

Italian Boss, Ruthless Revenge  
Carol Marinelli



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# **CAROL MARINELLI**

## **Italian Boss, Ruthless Revenge**

### **Аннотация**

Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. She was hired to make his bed... and then to warm it! Sexy Italian billionaire Lazzaro Ranaldi chooses women like his cars – sleek, elegant, and easily upgraded to a new model. His mistrust of women is seared onto his soul. But there's something about Caitlyn that tempts him to take her... But then Lazzaro starts to believe Caitlyn isn't as innocent as she seems; could she have already betrayed him and his family? He won't be played for a fool! He'll get his revenge by cutting her out of his heart – and putting a ring on her finger!

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**‘I’ve never made love before.’**

Did she think he was that stupid?

China-blue eyes stared up at him. That full mouth was quivering with nerves, still waiting to be kissed, and he was tempted to silence her with just that. What the hell was she playing at? He’d seen her pills in her bathroom, for God’s sake, and she’d told him—*told him*—that she’d just broken up with her boyfriend of six months. And now she was telling him she was a virgin.

Please!

A very scathing remark was on the tip of his tongue—whatever game she was playing with him was about to be abruptly concluded. The muscles in his arms tensed as he went to push her off—only he didn’t.

If she wanted to play virgin, if she wanted to pretend that he was her first, then who was he to stop her? In fact, somehow it made it easier—easier to block out the whys and hows, easier to lower his mouth to hers, to play whatever game it was that she was playing and lose himself.

Pulling her back towards him, Lazzaro kissed the shell of her ear as he spoke. ‘Then we’d better take things slowly!’

**Carol Marinelli** recently filled in a form where she was asked for her job title and was thrilled, after all these years, to be able to put down her answer as writer. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation, and after chewing her pen for a moment Carol put down the truth—writing. The third question asked—What are

your hobbies? Well, not wanting to look obsessed or, worse still, boring, she crossed the fingers on her free hand and answered swimming and tennis. But, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights, and the closest she's got to a tennis racket in the last couple of years is watching the Australian Open, you can guess the real answer!

**Carol also writes for Medical™ Romance!**

# ITALIAN BOSS, RUTHLESS REVENGE

BY  
CAROL MARINELLI



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# PROLOGUE

‘RANALDI’S here!’

A shiver of anticipation went around the lavish hotel reception—starting with a nod from the doorman to warn the concierge, who in turn signalled to the receptionists—and Caitlyn noticed everyone’s backs seemed to straighten just a touch more, hands all moving to flatten ties or hair, as a sleek limousine pulled up outside.

‘The question is—’ Glynn, the manager, blinked nervously as he flicked his fringe back off his face ‘—which one?’

The answer was, for Caitlyn, more relevant than Glen could possibly realise.

Here on work experience, shadowing the staff and completely supernumerary, it shouldn’t have mattered a jot to Caitlyn *which* one of the dashing Ranaldi twins was pulling up outside—after all, both were legends.

Lazzaro and Luca Ranaldi both headed up the sumptuous Ranaldi chain of luxurious international hotels—and, along with their sister, were heirs to the vast wealth their father had created and subsequently, following his death last year, left behind.

Impressive? Yes.

Newsworthy? No.

Unless, of course, that vast wealth happened to have landed in the laps of stunning identical twins. Not one but two immaculate

prototypes, who regularly hit the headlines courtesy of their jet-setting, depraved existence. Since their father's death, and their sister marrying and settling there, the stunning pair had loosely based themselves in Melbourne—two irrepressible playboys, who made no apologies and certainly offered no excuses! Only last week Luca had been in the papers for a fight at the casino, and there had been a few drink-driving scandals recently that Caitlyn could recall.

A dark-suited man stepped out of the limousine, and Caitlyn found herself holding her breath...

'Which one is it?' Caitlyn whispered.

'I'm not sure yet...' Glynn mused. 'They're both identical, both divine...'

Caitlyn hoped it was Lazzaro.

Not because he was considered the most powerful, the true leader of the two, but for a reason Glynn would have trouble believing.

Watching as two strappy sandals hit the ground beneath the car door, Caitlyn chewed on her lip, wondering what on earth she'd do if Roxanne came into view—wondering how the other hotel staff would react to her if they knew the strange truth...

Luca Ranaldi was dating her cousin.

'It's Lazzaro,' Glynn confirmed as, without waiting for his date, the dark-suited male walked through the gold revolving doors.

'How do you know?' Caitlyn frowned. 'I thought you said they



were identical...’

‘Lazzaro doesn’t wait for anyone...’ Glynn hissed out of the side of his mouth before stepping forward to greet his boss. ‘Not even a beautiful woman!’

Oh, she’d seen him before—had seen him in the papers, his photo being on the cover of a business magazine she was reading for her course—but nothing, *nothing* had prepared Caitlyn for the impact of seeing him up close and in the flesh. Well over six feet, as he walked in it was clear to all that he owned the place—and not just literally. Confidence and arrogance just oozed from him, and as he walked over to the desk Caitlyn realised he wasn’t just stunning—he was absolutely beautiful. His jet hair was longer than it was in the photos, with a raven fringe flopping over his forehead, and as for those eyes... Caitlyn actually gave a little sigh. Thickly lashed, they were black as the night and just as dangerous. As his gaze met hers, it was bored, utterly uninterested and he soon looked away. But, for Caitlyn, it was as if his image had been branded on her brain, freeze-framed so she could examine it at her leisure—see again that straight Roman nose, see close up his smooth olive skin and that sulky, full, incredibly kissable mouth.

Realising she was staring—gaping, even—Caitlyn tore her gaze away and looked at the woman who had walked in behind him. She was now sitting on one of the plush lobby sofas as she awaited her master—and Caitlyn couldn’t help the tiny ironic smile that pursed her lips.

Though it wasn't Roxanne, it might just as well have been.

The raven beauty who accompanied Lazzaro certainly hadn't been striving to achieve *au naturelle* when she'd applied her make-up. Dark glossy hair tumbled, albeit strategically, over shoulders that were so evenly tanned it could only have come from some serious hours on a sunbed combined with a regular spray tan.

'Welcome, sir.' Glynn's outstretched hand went ignored.

'How are things?' Lazzaro didn't return the greeting, his eyes narrowing as they scanned the reception area. 'Any problems?'

'None at all,' his manager assured him.

'Has Luca been in?'

'Not as yet,' Glynn said, discreetly omitting to mention the drunken call he'd taken earlier, demanding that the best room in the hotel be somehow vacated and prepared for his arrival.

'How's the wedding?'

'Excellent,' Glynn enthused. But as Lazzaro's burning gaze fell on him, he coloured up just a touch. 'Well, there's one teeny problem, but we're taking care of it now.'

