

CHAPTER TWO

MARIANNE was between songs, sipping café latte from a local coffee shop to warm her up and hope fully restore some heat into her blood again, on yet another day chilly enough to turn solid stone into a block of ice. All of a sudden a shaft of pure, undiluted sunlight arrowed down onto the pavement a few yards in front of her, trapping in its beam a golden head that riveted her attention. *It was him!* The expensive-looking guy with the stern mouth and the ivory topped cane. He didn't seem to be limping as badly today, Marianne reflected, watching him, and her insides executed an unsettling somersault as she saw that he was definitely heading her way.

Moments later he stood before her, his breath making a little puff of frosted steam as he spoke. 'Good afternoon,' he said politely, and there was a barely discernible lift to one corner of that impossibly serious mouth that surprisingly might have been the beginning of a smile.

'Hello,' she murmured, her gloved hand tightening round her take-away coffee cup.

'You are not singing?'

'No...I'm taking a break. Warming myself up.'

Finding herself the target of his devastating silent scrutiny, Marianne felt her entire body tense with discomfort. *Did he have any idea how intently he stared?* His eyes were like twin frosted blue lasers, making an exploratory dive straight down into her soul. Her husband Donal had never regarded her in such an intense way. *His* gaze had simply been in finitely kind.

'How's business?'

'Okay.' Shrugging, Marianne glanced down at the small collection of coppers and silver change in the hat at her feet. 'Like I told you before, I don't sing just for—'

'Money. I remember. You sing because you are compelled to...for the love of it, yes?'

'Yes.' Now she felt embarrassed, remembering her outburst of the other day. 'Look, I'm sorry if I offended you in any way by what I said or did, but there are a lot of people far worse off than me you know? In fact I'm not badly off at all. Appearances can be deceiving.'

His tanned brow creased a little, as if he were silently disputing her assessment of her situation, and his gaze care fully took in her mismatched woollen clothing that today consisted of purple tights, brown boots, a red dress over a cream sweater and Donal's too-big sheep skin lined leather jacket, with a beige scarf tucked into the neckline to keep out the worst of the cold. The only thing she wasn't wearing to finish off the eye-catching ensemble was her multi-coloured ski hat. Rushing out of the house this morning, she had accidentally left it behind.

'Well...if it helps you to know, I did in fact donate the money I would have given you to the church's collection for the homeless, as you suggested. Let me introduce

The rest of their conversation was politely superficial and companionable—as though they had silently recognised the potential danger in discussing anything more personal and mutually agreed to avoid it.

Twenty minutes later they parted—Marianne to return to her singing, and Eduardo to head wherever he was heading. She hadn't asked him where. But as he moved away from her and continued on down the street her heart definitely raced a little as she watched him go. Remembering his surprising offer of a job, she wondered why she suddenly felt so bad for refusing his help. Was it because she thought she'd detected a hint of melancholy or sadness in that magnetising gaze as they'd sat talking? Was it anything to do with the reason he walked with a cane? A wave of sympathy tugged hard at her heart strings.

'Sing us a song, love!' One of the cheerful vendors who sold fruit from a stall further down the street stopped in front of her, clapping his gloved hands together with an exaggerated shiver. 'We need something to warm us up. It's colder than bloody Siberia today, *and* there's heavy snow forecast for tonight. Got any songs about spring?'

Shaken out of her reverie, Marianne grinned. 'How about "By the Banks of the Sweet Primroses"?''

'Lovely job!' The vendor happily grinned back.

When the notion of trying to help the little roadside singer had come to him, it hadn't even crossed Eduardo's mind to offer her a job. So when the words had come out of his mouth he'd surprised even himself. Contract cleaners he could maintain an aloof distance from, and the familiar Ricardo whom he'd brought with him from Rio de Janeiro were one thing—but to invite a new young acquaintance to share his roof and become his house keeper was quite another. Especially when he guarded his privacy more jealously than Fort Knox was famed for guarding its gold bullion.

But it was perfectly true that he *did* need a housekeeper, and considering Marianne's shivering form yesterday, watching her struggle to keep warm in the bleak winter weather, Eduardo had suddenly thought it was the ideal solution. *But she had turned him down.* It was true that he had not really believed that she would accept his offer, but still...it *irked* him more than a little that she had not. And it was a practical certainty that if he attempted to offer her money again, to help better her situation, she would likely throw it back in his face and instruct him in no uncertain terms to go to hell! She had a temper on her, that was for sure. And it had genuinely shocked him to learn that she was no teenager but twenty-four years old...a *woman*.

