She'd been up since half-past six that morning, trying to finish the piece about a well-known make-up artist that she'd promised her editor would be on her desk the next morning. Or rather this morning, she amended, wondering if she ought to have asked Julia to postpone her party until the end of the week. But today—or rather yesterday—had been Julia's thirtieth birthday and it would have been mean to deny her having it on the day.

Isobel sighed again as she turned, and then sucked in a startled breath at the sight of a man standing in the doorway, his shoulder propped against the jamb; it was the man Sonia had been asking about. He was lean and unquestionably sexy, in tight-fitting jeans

and a black silk shirt, the sleeves rolled back over forearms liberally spread with fine, dark hair.

‘Oh,’ she said a little jerkily, unable to use his name because she didn’t know it. ‘Hi.’ She paused. ‘Do you need something?’

‘Nao quero nada, obrigado,’ he said, his voice low and disturbingly sensual. ‘I want nothing,’ he added, his accent spiking her nerves. ‘I was looking for you.’

‘Me!’ Isobel couldn’t have been more surprised. In the normal way, she had little in common with Julia’s friends. She and Julia had attended university together, but for more than five years they’d seen little of one another, and it was only since Isobel had moved back to London that they’d renewed their friendship.

‘Sim—you,’ he agreed, with a smile that gave his words a disarming intimacy. ‘I think, like me, you are—como se diz?—bored with these people, nao?’

Isobel frowned. So he was Portuguese, she thought, recognising the odd word in his language. But Julia wouldn’t be pleased if she could hear what he was saying. She’d spent the whole evening hanging on his every word.

‘I was just—tidying up,’ she said at last, unable to believe he had come out here especially to see her. For heaven’s sake, he didn’t look the kind of man who’d be interested in someone so ordinary. She was attractive enough for a young woman who’d been married and separated all in the space of a couple of years, but she was certainly not a leggy blonde like Julia or Sonia.

‘Que?’ The man frowned. ‘I do not believe you are just the—

um—domestico.’

‘Oh, no.’ Isobel had to smile at that. ‘This is my apartment, actually. Julia—your girlfriend...’ It was hard to describe their relationship in those terms, she found, and why was that? ‘She’s a friend.’

‘Ah.’ He rested his head against the frame of the door for a moment, studying her with eyes that she now saw were an odd shade of amber. Framed by thick, black lashes, they caused a shivery feeling inside her, and she chided herself impatiently at the realisation that it was the first time she’d been attracted to a man since David had walked out on her.

He straightened and moved further into the room, and her eyes widened, half in apprehension, half with a sense of anticipation she’d never felt before. Pull yourself together, Belle, she instructed, deciding she must have sampled too much of the punch. But all he did was set the beer bottle he’d been carrying on the drainer, his lips quirking in amusement as if he noticed her not-so-subtle reaction.

Without going back to his original position, he paused and then said, ‘So, you must be Isobel, nao?’

‘Yes!’ Isobel inclined her head a little breathlessly. ‘Isobel Jameson.’ She hesitated. ‘And you are...?’

‘My name is Alejandro. Alejandro Cabral,’ he said, with a slight bow of his head. ‘Muito prazer.’

‘Oh, um, how do you do?’ Isobel was taken aback when he held out his hand towards her. She wasn’t used to such a formal

introduction, though she guessed where he came from the old courtesies still survived.

‘I am very well, obrigado, Ms Jameson,’ he responded softly, taking the hand she offered in return and raising it to his lips.

But, although Isobel half-expected him to touch his lips to her knuckles, Alejandro turned her hand over and bestowed a warm kiss to her palm. And briefly she was almost sure she felt his tongue brush against her skin, although she was so bemused by the whole incident she might well have imagined it.

She would have withdrawn her hand immediately, and scrubbed her palm over the seam of her cream cotton trousers and pretended the kiss had never happened, but he didn’t let her go. Instead, he continued to hold her hand, gazing intently into her eyes. And she knew he knew he was disconcerting her, as much by his audacity as by her unwilling response.

‘Mr Cabral...’

‘You may call me Alejandro,’ he interrupted huskily, and her mouth was suddenly dry. ‘So long as you permit me to call you Isobel. That is such a beautiful name. My grandmother’s name is Isobella. It is a very popular name in my country.’

Isobel ran her tongue over her dry lips, shaking her head half in bemusement, half in frustration. She didn’t know where he’d learned his skills in seduction, but she doubted it was here. She guessed he was—what?—twenty-five or twenty-six. And she was almost thirty. Yet he had a way of making her feel inexperienced and out of her depth.

‘You can call me what you like, er, Alejandro,’ she said. ‘As long as you let go of my hand.’ She managed to pull her fingers free and forced a smile. ‘I gather you’re not enjoying the party?’

He shrugged, broad shoulders moving sinuously beneath the expensive cloth of his shirt. ‘Are you?’ he countered, making no attempt to give her some space. He gestured about him. ‘Is that why you are hiding in here?’

Isobel arched brows that were several shades darker than her honey-streaked hair. ‘I’m not hiding,’ she assured him firmly. ‘If I were, I’m not making a very good job of it, am I?’

Alejandro regarded her between narrowed lids. ‘We could hide together,’ he suggested, putting out a hand and allowing a finger to trace the curve of her face from lip to jaw. ‘Would you like that?’

Isobel took an involuntary step backwards. ‘No. I wouldn’t like that!’ she exclaimed, impatient with herself now for allowing this to happen. Whatever impression she’d given, she wasn’t interested in a one-night stand. Let Julia satisfy his libido. She had no wish to get involved with anyone else.

But unfortunately there was an empty crate positioned right behind her. Almost losing her balance, Isobel grabbed the counter for support, her fingertips accidentally brushing against the taut muscles of his midriff. Immediately, she felt the rush of heat she’d known when he’d touched her a few moments earlier but, when he would have reached to steady her, she hastily put some distance between them.

‘I think you ought to go back to the party, Mr Cabral,’ she said, despite the fact that she’d called him Alejandro already. ‘I’m sure Julia must be wondering where you are.’

‘And that is of importance why?’ he queried, his tone deepening intimately.

‘Well, because it’s probably very important to Julia,’ said Isobel tersely. Then, in an effort to lighten the conversation, ‘I expect you have lots of parties in Portugal.’

He shrugged, moving back to spread his arms along the counter behind him. ‘I do not have parties in Portugal,’ he remarked drily. ‘I am not Portuguese. I am Brazilian.’

