

The Ruthless Italian's Inexperienced Wife

Christina Hollis



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**The Ruthless Italian's
Inexperienced Wife**

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Step into a world of sophistication and glamour, where sinfully seductive heroes await you in luxurious international locations. From virgin nanny – to the boss's bride! Nanny Cheryl Lane has been summoned to Tuscany by billionaire Marco Rossi. His ruthless, brooding reputation precedes him. Marco Rossi has hired Cheryl to look after his orphaned nephew. But little does he realise that he's employed such a ripe young beauty; she may try to hide her luscious curves beneath a dowdy uniform, but Marco's no fool... The desire to unbutton the prim Miss Lane is so tempting – and he could never resist a challenge...

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He followed her, but in his own sweet time.

Cheryl felt as though she was in the presence of some large predator who watched her every move. She closed the door to little Vettor's room, tense with expectation. By now Marco was standing so close behind her she could almost feel his soft, warm breath on her neck. She hesitated, alight with nerves. They were both waiting for something to happen. Compelled to turn and look at him, Cheryl had to lower her head the instant their eyes met. His expression was too intense. The only way she could cope with those burning blue eyes was to look up at him from beneath her lashes.

'I'm only trying to be helpful, Marco.'

He smiled.

'Oh, I'm sure you're going to be invaluable...'

Christina Hollis was born in Somerset, and now lives in the idyllic Wye Valley. She was born reading, and her childhood dream was to become a writer. This was realised when she became a successful journalist and lecturer in organic horticulture. Then she gave it all up to become a full-time mother of two, and to run half an acre of productive country garden. Writing Mills & Boon® romances is another ambition realised. It fills most of her time between complicated rural school runs. The rest of her life is divided between garden and kitchen, either growing fruit and vegetables or cooking with them. Her daughter's cat always closely supervises everything she does around the home, from typing to picking strawberries!

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THE RUTHLESS ITALIAN'S INEXPERIENCED WIFE

BY

CHRISTINA HOLLIS



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CHAPTER ONE

WAS that something burning? Cheryl jumped from her chair and started searching the bedroom. Within seconds she discovered where the smell was coming from. The light glowing on Vettor's bedside table was covered in a thin layer of dust. She wiped it clean with a dry paper towel, fooling herself that everything was all right again.

Here she was, alone in a foreign country—no, it was worse than that. She was marooned in a creepy old villa with only a sick toddler for company. Leaning over the bed, she sponged his hot face with cool water. The poor little boy had to be kept calm. She didn't want to frighten him with her own worries.

Her fingers dug into the flannel as she remembered how helpless she had felt when RTN had broadcast warnings of a ferocious storm heading for Florence. The day staff had already left for their homes. The only worker living permanently at the Villa Monteolio was the caretaker. Cheryl had felt safe with him and his wife so close at hand. But then the storm had attacked, and when his wife had been struck by a tile, blown from the roof, the caretaker had rushed her to hospital.

Cheryl was now totally alone. She made another quick check of the sickroom. Expecting the power to go off at any second, she wanted to make sure she could find her way around in darkness if the worst happened. This summer storm had been screaming violently all evening. The electricity had been dipping in and out for hours. *Any ancient country house was bound to suffer from power cuts*, Cheryl told herself. *If only this old place wasn't quite so Gothic...*

She looked up at the nearest carving. A stone angel perched on a ledge, holding a shield. It gazed across to the opposite wall, where a once identical partner crouched. The other angel's head had been knocked straight off its shoulders—recently, she guessed. The exposed stone was pale, and still crumbling. Now and then a scatter of loosened grit rattled down against the flagstones.

Cheryl thought of the nervous warnings the villa's staff had given her that morning. *'Don't upset Signor Rossi whatever you do,'* they muttered. *'He's a demon in disguise.'* Cheryl, thinking they were teasing, had laughed at the time.

She wasn't laughing now.

Another icy blast slammed against the northeastern corner of the house. All the shutters and doors creaked in a diabolical chorus. Wind streamed through them, finding every crack and crevice in the Villa Monteolio. The power dipped again. Shadows engulfed the stone angels.

Cheryl gripped the nearest solid thing. It was the arm of the chair she intended sleeping in, though the idea of getting any rest on her first night in a place like the Villa Monteolio during this hellish storm was beyond a joke. As she held on tight, the chair seemed to tremble. She gasped. Did they have earthquakes in Italy? She didn't know. They were on the ground floor of the house, and, glancing around quickly, she reassured herself everything looked built to last. Perhaps she ought to check the room above, and make sure nothing was likely to come crashing through the ceiling onto Vettor's bed.

Life had taught Cheryl to prepare for the worst and deal with it, but her little charge might wake while she was gone. What would happen if there was a power cut at the same time? She couldn't bear to think of Vettor opening his eyes in darkness. That was why she'd hunted out the old emergency

lamp and set it up beside his bed without thinking to clean it first. It was why she kept this vigil. She was sure the power would go down as soon as she left the room. She dithered. If Vettor woke, surely the battery light would be enough to keep him company until she got back? If she went at all...

Cheryl fretted over what to do. Breathless seconds passed as she waited to see if an earthquake really would join all her other problems. Luckily, after that first shiver, the chair didn't move again. That *might* mean she only had Vettor and the storm to worry about.

After an eternity, she risked sinking onto the chair's seat. It felt stable enough, but she couldn't help wondering what the next panic would be. Outside, tiles had been falling like autumn leaves all evening. When interviewing her for this new job, Signor Rossi's human resources manager had told Cheryl to expect chaos. The old place was a wreck. So she'd known the Villa Monteolio was a work in progress, but the holes in its roof had still come as a shock.

Rain must be gushing in everywhere by now. Cheryl glanced around nervously. How long before the upstairs ceilings started to bulge? She *really* ought to go and check on everything. Finding out what was going on would be better than sitting here worrying. On the other hand, if she went to investigate, what could she do? Water and mess might be ruining the top floors, but no workman would struggle all the way out here in this weather. Cheryl decided to stay put and keep the little boy company. Any damage to the villa would have to wait. It wasn't her problem anyway—she already had enough of her own.

Work was Cheryl's refuge from pain. Taking this job in Italy was supposed to help her forget what a mess her life had become. Her parents couldn't resist forcing her most recent disaster down her throat at every opportunity, so she'd left England to make a fresh start. The past could really hurt her, but now reality was attacking her on every side as well. It was horrible.