Recalling the flash of fire in her almond-shaped hazel eyes as she'd castigated him for being too intrusive, he felt his skin tighten hotly. Irritably ignoring the unsettling sensation, he strode into the ornate marble bathroom that led off his private suite of rooms and for several moments just stood in the centre of the floor, unsure why he had even gone in there. Restlessly he pushed his fingers through his hair and sighed. It was probably best he curb his philanthropic urges where that particular young woman was concerned and concentrate his efforts on repairing his damaged leg, doubling his belief that one day soon he would be able to walk as well as he had before the accident—confidently, and without even a trace of a limp.

After that...Eduardo moved across to the vanity unit, staring at his reflection in the large oval mirror there and grimacing at the deep shadows wrought beneath his eyes by agony of body and spirit and a severe lack of sleep. *After that...* Well, he would just have to take one day at a time, he told himself, hardly able to contemplate a future that wasn't as bleak and pain-filled as the present. How could such a prospect be possible when

the two lives most intimately inter twined with his had been ripped away? When every night he relived the terrible night mare of the accident that had killed them—the accident that *he* had caused?

CHAPTER THREE

THERE was indeed a heavy snowfall that night, as the fruit vendor had predicted. After surveying the cloak of sparkling white that blanketed her garden as well as the street outside the next morning Marianne tidied the house, made herself a hot drink, then tinkered with an unfinished song she'd been composing on the piano. *But her mood was not buoyant, and she struggled to stave off the sense of melancholy that kept threatening to overwhelm her.* Finally, unable to bear the enforced isolation a moment longer, she donned a warm coat, boots and a hat over her jeans and sweater and went outside.

The ice in the air spat on her breath, making her eyes water, but her spirits lifted at just being out in the open again. She took herself off for a long, if *laboured* walk, due to the impediment of snow, into the park nearby. Just watching the children toboggan down the glistening frosted hillside and hurl snow balls at each other restored her sense of perspective *and* her good humour. And if any thoughts of the childhood *she'd* experienced, which had been bereft of similar happy times and feeling secure started to threaten, she firmly pushed them away, knowing it was point less to contemplate such things when her cheerful mood could so easily regress to one of despair.

By the time she returned home she'd made a vow to fight off any gloomy recollection that might seduce her into unwanted misery. She simply would not allow herself to go there. But by mid-afternoon, when early darkness had descended, impelling her to turn on all the lamps again and draw the curtains, Marianne was sitting in an armchair in front of the fire place, watching the flames lick round the burning coals and crackling twigs, and considering the prospect of life on her own again for the foreseeable future. *Donal would be so mad at her for sitting here feeling sorry for herself! That was for sure.* And suddenly she was crying. An unstoppable flow of hurt and sadness long dammed up could no longer be contained—making her weep until she was utterly spent and could cry no more.

Taking herself off to bed, she curled up in a foetal position, drawing the duvet right over her head, feeling numbed and empty. Just before she closed her eyes she swore to herself she would never indulge in such futile self-pity again. Tomorrow was a new day, and when the morning light came it would herald a new and more positive beginning. Marianne was *adamant* about that.

exacting, finding constant fault should she fail to measure up, examining her with that intense stare of his and making her rue the day she'd made the impulsive decision to go and work for him.

Yet beneath the cacophony of doubt and apprehension that raged inside her, a stronger more positive instinct was urging Marianne to go for it and give it a try.

'Marianne?'

Her prospective employer's voice—impatient and a little out of breath, as if he'd been interrupted in the middle of something and resented it—sounded in her ear.

'Hello, there. It's Marianne—the busker from town,' she explained, a light tremor in her voice. 'I—I hope you don't mind me ringing, but you said...'

'What is it that you need?'

Marianne glanced up to the heavens for courage. 'A job...and a home,' she replied, then made herself breathe deeply and mentally count to ten, so that she didn't succumb to her fears and change her mind. 'Are you still looking for a house keeper?'

Sweat broke out on Eduardo's brow. The visiting physiotherapist might have been a torturer straight out of the Spanish Inquisition, he thought grimly as the man manipulated his scar-criss-crossed leg into yet another excruciatingly painful position to test its flexibility. He swore...*loudly*. The therapist looked startled and care fully moved his patient's leg back down onto the treatment couch with a murmured apology. Staring up at the ornately plastered Victorian ceiling in the library as he lay there, Eduardo sensed his racing heart slowly return to a more normal rhythm.

'Are we finished?' he asked, gravel-voiced.

The sandy-haired physio gave him a respectful and sympathetic smile. 'I agree you've probably had enough for now, Mr de Souza. My advice is to take it easy for the rest of the day. Try and get some proper rest tonight, and don't overdo things.'

