



NINA SINGH

Swept Away by the  
Venetian  
Millionaire

MILLS & BOON  
*True Love*

Mills & Boon True Love

Nina Singh

**Swept Away By The  
Venetian Millionaire**

«HarperCollins»

## **Singh N.**

Swept Away By The Venetian Millionaire / N. Singh —  
«HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon True Love)

The trip of a lifetime leads to the man of her dreams! Betrayed by her ex, Maya Talbot's indulging her love for art and travel – alone. But she soon finds a new passion – in the arms of mysterious millionaire sculptor Vito Rameri! As this gorgeous Venetian's new muse, Maya gets to know the man behind the masterpieces and becomes even more captivated...

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The trip of a lifetime...

...leads to the man of her dreams!

In this Destination Brides story, Maya Talbot's taking a romantic vacation—alone! Betrayed by her ex, she's indulging her love for art and travel...but finds a new passion—in the arms of mysterious millionaire sculptor Vito Rameri! This gorgeous Venetian has closed himself off, but as Maya becomes his new muse, she gets to know the man behind the masterpieces and becomes even more captivated...

NINA SINGH lives just outside Boston, USA, with her husband, children, and a very rumbunctious Yorkie. After several years in the corporate world she finally followed the advice of family and friends to 'give the writing a go, already'. She's oh-so-happy she did. When not at her keyboard she likes to spend time on the tennis court or golf course. Or immersed in a good read.

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Swept Away by the Venetian Millionaire

Nina Singh

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To my mom and dad,  
who made possible my own many adventures.

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## CHAPTER ONE

IF ONLY SHE hadn't left her packing until the last minute.

Though the chore did give her something to do, didn't it? A task to take her mind off the catastrophic events of the past forty-eight hours. The time period in which she'd gone from being a happily engaged fiancée with a set, determined future to a woman betrayed.

Maya Talbot tossed the sandal she was about to pack across the room in utter disgust. It hit the wall with an unsatisfactory thud and left a dark smudge on matte beige paint. *Ha!* As if packing was her most pressing concern at the moment. No, there was a much more tragic issue she was dealing with right now: the fact that she'd suddenly found herself single, heartbroken and sorely disappointed. All as she was about to embark on the trip of a lifetime. A trip her hardworking grandmother had been generous and kind enough to gift her. A journey that had originally been meant for two. And now she'd be making that journey solo.

It was all too much. Maya plopped down on the bed and sobbed into her hands. *How could you, Matt? How could you do this to me?*

But perhaps the better question was, how long had he been deceiving her? Exactly how many women had he betrayed her with?

A nagging voice in her head teased that, deep down inside, she had known. She had always suspected that things between herself and her fiancé were not quite right. She had to admit the trepidation she'd felt whenever the two of them began discussing wedding preparations. The utter lack of focus from Matt when she'd asked him to go over all the details. She'd put it all down to pre-wedding nervousness on her part and obtuse male disinterest on his. Clearly, she should have listened to her instincts.

This trip was one she'd often dreamed of being able to take. The fantastical trip she'd always referred to as her "bucket list" getaway.

All she'd ever wanted since taking that art history class as a university freshman was to be able to tour through Europe to witness the grand art in world-famous museums and to marvel at the majestic architecture within the most romantic cities in the world. It was all to begin with a stop in Venice. Followed by a trip by rail to Florence and Rome. Then on to Paris, with a final stop in the glorious metropolis of London.

Maya had talked about it so often with her grandmother. Through some miracle, Grandmama Fran had come across a charity auction being held in Martha's Vineyard where she lived. Bless her soul, the woman had dipped into her modest savings to bid on it for Maya as an early wedding gift. For a wedding that now would never take place.

Maya sucked in a deep breath. She couldn't do this. She couldn't go through with this trip; she had to have been kidding herself to even consider it. And there was not one other person she could think of to ask to accompany her. Working for her uncle's plumbing company as a contractor had left her with a severe shortage of female colleagues. And all her closest friends had gradually moved out of the Boston area over the years. Her cousins were quite busy with their own lives, as well—Lexie blessed recently with a newborn and Zelda immersed in a major project at work.

Unlike Maya, everyone around her seemed to be enjoying full, adventurous lives.

It was settled. Her mind was made up. She couldn't handle seeing all those glorious, romantic spots as a single woman. Not when the original plan had been so different. The only reason Maya hadn't canceled the trip immediately was because she couldn't bear to turn down the gift of a lifetime and have Grandmama's money go to such waste. It would have been bad enough for Matt's half of the trip to be a loss. Granted they would have shared hotel rooms. But all his meals, travel, and museum tickets had been paid for in advance.

