

Bella Natale!

A FLORENTINE
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

Marianne Evans

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Dedication

To Lukas Harrison Evans. May your future be as bright as your eyes, as loving as your smile and as joy-filled as your laughter. I adore you, sweet angel. You'll always carry with you a great big piece of this grandma's heart.

Awards & Kudos

“Then & Now” ~ Winner of the Selah Award, Best Inspirational Romance

“Christmas at Tiffany's” - Inspirational Reader's Choice Award Finalist, Best Novella

“Marianne Evans is the queen of Christian romance.”
~ Nancee Marchinowski, Book Reviewer and Blogger
at Perspectives by Nancee

“I found myself cheering for these talented, modern women who live their faith, and the men who share their lives.”

~ NYT Bestselling Author Ruth Ryan Langan
on the Sisters in Spirit Series

1

Ashley Coratini sat on a ledge at the center of the Ponte Vecchio that jutted outward from the base of the structure and left just enough room to position her back comfortably against cold, time-worn stone and dangle her legs. Somewhat of a daredevil perch, to be sure, leaving herself suspended some one hundred feet or so above the churning surface of the Arno River; but the view was unusual, and stunning. Sketchpad open across her lap, charcoal pencil in hand, she tucked a rippling curl of hair beneath the edge of her knit cap, focus trained on a greenish-brown mountain scape that framed the horizon just beyond the curves of the river. Beneath her feet, water rushed and tossed. Returning to her sketch, Ashley lost herself in the euphoria that always accompanied a particularly eloquent art session.

Firenze.

Paved by narrow roads of ancient brick and stone, hemmed in by shops, homes, natives and tourists, this city of Medici—Florence, Italy—was the perfect place to re-find herself. God knew she needed to figure out the road ahead...and soon.

“Take the ticket. Take the chance. Don’t think, and don’t second guess. Go. Do it. You’ve been chasing God’s call for far too long. Stop listening to the voices of the ones who are trying to get in the way and listen to what He says. Don’t let what’s happening to your

world on the outside affect who and what you are on the inside. Go.”

Nonna Rosa’s promptings had been right, of course; more to the point, her grandma’s generosity allowed Ashley to free-fall into a much needed season of self-exploration. She had studied here for six weeks during her junior year of college, during a study abroad session wherein she had immersed herself thoroughly in art and Italian history. Returning to Firenze in many ways felt like returning home.

A stiff wind kicked across her skin, leaving a chill. The December air almost tasted of snow. When the corners of her pad lifted, Ashley smoothed the edges and continued to sketch—a spray of lines, a dash of shapes and shadows, a subtle blend of charcoal into the page, just enough contrast to create the illusion of light. She sank into the evolving image, lost to the world, thinking. She hadn’t meant to let outside influences dictate the pattern of her life. She hadn’t meant to let any form of naysaying—however well-meaning—keep her from the life she craved. So, she had accepted her grandmother’s gift of three weeks in Italy, opting to take that leap and rediscover Florence with a full and eager heart, eyes trained only on the future.

Early afternoon light shimmered off the surface of the water; Vespa cycles sped past at horrific speeds and angles, their shrill engines cutting the air, adding texture to the sound of lilting Italian. Seemingly undeterred by an ominous forecast, crowds milled past on the walkway just above and behind Ashley’s spot.

A second blast of cold air roused her senses, eliciting a responsive chill. It was almost time to call it quits and perhaps spend an hour or two like any other tourist in Florence, exploring quaint, inviting shops

and indulging in a hot meal, but in the distance, she spied the magnificent Duomo. Shifting from black- to gray-tinted charcoal, she went to work capturing its shape, the shading of its cupola, the lines and angles of its façade, before surrendering her artistic efforts for the time being.

~*~

The first thing Luca DeRosa noticed about the stranger was her hands. Perched just below him, on a ledge of the Ponte Vecchio, a waifish, brunette stroked swift, confident lines across the surface of a wire-bound sketch pad centered across her lap. Fluid grace punctuated the way she crafted a scene of the Arno, bringing her vision to life with a level of detail and eloquence that pulled him to stay put and absorb. Engrossed, she paused infrequently, just long enough to give brief study the world around her—the inward roll of fat, moisture-laden clouds, the dancing spikes of sunlight that intermittently pierced the cover of gray—before returning to her drawing.

