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Maddie's Love-Child

MIRANDA LEE

Miranda Lee

Maddie's Love-Child

Аннотация

FROM HERE TO PATERNITY She wanted a baby - but not a man! After Miles met Maddie, she stayed on his mind. In the end he returned to Australia to get Maddie out of his system by bedding her for six months or so - marriage would never be a part of his agenda Which suited Maddie just fine. She adored men, but had no faith in them - and no intention of marrying, either. But she did want a baby! And Miles had all the qualities Maddie wanted in the father of her child: brains, breeding and beauty... . Not that she would ever let him know... FROM HERE TO PATERNITY - men who find their way to fatherhood by fair means, by foul, or even by default!

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“Are you saying you’d marry if you met the right man?”

Maddie laughed. “Now don’t go putting words into my mouth, Miles. I’m not a marrying kind of girl.”

“So what kind of girl are you?”

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From Here to Paternity—romances that feature fantastic men who eventually make fabulous fathers. Some seek paternity, some have it thrust upon them. All will make it—whether they like it or not.

MIRANDA LEE is Australian, living near Sydney. Born and raised in the bush, she was boarding-school educated and briefly pursued a classical music career before moving to Sydney and embracing the world of computers. Happily married, with three daughters, she began writing when family commitments kept her at home. She likes to create stories that are believable, modern, fast-paced and sexy. Her interests include reading meaty sagas,

doing word puzzles, gambling and going to the movies.

Look out for Miranda Lee's next riveting romance, A HAUNTING OBSESSION (Harlequin Presents #1893), available in July.

Maddie's Love-Child

Miranda Lee



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PROLOGUE

'I JUST don't understand you, Miles,' Annabel said in an aggrieved tone.

True, Miles thought. Though to be fair, he didn't understand himself, either. Most men would be more than content with his lot. He seemed to have it all. Money. Position. Power. Not to mention a beautiful and elegant fiancée. A lady, no less.

Their wedding was to have taken place in just over four months' time. In June.

But not now.

Miles had broken his engagement to Annabel last night as kindly as he could. He'd had to confess, of course, that he did not love her. It was the truth, after all.

Luckily, the invitations had not yet been sent out, though

they had been printed. And Annabel had unfortunately already ordered her wedding gown. He'd offered to compensate her family for any financial loss. He'd also told Annabel to keep the ring—a generous gesture, since it had set him back twenty thousand pounds.

Annabel hadn't quibbled about that, he noticed. Miles didn't think she would. She came from an aristocratic family, complete with mansions and titles, but little cash.

He'd thought the matter had been settled till Annabel had shown up in his office this morning, demanding not further compensation, but further explanation. It seemed she was not going to give up being Mrs. Miles MacMillan lightly.

'Is all this something to do with your father having left control of the family company to Max?' she asked impatiently. 'Is that why you're running off to Australia on the pretext of overseeing the new branch out there instead of taking over the position of vice-president here in London? Because your pride's been hurt by your older brother wielding the whip hand, so to speak?'

Miles's smile was wry as he turned from where he'd been staring blankly out at the rain. What an apt turn of phrase where Max was concerned! His brother did have some peculiar private practices. But no one was supposed to know that. Publicly, he was a perfect English gentleman, complete with stiff upper lip and impeccable manners.

'No, that's not it at all,' he said. 'Max is welcome to the running of the company. Father chose rightly in giving him the job.'

He's not only better suited, but it's what he's always desperately wanted.'

'And what do you desperately want, Miles?' came the caustic question. 'Or don't you desperately want anything?'

An image flashed into his mind—of a woman, a witch of a woman with black hair and black eyes, the palest of skins and the reddest of mouths. Blood red. He could see her now, sashaying towards him across that crowded room, her floaty black dress swirling about her long, long legs, its semitransparent material hiding not an inch of her slender yet sensual curves.

The memory must have projected something into his face, for suddenly Annabel gasped, then glared, her peaches and cream complexion flushing angrily.

'Dear God, it's another woman, isn't it?' She bit the words out. 'You fell in love with some colonial bitch while you were out in Australia on business last year. That's why you've tossed me over, to run back to the arms of some leather-skinned blonde bimbo who probably spends all of her life on Bondi Beach in a bikini!'

Miles was startled by Annabel's viciousness. Plus her capacity for jealousy. Or was it just hurt pride?

There was no doubt Lady Annabel Swanson was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever met. And he'd met a good few in his thirty-three years. Far more beautiful than a certain outrageous creature he hadn't been able to get out of his head, no matter what he'd done.

'That's not so, Annabel,' he said with some of the superb

British control his public school education had managed to finally beat into him. 'There is a woman ... yes. But I have not fallen in love with her. I'm beginning to doubt I'm capable of falling in love at all,' he said truthfully enough. 'If I was going to fall in love, don't you think I would have fallen in love with you?'

Annabel preened at this, and Miles felt a right hypocrite. More and more he could see her type would never capture his heart, or even retain his desire. She was far too snobbish, far too ambitious and far too mercenary. -

As for her performance in bed... she was also far too fond of showers for his liking. He never did relish the feeling that she couldn't wait to wash him from her oh so perfectly painted, powdered and perfumed body. Frankly, he could not bear the thought of touching her ever again.

He simply ached to get away. Yes, to some sun and sand. And yes, into the arms of that witch.

He didn't want to marry her, of course. Heaven forbid. What he wanted was to sink himself deep into her gloriously sexy body, to wallow for a few months in the pleasures of the flesh and not think about England, other people's expectations of him or the infernal family company!

Maybe, after six months, he might be ready to return and get on with the life that had been mapped out for him since birth.

Maybe...

If not, he might do something else, go somewhere else. He had the money to travel indefinitely. His grandmother—his mother's

mother—had made him her sole heir. God knows why.

Perhaps because she thought her son-in-law had unfairly favoured his older son. Perhaps because Miles had taken after her side of the family and not the MacMillans. She'd been quite delighted, apparently, when she first saw the dimple in Miles's chin, declaring it was identical to her brother Bart's, the black sheep of the family who'd run off to sea and drowned when only a lad.

