



## The Italian's Ruthless Seduction (Rich, Ruthless and Renowned)

By Miranda Lee

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**What his billions can't buy...**

If Sergio Mancini wants something, he only has to snap his fingers to get it. Except for Bella Williams. No matter how much his stunning stepsister once drove him wild with lust, he never allowed himself to have her, believing she was a gold digger like her mother.

Now, when Bella calls unexpectedly seeking refuge at their secluded family home by Lake Como, their unfulfilled desire resurfaces. No longer able to resist, Sergio ruthlessly decides it's finally time to quench the fire.

But their one night together only inflames their passion—and now he wants more!

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

After leaving her convent school, Miranda Lee briefly studied the cello before moving to Sydney, where she embraced the emerging world of computers. Her career as a programmer ended after she married, had three daughters and bought a small acreage in a semi-rural community. She yearned to find a creative career from which she could earn money. When her sister suggested writing romances, it seemed like a good idea. She could do it at home, and it might even be fun! She never looked back.

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I should be happier, Sergio thought as he snapped off the shower, stepped out onto the luxuriously soft bath mat and reached for an even more luxurious bath sheet. Today I became a billionaire. Today, my two best friends became billionaires as well. If that doesn't make me happy, then what will?

Sergio frowned as he dried himself vigorously. Why *wasn't* he happier? Why wasn't he thrilled to pieces with the four-point-six billion they'd been paid for the Wild Over Wine franchise? Why did signing that contract today leave him feeling just a little...empty?

Wise people did say it was the journey that gave the most satisfaction, not the destination, he conceded with a resigned shrug of his broad shoulders. The irrefutable fact was that the three members of the Bachelors' Club had now reached their destination. Well...almost. None of them had turned thirty-five yet, though they would soon. His own thirty-fifth birthday was just over a fortnight away.

Sergio smiled a wry smile as he recalled the night they'd formed the Bachelors' Club. How young they were at the time. Not that any of them had realised it back then. They'd felt incredibly mature, older at twenty-three than a lot of the other students at Oxford in their year. More confident than most as well, each of them having been blessed with good looks as well as above-average intelligence. They'd also been very ambitious.

At least, he and Alex had been ambitious. Jeremy—who'd already had a private income—had just gone along for the ride.

It had been a Friday night, several months after they'd first met. They'd been in Jeremy's room, of course. His room had been so much bigger and better than the one Sergio and Alex had shared. They had all been more than a little intoxicated when Sergio—who had a tendency to become philosophical when he drank—had asked the others what their goals were in life.

'Definitely not marriage,' had been Jeremy's rather scathing remark.

Jeremy Barker-Whittle, youngest son of a British banking empire that went back generations. Perhaps because of their excessive wealth, his family was littered with divorce. It had not escaped his two friends that Jeremy was somewhat cynical when it came to the institution of marriage.

'I'm not interested in marriage either,' Alex Katona, a Rhodes Scholar from Sydney with a working-class background and a near-genius IQ had agreed. 'I'll be too busy working to get married. I aim to be a billionaire by the time I'm thirty-five.'

'Me too,' Sergio had concurred. Although Sergio was the only son and heir to the Morelli Manufacturing Company, based in Milan, he was well aware that the family firm was not doing as well as it once had. By the time Sergio inherited the business, he suspected it might not be worth inheriting. If he wanted to be a success in life, he had to make it on his own. Which meant no marriage as well. Not for ages, anyway.

And so the Bachelors' Club had been born, their rules and goals laid out that night with great enthusiasm.

Rule One had been somewhat sentimental—and optimistic—for three young men in their early twenties.

*To remain friends for ever.*

Of course they had been very drunk at the time, having consumed quite a few bottles of Jeremy's seemingly limitless supply of fabulous French wine.

But, rather amazingly, they were still the best of friends over a decade later, despite going into business together, which would usually spell the kiss of death where friendships were concerned. Sergio didn't question why their friendship worked, but he was grateful for it. He couldn't imagine anything ever happening to spoil the bond between them.

Sergio had to laugh over Rule Two, however, which was *To live life to the full*.

Translate that to mean they were to sleep with every attractive girl who looked sideways at them. Which the three of them had managed very well during their years at Oxford. Since their graduation to real life, however, they'd become a little more discerning. At least, Sergio had, preferring the company of women who had more to offer than just their willing bodies. Women with careers and class and conversation. Often older women, unlike Alex, whose girlfriends seemed to get younger as he got older.

'Younger women don't cling or criticise or complain as much as females of my own age,' he told Sergio one day. 'Neither do they always want me to marry them.'