A tremendous squealing crash echoed in from outside, catapulting Cheryl out of her seat. The electric lightbulb dimmed and went out. It hardly mattered. Flickering flashes of blue-white light flooded the room, bursting through the window shutters. Cheryl dashed over to them and peered between their slats, squinting against the glare. The gale had torn up one of the great trees lining the Villa Monteolio's rutted drive. Its branches were bouncing on a power line, and sparks arced into the darkness, lighting up the driving rain.

She grabbed her phone. When the caretaker and his wife had been forced to leave, Cheryl had asked them for a telephone directory and programmed in every emergency number she could find, just in case. *Good job I did*, she thought, though it still took what seemed like for ever to get through to the electricity company. Half the area was in trouble tonight. The call operator promised to send someone out to the Villa Monteolio as soon as they could, but didn't know how long it would take.

A small voice croaked from the other side of the room.

Dropping her phone, Cheryl ran straight over to the bed.

'Vettor, it's me—Cheryl. You remember? Your new nanny?'

The three-year-old's eyes glittered with fever.

Cheryl peeled the compress off his forehead, freshening it in a bowl of water before she spoke again.

'I'm here, Vettor. We're at your uncle Marco's house. I've been trying to get hold of him, so he can come and see you,' she said brightly, silently thinking of all the unanswered messages she had left with his uncle's secretary.

There was no reply from her patient. Taking a fresh glass of cold water and the wet flannel back to his bedside, she wiped his face and hands, then gave him a drink.

'He'll be busy,' the little boy said sadly. 'He's always busy.'

The words came straight from his heart. They saddened Cheryl so much she couldn't look at him.

'Signor Rossi is a very hard-working man.' Cheryl stopped herself using the most obvious word, *workaholic*.

She sighed, thinking of the procession of personal assistants she had dealt with since answering that advert in *The Lady*. Half a dozen different professionals had interviewed her, but never the man himself. They were equally polished, but every one of them was doing a job, not living a life. What sort of man took on a nanny for his orphaned nephew without checking her out for himself? A man who could ignore all Cheryl's most urgent calls today, that was who. Someone whose staff had told her they were afraid of him.

She tugged at Vettor's bedsheet again, smoothing it over his restless little body. 'At midnight, the radio said all the roads for miles around were closed. It's because of this bad weather. Your uncle must be held up somewhere.'

Luckily, her little charge drifted back into feverish sleep. She did not have to dodge any more difficult questions. *All I must do is survive until someone gets here*, she told herself, jumping like a kitten as a door banged somewhere, far off.

It would be light in a few hours' time. Things would feel better in daylight. Wouldn't they?

As Cheryl tried to reassure herself, another great gust exploded against the house. Every window in the building shook. Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a scream. Whatever happened, she mustn't scare little Vettor.

Biting the side of her thumb in terror, she braced herself for another blast. But when her next shock came, the gale wasn't responsible. A very human sound burst through the storm's racket, flinging Cheryl from her chair again. Someone was hammering at the front door.

She exhaled, feeling as though she'd been holding her breath for hours. It must be the electricians. What a relief! She was desperate to get the power back on again, for Vettor's sake. She checked her little charge and then grabbed a torch. Groping her way through the gloomy old building, she was glad to reach the great entrance hall without getting lost.

The arcing power lines bounced huge shadows crazily around the vast space. At any other time Cheryl would have been alarmed, but she was beyond that tonight. She didn't give herself time to think. Sprinting across to the imposing studded oak door, she pulled it open, sobbing with relief.

'Oh, thank God you're here!' she screamed at the large silhouette.

Then thunder crashed, right overhead. Cheryl jumped like a frog, dropped the torch—and fell straight into the stranger's arms.

He caught her, and held her close. Wind screamed around them in a fury of torn twigs and leaves, but Cheryl didn't care. Instinctively, she knew she was safe. The new arrival was sheltering her with his body, shielding her from harm. As his cheek pressed hard against the side of her head, he murmured quiet reassurance.

'Shh... *lei è sicuro con me*,' he whispered into her hair.

His voice was so reassuring all Cheryl's old fears were soothed away, along with her current terror.

But gradually fingers of reality fastened onto her again. What was she thinking? She stiffened, and tried to draw back from him.

'I'm sorry. My Italian is very basic...'

'Then I shall speak English. Is that better?'

Cheryl relaxed instantly. A voice speaking her own language was exactly what she wanted to hear so far from home.

'It's more than better, it's wonderful!' she said with real feeling. She'd been in Italy for less than a day, but her head was already throbbing. Trying to memorise new words while leafing through a phrasebook was hard enough at the best of times, but Cheryl had also been busy meeting new workmates—familiarising herself with a different workplace and dealing with a case of scarlet fever at the same time.

'Oh... I'm so sorry for that outburst, *signor*... you must think I'm a complete idiot. The boss here wanted to employ an English person, and as everyone else is apparently scared to death of him...'

The dark outline of the stranger's head dipped, and she heard a soft sound that might have been laughter.

'Don't worry. There's no need to apologise. This is the worst storm I've ever seen.' His voice bubbled with amusement. 'Isn't there a caretaker on duty?'

'He's had to go to hospital—' Cheryl began, but the wind swirled around them again. She shivered instinctively, sensing a hint of autumn in the air.

Instead of letting her go, the stranger tightened his grip. His bulky shape was an irresistible force, hustling her backwards into the building. She was more than willing to let him direct her into the darkened hall. As long as she didn't have to go on facing this storm on her own in this echoing old barn of a house she could stifle her usual feelings of panic in the presence of such overpowering masculinity.

There was a crash as the front door slammed shut. Her rescuer was still holding her securely against his powerful body, so Cheryl barely flinched. With the sounds of wind and torrents of water muffled, rational thought became easier for her. She supposed he must have kicked the door shut. She couldn't be certain, because she couldn't see past him. His vice-like hands were holding her so tightly she could barely move of her own accord. He was drenched, and dripping with rain, but Cheryl hung on. It was madness, but she couldn't let go. She was in the grip of a man and she didn't care. This *must* be a once in a lifetime storm.

Her legs gave way with the relief of it all, but the stranger held her up. Changing his hold to encircle her with only one of his strong arms, he supported her weight. Hugging her to his body, he comforted her with a voice that was lyrical, with a low, slow accent.

'There, there...it's all right now...'

Turning her in towards his body, he started patting her back softly.

Cheryl trembled with fear, but it wasn't only the storm terrifying her. Memories from the past, of Nick, came flooding back. Her mind did its best. It tried to keep her safe, telling her to make a stand and push this stranger off. But she was frozen to the spot.