'Do they teach you at medical school to come out with these clichéd platitudes?' Eduardo remarked irritably, swinging his legs over the side of the table and ignoring the other man's immediate move to help him.

Unoffended, the man smiled again. 'Sometimes rest really *is* the best course of action when dealing with any kind of physical trauma,' he explained. 'The body needs to access its own powers of healing, and rest gives it the opportunity to do that. I realise it may have been a little uncomfortable for you today, but the fact is your leg *is* definitely recovering from that last operation. Another month or two and you should notice a significant improvement when walking. I can practically guarantee it.'

'Give me your hand,' Eduardo muttered, and accepted help to stand—though it psychologically pained him to accept *anyone's* help these days, when he had previously been so fit and able.

Hearing the heavy oak front door open down stairs, then shut again with a sonorous clunk, he remembered that he'd instructed Ricardo to take the four-by-four and go and collect Marianne. Ironical that he had been reflecting on his resistance to accepting help when he had just effectively hired a girl he had only recently met to come and live in his house and act as his house keeper!

What had made her change her mind about accepting the post? he speculated. Perhaps it wasn't so difficult to deduce. Common sense had simply prevailed, and the plummeting temperatures had forced her to make a more sensible decision about her living and working arrangements after all. At least now he would not have her wellbeing on

Pulling out a pine chair, Marianne sat at the table and poured a glass of orange juice. It was cold, tangy and refreshing. She could almost sense it doing her good. Good food had been low down on her agenda since Donal had died, and she hadn't really taken care of herself as well as she might. But now that she'd changed her situation things would be different, she vowed.

Recalling what Ricardo had said about his employer still sleeping, her slim brows drew together. 'Not that it's particularly late, but does Mr De Souza normally rise much later than you in the morning?' she asked.

Her companion went briefly still, but did not turn round. A second later she saw him flip the bacon in the pan with a steel spatula in an expert move that wouldn't shame a top chef.

'Sometimes yes, some times no,' he answered. 'You will see.' Scooping the eggs and bacon onto a heated plate that he retrieved from the oven with a striped padded mitt, he brought it over to the table and placed it in front of Marianne. 'Be careful...the plate is hot. Enjoy!'

'Thank you...I will.'

'I will make some coffee for us, then we can talk about your new job.'

'Okay.'

'You do not mind coffee? Perhaps you would prefer tea?'

About to fork some silky, perfectly cooked fried egg into her mouth, Marianne gave him a grateful shrug. 'Coffee is fine, thanks. By the way—this looks fantastic. Have you always been able to cook?'

'I learned at my mother's knee, as did all my brothers and sisters. Now, eat. I will make the coffee.'

From time to time, in between chewing mouthfuls of delicious food, Marianne watched the tall young man move about the kitchen as though it had always been his natural domain. Clearly domesticity neither fazed him nor emasculated him one iota. It was swiftly becoming apparent to her that he was perfectly comfortable in his own skin whatever he was doing and already she intuited how fiercely loyal he was to his employer.

Continued private speculation made her wonder why Eduardo De Souza inspired such loyalty. Her curiosity surrounding the man increased. For instance, how come he didn't appear to have a wife? *Perhaps he did, and she had opted to stay in Brazil...or maybe he was divorced?*

Noticing that Marianne had finished eating, Ricardo whipped her plate away, leaving her with a cafetière of freshly brewed coffee, some sugar crystals in a tiny Willow pattern porcelain bowl, a matching jug of milk and a mug. He sat down opposite her, still—to her amusement—wearing his striped apron.

'Now we will talk,' he declared, pouring some delicious-smelling coffee into their waiting mugs.

'Has Mr De Souza had a house keeper before?'

'Yes, in Rio de Janeiro where we are from, but not in this house. Here he hires outside people to come in and clean. It is very good that you are here, Marianne. I hope you will stay.'

At the doubt she detected in his accented voice, her curiosity was provoked even further. 'Why would I not stay?' she asked.

'I only meant that I hope you do not find the work too hard or the house too...too *alone* and wish to be some where else. That is all.'

'I see.' Focusing her hazel gaze on the handsome bronzed face before her, Marianne knew that was not what he'd meant at all, but decided to let it pass. 'And Mr De Souza...does he work from home?' she enquired.

agreed. When he left me the house in his will his children con tested it, insisting that because he had been ill he couldn't have been in his right mind to do such a thing.' Her expression was anguished for a moment.

