



Sharon
KENDRICK

THE ITALIAN BILLIONAIRE'S
SECRETARY MISTRESS

Шэрон Кендрик
The Italian Billionaire's
Secretary Mistress

Аннотация

Prim and proper – until she's seduced by her gorgeous Italian boss! Katie Bannister is prim, perky and petite. Worlds apart from her new boss – the dangerous, daring and devilishly handsome Rigo Ruggiero. When she dips her toe in his jet-set world, Katie's sensible brown shoes suddenly seem very out of place. And as Rigo's assistant there's no desk to hide behind...When she accompanies the magnificent Italian to his newly inherited Tuscan palazzo, Kate witnesses the wolf entering his lair. Finally Rigo has come home – and he's ready to undo Miss Prim's buttons!

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Riccardo Castellari has never seen Angie as anything other than his mousy secretary—until she flaunts a silky red dress that hangs on her every curve. Now he doesn't just look once, but twice!

Angie is helpless to refuse one night of exquisite pleasure with Riccardo. But back at work her cheeks are burning. Mortified, she tries to resign. But Riccardo has other ideas—in order to leave, Angie must see out her notice as his very personal mistress...

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'You will join me, ostensibly as my secretary,' he had drawled. 'But we both know that you'll be fulfilling another role quite perfectly. As my mistress.'

'But, Riccardo—'

'No, say nothing more—for I will not countenance your objections. It is the perfect solution,' he had mused. 'My mother would not tolerate me bringing a lover into the house—but nobody need ever know that you are fulfilling a dual role so effectively, cara mia. You can provide me with sweet delight to distract me from all the stultifying details of the forthcoming wedding.'

She thought that his brother sounded as controlling as he did. 'But why, Riccardo?' she had breathed. 'I mean, why me?'

Almost impartially, he'd studied her and it was then that Angie had realised how cold a colour black could be—for his eyes

looked positively icy as they flicked over her distressed face.

‘Because you have unlocked a certain, inexplicable hunger in me, cara mia—and I see no reason not to feed that hunger until we are both satisfied. You have already decided to leave my employment, so let’s make sure that when you do, it is with no lasting regrets on either side.’

Dear Reader,

One hundred. Doesn’t matter how many times I say it, I still can’t believe that’s how many books I’ve written. It’s a fabulous feeling but more fabulous still is the news that Mills & Boon are issuing *every single one* of my backlist as digital titles. Wow. I can’t wait to share all my stories with you - which are as vivid to me now as when I wrote them.

There’s BOUGHT FOR HER HUSBAND, with its outrageously macho Greek hero and A SCANDAL, A SECRET AND A BABY featuring a very sexy Tuscan. THE SHEIKH’S HEIR proved so popular with readers that it spent two weeks on the *USA Today* charts and...well, I could go on, but I’ll leave you to discover them for yourselves.

I remember the first line of my very first book: “So you’ve come to Australia looking for a husband?” Actually, the heroine had gone to Australia to escape men, but guess what? She found a husband all the same! The man who inspired that book rang me up recently and when I told him I was beginning my 100th story and couldn’t decide what to write, he said, “Why don’t you go back to where it all started?”

So I did. And that's how A ROYAL VOW OF CONVENIENCE was born. It opens in beautiful Queensland and moves to England and New York. It's about a runaway princess and the enigmatic billionaire who is infuriated by her, yet who winds up rescuing her. But then, she goes and rescues him... Wouldn't you know it?

I'll end by saying how very grateful I am to have a career I love, and to thank each and every one of you who has supported me along the way. You really are very dear readers.

Love,

Sharon xxx

Mills & Boon are proud to present a thrilling digital collection of all Sharon Kendrick's novels and novellas for us to celebrate the publication of her amazing and awesome 100th book! Sharon is known worldwide for her likeable, spirited heroines and her gorgeous, utterly masculine heroes.

SHARON KENDRICK once won a national writing competition, describing her ideal date: being flown to an exotic island by a gorgeous and powerful man. Little did she realise that she'd just wandered into her dream job! Today she writes for Mills & Boon, featuring her often stubborn but always to-die-for heroes and the women who bring them to their knees. She believes that the best books are those you never want to end. Just like life...

The Italian Billionaire's Secretary Mistress Sharon Kendrick



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CHAPTER ONE

MAYBE because it was nearly Christmas and the sharp, cold weather had jolted her senses. Or maybe because she'd just had enough. But something had to change. It had to.

Angie's fingers trembled and she looked at them curiously, as if they belonged to someone else. But no, those neat, unvarnished nails belonged to her—a foolish woman with an empty heart which ached for a man who was beyond her reach. Who barely even noticed she was a member of the opposite sex—and treated her as he might treat one of his many powerful cars. And while Riccardo treated his cars with care—she wasn't an inanimate, functional object, was she? She was a living, breathing woman with desires of her own which were never going to be met. She had to leave him—she had to. Because if she wasn't careful she was going to waste her whole life loving a man who could never love her back. And sooner or later even her dreams would be smashed when he picked a suitable bride from all the actresses and models he'd dated over his action-packed life.

Riccardo Castellari, her boss—and the man who pretty much haunted her every waking thought. Well, not for much longer. Come the New Year and she was going to start looking for a new job—far away from the dizzy distraction of the black-eyed Italian who could make a woman swoon at a hundred paces with just a flick of that lazy smile. Except that he hadn't been smiling

much lately. His mood had been dark—his short temper more frayed than usual and, unusually, Angie wasn't sure why.

‘Cheer up, Angie—it’s nearly Christmas!’

As the words of the junior secretary cut into her thoughts Angie summoned up a smile. ‘It certainly is,’ she agreed softly as she looked around the staffroom.

Nearly Christmas and the normally tasteful offices of Castellari International were decked out with seasonal holly and the occasional hopeful sprig of mistletoe. When he'd first set up the London headquarters of his highly lucrative global business, Riccardo had banned tinsel on the grounds of bad taste. But gradually he'd given in to popular demand as garish strand after garish strand was introduced with every year which passed. This year the staffroom seemed to resemble Santa's Grotto, thought Angie wryly—and some of the offices weren't much better.

