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Hearts at the Holy See

THERESE M. TRAVIS

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Dedication

For Katie, for many, loving reasons; for God, always.

1

The sheer old-world romance of Vatican City nearly took Amalie Winter's breath away. The guards in their uniforms—much more regal and imposing than she'd anticipated—the height of the buildings, the breadth of Saint Peter's Square, all combined to make her feel more as if she'd dropped into another century, rather than another country.

The glow of the sunset threw their shadows ahead of them as Amalie followed her cousin through the square. They navigated a wide boulevard screaming with traffic into a slightly quieter, and much narrower, two-lane street. An old street, old in age, old-fashioned in feel, almost like a page from an illustrated manuscript.

If Casey weren't already five steps ahead and moving fast, Amalie would have stopped to soak in the ambiance.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"I need lunch."

"Don't you mean dinner? I think you're still on U.S. time." Amalie had no idea what time zone she'd landed in. Exhausted, excited, exhilarated, she didn't care what the clock said. For the first time in her life, she was in Vatican City. Or—she looked around—just outside the tiny country, and now, in Rome.

The light faded from bright, new-coin shiny to a

darker tarnished gleam, and the gold of the manuscript lost its glitter.

Amalie grinned at Casey as she caught up.

Casey made another detour, and they came to a street so narrow, two normal sized vehicles couldn't pass each other with more than half an inch clearance. But no cars tried. Instead, pedestrians filled the place, making the walk a struggle against whatever tide the rest of the world followed. Casey barreled past three restaurants, each reaching out with scents that tried to grab Amalie by the nose and slow her down.

"How much farther—" she started, but Casey was gone, disappearing inside the door of yet another delicious smelling lure. Amalie sidled in after her, just in time to see three waiters converge.

The first got to hand Casey a menu, the second threw his arms around Casey, welcoming her in a delightful mix of English and Italian. The third got the consolation prize—Amalie. Used to the phenomenon, Amalie gave him a smile that left him blinking and headed for the group now gathered around her cousin.

"I take it you've been here before," she said when waiter number two turned to babble at waiter number one, obviously demanding more services than customers usually received. "This must be the famous Rossetti restaurant."

Casey blushed. "Yup. That's Leo. I'll introduce you in a few minutes."

Amalie studied waiter number two, who had transformed into a young man named Leo—AKA Casey's one true love. His dark eyes flashed as he gave even more instructions, and he topped the other waiter by several inches—and had towered over Casey. When he turned back, she caught a look on his face which

told Amalie that Casey, at least, had picked someone with a true heart.

“Casey, *caro*, I didn’t expect you to come until tomorrow. I am so pleased!”

“I couldn’t wait to see you.” And when his eyes lit up even more, Casey added, “This is Amalie.”

She got the same tremendous hug that Casey had, and then Leo stepped back with his hands still on her shoulders. “You are Casey’s special cousin. I’m honored to meet you.”

If he weren’t officially Casey’s, Amalie might have swooned.

An older couple joined them. The man wore what would be Leo’s face in twenty years, and the woman, dressed in classic black, with gray threading through her hair, motioned them all to a large table which was surrounded by seven chairs. She shouted in Italian at the man, at Leo, and finally, at waiter number one, who scurried off.

Casey grinned through it all, but Amalie, after a terrified study of the older woman, edged closer to her cousin.

Leo held a chair for Casey then hurried around the table, waving Amalie to join him, where he seated her with the same flourish. “Please. Armino will bring appetizers.”

The older man held the chair next to Amalie for his wife, and sat next to her. Leaning around the woman, he pointed to himself. “Bernardo,” he said, and then, putting his hand on his wife’s shoulder, he said, “Manuela.”

Manuela nodded and beamed. At least she didn’t yell.

Amalie introduced herself in a like manner, sure

that this might be the only type of communication they'd be able to have unless Leo could tear himself away from mooning over Casey to translate. Or Manuela started shouting again.

So this man—this gorgeous man—was the reason Casey had begged Amalie to come to Italy with her, had bribed her with promises of tours of Vatican City, and even, if at all possible, a Mass with the Pope presiding. Amalie's heart bubbled with excitement. If Casey could deal with her prospective mother-in-law—and Amalie had no doubt Casey could—then her world was set. And if Amalie attended a Mass with the Pope—her world would be full, as well.

