

GELATO SURPRISE



SADIRA
STONE



ONE SCOOP
OR TWO

Gelato Surprise

One Scoop or Two

by

Sadira Stone

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Gelato Surprise

COPYRIGHT © 2020 by Sadira Stone

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press, Inc. except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Rae Monet*

The Wild Rose Press, Inc.
PO Box 708
Adams Basin, NY 14410-0708

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History
First Scarlet Rose Edition, 2020
Digital ISBN 978-1-5092-3227-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Duncan, my HEA.

PRAISE FOR AUTHOR

Sadira Stone

AND HER BOOKS

THROUGH THE RED DOOR

“...a beautiful love story filled with wonderful characters and if you like your romance hot, hot, hot look no further. It is a story about being able to begin anew and still love the one you lost.”

~Linda Tonis, *RWA Paranormal
Romance Review Team*

~*~

“The erotic scenes in this book were off the charts...a rich mix of love, sex, and thoughtful introspection.”

~Peggy Jaeger, *Author of
Christmas and Cannolis*

RUNAWAY LOVE STORY

~*~

“Stone’s use of everyday situations like putting a loved one in a nursing home brings a deep humanity to this novel that is usually lacking in romance, especially one this hot!”

~Suanne Schafer, *Author of
A Different Kind of Fire*

Thursday, June 20

“He did what?”

“Disneyland?”

“That bastard!”

Danielle Peters gulped her cheap Chardonnay before facing six outraged, goggling eyeballs. She could always count on her book club friends to denounce her ex-husband’s latest douchebaggery.

She heaved a sigh and slumped back on the sofa. “How can I say no? The kids really want to go, and it’s the only time he can take them.”

Cari clucked her tongue while topping off Danielle’s glass. “Really? He just happens to get VIP tickets during the beach vacation you’ve taken with your kids every year of their frickin’ lives?”

Marie snorted. “Typical divorced dad. Spoil the kids two weeks a year, then turn them over to Mom for all the hard stuff—school, lessons, sports, doctor’s appointments...”

Danielle massaged her aching temples. “The new girlfriend arranged it. Some kind of work junket in Southern California. She’s taking her sons too.” Another detail to sour the pot. Jason had been dating this woman only two months, and already he was folding their kids into the girlfriend’s family. Considering his dating history—which, it turns out, overlapped their marriage by several years—this

girlfriend would be around just long enough for Olivia and Noah to get attached. But how could she deny her kids the trip they were so excited about? Four amusement parks, then a week in San Diego.

Since giving Jason the boot, she'd labored to keep the kids' lives as normal as possible, including their annual summer kickoff—two weeks on the Washington shore—but that tradition paled in comparison to Jason's vacation-palooza. If she said no, the kids would hate her.

"And he waits to tell you until it's too late to get a refund on your rental?" Marie shooed her cat off the coffee table, then slid the tray of snacks toward Danielle. "I call bullshit. Now eat something before you pass out. You're too pale."

Danielle speared a cheese cube. "Looks like I won't be getting much sun this summer. Not at the beach, anyway." She popped the cheese into her mouth, but she might as well be chewing cardboard. Had her ex robbed her of that too? First her much-anticipated beach trip, then her love of food? Jason had a talent for sucking all the joy out of her life. Like a black hole.

"Why the hell not?" Laurie thumped the coffee table, interrupting Danielle's daydream of ejecting Jason from an airlock into the endless void of outer space.

She blinked at her friend. "Why not what?"

Cari pushed her glasses down her nose and fixed Danielle with a laser-sharp gaze. "You should totally do it."

"Do what?"

Marie's sharp nod made her chandelier earrings

tinkle. “You’re stuck with the rental. Why not use it? Beats hanging around Tacoma all by yourself. Especially on the Fourth of July.”

An odd sensation slithered down Danielle’s spine. Shiver of warning, or tingle of delight? “I haven’t traveled alone since—well—ever.”

“So?” Cari refilled Danielle’s glass. “You’ve been renting that same beach house so long, it’s like a second home. Only better—close to the beach.”

“And lots of cute guys,” Laurie added with a nudge.

Danielle snorted. “The last thing I need.”

Marie pinged a kernel of popcorn off Danielle’s forehead. “It’s the first thing you need. Classic scenario, just like in that movie. Oh, what’s it called?” She waved her hand, conjuring the memory. “Divorced woman takes a vacation by herself, goes to...”

“Tuscany?” Laurie suggested.

“Wasn’t it Greece?” Cari asked.

Danielle slouched further into the sofa. “I thought it was the Caribbean.”

Marie huffed and raised her voice. “The point is you need time alone to get your head on straight. Pretty hard to do when your kids are around, right?”

All four women nodded.

“And God knows you deserve pampering. So take advantage of this mess and make silver-lining lemonade.” Marie flashed a satisfied smile and slurped her wine.

Cari raised a finger. “Umm, I think you mean—”

Marie bounced another popcorn kernel off

Cari's forehead. "When Walter left me, I felt like crawling under a rock. But I forced myself to book a spa weekend at Salish Lodge. Just me, myself, and a big pile of murder books. They treated me like a queen. I wasted zero time thinking about my ex." She thumped her chest. "I came back rested, relaxed, and ready to tackle my new life as a single mom."

Laurie nodded. "Isn't there a spa out by Ocean View? Sea Queen something?"

