



Sharon Kendrick

The **ITALIAN'S**
CHRISTMAS

Housekeeper

MILLS & BOON

MODERN

Шэрон Кендрик

The Italian's Christmas Housekeeper

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From making the billionaire's bed... To Christmas between his sheets! Shy housekeeper Molly Miller always tries her best. She's anxious to impress outrageously wealthy house guest Salvio De Gennaro, but instead is unfairly criticised by her employer! Found sobbing by Salvio, she's comforted... with the most amazing experience of her life. When that incredible encounter costs Molly her job, Salvio rescues her with an irresistible proposition: become his temporary housekeeper—just in time for Christmas!

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Escape into this captivating Cinderella romance!

SHARON KENDRICK once won a national writing competition by 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, and her books feature 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...

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To Maura Sabatino, who is funny and beautiful

and whose help for this book was invaluable.

Grazie mille for bringing Naples alive with your words—and for helping me to create a Neapolitan Christmas!

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

SALVIO DE GENNARO stared at the lights as he rounded the headland. Flickering lights from the tall candles which gleamed in the window of the big old house. They made him think of Christmas and he didn't want to think about it—not with still six weeks left to go. Yet here in England the shops were already full with trees and tinsel and the kind of gifts surely no sane person would want for themselves.

His mouth hardened as the dark waters of the Atlantic crashed dangerously on the rocks beneath him.

Christmas. The *least* wonderful time of the year in his opinion. No contest.

He slowed his pace to a steady jog as dusk fell around him like a misty grey curtain. The rain was heavier now and large drops of water had started to lash against his body but he was oblivious to them, even though his bare legs were splattered with mud and his muscles were hot with the strain

of exertion. He ran because he had to. Because he'd been taught to. Tough, physical exercise woven into the fabric of his day, no matter where in the world he was. A discipline which was as much a part of him as breathing and which made him hard and strong. He barely noticed that his wet singlet was now clinging to his torso or that his shorts were plastered to his rocky thighs.

He thought about the evening ahead and, not for the first time, wondered why he had bothered coming. He was here because he wanted to buy a prime piece of land from his aristocratic host and was convinced the deal could be concluded more quickly in an informal setting. The man he was dealing with was notoriously difficult to pin down—a fact which Salvio's assistant had remarked on, when she'd enquired whether she should accept the surprise invitation for dinner and an overnight stay.

Salvio gave a grim smile. Perhaps he should have been grateful to have been granted access to Lord Avery's magnificent Cornish house, which stood overlooking the fierce midwinter lash of the ocean. But gratitude was a quality which didn't come easily to him, despite his huge wealth and all the luxury it afforded him. He wasn't particularly looking forward to dinner tonight. Not with a hostess who'd been eying him up from the moment he'd arrived—her eyes lit with a predatory hunger which was by no means unusual, although it was an attitude he inevitably found tedious. Married women intent on seduction could be curiously unattractive, he thought disdainfully.

Inhaling a lungful of sea air, he grew closer to the house, reminding himself to instruct his assistant to add a couple of names to the guest list for his annual Christmas party in the Cotswolds, the count-down to which had already begun. He sighed. His yearly holiday celebration—which always took place in his honey-stone manor house—was one of the most lusted-after invitations on the social calendar, though he would have happily avoided it, given the opportunity. But he owed plenty of people hospitality and you couldn't avoid Christmas, no matter how much the idea appealed.

He'd learnt to tolerate the festival and conceal his aversion behind a lavish display of generosity. He bought expensive gifts for his family and staff and injected yet more cash into the charitable arm of his vast property empire. He took a trip to his native Naples to visit his family, because that was what every good Neapolitan boy did, no matter how old or successful he was. He went back to the city which he avoided as much as possible because it was the home of his shattered dreams—and who liked to be reminded of those? For him, home would always be the place where he had been broken—and the man who had emerged from the debris of that time had been a different man. A man whose heart had been wiped clean of emotion. A man who was thankfully no longer at the mercy of his feelings.

He increased his pace to a last-minute sprint as he thought about Naples and the inevitable litany of questions about why he hadn't brought home a nice girl to marry, nor produced a clutch of bonny, black-haired babies for his mother to make a fuss of. He would be forced to meet the wistful question in her eyes and bite back the disclosure that he never intended to marry. *Never*. Why disillusion her?

He slowed his pace as he reached the huge house, glad he had declined his hostess's invitation to accompany her and her husband to the local village that afternoon, where a performance of Cinderella was taking place. Salvio's lips curved into a cynical smile. Amateur dramatics in the company of a married woman with the hots for him? Not in this lifetime. Instead, he intended making the most of the unexpected respite by trying to relax. He would grab a glass of water and go to his room. Listen to the soothing soundtrack of the ocean lashing hard against the rocks and maybe read a book. More likely still, he would chase up that elusive site in New Mexico which he was itching to develop.

But first he needed to dry off.

* * *

Sinking her teeth into a large and very moist slice of chocolate cake, Molly gave a small moan of pleasure as she got her first hit from the sugary treat. She was starving. Absolutely starving. She hadn't eaten a thing since that bowl of porridge she'd grabbed on the run first thing. Unfortunately the porridge had been lumpy and disappointing, mainly because the unpredictable oven had started playing up halfway through making it. Not for the first time, she wondered why her bosses couldn't

just have the kind of oven you simply switched on, instead of a great beast of a thing which lurked in the corner like a brooding animal and was always going wrong. She'd been working like crazy all morning, cleaning the house with even more vigour than usual because Lady Avery had been in such a state about their overnight guest.

'He's Italian,' her employer had bit out. 'And you know how fussy they are about cleanliness.'

Molly didn't know, actually. But more worrying still was Lady Avery's inference that she wasn't working hard enough. Which was why Molly dusted the chandeliers with extra care and fastidiously vacuumed behind the heavy pieces of antique furniture. At one point she even got down on her hands and knees to scrub the back door porch—even if she did manage to make her hands red raw in the process. She'd put a big copper vase of scented eucalyptus and dark roses in the guest bedroom and had been baking biscuits and cakes all morning, so that the house smelt all homely and fragrant.

