Maisey Yates

The SPANIARD'S STOLEN BRIDE

MILLS & BOON
MODERN

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Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Серия «Brides of Innocence», книга 2

Аннотация

Stolen for the Spaniard’s inheritance…Will her innocence be his undoing?To notoriously ruthless Diego Navarro, kidnapping and marrying his brother’s shy fiancée seems a perfectly sensible way to secure his inheritance! Yet when Liliana Hart willingly goes with him Diego’s reluctantly intrigued… Though the heat of their marriage bed is scorching, it’s the intensity of their connection that pushes Diego to the edge. But is it powerful enough to redeem this dark-hearted billionaire?

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Will her innocence be his undoing?

For notoriously ruthless Diego Navarro, kidnapping and marrying his brother's shy fiancée seems a perfectly sensible way to secure his inheritance! Yet when Liliana Hart *willingly* goes with him, Diego is reluctantly intrigued... Though the heat of their marriage bed is scorching, it's the intensity of their connection that pushes Diego to the edge. But is it powerful enough to redeem this dark-hearted billionaire?

Feel the heat in this intense marriage of convenience!

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www.millsandboon.co.uk
ISBN: 978-1-474-08738-4
THE SPANIARD'S STOLEN BRIDE
© 2019 Maisey Yates
Published in Great Britain 2019
by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF
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Version: 2020-03-02

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CHAPTER ONE

DIEGO NAVARRO HAD a bad habit of breaking his toys.

It had started with a little wooden truck when he was a boy. He hadn't intended to break it, but he'd been testing the limits, running behind it while he pushed it down on the ground.

He'd ended up falling on top of it and splitting his lip open, as well as popping the wheels off his favorite possession.

His mother had picked him up and spoken softly to him, brushing the tears from his face and taking the pieces of the truck into her hand, telling him it was okay.

His father had laughed.

He'd pushed Diego's mother aside and taken the toy from her hand.

Then he'd thrown it into the fire.

"When something is broken," he'd said darkly, "you must learn to let it go."

Those words had echoed in Diego's head later. When his mother was dead and his father stood emotionless over her body, laid out for burial before the funeral.

Diego hated his father.

He was also much closer to being his father than he would ever be to resembling his sweet, angelic mother, who had been destroyed by the hands of the man who had promised to love her.

Her hands had been gentle. Diego's were weapons of

destruction.

All throughout his life he had demonstrated that to be the truth.

In a fit of frustrated rage after his mother's death, he had burned down his father's shop at the family *rancho*. His father had known he'd done it, and Diego had wondered if the old man would finally kill him too. Send him to the devil, as he had sent Diego's mother to the angels.

It had been worse. His father had simply looked at him, his dark eyes regarding him with recognition.

To be recognized by a monster as being one of his own had been a fate near death. At least then.

Diego had spent the next few years accepting it. And daring the darkness inside of him.

His father gave him a sports car for his eighteenth birthday. Diego crashed it into a rock wall on a winding road. If he had spun another direction before the accident he would have simply plummeted into the sea, and both he and the car would have sunk down to the ocean floor.

It would have been a mercy. For him to die young like that. Before he could create the kind of damage he had been seemingly destined for.

But no. He had been spared.

His mother, sweet and worthy, had not been. Reinforcing his faith in nothing other than the cruelty of life.

While he seemed to create a swath of destruction around him,

Diego had thus far been indestructible himself.

It was the things he touched that burned. That broke.

Like Karina.

His one and only attempt at human connection.

His brother, Matías, was a good man. He always had been. Just as Diego had been born with a darkness in him, Matías seemed to have an innate morality that Diego could never hope to understand, much less possess.

Once he had realized that, he had isolated himself from his brother as well.

But he had met Karina. Pretty, vivacious and exciting.

She had lived life harder and faster than he had. Embracing all manner of mood-altering substances and wild sex. For a hedonist such as himself, she had been a magical, sensual embodiment of everything he hoped to lose himself in.

He had married her. Because what better way to tie his favorite new toy to him forever than through legal means?

Sadly, he had broken her too.

She had been beautiful. And he regretted it.

More than that, he regretted the life lost along with hers. The only innocent party in their entire damaged marriage.

But he was not heartbroken. He did not possess the ability to suffer such a thing.

His heart had already been broken. Shattered neatly, like his mother's bones when she had fallen off her horse after his father had shot her.

The only good thing about that was, now that it was done, it could not be done again.

Now there was only the destruction he caused the world to concern himself with.

