

Rosie's Little Book of Ice Cream

By

Liz Fielding

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With many thanks to Ian Smith of Ian Super Whippy who, when I embarked on Tempted By Trouble, answered all my questions about “Rosie” with charm and patience and sent me pictures of the “bell” mechanism.

Any diversions from reality are entirely Basil’s fault.

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Interesting Facts About Ice Cream



The Emperor Nero is said to have sent slaves into the Apennine Mountains to fetch snow to mix with nectar, fruit pulp and honey, although this widely told tale may be a myth.

The origins of ice cream date back to China's T'ang period, probably as a dish for the country's rulers. The founder of the dynasty, King T'ang of Shang, kept 94 "ice men" on hand to carry ice to the palace. It is widely thought that Marco Polo brought the idea back from his travels in China.

In the Persian Empire, people poured grape-juice concentrate over snow, in a bowl to eat as a treat.

When Italian duchess Catherine d'Medici married the Duke of Orléans (Henry II of France) in 1533, she is said to have taken to France some Italian chefs who had recipes for flavoured ices or sorbets. One hundred years later, Charles I of England was, apparently, so impressed by the "frozen snow" that he offered his own ice cream maker a lifetime pension in return for keeping the formula secret, so that ice cream could be a royal prerogative. There is no historical evidence to support these legends, which first appeared during the 19th century.

American colonists took with them recipes from Europe. On May 19, 1744, a group of VIP's dined at the home of Maryland Governor Thomas Bladen. Present was a Scottish colonist who described "a Dessert...Among the Rarities of which it was Compos'd, was some fine Ice Cream which, with the Strawberries and Milk, eat most deliciously." This is the first written account of ice cream consumption in the new world.

In the second half of the 19th century, street vendors in the UK sold ice cream in glass containers called a "penny lick". As the name implies, the treat cost just a penny and yes, the customer did lick it straight from the glass! It was banned in London in 1899 due to concern about the spread of disease, especially tuberculosis.

Edible cones were mentioned in French cookery books as early as 1825, but Abe Doumar rolled up a waffle, filled it with ice cream and began selling these cones at the St Louis Exposition in 1904. He later bought a machine which produced 20 cones a minute and his company was still operating 100 years later.

By WWII, ice cream had become so popular that it turned into an American symbol, causing Mussolini to ban it in Italy. Ice cream was great for troop morale and in 1943 the U.S. Armed Forces were the world's largest ice cream manufacturers!

The Collected Wisdom of Rosie



Life is like ice-cream, you have to take it one lick at a time.

Save the earth, it's the only planet with ice cream.

As with most things, there is a proper season for ice cream. The simple way to remember whether it's the correct time of year is this; it is any month with the letter A, E or U in it. — *inspired by Sandra Boynton*

Me and ice cream. Best friends forever. — *Jessi Lane Adams*

I doubt whether the world holds for anyone a more soul-stirring surprise than the first adventure with ice cream — *Heywood Broun*

Without ice cream, there would be darkness and chaos. — *Don Kardong*

Ice cream is exquisite. What a pity it isn't illegal. — *Voltaire*

Always serve too much hot fudge sauce on hot fudge sundaes. It makes people overjoyed, and puts them in your debt. — *Judith Olney*

Forget love. I'd rather fall in ice cream.

Age does not diminish the extreme disappointment of having a scoop of ice cream fall from the cone. — *Jim Fiebig*

Ice cream is happiness condensed. — *Jessi Lane Adams*

Fudge is a noun, a verb, an interjection and delicious! — *Jessi Lane Adams*

Never trust a skinny ice cream man. — *Ben Cohen*

The 12-step ice cream program; never be more than 12 steps away from ice cream. — *inspired by Terry Moore*

Happiness is life served up with a scoop of acceptance, a topping of tolerance and sprinkles of hope, although chocolate sprinkles also work. — *Robert Brault*

Take plenty of exercise. Always run after the ice cream van.

Life is uncertain. Eat dessert first.



The perfect ice-cream is like the perfect woman; cool, delicate, subtle with a flavour that lingers on the tongue.

Everyone has a price. Mine is ice cream.

If your ice cream melts, you're eating it too slowly.

A world without strawberry ice cream? That's a world without summer.

Put "eat ice cream" at the top of your list of things to do today and you'll get at least one thing done.

Don't drown your sorrows. Suffocate them with ice cream.

The most blissful words in any language. Vanilla ice cream with hot fudge sauce.

There's nothing more cheering than a good friend when we're in trouble — except a good friend with ice cream.

Ideas should be clear and ice cream thick. — *Spanish proverb*

There are four basic food groups; you'll find them all in a Knickerbocker Glory.

Man cannot live on ice cream alone. Women are tougher.

Never send to know for whom the ice cream bell chimes; it chimes for thee

A balanced diet is an ice cream in each hand.

I'd give up ice cream, but I'm no quitter.

Ice cream is like medicine; the secret is in the dose.

A little ice cream is like a love affair — a sweet pleasure that lifts the spirit.

Strength is the ability to open a tub of ice cream and eat just one spoonful.

Don't wreck the perfect ice cream moment by feeling guilty.

All I really need is love, but a little ice cream would do to be going on with.

Life is like ice cream on a hot day. Enjoy it before it melts.

Ice cream is cheaper than therapy and you don't need an appointment.

Things are bad, send ice cream. With hot fudge sauce, sprinkles, and mini marshmallows.



Eat spinach tomorrow; today is for ice cream.

In the winter dip your ice cream in sparkly, rose pink sprinkles.

There are no recipes for left over ice cream.

You can't buy happiness but you can buy ice cream which is much the same thing.

If you licked the sunset, it would taste like Neapolitan ice cream.

Forget science. Put your trust in ice cream.

Love is an ice cream sundae, with all the marvellous coverings. Sex is the cherry on top.

Eat ice cream for a broken heart. It freezes the heart and numbs the pain.

There's nothing wrong with life that a little ice cream won't fix.

“Have you ever spent days and days and days making up flavours of ice cream that no one’s ever eaten before? Like chicken and telephone ice cream? Green mouse ice cream was the worst. I didn’t like that at all.”

Neil Gaiman, The Sandman

“...everyone knows that ice cream is worth the trouble of being cold. Like all things virtuous, you have to suffer to gain the reward.”

Brandon Sanderson, The Rithmatist

“Like magic, she felt him getting nearer, felt it like a pull in the pit of her stomach. It felt like hunger but deeper, heavier. Like the best kind of expectation. Ice cream expectation. Chocolate expectation.”

Sarah Addison Allen, The Sugar Queen

“This one is called ‘Chunky Munky’.”

Nadia stopped with the spoon halfway to her mouth. “But isn’t a monkey a small chattering Earth creature that lives in trees?” she asked faintly. “Are...are you telling me that I’m eating chunks of its flesh?”

“Ugh.” Sophie shivered. “What a thought! The poor monkeys!”

Nadia felt ill. “Is that why this stuff is called ‘I Scream?’ Because the animal screams when they make it into dessert?”

Evangeline Anderson, Found

“It was the colour of someone buying you an ice cream cone for no reason at all.”

Lemony Snicket, When Did You See Her Last

“...stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot oftener, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more and cry less.”

Robert J Hastings, Tinyburg Tales



My advice to you is not to inquire why or whither, but just enjoy your ice cream while it's on your plate.

Thornton Wilder

Scoops of mint ice cream with chips of chocolate cows.

Jim Bishop on the English countryside

New clothes are a great way to deal after a breakup. A good mix CD also helps you get through it and...you know, 72 hours of ice cream.

