



The Innocent's Sinful Craving (Mills & Boon Modern)

By Sara Craven



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...at a price!

Now Dana has the opportunity to return to the life she craves, but she comes face-to-face with Zac. He's tainted her life once before, and now he has an outrageous proposition—he'll give Dana her heart's desire if she gives him her hand in marriage...and her innocence on their wedding night!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sara Craven was born in South Devon just before World War II and grew up in a house crammed with books. Her early career was in provincial journalism, and she had her first novel *Garden of Dreams* accepted by Mills and Boon in 1975. Sara enjoys listening to music, going to the theatre, watching very old films and eating in good restaurants. She also likes to travel, especially in France, Greece and Italy where many of her novels are set.

New York Times Bestselling author Maisey Yates lives in rural Oregon with her three children and her husband, whose chiseled jaw and arresting features continue to make her swoon. She feels the epic trek she takes several times a day from her office to her coffee maker is a true example of her pioneer spirit.

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At the top of the hill, she stopped the car on the verge and got out, stretching gratefully after the drive from London.

The house lay below her in its secluded green valley, a sprawl of stones like some ancient dragon sleeping in the sunlight.

Dana drew a long, satisfied breath, her taut mouth relaxing into a smile of pure pleasure.

'I've come back,' she whispered. 'And this time I'm going to stay. Nothing—and no one—is going to drive me away again. You're going to be mine. Do you hear me?'

And after one final, lingering look, she returned to the car and drove down the hill towards Mannion.

It would not—could not be the same. For one thing, there would be no Serafina Latimer with her kindness and smiling grace that could so suddenly change to severity. She was back in her beloved Italy, and Aunt Joss, of course, had gone with her.

But I've changed too, she thought.

She was a long way from the confused seventeen-year-old who'd left here seven years earlier, physically, emotionally and—yes, she supposed, even financially.

No longer the housekeeper's niece, there on sufferance, for ever on the outside looking in, but a successful and well-paid negotiator with a top London estate agency.

And the past years of fighting her way up the ladder, reinventing herself into a force to be reckoned with, had taught her a lot.

I've helped a lot of people make their dream come true, she thought. Now, it's my turn.

Except that Mannion wasn't simply a dream. It was her birthright, whatever the law might say. There was such a thing as natural justice, and she would lay hold to it, no matter what means she had to employ. Or what the consequences might be.

She'd decided that a long time ago, and the passage of time had only deepened her resolve.

She drove through the tall wrought-iron gates and up the long drive through the sweeping lawns and formal gardens to the house. There were already cars parked on either side of the main entrance and she slotted her Peugeot into the nearest available space.

Climbing out, she stood for a moment, scanning the other vehicles, steadying the sudden flurry of her breathing, and smoothing any creases from her khaki linen skirt before collecting her weekend case from the boot.

As she turned she saw that the heavily studded front door had opened and a plump woman in a neat dark dress was waiting there.

'Miss Grantham?' Her voice was quietly civil. 'I'm Janet Harris. Let me take your case and show you to your room.'

I probably know the way better than you do, Dana thought, amused, as she followed the housekeeper. How many times have I trotted round after Aunt Joss, making sure everything was ready for arriving guests? Sometimes even being allowed to put the flowers in the bedrooms.

I wonder if anyone's done that for me?

The answer to that, she soon discovered was 'no', along with the fact that she'd been allocated the smallest of the guest rooms in the remotest part of the house, looking over the shrubbery to the slope of the valley where the summer house still stood.

The one thing she had no wish to see. That she'd hoped would no longer exist, although the memories it evoked were still potent. Bitterly and disturbingly so.

However the choice of view was probably not deliberate, she thought, turning from the window. Unlike the selection of the room with its faded decor and elderly carpet, seemingly intended to put her firmly in her place.

That's fine, she thought. When the game's over, let's see who's won.

'The bathroom is just down the corridor, Miss Grantham.' Mrs Harris sounded almost apologetic. 'But you'll have it to yourself. If there's anything else you need, please let me know.' She paused. 'Miss Latimer asked me to say there is tea in the drawing room.'

How very formal, Dana thought with faint amusement as the housekeeper withdrew. And how very unlike Nicola. But perhaps she was finding it was rough going being a hostess.

She hadn't much to unpack apart from her dresses for this evening and tomorrow night's party which she hung in a wardrobe as narrow as the single bed.

The bathroom was basic but well supplied with towels, a tub with a hand shower and a full-length mirror.

So, having combed her hair, replenished her lipstick and freshened her scent, Dana inspected herself with the same critical intensity she expected to encounter downstairs.

