

Venice sets the stage for a diamond caper gone wrong, where everyone is someone else, and no one can be trusted. Slipping into designer shoes and donning her sleuth-in-training cap, Carla Romano sets out in a city of secrets that everyone knows, to solve a crime with more twists than the Venetian labyrinth of narrow streets and canals.

Ashes to Ashes, Diamonds to Dust

By Pamela Allegretto

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Pamela Allegretto

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1

Carla Romano smelled the air sour the moment the stranger lumbered into Sara Gastrom's memorial service. His conjoined eyebrows, resembling a misplaced mustache, hooded sodden eyes. Clumps of oily hair dribbled over his collar, and he mopped sweat beads with a handkerchief plucked from the grease-stained pocket of his crumpled suit coat. Carla silently christened him, "Mr. Goo."

She questioned his connection to Sara. With the exclusion of Mr. Goo, she recognized the eclectic collection of mourners that included highbrow nomads, artists, writers, avant-garde politicians, and one soon-to-be thief, herself, Carla Romano.

Carla tuned out the *Ave Maria* transmitted into the chapel via a raspy speaker and stared at the altar where Sara's ashes rested inside a red glass decanter. The image conjured up a conversation she had with Sara the previous year during their annual September trip to Venice, where they participated in an international art exhibition. While browsing through a back alley glass-blowing factory, that same red glass decanter had

caught Sara's eye. At the time, Carla joked that the squat round decanter looked more like a crematory urn than a wine carafe.

"Perfect. This will be my cremation urn," Sara told Carla, as she held the decanter up to the light. "When I die, put my ashes inside, come back to Venice, and scatter me into the Grand Canal."

"That won't be for another sixty years," Carla quipped. "By then, I won't even remember my own name. How will I remember to stuff your sorry ashes into a bottle and dump them into the Grand Canal? At best, you'll end up inside a peanut butter jar floating down the Hudson River."

"Promise," Sara demanded.

"Okay," Carla agreed. "The Grand Canal it is, no peanut butter jar and no Hudson River."

Sara's death resulted from a hit-and-run driver. She had been walking home after dropping off a painting at the frame shop a few blocks from her West Village apartment in New York City. It had been a moonless, rainy night where umbrella-toting passersby scurried along with their heads to the ground, and thus, there were no witnesses to the accident. Her best friend's sudden death hit Carla as though a speeding car had struck *her*. Still reeling from the shock of Sara's premature death at age thirty-five, Carla had informed Sara's

only living relative, Mabel Gastrom, of Sara's request regarding her ashes and the red decanter.

Auntie Mabel was a pinch-faced, sixty-something woman whose wilted cheeks and puckered lips expanded and retracted like a blowfish ready to pop. Her ancient pores oozed the stench of negligent hygiene; and clues to past meals embedded themselves between each tooth in her ill-fitted dentures. She announced her own plans for Sara's remains and the red decanter: Sara's ashes would be cast onto Auntie Mabel's weed-infested garden, and the decanter would serve as a watering can.

Auntie Mabel left Carla no alternative but to thrust herself into a life of crime.

Following the memorial service, Carla lingered in the chapel until everyone filed out and converged in the adjoining hall for the obligatory funeral feast. Preoccupied with her impending crime, she forgot about Mr. Goo and assumed the stink wafting from the back of the chapel to be an egg casserole that had sat too long on the buffet table. She hurried to the altar, stuffed the red decanter into a black canvas tote bag, and slipped out a side door.

Later that evening, as Carla arrived at Newark International Airport for her flight to Venice, she faced a security check maze that funneled impatient travelers, in various stages of undress, through x-ray booths. After twenty minutes of inching forward, Carla's carry-on bag and the two plastic bins that contained her shoes, jacket, purse, and the tote bag with Sara's ashes rode the belt through the x-ray machine, while Carla took her turn to pose in the x-ray booth.

After exiting the x-ray booth, she was pulled aside, patted down, wand-scanned, felt up, and finger swiped. She wasn't surprised: this was routine procedure each time she traveled. Her Mediterranean heritage passed down an olive complexion, a shock of dark curls that exploded into a wild frizz-fest whenever the humidity rose above 20%, and, as she liked to refer to it, a non-perky nose: all the elements necessary to warrant further scrutiny.

