

When Angelo flipped over to the next photograph, he dropped the lot.

“It’s Nonno. Outside the big house. With the painting,” he whispered.

“It all ties in,” Mariana said, putting her arms around him and hugging him. “We’ve found it. And this is bona fide documentary evidence.”

The next thing he knew, he was kissing her. Really kissing her. And she was kissing him back, her mouth warm and sweet, giving and demanding at the same time.

The world spun on its axis.

He shouldn’t be doing this. She was vulnerable, she’d been hurt and if her biological clock started ticking then he’d end up letting her down. She was off-limits.

And if he let himself fall for her and the whole thing went wrong, the same way it had gone wrong with Stephanie, he’d end up with his heart broken a second time. Better not to risk it in the first place. He needed to stop this. Right now.

With effort, he tore his mouth from hers.

Dear Reader,

I visited Florence for the first time and utterly fell in love with the place—the buildings, the history, the amazing art, the lovely people and the wonderful food.

Add to this that I can never pass an art gallery or museum, and I love documentaries on art, and you can see why this book appeared in the back of my head. It did have to go through a few drafts, because some of the secondary characters took over—and so did one of the strands of the story!

This book is about inner strength and how love can heal—and how a happy ending might turn up where you're not expecting it.

I hope you enjoy Angelo and Mariana's story.

With love

Kate Hardy

Finding Mr. Right in Florence

Kate Hardy

 **HARLEQUIN**[®] ROMANCE

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Finding Mr. Right in Florence

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For Gerard, who shared the wonders of Florence
with me.

**Praise for
Kate Hardy**

“I was hooked.... *Her Festive Doorstep Baby* is a
heart-tugging emotional romance.”

—*Goodreads*

CHAPTER ONE

MARIANA THACKERAY.

Angelo Beresford looked at the name on the email his sister had sent him.

Mariana was a presenter on a television programme about art—about paintings people had found in their attic or had been hanging on a wall unremarked-on for years, and then they turned out to be lost masterpieces worth a small fortune.

Camilla had spent the last couple of months of her pregnancy making a special trip from Rome to Florence every week to watch the programme with their grandfather. And Leo Moretti had apparently taken a real shine to the woman. He called her the Debussy girl—the girl with the flaxen hair. Cammie's version was that she looked like a pre-Raphaelite model.

Though it didn't matter what Mariana Thackeray looked like. What Angelo wanted

from her had nothing to do with her looks and everything to do with what was inside her head.

Did Mariana Thackeray really know her stuff about art, or was she presenting the programme from a script?

There was only one way to find out.

Angelo flicked into the Internet and typed in the programme's name.

Her profile came up on the programme's website, along with a couple of links to newspaper articles.

Yup. She looked exactly like a model for one of his grandfather's nineteenth-century paintings. Long golden curls, blue eyes, fine cheekbones, and a sensual curve to her mouth. She was absolutely gorgeous.

He shook himself. That wasn't what he needed to know.

He looked at the caption. *Mariana Thackeray, MA. Broadcaster and art historian.*

Solid academic qualifications: she worked from knowledge rather than just a script, then. Good.

And the next bit was better still: she was studying Italian nineteenth-century art for her PhD. His grandfather's passion. So she'd be just about the perfect person to help Angelo achieve his aims.

He wanted to check out her TV programme first, though. According to the Internet TV guides, it wasn't on air or even on catch-up TV at the moment; though a new series was planned for October.

Right now it was May. So, although Angelo didn't know exactly what the lead time of her series was, there was a good chance that she'd have the time to do the work he needed her to do. Better and better. The ducks were lining up nicely in a row.

The programme trailers were available, but a couple of minutes of screen time weren't really enough to tell him what he wanted to know. He went in search of the full episodes, guessing that someone would have downloaded them to the Internet, and bookmarked them in his laptop for viewing later that evening. Then he checked out the newspaper articles.

It looked as if her former partner was a nasty piece of work, a bully who was quite happy to lie in court and who'd made her life miserable in the extreme. Although Angelo's own branch of law was a very different one, he had friends who worked in that area and he knew how gruelling a case like that could be.

Mariana Thackeray had enough strength of character to stand up for herself in court

and tell the truth, even though it must've been painful for her to have her life laid bare before strangers and scrutinised, and she'd spoken out in the newspaper article about how it felt to be in an abusive relationship and where you could get help. She'd talked about how easy it was to doubt yourself and think that the rows were all your fault. How easy it was to believe that you were useless and unworthy, drip by slow drip; how it felt to question your own reality and feel guilty that you were doubting your partner.

