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The Twelve Quickies of Christmas



Book 12

Christmas Angel

Lisa Marie Rice

CHRISTMAS ANGEL

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CHRISTMAS ANGEL

Lisa Marie Rice

Naples, Italy

Christmas Eve, 2003

*'Guarda o' mare quant'è bello,
Spira tanto sentimento'*

*Look at the sea, how beautiful it is,
How it moves the heart*

-Old Neapolitan Song, Torna a Sorrento

A full moon shone brightly over Mount Vesuvius, casting an exquisite shimmering veil of silver over the Bay of Naples. Cruise ships lit from stem to stern with bright twinkling lights made their stately way across the bay like floating Christmas trees. The moonlight reflected off the calm bay sketched a pearly-white path to forever.

It was the most beautiful sight Nicole Caron had ever seen, and she'd traveled the world and seen her share of them.

The terrace of the French Consulate in the 17th century Palazzo Loredana was right on the bay itself, affording a view of Vesuvius, the bustling brilliant glittering city of Naples and the isle of Capri, a distant glimmer strung out on the horizon like a necklace of diamonds.

It was heartbreakingly beautiful and exactly as Alessandro had described it a year ago in Amman.

She'd laid in bed with him, her head on his broad chest and listened to his deep rumbling voice as he described his Naples.

She hadn't been listening all that closely, to tell the truth. She'd just had the most explosive series of orgasms in her life and any kind of exertion other than breathing and

smiling seemed insanely ambitious. Nonetheless, his deep voice was hypnotic and she listened to what he had to say.

Some.

Just enough to get an impression of a glittering city by the bay, beautiful and lively and sparkling.

At the time, Naples had been the last thing on her mind, or what passed for a mind in the time she'd come to think of as 'The Alessandro Period'. Like an art historical period studied in college. From the 17th of December 2002 to the 24th of December 2002.

As historical periods went, it was short. Only a week, but a week that had rocked her world. She'd fallen wildly in love and had been brutally abandoned, all in a week. Seven days.

There was even an Italian film on it. '*Sedotta e Abbandonata*'. '*Seduced and Abandoned*'. 1964, director Pietro Germi. She'd seen it during an art film festival in her sophomore year at Brown, when she'd fancied herself an intellectual, dressing entirely in black, with a dyed white Susan Sontagian streak in her dark hair.

At the time, she'd been so sure of herself. So certain that romantic love was dead, a figment of oppressed female imagination. Modern liberated women didn't *do* love; they did conversation and sex. She'd dated Howard Morgan, another intellectual, that year. They'd spent endless hours talking, going to the movies and having very bad sex.

The last she'd heard, Howard was curator of a major museum in Texas and was on his fourth marriage.

To her surprise, Nicole hadn't stayed in academia. On a whim she'd sat for the Foreign Service exam, aced it, and had found herself in the diplomatic corps at the age of 25. Postings in Haiti, Peru and Jordan had followed. All hard posts. Career makers. With hazardous duty pay and opportunities for advancement.

All in places where a single woman had to watch her step.

Turned out sex and the single girl were unspoken Foreign Service no-nos.

Taking a lover meant—always—a security concern. ‘Locals’ were generally off limits. Single female foreign service officers were prey—considered by all the other male foreign service officers in the tightly knit diplomatic community a highly prized fuck. A single female officer would never endanger her career by making a fuss over being treated badly and she would be gone in two years, anyway. Which made them targets for all the married scumbags in all the embassies in the entire world.

Sex had been more trouble than it was worth.

Nicole had safely negotiated the shoals of singledom in the Foreign Service, feeling smug about resisting temptation and concentrating on her career, which she wanted to crown with an ambassadorship in twenty years’ time. So she’d kept her nose clean and very close to the grindstone.

Until Amman.

Until Alessandro.

He’d caught her in the Christmas season, at a party thrown by the Italian Embassy in Amman. If there was an embassy in the world that could make being in a poverty-stricken, dusty charmless city chic, it was the Italian Embassy.

One step into the premises, after having negotiated three security perimeters in evening dress and stiletto heels, and it was like being in a little dream world designed by Versace. Designer premises, designer clothing, designer food. After spending a 12-hour day negotiating with the Jordanians and Syrians over textile quotas and human rights abuses, Nicole had been ready for some playtime.

She’d arrived alone, as usual. Though there had been offers—an attractive single woman in the diplomatic corps is never without an offer of an escort, especially in Islamic countries—she’d opted to arrive alone, chauffeured by the Embassy driver, an endearing African-American who’d befriended her and whom she suspected was the resident CIA officer.

The food had been good at the Italian Embassy, the wine better, the conversation a little on the insipid side. Nicole had been about ready to call Mike to drive her home when a deep voice behind her had said, "You look exactly like the angel on top of my family's Christmas tree."

She'd turned in surprise and her heart stuttered.

He was gorgeous. Out and out gorgeous, a heartbreaker of a man. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, dark-eyed. Olive-toned skin, perfect features except for a slightly crooked nose, which saved him from pretty-boy looks.

"I'm not an angel," she replied.

"I'm happy to hear that," he'd said, a deep dent appearing in his cheek, the male equivalent of a dimple. He spoke excellent English with a slight but highly sexy accent. "It makes things more promising."