Isobel’s lips parted, and for a moment she forgot her ankle, stinging courtesy of the beer crate, and the fact that she’d been trying to send him away. Her eyes widening, she said, ‘How fascinating! I’ve always wanted to visit South America.’

‘De verdade?’

She didn’t know what that meant, but she hurried on regardless. ‘So, are you working in London? Are you in advertising too?’

‘Ah, nao.’ His lips twisted mockingly. ‘Advertising myself is not my thing.’

‘I see,’ said Isobel, though secretly she thought it was a pity. She could quite see him walking naked out of a foaming ocean, promoting some sexy fragrance for men. ‘Um...so, what do you do?’ she hurried on, afraid the direction her thoughts were taking might show in her eyes. ‘Are you on holiday?’

‘De ferias?’ He sounded amused. And then, seeing her look of incomprehension, he explained, ‘On holiday? In England—in November? Acho que nao. I do not think so.’

‘Oh, well...’ Isobel told herself she wasn’t that interested, and reached for the bottle he’d discarded earlier. But it wasn’t until after she’d snatched it up that she realised it was still half full. Beer splashed stickily onto her shirt and she was obliged to stifle an oath. ‘Damn it,’ she said, unable to resist the expletive. ‘You should have warned me you hadn’t finished.’

‘Muita pena!’ Alejandro pushed himself away from the unit and took the offending bottle from her unresisting grasp. ‘I am so sorry,’ he said, tossing it into the sink behind her. He gazed down at the damp fabric clinging to and outlining the lacy cup of her half-bra. ‘What can I do to help?’ His fingers moved to the buttons on her shirt. ‘Por favor, let me take this off.’

Isobel gasped in disbelief, smacking his hand away. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she protested. His fingers looked so alien against the white linen. ‘Don’t do that! What if someone came in?’

Alejandro’s mouth took on a decidedly sensual curve, but he obediently shifted his hands to the narrow bones of her shoulders. ‘And that is the only reason you want me to stop?’ he queried, those curious amber eyes burning with a golden fire. ‘Muito bem.’

Isobel found she was actually trembling, and it infuriated her. For heaven’s sake, what was wrong with her? Even when she and

David had first got together she'd never felt quite so vulnerable. Or so exhilarated, she admitted painfully.

'I think you should let go of me, Mr Cabral,' she said stiffly. 'I'm afraid you've got the wrong impression.'

'And if I don't want to?' he murmured, his thumbs probing inside the neckline of her shirt.

'I don't think that matters,' she retorted, refusing to let him see how he was disturbing her. 'I don't know what Julia's told you about me, but I'm not interested in casual sex.'

That shocked him. She saw the sudden darkening of his eyes, the way the amber gave way to a much more sombre colour. But he still didn't release her. 'Nor am I,' he informed her flatly. 'And Julia has told me nothing about you. As surprising as that might seem.'

Isobel coloured. 'I just meant...'

'I know what you meant, querida.' His eyes impaled her. 'But somehow I do not think you are a virgin, nao?'

His fingers tightened a little and Isobel caught her breath. 'I'm divorced,' she told him shortly. 'Now, please—I'd like you to let me go.'

'Because I have offended you?' His scowl was absurdly attractive. 'That was not my intention.'

'No?' Isobel thought she knew exactly what he had intended. But right now she was more concerned with putting some breathing space between them. With his warm breath against her temple, and his fingers digging into her flesh, she was far

too vulnerable. ‘Well, whatever you meant, I’m not interested in massaging your ego.’

‘My ego?’ he sounded amused. ‘So you think you know what kind of man I am?’

Isobel shifted in his grasp. ‘I think you’re too sure of yourself,’ she declared stiffly. ‘And, whatever you say, I doubt if you’re a virgin either.’

He grinned then, white teeth showing between the sensual contours of his lips. ‘Esta certo,’ he said. ‘You are so right, cara. I have slept with women, sim. Would you like to know how many?’

‘No.’ She looked horrified now, and he gave a low laugh.

‘I did not think so,’ he said smugly, and, before she had an inkling of what he intended to do, he bent his head and caught the corner of her lower lip between his teeth.

He bit into the soft flesh, but the experience was more of a pleasure than a pain. His tongue stroked across her mouth, a sensuous exploration, and then his mouth covered hers and his tongue surged between her teeth.

One hand circled her neck, and she felt his fingers loosening the knot that bound her hair. She’d swept it up earlier, but she now realised how precarious it had become. Silky strands tumbled down about her ears and his knuckles, and his groan of satisfaction said it all.

Her muffled protest was only a half-hearted thing, the complete unexpectedness of what he was doing leaving her with an odd feeling of unreality. This couldn’t be happening, she

thought. Not to someone like her. David had always said she was frigid, but in Alejandro's arms the hot blood was fairly burning through her veins.

He moved so that she was pressed back against the counter, the hard strength of his body virtually moulded to hers. The kiss deepened and lengthened, and his hands sought her hips, bringing her fully against him, so that all thought of denying his love-making faded rapidly away...

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

Isobel heard the angry exclamation as if from a distance. But its significance didn't register until sharp nails dug into her arm and she was wrenched away from Alejandro.

Then she saw Julia, and the look on her friend's face brought a damning feeling of shame. It took the place of what she described to herself later as utter euphoria; she was certain she must have been out of her mind.

'Julia,' she said, turning towards her. 'I—it's not what you think.'

'Isn't it?' Julia wasn't convinced. 'My God, is that blood on your shirt?'

Isobel half-wished it was, then she could claim that Alejandro had only been comforting her. But she doubted Julia would believe that either. 'It's beer,' she admitted ruefully. 'I spilled it all over me.'

'That's not all that's been all over you.' Julia was bitter. 'I thought we were friends, Issy.'

‘We are—’

‘So are you drunk or what? God, aren’t there enough men here for you to choose from without hitting on my date?’

‘Julia—’

‘Se fez favor. Excuse me.’ Alejandro had been silently listening to their exchange, but now he intervened. ‘I came to the party alone, Julia,’ he told her coldly. ‘I may be many things, but I am not your date.’

‘Oh, please—’

Isobel tried again, her gaze barely glancing off Alejandro’s scowling face. She didn’t dare look at him properly, didn’t dare acknowledge something to him that she dared not acknowledge to herself.

Nevertheless, she registered his stillness, the fact that he’d pushed those long-fingered hands into the back pockets of his jeans. She could still feel those hands caressing her, she thought fancifully, but his expression didn’t match her thoughts.