And truly, he did not concern himself with it overmuch.

He carried those losses on his shoulders. Felt the weight of them. Like a dark and heavy cloak.

It was his nature. And he had grown to accept it.

He took a long drink of the whiskey in his hand and looked around the room. He was back at Michael Hart's impossibly stuffy New England mansion, playing the game that the older man demanded he play before they entered into any kind of business deal.

While Diego had a reputation as more of a gambler than a businessman, the truth of the matter was, he had not made his billions in Monte Carlo. He was a brilliant investor, but he made sure to keep his actions on the down low. He preferred his outrageousness in the headlines, not his achievements.

He wanted a piece of Michael Hart's company. But more than that...

He was fascinated by the man's daughter.

The beautiful heiress Liliana Hart had fascinated him from the moment he had first seen her, over two years ago. Delicate and pale, with long, white blond hair that seemed to glow around her head like a halo.

She was lovely, and nothing at all like the stereotype of an

American heiress. No sky-high heels and dresses that made the wearer look most suited to dancing on poles.

She was demure. Lovely. Like a rose. He wanted to reach out and touch her, though he knew that if he did, he was just as likely to bruise her petals as anything else.

But he was not a good man. He was selfish and vain. He was also competitive. And at the moment he and his brother were being pitted against each other by their grandfather for the inheritance of the family *rancho*.

They had to marry to get their share or forfeit entirely.

Matías was too good to rush out and pluck a wife out of thin air simply for financial gain.

Diego wasn't too good for anything. He would happily marry a woman for financial gain. And if on top of it, Liliana made his blood pound in a way no other woman ever had.

The money was an aside. The real attraction was besting his brother, and debauching Liliana.

And if Michael Hart was willing to give her up in trade for his investment in the company and solve the issue of his inheritance along with it?

Diego would chance bruising her.

He would be more annoyed with his *abuelo* if the old man's edict hadn't given him the excuse he'd needed to pursue the beautiful jewel of a woman who had captured his eye from the first.

He saw a flash of pink by the library door, and he realized it

was Liliana, peeking inside, and then running away.

A smile curved his lips. He knocked the rest of the whiskey back, and then excused himself from the gathering, striding out with confidence, enough that no one asked where he was going.

No one dared question him.

He saw her disappear around the corner, and he followed, his footfall soft on the Oriental rug that ran the length of the hall.

There was a door slightly ajar, and he pushed it open, finding that it was another library. And inside, standing behind one of the wingback chairs, her delicate hands resting on the back, was Liliana.

"Ms. Hart," he said. "We have not had a chance to say hello to each other tonight."

Her face went scarlet. He found it so incredibly appealing. She always blushed when they talked. Because she found him beautiful. He was not a man given to false humility. Or indeed, humility of any kind.

God had made him beautiful, and he well knew it. But God had also made vipers beautiful. The better to attract their prey.

The fact he knew the weapons at his disposal was more necessity than vanity.

That Liliana found herself under his spell would make this so much easier.

"Mr. Navarro. I didn't realize... That is... I don't make a habit of attending my father's business parties."

"You attended our business dinner only a few weeks ago."

She looked down. “Yes. That’s different.”

“Is it? I’m tempted to believe that you’re avoiding me, *tesoro*.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Treasure,” he said, taking a step toward her.

“And why would you call me that?”

He paused, midstride. She was not exactly what she appeared. Or perhaps she was. There was an openness to her. A lack of fear that spoke most certainly of inexperience. At least, inexperience with men like him.

Are there men like you? Or just monsters?

“It is what you are, is it not? Certainly, you are a treasure to your father.”

“If by that you mean a commodity.”

A smile curved his lips. “Well, money is the way of the world.”

“It would be nice if it weren’t.”

“Spoken like a woman who has always had it.” It wasn’t the first time he’d stolen time away to speak with Liliana. He found himself drawn to her like a magnet. And no amount of pursuing other women had dampened his interest in her.

“I prefer books,” she said, those delicate fingers curling around the chair, as if she were using it to brace herself.

“I prefer to experience life, rather than hiding away in a dusty library with only fantasy to entertain me.”

She surprised him by rolling her eyes. “Yes. A man of action. I prefer to pause and learn about the world, rather than simply wrapping myself up in my own experiences.”

“I didn’t realize you were socially conscious,” he said.

“A terrible detraction from my charms. Or so I’m told.”

He took another step toward her. “Who has told you this?”

“My father.”