Alex was still anti-marriage. Not in principle. Just for himself. Unlike Jeremy, he wasn't cynical about the institution, Alex's parents and siblings having enjoyed happy marriages. As for Jeremy...he'd become a playboy of the first order, his girlfriends coming and going with alarming speed. No one could get bored with a girlfriend quicker than Jeremy. But there was always another one eager to take the previous one's place, Jeremy's wealth, good looks and charm had women falling at his feet wherever he went. Naturally, they all fell in love with him as well, a sentiment that was never returned. Jeremy wasn't into love, leaving a trail of broken hearts all over Britain, and half of Europe as well. Sergio didn't approve—and said so—but Jeremy just shrugged and said it wasn't his fault that he was fickle. It was a genetic flaw. His father was on his third marriage and his mother her fourth. Or was it her fifth?

So of course neither Alex nor Jeremy had trouble with rule number three.

*Members of the Bachelors' Club must not marry till at least thirty-five.*

Which had seemed an eternity away at the time.

Still, Sergio had always known, despite a huge dose of bitterness over his father's second marriage and subsequent divorce, that one day he would marry. He was Italian, after all. Family was important to him. But he'd put the idea on hold whilst he'd worked obsessively towards the Bachelors' Club's main goal.

*To become billionaires by the age of thirty-five.*

Which they'd finally managed. Today.

Another wave of melancholy washed through Sergio as he accepted that today also marked the virtual end of their club. Yes, the three of them would still remain friends for ever—that was a given—but only at a distance. He himself was returning to Milan shortly to take control of the family business which had gone into serious decline since his father's death last year. Alex was off back to Australia tomorrow to expand his already successful property development company whilst Jeremy would stay in London where he planned to buy himself a business. Possibly advertising. Anything but banking, apparently.

Sergio knew that once he told Jeremy and Alex tonight about his intention to marry, they would also see that the Bachelors' Club's days were seriously numbered. Still, that was life, wasn't it? Nothing stayed the same. Change was inevitable.

I will think of marriage as a new goal, Sergio decided with determined positivity as he strode from the bathroom. A new challenge. A new journey.

So what kind of wife do you want, Sergio? he asked himself as he made his way into his huge dressing room, which housed a wardrobe that even Jeremy envied. Sergio bypassed the rack of superb Italian business suits he owned—tonight was for celebrating, not business—selecting a casually tailored pair of black trousers, drawing them on and zipping them up in a rather reckless fashion for a man of his impressive dimensions.

She would have to be reasonably young, he supposed, since he wanted to have more than one child. Certainly no older than mid twenties. She would also have to be physically attractive, he decided pragmatically, taking a white silk shirt off its hanger and putting it on. Sergio couldn't see himself marrying a plain Jane. Not stunning looking, though. Stunningly beautiful women caused a man trouble.

Sergio was buttoning up his shirt when his personal cell phone rang. He frowned as he strode back into the bedroom and over to where he'd left the phone by the bed. Only a small number of people had that particular number. Alex and Jeremy, of course. And Cynthia. He changed the number every year, liking the privacy this afforded him. No doubt it was either Alex or Jeremy, telling him they were running late. As usual. It wouldn't be Cynthia. He'd broken up with her over a month ago, and she'd long given up on a reconciliation.

Sergio's eyebrows lifted when he swept up the phone and saw that the caller ID was blocked, his lips pursing angrily at the very real possibility that some scam artist had hacked into his private number. It had happened once or twice before.

'Who is this?' he snapped down the line.

There was a short silence at the other end before a woman's voice hesitantly said, 'It...it's Bella...'

Shock slammed into Sergio with all the force of a physical blow, taking his breath away, not to mention his voice.

'Sergio?' she went on after a few seconds of strained silence. 'That is you, isn't it?'

'Yes, Bella, it's me,' he managed to say at last, marvelling at how normal he sounded. Because there was nothing even remotely normal going on inside him. His heart was pounding behind his ribs and his

head...his head had ceased to process logical thoughts. For this was Bella calling him. The stunningly beautiful Bella...his one-time stepsister and long-time tormentor.

'You said...that if I ever needed your help...that I could call you. You...you gave me your number. At your father's funeral...don't you remember?' she finished on a somewhat breathless note.

'Yes, I remember,' he admitted once his addled brain plugged into his memory bank.

'I'm going to have to ring you back,' she suddenly blurted out, then hung up.

Sergio swore, then stared down at the dead phone, gripping it tightly as he struggled to resist the urge to throw the damned thing at the wall.

For a full five minutes he paced the room, willing her to call him back, wondering and worrying about what kind of trouble she was in. Not that he should care. She obviously hadn't given him a second thought since their parents' divorce. And that had been eleven years ago! Her showing up at his father's funeral last year had been all about his father, not him personally. It infuriated Sergio that he was wasting time waiting for her to call him back when he should be getting himself down to the restaurant for dinner. His booking was for eight and it was close to that now.