She'd been taken totally unawares, cut off at the knees by her attraction. She hadn't even noticed time passing until they were the last guests left. They'd talked for five hours straight.

She hadn't called Mike after all. Alessandro had driven her home, followed her right up to her luxurious penthouse apartment paid for by the Embassy and had proceeded to strip her, in between deep, drugging kisses. Then he loved her until dawn, spending almost the entire night inside her.

The next day, Nicole worked in a fog of sleeplessness and sensuality. At moments when she needed to concentrate, she'd be utterly blindsided by a sensory memory. All it took was her blouse brushing against her nipple and she'd suddenly remember—could almost *feel*—Alessandro's mouth tugging at her nipple, licking and sucking. One of her countless orgasms had been from that alone—his mouth on her breast. She'd cross her legs and be instantly reminded of Alessandro's mouth there, too. And then—God!—his penis, talented and tireless.

He was very large and it had been a little uncomfortable the first time. He'd risen up on his elbows and looked down at her in shock, a lock of dark hair falling in a curve over his forehead. "Nicole, *carissima*, you're not –?"

She'd smiled and shook her head at him. Of course not. She'd gotten rid of her virginity on her seventeenth birthday, on principle.

But Alessandro still hadn't moved. He was deep inside her, huge and hot and burning. His dark eyebrows gathered in a slight frown. "When was the last time you made love, *cara*?"

The question threw her. Though the foreplay had been long and luscious, she was still adjusting to the feel of him inside her, internal muscles working to accommodate him. Tendrils of pleasure were starting to work their way outwards. It was hard to pay attention to what he was saying.

"*Tesoro*," he'd murmured, pressing more deeply. "When was the last time a man was inside you?" His dark eyes were magnetic; she found it impossible to look away, impossible to remember even one man she'd slept with while looking at Alessandro's fascinating face an inch above hers.

"*Ummm...*" Who was the last man she'd had sex with? No one in Amman, of course. Not in Lima. Not in Porte au Prince. So it must have been while she was taking the Foreign Service exams. That smarmy SEC lawyer, scrawny and hairless, the one who always wore white suits like a cut-rate Tom Wolfe. That was it. The one with a marshmallow for a penis. What was his name?

How could she think of the lawyer's name when her arms could barely reach around Alessandro's broad back? When his dark chest hairs rubbed against her nipples, still wet from his mouth, exciting her almost beyond bearing?

"Six –"

Alessandro rotated his hips and she could feel herself opening even more to him.

"Six years ago," she gasped. "Maybe more."

"Dio." He'd closed his eyes a moment, as if in pain, then started thrusting heavily. She'd climaxed so explosively she'd burst into tears.

She'd never had sex like that. Hadn't known sex like that was possible.

After she'd reassured a frantic Alessandro that they were tears of joy, he'd loved her embarrassment away. All through the night.

She sleepwalked through her duties, waiting impatiently for five o'clock when Alessandro said he'd pick her up.

Sure enough, there he'd been, at the security entrance, waiting for her. Tall, broad, elegant, even more insanely attractive than in her memory.

Alessandro della Torre. All day, she'd run through the few things she knew about him, little snippets of information she'd gleaned between the bouts of soul-shattering sex.

He was 35, four years older than she was, Neapolitan, never been married though he'd come close with the daughter of a family friend. They'd both heaved a sigh of relief when they separated.

He spoke superb English and French and had a smattering of Arabic and Russian. German, he'd confessed with a smile, had eluded him entirely. He'd made her shriek with laughter when he did a deadpan imitation of Fraulein Hupper, an amazingly ugly German teacher.

He had a law degree but had never practiced law, having gone into the Italian Foreign service at 25, the same age she'd entered. He was higher than she was in his country's hierarchy, the deputy Ambassador with a trade portfolio. He was an ardent promoter of his country's food and wine, but thought French literature was better and enjoyed American movies. He liked Italian soccer, American football and English tennis.

At the time, it seemed more than enough knowledge to fall in love, though later, with bitter hindsight, Nicole realized that she never got to know anything else about him. He'd been very sparing with personal details. She knew only the most general

facts, what would be available on a CV. She hadn't thought to dig deeper. She had somehow convinced herself he was the love of her life, her soul mate. She thought they'd have the rest of their lives to get to know each other.

And, of course, there was the biggie; the real reason she didn't know more. They'd spent most of their free time in bed. He was such a stupendous fuck, talking was the last thing on her mind.

She used the crude term in her head, to reduce the experience to mere sex. It had helped a lot after the first searing pain had started to subside. When she no longer cried all night, but merely woke up after a restless night with tears drying on her face. When she was able to eat again.

She tried to put it all in perspective in the painful months afterwards, though the parts didn't fit. Angular, jagged memories that didn't mesh at all. The Alessandro she'd known, who'd loved her so thoroughly and so well. And the Alessandro who'd left without a word.

She'd spent every single free second with him after that first incandescent night, most of it in bed, though they hadn't always restricted their sex to the bed. There'd been the kitchen table, her enormous terrace, the bathtub, the huge Persian carpet in the living room.

