



Seducing His Enemy's Daughter: Christmas at the Castello (bonus novella) (Harlequin Presents)

By Annie West, Amanda Cinelli

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Except Ella isn't the vacuous socialite he expected and she refuses to marry him! Her rebelliousness only makes Donato want her more, so he'll have to persuade her...touch by breathtaking touch. But soon Donato finds himself enthralled by their magnetic connection.

As their fake wedding day approaches, one question weighs heavily on Donato's mind: to love, honor...and betray?

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- Sales Rank: #156933 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-10-01
- Released on: 2015-10-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Annie West has devoted her life to an intensive study of tall, dark, charismatic heroes who cause the best kind of trouble in the lives of their heroines. As a sideline she's also researched dreamy locations for romance, from vibrant cities to desert encampments and fairytale castles. Annie lives with her family at beautiful Lake Macquarie. She loves to hear from readers and you can contact her at www.annie-west.com or at PO Box 1041, Warners Bay, NSW2282, Australia.

Amanda was born and raised in an Irish- Italian family in the suburbs of County Dublin, Ireland. Her passion for writing developed at a young age as a necessary outlet for an overactive imagination. She now splits her time between being a stay at home mom and writing love stories.

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'Of course you'll do it. You know you will.' Reg Sanderson paused in the act of pouring a double whisky to fix his gimlet stare on his daughter. As if he could bend her to his will, like he had years ago.

Ella shook her head, wondering how any man got to be so caught up in his own importance that he didn't notice the world had altered. *She'd* changed in the years since she'd walked out. Even Fuzz and Rob had changed lately, but their father hadn't realised.

He was too focused on his business machinations. Except they were no longer just business. His latest scheme was an outrageous mix of commercial and personal.

No wonder Fuzz had run. Felicity Sanderson might be flighty and spoiled, as only the favourite child of a very rich man could be, but she was no fool.

'Don't be absurd.' Ella stared her father down, ignoring his razor-sharp glare. It had taken years of practice to stand tall against his brutal behaviour but it came naturally now. 'This is nothing to do with me. You'll have to sort it out yourself.'

Who'd have thought Reg Sanderson would come cap in hand to his forgotten middle child, the one he'd ignored for so long?

Except there'd been nothing cap in hand about his bellowing phone call, demanding she come to his harbourside home instantly because her sister Felicity was about to destroy her life.

'Of course you're involved,' he roared, then caught himself, pausing to swallow a slug of alcohol. 'You're my only hope, Ella.' This time his tone was conciliatory, almost conspiratorial.

Ella's hackles rose, tension clamping her belly. Her father shouted whenever he didn't instantly get his way. But it was when he pretended to be on your side that you really needed to beware.

'I'm sorry.' She bit her lip, reminding herself there was no need for her to apologise. Yet ancient habits died hard. She lifted her chin. 'It's a crazy idea and even if it weren't I couldn't fill in for Felicity. I'm not—'

'Pah! Of course you can't hold a candle to your sister. But with a makeover and some coaching you'll do.'

Ella stood tall. Once upon a time his constant references to the many ways she didn't measure up to her older sister—in looks, grace, vivacity, charm, the ability to throw on anything and look like a million dollars—had been the bane of her life. Now she knew life held more important things than trying, fruitlessly, to live up to his expectations.

'I was going to say I'm not interested in getting to know any of your business cronies, much less *marrying* one.'

Ella shuddered. She'd escaped her awful father in her teens and never looked back. This man her father so wanted to do business with would be in the same mould: grasping, selfish, dishonest. She'd met his associates before.

'I'm sure if you explain the situation he'll understand.' She got up from the white leather lounge, retrieved her shoulder bag and turned towards the door.

'Understand?' Her father's voice cracked on the word, transfixing Ella. Despite his volatile temperament, she'd swear it was the closest he'd come to real emotion in years. Even when her mother died he'd shed only crocodile tears.