And she'd been frank about how hard it was to build yourself up again, how counseling could help you shift your mindset. She'd used her own painful experiences to help others. And the journalist had made it very clear that Mariana's fee for the interview had been donated to a women's refuge. He liked that: she hadn't profited from the experience, but used it to help others.

On one hand, it was a complication he could do without—a nasty-tempered ex who might want to make trouble. On the other, Angelo respected the fact that Mariana hadn't let the experience drag her down. That she'd worked hard and gone on to make a good life for herself, built herself back up from nothing.

He'd check out the programme, and then he'd make the decision about whether to contact her.

When he finally got home, Angelo ended up watching four episodes of *Hidden Treasure* back-to-back.

Now he knew exactly what had caught his grandfather's attention: Mariana's passion for art. Yes, she was beautiful. But it was when she talked about art that she really came alive. She *sparkled*. She took her audience along with her, showing them the technical side of the paintings and how the brushstrokes and pigments could be analysed; and she brought in the human side, showing snippets of the painter's life and where that particular painting fitted in. But most of all she brought out what the painting meant to the owner.

None of it seemed to be about the money. It was about vindication. Proving that the owners weren't dreaming about the art they'd fallen in love with—that they had a genuine painting rather than a copy or a fake. Something that could be traced all the way back to the artist; even when there wasn't a traditional paper trail, there were other bits of evidence that could back up a hunch. Scientific evidence.

Vindication.

That was what Angelo's grandfather needed. Proof that the painting he'd loved for years, his pride and joy, really was a Carulli. *The Girl in the Window*.

If anyone could prove it, Mariana Thackeray could. Even if it wasn't a suitable candidate for the show, he could still commission her to investigate the painting privately. He was perfectly happy to pay; what was the point in having money in the bank when you could use it to help someone you loved?

Angelo flicked into the word-processing program on his laptop and began to write.

The last lead in the file was a letter.

Most of the correspondence to *Hidden Treasure*, the television programme Mariana presented about lost art treasures found in people's homes, came by email, and she'd already sifted through this week's batch to find three potential leads for further investigation and sent a standard reply to the rest, thanking them for their interest and apologising that unfortunately they weren't suitable for the programme but she wished them the very best.

Letters were rare.

This one was from a lawyer, Angelo Beresford, requesting her to call him and set up

a meeting to discuss a painting. Two words leaped out at her immediately: Domenico Carulli.

The main painter out of the group of artists she was studying for her PhD.

Intrigued, she flicked into the Internet to check out the firm of solicitors on the headed paper. Their website listed Angelo Beresford as a mergers and acquisitions specialist. So why was he writing to *Hidden Treasure*? Did a company he was working with think they had a painting worth a considerable amount of money and he wanted her professional opinion?

She didn't get involved in artwork valuation as a rule. Half her time was spent on her studies, and the other half in detective work for the television programme.

But.

Domenico Carulli.

Her favourite painter.

Angelo Beresford hadn't said which painting it was, and most of the ones she knew about were in a handful of galleries; there were a few in private hands, but none that she knew of in a corporate collection. Which could mean this was the kind of painting she looked at on *Hidden Treasure*. One that had gone unremarked and forgotten about for

years. The lead was definitely worth checking out.

She picked up the phone and called his number.

‘Mr Beresford’s secretary,’ a plummy voice announced.

‘May I speak to Mr Beresford, please?’ Mariana asked.

‘I’m afraid he’s in a meeting. May I take a message?’

‘Thank you. My name’s Mariana Thackeray. He wrote to me saying—’

‘—that he wants to discuss a painting. Yes,’ his secretary confirmed. ‘He was hoping that you’d call. I have his diary in front of me. Would you like me to book an appointment?’

‘Couldn’t I just talk to him on the phone?’ Mariana asked.

‘I think he would prefer a face to face meeting with you, Miss Thackeray.’

Did that mean Angelo Beresford actually had the painting in his office and wanted her to take a look at it? All the hairs on her neck stood up in a rush of adrenaline. ‘All right. When do you suggest?’

‘He’s free at half past two today,’ the secretary said.

It would mean moving her meeting with Nigel, her producer, but if her hunch checked

out then she was sure Nigel wouldn't mind. 'All right. Can I confirm the address?' She read out the address from the top of the letter.