Suddenly, thunder broke overhead again. Cheryl screamed, and the man's hand went straight to the back of her head. He pulled her face in tight against his chest, murmuring soft words still deeper into her ear. Now he was running one hand up and down the length of her back, his fingertips warm and persuasive through the thin cotton of her shirt. He smelled of damp linen and woodland, spiced with a tang she couldn't identify. It was a wild fragrance, heavy with musk. She felt her body tense in response, ready for flight. Her heart and head were swimming, both in the same direction.

'Shh...it's all right. I'm here now.'

Words rolled from him like velvet, but instinct still told Cheryl to pull away. She started fluttering like a butterfly in a spider's web.

'No—I can't! Let me go... Now you're here I must get back to my little boy—' She stopped. Instantly the silent strength of this man told her that from now on *he* would be giving the instructions.

'*I'm* here,' he repeated slowly. There was real effort behind his words, as though he was working to keep his voice emotionless. 'Don't tell me I'm too late? The weather has been so bad—there are electric cables down everywhere. My car was stuck in a traffic jam. So many roads are blocked I had to abandon it and come across country. A local farmer gave me a lift for part of the way, but the crossroads below this estate is flooded. I had to climb over the wall and walk from there.'

'In this weather?' Cheryl jerked back in order to look up into his face. 'But the nearest road must be a mile away!'

Lightning ricocheted through a window, throwing his strong features into sharp relief. For a second a flash of white teeth flickered in the darkness of his smile. Cheryl saw he relished a challenge.

'I took a short cut through the woods.'

That must be why he smells of pine needles and honeysuckle, Cheryl thought. At any other time, in any other place, she might have savoured the fragrance, where it lingered on the big strong workman, holding her like this. But she could not trust herself.

‘When you *knew* we’d already lost one tree in this hurricane? You must be mad! It’s a wonder you weren’t killed!’ she burst out, more in fear than anger.

Her rescuer pulled a torch from his pocket. In its sudden glare she saw him shoot her a strange look. Now she could see him better, it wasn’t only the quizzical look in his clear blue eyes that set Cheryl wondering. This man seemed strangely familiar.

‘The pines were rattling, for sure.’ He sounded thoughtful. ‘But it didn’t matter to me at the time. I had to get here. There was no alternative.’

Cheryl returned his look with interest. For the life of her she could not think where she had seen that expression before. Those distinctive features and the determined jawline...

Another clap of thunder shook the building. Cheryl had been gradually releasing her hold on his jacket, but at that sound she grabbed him again.

‘That one was a little farther away, I think.’ A hint of amusement returned to his voice.

Cheryl shook herself, wondering why she still couldn’t bear to let go of this stranger. Not only had she flung herself at him, she was almost beginning to enjoy the experience.

She pressed herself against the stranger, hardly daring to breathe. Waiting for the next lightning flash, she tried to gauge if the storm really was passing over. Rain still hurled itself against the windows, and wind shook all the doors, but the thunderclaps must have broken the storm’s fever.

As she trembled against the stranger’s chest, his grip loosened a little. It was then that Cheryl remembered herself. She was the only staff member in the villa. That meant she was in charge, and clambering all over an electrician was definitely not part of her brand-new job.

Pushing herself out of his arms, she bent and picked up her own torch. Then she straightened up and looked her rescuer right in the eyes. The entrance hall was gloomy, but their hand lights and the crackling of broken power lines outside gave her enough light to make a judgement. He was tall, he was powerful, and his face was full of self-confidence. In fact, this man was ideally fitted for his role as lifesaver and genie of the power supply—except for two things.

He was dressed in a suit. It must once have been light grey and made to measure. Now it was dark with rain, and clinging as only wet linen could. And the reason he was able to keep such a firm grip on her? He was completely empty-handed.

‘Where are your tools?’ Cheryl began inching backwards, away from him.

He cast his torch beam around the vestibule. The action plunged his expression into shadow. Whenever sparks flared outside, it darkened still further. His frown looked threatening. She shrank again.

‘I am Marco Rossi. My things have all been left behind. I’ve already told you that. Now, tell me, where is Vettor?’

Cheryl stared at him. *This* was Marco Rossi, her new employer? His staff had painted him as a grim ogre, but this man was gorgeous. She gulped. There must be some mistake. He’d scooped her up and comforted her like a guardian angel, not a demon. But then she thought of the time she had spent with the chef of the house. That woman was a professional to her fingertips. *She* hadn’t offered any opinion on her boss, only facts. She hadn’t passed on idle gossip or made judgements. Apparently, Signor Rossi liked everything to run smoothly.

He looks a pretty sleek operator, Cheryl thought, and then brought herself up short. This one man couldn’t be allowed to trample down all her defences—even if her heart shimmered at the sight of him.

It was the way he looked at her. Surely there could never be any deceit in those eyes? They were too blue, too steady and too honest. When Marco Rossi gazed at her like that, Cheryl felt like the only thing in the universe. *His* universe.

This has to stop, she told herself. Her training at a top-class academy for advanced childcare professionals kicked in. She must treat him as her boss at all times. All her womanly responses would have to be denied.

‘I—I’m very pleased to meet you, Signor Rossi.’ She started to put out her hand to shake his, then withdrew it quickly to dry her damp palm on her jeans before offering it. ‘I’m Cheryl Lane—Vettor’s new nanny.’

‘I’m delighted to meet you at last, Cheryl. My people have given me some amazing reports of your interviews. I’m only sorry I was away in Brasília when they were conducted. The president wanted some advice.’

Cheryl didn’t know what to say. Her first job had been with an English businessman. She’d thought working for an Italian property developer might be a step down from that, but Marco Rossi was no ordinary man. The advertisement she’d answered had been extremely discreet. Figures and facts, including his name, had only come out at the final stage, when his staff had been sure she was The One. Later, she’d surfed the net to discover he was one of the wealthiest men in Europe. Marco Rossi was in worldwide demand. Now she knew why. *By women as well as heads of state*, she thought feverishly. In a daze, she reached out to try to find a switch on the wall.

‘Don’t bother trying the lights. The electricity supply is off—this whole estate is in darkness. Take me straight to Vettor.’

After his praise Cheryl felt several inches taller, and confident in her training.

‘Of course, Signor Rossi. Though I’m sure you won’t object if I ask to see some identification...’

Her voice had begun briskly but soon died away. Marco Rossi raised his torch, flooding his face with light. Shadows fell back, exposing the real man. Cheryl looked up into his iron features and piercing blue eyes. At once, she knew the word *no* didn’t have any meaning for him.

‘Take me to him. I’m his uncle and legal guardian. That’s all you need to know.’ His voice crackled with latent danger.

In a flash of alarm, Cheryl remembered the hushed tones of his staff. There must be some truth in their warnings. Right now he looked ready to explode at any moment. She stared at him, transfixed, like a doe caught in headlights.