Jennifer Love Hewitt

RECIPES

Champagne Sorbet



350 ml (12 fl oz) (1.5 cups) chilled water

120 ml (4 fl oz) (half cup) pink grapefruit juice

225 g (8oz) caster (fine) sugar (1 cup)

350 ml (12 fl oz) (1.5 cups) chilled champagne or sparkling dry white wine

1 small egg white

Combine the water, grapefruit juice and sugar together. Chill until the sugar has dissolved. Stir in the champagne or sparkling wine. Pour into an ice cream maker and process according to the manufacturer's instructions (or using the hand mixing method – see below) and churn until slushy.

Whisk egg white until it forms soft peaks and add to the sorbet while churning, or fold into the mixture in the freezer container. Continue churning until firm. Freeze for at least 20 minutes before serving.

Before serving, freeze the glasses briefly with a drop of brandy, cassis or fraise in the base. Do not keep more than a few days.

Serve the sorbet directly from the freezer as it melts very quickly.

Hand mixing method.

Pour into a freezer container deep enough to allow space for later mixing. Cover with clingfilm or greaseproof paper so that it can freeze evenly and cover with a well-fitting lid. Place container in coldest part of the freezer, leave for around an hour. Using a fork, scrape the frozen sorbet or ice cream in from edges and whisk to smooth, even texture. Cover container and return to freezer for another hour. Repeat two more times until the ice cream is smooth and nearly evenly frozen. Then cover and leave to freeze completely.

Cucumber Ice Cream



500g (1b 2oz) (3 $\frac{1}{3}$ cups) cucumber
200m (7fl oz) (just less than a cup) Honey
200ml (7 fl oz) (just less than a cup) double cream (heavy cream)
200ml (7fl oz) (just less than a cup) Greek yogurt
2 tbsp chopped fresh mint
Pinch of salt
Juice of 1 lemon

Pour the cream into a pan and bring to the boil, lower heat and simmer. Add the yogurt, honey and chopped mint and stir until the honey has completely dissolved. Set aside to cool completely.

Peel half of the cucumber as you only want some of the green skin for colour. Remove the seeds and core.

Chop the flesh and blitz in food processor. Pour in the creamy mixture and blitz again adding the lemon juice and the salt.

Press the mixture through a wire sieve to get the smoothest texture and chill thoroughly before churning in an ice-cream maker (or using the hand freezing method described above)

Spoon into a carton and freeze for 2 hours to firm

Lavender Granita



2 tbsp lavender heads

115 g (4 oz) (half cup) caster (fine) sugar

240 ml (8 fl oz) (1 cup) boiling water

240 ml (8 fl oz) (1 cup) chilled water

2 tsp lemon juice

2 tsp orange juice

Place lavender heads and sugar in a bowl and add the boiling water. Stir well, cover and leave to cool completely.

Strain, then add chilled water and fruit juices. Pour into freezer container and freeze until almost firm, breaking up with a fork during freezing. Break up again into even crystals just before serving.

The flavour of this delicate granita will soon disappear so eat it as soon as possible.

Risotto alla Milano

960ml (32 fl ozs) (4 US cups) chicken stock

25 gns (1 oz) (2 tblsp) unsalted butter

1 large shallot, finely chopped

Large pinch of saffron threads

225 gms (8 oz) (1 US cup) Arborio or Carnaroli rice

120 ml (4 fl oz) (½ cup) dry white wine or dry white vermouth

50 gms (2oz) (1/3 cup) grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

½ tsp salt to taste

Heat chicken stock in to a slow simmer in a large pot

In a large heavy saucepan or skillet melt butter, add shallot and sauté until translucent. Sprinkle in saffron threads and cook, stirring, for approximately one minute

Add rice and cook 1 to 2 minutes, making sure all the grains are well coated.

Add wine and cook, stirring constantly until wine has been completely absorbed by the rice,

Ladle in enough chicken stock to cover the rice and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently until stock has been absorbed. Continue cooking, adding a little stock (about ½ a cup at a time) until all the stock has been absorbed and the rice is still tender but firm to the bite (about 20 to 25 minutes)

When done, remove from heat and stir in cheese, Add salt to taste.

Makes 6 main course servings

Tempted by Trouble

Lovage (Elle) Amery's story



Rosie was pink and white with a chrome grille and little round headlamps that gave the impression of a smiley face. The ice cream cones on either side of the roof, like a pair of rabbit ears, added to the illusion.

‘LOVAGE Amery?’

If ever there had ever been a moment to follow grandma’s example and check her reflection in the mirror before she opened the front door, Elle decided, this was it.

On her knees and up to her Marigolds in soapy water when the door bell rang she hadn’t bothered to stop and fix hair sliding out of its elastic band. And there wasn’t much she could have done about a face pink and shiny from a day spent catching up with the housework while everyone was out, culminating in scrubbing the kitchen floor.

It was the complete Cinderella workout.

She couldn’t afford a fancy gym membership and, as she was always telling her sisters, cleaning was a lot more productive than pounding a treadmill. Not that they’d ever been sufficiently impressed by the argument to join in.

Lucky them.

Even sweaty lycra had to be a better look than an ancient shirt tied around her waist with an equally geriatric psychedelic tie. Sexier than the jeans bagging damply around her knees.

It wouldn’t normally have bothered her and, to be fair, the man standing on the doorstep hadn’t made much of an effort, either. His thick dark hair was sticking up in a just-got-out-of-bed look and his chin was darkened with what might be designer stubble but was more likely to be a disinclination to shave on Saturday when he didn’t have to go into the office.

Always assuming that he had an office to go to. Or a job.

Like her, he was wearing ancient jeans, in his case topped with a t-shirt that should have been banished to the duster box. The difference was, that on him it looked mouth-wateringly good. So good that she barely noticed that he’d made free with a name she’d been trying to keep to herself since she’d started kindergarten.

Swiftly peeling off the yellow rubber gloves she'd kept on as a "sorry, can't stop" defence against one of the neighbours dropping by with some excuse to have a nose around, entertain the post office queue with insider gossip on just how bad things were at Gable End, she tossed them carelessly over her shoulder.

'Who wants to know?' she asked.

Her hormones might be ready to throw caution to the wind – they were Amery hormones, after all – but while they had escaped into the yard for a little exercise, she wasn't about to let them go "walkies".

'Sean McElroy.'

His voice matched the looks. Low, sexy, soft as Irish mist. And her hormones flung themselves at the gate like a half-grown puppy in a let-me-at-him response as he offered his hand.

Cool, a little rough, reassuringly large, it swallowed hers up as she took it without thinking, said, 'How d'you do?' in a voice perilously close to the one her grandmother used when she met a good looking man. With that hint of breathiness that spelled trouble.

'I'm doing just fine,' he replied, his slow smile obliterating all memory of the way she looked. Her hair, the lack of makeup and damp knees. It crinkled around those mesmerisingly blue eyes and fanned out comfortably in a way that suggested they felt right at home there.

Elle had begun to believe that she'd bypassed the genetic tick that reduced all Amery women to putty in the presence of a good looking man.

Caught off guard, she discovered that she'd been fooling herself.

The only reason she'd escaped so far, it seemed, was because until this moment she hadn't met a man with eyes of that particularly intense shade of blue.

A man with shoulders wide enough to carry the troubles of the world and tall enough not to make her feel awkward about her height, which had been giving her a hard time since she'd hit a growth spurt somewhere around her twelfth birthday. With a voice that seemed to whisper right through her bones until it reached her toes.

Even now they were curling inside her old trainers in pure ecstasy.

He epitomised the casual, devil-may-care, bad-boy look of the travelling men who, for centuries, had arrived on the village common in the first week of June with the annual fair and departed a few days later, leaving a trail of broken hearts and the occasional fatherless baby in their wake.

Trouble.

But riveted to the spot, her hand in his, all it needed was for fairground waltzer music to start up in the background and she'd have been twirling away on a fluffy pink cloud without a thought in her head.