Waiters number one and three carried out platters brimming with mounds of cheese, bread, olives, and tiny bowls of herb-infused oil, followed by yet another waiter, who carried an armful of small plates and silverware. After he handed these around the table, he pulled napkins from the waistband of his apron and then, with a flourish, sat on Amalie's other side.

The most gorgeous of all men in Italy—even more so than Leo, as if that were possible—sat next to Amalie.

She gaped at him then smiled. Chances were, he was yet another member of Leo's family. He certainly shared the Roman nose, and even better, his dark eyes crinkled at the corners in a way that could set Amalie's heart pounding. She hoped his English came closer to Leo's proficiency rather than Bernardo's.

She pointed to herself. "Amalie."

His mouth twitched as he poked at his own chest. "Giovanni Rossetti. Yes, another Rossetti. Leo's cousin, this time. Pleased to meet you, Casey's cousin. She's told us a lot about you." He held out his hand.

Amalie blinked as she shook it. "Wow, your English is really good. You have hardly any accent."

"I hope not, since I grew up in Los Angeles."

At least the night and the candles did what they could to hide her blush. "Oh. I'm sorry. I thought—"

His eyes twinkled. "I don't blame you. But you're safe talking to me. No sign language required." He held out a platter of crostini and, after she'd served herself a few, offered the olives, then the cheese. Once she'd over-filled her plate, he did the same and then dunked a round of bread into the oil. "Casey tells us this is your first time in Italy. I hope you enjoy it."

"I will." Then, when he glanced at Leo, his mouth twitching again, she hurried to add, "I've wanted to visit Vatican City practically my whole life."

"Have you?" He tilted an eyebrow at her and then reached for more olives.

"I've been researching for years, just in case." Amalie nearly squirmed with the delight of seeing everything she'd learned right there in front of her, real life. "There's so much history—"

"And you've read all the books and seen all the movies?"

"Some of them. I liked Anthony Quinn in *Shoes of the Fisherman*, but I think it ended up being a bit controversial."

His mouth twitched. "I haven't seen that one."

"Well, there's a bit about selling all the church's treasures. I mean, if they did, what would we have to visit now?"

"You've got a point."

"*The Agony and the Ecstasy* is better."

"That one, I've heard of. It's about Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, isn't it?"

“Yes!” Clearly, this man had absorbed at least a drop of Catholic culture.

After he chose another oil-dripping olive, Giovanni glanced up. “I think Casey’s roped both Leo and me into being your tour guides.”

“Roped you?” Oh, now this sounded bad. No doubt Leo would love spending the next two weeks with Casey, but why on earth had her cousin bribed a man to drag Amalie around? And with what? “That’s not necessary. But thank you.”

He winced. “Sorry. Bad choice of words. And really, it was more Leo than Casey trying to persuade me.”

As if that made it better. Well, Amalie didn’t want to spend time with this man any more than he did with her, no matter how gorgeous he was. No matter how his voice sent shivers through her every time he leaned close so she could hear him over the noise in the restaurant.

“But now that I’ve seen you, no persuasion is necessary.” He smiled again, and she lifted her chin.

“I’m sorry. We have tickets and appointments. I’m not sure you can get the same reservations we did. I understand everything fills up pretty fast. But thank you for offering.” She made sure the last sounded as patently false as she meant it to.

He looked down at his plate for a moment then met her gaze. His eyes, shadowed now, didn’t waver. “Leo’s the one who made all the arrangements for the four of us. I don’t think he’s given Casey any of the tickets yet.”

And what could she say to that? As long as Amalie was able to attend a Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica, she ought not to mind. And if the Pope were presiding—

well, that just sent shivers up her arms—a very different kind than the ones Giovanni’s voice produced. Ever since the Papal Conclave, seeing the Pope in person had been on her bucket list.

Waiters brought out more food, even though no one at the table had made much of a road through the appetizers. Soup bowls this time.

Amalie swallowed hard as the smell wafted up to her, then she reached for her water goblet. She and seafood were not a good combination, but she wouldn’t mind skipping a part of the meal. She had the feeling there was much more to come.

Instead of worrying about allergic reactions, she checked out her cousin, on the other side of Manuela and Bernardo. Casey leaned close to Leo, her head nearly touching his, and he dipped a spoon into her bowl before holding it up to her mouth.