Her light brown hair, well-cut and highlighted so that it glowed with auburn lights, hung, smooth and shining, to her shoulders, and the subtle use of cosmetics had emphasised the green of her hazel eyes and lengthened her curling lashes.

Her body, rounded in all the right places, was slim and toned thanks to the exercise and dance classes she attended with zealous regularity. Not cheap, but the end would justify the means.

And Nicola's unstudied greeting of ten days ago had also been reassuring. 'Dana, it's wonderful to see you again. And you look amazing.'

A total exaggeration, but gratifying just the same, she thought as she started on her way downstairs.

Now that she had time to look around her, she realised it wasn't only her bedroom that needed refurbishment. The whole house looked tired and shabby and it was all too evident that the high standards of cleanliness observed in Aunt Joss's day had slipped badly.

Surfaces no longer glowed as they once had. There was no beguiling mixture of lavender and beeswax in the air, and in places there were even cobwebs.

It all looked—unloved, but perhaps that was what happened when the mistress of the house was no longer in residence.

Not that Serafina Latimer had enjoyed much choice in the matter. Once she'd decided to avoid Inheritance Tax by gifting Mannion to Nicola's older brother Adam, she was allowed only casual and infrequent visits to her former home in the seven-year period it took for the gift to become legal and Adam to become Mannion's full owner.

Aunt Joss had explained it all to Dana in some detail, brushing aside all attempts at questions or protests, before adding with chill emphasis, 'So, once and for all, let that be an end to this nonsense.'

Yet, how could it be, when Dana knew, as surely as the sun rose in the east, that she had been passed over? Her rightful inheritance given away like some free bar of soap?

Knew too that her aunt was wrong, and the fight was far from over.

Poor Mannion, she thought, as she reached the foot of the stairs. But when you're mine, you won't be passed from hand to hand again.

And this time there'll be no one around to stop me.

There was none of the expected buzz of conversation as she approached the dining room, and she found herself hesitating briefly before entering.

For a moment, as she took in the old-fashioned chintzes that covered the deep sofas and armchairs, and saw

the long brocade curtains moving gently in the faint breeze from the open French windows, she felt as if she'd stepped back in time.

Then, in the same instant, she realised that she'd totally misread the housekeeper's message, because it was quite another Miss Latimer waiting for her behind the tea table. A much older version, her plump girth squeezed into unbecoming floral silk, her bleached hair like a metal helmet, her lips pursed.

Nicola's Aunt Mimi, she thought with a silent groan. Oh, God, I should have known.

'Well, Dana.' She was motioned to a chair by a beringed hand. 'This is a surprise.' Mimi Latimer's tone suggested it was more of an unpleasant shock. 'I didn't realise that you and Nicola were still in touch, let alone so close.'

Dana smiled, unfazed. 'Good afternoon, Miss Latimer. No, sad to say, we probably haven't seen so much of each other lately.' Seven years to be precise. 'But I'm sure you remember that we were at school together.'

'Yes,' Mimi Latimer said with a touch of grimness as she poured straw-coloured Earl Grey into a fragile cup and held it out to Dana. 'I certainly hadn't forgotten that. Or that your scholastic career came to a sudden end. A poor reward for all Serafina's kindness to you.'

'Perhaps we both felt she'd been quite kind enough,' Dana returned coolly. 'And that it was time I stood on my own feet.' Besides, it was recognition as her granddaughter I wanted—not her charity.

'I don't think anyone would argue over that,' Miss Latimer said with a sniff, proffering a plate of sandwiches smaller than a child's finger.

That, and a Madeira cake, comprised the entire spread, Dana realised, remembering coming back for the school holidays to find the table laden not just with sandwiches but scones and cream, or buttered crumpets, depending on the season, to be followed with a rich chocolate cake and a Victoria sponge oozing strawberry jam. And Serafina presiding over these delights, gently questioning Nicola and herself on how the term had gone.

'And your family. Are they well?'

Memories scattered under Mimi Latimer's acidly pointed question.

'All fine, thank you.' At least on the rare occasions when I have news.

But the older woman had not finished. 'And your mother? Still living in Spain?'

'Yes,' Dana confirmed evenly. 'She is.'

'And you seem to be doing well too. Trying to sell Nicola and Eddie an expensive flat, I gather.'

'I've shown them a very beautiful flat,' Dana corrected, helping herself to an egg and cress sandwich and making it stretch to two bites. 'Well within the price guidelines she and her fiance had established, and which they both seemed to like.'

'How strange it should be you showing them round.'

'I prefer to call it serendipity,' Dana said lightly. 'A happy discovery by accident.' Apart from the wheeling, dealing and sheer manipulation it took to ensure I conducted that particular viewing.

She took a reluctant sip of cooling tea. 'Where is Nicola, by the way?'