Glittering silver, gold, scarlet and greens were looped around every available picture and door jamb and fairy lights festooned the fax machines. The coffee shop down the road was playing corny Christmas songs all day and yesterday the Salvation Army band had stood in the square and played carols so soaringly beautiful that Angie had had to swallow back tears as she'd fished around in her purse for a crumpled five-pound note.

Yes, it was nearly Christmas, and wasn't that part of the whole problem—and the reason why she was feeling so emotionally wobbly? Because Christmas did something to the world at large and to individuals in particular. It crystallised all your hopes and

fears. It made you yearn and wish and dream. And no matter how hard you tried—it made you realise all the things you were missing in life.

‘Are you looking forward to tonight’s office party?’ asked the junior, a sweet young secretary named Alicia who’d only joined a few months ago.

Angie pulled a face of mock-horror. ‘Are you kidding?’

Alicia looked at her eagerly. ‘What’s it like? Everyone says it’s absolutely fantastic—one of London’s classiest restaurants and with no expense spared! And is it true that Mr Castellari stays for the whole time?’

Angie had had enough experience of juniors being slightly overawed by her boss. Hadn’t she once been like Angie herself? Sneaking glances at his dark, beautiful face from afar and wondering how a man ever got to be that gorgeous. The only difference was that she had been plucked out of the typing pool by Riccardo himself and elevated to the dizzy status of his secretary overnight. She wasn’t quite sure why he’d chosen her—she had just been overjoyed that he had. And now? Well, now she wasn’t so sure. Sometimes she thought her life would be less complicated if she had stayed put in the typing pool. That way she would have moved on by now, gone to pastures new—and far away from the intoxicating presence of the sexy Italian.

She smiled at Alicia. ‘He certainly does. He’s there right until the end.’ Or the bitter end, as Riccardo rather bitingly put it. Truth to tell, he wasn’t crazy on Christmas—but once a year he

put himself out and fulfilled all the expectations of the Castellari workforce. He lavished money on a party which still had people talking in February and he gave everyone a generous bonus. Even her. Though hadn't she sometimes longed for him to give her something a little more...personal?

Recognising that there was no sense in longing for the impossible, Angie stood up and flicked a tiny piece of fluff from the front of her jersey skirt. 'In fact, I'd better go and finalise a few arrangements—I'm expecting Riccardo back any time now.'

'Are you?' questioned Alicia enviously.

'Yes. He's on his way from the airport.' Angie knew his schedule down to the last second. The dark limousine would be speeding its way towards central London and Riccardo would be stretching his long legs out in the back. He would have loosened his tie and he might be flicking through some paperwork. Or talking on the phone in one of the three languages he spoke. He might even be exchanging a few desultory comments with his Italian-speaking driver, Marco—who doubled as a bodyguard when the need arose.

'In fact...' Angie glanced at her watch '...if the roads are clear, then he might be—' Her beeper began emitting a high-pitched little squeal and she could do absolutely nothing about the rapid acceleration of her heart. 'Excuse me,' she said, with a brisk little smile which hid her instinctive excitement, 'but he's in the building.'

On her low-heeled, perfectly polished navy shoes, she sped

along to her office which adjoined Riccardo's—a breath of pleasure escaping her lips as she walked into the light and spacious room. Because it didn't matter how many times she saw it, she could never get over the fact that she worked in a place as beautiful as this. It was, Angie reflected, like a picture postcard come to life.

The Castellari headquarters looked out over the vast and impressive space of Trafalgar Square and the world-famous landmark always looked beautiful with its pluming fountain and tall statue, but never more so than at Christmas time. The iconic fir tree sent over each year by the King of Norway twinkled brightly and every single window as far as the eye could see was alive with brightly coloured Christmas lights. Angie stared out of the window. It looked...magical.

But then she heard the sound of a familiar footfall ringing along the corridor. A footfall she would have recognised even if it were treading in thick snow and she quickly moved into his office to greet him, wiping all traces of wistfulness from her face and replacing it with the calm and efficient expression which Riccardo had learned to expect from his right-hand woman. But nothing could stop the sudden acceleration of her heart as the door opened and she looked into his dark, heartbreakingly handsome face.

'Ah, Angie. You are here. Good.' His deep, accented voice washed over her skin like raw silk as he dropped his briefcase and coat onto one of the squashy leather sofas. His black hair was

tousled as if he had been running his fingers through it and he had loosened his tie as she'd known he would. A brief smile was slanted in her direction and then he picked up a sheaf of papers and began flicking through them. 'Get me the paperwork on the Posara takeover bid, would you?'

'Certainly, Riccardo,' she replied smoothly as she automatically scooped up the beautiful cashmere coat and hung it up.

Did her features betray her probably unreasonable hurt—that the man she had not seen for a fortnight should barely deign to greet her? Not a hello or a how are you? If she had been substituted by one of the other secretaries, would he even have noticed? But good secretaries didn't obsess about the fact that they might as well have been invisible for all the notice that was taken of them. And she prided herself on being a good secretary.

'Good trip?' she asked politely as she deposited the file he wanted onto the centre of his desk.

He shrugged. 'New York is New York. You know. Busy, buzzy, beautiful.'

Angie didn't know, as it happened—because she'd never been there. 'I suppose it must be,' she observed politely, biting down the question she longed to ask. About whether or not he'd seen Paula Prentice—the woman all the papers had been linking him to a year ago. Paula with her blonde and tanned beauty, her amazingly white teeth and a body which had been voted Most Lusted After by a leading men's magazine.

When Riccardo had been dating the Californian lovely, he had spent many weekends in the Big Apple—and Angie would anxiously study his face on his return, wondering if he was going to announce that he was planning to make the stunning Paula his bride. But he hadn't. To Angie's enormous relief, they'd split—again, according to the papers, since Riccardo certainly didn't discuss his private life with his secretary.

'And how about the de Camilla account?' she questioned, because that, after all, was the deal he'd gone out there to oversee.

'Frustrante! Frustrating,' he translated, tugging his silk tie off completely as he glanced up at her.

'I could just about work that out for myself, Riccardo.'

'Oh?' Jet dark brows were elevated. Did his sensible, reliable mouse of a secretary have frustrations in her own life? he wondered. He doubted it. The only frustrations he could imagine her having were being unable to find a new knitting pattern. Or her television breaking down, perhaps. He glittered her an ebony glance. 'You have been taking the crash course in Italian, perhaps?'