Wow. That reminded Amalie of some old romance movie, where the hero and heroine were about to share their first kiss. Candles wedged into fat, jute-wrapped wine bottles flickered their light off the glassware. The rest of the restaurant was a dim background to their table, and it all added to the cinematic feel.

Another woman, also clad in black, plopped herself next to Giovanni, and he turned to speak to her. His Italian was as quick and fluid as everyone else’s. He must be fully bilingual.

Amalie pushed the soup bowl away and concentrated on the appetizers.

“You don’t like the soup?”

She jerked, not having noticed Giovanni had finished speaking to the other woman.

“I can’t eat seafood.”

“I’m sorry.” He motioned to one of the waiters,

who removed the bowl.

"It's not—" A problem, but he'd already gotten it taken care of, and more waiters brought the main dish—a pasta drenched in cream sauce. After a moment Amalie picked up her fork. "I trust it's not shrimp?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't let you eat something that will make you sick."

Of course he wouldn't. The reputation of the family restaurant depended on it. Amalie took a bite and smiled as she tasted chicken. "Do you always choose meals for your customers?"

He seemed to give her an abbreviated double take. "But you're not customers. You're guests. And this is the house specialty. If you'd like something else—"

"Oh, no. It's wonderful. I just wondered."

"I'm sure Zia Manuela never thought it would be necessary. If you want to talk—"

"No. It's fine." And she wished she hadn't mentioned it. Now they'd managed to offend each other. Great start, considering they were doomed to spend the next two weeks together.

Somehow, she'd squirm out of that obligation—if Giovanni didn't do it first.

Again, Giovanni turned to answer the woman next to him, and Amalie twisted the opposite direction to watch her cousin. She had her head close to Leo's now, and each raised a glass to toast.

Like the rest of the family, Amalie hadn't quite believed Casey could have fallen in love with someone the family had never met. But after seeing Leo, after seeing the sheer devotion he lavished on Casey, Amalie couldn't fathom a single person she'd rather see Casey love. The man was smitten. And Casey?

Amalie smiled as she watched Casey and Leo look deep into each other's eyes. Oh, Casey was as far gone as Leo. They were a match. No arguments necessary.

Except, would Casey want to marry someone who lived and worked half a world away from home? Granted, she'd been traveling to Italy on a regular basis for her job the last few years, but living there would be different. Scary, maybe. Love conquered all; Amalie believed that with her whole soul, but it didn't always make things easy. And unless Leo also had dual citizenship, visits to the U.S. might be far between.

Then again, could Casey have fallen in love so soon? This was her fifth trip to Rome, but the previous four had all been for business. She couldn't have had much time to spend with Leo. Yet there was the promise of a ring this time around.

Amalie also believed in love at first sight—if not with her whole soul, at least, theoretically. She'd like to see it in action. Not for herself, of course, but for Casey? Why not?

With a sigh, Amalie shook her head. She'd thought she believed in love at first sight, until she'd experienced it. She'd fallen in love then fallen nearly into despair when he'd broken up with her. Now, she was just as glad she didn't have to make the same kind of choice as Casey. After Alex's accusations, the breakup, the endless loop of his voice telling her she had no passion, no heart, and no ability to keep a man, she didn't want to get into another relationship. Ever. She had no heart? Well, then, she wouldn't attempt to find the desires of it. She had no passion? Better to live alone. She couldn't keep a man? Then why start off with one?

She shook her head, appalled. Alex had broken up

with her more than a year ago, and she was still this bitter? Just another issue to add to the list she'd brought, hoping the atmosphere at the Holy City—and God—would help her deal with. If she could heal while she was here, maybe that was as much as she could ask for.

Giovanni jerked when Zia Silvana leaned close and jabbed a finger at him. "This one—" She pointed at Casey, speaking in Italian. "She is the kind of woman who would be good for you to marry. Beautiful, she is. She would give us beautiful babies. And she likes Italy. You could move here, take over the restaurant from Bernardo, and make your family happy."

"Zia, I can't marry someone who is practically engaged to Leo." If Zia Silvana had pointed at Amalie, he might have a different opinion. Amalie had some special spark that drew him. "And how would Leo feel if I—"

"Why not marry and then fall in love? It happens. How do you think all these arranged marriages survive? It's because love can come after the wedding as easily as before."

Glad they couldn't make him get married, Giovanni shook his head. "Zio Bernardo knows I wouldn't make a good restaurant owner."

