



A Vow of Obligation (Marriage by Command)

By Lynne Graham

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lynne Graham lives in Northern Ireland and has been a keen romance reader since her teens. Happily married, Lynne has five children. Her eldest is her only natural child. Her other children, who are every bit as dear to her heart, are adopted. The family has a variety of pets, and Lynne loves gardening, cooking, collecting allsorts and is crazy about every aspect of Christmas.

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'Were you seen coming up to my suite?' Navarre Cazier prompted in the Italian that came as naturally to him as the French of his homeland.

Tia pouted her famously sultry lips and in spite of her sophistication contrived to look remarkably young and naive as befitting one of the world's most acclaimed film stars. 'I slipped in through the side entrance—'

Navarre ditched his frown and smiled, for when she looked at him like that with her big blue eyes telegraphing embarrassed vulnerability he couldn't help it. 'It's you I'm concerned about. The paparazzi follow you everywhere—'

'Not here...' Tia Castelli declared, tossing her head so that a silken skein of honey-blonde hair rippled across her slim shoulders, her flawless face full of regret. 'We haven't got long though. Luke will be back at our hotel by three and I have to be there.'

At that reference to her notoriously volatile rock star husband, Navarre's lean, darkly handsome features hardened and his emerald-green eyes darkened.

Tia ran a manicured fingertip reprovingly below the implacable line of his shapely masculine mouth. 'Don't be like that, *caro mio*. This is my life, take me or leave me...and I couldn't bear it if you chose the second option!' she warned him in a sudden rush, her confident drawl splintering to betray the insecurity she hid from the world. 'I'm sorry, so sorry that it has to be like this between us!'

'It's OK,' Navarre told her soothingly although he was lying through his even white teeth as he said it. He loathed being a dirty little secret in her life but the alternative was to end their relationship and although he was remarkably strong-willed and stubborn, he had found himself quite unable to do that.

'And you're still bringing a partner with you for the awards ceremony, aren't you?' Tia checked anxiously. 'Luke is so incredibly suspicious of you.'

'Angelique Simonet, currently the toast of the Paris catwalk,' Navarre answered wryly.

'And she doesn't know about us?' the movie actress pressed worriedly.

'Of course not.'

'I know, I know...I'm sorry, I just have so much at stake!' Tia gasped strickenly. 'I couldn't stand to lose Luke!'

'You can trust me.' Navarre closed his arms round her slim body to comfort her. Her blue eyes glistened with the tears that came so easily to her and she was trembling with nerves. Navarre tried not to wonder what

Luke Convery had been doing or saying to get her into such a state. Time and experience had taught him that it was better not to go there, better neither to know nor to enquire. He did not interfere in her marriage any more than she questioned his choice of lovers.

'I hate going so long without seeing you. It feels wrong,' she muttered heavily. 'But I've told so many lies I don't think that I could ever tell the truth.'

'It's not important,' Navarre told her with a gentleness that would have astounded some of the women he had had in his life.

Navarre Cazier, the legendary French industrialist and billionaire, had the reputation of being a generous but distant lover to the beautiful women who passed through his bed. Yet even though he made no secret of his love of the single life, women remained infuriatingly keen to tell him that they loved him and to cling. Tia, however, occupied a category all of her own and he played by different rules with her. Accustomed as he was to independence from an early age, he was tough, self-reliant and unapologetically selfish but he always restrained that side of his nature with Tia and at least tried to accommodate her needs.

Later that afternoon when she had gone, Navarre was heading for the shower when his mobile buzzed beside the bed. Tia's distinctive perfume still hung in the air like a shamefaced marker of her recent presence. He would see her again soon but their next encounter would be in public and they would have to be circumspect for Luke Convery was a hothead, all too well aware of his gorgeous wife's chequered history of previous marriages and clandestine affairs. Tia's husband was always on the watch for signs that his wife's attention might be straying.

The call was from Angelique and Navarre's mood dive-bombed when he learned that his current lover was not, after all, coming to London to join him. Angelique had just been offered a television campaign by a famous cosmetics company and even Navarre could not fault her desire to make the most of such an opportunity.

