

At The Argentinean Billionaire's Bidding

The story behind the story...

This is my contribution to the International Billionaires series, which was written in association with the RFU and launches in February. The eight books in the series all have some connection with the sport of rugby.

My hero, Alejandro D'Arienzo, is an England International player who was forced to leave the team following a red-hot encounter with the coach's daughter at a party. Certain he has been set up, he returns to his native Argentina and turns his considerable sporting ability to polo, but is unable to quite put the past behind him or forget the girl who betrayed him. Six years later he is back at Twickenham playing for the Barbarians against his old team when he comes face to face with Tamsin Calthorpe again, and finds she's every bit as spoiled and sexy as she was all those years ago. And she doesn't seem remotely sorry for what she did to him either.

Because it was specially commissioned as part of a series the process of writing this story was very different to any I'd done before. Each of the authors was given a basic outline, detailing the nationalities and professions of the characters, and a little bit about their background as well as what was to happen to them during the course of the book.

I'm not usually much of a planner and like to let the story develop in its own way, so this felt a little bit like writing backwards—knowing where Alejandro and Tamsin would end up, and having to work out plausible, emotionally logical ways for them to get there. At times I found that part quite difficult, but it was always an enjoyable challenge, especially because the outline gave me ideas for settings I might never otherwise have come up with. Most notable of these was the world of high level polo, which is one of unbelievable wealth and glamour. I had the best time researching this (and beautiful Nacho Figueras who became the inspiration for Alejandro) and discovering that actually, behind the champagne and diamonds image, this game is about as tough and dangerous as a sport can get. It's the closest we get in the twenty first century to warriors doing battle on horseback, and the players have to be extraordinarily skilled, athletic and brave.



Of course, I loved being able to give Alejandro D'Arienzo all of those heroic qualities, as well as a deep-seated pride in his country and his heritage. He's possibly the toughest hero I've written to date, so it was particularly satisfying to make this proud, decisive alpha male

whose lightning reactions and total self-assurance have made him an unbeatable adversary in the boardroom and on the sports field, discovering what it feels like to hesitate, to question and to lose. And not just a game, but something much more important.

Extract from the book

‘So what are we playing?’ she said, whipping round to face him again. ‘Bar-room pool?’

The low light from the billiard lamp fell onto her short, platinum blonde hair, making her look like a rebellious angel. She was looking at him steadily, insolently, her head lowered slightly and her slanting green eyes unblinking.

‘If that’s what you want.’

She shrugged. ‘I’m easy. I just thought it might be what you’re used to.’

The bitch. For a fleeting second Alejandro felt almost lightheaded with hatred at her casual, calculated viciousness. To her, he was still the boy from nowhere, the imposter in the charmed circle of privileged English youth that made up the team, and her social circle.

‘I can play anything, anywhere, *Lady Calthorpe*. Would you prefer English billiards perhaps?’

His voice dripped with contempt and his eyes raked over her, cold and assessing. Holding the cue upright in front of her, Tamsin clung to it tightly, glad of its support. *English billiards? How the hell did you play that?*

‘No. Bar-room pool is fine with me,’ she said, trying to make it sound of little consequence to her, but secretly hoping that all those smoky afternoons spent playing pool in the student bar at college were about to pay off.

She was in danger of getting seriously out of her depth here.

With the lamplight casting hollows beneath his razor-sharp cheekbones and the bruising on his lip he looked like some kind of avenging warrior, primed for battle. Her hands were damp as she watched him move easily around the table. *I can play anything, anywhere*, he’d said, and she knew with a sick, churning mixture of fear and excitement that he was right. He would be just as at home playing pool in the back-street bars of Buenos Aires as playing billiards in an up market gentleman’s club in Mayfair. He exuded an effortless confidence that transcended all boundaries and singled him out as a natural winner.

Which was unfortunate, considering her reputation kind of rested on getting this shirt back.

‘You first.’

Placing her right hand firmly on the table Tamsin hoped he couldn’t see how much it was shaking.

‘You’re left handed?’

‘In some things.’

She took the shot, mis-hitting wildly so that the balls scattered crazily over the table.

‘You’re sure this is one of those things?’ Behind her his voice cold and mocking. ‘Maybe you might be better with your right hand.’

She turned, colour seeping into her cheeks as a slow pulse of anger beat in her veins. ‘Thanks for the tip, but can we leave it that if I want your help I’ll ask for it?’

‘I thought I’d already made it clear that even if you did, you wouldn’t get it,’ he said smoothly, moving around the table and potting two balls with a swift, lethal efficiency that made Tamsin’s heart plummet. ‘Although maybe I could make it a little fairer.’ He smiled lazily across the table, moving his cue to the other hand. ‘Since you’re playing left handed, I will too. Number ten. To you.’

Tamsin opened her mouth to make some stinging retort, but found her throat was dry and no words came. Helplessly her gaze fixed itself on the strong, tanned hand Alejandro placed on the table, splaying his lean, long fingers.

The room was very quiet and very still. A clock ticked on the mantelpiece, below which the fire had sunk to an amber glow. His narrow, focused stare was exactly level with her knicker line and it was intense enough to feel like he could see right through the flimsy grey chiffon.

The thought sent a gush of arousal crashing through her.