Danielle shrugged. Her previous visits to that kitschy Washington beach town centered around seashell hunting, go-karts, mini-golf, sampling saltwater taffy—family stuff. Other than raucous bars and a handful of art galleries, she had no idea what the town offered for adults. "I'm not really the spa type."

"Said no one who's ever been to a spa." Cari waved off Danielle's comment with a flick of her fingers. "Take the money you'd spend on kid stuff and spend it on yourself."

Danielle gnawed on a ragged cuticle. Spa or no spa, some low-stress time at the beach sounded appealing—except that Ocean View oozed memories of happier times. Being there alone would just hammer home her loss. "I'd have that three-bedroom house all to myself. Seems like a waste."

Marie sighed. "Wish I could join you, but I volunteered to help at my kids' science camp."

"And I'll be in court for the rest of the month," Cari added.

"Sorry, Dani." Laurie flashed a crooked grin. "I promised to go to Spokane and help my sister with

her new baby.” She squeezed Danielle’s knee, her eyes warm with sisterly affection. “But you should go. Really. It’ll do you good.”

Danielle straightened from her slump. Like it or not—and she damn sure didn’t like it—thanks to Jason she was stuck with the beach house rental. Maybe a few weeks away from home could help her figure out her next steps as a newly single mom. She stuffed a handful of popcorn into her mouth and chewed—on the snack and her dilemma.

Finally, she nodded. “Okay. You’re right. I’ll go.”

“You will?” Laurie pulled her in for a warm, squishy hug. “That’s great, Dani.”

Marie pumped a bejeweled fist in the air. “You go, girlfriend. Paint that cheesy beach town red.”

Cari raised her glass. “Here’s to fresh starts.”

The four women clinked glasses, then Danielle lifted her paperback from the coffee table. “So, we gonna discuss the book or not?”

Laurie winked. “Good thing we picked a murder mystery and not a romance. Let’s talk bloody vengeance.”

Saturday, June 22

This was almost fun. Ocean View's crowded main drag was so much easier to navigate without the kids stopping every few feet to beg for treats or souvenirs. She slid through the crowd at her own pace, pausing to admire a display of blown glass vases, then flip through a rack of colorful summer dresses. A reluctant smile tugged her lips upward as she inhaled the familiar scents of kettle corn, fish and chips, and sea tang. Maybe two weeks of this would do her some good after all.

Then she caught sight of her reflection in a shop window.

"Ugh." She'd smoothed her shoulder-length brown mane into a low ponytail, but the humid ocean breeze pulled tendrils loose and curled them into a wild frizz that totally clashed with her crisp outfit. She untucked her blouse from her linen skirt. Nope. Now she just looked sloppy.

Across the street, a pack of teen girls shrieked with laughter. The sight stabbed her with longing for her own daughter. Only thirteen, Olivia already possessed the sharp eye of a natural fashionista. She'd know exactly how to style Mom's outfit.

What would Olivia do? Danielle knotted her blouse at the waist. Better. Almost jaunty. Eyeing her reflection critically, she tugged the cloth lower

to cover a soft roll of pale flesh. *Marie's right. I need sun.*

Her exposed middle rumbled. Well, if she lacked for company, she sure didn't lack for culinary delights. During the school year, she'd opt for something healthy—an apple, perhaps, with low-fat string cheese. But this trip was about pampering her wounded heart and exhausted body. She scanned the street for the most deliciously sinful option. Snow cones, soft pretzels with gooey cheese sauce, pizza by the slice...

Bingo! Sandals slapping on the pavement, she crossed the street toward her favorite gelato shop, *Gelateria Paradiso*. For as long as she remembered, trips to Ocean View included a visit to Salvatore, the opera-singing, silver-haired signore who always greeted her with a flirtatious "*Ciao, bella.*" Just what she craved: sugar and flattery.

She entered the narrow shop and took her place in line behind a family with three squirmy littles. Beneath bright posters of the Amalfi coast, she hummed along to the strains of *Nessun Dorma* while daydreaming of top-down rides on twisting, cliffside roads above a sparkling blue sea.

"*Ciao, bella.*" The unfamiliar voice snapped her reverie.

"Oh, uh." She stammered at the gorgeous young man smiling behind the counter. Dark, curly hair, wide, lush-lipped mouth, cleft chin covered with dusky scruff, and espresso-brown eyes that twinkled with flirtatious mischief. Broad shoulders filled out his tight black T-shirt beautifully.

Like a scene from a Fellini movie, everything

around her slowed and blurred as his gaze slid down her body before returning to her eyes. His glossy eyebrows flicked up, a flirtatious salute. “Welcome to *Paradiso*, signora. Tell me, how can I serve you today?” With his ice cream scoop, he waved toward the Italian ices. “Something tart to soothe the heat? *Limone* or *mandarino*? Or perhaps something richer.” He leaned onto the glass case and rested his perfect cleft chin on his fist. “*Cioccolato fondente*? *Zabaglione*? *Tiramisu*?” Rolling off his tongue, the words sounded far more like seductive foreplay than dessert options.

She swallowed hard, took a step back, and tugged her collar away from her suddenly sweaty chest. “Uh—so many choices. I can’t decide.”

His teasing smile widened, slow and sure. “Then place yourself in my hands. Just tell me how many scoops and let me surprise you.”