‘We were together earlier!’ Julia exclaimed, looking at Alejandro. ‘You wouldn’t be here at all if it wasn’t for me.’

‘I did not know your invitation came with—how do you say?—strings attached,’ he retorted icily. ‘You forget yourself, Julia. I do not need your permission to speak with Ms Jameson.’

‘To speak with her?’ Julia scoffed. ‘Is that what you call it? When I came in, you had your tongue halfway down her throat.’

‘And that concerns you how?’ His accent was thickening, Isobel noticed. ‘I suggest you leave us, Julia. We are not innocents

who require you as a—a chaperon, nao?’

‘Um—perhaps Mr Cabral should leave,’ Isobel ventured, not looking at him as she spoke. ‘It is getting very late.’

She heard his sudden intake of breath at her words. ‘You do not mean this!’ he exclaimed harshly, but before she could respond Julia intervened.

‘She does,’ she said, her expression triumphant. ‘Bye bye, Alex. I’ll see you next week.’

Isobel’s gaze darted from Julia’s face to Alejandro’s. What was that supposed to mean? But he was already striding towards the door, and for a moment she thought he was going to leave without speaking again.

However he halted on the threshold, gripping the frame of the door with one hand, the other pushing back the tumbled darkness of his hair. ‘This is not over, Isobel,’ he informed her softly, and she didn’t know whether that was a threat or a promise. ‘Volto mais tarde.’ And what did that mean? ‘Boa noite, senhoras. Goodnight.’

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER Alejandro had gone, there was an uncomfortable silence. Then Julia said, ‘That was fun, wasn’t it?’

Isobel pressed her lips together. ‘Yes, well, I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.’ She glanced down at her wristwatch, noticing the way her shirt was clinging to her, and cringing at the image she presented. ‘It’s late, as I said. Perhaps it would be a good idea if we wrapped things up now. It’s after one, and—’

‘You’re not serious?’ Julia’s jaw dropped in disbelief. ‘Issy, you can’t. Things are just beginning to heat up.’ She made an impatient gesture. ‘Just because you got a little tight and made a pass at Alex, I’m not going to throw a wobbly. We’ve been friends too long to let a man—’

Isobel lifted a hand to silence her. ‘How do you know him anyway? And what did you mean when you said you’d see him next week?’

‘Oh.’ Julia looked coy now. ‘Didn’t he tell you? Well, I don’t suppose he had the chance, did he? We—that is, the agency—are doing some work for his company. Cabral Leisure is pretty big in South America. They’re wanting to break into the European market, and our agency was the one they picked to promote them here.’

‘Oh.’ Isobel nodded. ‘Oh, I see.’

‘Yeah. Our Alex belongs in the big league, Issy. That was why

I was so upset when I saw you two together.'

'Really?'

Isobel wasn't prepared to believe that, but Julia hurried on. 'I mean it, Issy. No one was more surprised than me when he accepted my invitation. I guess he must have been bored, yeah? Guys like him don't come slumming very often.'

Isobel turned away, gathering up the empty cans strewn about the worktops and dropping them into the waste bin. She was tempted to say that her apartment was certainly not a slum, but she didn't want to give Julia another excuse to patronise her. Besides, if he was as wealthy as Julia was implying, the other girl was probably right. At least, about him not mixing with the common herd every day.

'Anyway, just because he's walked out doesn't mean we have to ruin the party,' Julia continued when Isobel didn't bite. 'Another hour, Issy. Pretty please? Then I'll get the gang out of here, I promise.'

Alejandro walked back to his hotel.

It was a fairly warm night for London in November, which was just as well, because in his haste he'd left his leather jacket at Isobel's apartment.

It hadn't been a deliberate choice, he assured himself. He'd just been so angry when she'd asked him to leave that he hadn't thought about anything but getting out of there.

Now, the idea of seeing Isobel again intrigued him. As his temper cooled, he remembered her sweetness before Julia had

interrupted them—the softness of her skin, the unexpected provocation of her mouth.

Isobel, he mused. Isobella. She'd certainly been different from the other girls at the party. Her almost shy manner reminded him of the girls back home, though he guessed Isobel had never had a chaperon breathing down her neck.

Except Julia...

His lips twisted. When she'd invited him to the party, he'd intended to decline. Although he'd been working with the agency, he wasn't in the habit of mixing business with pleasure. But she'd been so insistent, he'd eventually given in. After all, despite the wishes of his parents, he had no serious commitments elsewhere.

He scowled. He didn't want to think about Miranda at this moment. Not when thoughts of Isobel were foremost in his mind. She'd felt so good in his arms, warm, soft and sexy. He wondered how old she was. His own age, he guessed, but she looked younger. It was unbelievable that she'd been married and divorced. She seemed so innocent somehow. He knew he wanted to see her again. But would she want to see him?

Disappointingly, she wasn't at home when he called at her apartment the next morning. Instead, a garrulous old woman came out of the adjoining apartment and accosted him.

'Are you looking for Mrs Jameson?' she demanded, and Alejandro, who wasn't used to being spoken to in such a manner, felt his hackles rising. 'Anyway, she's not here,' the woman went

on fussily, apparently unaware of giving any offence. 'She went out first thing this morning, though how she expects to do a day's work when none of us got a wink of sleep last night is beyond me.'

'Ah.' Alejandro was beginning to understand her reaction.

'Were you at the party?' she asked. Then, answering her own question, 'No, I don't suppose you were, or you'd not have expected her to be up yet.'

Alejandro didn't bother to correct her. 'You said Mrs Jameson, senhora. I understood the lady was divorced, nao?'

The woman's eyes widened suspiciously, as if she'd just realised he wasn't English, but she answered him anyway. 'She is,' she confirmed. 'Or that's what she told the landlord when she moved into the apartment.'

'I see.' Alejandro didn't allow his relief to show. 'Muito bem; I will have to return later, perhaps, when Mrs Jameson is at home.'

The woman frowned at him through her thick-framed lenses. 'Are you a friend of hers?' she queried, and once again Alejandro had to tamp down his impatience. She pursed her lips. 'Who shall I say has called?'

Alejandro was fairly sure the question was purely curiosity now, and he was tempted not to reply. But the last thing he wanted was for Isobel to think he'd been snooping around. 'My name is Cabral,' he said shortly. Then, with a slight bow of his head, 'Thank you for your time, Mrs—Mrs—?'

'Lytton-Smythe,' she said at once. She paused for a moment

and then ventured casually, 'Do you work for her uncle too?'