Who knew what the old lady's reasons had been? She'd died twenty years ago now. Her estate had been put into trust for Miles, and at thirty, he'd become a far wealthier man than Max would ever be. He could afford six years in Australia, if that was what he wanted.

Not that he thought he would need that long. A few months' solid bedding of that black-eyed Aussie witch would no doubt cure the unrequited lust that had besieged him ever since meeting her that fateful night twelve months before.

Looking back, he could see that he should have taken her up on her none too subtle invitation. Then maybe his desire for her would not have grown into such an obsession.

But he'd been involved with Annabel at the time and had planned to ask her to marry him on his return to London. His damned sense of honour had stopped him from indulging in a tacky one-night stand, and he'd cut and run before temptation got the better of him.

On coming home, he'd proposed straight away to Annabel,

then valiantly tried to forget the way he'd felt in that witch's company. So full of desire and reckless passion. So much a man!

But it had been impossible. In the end, he'd had to face the fact that he did not want to make love to Annabel anymore. He wanted that fiery-eyed witch in his bed, and no one else.

'So it's just sex, is that it?' Annabel snapped.

Miles flashed her an irritated look. 'I've already said I don't love her.'

'Then why on earth didn't you say so earlier?' She heaved an exasperated sigh. 'I'm not a child, Miles. I know what men are like. I have no illusions about their carnal natures. There's not a married woman I know who hasn't had to occasionally turn a blind eye to their husband's disgusting behaviour.'

'So you have the hots for this ... female. I can understand that. No doubt she appeals to you because she's different from what you're used to. Go to Australia, by all means, and get her out of your system. But when the six months is over, come back, Miles. Come back to me...'

She came forward, the softly understanding smile on her lovely mouth not at all matched by the calculating coldness in her arctic blue eyes. Miles almost shuddered when she put a hand on his arm.

He took a step backwards so that it dropped away. 'I do not want that kind of wife, Annabel. And I do not want that kind of marriage. When and if I marry, I will be faithful. And I will expect the same of my wife!'

‘Yes, of course you will,’ she cooed. ‘But I’m not your wife at the moment, am I? I’m not even your fiancée any more. But I’m still prepared to wait. Don’t say no, dearest. Don’t dash all my hopes. Let me at least wait till you get back. Then, if you still don’t want to marry me, I’ll go quietly. I promise.’

Miles made an impatient sound. ‘I don’t want to give you false hopes, Annabel.’

‘I know you don’t. You’re a dear, dear man, and a proper gentleman through and through. Any other man would have just had this woman on the side and not said a word. I can’t tell you how much I admire you, Miles. You’re a man of honour. Why do you think I love you as much as I do?’

Miles refrained from mentioning his bank balance.

He was glad when she left, glad to be able to breathe easily again. He’d been half-holding his breath from the moment she’d walked In.

At last he could return to the report he’d received from the private investigator only that morning, barely minutes before Annabel’s unexpected arrival. Now he dragged it out of the top drawer and sat down to peruse it at further length.

The quarry had recently broken up with her latest lover, he read again with satisfaction. If she ran true to form, she would not resume the relationship under any circumstances and would not take another man into her bed for several weeks. Though a woman of modern morals, she was, surprisingly, not promiscuous. She rarely had more than one lover a year, and she

was always faithful to him.

Miles liked what he read.

He would be presenting himself into her life right at the right time. She'd already showed him she fancied him, so he didn't think he'd have too much trouble becoming her next lover.

His flesh leapt fiercely at the thought. Dear God, he'd never wanted a woman as he wanted Miss Madeline Powers. Never!

Maddie, her friends called her. Darling, she called most men, he'd noticed that night.

He could not wait for her to call him darling.

He could hear the word now, coming low and husky from those scarlet lips. She would whisper it to him as those lush lips travelled over his body, moan it when they fused as one, gasp it every time she came.

Miles could feel his heart hammering away within his chest as he thought of her. He had never met such an overtly sexual creature. She was everything Annabel wasn't. Flamboyant and exotic and wild. She would be hot in bed, he knew. Hot and hedonistic and his!

'Maddie,' he said aloud, and savoured her name. It conjured up images of carnality that would make women like Annabel blanch. 'Maddie,' he repeated, and leant back in his chair, his eyes shutting.

'Maddie...'

CHAPTER ONE

MADDIE'S reaction to Carolyn's baby astounded her.

She hadn't had much to do with babies during her thirty-one years, having always found them annoying, noisy creatures with little to recommend them. They cried incessantly and made the most awful messes from both ends of their restless, wriggling bodies.

But from the moment Carolyn handed over her newborn daughter and she nestled contentedly in her arms, Maddie was enchanted. When the baby's pudgy fingers closed fiercely round one of hers, Maddie's heart had squeezed as tight as the tiny girl's grip. When those unblinking blue eyes looked up at her with total trust, everything inside Maddie just melted.

'Oh, God,' she groaned. 'I never thought this would happen to me, Carolyn, but I think I want one of these for my very own.'

Carolyn laughed softly from where she was propped up against a mountain of pillows in her hospital bed, looking far too lovely, Maddie thought, for a woman who had given birth less than twenty-four hours before. Even the dark smudges under her eyes did nothing to detract from her blonde-haired blue-eyed beauty.

'There's nothing to stop you from having a baby, Maddie,' she said. 'All you have to do is marry Spencer, and Bob's your uncle.'

'Marry Spencer? Good Lord, I wouldn't wish that on a dog.'

Carolyn gave her a perplexed look. 'But... but only last month you told me you were crazy about him!'

Maddie grimaced. 'Crazy being the operative word. The man's an insufferable snob. Do you know he started criticising my taste in clothes? He actually said I looked cheap. You don't think

Auntie Maddie looks cheap, do you darling?’ she crooned at the baby, who seemed entranced by the huge silver hoops that were swinging from Maddie’s lobes.

