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Diana Palmer**

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**Praise for *New York Times* bestselling author
Maisey Yates**

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Author of more than one hundred books, **Diana Palmer** is a multiple *New York Times* bestselling author and one of the top ten romance writers in America. She has a gift for telling even the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

www.DianaPalmer.com

Maisey Yates is a *New York Times* bestselling author of more than thirty romance novels. She has a coffee habit she has no interest in kicking and a slight Pinterest addiction. She lives with her husband and children in the Pacific Northwest. When Maisey isn't writing she can be found singing in the grocery store, shopping for shoes online and probably not doing dishes. Check out her website: maiseyyates.com.

New York Times Bestselling Author

DIANA PALMER

ENAMORED

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ENAMORED

Diana Palmer

To my Alice with love

Prologue

The gentle face on the starched white pillow was pale and very still. The man looking down at it scowled with unfamiliar concern. For so many years, his emotions had been caged. Tender feelings were a luxury no mercenary could afford, least of all a man with the reputation of Diego Laremos.

But this woman was no stranger, and the emotions he felt when he looked at her were still confused. It had been five years since he'd seen her, yet she seemed not to have aged a day. She would be twenty-five now, he thought absently. He was forty.

He hadn't expected her to be unconscious. When the hospital had contacted him, he almost hadn't come. Melissa Sterling had betrayed him years before. He wasn't anxious to renew their painful acquaintance, but out of curiosity and a sense of duty, he'd made the trip to south-

ern Arizona. Now he was here, and it was not a subterfuge, a trap, as it had been before. She was injured and helpless; she was alive, though he'd given her up for dead all those long years ago. The cold emptiness inside him was giving way to memories, and that he couldn't allow.

He turned, tall and dark and immaculate in his charcoal-gray suit, to stare out the window at the well-kept grounds beyond the second-floor room Melissa Sterling occupied. He had a mustache now that he hadn't sported during the turbulent days she'd shared with him. He was a little more muscular, older. But age had only emphasized his elegant good looks, made him more mature. His dark eyes slid to the bed, to the slender body of this woman, this stranger, who had trapped him into marriage and then deserted him.

Melissa was tall for a woman, although he towered above her. She had long, wavy blond hair that had once curled below her waist. That had been cut, so that now it curved around her wan oval face. Her eyes were blue-shadowed, closed, her perfect mouth almost as white as her face, her straight nose barely wrinkling now and again as it protested the air tubes taped to it. She seemed surrounded by electronic equipment, by wires that led to various monitors.

An accident, the attending physician had said over a worse-than-poor telephone conversation the day before. An airplane crash that, by some miracle, she and the pilot and several other passengers on the commuter flight from Phoenix had survived. The plane had gone down in the desert outside Tucson, and she'd been brought here to the general hospital, unconscious. The emergency room staff had found a worn, carefully folded paper in her wallet that contained the only evidence of her marital status. A marriage license, written in Span-

ish; the fading ink stated that she was the *esposa* of one Diego Alejandro Rodriguez Ruiz Laremos of Dos Rios, Guatemala. Was Diego her husband, the physician had persisted, and if so, would he authorize emergency surgery to save her life?

He vaguely recalled asking if she had no other relatives, but the doctor had told him that her pitifully few belongings gave no evidence of any. So Diego had left his Guatemalan farm in the hands of his hired militia and flown himself all the way from Guatemala City to Tucson.

He'd had no sleep in the past twenty-four hours. He'd been smoking himself to death and reliving a tormenting past.

The woman in the bed stirred suddenly, moaning. He turned just as her eyes opened and then closed quickly again. They were gray. Big and soft, a delicate contrast to her blond fairness; her gray eyes were the only visible evidence of Melissa's Guatemalan mother, whose betrayal had brought anguish and dishonor to the Laremos family.

His black eyes ran slowly over her pale, still features and he wondered as he watched how he and Melissa had ever come to this...