The Averys rarely used their Cornish house—which was one of the reasons why Molly considered being their resident housekeeper the perfect job. It meant she could live on a limited budget and use the lion's share of her wages to pay off her brother's debt and the frightening amount of interest it seemed to accrue. It was the reason she endured the isolated location and demanding attitude of her employer, instead of spreading her wings and finding somewhere more lively.

But the winter had made her isolation all the more noticeable and it was funny how the approach of Christmas always reminded you of the things you didn't have. This year she was really missing her brother and trying not to worry about what he was doing in Australia. But deep down she knew she had to let go. She *had* to. For both their sakes. Robbie was probably having the time of his life on that great big sunny continent—and maybe she should count her blessings.

She took another bite of chocolate cake and did exactly that, reminding herself that most people would revel in the fact that when the Averys *were* around, they entertained all kinds of amazing people. Guests Molly actually got to meet—even if it was only in the context of turning down their beds at night or offering them a home-made scone. Politicians who worked with Lord Avery in the Palace of Westminster, and famous actors who spouted Shakespearean sonnets from the stages of London's theatres. There were business people, too—and sometimes even members of the royal family, whose bodyguards lurked around the kitchen and kept asking for cups of tea.

But Molly had never heard Lady Avery make such a fuss about anyone as she'd done about the impending arrival of Salvio De Gennaro, who was apparently some hotshot property developer who lived mostly in London. Earlier that day she had been summoned into her boss's office, where the walls were decked with misty photos of Lady Avery wearing pearls and a dreamy expression, in those far-off days before she'd decided to have a load of extensive work done on her face. A bad idea, in Molly's opinion—though of course she would never have said so. Lady Avery's plump lips had been coated in a startling shade of pink and her expression had been unnaturally smooth as she'd gazed at Molly. Only the hectic flicker in her pale eyes had hinted how excited she was by the impending visit of the Italian tycoon.

'Everything is prepared for our guest's arrival?' The words were clipped out like tiny beads of crystal.

'Yes, Lady Avery.'

'Make sure that Signor De Gennaro's bed linen is scented with lavender, will you?' continued her boss. 'And be sure to use the monogrammed sheets.'

'Yes, Lady Avery.'

'In fact...'

A thoughtful pause had followed. 'Perhaps you'd better go into town and buy a new duvet.'

'What, *now*, Your Ladyship?'

'Yes. Right now.' A varnished scarlet fingernail began tracing a circle on the sheet of blotting paper on the desk and an odd, trembling note had crept into her employer's aristocratic voice. 'We don't want Signor De Gennaro complaining about the cold, do we?'

‘We certainly don’t, Lady Avery.’

The last-minute purchase of the new duvet had been the reason why Molly hadn’t been on hand to greet the Italian tycoon when he’d arrived. And when she’d returned from her shopping expedition—gasping under the bulky dimensions of a high-tog goose-down duvet—there had been no sign of him. Only his open suitcase and a few clothes strewn around his room indicated he was somewhere in the vicinity, although he was nowhere to be seen in the house. Which at least meant Molly had been able to make up his bed in peace—though her heart had started racing when she’d spotted the faded denims slung carelessly over a stool. And when she’d picked up the dark sweater which lay crumpled beside it, she had been startled by the softness of the cashmere as she’d automatically started to fold it. Briefly, her fingertips had caressed the fine wool before she had taken herself downstairs for tea and some restorative cake and she was just on her third mouthful when the kitchen door opened then slammed shut with a rush of icy air and Molly looked up to see a man framed in the doorway who could only be the Italian billionaire.

Her heart crashed against her ribcage.

The most perfect man she could have imagined.

Her mouth opened slightly but she clamped it shut and the chocolate fudge cake she’d been eating suddenly tasted like glue against the roof of her mouth.

Mud-spattered and windswept, he was standing perfectly still—his singlet and shorts surely the craziest choice of clothes he could have selected for the bitter winter day, although a fleecy top was knotted around his narrow hips. His olive skin was silky-smooth and his body was... Molly tried not to shake her head in disbelief but it took some doing, because his body was sensational—and she was certainly not the kind of woman who spent her time analysing men’s bodies. In fact, her interest had never really been sparked by anyone.

Until now.

She swallowed, the cake she was holding suddenly forgotten. It took a lot for Molly to disregard the sugar craving which had always been the bane of her life, but she forgot it now. Because she’d never seen a man like this. Not someone with a rocky torso against which his wet top clung to every sinew, as if it had been painted on with a fine-tipped brush. Nor such narrow hips and sculpted thighs whose glorious flesh was exposed by the shorts he seemed to wear so comfortably. Her eyes moved up to his face. To eyes as black as one of those moonless nights when you couldn’t ever imagine seeing daylight again. And his lips. Molly swallowed again. Oh, those lips. Sensual and full, they were hard and unsmiling as they looked at her with something it took a moment for her to recognise. Was it...*disdain*? Her heart pounded uncomfortably. Yes, of course it was. Men with whiplike bodies which didn’t carry an ounce of extra weight would be unlikely to approve of an overabundant female who was bulging out of her ugly uniform and stuffing a great big fix of carbohydrate into her mouth.

Flushing to the roots of her hair, she put down the half-eaten cake and rose to her feet, wondering why the ground beneath them suddenly felt as if it were shifting, the way she’d always imagined standing on quicksand might feel. ‘I’m...’ She blinked at him before trying again. ‘I’m so sorry. I wasn’t expecting anyone...’

His voice was sardonic as his gaze met hers for one heart-stopping moment, before dropping briefly to the crumb-laden plate. ‘Clearly not.’

‘You must be...’ *A dark angel who has suddenly fallen into my kitchen? The most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen?* Her chest felt tight. ‘You must be Signor De Gennaro?’

‘Indeed I am. Forgive me.’ Jet eyebrows were raised as he unknotted the warm top from his hips and pulled it over his head before shaking out his damp, dark curls. ‘I seem to have disturbed your snack.’

Her *snack*? Although his English was faultless, his richly accented voice was nearly as distracting as his body and Molly opened her mouth to say it was actually a late lunch because she’d been rushing around all morning preparing for *his* arrival, but something stopped her. As if someone

like Salvio De Gennaro would be interested in her defence! As if he would believe her making out she was a stranger to cake when her curvy body told an entirely different story. Smoothing her uniform down over her generous hips, she tried to adopt an expression of professional interest, rather than the shame of being caught out doing something she shouldn't. And he was still staring at her. Making her aware of every pulsing atom of her body in a way which was making her feel extremely self-conscious...but strangely enough, in a *good* way.

