



ITALIAN BOSS, RUTHLESS REVENGE (Harlequin comics)

By Carol Marinelli

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Editorial Review

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'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 ...

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