Chapter One

It was a misty rain, but Melissa Sterling didn't mind. Getting soaked was a small price to pay for a few precious minutes with Diego Laremos.

Diego's family had owned the *finca*, the giant Guatemalan farm that bordered her father's land, for four generations. And despite the fact that Melissa's late mother had been the cause of a bitter feud between the Laremos family and the Sterlings, that hadn't stopped Melissa from worshiping the son and heir to the Laremos name. Diego seemed not to mind her youthful adoration, or if he did, he was kind enough not to mock her for it.

There had been a storm the night before, and Melissa had ridden down to Mama Chavez's small house to make sure the old woman was all right, only to find that Diego, too, had been worried about his old nurse and had come to check on her. Melissa liked to visit her

and listen to tales of Diego's youth and hear secret legends about the Maya.

Diego had brought some melons and fish for the old woman, whose family tree dated back to the very beginning of the Mayan empire, and now he was escorting Melissa back to her father's house.

Her dark eyes kept running over his lean, fit body, admiring the way he sat on his horse, the thick darkness of his hair under his panama hat. He wasn't an arrogant man, but he had a cold, quiet authority about him that bordered on it. He never had to raise his voice to his servants, and Melissa had only seen him in one fight. He was a dignified, self-contained man without an apparent weakness. But he was mysterious. He often disappeared for weeks at a time, and once he'd come home with scars on his cheek and a limp. Melissa had been curious, but she hadn't questioned him. Even at twenty, she was still shy with men, and especially with Diego. He'd rescued her once when she'd gotten lost in the rain forest searching for some old Mayan ruins, and she'd loved him secretly ever since.

"I suppose your grandmother and sister would die if they knew I was within a mile of you," she sighed, brushing back her long, wavy blond hair as she glanced at him with a hesitant smile that was echoed in the soft gray of her eyes.

"They bear your family no great love, that is true," he agreed. The distant mountains were a blue haze in front of them as they rode. "It is difficult for my family to forget that Edward Sterling stole my father's *novia* on the eve of their wedding and eloped with her. My father spoke of her often, with grief. My grandmother never stopped blaming your family for his grief."

“My father loved her, and she loved him,” Melissa defended. “It was only an arranged marriage that your father would have had with her, anyway, not a love match. Your father was much older than my mother, and he’d been a widower for years.”

“Your father is British,” he said coldly. “He has never understood our way of life. Here, honor is life itself. When he stole away my father’s betrothed, he dishonored my family.” Diego glanced at Melissa, not adding that his father had also been counting on her late mother’s inheritance to restore the family fortunes. Diego had considered his father’s attitude rather mercenary, but the old man had cared about Sheila Sterling in his cool way.

Diego reined in his mount and stared at Melissa, taking in her slender body in jeans and a pink shirt unbuttoned to the swell of her breasts. She attracted him far more than he wanted to admit. He couldn’t allow himself to become involved with the daughter of the woman who’d disgraced his family.

“Your father should not let you wander around in this manner,” he said unexpectedly, although he softened the words with a faint smile. “You know there has been increased guerrilla activity here. It is not safe.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” she replied.

“You never do, *chica*,” he sighed, cocking his hat over one eye. “Your daydreaming will be your downfall one day. These are dangerous times.”

“All times are dangerous,” she said with a shy smile. “But I feel safe with you.”

He raised a dark eyebrow. “And that is the most dangerous daydream of all,” he mused. “But no doubt you have not yet realized it. Come; we must move on.”

“In just a minute.” She drew a camera from her pocket

and pointed it toward him, smiling at his grimace. "I know, not again, you're thinking. Can I help it if I can't get the right perspective on the painting of you I'm working on? I need another shot. Just one, I promise." She clicked the shutter before he could protest.

"This famous painting is taking one long time, *niña*," he commented. "You have been hard at it for eight months, and not one glimpse have I had of it."