But the more she thought about it, the less feasible the whole idea became. She just didn't have it in her. To traipse around Europe by herself, suddenly single and with a broken heart? No, she would stay here and try to pull her life back together. Beginning with somehow delivering the bad news of the broken engagement to Uncle Rex, Aunt Talley and her cousins.

Uncle Rex would be the toughest. He adored Matt and was going to be devastated. Not to mention the whole complication of Matt being the son of her uncle's business partner. The notion that she was letting her whole family down was hard to squelch.

The whole situation was one big mess.

She had to start with breaking the news to Grandmama. Maya owed it to her grandmother to explain exactly why she was essentially throwing away such a loving and generous gift.

Grandmama Fran would understand. She would have to. With shaky fingers, Maya reached for her cell phone on the bedroom night stand. This would be one call she'd never forget.

Her grandmother picked up right away. "Maya, dear. I was hoping to hear from you before you left. How nice of you to take time to call."

That was her grandmother. She was exactly the type of person to thank a grandchild for a simple phone call regarding a trip she herself had paid for. Maya swallowed yet another sob before trying to speak. "Hi there. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Nonsense. I'm much too excited to sleep." Her grandmother chuckled into her ear through the tiny speaker. "I know it's silly, but I'm as excited as if I were going myself. If only I was that mobile."

Maya found herself wishing more than anything that could be so. Having her grandmother accompany her to Europe would be the ultimate solution to this big, painful mess. But Grandmama's various health limitations made any kind of travel impossible.

"I shall just have to live vicariously through my favorite granddaughter," Grandmama added, sending a spear of hurt through Maya's chest.

Dammit. She had no reason to feel guilty. It wasn't as if she'd been the one to cause her breakup. What choice had she had? How could she continue with a man who'd so utterly betrayed her trust?

None of that would make this announcement to her grandmother any easier, however. "Gran, I have something I need to tell you," she began with a shaky, soft voice.

"Oh, my. You sound quite serious. I hope you aren't about to thank me again, dear. You've already done so more than enough."

Every word Grandmama spoke was just making this endeavor more and more difficult. She should have prepared herself better, Maya thought.

Her grandmother continued without giving Maya a chance to respond. "I was so happy to do it for you, you know. You may think I'm joking, but you really are my favorite."

Maya couldn't help the smile that spread over her lips. Ever since she'd lost her parents, Gran had been one of the people to step into the sudden massive hole in her life where her family used to be. Sure, her uncle, aunt and cousins had all provided her with a substitute family, and she'd be forever grateful to them for that. But the bond she felt with Grandmama went far deeper than any other relationship in Maya's life. Gran had been as broken as Maya was over the tragic loss. The older woman's loving comfort had been the sole factor in pulling Maya out of the overwhelming grief and pain after the accident.

Maya wanted to crumble at the thought that she was about to deliver yet another, albeit much smaller, bolt of pain to the older woman.

"Thanks, Gran. I just..."

Grandmama jumped into the silence. "Are you sure you packed that red dress with the thin shoulder straps? You look so nice in that dress, dear."

This conversation was even more difficult than she'd thought it would be. Gran had actually been thinking of the wardrobe Maya would be taking. She really was living the trip vicariously through Maya.

“Oh, and it would go so well with those strappy sandals you wore the last time you came to visit. This is all so exciting, dear!”

Maya bit her lip as she faced reality: she didn't have it in her to disappoint her grandmother. Not after the woman had already endured so much in her life. She just couldn't bring herself to say the words. Grandmama was so happy on her behalf.

Somehow, some way, she would make herself go on this trip. For her grandmother's sake if not for her own. Besides, who knew? Wasn't one of Matt's complaints about her that she always played life too safe? That she always took the path of least resistance? Not that she had much concern any longer about what Matt thought. But maybe he'd been right about this one thing. Maybe she would take this as an opportunity to try to be different, more adventurous. Going on a solo trip through Europe would certainly be an adventure. Maya decided she would do it.

Though misery was certain to follow her at every stop.

\* \* \*

In all his thirty-two years as a resident son of Venice, Vittorio Rameri had never actually seen anyone topple out of a gondola before. He supposed it happened, though it was quite rare. He'd just never witnessed it firsthand.

That appeared to be about to change. For the woman he was watching as he sat at an outdoor table at his favorite waterside café was clearly about to lose her balance completely. Vito had no doubt she was American. Everything, from the tiny clutch purse she carried to the sensible capri pants she wore, tagged her as a young professional from a large US city. Maybe New York. Or Los Angeles.