Lazzaro raised one perfectly arched black brow, and, though he didn't say a word, the tiny gesture clearly indicated that he wanted more information.

'The bride's father, Mr Danton—'

'Gus Danton is a close personal friend of mine,' Lazzaro interrupted, and though his English was excellent, his deep, heavily accented voice held just a tinge of warning.

Caitlyn's eyebrows shot up just a fraction—after all, if he was such a good friend, how come Lazzaro hadn't been at the wedding? She didn't say it, of course, but Lazzaro was either a skilled mind-reader or had felt the breeze from her eyebrows raising, because, as if answering her very thoughts he deigned to give her a brief look.

'There are not enough Saturday nights in a year to attend every wedding to which I am invited but—given Mr Danton has chosen my hotel, and given Mr Danton is a friend—naturally I will come in for a drink. Of course, I hoped to hear there have been no problems...'

'Quite.' Glynn swallowed.

'So?'

'Well, he's asked that the bar remain open for another hour. Of course we're more than happy to oblige—it's just that his credit card has been declined. I was actually on my way to have a discreet word with him now.'

'Bring up his details.' He snapped his fingers in Caitlyn's vague direction, and even though she'd been bringing up guests' details for most of the night, this *almost* mastered skill had never been tested under such stressful conditions.

'Er, Caitlyn's only here on work experience, sir,' Glynn said, rushing over to the computer. One black look from Lazzaro halted him. 'She's studying hospitality, and—'

'Since when has a work experience student stayed till midnight on a Saturday?' Lazzaro cut in, staring at her name badge,

lowering his eyes to her suede stilettos, and then lazily working them upwards—taking in the rather cheap navy skirt and white blouse that comprised her uniform. In absolutely no hurry, as Glynn chatted nervously on, he scrutinised her face, staring into her blue eyes and doing the strangest things to her stomach.

‘Caitlyn was very keen to witness a busy Saturday night...’

God, she wished she’d had warning—wished she’d had time to dash to the loo and redo her heavy blonde hair. She could feel her attempt at a French roll uncoiling before his eyes. And she wished the mouth he was staring at had just a little bit of lipstick on.

‘And she has been dealing with guests?’

‘Yes,’ Glynn croaked. ‘Well, she’s been closely supervised, of course.’

‘She has been bringing up details for paying guests?’

‘Er, yes...’ Glynn nodded. ‘But, as I said, only with supervision.’ Which wasn’t strictly true—Glynn had been out for more smoke breaks than Caitlyn could count. Still, she was hardly going to tell Lazzaro that.

‘If she is good enough for my guests,’ Lazzaro responded, with the martyrdom only the truly pompous could muster, ‘then she is good enough for me.’

If he called her *she* again, Caitlyn decided, then *she’d* jolly well give him a piece of her mind.

As his black eyes fell on her, Caitlyn recanted.

Well, maybe she wouldn’t actually *say* anything. Still, she

could *think* it—divine he might be to look at, but he was a loathsome, arrogant, chauvinist brute. Blushing with a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment, she furiously backspaced as she spectacularly mistyped. After an exceedingly long moment, Gus Danton's details finally flashed on to the screen.

Momentarily!

'His account,' Lazzaro snapped, clearly expecting that with a few rapid clicks Caitlyn should bring up the necessary page. But his impatience only unsettled her more.

The cursor wobbled on screen as suddenly he was behind her, standing over her, his hand hovering to take the computer mouse—effectively dismissing her efforts. She should have stepped back—only he was behind her. She should have moved her hand to let him take over—only his was above hers.

Perhaps it was the prospect of physical contact with him, perhaps it was nerves, or an impossible combination of both, but at *that* second precisely her hope for a glowing reference from the Ranaldi Hotel for her work experience melted away as rapidly as Caitlyn clicked the mouse—not once, not twice, but as if her finger had suddenly developed a nervous twitch. She repeatedly tapped away—panic rising as she deleted Lazzaro Ranaldi's number-one guest's entire financial history before his very eyes. He should step in, Caitlyn thought, frantically hitting the back arrow, sweat trickling between her breasts as his hand still hovered. His breath was on the back of her burning neck as an unfamiliar system command popped on screen, to taunt her.

*Put Susan to Bed.*

What?

Oh—she should have pressed cancel. As soon as she tapped okay, Caitlyn recalled the meaning of the strange prompt—that she really *didn't* want the computer system to shut down on the day, that she really, *really* didn't want to do the *one single thing* Glynn had told her she must never, ever do. But as the screen went black, Caitlyn knew that Susan wasn't just in bed, she was snoring her head off and completely unrousable as somewhere in the system she tallied and recorded the day's figures and guests' comings and goings.

Caitlyn never swore—well, never in front of her boss—but her curse was out before she could stop it. Glynn's alarmed expression told her that her frantic whisper had reached his ears.

'Everything okay?' Glynn checked nervously, from the other side of the desk, and Caitlyn looked up to face the lesser of two evils but Glynn's visible terror at her horrified expression held nothing that could console her. 'Everything is okay, isn't it?' he hissed.

'There seems to be a problem with the system.' Caitlyn attempted a calm voice, only her mouth seemed to belong to someone who had just stepped out of the dentist's after having a root canal procedure. Her lips struggled to form the words, her finger was still tapping away, but her whole body was absolutely rigid. She was wishing that she'd gone home when she could have—when she *should* have.

‘What the hell do you mean?’ Glynn snapped, moving to race his way around the counter. ‘A problem with the system? What on earth have you done, Caitlyn?’

Ended her career before it had even started, probably, Caitlyn thought with dread. Lazzaro Ranaldi’s temper was legendary amongst the staff—and something she’d never wanted to witness, particularly aimed at herself. Bracing herself for his caustic tongue, for a few choice expletives to fill the lavish reception area as he told her exactly what he thought of her computer skills, of her woeful inadequacy to work for such an exclusive hotel, bravely—*stupidly*, perhaps—Caitlyn lifted her head and craned her neck to face him.

Her terrified expression turned to one of bemusement as she saw that the eyes that met hers weren’t hostile at all. In fact, if she wasn’t mistaken, there was just the hint of a smile playing on the edge of his mouth.

‘It’s fine, Glynn.’ With one perfectly manicured hand he halted his manager’s progress. ‘You have guests to attend to.’ Lazzaro’s eyes fell on a rather affectionate couple at the desk, who really should get a room as quickly as possible. ‘As Caitlyn said, there is a small problem with the system—nothing I can’t sort.’

Was there really a problem with the system? Caitlyn wondered hopefully as Glynn went to sort out the couple, her eyes darting back to the now flickering screen of the computer.