"Who says, blonds have more fun?" she joked to the not amused TSA agent.

Carla found her gate, and she had just settled in when Mr. Goo charged into the boarding area. His necktie, flailing from shoulder to shoulder, looked as though it had doubled as a napkin for a drippy, everything-on-it hot dog. He slumped onto a seat and drew in long gulps of air. He nodded to Carla, curling the corners of his mouth into a

crooked smile that revealed more gums than teeth.

Ignoring the smile, Carla lowered her gaze and dusted imaginary lint from her black woolen slacks. Although she considered it an odd coincidence that he should be on the same flight, she didn't dwell on it, as her recent "heist" occupied her thoughts. She pulled her carry-on bag closer to her seat, tightened her grip on the tote bag, and listened for the boarding call.

On the plane from Newark to Milano, Mr. Goo sat across the aisle and a few rows up from Carla. His continual backward glances suggested concern that somehow she would magically deplane at 35,000 feet. Midway across the Atlantic, he made a trip to the bathroom. As he passed her, the reek of rotten eggs lingered in the aisle, and Carla's ultra-sensitive nose kicked into overdrive. The odor called to mind the scene of her crime and struck her with the revelation that Mr. Goo had witnessed the theft, and thus, his presence on her flight was no fluke: Auntie Blowfish sent him to reclaim Sara's ashes.

Carla blinked off sleep. Sara had often teased her that she was too vain to sleep on a plane, for fear of snoring, messing her hair, or smudging her mascara. Carla always pooh-poohed the accusation even though it was dead-on. On this

flight, aside from those usual reasons, Carla refused sleep to keep vigil on Mr. Goo.

The flight had not been a hasty booking. Carla and Sara reserved it months earlier, to attend the annual September *Mostra di Stranieri* at the Galleria Rimmi in Venice. They had participated in the international art exhibition for the past eight years and profited from the event through sales and commission requests. Now, instead of Sara sitting in the adjoining window seat and needling Carla to catch a few winks, Carla's seatmate was a tote bag that contained Sara's ashes.

In Milano, the hectic airline connection afforded Carla no opportunity to track Mr. Goo's whereabouts, but she didn't need to see him. She could smell him.

She sat in the front of the plane from Milano to Venice, while Mr. Goo occupied a seat in the rear.

"Next to the toilets, very appropriate," she snickered to herself. However, the attempt at humor failed, as she wondered what slimy plot Mr. Goo might be stewing to retrieve Sara's ashes.

2

Carla was one of the first to deplane in Venice. She slung her purse strap over her head, and while repositioning the double straps on the weighty tote bag, she flashed an over-the-shoulder glance and took in a deep breath. Mr. Goo wasn't in sight, but his odor polluted the air. She snapped up the pull bar to her carry-on bag, and with her purse flapping against her stomach, and the tote straps digging into her collarbone, she rushed for the exit.

Outside the terminal, she failed to flag down the shuttle, leaving her no choice but to hoof it to the water-taxi docks. Ten minutes later, overheated and breathless, she stepped into a water taxi poised to take her across the open channel to Piazza San Marco. As her boat zoomed away from the airport dock, she spied Mr. Goo lunge onto another water taxi that promptly bumped along in her wake.

At Carla's urging and the flash of a generous tip, her driver cut five minutes off the usual twenty-minute trip. When her motorboat reached the dock at Piazza San Marco, she sprang from the craft and pushed her way through a crowd of

camera-snapping tourists. She snaked between tour groups that marched behind guides who raised multihued umbrellas like officers hoisting rifles to lead their troops into battle, and she dodged scarecrow-mimicked outstretched arms that invited over-fed pigeons to land long enough for a photograph. After maneuvering across the congested piazza, she exited through a shady portico and continued past Bacino Orseole, a small gondola docking where some gondoliers engaged in animated conversations and others napped. One ambitious fellow polished the brass on his black lacquered gondola while singing his almost pitch-perfect rendition of *Nessun Dorma* to a gathering crowd.

Carla hurried past the budding *Pavarotti* and his adoring fans, scuttled up and down miniature bridges, and zigzagged through a labyrinth of narrow streets. In front of a pastry shop, she paused to sniff the sugary air, but the stench of rancid eggs devoured the lure of biscotti. She shook off her weakened condition and picked up her pace. She had to lose Mr. Goo before Sara's ashes were snatched away to become mulch for Auntie Mabel's dandelions.