'I never asked Donal—my husband—to leave me anything. I'd made my own way before I met him and I would again. But he made me promise that I would hold onto the house so I would have some sense of security. Life was very difficult for a while after he went...dealing with grief and loss, I mean. The legal wrangles over the house made it even more challenging. I finally decided that I didn't want to be in a battle any more. More than anything I wanted peace. So I wrote to Michael and Victoria, his children, and told them they could have the house *and* the money. In the same letter I returned the keys. So you see...when I told you I needed a job and a home...it was perfectly true. I wanted to tell you before, but somehow it never seemed to be the appropriate time.'

Rubbing at his temples, Eduardo frowned. Not one in *ten* women would have done what Marianne had done—given away the house that was legally hers, leaving herself with nothing. He was sure of it. What would her husband have made of such a gesture? he mused, more disturbed than he cared to be at the thought of her being married to a man more than twice her age. More startling still was the idea that they had *both* lost their spouses. Both had experienced the numbing dark realm of bereavement. Although perhaps the expected loss of Marianne's husband due to his illness had been a little less hard to take than the shattering blow Eduardo had been dealt.

Not wanting to revisit such sombre recollections any more tonight, he suddenly realised that the woman in front of him displayed all the signs of being dead on her feet from fatigue—and he was the cause.

'Go to bed,' he told her curtly. 'You have an early start in the morning.'

'Please don't think I came here under false pretences...I would hate that. I'm not a liar. When you left me your card and told me if I ever changed my mind about needing a job and a home I should ring you, I look you at your word.'

'And I honoured my word, did I not? Now...you have done quite enough for one night, playing *both* nurse *and* house maid, and you clearly need your sleep.'

'What about you?'

As Marianne stepped towards Eduardo her question was suspended on air that was subtly but exquisitely charged with an awareness that made his breath slow inside his chest and his mouth dry. He could not take his eyes off her. Her loveliness mesmerised him. With her long hair spilling over her shoulders like dark molten honey, her waist impossibly small, and her form so slender even in the unflattering dressing gown she was a sight that would make most men long to possess her. Silently he echoed that longing. But instead of surrendering to his great desire to hold her, instinctively Eduardo tensed. Desperately he wanted her to come closer, but at the same time the polar extremes of honour and self-loathing were causing him to contain his yearning and pray for it to dissipate.

'What *about* me?' he echoed, gravel-voiced.

'You need your sleep too. Please let me go and get you that hot drink or some brandy.'

'I have survived nights like these before *without* the need for hot drinks or brandy, and I will do so again. Please just do as I say and go back to bed.'

'All right, then—if you're sure?'

Deliberately not meeting her gaze, Eduardo glanced down at his neatly bandaged hand instead and said nothing.

lowering himself into it. 'I am a little tired of my own company just now. The snow is starting to melt at last, I see.'

'I know. But it's still freezing outside.' Following the direction of his brooding gaze out of the window, Marianne kept her voice deliberately neutral, intuitively guessing that it was probably wise not to mention last night.

But then, just as she was about to fill the kettle with water, she glimpsed the reddened gash on his hand and realised he'd removed the make shift bandage she'd made.

'How's that cut this morning?' she asked. 'I hope it wasn't too painful during the night?'

'It is nothing. I have already got ten about it.'

'I'll check it again after you've had your coffee' Marianne said lightly, turning on the tap, filling the kettle and inserting the plug into the wall socket.

'There is no need for you to trouble yourself any further about it.'

Did he dislike the idea of her touching him? Marianne wondered. And she was unable to stem the hurt that thought produced.

'Well...perhaps you're ready for some break fast, then? If you'd like something cooked it's no trouble.'

'No food. Just coffee.'

As if realising he had sounded a little curt, Eduardo softened his reply with a smile. It was as though she'd been given the most monumental gift. Marianne sensed pleasure gush through her blood stream like hot water springs, and to hide her burning cheeks she turned away to scoop pungent dark roasted coffee into the cafetière and place a matching cup and saucer on a tray.

'Marianne?'

'Yes?'

'I was thinking that maybe you'd agree to take a walk with me after I have had my coffee. Up towards the forest, perhaps.'

'Are you feeling up to going so far?'

Turning, he was just in time to catch Eduardo grimace, as if the last thing he wanted was to be reminded of his infirmity, and Marianne could have bitten out her tongue at her tact less ness.

'If I was not feeling up to it I would not have suggested it,' he replied, clearly attempting to quell any irritation inside him and making a deliberate effort to sound more agreeable instead.

'In that case, I'll be happy to go with you,' she told him, turning back to the kettle and pouring boiling water into the waiting cafetière...