“He is incorrect,” Diego said. “I find it fascinating.”

“Well. In that case. All of my personal issues of self-worth are solved.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

They stared at each other and he felt something. Heat. But something deeper. He was well acquainted with sexual attraction, and much in defiance of his typical fare, Liliana had an innocence about her that should not appeal to him. But did.

Still, he could appreciate the fact that his appetite—jaded from years of gluttony—was interested in something a bit different.

Something softer, sweeter.

She was like a ripe strawberry. And he wanted badly to have a bite.

But that thing beneath it... That current that made him feel as though he was being drawn to her against his will; that he could not quite understand.

She looked away, and her glossy hair caught the firelight, shimmering orange, as though the flames had wrapped themselves around the silken strands.

He closed the distance between them, and she did not turn to look his way. He reached out, brushing her curls to one side, his

fingertips brushing the delicate skin of her neck.

"You are truly beautiful, Liliana. Do you know that?"

She looked at him, those blue eyes guarded. "Men have told me that before. Usually when they want something from my father."

"Is that so?" It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that he wanted something from her father too. That he wanted her. But he held it back.

"My father is a powerful man."

"So am I, *tesoro*." He placed his hand on her hip and felt a jolt beneath his touch. "Believe me when I tell you that I do not require anything to help bolster that. I need a hand up from no one. My money is my own, and my power is my own."

"Is it?" she whispered.

"What do you think of that?"

She reached up, as though she were going to touch his face, and then she jerked her hand away. "Your power's all your own?"

"Perhaps at the moment some of it is with you."

She jerked away from him suddenly, almost tipping toward the fireplace before he caught her around the waist and sent them both stumbling back against the rock fireplace. His chest was pressed against her breasts, and she was breathing hard, those blue eyes locked with his.

"Sorry," she said, breathless.

She began to wiggle, trying to get out of his hold.

"You don't really want to escape me," he whispered.

“I have to. I was avoiding you.”

“And I found you.”

“Don’t you want to know why?”

There was something in her voice, a catch in her tone that made him find he did want to know. He released his hold and took a step back. And that was when he noticed the sparkling diamond on her left hand.

“Why, Liliana?” he asked.

“I told you, a great many men have seen me as a way to get to my father.”

“So you did.”

“And, well... One of them presented him with an offer that neither of us could refuse.”

“Is that so?” he asked, his voice rough, raging heat and fire and fury burning inside of him. “That is so interesting, as your father did not indicate as much to me.”

“Were you bartering with my father for my body as well?”

“Yes,” he responded.

He did not tell her that he had been offering her father money, and not the other way around. That he wanted her most of all.

“You’re not different,” she said, turning away from him. “Which is good to know.”

“It doesn’t matter. I doubt we’ll ever see each other again.”

She laughed softly. “We probably will. Christmases. Birthdays. That sort of thing.”

“Why would we see each other then?”

“Because, Diego. I’m about to become your sister-in-law. I’m marrying your brother.”

CHAPTER TWO

SHE WAS GETTING MARRIED. She could hardly believe it.

Liliana had spent her life being cosseted and protected in her family's sprawling estate in the US. While she had done a bit of traveling, it had always been under the watchful eye of her father and the au pair he had chosen to keep her company.

This was the first time in her life she'd felt like she wasn't being hovered over.

She had been in Spain now for two weeks with her fiancé, Matías.

Fiancé.

It was so very strange.

She had spent more time talking to...

She swallowed hard, curling her hands into fists as she sat down on the edge of the bed in her room.

She tried not to think of those piercing, dark eyes. That rakish grin that looked like dangerous enticement.

Truly, Matías and Diego Navarro looked so much alike it shouldn't make one bit of difference to her which one she married. They were both devastatingly handsome. And by all accounts, Matías was a much better man than his brother. Not that she knew much about them. She refused to allow herself to search the internet for information about Diego, as much as

she had wanted to. But he radiated an air of danger that Matías simply did not.

That was the problem. There was something more than looks driving that strange connection she had felt to Diego from the moment she had first set eyes on him two years earlier. She'd heard people describe attraction in terms of being struck by lightning.

She'd met Diego Navarro and it had been as if a black fire had been lit inside her. Burning slowly, growing, over the course of all that time.

Matías was a good man. A man that her father wanted to do business with. And why shouldn't she...

Why shouldn't she do exactly as he asked?

After all, she was the reason he had lost the love of his life. The reason her fragile, beautiful mother had died in childbirth.

