



The Spaniard's Defiant Virgin (Harlequin comics)

By Jennie Lucas



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Editorial Review

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Tarfaya, Morocco

He was waiting for her outside the Dar el-Saladin.

Marcos Ramirez held up his binoculars, watching the flower-covered limousine leave the fishing village in a whirlwind of rose petals. From where Marcos stood, the sturdy gate that protected the village from sandstorms on one side and the sea on the other seemed riddled with red bullet holes.

Tamsin Winter, at last. He'd kept tabs on her through her ten cloistered years in boarding schools until she'd returned to London last year. Since then, the wild young heiress had frequently been in the tabloids, always with a different man on her arm. The spoiled beauty was reputedly the most accomplished flirt in Britain.

Breaking her would be a pleasure.

"The car's moving into position, Patrón," his chief bodyguard, Reyes, noted aloud.

"Sí." Marcos put down the binoculars. He knew his men could have kidnapped the Winter girl without his supervision, preventing her from arriving at her wedding in the Sheikh's kasbah to the north. Marcos could be taking his ease in Madrid right now, drinking coffee and checking the latest numbers on the London and New York stock exchanges instead of sweating in the dust-choked desert.

But he'd been dreaming of revenge for twenty years, and today was the culmination of everything. After he had the girl, both she and her family would be utterly destroyed. Finally. As they deserved.

Marcos smiled grimly to himself. He only wished he could see the expression on her bridegroom's face when he heard the news, the black-hearted bastard.

The limousine left the village, moving along the sand-covered road that separated the Sahara and the bright Atlantic shore. He pulled his black mask down over his face and turned to Reyes. "Vámonos."

Tamsin Winter had just sold her virginity to the highest bidder.

Her white bridal kaftan, intricately embroidered with silver thread and jewels, weighed on her like a shroud as she looked through the darkened windows. She felt almost envious of a wrinkled woman selling oranges on the street. Selling oranges seemed like a pleasant fate compared with marrying a man who'd already beaten one wife to death.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. It didn't matter, she told herself. She would let Aziz al-Maghrib paw at her with his meaty hands, kiss her with the stench of his foul breath and take her innocence with his flabby, wrinkled body. It would be a small price to pay, since it would save her young sister from a life of misery and neglect.

But, as recently as last month, she'd looked forward to falling in love and marrying a man she could cherish. She'd dreamed of starting a career and some day having children of her own. She'd spent all of her twenty-three years dreaming of the day her life would truly begin.

Strange to think that it was already over.

Saving her sister was the best choice she'd ever made. But, even knowing that, part of her ached for all the time she'd wasted, the romances she'd never had, the chances she'd never taken. If she'd known her life would be so short...

"Tamsin! Stop fidgeting. You'll wrinkle your dress. Oh, you're doing it on purpose, you stupid girl!"

Tamsin slowly opened her eyes, heavy with black kohl, and looked into the hated face of her half-brother's wife. Camilla Winter was twenty years older than Tamsin, and her surgery-smoothed skin stretched oddly over her skull.

"Did you pay for your face-lift out of Nicole's money, Camilla?" Tamsin asked curiously. "Is that why you were letting a ten-year-old girl starve? So you could look like a doll?"

Camilla gasped.

"Do not fear. My brother will beat the rebellious spirit out of her," Hatima, her future sister-in-law, said confidently. Hatima and Camilla comprised her negaffa—the older female relatives who, according to Moroccan tradition, were supposed to help a young bride, to counsel her, to calm her fears about her coming marriage.

Some help, Tamsin thought bitterly. She looked down at her henna-decorated hands folded carefully in her lap. But Hatima was right. Her husband would beat her, either before or after he took her virginity. Maybe both.

She stared out the window as they passed the gate that encircled the village. She never should have saved herself for love, she thought. She should have slept with the first boy who'd drunkenly kissed her at a college party. Then maybe it wouldn't hurt so much now.

"What? No snappy comeback?" Camilla sneered. "Not so brave now, are you?"

Blinking hard to hold back the tears—she'd die before she cried in front of Camilla—Tamsin stared stonily at the fishing boats bobbing off the shore and the seagulls flying free over the ocean. Seemingly disappointed by her lack of spirit, the other women began to speak of recent attacks in nearby Laayoune.

"The wali's wife was kidnapped," Hatima whispered. "Taken in broad daylight."

"What's the world coming to?" Camilla replied gleefully. "What happened to her?"