‘I’ve been travelling non-stop for the past ten hours. My jet was diverted, and my documents are in my luggage. That’s all trapped, along with my driver. He’s still stuck in a huge traffic jam. I got out of my car empty-handed. So, are you going to tell me how my nephew is, or do I have to wring it from you?’

There was no trace of warm reassurance in his voice now. His Italian lilt skated over words in a way that made Cheryl’s heart sink for Vettor. Marco Rossi hadn’t returned any of her calls. He didn’t even bother calling the poor little mite by name. And he thought she was being awkward, when she was only doing her job. *So maybe this is my chance to strike back*, she thought.

Cheryl was the perfect employee, but this was serious. She raised her eyebrows. Then she gave Marco Rossi a hard stare. This was a man, she’d discovered, who was famous for always putting his work before anything else. It was a big black mark against him in Cheryl’s book—although, gazing at him now, it was difficult to remember that. As she looked him up and down, his broad, powerful body and intense stare did strange things to her. Such feelings were aroused deep within her body that Cheryl began to fidget.

This was an important moment. She knew she mustn’t wreck it. It was exactly the wrong time to be reminded of the feel of his damp jacket, or the wild fragrance of him...

So she channelled all her frustration into one dark glare. Marco Rossi didn’t deserve the surge of hormones that were powering through her body. She tried to convince herself of that as she took in his powerful bulk. She wasn’t going to allow it to make her eyelashes flutter like some silly schoolgirl.

‘If you had returned any of my telephone calls, *signor*, I could have given you an up-to-the-minute report on Vettor.’

His lids flickered.

They're lovely eyes, Cheryl thought, as clear and blue as that enormous swimming pool on his terrace...

With an exclamation of annoyance, she broke eye contact. She had to. This man was a magician! He was trying to bewitch her with his come-to-bed eyes. But Cheryl knew exactly what men were like. She thought back to the time she'd spent with Nick Challenger. That curbed her thundering pulse. Memories of Nick could kill any feeling within her stone-dead.

There was a tense silence. Then Marco Rossi cleared his throat.

'I tried many times. I couldn't get a signal for my mobile phone. The storm must have knocked out some of the transmitters.'

She risked shooting another look at him. The watchful amusement was long gone from his expression. He was staring straight ahead, his aquiline features carved in stone. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, she softened slightly.

'OK,' she allowed, 'I'll tell you what happened from the beginning. Your nephew didn't look well when I first arrived. I took his temperature, and he was feverish. I recognised the early signs of scarlet fever straight away. A local doctor confirmed my diagnosis.'

Cheryl had been relieved when the doctor had been impressed with her. She waited for Marco Rossi to congratulate her, too. Her new employer merely looked uncomfortable. She pressed on.

'Vettor has been calling for his grandmother. He seems to be missing her badly. Might it be possible for her to visit?'

Rossi stiffened, and then turned away in the direction of Vettor's bedroom. 'Things are that bad?'

'No—no. Wait, Signor Rossi.'

Instinctively Cheryl put out her hand and caught his arm. He stopped, looking down at her fingers. She forced herself to relax, and released her hold on him.

'I'm sorry, *signor*,' Cheryl said, without knowing if she was apologising for touching her employer or surprising him. 'I didn't mean to give you the wrong impression. It's just that—your staff tell me you don't often visit the Villa Monteolio.'

'What difference does that make? They always know how to get in touch with me. I write to Vettor, and he doesn't want for anything.'

Except physical contact, Cheryl added silently.

'He's just a child. He's lost his parents and he needs someone to care for him. To love him.' When a child was involved, Cheryl never knew when to keep quiet. The look on his face told her she had overstepped the mark.

Marco's jaw tightened. Turning his back squarely on her, he headed off along the corridor toward Vettor's room. 'I've wasted enough time already. Let me see him.'

Cheryl bounded past her new employer. Reaching the sickroom first, she blocked its doorway. She had to draw the line somewhere, and this was it. Marco Rossi couldn't leave a child alone in this ruin for weeks on end and then burst in on him like an avenging angel. Vettor was delirious. Cheryl knew how *she* would react if she opened her eyes and saw Marco Rossi's powerful figure bending over her in the gloom, but her fantasies had to be quashed in the face of a very real danger. If Marco confronted Vettor in this mood, it would terrify him. Cheryl couldn't allow that to happen.

'Wait here. I'll see if he's—'

Marco Rossi never waited for anything. With an angry exclamation he brushed Cheryl aside and went straight in.

CHAPTER TWO

MARCO leaned over the little figure in the bed. As she got closer, Cheryl thought she heard the murmured words, '*Eh, bimbo?*' or something like them. But when her employer realised she was at his elbow, he raised a barrier of grim silence.

Vettor stirred, muttering something in his sleep. Marco started adjusting the bedclothes. It was too much for Cheryl. She couldn't bear to think of Vettor being frightened awake. She tried to squeeze in between Marco and his nephew, hoping her friendly face would be the first thing the little boy saw when he opened his eyes. It was no good. Marco was big, and solid as a rock. Desperate to protect Vettor, Cheryl did the only thing she could. Reaching around, she grabbed her employer's hands.

The feel of them came as a shock. They were hard, and the smooth skin was stretched taut over sinew and bone. They contained such strength. Cheryl realised they could snap her like a twig. Although she quailed inside, she braced herself and held on.

'Please don't scare him, Signor Rossi!' she whispered desperately.

'I want to check his rash. The last message I got was from my secretary. She told me you suspected a bacterial infection. His mother had meningitis at this age. She only survived because, like you, I can recognise signs.'

That stunned her.

'Oh... Then I'm sorry, Signor Rossi.'

Cheryl relaxed her grip, but did not move. They were locked together, still bending over their patient. When Marco Rossi bobbed his head slightly in acknowledgement, Cheryl felt the movement stir her own body. Her heartbeat reacted instantly, but one look at his face shook it back into line. His expression was tense and inflexible.

'If that's the case, then hearing Vettor was sick must have given you a terrible shock,' she said. 'But the moment the doctor made his official diagnosis I rang your office number to give you the news. Vettor has scarlet fever. He's being treated with antibiotics, which are already taking effect.'

'Scarlet fever sounds serious.' Marco turned his aristocratic face towards her. 'Why isn't he in hospital?'

His expression was like flint, and its effect on Cheryl was instant. He trapped her in his gaze and looked right into her soul. A warm glow began creeping up from her breasts and flushed her cheeks with colour.

'The doctor said home was the best place for him,' she said, desperately trying to keep her mind on track.