She had to be the daughter her mother would have wanted. A daughter who was worth the loss her father had sustained. A daughter who made him happy. A daughter who was enough.

And so she did her best.

She had always known that her father would have a hand in choosing her husband.

She had accepted it with grace and dignity. The only time she had ever mouthed off, the only time she had ever allowed the witch rolling around in her mind to escape, was in conversation with Diego.

There was no point thinking about him now.

He had not offered for her.

But he might have.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

She heard footsteps in the hall and her heart rate quickened. She sat there on the edge of the bed, praying that it wasn't Matías.

There was no reason to believe that it should be.

Two weeks she had been here, and he hadn't so much as kissed her.

He had been solicitous beyond the point of reason. Constantly putting parasols over her head in the sun and worrying over her pale skin in the heat. Like she was a scoop of ice cream that might melt into a puddle.

She might be free of her father, but her fiancé had taken up the charge of overprotective presence easily enough.

Today had been the first time he had given her a bit of breathing room. There had been an accident with one of the horses on the *rancho* and a stable boy, and Matías had been consumed with the care of the boy since it had happened. As a result, Liliana had finally been given a few hours free to wander the *rancho* without someone clucking after her like a hen.

That was what was so funny. He was more like a protective older brother than he was a fiancé. At least, how she would imagine a fiancé would be.

And she was grateful for it. Which was another bad sign, she imagined.

She had never seen a married couple together. She didn't know

how her parents had been, but the way that her father talked about her mother made her believe that theirs had been a passionate love. That when she had died his heart had been ripped from his body and sent to the grave right along with her.

She couldn't imagine having a connection like that with another person.

Much less Matías.

She didn't think she wanted one like that, really.

The footsteps passed by and she let out a sigh of relief. She wasn't ready to be physical with him. Which was foolish, as they were going to be married very soon. They would have to be physical then. They should kiss. *Something.* They should do something.

The idea didn't disgust her—it was just that she found...

When she closed her eyes and thought of kissing Matías, inevitably, his sculpted, dark features transformed. Into more dangerous ones.

Diego.

She had never—not in all her life before setting eyes on that man—indulged in childish infatuations. Having always had a sense that her father was going to arrange her marriage, she had known there was no point.

She wasn't a fairy-tale princess. Prince Charming wasn't going to come for her.

Prince Acceptable was going to be selected for her.

And so there had never been a crush. Never been a fantasy.

Until *him*.

She wondered if it could be called a crush or a fantasy. This dark, terrible feeling that made her want to do something reckless and awful. Something the Liliana she'd been raised to be would never consider.

Diego was the worst possible man for her to have developed a connection to. The worst possible man to be fixated on now.

Her father wanted her to do this and she'd poured all of her energy, all of her life, all of herself, into doing what he asked.

Liliana felt compelled to be a counterpoint to death. And that was a very heavy weight to carry. But she was alive. Her mother was dead.

Could she complain about anything being too heavy when she *lived*?

But you'll live your whole life without ever touching him...

"It doesn't matter!"

She hadn't meant to say that out loud, but it burst from her mouth and she looked around, hoping her voice didn't draw attention to her.

It didn't matter. *He* didn't matter.

She'd made her choices. She could have been a rebellious daughter. She could have pushed back against her father's edicts. His demands she learn etiquette and deportment instead of going on to university. His pronouncement that she'd play hostess when he had businessmen over.

His long-standing proclamation he would choose her husband.

But when she thought of rebelling against him...

It made her cold all over.

Her father was her only family. The only person in the world who loved her.

How could she push back against that? How could she test that?

Maybe someday Matías would love her.

The idea didn't fill her with any sense of joy.

She stood from the bed and paced across the large bedroom. The *rancho* was opulent, but she had spent her life surrounded by opulence. It was nothing new, and suddenly, she despised her own jadedness on that score.

So many people would be grateful to marry Matías. To be made his princess, for all intents and purposes. To be the lady of the *rancho*, and have all these beautiful lands, this incredible hacienda and the horses that came with it.

And she could find nothing, no sense of excitement, no sense of triumph inside of her.

Nothing at all.

She stood at the window, brushing the curtains to the side and looking out at the well-manicured lawn. The pale moonlight spilled over the rippling grass, the slight breeze making it look like water rather than earth. Making her feel as though she could open the window and dive straight down into the depths and swim far, far away from all of this.

Suddenly, she saw movement. Not the shift of a blade of grass,

but a shadow, moving across the grounds. She didn't know what possessed her, only that she unlatched the window, opening it and the screen along with it, leaning out slightly so that she might get a better look at whatever was below.