What a gift.

The three words sounded through his spirit like a gong, eliciting a craving, the tantalizing curves of a wistful dream...

The creationist that had always resided in Luca's soul admired the woman's skill. Ever a tactile person, he continued to watch the way she used the tips of long, slender fingers to blend and shade. Her gentle strokes evoked a responsive warmth that built at his chest and flowed through his gut—launching the kind of intrigue and hunger only a fellow artist would truly understand, for the hunger he felt wasn't merely

physical, it seeped through the farthest reaches of his senses in a call that left behind an empty ache. A longing.

That fact alone should have prompted him to a hard pull-back from a reckless topple into attraction. Hadn't his heart just been extracted with nothing more than a blunt spoon? Hadn't he just traded one hope, one dream, for another?

Luc blinked, regrouped, and took a deep breath of cold air spiced by the promise of a December snow to come. Forecasters projected a blanket of white would soon cover the cobbled streets, slated rooftops and dormant balconies of Florence. He refocused when the artist stood, carefully, since her perch was somewhat narrow and precarious. She lifted onto the wide cement rail that served as a lookout post along this particular stretch of Florence's most historic and storied bridge.

When she swung her legs over, Luc ignored an instinct to withdraw and instead stepped forward.

"Please, allow me." He spoke his native Italian—and received a blank, somewhat sheepish look in return.

"I'm American. I'm sorry, but, do you speak English?"

"I do." Luc switched languages and took custody of her wire-bound pad. He helped her land safely by lifting her via a secure, two-handed hold against her waist. Light as a feather, he thought, once again sensing a natural grace.

After carefully settling her on solid ground, he extended his hand in welcome and introduction. "I'm Luca DeRosa."

She extended her hand in reciprocation then froze.

He puzzled at the flash of surprise that glanced across her features.

“DeRosa?”

Luc accepted her hand; he held fast and nodded while she continued to study him.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m...ah...”

“You’re startled. May I ask why?” During the ensuing pause, Luc slid into a vision of her being put off by his overt physical gestures. He released his hold and cringed at the idea, yet the connection had occurred instinctively, with unexpected ease.

“My grandmother’s last name is Rosa, Americanized from the DeRosa of her grandparents. I’m Ashley Coratini.”

“Where in Italy did they come from? Florence?”

“Florence on my mother’s side, Rome on my father’s. You might say I’m visiting the homeland.”

Her smile was tenuous, shy and sweet. Luca made ready to return her sketches, but hesitated. “I watched you just now. Your skills are exceptional.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the compliment.”

She ducked her head in retreat and claimed her drawings. A polite finality marked her words, accompanied by a second brief smile. She turned away and something mysterious pulsed beneath his skin.

“I wonder if you have a few minutes. I’d like to see more of your work. I’d like to learn more about you.”

She turned back, as decorum dictated, but tense body language and a subtle frown line between her brows threw an air of caution against his offer. She was suspicious, and he couldn’t blame her. After all, he was nothing more than a stranger.

Still...

Tightening her hold on the strap of her purse, she waited on him, eyes narrowed and questioning. She kept a liberal degree of distance between them, so Luc decided a more appropriate ice breaker was called for. From the pocket of his slacks, he slid free a business card and handed it to her. His invitation hadn't been well thought out—way too impulsive—he had to get going for both business and personal reasons, but that didn't change his level of interest, in both the artwork he witnessed and the woman behind it.

She accepted the offering and went still upon reading. Disbelief clouded her eyes, so he opted to answer the unspoken in plain, straightforward terms. "I hope your first impression of me isn't one of intrusiveness. My approach and my request are obviously unexpected, but I'm interested in your work. Please call me for an appointment."

~*~

Just like that, he was gone—an electric sizzle—the dazzling flash of a lightning streak.

Yet the impact of this particular lightning flash lingered, leaving behind the image of a tall man with waves of well-styled, dark brown hair. Smooth, aristocratic features had been illuminated by the power of his welcoming smile...