At that moment, jet lag wielded its unmerciful wrath. Her eyes stung, her head throbbed, and her ears buzzed. Her legs, swollen from the long flight, felt like lead weights attached to her butt.

Several steps further took her over a small bridge to her hotel's entrance. She ducked inside, but not without a quick glance and sniff for Mr. Goo.

She gave a silent, "*Grazie*," to the city of Venice and its labyrinth of *calli*: the crowded, narrow streets had served her well. If Mr. Goo had been following her, which she began to think might be the invention of her over-dramatic and jet-lagged imagination, he no longer posed a threat.

"Signorina Romano, *bevenuto*," the paunchy hotel *portiere* greeted Carla at the front desk. A two-inch tuft of black hair circled the back of his head from ear to ear, ignoring the top of his head that reflected multi-colored lights from a blown glass chandelier. On the tip of his nose, a bluish-black mole anchored narrow reading glasses.

"*Grazie*, Signor Corsini." Carla accepted the *portiere's* handshake while diverting her eyes from the beetle-like mole and crinkling her nose at his garlicky breath, pungent enough to ward off even the thirstiest vampire.

Carla always felt at home at Hotel Bonvecchia. It retained all the splendor of the sixteenth century palace it once had been. Tapestry rugs, gilt mirrors, and Venetian antiquities were skillfully appointed to guide the eye as though viewing a masterpiece. She and Sara had stayed there on numerous occasions. The staff never

changed, and thus, she knew most of them by name.

“*La Signorina Gastrom?*” Signor Corsini asked, looking toward the door for Sara.

“I’m alone this trip,” Carla answered, not in the mood to elaborate.

“*Va bene,*” Signor Corsini said, visibly disappointed. “*Ecco la chiave, numero trecentoquindici.*” He handed Carla a doorknob-sized brass ball attached to a long, tapered room key embossed with the number 315. “Marco!” he called out to his son, who worked as porter, room service waiter, dishwasher, and a multitude of other chores Signor Corsini dug up to keep the teenager occupied.

A lanky teen emerged from the office behind the reception desk. Puberty had taken a cruel toll on Marco’s complexion, and his gangly body banged into and upended everything in its path. He smelled of witch hazel that Carla assumed was the key ingredient in his not-even-close-to flesh-toned acne cream.

Marco was more disappointed not to see Sara than his father had been. He’d had a crush on Sara dating back to his pre-puberty days. Sara’s Nordic fair skin and blond hair fascinated him. She had shapely legs long enough to squeeze the life out of an unsuspecting lover, and Carla concluded they most likely came close on multiple

occasions. Sara had affably promised the boy that she would remain single and wait for him to grow up. Marco was growing up, but Sara wouldn't be around to see it. This reality forced Carla's finger to her eye to seize a departing tear.

"*Grazie. Lo faccio io,*" Carla said, declining Marco's help with her bags.

She stepped across the lobby where five people waited for the lift, which, as she recalled, boasted a three-person capacity. Unwilling to wait, she opted for the adjacent stairs. Since the first floor was up one flight, that meant a three story climb. She switched the tote bag to her right shoulder, hoisted the carry-on bag with her left hand, and trudged up the winding staircase.

After a brief struggle with the oversized key and antiquated lock, she stepped into room 315. Slivers of sunlight, woven between varnished shutters, lit the crystal chandelier suspended from a frescoed ceiling of cavorting baroque cherubs. Gold threads on the silk walls flickered, reflecting the shimmering water outside. The prismatic display and frolicking angels eased her tension as she set the tote bag on top of the mini bar, placed the carry-on bag atop the luggage stand, and tossed her purse on the corner desk. She plopped onto the bed and tugged at her Adolfo pumps until they released their grasp on her puffy feet. "Yes," she sighed with relief.

Her feet now free to inflate, she unlatched the shutters, revealing a balcony that looked down to the small bridge and narrow canal fronting the hotel. This picturesque thumbprint reassured her that not even the likes of Mr. Goo could taint this beautiful city.