'Can I get you anything, Signor De Gennaro?' she questioned politely. 'I'm afraid Lord and Lady Avery have gone to the village pantomime and won't be back until later.'

'I know,' he said coolly. 'Perhaps some water. And a coffee, if you have one.'

'Of course. How do you take your coffee?'

He flickered her a smile. 'Black, short, no sugar. *Grazie*.'

Of course not, thought Molly. No sugar for someone like him. He looked as if he'd never been near anything sweet in his life. She wished he'd go. Before he noticed that her brow had grown clammy, or that her nipples had started to push distractingly against the unflattering navy-blue uniform Lady Avery insisted she wore. 'I'll do that right away,' she said briskly. 'And bring them up to your room.'

'No need for that. I'll wait here,' he said.

She wanted to tell him he was making her feel awkward by standing there, like some kind of brooding, dark statue—just *staring* at her. As if he had read her thoughts, he strolled over towards the window and she became aware of an almost imperceptible limp in his right leg. Had he injured himself when out running and should she ask him whether he needed a bandage or something? Perhaps not. Someone with his confidence would be bound to ask for one.

She could feel a stray strand of hair tickling the back of her neck and wished she'd had time to fix it. Or had been sitting reading some novel which might have made her look interesting, instead of scoffing cake and emphasising the fact that she was heavy and ungainly.

'I'll try to be as quick as I can,' she said, reaching up into one of the cupboards for a clean glass.

'I'm in no hurry,' he said lazily.

Because that much was true. Salvio had decided that he was enjoying himself though he wasn't quite sure why. Maybe it was the novelty factor of being with the kind of woman he didn't come across very often—at least, not any more. Not since he'd left behind the backstreets of Naples, along with those women whose curves defined fecundity and into whose generous flesh a man could sink after a long, hard day. Women like this one, who blushed alluringly if they caught you looking at them.

He had waited for a moment to see if she would recognise him. If she knew who he was—or, rather, who he *had* been. But no. He was familiar with recognition in all its forms—from greedy delight right through to feigned ignorance—but there had been no trace of any of those on her face. And why should there be? She was much younger than him and from a different country. How would she have known that in his native Italy he had once been famous?

He watched her busying herself, her curvy silhouette reminding him of the bottles of Verdicchio which used to line the shelves of the city bar he'd swept as a boy, before the talent scouts had discovered him and ended his childhood. She turned to switch on the coffee maker and a sudden dryness turned his throat to dust because...her breasts. He swallowed. *Madonna mia*—what breasts! He was glad when she turned away to open the fridge door because his erection was pressing uncomfortably against his shorts, though, when she did, he then became mesmerised by her shapely bottom. He was just fantasising about what her shiny brown hair would look like loose when she turned around and surveyed him with eyes as grey as the Santissima Annunziata Maggiore—that beautiful church in Naples, which had once been an orphanage.

Their gazes clashed and mingled and something unspoken fizzled in the air as Salvio felt a leap of something he couldn't define. The hardness in his groin was familiar but the sudden clench of his

heart was not. Was it lust? His mouth twisted. Of course it was lust—for what else could it be? It just happened to be more powerful than usual because it had taken him by surprise.

Yet there was no answering hunger in her quiet, grey gaze—something which perplexed him, for when *didn't* a woman look at him with desire in her eyes? She was wary, he found himself thinking, with a flicker of amusement. Almost as if she were silently reproaching him for his insolent appraisal—and maybe that sentiment was richly deserved. What *was* he doing surveying her curvy body, like a boy from a single-sex school who was meeting a beautiful woman for the first time?

'You're the cook?' he questioned, trying to redeem himself with a safe, if rather banal question.

She nodded. 'Sort of. Officially, I'm the housekeeper but I do a bit of everything. Answer the door to guests and make sure their rooms are serviced, that sort of thing.' She pushed the coffee towards him. 'Will there be anything else, Signor De Gennaro?'

He smiled. 'Salvio. And you are?'

She looked taken aback, as if people didn't ask her name very often. 'It's Molly,' she answered shyly, in a voice so soft it felt like silk lingerie brushing against his skin. 'Molly Miller.'

Molly Miller. He found himself wanting to repeat it, but the conversation—such as it was—was terminated by the sudden sweep of car headlights arcing powerfully across the room. As he heard the sound of a large car swishing over gravel, Salvio saw the way she flinched and automatically tugged at her drab dress so that it hung more uniformly over her wide hips.

'That's the Averys.'

'I thought it must be.'

'You'd better... You'd better go,' she said, unable to keep the waver of urgency from her voice. 'I'm supposed to be preparing dinner and Lady Avery won't like finding a guest in the kitchen.'

Salvio was tempted to tell her that he didn't give a damn what Lady Avery would or wouldn't like but he could see the fear which had darkened her soft grey eyes. With a flicker of irritation he picked up his espresso and water and headed for the door. '*Grazie mille*,' he said, leaving the warm and steamy kitchen and walking rapidly towards the staircase, reluctant to be around when the Averys burst into the hallway.

But once back in his own room, he was irritated to discover that the low burn of desire was refusing to leave him. So that instead of the hot shower he'd promised himself, Salvio found himself standing beneath jets of punishingly cold water as he tried to push the curves of the sweet little housekeeper from the forefront of his mind and to quell the exquisite hardness which throbbed at his groin.

CHAPTER TWO

'MOLLY, THESE POTATOES are frightful. We can't possibly ask Signor De Gennaro to eat them. Have they even *seen* an oven? They're like rocks!'

Molly could feel herself flushing to the roots of her hair as she met Lady Avery's accusing stare. Were they? She blinked. Surely she'd blasted them for the required time, carefully basting them with goose fat to make them all golden and crispy? But no. Now she stopped to look at them properly—they were definitely on the anaemic side.

She could feel her cheeks growing even pinker as she reached towards the table to pick up the dish. 'I'm so sorry, Lady Avery. I'll pop them back in the—'

'Don't bother!' snapped her employer. 'It will be midnight before they're fit to eat and I don't intend going to bed on a full stomach. And I'm sure Salvio won't want to either.'