The realisation was enough to bring her crashing back to her senses and, letting go of his hand, she took half a step back.

'What do you want, Mr McElroy?'

His eyebrows lifted a fraction at the swift change from drooling welcome to defensive aggression.

‘Not a what, a who. I have a delivery for Lovage Amery.’

Oh, crap...

Back to earth with a bump.

She hadn’t ordered anything – she couldn’t afford anything that would require delivery - but she had a grandmother who lived in a fantasy world. And her name was Lovage, too.

But all the questions tumbling out of her brain — the what, the who, the “how much” stuff — hit a traffic jam as his smile widened, reaching the parts that ordinary smiles couldn’t touch.

Her pulse, her knees, some point just below her midriff that was slowly dissolving to jelly.

‘If you’ll just take this...’

She looked down and discovered that this delectable, sinewy package that had those drooling hormones sitting up and begging for whatever trouble he had in mind, was offering her a large brown envelope.

The last time one of those had come calling for “Lovage Amery” she’d taken it without a concern in the world, smiling right back at the man offering it to her.

She’d been younger then. About to start college, embark on her future, unaware that life had yet one more sucker punch to throw at her.

‘What is it?’ she asked, regretting the abandonment of the rubber gloves. Regretting answering the door.

‘Rosie,’ he said. As if that explained everything. ‘You are expecting her?’

She must have looked as blank as she felt because he half turned and with a careless wave of the envelope, gestured towards the side of the house.

She leaned forward just far enough to see the front of a large pink and white van that had been backed up towards the garage.

She stared at it, expecting to see some disreputable dog sticking its head out of the window. She’d banned her sister from bringing home any more strays from the rescue shelter. The last one had broken not only their hearts, but what remained of their bank balance. But Geli was not above getting someone else to do her dirty work.

‘Where is she?’ she asked. Then, realising this practically constituted an acceptance, ‘No. Whatever Geli said, I can’t possibly take another dog. The vet’s bills for the last one—’

‘Rosie isn’t a dog,’ he said, and now he was the one looking confused. ‘That’s Rosie.’

She frowned, stared at the picture of an ice cream sundae on the van door, little cones on the roof and suddenly realised what she was looking at.

‘Rosie is an ice cream van?’

‘Congratulations.’

Elle frowned. Congratulations? Had she won it in one of the many competitions she'd entered in a fit of post-Christmas despair when the washing machine had sprung a leak on the same day as the electricity bill had arrived?

Surely not.

She hadn't had any warning of its arrival. No phone call. No letter informing her of her good fortune. Which was understandable.

This would have to be the booby prize because desperate as she was, she wouldn't have entered a competition offering a second hand ice cream van as first prize.

She wouldn't have entered one offering a *new* ice cream van, but at least she could have sold it and bought a new washing machine, one with a low energy program — thus dealing with two problems at once — with the proceeds.

While unfamiliar with the latest trends in transport, even she could see that Rosie's lines were distinctly last century.

Already the sorry owner of an ancient car that had failed its annual roadworthy test with a list of faults a mile long. The last thing she needed was to be lumbered with more scrap.

'Congratulations?' she repeated.

'You appear to have twenty-twenty vision.'

'A very *old* ice cream van,' she pointed out, doing her best to ignore the gotcha grin, the faded black t-shirt clinging to those enticing shoulders and figure out what the heck was going on.

'Well spotted. She's a 1962 Commer ice cream van in her original livery,' he said, without a hint of apology. On the contrary, he seemed to be under the impression that it was a good thing.

'Nineteen sixty-two!'

It beat the wreck in the garage, which had rolled off the assembly line when she was still in primary school, by thirty years. That was a stripling youth compared to Rosie, which had taken to the road when her grandmother was still in school.

'The old girl's vintage,' Sean confirmed. 'She's your Great Uncle Basil's pride and joy, but right now she's in need of a good home.'

As he said this, he looked over her shoulder into the house, no doubt intending to emphasize the point.

He didn't visibly flinch but the hall, like the rest of the house, was desperately in need of a coat of paint. It was also piled up with discarded shoes, coats and all the other stuff that teenagers seemed to think belonged on the floor. And of course, her rubber gloves.

That was the bad news.

The good news was that he couldn't see where the carpet had been chewed by the dog that had caused them all so much grief.

'Vintage,' she repeated sharply, forcing him to look at her instead of the mess behind her. 'Well, it would certainly fit right in around here. There's just one small problem.'

More than one if she was being honest and honestly, despite the fact that the aged family car had failed its annual test and she was desperate for some transport, she wasn't prepared to take possession of a vehicle that was short on seats and heavy on fuel.

Walking, as she was always telling her sisters, is good for you. Shapes up the legs. Pumps blood around the body and makes the brain work harder. And they all had a duty to planet to walk more. Or use public transport.

She walked. They used public transport.

There was absolutely no chance that either of them would consider using the bike when it meant wearing an unflattering helmet and looking, in their words, "like a dork" when they arrived at school and college, respectively.

'Which is?' he prompted.

She didn't bother him with the financial downside of her situation, but kept it simple.

'I don't have a Great Uncle Basil.'

Finally a frown. It didn't lessen the attraction, just made him look thoughtful, studious. Even more hormone-twangingly desirable.

'You *are* Lovage Amery?' he asked, catching up with the fact that while she hadn't denied it, she hadn't confirmed it either. 'And this *is* Gable End, The Common, Longbourne.'

She was slow to confirm it and twiggling to her reluctance to own up to the name, the address, he glanced back at the wide wooden gate propped open and immovable for as long as she could remember. The letters that spelled out the words Gable End were faded almost to nothing, but denial was pointless.

'Obviously there has been some kind of mistake,' she said with all the conviction she could muster. Maybe. Her grandmother might well know someone named Basil who needed somewhere to park his ice cream van, but he wasn't her uncle, great or otherwise. And, even if she'd wanted to – and she didn't – she had no time to take on an ice cream round. End of, as Geli was so fond of saying. 'Please take it away.'

'I will.' Her relieved smile was a fraction too fast. 'If you'll just help me get to the bottom of this.'

'Some kind of muddle in the paperwork?' she offered. 'Take it up with Basil.'

'It's not a common name. Lovage,' he said, ignoring her excellent advice.

'There's a good reason for that.'

One of his eyebrows kicked up and something in her midriff imitated the action. Without thinking, Elle found herself checking his left hand for a wedding band. It was bare, but that didn't mean a thing. No man that good looking could possibly be unattached. And even if he wasn't, she reminded herself, she was. Very firmly attached to a whole heap of responsibilities.

Two sisters still in full time education, a grandmother who lived in her own make-believe world, and a house that sucked up every spare penny she earned working shifts in a dead-end job so that she could fit around them all.

‘You don’t like it?’ he asked.

‘No... Yes...’ It wasn’t that she didn’t like her name. ‘Sadly, it tends to rouse the infantile in the male, no matter how old they are.’

‘Men can be their own worst enemies,’ he admitted. Then said it again. ‘Lovage...’

This time he lingered over the name, testing it, giving it a deliciously soft lilt, making it sound very grown up. And she discovered he didn’t need the smile to turn her bones to putty.

She reached for the door, needing something to hang on to.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

‘Fine,’ she snapped, telling herself to get a grip.

The man was trying to lumber her with a superannuated piece of junk. Or worse, was a con artist distracting her while an accomplice – maybe Basil himself - slipped around the back of the house and made off with anything not nailed down. Well, good luck with that one. But whatever he was up to, it was a cast-iron certainty that flirting was something that came to him as naturally as breathing. And she was being sucked in.

‘If that’s all?’ she enquired.

‘No, wait!’

She hesitated a second too long.

‘Right name. Tick. Right address. Tick —’

‘Annoying male, tick,’ she flashed back at him, determined to put an end to this. Whatever this was.