'Donato Salazar isn't the sort to *understand*. You don't realise how badly I need him. I suggested marriage to cement our business ties and he agreed to consider it.' Her father's tone made it clear what an honour that was. This from a man who viewed himself as the acme of Sydney business and society.

'I need Salazar's money. Without it I'll go under and soon. Even with his money...' He looked every bit his age despite the work he'd had to keep the lines and sags of good living at bay. 'I need a *personal* tie to keep me safe. A family tie.' His tone was grim, his expression ugly, a familiar scheming look in his eye.

The idea of her father's massive wealth at risk should have shocked her. But somehow it didn't. He was an inveterate risk-taker.

'You don't trust him.' Ella stared in revulsion. 'Yet you want your daughter to marry him.'

'Oh, don't be such a prude. You remind me of your mother.' His lip curled. 'Salazar can give a woman everything money can buy. You'll be set for life.'

Ella said nothing. *She* knew her mother's worth, and that money couldn't buy the important things in life. But the discussion was academic. Fuzz had run rather than meet this Salazar person and Ella had no intention of sacrificing herself to her father's schemes. Besides, this paragon of corporate success wouldn't be interested in having Reg Sanderson's *other* daughter foisted on him. The dull, uninteresting one who actually worked for a living.

She was ordinary, a nurse who spent her days home-visiting the sick. She had nothing in common with a corporate high-flyer. Ella turned towards the door again.

'Without Salazar's money I lose everything. The business, this house. Everything. And if I go belly up, what do you think happens to your siblings?' He paused long enough for foreboding to trickle down Ella's spine.

'What about the money for your brother's new venture?' No mistaking the venom in his tone. 'The one Rob's so wrapped up in now he's left the family business. The one supporting your sister, Felicity, and her *boyfriend*' He all but spat the word.

Ella swung around, her pulse fluttering in her throat.

'*Rob's* money, not yours.'

He shrugged, his gaze sliding sideways. 'I...accessed some of it to tide me over.' He must have sensed her outrage, cutting her off before she could speak. 'If I go down, so do they. How do you think they'll cope when the cash to finish refurbishing their fine resort disappears?' Triumph lit her father's pale eyes.

Impotent fury blindsided her. He'd *stolen* from Rob but still expected her to help him!

Trust him to realise her feelings for her siblings was a weakness he could exploit.

She'd felt profound relief that Fuzz and Rob had finally broken from their father's slimy influence. He'd poisoned their lives too long. If they lost this chance to build something for themselves... Ella shrank inside. Rob *might* be okay; he'd shown unexpected steel in walking away from all their father offered. But Fuzz had done so little for herself. Despite her sister's air of casual unconcern Ella knew she had deep-seated self-doubts. A setback like this—

Ella stiffened her shoulders like a prisoner facing a firing squad even as everything inside screamed in protest.

'All right,' she bit out. 'I'll meet him.'

But only to explain that her sister, Felicity, was no longer part of the business deal.

It would be straightforward. What sane man expected marriage to cement a business deal?

'Here she is at last.' Her father's voice vibrated with bonhomie. 'I'd like you to meet my daughter Ella.'

For a moment longer she stood, watching the dying sun turn Sydney Harbour to a mirror of peach and copper. Then with a swift, sustaining breath she made herself turn.

'Ella, my dear.' Her father's greeting made her blink. It was the first endearment he'd ever given her. She stared blankly. Once she'd have given anything to hear him address her with approval and pleasure.

The realisation made something long-forgotten crumple inside.

He spoke again. Ella heard the name Donato Salazar and pasted on a smile. She turned to the man beside him, looking up, then up again.

Something jabbed hard at her insides, a blow that all but rocked Ella back on her feet after the shock of her father's words.

The man before her didn't belong at one of her father's parties. That was her first thought.

These events teetered on the borderline between trendy and louche. This man was too... *definite* to be either. *Elemental* was the word hovering in her head. He was like a force of nature, a leader, not one of the led.