Was it Molly's imagination, or did Lady Avery shoot the Italian a complicit smile from the other side of the table? The way she said his name sounded unmistakably predatory and the look she was giving him was enough to make Molly's stomach turn. Surely the aristocrat wasn't hinting that she intended ending up in bed with him, not with her husband sitting only a few feet away?

Yet it had struck her as odd when Sarah Avery had come down for dinner wearing the tightest and lowest-cut dress imaginable, so that the priceless blaze of the Avery diamonds dazzled like stars

against her aging skin. She'd been flirting outrageously with the Italian businessman ever since Molly had served pre-dinner drinks and showed no sign of stopping. And meanwhile, her husband—two decades older and already a quarter of the way through his second bottle of burgundy—seemed oblivious to the undercurrents which had been swirling around the dinner table ever since they'd sat down.

The meal had been a disaster from the moment she'd put the starters on the table and Molly couldn't understand why. She was a good cook. She knew that. Hadn't she spent years cooking for her mother and little brother, trying to produce tasty food on a shoestring budget? And hadn't part of her job interview for Lady Avery consisted of producing a full afternoon tea—including a rich and rather heavy fruit cake—within the space of just two hours...a feat she had managed with ease? A simple meal for just three people should have been a breeze, but Molly hadn't factored in Salvio De Gennaro, or the effect his brooding presence would have on her employer. Or, if she was being honest, on her.

After he'd swept out of the kitchen earlier that afternoon, it had taken ages for her heart to stop thumping and to be able to concentrate on what she was supposed to be doing. She'd felt all giddy and stupidly...*excited*. She remembered the way he had looked into her eyes with that dark and piercing gaze and wondered if she'd imagined the pulsing crackle of electricity between them before telling herself that, yes, of course she had. Unless she really thought a man who could have his pick of any woman on the planet would have the slightest interest in a naïve country girl who was carrying far too much weight around her hips.

In her dreams!

But there was no doubt that Salvio's unexpected trip to the kitchen had rocked Molly's equilibrium and after he'd gone, all the light had seemed to disappear from the room. She'd sat down at the table feeling flat, which was unusual for her because she'd always tried to be an optimist, no matter what life threw at her. She was what was known as a glass-half-full type of person rather than one who regarded the glass as half empty. So why had she spent the rest of the afternoon mooching around the kitchen in a way which was completely out of character?

'Molly? Are you listening to a word I'm saying?'

Molly stiffened as she saw the fury in Lady Avery's eyes—but not before she'd noticed Salvio De Gennaro's face darken with an expression she couldn't work out. Was he wondering why on earth the wife of a famous peer bothered employing such a hapless housekeeper?

'I'm so sorry,' said Molly quickly. 'I was a bit distracted.'

'You seem to have been distracted all afternoon!' snapped Lady Avery. 'The meat is overcooked and the hors d'oeuvres were fridge-cold!'

'Come on, Sarah. It's no big deal,' said Salvio softly. 'Give the girl a break.'

Molly's head jerked up and as she met the understanding gleam of Salvio De Gennaro's ebony eyes, she felt something warm and comforting wash over her. It was like sitting beside a fire when snow was falling outside. Like being wrapped in a soft, cashmere blanket. She saw Lady Avery appear momentarily disconcerted and she wondered if Salvio De Gennaro's silky intervention had made her decide that giving her housekeeper a public dressing-down wouldn't reflect very well on *her*. Was that why she flashed her a rather terrifying smile?

'Of course. You're quite right, Salvio. It's no big deal. After all, it's not as if we're short of food, is it? Molly always makes sure we're very well fed, but—as you can tell—she's very fond of her food!' She gave a bright, high laugh and nodded her head towards the snoring form of her husband, who had now worked his way through the entire bottle of wine and whose head was slumped on his chest as he snored softly. 'Molly, I'm going to wake Lord Avery and guide him to bed and then Signor De Gennaro and I will go and sit by the fire in the library. Perhaps you'd like to bring us something on a tray to take the place of dinner. Nothing too fussy. Finger food will do.' She flashed another toothy smile. 'And bring us another bottle of the Château Lafite, will you?'

'Yes, Lady Avery.'

Salvio's knuckles tightened as he watched Molly scuttle from the room, though he made no further comment as his hostess moved round the table to rouse her sleeping husband and then rather impatiently ushered him from the room. But he couldn't shake off the feeling of injustice he had experienced when he'd seen how the aristocrat treated the blushing housekeeper. Or the powerful feeling of identification which had gripped him as he'd witnessed it. Was it because he'd known exactly how she would be feeling? His mouth hardened. Because he'd been where she had been. He knew what it was like to be at the bottom of the food chain. To have people treat you as if you were a machine, rather than a person.

He splayed his fingers over the rigid tautness of his thighs. He would wait until his hostess returned. Force himself to have a quick drink since she'd asked for one of the world's most expensive wines to be opened, then retire to his room. He glanced at his watch. It was too late to go back to London tonight but he would leave at first light, before the house was awake. All in all it had been a wasted journey, with Lord Avery too inebriated to talk business before dinner. He hadn't even been able to work because the damned Internet kept going down and because his thoughts kept straying to the forbidden... And the forbidden had proved shockingly difficult to erase from his mind. He sighed. How crazy was it that the wholesome housekeeper had inexplicably set his senses on fire, so that he could think of little but her?

He'd walked into the orangery before dinner to see her standing with a tray of champagne in her hands. She had changed into a simple black dress which hugged her body and emphasised every voluptuous curve. With her shiny brown hair caught back at the nape of her neck, his attention had been caught by those grey eyes, half concealed by lashes like dark feathers, which were modestly lowered as she offered him a drink. Even that was a turn-on. Or maybe especially that. He wasn't used to modesty. To women reluctant to meet his gaze, whose cheeks turned the colour of summer roses. He'd found himself wanting to stand there studying her and it had taken a monumental effort to tear his eyes away. To try to make conversation with a host who seemed to be having a love affair with the bottle, and his disenchanted wife who was almost spilling out of a dress much too young for a woman her age.