At times, almost drugged with sex, she wondered dazedly whether she was subconsciously making up for the past few years of enforced celibacy.

The sex had been so overwhelming, she hadn't even realized she'd fallen in love until it was too late.

Alessandro had to be away on the 24th of December, Christmas Eve, which wasn't a holiday anyway in an Islamic country. He said he'd be back that evening. With his suitcases. He was moving in with her.

Christmas Eve found her anxiously preparing a gourmet candlelit meal in her brand-new silk negligee. She hadn't been wearing underwear, which would have been

pointless around Alessandro, anyway. He'd ripped several pairs of expensive La Perla panties in his haste to be inside her.

He was supposed to arrive not later than 7:30. She'd been in a frenzy of delight since the late afternoon. Cooking madly, spraying perfume on herself to get rid of the smell of cooking, straightening the cushions, taking another bath, keeping the bathroom door open so she could hear him come in, pacing through the house...

By 9 she'd calmed down a little. Alessandro had been detained, that was it. Though it was very strange that he didn't call to say he'd be late.

The food turned from lukewarm to cold, then congealed.

The candles guttered, then went out.

By midnight she started to get worried and at two in the morning she was sweating with fear. Anything could happen in the Middle East, all of it bad. A car bomb, a terrorist attack, a suicide bomber. She switched on CNN. Nothing unusual. The Internet yielded nothing overtly dangerous, either. Nicole wanted to call Alessandro but realized with a sudden chill she didn't know his home number. Or his address.

His cell phone wasn't on.

By morning, Christmas Day, she was in turn frantic and angry, in a bewildering whiplash of emotions. The Italian Embassy was closed, with only a lowly secretary on duty to answer the phone. She was no help, and indeed, seemed not to recognize Alessandro's name.

Nicole spent Christmas day and the next day in her negligee, compulsively watching TV and checking Google News. When she finally went back to the office on the 27th, she felt as if she'd been in a war, frayed nerves sparking and sputtering.

She must have called the Italian Embassy a dozen times in the next few days. Though Nicole knew for a fact that everyone at the Italian Embassy spoke excellent English, she somehow couldn't manage to communicate with anyone in any meaningful way.

And then the Ambassador, Count Stefano Volpi, called her personally, at home. And in his gentle, aristocratic way, he managed to let her know that there was no Alessandro della Torre working at the Embassy and even if there were...it was better to leave him alone.

Count Volpi's call came on Friday evening and Nicole huddled on her couch with the cordless in her lap for twenty-four hours after that, frozen with shock. The Count's voice had been gentle, but firm, and quite clear in the message he managed to convey.

Don't bother Alessandro again.

How had she got it so wrong? Alessandro hadn't been the love of her life. He'd been a good – very good, incredibly good – fuck. That was all. They'd had a brief affair, and he'd moved on.

Pity Nicole couldn't move on as well.

She became stuck in a groove of grief and sorrow.

Nicole sleepwalked her way through her job. There was a major diplomatic scandal that broke out in the new year, lasting all spring. A ring of low-level diplomats funneling millions of dollars of illegal arms in diplomatic pouches into a region already bristling with arms had been unmasked in a sting operation. There'd been two smugglers uncovered in the U.S. Embassy itself, dozens more in other embassies. Everyone in the Embassy ended up working 12-hour days trying to cope with the fallout.

Nicole the best she could during the day, then came home to her cold empty flat with no appetite for dinner and knowing she faced a restless and sleepless night.

She lost weight. She would catch colleagues at the Embassy falling silent when she walked by. Though socializing was part of the job, she simply couldn't accept any of the invitations to concerts and receptions a woman in her position received as a matter of rote. There was no lightness in her any more, no ability to chat at a cocktail party.

That summer, Nicole decided she needed to find herself a lover. Maybe what she was mourning wasn't Alessandro but sex. He'd awakened her to her intensely sexual

nature, then left her dangling. It hadn't been love, it had been fucking and now she needed to get back into the saddle, as it were.

There was no shortage of candidates. Nicole chose carefully. It couldn't be someone in the diplomatic corps, which would be fouling her own nest. It couldn't be someone who lived in Amman, she wasn't in any way looking for commitment.

She finally found the right man. The physical opposite of Alessandro, too. Medium height, slender, blond and blue-eyed with sharp pale features. David Anderson, a visiting businessman from the Midwest, representing some company that manufactured farm machinery. A big company and he was high up in it. Best of all, he didn't live here. She could have a short affair, fuck another man, get Alessandro out of her mind and body and move on.

Nicole allowed herself to be wooed. David spent several evenings over very expensive meals trying, in the flat nasal tones of the Midwest, to impress her. He was even interesting, in his wholesome way. His eyes lit when, one July evening, she invited him back to her flat for a nightcap.

Nicole was almost angry at David's careful foreplay. She wanted a fast and furious fuck, mindless sex that would make her forget herself and—above all—forget Alessandro.

David was determined to turn it into lovemaking. He was a very good kisser but she didn't want kisses, and she finally just turned her head to avoid them. He tried to arouse her with careful caresses but Nicole didn't want that, either. All she wanted was for him to fuck her, hard, in the dark. The hell with foreplay.