He thought about going over to help but at this distance there was no way he would make it in time. He was right; it took mere seconds. The gondolier reached for her but the poor man wasn't quick enough. With an inelegant gasp, she toppled over the side and landed with a sharp splash in the water.

Vittorio blinked his eyes against the bright sunshine. She had to be drunk, despite the relatively early hour of the afternoon. He'd seen his fair share of tipsy tourists, and certainly wasn't one to judge. He'd just never seen one actually drunk enough to fall out of a gondola before. She'd attracted a crowd of onlookers as she splashed and spluttered in the water. None of them seemed to be of much help, however. The gondolier wasn't having much luck pulling her out, either.

So much for a nice relaxing afternoon.

He didn't know what compelled him to leave his much-needed espresso and the unread newspaper in order to go over and assist the lady. Perhaps it was the look of utter despair on her face just before she tipped over. Her expression clearly stated that she'd been through quite enough already. And that this fall into the murky Venetian water might ultimately be the last straw.

When Vito reached the gondola, it took extreme effort from both himself and the gondolier to manage to hoist her out of the water and onto the wooden walkway where the gondola was docked. She came out cursing in English. He'd been right about the American guess. Being fluent, Vito understood every one of the curse words she muttered. Or slurred, to be more accurate. Yep, she was definitely drunk. She was also soaked to the skin.

“Are you hurt, miss?” he asked when she stopped swearing long enough to take a breath.

He got a good look at her then and a strange sensation shot through his chest. Her eyes were the color of the Venetian sky at sunset. Thick, dark hair now clung to her face and scalp. Her makeup had clearly not been the waterproof kind.

Yet it struck him that she still looked quite lovely despite her accident of seconds ago.

The gondolier stood next to them, pale and silent. Vito couldn't decide which one of them looked more shocked, the boatman or the American. For an insane moment, he had to bite back the urge to laugh. He barely managed to withhold a chuckle. How rude of him. Her state was no laughing matter, after all. For all he knew, she could be sporting some nasty injury. She still hadn't answered his question.

She shook the water off her face. “Thank you for your help, whoever you are.” Turning back to the boatman, she said in a surprisingly steady and deadly serious tone, “I’ve changed my mind about the gondola ride, sir.”

That did it. Vito couldn’t hold it in any longer. A small chuckle escaped him before he could stop it. She whirled on him with such force, he thought she might topple over again.

“You think this is funny, do you?”

Her golden hazel eyes blazed bright with fury. Fury directed at him.

“I’m sorry, miss. I certainly did not mean to laugh at you.”

She continued to glare at him, despite his apology. The gondolier had apparently heard enough. Without another word, he jumped back onto his vessel and began to pole away. All too hurriedly, Vito thought.

The man had essentially just left him alone with this wet, tipsy American woman.

A woman who looked very good in wet clothes that clung to her skin. Vito gave himself a mental shake. Where had that wayward thought come from?

“You didn’t answer my question,” he reminded her.

“What question?”

“Are you all right? You didn’t hurt yourself or anything, did you?”

She rubbed a hand down her face. Vito watched as the anger suddenly seemed to just melt away from her. Replaced by something akin to total resignation. With a jolt of surprise, he realized that made him sad for some reason. He preferred her angry to defeated. As if it meant anything to him. He’d never laid eyes on the woman before.

“I’m okay,” she answered. “Just embarrassed,” she added, glancing to the crowd around them which hadn’t fully dispersed yet.

He waved a hand in dismissal. “Don’t give it a thought. People fall out of gondolas all the time in Venice,” he lied.

She studied him up and down. Her eyes really were stunning. A rich amber color that shouldn’t have worked at all with her dark olive skin tone. But somehow it served to lend her a rare and striking look that he couldn’t help but feel drawn to, given his artist’s instincts.

He couldn’t seem to tear his gaze from her eyes. He tried to look away to avoid staring at her face too long, but failed.

“Why don’t I believe you about that?” she wanted to know. The slightest hint of a smile graced her full, pink rosebud lips.

“*Bene*. Perhaps because I’ve just made it up.”

Her smile grew. “Nice try. You’re quite the gentleman. First you come to my rescue from a certain and tragic watery death. And now you’re trying to rescue my pride.” She glanced down at the soaking-wet fabric of the red shirt she wore. It now clung to her like a second skin and accentuated her feminine curves.

What in the world had gotten into him? When was the last time he’d noticed a woman’s curves? Certainly not in the last two or so years. Not since Marina’s accident.

An awkwardly silent beat ensued before she stretched out her hand. “Thank you, Signor...?”

“Rameri. Vittorio Rameri,” he supplied as he took her hand into his. Her skin felt surprisingly warm for someone who’d just taken a plunge in dirty water. “I’m often called Vito.”