'Hardly! My Italian may be poor but I have a comprehensive knowledge of exclamations and profanities which I've managed to acquire after working for you for so long!' she said crisply. 'Now, would you like some coffee?'

Riccardo gave the ghost of a smile. 'I would love some coffee—could you tell?'

Hopelessly, she noted the way his voice dipped when he said

love like that. 'Of course I could, because—'

'Because?'

'You're entirely predictable.'

'Am I?'

'As the sun which rises in the morning sky. And in a minute you'll start moaning about the fact that tonight's the office party —'

'It's tonight?' Riccardo raked long olive fingers through already tousled black hair. 'Madonna mia!'

'You see?' she murmured as she walked over to the machine which had been exported here at great expense from his native Italy. 'Entirely predictable.'

Ignoring the file in front of him, Riccardo sat back and watched her for a moment, thinking that she was the only woman whom he would allow occasionally to tease him. She was certainly a lot less timid than when he had first employed her—though her dress sense hadn't improved one little bit. Disparagingly, he flicked a glance over her neat skirt and the pristine blouse which accompanied it and he suppressed a very Italian shudder. How dull she looked! But perhaps he was ill-advised to criticise her appearance under the circumstances. After all—hadn't her plainness been one of the reasons he'd employed her?

He'd been looking for someone to replace the motherly figure who had guarded his office since his arrival in London but who was leaving to spend time with her grandchildren, no matter how

much he'd tried to persuade her otherwise.

It had been a gruelling day of interview after interview—when it had seemed that every would-be glamour model in the universe had tried to convince him that she wanted nothing more but to type his letters and answer the phone. He hadn't believed one of them—not when their accompanying actions had belied the sincerity of their words.

Riccardo knew what he wanted, and he did not want distractions in the office—women crossing and uncrossing their legs to show him peeps of stocking tops, or leaning forward to accentuate their cleavage. In fact, he regarded his time at work as a break from the constant attentions of women which had plagued him since his early teens.

The afternoon interviewing session which had fielded a clutch of admirably qualified graduates had proved no more fruitful in his search to find someone prepared to work for him on his terms. Not one of them had flinched when he had flicked a cool, challenging gaze and stated that what he wanted was an old-fashioned secretary. Not an assistant—and certainly not an equal. He was not interested in teaching them anything and there would be no fast-track promotion through the business.

His outrageous assertion had not put off a single candidate and yet Riccardo had moodily rejected every one of them—mainly on the illogical grounds that there wasn't one he couldn't have bedded before the evening was out. And he wanted a secretary, not a lover.

But then he had been on his way home and had passed the open door of the typing pool—to see some mouse of a thing bent over the filing cabinet. To a man with the Italian sensibilities of Riccardo, her appearance was appalling—a functional skirt which did her no favours and hair scraped back into an unflatteringly tight bun.

He remembered glancing at his watch, thinking how late it was and admiring her dedication to duty before deciding that she probably didn't have much to rush home to; this mouse was unlikely to have a line of men beating their way to her door. Maybe she was one of those women who lived at the office, he thought wryly.

She must have been alerted to his presence for she had whirled round, fingers flying to her bare lips—her cheeks colouring a rosy-pink when she saw him standing there. It was a long time since a woman had blushed in his presence and for a moment a faint smile had played around Riccardo's lips.

'Can I...can I help you, sir?' she had questioned with the kind of deference which told him that she knew exactly who he was.

'Maybe you can.' His eyes had narrowed as he took in the dreary surroundings of the communal room and then back to study her surprisingly long fingers. 'Can you type?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Fast?'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

'And what would you say,' he had asked, 'if I asked you to

make me a coffee?’

Angie’s eyelids had lowered by a deferential fraction. ‘I would ask if you took it black or white, sir,’ she had replied softly.

Riccardo had smiled. So—she had no unrealistic ambitions to be on the board. Or none of the ridiculous modern attitude which meant that women no longer seemed prepared to wait on men!

She had been installed in his office the very next day—and up until this moment she was the best secretary he’d ever had. Mainly because she knew her place and had no desire to leave it. And perhaps just as importantly because she hadn’t fallen in love with him—although naturally she adored him, as women invariably did.

His recollection faded as the tantalising aroma of coffee reached him and Angie put a cup of coffee in front of him. Cappuccino, because it was before noon. Just as later she would produce an inky-black espresso after lunch. She acted like balm to a troubled flare of skin, he thought suddenly. Like a long, warm bath after a transatlantic flight. For a moment, he relaxed. But only for a moment.

His time in New York had been troublesome—with the actress he had dated earlier in the year refusing to accept that it was over. Why did women show such little dignity when a man ended a relationship? he wondered bitterly. And there were problems at home in Tuscany, too...

‘Riccardo?’ Angie’s soft voice drifted into his troubled thoughts.

‘What?’

She stood there looking at him—wondering what was causing his darkly handsome face to look so grim. ‘You do know that the party’s starting a little earlier this year?’

‘Don’t nag, Angie.’

‘It’s called a timely reminder.’

He bit back a sigh of irritation. ‘What time?’

‘We start at seven-thirty.’

‘And the restaurant’s booked?’

‘Everything’s ready. I’m going there now just to check a few last-minute details. All you have to do is turn up.’

He nodded. Maybe he could grab a little sleep. ‘I’ll go back to my apartment and change,’ he said. ‘And then go straight to the restaurant. There’s nothing especially urgent that I need to handle here, is there?’

‘Nothing that can’t wait until Monday.’

She turned to leave and as he noticed the plain navy skirt which hung so unflatteringly over her bottom Riccardo suddenly remembered the package he had left lying in the car.

‘Oh, Angie?’

‘Yes, Riccardo?’

‘You don’t usually bother dressing up, like the other girls, do you?’ he questioned slowly. ‘For the office party, I mean.’

Angie halted, composing her face before she turned to face him with just the right amount of friendly interest. It wasn’t just that the question was so unexpected—it was—it was just

extremely hurtful into the bargain, though she was pretty sure he didn't mean it to be. Of course she dressed up for the party—but her taste was different from the other girls'. Inevitably. Because so was her age. When you were barely into your twenties you could easily buy up one of the cheap and sequined dresses which abounded in the shops at this time of year. You could splash out very little on an entire outfit—and end up looking like a million dollars.