"I work slow," she prevaricated. In actual fact, she couldn't draw a straight line without a ruler. The photo was to add to her collection of pictures of him, to sit and sigh over in the privacy of her room. To build dreams around. Because dreams were all she was ever likely to have of Diego, and she knew it. His family would oppose any mention of having Melissa under their roof, just as they opposed Diego's friendship with her.

"When do you go off to college?" he asked unexpectedly.

She sighed as she pocketed the camera. "Pretty soon, I guess. I begged off for a year after school, just to be with Dad, but this unrest is making him more stubborn about sending me away. I don't want to go to the States. I want to stay here."

"Your father may be wise to insist," Diego murmured, although he didn't like to think about riding around his estate with no chance of being waylaid by Melissa. He'd grown used to her. To a man as worldly and experienced and cynical as Diego had become over the years, Melissa was a breath of spring air. He loved her innocence, her shy adoration. Given the chance, he was all too afraid he might be tempted to appreciate her exquisite young body, as well. She was slender, tall, with long, tanned legs, breasts that had just the right shape and a waist that

was tiny, flaring to full, gently curving hips. She wasn't beautiful, but her fair complexion was exquisite in its frame of long, tangled blond hair, and her gray eyes held a kind of serenity far beyond her years. Her nose was straight, her mouth soft and pretty. In the right clothes and with the right training, she would be a unique hostess, a wife of whom a man could be justifiably proud...

That thought startled Diego. He had had no intention of thinking of Melissa in those terms. If he ever married, it would be to a Guatemalan woman of good family, not to a woman whose father had already once disgraced the name of Laremos.

"You're always at home these days," Melissa said as they rode along the valley, with the huge Atitlán volcano in the distance against the green jungle. She loved Guatemala, she loved the volcanos and the lakes and rivers, the tropical jungle, the banana and coffee plantations and the spreading valleys. She especially loved the mysterious Mayan ruins that one found so unexpectedly. She loved the markets in the small villages and the friendly warmth of the Guatemalan people whose Mayan ancestors had once ruled here.

"The *finca* demands much of my time since my father's death," he replied. "Besides, *niña*, I was getting too old for the work I used to do."

She glanced at him. "You never talked about it. What did you do?"

He smiled faintly. "Ah, that would be telling. How did your father fare with the fruit company? Were they able to recompense him for his losses during the storm?"

A tropical storm had damaged the banana plantation in which her father had a substantial interest. This year's crop had been a tremendous loss. Like Diego, though,

her father had other investments—such as the cattle he and Diego raised on their adjoining properties. But as a rule, fruit was the biggest money-maker.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. He doesn’t share business with me. I guess he thinks I’m too dumb to understand.” She smiled, her mind far away on the small book she’d found recently in her mother’s trunk. “You know, Dad is so different from the way he was when my mother knew him. He’s so sedate and quiet these days. Mama wrote that he was always in the thick of things when they were first married, very daring and adventurous.”

“I imagine her death changed him, little one,” he said absently.

“Maybe it did,” she murmured. She looked at him curiously. “Apollo said that you were the best there was at your job,” she added quickly. “And that someday you might tell me about it.”

He said something under his breath, glaring at her. “My past is something I never expect to share with anyone. Apollo had no right to say such a thing to you.”

His voice chilled her when it had that icily formal note in it. She shifted restlessly. “He’s a nice man. He helped Dad round up some of the stray cattle one day when there was a storm. He must be good at his job, or you wouldn’t keep him on.”

“He is good at his job,” he said, making a mental note to have a long talk with the African American ex-military policeman who worked for him and had been part of the band of mercenaries Diego had once belonged to. “But it does not include discussing me with you.”

“Don’t be mad at him, please,” she asked gently. “It was my fault, not his. I’m sorry I asked. I know you’re

very close about your private life, but it bothered me that you came home that time so badly hurt." She lowered her eyes. "I was worried."

He bit back a sharp reply. He couldn't tell her about his past. He couldn't tell her that he'd been a professional mercenary, that his job had been the destruction of places and sometimes people, that it had paid exceedingly well, or that the only thing he had put at risk was his life. He kept his clandestine operations very quiet at home; only the government officials for whom he sometimes did favors knew about him. As for friends and acquaintances, it wouldn't do for them to know how he earned the money that kept the *finca* solvent.

