ANNE MATHER

The Virgin's Seduction

MILLS & BOON

Anne Mather

The Virgin's Seduction

«HarperCollins»

Mather A.

The Virgin's Seduction / A. Mather — «HarperCollins»,

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.The looks of an angel, the charm of the devil… Eve Robertson’s quiet life in the country takes an unexpected turn when charismatic Jake Romero arrives! Eve is desperate to put her turbulent past behind her, and doesn’t need such a dangerous distraction.Jake soon makes it clear he wants innocent Eve – and his touch leaves her aching for more, but her secrets hold her back. How long can she resist Jake's intense, exotic brand of seduction…?

© Mather A.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Anne Mather 6
CONTENTS 7
CHAPTER ONE 8
CHAPTER TWO 13
CHAPTER THREE 19
CHAPTER FOUR 24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 27

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 Virgin's Seduction

Anne Mather

www.millsandboon.co.uk

CONTENTS

Cover
About the Author
Title Page
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Copyright

CHAPTER ONE

ELLIE came to find her as Eve was shovelling manure out of Storm's stall. The work should have been done that morning, but Mick hadn't turned in today and Eve had offered to help out.

Nevertheless, Eve felt a little self-conscious when the old lady raised her handkerchief to her nose before saying, 'Come outside. I want to talk to you.'

Eve didn't argue. You didn't argue with her grandmother, and the old lady's cane tap-tapped its way back along the aisle between the row of empty stalls. Meanwhile, Eve jammed the fork she was using into her wheelbarrow and, after checking to see that she had no dirt on her hands, followed Ellie out into the crisp evening air.

It was November, and the scent of woodsmoke banished the smell of the stables. Already there was a tracing of frost on the trees in the copse, and the lights that surrounded the stable yard had a sparkling brilliance.

'Cassie's coming tomorrow.'

The old lady waited only long enough for Eve to emerge from the doorway before making her blunt announcement, and her granddaughter's stomach tightened. But she knew better than to show any obvious reaction, and with a shrug of her thin shoulders she said, 'Don't you mean Cassandra?'

'No, I mean Cassie,' retorted the old lady shortly, wrapping the woollen pashmina she was wearing over her tweed jacket tighter about her ample form. 'I christened my daughter Cassie, not Cassandra. If she wants to call herself by that damn fool name, I don't have to follow suit.'

Eve acknowledged this with a wry arching of her dark brows, but she thought it was significant that Ellie was wearing the wrap Cassie had given her several years ago. Was this a sign that she'd forgiven her daughter at last? That the rapidly approaching demands of old age had reminded her that her time was slipping away?

'How long is she coming for?' asked Eve casually, aware that, whatever Ellie said, this was not going to be an easy time for any of them. She and Cassandra could never be friends, and it might be easier all round if she simply moved into a hotel for a couple of weeks.

'She didn't say.' Ellie's tone was grumpy. 'As usual, I'm supposed to accommodate myself to her needs. Oh, and by the way, she's bringing some man with her. I don't know who he is, but knowing Cassie he's probably someone who can help her with her career.'

'Oh, well…' Eve tried to sound philosophical. 'If she's bringing a boyfriend I doubt if she'll be staying long. He must have commitments; a business, maybe.' She tugged her lower lip between her teeth. 'What do you want me to do?'

Ellie's eyes, which were extraordinarily like her granddaughter's, narrowed in surprise. 'Why should I want you to do anything?' She gave a shiver as the wind, which had a decidedly northerly bite to it, whistled across the stable yard. 'I just thought I ought to—to—'

'Warn me?'

'To tell you,' she insisted tersely. 'If I could put her off, I would.'

'No, you wouldn't.' Eve's tone was dry. She wasn't taken in by her grandmother's last remark. 'You're really delighted she's coming to see you, even if she is using this place as her own private hotel. As usual.'

'Eve—'

'Look, I understand where you're coming from, Ellie. I do. So—would you like me to find somewhere else to stay while she's here? I'm sure Harry—'

'We'll leave the Reverend Murray's name out of this.' The old lady looked scandalised at her suggestion. 'You can't stay with him. It wouldn't be seemly. In any case, this is your home. I don't want you to move out.'

'Okay.'

Eve was dismissive, but the old lady wasn't finished. 'This is Northumberland,' she said, with a quaver to her voice. 'Not north London. You're not living in some smelly squat now.'

That was a low blow, but it was a sign that her grandmother wasn't as blasé about Cassie's visit as she pretended. Ellie seldom if ever mentioned where Eve had been living when Ellie had arrived to rescue her, and she could see from the old lady's expression that she already regretted speaking so bluntly. But Ellie must remember that the last time Cassie was here she and Eve had barely said a word to one another.

As if needing some reassurance, she added, 'Are you saying you don't want to be here while Cassie's staying?' All the ambivalence she was feeling about the visit showed in her lined, anxious face. 'Because if you are—'

'I just thought it might be easier all round if I left you to it,' Eve muttered unwillingly. She didn't want to hurt the woman who was her closest relative and her friend.

'Well, it isn't,' declared her grandmother, pushing the hand that wasn't holding her cane into her pocket for warmth. 'So we'll say no more about Henry Murray. And it's too cold to stand here gossiping, anyway. We'll talk about this again later. Over supper, perhaps.'

But they wouldn't, Eve knew. Her grandmother had spoken, and in her own way she was just as selfish as Cassie. Oh, she would never have abandoned her child at birth, or ignored its existence for the first fifteen years of its life. But she liked her own way, and Eve rarely felt strongly enough about anything to argue with her.

'You'll be in soon, won't you?' Ellie asked now, and Eve nodded.

'As soon as I've got Storm back in his stall,' she promised.

'Good.'

Her grandmother looked as if she would have liked to say something more, but thought better of it. With a farewell lift of her cane, she trudged away towards the lights of the house.

The hired Aston Martin ate up the miles between London and the north of England. Jake liked motorway driving, mostly because the journey—this journey—would be over that much quicker. He hadn't wanted to come, and the sooner this trip was over the better he'd like it.

'Shall we stop and have some lunch?'

Cassandra was being determinedly cheerful, but for once he didn't respond to her lively chatter. This was wrong, he thought. He shouldn't be here. Bringing him to meet her mother smacked of a relationship they simply didn't have.

Oh, they'd been spending time together, off and on, for the past six months, but it wasn't serious. Well, in his case it wasn't, anyway. He had no intention of marrying again. Or of setting up home with someone like Cassandra, he conceded ruefully. He liked her company now and then, but he knew that living with her would drive him up the wall.

'Did you hear what I said, darling?'

Cassandra was determined to have an answer, and Jake turned his head to give her a fleeting look. 'I heard,' he said. 'But there's nowhere to eat around here.'

'There's a service area coming up,' protested his companion. 'There, you see: it's only another five miles.'

'I'm not in the mood for soggy fries and burgers,' Jake told her drily. He glanced at the thin gold watch circling his wrist. 'It's only a quarter of one. We should be there in less than an hour.'

'I doubt it.'

Cassandra was sulky, and once again Jake permitted himself a glance in her direction. 'You did say it was only a couple hundred miles,' he reminded her. 'As I see it, we've covered at least three-quarters of the journey already.'

Cassandra gave a careless shrug. 'I may have underestimated a little.'

Jake's fingers tightened on the wheel. 'Did you?'