Alejandro hesitated. 'Her uncle?' he echoed, unable to prevent himself, and the woman nodded.

'Samuel Armstrong,' she said. 'He publishes magazines or something. Mrs Jameson is always on the go, interviewing famous people and writing articles about them for him.'

'Is she?' Alejandro was impressed.

'Yes.' There was reluctance in the woman's tone now, as if she regretted being so frank. 'I suppose she must be quite clever, really, even if it is only her uncle she works for.'

Damned with faint praise, thought Alejandro drily, but he was grateful for the information nonetheless. If only so he knew there was an alternative source to contact to get his jacket back, he assured himself. But that didn't alter the fact that he still wanted to see Isobel again.

Isobel was exhausted when she got back to her apartment. She'd managed to finish the piece on the celebrity make-up artist after the party was over, but it had been a good two hours after Alejandro Cabral had departed that she'd ushered the last of Julia's guests out of the door. Julia, herself, had left at least half an hour earlier, giggling with her bearded escort, fluttering fingers at Isobel and showing no remorse at leaving her friend to clear the place up.

In consequence, when Isobel did get home that afternoon, she still had to face the debris of the previous night's festivities. She had dumped the remains of the cold buffet into the sink-disposal

before she'd gone to bed, but she'd been too tired then to start picking up the rest of the mess.

The first thing she did now was open all the windows. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and spilled beer was disgusting, and she leaned on the sill for a moment, taking in deep breaths of cool air.

There were scuff marks on the floor, she noticed, and cigarette burns on the arm of one of the chairs. But no irretrievable damage had been done. It could have been much worse, she assured herself.

Nevertheless, it took her a good half-hour to collect all the empty cans and bottles and drop them in refuse sacks for collection. Then, feeling she deserved it, she made herself a fresh pot of coffee.

Carrying her cup into the living room, she looked critically about her. The floor needed waxing and the rugs needed vacuuming, but the worst was over. For now, she was grateful just to sit down on the sofa and close her eyes. She grimaced. The truth was, she wasn't used to such late nights.

When the doorbell rang, she was tempted to ignore it. She suspected it might be Mrs Lytton-Smythe, come to complain again about the disturbance she'd suffered the night before. Isobel had already had to apologise to the two doctors downstairs, whom she'd met on her way to the office. Thankfully, they'd been understanding, but her next-door neighbour was another matter.

Putting her coffee cup down on the low table beside the sofa,

she got wearily to her feet. She'd kicked off her shoes when she came in, and she couldn't be bothered to look for them right now. Instead, she trod barefoot to the door.

It wasn't Mrs Lytton-Smythe.

But she had no difficulty at all in identifying the man whose shoulder was propped so casually against the wall outside. He was still as tall, dark and disturbingly good-looking as she remembered, even with a night's growth of beard. And a tremor of awareness feathered her spine.

'Oh,' she said, momentarily unnerved by his appearance. Her stomach hollowed and she pressed a hand to her midriff, trying to ground her scattered emotions. 'Hello.'

'Ola,' he greeted her softly, his voice as dark and sensual as molasses, with that distinctive accent that made everything he said sound like a caress. He straightened, dark brows lifting as he noticed her confusion. 'Am I disturbing you?'

Only totally, thought Isobel, swallowing to ease the dryness in her throat. 'Um—no. I just got in, actually.' She glanced behind her at the untidy living room. She couldn't invite him in. She just couldn't. 'Would you like to come in?'

Alejandro doubted she would appreciate his reaction at the moment. Going into her apartment had definite attractions—but taking her by the shoulders, crushing that tempting mouth beneath his own, pulling her close against his aroused body and letting her feel the response he seemed incapable of controlling was far more appealing.

He shook his head. This wasn't supposed to happen. Okay, he'd been attracted to her the night before, but he hadn't intended to pursue it. He'd wanted to see her again, yes, but not to feel this overwhelming need to touch her. For goodness' sake, what was wrong with him? His family would be appalled if they knew what he was doing.

However, Isobel had taken that rueful shake of his head at face value. 'Okay, then,' she said a little stiffly, misunderstanding him completely. 'How can I help you?'

'Nao!' Alejandro couldn't help himself. He spread his hands apologetically. 'I did not mean—isto e—I would very much like to come in.'

'Oh!' She was disconcerted now, but too polite to refuse. 'Okay.' She moved aside to allow him to enter, her hand fluttering towards the living room. 'I'm sure you remember the way.'

Alejandro stepped into the small entry, immediately dwarfing the hall. What had possessed her to do this? Isobel was asking herself. After what had happened the night before, she must be crazy. In the narrow confines of the hall, she was much too aware of him. As well as his size, which was intimidating, he was so disturbingly male.

When he looked down at her, Isobel felt as if she couldn't breathe suddenly. What now? But then he said, 'Voce primeiro,' the words sounding absurdly sensual. 'After you, cara,' he added, and she realised she was letting her imagination run away with her good sense.

Somehow she managed to close the door and lead the way into the living room. But now the state of the apartment was the least of her worries. She was intensely aware of him watching her, and she wished she was wearing something a little more feminine than a cropped black tee-shirt and jeans.

And how pathetic was that?

‘So,’ she said when he halted in the doorway, looking about him with obvious interest. ‘As you can see, I haven’t had time to repair the damage yet.’

Alejandro shrugged. This afternoon he was wearing black jeans and a dark-green hooded fleece with the logo of some sporting club sprawled elegantly across the front. ‘I did not come to check on the apartment,’ he said, his golden eyes resting almost tangibly on her mouth. His brows drew together. ‘You look tired, pequena. Did you not get any sleep?’

Isobel let out a breath. ‘Gee, thanks,’ she said, finding relief in sarcasm. ‘That’s so good for my ego.’

Alejandro’s mouth compressed. ‘It was not a criticism, cara,’ he said, stepping towards her, and before she could restore the space between them he’d put out his hand and smoothed his thumb over the circles beneath her eyes. She blinked rapidly, her stomach plunging at the disturbing intimacy of his touch, and his lips curved in satisfaction. ‘Relax, little one. Is it my fault that even your neighbour—Mrs Smith?—’

‘Lytton-Smythe,’ Isobel corrected him breathlessly, and his lips tilted.

‘Sim; the good Mrs Smith,’ he went on, ignoring her intervention. ‘She complained that no one had had—what was it she said?—I wink of sleep, nao?’