He shrugged indifferently. "*No importa.*" He was silent for a moment, his black eyes narrow as he glanced at her. "You should marry," he said unexpectedly. "It is time your father arranged for a *novio* for you, *niña.*"

She wanted to suggest Diego, but that would be courting disaster. She studied her slender hands on the reins. "I can arrange my own marriage. I don't want to be promised to some wealthy old man just for the sake of my family fortunes."

Diego smiled at her innocence. "Oh, *niña*, the idealism of youth. By the time you reach my age, you will have lost every trace of it. Infatuation does not last. It is the poorest foundation for a lasting relationship, because it can exist where there are no common interests whatsoever."

"You sound so cold," she murmured. "Don't you believe in love?"

"Love is not a word I know," he replied carelessly. "I have no interest in it."

Melissa felt sick and shaky and frightened. She'd al-

ways assumed that Diego was a romantic like herself. But he certainly didn't sound like one. And with that attitude he probably wouldn't be prejudiced against an arranged, financially beneficial marriage. His grandmother was very traditional, and she lived with him. Melissa didn't like the thought of Diego marrying anyone else, but he was thirty-five and soon he had to think of an heir. She stared at the pommel on her saddle, idly moving the reins against it. "That's a very cynical attitude."

He looked at her with raised black eyebrows. "You and I are worlds apart, do you know that? Despite your Guatemalan upbringing and your excellent Spanish, you still think like an Anglo."

"Perhaps I've got more of my mother in me than you think," she confessed sheepishly. "She was Spanish, but she eloped with the best man at her own wedding."

"It is nothing to joke about."

She brushed back her long hair. "Don't go cold on me, Diego," she chided softly. "I didn't mean it. I'm really very traditional."

His dark eyes ran over her, and the expression in them made her heart race. "Yes. Of that I am quite certain," he said. His eyes slid up to hers again, holding them until she colored. He smiled at her expression. He liked her reactions, so virginal and flattering. "Even my grandmother approves of the very firm hand your father keeps on you. Twenty, and not one evening alone with a young man out of the sight of your father."

She avoided his piercing glance. "Not that many young men come calling. I'm not an heiress and I'm not pretty."

"Beauty is transient; character endures. You suit me as you are, *pequeña*," he said gently. "And in time the

young men will come with flowers and proposals of marriage. There is no rush.”

She shifted in the saddle. “That’s what you think,” she said miserably. “I spend my whole life alone.”

“Loneliness is a fire which tempers steel,” he counseled. “Benefit from it. In days to come it will give you a serenity which you will value.”

She gave him a searching look. “I’ll bet you haven’t spent your life alone,” she said.

He shrugged. “Not totally, perhaps,” he said, giving away nothing. “But I like my own company from time to time. I like, too, the smell of the coffee trees, the graceful sweep of the leaves on banana trees, the sultry wind in my face, the proud Maya ruins and the towering volcanoes. These things are my heritage. Your heritage,” he added with a tender smile. “One day you will look back on this as the happiest time of your life. Don’t waste it.”

That was possible, she mused. She almost shivered with the delight of having Diego so close beside her and the solitude of the open country around them. Yes, this was the good time, full of the richness of life and love. Never would she wish herself anywhere else.

He left her at the gate that led past the small kitchen garden to the white stucco house with its red roof. He got down from his horse and lifted her from the saddle, his lean hands firm and sure at her small waist. For one small second he held her so that her gaze was level with his, and something touched his black eyes. But it was gone abruptly, and he put her down and stepped back.

She forced herself to move away from the tangy scent of leather and tobacco that clung to his white shirt. She forced herself not to look where it was unbuttoned over a tanned olive chest feathered with black hair. She wanted

so desperately to reach up and kiss his hard mouth, to hold him to her, to experience all the wonder of her first passion. But Diego saw only a young girl, not a woman.