Snapping to, Ashley fingered the card she held. Square shaped and glossy, a subtle, chic shade of light gray formed its background. Watermarked across the surface was a black pencil sketch of a narrow roadway, lined by ancient looking brick shops, wrought iron and stone balconies, slate roofs. Scripted across the center were the words, *L'arte Della Vita*, then, in smaller

print, Luca DeRosa, Owner.

His name lifted like a beacon, prompting her to believe the impossible. The man who had stopped her owned an art gallery? He had taken an enthusiastic and authentic interest in her work? He wanted her to call him for an appointment?

Ashley stumbled away from the Ponte Vecchio, tempted to shake her head and work free of a dizzying, surreal flood of...of what exactly? Hope? Excitement?

Vindication?

No. She was jumping ahead of herself. She needed to focus. Christmas. Presents. Shopping. Wasn't that, and the deepening chill, what had called her away from creating before this extraordinary encounter had taken place?

As she walked a narrow, cobbled street lined by storefronts, a jewelry display captured her attention. Behind brightly lit glass Ashley spied an elegant, delicately crafted rosebud charm and matching chain. The silver piece would be perfect for Nonna Rosa.

Slipping inside the bustling, sparkling shop Ashley paused to savor the atmosphere. Drapes of evergreen and tinsel, the glow of fairy lights and a small, bejeweled Christmas tree heralded the season. While she waited for her turn to be waited on, an all-over joy lit her body from the inside out.

She peered through the small shop window, which framed an incomparable view of the river. Lengthening shadows and fading light painted the world purple and deep blue. Gold-tipped clouds skimmed forward and snow began to fall.

Maybe, she thought, lifting a prayer of hope and expectation. Just maybe...

2

The next morning, Ashley fought a battle between the fear of reaching out and the idea that she should approach this opportunity with rationality and calm. She picked up her cell phone at least a half-dozen times, referring to Luca's business card while she dialed. And hung up. And growled at herself. And tried all over again...and hung up.

What was wrong with her? This was nothing more than a meeting between two people mutually driven by a passion for art. But that was just it. There was meaning and potential to this connection that extended far beyond the parameters of a mere meeting. She had sensed as much the instant he handed over his card.

Move, my child. Don't question. Move. I'm with you always.

A loving Spirit prompt gave her the stillness, and calm, to finally dial the number in its entirety.

"Ciao, L'arte Della Vita. In cosa posso servirla?" Crisp, rapid-fire Italian crossed the connection, and Ashley intuited the woman's request to be of assistance. She gave her name and did her best to ask for Luca in as smooth a return of Italian as she was able. Nerve sparks came alive all over again while she waited.

"Ashley. I'm glad to hear from you. How are you?"

Smooth and deep, his tone blended professionalism and pleasure. That set her promptly at ease. They exchanged pleasantries and Luca laughed gently. "I was hoping you'd call, and that you weren't

too put off by the way I introduced myself.”

“You’re a braver soul than I am, and I appreciate what you did. I spent some time last night familiarizing myself with your gallery. To call it impressive is an understatement. I’m amazed by the level of success and acclaim you’ve achieved.”

“Thank you, but the artists are the ones to be commended. I simply give them an avenue, a chance for exposure. May I give you a tour in person? Are you going to be in Florence for long?”

“I’d be honored. I’ll be in Florence for the next three weeks.”

“Back to the States after that?”

“Yes, but I have to admit, I don’t even want to look that far ahead.”

“Live in the moment. I understand completely, and leaving Florence is never easy. Would two o’clock today work?”

“Perfectly.”

“Good. I look forward to seeing you then. And don’t forget your portfolio. I’m eager to explore your work.”

She rang off and spent the next few hours doing what she loved most since arriving in Italy, walking slowly through narrow, angled streets, milling about sundry shops, bakeries, before ending at a favorite café where she ordered a macchiato and cannoli.

At just before two o’clock she lingered before the window display of *Il Papiro*, a high-end stationary shop tucked within the narrow confines of the *Via Dei Tavolini*. Luca DeRosa’s gallery was just half a block away, but she didn’t want to appear to be overly eager by showing up early, so instead of storming the gates she opted to admire the sketch books and leather

goods spotlighted beautifully behind snow-dusted glass.