'That's correct, Miss Thackeray. We'll see you at half past two.'

'Thank you for your help.' She ended the call and rang Nigel.

'Sweetie, I'm running late. Can we talk about it in our meeting this afternoon?' he asked.

'That's why I'm calling. I need to move our meeting because I'm chasing up a lead.'

'I'm about to go into another meeting,' he warned. 'I can give you thirty seconds.'

'OK. I've been through this week's mail. Three possibles, lots of sorry-not-for-us-es, and a letter about what I think is an unknown Carulli. A lawyer wants to see me about it this afternoon. So can I see you on Monday morning instead?'

Nigel groaned. 'I *hate* Monday mornings.'

'I'll bring you a turmeric latte. And one of the pecan and apricot muffins from the bakery round the corner,' she said, knowing his weaknesses well.

'All right. As it's you. I've really got to go, sweetie. Let me know how you get on.'

'Yes, boss,' she said, even though he'd already hung up.

* * *

At twenty-five minutes past two, Mariana walked into the reception area of the gleaming glass and chrome building where Angelo Beresford worked, and asked for his secretary.

Two minutes later, a smartly dressed middle-aged woman approached her. ‘Miss Thackeray?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mr Beresford will see you now.’

The paintings in the reception area were all modern abstracts, Mariana noticed, in keeping with the style of the ultra-modern glass and chrome building. It was a far cry from the kind of art she was studying. The painting must belong to a client, then, rather than to the firm of solicitors.

At half past two on the dot she was shown into Angelo Beresford’s office.

Even though she’d looked him up on the website and discovered that he was a real hot-shot in the firm and their youngest partner ever, in the flesh he wasn’t quite what she’d expected. He had the kind of dark hair that would turn curly if he let it grow, dark eyes, a sensual mouth, and the longest eyelashes she’d ever seen.

He was absolutely gorgeous. And, when he smiled, her heart actually skipped a beat.

Not that she should let herself react like that. This was business. And, apart from anything else, she knew better than to trust to physical attraction. She'd made that mistake before, and it had ended really badly—to the point where she'd given up on relationships because she didn't trust her own judgement any more.

'Thank you for coming, Miss Thackeray.' He shook her hand, and a tingle went through her, despite her intentions to damp down that flare of attraction. 'May I offer you some coffee? Or something cold?'

'Thank you, but I'm fine.' She sat down on the chair he gestured to. 'How can I help?'

For a moment, Angelo's mouth went dry. He'd thought Mariana Thackeray was beautiful on the screen, but in real life he hadn't expected her to be quite as stunning. Surely the television make-up artists had exaggerated her features? But, although her glorious hair had been caught back at the nape of her neck and she wore no make-up whatsoever, she was still easily the most beautiful woman he'd seen in a long time—the more so because she didn't seem to realise it. And when she'd shaken his hand a second ago it had felt almost like an electric shock.

He needed to get a grip. This was business. He didn't do personal any more.

'I have a proposition for you, Miss Thackeray.' Oh, help. That sounded bad. He didn't mean it like that. Well, maybe his libido did, but he wasn't giving in to that pull of attraction. It couldn't go anywhere, even if it was reciprocated, so he'd smother it now. 'A job.'

She frowned. 'Your letter spoke about discussing a painting, not a job.'

'It's one and the same.' He sat down. 'My grandfather collected art. He'd like his collection to be in a gallery.'

'I can certainly recommend somewhere suitable, if he'd like to donate his collection,' she said.

'No, he wants to set up his own gallery,' Angelo said. 'But he needs the paintings to be catalogued and authenticated. One of them in particular.'

'Surely he was given the provenance when he bought the paintings?'

'Let's just say his paperwork's a bit on the slapdash side,' Angelo said. 'And some of the artwork is unsigned.'

'Which means you need someone to find a paper trail and do scientific investigations to prove that the works are what you think they are.'

He smiled, liking the way she'd picked up his train of thought so quickly. 'Exactly. Which is why you'd be perfect for the job. Plus my grandfather's seen your programme and he's taken a shine to you.'

'How much art are we talking about?' she asked.

'Framed, about forty or fifty pieces. Unframed—' He shook his head. 'I'm afraid I have absolutely no idea. He collected for forty years.'