'Salvio!' Sarah Avery was back, a look of determination on her face as she picked her way across the Persian rug on her spiky black heels. 'Sorry about that. I'm afraid that sometimes Philip simply can't hold his drink. Some men can't, you know—with predictable effects, I'm afraid.' She flashed him a megawatt smile. 'Let's go to the library for a drink, shall we?'

There had been many reasons why Salvio had left Naples to make his life in England and he had absorbed the attitudes of his adopted country with the tenacity he applied to every new challenge which came his way. These days he considered himself urbane and sophisticated—but in reality the traditional values of his Neapolitan upbringing were never far from the surface. And in his world, a woman never criticised her husband to another person. Particularly a stranger.

'Just one drink,' he said, disapproval making his words harsher than he intended. 'I have a busy schedule tomorrow and I'll be leaving first thing.'

'But you've only just arrived!'

'And I have back-to-back meetings in London, from midday onwards,' he countered smoothly.

'Oh! Can't you cancel them?' she wheedled. 'I mean, I've heard that you're a complete workaholic, but surely even powerhouses like you are allowed to slow down a little. And this is a beautiful part of the world. You haven't really seen any of it.'

With an effort, Salvio forced a smile because he found her attitude intensely intrusive, as well as irritating. 'I like to honour my commitments,' he observed coolly as he followed her into the firelit library, where Molly was putting cheese and wine on a table, the stiff set of her shoulders showing her tension. He wasn't surprised. Imagine being stuck out here, working for someone as rude and demanding as Sarah Avery. He sank into one of the armchairs, and watched as his hostess went to stand by the mantelpiece in a pose he suspected was intended to make him appreciate her carefully

preserved body. She ran one slow finger over the gleaming curve of an ancient-looking vase, and smiled.

‘Are you looking forward to Christmas, Salvio?’ she questioned.

He was immediately wary—recoiling from the thought that some unwanted invitation might soon be heading his way. ‘I am away for most of it—in Naples,’ he said, accepting a glass of wine from Molly—ridiculously pleased to capture her blushing gaze before she quickly turned away. ‘I’m always glad to see my family but, to be honest, I’m equally glad when the holiday is over. The world shuts down and business suffers as a result.’

‘Oh, you men!’ Sarah Avery slunk back across the room to perch on a nearby chair, her bony knees clamped tightly together. ‘You’re all the same!’

Salvio managed not to wince, trying to steer the conversation onto a more neutral footing as he sipped his wine, though all he could think about was Molly hovering nervously in the background, the black dress clinging to her curvaceous figure and a stray strand of glossy brown hair dangling alluringly against her pink cheek. He cleared his throat. ‘How are you and your husband planning to spend Christmas?’ he questioned politely.

This was obviously the opportunity Sarah Avery had been waiting for and she let him have the answer in full, telling him how much Philip’s adult children hated her and blamed her for ending their parents’ marriage. ‘I mean, I certainly didn’t set out to get him, but I was his secretary and these things happen.’ She gave a helpless shrug. ‘Philip told me he couldn’t help falling in love with me. That no power on earth could have stopped it. How was I supposed to know his wife was pregnant at the time?’ She sipped a mouthful of wine, leaving a thin red stain above the line of her lip gloss. ‘I mean, I really don’t care if his wretched kids won’t see me—it’s Philip I’m concerned about—and I really think they need to be mindful of their inheritance. He’ll cut them off if they’re not careful!’

Salvio forced himself to endure several minutes more of her malicious chatter, his old-fashioned sensibilities outraged by her total lack of shame. But eventually he could stand no more and rose to his feet and, despite all her cajoling, she finally seemed to get the message that he was going to bed. Alone. Like a child, she pouted, but he paid her sulky expression no heed. He felt like someone who’d just been released from the cage of a prowling she-cat by the time he escaped to the quietness of the guest corridor and closed the door of his room behind him.

A sigh of relief left his lips as he looked around. A fire had been lit and red and golden lights from the flames were dancing across the walls. He’d been in these grand houses before and often found them unbearably cold, but this high-ceilinged room was deliciously warm. Over by the window was a polished antique cabinet on which stood an array of glittering crystal decanters, filled with liquor which glinted in the moonlight. He studied the walls, which were studded with paintings, including some beautiful landscapes by well-known artists. Salvio’s mouth twisted. It was ironic really. This house contained pictures which would have been given pride of place in a national gallery—yet a trip to the bathroom required a walk along an icy corridor, because the idea of en-suite was still an alien concept to some members of the aristocracy.

He yawned but didn’t go straight to bed, preferring to half pack his small suitcase so he was ready to leave first thing. Outside he could see dark clouds scudding across the sky and partially obscuring the moon, turning the churning ocean silver and black. It was stark and it was beautiful but he was unable to appreciate it because he was restless and didn’t know why.

Loosening his tie and undoing the top button of his shirt, Salvio braved the chilly corridor to the bathroom and was on his way back when he heard a sound from the floor above. A sound which at first he didn’t recognise. He stilled as he listened and there it was again. His eyes narrowed as he realised what it was. A faint gasp for breath, followed by a snuffle.

Someone was crying?

He told himself it was none of his business. He was leaving first thing and it made sense to go straight to bed. But something tugged at his... He frowned. His conscience? Because he knew that

the person crying must be the little housekeeper? He didn't question what made him start walking towards the sound and soon found himself mounting a narrow staircase at the far end of the corridor.

The sound grew louder. Definitely tears. His foot creaked on a step and an anxious voice called out.

'Who's there?'

'It's me. Salvio.'

He heard footsteps scurrying across the room and as the door was pulled open, there stood Molly. She was still wearing her black uniform although she had taken down her hair and removed her sturdy shoes. It spilled over her shoulders in a glorious tumble which fell almost to her waist and Salvio was reminded of a painting he'd once seen of a woman sitting in a boat, with fear written all over her features. He could see fear now, in soft grey eyes which were rimmed with red. And suddenly all the lust he'd felt from the moment he'd set eyes on her was replaced by a powerful sense of compassion.

'What's happened?' he demanded. 'Are you hurt?'

'Nothing's happened and, no, I'm not hurt.' Quickly, she blotted her cheeks with her fingertips. 'Did you want something?' she asked, a familiar note of duty creeping into her voice. 'I hope... I mean, is everything in your room to your satisfaction, Signor De Gennaro?'

'Everything in my room is fine and I thought I told you to call me Salvio,' he said impatiently. 'I want to know why you were crying.'