Carolyn decided this was one of those moments when silence was golden. She, personally, would never describe Maddie as cheap-looking. Way out, perhaps. Or off-beat. Definitely Bohemian. Maddie was of an artistic nature. One expected artistes to be different, didn’t one?

Carolyn could see, however, that if a man did not really know and love Maddie for the warm, generous and genuine person she was underneath her outwardly outrageous facade, he might mistakenly think her cheap.

Of course, it would help if she dressed differently. Her clothes were always outlandish and her jewellery garish, to say the least. Carolyn wished Maddie would wear a little less makeup and a lot more underwear....

Carolyn’s rueful gaze drifted over the outfit her friend was sporting that morning. Skin-tight black leather pants with a matching black leather vest held together with a single wooden button. Every time Maddie moved—or even breathed in—it looked like the precarious closure would pop right open to display her obviously braless state.

‘I don’t have to get married to have one of these little darlings,’ Maddie resumed, glancing up at Carolyn with a minx-like gleam in her flashing black eyes. ‘All I need is a suitable sperm donor. He’d have it all, of course. Brains. Beauty. Breeding. I have

no intention of introducing an inferior specimen into this poor pathetic world. Someone like this splendid example of human perfection in my arms would be fine.'

She sent Carolyn a wicked smile at this juncture. 'You wouldn't mind lending me Vaughan for a few nights, would you, sweetie? He seems to be one of those prepotent sires who passes on all his good genes.'

Carolyn laughed.

There'd been a time when she'd worried Vaughan and Maddie were lovers. They'd been very close for many years, having been flatmates during their university days, after which they'd gone into business together—Maddie doing the interior decorating of Vaughan's architectural projects.

But despite the intimacy of their ongoing relationship and their relaxed camaraderie, they claimed they had never been physically intimate.

And Carolyn believed them.

Maddie's flamboyant sensuality might have worried a less secure wife, considering the amount of time they spent together. But Carolyn felt supremely confident in her husband's love, as confident as she was of Maddie's friendship.

'You find your own sperm donor, thank you very much,' Carolyn advised with mock tartness. 'And I think I'll have my baby back before your craziness goes off on another tangent and you become a baby stealer.'

'You think I'm joking, don't you?' Maddie smiled as she

handed back the tiny bundle. 'About having a baby, I mean, not about wanting to borrow your Vaughan. Much as your hubbie's a gorgeous hunk of male flesh, he's not really my type. Never was.'

'And what is your type, Maddie? Spencer?'

'I suppose so,' she agreed happily. 'Lord knows I must be a masochist, but I always seem to be attracted to the sort of supercilious stuck-up silver-spoon who wouldn't normally be seen dead with someone like me.'

'And why's that, do you think?' Carolyn asked thoughtfully. 'I mean ... I would have thought you'd find such men stifling.'

Maddie shrugged. 'I do, in the end. Especially when they start wanting to change me—or hide me away. That's the kiss of death as far as I'm concerned. Needless to say, dear old Spence got his walking papers the night he decided I would have to change my clothes before he could possibly take me out in public. He rang me every hour of every day for a while, but I simply clicked on my answering machines, both at home and at the office, and in the end, he gave up. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.'

Carolyn shook her head, sighing. 'You have a mean streak in you, Maddie. Still, I can't admit to feeling much pity for Spencer. He's a male chauvinist pig, if ever there was one.'

'Then why suggest I marry him, for pity's sake?' Maddie pointed out frustratedly.

'I was only teasing. I knew darned well you wouldn't. You're never going to get married, are you?' Carolyn said, a tender exasperation in her voice.

‘No.’

‘Is it because of what happened to your mother?’

‘You mean do I have some deep-seated Freudian aversion to marriage and commitment because Mama was loved and left by a married man, leaving poor little ol’ me behind?’

‘Something like that.’

Maddie laughed, tossing her long black curls from her shoulders. She really was a very striking woman, Carolyn thought. And far more complex than anyone realised. In a way, she felt some pity for the pompous Spencer. And any other man Maddie sank her teeth into.

‘What a perfectly interesting thought!’ Maddie exclaimed, her smile dazzling white behind her lushly scarlet lips. ‘It never occurred to me, but you could be right, I suppose. I never try to psychoanalyse myself. I am what I am, and to hell with anyone who doesn’t approve of me, which includes Spencer. The last thing I need in my life is some hypocrite of a man who wants to make me over into what he thinks is suitable to his narrow-minded stuffy life-style.’

‘Good Lord, Maddie! I didn’t realise you hated men so much!’

Maddie blinked, startled by her friend’s remark. ‘But I don’t!’ she denied. ‘I simply adore men!’

‘Do you, Maddie? Do you really?’

‘Of course I do,’ she insisted, though not meeting Carolyn’s eyes as she looped a stray curl behind her left ear. ‘Don’t be silly. I can’t stand not having a man in my life.’

‘Then why don’t you want to ever marry one?’

Maddie looked up, deflecting her friend’s serious question with a naughty grin. ‘Because I like men, darling heart, not a single man..I can’t think of anything more boring than having to sleep with the same man every night for the rest of my life. Actually, I can’t think of anything more boring than marriage in general!’

‘Are you saying my life is going to be boring?’

‘You and Vaughan are the exceptions to the rule.’

‘What about my mother and Julian? They’re blissfully happy.’

‘Chips off the same block,’ Maddie returned, smiling fondly as she thought of Carolyn’s still beautiful mother and her husband. Isabel and Julian.

Such romantic names for such a romantic couple.

Maddie had met them the previous year when Julian, a successful businessman from Sydney, decided to semi-retire on the South Coast and commissioned Vaughan and herself to design, build and furnish a special surprise home for his new bride. Maddie had become good friends with Carolyn when Julian had asked his stepdaughter to oversee the decor while he was overseas on his honeymoon with Isabel. It was during this time that Carolyn and Vaughan fell madly in love, marrying within a few short weeks.

Now, twelve months later, they had this gorgeous little baby.