In silence they made their way across the bridge, then onto the path that wound its way into the dense, still snow-covered forest. Now and again Marianne glanced to her side, to make sure Eduardo was not in difficulty, but she soon got the message that it would be unwise to display too much concern. Just a glimmer of a warning glance was all it took, so Marianne walked onwards without comment, her booted feet crunching on deep snow that was still treacherously slippery in places, the freezing air caressing her face with the cold kiss of winter at its deepest.

On either side of them tall trees rose up like dark walls hemming them in, and the path seemed to thin to a bare ribbon in places. She knew that, much as she might like to wander off at will, it would not be a good idea on a day with conditions as potentially treacherous as this. As soon as the lighter, milder days of spring arrived, then it would be an

‘Doing what? It would have to be something in which I would not constantly be distracted by you and want to touch you!’ Eduardo admitted with a wolfish grin.

Sensing her whole body glow with pleasure, Marianne smiled. ‘I see you have a chess board...do you play?’

‘Does it rain in the Amazon?’

Folding his muscular arms across his chest, he chuckled. He had the most mischievous look on his face that she had ever seen, and it made her tummy imitate the motion of a yo-yo.

‘What are you suggesting? That we spend the evening playing chess? You think you can keep me occupied with your game for long enough so that we won’t have to find something else to do?’

‘Wait and see. I might just surprise you!’

‘*Namorado*...you have already surprised me more than I ever could have believed possible.’

Looking as if he would once again draw her into his arms, Eduardo dropped his hands to his hips as if to regretfully contain the urge. Marianne chose that same moment to head for the door.

‘It’s a deal, then. I’ll see you later,’ she told him shyly as she let herself out.

Eduardo discovered that amongst the things he was starting to love about Marianne was one of the most relatively innocuous things of all: *watching her concentrate*. Many times during their now nearly four-hour chess game he had seen her exhibit myriad different expressions—sighs, pouts, chewing of the lips and thumb-nails. His favourite was the way that little crease would appear in the flawless skin between her brows—usually just before she had achieved a move with the most lethal result—before relaxing again as though it had never been.

Having always loved the game, Eduardo had thought of himself as a fairly accomplished player—but after four hours of battling it out with Marianne she was beating him hollow. And the most surprising thing of all was that he didn’t even *care*. Playing the ultimate game of strategy with his engaging companion had been so fascinating, so absorbing and enjoyable, that he had simply forgotten about everything else and relaxed. So much so that she had just declared check mate.

‘You’ve got a killer instinct.’

‘Are you upset that I won?’

‘Not at all. You were at least a couple of moves ahead of me every time. Watching you play was like observing a general conducting a military campaign! Who would have thought that behind those pretty quixotic eyes lurks such a calculatingly organised mind? You deserved to win. Who taught you to play so well?’

‘My husband...we spent many hours playing when he was confined to bed because of his illness.’

Those two words ‘husband’ and ‘bed’ were enough to deflate Eduardo’s newfound good humour as emphatically as a bucket of ice water poured over his head.

‘You said he was much older than you?’ he murmured, his glance flicking jealously over her lovely features in the glow of the fire light.

‘Yes...he was fifty-nine. I told you.’

‘So...you like older men as opposed to younger ones?’

‘Do you have any more questions? If you’re finished acting as some kind of inquisitor then I think I’ll go back to my room!’

‘Marianne?’

Unbelievably his hand was sliding round her jaw, tipping her face towards him. He was definitely *not* behaving like a man about to reject her, she saw, and her heart began to race.

‘I am sorry that you were denied the pleasure and comfort of intimacy with your husband...but I am *honoured* that you would consider giving this great gift to me.’

‘You—you still want me?’ Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper.

‘More than ever.’

He demonstrated the fact by claiming her mouth in a kiss that was so voracious and commanding Marianne thought her already weakened limbs might fold beneath her like some delicate piece of origami. Yet under lying the sensuous caress the feeling persisted in her that there was a measure of distinct control there too—as if he didn’t want to scare or over whelm her. Surely it was *rare* to meet a man so mindful of a woman’s sensitivity that he would curtail the strength of his own desire in deference to her in experience? She could only conclude that Eduardo De Souza was a man in a million.

But secretly she *wanted* him to lose control with her, she realised. She was certain that she could match his passion, and give him pleasure too...the pleasure he in explicably so often seemed to deny himself.

Withdrawing her lips from his, Marianne studied him longingly from beneath her lashes. ‘I want you too, Eduardo, so you don’t have to treat me as if I’m made of glass. I know that whatever happens you won’t hurt me.’