She shook her head. 'I wasn't crying.'

'Yes, you were. You know damned well you were.'

An unexpected streak of defiance made her tilt her chin upwards. 'Surely I'm allowed to cry in the privacy of my own room.'

'And surely I'm allowed to ask why, if it's keeping me awake.'

Her grey eyes widened. 'Was it?'

He allowed himself the flicker of a smile. 'Well, no—now you come to mention it. Not really. I hadn't actually gone to bed but it's not a sound anyone particularly wants to hear.'

'That's because nobody was supposed to. Look, I'm really sorry to have disturbed you, but I'm fine now. See.' This time she gritted her teeth into a parody of a smile. 'It won't happen again.'

But Salvio's interest was piqued and the fact that she was trying to get rid of him intrigued him. He glanced over her shoulder at her room, which was small. He hadn't seen a bedroom that small for a long time. A narrow, unfriendly bed and thin drapes at the window, but very little else. Suddenly he became aware of the icy temperature—an observation which was reinforced by the almost imperceptible shiver she gave, despite the thickness of her black dress. He thought about the fire in his own bedroom with the blazing applewood logs which she must have lit herself.

'You're cold,' he observed.

'Only a bit. I'm used to it. You know what these old houses are like. The heating is terrible up here.'

'You don't say?' He narrowed his eyes speculatively. 'Look, why don't you come and sit by my fire for a while? Have a nightcap, perhaps.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'A nightcap?'

He slanted her a mocking smile. 'You know. The drink traditionally supposed to warm people up.'

He saw her hesitate before shaking her head.

'Look, it's very kind of you to offer, but I can't possibly accept.'

'Why not?'

'Because...' She shrugged. 'You know why not.'

'Not unless you tell me, I don't.'

'Because Lady Avery would hit the roof if she caught me socialising with one of the guests.'

‘And how’s she going to find out?’ he questioned with soft complicity. ‘I won’t tell if you won’t. Come on, Molly. You’re shivering. What harm will it do?’

Molly hesitated because she *was* tempted—more tempted than she should have been. Maybe it was because she was feeling so cold—both inside and out. A coldness she’d been unable to shift after the telling off she’d just been given by Lady Avery, who had arrived in the kitchen in an evil temper, shaking with rage as she’d shouted at Molly. She’d told her she was clumsy and incompetent. That she’d never been so ashamed in her life and no wonder Signor De Gennaro had cut short the evening so unexpectedly.

Yet now that same man was standing in the doorway of her humble room, asking her to have a drink with him. He had removed his tie and undone the top button of his shirt, giving him a curiously relaxed and accessible air. It was easy to see why Lady Avery had made a fool of herself over him during dinner. Who wouldn’t fall for his olive-dark skin and gleaming ebony eyes?

Yet despite his sexy appearance, he had looked at her understandingly when she’d messed up during dinner. He’d come to her rescue—and there was that same sense of concern on his face now. He had an unexpected streak of kindness, she thought, and kindness was hard to resist. Especially when you weren’t expecting it. An icy blast of wind rushed in through the gap in the window frame and once again Molly shivered. The days ahead didn’t exactly fill her with joy and her worries about Robbie were never far from the surface. Couldn’t she loosen up for once in her life? Break out of the lonely mould she’d created for herself by having a drink with the Italian tycoon?

She gave a tentative shrug. ‘Okay, then. I will. Just a quick one, mind. And thank you,’ she added, as she slipped her feet back into the sensible brogues she’d just kicked off. ‘Thank you very much.’

He gave a brief nod, as if her agreement was something he’d expected all along, and Molly tried to tell herself that this meant nothing special—at least, not to him. But as he turned his back and began to walk she realised her heart was racing and Molly was filled with an unfamiliar kind of excitement as she followed Salvio De Gennaro along the narrow corridor towards his grand bedroom on the floor below.

CHAPTER THREE

‘HERE.’

‘Thanks.’ Molly took the brandy Salvio was offering her, wondering if she’d been crazy to accept his invitation to have a drink with him, because now she was in his room she felt hopelessly embarrassed and out of place. She noticed his half-packed open suitcase lying on the far side of the room and, for some stupid reason, her heart sank. He obviously couldn’t wait to get away from here. Awkwardly, she shifted from one foot to the other.

‘Why don’t you sit down over there, beside the fire?’ he suggested.

Lowering herself into the chair he’d indicated, Molly thought how weird it was to find herself in the role of visitor to a room she had cleaned so many times. Just this morning she’d been in here, fluffing up the new duvet and making sure the monogrammed pillowcases were all neatly facing in the right direction. Over there were the neat stack of freshly ironed newspapers Lady Avery had insisted on, and the jug of water with the little lace cover on top. Yet it was funny how quickly you could get used to the dramatic change from servant to guest. The soft leather of the armchair felt deliciously soft as it sank beneath her weight and the warmth of the fire licked her skin. She took a tentative sip from her glass, recoiling a little as the powerful fumes wafted upwards.

‘Not much of a drinker?’ observed Salvio wryly, as he poured his own drink.

‘Not really.’ But even that minuscule amount of liquor had started to dissolve the tight knot of tension in the pit of her stomach, sending a warm glow flooding through her body. Molly stared out of the windows where clouds were racing across the silvery face of the moon. Outside the temperature had plummeted but in here it felt cosy—in fact, she might even go so far as to say she was starting to feel relaxed. Yet here she was in a strange man’s bedroom in her black uniform and heavy-duty

shoes as if she had every right to be there. What on earth would Lady Avery say if she happened to walk in? Anxiety rippled through her as she glanced at Salvio, who was replacing the heavy stopper in the bottle. 'I really shouldn't be here,' she fretted.

'So you said,' he drawled, his tinge of boredom implying that he found repetition tedious. 'But you are here. And you still haven't told me why you were crying.'

'I...' She took another sip of brandy before putting the glass down on a nearby table. 'No reason really.'

'Now, why don't I believe you, Molly Miller?' he challenged softly. 'What happened? Did you get into more trouble about dinner?'

Her startled expression told Salvio his guess was correct. 'I deserved it,' she said flatly as she met his gaze. 'The meal was rubbish.'