Maddie leant over and clucked the baby’s chin, goo-gooing at it as she’d never goo-gooed before. There was no longer any

doubt in her mind. A baby she was going to have. And soon, before the years ticked away and she was too old. She could well afford it, which to Maddie's mind was the only negative against bringing up a baby on her own. What did a child need a father for, anyway? She'd never had a father around and she was as happy and normal as could be!

'You're not really going to have a baby out of wedlock, are you?' Carolyn asked worriedly.

Maddie chuckled. 'Trust you to use a term. like that! I've never heard anything so old-fashioned in my life!'

'What's old-fashioned?' Vaughan said as he walked in and strode over to the bed. 'Hello, my precious darlings.'

He bent to kiss his wife and baby daughter, the tenderness and love on his face moving Maddie. She'd always known Vaughan was a warm, caring man underneath his outward machismo, but to witness the intensity of his feelings on display for all to see brought a lump to her throat and a tinge of envy to her heart.

'Well?' Vaughan straightened to throw Maddie a questioning glance. 'What's so old-fashioned?'

'Your wife thinks I should be married before I have a baby,' came her dryly amused reply.

Vaughan looked more shocked than in the thirteen years she had known him. 'Good God,' he blurted out. 'You're pregnant?'

'No, of course not, you silly man. But seeing your lovely baby girl has sunk a deep well into previously untapped maternal instinct. Yet when I expressed my wish to have a baby, your dear

wife insisted I marry Spencer first.'

Vaughan grimaced. 'Good God, not him. Find someone else, for pity's sake. He might be a top solicitor, but he's the most arrogant bastard I've ever met.'

'See?' Maddie pulled a face at Carolyn, who pulled another right back. Both women started to giggle and the baby to cry.

'Here, give her to me,' Vaughan suggested, scooping up his daughter and walking around the room with her, whereupon she immediately stopped crying. 'Speaking of arrogant bastards—' he directed the words at Maddie '—you'll never guess who rang me this morning.'

'If I'd never guess,' Maddie countered, 'then perhaps you should save me the trouble of trying and just tell me.'

'Miles MacMillan,' he announced. 'You probably don't remember him, either of you, but he was at Julian's house-warming party round about this time last year. The night we got engaged, Carolyn. He's British and was out here at the time to plan the opening of a Sydney branch of his family's finance company. Julian was having dealings with him.'

'Anyway, apparently he's come back for another six-month stint in Australia and wants to buy a weekender within easy commuting distance of Sydney. Since he'd already seen the South Coast area and liked it, he contacted Julian, who told him about that house I'd nearly finished building at Stanwell Park—the one where the owner went bankrupt, bringing things to a halt. He's driving down to have a look at it this afternoon, and if he

likes it, he's going to buy it.'

'I don't remember him at all,' Carolyn admitted. 'There again ... I did have my mind on other things that night.' And she winked at her husband.

'Wicked woman,' he rebuked, but softly, lovingly.

'I remember him only too well,' Maddie said sharply, and Carolyn and Vaughan's heads whipped round to stare at her.

'No, I did not seduce him,' she added.

Though it wasn't for want of trying....

'But he's not the sort of man one easily forgets,' she went on. 'If one's eyes were not already full of stars, that is.' Her droll tone belied the squirming in her stomach as her mind flashed back to that night.

Miles MacMillan....

Vaughan was right when he called him an arrogant bastard, though Maddie doubted he was a bastard in the literal sense of the word. Not like herself. Miles MacMillan was blue-blooded through and through. If asked, he could undeniably trace his British ancestry right back to the dim dark ages, and there would not be a single entry from the wrong side of the blanket.

None in writing, anyway.

He was upper class through and through. Upper class, upper crust and up himself!

That said, he was also the most maddeningly attractive man Maddie had ever seen, Tall, dark and handsome, with superb bone structure, a squared jawline with a Cary Grant dimple,

steely grey eyes and a perversely sensual mouth totally at odds with his coolly controlled air of haughty superiority.

Maddie had found him downright irresistible from the moment she'd spotted him across Julian's living room, standing all alone, dressed in an impossibly stuffy pin-striped suit, not a hair out of place on his dark, well-shaped head, his aristocratically chiselled nose high in the air.

When she'd swanned toward him in her semi-transparent black chiffon dress, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. Understandable, considering her seeming lack of underwear—the skin-coloured teddy she was wearing did give the illusion of nakedness underneath.

Maddie had foolishly believed he'd been hers for the taking that night, especially once she found out he wasn't married.

How wrong she was!

Oh, yes, he'd been interested, in a sexual sense. She'd been too long on the end of male desire not to recognise the signs. But as much as he'd been aroused by her, he'd also been faintly repelled, she decided later, his ambivalence towards her making him run hot and cold all night. She wondered afterwards if he'd been unable to make up his mind whether to risk his reputation—or perhaps his soul?—by responding to such a shameless creature's advances.

When she'd boldly asked him home for a nightcap, he'd stared at her as though she'd suggested something really depraved. He'd declined politely in a voice reminiscent of Queen Victoria's

we-are-not-amused remark, added a curt good-night, then decamped, leaving Maddie in a most unusual state of hurt, humiliation and anger.

Never before had a male prey of his ilk escaped once she set her sights on him. And never before had a man made her actually feel cheap.

But Miles MacMillan had. He'd made her feel lower than the lowest, vilest, slimiest reptile.

Unaccustomed as she was to rejection and humiliation, Maddie had taken some time to get over the incident. Now Miles MacMillan was coming back into her line of fire, and she didn't know if she was excited by that prospect or terrified of it.

Both, she suspected.

'Does Mr. MacMillan know about my business association with you, Vaughan?' she asked archly. 'Does he realise that if he engages your services, he also gets the services of Miss Madeline Powers, interior designer extraordinaire?'

She could not quite recall what she had told their British visitor about herself that night. His cryptic responses had rattled her somewhat. But she rarely prattled on about herself on first meeting with a member of the opposite sex, concentrating on him instead. Presumably he knew nothing about her job, not to mention her passion for painting nude portraits. She usually didn't bring that up till the second meeting.