But when you were twenty-seven, it was a little different. You ran the risk of looking tacky. Or like mutton dressed as lamb. So Angie handled her budget carefully and dressed accordingly. All her clothes were conservative pieces. Investment dressing, they called it. Clothes that would never date—which you could bring out year after year and they would look just as smart. Why, last year she had been wearing a lovely beige knitted dress—with a string of real pearls around her neck.

'Oh, I just throw on any old thing,' she responded, determined that he should not see how hurt she was.

'Well, I have a present for you in the car,' he said softly. 'I'll speak to Marco on the way out and have him deliver it up here for you.'

Angie blinked. A present? Normally, he gave her vouchers along with her Christmas bonus. And a case of wine from his family's vineyard in Tuscany—most of which still lay untouched from last year. But he'd never bought her anything personal before. Her heart lifted—even though the thought came into her

head that perhaps he was trying to sweeten her up. Had he maybe guessed that she was thinking of leaving him and so was trying to induce her to stay? No, Riccardo would never be that subtle.

‘Gosh,’ she said, and shrugged her shoulders in helpless pleasure—completely unsure how to react. ‘What kind of present?’

His eyes ran over her assessingly, and he smiled. ‘Something to wear,’ he murmured. ‘Something for the party.’

CHAPTER TWO

ANGIE gasped as she peeled back the final layer of tissue paper and pulled the dress from the shiny box, her cheeks flaring as scarlet as the fine silk-satin which slipped through her fingers. And suddenly she felt glad she was alone. Glad that nobody was around to see—because surely Riccardo wasn't seriously proposing she wear this?

It was the kind of dress which usually featured in the glossy pages of aspirational magazines—and even Angie had heard of the designer whose name was embroidered so beautifully on the label. She swallowed. This gown must have cost a small fortune. For a brief, mad moment the thought sped through her mind that she might be able to sell it on one of the many internet auction sites. But what if Riccardo found out? Would that look awfully rude—his secretary ungratefully flogging a present which had clearly cost him a lot of money?

She held it up to the light. It felt so gossamer-light it shimmered like some kind of rich red syrup, and a feeling she'd never had before crept over her. It was curiosity and it was wistfulness and it was a desire to know whether someone like her could carry it off. Shouldn't she just try it on? Just to see. Slipping into the en-suite bathroom where Riccardo sometimes took a shower if he was going straight out to dinner from the office, Angie locked the door and then stripped off her skirt and

blouse.

The first thing which became apparent was that it was the kind of dress where it was impossible to wear a bra—unless you happened to have one of those backless, halter-neck bras, which Angie most certainly didn't. Her underwear was as practical as the rest of her wardrobe. Pants and bras made in fabrics whose main function was to show no visible panty line.

Rather furtively, she removed her bra and then slithered into the dress just as she heard someone entering the office and she froze in absolute horror. Riccardo hadn't told her he was expecting anyone!

'Hello?' she called out nervously.

'Angie?'

Cautiously, Angie opened the door and put her head round to see young Alicia standing there and she let out a sigh of relief. 'Yes, what is it?' she questioned briskly, though it was difficult sounding efficient when this buttery-soft fabric was whispering against her skin like a sensual kiss.

Alicia was blinking. 'What are you doing?'

For a moment it occurred to Angie to tell the junior secretary that it was none of her business what she was doing. But mightn't Alicia tell her the truth? 'Will you give me your honest opinion on what I'm thinking of wearing to the party?' she questioned.

Alicia smiled. 'Of course.'

Angie stepped out into the office and the minute she saw Alicia's shell-shocked face she knew that she'd been right to ask.

‘I’ll go and take it off.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ said Alicia fiercely. ‘Come and stand in the light and let me see you properly. Oh, Angie—I can’t believe it’s really you. You look...you look gorgeous.’

No one had ever called her gorgeous before and Angie wouldn’t have been human if she hadn’t allowed herself to bask in the unexpected—if rather backhanded—compliment. But then she caught sight of herself in the large mirror which reflected back the London skyline and she stared at herself in disbelief. She had never really understood why women were prepared to pay hundreds and hundreds of pounds for a garment which could be reproduced for a modest sum in just about any high street store, but suddenly she did. Because how on earth could a simple piece of fabric be fashioned to make the wearer look so...so...

Angie swallowed. The scarlet satin seemed to mould her skin like cream poured over a peach and the rich material skated over her bottom and clung to her bust. It should have looked tarty and yet it didn’t—for the material was rich and the gown seemed to accentuate qualities she hadn’t even known she possessed. It sung of sensuality and quality instead of screaming availability.

‘Oh, Angie,’ breathed Alicia. ‘You look like a princess.’

‘And I feel like a princess,’ Angie responded slowly, before turning away from the mirror with a resolute shake of her head. ‘No, I can’t possibly wear it.’

Alicia stared at her in disbelief. ‘Why ever not?’

‘Because...because...’ Because, what? Because it made her

into an Angie she'd never seen before? One she didn't know and had no idea how to handle? One who felt all kind of squirmy and excited—the way she'd always imagined a woman should feel before a party, but which she couldn't ever remember feeling before? Or because Riccardo had bought this dress? And that was the most incredible thing of all. Riccardo had bought it for her! Did he imagine me wearing it when he bought it? she found herself wondering—her heart hammering with an urgent kind of longing. And if that were the case—wouldn't it be wrong not to wear it?

'You have to wear it,' said Alicia firmly. 'Because you'll never forgive yourself if you don't.'

And so Angie allowed herself to be convinced—telling herself that someone as young and as trendy as Alicia would have told her if she was making a fool of herself. She even allowed herself to be taken along to one of the shops on Oxford Street to buy a pair of towering black stilettos to do the dress justice. And the sweetest little sparkly black clutch bag. Even to take her hair down and to brush it until it gleamed and—although she had always despaired of a colour which most resembled wet sand—she had to agree that it looked rather nice. In fact, she took all the advice that Alicia offered and let her put two coats of mascara onto her eyelashes and to coat her lips in an extravagant-looking gloss.