‘Well, yes.’ Cassandra turned towards him now, all eager for his forgiveness. ‘But I knew you’d never agree if I told you it was over three hundred miles from London.’

Her fingers slipped over the sleeve of his sweater, seeking the point where the fine black wool gave way to lean, darkly tanned flesh. The tips of her fingers feathered over the dark hairs that escaped the cuff of his sweater, but he didn’t respond to the intimacy of her touch. Three hundred miles, he was thinking. That meant they had at least a couple of hours to go. It also meant they would have to stop somewhere for Cassandra to toy with a salad and sip a skinny latte. Although she rarely ate a proper meal, she insisted on drinking numerous cups of coffee every chance she got.

‘You do forgive me, don’t you, darling?’ She had nestled closer now and, in spite of the obstacle the centre console presented, she laid her head on his shoulder. ‘So—can we stop soon? I’m dying for the loo.’

Faced with that request, Jake knew he didn’t have any option, and although he didn’t say anything he indicated left and pulled off the motorway into the service area she’d pointed out. It was busy. Even in November, people were always going somewhere, and Jake had to park at the far side of the ground. He just hoped the car would still be there when they came back.

‘This is fun, isn’t it?’ Cassandra said, after they had served themselves and occupied a table for two by the window. As usual, she’d helped herself to a salad, carefully avoiding all the mayonnaise-covered options and sticking to lettuce, tomato and peppers. She sipped at the bottled water she’d had to choose when no skinny latte was available. ‘It gives us a bit more time on our own.’

‘We could have spent time alone if we’d stayed in town,’ Jake reminded her flatly. He parted the two slices of his sandwich to discover the almost transparent piece of ham covering the bread. When would the British learn that a ham sandwich needed a proper filling? he wondered gloomily, as a wave of nostalgia for his homeland swept over him. What he wouldn’t give to be back in the Caribbean right now.

‘I know,’ Cassandra said, reaching across the table to cover his hand with hers. Long scarlet nails dug into the skin of his wrist. ‘But we’ll have some fun, I promise.’

Jake doubted that. From what Cassandra had told him, her mother was already well into her seventies. Cassandra had been a late baby, she’d explained, and her brother, her only sibling, was at least fifteen years older than she was.

Jake wasn’t absolutely sure how old Cassandra was. In her late thirties, he imagined, which made her half a dozen years older than he was, though that had never been a problem. Besides, in television or theatre age was always a moot point. Actresses were as old as they appeared, and some of them got ingénue roles well into their forties.

‘So, tell me about Watersmeet,’ he said, trying to be positive. ‘Who lives there besides your mother? You said it’s quite a large property. I imagine she has people who work for her, doesn’t she?’

‘Oh…’ Cassandra drew her full lips together. ‘Well, there’s Mrs Blackwood. She’s Mummy’s housekeeper. And old Bill Trivett. He looks after the garden and grounds. We used to have several stable hands when Mummy bred horses, but now all the animals have been sold, so I imagine they’re not needed any more.’

Jake frowned. ‘Don’t you know?’

Cassandra’s pale, delicate features took on a little colour. ‘It—it has been some time since I’ve been home,’ she said defensively. Then, seeing his expression, she hurried on, ‘I have been busy, darling. And, as you’re finding out, Northumberland is not the easiest place to get to.’

‘There are planes,’ Jake commented, taking a bite out of his sandwich, relieved to find that at least the bread was fresh.

‘Air fares are expensive,’ insisted Cassandra, not altogether truthfully. ‘And I wouldn’t like to scrounge from my mother.’

‘If you say so.’

Jake wasn't prepared to argue with her, particularly about something that wasn't his problem. If she chose to neglect her mother, that was her affair.

'Doesn't Mrs Wilkes have a companion?' he asked now, his mind running on the old lady's apparent isolation, and once again he saw the colour come and go in Cassandra's face.

'Well, there's Eve,' she said reluctantly, without elaborating. 'And my mother's surname is Robertson, not Wilkes.'

'Really?'

Jake regarded her enquiringly, and with evident unwillingness she was obliged to explain. 'I changed my name when I moved to London,' she said tersely. 'Lots of actors do the same.'

'Mmm.' Jake accepted this. But then, because he was intrigued by her apparent reticence, he added, 'And what about Eve? Is she some elderly contemporary of your mother's?' Faint amusement touched the corners of his thin mouth. 'Doesn't she approve of you, or what?'

'Heavens, no!' Cassandra spoke irritably now, and he wondered what he'd said to arouse this reaction. 'Eve is—a distant relative, that's all. Mummy brought her to live with her—oh, perhaps ten years ago.'

'As a companion?'

'Partly.' Cassandra huffed. 'She actually works as an infant teacher at the village school.'

Jake made no response to this, but he absorbed both what she'd told him and what she hadn't. It seemed from his observations that Cassandra resented this woman's presence in her home. Perhaps she was jealous of the relationship she had with Cassandra's mother. Possibly the woman was younger, too, though that was less certain. Whatever, Jake would welcome her existence. At least there would be someone else to dilute the ambivalence of his own situation.

They reached the village of Falconbridge in the late afternoon. The traffic on the Newcastle by-pass had been horrendous, due to an accident between a car and a wagon. Luckily it appeared that no one had been hurt, but it had reduced the carriageway to one lane in their direction.

The last few miles of the journey had been through the rolling countryside of Redesdale, with the Cheviot Hills in the distance turning a dusky purple in the fading light. Despite his misgivings about the trip, Jake had to admit the place had a certain mystery about it, and he could quite believe Roman legions still stalked these hills after dark.

A latent interest in his surroundings was sparked, and he felt a twinge of impatience when Cassandra shivered and hugged herself as if she was cold. 'This place,' she muttered. 'I can't imagine why anyone would want to stay here. Give me bright lights and civilised living every time.'

'I think it's beautiful,' said Jake, slowing to negotiate one of the blind summits that were a frequent hazard of the road. 'I know a lot of people who live in London who would love to leave the rat race and come here. Only not everyone has the luxury of such an escape.'

Cassandra cast him a disbelieving look. 'You're not trying to tell me that you'd prefer to live here instead of San Felipe?'

'No.' Jake was honest. Much as he liked to travel, there was nowhere quite as appealing as his island home. 'But I was talking about London,' he reminded her. 'You have to admit, there are too many people in too small a space.'

'Well, I like it.' Cassandra wasn't persuaded. 'When you work in the media, as I do, you need to be at the heart of things.'

'Yeah.'

Jake conceded the point, but in the six months since he'd known her Cassandra had only had one acting role that he knew of. And then it had only been an advertisement for some new face cream, though she'd told him that advertising work certainly helped to pay the bills.

They approached the village over an old stone structure spanning a rushing stream. The original Falcon Bridge, he concluded, glad they hadn't encountered another vehicle on its narrow pass. Beyond,

a row of grey stone cottages edged the village street, lights glinting from windows, smoke curling from chimneys into the crisp evening air.

'My mother's house is on the outskirts of the village,' Cassandra said, realising she would have to give him directions. 'Just follow the road through and you'll see it. It's set back, behind some trees.'

'Set back' was something of an understatement, Jake found. Turning between stone gateposts, they drove over a quarter of a mile before reaching the house itself. Banks of glossy rhododendrons reared at one side of the drive, while tall poplars, bare and skeletal in the half-light, lined the other.