'I haven't mentioned you to him yet,' Vaughan admitted. 'But I doubt there'll be any problem. Wealthy men don't like doing

their own decorating, unless they have some female in tow who needs to be pleased. Which there isn't. No wife, fiancée or live-in girlfriend with him. I asked.'

'So our esteemed Mr. MacMillan is still unattached,' Maddie drawled. 'How interesting.'

Carolyn groaned. 'She's off on the prowl again, Vaughan. Do you think you should warn this poor Miles person?'

Vaughan laughed. 'The not-so-poor Miles is well able to take care of himself. If Maddie is silly enough to set her cap at his head, then she's the one who needs warning. Men like Miles don't lose their heads to any woman. They don't have it in them. They have ice in their veins instead of blood, and computer chips where their hearts should be.'

Carolyn shuddered. 'I don't know what you see in men like that, Maddie.'

'Neither do I,' she returned airily. 'But it's been the same with me as long as I can remember. Still, it's not as though I want to marry any of them. It's strictly on a love 'em and leave 'em basis.'

'Sure is. Once they fall in love with you, you leave them,' Carolyn muttered. 'I hope you're not thinking of soliciting this Miles person to be the father of the baby you've decided you want all of a sudden.'

Surprise sent Maddie's black eyes rounding. The thought had never crossed her mind. But now that Carolyn had mentioned it ...

Why, Miles MacMillan would be the perfect candidate! Not only did he have the brains, beauty and breeding she was looking

for, but he was only staying in the country six months.

No doubt after his exile in the colonies was over, he would wing his way back to merry England, where he would eventually marry some peaches-and-cream-complexioned lady, raise an heir or two in the image of his own stuffy self and end up in . Who's Who and the House of Lords!

Or was it Commons? No, no, she was the one who was common. Spencer had said so the other night, and Spencer would know, the hypocritical creep!

'Vaughan, say something to stop her,' Carolyn said in a panicky voice. 'I can see it written all over her face. She's going to seduce that man. I just know she is!'

'What Maddie does in her private life is her business,' Vaughan pronounced stolidly. 'Besides, you don't honestly think she'd take any notice of me if I tried to stop her, do you?'

Carolyn sighed. 'I suppose not.'

Maddie didn't defend herself, because Vaughan was right. There wasn't a man alive who could stop her from doing what she wanted to do. Men, she'd decided from a very early age, would never play a controlling role in her life. Never!

But seducing Miles MacMillan was more a fantasy at that moment than a reality. Frankly, as perfect a sperm donor as the man might be, Maddie wasn't about to put herself in a position to be humiliated yet again. Rejection was no good for the soul, or her self-esteem.

'Don't worry your pretty little head, Carolyn, love,' she said. 'I

do not have my sights set on Miles MacMillan. He didn't want to have anything to do with me last time we met, and I don't want to have anything to do with him now, except in a business sense. So when is his lordship due, Vaughan? Is he coming to the office or are you meeting him on site?

'He's coming to the office.'

'What time?'

'Around two.'

'Bring him along to meet me then. Best we make sure he's agreeable for me to do his decorating right from the start.'

'You think he might object?'

Maddie shrugged. 'It's on the cards.'

'He damned well wouldn't want to. You're the best interior decorator for miles. I've got no intention of having my perfectly splendid design ruined by a ghastly decor. I'll make it abundantly clear when he arrives that if he wants one of my houses, he gets you, too!'

Maddie smiled and batted her eyelashes at him. 'My champion.'

'I'm not your champion, and you know it. I'm selfish to the core where my work is concerned. Object to you, indeed,' he scorned. 'He won't object when I'm through with him, believe me!'

CHAPTER TWO

MILES didn't know what to make of the situation or this possible complication. It had never occurred to him that Maddie

might be having a thing with her business colleague. The investigator hadn't brought up any such possibility, but how else could one explain Slater's overly protective attitude towards her?

He stared at the man as he pointed out for a second time that he and Miss Powers were an inseparable team.

'You buy a Vaughan Slater home, then it comes decorated by my partner. Take it or leave it!'

The aggressive tone suggested he feared Miles might not take it, which was ironic. Little did he know the only reason Miles was buying one of his — damned homes was that Maddie came with it.

Not that the man wasn't a good architect. He was, if a little unconventional. Miles had thought Julian's home quite incredible when he'd seen it last year. Made of steel and concrete and glass, it clung to a mountainside overlooking Wollongong, giving -it a panoramic view of the city below and the Pacific Ocean beyond. Miles knew he wouldn't suffer—either financially or comfort-wise—from buying a Vaughan Slater home.

'That's fine by me.' It was a huge understatement, delivered quite coolly while he sized up this highly unexpected competition.

Vaughan Slater was a handsome fellow, no doubt about that. And well built, to boot. Around Miles's own six foot three, he had broad shoulders, a strong mate face, intense brown eyes and unusual coloured hair. Dark brown mixed with red.

Miles could not imagine Maddie not finding the man

physically attractive—and vice versa. And the way the man carried on... Well, it was obvious Maddie meant more to him than just a business partner.

Miles hated the idea of their being lovers, but he knew that Slater having a wife and new baby didn't mean he wasn't having something on the side.

Frankly, Miles's view of male morals was even more tarnished and cynical than Annabel's. His father had been an unconscionable rake. His brother was a roué of the worst kind. Most of the married businessmen Miles knew were having dalliances with other women. Hell, just about all of them were!

Miles detested that kind of disloyalty. And while he could understand some circumstances where adultery was excusable, he could find none such excuse for the man in front of him. Or Miss Madeline Powers, for that matter.

Slater was married to her supposed best friend, Julian's stepdaughter, Carolyn, a lovely-looking and very nice young woman from what Miles could recall. If Maddie was having an affair with her best friend's husband then he would have none of her. It was as simple as that.

But of course it wasn't as simple as that.

Miles was to realise the extent of his self-delusion as soon as he was escorted along to Maddie's adjoining office.

Slater ushered him past an empty reception area—muttering something about Maddie refusing to have a secretary—then through another door with only the briefest of knocks, catching

the woman herself standing at the huge plate-glass window behind her, her back towards them.