“I will leave your mare at the stable,” he promised as he mounted gracefully. “Keep close to home from now on,” he added firmly. “Your father will tell you, as I already have, that it is not safe to ride alone.”

“If you say so, Señor Laremos,” she murmured, and curtsied impudently.

Once he would have laughed at that impish gesture. But her teasing had a sudden and unexpected effect. His blood surged in his veins, his body tautened. His black eyes went to her soft breasts and lingered there before he dragged them back to her face. “*¡Hasta luego!*” he said tersely, and wheeled his mount without another word.

Melissa stared after him with her heart in her throat. Even in her innocence, she’d recognized the hot, quick flash of desire in his eyes. She felt the look all the way to her toes and burned with an urge to run after him, to make sure she hadn’t misunderstood his reaction. To have Diego look at her in that way was the culmination of every dream she’d ever had about him.

She went into the house, tingling with banked-down excitement. From now on, every day was going to be even more like a surprise package.

Estrella had outdone herself with supper. The small, plump *Ladina* woman had made steak with peppers and cheese and salsa, with seasoned rice to go with it, and cool melon for a side dish. Melissa hugged her as she sniffed the delicious aroma of the meal.

“*Delicioso*,” she said with a grin.

“Steak is to put on a bruised eye,” Estrella sniffed. “The best meat is iguana.”

Melissa made a face. "I'd eat snake first," she promised. Estrella grinned wickedly. "You did. Last night."

The younger woman's eyes widened. "That was chicken."

Estrella shook her head. "Snake." She laughed when Melissa made a threatening gesture. "No, no, no, you cannot hit me. It was your father's idea!"

"My father wouldn't do such a thing," she said.

"You do not know your father," the *Ladina* woman said with a twinkle in her eyes. "Get out now, let me work. Go and practice your piano or Señora Lopez will be incensed when she comes to hear you on Friday."

Melissa sighed. "I suppose she will, that patient soul. She never gives up on me, even when I know I'll never be able to run my cadences without slipping up on the minor keys."

"Practice!"

She nodded, then changed the subject. "Dad didn't phone, I suppose?" she asked.

"No." Estrella glanced at Melissa with one of her black eyes narrowed. "He will not like you riding with Señor Laremos."

"How did you know I was?" Melissa exclaimed. These flashes of instant knowledge still puzzled her as they had from childhood. Estrella always seemed to know things before she actually heard about them formally.

"That," the *Ladina* woman said smugly, "is my secret. Out with you. Let me cook."

Melissa went, hoping Estrella wasn't planning to share her knowledge with her father.

And apparently the *Ladina* woman didn't, but Edward Sterling knew anyway. He came back from his business

trip looking preoccupied, his graying blond hair damp with rain, his elegant white suit faintly wrinkled.

“Luis Martinez saw you out riding with Diego Laremos,” he said abruptly, without greeting her. Melissa sat with her hands poised over the piano in the spacious living room. “I thought we’d had this conversation already.”

Melissa drew a steadying breath and put her hands in her lap. “I can’t help it,” she said, giving up all attempts at subterfuge. “I suppose you don’t believe that.”

“I believe it,” he said, to her surprise. “I even understand it. But what I don’t understand is why Laremos encourages you. He isn’t a marrying man, Melissa, and he knows what it would do to me to see you compromised.” His face hardened. “Which is what disturbs me the most. The whole Laremos family would love to see us humbled. Don’t cut your leg and invite a shark to kiss it better,” he added with a faint attempt at humor.

She threw up her hands. “You won’t believe that Diego has no ulterior motives, will you? That he genuinely likes me?”

“I think he likes the adulation,” he said sharply. He poured brandy into a snifter and sat down, crossing his long legs. “Listen, sweet, it’s time you knew the truth about your hero. It’s a long story, and it isn’t pretty. I had hoped that you’d go away to college, and no harm done. But this hero worship has to stop. Do you have any idea what Diego Laremos did for a living until about two years ago?”