Even as the shy confession left her lips her blood was pounding with a primal yearning to be even closer to him. Everything about this man seemed to inflame her, making her behave in a way that was quite unlike her normal self. He growled and pulled her hard against him. Sighing, Marianne found her arms round his neck to steady herself. Engulfed by heat and longing she knew there was no one inch of her entire body where Eduardo’s kisses or touch would not be an utter delight to her.

She’d been alone for too long, and silently she admitted that she had a great need to be held, touched, tasted, even driven a little crazy by a lover...someone who would help her forget her painful past and make her think only of today instead.

Now, coming into contact with the intimate caress of the proud male erection beneath the smooth silk of his pyjamas, Marianne found her hips impelled hard against Eduardo’s, so that she was left in no doubt as to the extent of his desire for her. His hands shaped her body through the material of her gown, following every line of every curve as though it were imperative he discovered every part of her.

Riveted by the feverish bolt of desire that surged through her, Marianne became aware that the edge of the bed was only bare inches away. The room seemed to spin dizzily for a moment as Eduardo guided her back against it, his touch gentle yet commanding.

‘I want this first time to be un for get table for you, *namorada*...’ His eyes darkened with feeling. ‘All you have to do is lie still and let me pleasure you.’

Gathering the smooth crisp cotton of her night gown as she sat on the bed, he lifted it over her head and discarded it. Marianne’s long rippling hair fell in a honey-coloured cloud round her bare shoulders and goose flesh chased across her skin as the cool night air hit her. She saw the appreciative gleam in Eduardo’s avid gaze as his glance travelled slowly up and down her body, and now it wasn’t just the cool air that made her shiver.

‘Eduardo...’ Her voice thick with emotion, she uttered his name. His dazed, aroused gaze seared her with palpable heat as he rose to join her. With an awed look Marianne placed her hands either side of the stunning masculine face that she knew would be imprinted on her heart and mind for ever. ‘That was wonderful.’

‘It was my pleasure.’

‘What can I— How can I—? I mean, now I want to make *you* feel good too.’

He chuckled softly. ‘Believe me, my angel, I have not felt this good in a long, long time! But do not worry...we are not finished yet.’

Although his glance was wry, there was deep purpose in it. Sitting back a little, he started to ease the navy silk pyjama pants he still wore down over his arrow-straight hips.

Watching him, Marianne felt her mouth go dry. It was a revelation to her that a woman could lust after a man with the same fervent desire with which a man could want a woman. But suddenly she remembered his injured leg and, concerned that he might be in pain and keeping it from her, she frowned and leaned towards him, her intention to assist him in whatever way she could.

‘Be careful!’ she en treated as she saw him briefly wince. But never had a man wanted help *less* than Eduardo did right then, she saw. His look no longer wry, he threw her a brief hard glare. ‘I invited you to my room to be my lover tonight...not my nurse! I am no invalid who needs your care and attention as your husband did!’

Stung by the harsh ness of his reply, Marianne felt her cheeks burn hotly. ‘Why do you have to be like this?’ She made a little motion of despair with her hands. ‘I know very well you’re not an invalid. You’re—you’re everything I ever dreamt a lover would be, Eduardo.’

‘Then come over here.’

She didn’t even have a moment’s hesitation. His body was still filled with languorous heat from his love-making, and she had a great need to give him pleasure too. She knew that that was his genuine desire, so his huskily voiced command could do nothing but thrill her.

He tipped up her chin. ‘I did not mean to scold you,’ he said gruffly. ‘Sometimes I just react too quickly. Perhaps you would like to help me in another way?’

The glimpse of despair she’d seen in his haunting blue eyes had now been replaced by a spine-tingling boyish grin, and Marianne saw that he was opening a small foil packet and extracting the contents. Her heart skipped a beat as he looked her straight in the eyes.

‘I know you have never done this before, but I will guide you if you like.’

‘All right.’ Her voice had dropped to half its normal strength.

Revealing himself in all his magnificent glory, Eduardo guided her hands to the latex protection and helped her sheathe him. Touching and seeing him like this, feeling the silky hardness and the heat that radiated so powerfully beneath her fingers, Marianne couldn’t help but tremble. Inside, a tumult of feelings flooded her. Yes, she was nervous—but she was undeniably excited too. *She was also a little concerned that there might be some pain.* Above all she was grateful that her lover had thought about the practicalities of the situation—because, to her shame, *she* hadn’t.

‘It will be all right *namorada*...trust me,’ Eduardo soothed. ‘I will be as gentle as I can.’

Sitting astride her hips, he bent his head to claim another passionate, hungry kiss. The harsh graze of the stubble round his jaw scratched her a little, but Marianne didn’t care. Lost in the sheer enjoyment of what was happening, she jerked as she sensed Eduardo’s

some tips on how best to handle it. It was a powerful model that she had desired for ages. I'd had my doubts about buying it for her, but somehow I ended up doing just that.'