The trouble was that this high level of preparation took much longer than it normally did and made Angie horribly late. So that

instead of being the first to arrive—for once, she was the very last. Usually, she walked into a restaurant and was shown to a corner where she would sit unnoticed, quietly nursing a drink until the others arrived.

But not tonight.

Tonight, as the plate-glass doors of one of the city's most upmarket restaurants slid open, she was aware of something very odd as she put one high-heeled shoe over the threshold. Silence. Complete and utter pin-drop silence, before the buzz of conversation resumed. Angie blinked. She was sure she hadn't imagined it.

From nowhere, a waiter appeared at her side and stuck very close to it as she mentioned the name of the Castellari table, his smile very wide indeed as he gestured that she follow him. And Angie sensed that every eye was on her as she made her way through the room. Why were they all looking at her? she wondered in a panic. Surreptitiously, her hand slid round to her bottom, smoothing down her dress—because for one awful moment she had imagined that it was tucked into her tights. But no, all seemed well.

Until she spotted the long, large table containing most of the Castellari workforce and in particular Riccardo, who sat at the head of it—staring at her as she could never remember him staring at her before. And inside, Angie felt a terrible flutter of nerves. What if Riccardo didn't like the dress? Or was embarrassed that he had ever purchased such a personal gift for

his secretary?

She slanted him a shy smile which he didn't return. On the contrary. He continued to stare at her with a look of pure astonishment on his face—a look which he didn't bother to hide, even when he curled his finger to beckon her over. She walked across to stand directly in front of him and his eyes flicked over her as if she had suddenly sprouted wings, or horns.

'Is...something wrong?' she questioned hesitantly.

Wrong? Riccardo felt his mouth dry. He wouldn't quite put it like that. It was just that up until this precise moment he'd had no idea that his secretary possessed a pair of the most pert and lush breasts he had ever seen, and the silky fabric was caressing them like a man's tongue. He swallowed. Or that her waist should dip in like that. Or her hips swell out into slim curves, or that she had such a luscious bottom. Or indeed that her legs should be so long...long enough to...

'Ma che ca...' he began, and then halted, his face darkening as the waiter murmured something to him in Italian and Riccardo snapped something back so that the man looked taken aback. And all of a sudden Riccardo was pointing peremptorily to the empty space beside him and, not quite believing her luck, Angie slid in next to him. Usually there was a battle royal to sit next to the boss and usually he conferred an imperious nod to the lucky two who would flank him while Angie watched him from afar.

But tonight Riccardo wasn't paying anyone any attention except her.

‘What the hell are you playing at?’ he demanded.

She blinked at him in confusion. His black eyes looked as she’d never seen them before. With distinctly unseasonable anger lurking in their ebony depths—and why the hell was he directing it at her? ‘What do you mean?’

‘You look...’ For once, words failed him.

‘You don’t like the dress, is that it?’

He shook his head. ‘No, that is not it,’ he bit out, trying and failing to avert his eyes from her creamy décolletage.

‘What, then?’

He pulled the napkin over his lap, glad to be able to conceal the lower half of his body. How could he possibly tell her that she didn’t look like Angie any more? That he felt relaxed and comfortable with the plain and frumpy Angie—not this sizzling sex-pot of a creature who was attracting the lecherous gaze of every hot-blooded male in the place. And that he was aroused, which was as inconvenient as it was unexpected.

He shook his head. ‘I wasn’t expecting...’

She had never known Riccardo Castellari tongue-tied before. Never. ‘Wasn’t expecting what?’ she challenged, but deep down she knew exactly what he meant, even though the realisation hurt her more than he would ever know. He hadn’t been expecting her to look good in it, that was it. Angie was not in the least bit vain—but neither was she stupid. And she’d seen enough of people’s reactions tonight—as well as her own reflection in the mirror—to realise that for once her appearance was transformed. And now

he was in danger of spoiling her once-in-a-lifetime Cinderella experience with that dark and faintly dangerous expression on his face.

‘If you’re implying that the outfit is unsuitable for an occasion like this, then remember that you’re the one who told me to wear it and you’re the one who bought it for me,’ she said tartly.

At this his face darkened even more, and he seemed about to say something else—presumably another insult—but then he nodded, forcing out a lazy smile. ‘Forgive me for my lack of manners, Angie. You...you fill the dress very well,’ he added slowly, impatiently waving away the bread basket which was doing the rounds.

It was a curious way to put it—and it was a very continental way to put it. It thrilled her to have Riccardo say something like that to her and the last thing in the world she needed was to increase the thrill factor where her boss was concerned. Accepting the glass of champagne which the waiter was offering her, she took a big sip. ‘Do I?’

God, yes. Riccardo felt like a man who had just been given a spoonful of bitter medicine—only to discover that it was as sweet as nectar. He had given Angie the dress more as an idle and convenient gesture than anything else—and now she had completely surprised him.

And it was a long time since a woman had surprised him.

Forcing himself to remember that this was the woman who spent more time with him than anyone else, who made his coffee

and sorted out the dry-cleaning of his shirts, Riccardo picked up his own glass of champagne rather thoughtfully. Remember too that this is the staff party, he told himself—and that after tonight you don't have to see her until the new year when she'll be back to looking like Angie and you can forget all about the sex-bomb image.

'So what are you doing for Christmas?' he questioned conversationally, willing his erection to subside as he forced himself to spear a large prawn and eat it.

'Oh, you know.' Angie drank some more champagne. It was delicious. 'Family stuff.'

Riccardo put his fork down. He certainly did. Sometimes he thought he could write a textbook about families—especially dysfunctional Italian ones. But Angie's would be very different... A wry smile quirked the corners of his lips. 'You'll see your parents, of course? What is it—let me guess—a cosy and very English Christmas around the tree?'

Angie's face didn't change, but she brought the glass up to her lips more as a distraction technique than because she particularly wanted to drink any more of the wine, because it was making her feel a little bit giddy. She forced a smile. 'Well, not really, no. As I'm sure you know—my father is dead and my mother is worried sick because my sister's getting a divorce.'

Riccardo's eyes narrowed as he registered the subtle dig. Had he known that? Had she perhaps told him and it had slipped his mind? He looked at the honeyed spill of her hair and wondered

why she didn't wear it down more often. 'Sì, sì—of course.' He shrugged—for he had wanted a polite, monosyllabic response from her, not to continue with a topic such as this one. But it was nearly Christmas and she deserved his civility. 'And is that a... difficult situation?'