She was relieved when he finally mounted her, kneeling her legs apart.

This was what she wanted. A man's weight on her, a man's penis poised to enter her. Fast, hard fucking.

Except that the shoulders she clutched weren't broad. His chest was almost hairless. When she reached for his penis to guide him to her, he was nicely erect but small and narrow.

He wasn't Alessandro.

Even in the dark, she couldn't pretend he was Alessandro.

Every muscle she had tightened. Her entire body closed in on itself in rejection and David couldn't penetrate.

When David levered himself up on his forearms in surprise, Nicole suddenly pushed him off her and ran into the bathroom. She locked the door, slid down to the floor in the dark and rested her forehead on her knees, shaking with deep tremors. She fought against it, arms crossed tightly around her midriff in an attempt at control, but it was no use. She finally gave in to bitter, helpless tears.

She wept in silence, in the dark, grieving for her lost love, her lost womanhood, her lost soul...

When, finally, she found the courage to go back, swollen-eyed, into the bedroom, David was gone. He'd quietly put his clothes back on and left the madwoman's house.

The next day at work, two-dozen yellow roses arrived for her. Two-dozen yellow roses in Amman in summer were a minor miracle and must have cost a fortune. David's note was short and very sweet: *I'm sorry it didn't work out.*

That was when Nicole realized she had to leave Amman if she was to keep even a scrap of her sanity.

She was for a new posting anyway. She was high up, with a good reputation, a rising star. She had some leeway in choosing. Friends back at the State Department told her what her choices were: Kabul or Harare.

The choice was clear. Another poor dusty desert Islamic city would only remind her of Alessandro. Better war-torn Africa. She chose Zimbabwe and started boning up on the tormented political history of East Africa.

To her horror, however, when she opened the envelope with her new assignment, she read: Consulate in Naples, Italy. Nothing she could do – phone calls to Washington,

increasingly frantic letters, contacting everyone she knew who had some pull at State—none of it made any difference at all.

Though she'd fought the posting with every atom of her being, she fell in love with the city from the first day. She'd landed on an early November morning, sunny and warm, and had spent her first day walking the streets, dazzled at the beauty and liveliness.

Maybe, just maybe, she thought, it would be Naples, of all places, that would heal her wounded spirit.

Certainly this view over the bay was enough to soothe the most troubled soul.

The faint sound of music from the baroque quartet playing in the ballroom filtered out into the terrace, but Nicole had no desire to return to the reception. Though it was Christmas Eve, it was warm outside, a gentle breeze coming off the bay. One of the cruise ships sounded its bass horn and the ferryboat to Ischia answered in a treble toot. She thought she could hear laughter on the wind.

Christmas Eve.

A full year had gone by since Alessandro.

For the first time in a long time, hope stirred faintly in her heart. If she could survive one year, why then she could survive two, three, four. At some point in the future, an entire day would go by without thinking of Alessandro. It wasn't much to look forward to, but it was more than she'd had this past year.

Music billowed out from the big double doors as they opened. So someone else wanted to enjoy the unusually balmy evening. That was fine. It was a big terrace and Nicole knew she carried an aura of solitude about her. No one would bother her. Maybe she'd just spend the whole evening out here. Let the entire diplomatic community get to know her as an eccentric loner.

Footsteps. A man's footsteps behind her. Nicole could feel her back muscles stiffen. Couldn't he see she wanted to be alone?

"Signora." A young man's voice. *"Questo è per Lei."* This is for you, ma'am.

Nicole turned to see the young waiter in 17th century livery. He was holding a silver salver. On it was a painted wooden angel. Curious, Nicole picked it up and the waiter disappeared.

How odd.

She turned the angel in her hands. In the short time she'd been here, Nicole had realized that Naples specialized in Christmas and nativity scene figures. Entire narrow streets were given over to artisans crafting the lovely figurines of papier machè and wood. It was a centuries-old tradition and antique figurines fetched thousands of dollars. The churches had exquisite nativity scenes with hundreds of shepherds and Magis and baby Jesuses, three-dimensional works of art.

The angel in her hands was an antique and beautiful, the loving work of an artist craftsman, perfect in every detail, from the lovely oval face to the billowing folds of her white satin gown. Nicole stroked the cheek and smiled.

"I told you she looked just like you," a deep voice said and Nicole froze. As she lifted her eyes, the hairs on the nape of her neck rose. The hands holding the angel started trembling.

She could barely make out the figure in the shadows, but she'd recognize that voice anywhere, even in hell.

"I'm so happy to see you, *cara*," the deep voice said. Alessandro stepped out of the shadows.

Her fingers were too numb to hold on to the beautiful angel and it slipped from her grasp. A wild wind sounded in her head and her knees buckled.

Alessandro cursed and sprang forward. He'd planned it all so carefully, the setting, the timing. He knew it was going to be tricky, knew he wouldn't have much time to make his case, but he hadn't counted on Nicole fainting.

He caught her just as she fell. He staggered.

She'd lost a lot of weight but so had he. He was barely back on his feet. Though he'd carried her with ease in Amman—had gloried in carrying her in his arms to bed—he could barely manage to hold her now.