Unable to suppress the flash of guilt that jolted through him whenever he recalled Eliana pleading with him to let her have the car, knowing that he should not have allowed her to drive it until she had had more experience with it, Eduardo winced. There was a momentary ache behind his eyes.

'Anyway...when it was time for us to return home, she insisted I let her drive. Everything was fine until we were about ten minutes from our house.' Swallowing hard over what felt like dozens of tiny hot prickles layering his throat, he grimaced. 'There was a patch of oil on the road and the car spun out of control. I yelled at Eliana, to tell her what to do, and leaned across to help. But she was screaming in fright—her hands practically frozen on the steering wheel. It all happened so fast. We were on a mountain road and we hit a barrier at speed. She was killed outright. I lost consciousness. When I briefly woke up it was to find myself in the emergency room at the hospital, being prepared to be taken down to the operating theatre.'

'And after the operation—that's when they told you about your wife?'

'Yes.' Eduardo sighed.

With a distressed sound, Marianne laid her hand on his arm, gently stroking it over his skin, her eyes shimmering. 'It must have been awful for you to lose someone you loved very much so suddenly like that—and in such a terrible way.'

'Yes. There was a time when we were closer than close, but...'

'But what?'

'I—it doesn't matter right now. What matters right now is you and I, *namorada*. I am tired of dwelling on the past. Today is a new day and I have enjoyed the most satisfactory of nights...in *more* ways than one. That being the case, I want to enjoy the day equally as satisfactorily.'

The glance he gave Marianne was full of meaning. But at that exact moment there was the sound of a car coming up the drive, followed by the front door closing.

'Ricardo,' Eduardo identified, tunnelling his fingers through his already sleep-dishevelled hair. He looked over at her ruefully. 'He must have returned from his trip. I will have to see him for a few moments.'

'Well, then...I'd better get back to my room and take a shower before I see to break fast.'

'I will talk to Ricardo down stairs in the sitting room. Give me a couple of minutes, then you can leave—yes?'

'All right.'

Quickly dressing, Eduardo sensed Marianne's avid gaze on him. Briefly, and perhaps vainly, he wished that his body was as it had been before the accident...when he had taken much pride and pleasure in the supreme level of fitness he had achieved through running on the beach, swimming, surfing and working out in his own private gymnasium. *How did Marianne perceive him as he was now?* he wondered. Did she see a still vital and fit man in his prime, or did she see a man who had too easily succumbed to uninterest and despair about his future because of the physical ravages and mental agony suffered after his accident? Then he remembered what she had said about age and looks or any of that not being important—it was the *person* that mattered, none of the rest.

Eduardo wished no more interruptions were possible—either from distressing memories of the past or someone needing his attention. Because what he wanted more than anything else in the world right then was to spend the day alone with Marianne—to keep her preoccupied and tangled in his silken sheets, to make wild passionate love to her until, sated and sleepy, once again she fell asleep in his arms...

the circumstances that had made him seek refuge abroad, apprehensive too. The tension in him had already been heightened back at the airport, when he had been hiring the car. If he had thought to slip quietly back into Rio unnoticed then he had definitely deluded himself. The young man taking his details had knowingly narrowed his gaze at the mere sight of Eduardo, then proceeded to sorrowfully express his condolences on his wife's passing.

Eliana had been a well known soap star in Brazil, and inevitably her face and Eduardo's had been instantly recognisable wherever they went. Graciously thanking him for his kind words, Eduardo had known the man's obvious interest had aroused Marianne's curiosity, but he had chosen not to explain what all the fuss was about right then. *There would be time enough once they reached his beach front house in Ipanema for him to tell her about his deceased wife's celebrity and consequently his own.* Yes, and to tell her that philanthropy had not been his *sole* occupation.

There were other things he wanted to share with her too...more personal revelations that should be revealed... But how? He had kept his thoughts about his marriage and the accident to himself for so long that they had turned into a debilitating and heavy suitcase that he permanently carried, and unhappily he had got used to the weight. Since it had begun to dawn on Eduardo that it was a terrible added burden on top of the tragedy itself, and that he might finally be free of it if he shared it with Marianne, he had become determined to do exactly that.

But his main aim in returning home was to start picking up the threads of a life that had been deeply scarred, almost beyond bearing, and at last start to live again. Somehow...by some miracle...he had started to believe that he deserved that chance—and Marianne was a big part of that miracle. That was why he had chosen to return first to Ipanema, rather than his estate in the countryside. No more would he hide, or shut himself away from the rest of the world like some wounded hermit.