“Hello, Vito. I’m Maya Talbot. From the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts. And I wish we hadn’t had this very mortifying meeting. Nothing personal,” she added after a pause, wringing out the tail of her shirt.

Oh, but he was so very glad that they had met. Damned if he could put his finger on exactly why that was so. He only knew that today was the first time in a long while that he’d felt drawn to study the features of a woman. He wanted to examine further the way the sunlight brought out the

golden specks of her eyes, how the dampness of her hair took it to a dark shade of ebony that framed her delicate chin.

He wanted to think of how it would feel to sculpt what he was seeing before him. An instant desire to squash the urge rose in his chest. In his soul, he knew he wasn't ready just yet. Not to handle clay.

"I suppose I better get going back to my hotel," she said as he continued to stare. If she noticed the way he was looking at her, she was too polite to mention it.

"Are you alone?"

Her shoulders fell. The question seemed to deflate her even more. He found himself intrigued. What exactly was her story?

She shrugged and looked away before answering. "I'm afraid so. It's just me. By myself. In one of the most romantic cities in the world. Go figure."

Now that was surprising. By the looks of her, Vito would guess she wasn't often lacking for male companionship. "I see."

She dabbed a wet, trembling finger against his chest. "It wasn't supposed to be this way," she supplied. Vito guessed it had to be the alcohol that had her talking so freely to the stranger who'd just pulled her out of the canal. "I was supposed to be here with my fiancé," she continued.

"Uh-huh."

"But the...what do you call it? *Bastardo*? Yes, that's it. He was a *bastardo*. I learned that word from the hotel housekeeper who brought a complimentary bottle of valpolicella to my room earlier." She smiled at him.

Well, that explained the early drinking. Maya Talbot was a jilted bride. Or almost bride, as the case might be. But had she had the whole bottle? Still, he felt a twinge of admiration at the fact that she'd decided to come solo on a trip that had obviously been planned to include a romantic partner.

She twirled her fingers at him. "Well. Ta-ta. I should be going."

Vito reached for her arm before she could take a step. "*Un momento*." He couldn't just let her walk away. The woman was in no condition to be by herself in an unfamiliar city.

She blinked at him in surprise. "Yes?"

"Do you actually know where you're going?"

She blinked yet again before looking off into the distance to her left. Scratching her forehead, she turned to look the opposite way. It was blatantly clear she had no idea where she was. Let alone where she was going. "Well, I'm sure I can figure it out."

Vito weighed his options. Leaving her to her own devices was out of the question under the circumstances. For all he knew, she might actually trip and fall into the water again. He could offer to buy her a cappuccino at the café; clearly she could use the caffeine. But she was soaked to the skin. He doubted she'd be comfortable for long sitting in a wooden chair as wet fabric clung to her skin. Not to mention the attention the sight of her would attract from passersby. He could always load her into a *vaporetto* and send her on her way, but the likelihood that she'd get seasick was all too real.

Based on some past benders he'd been on himself, he figured the thing she needed the most was just to be able to lie down until the effects of the alcohol passed.

"Perhaps I can be of help."

Her eyebrows lifted over those dazzling amber eyes. "How?"

"My place is just over the bridge." He pointed in that direction. "We can go get you dried off and cleaned up."

She narrowed her gaze on him, suspicion clouding her features immediately. Not that he could blame her. She didn't know him from the street vendor selling gelato a few feet away.

"You expect me to accompany you, a man I've never laid eyes on before, to your apartment? Thanks, but no thanks."

He should have explained better. Fluency only got a person so far, it appeared.

Shaking his head, he tried to explain. “*Scusa*. First of all, it’s not an apartment. I own an art studio near Le Mercerie. A public studio. Open for business. There’s a comfortable sitting area complete with a sofa for browsing patrons. I might even have some dry clothing for you.”

She looked him up and down. “I doubt we’re the same size.”

“I meant ladies’ clothing.”

Relief and understanding washed over her features. “Your wife’s clothing, you mean.”

Vito cringed inwardly at the word. Even after all this time, he hadn’t quite adjusted to the new reality that he no longer had a wife. And he never would again.

He shook his head. “I don’t have a wife. But my models have been known to leave things behind.” Not that any kind of model had graced his space in the past several months.

“Your models? What kind of studio are we talking about exactly? Are you a photographer? Or some kind of artist?”

That was one way to put it, Vito supposed. Though, truth be told, he hadn’t been any kind of artist in quite a while.

## CHAPTER TWO

SHE'D CLEARLY BEEN dining on cotton. Maya tried to swallow past the dry ash that seemed to be coating her mouth and tongue. All she managed was a squeaky croak.