And then, the dark shadow was closer to the house, and she could see for sure what it was.

A man.

There was a man out on the grass, moving around. She should call someone. For in all likelihood someone clearly sneaking through the property was not staff, and was not supposed to be here at all.

Perhaps he was one-half of a pair of ill-fated lovers. In which case, she didn't want to call anyone.

Her own love life was, if not ill-fated, then severely stunted, and she was hardly going to damage anyone else's.

But the figure kept coming closer to the house, and when he began to scale the side of the building, using the ornate molding and the window ledges as footholds, she stood frozen, watching him.

She should scream. She should call out for help. But she didn't. She simply stood. With the window open, as if she were inviting him in. He kept moving closer, and closer. And then he looked up, and she saw dark, glittering eyes just barely visible in the moonlight.

Still. She didn't move. Still, she stood without making a sound.

It wasn't until he climbed to her window, and wrapped his

arm around her waist, one hand holding tightly to the molding up above, his eyes clashing with hers, that she screamed.

"Now we must hurry," he said, that voice low and far too familiar. "Because you have caused a scene."

She found herself being jerked from the window, suspended above the ground, terror roaring through her veins.

She clung to the man, because she had no choice. She would fall to her... Well, perhaps not her death, but her certain maiming if she did not cling to those strong, broad shoulders, her breasts pressed against the chest so solid it seemed to be made of stone rather than flesh.

But he was hot. Hot in a way that only flesh and blood could be.

He had spoken.

And she *knew*.

Knew exactly who held her in his arms.

"I have a helicopter waiting," he whispered. "Are you holding on to me?"

"Y-yes."

"Good," he responded.

He let go of her and she wrapped her arms more tightly around his neck, as he made startling time scaling down the side of the house. She gave a short prayer of thanks when her feet connected with the grass, but it was short-lived as she found herself being picked up and hauled away quickly.

She heard voices, shouting, and she looked over his shoulder

to see dark figures standing in her bedroom window. Clearly responding to the scream.

"We will escape before he manages to mobilize. Believe me. I was hardly going to plan a kidnapping that I could not execute. I'm far too vain for such a thing."

"For kidnapping?"

"For *failed* kidnappings. I would only ever engage in a successful one." He bustled her into a car waiting at the edge of the lawn and drove them to the edge of the woods, taking her out of the car again, hauling her around like she was a sack of nightgown-wearing potatoes.

"Why exactly are you kidnapping me?" she asked, as she hung limp over his shoulder.

It was strange, she imagined, that she wasn't fighting him. That she wasn't screaming or pitching a massive fit, trying to escape his hold.

But she didn't want to. Not even a little bit. Not in the slightest. She found that she wanted to...see where he was going. Because hadn't it been Diego she had just been thinking of?

And she had to ask herself why she had stood there with the window open if she truly didn't want to be taken.

And so she let him carry her into the woods, across to a clearing, where there was indeed a helicopter awaiting them. He hauled her up inside easily, depositing her in the seat and buckling her before taking his position at the controls.

"You pilot...helicopters?"

“We don’t have time to talk.”

He fired up the rotors, and they began to gain speed. Just as she saw lights in the distance, they lifted off from the ground, above the trees, and away.

She couldn’t hear, not over the sound of the engine and the propellers, but then he put a headset on, and placed one on her head as well. She adjusted it.

“Can you hear me?”

His voice came over the speakers and into her ears. “Yes,” she responded.

“Excellent.”

“Did you want to make conversation now?” It seemed strange, all things considered.

“I thought we might pick up where we left off when last we spoke,” he said.

“Did you? Well, it might be a slightly different conversation, Diego, as when last we spoke we were in my father’s library. And today we are in a helicopter, with you having kidnapped me from my fiancé’s home.”

“You will not marry him.”

Her heart kicked into gear, slamming into her breastbone. “I won’t?”

“No,” he said, his voice dark and decisive.

“He’s going to come for me.”

“I’m not going anywhere that he will be able to trace us. My brother and I are not close. Believe me when I tell you he has no

idea of all the residences I own. Nor the aliases they are listed under."

"Aliases..."

"What did you think of me, *tesoro*? That I was simply misunderstood? And that was why I was the black sheep of the Navarro family? No. I am not misunderstood. Not in the least. In point of fact, I am rather well understood. I'm not a good man."