Marco Rossi might be scary, but he was gorgeous, too. It was amazing to be pressed up against him like this, with neither of them willing to give way. He sent shivers right through her.

'I can see an improvement in him already, so there's no need to move him now. Besides, where would you rather be if you weren't feeling well, Signor Rossi? In an unfamiliar hospital ward, or safe at home with someone who cares *about* you, not just *for* you? This is the best place for Vettor,' she added, half afraid her employer would wheel away with a snarl.

He didn't. Instead, he went on staring at her with those piercing blue eyes. Eventually his lips twitched into a slow, teasing smile. Then he pulled straight out of her grasp, as though all her strength was nothing. Standing up straight, he confronted her, head on.

'You English, with your manners and your stiff upper lips!' He spread his hands wide to emphasise his point. 'Let me tell you something, Cheryl—'

'My name is Miss Lane, Signor Rossi.'

He raised one eyebrow in a gesture she wasn't supposed to defy.

'And my name is Marco, Cheryl. I don't have time for airs and graces. That's why I couldn't care less if you don't like the fact I haven't been here for my nephew. Your opinion means nothing to me. But why don't you just come straight out with your complaints, instead of tossing that lovely brown mane of hair and flashing those beautiful eyes?'

Cheryl had been about to answer back, but his last words disarmed her completely. All her nervous tension about Vettor, the storm, meeting her new employer dissolved, and she giggled. Actually *giggled*! She couldn't help it. But what sort of dedicated professional did something like that?

Horrified, she clapped a hand to her mouth, stifling the sound. As she stared round-eyed at Marco Rossi she could hear her whole career shattering around her, louder than the storm.

And then he smiled. It was a triumphant gesture, as though she had fulfilled all his expectations.

The effect on Cheryl was alarming. Feathers of feeling began rippling up and down her spine. She tingled in such an intimate way it scared her. To cover her confusion she started flouncing the bedclothes and bustling around her patient's bed to neaten the far side.

'I'm sorry to cut your visit short, Signor Rossi, but Vettor needs peace and quiet. I shall have to ask you to leave.' *While I've still got a sensible thought left in my head*, she thought. Marco Rossi filled her mind and distracted her body. The silent strength of his tall figure stopped her looking at him as she spoke. She couldn't trust herself not to fall into the magnetism of his eyes again.

'Of course.'

That was a surprise. She had expected an argument. Despite all her good intentions, Cheryl looked up. He nodded in agreement with her. As he did so, the light in his eyes faded. Looking down, he swore softly, as though noticing the state of his sodden clothes for the first time.

'You're right. And I shall be no good to Vettor if I catch my death of cold,' he announced. 'Did all my day staff get away safely?'

Cheryl nodded. 'They left at around 5:00 p.m. That was when the weather warnings started to get really serious.'

'I don't blame them. Storms are trapped here by that ridge of hills.' He nodded towards the far side of the building, moving restlessly inside his wet suit. 'I need to dry off and change into some clean clothes. My staff take care of all my domestic details, but with no one else about I'll have to ask you a favour, Cheryl. I know it's not in your job description, but could you have a look around and try to find where they keep the towels?'

Cheryl blushed. This was awkward. She was only one of dozens of people who worked for Marco Rossi. She had already glimpsed a side of him the others had never even hinted at. She had been glad—far *too* glad—of his gentle reassurance when alone and scared. Flinging herself into his arms had been the most delicious, daring thing she had ever done in her life. But all that had happened before she knew who he was. Now it was a case of an employer giving his wage-slave instructions. The change was painful.

Cheryl hoped he would forget the way she had mistaken him for an electrician in the entrance hall. That had been a terrible mistake, but she'd never underestimate him again. She would make sure of that. From now on she would treat Marco Rossi with respect. There was a barrier between them for all sorts of reasons. One short tour around his estate and house had convinced Cheryl the rumours in the media were true. He really must be one of the wealthiest men in the west. Anyone who had the self-confidence to take on a wreck like the Villa Monteolio would need barrowloads of cash to back it up. *Which Marco Rossi obviously has*, she thought.

She didn't need to look at the quality of the brand-new handcrafted staircase, or the Olympic-sized pool being installed on the south terrace to know that Marco Rossi was obviously mega-rich... and right out of her league. *Thank goodness he's not really my sort*, she told herself. So why had his almost perfect features long ago burned their way into her brain? Somehow Cheryl knew that even if she never saw Marco Rossi again, his face would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Uninvited, the memory of jostling against him over Vettor's bed rose up to tease her. For a few glorious moments they had been locked together. The touch of Marco's hands was all power. She had felt them twice now. Once in gentleness, once with determination. They were so unforgettable they fired her blushes all over again. Trying to calm her emotional turmoil, Cheryl thought back to Nick Challenger. He'd been her one and only boyfriend, and the relationship had been disastrous.

As a distraction, her memory worked far too well. Her heart froze. The smile died on her lips. She shivered, hugging her arms around her body. Not that they could give her any protection against

a man like Marco Rossi! Nick was only half his size, and she still carried the scars. Marco would make a much more formidable enemy. She didn't want to put him to any sort of test.

His shoulders were wide and powerful, and two metres was such an awkward height. She already had a crick in her neck from looking up to him. As for his clothes—Cheryl looked them over carefully. His suit and open necked white shirt were obviously expensive. The cut was perfect. This man didn't have any physical flaws to hide, and his tailor had concentrated on accentuating the tall masculinity of him. The materials used were the best quality linen and fine cotton, but it was all ruined now. Everything he wore was soaking wet, and dirty from his mercy dash.

Even Marco Rossi's smile isn't *quite* perfect, Cheryl realised. It might be white, it might be tempting, but there's a tiny chip out of that front tooth, on the right...

'How long will it take for your luggage to catch up with you, Signor Rossi?' she said briskly, trying to divert her attention from his body to his situation.

'I've told you—call me Marco.'

Cheryl smiled, and then wished she hadn't. He smiled back, and the effect was electric. Luckily, another hurricane blast smashed against the house and the moment was broken. She glanced over her shoulder, terrified. Marco grimaced.

'It will take my things some time to get here, judging by this weather.'

'Then it's just as well the rest of the staff showed me around before Vettor fell ill,' Cheryl managed with a trace of her usual bright efficiency. At last there was something about this horrible day to smile about. 'As we say in England, "it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good". While you go and have a shower, *Marco*, I'll sort you out some dry things. Finding my way around by torchlight might take some time, though!'

'I'll get my clothes, if you could find where Housekeeping store my towels. And don't worry, you won't need a torch. Listen—the generators have kicked in.'