‘You may well be right,’ he agreed, amused rather than annoyed. Which was annoying. ‘But while you might not have known your great uncle Basil, I think you’re going to have to accept that he knows you.’ He looked down at the envelope he was holding, then up at her. ‘Tell me, are you all named after herbs in your family?’

She opened her mouth then, deciding not to go there, said, ‘Tell me, Mr McElroy, does she ... it,’ she corrected herself, refusing to fall into the trap of thinking of the van as anything other than an inanimate object. ‘Does it go?’

‘I drove her here,’ he pointed out, the smile enticing, mouth-wateringly sexy. Confident that he’d got her. ‘I’ll take you for a spin in her so that I can talk you through her little eccentricities if you like,’ he went on before she could complete her punch line, tell him to start her up and drive it away. ‘She’s a lovely old girl, but she has her moods.’

‘Oh, right. You’re telling me she’s a *cranky* old ice cream van.’

‘That’s a bit harsh.’ He leaned his shoulder against the door frame, totally relaxed, oblivious of the fact that the rose scrambling over the porch had dropped pink petals over his thick, dark hair, on one of those broad shoulders. Shall we say she’s an old ice cream van with bags character?’

‘Let’s not,’ she replied, doing her best to get a grip of her tongue, her hormones, her senses, all of which were urging her to forget her problems, throw caution to the wind and for once in her life say yes instead of no. ‘I’m sorry, Mr McElroy-’

‘Sean—’

‘I’m sorry, Mr McElroy,’ she said, refusing to be sidetracked, ‘but my mother told me never to take a ride with a stranger.’

A classic case of do as I say, rather than do as I do, obviously. In similar circumstances, her mother wouldn’t have hesitated. She’d have grabbed the adventure and, jingle blaring, driven around the village scandalising the neighbours.

But, gorgeous though Sean McElroy undoubtedly was, she wasn’t about to make the same mistakes as her mother. And while he was still trying to get his head around the fact that she’d turned him down flat, she took a full step back and shut the door. Then she slipped the security chain into place, although whether it was to keep him out or herself in she couldn’t have said.

He didn’t move. His shadow was still clearly visible behind one of the stained glass panels that flanked the door and realising that he might be able to see her, pinned to the spot, her heart racing, she grabbed the rubber gloves and beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the kitchen.

Today was rapidly turning into a double scrub day and back on her knees she went at it with even more vigour, her pulse pounding in her ears as she waited for the bell to ring again.

It didn’t.

Regret warred with relief. It was a gorgeous May day and the thought of a spin in an ice cream van with a good looking man called to everything young and frivolous locked up inside her. Everything she had never been. Even the scent of the lilac, wafting in through the kitchen door, seemed hell-bent on enticing her to abandon her responsibilities for an hour and have some fun.

She shook her head. Dangerous stuff, fun, and she attacked the floor with the brush, scrubbing at the already spotless quarry tiles, taking her frustration out on something inanimate while she tried to forget Sean McElroy’s blue eyes and concentrate on today’s problem. How to conjure two hundred and fifty pounds out of thin air to pay for Geli’s school trip to France.

There was nothing for it. She was going to have to bite the bullet and ask her boss for an extra shift.

* * *

Sean caught his breath.

He'd been having trouble with it ever since the door of Gable End had been thrown open to reveal Lovage Amery, cheeks flushed, dark hair escaping the elastic band struggling – and failing - to hold it out of a pair of huge hazel eyes.

Being a step up she was on a level with him which meant that her full, soft lips, a luscious figure oozing sex appeal, were right in his face.

That she was totally oblivious of the effect created by all that unrestrained womanhood made it all the more enticing. All the more dangerous.

Furious as he was with Basil, he'd enjoyed the unexpected encounter and while he was not fool enough to imagine he was irresistible, he thought that she'd been enjoying it, too. She'd certainly been giving as good as she got.

It was a long time since a woman had hit all the right buttons with quite that force and she hadn't even been trying.

Maybe that was part of the attraction.

He'd caught her unawares and unlike most women of his acquaintance, she hadn't been wearing a mask, showing him what she thought he'd want to see.

Part of the attraction, all of the danger.

He'd as good as forgotten why he was there and the suddenness of her move had taken him by surprise. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been despatched quite so summarily by a woman but the rattle of the security chain going up had a finality about it that suggested ringing the doorbell again would be a waste of time.

He looked at the envelope Basil Amery had pushed through his door while he was in London, along with a note asking him to deliver it and Rosie to Lovage Amery.

He'd been furious. As if he didn't have better things to do but it was typical of the man to take advantage. Typical him to disappear without explanation.

True, his irritation had evaporated when the door opened but while the temptation was to take advantage of the side gate, standing wide open, and follow up his encounter with the luscious Miss Amery, on this occasion he decided that discretion was the better part of valour.

It would take more than a pair of pretty eyes to draw him into the centre of someone else's family drama. He had enough of that in his own backyard.

A pity, but he'd delivered Rosie. Job done.

For more go to <http://www.lizfielding.com>

Anything But Vanilla

Sorrel Amery's story

'I've got the strawberry and cream gelato and the cupcakes, Ria.' Her voice, sexily breathless as she shifted containers, echoed from the depths of the freezer. 'And I've found the bread and honey ice cream. But there's no Earl Grey granita, champagne sorbet or cucumber ice cream.'



'HELLO? Shop?'

Alexander West ignored the rapping on the shop door, the call for attention. The closed sign was up, Knickerbocker Gloria was out of business. End of story.

The accounts were a mess, the petty cash tin contained nothing but paper clips and he'd found a pile of unopened bills in the bottom drawer of the desk. All the classic signs of a small business going down the pan and Ria, with her fingers in her ears, singing la-la-la as the creditors closed in.

It was probably one of them at the door now. Some poor woman whose own cash flow was about to hit the skids hoping to catch her with some loose change in the till, which was why this wouldn't wait.

He topped up his mug with coffee, eased the ache in his shoulder and set about dealing with the pile of unopened bills.

There was no point in getting mad at Ria. This was his fault.

She'd promised him that she'd be more organised, not let things get out of hand. He was so sure that she'd learned her lesson, but maybe he'd just allowed himself to be convinced simply because he wanted it to be true.

She tried, he knew she did, and everything would be fine for a while, but then she'd hear something, see something and it would trigger her desperation. It didn't take long for a business to go off the rails and then she'd be ignoring everything, including the scary brown envelopes.

'Ria?'

He frowned. It was the same voice, but whoever it belonged to was no longer outside—

'I've come to pick up the Jefferson order,' she called out. 'Don't disturb yourself if you're busy. I can find it.'

—but inside, and helping herself to the stock.

He hauled himself out the chair, took a shortcut across the preparation room — scrubbed, gleaming and ready for a new day that was never going to come — and pushed open the door to the stockroom.

All he could see of the “voice” was a pair of long, satin smooth legs and a short skirt that rode up her thighs and stretched across a neat handful of backside. It was an unexpected pleasure in what was always going to be a very bad day and, in no hurry to halt her raid on the freezer, he leaned against the door making the most of it.

She muttered something and reached further into its depths, balancing on one toe while extending the other towards him as if inviting him to admire the black suede shoe clinging to a long, slender foot. A high-heeled black suede shoe, cut-away at the side and with a saucy bow on the toe. Very expensive, very sexy and designed to display a foot, an ankle, to perfection. He dutifully admired the ankle, the leg, a teasing glimpse of lace — that skirt was criminally short — and several inches of bare flesh where her top had slithered forward, at his leisure.