Water. She was in desperate need of water.

Maya forced her lids open and winced at the pain behind her eyes once she did. For heaven's sake. She hadn't even had the whole bottle. Just went to prove what a lightweight she was. After all, wasn't that a point that Matt had continually made? How often had he told her that she needed to let loose a little? To not be so constrained and proper all the time.

Maybe if she had done so every once in a while, her tolerance level would be a little higher.

Well, if he could only see her now. Sprawled out on a couch in what appeared to be the back room of an Italian art studio that she'd followed a stranger to. She could hear soft Italian voices from somewhere in the building. Two male voices and one female. Maya didn't understand a thing that was being said. She heard the sound of a door open, then close.

Maya struggled to sit up. She wore a soft cotton tunic of some sort. She vaguely remembered stepping behind a curtain to take off her clingy wet capri pants and tank top, nearly toppling over in the process.

But she also remembered other things. Gentle, sympathetic chestnut-brown eyes. Wavy hair so dark it had reminded her of the moonless New England sky. A set of strong arms steadying her on her feet after helping to lift her out of the water. Who was he, exactly?

She really had no idea of the identity of the man who'd brought her here.

A gasp escaped her chest. How utterly mortifying. She'd left herself at the total mercy of a complete stranger. A stranger in a foreign city where she didn't know a soul. No one would even know to come looking for her if this handsome artist man turned out to be a cold-blooded psycho killer.

Maya bit back a groan. Definitely one of the dumber things she'd done. But it wasn't as if she'd followed the man back to his private residence. Technically, she was in a public place of business. There'd even been browsers in here when they'd arrived after her drunken mishap with the gondola. Sure. Like that kind of reasoning would pass muster with Uncle Rex if he ever got word of any of this.

Uncle Rex. She hadn't technically lied to him and the rest of her family. She'd just bought herself some time, inadvertently doing the same for Matt. She'd concocted a vague tale about Matt running into some kind of emergency at work that would delay his travel and that he would join her in Europe as soon as he could. Just a small fib in order to postpone the nastiness that was certain to follow once she announced the demise of her engagement to the man her family considered to be the catch of the decade. Little did they know.

Little had *she* known.

Sudden tears stung the back of her eyes, exacerbating the pounding pain in her head. Fire burned behind her throat. All her earthly possessions for a drop of water.

The universe answered her prayers.

"May I come in?" she heard a masculine voice ask from the doorway. "I heard rustling. Figured you must be awake? *Si?*"

"That might be one word to describe it."

Her rescuer walked in carrying a tray of assorted plates and dishes as well as a steaming carafe. But the only thing Maya could focus on was the glass pitcher of icy water with wedges of lemon floating on top.

"How do you feel?" he asked as he set his load down on the marble table between them.

How could she possibly answer that? So many apt descriptions came to mind. Embarrassed. Ill. Thirsty. Out of her element.

And to dig deeper, she was utterly confused as to what her future held now. A boring dead-end job. Her most significant relationship in complete shambles. Nothing to look forward to. She forced the thoughts away and focused her eyes on the man standing before her.

Maya had to suck in a breath. Now that her gaze had cleared, she realized her memory of their initial encounter had not done the man justice. He was breathtakingly handsome. Tall and dark, with broad shoulders and richly tanned skin. He wore dark pleated dress pants with a pressed collared shirt the color of the Cape sky at dawn. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a print ad for expensive men's cologne.

She pulled on the collar of her smock. Dear heavens, in contrast to this stellar specimen of a man, she must look like a walking demolition site.

Without waiting for her answer, he lifted the jug of water and began pouring into a clear glass with yet another lemon wedge at the bottom. So the man had mind-reading skills in addition to killer good looks. Either that or she looked as parched as she felt.

She took the water gratefully with a shaky hand as she spoke. "I feel like I might have drunk too much on an empty stomach and then fallen into a river in front of a crowd of strangers."

He gave a playful shrug as she took a massive swallow of water. The ice-cold liquid felt heavenly as it poured over her thick tongue and down her dry throat.

"Hey, these things happen," he said, giving her a playful wink.

Maya wouldn't have thought she had it in her to laugh.

Vito Rameri. See, she couldn't have been too far out of it earlier by the canal if she remembered his name. Though it would be hard to forget the sole person who'd helped her out of a situation like that. An artist and a gentleman. Even the gondolier had taken off at the first opportunity. Vito was the only one who'd stayed to make sure she was okay. Which begged the question: Had she even so much as thanked him yet?

She cleared her throat. "I don't know how to thank you, Signor Rameri."

