



The Marcelli Bride (The Marcelli Sisters of Pleasure Road, Book 4)

By Susan Mallery

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USA Today bestselling author Susan Mallery returns to the idyllic setting of her sensual Marcelli sisters trilogy -- California wine country, where love and laughter flow, and where an unlikely couple discovers the one thing their hearts hunger for most: a place to call home.

The rebel of the Marcelli family, Joe never joined his sisters Katie, Francesca, and Brenna in running the winery business. Instead, he chose a life of military service. But now that this handsome, headstrong former Navy SEAL has received a new, undercover assignment -- protecting none other than the commander in chief's daughter -- he finds himself stationed back at the California vineyard he defiantly left behind. First-daughter Darcy Jensen has been placed in hiding at the Marcelli Winery after surviving a kidnapping attempt . . . and now it's Joe's job to keep the fearful, fiery beauty out of harm's way. Begrudgingly, Joe heeds his presidential order -- until "babysitting" Darcy proves to be the greatest pleasure he's ever known. How can Joe protect Darcy from danger, when he's falling dangerously in love? And can Darcy trust that Joe's intentions are true -- when no one else's have ever been?

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Editorial Review

Review

"Smart, sexy entertainment." -- Christina Dodd

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery has entertained millions of readers with her witty and emotional stories about women. Publishers Weekly calls Susan's prose "luscious and provocative," and Booklist says "Novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." Susan lives in Seattle with her husband and her tiny but intrepid toy poodle. Visit her at www.SusanMallery.com.

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Chapter 1

If Darcy Jensen had known she was going to be kidnapped, she would have worn better shoes. Or at least more sensible shoes. As it was she'd dressed in black strappy sandals that weren't all that comfortable for walking, let alone being dragged across a parking lot and thrown into the back of a van.

She did her best to resist. Screaming was out of the question because they'd already gagged her. And the resisting part went badly, what with her hands tied behind her back, although she did nail one guy with a decent head butt.

Even as she landed hard on the metal floor of the van, she wondered how it all had happened. She'd been in Ann Taylor checking out the new clothes for fall. She'd told Drew she needed to use the restroom.

Traveling with two Secret Service agents meant rarely using a public restroom. Drew had consulted with the manager of the store, who was all too happy to have the president of the United States' daughter peeing in her private bathroom. Darcy had done her business, washed her hands -- not only because she always did, but also because people checked on things like that when one was in the public eye -- and had started back through the stockroom toward the dressing rooms, where she had a pile of clothes waiting for her.

That's when the men attacked. Four guys in Halloween-type demon masks grabbed her. Before she knew what was happening, they'd slapped tape on her mouth. The hand tying came next, then the dragging.

One of them even remembered to pick up her purse, she thought grimly as she stared at her now-scratched Maxx bag bought on QVC lying next to her on the floor of the van.

The rear doors slammed shut, and the vehicle sped out of the parking lot.

Darcy braced herself as best she could on the ribbed floor as the van bounced, swerved, then turned onto what felt like a main road. Two of her abductors had taken the front seats -- she could see them through the small grille -- while the other two must have had their own transportation. She was alone in the back of the van.

Alone with her purse.

There were no windows, no way to get anyone's attention. And no one to watch her retrieve the panic button

that would signal the Secret Service and send them rushing to rescue her.

She inched her way toward the purse, only to have the van take another corner, causing the bag to go sliding out of reach. Two more slip-slides across the dirty metal floor and she was within reaching distance of her purse . . . except for the small problem of her hands tied behind her back. Could she open the zipper with her teeth? Probably not with the gag in place.

Darcy had done her best to stay focused in the moment. If she anchored herself in the now, the terror wasn't so bad. She could function. But if she allowed herself to think about what they could do to her, how it was national policy to never negotiate with terrorists, then fear would explode inside of her, making her want to scream and beg, despite the tape across her mouth.

No! She wouldn't go there. She wouldn't give in. She was strong and determined, and by God, she would get her panic button and push it until dozens of armed agents came storming through the walls of the van.

She didn't have much choice. Drew had been assigned to her long enough to know that the "trying on" part of a shopping trip could take at least an hour, which meant he wouldn't notice she was missing until the van had enough time to cross a couple of state lines.

If only it wasn't so hot, she thought as she went to work on the zipper. August in D.C. maintained the average temperature of a blast furnace with plenty of humidity thrown in for good measure. The front of the van might have AC, but here in the prison part of the vehicle, no such luck.

She ignored the heat, the sweat, the scrapes and bruises, and bent over her purse. Several more turns, some speeding and three failed attempts later, Darcy had discovered she could *not* open the damn zipper with her teeth. Which left her to scoot the purse into a corner, turn her back, and try to open it that way.