But with his dying breath, on his knees, he could carry Nicole.

Nicole was *his*, to love and cherish to the end of time.

He needed a place where they could be private and he knew where. He was familiar with every single inch of the French Consulate. It had been in the della Torre family for two hundred years, named after his great, great, great-grandmother, Loredana della Torre, and had been sold only twenty years ago to the French Foreign Ministry to serve as their Consulate. He knew its nooks and crannies and knew where they could find privacy.

Alessandro carried Nicole into the Sala Della Regina—the Queen's Room. The room where the future Queen of Italy, Margherita, accepted the proposal of the King of Savoy.

There was a Recamier couch, basically a queen-sized bed. He carefully placed Nicole on it, then turned to lock the door. No one would bother them, he knew.

He was sweating with exertion as he returned to Nicole, sliding on his knees by her side.

All his life he'd been strong. His current weakness was a curse, bearable only because it meant he was alive. For too many months he'd hovered in that twilight area between life and death.

"Alessandro?" Nicole whispered. Her eyes moved over his face, unfocused.

"Yes, *amore mio*." He tenderly moved aside a heavy lock of dark shiny hair to run the back of his forefinger down the side of her face. Her cheekbones were more prominent, the skin more delicate, infinitely pale. She looked fragile. Too fragile.

Together they'd put back on the weight they'd lost over the past horrible year. They'd stuff each other with food in bed. Food and sex, the eternal healers.

Nicole would go back to being the glorious woman he'd first met a year ago in Amman. Nothing, however, would ever turn the clock back for him. He'd carry the scars on his body for the rest of his life.

Nicole blinked, then opened her eyes wide. She had the most beautiful eyes Alessandro had ever seen. Cat's eyes, green and intelligent. She blinked again, awareness returning with every passing second. The expression in those gorgeous eyes turned from bewildered, to astonished, to cool.

"Alessandro. Well. This is a...surprise." Her voice was firm now, and she was trying to sit up.

In a sudden electric rush of understanding, Alessandro knew if she got up now, she'd walk right out of the room and out of his life. He would lose her forever.

No. His entire body rejected the notion. Nicole was his, body and soul. He needed to claim her body as his, now. The hell with explanations, he needed her body. Her soul would follow.

He kissed her. At first to shut her up but, after a second, he lost himself in the kiss.

It had been exactly this way the first time he'd kissed her, in his car outside the Italian Embassy in Amman. It had taken every crumb of self-control not to strip her in his car and make love right there in his Alfa Romeo, like a horny teenager. God knew she made him feel like a horny teenager. He hadn't been deprived of sex at all, yet he had fucked Nicole during the one-week fate had allotted them as if he'd spent the past 20 years alone on a desert island.

He held her head, licking his tongue into her mouth. Her taste hadn't changed.

The first four months, he hadn't been able to eat and had had to be fed parenterally with constant IV lines. The memory of the taste of Nicole's mouth had sustained him.

He could feel the warfare going on in her body, mind trying to reject him, heart opening to him.

Yes. Her heart was his, too. All of her was his.

Alessandro deepened the kiss, rejoicing when she returned it. He made love to Nicole's mouth, as he'd made love to her breasts and her butterfly.

Nicole had been charmed when he'd told her that the name used by Italian kids for the female genitalia was '*farfalla*', butterfly. They'd joked about her butterfly, about how well suited it was to him, about its moods and whimsies.

He knew Nicole's butterfly like he knew his cock. Everything it wanted, everything it desired, what made it purr, what turned it off, what made it tick.

It was ticking now, he could feel it, though he wasn't in her yet.

He wanted to be inside her butterfly as fast as was humanly possible.

Only recently was he able to even think of it. His cock had been dead meat for nine long months. He might as well have had a cylindrical piece of wood between his legs. Then in September, when he was first able to sit up unaided, a very attractive nurse had washed him and his cock had stirred. She'd been an intelligent woman and it amused her. She knew perfectly well that an erection, even a half-assed one, was a major accomplishment for him, a man who should have been dead in the ground nine months before. She'd smiled, given him an extra long swipe over his rising cock and left.

Alessandro hadn't wanted the nurse, he'd wanted Nicole. The erection had been an automatic response of his body, one he wouldn't have given a thought to a year ago. But right then, it had been a fucking miracle. The very first sign that maybe, just maybe, he might be able to get his life and Nicole back.

It was as if the hard-on were a signal that his body was coming back from the near-dead. The next week, he stood up on his own for the first time, and the week after, he started walking. Up and down the hospital corridor, it was true, but walking under his own steam.

That was when he'd first started making plans to get Nicole back, calling in favors. Now that he knew he wasn't going to die, he wasn't going to be a useless, impotent invalid, he could start dreaming again. Hoping and planning to put the shattered pieces of his life back together.

He'd moved mountains to ensure that Nicole be posted to Naples.

The Americans owed him, and he'd made sure they realized it. His former boss had called in favors with them, too.

So Nicole had been in Naples, his city, breathing his same air, for about six weeks now. He hadn't wanted to make his move until he was sure he could stay on his feet for more than an hour at a time.

Right now, he didn't have to be on his feet, he was lying next to Nicole and his cock had sprung to full life. She excited him as no other woman ever had and no other woman ever would.

