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By Lynne Graham

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But now he's made millions and claimed his aristocratic Venetian birthright—and he's poised to get his revenge. He'll ruin Caroline's family by buying out their company and throwing them out of their mansion...unless she agrees to give him the wedding night she denied him five years ago....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lynne Graham wrote her first book at fifteen and it was rejected everywhere. She started writing again when she was at home with her first child. It took several attempts before she sold her first book and the delight of seeing that book for sale in the local newsagents has never been forgotten. Lynne loves gardening, cooking, collects everything from old toys to rock specimens and is crazy about every aspect of Christmas. Lynne lives in Northern Ireland with her family.

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'It's all yours, signed, sealed and delivered...the business and the house and land,' the lawyer confirmed.

When Valente Lorenzatto smiled, his enemies took cover. Even his employees had learned to fear the rough passage that might lie ahead. Darkness invariably shadowed that smile and lent it a wolfish quality of threat. While he contemplated the documents set before him, the set of his wide, sensual mouth gave his breathtakingly handsome face a distinctly chilling quality. 'Excellent work, Umberto.'

'It is your own work,' the older man pointed out. 'Your acquisition plan was a triumph.'

Umberto would have given more than his annual bonus, however, to learn exactly *why* his fabulously wealthy employer had devoted so much time and energy to the planned downfall and purchase of an English transport firm and a piece of private property, neither of which appeared to be of sufficient financial or strategic value to justify his interest. Umberto doubted the wild rumour that Valente might once have worked there in the days before his first big deal. It was only after the high point of the latter that the haughty Barbieri family had finally chosen to recognise Valente as Count Ettore Barbieri's illegitimate grandson.

That particular revelation had caused a public sensation, very much in keeping with Valente's colourful lifestyle and his even more spectacular rise to prominence with a series of bold takeovers. Valente was exceptionally clever, and extraordinarily successful in business, but he was even more renowned for his ruthlessness. The Barbieri clan had been very lucky to find a golden goose like him in the family tree at a time when their fortunes had been in need of restoration. Valente's success in that field had proved to be of little comfort to his long-lost relatives, however, when Old Man Barbieri had begun to idolise his grandchild for his dazzling achievements. The Count had ultimately disinherited his other descendents so that he could leave everything he owned, bar his title, to Valente instead.

That development had provided months of tabloid coverage about Valente, who had been asked to take the family name to qualify for his massive inheritance. And, Valente being Valente—a rebel who did not stand for being told to do anything—had gone to court with the argument that he was very proud of his late mother's unremarkable surname, Lorenzatto, and that it would be an offence to her memory and all she had done for him to discard it. Mothers across Italy had lauded him for his attitude. He had won his case to become one of the most illustrious billionaires in the land, regularly consulted for his opinion by the great and good, with his pronouncements quoted in every part of the media. He was, of course, extremely photogenic and media savvy.

Having dismissed Umberto, and other members of his personal staff, Valente took the air on one of the splendid stone balconies that overlooked the busy thoroughfare of Venice's Grand Canal. The Barbieri family had been hugely shocked when he'd taken the ancient Palazzo Barbieri back to its medieval merchant roots and renovated it to act as his business headquarters, just as it had been originally used in the fourteenth

century. He had retained only part of the vast, imposing property for accommodation. Valente was a Venetian born and bred, before he was an Italian, and he had kept faith with his late grandfather, Ettore, in doing what had to be done to preserve *thepalazzo* for future generations when money might not be in such liberal supply.

Valente drank his black coffee and savoured the moment for which he'd had to work five long years to bring it about. Now he owned Hales Transport, which had finally been brought to its knees by the toxic effect of Matthew Bailey's fraudulent and incompetent management. Valente had also become the owner of a crumbling old house called Winterwood. It was a deeply personal moment of boundless satisfaction for him. As a rule he was neither a patient man nor a vengeful one. After all, he had not sought revenge on his own family, who had left his ailing mother to work as a maid in order to feed and clothe her son. Indeed, if asked, Valente, who generally lived very much in the present, would have said that acts of revenge were a waste of time, and that it was better to move on and forget the past, for the future should hold a more exciting and worthwhile challenge.

Unhappily, however, Valente deliberated, with a harsh expression etched on his bronzed features, even after five years he had yet to meet a woman who excited him anything like as much as his former English bride-to-be, Caroline Hales, once had. His tiny artist, with her pale hair and mist-coloured eyes, who had wept incon-solably when anyone had been cruel to animals but who had, without apparent hesitation or apology, jilted him at the altar for a richer man from a more socially acceptable background.