Isobel couldn’t help the smile that tugged at her lips at his deliberate corruption of the old lady’s name. ‘How do you know my neighbour’s name?’ she asked, backing out of harm’s way. ‘Did she speak to you just now?’

‘This morning,’ Alejandro amended, and to her relief he transferred his gaze to his surroundings again. ‘This is a beautiful room.’ He paused and once again his eyes drifted back to rest on her nervous face. ‘Your husband—ex-husband, nao?—must have regretted having to leave.’

‘He never lived here,’ said Isobel swiftly. ‘We lived, well, somewhere else.’

‘But you do not wish me to know where?’ suggested Alejandro shrewdly, and Isobel sighed. ‘I think the memory is still painful, nao?’

‘Not any more.’ Isobel could be very definite about that. Sometimes she thought it had just been her pride that had been hurt rather than her emotions.

‘There was another woman?’

He was persistent, and Isobel’s lips flattened at the memories his words evoked. ‘No,’ she said flatly. ‘Look, can we leave it? It all happened a very long time ago.’

Alejandro stepped towards her and now, when she backed away, she felt the unyielding coolness of the wall behind her. ‘So,’

he said a little roughly, 'are you still seeing this man?'

'What man?' Isobel gazed up at him blankly.

'If there was no woman, there must have been another man,' he explained harshly, raising one hand to rest it against the wall beside her head. 'I want to know if you are still—what is it you say in this country?—with him, nao?'

'No.' Isobel lifted a hand, as if she intended to ward him off. 'That is—all right, yes. There was another man. Now, can we please talk about something else?'

'You did not answer my question,' he said, his curious cat's-eyes searching her face with grim intensity. 'Where is this man who persuaded you to break your marriage vows?'

'Who persuaded me—?' She couldn't allow him to think that she'd caused the break-up. 'I wasn't involved with another man. David—my husband—was. But it all happened a long time ago. Really, I wish you would forget about it. I have.'

Alejandro's nostrils flared. His reaction to the news that some other man had hurt her in this way was unbelievable. He wanted to find this man and give him the beating he so richly deserved.

Yet her relationship with her ex-husband should have meant nothing to him, he reminded himself. They were barely acquaintances. He had no right to care, one way or the other.

But he did.

Looking down into her slightly flushed face, he badly wanted to kiss her. Only the memory of the sensual heat her mouth had generated the night before, and the lack of control he'd

experienced, held him back.

Even so, he couldn't prevent his need to touch her, and, lifting his free hand, he allowed one finger to trace a line from the curve of her cheek to her jaw. Nerves tensed beneath his touch. He could feel them, and there was an erratic pulse beating below her ear. He'd like to feel the source of that palpitation, to slip his hand beneath the tempting hem of her tee-shirt and stroke her breasts.

'Please...' It was as if she sensed his distraction and wanted to divert it. 'I don't know why you've come here, Mr Cabral, but I really think you should go.'

'You do not mean that.' Despite the obvious get-out, he didn't take it. His eyes dropped to her mouth. 'We are just getting to know one another, nao?'

'So why don't you go and sit down?' said Isobel a little wildly. She had to get him away from her. 'Perhaps you'd like coffee, or a cold drink?'

'I do not want anything to drink,' said Alejandro a shade impatiently, resisting the urge to show her what he did want with an effort. His hand moved to her shoulder, his thumb invading the neckline of her tee-shirt and smoothing the fine bones he found beneath the cloth. 'You are such a contradicao—a contradiction—querida. You say you have been married and divorced, nao? You admit your husband cheated on you, yet you seem—untouched.' His lips twisted. 'What kind of a woman are you?'

At this moment a desperate one, thought Isobel, her chest

heaving. He thought she seemed untouched. She swallowed. Well, in a manner of speaking, she supposed she was. On the very rare occasions when David had had sex with her, she'd had to hide the fact that she'd felt nothing. Certainly nothing like the way she was feeling now. Was that why she'd never suspected that David had had another lover? Why it wasn't until the divorce that she'd learned the truth?

But Alejandro was waiting for an answer and she managed to say, 'A very confused one, I'm afraid.' She bit her lip. 'I'm sure you're far more experienced than me, Mr Cabral. Is that what you're trying to prove?'

'Nao!' Alejandro was annoyed, his eyes darkening with impatience. 'I wanted to see you again, Isobella. Is that so hard to believe?'

'Well, yes, it is, actually,' said Isobel, eager to keep him talking. 'I'm not the kind of woman you usually spend time with, I'm sure.'

Alejandro's jaw tightened. She was right, of course, though he was loath to admit it. Nevertheless, she did intrigue him, and that was a novelty for him.

His eyes dropped to the hectic rise and fall of her chest, and his jeans tightened instinctively. She had full breasts, high and rounded, and they were fairly erupting against the fabric of her shirt. Was she aroused, or was she apprehensive? Was that why she was pushing him away?

'Do I frighten you?' he asked abruptly, not sure where that had

come from, and her eyes widened at the suggestion.

‘No,’ she denied hotly. ‘But I’d still like to know why you’ve come here. I told you last night that I wasn’t interested in—in—’

‘Casual sex,’ he interposed softly, bending his head to blow gently into her ear. ‘Did I say that was what I wanted?’ His mouth tilted at the corners. ‘Oh, Mrs Jameson, I fear you have a one-track mind.’

Isobel decided she’d had enough. He might be right that she was a contradiction, but he couldn’t know how inexperienced she was when it came to sex.

Raising both hands, she pushed hard against his chest, unbalancing him. Then, she jackknifed away behind the sofa.

But not quickly enough.

His hand caught her wrist, catapulting her back against him. The involuntary recoil brought her up against his chest, her breasts crushed almost painfully between them.

And not just her breasts, she realised, feeling the sudden pressure of his pelvis against her. A pressure reinforced by the swollen thrust of his erection, its heat throbbing hotly against her stomach.

But all this happened almost subliminally. Consciously she was drowning in the unexpected fire in his eyes. A fire that spread throughout her body, creating havoc in its wake. She felt as if she was being consumed, body and soul.

‘Querida...’ The word slipped helplessly from Alejandro’s lips, his hand finding the nape of her neck and turning her face

up to his. ‘Do not—do not tell me you do not want me to kiss you. I think you want this just as much as I do.’

And then his mouth was fastened to hers, sucking all the breath from her body. Her lips parted beneath his, his fingers plunging into her hair. Desire, hot and electrifying, assaulted her senses. It was like a flame, licking along her veins, his tongue forcing its way between her teeth to possess the moist cavern of her mouth.