"Cara, dolcissima," he murmured against her mouth. She'd loved it when he spoke Italian to her. He bit, lightly, her lower lip, rejoicing when she shivered.

She'd loved everything he'd ever done to her. Her hot responses drove him wild. She drew in a deep breath to say something and he covered her mouth again.

Now wasn't the time for words. Words would come later, together with explanations. Now was for the magic their bodies could create.

Kissing her deeply, Alessandro lifted Nicole so he could unzip her ball gown, an elegant confection of emerald green silk, the color exactly matching her eyes. Hands trembling, he pulled the bodice off her shoulders and down to her waist. If she wanted to protest, he wouldn't let her. He couldn't release her mouth to save his life.

He could tell by touch that she had on one of her expensive lacy bras, the ones that drove him wild. This one had a front clasp and in a second it fell away. Ah, there she was. Round and—yes!—her nipples were hard. With a trembling hand he moved lower, impatiently tearing away her panties—Nicole should never wear underwear around him—and slid his hand there, where he wanted his cock. Right into her butterfly.

She was wet. Nicole had once confessed that she started getting wet the instant she saw him. Which was a good thing because the first fuck was always frantic. He often remembered about foreplay after he was already in her.

This was going to be one of those times.

After a year's absence, Nicole would want wooing, gentle words, explanations. That would all come later. Now, right now, he needed to be inside her, to claim her and in doing so, to claim his lost life back.

A swipe of his hands and Nicole was naked. He couldn't undress, not yet. Not until he was certain Nicole was his again. He wasn't a pretty sight. He had to be looked at through the eyes of love. So all he did was unzip and open his silk briefs. His cock sprang out.

He held her face still for his kisses while he mounted her. He didn't need to guide his cock into her. It knew where to go all on its own.

Alessandro slid into her, into his own little butterfly. Their lips parted as both exhaled on a soft shaky moan at being together again. He dug his fingers into her scalp, into the mass of fragrant hair and shut his eyes so she wouldn't see the tears.

This was what he'd thought of constantly as he fought death. Being inside Nicole again.

He tasted her mouth, her cheeks, the soft spot behind her ear. He inhaled deeply, the smell of her filling his head. He inhaled again and rotated his cock, feeling every centimeter of her tightly clasped around him.

She hadn't been with another man. He'd have smelled it, felt it.

It had been his deepest dread that she would find someone else. That another man would take his place in her bed, and in her butterfly.

How any man could keep his hands off her, once he saw her, was a mystery to him. He'd been blown away, the first time he saw her at the Embassy Christmas party in Amman. The lovely new *Americana* all the men had been talking about. She carried an

aura of remoteness and mystery about her, elegant inside and out, as self contained as a cat.

Discreet inquiries informed him she was unattached and had been for some time. Such a beautiful woman could be unattached only out of choice, because she was picky.

And she was. His beautiful Nicole was finicky and fastidious about everything—what she ate, what she wore, what she read, the music she listened to, who she frequented. It was just one of the many things he found fascinating about her.

Alessandro was a man of instinct. He trusted his head and his heart and his cock and all three proclaimed to him, loud and clear, *this is the one*. They'd only had a week, but he knew he would never be tired of her. She fascinated him on every level there was.

The idea that some other man was with her, talking to her, laughing with her, fucking her, while he was chained to a hospital bed, had kept him awake more than the pain.

He had to be certain, had to hear it from her.

He pressed into her deeply, feeling her sharp hipbones cut into him. Her hips had been soft, generous before. He stroked deeply once, twice, then stopped.

"There hasn't been another man here this past year, has there?" He whispered the words, holding her head tightly. He forced himself to keep his eyes open and on hers.

"No." Nicole's voice was low, steady. Sadness was in her eyes. "I tried, but I couldn't do it."

Her words set him off.

Alessandro closed his eyes in relief, resting his forehead against hers, and started climaxing. He had no control at all over his cock, couldn't hold it back if he tried. His semen jetting into her set Nicole off, too, her little butterfly clutching his cock tightly, milking him.

Alessandro moaned as his hips thrust against hers. There wasn't time for more than a few short strokes and then he had to stop, overwhelmed with the electric climax roaring through him, his entire body pulsing in time with his cock.

He simply rode it out, letting it wipe his mind clear, rejoicing in his first orgasm in a year.

It didn't matter that he'd come immediately. It just meant that he would slide in and out of Nicole more easily from then on. He smiled against her hair. His love had a small little butterfly and the second time they always found it easier for him to fuck her, once his seed was in her.

Nicole's contractions were slowing, her breathing slowing, too, though he could feel her heart hammering under her breast.

It was okay. He breathed deeply, joy coursing through him. It was okay. He was alive and had his manhood back. Even after coming, he was still hard, so his cock worked again.

He could function as a man and he had Nicole back.

Everything was going to be all right from this moment on.

Alessandro finally raised his head to smile down at Nicole and met her cool green eyes.

"Well, that was fun." She pushed at his shoulder. "Now get off me."

