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The Italian Billionaire's Secretary Mistress (Billionaire Collection)

By Sharon Kendrick



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When the boardroom leads to the bedroom...

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Until she turns up to the office party in a red dress that clings to *all* the right places...

Riccardo can't wait to find out what else his not-so-mousy secretary is hiding... but after one night of incredible passion, Angie is mortified! When she tries to resign, this determined Italian strikes a bargain to keep her in his bed, and Angie's mouth just can't seem to form the word 'no'...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sharon Kendrick started story-telling at the age of eleven and has never stopped. She likes to write fast-paced, feel-good romances with heroes who are so sexy they'll make your toes curl! She lives in the beautiful city of Winchester – where she can see the cathedral from her window (when standing on tip-toe!). She has two children, Celia and Patrick and her passions include music, books, cooking and eating – and drifting into daydreams while working out new plots.

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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 plumbing 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, heart-breakingly 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.'

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