The combination of long legs and dark red skirt, sandwiched between cream silk and lace, reminded him of a cone filled with Ria’s homemade raspberry ripple ice cream. It had been a while since he’d been within touching distance of temptation but now, recalling that perfect mix of fresh tangy fruit and creamy sweetness he contemplated the idea of scooping her up and running his tongue along the narrow gap of golden skin at her waist. Licking up the refreshing sweetness...

‘I’ve got the strawberry and cream gelato and the cupcakes, Ria.’ Her voice, sexily breathless as she shifted containers, echoed from the depths of the freezer. ‘And I’ve found the bread and honey ice cream. But there’s no Earl Grey granita, champagne sorbet or cucumber ice cream.’

Cucumber ice cream?

No wonder Ria was in trouble.

He took a final, appreciative look at the endless legs and calling the hormones to heel said, ‘If it’s not there, then I’m sorry, you’re out of luck.’

Sorrel Amery froze.

Metaphorically as well as literally. With her head deep in the freezer and nothing but a strappy silk camisole between her and frozen to death, she was already feeling the chill, but either Ria had the worst sore throat in history, or that was—

She hauled herself out of its chilly depths and turned round.

—not Ria.

She instinctively ran her hands down the back of a skirt that her younger sister — with no appreciation of vintage fashion — had disparagingly dismissed as little more than a pelmet. It was, however, too late for modesty and on the point of demanding who the hell the man leaning against the prep room door thought he was, she decided against it.

Silence was, according to some old Greek, a woman's best garment and, while it was not a notion she would generally subscribe to, hot blue eyes above a grin so wide that it would struggle to make it through the door were evidence enough that he'd been filling his boots with the view.

Whoever he was, she wasn't about to make his day by going all girly about it.

'Out of luck? What do mean, out of luck?' she demanded. 'Where's Ria?' Brisk and businesslike was her first line of defence in the face of a sexy male who thought all he had to do was smile and she'd be putty in his hands.

So wrong — although the hand propping him up against the doorframe had a workmanlike appearance; strong, broad and with deliciously long fingers that looked as if they'd know exactly what to do with putty...

She shivered a little and the grin twitched at the corner his mouth, suggesting that he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Wrong again.

She was just cold. *Really*. She hadn't stopped to put on the cute, boxy little jacket that completed her ensemble. This wasn't a business meeting, but a quick in-and-out pick-up of stock.

While the jacket wouldn't have done anything for her legs, it would have covered her shoulders and kept her warm. And when she was wearing a suit, no matter how short the skirt, she felt in control. Important when you were young and female and battling to be taken seriously in a world that was, mostly, dominated by men.

In suits.

But she didn't have to impress Ria and hadn't anticipated the freezer diving. Or the audience.

The man lounging against the door frame clearly didn't feel the need for armour of any kind, beyond the heavy stubble on his chin and thick brown hair that brushed his shoulders and flopped untidily around his face.

No suit for him. No jacket. Just a washed-out T shirt stretched across wide shoulders, and a pair of shabby jeans moulded over powerful thighs. The sun streaks that brightened his hair — and the kind of skin-deep tan that you didn't get from two weeks on a beach — only confirmed the impression that he didn't believe in wasting his time slaving over a hot desk, although the suggestion of bags under his eyes did suggest a heavy night-life.

'Ria's not here.' His voice, low and gravelly, lazy as his stance, vibrated softly against her breast bone, as if he'd reached out and grazed his knuckles slowly along its length. It stole her breath, circling softly before settling low in her belly and draining the strength from her legs. 'I'm taking care of things.'

She fumbled for the edge of the freezer, grasping it for support. 'Oh? And you are?' she asked, going for her "woman in command of her environment" voice and falling miserably short.

Fortunately, he didn't know that. As far as he knew, she always talked in that weirdly breathy way.

'Alexander West.'

She blinked. 'You're the post card man?'

'The what?' It was his turn to look confused, although since he was already leaning against the door, he didn't need propping up.

'The postcard man,' she repeated, desperately wishing she'd kept her mouth shut, but the nickname had been startled out of her. For one thing he was younger than she'd expected. Really. Quite a lot younger. Ria wore her age well, but wasn't coy about it, describing her fortieth birthday as a moment of "corset loosening" liberation. Not that she'd ever needed a corset, or would have worn one if she had. 'That's what Nancy calls you,' she explained, in an attempt to distance herself from her surprised reaction. 'Ria's assistant? You send her postcards.'

'I send postcards to Nancy?' he asked, the teasing gleam in his eyes suggesting that he was perfectly aware of her discomfort and the reason for it.

'To Ria. Very occasionally,' she added. Having regained a modicum of control over her vocal chords, if nothing else, she wanted him to know that wasn't impressed by him or his teasing.

It wasn't the frequency of their arrival that made the post cards memorable, but their effect. She'd once found Ria clutching one to her breast, tears running down her cheeks. She'd waved away her concern, claiming that it was hay fever. In November.

Only a lover, or a child, could evoke that kind of response. Alexander West was a lot younger than she'd expected, but he wasn't young enough to be her son, which left only one possibility, although in this instance it was a lover who was notable only by his absence. His cards, when they did arrive, they were mostly of long white tropical beaches fringed with palm trees. The kind that evoked Hollywood-style dreams of exotic cocktails and barefoot walks along the edge of the shore at sunset with someone who looked just like Mr Postcard. Sitting at home in Maybridge, it was scarcely any wonder Ria was weeping.

'Once in a blue moon,' she added, in case he hadn't got the message.

Sorrel knew all about the kind of travelling man who took advantage of a warm-hearted woman before moving on, leaving her to pick up the pieces and carry on with her life. Her own father had been that kind of man, although he had never bothered with even the most occasional postcard. Forget moons — blue or any other colour — his visit was on the astronomical scale of Halley's Comet. Once in a lifetime.

'A little more frequently than that, I believe,' he replied. 'Or were you using the term as a figure of speech rather than an astronomical event?' Fortunately, the question was rhetorical because without waiting for an answer, he added, 'I'm not often in the vicinity of a post office.'

'You don't have to explain yourself to me,' she said, making an effort to get a grip, put some stiffeners in her knees.

Not at all.

'I'm glad to hear it.' West let go of the door and every cell in her body gave a little jump — of nervousness, excitement, anticipation — but he was only settling himself more comfortably, leaning

his shoulder against the frame, crossing strong, sinewy arms and putting a dangerous strain on the stitches holding his T-shirt together. 'I thought perhaps you were attempting to make a point of some kind.'

'What?' Sorrel realised that she was holding her breath... 'No,' she said, unable to look away as one of them popped, then another and the seam parted to reveal a glimpse of the golden flesh beneath. She swallowed. Hard. 'The frequency of your correspondence is none of my business.'

'I know that, but I was beginning to wonder if you did.' The gleam intensified and without warning she was feeling anything but cold. Her head might be saying "He is so not your type..." She did not do lust at first sight.

Her body wasn't listening.

It had tuned out her brain and was reaching out to him with fluttery little "touch me" appeals from her pulse points, the tight betraying peaks of breasts poking against the thin silk...

No, no, no, no, no!

She swallowed, straightened her spine, hoping that he'd put that down to the cold air swirling up from the open freezer. She continued to cling to it, not for support, but to stop herself from taking a step closer. Flinging herself at him. That's what her mother, who'd made a life's work of lust at first sight and had three fatherless daughters to show for it, would have done.

Since the age of seventeen, when that legacy had come back to bite her and break her teenage heart, she had made a point of doing the opposite of whatever her mother would do in any circumstance that involved a man. Especially avoiding the kind of rough hewn men who, it seemed, could turn her head with a glance.

Sorrel had no idea what had brought Alexander West back to Maybridge, but from her own reaction it was obvious that his arrival was going to send Ria into a melt-down tizzy. Worse, it would cause no end of havoc to the running of Knickerbocker Gloria, which was balanced on the edge of chaos at the best of times. The knock-on effect was going to be the disruption of the business she was working so hard to turn into a high end event brand.