"That is not...overly comforting, considering I'm now hurtling through the air with you."

"It was not intended to be a comfort. I'm simply making sure that you are aware of the position you find yourself in."

"What position is that?"

"You're going to marry *me* now, Liliana."

Something hot and reckless jolted through her, a lot like fear, but with a hard edge to it that thrilled her as much as it repelled her.

"You can't just... How can you possibly think that I would agree to that?"

"Don't be silly, *tesoro*. I have all the ammunition I could possibly want. Did you honestly think I would go to all this trouble without hedging my bets? I was not counting on my charm to sway you."

If only he knew. Before this moment, he could have climbed through the window and seduced her, likely so easily it would be humiliating.

She had never kissed a man. Not truly. The chaste exchanges

she'd had with Matías were nothing like a real kiss, and the idea of Diego's lips kept her awake at night.

Indeed, they had been keeping her awake this very night. And he had no idea. Of course not.

But now... Now she was seeing him in a slightly different light.

She looked at him, his face cast in sharp relief by the glow of the control panel in front of him. High, hard-cut cheekbones, a cruel, sculpted mouth, nose straight like a blade.

Oh, dear heaven, she was no less attracted to him now than she had been before. There was perhaps something wrong with her. And she wasn't entirely certain there was anything that could be done about it. She wasn't entirely certain there was anything she would want to do about it. Because she had never felt anything like this. Nothing quite so dangerous, nothing quite so exhilarating. Her life had been lived entirely to please her father. Entirely to live up to the memory of her mother.

Lusting for dark and dangerous men fit nowhere in that. But Diego had swept into her father's house like an undeniable force. Indeed, he had swept into her bedroom tonight like one as well. And at the moment there was nothing she could do.

She was being whisked away, after all. She could hardly leap from the helicopter.

And the fact that he made her stomach sink, made it swoop like a butterfly whose wings had been torn, one that was falling out of the sky, toward its inevitable demise... Well, right now there was nothing she could do about that.

“If you truly wanted to marry me, you could have spoken to my father,” she said, her voice small.

“You don’t understand,” Diego said. “I must prevent my brother from marrying you.” He turned to face her for a moment, his lip curled into a sneer. “If he marries you, then he gains the inheritance of the ranch. I want you, and I want the *rancho*. My marriage ensures that I get it. And that is why you must marry me. The fact that I have fantasies of tearing that virginal nightgown from your body is only a bonus.”

His words rolled over her like a poison. He didn’t want her, not really. He didn’t want to marry her because he had any finer feelings for her. He wanted to marry her because of an inheritance.

Matías wanted to use her as well, wanted to use her to forge an alliance with her father, and apparently, to get an inheritance. But that didn’t bother her. Because when it came to Matías, she had only been following her father’s orders.

Her feelings for Diego had nothing to do with orders.

“If my brother has had you, that makes no difference to me. In fact, I shall take a great joy in wiping your memory of him from your mind.”

She realized what he meant, though it took a moment, and shock rolled over her.

She had not been with Matías. But she wasn’t going to tell him that. She didn’t know why, but for the moment it felt like a small bit of power.

He said that he didn't care, but the fact he had mentioned it made her think that perhaps he did.

And so she said nothing. She simply sat with her hands folded, staring straight ahead into the darkness as she was taken further and further away from any kind of certainty and deeper into this madness of Diego's making.

CHAPTER THREE

DIEGO WATCHED HIS captive closely as they walked from the helicopter toward his home. If she was expecting that there would be anyone here who might become sympathetic to her plight and offer her assistance, she would be sadly mistaken. He had taken pains to clear his house of all the usual staff, leaving it stocked with everything they would need to get through the next period of time without drawing attention to them.

He paused at the beginning of the walkway that led up to the old manor that looked near consumed by ivy where it was pressed deep into a rocky hillside.

He extended his gloved hand, and she took it, and he could feel her delicate fingers, could feel the heat of her body through the black leather.

He felt a bit like Hades, leading Persephone down into the underworld.

Some men might be consumed with guilt at that easy comparison. The idea that they might be the devil himself.

Diego suffered from no such guilt.

Diego did not suffer from a conscience at all.

Liliana was silent, and she looked like a very small ghost shrouded in her white nightgown, her pale hair blowing in the breeze.

“Where are we?”

"On a private island," he said. "Near enough to Spain, but far enough as well. This is mine. And no, my brother does not know."

"It's... It looks rather English."

"The English like Spain," he said. "At least, they like to get drunk in Spain."