Alejandro’s senses swam. This was not meant to happen, he told himself, yet the smell, the feel and the taste of her caused him to gather her even closer into his arms.

One hand traced the contours of her spine, cupping her bottom and lifting her against him. She couldn’t fail to recognise what was happening. Almost without his own volition, he had surrendered to a need greater than his will.

And then the doorbell rang...

‘Cristo!’ Alejandro swore angrily, burying his face in the moist hollow of her throat, his overnight stubble abrading her skin. ‘Do not move,’ he groaned, uncaring of the reprieve this was offering him. ‘Por favor, Isobella, do not answer the door.’

‘I must.’

Isobel had already slid away from him, tugging down the hem of her tee-shirt, lifting a trembling hand to push back the tumbled mass of her hair. Her voice was shaky, but it was determined. Like it or not, she was going to open the door.

CHAPTER THREE

‘SO, HOW did the party go?’

It was the following morning when the phone rang. Isobel had half-expected it to be Alejandro. Had half-hoped, if she was honest, even though he didn’t have her number. But she’d found his leather jacket after he’d left the day before, and, although she suspected that was the real reason he’d come here, she desperately wanted to speak to him again.

But it was her Aunt Olivia.

Isobel’s aunt and uncle had become her guardians when her mother and father had been killed in a skiing accident in Austria when she’d been only five, and she loved them as much as any parents.

‘Um, it was okay,’ she said lightly, but Olivia had detected the lack of enthusiasm in her voice.

‘I did warn you, Belle,’ she said ruefully. ‘That crowd Julia runs with these days are not like you. What happened? Were there drugs?’

‘No!’ At least she hoped not, Isobel amended to herself. ‘No, it just went on too long, that’s all.’

‘Hmm.’ Her aunt didn’t sound convinced. ‘Oh, well, it’s done with now. And I gather from what you say that there was no permanent damage?’

‘No. No permanent damage,’ Isobel agreed, wondering what

her aunt would say if she told her what had so nearly happened the previous afternoon. If it hadn't been for Mrs Lytton-Smythe...

'So, when are we going to see you?' Olivia was speaking again and Isobel dragged her thoughts back to what her aunt was saying. 'You haven't spent a weekend at Villiers in ages.'

Her aunt and uncle owned a small estate in Wiltshire. Her uncle, who owned a string of magazines, commuted to London a couple of times a week to keep an eye on his editors, while her aunt bred horses and golden retrievers. Villiers was where Isobel had lived until she'd gone to university in Warwick and had met David Taylor, the man she'd married as soon as she'd got her degree.

'That's because Uncle Sam keeps me busy,' she said now, happier talking about her work. She enjoyed interviewing the various people who made the news and were interesting subjects. It might not have been her original career choice, but she appreciated the confidence her uncle had shown in her.

When she'd first gone to university, she'd intended to get a degree in journalism and then try to get a job with one of the national daily-newspapers. She'd had visions of becoming a war correspondent, sending back copy from embattled positions all over the world.

But meeting David, who'd been one of her tutors, had changed all that. Instead, she'd settled down with him in Leamington Spa, telling herself she was happy to work as a research assistant until

they had a family of their own.

Of course, it hadn't happened. Instead, two years after their glossy wedding, she'd found herself lost and alone. Belatedly, she'd got a job as a journalist. But not in the way she'd ever imagined.

Now, though, her aunt sounded impatient. 'Then I shall tell Sam to stop sending you on all these assignments,' Olivia said firmly. 'It's time you found a decent man to look after you and settled down.'

'Been there, done that and no thanks!' Isobel exclaimed at once.

Even if it was six years since the divorce, she had no desire to get sexually involved again. She liked her life; she liked her independence. And just because she'd succumbed to a moment's madness the afternoon before...

'You're sure you've not met anybody?' Olivia persisted, and Isobel sighed. Her aunt could be far too perceptive at times. The last thing she wanted was to start a discussion about the opposite sex, particularly when her thoughts were so chaotic.

'No,' she said now, sinking down onto the arm of the sofa, hoping she didn't sound too adamant. 'So—how are things with you? Did Villette have her foal?'

'You know, I suspect you're trying to change the subject, Belle, but I forgive you.' Olivia's tone was dry. 'Anyway, moving on, why don't you come down this weekend? The Aitkens are hosting a dinner party to celebrate Lucinda's twenty-first birthday, and I

know they'd love for you to join us.'

Isobel bit her lip. Apart from the fact that she and Lucinda Aitken had nothing in common, Lucinda's brother Tony would be there, and she knew her aunt and uncle had long nurtured hopes for her in that direction.

'Um—can I get back to you on that, Aunt Olivia?' she asked now, trying not to let her reluctance show. She hesitated. 'Maybe I could come down on Sunday, hmm? Just for the day.'

Olivia sighed disappointedly. 'I suppose beggars can't be choosers,' she said a little plaintively. 'Why don't you think about it, darling? Give me a ring tomorrow, yes? It's only Thursday. You may find you can come after all.'

Isobel felt mean, but she couldn't face Tony this weekend; she really couldn't.

But, 'Okay,' she said at last. 'I'll do that.'

'Good.' Olivia sounded infinitely more optimistic. 'I know you'll do your best, Belle. Oh, and for your information, Vilette had the most gorgeous black colt. We've provisionally called him Rio, but you can choose his name when you see him.'

Rio!

Was there to be no escape from things Brazilian?

Isobel felt a reluctant smile touch her lips. 'I'll look forward to seeing him,' she said, and knew it was an unspoken admission as soon as she'd put down the phone.

Alejandro scowled when he found it was raining when he left the meeting. And, because it was the rush hour, there were no

cabs to be had.

Sucking in a breath of cool, moist air, he turned up the collar of his mohair jacket and headed for the nearest tube station. He could have arranged for a company car to meet him, but he hadn't known exactly how long the meeting would last, and he'd thought a walk back to his hotel might be rather pleasant.

But not in the pouring rain.

Nevertheless, he wasn't used to so much inactivity. At home in Brazil, he walked, swam and sailed on a regular basis. And, when he wanted to get away from the city, he headed for the estancia his family owned in the beautiful country north of Rio.

Indeed, he sometimes thought he'd prefer to spend his days at the ranch rather than locked up in some stuffy boardroom. But, as the eldest son, he'd been expected to take control of Cabral Leisure when his father had retired. Roberto Cabral had been forced into early retirement after developing heart trouble, and he relied on both his sons to continue the development of the company.