The other reason for coming to the livelier part of Rio was for his companion's benefit. For a girl so young and beautiful she too had had her share of tragedy, and he hoped that with a little luxurious living, pampering and sunshine she would blossom. Then slowly, given time, the memory of her husband's premature death and her distressing family life would fade. What Eduardo hoped most of all was that she would begin to see the benefit of being with him long-term and decide to stay. He knew it would sound unbelievably macho and possessive, should he speak the words out loud, but he honestly felt that Marianne *belonged* to him now—it was just plain unthinkable that she should live alone, or with someone else other than *him*.

Adjusting his dark sun glasses to fit better over the slight bump in the bridge of his nose, he grimaced as she sat quietly beside him in the passenger seat, staring out at the long line of traffic in front of them. She sighed.

'I am afraid it is always like this during rush-hour,' he told her. 'I should have timed our arrival better, but I'm afraid I took the first flight available. Do not mind all the waving of hands and passionate exchanges of words from the other drivers. It looks more dramatic than it really is. We Brazilians are a nation of soapwatchers—or telenovelas, as they are known here. We make no apology for enjoying a little drama in our lives! Some might call it life imitating art.'

'Are you all right?'

Her quietly voiced question cut through the nervous static in Eduardo's brain and acted like a lifeline. Becoming accustomed to Marianne's uncanny perception where his feelings were concerned, he should have known his enforced jollity would not fool her. Now, instead of dismissing her concern as he might well have done not so very long ago, he actually *welcomed* it. *But then the more time he spent with this intriguing and lovely young*

woman the more Eduardo found himself becoming infatuated with her. He knew that he would not have returned to Brazil at this stage without her.

‘Yes, I am fine.’

‘You *can* talk to me, you know. You don’t have to pretend you’re feeling fine if you’re not. I realise that returning home for you will have its challenges as well as its pleasures, and I want to help make things easier if I can.’

‘You have already made it easier by coming with me. I am very glad that I was able to persuade you.’

‘Like it was difficult!’ She grinned. Her dazzling eyes were concealed behind her sun glasses but her pretty mouth—sweetly shaped and devoid of lipstick—lifted in a wry curve. ‘To leave the British winter behind and fly out to Rio, where the sun is shining and the beaches are legendary? Even an unsophisticated girl like me wouldn’t refuse *that* kind of persuasion!’

Eduardo stole a long, appreciative glance at her in the now near-stationary traffic. She wore a simple white sundress...the only summer dress she owned, she’d confessed...and although it was a loose non-figure-hugging style, like the Victorian night gown she wore to bed, it was unbelievably sexy on Marianne’s lithe slim figure, with her long hair flowing down her back.

Feeling his limbs pleasantly flood with languorous heat, Eduardo did not fight the surge of desire that gripped him—he simply enjoyed it. All last night, until they had risen in the early hours to leave for the airport, Marianne had stoked the fire in him to fever pitch—as she had on the many previous nights they’d been together—and he had barely been able to keep his hands off her. Now, as he gazed at her, seeing the sun turn the colours in her hair into a blaze of honey and gold, the fire that she aroused in him simmered again. Impatience flashed through him that they were still so far from the house, where he would at last be able to get her alone and have her to himself.

‘I like it very much that you are unsophisticated, *namorada*. You have no idea of the power you have at your fingertips by that fact alone!’

‘Power?’ Behind the huge sunglasses that dwarfed her elfin face, Marianne frowned.

‘Yes—power. A man would have to travel a long way to find a woman as innocent and beautiful as you are, Marianne, and I mean that as a *compliment*. You have no idea how tired men can get of women who feel they have to behave like men to get on in life. It is completely refreshing to meet someone like you...someone who doesn’t care about climbing some career ladder but instead is willing to follow her passions!’

‘We’re moving again,’ she said softly, and Eduardo turned his attention back to the road and the now steadily moving traffic.

And if his heart leapt and his pulse quickened at the idea that they might get home sooner than he had first believed...then who could blame him?

Everything Marianne had heard was true. The beaches *were* spectacular. Long white bands hugging the coastline and shimmering in the blazing sun next to a jewel-like sea. And Eduardo’s perfect modernist house, with its pristine white walls and ready access to Ipanema Beach, was the quintessential accompaniment to such spectacular appeal.

As he assisted her from the car, she gazed out at the horizon of white sand and glistening sun-kissed water, hardly able to believe that she’d made the switch from white ness of a completely different kind—deep snow and frost that had at one point seemed it would stay for ever—to this...this *paradise* on earth.