She was helpless to resist. “Okay. You choose. Two scoops, please.” She cleared her throat and found a bit of courage. “I place myself in your expert hands.”

Was that a blush darkening his sculpted cheekbones? No, must be a reflection from the deep red gelato he scooped into her paper bowl. He added a scoop of creamy white laced with ribbons of crimson, then raised a spray can and his eyebrows. She nodded. He topped the bowl with a fluffy peak of whipped cream and handed it over, along with a plastic spoon.

“Tell me if I got it right.” His dark gaze never left her face as she lifted a bite to her lips.

Subtle and creamy, hints of vanilla contrasted

with a tart burst of cherry flavor. “Wow.”

“That’s *amarena*. Bitter cherries with *fior de latte*. He gestured with a tilt of his chin. “Try the other.”

She dug into the fruit ice. Tart and rich, the perfect foil. Mouth full and tongue a little numb, she smiled and nodded.

“*Frutti di bosco*. Fruits of the forest. It’s good, huh?” His flirtatious mask slipped just a little, giving her a glimpse of the young man beneath, sweet and eager to please. And she wanted to please him in return.

“The perfect combination. You are a true artist, *signore*.” She glanced around the shop, grateful no new customers interrupted this surprise encounter. “But where’s Salvatore?”

The brass bell above the door tinkled, and the old gent in question stepped through, thick silver hair gleaming, burly arms around a big Styrofoam cooler. He set his load on the counter, spread his arms wide, and flashed a mustachioed smile. “*La bella Daniella!*” He enfolded her in a warm hug, then glanced over her shoulder. “But where’s your family? I have your daughter’s favorite right here.” He patted the cooler.

The mention of her missing kids pierced her happy, sexy ice-cream dream. “I’m afraid they aren’t coming this year. Jason and I, we—” No use boring her old friend with tales of Jason’s infidelity, his coldness, his indifference. “We went our separate ways. The kids are with him in Southern California.”

Salvatore’s smile melted. He cupped her cheek

in his broad, calloused hand. “Oh, *cara mia*, I’m so sorry.”

Embarrassed by a wash of tears, she snuffled and lifted her cup. “Well, your new helper made me feel much better with his magic touch.” Realizing how sexy that sounded, she quickly added. “With choosing flavors, I mean.”

Salvatore chuckled. “My nephew loves the beautiful ladies, just like his old uncle. Come, sit. Visit with me a moment.”

“Oh, but I haven’t paid yet.”

Salvatore patted her hand. “On the house.” He led them to a little wrought-iron table near the front window, then called over his shoulder, “Matteo, *due espressi, per favore*.”

Sal glanced at his nephew. “My younger brother’s boy. His papa died last March. Heart attack. Always working too hard. I told him to slow down, enjoy life. But would he listen to his big brother?” He raised his hands in a helpless gesture. “Matteo’s been a great help in the shop since I lost my Giulia.”

“Your wife? She’s—”

Sal nodded and crossed himself. “Breast cancer. Terrible thing. If it weren’t for Matteo, I woulda had to close the shop.”

Danielle squeezed the old man’s burly hand. “I’m so sorry, Sal. Giulia was a wonderful person.” Her kids would be heartbroken to hear of her passing. The tiny, bustling woman always fussed over Olivia and Noah when they came into the shop.

Sal sniffed, patted her hand, and jerked a thumb

toward the counter. “Matteo’s a good boy. A carpenter like my *papà*.”

The good boy in question appeared at her shoulder, all six muscly feet of him. “Here you go, Zio Sal. *Signora*.” He set a steaming espresso in front of each of them.

Salvatore patted the table. “Sit, boy. Meet Danielle. She’s been coming here for—how many years, *bella*?”

“Fifteen, at least.” She regarded Matteo. How old was he, twenty-five? Faced with his glorious male beauty, she felt every year of her age.

Salvatore and his nephew leaned close across the table and muttered back and forth in Italian, their gazes flicking to her. Her knowledge of that language was limited mostly to food words, but *divorziata* was easy enough to understand. The two men straightened and faced her, Salvatore with a wide grin, Matteo with a shy one.

What happened to Mr. Suave?

“Danielle,” Salvatore began, “would you do an old friend a big favor?”

“Umm.” Her gaze skittered between them. “Sure, if I can.”

“Tomorrow night, we are attending the Sons of Italy scholarship banquet. The food will be *squisita*.” He kissed his fingertips. “But the old *nonnas* keep trying to set up Matteo with their daughters and granddaughters.” He clapped his nephew’s muscly shoulder. “If you come as our date, he can enjoy the party in peace. What do you say?”

Matteo added, “You’d be doing us a huge

favor, Danielle. And he's right—the food is really good. Just dinner and a little dancing. Will you join us?"

How could she possibly say no to charmers like these two? Between Sal's courtly, old-world manners and Matteo's sparkling, flirtatious gaze, she was a goner. Besides, her book club would approve. Hell, they'd stomp and pump their fists.

She smiled. "Sure, I'd love to join you."

"*Stupendo!*" Sal downed his coffee, gave her hand a squeeze, and rose to greet incoming customers.

Matteo took her hand and raised it to his lips. "*Mille grazie*, Danielle. You've saved me from the *nonna* mafia. I promise you'll have a good time." His warm, soft kiss on her knuckles triggered a cascade of happy shivers.