Watersmeet looked solid and substantial. Like the cottages in the village, it was built of stone, with three floors and gables at every corner. There were tall windows on the ground floor, flanking a centre doorway, uncurtained at present and spilling golden light onto the gravelled forecourt.

'Well, we're here,' said Cassandra unnecessarily, making no attempt to get out of the car. She gathered the sides of her fake fur jacket, wrapping it closely about her. 'I wonder if they know we're here?'

'There's one way to find out,' remarked Jake, pushing open his door and swinging his long legs over the sill. He instantly felt the cold, and reached into the back to rescue his leather jacket. Then, pushing his arms into the sleeves, he got to his feet.

The front door opened as he buttoned the jacket, and a woman appeared, silhouetted by the glowing light from the hall behind her. She was tall and slim, that much he could see, with what appeared to be a rope of dark hair hanging over one shoulder.

Obviously not Cassandra's mother, he realised, even as he heard Cassandra utter an impatient oath. The distant relative? he wondered. Surely she wasn't old enough to be the housekeeper Cassandra had mentioned?

The protesting sound as the car door was thrust back on its hinges distracted him. Turning his head, he saw Cassandra pulling herself to her feet and, unlike the other woman's, her face was clearly visible.

'Eve,' she said, unknowingly answering his question, her thin smile and tightly controlled features an indication that he hadn't been mistaken about her hostility towards this woman. 'Where's my mother? I thought she'd have come to meet us.'

The girl—for he could see now that she was little more—came down the three shallow steps towards them. And as she moved into the light cast by the uncurtained windows Jake saw her pale olive-skinned features were much like his own. He guessed her eyes would be dark, too, though he couldn't see them. She barely looked at him, however, her whole attention focussed on Cassandra, but he saw she had a warm, exotic kind of beauty, and he wondered why she was content to apparently spend her days looking after an old woman, distant relative or not.

Her mouth compressed for a moment before she spoke. Was it his imagination or was she as unenthusiastic to see Cassandra as she was to see her? 'I'm afraid Ellie's in bed,' she said, without offering a greeting. 'She had a fall yesterday evening and Dr McGuire thinks she might have broken one of the bones in her ankle.'

'Might have?' Cassandra fastened onto the words. 'Why is there any doubt about it? Shouldn't she have had her ankle X-rayed or something?'

'She should,' agreed Eve, and Jake noticed that she didn't let Cassandra's agitation get to her. 'But she wanted to be here when you arrived, and if she'd had to go to the hospital in Newcastle…' She shrugged. 'I've arranged for an ambulance to take her in tomorrow—'

'An ambulance!' Cassandra snorted. 'Why couldn't you take her?'

Eve's face was a cool mask. 'I have a job to do,' she replied flatly. And now she looked at Jake fully for the first time. 'Would you—both—like to come in?'

CHAPTER TWO

AN HOUR later, Eve was able to escape to her room to change for supper.

She'd spent the time between the guests' arrival and now escorting Cassie to see her mother, showing Jacob Romero to his room—Ellie had been adamant that Cassie shouldn't sleep with her lover under her roof—and arranging with Mrs Blackwood for refreshments to be provided in the library.

Eve, herself, had done her best to keep out of Cassie's way after she'd delivered her to her mother. Out of Jacob Romero's way, too, with his deepset eyes and dark, attractive features. She didn't know what she'd expected Cassie's escort to be like. She only knew she couldn't call him her boyfriend. There was nothing remotely boyish about Jacob Romero, and from the moment she'd seen him standing beside his car in the courtyard she'd felt a curious sense of foreboding that she couldn't quite place.

She supposed she'd been expecting someone older. Cassie was forty-six, after all. But Romero was obviously much younger. Tall—he was easily six feet and more—with a well-muscled chest and a flat stomach tapering to narrow hips, he looked strong and virile. An impression increased by his hair, which was cut very close to his head.

He looked—dangerous, she thought. Dangerously attractive, at least. And sexy—a description that in his case wasn't exaggerated. It was easy to understand what Cassie saw in him. What troubled Eve most was that she could see it, too.

She pulled a face at her reflection in the mirror of her dressing table. Then, shedding her shirt and jeans onto the floor, she went to take her shower. She was being fanciful, she thought. Ten years ago, feeling a man's eyes upon her wouldn't have bothered her so much. But she'd been harder then, wary and streetwise. In the years since she'd come to live with her grandmother she'd become softer. She'd let down the guard she'd had since she was old enough to understand.

Drying her hair later, she mentally ran through the contents of her wardrobe. Nothing very exciting there, she acknowledged. Skirts and blouses or sweaters for school; jeans and sweaters for home. For the rare occasions when she went out her grandmother had bought her a little black velvet dress, with long sleeves, a scoop neckline, and a skirt that skimmed her kneecaps. But this was not that kind of occasion, and she had no intention of attracting Cassie's curiosity by wearing something totally unsuitable for the evening meal.

She was tempted to leave her hair loose, something she often did in the evenings after she'd washed it. But once again she decided against drawing attention to herself. She plaited the glossy black strands into the usual single braid, securing it with a narrow band of elasticated ribbon.

After far too much deliberation, she put on a V-necked top made of elasticised cotton. Bands of ivory ribbon hid the shaping both around her arms and above and below her breasts, contrasting with the rest of the garment, whose jade-green colour complemented her pale skin.

She almost took it off again when she saw how well it suited her. She'd bought the top on one of her infrequent trips to Newcastle, and had pushed it away in a drawer because she'd thought it was unsuitable for school. Now, looking at it again, she saw she'd been right. It was more in keeping with the teenage girl her grandmother had found subsisting in a draughty squat.

But it was too late to be having second thoughts now. Besides, she doubted she'd be eating with her grandmother's guests. She had no intention of leaving the old lady to eat alone, or of playing gooseberry to Cassie's tête-à-tête.

Zipping on a pair of black cords, she paused only long enough to stroke her lids with a dark brown shadow and run a peachy gloss over her mouth. Then, slipping her feet into heelless mules, she left her room before she could change her mind.

Watersmeet was a fairly large house, but over the years Eve had got used to it, and now she hardly noticed its high-ceilinged rooms and wide corridors. Some years before she'd come to live here central heating had been installed, but the boiler struggled to keep the place at an ambient temperature. Consequently, at this time of year, fires were lit in all the downstairs rooms that were used.

Eve went first to the kitchen, to see how Mrs Blackwood was coping. The elderly housekeeper wasn't used to having guests, but very little fazed her. At present, she was rolling curls of homemade cream cheese in slices of ham, and an avocado dressing waited to be served in tiny ramekins to accompany each plate.

'Her Ladyship won't eat any of the dressing,' Mrs Blackwood explained, when Eve commented on the arrangement. The woman meant Cassie, she knew. Her grandmother didn't watch the calories these days. 'Just hope she approves of the sea bass,' she continued. 'I asked Mr Goddard to deliver it specially. I know how fussy she is about eating meat.'

Eve smiled. 'I'm sure it will be a delicious meal,' she said warmly. 'What have we got for dessert?'

'Bread and butter pudding and ice cream,' said Mrs Blackwood at once. 'I know it's fattening, but it is Mrs Robertson's favourite. I thought she deserved something really nice, after having that fall and all.'