Beautiful was her second thought.

Even the thin scar running up one cheek emphasised rather than detracted from the powerful beauty of that face.

It was beautiful in the way a remote mountain crag was, its icy peak compelling to climbers yet treacherous. In the way a storm at sea was beautiful in its lethal magnificence.

Which led to her third thought: *dangerous*.

It wasn't just his utter stillness, his total focus as he scrutinised her like an amoeba under a microscope. Or that his spare, gorgeous face was hewn of slashing strokes and planes, not a curve to be seen. Except for that thin, perfectly defined mouth that drew her gaze.

In her profession she'd seen lips curved in smiles of joy or relief, drawn tight or stretched in pain or grief. She'd never seen one like this, hinting at both sensuality and cruelty, the grooves around it all about control.

Danger. It was in the air around him, the way it thickened, alive with his presence, enveloping her, drawing her.

That beautiful hard mouth moved, articulating words Ella couldn't catch as her brain blurred. Then it curved in a smile and everything sped up, her pulse, her thoughts, her breathing.

'I'm sorry, I missed that.'

'I said it's a pleasure to meet you, Ms Sanderson.' Once more those lips curved up, but Ella knew with absolute certainty it wasn't pleasure Donato Salazar felt.

That was confirmed when she met his eyes, dark denim-blue beneath sleek black eyebrows that winged upwards. His look was assessing and...annoyed?

'It's good to meet you too, Mr Salazar.'

'Mister, Ms, there's no need to be so formal.' Her father spoke and Ella had never been so grateful for his presence. He seemed almost benign by comparison with the man beside him. 'Call her Ella, Donato. We don't stand on ceremony here.'

The tall man nodded and she told herself the perfect fall of his smooth, dark hair did *not* shine with the blue-black gloss of a raven's wing. Just as that wasn't the hint of a cleft in his chin. Or a flare of understanding in those deep-set, remarkable eyes holding hers.

The idea of being read and understood by one of her father's associates was too extraordinary to consider. She'd never fitted into Reg Sanderson's world. She'd been the cuckoo in the nest, unfathomable and uninteresting.

'Ella.' Donato Salazar's voice was deep, with a resonance that trawled through her insides, leaving her

strangely empty. 'And you must call me Donato.'

Perhaps it was the gleam in his eyes, the satisfied twitch of those lips, or the fact she'd finally got over his shocking first impact on her, but suddenly Ella was herself again.

'That's kind of you... Donato.' Something in his eyes flickered and Ella felt a throb of satisfaction. He was human after all. For one stunned moment he'd seemed larger than life.

'I understand you're from Melbourne. Are you staying in Sydney long?'

'That depends—' a look flashed between him and her father '—on a number of things. For the moment I have no definite plans to return.'

Ella nodded easily, as if those plans didn't include marriage to Reg Sanderson's daughter.

That was *not* going to happen.

'Let's hope the weather stays fine for your visit. Sydney is a city to be enjoyed in the sunshine.' As if she spent her days lolling on her father's motor cruiser, quaffing champagne or indulging in long lunches.

Ella pressed a hand to her empty stomach. Fuzz had left mere hours before this party to honour the man their father wanted her to marry and Reg had summoned Ella straight from work. Typically, while there was plenty of alcohol flowing, food had yet to make an appearance.

'Ah, the weather.' Donato's tone was unreadable, his eyes serious, yet she detected a flicker of superior amusement at one corner of his mouth. 'A polite and predictable conversation starter. Will you tell me how much better it is here than in wet, windy Melbourne?'

'It hadn't occurred to me.' Ella feigned surprise to hide her annoyance. She'd had her fill of being a source of amusement for her father's sophisticated friends. Years as the ugly duckling made her prickly when patronised. 'Are Melbournians really so touchy about their weather? I thought they were more robust.' She ignored her father's glowering frown. 'But do, please, feel free to choose another conversation starter, polite for preference.'

