



The Wedding Charade (The Sabbatini Brothers Book 3)

By Melanie Milburne

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He's turned Jade down once before. *But this time?*

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Melanie Milburne read her first Harlequin at age seventeen in between studying for her final exams. After completing a Masters Degree in Education she decided to write a novel in between settling down to do a PhD. She became so hooked on writing romance the PhD was shelved and soon after she was signed on to the London office of Harlequin Mills and Boon line, becoming the first not previously published Australian author to be contracted for the Presents line in over a decade.

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'There's a Jade Sommerville here to see you, Signor Sabbatini,' Nic's secretary, Gina, informed him as she brought in his morning coffee. 'She said she's not going to leave the building until you agree to speak to her.'

Nic continued to look through the prime real estate properties listed on his computer screen. 'Tell her to make an appointment like everyone else,' he said, smiling to himself as he thought of Jade pacing the floor in Reception. It was just the sort of thing she would do: fly in to Rome on an impulse, demand her way no matter what, throwing her light weight around as if she had an inborn right to everything she wanted right when she wanted it.

'I think she really means it,' Gina said. 'In fact, I think—'

The door opened with a thud as it banged against the wall. 'Please leave us, Gina,' Jade said with a plastic-looking smile. 'Nic and I have some private business to discuss.'

Gina looked worriedly at Nic. 'It's all right, Gina,' he said. 'This won't take long. Hold my calls and make sure we are not interrupted under any circumstances.'

'*Sì*, Signor Sabbatini,' Gina said and left, closing the door with a soft click behind her.

Nic leaned back in his chair and surveyed the black-haired virago in front of him. Her green eyes were flashing with sparks of fury, the normally alabaster skin of her cheeks cherry-red. Her small hands were clenched into tight fists by her sides and her breasts—which he had secretly admired ever since she was sixteen—were heaving with every enraged breath she took. 'So, what brings you to my neck of the woods, Jade?' he asked with an indolent smile.

Her cat's eyes narrowed. 'You bastard!' she spat. 'I bet you put him up to it, didn't you? It's just the sort of underhand thing you would do.'

Nic raised a brow. 'I have no idea what you are talking about. Put whom up to what?'

She came over to stand in front of his desk, her hands slamming down on the leather top as she eyeballed him. 'My father is stopping my allowance,' she said. 'He's dissolved my trust fund. He's not giving me another penny. And it's all your fault.'

Nic allowed himself the luxury of the delectable view for a moment. Jade's creamy cleavage was about as close as it had ever been, apart from the night of her sixteenth birthday party. His nostrils flared as he caught a waft of the exotic fragrance she was wearing. It was an intriguing combination of jasmine and orange

blossom and something else he couldn't put a name to, but it definitely suited her. He brought his gaze back to the fireworks show in hers. 'I might be guilty of many sins, Jade, but that is not one you can pin on me,' he said. 'I haven't spoken to your father in years.'

'I don't believe you,' she said, straightening from the desk.

She folded her arms across her body but if anything it gave him an even better view of those gorgeous breasts. He felt a stirring in his groin, the same rush of blood he always felt when around her. It annoyed him more than anything. He wasn't opposed to the odd one-night stand, but something about Jade made him wary of bedding her even for the short time it would take to do the deed. She oozed sensuality, but then she was known for her sleep-around ways. Only recently there had been a report in the press about her scandalous behaviour. She had allegedly lured a married man away from his wife and young family. Nic wondered how many men had enjoyed the experience of possessing her—or had *she* possessed them? She was a witch, after all: a little she-devil who liked nothing more than a full-on scene.

'Well?' she said, unfolding her arms and planting them on her slim hips in a combative manner. 'Aren't you going to say something?'

Nic picked up a gold pen off his desk and clicked it a couple of times. 'What do you want me to say?'

She blew out a breath of fury. 'Are you deliberately being obtuse? You know what we have to do. You've known it for months and months. Now we've only got one month to make up our minds, otherwise the money will be lost.'

Nic felt an all too familiar spanner of anger tighten each vertebrae of his spine at the way his late grandfather had written his will. He had spent the last few months looking for a way out of it. He had consulted legal experts but to no avail. The old man's will was iron-clad. If Nic didn't marry Jade Sommerville by May the first, a third of the Sabbatini assets would be gone for ever. But a month was a month and he wasn't going to allow Jade to manipulate him into doing things her way. If he had to marry her—and it was very likely he would—he would do so on his terms and his terms only.

'So,' he said, drawling the word out as he swung his chair from side to side, his pen still clicking on-off, on-off. 'You want me to be your husband, do you, Jade?'