Presumably Ria's absence this morning meant that she was having a long lie-in to recover from the enthusiastic welcome home she'd given the prodigal on his return.

He looked pretty shattered, too, come to think of it...

Sorrel slammed the door shut on the images that thought evoked. It was going to take a lot more than a pair of wide, here-today-gone-tomorrow shoulders to impress her.

Oh, yes.

While her friends had been dating, she'd had an early reality check on the value of romance and had focussed on her future, choosing the prosaic Business Management degree and vowing that she'd be a millionaire by the time she was twenty-five.

Any man who wanted her attention would have to match her in drive and ambition. He would also have to be well groomed, well dressed, focussed on his career and, most important of all, stationary.

The first two could be fixed. The third would, inevitably, be a work in progress, but her entire life had been dominated by men who caused havoc when they were around and then disappeared leaving the women to pick up the pieces. The last was non-negotiable.

Alexander West struck out on every single point she told herself as another stitch surrendered, producing a flutter of excitement just below her waist. Anticipation.

Dangerous feelings which, before you knew it, could run out of control and wreck the lifeplan, no matter how firmly nailed down.

‘What, exactly, are you doing here?’ she demanded. If the cold air swirling around at her back wasn’t enough to cool her down, all she had to do was remind herself that he belonged to Ria.

She was doing a pretty good job of cool and controlled, at least on the surface. Having faced down sceptical bank managers, sceptical marketing men and sceptical events organisers, she’d had plenty of practice keeping the surface calm even when her insides were churning. Right now hers felt as if a cloud of butterflies had moved in.

‘That’s none of your business, either.’

‘Actually, it is. Ria supplies me with ice cream for my business and since she has apparently left you in charge for the day...’ — major stress on “apparently” — “...you should be aware that while you are in a food preparation area, you are required to wear a hat,’ she continued, in an attempt to crush both him and the disturbing effect he and his worn-out seams were having on her concentration. ‘And a white coat.’

A white coat would cover those shoulders and thighs and then she would be able to think straight.

‘Since Knickerbocker Gloria is no longer in business,’ he replied, ‘that’s not an issue.’ Had he placed the slightest emphasis on *knicker*? He nodded in the direction of the cartons she had piled up on the table beside the freezer and said, ‘If you’ll be good enough to return the stock to the freezer, I’ll see you off the premises.’

It took a moment for his words to filter through the distraction of the widening gap, the glimpse of honey-coloured skin.

‘Stock?’ ‘*No longer in...*’ ‘What on earth are you talking about? Ria knows I’m picking up this order today. When will she be here?’

‘She won’t.’

‘Excuse me?’ She understood the words, but they were spinning around in her brain and wouldn’t line up. ‘Won’t what?’

‘Be here. Any time soon.’ He shrugged, then taking pity on her obvious confusion — he was probably used to women losing the power of speech when he flexed his biceps — he said, ‘She had an unscheduled visit from the Revenue last week. It seems that she hasn’t been paying her VAT. Worse,

she's been ignoring their letters on the subject and you know how touchy they get about things like that.'

'Not from personal experience,' she replied, shocked to her backbone. Her books were updated on a daily basis, her sales tax paid quarterly by direct debit. Her family had lived on the breadline for a very long time after one particularly beguiling here-today-gone-tomorrow man had left her family penniless.

She was never going back there.

Ever.

There was nothing wrong with her imagination, however. She knew that "touchy" was an understatement on the epic scale. 'What happened? Exactly,' she added.

'I couldn't say, exactly. Using my imagination to fill the gaps I'd say that they arrived unannounced to carry out an audit, took one look at her books and issued her with an insolvency notice,' he said, without any discernible emotion.

'But that means—'

'That means that nothing can leave the premises until an inventory has been made of the business assets and the debts paid or, alternatively, she's been declared bankrupt and her creditors have filed their claims.'

'What? No!' As her brain finally stopped freewheeling and the cogs engaged, she put her hand protectively on top of the ices piled up beside her. 'I have to have these today. Now. And the other ices I ordered.' Then felt horribly guilty for putting her own needs first when Ria was in such trouble.

Sorrel had always struggled with Ria's somewhat cavalier attitude to business. She'd done everything she could to organise her but it was like pushing water uphill. If she was in trouble with the tax man, though, she must be frightened to death.

'That would be the champagne sorbet that you can't find,' Alexander said, jerking her back to her own problem.

'Amongst other things.' At least he'd had his ears as well as his eyes open while he'd been ogling her underwear. 'Perhaps they're still in the kitchen freezer?' she suggested, fingers mentally crossed. 'I don't imagine that she would have been thinking too clearly.' Then, furious, 'Why on earth didn't she call me if she was in trouble? She knew I would have helped.'

'She called me.'

'And you came racing, *ventre à terre*, to rescue her?' Her sarcasm covered a momentary pang of envy for such devotion. If he'd been *devoted*, she reminded herself, he'd have been here, supporting her. He wouldn't have been gallivanting around the world, beachcombing, probably with obligatory dusky maiden in attendance. Sending Ria the odd postcard when he could be bothered.

'Hardly "belly to the earth". I was in a Boeing at thirty thousand feet,' he replied, picking up on the sarcasm and returning it with interest.

‘The modern equivalent,’ she snapped back. But he had come. ‘So? What are you going to do? Sort things out? Put the business back on a proper footing?’ she asked, torn between hope and doubt. What Ria needed was an accountant who couldn’t be twisted around her little finger. Not some lotus-eater.

‘No. I’m here to shut up shop. Knickerbocker Gloria is no longer trading.’

‘But...’

‘But what?’

‘Never mind.’

She would do her level best to help Ria save her business just as soon as the Jefferson job was over. Right now it was her reputation that was on the line. Without that sorbet, she was toast and she wasn’t about to allow Ria’s beefcake toy boy to stand in her way and she cast herself off from the freezer.

For more go to <http://www.lizfielding.com>

Vettori's Damsel in Distress

Angelica (Geli) Amery's story

His hand was warm against her cold skin. On the surface everything was deceptively still but inside, like a volcano on the point of blowing, she was liquid heat.



IT was late and throwing down a sleety rain when Geli emerged from the Metro at Porta Garibaldi into the Milan night. Her plan had been to take a taxi for the last short leg of her journey but it was par for the course, on a day when everything had conspired to keep her from her destination, that there wasn't one in sight.

Terrific.

The weather had been mild with a promise of spring in the air when she'd left Longbourne and, optimistically, she'd assumed Italy would be warmer; something to do with all those sun-soaked travel programmes on the television, no doubt. If she'd had the sense to check the local weather she'd have been wearing thermals instead of lace beneath her dress, leggings over her ultra-sheer black tights and a lot more than a lace choker around her neck.

Not the most practical outfit for travelling but she was going to Milan, style capital of Europe, where the inhabitants didn't wear joggers unless they were jogging and policewomen wore high heels.

In her determination to make a fashionable impression she had overlooked the fact that Milan was in the north of Italy. Where there were mountains. And, apparently, sleet.

Okaaay...

According to the details she'd downloaded from the Internet, her apartment was no more than a ten-minute stroll from the Metro. She could handle a bit of sleet. In style.

She checked her map and, having orientated herself, she pulled the wide hood of her coat over ears that were beginning to tingle, shouldered her roomy leather tote and, hauling her suitcase behind her, set off.

New country, new start, new life.

Unlike her sisters, who were married, raising families and, with their rapidly expanding ice cream events business, had life all sewn up and sorted, she was throwing herself into the dark—literally.

With little more than an Italian phrasebook and a head full of ideas, she was setting out to grab every experience that life offered her. If, as she crossed the railway bridge into the unknown, the thrill

of nervous excitement that shot through her was edged with a ripple of apprehension, a shiver of fear—well, that was perfectly natural. She was the baby of the family.