Flushed and stammering, she thanked him for the ice cream, then watched him turn his dazzling charm on the next customer.

Could I...could we...maybe a summer fling? She shook her head, dismissing the ridiculous notion. Just a nice young man flattering an old friend of his uncle's. Nothing to get excited about. Still, as she left the shop, she hummed along with the Italian opera, a giddy grin on her lips and a cocky sway in her step.

Sunday, June 23

With Cari on video chat, Danielle held her phone aloft and flipped through a rack of colorful hippie skirts in The Mermaid's Cave Gift Shop, Fashion Boutique, and Saltwater Taffy Emporium.

"What do the Sons of Italy wear, anyway?" Danielle muttered.

"Why not ask your gelato friend?" Cari dug into a takeout carton.

"That'd make me look too eager." She aimed her phone at a skirt in peacock blue, green, and purple, embroidered with feather designs and tiny mirrors. "Too much?"

"Not for a beach town. Besides, isn't that the point? You're breaking out of your drab routine." Cari gestured with her fork, loaded with dangling noodles. "Can't believe you didn't send a picture of this Italian stallion."

Danielle snorted. "Right. Shoulda snapped a pic as soon as he asked me out. That wouldn't be awkward at all." She flipped through a rack of tops until she found a floaty peasant blouse in emerald green, a perfect match for the skirt. "You like this?"

Cari whistled. "Fahncy! Try it on."

She carried both garments into the dressing room, propped her phone on the little shelf, and continued her conversation as she peeled off her

boring blouse and skirt. “I have so few play clothes anymore. Just work outfits and gym clothes. That’s sad, right?”

“It is sad, but you’re taking steps to change that.” Cari clucked her tongue. “Better get a new bra, while you’re at it. A woman with your assets should show them off, not squash them.”

Danielle frowned at her reflection. “This is my favorite sports bra. It’s comfortable.” She turned to examine her profile. “I’ll wear a better one tonight. Pokey wires and all.” She pulled the blouse over her head, cinched the skirt’s drawstring waist, and stepped back. Wow.

Cari gave a low whistle. “Oh, honey. That. Is. It. You look like a gypsy queen. What’s her name, Esmerelda?”

Danielle tugged off her hair band and fluffed her hair. “Didn’t they hang her at the end of the book?”

“Not in the Disney version.”

Disneyland. Just like that, her pleasure in the new outfit evaporated. She slumped onto the little stool.

“Oh, hey, I’m sorry.” Cari clucked her tongue. “That was insensitive. Have you heard from your kids?”

“Just a few texts. They’re having a great time.” She blinked at the ceiling to hold back threatening tears. “Who am I kidding? Playing dress-up doesn’t change anything. I’m still the mama drudge they’ll come home to with stories about their cool new step-mom and their great vacation—”

Cari cut her off. “Jason’s marrying that

bimbo?”

She shrugged. “Not likely. She’s the third new girlfriend since I finally kicked him out.” She sniffled and cracked a wry smile. “I almost feel sorry for her. I mean, spending all that money to impress her new boyfriend’s kids, and he’ll probably drop her in a few months.”

“Yeah, but it still sucks.” A buzz from Cari’s end. “Judge is ready. Gotta go. But listen.” She stabbed a finger at her screen. “Promise me you’ll have fun tonight. I want a full report.”

Danielle pasted on a brave smile and snapped a salute. “Aye aye, Ma’am. Esmerelda out.” She clicked off the call and surveyed her new look. The brilliant colors played up the contrast between her pale skin and dark hair and eyes. Would Matteo like it? She skimmed her fingertips along her exposed collarbone, imagining his plush lips there, the brush of his short, trim beard against her skin. *Mama mia*.

She fanned her flushed chest and throat, then slicked on rosy lipstick, and snapped a few selfies. She sent the best one to Olivia and Noah.

—Going out to dinner with some new friends tonight. Hope you’re having fun—

Olivia’s reply pinged seconds later.

—Pretty. Get dangly earrings, and don’t wear those ugly sandals—

Noah’s text came next.

—Mom’s got a date? I’m telling Dad— He added a wink emoji.

A wiser woman would tell her ten-year-old son it was just a potluck dinner with a bunch of strangers and the old gelato salesman. But in her

heart of hearts, she hoped he would tell Jason.

On her way back to the rental house, she passed Auntie Annabelle's Antique Nook, a sprawling junk shop that took up two adjacent houses. Bittersweet memories flashed across her mind's eye—trawling Ocean View's junk shops with her kids, hours of giggling as they tried on vintage hats, marveled at tin wind-up toys, and flipped through old comic books. Jason would grumble about "useless trinkets" and "worn-out junk" before leaving them to find a bar. It seemed with each passing year he tried harder to spoil their fun.

And now he had. How could a rinky-dink beach town compete with Disneyland and Universal Studios? Though the shopping bags she carried weighed very little, her shoulders slumped. Then she spotted something that jerked her upright.

Propped in the window behind cut-glass vases and creepy porcelain dolls, a guitar. Not just any guitar, a gorgeous acoustic dreadnought, dark walnut with mother of pearl edging. How long since she'd played? Ten years? Fifteen?

Back in college, she was good enough to earn a hatful of tips on Saturdays in the little park near Pike's Place Market, or in coffee shops near campus.