Just after a bell tower in the nearby Piazza della Repubblica struck the hour, she moved ahead and crossed the threshold of L'arte Della Vita. A glass and chrome reception desk framed the rear corner of a wide display area. Crafted into the shape of a supple wave, the desk featured the shop name etched in script across the front. The artwork was stunning, strategically positioned, and perfectly lit. Ashley cautioned herself in firm terms. If she paused to gawk at the visual feast before her, she'd never properly attend to her scheduled appointment. She focused instead on the stylish woman who lifted to her feet and moved forward in greeting. Shifting a tabloid-sized satchel from her right hand to her left, Ashley tried to keep from shuffling nervously.

"May I help you?" Supermodels had nothing on this statuesque lady with her high cheekbones, full lips and ocean of wavy, waist-length brunette hair. She was cordial, but Ashley absorbed the rake of a curious gaze.

"I hope so. My name is Ashley Coratini. I'm here for a meeting with Mr. DeRosa."

Interest lit the hazel eyes of her greeter. "Ah, yes. The charcoal artist. He's told me about your work. Please, come with me."

Ashley followed the woman's lead.

"I'm Katrina Marshall. I manage the gallery on behalf of Mr. DeRosa."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, and I envy you the opportunity. Living out my professional life in the art world would be a dream come true."

Katrina responded with a soft smile. "I've worked with Luca for years now; almost since the day he

opened. He recruited me after I graduated with my masters of fine arts degree from Studio Art Centers International."

Ashley's forward progress stuttered to a stall. A flutter of longing, an instant sense of artist-to-artist kinship, came to life. "You attained your masters from SACI? What an incredible experience that must have been. What's your degree in?"

"Studio art." Katrina rested her hand on the knob of a closed office door and nudged it gently open. "Here we are."

Though kind and professional, there remained something vaguely aloof and intimidating about the woman. "Luc, Ashley Coratini is here to see you."

"Ashley, welcome." Luca sat behind a glass-topped desk; his smile dawned warm as he took to his feet. "Thank you Katrina."

A pregnant pause followed the dismissal. Before Ashley could wonder too much about it, Katrina smiled and nodded, leaving a subtle air of tension in her wake. The woman's thin heels tapped against high-glossed wood floor as she walked away. A slim skirt fell just above the knee, topped by a crisp white shirt. Definitely intimidating, Ashley thought as she slid her fingers over the crepe fabric of her black slacks. She had chosen a hip-length blouse of royal blue lace because the ensemble had struck her as chic and artsy—until she met Katrina.

Doubts and static faded once Luca took hold of her hand and kissed both of her cheeks in a light, European-style greeting that left the rest of Ashley's world hazy around the edges. A delicious sensation, all in all, but she tempered that reaction with a businesslike attitude. "It's good to see you again."

"Likewise." He didn't return promptly to his desk but instead gestured to a nearby chair. "Feel free to set aside your folio. I'd like to get you acquainted with the gallery first if that's all right."

"Absolutely. I'd like that very much."

Actually, Ashley couldn't wait to explore. Thanks to the Google machine, she had learned a few things about L'arte Della Vita and its owner. After just ten years in existence, in a very tight and competitive art market, Luca and his wife Madelyn had created a fast-growing gallery with an upscale clientele and strong reputation as a venue that catered to fresh artists who were local to Florence and its many art institutes.

"I understand from my web search that you and your wife are the ones who established the gallery." Ashley wandered slowly, entranced by strong brass sculptures, ethereal water colors, provocative and breathtaking sketches. "What a wonderful legacy you're creating, to fill the world with beauty, and art."

"Well said. Spoken like an artist who truly understands the overall mission. Actually, that was Madelyn's driving philosophy from the day we opened."

Was? Ashley turned to him in silent question...and surprise.

"She passed away three years ago, very unexpectedly, but she was the visionary behind what you see. I've always been the talent scout while she was the key-holder of the gallery and the business side of things."