"Mmm.' Eve nodded appreciatively. Mrs Blackwood's bread and butter pudding, which she made with brioche and peaches, was famous in the village. She usually contributed individual puddings whenever the church had a coffee morning, and it always sold out at summer bakes and Christmas fairs.

'You think your grandmother will approve, then?'

'I think she'll be delighted,' Eve assured her. 'Which reminds me, I'd better go and see how she is. I hope nothing's been said to upset her.'

'I shouldn't worry.' Mrs Blackwood looked up from her task as she made for the door. 'Your grandmother's a tough old bird, Eve. She's had to be, if you get my meaning. I'm not saying she doesn't love her daughter. Of course she does. But she's known her too long to be upset by anything Cassie says.'

'I hope you're right.'

Eve let herself out of the door and headed for the stairs. The large entrance hall of the building struck her as chilly, after the cosy warmth of the kitchen, and she wondered if she ought to fetch a sweater while she was upstairs. But then, as she put her foot on the bottom stair, she realised someone was coming down. Looking up, she saw Jacob Romero descending towards her, and that thought went out of her head.

He'd changed his clothes, too, she noticed, though she quickly dropped her gaze and stood back to let him pass before starting up. Evidently Cassie had warned him that they didn't dress formally for supper, but his fine wool camel-coloured sweater and black moleskin pants would have looked good in any company.

She supposed it was because they were expensive. Everything about him breathed money, which was par for the course as far as Cassie was concerned. Not that his dark good looks wouldn't have played a part. Eve had seen from the way the other woman looked at him that she very much coveted his body as well.

She'd expected him to perhaps offer a smile and go on, but he didn't. Instead, he stopped beside her, and she was instantly aware of his height. A tall girl herself she found she was usually on eye-level terms with the men she met, but Jacob Romero was several inches above her.

He was also much closer than she could have wished, and she had to steel herself not to step back from him. Was there a trace of cruel humour in the dark eyes? Was he as aware as she was of the effect he had upon her?

‘I just wanted to thank you for having me here,’ he said, the faint trace of some accent evident in his husky voice. Was he an American? If so, the intonation was very soft. Whatever, it only added to the sensual appeal of the man, and Eve couldn’t prevent a shiver of apprehension from sliding down her spine.

‘It’s not my house,’ she said quickly, aware that her tone had been much sharper than his. But, dammit, he disconcerted her, and she was pretty sure he knew it.

‘You live here,’ he murmured simply. ‘Cassandra says you teach in the village. Is that an interesting occupation?’

‘It’s a job,’ Eve responded, putting a hand firmly on the banister, making it fairly clear that as far as she was concerned the conversation was over.

He didn’t take the hint. ‘So—do you like living here?’ he asked. ‘It seems very—remote.’

‘Far from civilisation, you mean?’ she countered, aware that she was being unnecessarily blunt, but unable to help herself. He probably thought she was graceless as well as ignorant, she reflected. It wasn’t his fault that Cassie was such a bitch.

‘I meant it can’t be easy having only an elderly lady as a companion,’ he amended drily. Then, with a glint of humour tugging at his thin mouth, he added, ‘Who am I kidding? You obviously don’t want us here.’

‘I never said that.’ Eve was appalled that she’d betrayed her feelings so candidly. ‘Naturally, Cassie’s always welcome. This is her home.’

‘Yeah, right.’ He grinned at her discomfort, white teeth contrasting sharply with the dark tan of his skin. ‘But it’s not my home. I know.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’ Eve had been staring at him, but now she dropped her gaze. ‘You’re deliberately misunderstanding me,’ she said, concentrating her gaze some way below the shadow of beard already showing on his jawline. But the tight-fitting pants were just as disturbing to her present frame of mind, the velvet-soft fabric clinging lovingly to every line and angle of the bulge between his legs.

Dear God!

‘I’m trying not to,’ he said then, and his husky drawl scraped like raw silk across her sensitised flesh. He was much too close, much too male, and it was an effort to remember where she’d been going before this encounter.

‘I—I have to go,’ she declared hurriedly, attempting to move past him. ‘Um—Mrs Robertson will be wondering where I am.’

‘The old lady?’ As her breasts came up against the arm he’d put out to stop her, she recoiled in panic. But all he said was, ‘She’s not in her room. Cassandra said she insisted on coming downstairs to eat with us.’

Eve gathered her wits about her. The knowledge that Cassie had persuaded her mother to leave her bed, when she really needed her rest, just to join her and her paramour for supper was bad enough. But what had just happened had added a tension she really didn’t need.

Yet what had happened? she chided herself. It had obviously meant less than nothing to him. And was she so afraid of male attention that having her boobs accidentally crushed against his arm turned into a major event?

Once, she wouldn’t have considered it. Once, she would have fought off any attempt to get close to her, and any man who’d tried would have been nursing an aching groin for his trouble.

She was getting soft, she thought, aware that he was watching her with a strangely speculative look on his dark face. But, dammit, her nipples were still taut and tingling, and the unexpected contact with his body had caused a disturbing explosion of heat inside her.

Shaking her head, as if the simple action would clear her confusion, she said stiffly, ‘Where is she? My—Mrs Robertson, I mean.’

‘Your Mrs Robertson is in the library,’ Jacob Romero told her consideringly, and she guessed her slip of the tongue had not gone unnoticed. His brows drew together above his straight, almost aquiline nose. ‘Are you all right?’

Eve did step back then. This had gone far enough. ‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ she exclaimed, managing to sound surprised at the question. She smoothed her palms, which were unusually damp, down the seams of her cords. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go and see if she needs anything.’

If she’d thought to escape him, she was disappointed. He accompanied her across the circular Persian carpet that occupied a prominent position in the centre of the floor. Double doors opposite opened into the library, which had been her grandfather’s study while he was alive, but now served as both estate office and sitting room.

It was a cosy room, the books lining the walls scenting the air with the smell of old leather. A fire was burning in the large grate and Eve’s grandmother was seated in her armchair beside it. A footstool supported her injured ankle, and although Eve thought she looked tired, she was defiantly holding a glass of red wine in her hand.

Cassie was there, too, occupying the chair opposite. In thin silk trousers and a matching sapphire-blue tunic, she looked blonde and elegant. Someone had dragged her grandfather’s old captain’s chair over from behind the desk in the corner, and it was pulled strategically close to Cassie’s; obviously with Jacob Romero in mind, thought Eve cynically. Which meant she was obliged to sit on the ladder-backed dining chair that Mr Trivett used when he came to discuss estate matters.

‘Help yourself to some wine, my dear,’ Ellie suggested when Eve made to sit down, but Jacob Romero intervened. ‘I’ll get it for you,’ he said, indicating the chair beside Cassie. ‘And sit here. My bones are more liberally covered than yours.’

Eve doubted that. There wasn’t an ounce of spare flesh on his body. And although she wanted to demur, it would have seemed uncharitable to do so. ‘Thanks,’ she said, and ignoring the irritation she could feel emanating from the woman beside her, she turned to Ellie. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m feeling much better this evening,’ Ellie declared, despite the fact that her usually ruddy cheeks were pale. ‘Don’t look so disapproving, Eve. I didn’t struggle down the stairs on my own. Mr Romero carried me.’

Eve only just stopped herself from giving him an admiring look. Her grandmother was no lightweight, and he had to be fit if he’d carried the old lady down from her room.