But her garage band fizzled, her coursework got more demanding, and Jason claimed her free time. Then came marriage, work, and kids. Music receded into the background, just another thing she used to do.

She glanced at her fingers. Once upon a time, she'd sported short nails, with sturdy callouses on

her fingertips. Now she had a standard-issue gel manicure, just like all her suburban mom friends.

A slow smile stretched her lips. *New chapter. New beginning.* She squared her shoulders and strode into the shop. Twenty minutes later she emerged with a vintage denim jacket, dangly beaded earrings, and the guitar.

Sunday Evening

As Danielle entered the low cinderblock building on Salvatore's arm, a blast of sensation slammed her: loud voices, laughter, and rich scents of garlic, cheese, fresh bread, and tomato sauce wafting from serving tables along the wall. Her stomach rumbled.

All dolled up for a party, the meeting hall was stuffed with big, round tables decked with flickering candles. On the low stage, Italian and American flags framed a D.J.'s table. People streamed through the entrance, greeting each other with hugs and back slaps. Little kids dashed about, peeked from beneath tablecloths, and poked fingers into dishes. Mamas and grandmamas smacked little hands away from the feast. At a smaller corner table, old guys gesticulated over a dice game. Above the din, Dean Martin crooned, "Come back to Sorrento." Family, friends, food, fun—like all the best parts of Thanksgiving transplanted to June and sprinkled with Italian seasoning.

Danielle sighed. Her kids would love this. Over the years, she'd often wondered what it would be like to live full-time in Ocean View. Tonight, she'd get a taste.

Salvatore tugged her toward a table in the center of the room and pointed to a folding chair.

“That’s Matteo’s jacket. Where’s that boy gone to?”

She scanned the crowd. “There he is.”

Entering from a side door, he carried an enormous, steaming pan, which he set on the buffet table. A petite *nonna* bussed him on the cheek, and another patted his biceps. More grandmothers swarmed him, patting his cheeks and pointing to their own dishes of food.

Salvatore chuckled. “See? Those *nonnas* will tear him apart. Each one wants him for her own daughter or granddaughter, and Matteo’s too polite to chase them away.” He nudged Danielle with his elbow. “That’s your job, *bella*.” He stuck two fingers in his mouth and let fly a piercing whistle.

Matteo’s head snapped toward the sound. His brows flicked upward, and his smile widened.

Her heart skipped a beat or two, then thumped in time to his steps as he crossed the room. Despite the hands clutching at him, the hugs and backslaps, he kept his gaze trained on her—until a tiny princess in a poufy taffeta dress planted herself in his path, raised both hands, and demanded, “Up.”

He scooped the toddler into his arms, smooched her forehead, and carried her to the table where Danielle waited, barely breathing.

“Hi,” the little girl announced with a serious expression. “I’m Sophia. I’m this many.” She held up two fingers, then three. “You’re pretty.” She patted Matteo’s broad chest. “Down.”

As the child skipped back into the crowd, Matteo took both of Danielle’s hands. His gaze traveled over her body, leaving her a little dizzy. If he was gorgeous yesterday in his black T-shirt,

jeans, and apron, tonight he was simply spectacular in slim charcoal dress pants, shiny loafers, and a crisp white shirt with sleeves rolled up, revealing strong forearms dusted with dark hair. His top two buttons were open, just enough to glimpse a small silver medal against tan skin. Her fingertips itched to unbutton the next button, and the next.

His gaze met hers, and his lips quirked in a small, private smile. “Sophia’s right. You’re very pretty, Danielle.” He pronounced her name with a panty-melting Italian accent, like some delicious dish.

Mayday! She sucked in a breath and slid her hands from his soft grip. “Thanks. You’re looking very dapper too.” *Dapper? What a dorky thing to say.*

But Matteo’s smoldering expression didn’t change. He moved closer, close enough to smell his subtle scent, sandalwood and sea air. Close enough to feel his breath tickling her ear as he whispered, “You’re just in time. The *nonnas* were closing in.”

Deep inside her chest, something fizzled like a snuffed candle. She’d misread the flicker in his dark eyes. He’d only asked her out as a shield against matchmaking matriarchs. For a split second, she considered excusing herself, pretending an upset stomach. Then a skinny teen deposited a basket of steaming garlic bread on their table. The tempting, yeasty aroma beckoned, and Cari’s voice echoed in her memory. “Promise me you’ll have fun tonight.” She couldn’t break a promise to a friend. Besides, these two charming gents were counting on her.

Placing a hand on Matteo’s shoulder, she rose

on tiptoe and whispered, “You can count on me, *bello*.”

“*Mille grazie*.” He pressed a soft kiss to her temple. “Now, let’s eat before all the best dishes are gone.”

Flushed and flustered, she followed him to the buffet line and filled her plate with pasta, plus antipasti of marinated mushrooms, grilled vegetables, olives, cheese cubes, and paper-thin salami and prosciutto, along with peppery rucola salad and spinach-and-cheese stuffed turkey involtini. Good thing her new skirt had a drawstring waist.

Back at the table, Salvatore filled her tumbler to the rim with red wine. “Local family makes this, up near Westport. It’s not *Chianti classico*, but it’s not bad.”