* * * * *

Nicole wanted to weep. Her lower body was still climaxing. She could feel herself clenching tightly, rhythmically around Alessandro, who was almost larger than in her memory. He hadn't even bothered to make love with skill, as she knew he could, regulating his strokes, following her rhythms. He hadn't had to. Just seeing him had awakened nerves she'd thought dead. Her vagina—what he'd delighted in calling her 'butterfly'—had no pride at all where Alessandro was concerned. Her orgasm would go

on for long minutes, though he'd done nothing to merit it. She felt the spasms of orgasm as if they were remote arcane aspects of her body, having nothing to do with her.

Her lower body was welcoming Alessandro back. Her mind was screaming—you fool!

It was like being torn in two.

Was this to be her future then? For the rest of her days, she'd live celibate and alone, sad and empty, waiting for Alessandro to walk in and out of her life as he pleased. She'd spend a year mourning him, then he'd show up and fuck her and she'd be stupidly grateful and then he'd leave again.

Repeat cycle.

It didn't bear thinking about.

She was still climaxing when she pushed again at his shoulder. "Didn't you hear me? Get off me. *Now.*"

Alessandro was looking down at her, face blank with shock. "What did you say?"

Well of course he was surprised. Bimbos didn't say no, did they? They were grateful for every second The Great Man was fucking them.

She took a deep breath. "I. Said. Get. *Off.*"

He clutched her hips and moved upwards with his penis, in short strokes that touched some secret spot only he had ever found.

Pleasure spiked through her, insidious, burning, electric, her body's curse. Tears sprang into her eyes as she tried to twist her hips to get away from him. She couldn't, of course.

"Be still," Alessandro murmured. He held her hips harder, pumped more quickly. Nicole could feel herself moving quickly into another orgasm. She burned with humiliation, as if she was a cheap whore and he had a ten-dollar bill in his hand.

Her thighs started trembling. She had to stop him, had to, before she came again.

"There's a name for this," she said coldly, holding his eyes. "And it isn't a pretty one."

Alessandro's jaw muscles bunched. "This isn't rape and you know it, *cara*."

"It is when the woman doesn't want it."

Something hot flashed in his dark eyes. "You don't want it?" The tempo of his hips increased, he did something that moved the heavy base of his penis directly against her clitoris and thrust hard. Nicole was caught in the grip of a wild burning storm, shaken from the inside out by the force of her climax. She cried out, her entire world reduced to her body, to her vagina and Alessandro inside her. The contractions went on and on as he kept pumping. She was helpless to stop it; it was as if some malign entity had taken over her body.

She didn't want this. She didn't want to respond to Alessandro as if she was a lock and he was the key. The only key.

She had just now started finding some measure of peace and serenity in her heart and he was breaking it all over again.

To her utter horror, Nicole burst into tears.

"*Tesoro*," Alessandro murmured. She tried to evade him, but he held her head still for his kiss. He kissed her mouth, her closed eyelids, the tears from her cheeks. "*Carissima, amore mio, non piangere*."

Don't cry, he was saying.

He was right. She mustn't –she daren't– cry. Crying showed weakness and she was far too vulnerable to him. She shut her eyes tightly, biting down on her lips, willing the tears away. She'd shed far too many tears for him, anyway.

It was so hard to think with him on top of her. He was still making love to her, his penis sliding in and out, much more deeply now. He'd shot so much semen into her they were making wet sounds and were probably staining the yellow satin of the couch.

They smelled, too, the particular smell of her Diorissima, his soap and their sex. The smells of Amman.

She'd tried pushing at him and twisting her hips. Now she'd try her tongue.

"If you think you can just waltz in and out of my life as you please, you're sorely mistaken, Alessandro della Torre. It doesn't work like that."

He levered himself up, still moving deeply inside her and stared down at her. "I'm not leaving your life again, ever, Nicole, *mia cara*. And I couldn't waltz if I wanted to. I can barely walk."

His face was somber, deep lines bracketing his mouth. For the first time, Nicole noticed how changed Alessandro was. He'd aged a lot in the past year. He was much more pallid than he'd been in Amman. Silver threads swept through his black hair. Though he was still heavy on top of her—he was a big man—he had lost a lot of weight. She hadn't noticed it because he was still dressed, but now that she thought of it, she could feel how much lighter he was than before.

She blinked up at him. There was something in his expression...

"Stop," she whispered, and clutched his buttocks. She couldn't think while he was making love to her. Obediently, his hips stilled. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been in the hospital this past year." His deep voice was sober, quiet. "I barely survived Christmas Eve."

"How—what?" Her mind whirled.

"I don't work for the Foreign Ministry, Nicole," he said, watching her eyes. "I never did for them. I work—used to work—for the Ministry of Defense."

He knew she'd have received briefing books on her new posting, and she had—five thick tomes on every aspect of Italian political life. And its Secret Services.

"Are you—are you SISDE?" A shadowy intelligence agency, modeled after the American CIA, SISDE was responsible for external security.

Alessandro nodded, then his hard mouth lifted in a half smile. "I knew you were smart. You frighten me sometimes. Stefano Volpi told me he had to call you to warn you off. He was frightened you'd put it together."

"He broke my heart." Nicole shivered as she remembered the shock she'd felt after Count Volpi's phone call.