She glared at him like a wildcat. 'Technically, no,' she said. 'But I want that money. It was left to me and I don't care if I have to jump through hoops to get it, and no one can stop me.'

Nic smiled lazily. 'As far as I see it, *cara*, I am the one who can stop you.'

She strode back to the desk but, instead of standing in front of it, she came behind to where he was sitting. She grasped the top of the chair next to his left shoulder and swung him round to face her. She stood in between the intimate bracket of his open thighs, her warm vanilla-scented breath breezing over his face as she jabbed him in the chest with a French-manicured finger. Nic had never felt so turned on in his life.

'You. Will. Marry. Me. Nic Sabbatini.' She bit out each word as if she were spitting bullets.

He curled a lip as he held the green lightning of her gaze. 'Or else?' he said.

Her eyes flared, the thick black heavily mascara-coated lashes almost reaching her finely arched brows. She licked her mouth, making it glisten and shimmer, the action of her tongue sending a rocket-fuelled charge of blood to his pelvis.

Nic grabbed her hand before she could move away,

wrapping his fingers around her wrist until they overlapped. 'You're going about this all wrong, Jade,' he said, pulling her farther in between his thighs. 'Why not use some of that sensual charm you're known for instead of coming at me like a cornered cat? Who knows what you might be able to talk me into doing, hmm?'

She flattened her mouth, her eyes full of disdain as they tussled with his. 'Let go of me,' she said through clenched teeth.

Nic elevated his eyebrow again. 'That's not what you were saying when you were sixteen.'

Her cheeks were like twin pools of crushed raspberries, which seemed strangely at odds with her cutting retort. 'You missed your chance, Italian boy. Your best friend took home the prize. He wasn't the best I've had but at least he was the first.'

Nic worked on controlling his breathing, dousing his blistering anger with the ice-cold water of common sense. She was deliberately goading him. It was what she did best. She had been doing it for as long as he had known her. She was a tart who used sex to get what she wanted.

He had done the honourable thing all those years ago, rejecting her advances, seeing them for what they were: a young, immature girl's grab for attention. He had lectured her about her behaviour but she had ignored his warning, deliberately seducing one of his closest friends to drive home her petulant point. It had destroyed his friendship with his mate and it had destroyed any respect he'd had for Jade. He had been prepared to give her a chance, but it seemed she was on the same path of destruction as her socialite mother had been before her death when Jade was a young child. 'You blame me for your father's withdrawal of your allowance, but don't you think it might have something to do with your recent affair with Richard McCormack?' he asked.

She tugged her wrist out of his hold and rubbed at it pointedly. 'That was just a stitch-up in the press,' she said. 'He made a move on me but I wasn't interested.'

Nic gave a snort. 'It seems to me you're always interested. You're every man's fantasy. The wild-child party girl who will do anything to be the centre of attention.'

She gave him an arch look in return. 'You're a fine one calling me out for being a black kettle when your pot's been stirred by more women than any other man I know.'

Nic smiled at her imperiously because he knew it would inflame her. 'Yes, I know it's hypocritical of me, but there you have it. The double standard—even in spite of enlightened times—still exists. No man wants a tart for a wife.'

She frowned at him. 'So you're going to turn your back on your inheritance?'

He gave an indifferent shrug. 'It's just money.'

Her eyes widened again. 'But it's a fortune!'

'I'm already rich,' he said, enjoying the play of emotions on her face she was clearly struggling to disguise. 'I can earn double that in a couple of years if I put my mind to it.'

Her frown deepened. 'But what about your brothers? Won't Giorgio and Luca's shares in the Corporation be

put in jeopardy if yours are given to an unknown third party?'

Nic schooled his features into a blank mask. 'If it happens, it happens. It's not what I would have wished but I can't compromise my standards to fit in with an old man's whimsical fantasy.'

This time she didn't bother trying to hide her outrage. 'But this is not just about you! It's about me as well. I need that money.'

Nic leaned back in his chair again and crossed his ankles. 'So go out and get a job,' he said. 'That's what other people who haven't been born into money do. You might even enjoy it. It will certainly make a change from having your nails and hair done.'

Her gaze seared his. 'I don't want a job,' she said. 'I want that money because your grandfather—my godfather—gave it to me. He wanted me to have it. He told me before he died that he would always be there for me.'

'I agree he wanted you to have the money,' Nic said. 'He had a rather soft spot for you. God knows why, given your track record of appalling behaviour, but he did. But he also wanted to manipulate me into doing things his way and that I will not stand for.'

She pressed her lips together as ...

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