Even so, it seemed to Navarre that life was cruelly conspiring to frustrate him. He *needed* Angelique this week and not only as a screen to protect Tia from the malicious rumours that had linked his name with hers on past occasions. He also had a difficult deal to close with the husband of a former lover, who had recently attempted to reanimate their affair. A woman on his arm and a supposedly serious relationship had been a non-negotiable necessity for Tia's peace of mind as well as good business practice in a difficult situation. *Merde alors*, what the hell was he going to do without a partner at this late stage in the game? Who could he possibly trust to play the game of a fake engagement and not attempt to take it further?

'*Urgent—need 2 talk 2 you*,' ran the text message that beeped on Tawny's mobile phone and she hurried downstairs to take her break, wondering what on earth was going on with her friend, Julie.

Julie worked as a receptionist in the same exclusive London hotel and, although the two young women had not known each other long, she had already proved herself to be a staunch and supportive friend. Her approachability had eased Tawny's first awkward days as a new employee when she had quickly discovered that as a chambermaid she was regarded as the lowest of the low by most of the other staff. She was grateful for Julie's company when their breaks coincided, but their friendship had gone well beyond that level, Tawny acknowledged with an appreciative smile. When, at short notice, Tawny had had to move out of her mother's home, Julie had helped her to find an affordable bedsit and had even offered her car to facilitate the move.

'I'm in trouble,' Julie, a very pretty brown-eyed blonde, said with a strong air of drama as Tawny joined her at a table in the corner of the dingy, almost empty staff room.

'What sort of trouble?'

Julie leant forwards to whisper conspiratorially, 'I slept with one of the guests.'

'But you'll be sacked if you've been caught out!' Tawny exclaimed in dismay, brushing back the Titian red spiral curls clinging to her damp brow. Changing several beds in swift succession was tiring work and even though she was already halfway through a glass of cooling water she still felt overheated.

Julie rolled her eyes, unimpressed by the reminder. 'I haven't been caught out.'

Her porcelain-pale skin reddening, Tawny wished she had been more tactful, for she did not want Julie to think that she was judging her for her behaviour.

'Who was the guy?' she asked then, riven with curiosity for the blonde had not mentioned anyone, which could only mean that the relationship had been of sudden or short duration.

'It was Navarre Cazier.' Wearing a coy look of expectancy, Julie let the name hang there.

'Navarre Cazier?' Tawny was shocked by that familiar name.

She knew exactly who Julie was talking about because it was Tawny's responsibility to keep the penthouse suites on the top floor of the hotel in pristine order. The fabulously wealthy French industrialist stayed there at least twice a month and he always left her a massive tip. He didn't make unreasonable demands or leave his rooms in a mess either, which placed him head and shoulders above the other rich and invariably spoilt occupants of the most select accommodation offered by the hotel. She had only seen him once in the flesh, though, and at a distance, the giving of invisible service being one of the demands of her job. But after Julie had mentioned him several times in glowing terms Tawny had become curious enough to make the effort to catch a glimpse of him and had immediately understood why her friend was captivated. Navarre Cazier was very tall, black-haired and even to her critical gaze, quite shockingly good-looking.

He also walked, talked and behaved like a god who ruled the world, Tawny recalled abstractedly. He had emerged from the lift at the head of a phalanx of awe-inspired minions clutching phones and struggling to follow reams of instructions hurled at them in two different languages. His sheer power of personality, volcanic energy and presence had had the brilliance of a searchlight in darkness. He had outshone everyone around him while administering a stinging rebuke to a cringing unfortunate who didn't react fast enough to an order. She had got the impression of a ferociously demanding male with a mind that functioned at the speed of a computer, a male, moreover, whose intrinsically high expectations were rarely satisfied by reality.

'As you know I've had my eye on Navarre for a while. He's absolutely gorgeous.' Julie sighed.

Navarre and Julie...*lovers*? A little pang of distaste assailed Tawny as she pulled free of her memories and returned to the present. It struck her as an incongruous pairing between two people who could have nothing in common, but Julie was extremely pretty and Tawny had seen enough of life to know that that was quite sufficient inducement for most men. Evidently the sophisticated French billionaire was not averse to the temptation of casual sex.

'So what's the problem?' Tawny asked in the strained silence that now stretched, resisting a tasteless urge to ask how the encounter had come about. 'Have you fallen pregnant or something?'

'Oh, don't be daft!' Julie fielded as if the very ...

Users Review

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