For a few distracting moments Miles's gaze was drawn to the breathtaking view of bright blue sky above, turquoise ocean in the distance, crisp white sands closer to hand, then a clean-looking shopping centre directly below. Fifty or so miles to the south of Sydney, Wollongong was one of the most beautiful seaside cities Miles had ever seen.

He took a deep breath, telling himself it was worth it to come halfway across the world for the view alone. But then the witch began turning round, and he knew she alone was the reason for his long journey.

Hell, he thought, as his eyes took in what she was wearing this time. Black again. And leather. Tight, tight leather, stretching and straining to encase those long, long legs and that tautly rounded derriere.

The vest top was another story, only a single button holding it provocatively together over obviously braless breasts. Not big breasts. But high and firm and round, the soft, tight leather moulded around them, pressing them together to form a shadowed valley underneath that stupid button.

Miles had never been turned on by black leather before. That was one of Max's kinks.

But he was this time. Or was it the woman within the leather, the witch woman with the tightly curled black hair, which was down today, and fluffed wildly out over her shoulders?

He swallowed and did his best not to look like a man who was dangerously aroused. Suddenly, he knew he should run a mile from this woman. She was going to change his life irrevocably if he became involved with her. He would never be the same again, could never go back to the stolid, staid existence at home. She would sweep him into a world he'd not yet tasted, but which, once savoured, could quickly become an addiction. She was untamed, this creature. Totally wild and tantalisingly wicked.

She would probably corrupt him and was best avoided at all costs.

Miles took a long, hard look at her and wanted her more than ever.

Maddie tried to contain her nerves as she turned round, annoyed with herself for letting a man rattle her. If he looked down his nose at her again, she would not be responsible for her behaviour!

‘Vaughan, darling!’ she exclaimed, her red lips smiling only briefly before pursing into a reproachful pout. ‘You’re late again, you bad man. You did say two, didn’t you?’

‘Why, hello, Miles,’ she managed airily, making no concession to an ongoing and most uncharacteristic attack of butterflies. ‘Long time, no see. Vaughan tells me you’re out here for six months and want us to whip up a weekend for you. Is that right?’

His momentary hesitation in answering irritated the death out of her, as did his ongoing and faintly contemptuous survey of

her appearance. She used the awkwardly silent moments to do a survey of her own, finding to her disgust that she still thought him the most attractive man she'd ever met. She also realised why she'd been transitorily drawn to Spencer. He was a watered-down version of Miles.

Being faced with the real thing, however, brought home to her the many differences. Miles was taller than Spencer, and leaner and far more elegant. That severely tailored pale grey suit looked superb on him, as did the colour, the same as his eyes. Maddie thought his nose wonderfully patrician, and that dimple in his chin quite irresistible, especially since he always held himself with his chin and nose tilted slightly upwards.

He stood before her, the epitome of beauty, brains and breeding.

He was, no doubt, the ultimate choice for the father of her child. But as such, the ultimate challenge.

For it was obvious from the look on his face that he was still as disapproving of her as he'd been at the party last year. There was no sign, either, of any reluctant desire. His grey gaze remained cold as it swept over her a second time.

He would be a lot harder to seduce than Spencer, Maddie conceded. But all of a sudden, she was determined to succeed. Nothing would stand in her way. It might take time, but then, she had a whole six months. She could afford to take her time, to be a little more subtle than usual, if necessary.

She looked him up and down again and decided he would be

well worth waiting for. Ah, but he would make a magnificent donor! With his impeccable breeding, he would surely pass on all those qualities she admired. His looks, his intelligence, his strength, his style.

But none she despised. Because he would not be around to give her child those. His offspring would not learn his snobbishness, or his ruthless ambition, or his cold, callous selfishness. His child would learn nothing but love. He or she would be a true love child in every sense of the word.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he said at last, his voice as rich and cultured as she remembered. ‘I’ve been assuring Vaughan here that I well understand your services come with purchasing one of his houses.’

I’m counting on it, Miles thought with black irony, having already surrendered himself to the inevitable.

It was some salve to his pride that he would not have to make the running. She would do that. Already she was looking him over like a greedy child with a much-desired toy in its sights.

He wondered where her pride was. Didn’t she have any at all? He’d rejected her advances the last time. Quite brutally. Yet the gleam in her eye suggested she was ready and willing to mount a second assault on his supposed virtue. Lord, if only she knew!

‘Have you shown Miles the house at Stanwell Park yet, Vaughan?’ she asked, flashing her partner-cum-whatever a dazzling smile. ‘If you haven’t, then I’ll be only too glad to do the honours. That way you can visit Carolyn and the baby again

this afternoon.'

'Would you? That'd be great, Maddie. Would you mind, Miles?'

Mind? He couldn't think of anything he'd like better. He wanted her alone. He wanted her anywhere. He just wanted her.

Why, then, did he adopt such a coolly indifferent pose, plus such a formal polite voice? Habit, he supposed. And more of his infernal pride. It was going to be the death of him, that pride.

'If Miss Powers doesn't mind abandoning her work to show me the house,' he pronounced stiffly, 'then I do not object. I would not, however, wish to put her to any inconvenience.'

Maddie resisted the urge to sigh. Instead, she glanced away for a moment. Getting this pompous fool into bed was not going to be easy. Getting him there without protection might prove near nigh impossible ! She wondered caustically if his underwear was as starched as his personality. All she could hope was that underneath all that chilling English control lay a real man, with real male hormones.

Looking at him, she caught him off guard for a moment, glimpsing a moment of naked desire in his eyes. It was gone in a flash, but it had been there. She was sure of it.

So! The game was the same as last time. He wanted her yet didn't want her.

It was a game she'd played before, with other men of his ilk. But none, she conceded, of Miles MacMillan's stiff stature and staunch standing.

How good it would be to break that iron control, to have him practically beg her to let him make love to her.

Maddie's eyes narrowed at the prospect. The pleasure of a man's body was nothing compared to the pleasure she gained from his utter surrender to her power as a woman.

