



The Marciano Love-Child (Bought for Her Baby)

By Melanie Milburne

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But when Alessandro's faced with the fact that Scarlett's child is his son, there is no choice.

Scarlett will be the Marciano bride—willingly or not....

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Editorial Review

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It had started just like any other Monday morning. Scarlett dropped three-year-old Matthew, at crèche after the usual tearful and heart-wrenching 'don't leave me, I miss you too much' routine, before fighting her way through heavy traffic to her small interior-design studio in Woollahra. And just like any other Monday morning her business partner and best friend, Roxanne Hartley, handed her a double-strength latte on her way in the door and asked her how her weekend had been.

'Don't ask,' Scarlett said wearily, and took a reviving sip of the creamy latte.

'So I take it the blind date your sister set up for you wasn't a success?' Roxanne said as she perched on the edge of Scarlett's desk.

Scarlett rolled her eyes expressively. 'Depends what you mean by a blind date. Clearly this guy's idea was to turn up blind *drunk*. He slurred his way through his sob story about his ex-wife for an hour and a half, until I finally managed to escape.'

'Poor you,' Roxanne said in empathy. 'But don't give up yet. There's got to be someone decent out there for you.'

'Decent would be good,' Scarlett said, booting up her computer. 'A good father-figure for Matthew would be good, too, but as soon as men hear I have a three-year-old son they seem to lose interest.'

'Yes, well, men today can be so shallow,' Roxanne agreed. 'They won't commit, and they want sex on tap.'

'Tell me about it,' Scarlett said as she clicked on her computer mouse to activate the screen to check her list of appointments. She put her glasses on and blinked, once, twice, three times, her heart giving a quick, hard thud when she saw *that* name staring back at her.

'What's wrong?' Roxanne asked in a guileless tone.

Scarlett swivelled her chair to look up at her business partner, her face going pale with shock. 'You made an appointment for *me* to meet with Alessandro Marciano?' she choked.

Roxanne grinned at her excitedly. 'Yes. I wanted it to be a surprise, otherwise I would have called you over the weekend to tell you about it. He phoned on Friday afternoon just after you'd left. It's a huge contract, Scarlett. He's worth zillions, and if we get the deal think of what it will do for us. We'll be featured in every interior-design magazine across the globe. We won't have to pay rent any more, we'll be able to buy the building, no—' She clasped her hands together in glee and added, '—we'll be able to buy the whole street!'

Scarlett sprang to her feet, almost spilling her latte over her keyboard in the process. 'I'm not seeing him,' she said through tight lips. 'I don't want the contract. I want nothing to do with it.'

Roxanne slapped the side of her head as if she couldn't believe what she had just heard. 'Have you happened to look at our financial statements recently?' she asked as she slipped down off the desk. 'Come on, Scarlett, our business loan is stretched to the limit, you know it is. I know things are often a bit slow in January, while

everyone is still on summer holidays, but this is a chance in a lifetime. This is just what we need right now. Alessandro Marciano has bought the old Arlington Hotel building in the city. He's going to turn it into a luxury hotel, with three floors of penthouse apartments for the super rich. And he wants us to do the interior design. *Us!* Can you believe it? It's like winning the lottery.'

'I can't see him, Roxanne,' Scarlett insisted. 'Please don't ask it of me.'

A light bulb seemed to come on in Roxanne's head as she peered at Scarlett. 'Hang on a minute, what... Have you dated him in the past or something?'

'More than dated,' Scarlett answered with a dark frown.

Roxanne gave her a probing look. 'What do you mean "more than dated"?"

Scarlett drew in an unsteady breath. 'He's Matthew's father.'

Roxanne's jaw dropped open, and her eyes went saucer-wide. '*He's what?*' she gasped.

Scarlett's expression became rigid with tension. 'I'm not going to see him, Roxanne. No way. I hate him for what he did to me, and I am not going to—'

The unmistakable throaty roar of a Maserati suddenly sounded on the street outside. Both girls looked out of the front window of the studio, and watched as the car's black, sleek body was expertly manoeuvred in between their tiny fuel-efficient vehicles parked outside.

Roxanne met her friend's startled grey-blue gaze. 'Looks like you're not going to have a choice,' she said, and added, with a little sheepish grimace as the front door opened with a cheery tinkle of the bell hanging on the back, 'Er...did I forget to mention the meeting was here, at nine-fifteen?'

Scarlett felt every pore of her skin and every hair on her body stand to attention as that imposing, darkly handsome figure stooped as he came in through the door. Her heart started going like a jackhammer, the pressure building in her chest so overwhelming she wondered if the heavy thumping would be visible through the lightweight white linen of her blouse.