Angie knew her boss well enough to know when he was distracted, when he was asking a question because he felt it was expected of him rather than because he was particularly interested in the answer. And although it was usually in her nature to instinctively accede to Riccardo's wishes, to cushion his life and make it as carefree as possible—tonight she wasn't in a particularly cushioning or secretarial mood. Let him ask something about her for a change—for hadn't she devoted enough of her life asking about him?

She thought about the actuality of the festival which was looming up. About the frantic phone calls she and her mother would receive from her sister. And their frustration at their powerlessness to do anything much to help because she was so far away. And she thought of Riccardo, who would be flying off to Tuscany—to his family's amazing castle. Unlike her, his new year would be filled with lots of exciting things. New challenges. A new woman probably.

'Actually, yes, it is difficult,' she admitted. 'Especially at Christmas time. Because, if you remember—my sister lives in Australia and we can't be there for her.'

Riccardo leaned back to allow the half-eaten plate of

prawns to be replaced with some sort of fish, and viewed it unenthusiastically. 'Yes,' he said. 'I can imagine it can't be easy.'

Angie doubted it. Riccardo had many, many characteristics which made him irresistible to women, but an ability to put himself in someone else's shoes and to empathise wasn't at the top of the list.

Angie leaned closer and peered into his face. 'Can you really?' she questioned pointedly.

Riccardo was so preoccupied with the tantalising glimpse of her cleavage when she leaned forward that he failed to register a word of what she was saying. Or what he had said to her. But she had clearly just asked him a question and so he tried the fail-safe approach which always worked and which women seemed to love.

'Why don't you tell me about it?' he murmured.

Angie's mouth opened into an astonished little 'oh' shape that Riccardo should have given her carte blanche to confide in him. He really was being attentive tonight, she thought. Understanding, even. Nobody else was even getting a look-in. And the awful thing was that, try as she might to quell it, she began to get a flicker of hope that he really might be thinking of her as a woman at last.

'Well, my sister keeps ringing up in hysterics because it's a really acrimonious divorce,' she said.

Riccardo shrugged. 'Ah, but surely that is the nature of divorce.' He studied her, aware of the trace of some light perfume

which was drifting towards his nostrils. Maybe she always wore perfume...but if that was the case, then why had he never noticed it before? Noticing that one of the waiters seemed to be as fascinated by her as he was, Riccardo glowered at him until he went away again. 'Did they marry for love—your sister and her husband?' he questioned, sitting back in his chair.

'Oh, yes,' said Angie defensively, though the question caught her off guard and she found herself grateful for the candlelight which shielded the sudden rush of colour to her cheeks provoked by Riccardo speaking about love.

He shrugged. 'Well, there you have your reason for their break-up in a nutshell.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't you? It's quite simple. Never marry for love. Much too unreliable.'

Someone was enthusiastically poking her in the ribs and Angie turned to half-heartedly pull at a cracker, glad for the momentary disruption which gave her time to gather her thoughts. To formulate some kind of answer. To be sure he wouldn't see her stupid and naïve disappointment that clearly he thought so little of love.

'You don't really believe that, do you, Riccardo?' she questioned, in a deliberately jocular way.

'Sì, piccola,' he said softly. 'Absolutely, I do. For it is unrealistic for a man and a woman to commit to a lifetime together based only the temporary excitement of chemistry and

lust. And love is just the polite word we use to describe those things.'

'What do you think they should do?' she asked tremblingly. 'Go to a marriage broker?'

He ate a little salad. 'I think that a couple should find as many compatible areas in their lives as possible and work hard to keep the marriage going for the sake of the children. Something which is—alas—becoming increasingly rare in these days of easy divorce.' Putting the glass down, he gave a slow smile. 'And of course, you can maximise your chances of marital success.'

He thought he was making marriage sound like a game of cards now—but Angie continued to stare at him in fascination! 'How?'

'By having a bride who's a generation younger than the groom.'

Angie's mouthful of wine threatened to choke her and she could feel her cheeks growing flushed. 'I beg your pardon?'

His black eyes mocked her. 'You heard me perfectly well.'

'I thought my ears must be playing tricks with me.'

'But why are you so shocked?' he questioned carelessly. 'Italian men have done this successfully for centuries. My own parents had such a union and a very happy marriage until my father's death. Because such a match ensures the very best combination between the sexes—an experienced man who can educate a young virgin. He will tutor her in the fine art of pleasure and she will give him many child-bearing years.'

Angie's throat constricted. 'You are...are...'

He leaned closer, enjoying her obvious rage, finding that it was turning him on far more than was wise—but suddenly he didn't care. 'Am what, piccola?'

'Outrageous. Outdated. Shall I go on?' she retorted, swallowing to try to dampen down the sudden leap of excitement which his proximity had provoked. But wasn't the real reason for her anger not so much a noble championing of women's rights—but the fact that Riccardo's criteria for finding a bride had effectively ruled her out? That she was neither young, nor a virgin. And how pitiful was that? Surely she wasn't imagining that plain Angie Patterson was in with a chance—because if that were the case then leaving his employment wasn't just a half-hearted desire, but a necessity. 'I can't believe you subscribe to such an outdated point of view, Riccardo,' she finished crossly.

But instead of looking chastened by her criticism, he merely smiled like a cat who had been given an entire vat of cream. 'Ah, but I say what I believe—unfashionable or not. And I have never pretended to be any different, Angie,' he murmured.

And that, she thought, just about summed him up. Riccardo had pleased himself all his life—and the combination of looks, brains and charisma had allowed him to do so. Didn't matter that he expressed views which were deeply unfashionable and would be seen by many as out of date. He didn't care because he didn't have to. Rich, powerful and single—he blazed through life exactly as he wanted to and he wasn't about to start changing

now. Why should he?

So forget the fancy dress you're wearing and try to forget your unwanted feelings for him, she told herself fiercely. Just be Angie—and set an example to the juniors by enjoying your staff party.

‘Who wants to pull another cracker?’ she questioned brightly.