Returning to her luggage, she unzipped the carry-on bag and removed a bubble wrapped 12"x12" painting that Sara had painted. Coincidentally, the painting was a rose, as red as the decanter that held Sara's ashes. The variations of light and dark gave the rose a three-dimensional quality. Coupled with its velvety texture and luminosity, it begged the viewer to take a sniff. Carla lifted the painting to her nose and drew in a long breath, conjuring the scent of rose water, which Sara always had added to her daily bath. A cream-colored eucalyptus burl framed the painting. The beautifully figured wood came from Australia, as did all the rare woods in Mabel Gastrom's frame shop. Auntie Mabel knew nothing about art, but her framer, Frank Pierce, was top-notch.

Carla had set aside the rose painting when she shipped the other paintings for the *mostra*. She had debated whether to bring the painting, as she'd already decided to keep it for herself. However, the painting deserved international admiration, and there would be plenty of time

later for solitary viewing. Luckily, the rose painting was small enough to fit inside her carry-on bag.

She didn't unwrap the painting, seeing it through the bubble wrap was heartbreaking enough. She had been at Sara's side through each brush-stroke. They had painted together almost daily, and their ruthless criticisms of each other's work paid off. Neither signed a painting until the other gave the go ahead. Now, Carla wondered, who would tell her when her paintings were finished? She placed the painting back inside the suitcase and folded over the top.

She pulled the balcony shutters closed and sprawled out on the bed. In her exhausted mind, the events of the past twenty-four hours competed with fond memories of Sara and the joy and exhilaration she felt each time she returned to Venice. Finally, she nodded off.

The smell of moldy eggs wafted through the shutters, but Carla slept too soundly to notice.

3

When Carla awakened, her hotel room had grown dark and no longer magical. She switched on the bedside lamp and looked at her watch. Seven o'clock. She'd slept four hours, but it seemed only minutes.

She forced her reluctant body off the bed and pushed open the balcony shutters to reveal a sky dressed in its nighttime colors. A full moon peeked above red-tiled rooftops, and lights along the canal cast ribbons of yellow and white on the water.

She took in a deep breath to clear her head, but the air wasn't filled with the fragrance of petunias that overflowed the railing pots. Instead, it stank of rotten eggs. Her head whirled to the balconies on the left and right; they were both deserted. She was not consoled. She scanned the street below that buzzed with chatter from camera-clicking tourists and animated Venetian couples out for a pre-supper *passeggiata*. Mr. Goo was somewhere nearby, lurking in the shadows like all stinky slugs.

The telephone's quick chain of earsplitting squeals startled her. Considering her mission

thus far had all the earmarks of a badly written cartoon, it wouldn't have surprised her to see the clamorous phone elevate above the nightstand.

"*Sì, pronto,*" she answered.

"Carla Romano?" The caller's voice sounded sticky, as though he was trying to retrieve peanut butter from the roof of his mouth.

"Yes."

"I want the diamonds." His spongy voice sopped up the words, and they squished in his mouth like stomped grapes.

"Diamonds?"

"Playing dumb isn't good for your health." A snicker gurgled inside the caller's throat.

"You've dialed the wrong number." Carla slammed the phone on its carriage.

Carla's heartbeat thumped in her ears, and she cursed her victory over cigarettes. Chewing on a stick of gum doesn't cut it when a stranger calls and threatens your life. She settled for the second-best crutch and dove for the mini bar. She retrieved a Lilliputian bottle of brandy and drained the entire half ounce in one quick gulp.

Once again, the rowdy phone jangled. Emboldened by the teaspoon-sized sip of liquor, she grabbed the receiver.

"*Pronto.*"

"Miss Romano, you're in danger. We need to talk."

This voice was as smooth as chocolate mousse. He could be the first caller trying to disguise his voice; nevertheless, Carla guardedly took the bait.

“Who is this? How do you know me? And what danger?” Carla smiled at her newly found aggression and saluted the perfume-sample-sized brandy bottle.

“I’m a friend of Sara.”

“Sara’s dead,” Carla answered matter-of-factly. Those two words tasted like a mouthful of bitter lemon seeds, and her tongue scoured the rim of the brandy bottle for relief.

“I know. My name’s Chad Marlow.”