His hazel eyes met hers, the brown-and-green flecks reminding her all over again of the myriad colours of a rainforest. But this time she felt as if there were mysterious shadows lurking in the depths of his gaze, as he stood looking at her in a watchful silence for what seemed like endless seconds.

'Hello, Scarlett,' he finally said in that stomach-tilting velvet drawl that had been her downfall close to four years ago.

Scarlett lifted her chin and turned to Roxanne, who was standing with her mouth opening and closing like a recently landed fish. 'Roxanne, would you please inform Mr...er...' She glanced down at her diary as if to remind herself of his name, before looking back up and continuing in the same haughty tone, '...Mr Marciano that I am not taking on any new clients as I am booked up until the end of the year.'

'But—' Roxanne spluttered, but was cut off by Alessandro who had stepped forward to smile at her with lethal charm.

'Miss Hartley, would you be so kind as to leave Miss Fitzpatrick and I to conduct our meeting in private?' he asked.

'No! Don't you dare leave,' Scarlett bit out hastily. *Please, oh please, don't leave me with him;* she silently begged the rest of the sentence with her eyes.

Roxanne pursed her mouth, and after a moment's hesitation scooped up her bag and half-finished latte. 'Sure, I can do that,' she said, smiling girlishly at Alessandro. 'I have to see a man about some tiles anyway. I'll be back at eleven.'

Scarlett sent her an 'I'm going to kill you for this' glare, before taking her place behind her desk in case her legs followed through on their current threat to fold beneath her.

The studio door opened and closed with another tinkle on Roxanne's exit, but to Scarlett it felt more like the sound of a vault locking down for good.

The silence thrummed in her ears, the air becoming so thick with it she felt as if a pair of hands was around the slim column of her throat, gradually increasing the pressure until she was sure she was going to choke.

'So you are not interested in doing business with me, Scarlett?' Alessandro asked with a coolly impersonal smile.

'No.' Her one-word response came out of her mouth like a hard pellet.

'Why ever not?' he asked with an ironic arch of one dark brow. 'I thought you would be jumping at this chance to get your hands on my money.'

She tightened her mouth even further, and forced her gaze to meet his. 'I am surprised you are interested in engaging the services of a filthy little slut—those were your words for me back then, were they not?'

There was no sign of anger in his expression, but Scarlett could sense it all the same. She had known and loved that face so well in the three months they had been together. Every nuance of it was imprinted indelibly on her brain. The smile that could melt stone, the gaze that could heat blood, the mouth that could kiss like a teasing feather, or with such hungry passion her lips had tingled and been swollen for hours afterwards. Even now, after all this time, she could still taste the salt and musk of his lips and tongue, and her lower body began to pulse with the memory of how it had felt with him plunging between her legs.

She crossed her legs under her desk, fighting the sensations brewing there. But it was almost impossible to control the hit-and-miss beat of her heart every time she encountered that brown-and-green flecked gaze.

'Your sexual proclivities, I would imagine, have no bearing on your talent at interior design,' he said with an enigmatic look. 'You have a good reputation professionally. That is why I am keen to have you wholly responsible for the project I am about to commence.'

Her chin went even higher. 'I told you, I'm not available.'

His mouth tilted slightly. 'Perhaps before you throw away this chance, Scarlett, you should at least look at what I am offering.'

'No amount of money you could dangle in front of me will induce me to conduct any sort of relationship with you again, business or otherwise,' she stated implacably.

A flicker of male interest darkened the brown in his eyes as they moved over her appraisingly. 'I was not going to suggest anything other than a business agreement between us, however...' He left the sentence suspended between them in the pulsing silence.

'Forget it, Alessandro,' she said. 'In any case, I'm already seeing someone.'

'Is it the same man you were involved with in Italy?' he asked, piercing her gaze with his. 'Dylan Kirby was his name, was it not?'

Scarlett felt her blood begin to simmer in her veins. 'I was travelling with him, not sleeping with him.'

Cynicism burned in his gaze. 'Ah, yes, that old story. I remember it well.'

'It's not a story, it's the truth,' she insisted. 'I met Dylan, Joe and Jessica on a bus tour. I told you all this four years ago. How many times do I have to repeat myself?'

'I am not interested in your lies, but I am interested in what you can do for me,' he said. 'Your business is in need of a contract as big as this, Scarlett. You would be a fool to throw it away as if it was worth nothing.'

She clenched her jaw. 'I hate to be the one to point out the irony in all th...'

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