‘Nothing that can’t be fixed ...’ He was leaning right over her now, as she stood frozen to the spot—and not just her

feet. Caitlyn's hand was still clutching the mouse like a frozen claw. Her throat tightened as his warm hand closed around hers, guiding it up to the little red arrow at the top and closing the programme—something Caitlyn was sure, positive in fact, that you shouldn't do. Her heart was thumping in her chest as he removed his hand—she should really step aside. Only she didn't. In fact, still she stood there, as his hands came around either side of her waist and moved to the keyboard. Her heart leapt up into her mouth as, without a single mistake, he calmly logged in and with impressive speed typed in the necessary details to retrieve Gus Dalton's information.

'Luckily everything is backed up.' His voice was low in her ear, and she waited for relief to flood her—waited for grateful breath to escape her lips as the crisis was averted. Only it never came. Her body was resisting the call to relax, and her mind was telling her in no uncertain terms that now certainly wasn't the time for complacency. Every nerve was on high alert, every cell, every shred of DNA was quivering with tension. Only it had nothing to do with her career, nothing to do with her boss catching her making a stupendous mistake, but everything to do with the man who was leaning over her, the heavy scent of him, the absolute undeniable maleness of him, was having the most dizzying effect.

'How...?' Caitlyn blinked. 'Glynn said that once Susan was put to bed...'

'All the day's data is sent to me for checking,' Lazzaro explained then elaborated, still tapping away. 'Nothing that



happens on this computer is deleted till I am satisfied it is okay...'

'Thank goodness for that.'

'So long as you're not attempting a dash of embezzlement...?'

He'd stopped typing now, put the delicious prison of his arms down as he stepped back, and Caitlyn thankfully exhaled before she turned to face him.

'Of course not!' Caitlyn giggled.

'Or having a few friends paying mate's rates while staying in the Presidential Suite?'

'Please!' Caitlyn laughed.

'Or mooning behind the desk checking e-mails and doing a spot of internet banking on my time?'

'Er, no.' Caitlyn wasn't laughing now. In fact she was having trouble forcing a smile.

'Or checking your horoscope...?'

Caitlyn didn't even attempt a denial. Her face was burning an unattractive shade of scarlet, but if she'd had the nerve to look up she'd have seen that he was smiling.

'Everything in order?' Glynn was positively dripping with nerves as he came over.

'Of course.' Lazzaro shrugged. 'I see that Gus paid in advance forty-eight hours before the reception...'

'Still...' Glynn cleared his throat. 'I thought I ought to warn him...'

'Lazzaro!' Smiling, loud, and as red in the face as Caitlyn, Gus Danton crossed the foyer. 'Come in and have a drink!'

‘I was just about to.’ Lazzaro nodded. ‘I trust everything has gone smoothly tonight?’

‘It’s been perfect!’ Gus enthused. ‘Everything’s gone off without a hitch. Actually...’ Gus turned to address Glynn. ‘Did you sort out the bar, like I asked?’

‘All done,’ Lazzaro answered for his manager. ‘You’ll be posted an itemised bill next week.’

‘Details, details...’ Gus waved them away. ‘Join us, Lazzaro.’

‘I’ll be there in just a moment.’

As Gus headed back to the ballroom, Lazzaro gave a nod to his waiting beauty. And though he didn’t whistle, though he didn’t wave a lead, as she jumped up eagerly, the only thing Caitlyn could liken her to was an over-eager dog, finding out it was about to be walked.

Every staff member stood rigid, every polished smile was perfectly in place as he stalked towards the ballroom, yet, like a leaky balloon, one could almost feel the tension seeping out as the ballroom doors were opened and Lazzaro and his date entered. But just as shoulders drooped, just as everyone prepared to exhale *en masse*, as if having second thoughts, he turned around—striding back to the reception desk and fixing a stunned Caitlyn with his stern glare.

‘Why did I do that?’ he demanded. ‘Come on—you are here to learn. Why, when this is a business, when I know he may not have the funds, would I choose, for now, to ignore it?’

‘Er...’ Caitlyn’s eyes darted to Glynn’s in a brief plea for

help, but when none was forthcoming she forced herself to look back at Lazzaro. ‘Because he’s a friend?’ Caitlyn attempted. Seeing his frown deepen, she had another stab. ‘Because he’s a guest and, rather than embarrass him tonight...’ The frown was still deepening as she frantically racked her brain. ‘Because he’s already paid so much...’

She was clearly completely off track. Her mind raced to come up with an answer, only she had none left. Bracing herself for the cracking whip of his putdown, she gave in. And he did the strangest, most unexpected thing.

‘All good reasons. But...’ That inscrutable, scathing expression slipped like a mask and broke into another smile of which Caitlyn was the sole beneficiary, and it was like stepping out into the sun unprotected—dazzling, warming, blinding her with its intensity, knocking her completely off guard, a smile that magnified everything. ‘He has three more daughters and all of them are single—so if tonight goes well, that is three more weddings...’

He didn’t finish. Bored now, he turned again and headed back to his date, and towards the ballroom.

And this time, for Caitlyn at least, the tension had only just started—and there wasn’t a trace of breath left in her lungs to be let out.

There were several clocks in the reception area, each giving the different times around the world—ten minutes to midnight in Melbourne, ten minutes to two in the afternoon in London, and

ten minutes to nine in the morning in New York—and Caitlyn glanced up at them, freeze-framing them in her mind. Because suddenly it was relevant; for the first time in her life Caitlyn actually understood the saying that time stood still...

Because it did.

At ten minutes to midnight Caitlyn's eyes were dragged back to Lazzaro's departing back, watching as he walked into the ballroom and out of her view, taking with him just a little piece of her very young, very tender heart.

'You might as well go home,' Glynn said a little while later. 'There's not much to do.'

'There will be, though.' Caitlyn coloured up a touch, her work ethic for once having nothing to do with her wanting to hang around. 'Once the wedding reception finishes.'

'It's all under control.'

'What are you going to do about Luca?' Caitlyn asked. 'All the best rooms are booked out for the wedding.'

'He'll be so wasted he won't notice if I put him in the broom cupboard.' Glynn rolled his eyes, then smiled. 'Have you thought about what I said? About working here while you study? A lot of our chambermaids are students.'

Caitlyn nodded. 'I'm going to put in my résumé on Monday.'

'Well, you can put me down as a reference,' Glynn said. 'You've done really well—here.' He handed her a cab voucher.

'What's this for? You don't have to do that!'

'Don't worry—I haven't gone soft. Lazzaro insists the hotel

pays for a taxi if staff work after eleven—and given that you're practically staff, he wouldn't hear otherwise!'

'So he can be nice, then?' Caitlyn fished. 'Despite what everyone says?'

'Unfortunately, yes.' Glynn sighed. 'Which means one always ends up forgiving him when he's being bloody! Night, Caitlyn.'