She sipped. “Not bad” was a huge understatement. Bold and complex, perfumed with berries and earth, the wine offered a perfect complement to the rich dishes before her. She’d tried most of the restaurants in Ocean View, but nothing came close to this feast. Their tablemates, two middle-aged couples and a retired fire chief, entertained them with town gossip and good-natured ribbing. Salvatore joined in, pointing his fork at the people being discussed. Matteo kept quiet, focused on the heap of food before him, but from time to time he nudged Danielle’s leg and waggled his eyebrows, as if to say, “Isn’t this good?”

After the chief’s story about rescuing a cantankerous pet monkey from the church steeple,

Matteo's hand closed softly over hers. "Seconds, *bella?*"

She blinked at her empty plate. Distracted by the genial company and Matteo's husky laughter, she'd hoovered down enough food for two dinners, maybe three. "Thanks, but no. If I eat any more, you'll have to roll me home."

The woman across from her asked, "So, Danielle, you Italian?"

"Partly. My grandfather's family came from Genoa. Dante Delfino was his name."

"*Meraviglioso.*" The woman's husband pinched his wife's plump cheek. "See, Rosa? Matteo's found himself a nice Italian girl without your help."

Rosa gave her husband a shove, but the smile she shot Danielle was warm and genuine.

Beneath the table, Matteo squeezed her knee. Happy sparks zinged up her leg. Why not play along? Just for tonight, she'd help her new friend by letting these matchmakers think she and Matteo were a couple.

Rosa asked, "What do you do in Tacoma?"

"I'm a speech therapist for the school district."

Matteo leaned in, eyes alight with sincere interest. Or was he just that good at flattery and flirtation? "So, you help kids with lisps and stutters?"

"That's right. Some of my students have difficulty with certain sounds, like L or R or TH. Others have speech delays or learning problems that affect their oral communication."

"Big kids or little?" Salvatore asked.

"Mostly little. With early intervention, they can

make big improvements.” She tapped her sternum. “Like me. When I was little, I couldn’t say my S’s. Other kids made fun of me.”

Further explanation was interrupted when a tall, bony-faced gentleman stepped up to the podium to thank the chefs. A tiny nonna accepted a bouquet of flowers for organizing the meal. She angled the mic down and rattled off a long list of names. “And thanks to Matteo, our muscle man, for carrying all the heavy stuff.” She blew him a kiss, which he caught in his palm and pressed to his heart.

“Before we start dessert,” the MC continued, “you got ten more minutes to buy your raffle tickets. Remember, all proceeds go the scholarship fund, so dig deep.”

Salvatore pointed to a long table at the back of the stage. “Go take a look, you two. It’s for a good cause.”

She had the strong suspicion her old friend had matchmaking inclinations of his own. People rose to stretch, and several moved toward the display of raffle prizes. She slid through the crowd on Matteo’s arm, their passage marked by whispers and pointing fingers.

“You’re making quite an impression,” he murmured. “Everyone’s wondering who you are and how long you’re going to stay.”

“Just two weeks, I’m afraid. My kids have summer soccer league, and I have appointments booked for July and August.”

As they climbed the steps onto the stage, he pursed his lips and nodded. “Tacoma’s not so far away. I’ve been meaning to get up there and check

out the antique shops.”

“You’re into antiques, Matteo?”

“Sort of. I upcycle old furniture, like this here.”

He pointed to a small table with a gleaming blue-green finish that allowed the wood’s natural grain to shine through.

“Gorgeous.” She ran her fingertips over the smooth surface. “Reminds me of my mother’s sewing table.”

His smile widened. “That’s what it was, before I gave it a makeover. Open it.”

She lifted the fold-out top. A galvanized tub sat in the cavity that once held a sewing machine.

“To hold ice and drinks.” He pointed to the wooden lid. “You put your snacks here, and the cups go over there.”

“Matteo, this is brilliant.” She squatted to see how he’d attached the tub.

He huffed and shoved a hand through his dark curls. “Nothing like helping kids learn to speak right. I mean, correctly.”

Great, now she’d made him self-conscious. Swallowing a soft grunt, she pushed herself upright. “We all have our gifts. I lack your artistic talent.”

“Artist? Hell, I’m a carpenter.” He grasped the medal at the V of his throat. “Saint Joseph, our patron saint. Gift from my grandfather.”

“Was your dad a carpenter too?”

Another snort. Funny how he made that ungraceful noise sound so sexy. “Dad sold cars. Had a big, shiny dealership. Kept pressuring me to work for him, until he dropped dead from a heart attack at age sixty.” He patted the tabletop. “I’ll

stick with carpentry.”

Poor kid! He might laugh it off, but his wry half-smile betrayed a deep vein of hurt. She wanted to comfort this near stranger who made her pulse race. But she settled for squeezing his shoulder, firm and solid beneath her hand.

Not content with that skimpy contact, he pulled her in for a hug. A flurry of whispers followed. He murmured against her hair, “Sorry to be such a downer. You’re easy to talk to, Danielle. Thanks.”

Fizzy warmth burbled up from her middle and filled her head with foolish thoughts. Fighting her reaction, she stepped back and pasted on a casual grin. “So, where do I get my raffle tickets?”