‘Um—that was good of—of you,’ she murmured lamely, accepting the glass of wine he’d brought her, but she was aware that Cassie was now preening herself in his reflected glory.

‘Jake’s immensely strong,’ she said, her smile towards him warm and intimate. Her tongue circled her upper lip in a deliberately sensual gesture as he seated himself beside Ellie. ‘I suppose it’s because he gets plenty of exercise.’

The double entendre was unmistakable, but the object of her insinuation didn’t respond in kind. ‘My family owns a charter company in San Felipe,’ he offered smoothly, leaning forward, his arms along his thighs. His thumbs circled the glass he’d brought for himself. ‘I’ve been hauling masts and rigging sails since I was a kid, so lifting a lightweight like you, Mrs Robertson, was no problem.’

Ellie looked pleased. ‘San Felipe?’ she murmured, echoing the name as Eve absorbed the fact that he wasn’t an American after all. ‘Is that in Spain?’

‘It’s an island in the Caribbean, ma’am,’ he said, and Eve had an immediate image of white sands, blue seas and palm trees. No wonder he was so darkly tanned. She guessed he must be brown all over.

Now, where had that come from?

‘Jake’s family own the island, Mummy,’ Cassie put in smugly. ‘His father’s retired, of course, and Jake runs the company himself.’

‘How nice.’ Eve was pleased to see her grandmother wasn’t overawed by this intimation of unlimited wealth. ‘So what are you doing in England, Mr Romero? I’d have thought this was the time of year when most people visit the Caribbean.’

‘It is, of course.’ He sounded regretful. ‘However, I’m obliged to spend at least part of the year in Europe.’

‘Jake has business interests all over the world.’ Cassie was evidently determined to impress her mother. ‘We met last year at the Paris Boat Show—didn’t we, darling?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought sailing boats would interest you, Cassie,’ remarked Ellie drily. ‘You were always seasick whenever your father and I took you out on the water.’

‘That was years ago—’ began Cassie snappishly, but before she could say any more Romero explained.

‘Cassandra was one of the hostesses at the show,’ he said, smiling at her hostile expression. ‘She was very good at it, too.’

‘It was just a fill-in between parts,’ protested Cassie resentfully. ‘I don’t usually do that sort of thing.’

‘Don’t you?’ Her mother seemed to perceive that she suddenly had the upper hand. ‘Remind me, Cassie: what was the last part you played?’

Eve now found herself in the unlikely position of feeling sorry for her and, with unexpected compassion she said, ‘You had a role in the remake of Pride and Prejudice, didn’t you, Cassie? I think you played one of the Bennett sisters.’

‘You know I didn’t play one of the Bennett sisters,’ hissed Cassie, giving Eve a filthy look, but her mother only smiled.

‘Mrs Bennett, perhaps?’ she suggested, enjoying the moment. ‘You’d be unlikely to be cast as an ingénue, if that’s the term they use these days.’

‘So, did you and Mr Romero spend much time in Paris, Cassie?’ Eve asked quickly, realising her grandmother wasn’t about to back off, and this time Cassie seemed grateful for her intervention.

‘Just a few days,’ she said. ‘But Jake promised to look me up the next time he was in London,’ she added, giving him a forgiving look. ‘And that was six months ago, wasn’t it, darling?’

‘Something like that.’ Eve noticed that Romero didn’t respond to Cassie’s frequent endearments. But she was taken aback when he turned to her. ‘And my name’s Jake. Or Jacob, if you prefer.’

‘Yes.’ Aware that all eyes were on her now, Eve was forced to be polite. ‘Yes, right.’ Then, dragging her gaze away from his disturbing face, she managed to smile at her grandmother. ‘Um—I’ll go and see how Mrs Blackwood is getting on. Is there anything I can get you?’

‘Yes, you can get me another drink,’ said Cassie at once, holding out her glass as Eve got to her feet. ‘I’ll have whisky, if there is any.’ She glanced at her mother. ‘Your choice of wine isn’t to my taste.’

‘Nor are your manners to mine, Cassie,’ retorted Ellie, and Eve wished now that she hadn’t offered to go and see how the housekeeper was coping. There was an ominous atmosphere building in the room, and she dreaded what her grandmother might say next.

‘I’m not a child, Mother.’ Everyone must have noticed that the honeyed ‘Mummy’ had given way to the chillier term. ‘And I don’t like red wine, as it happens. But you knew that.’

‘I’d forgotten,’ declared her mother blandly. ‘Your visits here are so infrequent, Cassie. I can’t be expected to remember everything.’

Cassie’s lips tightened, and Eve guessed she was biting her tongue. She must know better than anyone that it would be unwise to antagonise her mother when there was a guest in the house. Particularly when that guest was someone she wanted to impress.

In the hope of avoiding any further argument, Eve set Cassie’s empty glass on the tray. Then, keeping her back to the room, she managed to sneak the whisky bottle off the tray and into the cupboard below. Swinging round on her heels, she said, somewhat breathlessly, ‘I’m sorry. There

doesn't appear to be any whisky here, Cassie. I expect there's a new bottle in the kitchen. Why don't you come and get it?'

The face Cassie turned to her was hardly friendly. Eve was sure the words, Why don't you get it? were hovering on her lips. But politeness—or common sense—won out, and with a muttered, 'Excuse me,' to Romero, she pushed herself to her feet and flounced across the room to join Eve at the door.

She waited until the door was firmly closed behind them and they'd put the width of the hall between them and the library before speaking again. But when she did, her words were hard and accusatory.

'What do you think you're playing at?' she demanded. 'I saw the bottle of whisky on the tray when Mrs Blackwood was pouring us all a glass of the poor excuse for claret my mother insists on serving. Don't think I didn't see you spirit it away into the cabinet. I'd be surprised if anybody missed it.'

Eve's lips twisted. 'I should have known that nothing I did would please you,' she said flatly. 'And here I was thinking I was saving your sorry ass!'

'What do you mean?'

'Are you for real?' Eve stared at her. 'Don't you realise your mother is just waiting for a chance to explode this myth you've created about yourself? You're a fool if you think she's forgotten—anything.'

'With your connivance, no doubt.'

Eve shrugged. 'If you want to think that, I can't stop you.'

'Well, what else am I supposed to think?' Cassie balled one fist and pressed it into the palm of her other hand. Then, less aggressively, she said, 'She wouldn't say anything.' A beat. 'Would she?'

'If you persist in baiting her, I don't know what she might say,' replied Eve honestly.

'But she's baiting me!' Cassie made a sound of frustration. 'Am I expected to take whatever she wants to give without defending myself at all?'

Eve moved towards the passage leading to the kitchen. 'I can't answer that. I suppose it rather depends on how much you want your—guest—to know about you.'

Cassie's mouth tightened. 'Are you threatening me?'

'No!' The look Eve cast over her shoulder was incredulous. 'Why should I threaten you? I don't care what you do, do I? How you conduct your life means nothing to me.'

Cassie scoffed. 'Little Miss Prim,' she said contemptuously. 'I wonder if my mother has any idea of the kind of life you were living before she arrived like a fairy godmother to whisk you away.'

'She knows,' said Eve, and without waiting to see if Cassie was going to follow her she pushed open the door into the reassuring light and warmth of the kitchen.