His scowl deepened. He wasn't in the best of moods. Hadn't been in the best of moods, if he was honest, since he'd walked out of Isobel's apartment for the second time in two days in a state of raw frustration.

He could have gone back that evening, he supposed, but his pride hadn't let him. He'd consoled himself with the thought that the women he was used to associating with would never have invited a man into their apartment in the first place, not when

they were alone. Particularly after the way he'd behaved at their first meeting. But she had, and he'd accepted, and now he was paying the price.

He shook his head, impatient with himself, impatient with the weather. Running down the steps into the tube station, he straightened his collar and ran a careless hand over his damp hair. The sooner he got back to Rio, the better he'd like it.

Got back to Miranda, he thought drily, although that wasn't a prospect he was looking forward to. He liked her; of course he did. They'd practically grown up together, damn it, but the crowd she ran with now was not his choice. Nevertheless, her mother and his father were making far too much of what was, in essence, a friendship. They expected an announcement, but they were going to be disappointed.

He forced himself to concentrate on the column of stations listed on the notice board. Yes, there was Green Park, on the Piccadilly Line, the nearest station to his hotel. But if he took the Central Line he was only a couple of stations from Isobel's apartment.

He blew out a breath. Okay, he told himself, why not take this opportunity to call for his jacket? He was leaving for home in a few days' time. This might be his last chance to collect it.

Yeah, right.

Did he really believe that was his only motive for going there? She'd shown him the way she felt on a couple of occasions already, hadn't she? Was he ready for another put-down?

In the event, he bought two tickets, deciding that whichever train arrived first would be the one he'd take.

Which meant that half an hour later he was climbing the stairs to Isobel's apartment, his jacket soaked and his expensive loafers oozing water.

She'd better be at home, he thought grimly, raising his hand to press the bell. It was a quarter to six. The working day was over. He could only hope she hadn't arranged to meet someone for a drink, or even dinner.

It seemed to take forever for Isobel to answer the door. A bit different from when Mrs Lytton-Smythe had called, he brooded irritably. But eventually he heard the bolt being drawn and the key turning in the lock, and presently he was given a glimpse of a bathrobe-clad figure sheltering behind the panels.

So she had an excuse for her tardiness, he thought, guessing she had just come out of the shower. Her face was flushed and her wet hair was in tangles about her shoulders. Well, what he could see of it anyway. She wasn't opening the door an inch further.

For a moment, Isobel just stared at him, too shocked by his appearance to think of anything to say. All she was conscious of was the fact that she was naked under the bathrobe, and tiny drips of water from her wet hair were finding their way inside her collar and down her neck.

'I was in the shower,' she managed at last, and Alejandro nodded.

'I can see that,' he said, those curious amber eyes intent upon

her. 'Have I come at a bad time?'

You think?

Isobel's tongue sought her upper lip and she moved her shoulders uncertainly. Was this why she hadn't made any attempt to return his jacket? Had she suspected—no, hoped—that he might decide to come back?

'I suppose you've come for your jacket,' she said, deciding there was no point in pretending he might have another motive, and Alejandro arched his brows in a way that might have meant anything. He was more formally dressed this afternoon, in an elegant mohair-suit the jacket of which had been sadly impaired by the weather. His hair was almost as wet as hers, a thick, dark mass clinging closely to his scalp.

'You found it?' he queried softly, and Isobel's spine quivered at the dark tenor of his voice.

'Why wouldn't I?' she rushed on breathlessly. 'It wasn't hard to find.'

Alejandro inclined his head. 'E claro.' Of course. He paused. 'So—you are well, sim?'

'A little cold is all,' admitted Isobel ruefully. And then, realising she couldn't go and get his jacket and leave him standing on the doorstep, particularly as he was obviously soaked to the skin, she murmured, 'I suppose you'd better come in.'

'If you are sure?'

Alejandro wasn't at all sure he knew what he was doing, but he'd virtually accepted her invitation now.

‘Why not?’ Isobel asked, a little offhandedly. And, unlike that other occasion when she’d stepped aside to let him in, she left the door to hurry into the living room. ‘Close the door, will you?’ she called, heading for her bedroom. ‘I won’t be a minute.’

Alejandro closed the door by leaning back against it. Then, turning, he flicked the key in the lock. For security, he told himself, refusing to admit he had any other reason. Then, as before, he walked into the living room.

The dark day meant there were lamps burning in three places around the room, two rather attractive table-lamps and a pewter standard-lamp with a huge, fringed shade. She had good taste, he conceded, noticing that the floor had been waxed and that the sofa and chairs had been thoroughly cleaned. Even the cushions bore no imprint of a human body, and the rug that occupied the centre of the floor looked like new.

A door was open across the room, and curiosity compelled him to find out where it led. But his jacket was wet and, slipping it off, he dropped it onto the floor. Then after a moment’s hesitation he crossed the room and stepped into the short corridor beyond.

Evidently, the hall gave access to her bedroom and bathroom. There were two doors and, although he knew he was being unforgiveably inquisitive, he went forward towards the first door.

It was open, and was obviously her bedroom. He saw a rose-patterned bedspread and clothes laid out upon it. Was she preparing to go out? he wondered, unconsciously unfastening his

collar as an unfamiliar twinge of something gripped his insides. He couldn't be jealous, he told himself, pulling his tie halfway down his shirt. It wasn't as if there was any way he could become involved with an English woman.

Yet...

Another door opened across the room and Isobel appeared, clad only in a skimpy half-bra and lacy briefs. She'd made an effort to dry her hair with the towel, but it was still curling wildly about her shoulders. She looked distracted, but amazingly sexy, and Alejandro felt his body respond.

She hadn't noticed him yet. She was too intent on picking up the filmy stockings from the bed and sitting down to roll them up her slender legs. But something, a sudden intake of breath on his part perhaps, caused her to glance in his direction.

With one leg raised so that he could plainly see the honey-gold curls escaping from the crotch of her panties, she was irresistibly appealing and, despite her gasp of outrage, Alejandro moved slowly into the room.

'What do you think you're doing?' Isobel could barely get the words past her lips, and, tugging off her stockings, she rolled them into a ball and flung them angrily in his direction. 'Get out of here!' she exclaimed, her voice rising half in panic, half in indignation. 'I—I asked you to wait in the other room.'