Easier said than done, she thought as she discovered she couldn't even hold on to the purse, although she did a lovely job of scraping her arm and banging her head. Why did this stuff always look so easy in the movies?

She tried again, carefully lodging the purse against the wheel well, then rolling onto her back and grabbing for the bag with her fingers. This time she got it and turned it slowly until she felt the zipper.

Don't make a turn, don't make a turn, she chanted silently, knowing if they did, she would slide across the van and have to start all over again.

The vehicle stayed mercifully straight.

Inch by inch she pulled the zipper down. Sweat poured down her back and made her fingers damp. Her bare legs stuck to the floor of the van and to whatever crumbs and icky things were scattered there. At last the purse was open. She plunged both hands inside and felt around for the familiar plastic case. Lipstick, wallet, cell phone, pen --

Cell phone? Nearly as good as the panic button. She would have to dial, of course, but she could call the operator and asked to be put through to her father. She could --

Darcy swore. Right. The tape across her mouth would make it difficult to hold a conversation. Back to digging for the panic button.

At that exact moment, the van suddenly came to a stop. Both she and her purse went sliding, although not at the same rate of speed. She had no way to get back to it before the bad guys opened the rear door to find her sprawled in a corner, her skirt up to her waist and the contents of her purse spread all over the floor of the van.

"You didn't take her handbag?" one of the guys asked the other. "Goddamn it, Bill, I thought you were smarter than that."

The recipient of the scolding, a smallish man in a vampire mask, stiffened. "You used my name. Now she knows my name."

The other one, demon-guy, snorted. "Yeah, because there's only one guy named Bill in the whole country. Come on, Einstein, let's get her inside."

Darcy tried to scramble away from her kidnapers, but as she was already in a back corner of the van, there was nowhere else to go. They half carried, half dragged her into what looked like a large warehouse.

She did her best to fight, lashing out at them with her feet. The action caused them to hold on tighter to her upper arms and made her break a heel on her new sandals.

Now she was mad, she thought as they put her into a straight-back chair and began tying her down. They'd screwed with her day, bruised her, thrown her around the inside of a disgusting van, scratched her new leather bag, and ruined the black sandals she'd just bought after waiting four weeks for them to go on sale. There was going to be hell to pay.

She told them so, although the tape on her mouth interfered with the intensity of her message.

"I don't think she likes us," Bill said, stepping back as she tried to kick his shin.

"Gee, I wonder why. Most people love a good kidnapping."

With that, the two men walked off. Darcy tried to hold on to her anger by reminding herself how much the sandals had cost, even on clearance, and how little money she had coming in these days. It worked for nearly a minute, then the fear set in. What were they going to do to her?

She told herself that torture was unlikely. Either they wanted money or something they thought they could only get from the president of the United States. Unfortunately that was a big pool of possibilities, everything from sovereignty to nuclear weapons.

Then there was the matter of the no-negotiation policy. The one that told her she could be stuck here for a very long time, and then she could be killed.

Darcy might not love everything about her life at this moment in time, but she wasn't ready for it to be over. Terror tightened her throat and made it impossible to breathe. She had the sudden thought that she was going to throw up.

Stay calm, she told herself. If she vomited, she could drown in a really gross way. She had to find her Zen center. Not that she'd ever studied Zen, but she could imagine what it was like. A tranquil place. A place where reality was an illusion and all that mattered was the slow, steady beating of her heart.

Deep breaths, she told herself. In and out. No hurry in the air department. Just nice slow --

"Did you hurt her?"

The question came from somewhere behind her as she heard several people approaching. Panic joined fear as she tried to figure out if, in this man's opinion, hurting her would be a plus or not.

"She got banged up in the back of the van," Bill said. "But that's all."

She looked around for some kind of escape. But the huge, empty warehouse didn't offer any places to hide, and being tied to a large, heavy chair limited her options. She tried to scoot and only succeeded in wrenching her back.

"Good. We don't want any unnecessary bloodshed."

Darcy exhaled in relief. Speaking as the kidnappee, she was delighted to know that bloodshed was to be avoided until necessary. Not that she wanted to know what would be considered necessary.

Their footsteps got closer, then three men were standing in front of her. She recognized her two kidnappers, who stood with a new guy, also in a demon mask. He was taller than the other two, and stronger. Something he proved when he turned on the non-Bill one and grabbed him by the throat.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he demanded, shaking the smaller man like a dog shakes something tasty just before he kills it.

Bill danced from foot to foot, although he didn't rush in to help his friend. "We got her, boss. Just like you said. The president's daughter. This is her."

The leader released non-Bill and curled his hands into fists. He stared at Darcy through the slits of the mask and growled.

"Not *this* one, you idiot. The other one. Lauren. No one cares about this one."

Less than thirty minutes later th...

Users Review

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