"Is that what *you* like about Spain?"

"I *am* Spanish, *querida*."

"Of course," she said, her cheeks coloring slightly.

How funny that she could be embarrassed over making a faux pas with him. Her kidnapper. How charming that she would care at all.

"I take that as a compliment on the proficiency of my English," he said. His lips curved into a smile. "But not as much of a compliment on my character."

"Were you looking for compliments on your character, Diego? Because if so, you might have stopped short of the kidnapping."

He chuckled. "I was not. It is delightfully freeing when you don't care about your own morality. If you just sink into turpitude, I find that it has a very warm embrace. And there are a host of fabulous side effects. A lack of caring what anyone thinks. Least of all your own conscience."

"Some of us don't live exclusively for ourselves," she said softly.

"Your father?" He wondered if the poor creature imagined her father to be a good man. Why wouldn't she? She was... She was sweet. And in this world that was a rare and precious thing.

A thing he was going to destroy. He should care about that. He found he didn't. "What a fantastic paragon for you to live for."

He began to walk more quickly, drawing her into the entryway of the house, and pressing his thumb against the door to unlock it. "My thumbprint only, *tesoro*," he said.

"Does that include getting out as well?"

He laughed. "You know it does. Again, I would not conduct a kidnapping without being thorough."

"I suppose I should appreciate that as a commentary on my fortitude and ingenuity."

"I feel that you should be flattered by this entire caper."

"Should I?"

"Indeed. I've gone to quite a lot of trouble to procure you."

"More due to the relationship with your brother than anything to do with you."

"Yes. But if I did not find you enticing in your own right then I would simply have held on to you until the date on my grandfather's great edict expired."

"Lucky me."

"Many women would say that you were lucky. Being fought over by the Navarro brothers as you are."

"And yet, I feel more like a wretched hen between the jaws of two posturing dogs."

"Or, a precious gem being traded amongst thieves. Pick your metaphor, *tesoro*. I would pick the more flattering of the two."

"I don't have the motivation. Flattered or not, I remain

kidnapped."

"Perhaps you will in time." He brought her inside, closing the door behind them. The lock clicked with a delicious, satisfying finality.

"What are you going to do with me?" For the first time, she looked afraid. No, more than afraid—terrified. And two things dawned on him in that moment. That she had not looked truly frightened this entire time, which was an oddity. She seemed to have accepted her kidnapping with a remarkable aplomb. She had not fought him. In fact, she had clung to him, long after her safety had depended on it.

She had opened the window for him.

Something about that kicked masculine triumph through his veins. She did not hate him. That much was clear.

Or perhaps, she did not care for his brother. It didn't matter to him which it was. Not in the least. The fact that it was either was good enough.

The second was that she looked out of her mind with fear at the moment, and he did not care for that. Another revelation. He could not recall much caring about the feelings of another. Not ever.

Or at least, not in quite some time.

"I already told you," he said. "I intend to marry you."

"Are we alone here?" She backed up against the wall, her pulse thundering at the base of her throat.

Diego frowned and walked toward her, marveling as she

shrank away from him, turning herself near inside out to avoid him. He reached out, pressed his thumb against that delicate hollow there. It felt like a frightened bird against his touch, fluttering, trying to escape.

"What do you think I will do to you?"

"You have already kidnapped me. I fear that any number of indignities can't be too far away."

He dropped his hand quickly. "I have never once forced myself on a woman. I would hardly start with you."

"Why do you say it like *that*?"

"Because you want me."

"I want you? You kidnapped me. Do you honestly think that I'm panting after you now that you've stolen me out of my bedroom window?"

He lifted a brow and shrugged one shoulder. "A bedroom window you opened for me. That makes your protests slightly weak."

"I didn't know it was you."

"Did you not?"

Her shoulders went rigid. "I did not."

"It is moot. I saw the way you looked at me at your father's house. You wanted me then. You want me now. I would take absolutely no pleasure in forcing you. I would much rather you had to lower yourself to beg for what you want. Taking it from you would make it far too easy on you."

Her lip curled and she raised her hand, pulling it back as if she

meant to strike him. He didn't stop her. He merely stood, ready for her strike. And she of course didn't land the blow.

It did not surprise him. Not in the least.

"A word of advice, *tesoro*," he said. "If you're going to make threats you had best be prepared to follow through. I am not a man who makes idle threats, and therefore, you do not want to be the kind of woman who makes them. Not in my presence. If you're going to hit me, you best do it hard. If you're going to tempt my retribution, then it had better be worth it."