She might be the one with the weird clothes, the ‘attitude’, but they knew it was all front; that this was her first time out in the world. Okay, she’d been to Italy before, but that was on a student study trip and she’d been with a group of people she knew. This time she was on her own, without the family safety net of loving hands reaching out to steady her if she stumbled. To catch her if she fell. Testing herself...

‘*Scusi!*’

‘Sorry...um...*scusi...*’ She steered her case to one side to let someone in a hurry pass her and then, as she looked up, she saw the colourful street art gleaming under the street lights—bright tropical scenes that lit up dull concrete—and caught her breath.

Despite the icy stuff stinging her face, excitement won out as she remembered why she had chosen Italy, Milan...Isola.

The minute she’d opened a magazine, seen the photographs, read about this enclave of artists, musicians, designers all doing their own thing, she’d been hooked. This was a place where she could spread her wings, explore her love of fashion, seek new ways of making art and maybe, just maybe fall in love. Nothing serious, not for keeps, but for fun.

Twenty minutes later, her face stiff with cold, the freezing stuff finding its way into a hood designed more for glamour than protection, and totally lost, the bounce had left her step.

She could almost see her oldest sister, Elle, shaking her head and saying, *You’re so impatient, Geli! Why didn’t you wait for a taxi?*

Because it was an *adventure!* And the directions had been simple enough. She’d counted the turnings, checked the name of the street, turned right and her apartment should be there, right in front of her, on the corner.

Except it wasn’t.

Instead of the pink-painted five-storey house on the corner of a street of equally pretty houses that overlooked the twice-weekly market, she was faced with eight-feet high wooden barriers surrounding a construction site.

No need to panic. Obviously she’d missed a turning. There had been a couple of narrow openings—more alleys than streets—that she’d thought were too small to be the turnings on her map. Obviously she was wrong.

She backtracked, recounted and headed down one just about wide enough to take a Fiat 500. It ended in a tiny courtyard piled up with crates and lit by a dim lamp over what looked like the back entrance to a shop. In the dark something moved, a box fell, and she beat a hasty retreat.

The few people about had their heads down and her, ‘*Scusi...*’ was blown away on wind that was driving the sleet, thicker now, into her face.

It was time to take another look at the map.

Ducking into the shelter of the doorway of a shuttered shop, she searched her tote for the powerful mini torch given to her by her explorer brother-in-law as a parting gift.

She'd reminded him that she was going to one of the world's great cities rather than venturing into the jungle. His response was that in his experience there was little difference and as something wet and hairy brushed against her leg she let out a nervous shriek.

Make that one for the explorer.

A plaintive mew reassured her and the bright beam of her torch picked out a tiny kitten, wet fur sticking to its skin, cowering in the doorway.

'Hey, sweetie,' she said softly, reaching out to it, but it backed away nervously. She knew how it felt. 'You're much too little to be out by yourself on a night like this.'

The poor creature, wetter and certainly colder than she was, mewed pitifully in agreement. She'd bought a cheese sandwich on the plane but had been too churned up with nerves and excitement to eat it and she opened it up, broke a piece off and offered it to the kitten. Hunger beat fear and it snatched the food from her fingers, desperately licking at the butter.

Geli broke off another piece and then turned her attention to the simple street map. Clearly she'd taken a wrong turn and wandered into the commercial district, now closed for the night, but for the life of her couldn't see where she'd gone wrong.

Phoning Signora Franco, her landlady, was not an option. The *signora's* English was about on a par with her own Italian—enthusiastic, but short on delivery. What she needed was one of Isola's famous caf  s or bars, somewhere warm and dry with people who would know the area and, bracing herself to face to what was now whiter, more solid than mere sleet, she peered along the street.

Behind her, the kitten mewed and she sighed. There were a few lights on in upper floors but down here everything was shut up. The tiny creature was on its own and was too small to survive the night without shelter. The location might be new, but some things never changed.

Inevitably, having begged for help, the kitten panicked when she bent and scooped it up but she eased it into one of the concealed seam pockets hidden amongst the full layers of her coat.

She'd come back tomorrow and see if she could find someone who'd take responsibility for it but right now it was time to put her Italian to the test. She'd memorised the question and could rattle off '*Dov'   Via Pepone?*' without a second thought. Understanding the answers might be more of a problem.

She stuffed her torch, along with the useless map, in her bag and began to retrace her steps back to the road from the station, this time carrying straight on instead of turning off.

In the photographs she'd seen it had been summer; there were open-air jazz concerts, the communal garden and collective 'bring a dish' lunches where every Tuesday the local people gathered to share food and reinforce the community ties. People sitting outside trendy caf  s. Perfect.

This was the wrong time of day, the wrong time of year. Even the famous Milan 'promenade' was on hold but, encouraged by a sudden snatch of music—as if someone had opened a door very

briefly—she hurried to the corner and there, on the far side of a piazza, lights shone through a steamy window.

It was Café Rosa, famous for jazz, cocktails and being a hangout of local artists who used the walls as a gallery. More relieved than she cared to admit, she slithered across the cobbles and pushed open the door.

She was immediately swathed in warmth, the rich scent of luscious food and cool music from a combo on a tiny stage in the corner mingling with bursts of steam from the espresso machine. Tables of all shapes and sizes were filled with people eating, drinking, gossiping, and a tall dark-haired man was leaning against the counter talking to the barista.

If the scene had been posed by the Italian Tourist Board it couldn't have been more perfect and, despite the cold, she felt a happy little rush of anticipation.

A few people had turned when the door opened and the chatter died away until the only sound was the low thrum of a double bass.

The man standing at the bar, curious about what had caught everyone's attention, half turned and anticipation whooshed off the scale in an atavistic charge of raw desire; instant, bone-deep need for a man before you heard his voice, felt his touch, knew his name.

For a moment, while she remembered how to breathe, it felt as if someone had pressed the pause button on the scene, freezing the moment in soft focus. Muted colours reflected in polished steel, lights shimmering off the bottles and glasses behind the bar, her face reflected, ghost-like, behind the advertisement on a mirror. And Mr Italy with his kiss-me mouth and come-to-bed eyes.

Forget the thick dark hair and cheekbones sharp enough to write their own modelling contract, it was those chocolate-dark eyes that held her transfixed. If they had been looking out of a tourist poster there would be a stampede to book holidays in Italy.

He straightened, drawing attention to the way his hair curled onto his neck, a pair of scandalously broad shoulders, strong wrists emerging from folded-back cuffs.

'*Signora...*' he murmured as he moved back a little to make room for her at the counter and, oh, joy, his voice matched the face, the body.

She might have passed out for lack of oxygen at that moment but a tall, athletic-looking blonde placed a tiny cup of espresso in front of him before—apparently unaware that she was serving a god—turning to her.

'Sta nevicando? E brutto tempo.'

What?

Oh...

Flustered at being confronted with phrases that hadn't featured so far on the Italian course she'd downloaded onto her iPod, she took the safe option and, having sucked in a snowflake that was clinging to her lip, she lowered her hood. The chatter gradually resumed and, finally getting a move it message through to her legs, she parked her suitcase and crossed to the bar.

‘Cosa prendi, signora?’

Oh, whew, something she understood. ‘Um... *Vorrai un espresso...s’il vous plait...*’ Her answer emerged in a mangled mixture of English, Italian and French. ‘No...I mean...’ *Oh, heck.*

The blonde grinned. ‘Don’t worry. I got the gist,’ she replied, her English spiced with an Australian accent.