Something glinted in Donato's appraising eyes and Ella drew herself up.

'Really, Ella—' her father began.

'No, no. The weather it is, Ella.' Donato said her name slowly as if tasting it. Absurdly, since his accent was as Australian as her own, she caught a hint of exotic foreignness, an unexpected sliver of something unfamiliar and alluring in her simple little name.

The hairs at her nape and along her arms stood to attention.

She firmed her lips at such a flight of fancy. If hearing him say her name with that appealing lilt made her giddy, how would she cope when she finally saved enough for her long-awaited holiday to South America?

'Tell me—' he leaned in and Ella caught an enticing hint of coffee and warm male skin '—since you're interested in the weather. Do you think we can expect a summer storm later? Lightning and thunder,

perhaps?'

Ella looked from her father, his expression icy with warning, to the clear sky, then back to Donato Salazar with his glinting, unreadable eyes. He knew how her father was sweating on this meeting and he didn't give a damn. Ella was torn between admiration and anger.

'Anything is possible, given the right atmospheric conditions.'

He nodded. 'I find the prospect surprisingly...invigorating.' He didn't move but suddenly he seemed to loom closer, towering over her despite her borrowed heels. The air around her seemed to snap and tighten. Or was that her nerves?

Ella told herself that squiggle of response deep inside was because, at five feet ten, she wasn't used to men dwarfing her. It had nothing to do with the idea of this dark, challenging, vibrant man being *invigorated*.

The image that word conjured made her catch her breath. Since when had her imagination been so flagrantly erotic?

She had an awful suspicion he read her thoughts. Heat seeped under her skin, spread across her chest and up her throat.

Maybe she'd been working with elderly patients too long. How long since she'd been close to a virile man in his prime? One whose gaze challenged her not to react to him, even as she felt that telltale melting at her core.

'Tell me more,' he murmured, his voice like dark, rich syrup. 'What atmospheric conditions would lead to electricity in the air?'

He was toying with her.

He'd sensed her instantaneous, deeply feminine response to him—that tremor in her belly, that lush softening, and it amused him. His face was as close to bland as such a strong, remarkable face could be. Yet she *knew*. Something she couldn't name connected them.

'I have no idea,' she snapped. 'I'm no meteorologist.'

'You disappoint me.' His words were silky, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on her as if she were some curious specimen. 'Most people I meet like to talk about things they know well.'

'To show off their knowledge, you mean?'

He shrugged. The implication was clear. People tried to attract his attention. Her father was about to do it, clearing his throat ready to interrupt this conversation that wasn't going as he'd planned.

'You think I should try to impress you?' Stupid question. This man could make or break her father and, by association, her siblings. She might not need to impress him but common sense dictated she shouldn't antagonise him either.

Yet it was antagonism she felt, swirling in her blood. That and attraction. And something like fear. It was a

dangerous combination.

'I can tell you—' she spoke as her father opened his mouth '—that our weather often comes from the south.'

'From the direction of Melbourne, you mean?' Donato's eyes narrowed.

'Precisely.' She angled her chin higher, refusing to look away from that intent stare. 'So if there's an abrupt change in the atmosphere from the south, a big blustery wind, for instance. Or a sudden influx of hot air...' She shrugged. 'Who knows what bad weather might result?'

'Ella—' Her father's voice promised retribution but was drowned by a sharp crack of laughter.

It reverberated around her, deep and appealing. Ella's skin prickled and shivered as if in response to the elemental rumble of thunder.

Donato Salazar had a surprisingly attractive laugh for a man who looked like he could play the Prince of Darkness with no effort at all. The trouble was laughter, the humour in his eyes and that unlooked-for smile turned him into someone far more approachable.

Her fingers tingled. She wanted—so badly she wanted—to cup his face and discover how that sharply defined jaw, that rich olive skin felt beneath her hand.

Users Review

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