The sudden sharp crack of the balls colliding made her jump, and she watched mesmerized as the yellow ball rolled gently across the green baize towards the pocket beside her thigh. A shiver rippled through her as she suddenly, unaccountably, found herself thinking not of the movement of the ball across the table, but of Alejandro’s fingers over her skin...

Guiltily she wrenched her head up as the ball came to a halt. Alejandro was watching her, the expression on his dark, bruised face unreadable.

‘There,’ he said with exaggerated courtesy. ‘Your turn.’

Tamsin blinked. He’d missed the shot. That was good news, but somehow the knowledge that he’d only missed because he’d taken it with his left hand took any sense of triumph she might have felt and turned it right on its head.

‘I don’t need favours, Alejandro, and I don’t need special treatment,’ she snapped, walking briskly towards him to take the shot. ‘In fact, let’s be honest, I don’t need any of this. Wouldn’t it be better for both of us if you just did the decent thing for once in your life and just gave the shirt back to me now? Or are you on some kind of personal mission to make my life as unpleasant and difficult as possible?’

‘You want to concede defeat?’

There was a sinister, watchful stillness about him, and his tone was carefully neutral, but she heard the challenge in his words.

‘No. Never.’ She smiled slowly, sweetly. Adrenaline was pulsing through her like pure alcohol, dilating her blood vessels, making her heart beat faster. She felt high, spacey, but at the same time perfectly lucid and oddly calm as she turned her body towards his, mirroring

his position, leaning with one hip propped against the edge of the table. ‘You’d love that, wouldn’t you?’ she said softly. ‘Which is exactly why it’s the last thing I’d ever do.’

He didn’t smile back. His swollen upper lip accentuated the beauty of his face while making him look twice as dangerous. Standing there, with the lamplight making the hair that fell over his face blue-black, he was every inch the Spanish conquistador.

‘You’re sure about that?’ he said quietly, almost apologetically. ‘You have to know that you don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of winning this?’

He held her in his gaze. It was like drowning slowly in warm syrup... delicious, but no less terrifying for it. She blinked. Drowning was drowning, after all.

‘Let’s see shall we?’ she said in a low voice, and moved round so that she was facing the table again. She was acutely, painfully aware of him beside her, towering over her as she bent to take her shot, looking down on her bare back with that hard, golden gaze that seemed to warm her skin like evening sun.

God. She had to get a grip. Concentrate.

There was no hurry. She flexed her shoulders slightly, steadying herself. Above her she heard a low rasping sound as Alejandro dragged a hand across his stubble-roughened jaw. She clamped her own mouth shut against the whimper of excitement that rose up in her at the sound and took the shot.

With a series of satisfying staccato clicks the balls ricocheted around the table, the orange she’d lined up cannoning neatly into the top pocket. She threw him a quick glance from under her lashes as she moved around to the other side of the table.

‘I hope you’re keeping score.’

Alejandro gave a low, ironic laugh. ‘Don’t worry about that. And you still have a long way to go before the shirt is yours. Don’t get complacent.’

The look she gave him was full of fire and loathing. Alejandro watched with interest as she bent forward over the table to take the next shot, his eyes automatically travelling to the shadowed hollow between her breasts. Being so relentlessly spoiled for a lifetime had obviously given her a completely unrealistic grasp on her own limitations, he mused, forcing himself to shift his gaze upwards to her face. In the glow of the lamp above, the green baize of the table intensified the colour of her eyes to a vivid emerald. He watched them flicker, dart, measuring the distance, as a tiny frown of concentration appeared between them.

She hesitated, completely focused, the tip of her pink tongue appearing between her plump lips. She moved; and with one swift flick of her wrist the ball dropped into the pocket. As it fell, Alejandro realised he’d been holding his breath. His whole body felt tense.

Well, that was one word for it. And some parts felt more ‘tense’ than others.

Damn her. As she straightened up he saw the same look of self-satisfied triumph on her face as he’d seen earlier on in the hallway with her father when she’d got her own way. She was playing him, he thought acidly. She was perfectly aware of how sexy she looked, leaning

over that table with her dress falling forward and her green eyes right on a level with his crotch.

She was manipulating him as ruthlessly as she had that night at Harcourt Manor all those years ago, but with twice as much finesse.

‘This isn’t complacency, Mr D’Arienzo,’ she said huskily. ‘This is confidence.’

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Reviews

As an 18-year-old, heiress Tamsin Calthorpe fancied herself in love with Argentinean rugby player Alejandro D’Arienzo and was determined to have him. But it proved to be disastrous for both of them. Now, six years later, Tamsin is an up-and-coming fashion designer, trying to prove she can make it on her own, when her path crosses with Alejandro’s. The attraction is as strong as ever, but so is the distrust, since both have their own version of what happened between them. Sparks fly everywhere in this supercharged tale of churning emotions. These two verbal boxers are in a fairly brutal sparring match, and when everything explodes, the energy and passion jump off the page.

Romantic Times (4 stars)

From the 2009 winner of the Romantic Novelists’ Association’s Romance Prize comes a spellbinding tale of sizzling romance, poignant emotion and dramatic sexual tension.

Cataromance. (4.5 stars)

Their journey is full of passion, heat and at times hard to read as they are constantly in a battle of wills and sexual attraction. Be ready for tears when Tasmin shares past secrets. Theirs is such an incredible love story, full of adventure and heat, plus the two settings.....rugby in England and polo in Argentina only add to this incredible book.

Marilyn’s Romance Reviews