Zia Silvana waved away Giovanni's change of subject. "That means nothing. You hear me? Nothing. That is not why you won't choose a woman. Picky, that's you. You think your poor mama doesn't tell me about the girlfriends you go through back in California? You think no one in the family knows how

you find some little thing to dislike and suddenly, she's out of your life?"

Giovanni gritted his teeth. "No, I'm sure everyone in Italy knows every detail of my dating life."

"Not all of Italy." She patted his arm. "Jovi, you're thirty years old. Your beauty won't last forever. How can you deny your family your babies?"

"I want to find—" He stopped. Zia Silvana had already annihilated any claim that he needed to fall in love first. His mother must have passed on that particular requirement of his. And that was being picky? He didn't think so.

There was something about Amalie, though. He could dream all night based on the little attention she'd given him, so far.

Zia Silvana grabbed his arm and jerked him to look at Casey. Her blonde hair picked up the candle glow like silk, and her eyes sparkled with the fun of her three-way conversation with Leo and Leo's mother.

Giovanni sank back into his chair, shaking his head and marveling at his aunt, before he turned to study Amalie's profile. She hadn't asked what he'd heard about her, which surprised him. Most women, even the least vain, would be curious. But this woman had let his remark pass as if it meant nothing.

It meant plenty to Giovanni. "Amalie had a really bad breakup," Casey had told them on her last visit to Italy—the first time she and Giovanni had met. "You can't imagine what it took for me to convince her to agree to come. You'd think someone who spends so much time in church would jump at a chance at the Vatican, but she acted as if she couldn't believe she was worthy."

Interesting. Why would someone not deserve it?

Now, Amalie sighed and he touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Exhausted, but I'm fine." She smiled, and once again, he saw that enticing spark of joy light up her face. Maybe she'd done some healing all on her own, and now Rome and Giovanni could help finish off the cure.

"I could walk you to your hotel if Casey's not ready to go."

"Oh, no, that's fine. I'll wait for her." She looked down at her hands, and then across the table.

Good one, Jovi. She's an intelligent woman. A hesitant woman according to her cousin. She's probably studied all kinds of crime and how to travel safely. Now she thinks you're a predator. You need to remember she's just met you. He, on the other hand, had met her years ago, in some dream, and now he'd come home to her.

He had never believed in love at first sight.

Joke's on Jovi. He laughed to himself then had to scramble to come up with an explanation when the girl from his dreams turned with a question in her eyes.

"Someone will have to lead you by the hand," he said. "You're practically asleep right now." He waved to get Leo's attention, and within seconds, Leo got the gist and got to his feet.

"Jovi and I will walk you to the hotel."

Amalie didn't seem to mind that time. Did Leo make her feel safer, or was it simply the numbers?

They walked slowly, an amble through streets teeming with the people, scents, and sounds that were Giovanni's second home.

Casey, leaning on Leo's arm, tapped Amalie on the shoulder. "This was worth it, wasn't it?"

Amalie raised her chin. "Absolutely."

Did Giovanni hear a hint of a warning in her tone? Frowning, he glanced back at Casey then at Amalie.

"Rome is a good place to forget the past," Casey said.

Amalie's eyes went from sparking joy to shooting fire-breathing bullets. Definitely her cousin had touched on a difficult topic. But rather than flare up, she sent her brilliant smile to Giovanni. "Do the Swiss Guard patrol outside of Vatican City?"

"Not usually." Giovanni tucked a hand in his pocket, wondering. She'd changed the subject so suddenly—and so startlingly—that he could barely catch up. Certainly, he couldn't follow her agenda.

"Because that never came up in my research. I mean, I read about their uniforms, of course, and the requirements."

"Yeah, I've heard about that," Casey said. She muttered something else. Giovanni thought it sounded like, "Too much," but he wasn't sure.

"And that they're much more military now than they used to be—"

"OK." Casey growled the word as if giving up in an argument. "I won't mention anything else. Just give it a break."

Amalie shrugged, but a hint of that smile tugged at her dimples, and then they arrived at the hotel.

Casey and Leo said a rather more restrained good-bye than Giovanni had expected, and the two men watched the women disappear inside.

"She's cute, right?"

"Both of them," Giovanni agreed.

"Hey! Hands off Casey."

"No fear."

They walked a while and had nearly reached Leo's

apartment, where Giovanni was bunking, before Leo asked, "You like her? Amalie, I mean?"