Chatting idly to the doorman, Caitlyn shivered—not with cold but with tiredness as she waited for ever for her taxi. But her weariness was quickly forgotten when Lazzaro's rather ravishing date came out alone and boot-faced, and was gobbled up by his limousine.

'Lovers' tiff.' Geoff winked, once she was safely off into the night. 'You'd think he'd have had the sense to wait till morning to get rid of her!'

'Have they been together long?' Caitlyn attempted to be casual but her face was burning.

'Never seen her till tonight,' Geoff said cheerfully. 'I'll give your taxi another reminder—mind you, the tennis is on. Why don't you wait inside and I'll call you when it comes?'

And she would have—only Lazzaro Ranaldi himself was coming through the revolving glass doors. Lazzaro Ranaldi himself was smiling at her as he walked past.

'You're either very late leaving, or arriving incredibly early.'

'I'm waiting for a taxi,' Caitlyn mumbled.

'You'll be waiting a while—the night match at the tennis just wrapped up.'

‘I heard.’

‘Would you like a lift?’

Just like that he said it—just like any *normal* person would say it. Only he wasn’t just a normal person, and Caitlyn had difficulty coming up with a normal answer. She just stood there mute for a moment as a few hundred thousand dollars’ worth of sleek silver sports car pulled up and the valet handed him the keys.

‘I was expecting the limousine!’ She put on a plummy voice and raised her nose in distaste at his stunning car—then panicked that he wouldn’t get her rather offbeat humour.

‘Sorry about that... You’ll just have to slum it in this...’ He didn’t just get it, he topped it! As Geoff opened the passenger door for her, Lazzaro peered inside at the immaculate leather upholstery. ‘I can look in the boot for a newspaper or something for you to sit on, so you don’t mess up your skirt.’

‘I’ll be fine.’ Caitlyn gave a martyred sigh and climbed into the seat, wriggling down in the baby-bottom-soft leather and returning his smile as he joined her, watching as he punched her address into the sat nav. And just like that she forgot to be nervous—just like that they purred off into the night, chatting about anything and everything—including her age.

‘How old are you, then?’ Lazzaro asked as she rattled on about her studies.

‘Twenty,’ Caitlyn lied. Then, realising he could look it up, she recanted. ‘Well, I will be on Thursday.’

He made a mental note to tell his PA to send flowers and book

a table—Thursday suddenly seemed an impossibly long way off.

*‘Turn left at the next roundabout and your destination is on the right,’* came the very calm voice of the sat nav.

‘The trouble with these things,’ Lazzaro said, smiling as he turned off the engine and faced her, ‘is that you can’t pretend you’re lost and prolong your journey.’

‘I know where I live,’ Caitlyn pointed out, but her heart was soaring at his blatant flirt.

‘Nice place.’ It was—amassiveold weatherboard in a very nice street, just a stone’s throw from the beach. Either there were a thousand students crammed in or, Lazzaro realised, she still lived at home. ‘Someone’s still up.’

‘My mum!’ Caitlyn frowned at the twitching curtain, wishing she’d just gone to bed, embarrassed all of a sudden and feeling about twelve years old. ‘Or my grandad.’

Only it didn’t bother him a bit—in fact, there was a certain novelty to it all. Lazzaro was used—too used—to sophisticates seductively inviting him up, having already gone down!

‘Then you’d better go in.’

He watched her face fall an inch, and, though he wanted nothing more than to reach over and kiss her, Lazzaro knew exactly how to keep a woman wanting more.

God, she was gorgeous, though, Lazzaro thought as she walked up her drive.

The front door was opening before she even got there.

Funny too, Lazzaro mused, smiling as he drove off into the

night. He'd put her out of her misery and ring her on Monday—put himself out of his misery too, Lazzaro thought, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Once he'd dealt with Luca he'd ring her.

Luca.

His face hardened when he thought of his twin brother—he was not relishing a bit the task that lay ahead.

Monday suddenly seemed impossibly close.

## CHAPTER ONE

'YOU bit him!' Black eyes fixed her with a stern glare as she stood at his desk. *This* was the very last thing Lazzaro needed to be dealing with today, and a petty row among the domestic staff was something he didn't usually have to.

'I didn't bite him,' Caitlyn snapped, and Lazzaro actually blinked. Her denial was not what he had been expecting—especially given the evidence. But her irritation, her indignation, even, told him that this five-minute problem that had landed on his desk at five p.m. on a hellish Friday was actually a rather more serious one. Jenna, his PA, had tearfully resigned on Wednesday, and *her* assistant was off with the flu that had swept through half his admin staff, which meant that today Lazzaro was dealing with what was usually expertly delegated. Only maybe it was just as well he was dealing with this particular scenario. It would seem that Caitlyn—he glanced down at the file on his desk—Caitlyn Bell, had a side to her story that he needed to hear.

Even if he really didn't want to.



‘It was just a little nip.’ China-blue eyes held his—eyes that were familiar somehow...eyes that were just as blue as Roxanne’s.

Where the hell had *that* thought come from?

This woman was nothing like Roxanne.

Caitlyn was as blonde as Roxanne was dark, and the woman who stood before him was petite whereas Roxanne was curvaceous, but those eyes... A tiny swallow was the only evidence of his inner turmoil—he was angry with himself that even after all this time the memories, the pain, could still wash over him at the most unexpected of times.

‘It’s not as if I sank my teeth in.’

Lazzaro dragged his mind back to the conversation, grateful to escape his own thoughts, and it was quite hard not to smile at her description, quite hard *not* to compare it to Malvolio’s—who had roared and ranted so loudly, his hand wrapped in a handkerchief, as if it was about to fall off. He hadn’t known what to expect when he’d called her to his office. He was the last person who would normally deal with one of the hotel’s maids, and when he did they were usually cowering in the chair. But not this one.

She’d declined his offer to sit, and was instead standing at his desk—jangling with nerves, perhaps, but curiously strong. Long blonde hair that was presumably usually neatly tied back was tumbling out of its hair-tie after the *incident*, her arms were folded across her chest, and the blue eyes were glassy from her trying not to cry. She kept sniffing in the effort not to, and

somehow, even if she was tiny, even if she was clearly shaken, somehow she was incredibly together too—her rosebud mouth pursed and defiant as she refused to relent.

‘I need more information.’

‘I really don’t see what all the fuss is about.’

‘One of my staff members has been bitten by another—’

‘Not just any one of your staff members...’

This time he deliberately didn’t blink. He held his expression in absolute check as she interrupted, and, though few usually dared, he let the fact go as Caitlyn Bell got straight to the rather awkward point.

‘Malvolio is, I believe, your brother-in-law.’