'Does she?' Cassie came after her, evidently deciding that if she couldn't torment her mother, she would torment Eve instead. 'Well, don't talk to me as if you're Goody Two Shoes! We both know you'd do anything to get a man like Jake to support you.'

Eve gasped. She was used to Cassie speaking as if Mrs Blackwood was just a cipher, but this time she'd gone too far. 'You're wrong,' she snapped. 'I've never prostituted myself to get any man, Cassie. And unless you're prepared for me to expose all your dirty washing, I suggest you back off!'

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS still dark—and cold—when Jake got out of bed. The heating hadn't kicked in yet, and he padded across to the windows to look out on a grey world, with only the silvery trace of a rime frost to soften the outline of the trees in the paddock.

He'd slept alone, much to Cassandra's annoyance. He knew one of the reasons she'd invited him here was because she wanted their relationship to advance to another stage. But he wasn't interested in that, and the fact that her mother had arranged for them to have separate bedrooms showed that she didn't approve of them conducting any illicit dealings under her roof.

She'd even phoned him on his mobile, evidently deciding it was too cold to brave the chilly corridors of the house when she couldn't be sure how he'd respond. Cassandra didn't like taking no for an answer.

A flicker of light in the yard below caught his attention. His room overlooked the back of the house, and as he watched he saw a figure detach itself from the building and head off towards the cluster of barns and outbuildings that were just visible in the gloom.

Eve.

Her tall, slim figure was unmistakable. Dressed in jeans and a bulky sweater, the thick braid of dark hair swinging over her shoulder, she moved with an unconscious grace that stirred an unwilling awareness inside him. Which was crazy. She wasn't beautiful in the way Cassandra was beautiful. Her features were too irregular, her mouth too wide, her nose too long. Yet she possessed an almost exotic allure that pointed to a Latin ancestry, and there was a wealth of knowledge in her smoky grey eyes. He'd found himself wanting to bring a smile to those full, sultry lips, to feel her warmth enveloping him instead of that argumentative old woman she worked for.

He hadn't succeeded. Not yet, at least. For some reason she'd taken an instant dislike to him, and try as he might he couldn't get her to relax. She'd been forced to be polite to him during the rather tense supper Cassandra and her mother had created, but he'd been conscious of her disapproval all through the meal.

He pulled a wry face. He would have to do better, he thought, without really understanding why he should want to. Nevertheless, he turned swiftly from the window and went into the adjoining bathroom. Leaving his shower until later, he had a quick wash, cleaned his teeth, and ran his damp hands over his hair. That would have to do for now, he decided, and with a grimace at his reflection he returned to the bedroom.

Pulling on his oldest pair of jeans, he shivered a little as the cold fabric encased his warm skin. Then, grabbing the cashmere sweater he'd worn the night before, he thrust his arms into the sleeves and jerked it over his head.

He left his room a couple of minutes later. He'd hooked his leather jacket over one shoulder, and his trainers made little sound as he strode along the upper landing. Downstairs, he hesitated in the chilly hallway, not absolutely sure which way to go. But then he remembered the direction Eve had been coming from the night before and, taking a chance, he headed along the corridor that he hoped might lead to the back of the house.

He was right. Or at least partly so. When he opened the door at the end of the corridor, he found himself in the kitchen. The housekeeper, who had just been about to take a tray of freshly baked rolls from the oven, looked round in surprise, and Jake guessed he was the last person she'd expected to see.

'Mr Romero!' she exclaimed, pausing uncertainly. But then, realising she had to complete her task, she hurriedly set the tray of rolls on the scrubbed pine table and closed the oven door. 'Can I help you?'

Jake gave her a rueful grin. He hadn't expected to encounter anyone else either. 'I—er—I was going to take a walk,' he said a little lamely. 'I wanted to get out back of the house.'

'Ah.' Mrs Blackwood pushed the rolls a little further onto the table. 'Well, you can come through here, Mr Romero.' She gestured towards another door. 'That leads to the bootroom. You'll see another door through there that leads outside.' She paused. 'But are you sure you want to go out so early? It's very cold.'

Jake could believe it. He was glad he'd brought his jacket with him. 'I'll be okay,' he assured her. He nodded at the rolls. 'New bread! I can't wait for breakfast.'

'You can take one with you, if you like,' offered Mrs Blackwood shyly, and, although Jake was impatient to get going, he couldn't refuse her.

'Great,' he said, selecting one with a golden crust. Then, after taking a bite, almost burning his mouth in the process, he grinned again and made for the door.

Outside, he discovered that she hadn't been joking. It wasn't just cold, it was freezing, and ramming the rapidly cooling roll between his teeth, he swiftly shouldered into his jacket. Then, after fastening the buttons, he removed the roll again and set off in the direction he'd seen Eve heading.

It didn't take long to reach the stable yard. Low buildings occupied two sides of a cobbled courtyard, with the black bulk of a barn dominating the other. And it was from the barn that he could see light emanating. It filtered out, a golden finger penetrating the half open door. If he'd been further way he wouldn't have seen it, the light swiftly swallowed by the lowering shadows.

He doubted she'd be pleased to see him, but he crossed the yard anyway, still munching on the crusty roll as he rounded the door.

Eve was in the process of forking clean straw onto a handcart. She'd pushed the sleeves of her chunky sweater up to her elbows, and as she bent towards the bales stored against the wall of the barn the back of her jeans exposed a delectable wedge of skin at her waist. But she didn't seem to feel the cold. Obviously what she was doing was keeping her warm, but he couldn't help wincing when she jabbed the fork particularly viciously into the stack.

'Ouch,' he said softly, and had the doubtful satisfaction of seeing her reaction. He'd startled her, there was no doubt about that, and a becoming wave of colour invaded her pale cheeks.

She straightened automatically. 'What are you doing here?' she demanded, and once again he could hear the barely suppressed impatience in her voice.

'I thought I'd take a look around,' he replied easily, finishing the roll and dusting the crumbs from his hands. 'What are you doing? I thought Cassandra said her mother had sold all the horses.'

'All but one,' said Eve shortly. And then, because she resented his impression that he could ask her anything he liked and she'd meekly answer him, she countered, 'Where's Cassie?'

Jake shrugged, propping his shoulder against the wall of the barn and putting most of his weight on one leg. 'In bed, I guess,' he responded, unbuttoning his jacket and warming his fingertips beneath his arms.

Eve's fingers tightened round the shaft of the fork. She couldn't help noticing that by opening his jacket he'd exposed the fact that his tight-fitting jeans were worn in all the most intimate places. The fabric clung lovingly to his shape, soft and textured, and she wondered why a man who apparently had an unlimited income would want to wear something so old.

She'd hardly been aware of how she was appraising him until her eyes returned to his face and encountered his. He'd been watching her, and in an effort to show that he hadn't fazed her she muttered, 'Don't you know?'

Jake's eyes narrowed. 'Don't I know what?' he queried innocently, and her momentary spurt of defiance faltered.

'Don't you know where—where Cassie is?' she said, lifting her shoulders in a dismissive gesture. 'I'd have thought you would.'

‘What you mean is, you thought we’d be sleeping together, right?’ he suggested mildly, evidently enjoying her confusion. ‘Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I slept alone.’ His eyes darkened. ‘Very well, as it happens.’ Which wasn’t entirely true.