He reached across to the nearest wall switch and snapped it on. A low-wattage bulb glowed bravely in the darkness.

'Oh, that's wonderful!'

Marco gave a very Italian shrug. 'It's always a good idea to have back-up when you live in the country.'

The increased light tempted Cheryl to run an appreciative gaze over him again. She chose exactly the wrong moment to do it. Marco sensed where she was looking, and turned his head. The glint in his eyes made her glance away sharply.

'That's very efficient of you, Marco.' She tried to sound prim.

'But of course! What else would you expect from a man with my reputation? And you *can* smile when you speak to me. It's allowed!' His response was light and teasing.

Cheryl didn't know what to think. To hear his staff talk, Marco Rossi was deadly serious about everything. But from the moment he'd burst into this house she'd been swept up by a whirlwind. He'd been protective, determined, and now he was smiling at her again.

She decided not to risk returning his gaze. It brought back memories of his hands touching hers. Cheryl didn't dare let herself be carried away like that, so she made herself stick to purely practical things.

But trying to talk about one thing while her mind was on something else proved to be a *big* mistake. 'When I've found the towels, I'll take your wet clothes off you, Marco.'

Then she gasped, suddenly aware of what she had said.

'Oh, no! I didn't mean—that is, when you've taken them off, I'll— No, what I should have said was—'

A devilish look haunted Marco's face as he watched her floundering. It spurred Cheryl into ever more desperate torrents of apology. She got more and more flustered, but Marco said nothing. He didn't need to. When he'd had his fun, he stretched like a cat and smiled with equal assurance.

‘*Non te la prendere, Cheryl!*’ His beautiful accent caressed her into silence. ‘I’d say chill out, but you look like a girl who doesn’t know what that means. What a shame you didn’t leave your English reserve at the airport,’ he said with mocking severity. ‘Life in Italy is going to be tough if you’re always worrying about double meanings. As for this—’ he glanced down ruefully at his ruined suit ‘—it’s not a problem. I’ll sort it out. I’d never expect you to run around after me like that. In any case, it’s the middle of the night!’

To her surprise, his concern sounded genuine. There was no sarcasm in his voice at all. That confused Cheryl even more.

‘You’re a man who employs staff... surely you expect that sort of treatment as your right, Signor Rossi? I mean, Marco.’ She corrected herself as he lowered his dark brows in warning.

‘Not from you. I’m employing you as a nanny—nothing more.’ He was firm, but she couldn’t leave it at that.

‘I have to do something—you’re filthy, soaking wet, and you might have been killed coming across country as you did!’

As she gazed into the blue of Marco’s eyes Cheryl’s mind was filled with images of him powering through the storm. Those pictures superheated a secret place inside her. It was somewhere she had almost forgotten existed.

When he spoke, his teasing tone aroused her most primitive instincts to an even higher pitch.

‘It was worth it for the reception I got when you opened the door to me.’

There was that smile again. Coupled with his low, melodious voice, it plucked at feelings Cheryl hadn’t allowed herself for a very long time. It felt right, and urgent, and...

If I don’t do something fast I’m lost, she thought desperately. Marco Rossi had a way of looking at her that made her forget time and place. Once trapped in the mystery of his eyes, surely it would only be seconds before she was yielding to the kiss to end all kisses...

‘I have to keep my mind off this storm, Marco.’ She gulped. ‘Tell me which bathroom you’ll be using. I’ll bring some towels when I’ve discovered where they’re kept.’

Dodging past him, she tried to distract her body. His voice wandered out of the sickroom and into the corridor. ‘That sounds ideal. I’ll use the shower in my suite.’

He followed her, but in his own sweet time. Cheryl felt as though she was in the presence of some large, predatory feline who watched her every move. She closed the door to Vettor’s room, tense with expectation. Marco was standing so close behind her she could almost feel his soft, warm breath on her neck. She hesitated, alight with nerves. They were both waiting for something to happen.

Compelled to turn and look at him, Cheryl had to lower her head the instant their eyes met. His expression was too intense. The only way she could cope with those burning blue eyes was to look up at him from beneath her lashes.

‘I’m only trying to be helpful, Marco.’

He smiled.

‘Oh, I’m sure you’re going to be invaluable...’ he murmured. And her heart stood still.

CHAPTER THREE

HORMONES surged through Marco’s veins, goading him on. He looked down on Cheryl’s upturned face. Her lips parted. It was an invitation he definitely didn’t need, but he was a red-blooded male. One kiss from her lovely full lips would be a great reward for dropping everything and focusing totally on getting home.

Hours of travelling through foul weather had washed him up on the front steps of the Villa Monteolio in a desperate state. He needed a break—and it had come in the shape of this gorgeous girl. Sex had been the last thing on his mind at the time, but when she’d flung herself into his arms his body had recovered like lightning. Marco’s mind might have been full of worry for his nephew, but physically he had warmed to Cheryl straight away.

Now he'd seen Vettor, Marco could afford to indulge himself. Desire had been rising in him since his explosive arrival. Now it was a simmering need, threatening to boil over at any moment. Whatever the circumstances, there was one part of his body that was forever ready. It throbbed with anticipation right now. He was going to enjoy this.

Although...

Alarm bells rang in his head. His newest female employee ought to be as out of bounds as all the rest of them. Marco never dabbled with his staff. *But then*, he reminded himself, *none of them offered such warm temptation, so obviously*. Cheryl Lane was soft as butter. The novelty of her English reserve delighted him. It was almost as much a turn-on as the questions in her eyes. All he saw there was *When? Where? and How are you going to take me?*

Marco recognised consent. Miss Cheryl Lane was sending out all the right signals, and there was no harm in a little flirtation. He wouldn't admit it to himself, or anyone else, but his feelings for women were often tinged with revenge. At times like this, thoughts of another English girl shouldered themselves into his mind.

Years before, Sophie had seduced him in her parents' grand villa. He was a realist. He'd already known then from experience that the sight of him stripped to the waist and working up a sweat would cast a spell over any woman with a pulse. So the fact a titled English 'princess' had made a play for him had meant nothing to Marco at first. But Sophie had turned out to be...different. She'd had brains. Her natural lust had quickly directed his feelings to her own advantage. A poor little rich girl, she'd led Marco on and then dropped him as soon as Mummy and Daddy threatened her allowance.

The whole business had been a tourniquet round Marco's heart, twisting it until he'd sworn never to leave his emotions open to attack again.

It had been a hard lesson in how manipulative people could be when it came to getting their own way. But Marco was a quick study. He had a lot more to lose than his naivety these days. He didn't do the R word—relationships. Now he was as careful with women as he was with business deals.