He gave a terse nod—a nod that was actually respectful, acknowledging what she had to say even while quickly disregarding it. ‘The fact Malvolio is my brother-in-law has no bearing in this matter—none whatsoever. Now, I want to hear exactly what happened.’

‘As Malvolio said, we were discussing a promotion—he tripped and, like a reflex action, he put out his hands to save himself—’

‘Caitlyn—’ Rather more usually, it was Lazzaro interrupting now, but unusually someone overrode him—someone’s voice got a touch louder and more insistent as Caitlyn spoke over him.

‘And—like a reflex action—I bit him.’ She gave a tight smile. ‘Or rather, I gave him a little nip.’

‘I want the truth.’

‘You just got it.’

‘Caitlyn, you are one of my staff...’

‘Not any more.’ She shook her head. ‘I just resigned.’

‘No.’ He wasn’t having it—he saw just a flash of tears in those stunning blue eyes, and loathed Malvolio for causing them. ‘You do not have to lose your job over this...’

‘I was already leaving. That’s why I was having a discussion with Malvolio in the first place. I’ve got an interview next week—a second interview, actually—for a PR position with the Mancini chain of hotels.’

‘A PR position?’ Lazzaro frowned. Alberto Mancini was both his friend and his rival. Both had hotels all over the world, both had formidable reputations, and both were choosy with their staff—and a chambermaid, no matter how well presented, wouldn’t cut it in PR. ‘You are a chambermaid. How can you have an interview for a PR—?’

‘I’ve been working as a maid while studying.’

‘Studying?’

‘Hospitality and tourism...’

He was only half listening—that jolt of recognition he had experienced when he saw her was explained now. That was where he knew her from. She’d been on the desk—funny that he could remember, but he did—and there had been a wedding... The Danton wedding ...that was it...

‘You did work experience here while you were studying?’

Lazzaro checked. ‘A couple of years ago?’

‘That’s right...’ Caitlyn blinked, stunned that he remembered, wondering *what* he remembered. ‘Just for a few days. I filled in an application form at the time, and I’ve been working as a maid while I’ve been studying ever since.’

He ran a hand over his forehead and trailed it down over his cheek, fingering for just a second the livid scar that ran the length of it. And for the second time in as many moments, Lazzaro came up with another logical explanation as to why this particular woman’s face remained in his memory.

*Before.*

The weekend before it had happened.

The weekend before, when life had been so much easier.

When laughing had come so much more readily.

He’d kissed thousands of women he couldn’t recall. Funny that he remembered one that he hadn’t.

‘Why haven’t you applied for a position here—given your history with the place?’

It was a perfectly reasonable question, one that her family and colleagues regularly asked, but one she simply couldn’t answer—and especially not to Lazzaro.

How could she tell him that for more than two years he’d been on her mind, that the king-size crush that had hit her that night—despite her busy life, despite dancing and fun and boyfriends—still hadn’t faded?

That she really needed to get a life.

One away from Lazzaro Ranaldi and the stupid torch she

carried for him.

Maybe if his brother hadn't died...maybe if she hadn't started work as a chambermaid...maybe if he hadn't been linked with Roxanne and it hadn't been on every news bulletin and in every paper or magazine Caitlyn had opened...then, after that initial meeting, she'd have moved quickly on, forgotten the feel of his eyes on hers, forgotten the thrill in her stomach as that dark, ruthless face had been softened by a rare smile. Only in the days after that meeting she'd seen the pain in those closed features screaming from the newspapers, had winced at the scurrilous gossip that had ensued, the blistering row between brothers that had preceded Luca Ranaldi's sudden and tragic death. But still working in the hotel—instead of moving on—she had caught her breath whenever she'd gleaned an occasional glimpse of him striding through the hotel, blushing in her maid's uniform as—naturally—he didn't deign to give her a glance. Though Caitlyn did. That perfect face, marred since that tragic day by a livid scar along his cheek, with lines now fanning his dark eyes and his mouth permanently set on grim. She could see the tension he carried in his shoulders, and wanted somehow for him to smile again.

Just the way he once had.

She hadn't spoken to him since that night—not even once. And thank goodness for that, Caitlyn realised, because despite more than two years between drinks, so to speak, still he absolutely moved her. Despite the angry scar on his cheek,

despite the closed, much more guarded expression he wore now, despite the pain in his eyes—still he was absolutely beautiful.

‘I need a bit more variety...’ Caitlyn answered truthfully—because she did. She needed to sample a world that didn’t have his name on every sheet of paper, needed to check her bank balance and not see ‘Ranaldi’, needed to just get over him—for good.

‘You’ll find nowhere better than right here.’

‘You’re probably right...’ Caitlyn’s face twisted slightly at the unwitting irony of his statement. ‘But I really think it’s time for a change—so you see today really doesn’t matter. I was leaving soon anyway.’

‘But it *does* matter, Caitlyn. You have worked for this hotel for two years and one month.’ He gave a small swallow as her eyes narrowed, and he glanced again at her file, as if he’d gleaned the information from there. Only he hadn’t—the date was indelibly etched on his mind, but she didn’t need to know why...

It had nothing to do with her.

‘If anything untoward has happened, you have the same rights as any other staff member. Just because Malvolio is family...’

‘I hear your sister’s having a baby...’ She pulled a crumpled tissue out of her pocket and gave her nose a rather loud blow.

‘What does that have to do with this?’ Lazzaro’s voice was completely even, his face impassive, but he had to stop himself from drumming his fingers on the desk—actually had to remind himself to keep looking her in the eye as she voiced his very

thoughts. How the hell would Antonia cope? She had just started to get her life back on track after Luca's death, the new baby was due in just a few days, there was his niece, Marianna, just four years old—what the hell had Malvolio been *thinking*?

‘It has everything to do with this!’ Caitlyn gulped. ‘Look, I’m fine—I really am—and I don’t want any fuss. I just want to get my things and leave.’

And, though it must surely be the last thing she wanted after the day’s events, all *he* wanted to do was to walk around the desk and put his arms around her, this little spitfire who had marched into his office on his command and was about to walk out against it. And, yes, technically it would be so much easier to let her go. But it would be wrong, so very wrong, if he did.

‘Caitlyn—let’s just talk about this. It can be dealt with—you really do not have to leave.’

‘Oh, but I think I do,’ she countered. ‘As I said, I’ve got the Mancini interview...I can muddle through till then. Though...’ Her voice faded, her head shaking at the impossibility of explaining her problems to him.

‘What?’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘Probably not to me.’

She managed a wan smile, realising she had no choice but to tell him. ‘I’ve been doing a lot of overtime for the last two months. A *lot* of overtime,’ Caitlyn reiterated.

‘I will ensure that you’re paid.’