She looked at him as if she was assessing the scale of the project. As if she was really tempted. And then her blue eyes were filled with regret. 'Thank you for the opportunity, Mr Beresford,' she said, 'but I can't take on a project that big. Not with my studies and my work on *Hidden Treasure*.'

'Your studies are on the Macchiaioli—the Italian Impressionists,' he said. 'My grandfather has a lot of paintings by Lega, Fattori, Boldini and Carulli.' The artists she was studying. Would this be enough to tip the balance in his favour?

'So the painting in your letter...?'

'It's unsigned,' he said. 'But my grandfather believes that it's by Carulli.'

To his relief, her expression changed very slightly. So she *was* interested. Good.

‘Do you have the painting here, Mr Beresford?’

Now for the tricky bit. ‘No. It’s at my grandfather’s house in Florence.’

‘Florence?’ Her eyes widened in obvious surprise. ‘I’m sorry, I can’t just drop everything and go to Florence.’

‘On what might turn out to be a wild goose chase? Quite. I wouldn’t expect you to.’ He took a cardboard wallet from the drawer and handed it to her. ‘I took photographs of a few of the paintings at the weekend on my phone. I’m afraid they’re not professional quality because I took them all just where they hung in the house. I didn’t want Nonno to ask what I was doing, in case you said no. But I did zoom in on the signatures as well, so I hope that will give you a better idea of exactly what he has.’ And please, please, let it be enough for her to help him. To let him fulfil his grandfather’s dreams before Leo Moretti died.

She opened the wallet and took out the photographs. She studied them closely, but there was no sign of recognition on her face. ‘I don’t know these works, but the styles are familiar,’ she said.

Then she turned to the last photograph. The important one.

‘This is the one you want me to investigate.’ There was a slight crack in her voice, which told him the picture had definitely affected her. That was a good sign.

‘That’s the main one, yes, but I want you to check out all of them,’ he said. ‘Obviously I’ll pay you a consultancy fee.’ And he named a sum that was more than double what the media said she earned each year from the television programme. ‘I’m happy to draw up a contract so everything is official.’

She stared at the photograph. ‘I can’t authenticate a painting from a photograph. I need to examine the actual painting, and I need to see a proper paper trail for the provenance—or as much of it as you have.’

‘Then come to Florence and see the paintings for yourself,’ he said.

She looked torn. So she was considering it; he just needed another sweetener to tip the balance. As Leo’s executor, he had the power to make decisions.

‘It wouldn’t just be authenticating them,’ he said. ‘The family would give you exclusive access to the painting for your studies, before the gallery opens.’ Which, if his grandfather was right and the paintings were genuine, could make a huge difference to her thesis.

‘What do you know about that painting?’ she asked.

‘Just that he bought it in the nineteen-sixties, somewhere in England. The paperwork is probably in his files.’ Honesty compelled him to add, ‘But he hates filing. His paperwork is a total mess and I wouldn’t even know where to start sorting it out.’

‘I’m about to get really busy with the new series,’ she said. ‘Maybe if I start with the unsigned one and, if the initial investigations check out, we might be able to use it as part of the show—but I’d still need to get my producer’s agreement for that. And then, after the summer, I could consider working on the rest.’

After the summer would be too late. ‘I need you to work on them *now*, Miss Thackeray,’ Angelo said, keeping his tone cool and calm but very definite.

‘Why?’

The thing he’d been trying to make himself come to terms with for the last month. The thing that broke what was left of his heart into tiny, tiny shards. ‘Because my grandfather is dying. He has lung cancer. He was in remission, but his last check-up at the hospital showed that it’s back and they can’t operate. All they can offer him now is palliative care.’

She looked horrified, and he realised he'd been too harsh. But there wasn't a nice way to say that someone you loved was dying. There just wasn't. The only way he could cope was to use cold, hard facts. 'Because I'm the lawyer in the family, he's asked me to be his executor. His will says he wants his collection authenticated and shown off in a gallery—but I want that unsigned painting examined now and the proof found that it really is what he thinks it is, so he can die happy, knowing he was right all along. I love my grandfather, Miss Thackeray, and I want to make him happy.' Give him something to distract him in his last few weeks, something else to focus on rather than the disease that was eating away at every breath.

'Until I've examined the paintings myself and inspected the backs,' she said, 'I can't promise anything. And I'd need to get my producer's agreement about using that unsigned painting on the show.'

'Why do you want to see the backs of the paintings?' he asked, not understanding.