And he could afford to be selective. If he decided to seduce Cheryl, it would be his first taste of a woman for quite a while. As usual, he was wary. From the moment he laid hands on them, women could never quite keep the acquisitive look out of their eyes. Whether he met them in Manhattan or Melbourne, Florida or Florence, once a woman learned who he was she wanted his wallet. But there was something about Cheryl... She was definitely one of a kind. When this softly upholstered girl had greeted his arrival by throwing herself into his arms the unusual sensation of pliant, warm helplessness beneath his hands had stimulated his body straight away. Now all he had to deal with was his mind.

He wondered what it would be like to push his hands through her rich brown hair. The need to feel its smooth silkiness rippling through his fingers rose up as he cast appreciative eyes over her. That mane of hers swung like a heavy curtain each time she moved. He liked that. And leaving the sickroom to follow her out into the vestibule had been no hardship at all. Those jeans of hers were good and snug. There was just enough curve about her to make it worthwhile walking along behind.

She intrigued him, and he could hardly wait to get her in his arms again. Miss Cheryl Lane was so different from the nerveless, hard-faced celebrity women he'd left behind in the city. Perhaps it was something to do with relief, and finally getting back here to his secret retreat. If only she wasn't on his payroll...

He treated his staff so well that core members were loyal to the point of obsession. But new arrivals like Cheryl were a different matter. They were untried and untested. If she walked, it might be straight into the offices of a tabloid newspaper. Marco usually laughed off 'kiss and tell' stories. But things were different now he had Vettor to think about.

He looked down, deep down, into Cheryl's eyes. They were dark pools of arousal. She wanted him. He wanted her. It took superhuman powers to resist brushing that soft cloud of hair back from her brow. Everything about this little beauty sang to him. It must be three months since he had

bothered to take a woman to bed. That was an unheard of spell of celibacy for him. But other things had seemed more important—until now.

Here was the perfect opportunity to put that right—if he wanted. He could tell there was a conflict between her mind and her body. Despite the invitation in her eyes, her hands were clenched and her brow was troubled. To put his thoughts into action was obviously going to take some delicate persuasion. Marco felt his body kick with the idea of another challenge. He smiled.

‘Don’t worry, *cara*. Anything that may or may not happen from now on will be completely between ourselves...’

Bending forward, he whispered into the sweet-smelling cloud of her hair. He already knew what it was like to have his hands moving slowly over her voluptuous body, melting her. From there it was a small step to imagining her softening beneath his touch, moulding herself into his arms as she relaxed into the rising tide of desire flowing between them. His fingers would travel back to the soft luxuriance of her hair, and from there flow down across the smoothness of her cheek. His caress would glide over her skin like silk on silk...

And then a thin cry pierced the night. It was Vettor.

Marco answered immediately, breaking the spell. ‘I’m coming!’

Cheryl flinched, waking from her trance.

‘I’ll go!’ She jumped to answer the call, still worried that larger-than-life Marco might overwhelm the little boy. He was only half a stride behind her as she rushed back into the sickroom.

‘It’s a dream!’ Cheryl whispered, putting her secret thoughts into words as she soothed Vettor.

She told herself she ought to be grateful. He was still as febrile as she was, and this interruption gave her a chance to cool down. She definitely needed it. Had she lost her mind? Marco was filling her body with sensations that threatened to sweep aside all her good sense. But he *had* to be resisted. He was her boss, and Vettor’s uncle. She couldn’t allow herself to be seduced, however desperate she might be for his body. And there was bound to be something in the European Working Time Directive forbidding this kind of thing!

It’s a bit late to start checking my contract now, she thought with growing horror. This is a nightmare situation, and it’s all my own fault. If only I hadn’t thrown myself at Marco so recklessly in the first place!

That had been a genuine mistake, but what sort of impression had it given her new boss?

Cheryl didn’t have to ask. It was obvious. She could blame the storm, or the stress of being on her own, but what she had done was wrong. This very male man had seen it as an open invitation to tempt her with his eyes, his voice and the brush of his hand in passing. She could hardly expect him to do anything else after the reception she’d given him, but he must be put right straight away.

She sponged Vettor again, and gave him a cold drink. After settling him down, she sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his face until he was deeply asleep. It took quite a while. When she got up to creep out of the room, she was amazed to see Marco was barely a handspan away from her, a lazy smile in his eyes. He had been there all the time, watching.

Everything within Cheryl wanted him to pull her into a world of shameless passion. The feeling of relief when she’d fallen into his arms on the doorstep had been indescribable. Being held in that firm grip and reassured by his warm voice had been one moment of perfect calm in the midst of the storm. Now her body was throbbing with his presence. Strange sensations were making themselves felt, low down in her body. She had to fight the urge to brush her hand over a place that was fast filling up with liquid warmth.

The nearness of Marco reminded her of things she had wanted to experience a long time ago. But none of her dreams had come true, only nightmares. Her relationship with Nick had ended in disaster. That love rat had treated Cheryl’s emotions as badly as he’d treated her body. The experience had made her retreat from life, hiding away in her work among children. It was the one place she

could be sure no one would ever hurt her again. Now this pirate of a man, Marco Rossi, seemed to promise things she was scared to experience.

His eyes focused on her full lips, and Cheryl felt her cheeks begin to pinken. 'It looks as if you're going to be one of my most capable members of staff.' He spoke with easy charm, glancing back as he strolled towards the bedroom door.

Cheryl stared after him, finding his voice softly arousing. What did it all mean? Every word he spoke acted like an aphrodisiac on her. She had never received *any* praise from Nick. Marco's confidence in her sent Cheryl's spirits into overdrive.

Her mind and body tussled for control. She felt like kicking against every rule. Marco Rossi's warm stability and the promise of his kisses made her want to go and offer herself to him right now. But her past cast such a long shadow. She had been a total failure in her one and only relationship, and now it looked as though she had totally misread the signs. Marco didn't want to kiss her at all. If he had, he would have taken up where he'd left off, wouldn't he? Her mother must be right. Thinking about sex blinded Cheryl to common sense.

I have had a very narrow escape, she thought. Making a fool of herself in front of Marco would have been agony. She couldn't bear to be hurt again, so instinct quickly chained up her impulses. It nailed her feet firmly to the ground, and right now that was exactly what she needed. But still her nerves taunted her. How could she trust her reactions to him? He would be spending the rest of the night here. *Not far from Vettor's room*, she thought, putting one hand to the neck of her shirt as though it was suddenly too hot and restricting.