‘Oh.’ Eve swallowed. ‘Well—good.’ She turned back to her task and attacked the straw with renewed vigour. ‘I have to get on.’

He straightened. ‘Let me help you.’

Eve’s lips parted and she stared at him with disbelieving eyes. ‘I—don’t think so.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you—’ She moistened her lips before continuing awkwardly, ‘This is a dirty job.’

‘So?’

‘So—I’m sure you don’t want to get all hot and sweaty.’

‘I get hot and sweaty all the time,’ he told her drily. And then, because he could see what she was thinking, he added, ‘I meant working on boats, of course.’

‘I know that.’ Eve’s face felt as if it would never be cool again.

‘Okay.’ His grin said he didn’t believe her. ‘I just didn’t want you to get the wrong impression.’

Eve pursed her lips. ‘I think that’s exactly what you did want me to do,’ she muttered, barely audibly. She sighed. ‘Look, why don’t you go for a walk and let me finish this?’

‘Because I want to see this horse you’re doing all this work for,’ replied Jake, taking off his jacket and flinging it over a rusting oil drum. He came towards her and took the fork from her unresisting fingers. ‘See, that wasn’t so difficult, was it?’

Eve took a deep breath and stepped somewhat reluctantly aside. ‘Cassie’s not going to like it,’ she warned, and Jake turned to give her a knowing look.

‘Do you care?’ he said, beginning to fork straw onto the cart with surprising energy. ‘You know, I’m gonna enjoy this. I’ve been sitting on my butt for far too long.’

Eve thought about voicing another protest, but then what he’d said distracted her. ‘I thought you were used to manual labour.’

‘I am.’ Jake loaded the fork and tossed its contents onto the growing pile on the cart. ‘But for the past six weeks I’ve been trailing around Europe checking on orders, arranging contracts, and generally pushing a pen for most of the day.’

Eve hesitated. She badly wanted to know if Cassie had been with him, though why that should be of any interest to her she couldn’t say.

‘Don’t you have an assistant who could handle the grunt work for you?’ she asked, and Jake straightened, flexing his back muscles as he gave her a narrow-eyed stare.

‘Why don’t you ask right out whether Cassandra accompanied me?’ he said, massaging his spine with a grateful hand. ‘That’s what you mean, isn’t it? Has Cassandra’s mother given you the job of finding out what my intentions are?’

‘No!’ Eve was indignant. ‘And whether or not Cassie went with you is nothing to do with me.’

‘Okay.’ His hand moved from the small of his back to rub the flat muscles of his stomach, and Eve’s breath hitched when he accidentally pulled up the front of his sweater and a cloud of night-dark hair spilled into the gap. The pull of an attraction that was as unwelcome as it was primitive swept over her, and she had turned hurriedly away when he said, ‘Well, for your information, then, Cassandra stayed in London.’

‘Whatever.’ Eve didn’t look back. Squaring her shoulders, she said, ‘In any case, that’s enough straw. If you want to see Storm, it’s this way.’

She slipped out of the door and Jake pulled on his jacket, feeling vaguely irritated that she was treating him so offhandedly. What had he said—or done, come to that—to warrant the cold shoulder she was presently giving him? No, scrub that, he amended shortly. She’d been giving him the cold shoulder ever since he’d got here, and he didn’t like it.

Deciding that if she wanted the handcart, she could fetch it herself, he buttoned his jacket and followed her outside. The skies were lighter now, but it was just as cold, and he pushed his hands into his jacket pockets as he trudged across the cobbled yard in her wake.

The stables were amazingly warm. Considering only one animal was in residence, he'd expected it to be only marginally less frigid than the barn, but it wasn't. Unless the company had something to do with it, he thought caustically. Obviously Eve preferred the horse to him.

Storm was stabled at the end of the row. He'd evidently heard them coming and was neighing a welcome as they reached his stall. A solid-looking chestnut, the animal had a distinctive flash of white between his eyes. Intelligent eyes, too, Jake noticed, as it nuzzled Eve's pockets for sugar or some other treat.

Eve pulled out a small apple and let Storm take it from her hand. He crunched away happily, showing surprisingly good teeth for his age. In Jake's opinion he wasn't a young animal, but he looked strong and well-muscled.

'How old is he?' Jake asked, when Eve said nothing, and she gave him a scornful look.

'He's a she,' she said, unlatching the gate and attaching a halter. 'Storm Dancer. And she's twenty-eight. My—Mrs Robertson used to breed from her when she was younger.'

Jake stepped back to allow her to bring the horse out, and Storm took the opportunity to nip his ear. She didn't bite him. She was amazingly gentle, actually, and he saw Eve watching her with some surprise.

'She seems to like me, anyway,' he said, finding a reluctant humour in the situation. 'Sorry.'

'I imagine females usually do,' retorted Eve hotly, and then turned scarlet when she realised what she'd said.

'You don't,' remarked Jake drily, following her and Storm Dancer along the row of empty stalls, but Eve didn't look back.

'I neither like nor dislike you, Mr Romero,' she said, the words drifting back over her shoulder, but Jake could tell she wasn't half as indifferent as she was trying to sound.

'I'm pleased to hear it,' he said, as they emerged into the morning air again. He held her gaze when she darted a glance towards him. 'That gives me some hope.'

Eve swallowed. 'Hope—for what?'

'That you might come to like me.' He glanced about him, allowing her to return to her task. 'Where are we going now?'

'I'm going to take Storm into the paddock,' she told him, concentrating on controlling the mare to avoid another visual confrontation. 'I think you ought to go back to the house. Cassie will be wondering where you are.'

He glanced at his watch. 'At ten after seven in the morning?' He grimaced. 'I doubt it.'

Eve tugged on the halter, causing Storm Dancer to toss her head in protest. 'You'd know, of course.'

'Because I've slept with her?' suggested Jake flatly, and once again he saw that he'd disconcerted her.

But he also saw the way she tried to disguise it. 'Well, you have, haven't you?' she demanded fiercely, and instead of feeling angry he knew an almost irresistible urge to take her face between his cold palms and kiss her.

Her mouth looked soft and vulnerable, despite her desperate bid for control, and he wondered how she would taste. He already knew what she smelled like. She probably hadn't showered before coming to attend to the mare, and the clean scent of her woman's body was overlaid with the faintest trace of perspiration. He found it an incredible turn-on, incredibly sexy, but it wasn't a good feeling. Dammit, he'd come here with one woman and now he was lusting after another. What kind of an animal was he when he got a hard-on just being with Eve? What the hell was the matter with him?

The fact that he hadn't wanted to come here was some comfort, but Cassandra would spit blood if she even suspected he was attracted to her mother's companion. She'd been trying for more than six months to get him to commit to a relationship, and it was only because he'd had the excuse of business meetings in various parts of Europe that he'd been able to avoid any serious entanglement.

He liked her well enough. She was good company when she wasn't continually trying to get into his pants. And he'd been glad of her company at many of the parties and social gatherings he'd been invited to while he was in London. But this…This didn't bear thinking about, and, abandoning any idea of helping Eve to clean out the mare's stall and spread the fresh straw, he jammed his hands deep into the back pockets of his jeans.

'Does it matter?' he asked dispassionately. Then, deliberately emptying his face of any expression, he added, 'But I guess I'd better go and let her know I haven't forgotten about her.'