He was a widower. That stole her words for the moment. Luca struck her as being maybe in his mid-thirties, perhaps even a bit older judging by his outlook and polish, but he certainly didn't look it. He

was tall and lean, strong shouldered; his features were unlined, but now she noticed his thick brunette hair featured a smattering of silver.

Luca gestured to their left. "Here's the offshoot of the main gallery. I use these two compartmentalized spaces to spotlight the work of students. In the main area I host exhibitions for new and promising artists and acquisitions."

He moved away from the topic of his late wife and Ashley refused to press into uncomfortable territory. She studied him as he led the way, admiring his black silk suit, the flair of a ruby red tie, his smooth carriage.

She forced herself to proper focus. "I have to ask. How did you come up with the name The Art of Life? I think it's a wonderful choice."

"Thank you. Madelyn came up with it, and I agreed straight away. It's fitting. Perfect, really. Art gives and reflects life—which, I know, sounds about as cliché and lofty as any art patron can be, right?"

Ashley laughed, allowing herself to relax, and step into this delicious, often-dreamed of world of creation. Soft recessed lighting accentuated dreamy watercolors, stark modernistic canvases; colonnade-style pedestals featured brass renderings of abstracts, of people, and there was a breathtaking version of the Duomo that was so strongly crafted, so evocative, Ashley nearly reached out a hand to gloss fingertips along its ridges...

"I lose myself every time I stroll through this place. The talent thrills and captures me every time."

"I suppose I'm pretty transparent."

His smile ended at the crinkled corners of his eyes; appreciation lit his demeanor. "Yes, but I consider that an admirable trait. Let's take a look at your portfolio."

I'm eager to see what else you've done."

Luca led them on a return to his office, but didn't reclaim his seat. Rather, he stopped short and turned her way. "Rather than conducting a stilted business meeting, why don't we take a walk? There's a café nearby that serves wonderful cappuccino, and I want to review your work, and show you a rooftop view of Florence that I think you'll love."

"I'd like that very much."

~*~

Ashley stood behind Luca in a line that formed near the baked goods display case of the Cuppa Cappa Coffee shop. He ordered a pair of their signature Cappuccinos while she watched a skilled barista spray a layer of frothy white cream atop their beverages then sculpt thin, delicate streams of chocolate into the perfect shape of Florence's time-honored and iconic emblem: the fiordaliso.

They claimed a table to the rear of the café and Ashley settled, unwinding a pink wool scarf from around her neck. She took a careful but delighted sip of her beverage. "Thank you for the coffee. It's almost too pretty to drink."

"You're welcome."

"I meant to say, earlier, that I'm impressed by your command of the English language."

"I'm afraid that's purely mercenary on my part. Some of the most prominent and passionate art collectors are from New York. I've also learned French and a bit of Chinese, but Chinese is a challenge."

"I took a year of Italian before coming here for a study abroad session almost two years ago, at the end

of college. I'm afraid I know just enough of the language to be dangerous."

"Languages, like art, have always interested me for some reason. Language is creative—and I've always been drawn to anything creative." He pushed back his chair slightly and nodded toward her folio. "Speaking of which, would you mind if I take a look?"

"Not at all." Oh, sure, she sounded confident, but on the inside, she quaked in the throes of uncertainty. Ashley handed him the satchel. "I hope you won't be disappointed. I get the feeling you hold my work in high regard."

He took custody and opened the cover. At once, she could tell he lost himself. He turned the pages slowly, and an expressive grin lit his features. "You have good instincts. I think your work is remarkable."

He peeled back layer upon layer of her portfolio. He studied—really studied—each image in a manner that left her senses to sparkle and dance. She waited in silence until he looked up at last and refocused.

"What's your dream as an artist, Ashley? If you had carte blanche, what would you hope to achieve?"

The questions caught her off guard, leaving her no choice but to respond on instinct and from her heart. "I suppose—like any artist, really—I want to reach people. I want touch hearts, and engage."

She shrugged shyly and noticed he returned to taking in her work—absorbing it all over again.

"I think the highest honor an artist can achieve is for their work to find a place in people's memories," she said, "in their homes and their minds. I've always believed art speaks to people, and that belief moves me forward."

He looked up once more and regarded her with