Giovanni smiled into the neon-lit darkness. "I think I do."

"Good. It'll make things a lot easier."

Giovanni didn't ask how. He could imagine. And really, he'd rather imagine the next two weeks, where he and Amalie were thrown together by Leo and Casey and their relationship. Yeah, that was all he wanted to imagine. He was glad Leo wanted to marry a nice girl like Casey. Other than that, he wanted to forget that Leo and Casey would be a part of the next two weeks at all.

2

Sleeping in had sounded wonderful the night before, but Amalie woke early to the sound of birds and traffic. Something tickled the back of her mind, and she lay for a while, staring at the shadows shifting on the wall, reliving the day before.

First, the airport, the long waits, the flight, customs. Nothing special there.

Then checking into the hotel, following Casey as she wound her way through an Italy she'd come to know so well, taking Amalie to the man who'd captured Casey's heart.

And then, inside the restaurant—really, Amalie ought to concentrate on the gorgeous food rather than the gorgeous men. Or concentrate on the feel of stepping into a world of a hundred years gone by, yet still real and true, rather than a romance so far beyond her reach. She should not think about Giovanni.

But she already had.

Rather than indulge that, she hustled to the shower, shooed Giovanni out of her thoughts once again, dressed, chased Giovanni away from her mind a third time, and set about dressing for her first full day in Vatican City.

Casey had e-mailed their itinerary. Amalie pulled it up on her phone. They were scheduled to visit the Sistine Chapel, followed by lunch, followed by an

afternoon at the basilica. Most of the buildings in Vatican City closed in the evening. No nightlife, which Amalie thought only fitting, and since the country had few restaurants open to the public, it made sense.

After Casey woke, Amalie grabbed a multicolored, floppy hat to smash onto her head. With her skin, she rarely went outside without something to protect her. "We don't want to be late meeting Jovi."

"Don't call him that."

"Why not?" Amalie made sure she had her key card in her pocket. "That's what his family called him. I heard Leo say it, too."

"That's family. Anyway, Giovanni is so much more—" Casey stopped and sighed.

"Ro-man-tic." Amalie drawled the word out to a ridiculous length.

Casey snorted. "I was thinking it's more Italian."

Amalie nodded as though she believed Casey's protest. "What's Leo's full name?"

"Leonardo, of course."

"That's pretty romantic, too."

"Isn't it?" Casey pressed a hand to her heart then patted her purse. "I've got my sunglasses, camera, and money. Anything else I need?"

"You don't need your camera for the Sistine Chapel," she said, dredging up more research. "No pictures allowed there, remember?"

"Yes, you've already told me." Casey's lips pursed before she went on. "But there's lunch, and the whole afternoon in the basilica. Let's get some breakfast and then meet our oh-so-handsome guides."

Amalie had to practically beat the image of Giovanni out of her mind that time. But maybe meeting him again would help. That way, she could

prove to herself that she wasn't attracted to the man at all, and she could enjoy the rest of her visit in peace. She had to swallow her giggles the whole way down the stairs.

They hurried to the dining room and chose a table near the windows, but the lure of Vatican City was too much for both of them. They didn't give a lick of justice to the sumptuous spread but gathered their things and left as soon as they were both satisfied.

Chattering, the cousins left the cafe and made their way along *Via Borgo Santo Spirito* to the border of Vatican City and the entrance to the square.

"I don't see them." Amalie held her hat on her head while she searched the wide, paved space between the entrance and the obelisk. Behind her, huge buildings that looked like simple apartments nearly ringed them in. She turned in a circle, unsure if she'd be able to spot Giovanni out of the hundreds of dark haired men crowding the square, and daring her heart to do just that. Daring it to prove she wasn't falling in love again...quickly. Irrationally. Love at first sight was a myth. Her previous experience proved it. She'd spun head-over-heels. Alex had trampled her fallen heart.

"Leo's right there."

Amalie nodded and pretended she'd just missed him, not that she'd been searching for his cousin and didn't care if Leo showed up or not.

"He's not bad looking, is he?" Casey shot her an appraising glance.

On a sigh, Amalie said, "Oh, yes, actually, Leo is quite gorgeous." And it ran in the family, obviously.

"Amazing. And sweet, too. In fact—" Casey stopped as Leo sprinted up to meet them.