Maddie enjoyed sex in her own way but had never had an orgasm in her life. She knew she wasn't capable of it. But she was such a brilliant faker in bed that her lovers never twigged. She always praised their performance afterwards, and they were left smugly thinking they'd satisfied her as well as any man had ever satisfied her.

Which they had.

Maddie looked at Miles and knew his surrender would give her more pleasure than any man's had ever done. She would not only win the game, but a prize, as well. A baby...

She could hardly wait.

'I'll just get my keys,' she said sweetly, 'and we'll be on our way.'

CHAPTER THREE

MILES clung to the seat belt for added support as the car swung round another sharp curve at far too fast a speed. Lord, the woman drove like a maniac. On top of that, her car was a bomb, an old black thing with a big silver grille in front, which she'd proudly said was one of the original F.J. Holdens, whatever they were.

He wished to God he'd insisted on using his hire car. At least

it had air-conditioning. He was beginning to feel rather hot under the collar, not to mention totally frazzled inside.

She was coming on to him again the same as before, with all the subtlety of a steamroller, and he still didn't know how to handle her. It was one thing to think about the sexually charged Miss Madeline Powers from the safety of England, quite another to be faced with the woman in the flesh. Especially when that flesh was poured into black leather.

'Runs like a dream, doesn't it?' she enthused as another curve was successfully negotiated on two wheels.

The road they were traversing generally followed the coastline. It had started out going through sedate village-like streets but had left civilisation behind and was winding a narrow path round the edge of cliff faces. Dangerous drops greeted one to the right, raw mountainside covered in virgin bush rose steeply to the left. The place looked as wild and untamed as the woman next to him.

'Mmm,' was all he could manage.

'Am I driving too fast for you?' she asked in an innocent-sounding voice. 'Just say so if I am.'

He resisted telling her she did everything too fast for his liking. But maybe his pale face gave her the message, for her foot lifted off the accelerator. She laughed as she slowed.

'Vaughan's always telling me I drive too fast. Not that he can talk, the bad man. He has this old red MG with the top down, which he tears around Wollongong in. Though he might have to

sell it now the baby's come.'

'You and Slater seem very, er, close,' Miles ventured.

'Oh, we are. Very. There's nothing I wouldn't do for Vaughan.'

'Nothing?' Miles echoed in a dryly derisive voice.

Maddie slanted him a look of mock horror, then smiled a devilishly attractive smile. God, but the woman was more than wicked. She was downright irresistible.

'If you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting, Mr. MacMillan,' she said, 'then shame on you. Vaughan is a married man. Not only that, his wife is my very best friend. Even if I chose to overlook my hard-and-fast rule never to sleep with married men, I could never betray Carolyn. You've met her, haven't you?'

'Briefly.'

'Then you must know anyone who betrayed such a sweetie should have a millstone put around her neck and be cast into the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Anyway, Vaughan's besotted with her. He wouldn't look twice at another woman, and especially not me.'

'Why not you?' he said.

'Because he doesn't fancy me. Never did. We're good friends, nothing more.'

'And you don't fancy him?'

'Heaven's, no. He's not my type at all.'

'And what's your type?'

She gave him a look that made him grateful he wasn't driving. As it was, his heart and loins leapt uncontrollably.

Maddie silently berated herself as she returned her eyes to the road. You call that subtle, you idiot? You have to play this fellow like a fish. Slowly and very, very carefully.

But damn it all, she did find him so delicious. She dearly wished to take his startled face and kiss the shock from his mouth and from his eyes. She wanted to whisper wickedly seductive things into his ears and make him squirm with desire, wanted to strip him of those wonderfully stuffy clothes and caress him till he was trembling with need and longing.

An almost alien heat suffused Maddie's whole body at the thought of his flesh fusing with hers. My God, if she didn't know better, she might think she actually wanted this man. In a physical sense, that is.

Impatiently, she dismissed the idea. Impossible! She'd never really wanted a man like that! And probably never would.

This foreign excitement had to have something to do with choosing him as the father of her baby. Knowing that she might conceive made even thinking about sleeping with the man so much more marvellously meaningful.

'Is it much farther to the house?' Miles asked abruptly.

'Nope. Fact is, we're here!'

Miles glanced up as the car suddenly zoomed off the road and up a steep driveway, his eyes rounding at the sight of the impressive concrete-and-glass construction looming high over them.

Not dissimilar to Julian's house, it seemed to cling to the cliff,

its two storeys sporting identical semicircular balconies, which would give a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the ocean.

The black bomb roared to the crest of the steep slope, levelling out only momentarily before plunging into a large parking area under the building. Miles sucked in a deep breath as Maddie braked to a savage halt barely inches short of the cliff wall at the back of the unfinished garages. The F.J. Holden shuddered as the engine died.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said without a shred of apology in her voice. ‘But I have to give the old girl plenty of gas to get up that drive, then I have to brake hard to stop in time. You won’t have any trouble in your Audi.’

‘In that case, we’ll bring the Audi next time, shall we?’ he said, straightening his tie as he struggled out onto still unsteady feet. The tie didn’t need straightening. It was just something he did to cover any inner agitation, as though by straightening his clothes he could straighten out his thoughts—and his life. He’d been doing it a lot these past twelve months.

‘If you like.’ She shrugged indifference to his car as she hopped out from behind the wheel and smoothed down her leather pants.

A thought flashed into his mind of Annabel and her passion for limousines. She wouldn’t be seen dead driving around in this old bomb of Maddie’s. Or dressed in black leather, for that matter.

Miles knew which woman he preferred and marvelled anew

at his apparent lack of taste. His mother would be appalled if she could see him now.

Or would she? he puzzled.

She'd changed since his father's death. Loosened up, for want of a better word. And grown in self-confidence. She'd been surprisingly supportive about his decision to break his engagement to Annabel and take off for far-flung shores for a while.

Miles secretly hoped she would marry again, some nice kind man who would love her to death and dance attendance on her. She deserved it, after his pig of a father. It killed Miles to think he might take after that man in any way at all.