‘It’s just that...’ Caitlyn took a deep breath. ‘I’m applying for a mortgage, and I need three months of payslips to show my earnings.’ She scuffed the carpet with her foot. ‘I told the bank it was my regular wage.’

‘Without overtime?’ Lazzaro checked. ‘But wouldn’t that show up on your payslip?’

‘Quite!’ Caitlyn blushed.

‘So you lied to the bank?’

‘Not lied exactly.’ Caitlyn gulped. ‘Malvolio said it...’ She watched his eyes narrow, realised he must be thinking there was something more to their working relationship. There truly wasn’t. She had asked and he had agreed—it was as simple as that. ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter.’ Caitlyn shrugged. ‘I need three payslips anyway.’

‘Then stay.’

‘I don’t want to.’ She stood firm. ‘I’d rather not put Malvolio down as a reference. I know he deals with the domestic staff, and I know he usually would be the one, but I...’

‘You can put me—I can assure you I have more influence with Mancini than Malvolio does, and I will ensure it is extremely favourable.’

‘How?’ Caitlyn frowned. ‘How can you write my reference when you don’t know anything about me?’

‘Oh, but I think I do.’ Her words, only spoken through his lips now. He stared over at her—little, but strong and, unlike his brother-in-law, unlike the father of the baby, this stranger actually gave a damn about the woman who was carrying his



child.

‘I will get the forms and have your pay made up. I will do it on Monday—that way, if you change your mind over the weekend —,’

‘Could you get the forms now, please?’ She wasn’t looking at him now, instead staring out of his vast windows somewhere over his shoulder at the Melbourne city skyline. ‘I won’t be changing my mind.’

‘Just think about it.’

‘I’d like the forms now.’

This time she didn’t add please.

This time Lazzaro knew there was no persuading her otherwise.

‘Where’s Malvolio?’

Storming through the Admin corridors, Lazzaro caught everyone by surprise. Admin staff with bags over their shoulders, hoping to slope off a little early, suddenly sat back down and started tapping at blank screens; the raucous laughter coming from the boardroom that signalled end-of-week drinks that Lazzaro supplied for his team, which should start at five but in fact seemed to start around lunchtime, snapped off as if the power had been pulled as he stormed into rather unfamiliar territory. His suite was on the top floor, and he had a private lift that absolutely bypassed the usually well-oiled engines of Admin.

But come five p.m. on Friday, the wheels fell off somewhat! ‘He’s gone!’ Audrey Miller, Malvolio’s assistant, gave an

anxious smile. ‘He had to dash off—Antonia rang and said she was having some cramps...’

‘Antonia’s in labour?’

‘I’m not sure.’ Audrey gulped. ‘But the staff got a bit excited, as you can see...’

There wasn’t a hope in hell of getting the termination forms—let alone a final cheque cut.

He’d deal with the lot of them on Monday.

Right now, his sister could be in labour.

His brother-in-law by her side.

The same brother-in-law who had forced Caitlyn Bell’s resignation for all the wrong reasons.

## CHAPTER TWO

DAMN!

Pacing the floor of the huge office, Caitlyn paused for a moment to blow her nose again, and rummaged in her bag for her compact, powdering her reddened face and telling herself to hold it together for just a little while longer.

She’d surely get another job—but she also needed those three blasted payslips just in case the court ruling went against her mother.

It wouldn’t, Caitlyn consoled herself. Their lawyer had assured them that everything was under control. A moan of horror escaped her lips at the thought of that same lawyer’s bill, sitting on the dining room table—a bill that had to be paid before he’d proceed further.

What the hell was she going to do?

She'd lied to Lazzaro about a second interview with the Mancini chain—she hadn't even had the first interview yet. Her application was still sitting half-typed on her computer! Actually, she'd lied to Lazzaro about everything. There had been no discussion about a promotion; Malvolio had just been his usual sleazy self. She'd been sitting on her afternoon break, minding her own business, when he'd come into the coffee room and again suggested they catch up for a drink after work.

Again she'd declined.

'You've got something in your hair.'

He'd come over, had stood behind her where she sat, and, as if being touched by a lizard, she'd flinched as his hand had made contact with her hair. She had screwed her eyes closed as he'd brushed something that surely wasn't there away, wishing the horrible moment over, only the horror hadn't even begun. The lizard had been on the move.

'Come on, Caitlyn...stop teasing me...'

His filthy hands had crept down; she'd been able to hear his breath coming short and hard behind her.

'I'm not teasing you...' Her head had been spinning. The confrontation she'd dreaded—dreaded but convinced herself would never happen, that she was surely imagining things—was actually here. *'Malvolio, you're married...'*

*'Antonia....'* His hand had moved down. *'She is so wrapped up in herself and the baby. You and I could be so good together....'*

Paralysed, she'd sat, watched his fingers sneaking at the top of her dress, her brain literally frozen. It had been like being stuck in a nightmare, where you couldn't scream. She'd known that by doing nothing she was implying consent...and if she couldn't speak, if she couldn't scream, then there were two other choices that had sprung to her panicked mind: vomit or bite.

Caitlyn had chosen the latter!

She could still hear his screams of rage—hear again the vile torrent of words he'd spat at her as he'd jumped back—and, like a child, she put her hands over her ears, blocked out what he had said to her. She just didn't want to go there right now.

How, Caitlyn begged herself as she resumed her pacing, could he think she'd teased him? She'd gone out of her way to avoid him, though she had felt his unwelcome eyes on her for months now, had done everything possible to avoid... Her eyes shuttered in wretched horror. The consequences of her resignation were starting to hit home. The prospect of going home and telling her mother that she no longer had work... Oh, a chambermaid's wage wasn't going to change the world, but for now at least it meant holding onto her mother's.

A single mother, Helen Bell had done *everything* to provide not just for her daughter, but for her own father. When Caitlyn's grandmother had died, two years after Caitlyn was born, concerned about her father's declining health and mounting financial problems, Helen had moved back to the family home, working several jobs to pay the mortgage and bills and had

gradually cleared his debts. It hadn't all been a struggle, though—the home had been a happy one, with Caitlyn's grandfather more than happy to mind his grandchild while Helen worked hard. And in later years, as his health had declined, both Helen and Caitlyn had in turn been more than happy to care for him—nursing him at home right till the end.

Caitlyn's aunt Cheryl had rarely put in an appearance—until after the funeral. Of course the family home Helen had worked so hard to keep and pay for had been left to her. But Cheryl had had it valued—the beachside suburb close to the city was prime real estate now—and Cheryl wanted not only the generous cash sum that her father had bequeathed to her in his will, but half the value of the family home. Egged on by Roxanne and a greedy lawyer, she was moving heaven and earth to ensure that she got it.