‘Oh, thank goodness you’re English. No! Sorry, Australian—’ Achingly conscious of the man leaning against the counter, an impressive thigh stretching the cloth of his jeans just inches from her hip, she attempted to recover the cool, sophisticated woman of the world image with which she’d intended to storm Milan. ‘Shall I go out, walk around the block and try that again?’

The woman grinned. ‘Stay right where you are. I’ll get that espresso. You’ve just arrived in Isola?’ she asked as she measured the coffee.

‘In Isola, in Milan, in Italy. I’ve been working on my Italian—I picked some up when I spent a month in Tuscany as a student—but I learned French at school and it seems to be my brain’s foreign language default setting when I panic.’

Her brain was too busy drooling over Mr Italy to give a toot.

‘Give it a week,’ the woman said. ‘Can I get you anything else?’

‘A side order of directions?’ she asked hopefully, doing her best to ignore the fact that it wasn’t just her brain; her entire body was responding on a visceral level to the overdose of pheromones wafting in her direction. It was like being bombarded by butterflies. Naked...

She was doing her level best not to stare at him.

Was he looking at her?

‘You are lost, *signora*?’ he asked.

In Italian, his voice was just about the sexiest thing she’d ever heard, but his perfect, lusciously accented English sent a shiver rippling down her spine that had nothing to do with the snow dripping from her hair. That was trickling between her breasts and turning to steam.

She took a breath and, doing her best to remember why she was there, said, ‘Not lost exactly...’ Retrieving the apartment details from her tote, she placed it, map side up, on the counter and turned to him, intending to explain what had happened. He was definitely looking and, confronted with those eyes, the questioning kink of his brow, language of any description deserted her.

‘No?’ he prompted.

Clearly he was used to women losing the power of speech in his presence. From the relaxed way he was leaning against the bar, to eyes that, with one look made her feel as if he owned her, everything about him screamed danger.

First day in Isola and she could imagine having a lot of fun with Mr Italy and, from the way he was looking at her, he was thinking much the same thing about her.

Was that how it had been for her mother that first time? One look from some brawny roustabout at the annual village fair and she’d been toast?

‘I know exactly where I am, *signor*,’ she said, looking into those lusciously dark eyes. To emphasise the point she eased off the fine leather glove that had done little to keep her hand warm and tapped the piazza with the tip of a crimson nail.

‘No,’ he repeated, and this time it wasn’t a question as, never taking his eyes from hers, he wrapped long fingers around her hand and moved her finger two inches to the right. ‘You are here.’

His hand was warm against her cold skin. On the surface everything was deceptively still but inside, like a volcano on the point of blowing, she was liquid heat.

She fought the urge to swallow. ‘I am?’

She was used to people staring at her. From the age of nine she had been the focus of raised eyebrows and she’d revelled in it.

This man’s look was different. It sizzled through her and, afraid that the puddle of snow melting at her feet was about to turn to steam, she turned to the map.

It didn’t help. Not one bit. His hand was still covering hers, long ringless fingers darkly masculine against her own pale skin, and she found herself wondering how they would look against her breast. How they would feel...

Under the layers of black—coat, dress, the lace of her bra—her nipples hardened in response to her imagination, sending touch-me messages to all parts south and she bit on her lower lip to stop herself from whimpering.

Breathe, breathe...

She cleared the cobwebs from her throat and, hoping she sounded a lot more in control than she was, said, ‘One piazza looks very much like another on a map. Unfortunately, neither of them is where I was going.’

‘And yet here you are.’

And yet here she was, falling into eyes as dark as the espresso in his cup.

The café retreated. The bright labels on bottles behind the bar, the clatter of cutlery, the low thrum of a double bass became no more than a blur of colour, sound. All her senses were focused on the touch of his fingers curling about her hand, his molten eyes reflecting back her own image. For a moment nothing moved until, abruptly, he turned away and used the hand that had been covering hers to pick up his espresso and drain it in one swallow.

He’d looked away first and she waited for the rush of power that always gave her but it didn’t come. For the first time in her life it didn’t feel like a victory.

Toast...

‘Where are you going, *signora*?’ He carefully replaced the tiny cup on its saucer.

‘Here...’ She looked down but the ink had run, leaving a dirty splodge where the name of the street had been.

‘Tell him the address and Dante will point you in the right direction,’ the barista said, putting an espresso in front of her. ‘He knows every inch of Isola.’

‘Dante?’ Geli repeated. ‘As in the *Inferno*?’ No wonder he was so hot... Catching the barista’s knowing grin, she quickly added, ‘Or perhaps your mother is an admirer of the Pre-Raphaelites?’

‘Are you visiting someone?’ he asked, ignoring the question.

‘No.’ Mentally kicking herself for speaking before her brain was in gear—he must have heard that one a thousand times—she shook her head. ‘I’m here to work. I’ve leased an apartment for a year. Geli Amery,’ she added, offering him her hand without a thought for the consequences.

He wrapped his hand around hers and held it.

‘Dante Vettori.’ Rolled out in that sexy Italian accent, his name was a symphony of seduction. ‘Your name is Jelly?’ He lifted an eyebrow, but not like the disapproving old biddies in the village shop. Not at all. ‘Like the wobbly stuff the British inflict on small children at birthday parties?’

Okay, so she’d probably asked for that with her stupid ‘*Inferno*’ remark, but he wasn’t the only one to have heard it all before.

‘Or add to peanut butter in a sandwich if you’re American?’ She lifted an eyebrow right back at him, which was asking for trouble but who knew if he’d ever lift his eyebrow at her like that again? This was definitely one of those ‘live for the day’ moments she had vowed to grab with both hands and she was going for it.

‘*É possibile*,’ he said, the lines bracketing his mouth deepening into a smile. ‘But I suspect not.’

He could call her what he liked as long as he kept smiling like that...

‘You suspect right. Geli is short for Angelica—as in *angelica archangelica*, which I’m told is a very handsome plant.’ And she smiled back. ‘You may be more familiar with its crystallised stem. The British use it to decorate the cakes and trifles that they inflict on small children at birthday parties.’

His laugh was rich and warm, creating a fan of creases around his eyes, emphasising those amazing cheekbones, widening his mouth and drawing attention to a lower lip that she wanted to lick...

Make that burnt toast...

In an attempt to regain control of her vital organs, Geli picked up her espresso and downed it in a single swallow, Italian style. It was hotter than she expected, shocking her out of the lusty mist.

‘I had intended to take a taxi—’ Her vocal cords were still screaming from the hot coffee and the words came out as little more than a squeak. She cleared her throat and tried again. ‘Unfortunately, there were none at the Porta Garibaldi and on the apartment details it said that Via Pepone was only a ten-minute walk.’

‘Taxis are always in short supply when the weather’s bad,’ the barista said, as Dante, frowning now, turned the details over to look at the picture of the pretty pink house where she’d be living for the next year. ‘Welcome to Isola, Geli. Lisa Vettori—I’m from the Australian branch of the family. Dante’s my cousin and, although you wouldn’t know it from the way he’s lounging around on the wrong side of the counter, Café Rosa is his bar.’

‘I pay you handsomely so that I can stay on this side of the bar,’ he reminded her, without looking up.

‘Make the most of it, mate. I have a fitting for a bridesmaid dress in Melbourne on Tuesday. Unless you get your backside in gear and find a temp to take my place, come Sunday you’ll be the one getting up close and personal with the Gaggia.’ She took a swipe at the marble counter top with a cloth to remove an invisible mark. ‘Have you got a job lined up, Geli?’ she asked.

‘A job?’

‘You said you were here to work. Have you ever worked in a bar? Only there’s a temporary—’

‘If you’ve been travelling all day you must be hungry,’ Dante said, cutting his cousin off in mid-sentence. ‘We’ll have the risotto, Lisa.’ And, holding onto the details of her apartment and, more importantly, the map, he headed for a table for two that was tucked away in a quiet corner.

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