He cut her off before she could continue. "Please. Call me Vito. Signor Rameri is my father."

"Okay. Vito, then. I'm not sure what would have happened if you hadn't come along." She studied her fingers. "I don't know how to pay back your kindness. I vow to find a way."

He waved a hand in dismissal. "Nonsense. Anyone would have done the same. We Venetians take care of the visitors to our city."

"Well, you shouldn't have had to take care of this tourist. Please believe me when I say that my behavior today was quite uncharacteristic. This isn't how I normally behave. I'm not even much of a drinker."

"Clearly."

Between his accent and the absurdity of this conversation, Maya couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic. If so, he had every right.

"I didn't think I'd had that much. Only I hadn't eaten anything since arriving yesterday and I guess I don't know my tolerance too well." Or lack thereof.

"Alcohol on an empty stomach can certainly catch up with someone who's not used to it."

She nodded. "Exactly. And I should have known better. It's just that I'm dealing with an unexpected...disappointment."

"Ah, right. The *bastardo*."

She'd forgotten about that tidbit in their conversation. "Yes, that would be Matt. My fia—" she caught herself. "My former fiancé. As of about three days ago." Though it seemed like she'd been dealing with the loss and betrayal for far longer.

Maya didn't think she could feel any lower. Between having to explain herself to this handsome Italian and the feeling of complete and utter rejection, her loser status was quite confirmed. And did the Italian have to be quite so good-looking? Why couldn't she have been rescued by a balding, older,

grandfatherly type? Would that have been too much to ask? Instead, her savior had had to come in the form of a dark and charming Adonis clad in Armani.

Yet another way she'd failed at life. Another indication that she didn't fit in with the accomplished, overachieving family she'd been taken in by after losing her parents. Both her cousins had ideal careers and relationships. Her aunt was a revered professor at one of Boston's top universities. Her uncle a respected and successful business owner. And here she was, unable to enjoy a dream trip she couldn't have even afforded on her own without the assistance of her grandmother.

"Why don't you tell me about it? While you eat. You mentioned you haven't eaten since yesterday. It's just criminal to go without nourishment that long in a city with such gourmet cuisine."

Her stomach growled in response to his words. She studied the food-laden tray he'd set down earlier. An elaborate antipasto plate with olives, several varieties of cheese and small glass bowls of various dipping oils. A crusty loaf of Italian bread looked like it had just been pulled out of the oven. Maya's mouth watered despite herself. And bless the man, she could smell the rich aroma of strong Italian espresso wafting from the silver pitcher. In spite of the queasy roiling in her stomach, she really was quite famished.

"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

"No trouble. I just stepped into the trattoria next door. I do it all the time." He motioned to the food. "Go on. Eat. The bread won't stay warm much longer."

Maya ducked her head. As much as she wanted to indulge in the mouthwatering array of goodies before her, she felt like a helpless child who had to be taken care of. It was enough that he'd pulled her out of the water then given her a safe place to sober up. He certainly didn't need to be waiting on her, as well.

Not that the child comparison wasn't an adequate description. What she ought to do was to find her clothes, determine exactly where she was and make her way back to her hotel room overlooking the piazza. Then she should sit there and contemplate all the ways her life had gone so horribly astray.

Still, Vito had been so kind to get a meal set up for her. It would be rude to turn it down. "Only if you'll join me."

"I never turn down an offer to share a meal with a beautiful woman."

Wow. He really was a charmer.

"It will give us a chance to talk," Vito added, pulling up a chair to the marble table between them. "I get the feeling you could use a...how do you say...an ear lender?"

That tickled a smile out of her. "Close enough." She shook her head. "But I couldn't do that. I've already taken up so much of your time and graciousness."

He released a long sigh, one heavy with a meaning she couldn't guess at. Lifting the carafe, he poured steaming espresso into both their cups.

"Trust me. At the moment, I have more than enough time."

\* \* \*

Why exactly did he care? Vito really had no business wanting to know more about the sad American beauty currently sitting in his back-room office. But he found himself genuinely curious.

She called to him. Unlike anyone he could remember. Even Marina. A stab of guilt tore through his chest. Would he ever be able to think of her without the guilt eating away at him? Would her memory ever cease to tear him to shreds inside?

Across from him, Maya sat sipping her espresso. The way she seemed to savor each taste made him want to capture the expression on her face. His fingers actually tingled with the desire to find his sketch book yet again. Twice so far this afternoon, when he hadn't created anything in months. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that longing. No. Actually, he could. He could trace it back to the day his world had turned tragically upside down. And he had no one but himself to blame for any of it.

He realized she was speaking.

