
SECRETS AND SEDUCTION

The Billionaire Spy - Book One

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Oranges and Apples

This job was a bit outside her usual wheelhouse. Mariana Stein mostly handled crises for big names in the arts—actors, writers and TV personalities—and her corporate work was heavily focused on technology and industrials. She knew very little about commodities and virtually nothing about crops. But she was asked to come by Marsha Waters, an old college friend whose husband was big in Venture Capital. Marsha had called her up while Mariana was in a meeting with a client in Dallas, and had begged Mariana to fly down to Florida as a personal favor. She would never say no to Marsha. She caught the next plane out of Dallas-Fort Worth to Orlando, instead of heading back home to Los Angeles.

There she was, twenty-four hours later, wearing jeans and muddy boots, knowing more about oranges, mysterious orange-tree diseases, and frost, than she had ever wanted to know, casually sipping on a Tequila Sunrise with the most handsome man she'd ever seen in her life.

Getting to meet William Smith was certainly the highlight

of the day. It wasn't just about his looks; there was something magnetic and compelling about him. He oozed confidence, with a hint of something else Mariana couldn't quite place, but she wanted to put a name to it. Dominion? Daring? Something with a 'D'.

The problem, she learned, was frost, not uncommon, rather inevitable, an act of God. Still, the orange business in Central Florida was serious business. They didn't want to lose their place in the race for orange superiority, not after they'd managed to rob California of its exclusivity for the fruit, which had first been imported from Spain, and planted in groves on the California hills by devout Spanish monks. The whole orange industry in Florida began as a way to give some purpose to the marshland, creating a few jobs, and ensuring the West Coast had no way to manipulate prices by restricting supply, as they had done during the Great Depression.

Florida wasn't even really suited to oranges. The soil was wrong: too saline, too sandy, or some such. Mariana only learned this because the bigwigs at Sonnyshine had hired an arborist guru from Connecticut to look at the orchards—a man whom they called the tree-whisperer, of all things.

"How does one get the label 'the tree-whisperer'?" Mariana asked him, teasing.

In the few hours they'd spent together surveying the damage at the orchards, Mariana had found that William Smith had a pleasant, easy manner. He was earthy and sturdy. He could handle her taunt.

"Not my idea, not my term," he said with a smirk. "They just pay me, you know?"

"You sound like me," Mariana said.

"No," he said. "You sound different. You put a spin on things. If they asked you what two plus two was, you'd say progress."

It was Mariana's turn to laugh. He gave as well as he took.

He was a simple man, plain spoken. Easy to like, if he liked you. Impossible to get to know, if he disliked you. Mariana had the impression William didn't split hairs.

She didn't usually accept an invitation to drinks with men she had to work with, but William had made a very good impression. Besides, the lobby bar at their hotel was a safe enough place, and she really wanted to walk into the meeting with the Board of Sonnyshine well informed.

"Are you going to be able to heal the trees?"

"God does that," he said. "All I can do is find out what's ailing them and tell people how to fix it."

"But it's just frost, right? I mean, they'll recover."

"Well, it's not just frost, to start with. A lot of the trees were already vulnerable because the orchards haven't been protected against that dragon disease I told you about. They were weak before they went into a sudden winter. Some will make it, and some will die. The best thing would be to raze the ones in the orchards that are afflicted with the disease and to plant new ones in their place, protecting those new trees from contagion by covering the orchards with nets that keep out the carrier flies."

"That sounds expensive," Mariana said.

"It is, in the short-run, but in the long-run it will pay off."

"Will they be able to recover their losses?"

"You sound like the Sonnyshine people. You want promises but I can only guess."

"I have to be able to prepare the special report for the stockholders," Mariana said. "That's what they pay me for."

"Tell them it looks promising."

"Does it?"

"It's what they want to hear."

"Yes, but I do have ethics—standards, you know? I can't just tell them a lie. I have to believe what I'm saying. If it turns out to be wrong later, that's just the breaks, but I won't deceive

my clients.” Mariana paused for a minute to get off her soap-box, and smiled at him over the umbrella of her Tequila Sunrise, flashing her lashes, “Does it look promising?”

“That depends,” he smiled.

“Depends on what?”

“On whether you’re sleeping in your room or mine.” He winked.

“Bill Smith that is beneath you!” Mariana recovered her long-abandoned southern accent, sounding very Blanche.

“It’s always William. Never Bill.” He said, giving her a sharp look—revealing a hard-nose Connecticut yank—but the reprimand in his eyes softened, nearly as quickly as it appeared. “And it can be beneath me, or on top of me, or in front of me. Lady’s choice.”