She blinked. “He traveled on business, I suppose. The Laremoses have money—”

“The Laremoses have nothing, or had nothing,” he interrupted curtly. “The old man was hoping to marry Sheila and get his hands on her father’s supposed mil-

lions. What Laremos didn't know was that Sheila's father had lost everything and was hoping to get *his* hands on the Laremoses' banana plantations. It was a comedy of errors, and then I found your mother and that was the end of the plotting. To this day, none of your mother's people will speak to me, and the Laremoses only do out of politeness. And the great irony of it is that none of them know the truth about each other's families. There never was any money—only pipe dreams about mergers.”

“Then, if the Laremoses had nothing,” Melissa ventured, “why do they have so much these days?”

“Because your precious Diego had a lot of guts and few equals with an automatic weapon,” Edward Sterling said bluntly. “He was a professional soldier.”

Melissa didn't move. She didn't speak. She stared blankly at her father. “Diego isn't hard enough to go around killing people.”

“Don't kid yourself,” came the reply. “Haven't you even realized that the men he surrounds himself with at the Casa de Luz are his old confederates? That man they call First Shirt, and the black ex-soldier, Apollo Blain, and Semson and Drago...all of them are ex-mercenaries with no country to call their own. They have no future except here, working for their old comrade.”

Melissa felt her hands trembling. She sat on them. It was beginning to come together. The bits and pieces of Diego's life that she'd seen and wondered about were making sense now—a terrible kind of sense.

“I see you understand,” her father said, his voice very quiet. “You know, I don't think less of him for what he's done. But a past like his would be rough for a woman to take. Because of what he's done, he's a great deal less vulnerable than an ordinary man. More than likely his

feelings are locked in irons. It will take more than an innocent, worshiping girl to unlock them, Melissa. And you aren't even in the running in his mind. He'll marry a Guatemalan woman, if he ever marries. He won't marry you. Our unfortunate connection in the past will assure that, don't you see?"

Her eyes stung with tears. Of course she did, but hearing it didn't help. She tried to smile, and the tears overflowed.

"Baby." Her father got up and pulled her gently into his arms, rocking her. "I'm sorry, but there's no future for you with Diego Laremos. It will be best if you go away, and the sooner the better."

Melissa had to agree. "You're right." She dabbed at her tears. "I didn't know. Diego never told me about his past. I suppose he was saving it for a last resort," she said, trying to bring some lightness to the moment. "Now I understand what he meant about not knowing what love was. I guess Diego couldn't afford to let himself love anyone, considering the line of work he was in."

"I don't imagine he could," her father agreed. He smoothed her hair back. "I wish your mother was still alive. She'd have known what to say."

"Oh, you're not doing too bad," Melissa told him. She wiped her eyes. "I guess I'll get over Diego one day."

"One day," Edward agreed. "But this is for the best, Melly. Your world and his would never fit together. They're too different."

She looked up. "Diego said that, too."

Edward nodded. "Then Laremos realizes it. That will be just as well. He won't put any obstacles in the way."

Melissa tried to forget that afternoon and the way Diego had held her, the way he'd looked at her. Maybe

he didn't know what love was, but something inside him had reacted to her in a new and different way. And now she was going to have to leave before she could find out what he felt or if he could come to care for her.

But perhaps her father was right. If Diego felt anything, it was physical, not emotional. Desire, in its place, might be exquisite, but without love it was just a shadow. Diego's past had shocked her. A man like that—was he even capable of love?

Melissa kept her thoughts to herself. There was no sense in sharing them with her father and worrying him even more. "How did it go in Guatemala City?" she asked instead, trying to divert him.

He laughed. "Well, it's not as bad as I thought at first. Let's eat, and I'll explain it to you. If you're old enough to go to college, I suppose you're old enough to be told about the family finances."

Melissa smiled at him. It was the first time he'd offered that kind of information. In an odd way, she felt as if her father accepted the fact that she was an adult.