'Taking Eddie and his parents to see the village church.' Miss Latimer's mouth tightened sourly. 'She's decided she wants to be married there. Quite ridiculous when London would be so much more convenient for everyone.'

'But she's managed to persuade Eddie that they should have a quiet country wedding with just family, close friends and local people. As this weekend's gathering was supposed to be,' she added pointedly.

'Heaven only knows what the Marchwoods will think,' she went on peevishly. 'I've tried to talk some sense into the child, but, for some reason, that cousin of Serafina's, the Belisandro man, has taken her side.' She sniffed again. 'Of course, he's always spoiled Nicola, encouraging her to have her own way. I'm only surprised he isn't marrying her himself.'

Dana felt her heartbeat stumble and her throat tighten. She forced down another mouthful of Earl Grey.

When she spoke, her voice was remarkably steady. 'Zac Belisandro hardly seems the marrying kind.'

Besides being safely on the other side of the world. Although it seemed that had not stopped him again pulling strings in the Latimer affairs.

'Well, I dare say his father will have something to say about that before he's much older,' Miss Latimer opined snappishly. 'Not that it's any concern of mine,' she added hastily. 'Or yours for that matter.'

Dana managed a serene smile. 'You're quite right. Gossip can be so damaging.'

The silence that followed seemed to be waiting for her to ask, 'And where is Adam?'

But all hell would freeze over before she said any such thing. Especially to Mimi Latimer.

Anyway, I shall see him soon enough, she thought, allowing her mind to dwell pleasurable on his windblown blond hair and almost boyish good looks, enhanced by the laughter lines at the corners of his blue eyes and the mouth that seemed always ready to smile.

A man that any woman would want, even without the riches he was bringing with him, and she knew it. Had reminded herself over and over again that it justified the course of action she was set upon.

Even so, she was suddenly struggling to hold on to that inner picture. To prevent it being superseded by another image, as disturbing as it was unwelcome. By another face, olive-skinned and saturnine, the features strongly marked, the eyes as dark and impenetrable as a starless winter night.

She put her cup with what remained of the tea carefully back on the table. 'This has been most enjoyable, but, if you'll excuse me, I need to stretch my legs after the drive.'

And, with another smile, she walked across the room and out through the French windows on to the terrace.

Where she paused, staring at the lawns below as if in rapt admiration of its billiard table smoothness.

In reality, and in spite of herself, she was listening to her brain frantically re-echoing the name—*Zac Belisandro*.

His father's only son and heir to the vast Belisandro International empire. Currently running its holdings in Australia and the Far East with an aplomb and success that was becoming legendary.

'The man who makes Midas look like a beginner' had been a headline in the business pages of a popular daily.

And to Dana—the man who'd caused her to be sent away from Mannion seven years ago. Her enemy, who would still want her barred now, if he wasn't thousands of miles away.

Don't think of him, she told herself fiercely. Concentrate on Adam. He's the only one who matters and always has been.

But her mind—her memory—would not obey her. Because Zac Belisandro was still there like a shadow in the sunlight.

In spite of the heat, Dana shivered. Just let him stay away, she whispered silently. Don't make me have to see him again. Ever. Or at least until I've got what I want and it's too late for him to interfere and ruin everything a second time.

Until I'm Mrs Adam Latimer and Mannion belongs to me as it always should have done.

Captain Jack Latimer, she thought. Serafina's soldier son and my father. If he hadn't been killed in that ambush in Northern Ireland, my mother's life—and mine—would have been very different. They would have been married, and whatever Serafina thought, she would have had to accept it.

He wouldn't have allowed the girl he loved to be sent away in disgrace.

She walked down the terrace steps and headed across the lawn to the shrubbery. Ever since she'd first come to live at Mannion, it had been her favourite bolthole, a place to hide in when she was missing her mother and wanted to cry in peace. Aunt Joss was kind enough but too busy and often too harassed to devote much time to her. And taking charge of her young niece was something Dana knew had been thrust upon her, because her sense of duty would not allow the little girl to be fostered during her mother's frequent and often lengthy absences in hospital.

So, a lot of the time, she was lonely. Not the kind of desolation where she knelt on the other side of a locked door listening, frightened, to her mother's harsh weeping.

It was more a sense of bewildered abandonment which remained even when she and her mother were reunited in some new poky flat, while Linda, each time more fragile, more diminished, struggled with yet another deadend job, and promised the brisk women who visited her in the evenings with their files of paperwork, that this time she would make an effort—make it work for Dana's sake as well as her own.

She paused, fists suddenly clenching at her sides, as she wondered if she, a small child, had been the only

one to see it was never going to happen.

And by that time all that filled her heart and mind was Mannion.

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