If he had any sense he would stop thinking about Bella and do just that.

He laughed at himself as he collected his shoes and socks and started putting them on. For when had he ever been able to stop thinking of Bella once she'd entered his head?

Maybe, if she'd remained a nobody, living a quiet life back in Australia, Sergio might have been able to forget her. But no. Fate hadn't been that kind. After winning a high-profile talent quest on Australian television shortly before Dolores asked his father for a divorce, Bella had gone on to become a famous leading lady in musical theatre, starring in shows all over the world, most on Broadway, but some of them in London. Her exquisitely beautiful face had been everywhere at one time. On television. The sides of buses. On billboards. Sergio had resisted going to see her on stage, knowing that watching her perform in person would only fuel the overwhelming desire that she'd once inspired in him, the memory of which he still struggled with.

But once again, fate hadn't been kind, Jeremy dragging him along one night about three years ago to a Royal Variety Performance where Bella—unbeknownst to Sergio—had been one of the guest performers. What agony it had been, sitting there watching her sing and dance.

But even worse had been to come that night, with Jeremy informing him after the curtain had finally gone down that he'd received an invite to the after-concert party at the Soho Hotel. Sergio could have refused to accompany him, but a perverse curiosity had overridden his first instinct, which was to go home to his new Canary Wharf apartment and get blind drunk. Instead, he'd gone to the party where Bella had waltzed in on the arm of her latest lover, a handsome French actor of dubious talent with a reputation as a womaniser. What a brilliant-looking couple they'd made, her exquisite blonde beauty the perfect foil for the Frenchman's dark good looks, Bella dressed in an ethereal white evening gown whilst he was all in black; a devil to her angel. Sergio had watched her for ages from a distance, watched her and wanted her, his jealousy fierce whenever the Frenchman had touched her. Which had been often.

Sergio no longer had a clear memory of what he'd said to her when she'd finally spotted him across the room,

leaving the leech for a moment to come over and speak privately to him. He would not have been rude. That was not his way, his father having instilled politeness and manners into him from a young age. No doubt he'd said something complimentary about her performance. What he could recall, however, was the wicked cruelty of his erection as he'd watched her mouth move to say he knew not what. Never before or since had he felt anything like it, her physical closeness causing his unrequited desire for her to flare to a point almost impossible to control.

But control it, he had, conversing with her for a short while till her obsequiously possessive lover had come over and drawn her away. It was only after Sergio had arrived home and was safely alone in his bedroom that he'd given vent to his explosive emotions, smashing his fist through the bathroom door, breaking two fingers in the process, after which he'd plunged himself into a cold shower and wept like a baby.

It had taken several weeks for his hand to heal, and for him to find some perspective about his self-destructive feelings for Bella. Talking to Alex and Jeremy had helped, though their advice had been typical.

'What you need, mate,' Alex had said, 'is to get laid more often.'

'She's probably not that great in bed, anyway,' Jeremy had added. 'Alex is right. There's plenty more fish in the sea. Throw the net out a bit more, bro.'

Which he had, for a while, having sex with more women in the next month than he had for years. All of them had been one-night stands. All of them blondes with blue eyes, pretty faces and very nice figures.

In the end, however, such a lifestyle had not sat well with Sergio. So he'd found himself Cynthia, an attractive divorcee who had been very good in bed and hadn't minded that he didn't love her. Gradually, Bella had slipped to the back of his mind, where she stayed. Most of the time.

Still, when he'd heard via Alex that Bella had broken up with the French actor, Sergio hadn't been able to deny feeling some satisfaction. He hadn't felt quite so happy when he'd found out she'd taken up with a Russian oligarch who'd made billions out of oil and natural gas, investing his fortune in a string of luxury hotels. The Russian had, again according to Alex, a reputation as a notorious ladies' man with a penchant for celebrity blondes, usually supermodels or actresses. Sergio had shaken his head in dismay over this. Because it wasn't the first time Bella had taken up with a man of dubious reputation. Aside from the French actor, her list of previous lovers included a rock star with a drug problem and an Argentinian polo player who changed girlfriends as often as his horses. None of these relationships had lasted. But the gossip rags had had a field day during every one of these affairs, and afterwards.

When would Bella ever find true love? they'd speculated *ad nauseam*.

Sergio stared down at the still-silent phone, hating himself for worrying about her, *despising* himself for just wanting to hear the sound of her voice again. But why *hadn't* she rung back? She'd actually sounded nervous. And why had she hung up so abruptly? Had her latest lover come into the room and found her on the phone to another man? Was she in an abusive relationship perhaps?

Despite being successful in her career, Bella was a very bad picker of men.

Which was nobody's fault but her own!

Still...he did not like to think of her being treated badly.

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