Carla didn’t know any Chad Marlow. That didn’t mean he couldn’t be Sara’s friend, but it was unlikely. She and Sara had been friends for all but the first three of their thirty-five years. They were both artists and shared a studio since their early twenties. Their apartments were in the same building. Neither had ever married, which is not to say sex wasn’t on their menu, but they always shared names, ranks, and when applicable, serial numbers. The name Chad Marlow was never mentioned.

“How do you know Sara?” Carla asked.

“Could we have this conversation in person? I’m afraid time is not on your side. We could meet in your hotel’s lounge. How about in ten minutes?”

“How will I know you?”

“I’ll know you. Oh yes, bring the diamonds. You shouldn’t leave them unguarded,” he said, and hung up.

“Again with the diamonds,” Carla muttered into the dead receiver.

Her legs still ached, and she longed to lie on the bed and elevate the bloated monstrosities, but she had committed to this bizarre rendezvous so her pathetic limbs would have to hold out a little longer. She contemplated hitting the mini bar again but decided to let Chad buy her a real drink. She stepped into the bathroom, ran water on her palms, and scrunched down her natural curls, which the humidity had caused to bloom into epic proportions. She applied some lip-gloss and then squeezed her still-swollen feet into the Adolfo pumps. She didn’t grab the diamonds, because, of course, she didn’t have any diamonds. She did sling the tote bag over her shoulder. She wasn’t about to leave Sara’s ashes unattended should Mr. Goo be loitering about. The bag seemed heavier than before, and she wondered if it was her weakened condition or had Sara, even in her cremated state, already gained that extra weight the Italian guidebooks warned about.

4

The hotel lounge was a cozy parlor. Groupings of overstuffed velvet chairs and small glass-top tables were placed strategically to allow intimate conversations, while walnut panels and flocked wallpaper accommodated fourteenth century tapestries.

“*Buona sera,*” A thirty-something waiter sporting a white tuxedo jacket and a syrupy layer of lemon-scented hair pomade greeted Carla.

“*Buona sera.*”

“*E` sola?*”

“No,” Carla said, miffed by the intonation that implied to be a woman alone was a pathetic curse. Her eyes made a quick sweep of the room, but she didn’t spy any single men. “*Saremo in due.*” At least she assumed there would be two of them. Maybe Chad Marlow wouldn’t show. Maybe it was all a bad joke.

“Ah, *Prego, Signorina,*” the waiter said enthusiastically. His dark eyes lit up, as though he was about to become an accomplice to a clandestine tryst. He led Carla to a table in a candlelit corner. “*Va bene, Signorina?*”

“*No, preferisco quello.*” Carla pointed to a table by the door that offered a quick getaway. There was no way she would be stuck in a corner with this Chad Marlow: if that were his real name. It sounded to her more like the name of a small-town lothario on a soap opera.

“*Come vuole, Signorina.*” The waiter emphasized the “*Signorina,*” just enough to indicate he assumed the reason Carla was still a single *signorina* and not a married *signora* stemmed from her reluctance to sit in private corners.

“*C’è Dario?*” Carla referred to the waiter she and Sara had befriended through the years. Carla had finally slept with Dario on their last visit to Venice, but that took place after a tequila-filled night. At least, that was her excuse. In truth, despite her 5’3” frame and mere 105 pounds, she had an enormous capacity for tequila, and she had merely wanted to bed the intriguing, beautiful man.

“No.”

“*Peccato,*” Carla muttered. It *was* a pity. A night between the sheets with Dario could prove to be the best jet lag remedy. She ordered a glass of Prosecco, although she doubted the fizzy sweet wine would accomplish as much as the double-shot of tequila that she would have preferred, but she had to keep her wits about her.

The waiter returned with the drink and cast a not-so-subtle glance at the empty chair next to Carla.

Carla smiled, thanked him, and as a joke flashed him a fake “Look.” A “Look” was something she learned growing up in an Italian family. There were innumerable “Looks,” and each had its own distinct meaning. A “Look” could mean something as basic as “*screw you,*” or as complex as the “Look” Carla gave the waiter: “*I know I should have sat in the corner, and if my lover chooses not to join me, I will move to the corner and wait for you, which is what I wanted all along.*”

The jubilant waiter understood perfectly the “Look,” and before leaving the table, he returned his own X-rated “Look.”