'As I recall, you did not make any—como se diz?—any stipulation, nao, as to where you wanted me to stay,' Alejandro contradicted her, huskily catching the ball of black silk in one

hand and raising it to his face. 'Mmm, they smell of you,' he went on as she rose from the bed to face him. 'Do not be angry, cara. You are a beautiful woman. Do not be ashamed of your body.'

'I'm not ashamed!' Isobel caught her breath. 'But, if that's supposed to be some sort of apology, I don't accept it. You have no right to come here, uninvited, and behave as if I should be flattered.'

'It was not an apology,' inserted Alejandro mildly, dropping the stockings onto the floor and looking down at her with light, disturbing eyes. 'I was merely speaking the truth, querida. Do not blame me for that.'

'Oh, right.' Isobel glanced about her wildly, looking for something—her dressing gown, perhaps—to cover her semi-nakedness. But she'd taken her robe into the bathroom, and the trousers and sleeveless wrap-tank she'd been planning to wear offered little in the way of protection. 'And I suppose if I were a Brazilian girl you'd behave in exactly the same way?'

Alejandro's lips thinned. Despite recent events, he couldn't deny that there was no way Miranda's mother would have allowed him to enter her daughter's bedroom, even if he'd wanted to. Despite the new freedoms the twenty-first century had brought, women of good family clung to the old ways. Oh, that wasn't to say that young people didn't rebel. He was sure Miranda had done things her mother knew nothing about. But on the surface anyway the old customs applied, and he was honest enough to admit he'd want it no other way.

The silence between them stretched, and when he didn't answer her her lips twisted in contempt. 'I didn't think so,' she said, turning her back on him. 'Now, will you please get out of here?'

Alejandro's hands balled into fists, the urge to grip her shoulders and pull her back against him almost overwhelming. From this angle, he was offered only a glimpse of her breasts, but the narrow curve of her waist and the delectable swell of her hips were irresistible. And the rounded cheeks of her bottom protruding from the black lace of her panties sent a hot rush of blood into his groin.

He wanted her, he acknowledged grimly. Wanted to bury his burning sex inside her and expunge all the stress and frustration he'd felt since he first kissed her in the welcoming heat of her body.

But he couldn't do it.

He mustn't do it.

For God's sake, he wasn't an animal. And she wasn't some cheap whore he could seduce and leave without a backward glance. He respected her too much for that. And, for that reason, he had to get himself out of here before his own needs and the indisputable temptation she represented overcame his good sense.

And then, as he was backing towards the door, she turned her head and looked at him. Blue eyes, as clear and lucid as a summer sky, met his tormented gaze. Eyes that softened and gentled as he looked at her, lips parting to allow the provocative tip of her

tongue to appear between her teeth.

She held his gaze for long, disturbing moments, and then she said a little breathlessly, ‘Your—your jacket’s hanging on the stand in the hall. You—you might have seen it when you came in.’

In actual fact, Alejandro had been aware of nothing but Isobel when he’d entered the apartment, but he acknowledged now that there probably had been some coats hanging in the hall.

‘Certo,’ he said, a faintly mocking expression marring his dark features. Right. But what had he expected? he asked himself bitterly. That she might change her mind and beg him to stay? ‘Obrigado.’ Thanks.

Isobel managed a slight smile over her shoulder, but her teeth came together and trapped her tongue before she could say anything else. He’d already shown her what he really thought about her. His silent admission that he wouldn’t treat a Brazilian girl with the same lack of respect that he’d shown her proved it. Just because she was tempted to throw caution to the winds and let him make love to her—something she suspected they both wanted—she had to remember that was not a sensible option.

Alejandro had reached the bedroom door now, and before he stepped out of her sight he gave a slight bow of his head. ‘It has been a pleasure knowing you, Isobella,’ he remarked, not without some irony. ‘Adeus, cara. I hope you have a good life.’

As Isobel digested the finality of his words, he disappeared into the living room, and she waited breathlessly for the outer

door to open and close. He was going, she thought, aware of her own mixed feelings about it. He had to go. But she didn't really want him to.

The silence was deafening, and her mood swung from ambivalence about his departure to an anxious curiosity as to why he hadn't left. She would have heard the door, she assured herself. Which meant he was still in the apartment. But why? What was he doing?

She had to find out and, snatching up the shirt she'd discarded when she'd gone for her shower, she pulled it on and wrapped the folds around her. It only skimmed her thighs, but at least it was a little less revealing than her underwear.

Alejandro was in the living room. Because her apartment was on the sixth floor, she hadn't drawn the curtains, and he was standing at the window staring out at the lights of the city.

He'd put on the jacket he'd been wearing when he'd arrived at the apartment, and she could see how wet and creased it was. Even so, that didn't explain why he was still here, and with a tentative clearing of her throat she said, 'Is something wrong?'

Alejandro swung round, his hands at his throat, and she realised he'd been fastening his collar and tie. She'd been too premature, she realised. She should have given him more time. As it was, she felt a fool for intruding.

'You have an interesting view,' he said, his hands dropping to his sides. 'My apologies. I realise I am overstaying my welcome.'
Isobel's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. 'Your—your

coat's soaking,' she said at last, unable to think of anything else, and Alejandro's lips twisted.

'Esta chovendo,' he said, and then, collecting himself, 'It is raining, cara.' He spread his arms. 'When it rains, I get wet.'

Isobel pressed her lips together. 'You could—you could wear your other jacket,' she pointed out, and Alejandro's lips tilted.

'So I could,' he agreed ruefully, slipping the mohair jacket off his shoulders again. 'As always, you are—como se diz?—the soul of practicality, nao?'

Isobel didn't feel very practical, particularly when she was halfway across the living room before she remembered her state of undress. But by then it was too late to indulge in any false modesty, and, stepping into the hall, she lifted down the leather jacket she'd hung there and brought it back to him.

'Many thanks,' he said, coming to take the jacket from her, and as he did so she was made intensely aware of the damp, masculine scent of his skin.

'I—no problem,' she murmured. And then, before she could prevent the words, 'Your shirt's wet too.'

Alejandro lifted a hand and smoothed it down over his chest. The silk clung to his skin, and he made a slight gesture of acknowledgement. 'So it is,' he conceded with a rueful smile. 'Unfortunately, I do not have another shirt to wear.'

'I—I could dry it,' offered Isobel recklessly, and he gave her a conservative look.

'I think not, cara.'

‘Why not?’

‘You know the answer to that as well as I do,’ murmured Alejandro, his voice thickening as his eyes lowered to the sensual beauty of her mouth. ‘Or are you so immune to this attraction I feel between us that you do not care what I do?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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