'There are often markings and labels which can help trace its provenance. But I should warn you that there have been lots of scandals over the years in the art world. Copies, forgeries, and even forgeries of forgeries.'

‘So you’re saying my grandfather’s paintings could be fakes.’ Which meant that he was risking making his grandfather’s final weeks miserable, taking all hope away. He didn’t want to do that. But he didn’t want his grandfather to die full of regrets, either.

‘Or good reproductions, or maybe copies. If we can find paperwork for the provenance, that will help.’ She looked at him. ‘Why did you ask me to help?’

‘Because my grandfather and my sister like your show,’ he said. ‘Nonno says you understand art. That you love it.’

‘I do,’ she agreed.

‘And your biography on the *Hidden Treasure* website says that your studies are in the exact area of my grandfather’s collection. Nineteenth-century Italian painters—the Macchiaioli, to be precise.’

Had he looked her up on only the *Hidden Treasure* website? Or had he seen the other stuff that would come up on an Internet search of her name?

As if the thought showed on her face, he said gently, ‘And I saw your interview. Sorry, that’s not meant to be unkind. Just that it was the next thing on the search results.’

‘I know.’ But it also meant that he knew

everything that Eric had done. What a fool she'd been. 'And you still want me to look at the paintings?'

'Yes, I do.' He looked straight at her. 'Speaking out like that takes courage. I admire what you did. And I admire the way that you've moved on, done something good with your life.'

She wasn't quite there yet, but she was trying. 'I wanted to help other people in my situation. The interview seemed like the best way.'

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly, 'that you went through something so horrible.'

'It's past,' she said. 'And I've moved on.' That wasn't completely true. She'd completed her MA and started her PhD, forged a new career. She'd proved to herself that she wasn't the pathetic mess Eric had wanted her to believe she was. But she hadn't dated anyone since Eric. She couldn't trust herself not to get it so badly wrong as she had last time.

And this wasn't about relationships. Yes, so far, Angelo Beresford seemed like a nice guy. He'd been sensitive about her past. And he was attractive—he would've made a perfect artist's model. But for all she knew he could be in a committed relationship. Even

if he wasn't, it didn't mean that anything could happen between them. She didn't trust herself—either to find the right person for her, or to make it work. This was going to be strictly business.

'All right. I'll come to Florence and see the paintings.'

'Good. Tomorrow?' he asked.

She stared at him. '*Tomorrow?*'

'I know it sounds like a rush.' Though he didn't sound in the slightest bit apologetic.

'It *is* a rush,' she corrected.

'Time's the one thing I don't have,' he said.

She thought of her own grandfather and how much she missed him since his death; she would have done anything to help him in his last days. Anything to make him smile instead of looking so lost and desolate, the light in his eyes gone. Clearly Angelo Beresford wanted to do the same for his grandfather. Who was she to deny that? 'All right,' she said.

'May I have your mobile number?' Angelo asked. 'I'll get my secretary to book the flight and contact you with the details.' He took a business card from his desk and scribbled something on the back. 'My private mobile, email and address, and my office details on the front,' he said, handing the card to her. 'If

you do think the paintings are worth working on, what happens next?’

Now she was on safer ground. Work, not emotions. ‘I’d photograph them, front and back,’ she said. ‘Then I’d set up a computer file for each one and work through the provenance.’

‘How long would that take?’

‘Photographing, maybe half an hour for each one. Less if I have someone to help me take them down from the walls and put them on an easel. The paperwork really depends—I can do some things online, but I’ll also need to look at any paperwork your grandfather has. I’d like to talk to him about each of the paintings and for him to tell me what he remembers about them, if he’s well enough.’

‘Nonno’s always well enough to talk about art,’ Angelo said. He looked as if he was weighing up her words, working something out. ‘So if we allow, say, three days to take the photographs, and a couple of days to talk about the paintings, we can fly back to London next Friday.’

She blinked. ‘Are you serious? You want me to spend practically a week in Florence? With no notice?’

‘I want the project done as soon as possi-

ble,' Angelo said. 'You can stay at the *pala-*
zzo with us, or I can book a suite in a hotel
for you if you'd prefer.'

Stay at a complete stranger's home—even
if he was an elderly man in his final days?
This was all going way too fast for her. 'I
haven't even seen the paintings yet. Until I
have, I can't make any promises.'