Briefly he acknowledged her loyalty. She would have been perfectly justified in moaning about her employer but she hadn't. She was a curious creature, he thought, his gaze flickering over her dispassionately. Totally without artifice, she didn't seem to care that the way she was sitting wasn't the most flattering angle she could have chosen. Yet her abundant hair glowed like copper in the firelight and as she crossed one ankle over the other he was surprised by how unexpectedly erotic that simple movement seemed. But he hadn't brought her here to seduce her, he reminded himself sternly. Tonight he had cast himself in the role of the good Samaritan, that was all. 'And that's the only reason for your tears?'

Molly gave an awkward wriggle of her shoulders. 'Maybe I was feeling sorry for myself,' she admitted, shifting beneath his probing gaze. Because no way was she going to tell him the real reason. He wouldn't be interested in her wayward brother or his habit of accumulating debt, but more than that—she was afraid of saying the words out loud. As if saying them would make them even more real. She didn't want to wonder why Robbie had rung up just an hour ago, asking her if she had any spare cash for a 'temporary' loan, despite his promises to find himself some sort of job. Why hadn't he got any money of his own? Why was he asking her for more, after all his tearful promises that from now on he was going to live his life independently and free of debt? She swallowed. She couldn't bear to think that he'd got himself into that terrible spiral yet again—of playing poker and losing. Of owing money to hard-faced men who wouldn't think twice about scarring his pretty young face...

'Call it a touch of self-pity,' she said, meeting the black fire in his eyes and realising he was still waiting for an answer. 'Not something I imagine you have much experience of.'

Salvio gave a mirthless smile. How touching her faith in him! Did she think that because he was wealthy and successful, he had never known pain or despair, when he had been on intimate terms with both those things? His mouth hardened. When his life had imploded and he'd lost everything, he remembered the darkness which had descended on him, sending him hurtling into a deep and never-ending hole. And even though he'd dragged himself out of the quagmire and forced himself to start over—you never forgot an experience like that. It marked you. Changed you. Turned you into someone different. A stranger to yourself as well as to those around you. It was why he had left Naples—because he couldn't bear to be reminded of his own failure. 'Why do you stay here?' he questioned quietly.

'It's a very well-paid job.'

'Even though you get spoken to like that?'

She shook her head, her long hair swaying like a glossy curtain. 'It's not usually as bad as it was tonight.'

'Your loyalty is touching, *signorina*.'

'I'm paid to be loyal,' she said doggedly.

'I'm sure you are. But even taking all that into account, this place is very *isolato*...isolated.' He gave a flicker of a smile, as if begging her to forgive his sudden lapse into his native tongue. 'I can't imagine many people your age living nearby.'

‘Maybe that’s one of the reasons I like it.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘You don’t like to socialise?’

Molly hesitated. Should she tell him that she always felt out of place around people her own age? That she didn’t really do the relaxed stuff, or the fun stuff, or the wild stuff. She’d spent too many years caring for her mother and then trying to keep her brother from going off the rails—and that kind of sensible role could become so much a part of you that it was difficult to relinquish it. And wouldn’t that kind of admission bring reality crashing into the room? Wouldn’t it puncture the slightly unreal atmosphere which had descended on her ever since she’d walked in here and settled down by the fireside, allowing herself to forget for a short while that she was Molly the housekeeper—so that for once she’d felt like a person in her own right?

‘I can take people or leave them,’ she said. ‘Anyway, socialising is expensive and I’m saving up. I’m intending to put my brother through college and it isn’t cheap. He’s in Australia at the moment,’ she explained, in answer to the fractional rise of his dark brows. ‘Doing a kind of...gap year.’

He frowned. ‘So you’re here—working hard—while he has fun in the sun? That’s a very admirable sacrifice for a sister to make.’

‘Anyone would do it.’

‘Not anyone, no. He’s lucky to have you.’

Molly picked up her glass again and took another sip of brandy. Would Salvio De Gennaro be shocked if he knew the truth? That Robbie hadn’t actually got a place at college yet, because he was still ‘thinking about it’, in spite of all her entreaties to get himself a proper education and not end up like her. She licked her lips, which tasted of brandy. She didn’t want to think about Robbie. Surely she could have a night off for once? A night when she could feel young and carefree and revel in the fact that she was alone with a gorgeous man like Salvio—even if he had only invited her here because he felt sorry for her.

Putting her glass down, she stared at him and her heart gave a sudden lurch of yearning. He hadn’t moved from his spot by the window and his powerful body was starkly outlined by the moonlight.

‘What about you?’ she questioned suddenly. ‘What brought you here?’

He shrugged. ‘I was supposed to be discussing a deal with Philip Avery.’ He twisted his lips into a wry smile. ‘But that doesn’t look like it’s going to happen.’

‘He’ll be much more receptive in the morning,’ said Molly diplomatically.

‘It’ll be too late by then,’ he said. ‘I’m leaving as soon as it’s light.’

Molly was aware of a crushing sense of disappointment. She’d wanted... She stared very hard at her brandy glass as if the dark amber liquid would provide the answer. What had she wanted? To see him at breakfast—their eyes meeting in a moment of shared complicity as they remembered this illicit, night-time drink?

‘Oh, that’s a shame,’ she said, sounding genuinely disappointed.

He smiled, as if her earnestness had amused him. ‘You know, you’re far too sweet to be hiding yourself away somewhere like this, Molly.’

Sweet. Molly knew it was a compliment yet for some reason it offended her. It made her sound like the cake he’d caught her eating. Because sweet wasn’t sexy, was it? Just as *she* wasn’t sexy. ‘Am I?’ she questioned tonelessly.

He nodded, walking over to the desk and writing something on the back of a business card before crossing the room and handing it to her. ‘Here. Take this. It will get you straight through to my assistant. If ever you decide you want a change, then give her a ring. She knows plenty of people, and domestic staff are always in short supply.’ He met her eyes. ‘You could always find something better than this, you know.’

‘Despite dinner being such a disaster?’ She tried to sound jokey even if she didn’t feel it, because she realised she was being dismissed. Getting up from the comfort of her fireside seat, Molly took the card and slid it into the hip pocket of her dress.

‘Despite that,’ he agreed, his words suddenly trailing away as his gaze followed the movement of her hand.