Carla sipped her Prosecco and brought herself back to the reason she was sitting in the lounge, instead of lying in bed and sleeping off the oppressive jet lag. She looked at her watch. A half hour had passed. Chad Marlow was late. Why the delay? Was this all a ploy to get her out of her room so he could rummage through it looking for non-existent diamonds? She readjusted the tote bag she held on her lap and thought about Sara. She and Sara would have had a great time dissing the waiter and dissecting the day’s bizarre events.

“Miss Romano? I’m Chad Marlow.”

Carla looked up at a man she deemed to be in his early 50's. His chiseled features were not softened in the least by the silver strands that dusted his short dark hair, which looked damp. She caught a whiff of pine-scented soap and wondered if he had just stepped out from the bathtub. If so, this meeting couldn't be that important if he was willing to delay it by lounging in a tub. This idea irritated her, and she shot him a "Look" that said so.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, as he eased into the empty armchair and motioned to the waiter.

"*Cosa prende, Signore?*" the waiter inquired, clearly disappointed that Chad had materialized.

"Do you have tequila?" Chad asked in English.

"*Tequila? Ma certo, Signore.*"

"Miss Romano, would you care for another drink?"

"Yes, tequila sounds like an interesting choice," Carla answered. "*Vorrei anch'io una tequila,*" she told the not so happy waiter.

"He looks agitated," Chad remarked, nodding at the retreating waiter. "I suppose I should learn some Italian, so I'm not construed as a pushy American tourist."

"Yes, you should," Carla agreed, purposely avoiding Chad Marlow's seductive blue eyes.

“My, you’re as blunt as Sara described, but much prettier,” Chad said, flashing a mouthful of over-bleached teeth.

“Did Sara also tell you that flattery will get you nowhere fast? Assuming you ever knew Sara.” Carla’s voice was as sharp as the throbbing in her left temple. Sleep, God, she needed sleep. She drained her glass of Prosecco and reached for the tequila the waiter had served. “What danger am I in? And what diamonds?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but someone has been following you since you left Newark.”

“I’d not only have to be blind not to notice but also lacking all sense of smell. Who is this Mr. Goo, and how do you know about him? Are you following me, too?” Carla took a sip of tequila. Her wool pants itched, and her turtleneck seemed to shrink around her neck. She wanted a cigarette.

“Mr. Goo?” Chad asked, avoiding Carla’s other questions.

“Yes, that’s what I call that stinking wretch. Well, I can tell you that Auntie Blowfish is not getting her way.”

“Auntie Blowfish?”

“Sara’s Aunt Mabel.”

“Mr. Goo, Auntie Blowfish, I wonder, do you have a nickname for me?”

“Not yet.” Charming Chad, Cheating Chad, and Hanging Chad, all came to mind. He seemed

charming, but that could be an act, and if that were the case, he would be a cheat. Then there was Hanging Chad, which had nothing to do with defective Florida election cards and everything to do with his anatomy that was ill-concealed behind too-tight designer jeans.

“I don’t know anything about Aunt Mabel, but I do believe this Mr. Goo, as you call him, is after the diamonds.”

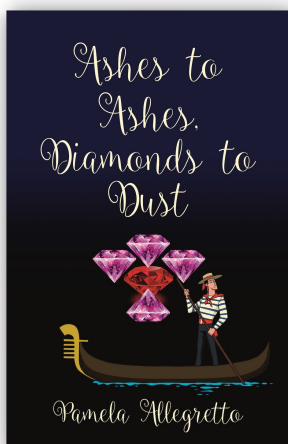
“What diamonds?” Carla demanded, as she turned away from the table and motioned to the waiter. “*Ce l’ha una sigaretta?*”

“*Non si può fumare,*” the waiter said, pointing to the no-smoking sign.

“*Va bene.*” She picked up her glass of tequila and took a drink. It tasted bitter and grainy.

“I’m referring to Sara’s diamonds,” Chad said.

“Sara never wore diamonds. She loathed diamonds. Sara was strictly sterling silver and turquoise. If you were her friend, you would know that.” Carla wrapped the straps to the tote bag over her shoulder and stood up. A rush of wooziness flooded her head, her knees buckled, and she slumped to the floor.



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