'My grandfather believes they're genuine,
Miss Thackeray, and I trust his judgement.
Give me that week. I'll book a hotel for you.
If you come to Florence with me tomorrow,
see the paintings and you think I'm wasting
your time, then that gives you a few days'
holiday. If you don't think it's a waste of time,
then that's a few days of work with some art
that I'm guessing will be useful for your stud-
ies. Either way, I will pay you a consultancy
fee for your time.'

Florence. Where, if the paintings turned
out to be a disappointment, she could visit
the Galleria d'Arte Moderna at the Pitti Pal-
ace, her favourite place in the city, and see
some of the paintings she was studying. On
the other hand, this could be the chance to
see some paintings by her favourite artists
that had been lost for decades...

How could she turn down an opportunity
like this? 'All right.' She took one of her own

business cards from her handbag. ‘That’s my work mobile number.’ She scribbled down some more information on the back. ‘And my private mobile and email.’

‘I’ll let you know the flight times and I’ll arrange for a taxi to take you to the airport in the morning,’ he said. ‘Thank you, Miss Thackeray. If you give my secretary your bank details on your way out, I’ll transfer a consultancy fee for your time.’ He named a sum that made her eyes widen.

‘Working on the basis that you’re right about the collection, I’ll need to bring my camera, tripod, photographic lights and an easel,’ she said. ‘Plus my laptop. And I’d prefer them to travel with me in the cabin rather than in the hold.’

‘Noted. I’ll organise the baggage details. And if you can give my secretary your passport details,’ he said, ‘she’ll check you in on the flight.’

In some ways, this was surreal. But it was also the first time she’d felt properly enthusiastic about something since the court case. Maybe this would be the tipping point, the thing that finally helped her to move on and put the past completely behind her.

‘I’ll go home now and arrange it,’ she said.

‘Thank you, Miss Thackeray. I appreciate it.’ He held out his hand to shake hers.

Again, her skin actually tingled where it met his. She’d have to be very careful not to let her attraction to him get in the way. She knew what she was doing where work was concerned, but relationships were a very different matter. Something she really wasn’t good at.

‘May I borrow those photographs?’ she asked. ‘So I can talk to my producer.’

‘Of course.’

‘Thank you.’

On the way home, Mariana used her phone to snap the photographs, emailed the images to Nigel, and then called him.

‘I’m just out of the meeting and I’ve emailed you some photographs. Here’s the elevator pitch. Imagine the equivalent of a chateau full of lost paintings by Degas, Monet and Pissarro. And the owner wants me to catalogue them all and check out the provenance of some of them.’

‘No way,’ Nigel said. ‘No way is there a chateau full of lost French Impressionists.’

‘*Equivalent*,’ she reminded him. ‘It’s a *palazzo* in Florence, so we’re talking Italian rather than French Impressionists. It’s the

Macchiaioli, the ones I'm studying. And I'm going to see the paintings tomorrow.'

'What?'

'Angelo Beresford wants me to authenticate the paintings—and the painting in that last shot I sent you is unsigned. If it's what my gut tells me it is, then it'd be perfect for the show.'

'If something sounds too good to be true, Mariana, it usually is.'

Yeah. She knew that one first-hand from the lovely, sweet, gentle man she thought she'd got engaged to—the man who'd turned out to be a control freak with a nasty temper behind the charm. The man who'd almost broken her. 'It's worth a look,' she said. 'Just think, Nigel. *A whole collection*. Art that hasn't been seen for decades.' Even the idea made her heart rate go up a few notches.

'So, on the basis of a few photographs, you're planning to go to Florence tomorrow with a stranger.'

'A lawyer in a very respectable firm that has very posh offices in the city, and he checks out as genuine,' she corrected.

'But the man's still a stranger.'

'We're working on the third series of the show now. How many lost paintings have we found so far?' she asked.

‘Fourteen, and two where we couldn’t prove the provenance or get them accepted by the experts, but the detective side of the story made really good viewing,’ Nigel said. ‘Along with all the hundreds of people who’ve contacted us about fakes and copies.’

‘I think it’s worth following up,’ she said. ‘I haven’t had a holiday in a year and a half. Worst-case scenario, if it *is* too good to be true, then I’ll get a few days’ break in Florence. Best-case, if this is an eccentric collector and the paintings are genuine, they’ll fit in with my PhD and make a potential episode of *Hidden Treasure*—and I think it’ll be our best episode to date.’

‘You really want to do this, don’t you?’