'Anything the matter?' Maddie quizzed him.

Miles blinked, then focused across the bonnet of the car onto her very sexy red mouth. It was wide and lush, and he couldn't wait to be ravaged by it.

'You were scowling,' she added.

'Scowling's a family trait,' he said ruefully.

'Then give it up,' she suggested airily. 'It's unbecoming.'

Miles was taken aback. No woman had dared to criticise him openly in years. He should have chilled any other's woman's temerity with a frosty look. Instead, he found a smile tugging at his mouth.

'All right,' he agreed.

She seemed taken aback for a second before smiling back. 'You know, you're even more good-looking when you smile,' she

said with a disarming but charming candour.

Miles might have blushed if his body had known how. 'You think so?'

'I know so. Fact is, Miles MacMillan, you're the most handsome man I've ever met.' Her head cocked on one side, she looked him up and down for the umpteenth time. 'I'd really like to paint you.'

'Paint me? You mean a portrait?'

'Sort of. Painting people is a passion with me. I've been doing it for years and making good money out of it, too. You'd make a perfectly divine subject for my entry in this year's Whitbread Prize. Might I persuade you to sit for me some time?'

'The Whitbread Prize,' he repeated as he wandered round the front of her car to stand less than a metre in front of her. 'What's that?'

'It's an art competition.'

Miles felt hopelessly flattered yet slightly flustered at the same time. It had something to do with the way that glittering black gaze was appraising him, like she was undressing him with her eyes and seeing him without a stitch on.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably, glad his suit jacket was of the new double-breasted style and hid his growing discomfort. 'Wouldn't you be better off with an Australian subject?' he asked abruptly.

'Heavens, no. The subject doesn't have to be known. Frankly, it's better if they're not. Less embarrassing that way.'

Miles swallowed slowly. 'What do you mean? Less embarrassing?'

'Oh, didn't I mention it? All the paintings entered in the Whitbread Prize are nudes.'

'Nudes.' Miles gulped. How could he possibly pose for her in the nude when his body would be raging with desire all the time? Embarrassing was not the word. It would be simply humiliating! 'I, er, don't think I, umm ...'

'Don't be silly, Miles,' she interrupted, coming forward to link arms with him and turn him towards the stairwell in the corner. 'I don't do explicit nudes. You won't have to be completely starkers to pose for me. I rarely put faces on my subjects, either. No one will know it's you. Except for me, of course.' Her sideways smile was erotically suggestive in the extreme.

Frankly, the last thing Miles needed at that moment was anything remotely erotically suggestive. Her arm through his was bad enough to contend with.

She stopped walking and looked at him, her expression expectant. 'So what do you say? Is it a yes?'

He stared into her striking face, with its high, exotic cheekbones, bewitching black eyes and luscious mouth, and knew his answer to her would always be yes. He was hers to command. Only his pride stopped him from openly admitting it, his staunchly embedded British pride.

'We'll see,' came his coolly delivered, almost haughty words. 'Posing for a nude portrait would not be looked upon favourably

by the board of MacMillan Credit if it ever got out. I'll have to give the matter some further thought. A man in my position can't just do as he pleases all the time, Maddie. He must always be aware of his reputation.'

CHAPTER FOUR

MADDIE almost laughed at that point. How pompous could you get? But it was rather endearing, in a way. And it would make his eventual seduction all the more satisfying.

'I'll have to know your answer soon,' she said coolly, extracting her arm from his. A tactical retreat at this critical point often worked to splendid effect. 'Otherwise, I'll have to find myself another subject. Entries for the Whitbread Prize close in a couple of months.'

Miles could see his chances of becoming her next lover slowly flying out the window. Why hadn't he simply said yes to posing for the damned picture? Why had he come out with all that guff?

'I'll let you know next time we meet,' he said, still unable to simply say yes.

Maddie sighed expressively and tossed her hair from her shoulders. Both actions drew his gaze—as she knew they would—first to her softly parted lips, and then to where the leather vest strained open for a second as air filled her lungs.

Miles clenched his jaw as his loins leapt once more to attention. The temptation to haul her into his arms and kiss her senseless was acute. Yet he knew he would not be able to stop at kisses, not the way he was feeling.

He glanced around the half-finished area with its dirt floor and rough brick walls. A wheelbarrow stood in one corner, a stack of rough-cut timber in the other. To even think about making love in such a setting filled him with self-disgust, more so when the image of taking her in the dirt or up against the wall stirred his flesh to an even fiercer arousal.

As much as his need was reaching monumental proportions, his pride and self-respect remained the stronger forces. He was a gentleman, God damn it, not some wild beast in the jungle. For a gentleman, there was a time and place for everything. And this was not the time or the place.

‘You’d better get on with showing me the house,’ he said brusquely as he straightened his tie again. ‘Time’s getting on, and I have to be back in Sydney for dinner tonight.’

It was a lie, but a necessary one: He could not go on like this. He had to get away from her for a while, had to have time to gather his wits and his control. Miles hated anything that smacked of not being in control. It was why he’d fought against her attractions for so long. Even now, having surrendered enough to come in pursuit of her, he still refused to throw all standards to the four winds!

‘A business dinner?’ she enquired lightly as she led him over to unlock the door to the stairwell.

‘Not exactly.’

‘You could cancel it, then?’

He threw her a darkly frowning look. ‘In favour of what?’

‘Since Carolyn’s in hospital, I’m cooking Vaughan dinner tonight.,The dear man would live on Big Macs if I didn’t. I thought you might like to join us. We could use the opportunity to discuss the house. If you decide to buy it, that is.’

A jab of jealousy ripped through Miles. No woman—least of all Annabel—had ever cooked him a cosy dinner at home. Yet Maddie was going to do it for Slater.

Damn it all, he didn’t like that one bit!

His resolve to make a quick exit wavered considerably. How could he possibly leave her alone with that hunk? Okay, so they didn’t seem to be lovers at the moment, but who knew what might happen? Maddie was obviously feeling the absence of a man in her life, and in her bed. Why else would she have been coming on to him so strongly all day?

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