“I wonder if I should have even come.”

“You were in no condition to go back to your hotel.”

She bit down on her bottom lip. “I mean I shouldn’t have come to Venice. I should have stayed home. In Boston.”

“One should never regret visiting Venice.”

She swallowed the piece of bread she’d bitten into. “Look how much trouble I’ve been. And it’s only day two,” she said on a miserable-sounding groan.

“Then we must assume it’s only going to get better from here.”

She grunted a laugh. The sound held no amusement. “It couldn’t get much lower, could it?”

“Come now. Things could have been much worse.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “How do you figure that?”

“Well, you could have been hurt during your fall. You haven’t broken anything. By tomorrow, all of this will be forgotten. After all, I didn’t see anyone with a phone out, filming or snapping photos.”

The blood rushed from her face as she clapped a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my God. Are you sure? That would be all I need. To have all this posted somewhere online for everyone to witness.”

“Including the *bastardo*?”

“Yes! Even him!”

Interesting phrasing on her part. Something tightened in his chest at the look of horror on her face. This former fiancé of hers had done quite a number on her. Despite his betrayal, she desperately cared still what he thought of her. The man clearly hadn’t deserved the affections of such a lady. “Relax,” he reassured her. “I was watching the scene as it unfolded. No one had any type of recording device.”

Relief flooded her face. Then, to his surprise, she let out a small chuckle. “I’m guessing it was quite a sight to behold.”

Vito bit down on his tongue to keep from laughing himself. She noticed his struggle. “It’s all right. Go ahead and laugh. I won’t take it personally.”

He clasped his chest in mock offense. “I would never laugh at a lady in such a manner.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did. I’m sure I looked quite ridiculous as I lost my footing and splashed into the water.”

“On the contrary, it was quite a graceful fall. Perhaps the most elegant instance of a lady tripping I’ve ever had the opportunity to witness.”

“Somehow I doubt it. I’m certain it wasn’t my most ladylike moment.”

“I think being too ladylike is overrated, myself.”

Her lips tightened. “So I’ve been told.”

Indeed, he’d been right. The fiancé had left a mark on her psyche that would last for a long while. Vito felt a sudden intense dislike for a faceless man he wouldn’t know if they crossed paths on the nearest bridge.

“I think you should forget everything this man ever told you,” he ventured, though he knew he was perilously close to crossing a line. After all, he’d barely met the woman. For all he knew, her ex-fiancé was the love of her life. A loss she might never get over. Something he couldn’t quite put his finger on told him that wasn’t the case. Still, the tightness in his chest intensified. How silly of him.

“I’ll have to give that a try.” Her words were utterly unconvincing. She’d be licking her wounds for some time.

He wished he could find the right words to say, words that might reassure her, persuade her that this Matt wasn’t worth the love she’d wasted on him. Even given what little he knew of the situation, he had no doubt the man had been given a gift and had been too selfish to cherish it.

As if that wasn’t the most hypocritical thought, coming from someone like him, of all people.

“I wish there was a way I could be of help, *cara*,” he said, dropping the endearment without thinking. Her surprised intake of breath told him she was familiar with the word.

“You’ve done more than enough.”

“Yet here you are. Miserable and alone on a trip that was clearly meant to be a romantic getaway.”

She slumped where she sat. “It was supposed to be so much more than that.”

“Oh?”

“My grandmother won this trip for me at a charity auction. To raise money for a substance abuse shelter on Martha’s Vineyard. She spent a good chunk of her retirement savings on my behalf.”

And she felt guilty about that. His artist’s eye could almost see it manifested. The guilt practically sat like a heavy, tangible weight on her shoulders. “Sounds like a deserving and noble cause.”

“It was. She wanted the trip to be an early wedding present. A pre-honeymoon. Because she knew how much I’ve always wanted to see the historic art of the European continent. Matt would have never agreed to come if we’d had to pay for it ourselves. He’s more a tropical island type of traveler.”

“I see.”

“It was such a generous gesture on her part. She’d tell me about all the marvelous trips she and my grandfather used to take. She wanted me to be able to experience something like it firsthand.”

“Well, all I have to say is—better solo than never. Does that make sense as an American idiom?”

The pensive look on her face gave him the answer to that question. “I know what you mean,” she assured him. “Nevertheless. I never should have attempted it alone. I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m going to cut this trip short. And stay in my room in the meantime. It was foolish of me to think I could enjoy this after everything that happened back in Boston. I’ve been kidding myself.”

Vito couldn’t help his next move. Reaching across the table, he took her trembling hand into his own. “I would be completely remiss as a Venetian if I allowed that to happen, *cara*. You mustn’t leave. Not just yet.”