She nodded. ‘I’ve got a funny feeling about it.’

‘More like you really want it to be true,’ Nigel said. ‘Like if someone told me they had what they thought was a lost Turner painting and we looked into it for *Hidden Treasure* and managed to find the provenance. I’d be thrilled.’

‘Exactly.’

Nigel sighed. ‘I’d be happier if someone went with you.’

Mariana knew what he was worrying

about. ‘Eric isn’t going to come after me,’ she said. ‘There’s a restraining order in place.’

‘Which he broke last year.’

‘And he has a suspended sentence. He’s not going to risk spending at least two years in prison,’ Mariana said. ‘So I’m going to Florence. I’ll keep you posted.’

She was lucky, Mariana thought as she walked from the tube station to her flat. So very lucky.

Lucky that she had a family and friends who’d refused to give up on her when Eric had started to isolate her from everyone. Lucky that they’d seen through his charm when she hadn’t been able to—and then that they’d seen her failing self-esteem and bolstered her. Lucky that they’d got her into a refuge when things turned nasty and then helped her get a restraining order so he couldn’t come anywhere near her again.

Eric had lied in court. He’d said that she was making it all up. That she was a drama queen begging for attention and she might as well have been on one of those ‘court case’ reality TV shows rather than in a proper court of law.

But the court had seen the truth. That he’d systematically undermined her over the two years of their relationship, made her feel use-

less and worthless, and isolated her from her family and friends. And her lawyer had found one of his exes; Eric had treated Adele in exactly the same way, and she'd been willing to speak up in court.

The court had made the injunction with no reservations.

And how Eric must hate it that she'd gone on to be happy. That she'd finished her MA in History of Art and then landed the job presenting *Hidden Treasure*. That she was well on the way to becoming Dr Mariana Thackeray and people respected her for her knowledge.

He'd tried to bring her down when *Hidden Treasure* first started airing. He'd posted anonymous comments on social media, hinting that she was unstable and untrustworthy. In the end, to squash the rumours and to make sure the truth was told properly, she'd told her story to the national press and made sure that the fee went to the women's refuge that had helped her. She really, really hoped that she'd helped other people in that situation and given them the courage to find an escape.

She'd come through the other side.

But she was never, ever going to get sucked into another relationship again. She'd learned

that work and friendship were reliable; love and her judgement in men definitely weren't.

'We're flying to Florence tomorrow, Mamma,' Angelo said.

'And do you think she will do the job?' Lucrezia asked.

'I hope so. She needs to see the paintings for herself before she'll commit—which is fair.'

'Maybe I should come back from Rome.'

Where she was staying with his sister and the new baby.

Baby, Angelo thought, and shoved the thought aside before it started trampling on a sore spot. 'Don't cut your visit short, Mamma,' he said. He loved his mother dearly, but she had overdramatic tendencies—he rather thought she enjoyed playing up to the stereotypes of being Italian and being an opera singer—and the last thing he wanted was for his mother to scare Mariana off. 'It's fine. Nonno will have me to translate if he gets tired, and he has Lucia to look after him.' The housekeeper, who kept everything on an even keel and kept an eye on Leo for Angelo.

'Angelo. It breaks my heart seeing him fade and knowing I can do nothing to help.' Her

voice cracked. 'Palliative care. *O mio bambino caro.*'

She was so upset that she was whispering the words rather than singing them as she usually would. Angelo dug his nails into his palms. He couldn't fix this. Nobody could. But he was going to make sure his grandfather was happy before they lost him for ever. He was going to bring joy to Leo Moretti's last days, whatever it took. 'I know, Mamma. It's hard.'

'And you're a good boy. So like your father. Roderick would be so proud of you.'

Angelo had followed in his father's footsteps as far as his career was concerned, even joining the same legal firm. His marriage and the children he'd thought he'd have were a very different matter.

'Would you have time to come and see us when you're in Italy?'

He knew what his mother wasn't saying. They all understood why he would find seeing the baby difficult. And he also knew he had to face it, for his sister's sake. He had to put his family's needs first instead of being selfish and trying to protect himself from having old scars ripped open. 'If Mariana stays to do the photographs, I'll come up to Rome for the afternoon. I'll get the train.'

‘Try, Angelo. Cammie worries.’

His younger sister was far less dramatic, but he took the point. ‘I know, Mamma. And there is no need to worry. Everything is going to be just fine.’

He’d make sure it was.