Riccardo sat back in his chair and watched her as she fished a gaudy-looking bracelet from the tissue paper of a spent cracker, and good-naturedly put it onto her wrist. But then, she was pretty much always good-natured, he realised. She was one of those backroom kind of people—the unseen and unnoticed ones who quietly kept the wheels of enterprise turning, without seeking any attention or glory for themselves. He could talk to Angie in a way he couldn't talk to other women. Where would the world be without people like her? His eyes narrowed as a disturbing thought popped into his mind without warning. Because God help him if she ever decided to leave.

Did he treat her properly? Did she get from him all the perks a secretary of her standing would expect to receive? His attention was caught by a pale flurry of snowflakes outside the window. Snow was unusual in London and it would be a cold night. His eyes flicked to the scarlet satin and a pulse began to work at his temple. A very cold night. Especially in a dress like that.

And just at that moment, he saw yet another waiter look at her with ill-concealed interest on his face. ‘How are you getting home?’ he questioned suddenly.

Angie stilled. ‘Home?’ she echoed stupidly, digging a spoon

into her little dish of trifle.

‘I presume you have one,’ came the dry rejoinder. ‘Where do you live?’

The question hurt more than it should have done. She knew everything about him. She knew the size shirt he wore, the hotels he liked to stay in and the wine he liked best to drink. She knew the birthdays of his mother, his brother and his sister and always reminded him in plenty of time for him to buy them presents. That she inevitably ended up choosing those presents was neither here nor there—because that was what good secretaries did, wasn’t it?

She knew where he liked to ski in winter and where he occasionally basked in summer. She knew that he never ate pudding but occasionally would eat a square of dark, bitter chocolate with his coffee. She even knew which flowers he liked to send women when he was in pursuit—dark pink roses—and an appropriately generous consolation gift when he inevitably ended it—pearl and diamond cluster ear-studs from an international jeweler, and, oh, what pleasure Angie took in the purchase of those.

Yet after five years of her pandering to his every whim and making his life as easy as possible Riccardo Castellari didn’t even know where she lived!

‘Stanhope,’ she said, putting her spoon down.

‘And where’s that?’

‘It’s on the Piccadilly Line—towards Heathrow.’

‘But that’s miles out.’

‘That’s right, Riccardo. It is.’

‘And how are you getting there?’

How did he think? ‘By broomstick,’ she giggled.

He frowned. Angie giggling? Was she drunk? ‘I’m serious, Angie,’ he growled.

‘Oh, all right, then. By Tube.’ She tipped her head to one side, aware of the unaccustomed silky fall of hair over her shoulders. ‘Same way I always get home.’

He thought of the late-night underground network, chock-a-block with Christmas revelers, and the kind of reception she might expect to get. And his eyes flicked over her surprisingly slim waist, accentuated by a flimsy silk gown which he must have been insane to give her. At the way her breasts seemed to be defying gravity by failing to spill out of the damned dress altogether. No wonder the waiters had been circling her like a pack of wolves for most of the evening, until his icy glance had made it very clear that they were jeopardising their tip by doing so. Was he prepared to sit back and let her go alone into the night? Why, it would be like throwing a lamb before lions!

‘Come on—get your coat on,’ he ordered abruptly. ‘I’m taking you home.’

CHAPTER THREE

FOR a moment Angie stared at Riccardo in disbelief, her lips parting as she stared at him. ‘You’re...you’re taking me home?’

His black eyes gleamed. ‘I am.’

‘You mean on the Tube?’ she questioned blankly, trying to imagine her billionaire boss accompanying her down the escalator.

‘No, not on the Tube.’ He repressed a shudder. ‘In my car.’

‘You can’t take me home in your car,’ she objected. ‘You’ve been drinking.’

‘I may have been drinking,’ he stated grimly, ‘but I can hold my drink—something I suspect you cannot. And believe me, there’s little that’s more unattractive than a woman who is exhibiting signs of being drunk.’

‘That’s a very chauvinist remark.’

His eyes gleamed. ‘But I am a very chauvinistic man, piccola—I thought we had already established that?’

Angie swallowed. There was something very exciting about him when he was speaking to her like that. In that kind of half-challenging, half-threatening way. But piccola meant small, didn’t it? Her mouth turned down at the corners. That was hardly compliment of the year, was it? ‘Are you saying I’m drunk?’

‘No, but I’m saying you’ve had enough alcohol to make you behave in a way which is...uninhibited. I don’t think you should

travel home alone—it's not safe—and I'm not driving, as it happens. That's what I employ Marco to do. Now take your handbag and let's get going.'

Suddenly, he sounded masterful. The way she'd heard him speak to the occasional model he'd dated and who had dropped in at the office on their way to dinner. Angie could see one of the women from the human resources department staring at them with a very peculiar expression on her face. 'Won't...won't people talk—if we leave together?'

He shot her a cool look. 'Why on earth should they?' he questioned indifferently. 'I'm simply giving my secretary a lift home.'

Well, that certainly put her in her place!

Marco had the car waiting with the engine running and Angie slid onto the back seat—completely forgetting that she was wearing a hemline about half as short as usual.

A glimpse of delicious thigh was revealed and Riccardo felt the sudden fizz to his blood. Quickly averting his gaze, he turned instead to stare out of the window as they drove westwards on a journey which seemed to take for ever. Lots and lots of tiny houses—all, it seemed, exactly the same, with cars parked nose to nose by the edges of all the narrow roads. The shops looked unexciting and some of them were boarded up for the night. A small gang of youths stood moodily on a street corner, smoking cigarettes.

Riccardo frowned. Surely he didn't pay her so little that she

had to live somewhere like this?

The car came to a smooth halt outside a tall house and he turned to see that she was reclining lazily against the seat. Was she asleep? Her head was leaning back against the soft leather head-rest and her lips were more relaxed than he'd ever seen them. As was the soft fall of hair which tumbled over her shoulders. Not quite the brisk and efficient secretary now, he thought, and gently shook her by the shoulder—suddenly aware of the softness of her flesh. And another tantalising glimpse of thigh as she uncrossed her legs.

Angie started into wakefulness from the half-dream she'd been having, lulled into a sleepy state by the warmth of the car and its smooth passage through the streets. Except when she opened her eyes she found that the dream hadn't ended. For there was Riccardo leaning over her. Riccardo with his hard face and all its shifting planes and shadows. His gleaming black eyes and those hard-soft lips which could shift so easily between contempt and sensuality. For a moment she lost herself in that ebony gaze and a strange ache tugged at the pit of her stomach as she allowed herself the recurring fantasy that Riccardo was about to kiss her.