Mariana was as tempted as she hadn’t been in many months. William was an extremely attractive man. She’d felt the charge between them all day. It had been wreaking havoc on her concentration. But sparks started fires and fires were dangerous at work.

“I should go,” she said. “I shouldn’t have agreed to drinks. I just need to know whether the trees will be saved or lost.”

She began to rise from her chair, until he put his hand on hers. It was a softer hand than she expected from a man who spent his life in the fields.

“I’m sorry, please sit,” he said. “I was out of line.”

She sat back down, though she should probably have left. Little decisions, which don’t seem to add up to much at the time, they always get you.

“About thirty percent of the crop is beyond saving,” he said. “Of the remaining seventy, I can be confident of only saving half.”

“God.”

“Yep, no one else. I’ll do my best. You can tell them that. I’ll speak with the trees and I’ll speak with the farmers, but tell

them not to cut corners on this, or they'll pay the price. They take the trees for granted, and things that grow need constant care, or they won't bear fruit."

"Thank you for being honest."

"Never been accused of anything else, though it hasn't made me popular."

"Well, I respect you for it."

"I respect you too, Mariana, despite my flirtation. I just find you attractive, that's all. I thought you were single, and we might be well-suited to one another." Will extended his hand in a formal manner. "Friends?"

She thought about it for a moment, and let her instincts take over as she shook his hand, saying, "Lovers could work."

"Now you're confusing me."

"Have another Mojito. It will make more sense."

"No, I think I'd like to be sober for this."

"Good point."

They began to undress and embrace the minute she locked the door of her hotel room.

William smelled green, there was no other word for it, a blend of forest and ocean and rain in his cologne, which combined with his natural musk to create an intoxicating scent.

His eyes were clear, focused on her with purpose, a hint of danger and a promise of pleasure. The sculpted muscles on his tall, lean, naked frame reminded Mariana of a statue of Adonis gazing into the distance, which she had once seen at the Biltmore House in Asheville. This Adonis was gazing into the depths of her. His skin was not made of a cold, pale marble. It was hot to the touch, and soft as a baby's, even where it was sun-burnished and freckly. His breath emitted a

delicious heat, which awakened her skin as he kissed every inch of her. His dark, wavy hair was soft as silk, and delightful to wrap between her fingers.

William was a masterful lover: deliberate, measured, taking his time to map her body with his hands and mouth, as she lay on the bed feeling worshipped. He nurtured her arousal, licking her folds, and brought her to her first climax before he finally entered her. With his sizeable manhood deep inside of her, pushing the limits of her sheath, she felt herself slip into oblivion, lost in the act of loving and being loved. Waves of pleasure ran through her body with each deep thrust, as his body dominated hers. For the first time in years, she was speechless. She could only sigh and moan, and finally beg him to do it all over again.

It was a long night for both of them. He didn't leave her room, but held her close when they were finally spent, wrapping his body around her as they both slept peacefully during the few hours of night remaining.

The morning wake-up call from the hotel came too soon. But, instead of regrets and awkward silences, she found a welcoming hard-on and a fresh appetite. They skipped the continental breakfast, to buy themselves time.

"We have a problem," he whispered in her ear, as he stroked her hair.

"What's that?"

"I'm not going to let you go."

She ran her fingers over his chest.

"You have to," she said. "I have a report to write and a meeting to prepare for, and you have trees to save."

"Damn it."

"There's always tonight..."

"I fly out this evening."

"Oh."

He kissed her, deep, then pinned her down on the bed and asked, “Do you have any clients in Connecticut?”

“I have clients in New York.”

“Don’t you think you should check in on them, from time to time?”

“I suppose it’s only good business.”

“That’s my girl.”

He smiled, cocky. He knew he had her.

She rode a high that morning, but as she headed for her meeting at Sonnyshine headquarters in Orlando, doubt began to seep in. What was she doing? She couldn’t afford to be distracted by an infatuation. Sure, sex with William had been better than she could have imagined, and there was more to the connection between them than sex alone, but she couldn’t quite name it. Whatever it was, life had taught her it couldn’t last.

She wasn’t sixteen anymore, even if the spring in her step made her feel that way. She was a grown woman, twenty-nine going on thirty, with serious responsibilities and a busy calendar. She didn’t have time to fall in love. Besides, who fell in love after one night? No, it wasn’t that. It couldn’t be that. It was no more than fancy.

The scowls on the face of the board members gathered around the table for her presentation quickly brought her back to Earth.

“You can’t print that!” Roger Waterman, the Chairman of Sonnyshine shouted at her when she came to the bit about appealing for state aid to support William’s more ambitious plan to re-plant the orchards.