Traffic waned as they traveled northwards along the Atlantic, but the car weaved back and forth across the road. Frowning, Tamsin glanced up at the driver. Though the car was cold with air-conditioning, the back of his neck was covered with sweat.

"The wali had to sell everything he owned to pay the ransom. The family is ruined, of course, but at least the wife was returned."

"You mean they didn't hurt her?" Camilla sounded disappointed.

"No, they just wanted money. It was—"

Hatima's voice ended in a scream as their driver veered hard right and slammed on the brakes. The limousine

spun around twice, skidding across the road before it crashed heavily into a sandbank.

The driver threw open his door and ran back towards Tarfaya.

"Where are you going?" Camilla cried. Her long nails scraped against the handle as she reached for her door.

The door handle was abruptly yanked out of her hand from the other side. Three men in black masks and desert camouflage leaned threateningly into the back seat, shouting orders in a language that Tamsin didn't understand.

Her own side door was yanked open. She whirled around with a gasp.

A man, taller than the others, towered over her. Beneath his black mask, she could see a cruel mouth and steel-gray eyes that bored into her like a revolver pressing into her flesh.

"Tamsin Winter," he said in English. "At last you are mine."

He knew her name. A strange sort of bandit, she thought dimly, even as she heard the other women screaming behind her. Why would a desert bandit know her name?

Had her prayers been answered and he'd come to save her?

No! she thought desperately. No one could save her. Tamsin had to marry Aziz or her sister would pay the price.

What had Hatima said the bandits wanted? Money? Licking her lips nervously, she sat up straight, trying to stare him down. "I am the future bride of Aziz ibn Mohamed alMaghrib," she said. "Touch a hair on my head and he will kill you. Return me safely, and you will be rewarded."

"Ah." The man's mouth stretched into a smile, showing white, even teeth. "And how would he reward me?"

He had a strange accent, the flat vowels of an American punctuated with something more exotic—the rolling Rs of a Spaniard. Who was this man? He was more than a mere brigand. The thought frightened her.

"A million euros," she said recklessly.

"A fine number."

"You'll be rich," she agreed, praying that Aziz's uncle, who held the wealth in the family, would actually pay it.

"A generous offer," the brigand said. "But, unfortunately for you, money is not what I'm after."

He reached into the back seat, grabbing her shoulders. Tamsin screamed, kicking and clawing at his face.

"Don't fight me," he growled.

She only screamed and kicked harder. One of her shoes slammed hard against his groin. Cursing, he restrained her wrists with one hand. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a white cloth and pressed it against her mouth.

He was drugging her! She tried not to breathe, but after a minute she couldn't stop herself from taking a

gasping breath. The air tasted sickly sweet through the cloth. She tried to twist her face away, but the man wouldn't allow it. She took another breath, and the desert horizon started to spin before it all went black.

* * *

Tamsin woke up in a very soft bed.

She opened her eyes slowly. Her head pounded. She could hear the lapping of water, the creaking of wood, the caw of seagulls overhead.

And she realized she was naked.

Sitting up straight in bed, she pulled the luxurious cotton sheets away from her body. She was wearing her see-through white lace bra and panties—her wedding-night lingerie—and nothing else.

"I trust you slept well."

She yanked the sheets up to her chin. A handsome stranger was leaning against the doorway. He was tall, broad-shouldered and olive-skinned, with short, wavy dark hair. He wore a crisp white shirt and dark pants that molded to his muscular body.

She'd never seen him before, but she recognized his voice. That cruel, sensual mouth. Most of all, those dark, cold eyes.

"Where am I?" She had a hazy memory of being on a helicopter and then driven through the streets of Tangiers. "What did you do with Camilla and Hatima?"

He stepped into the cabin, his gray eyes alight with malignant hatred as he looked at her. "You should be worried about what I'm going to do with you."

That was exactly what she was trying not to think about. If she did, she'd start screaming with terror and fear. Not just for herself but for ten-year-old Nicole, who was still held hostage in Tarfaya, depending on her to get through this.

She had to hold herself together long enough to come up with a plan of escape.

"Did you kidnap them as well?" she asked, despising the involuntary tremble in her voice. "Where have you taken me? Have you sent a ransom note to the Sheikh?"

He folded his arms. "There will be no ransom note."

"What?"

He took a step closer to the bed. His whole body was muscular and taut beneath his fine clothes, as if only sheer will kept him from grabbing her.

"I left the others in Tarfaya," he said. "I only need you."

She swallowed. "Me? Wh...

Users Review

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Daniel Soderquist:

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Amanda Young:

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