\* \* \*

“How can I let you leave this majestic city so soon? And without the opportunity to fully explore it?” Vito Rameri wanted to know.

A jolt of awareness flashed between them as he took her hand in his. For a moment Maya couldn’t get her mouth to work. Electricity seemed to sparkle along her skin, originating at the exact spot where he touched her.

Once she managed to get her brain to focus, Maya wanted to answer him with a few questions of her own, albeit rhetorical ones. Questions like: How could she go on acting the happy tourist when her whole reality had just crumpled? How could she pretend all the activities she’d been so looking forward to as part of a couple would be anything less than awkward for her now?

Slowly she pulled her hand out of his gentle grip. She was clearly overcompensating for Matt’s rejection. Looking for validation from a stranger. Sure, that stranger happened to be achingly handsome. Straight out of a romance novel. But she’d be remiss to start reading things into small gestures.

It was no wonder she was overreacting to the man before her. He was simply being kind. Worse, he’d probably taken pity on her. How pathetic that she thought there was some kind of mysterious current between them.

“I don’t know,” she began. “Day two didn’t go so well.”

“It’s not over yet, however.”

She supposed he had a point. And she could have done worse than meeting this charming, charismatic man. Though she would have preferred a much different set of circumstances leading to said meeting.

She watched as he poured more coffee into both their cups. What if they’d met under different circumstances? What if somehow she’d made this journey years ago as a single woman? Or perhaps with a bunch of girlfriends? She imagined wandering into his studio purely by coincidence, simply to

admire a local artist's work. What might such a different introduction have led to? Would they have hit it off? She wasn't the type of woman to typically attract a man like the one she sat eating with right now. But maybe, just maybe, he would have seen something in her.

Who was she kidding? Vito Rameri probably wouldn't have given her a second glance under normal circumstances. It took literally falling into a canal for someone like her to be noticed by the likes of him.

She wasn't the striking, alluring type. In fact, it had taken her by surprise two years ago when the outgoing, successful, not to mention strikingly handsome son of her uncle's business partner had first asked her out. She'd almost been too stunned to accept his invitation to a leisurely pasta lunch in Boston's North End. To her further shock, Matt seemed to have genuinely enjoyed her company that afternoon. So much so that he'd asked her out again before their lunch was even over.

Maya had hoped she might have finally found the man who would help her create the kind of future she so desperately craved. A future with a family of her own. Not one she'd been thrust into after tragedy had left her orphaned and alone. One she actually felt she belonged in and fit into.

But she had to admit that, deep down, she'd sensed something wasn't right about the whole thing. Even on that first lunch date, the vibe between her and Matt had seemed forced. Rather than giving her the future she so desperately wanted, she'd known somehow Matt was going to let her down. Or vice versa.

Maya had ignored the warning bells that seemed to go off every step of the way. Those bells had morphed into all-out ringing alarms when Matt proposed. In many ways, he was too much for her. Too outgoing, too talkative, too *everything*. They'd both known and done their best to pretend not to. She'd also ignored her suspicions that she'd been nothing more to Matt than a convenient way to present himself as a settled and serious career professional rather than the philandering party man he really was. Again, she'd foolishly brushed it all aside.

She looked up to find Vito studying her. "You appear to have drifted off thousands of miles. Back to Boston, perhaps?"

Maya gave a shake of her head. "I'm sorry. Just thinking about some things, is all."

"I saw." He leaned back, inhaled. "Did anyone tell you that you have the most transparent face?"

"I don't understand."

"It's almost as if your features completely alter as your thoughts do. It's difficult to explain."

As far as lines went, that was a new one. If Vito was trying to come on to her, this was the most unusual way she'd ever heard.

"No. I can honestly say that no one has ever told me that before."

"It's true. Someone who creates art for a living can see it clearly."

Yeah, that was definitely not any kind of flirtation on his part. "Well, I think you may be the first real artist I've met. No one's actually commented on my face that I can recall."

She saw his hand move ever so slightly before he curled his fingers into his palm. For an insane moment, she thought he might have been about to touch her. She imagined him trailing a finger along her jawline, cupping her cheek in his palm. A shiver ran down her spine.

The effect of his gaze was hypnotic. He wasn't so much looking at her as discovering, exploring her features. The air around them suddenly grew thick. In that moment, Maya had the strangest notion that she somehow knew this man. Had known him forever. She'd seen him in her dreams, heard his voice in her imaginings.

Or maybe she'd actually hit her head on the side of the gondola while toppling over the side.

"I have a confession to make," he stated. His tone as he spoke the words took her breath away. "I'm afraid you may not like it."

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