Behave yourself! Girls like you never... Her mother's voice suddenly rang through her head, leaving Cheryl to fill in the rest. It was the voice of cold, hard reality and it punctured all her dreams. As usual.

Once again Cheryl retreated into her work. There was no alternative. She knew she was brilliant at her job, and it was so much safer to stick with what she knew.

According to Nick, she was frigid. He had called her a total loser in love. It had been horrible enough to fail with a bully like him. She ought to be thanking her lucky stars Marco Rossi hadn't kissed her after all. How much worse it would be to let a gorgeous man like *him* discover how bad she was at...

Cheryl swallowed hard. She couldn't even bring herself to think the word. She would just have to put a lid on her lust. If she didn't, it was sure to lead to disaster.

Thinking back to the tour she had been given earlier in the day by his chef, Cheryl followed Marco out of the nursery suite. Only then did she remember the laundry room was in the same direction as his suite. It might have been better to give Marco a head start. But it was too late now—he must have heard her close the door. She could hardly hang around in the corridor. It would seem suspicious. Keeping her head down, and without looking in the direction he had gone, she put on her most efficient voice.

'I'll put some towels out for you in your suite...Marco.'

His name was the only informality she could manage.

'Fine.'

She expected to see him stride off. That would have given her a good excuse to hang back. She was so much shorter than him, and the distance between them would stifle her embarrassment—or so she thought. Instead, Marco waited for her to catch him up. Shortening his stride, he fell in step beside her. He was close enough for her to sense the musky, warm male smell about him. It tantalised her nostrils until she had to glance at his face. As usual he was smiling, but it was to himself now, not her.

'I never thought it would be a relief to find a woman whose eyes *don't* light up every time she says the word *Marco!*' he murmured.

'Don't worry, I'm not unique. Graduates from the academy for advanced childcare professionals I attended are trained to deal with celebrity parents at close quarters,' Cheryl replied, glad he had

hit on a bland subject. 'Our illusions soon go. We stop noticing people like you as individuals. In my experience, they all treat their children the same way in any case,' she finished, managing a barb.

'Oh? And you're so much better than they are, I suppose?' he probed.

'That's why they employ top-class nannies like me, yes,' Cheryl retorted, but regretted it straight away. Marco Rossi's expression had hardened. She knew then it was a mistake to go on digging in the knife over Vettor.

Luckily, they reached the door to Marco's suite before either of them could react to her words. Cheryl stood aside. It was a good excuse for another change of tone.

'I'll go and fetch you some towels and pyjamas—'

He exploded with laughter. 'I don't need *pyjamas*! I haven't worn those since I left home as a teenager!'

'Then what—' Cheryl began, and stopped. What else would Marco Rossi wear to bed, apart from that crooked smile of his? Flustered, she looked down at the toes of her shoes and blushed.

He stopped laughing the moment she realised her mistake. 'Just towels will be fine.'

Only gentle amusement tinged his words now. It gave Cheryl the confidence to look up and carry on.

'I'll be as quick as I can, although I must look in on Vettor every few minutes. He'll be so pleased to know you're here when he wakes up properly!' she said, hoping it was true.

'When are the electricity people turning up?' Marco strolled past her into his room, already peeling off his sodden jacket.

'They wouldn't give me an exact time.'

'In that case, you concentrate on Vettor. I'll tackle the workmen when they get here.'

'But you haven't had any sleep!'

'Don't worry about that. A shower and something to eat will keep me going for a while longer.'

Cheryl gazed at him, half afraid to see how much more he might take off while she was standing on the threshold. 'I hope there's something in the kitchen for you to eat. Things went a bit haywire when the staff left, and with Vettor being ill...'

Marco nodded. 'I'm glad you were here to look after him, Cheryl. I'm grateful. Your glowing references weren't exaggerating, were they? You really are a remarkable woman.'

Cheryl took a second step back, away from him. It was another compliment. This could only mean trouble. She began to wonder if perhaps her instincts were right—that only a split second *had* separated Marco's silver tongue from feeling so sweet against her lips. The next time they were alone together her resistance might crumble altogether. She could not afford to fall under his spell again.

'That's why you pay staff like me such good rates,' she said, emphasising the social divide between them on purpose. 'People who only offer peanuts get the monkeys they deserve. And now I really must go and look for those towels.'

Her excuse was as feeble as her will-power. The only reason she had to get away was to escape the torment of his presence.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHERYL cooled down for long enough to remember where the airing cupboards were. She half hoped time away from Marco would allow her mind to clear properly. When she was in his orbit he filled her senses and turned her to marshmallow. While he was out of sight she wouldn't have the distraction of those clean-cut features and his sinuous movements. She could concentrate and become efficient, dependable Cheryl again.

Arriving back in Marco's suite, she found it almost silent. The only sound was the faint hiss of running water, coming from his *en-suite* bathroom. What Cheryl *should* have done was march straight into his dressing room, deliver the towels and go. But Marco would be busy in the shower for as long as she could hear the water run. That reassured her, and the temptation to explore his kingdom was too great.

This master suite was one of the few completed parts of the Villa Monteolio. Marco's chef had showed her around earlier in the day. Greatly daring, Cheryl risked taking another quick look. The rooms were practically empty of furniture, but they were full of sweet fragrances. All the woodwork was freshly painted in white, and the walls had been given coats of pale, neutral colours. There were no drapes at the windows yet. Chef had told her in hushed tones that they were still being made—in Milan, of all places. A single large abstract painting hung over the reception-room fireplace. Its organic shapes in shades of copper and gold picked up the colours of the original light fittings and the hearth. It put a contemporary twist on gracious living, and Cheryl decided Marco Rossi's craftsmen and interior designers must really know what they were doing.

Still the shower powered on. She edged farther into the suite. There were built-in wardrobes along one whole wall of Marco's dressing room, and a door had been left open, giving her a glimpse into a walk-in space the size of a small bedroom. She could see designer suits in every weight from linen to wool, and dozens of shirts.

Looking nervously over her shoulder, she took a few more steps. A chest stood against the back wall of the massive cupboard. Its drawers had been pulled out from the bottom upwards in his search for clothes. They had been left open like steps, burglar fashion. Craning her neck, Cheryl could see casual tops neatly folded and laid out according to type, style and colour. It was hard not to wonder how much it had all cost. *The rich certainly are different*, she marvelled, then realised she should be making her escape.

Alert to the still crackling patter of water from the shower room, she walked over to deliver the warm towels she had brought. She would leave them just inside the door. As long as she was quick, she could be in and out without him knowing. But the moment she entered she saw his wet clothes, discarded in a heap. Her mind began to work, and those strange feelings started tormenting her again. *He*

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