Just five short years earlier Valente had been an ordinary working man, a truck driver, who'd worked long hours while struggling to complete a business degree in what time was left over. Life had been tough but good—until he'd made the very great mistake of falling head over heels in love with the daughter of the owner of Hales Transport. And Caro, as her adoring family called her, had played him for a fool from the outset, he acknowledged bitterly. She had strung Matthew Bailey and Valente along. And had, regardless of her claims to love Valente, ultimately married Matthew at a big, showy wedding.

Valente savoured the prospect of extracting punishment for those offences against him. He was no longer poor and powerless. Indeed, it had been the rage and aggression incited by the thought of the woman he loved lying naked and willing in another man's arms which had made Valente so fiercely determined to succeed. Soon, however, Caroline would be lying naked and willing in *his* arms, Valente reflected with a saturnine smile. He could only hope the grieving widow he had seen pictured clad in the unrelieved black of mourning would prove to be worth the effort and expense he had already expended on her behalf.

Still, at least he could ensure that when he peeled off the mourning clothes she was at least dressed to his taste. He unfurled his mobile phone and called the owner of Italy's most exclusive lingerie atelier to put in a special order—a Caroline-sized order, in pastel colours that would enhance her pale skin and dainty curves with the finest materials and trimmings available. Even the thought of her parading her sublimely graceful little body in such flimsy apparel for his entertainment caused a painful tightening in Valente's groin. He reckoned that he was a little too sexually hungry for comfort and coolness. He would pay a visit to his current bedmate, Agnese, before he flew to England to take possession of his new mistress and everything precious to her.

It was time.

His moment had come.

Valente punched out some numbers on his mobile phone and made the call he had been working towards for five years...

Twenty-four hours before Valente made that phone call, Caroline Bailey, formerly Hales, had been engaged in an increasingly upsetting dialogue with her parents. 'Yes, of course I realised that the firm was in trouble last year! But just when did you mortgage the house?'

'In the autumn. The firm needed capital, and pledging the house as security was the only way we could get a bank loan.' Joe Hales settled his portly frame down heavily into an armchair. 'There's nothing we can do about it now, Caro. We've lost the lot. We couldn't keep up the payments and the house has been repossessed...'

'Why on earth didn't you tell me about this at the time?' Caroline prompted in disbelief.

'It was only a few months since you had buried your husband,' her father reminded her. 'You had enough to cope with.'

'We've only been given two weeks to move out of our home!' Isabel Hales exclaimed. A small blonde woman in her late sixties, with a tight lack of facial lines and movement that suggested a good deal of surgical enhancement, she was the exact opposite in appearance of her tall, heavily built husband. 'I can't believe it. I knew the business was gone—but our home as well? It's a nightmare!'

Engaged in giving her father's heavy shoulder a comforting squeeze, Caroline resisted the urge to try and comfort her tear-stained mother with a hug. She was a touchy-feely person, and always had been, but her mother was not. While her father had grown up secure as the son of the major employer in the district, her mother had been raised by socially ambitious parents who'd been resentful of their lowly status and lack of money. Isabel was their daughter in every way, with the same aspirations and the same reverence for wealth.

Ill-matched though Joe and Isabel might initially have seemed, the only disappointment in their marriage had proved to be Isabel's infertility. The Haleses had been in their forties by the time they'd adopted Caroline at the age of three. As their only child she had enjoyed an excellent education and a stable home life, and would never have dreamt of voicing the reality that she was much closer to her kind-hearted father than her often sharply critical and pushy mother. In truth she had never shared her adoptive mother's aspirations or interests, and was uncomfortably aware that the opinions she held and the choices she made had dismayed and disappointed both her parents.

'How can we only have two weeks to move out of our home?' Caroline exclaimed, in a voice weakened by incredulity.

Joe shook his balding head wearily. 'We're lucky to get that long. A surveyor viewed the whole place last week and went back to our creditors with an offer. It wasn't a great offer, but the administrators snapped it up. They're only interested in paying off the debts and trying to save jobs. I was relieved they had found a buyer for Hales Transport.'

'But too late to be of any help to us!' Isabel Hales snapped angrily.

'I've lost my father's business,' her husband responded heavily. 'Have you any idea how ashamed that makes me...'

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