Molly became aware of a subtle alteration in the atmosphere as Salvio lifted his eyes to her face. She’d wondered if the attraction which had sizzled between them earlier had been wishful thinking, but maybe it hadn’t. Maybe it had been real. As real as the sudden thrust of her nipples against the soft fabric of her dress and the distracting heat between her thighs. She held her breath, waiting, instinct telling her that he was going to touch her. Despite him being who he was and her being just Molly. And he did. Lifting his hand, he ran the tips of his fingers experimentally over her hair.

‘E capelli tuoi so come a seta,’ he said, and when she looked at him in confusion, he translated. ‘Your hair is like silk.’

It was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to her and when she heard it in Italian it made her want to melt. Was that why he did it, knowing it would push her a little further beneath his powerful spell? Molly told herself to move away. She should thank him for the drink, for his kindness and for giving her his card and then hurry back to her little room to mull over her memories and hug them to her like a hot-water bottle. But she didn’t move. She just carried on gazing up into the rugged perfection of his looks, praying he would kiss her and make the fairy tale complete—even if that was all she was ever going to have to remember him by. ‘Is—is it?’ she questioned.

Salvio smiled, letting his thumb drift from the fire-warmed strands, to hover over the unmistakable tremble of her lips. He felt a tightness in his throat as he realised what he was about to do. He had invited her here because he sensed she was lonely and unhappy—not because he intended to seduce her. Because there were rules and usually he followed them. He no longer took physical comfort just because it was available—because it was pretty much always available to a man like him. Just as he no longer used sex to blot out his pain, or his anger.

But the little housekeeper had touched a part of him he’d thought had died a long time ago. She had stirred a compassion in his soul and now she was stirring his body in a way which was all too obvious, if only to him. He could feel the aching hardness at his groin, but the urge to kiss her was even more overwhelming than the need to bury himself deep inside her body. He told himself he should resist—gently shoo her out of the door and send her on her way. And maybe he would have done—had she not chosen that moment to expel a shaky breath of air, the warmth of it shuddering softly against his thumb.

How could something as insignificant as a breath be so potent? he marvelled as he stared down into her wide grey eyes. ‘I want to kiss you,’ he said softly. ‘But if that happens I will want to make love to you and I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. Do you understand what I’m saying, Molly?’

Wordlessly, she nodded.

‘And the only thing which will stop me, is you,’ he continued, his voice a deep silken purr. ‘So stop me, Molly. Turn away and walk out right now and do us both a favour, because something tells me this is a bad idea.’

He was giving her the opportunity to leave but Molly knew she wasn’t going to take it—because when did things like this ever happen to people like her? She wasn’t like most women her age. She’d never had sex. Never come even close, despite her few forays onto a dating website, which had all ended in disaster. Yet now a man she barely knew was proposing seduction and suddenly she was up for it, and she didn’t care if it was *bad*. Hadn’t she spent her whole life trying to be good? And where had it got her?

Her heart was crashing against her ribcage as she stared up into his rugged features and greedily drank them in. ‘I don’t care if it’s a bad idea,’ she whispered. ‘Maybe I want it as much as you do.’

Her response made him tense. She saw his eyes narrow and heard him utter something which sounded more like despair than joy before pulling her almost roughly into his arms. He smoothed the hair away from her cheeks and lowered his head and the moment their lips met, she knew there would be no turning back.

At first his kiss was slow. As if he was exploring her mouth by touch alone. And just when she was starting to get used to the sheer dreaminess of it, it became hard. Urgent. It fuelled the hunger which was building inside her. He levered her up against him, so that her breasts were thrusting eagerly against his torso and she could feel the rock-hard cradle of his pelvis. She should have been daunted by the unmistakable bulk of his erection but she wasn't, because her hungry senses were controlling her now and she didn't feel like good, rule-following Molly any more. She felt like wanton Molly—a victim of her own desire.

And it felt good.

More than good.

His laugh was unsteady as he splayed his fingers over one of her breasts, the nipple instantly hardening against his palm. 'You are very passionate,' he murmured.

Molly gave a small gurgle of pleasure as he found the side zip of her dress because suddenly she *felt* passionate. As if she had been waiting all her life to feel this way. 'Am I?'

'I don't think you need any reassurance on that score, *bedda mia*.'

He was wrong, of course—but he wasn't to know that and Molly certainly wasn't going to tell him. She felt breathless as he peeled the plain black dress away from her body and let it fall to the ground before stepping back to survey her. And wasn't it funny how a look of admiration in a man's eyes could be powerful enough to dispel all a woman's instinctive insecurities? Because for once Molly wasn't thinking that her tummy was too plump or her breasts unfashionably massive. Or even that her bra didn't match her rather functional pants. Instead she was revelling in the look of naked hunger which made his eyes resemble black fire as they blazed over her.

And then he picked her up. Picked her up! She could hardly believe it. He was carrying chunky Molly Miller towards the bed as if she weighed no more than a balloon at a child's birthday party, before whipping back the brand-new duvet she'd purchased that very morning and depositing her beneath it. It was the most delicious sensation in the world, sinking into the mattress and lying beneath the warmth of the bedding, her body sizzling with a growing excitement—while Salvio De Gennaro began to undress. She swallowed, completely hypnotised as she watched him. The shoes and socks were first to go and then he unbuttoned his shirt, baring his magnificent chest before turning his attention to the zip of his trousers. But when he hooked his thumb inside the waistband of his boxers, Molly squeezed her eyes tightly closed.

'No. Not like that. Open your eyes. Look at me,' he instructed softly and she was too much in thrall to disobey him.

Molly swallowed. She couldn't deny that it was slightly daunting to see just how aroused he was and as she bit her lip, he smiled.

'*Me fai asci pazzo*,' he said, as if that explained everything.

'Wh-what does that mean?'

'It means you make me crazy.'

'I love it when you talk Italian to me,' she said shyly.

'Not Italian,' he said sternly as he slipped into bed beside her. 'Neapolitan.'

She blinked. 'It's different?'

'It's dialect,' he said and she noticed he was placing several foil packets on the antique chest of drawers beside the bed. 'And yes, it's very different.'

The appearance of condoms somehow punctured some of the romance, but by then he was naked beside her and Molly was discovering that the sensation of skin touching skin was like nothing she'd ever known. It was *heaven*

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