'Bloody Roxanne and Auntie Cheryl...' Caitlyn hissed. Why couldn't they just leave them alone?

The ringing of the phone halted her pacing for less than a second. Her mind was so consumed with her own problems that at first she didn't even give it a glance.

She needed work so badly, but here it would be impossible. Lazzaro was hardly going to fire his own brother-in-law. It would be her word against his. And what about Malvolio's poor wife? How—?

The phone resumed its shrill, and irritated now, unable to ignore it, Caitlyn picked it up.

'Lazzaro Ranaldi's phone. This is Caitlyn Bell speaking.'

She didn't notice Lazzaro come in at first, just listened as a rather exasperated female voice demanded that she be put through.

'I'm sorry, Mr Ranaldi isn't in his office right now. But if you'd like to leave your name, as soon as he returns I'll let him know that you called...'

Half turning, she saw him, and was just about to hand the phone over when instinct kicked in somehow. The dash of bitters in the woman's voice was telling Caitlyn that perhaps this was one call Lazzaro might be glad to miss, so instead of handing him the receiver, she grabbed a pen and scribbled down the woman's name. *Lucy*.

She even managed a little smile when he grimaced and shook his head while Lucy vented her spleen down the phone.

'Of course,' Caitlyn said sweetly. 'I'll be sure to let him know.' Replacing the receiver, she turned to her very soon to be ex-boss. 'You're a bastard!'

'Thank you for passing it on.'

'And she knows you're there and just refusing to talk to her.'

'Anything else?'

'Er, that was pretty much it,' Caitlyn lied. Well, she was hardly going to tell him that 'just because he's fabulous in bed, it doesn't make up for the way he's treated me'. Though she did give him a rather edited version of the teary conclusion to the call. 'She'd like you to call her—any time,' Caitlyn emphasised. 'Any time at all! So...' Noticing his empty hands, she raised her eyebrows.

‘Where are the forms?’

‘In a filing cabinet.’ He gave an apologetic grimace. ‘Only I’m not sure which one...but I will write you a cheque now...’

‘A cheque’s not much good to me at this time on a Friday.’ She didn’t want to stay another second. Another second and she’d start crying; another second and she’d crumple. The brave façade she was wearing so well was seriously falling apart—the hem unravelling along with the seams—so she hitched her bag on her shoulder and headed for the door. ‘Just have it all posted to me on Monday.’

‘Caitlyn.’ His strong voice summoned her back, but she kept on walking. ‘Just listen to me for a moment. What if I were to offer you a job as my personal assistant?’

Now, that was enough to stop her in her tracks—only not enough to make her turn around.

‘Me?’

Her hand paused as it reached for the handle and Lazzaro spoke on. ‘Clearly I need someone, and you have no idea of some of the poor efforts the agency has sent. You handled that call well, you are qualified, and you are clearly...’ he gave a slightly uncomfortable cough ‘...discreet...’

‘I can’t.’

The words shot out on instinct—her dream job, everything that she’d wished for coming true, and the money, oh, God, the money would make *such* a difference. Only she couldn’t do it—just couldn’t do it. And bitter, so bitter, was her regret.

‘I can’t face seeing Malvolio again.’ Her voice was shrill, and still she didn’t turn around. Her hand was on the door now, but not to open it, more for support. The horrors of the day were finally catching up, the feelings she had denied, had willed herself not to examine until she was safely alone, were making searing contact with her brain now. ‘I don’t think I could stand to be...’

Silence filled the room. Only it wasn’t peaceful. It was that horrible silence of a strangled sob, the thud of reality, that moment when it all catches up and there’s nothing that can be done to push it back down—when you can’t keep smiling as if you’re stupid, when you can’t pretend that you don’t care and that it didn’t really matter that filthy hands had dirtied your life. Yes—in a while she’d no doubt be able to shrug it off; in a while she’d probably put it all into perspective and apportion the correct blame. In a while it wouldn’t matter as much as it mattered now.

But right now it mattered.

And it mattered to Lazzaro too.

Seeing her convulse—seeing this proud, strong woman wilt for a second—he found it mattered enough to propel him from his desk, to literally peel her trembling body from the door, to turn her around to face him and hold her. Like some mountain rescuer he reached her on the cliff-edge and tried to imbue her with his warmth.

‘I hate him...’ She wasn’t talking to Lazzaro; he knew that. ‘I *hate* him.’

‘I know.’



‘I’ll be okay soon.’ She gulped, knowing she would, just confirming it to herself. She was embarrassed now at letting him see her cry, but he held her closer as she started to pull away, and after just a second of protest she let him—let him comfort her, let him hold her as the horror slowly receded, her breathing slowing at just listening to the soothing thud of his heart in his chest.

For Lazzaro there was one inevitable end to holding a woman in his arms. The luxury of having a penthouse suite as your office meant there was a bed just a door away, and as he stared down at lips swollen from nibbling teeth and salty tears, instinct told him to kiss her—to soothe her in the way he soothed women best. Only a deeper instinct prevailed.

Morality—which was usually void—crept in. His kiss was surely not what she needed now.

Only it was.

It felt like for ever that she’d dreamt of being in his arms, but now it had happened Caitlyn found out dreams didn’t actually compare. Being held by him was so blissfully consuming, the circle of his arms so strong and safe, that nothing else could invade. She felt the shift in him, felt the shift from comfort to more, and she actually *wanted* him to kiss her, wanted his hands on her to erase the grubby stains Malvolio’s had left.

But he didn’t. Instead he held her for just a little bit more, held her close as she assimilated all that had taken place and put it into some sort of order, and when finally he let her go, when finally

she could stand alone again, the world was certainly a nicer place than the one she'd left just moments ago.

'Malvolio manages the housekeeping staff. He's rarely in the office and I'm rarely here. The job would involve a lot of travel...' His voice was low, his gaze direct as he told her he hadn't changed his mind.

'But even so...' Caitlyn protested. 'I'd still have to see him sometimes...' Again she shook her head, but she wasn't so certain now. Lazzaro believed her. Lazzaro knew. And he would, she was sure, sort it.

That thought was confirmed when Lazzaro spoke next. 'He will not trouble you at all—I will go and see him and make very sure of it. You do not have to leave.'

'I haven't got any experience...' She was being offered her dream job, a fast-track to what would normally take years to achieve, and even if it was foolhardy to show how woefully inadequate she was for such an esteemed position, really she had no choice.

'You haven't picked up any bad habits, then.' For the first time today she saw him smile, then he gestured to the desk. 'Sit down.'

Formality was welcome.

Formality she could actually deal with.

So she listened as he took her through her new role, blinking at the description of international flights and luxury hotels that would now pepper her existence, at a salary that made her eyes widen, and at the prospect of a life, as Lazzaro strongly pointed

out, that would be basically put on hold to accommodate his.