She bought twenty, depositing most in the jar in front of Matteo’s ingenious bar cart, plus one each in a basket of romance books and bubble bath, as well as a picnic hamper filled with salami, cheese, and wine. When the drawing was held, she won the romance basket. A sign of good things to come? Or solitary nights curled up with a book? She sighed when a cute young woman ended up with Matteo’s table.

Who am I kidding? Dozens of pretty young girls here. He’s not coming home with me. Time to get out of here before I make a fool of myself.

While he hauled the prize out to the winner’s car, she thanked Salvatore for a wonderful evening, then shook hands with the rest of their tablemates and retrieved her wrap and purse. Returning to her side, Matteo rumbled his brow. “You can’t leave yet. You haven’t had dessert.”

“Dessert?” She patted her overstuffed tummy.

“Where would I put it, in my purse? I had a wonderful time, Matteo, but I should get back home before—”

He leaned in close and whispered, “There’s dancing too, and if you go, the nonnas will pounce.” He ran his hands up and down her arms. “Please stay. Dance with me.”

The lights dimmed, and someone switched on a by-God disco ball above the dance floor. Its glittery shine reflected in Matteo’s dark eyes.

“Well, I suppose...” She wet her lips as she draped her belongings over the chair back. She hadn’t danced with a man since a stilted two-step at her wedding. Since then, she only danced with packs of tipsy women at concerts and parties. But now, Matteo was holding her hand, walking backward toward the dance floor where couples young and old swayed to “Volare.”

He pulled her into his arms, his right hand between her shoulder blades, his left gently cradling her palm. For a moment that felt like forever, they stood beneath the spinning lights, gazes locked. His eyebrow quirked up. “Are you ready?”

She sucked in a breath, then nodded.

Away they glided. Maybe it was the wine, but it seemed her feet didn’t quite touch the ground as Matteo guided her around the floor in swirling arcs. She was dimly aware of stares and whispers from the growing crowd of dancers. When the song ended, he spun her out, then back, so she landed against his chest.

“You’re a great dancer, Danielle.” His soft kiss on her forehead sent giddy echoes through her

whole body.

“That was all you, Matteo.” Movement over his shoulder caught her eye—a trio of pretty twenty-somethings tittering at the dance floor’s edge. Two of the girls shoved the third forward. “Incoming,” she whispered.

Without releasing her, he glanced at the intruder, then pressed his forehead to Danielle’s. “Can I kiss you?”

Her breath hitched, but she nodded, too stunned to think up an objection.

He captured her chin between thumb and forefinger, held her gaze for a moment, then his dark lashes fluttered down, and he moved in for the kill. His lips brushed hers, feather-light, then pressed softly at each corner of her mouth, which opened on a sigh. *Sweet Jesus*. When had she ever been kissed like this?

“Mmm,” he hummed against her. His breath smelled of Chianti. He pressed her closer, hand splayed at the small of her back, and kissed her again, a long, voluptuous caress. She wound her arms around his neck and arched into his embrace. The tip of his tongue traced her lower lip.

“Madonna,” he murmured. Beneath half-lowered lids, his eyes shone dark and feral.

A sharp whack on his shoulder shattered the moment. “*Basta così*,” an older man scolded. “There are kids here. Go home if you’re that *arrapato*.”

Matteo threw his head back and laughed. “Means horny,” he murmured. “Sorry, *bella*. Your beauty is intoxicating. I got carried away.” He

pressed another kiss to the shell of her ear. “Will you forgive me?”

Face aflame, she nodded. “Should we go?”

He loosened his hold, once again taking her right hand. “As much as I’d like to get you alone, I’m enjoying dancing with you. Maybe just one more?” As if on cue, the D.J. began a Sinatra tune.

She searched the dance floor for the giggly girls, but they’d disappeared into the crowd. The lights shifted to a rosy hue. Keeping a safe distance this time, he swayed her slowly, but the empty inches between them crackled with electricity. Could the others see how she flushed and bloomed at his touch? They must because at each turn eyes followed their movements, and murmurs trailed behind them.

“I think I’d better sit down,” she told him when the music faded. “I’m feeling a little woozy.”

On their way back to their table, they passed the girl who’d hoped to dance with Matteo. She muttered under her breath, but when Matteo gave her a dismissive wave, she raised her volume. “Cradle robber.”

Heat boiled up from Danielle’s belly. *Jealous bitch*. The girl was right, though. Matteo was at least ten years her junior—maybe more? She must look ridiculous, making out with a much younger man on the dance floor in front of a roomful of strangers. Her rosy cloud deflated, dumping her back to earth with a painful thud.

“Matteo, I’m really tired. I think I’ll head home.”

Those mesmerizing dark eyes saw right

through her lie. “Don’t worry about Bianca. She’s crazy, a real shit stirrer. Nobody listens to her.”

She reached for her purse, dangling from the back of her chair. “Honestly, I had a wonderful time, but I’m ready for some quiet.”

He hovered behind her, far too close for clear thinking. When she reached for her wrap, he unfurled it and draped it over her. His hands settled on her shoulders, a warm, heavy weight that kept her rooted in place. His breath stirred her hair. Finally, he sighed. “Okay. If you want to go, let me walk you home.”

“No, really, I—”

“Too many drunk tourists out on a warm night like this. Please, *bella*. Let me see you to your door.” His broad palms kneaded her tense shoulders. “Uncle Sal will give me hell if I don’t.”