Except that there had been enough fantasies for one day. The dress. The chauffeur-driven car. But midnight was beckoning and the carriage was about to turn into a pumpkin.

She blinked, struggling to sit up from the seductive comfort of the squashy leather seat—aware of her dry throat as she groped around on the floor of the car for her handbag. 'Thanks for the

lift.'

'Don't mention it.'

But he made no move to get out, and with her head clearing by the second, Angie suddenly remembered her manners. He'd come miles out of his way to bring her here. And she noticed that he'd eaten barely anything at dinner. Offer him coffee, she thought. He's bound to refuse. Because this felt odd. Disorientating. Riccardo outside her home!

'Um, would you like a cup of coffee?'

Riccardo had been just about to tell Marco to let her out when something in her question made him pause and bite back his automatic refusal. What was it, he wondered—a desire to see how someone like Angie lived, in a world away from his own? Suddenly and inexplicably, he was intensely curious—like a tourist in a foreign city who had just found a dark and hidden labyrinth and wanted to discover where it led.

'Why not?' he questioned lazily, and leaned across to open the door for her.

For a moment, Angie stilled. In all their years of working together, they had been close—but never this close. So close that some tantalising trace of sandalwood and warm masculinity stole over her like an irresistible thief. Her hands were trembling as she got out of the car, her heart racing as she inserted her key in the lock, trying desperately to remember what kind of state she'd left the place in that morning. Because, yes, she was a naturally tidy person—but she was only human. What if he wanted to use

the loo when she knew there were three pairs of panties drying on a line over the bathtub?

She showed him into her sitting room—trying her best to feel proud of her little home, but nothing could stop her from seeing it through his eyes. The tiny sitting room with the tired old furniture which she'd done her best to beautify by adding a few brightly coloured throws. But even though she'd applied several coats of paint to the walls nothing could disguise the ugly, embossed wallpaper underneath. Or the fact that the kitchen looked as if it had been frozen in time and transported there from the middle of the last century. Her only concession to the forthcoming holiday season was an armful of holly which she'd bought down at the market and then stuffed into an enamel jug. At least the dark green foliage and scarlet berries injected some living colour into the room.

'I must, just—er—I'll go and put the kettle on!' she announced. She dashed off to do so and after that she performed a swift underwear sweep of the bathroom. Stuffing the clean panties into the airing cupboard, she was miserably aware of the tired bathtub and the ancient cistern. Please don't let him want to use the bathroom, she prayed.

She returned to the sitting room with a tray of coffee to find Riccardo standing looking out of the window and as he turned round she could do nothing to prevent the great leap of her heart. He had taken off his jacket and hung it over the edge of the sofa and Angie found herself hoping that he wouldn't snag it there.

Never had his Italian elegance been more in evidence than here where it contrasted against the humble setting of her home.

Rather helplessly, she handed him a mug—aware that it was slightly faded and bore the legend of a long-ago national sporting triumph. Just as everything in her life was faded. Or was it just seeing Riccardo standing here—so vibrant and so full of colour and charisma—that made her self-doubt loom into the forefront of her consciousness, like a great dark spectre? She waited for him to make some polite comment about her home, but he didn't. He still had that faint air of distraction he'd had for weeks, she realised—a tension and tightness which added up to more than his usual alpha-male alertness.

'Is everything...okay, Riccardo?' she asked him uncertainly.

He had been miles away and his eyes narrowed as his thoughts cleared and he found himself in her dingy little sitting room holding a large cup of coffee in his hand, which he didn't particularly want.

'What makes you ask that?'

'Just that you seem a bit...oh, I don't know. A bit uptight lately. More so than usual.'

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. Was she prying? Stepping into areas which were nothing to do with her? Yet her face was soft with concern, the way it always was. And couldn't he talk to her in a way that he couldn't talk to other women—because the relationship between boss and secretary was uniquely close without being in any way intimate? With Angie

he could unburden himself—could she wash away all his worries with her sweet common sense? Putting the untouched mug down on a faded table, he shrugged.

‘Just problems at home,’ he bit out.

She knew that no matter how long he had lived in London—or anywhere else in the world for that matter—Italy would always be his home, and Tuscany in particular.

‘Something to do with your sister’s forthcoming wedding?’ she guessed.

His eyes narrowed as he shot her a suspicious look. ‘How did you know that?’

She ignored the accusatory tone. She knew how intensely private he was about family matters, but surely he realised that she was privy to many of his telephone conversations—especially when he lost his temper? Or did her general invisibility mean that he overlooked even that simple fact?

‘I’ve heard you...’ She hesitated.

Black eyes bored into her. ‘Heard me what, Angie?’

‘Having...’ she paused, delicately ‘...discussions.’

Angrily, he slammed the flat of his hand against the flank of his thigh. ‘You mean telling my sister how damned lucky she is to have landed herself an aristocrat for a fiancé? To have found a Duca who wishes to make her his wife? So that one day soon she will be a Duchessa!’

Angie stared at him in dismay. What a terrible snob he could be at times, she thought. She’d met his rebellious and bright-

eyed sister a couple of times and really couldn't imagine Floriana settling into life as a member of the Italian aristocracy. Looking into Riccardo's suddenly cold mask of a face, she thought what a formidable brother he would be—forever laying down the law and demanding obedience. And she felt a little tug of sympathy for Floriana. A sympathy strong enough to make her defend his sister in her absence. 'But surely this man's position in society isn't as important as her feelings for him. Does she...love him?'

Riccardo's lips curved. 'Oh, please—let's not play into that particular fantasy, Angie—especially when I thought I'd made clear my feelings on the subject of "love" in the restaurant earlier. Aldo adores her. He is a wealthy man with many centuries of breeding behind him—and he has provided Floriana with a stability in her life which was sorely lacking. It is an honour that he has selected my sister as his bride! He will provide for her an excellent home and lifestyle—while she will give him the heir he undoubtedly needs to continue the bloodline,' he finished.

'Bloodline?' she echoed incredulously.

'You have a problem with that, do you?'

'It seems a curiously cold-blooded way to look at a marriage.'

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