‘My time is valuable,’ Lazzaro said, and she nodded. ‘Take today—I should not be going to Admin to get forms, and nor will you be able to. That is why you too will have an assistant. My former PA has a list of names somewhere, of people who can be put through to me without question, people who first you check and people who, like Lucy, you will have to deal with.’ He gave a tight smile. ‘At times your work will be menial, and at times it will be downright boring—such as sitting in a car waiting for me. At other times the stress and demands will be intense. Each morning we will go through my day—each week we will plan my schedule. For example, in a couple of weeks we will fly to Rome—’

‘I don’t speak Italian...’

‘Lucky for you then, that nearly all my staff in Rome speak excellent English... Still, if you do decide to remain in this position, that is something you might be wise to address.’

*If she decided to remain! Who would be mad enough to leave such a fabulous job?*

Lazzaro must have caught the slightly incongruous dart of her eyes.

‘I have never had a PA stay for more than a year—that is how long you will be contracted for. Towards the end of your term we will discuss your future. This is an exceptionally demanding role—and, yes, I am an exceptionally demanding boss. I have high standards, a formidable workload, and at some point you will no

doubt decide that no amount of money or perks can make up for it.’

‘Is that why Jenna left?’ Caitlyn asked, because she’d heard that you should find out the reasons any position was vacant. Though when Lazzaro answered she rather wished that she hadn’t.

‘Jenna had certain demands that I wasn’t prepared to meet.’

Like monogamy? Caitlyn was tempted to say, but thankfully she didn’t—their private affair had not been so private, given it was she who had changed the sheets!

‘At some point,’ Lazzaro continued, ‘you will want to resume your own life—I accept that. However, a period of working for me will open many doors for you.’

‘I just don’t get why me, when it’s clearly such a demanding role...’ Caitlyn’s mouth was suddenly dry—she was acutely aware that she was sitting in a chambermaid’s dress, suddenly being interviewed for a plum position. ‘And though naturally I’d love the opportunity, I just don’t understand why you’d just hand it to me. If it’s because of what happened with Malvolio—’

‘After several unsuccessful interviews, I wasted yet another hour this afternoon attempting to explain to a very boutique recruitment agency my needs,’ Lazzaro interrupted. ‘Outlining what it was I was looking for in an assistant. Next week I will be paraded with a number of what they consider suitable applicants. I do not necessarily want someone who speaks fluent Italian. I do not want someone who on paper has “excellent interpersonal

skills” but in reality cannot read a situation. I want someone who, without being told, writes down the name of a caller they assume might be difficult.’ His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he looked over at her. ‘I guess you just know sometimes that you’ve found the person you’re looking for.’

‘Quite!’ Caitlyn croaked, then coloured up, biting on her bottom lip, wishing she were hearing that from him somewhere other than in an interview.

‘And,’ Lazzaro continued, ‘I want someone who has the guts to be honest.’

‘I *am* honest...’ Caitlyn flared.

‘Just not with your bank.’ He grinned. ‘Look, I am not asking you to sign away the rest of your life. I understand that the role is too consuming, too demanding to expect longevity. But most people I interview are using this as a stepping stone—are prepared to work hard for a few months because of the doors it will open. I want someone who is prepared to work hard, full-stop. So when you are thinking of leaving—which you will—I want you to tell me.’

‘Okay...’ Caitlyn nodded, only she didn’t sound very convinced—wasn’t convinced at all, in fact, that she would ever leave. Still, maybe this was the way to get over him, she decided, looking at the multitude of positives. Maybe witnessing his legendary bloody nature first hand might just get her to put out the light on the stupid torch she’d been carrying for him.

‘Are you in a relationship?’

‘Excuse me?’ Caitlyn’s response was suitably appalled. ‘I hardly think that’s relevant.’

‘But it is,’ Lazzaro countered. ‘He is going to have to be one very patient man to accept that he’s hardly going to see you—that if this goes ahead, as of Monday, I come first!’

‘Well, I’m not in a relationship.’ Caitlyn sniffed. ‘We just broke up.’

‘Excellent.’ Lazzaro smiled. ‘How long were you together?’

‘Why? Are you worried I’m going to be crying into my tissues instead of concentrating on you?’

‘I’m just curious.’ Lazzaro shrugged. ‘Given that we’re going to be working so closely together, we’re going to get to know these things about each other.’

Hardly! Caitlyn choked back the word—she couldn’t imagine asking Lazzaro to pass the tissues as she cracked a bar of chocolate and told him that the reason she and Dominic had broken up was because—because... She closed her eyes and cringed. Because of the things she *didn’t* do. Because, at the ripe old age of twenty-two, she was still a virgin!

‘Purple!’ Caitlyn said instead, giving a tight smile at Lazzaro’s bemused frown. ‘I’m wearing purple knickers, before you ask, and we were together six months. He ended it, but I was actually about to. Is that enough information for you?’

‘For now...’ He gave her a very lazy smile, and stared at her for the longest time without even attempting to speak. For Caitlyn it was excruciating as she awaited what she knew was about to

be a summing up. ‘You’re very...’ he paused before he delivered his verdict ‘...different.’

‘I am.’

‘Very interesting...’ Lazzaro mused.

‘I’m hard bloody work, actually!’

‘I like hard work.’ Lazzaro grinned, and she nearly shot out of her chair at the look he was giving her. ‘Well, I look forward to working with you. That will be all.’

‘Not quite.’ Caitlyn saw his frown of surprise and she took a deep breath before speaking. ‘Generally at the end of an interview the interviewee is asked if she has any questions or anything she’d like to add.’

‘Do you?’

‘Actually, yes...’ Caitlyn hesitated for a second—could absolutely hear the horrified shriek of the little devil that sat on her shoulder as she decided to be up-front. But there was no point in taking this job, no point at all, if one thing wasn’t made perfectly clear from the start. She’d heard Lazzaro was a tough and demanding boss, that he had no qualms at all about speaking his mind—loudly on occasion. That she could accept, so long as Lazzaro could accept her. ‘I admire the fact that you speak your mind. However...’ her blue eyes locked with his ‘...so do I.’

‘I’d already worked that one out,’ Lazzaro countered. ‘Though stand-up rows with my personal assistant I can do without.’

‘Oh, there’ll be no stand-up rows.’ Caitlyn smiled. ‘I’m more professional than that. But, before you formally offer me the

position, you should know that I do have a tongue, and one that I'll use if I think I'm being spoken to inappropriately—no matter how good the salary, manners cost nothing.'

Lazzaro, though his face never moved a muscle, was actually smothering a smile; listening to Caitlyn was as unique as it was refreshing—almost as if *he* were the one being interviewed for the job.



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