Just then, Salvatore returned from the dessert table holding a plate piled high with pastries. “What’s this? Leaving before dessert?” He lifted a *cannolo* to her lips. “Stella Giusto made these. You’ll never taste anything better.”

“She’s tired, *Zio*,” Matteo interjected. “I’m gonna take her home.”

Salvatore gaped for a moment, then grinned. “Ah. Okay, then. You two lovebirds go on home.” Grasping her shoulders, he kissed both her cheeks. His mustache tickled. “I hope to see you soon, Danielle.”

She nestled under Matteo’s protective arm as they wound through the crowd. Outside, the cool evening air carried the ocean tang, more noticeable now that the Belgian waffle and kettle corn vendors

had shut down for the night. Just as Matteo predicted, boisterous tourists filled Main Street, roaming from one bar to the next. He kept his arm around her shoulders until they reached her rented cottage, only releasing her when they climbed the porch stairs, and she fished in her purse for the key.

“Nice place,” he remarked. “I can see why you keep coming back.”

“Yeah, well.” She opened the door. “It’s not the same without my kids.”

According to Marie and her other divorced friends, the quickest way to get rid of a guy was to mention your kids. But Matteo stood his ground, a dreamy smile on his face. “I’ll bet you’re a wonderful mama.”

“How can you tell?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. You’ve got—” He waved a hand as if wafting smoke “—this caring aura. You’re a very loving person.”

“You can tell that from just one kiss?”

He shuffled closer. “One spectacular kiss.” Closer still. “Fireworks, *bella*.”

Oh God, he’s going to kiss me again. And I really, really want him to. His eyes glowed with the promise of passion. But instead of kissing her, he pressed his forehead to hers and chuckled. “And the fact that you’d go on a blind date with an old man and a stranger. That was a very sweet thing to do, Danielle. Thank you.”

Her sigh of relief was tinged with disappointment. Better not think about how marvelous it would feel to kiss him again, how he’d taste, how he’d hold her, caress her... She gave her

head a little shake. “It was my pleasure, Matteo. I enjoyed that glimpse of the real town. You know—beyond the tacky shops.” *Oops!* “I don’t mean your shop, of course.”

He tucked his chin and flashed a wry smile. “Yeah, Main Street’s pretty damn tacky in summer. But there’s a lot more to the town than tourist traps.” His brows flicked up, and he seized her hands. “Let me show you, Danielle.”

“Show me what?”

“Ocean View.”

She chuckled. “I’ve been coming here since you were—” *In high school? Elementary school?* The thought landed like a rock in a puddle, splattering her dreams with muddy reality. “Anyway, I’ve seen Ocean View from top to bottom. The beach too.”

“You’ve only seen the façade. Let me show you the real deal.”

“I don’t know, Matteo. You’re so”—She waved her hand, taking in his gorgeous frame from top to bottom—“young, damn it.”

He tilted his head. “Ah, the age thing. Okay, I’m thirty-one. You?”

She gulped. She’d never worried much about the passage of time. As her Italian nana said, you’re as old as you are. Useless to fret about it. But tonight, she wished she could turn back time just for these two weeks, so she could be with Matteo without feeling so damn foolish.

She squared her shoulders. “I’m forty-two.”

He stroked her arm with the back of his forefinger. “A woman in full bloom.”

Her knees wobbled. Either he was joking, or he was a true seduction artist. She searched his dark gaze and found no mockery there. Maybe it was an Italian thing—Europeans held more appreciation for mature beauty, right? Or maybe he just had a weird mama fixation?

Who cares? I have two weeks to myself. Might as well enjoy them to the fullest.

“All right, then. I’d love to see the town through your eyes, Matteo.”

He grinned like a kid at Christmas. “Yeah? That’s great. I have to work for Uncle Sal in the afternoon, so we can start with breakfast. Pick you up at seven?”

“In the morning?”

He winked. “Put yourself in my hands, dear lady. I promise, you’ll have a good time.”

Gelato Surprise

About the Author

Sadira's been spinning steamy romantic tales in her head ever since she discovered the fine art of smooching. But it wasn't until her 50s, after a teaching career in Germany, that she tried her hand at writing one. Now she's a happy citizen of Romancelandia, penning contemporary romance and cozy romantic suspense from her new home in Washington State. When not writing, which is seldom, she enjoys exploring the Pacific Northwest with her charming husband, playing darts and guitar, and listening to live music, especially blues.

~*~

Visit Sadira at
www.sadirastone.com

Also Available
from The Wild Rose Press, Inc.
and major retailers.

Through the Red Door

The Book Nirvana Series Book One

By Sadira Stone

Clara Martelli clings to Book Nirvana, the Oregon bookshop she and her late husband Jared built together. When rising rents and corporate competition threaten its survival, her best hope is their extensive erotica collection, locked behind a red door. In dreams and signs, her dead husband tells her it's time to open that door and move on. When a dark and handsome stranger's powerful magnetism jolts her back to life and he wants a look at the treasures of that secret room, she can't help but want to show him more.

Professor Nick Papadopoulos is looking for historical erotica. Book Nirvana's collection surpasses his wildest dreams, and so does its lovely owner. A widower, he understands Clara's battle with guilt, but their searing chemistry is too strong to resist. Besides, he will only be in town for two weeks, not long enough for her to see beyond the scandal that haunts his past.