As if that was likely, thought Eve painfully as he strode out of the stable yard. She had the feeling that, however he felt about her, Cassie would make sure she was not easy to forget.

She wished she hadn't taunted him now. Although she knew she was asking for trouble, something about Jake Romero got under her skin. And, despite her determination not to let him get to her, she'd enjoyed their verbal baiting. Enjoyed being with him, she thought, tugging rather viciously at Storm's halter again.

And how sick was that?

CHAPTER FOUR

JAKE went up to his room, showered, and changed into navy chinos and a long-sleeved purple polo shirt. He was downstairs again, having breakfast in the morning room, when Cassandra finally made her appearance.

Of Eve there was no sign, but as it was already after nine o'clock he guessed she'd probably left for work. Mrs Robertson was still in her room, of course, resting her ankle. Which was a shame, he reflected, because he would have welcomed the chance to avoid a tête-à-tête with her daughter.

Cassandra trailed into the room, still wearing her dressing gown. A red silk kimono that she'd told him some admirer had brought her from Hong Kong, Jake doubted it was warm enough for Watersmeet in November. But he knew she liked the garment. She thought it flattered her fair colouring. And, as she didn't appear to be wearing anything under it, Jake guessed where this was going.

'Darling,' she exclaimed petulantly, 'where have you been? I came to your room earlier but you weren't there, and I was worried. Now, here you are, scarfing down bacon and eggs as if you didn't have a care in the world.'

'I don't.' Jake had got up at her entrance, but now he subsided into his seat again. He didn't usually eat a big breakfast, but Mrs Blackwood seemed to think he needed fattening up, and he hadn't the heart to refuse her. 'This is good.'

'It's also very bad for your arteries,' said Cassandra irritably. 'So—where were you?'

'When?'

Jake was being deliberately obtuse, but Cassandra was like a dog with a bone. 'Earlier on. When I came to your room,' she said, running the cord of her robe through her fingers. 'And don't tell me you were in the shower, because I looked.'

Jake finished the last morsel of sausage and put his knife and fork aside. 'I went out,' he said, relieved at having avoided another confrontation about their sleeping arrangements. Then, in the hope of diverting her, 'Why don't you get dressed and go and see how your mother is this morning?'

'Do I care?' Cassandra was bitter. 'She obviously doesn't give a damn about me. Did you hear her making fun of me—of my acting career last night? Just because I had more sense than to be satisfied with life in this provincial backwater, she takes every opportunity to make me feel small.'

Jake shrugged. He couldn't deny that Mrs Robertson had been provoking. But he didn't know the family history, so it was difficult for him to have an opinion. Eve was the one he felt sorry for—caught in the middle of two women who seemed determined to rub one another up the wrong way. Yet Eve had defended Cassandra to her employer, despite the way she'd spoken about her this morning.

'Anyway, it's early yet.' Clearly Cassandra had other matters on her mind. Coming round the table to where he was sitting, she loosened the kimono. It fell open, revealing that his initial suspicions had been right. 'Why don't we go back upstairs?'

Jake pushed back his chair and got to his feet. Then he grasped the two sides of the kimono in his hands. But, although he knew she expected him to pull her closer, he jerked the two sides together instead. 'Go take a cold shower, Cassandra,' he told her flatly. 'I want to go out and see something of the countryside around here. If you want to come with me, say so. I'll give you forty minutes to get dressed.'

He suspected she swore then, but he couldn't be sure of it. Whatever, she wrapped the kimono about her and marched towards the door. 'I'll need at least an hour,' she said, glancing back at him. 'Do you think you can entertain yourself for that long?'

It was not a good day. Fridays usually were, but today Eve found it almost impossible to concentrate on her work. The children knew it, and consequently played her up more than usual, and she was forced to use her strictest voice to bring order to the class.

The day didn't get any better when she was summoned to a staff meeting when lessons were over for the day. They never had staff meetings on Friday afternoons. Most of the teachers who were employed at the small primary school were eager to get home to their families at the end of the working week. But the head teacher's face was grave when she joined them in the staff room, and Eve had the uneasy premonition that whatever they were about to hear was not going to be good.

She was right. It appeared that Mrs Portman had heard, just that afternoon, that Falconbridge was to be merged with a larger school at East Ridsdale. The local education authority had decided that their school had simply not enough pupils to warrant the expense of keeping it open, and although every effort would be made to find the teachers new posts, by the end of next term Falconbridge Primary would be closed.

There was a stunned silence after Mrs Portman had finished speaking. The women who worked at Falconbridge—and they were exclusively female—considered themselves almost family, and the idea of being split up and sent to different schools was almost as bad for them as it was going to be for the children.

'But can they do this?' asked Jennie Salter worriedly. Jennie was a mother herself, and her children were still young enough to come to school with her. 'I thought I read somewhere that parents were fighting these closures.'

'Well, they are,' agreed Mrs Portman ruefully. 'But I doubt if the parents whose children attend this school will be prepared to fight our education authority—particularly if it means their council tax is going to go up. There simply aren't enough of them to make a difference.'

'So the school closes at Easter,' said Eve, her heart sinking at the thought of having to look for another job.

'Officially,' agreed Mrs Portman. 'But naturally I don't expect you all to wait until then to look for other posts. Besides, as soon as the news gets out parents will start looking for alternative schools. Not all of them will want their children to travel to East Ridsdale every day—not when there's a private school in the vicinity.'

'That's okay if you can afford it,' muttered Jennie gloomily, and Eve put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

'It's months away yet,' she said, trying to be optimistic. 'You never know—you may get a job at Ridsdale and then you could continue taking the children to school yourself.'

'Fat chance!'

Jennie refused to look on the bright side, and Eve couldn't really blame her. It was hard enough to find work in this area as it was, without a dozen other people doing the same.

In consequence, she was in a rather downhearted frame of mind when she walked home later that afternoon, and she was in no mood to respond favourably when the Aston Martin swept through the gates ahead of her. Romero was at the wheel, of course, and Cassie was sitting proudly beside him, lifting a languid hand—almost as if she was royalty and Eve was just a paid retainer.

She wasn't jealous, Eve assured herself fiercely. She'd never had anything from Cassie in the past and she didn't want anything now. But just occasionally she wished the woman would acknowledge her responsibilities.

The squeal of brakes brought her out of her reverie. The Aston Martin had stopped and was now reversing back towards her. Oh, God, they were going to offer her a lift, she realised sickly. And she could guess whose idea that was.

A window was lowered and Romero looked out. 'Get in,' he said. 'We'll give you a ride up to the house.'

'That's not necessary,' said Eve stiffly, and Cassandra gave a protracted yawn.

‘I told you she’d say no,’ she declared in a bored tone. ‘Come on, darling. Close the window, can’t you? I’m getting cold.’

Jake’s jaw compressed. Having spent most of the day humouring Cassandra, he wasn’t in the mood to listen to her griping now. But, dammit, Eve wasn’t making it easy for him either, and he was tempted to make some excuse and hightail it back to London before he did something he would surely regret.

Eve looked cold, he thought. Her exotic features were unnaturally pale in the light of the lamps that lit the driveway, and, although she was wearing a navy duffel, the coat didn’t look substantial enough to keep her warm. He forced himself to suppress the irritation he felt at her evident unwillingness to allow him to help her, and, ignoring Cassandra’s protests, he thrust open his door and got out of the car.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.