Waterman cared nothing about oranges, orange trees or

orange groves. He was a bottom-line guy. He wanted to keep his bottom line in the black.

“I’m not printing anything,” Mariana said, keeping her composure. “We are only discussing options. You asked me to ascertain the situation. I’ve done that. I’m informing you of what I’ve learned, so we can discuss how you want it presented.”

“You have to spin it.”

“That I take for granted, but there is only so much spinning to do here. I mean, the news is not very good.”

“So, lie! Make up a happy-ending story that is credible enough for now to get the stockholder’s confidence up, and can give us a boost in the markets.”

Mariana looked around the room, at the faces of the Board before her, all waiting for her to agree. None of them seemed willing to take her side, or even to speak up.

“I’m sorry, I think you misunderstand what I do,” she said. “I manage crises. I look for the silver lining. I highlight the positive. But I tell the truth.”

“We don’t need a Pollyanna! We need a fucking ray of hope for the stockholders!” Waterman pounded the table, but Mariana refused to flinch. She’d learned to handle a man who could only communicate with a fist, and this one wasn’t going to get the better of her.

“If you follow Mr. Smith’s suggestions...”

“If we follow what that tree-nut says we should do, it’ll cost us every bit as much as losing the entire crop!” Waterman cut her off.

“Only in the short term,” she said, remaining calm. “In the long term, you’ll recover a greater share of your yield, because you will have planted healthy trees.”

“We didn’t hire you to make business decisions we are more qualified to make,” Waterman said. “We hired you to keep our stockholder confidence up while we fix this mess.”

Tell them it looks promising. It's what they want to hear. William's words echoed in her mind, but she knew they had been only a test of her character, not a recommendation.

"We can say you have the best experts on the situation, with Smith Arboriculture as your consultant. We can say if any crops can be saved, after an event like this, then your company is better poised to save them than others. We can say the State of Florida has an obligation to make the necessary resources available to ensure that this dragon plight is minimized..."

"Plight! You can't use that word."

"It's important, if they hear plight, then they will be more willing to lend aid to the industry. Florida State, I mean."

"I think we've heard enough, Miss Stein. This situation is over your head."

"I see," Mariana said.

She knew about persuading people well enough to know when she was up against someone who didn't intend to be persuaded. What she couldn't understand is why Marsha had recommended her for this job in the first place.

"We will not expect to be billed for this," Waterman said, evidently wanting to twist the knife deeper.

"Travel expenses and hourly charges apply, on a cancellation. As well as a penalty fee."

"I think we've paid a great enough penalty. You should be happy to have your travel expenses covered."

"Very well, I wish you luck," Mariana said, closing her laptop and putting it back in her tote.

"We don't need luck, we need pluck. We were told you had that, but we were clearly misinformed, just as we were with Mr. Smith."

"Have a good day, gentlemen."

All in all, she exited the meeting gracefully, holding her head up. Her hands did not shake until she was well clear of

the conference room, and she only allowed herself to cry once she was back in her hotel room.

It shouldn't have mattered this much, getting fired by one ornery client who didn't want to be helped, but Mariana was always aware her biggest asset was her reputation. If Waterman wanted to spread the word that she was inadequate, his view would carry water with some people. She could defend herself, if she had to, but being on the defensive was never a good way to start.

She planned to compose herself, reach out to Marsha to explain her side of things, but her phone rang first—an unknown caller.

“Hello?”

“Are you all right, baby? You sound upset.”

It was Martin Harper, the CEO of Silverlight CGI and Founder of PlayTech, whom she'd met at one of Marsha's big parties in San Francisco a month earlier. She had gone on a few dates with him since then. He was good for a laugh, but little more than that. Still, he was persistent, and he loved to lavish her with his clearly limited attention and seemingly limitless wealth. Mariana didn't feel anything would ever come of it. There was something not quite right at his core, and she had a whiff of it, but she couldn't really say what it was. Still, she was feeling pretty vulnerable, and his baby talk had an effect.

“No,” Mariana wept, to her shame. “I think I just got fired.”

“Stupid bastards! You're the best. Don't they know that?”

What *was* she doing? She didn't need to unload her burdens on Martin Harper, of all people.

“I can't really talk now, Martin. I need to get myself together.”

“No, you don't, honey, just let Daddy take care of you. Come home,” he said. Mariana hesitated, but he didn't wait

for her to turn him down. “Forget that. I’m coming over on the jet. Just stay put, you’re in no state to travel alone across the country. Order room service, pamper yourself. Daddy’s on his way to kiss the boo-boo.”

Normally, that would have made her wretch, but at that moment... it sounded good.