"Yes," Alessandro said simply. "But it was necessary."

"Were you—" Nicole's mind was whirling as she put the broken pieces of the last year together. "Were you in some way involved in the gunrunning scandal?"

"I wasn't just involved, *tesoro*. I broke it. I was in the Amman Embassy undercover. It was a very rare example of international cooperation amongst police officers and security agents because we knew we had to find out how these arms were entering the area. I had the help of an excellent CIA officer in your Embassy. He was under cover, too."

"Mike Holden," Nicole said. "The Embassy driver."

"*Dio*." Alessandro closed his eyes and shook his head. "Remind me never *ever* to cheat on you."

For the very first time, Nicole felt able to smile. "I would cut your heart out and eat it if you ever cheated on me."

"Beautiful and blood-thirsty." He gave her a quick kiss. "I'm in very deep here."

She trailed her hand up his back in an uncertain caress, aware that her heart was opening to him with every word he spoke. "So..." she said quietly. "What happened?"

"I put out feelers, saying I wouldn't be averse to earning money by looking the other way when my diplomatic pouch was being filled and, sure enough, they bit. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve we were to meet, the gunrunners and twelve diplomatic officers from eight embassies. I was wearing a body wire. We had our men outside, waiting. It was supposed to be a clean operation. I got enough information for convictions and was about ready to leave when a young American intelligence officer

got overexcited and made a move. All hell broke loose and I was caught in the cross fire." Alessandro took a deep breath. "I took seven bullets. I lost 3 liters of blood before the medics were able to stabilize me. I barely survived and was in a coma for a month."

"Alessandro," Nicole whispered, shocked. In her deepest despair, in the darkest heart of the loneliest night, Nicole had still felt a little kernel of joy just knowing Alessandro was in the world. "You could have died and I would never have known."

"It's the way of the world, *tesoro*. And before we go any further, I have to warn you that I have scars all over my body. Ugly ones. I have metal pins in both hips and a knee, enough to set off metal detectors. I will forever have a limp. I had to retire from SISDE on a disability pension and am currently without a job." He searched her eyes. "With all of that, can you still love me?"

"Alessandro." Her voice was liquid with tenderness. She caressed his face, the new wrinkles around his eyes, the deep lines bracketing his mouth. "How could you even ask? I could never love another man after you."

"Excellent. Do you think you could possibly live the rest of your life in Naples? I know I'm asking you to quit your job and I'm willing to follow you around the world if you insist, but I warn you, I'd make a lousy househusband."

Living forever in this beautiful city. With Alessandro. There was only one possible answer. "Of course I'll live here with you. I can find a job."

"My darling Nicole. You will find that there is an opening for a very high-level liaison job at the NATO base here and that they will jump to have you. And I will be finally putting my law degree to use. I'm joining my cousin Stefano's law office. It's a very successful one and there's family money. A lot, in fact. So you won't ever want for anything. But neither of us will start work until March. We're going to spend the next three months in bed, making love and eating. How does that sound for a plan?"

She blinked back the tears, her heart overflowing with love and hope. "Sounds...wonderful."

"*Bene.*" Alessandro flashed a sudden grin, looking suddenly like a young man. "Then let's move on. Are you still on the Pill, *cara*?" He rotated his hips and Nicole could feel the wetness.

Appalled, Nicole stared up at him. She hadn't even thought of it. She could feel the blood draining from her face. "No," she whispered. "My doctor cycled me off for four months. Oh, Alessandro, what are we—"

"Good." The deep voice rumbled with pleasure. "We have just made a child, my darling Nicole. I want a daughter," he ordered. "Several of them. They are supposed to look after me and pamper me in my old age. That is the Italian way. I might some day want a son. Just one, someone to smoke cigars and play chess with. And while we're talking about children—" He reached into his jacket pocket, the movement pressing him more deeply into her.

Nicole gasped, on the razor's edge of climax. Alessandro grinned wickedly. "Patience, *carissima*," he murmured, amusement in his dark eyes. "We still have some business to conduct and then I'll love you as much as you want. Now pay attention because this is important."

It was extremely hard to pay attention with him so hot and heavy inside her. Nicole completely forgot about her lower body, however, when she saw what Alessandro had in his hand.

A ring. A gorgeous antique ring. A diamond-cut emerald in an elaborate setting.

"This ring has been in my family for a hundred years," Alessandro said quietly. "Every della Torre woman who has worn it has had a long and happy marriage. Prolific, too," he added, lips curved in a wicked smile. "I have to warn you that I have four brothers and they are all going to fall in love with you the instant they see you, so we must get married very soon. Immediately, in fact. My little girl must be born a della Torre."

His voice was teasing, but there were tears in his eyes as he slid the magnificent ring on her finger. Nicole didn't even bother wiping away her own tears, streaming down her face.

"Marry me," Alessandro whispered.

"Oh, yes," she whispered back.

There was an explosion in the air and she looked, startled, out the big picture windows at fireworks exploding over Vesuvius, purple and scarlet and gold. It was midnight.

"Buon Natale, amore mio," Alessandro said as he began thrusting.

"Merry Christmas, my love," Nicole answered, her own fireworks exploding inside.

About the author:

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