She said nothing. She simply stood there, shaking like an indignant leaf, her rage and fear barely suppressed. "Would you like to go to your room?"

"I'll have my own room?"

He sighed heavily, feigning exasperation. "Of course you will have your own room. I already made it clear that I do not intend to force myself on you."

"You just intend to force marriage on me."

"Naturally." He said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the entire world.

"You make no sense."

"I'm a villain. I don't have to make sense."

He turned away from her and they began to walk up the long staircase and down a winding corridor, leading her to the chamber he had selected expressly for her.

Truly, the entire house had been chosen for her. The entire island.

There was something classic about it. Classic, and yet wild. He had appreciated it from the moment he'd set eyes on it last week. From the moment he had decided on his course of action.

The chamber that he had selected for her, had had furnished and decorated and filled with beautiful clothes, had been chosen specifically with her in mind. He had imagined how she might react to it. Had imagined the delight she might take in the way the soft mattress molded itself around her body, in the way the soft fabrics felt against her skin.

Instead, when she saw the room, her expression was blank.

"Is it not to your liking?"

"As jail cells go, I imagine it's quite a beautiful one."

"There is a library," he bit out. "Just through that door."

"Do you think this is a movie? And that you can buy away my ire with books?"

"You told me you liked books," he said.

"Books *and* freedom. Perhaps I should have added that last part."

"Sadly, in this instance, you may have one, but not the other."

He began to walk away, his heart thundering hard, rage he did not quite understand beginning to spike in his system.

"How do you expect that you'll force me to marry you?" she asked. "I can't do anything about the fact that you have me in this house, but you cannot make me say vows."

He paused, bone-deep satisfaction rolling through him. "I already told you, *tesoro*. I have thought of absolutely everything."

"What have you thought of?"

"You told me that you live for other people. For your father. Well, I know things about Michael Hart that would destroy your girlish fantasies of the man you call father. I can ruin him, Liliana. His reputation, his fortune. I can reduce it all to dust."

"How? My father is a good man."

"Your father is a criminal, who has made the same mistake a great many idiotic criminals make. He has built his power upon legitimacy. For my part? I am a criminal who would lose nothing if the world were to find out."

"You could be arrested for kidnapping me."

"Could I? Do you suppose I am not prepared to bribe officials in Spain and in the United States to make sure that is not so? You mistake me for a man with limits."

"The man that I knew back at my father's home... He was not a monster."

"Yes," Diego said, advancing toward her. "He was. The monster is always there, Liliana, and make no mistake." He reached out, grabbing hold of her hand and forcing it down onto his chest, over his heart. "Understand this. No matter how civil I may seem, the monster is always there. When I'm smiling at you, the monster is there. Right there," he said, pounding her hand against him now. "Do not ever forget it."

Her eyes went wide, and for a moment he thought he might have succeeded in terrifying her. Then her face relaxed, a clear decision having taken place inside her.

“As seduction bids go,” she said, her voice wobbly, “this is not a good one.”

She was tough, was Liliana. Never as fragile as she appeared.

“At what point did you begin to believe this was a seduction? If I had wanted to seduce you, I would have done so back at your father’s home. I could have. We both know. The moment you told me you were to marry my brother I could have had you on the floor. I can sense how badly you want me. But it’s not enough. It’s not permanent enough for my purposes. And that’s why I didn’t. I wanted insurance. And I found it. Your father has been scamming those who invest in his company. And I have the proof. Not only that, there are rafts of harassment allegations from a great many female employees. All buried. Covered up by his money. But the only person who possesses the power to pay more than he does is me. I have my finger poised on the kill button, Liliana, and he would be a fool to think I won’t press it.”

“He... He couldn’t have.”

“Oh, but he could have. And did.”

“If you draw attention to yourself...”

“My reputation as a gambler, womanizer and reprobate will be compromised?”

She shrank in on herself, clearly realizing that she was defeated.

“I recommend that you get a good night’s sleep. For we are to be married as quickly as possible.”

“How?”

“I have already begun the paperwork for a license. It requires only your signature and then it is poised to be processed. After which I have arranged for an officiant to come and speak our vows to us. I am a traditionalist at heart. I could have simply had us married over the computer, but I find technology so cold.”

“I don’t think it’s technology. I rather think it’s your heart.”

He laughed. “No, darling. I don’t have a heart.”

“I just felt it beating.”

“You just felt the monster. Trying to escape.”

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