



"I Do"...Take Two! (Three Coins in the Fountain)

By Merline Lovelace

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HER PERFECT ROMAN HOLIDAY

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Travis knows his dangerous missions broke up his marriage, but he's determined to win back his wife. How can Kate resist the magic and moonlight of Venice, followed by a passionate interlude in a sun-drenched Tuscan villa? Now, instead of dodging missiles, Travis faces a far more daunting challenge: proving to the woman he adores that their love is as enduring as the Eternal City itself.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

As an Air Force officer, Merline Lovelace served at bases all over the world. When she hung up her uniform for the last time, she decided to combine her love of adventure with a flare for storytelling. Since then, she's produced more than 85 action-packed novels. Over eleven million copies of her works are in print in 30 countries. Named Oklahoma's Writer of the Year and Female Veteran of the Year, Merline is also a recipient of Romance Writers of America's prestigious Rita Award.

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"Cm'on, Kate. We have to do it."

"No, we don't."

Katherine Elizabeth Westbrook—Kate to the two friends tugging her through the crowd lined up at one of Rome's most famous landmarks—dragged her feet. The water spouting from the Trevi Fountain's gloriously baroque sculptures glistened in the late August sunshine, but Kate had no inclination to participate in the time-honored tradition of tossing a coin in the sparkling pool.

"This is too touristy for words."

"No, it's not." Vivacious, auburn-haired Dawn Mc-Gill dismissed Kate's protest with an airy wave. "We've talked about doing this forever."

"Remember the first time we watched *Three Coins in the Fountain*??"

That came from Callie Langston, the quiet one of the unbreakable triumvirate forged more than twenty years ago, when eight-year-old Kate and her family moved to the small town of Easthampton, Massachusetts.

Callie's reminder of that long-ago sleepover won a smile from Kate. "How could I forget?"

They'd been friends for years by then, all three hopeless romantics and avid movie buffs. In that particular all-night extravaganza, they'd devoured pizza and Twinkies and a gallon of triple ripple mocha fudge while bingeing on rented movie classics.

Callie had chosen the 1940 megahit *The Philadelphia Story*, which had the three teens drooling over a debonair Cary Grant. Dawn had opted for Audrey Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart in *Sabrina*, a sparkling romance that provoked laughter and tears and a burning desire to run off to Paris. Kate had gone with the 1954 version of *Three Coins in the Fountain*, starring Dorothy McGuire and a dreamy Louis Jourdan as a playboy Italian prince. The story of three single women finding love and adventure in Rome made all three girls vow that one day they, too, would visit the Eternal City and toss a coin in its famed fountain.

Kate had loved the movie. Then. Back when she was young and naive and stupid enough to believe in happy endings.

"The wish won't come true unless all three of us do it," the irrepressible Dawn insisted.

"That's right," Callie chimed in. "All for one..."

"...and one for all." Kate dredged up another smile. "Okay, okay! Who's got a coin I can bum?"

"Here."

Dawn thrust a euro into her friend's left hand. It was dull and tarnished and banded by a rim of brass. Soon to be replaced, Kate knew from her work at the World Bank, by a newer, shinier model.

Out with the old, in with the new.

Like her life, she thought, although her new was uncertain and her old hurt almost more than she could bear. Her fist closed around the euro while images cut through her mind like shards of jagged glass. Of Travis roaring up to her college dorm on his decrepit but much-loved Harley. Their engagement the day she'd pinned his air force pilot's wings on his uniform. The wedding two years later that Kate and her two friends had planned in such excruciating detail. The much-dreamed-of trip to Italy that she and her husband had been forced to put off repeatedly while he rotated in and out of Afghanistan and Iraq and a dozen other locales he couldn't tell her about.

The irony of it ate at Kate as she remembered the hours she'd spent planning this dream trip. She remembered, too, all the days she'd buried herself in her own work to dull her gnawing worry about her husband. And the long, empty nights she'd tossed and turned and prayed for his safe return from whatever hot spot he'd been sent to this time.

Now here they were. She and Major Travis Westbrook. In Italy! Separated by only a few hours' train ride. The sad part was that Kate hadn't even *known* her soon-to-be ex was operating out of the NATO base near Venice until she'd talked to his mother just before she and Dawn and Callie had left for their Roman Holiday.

Venice might lie only a few hours north of Rome, but the distance between Kate and Travis couldn't be bridged. Not now, not ever. They'd said too many painful goodbyes and spent too much time apart. They'd also grown into different people. Travis, according to the Facebook post his wife had obviously *not* been intended to see, more so than her.

"Make a wish," Dawn urged. "Then toss the coin over your shoulder."

"You don't have to make a wish," Callie corrected in her calm way. "It's implicit in the act. Throwing a coin in the fountain means you'll return to Rome someday."

Kate barely heard her two friends. Fist clenched, eyes squeezed shut, she let her subconscious spew out the anger and hurt that came from deep in her gut.

I wish... I wish... Dammit all to hell! I wish the bitch-whore who bragged on Facebook about having an affair with my husband would develop a world-class case of... whatever!

She flung up her arm and let fly. Not even the water gushing through the fountain's many spigots could drown out the loud thunk as the euro bounced off the basin's rim, or the amusement in the deep drawl that sounded from just behind her.

"You never could throw worth a damn, Katydid."

Her arm froze in the middle of its downward arc. Disbelief jolted through her even as something hot and wild balled in her belly. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Her frantic gaze shot to her two friends. Dawn's ferocious scowl was as telling as the mask of icy disapproval that dropped instantly over Callie's face. Kate closed her eyes. Sucked in a shuddering breath. Forced herself to turn slowly, deliberately. Her initial reaction to the first sight of her husband in more than four months was purely instinctive. Bunching her fists, she refused to yield to the all-too-familiar worry over the tired lines webbing his hazel eyes. Refused, as well, to let any trace of anger or hurt seep into her voice.

"Hello, Travis. Your mom must have told you that I finally made it to Rome."

"She did."

Those changeable green-brown eyes drifted over her face and lingered on her mouth. For an incredulous moment Kate thought he might actually try to kiss her. Flashing a warning, she took a half step back.

Dawn and Callie must have read the same intent. They moved simultaneously, one to either side of Kate. Travis's glance moved from Dawn's scowl to Callie's set mouth.

Was that regret that flickered across his face? Or a trace of the amused wariness he'd always insisted he had to pull on like a Kevlar vest when confronted by the trio he'd dubbed the Invincibles? The look came and went so quickly, Kate couldn't tell.

"Rome's a big city." She managed to maintain an even tone, but the effort made her throat cramp. "How did you find us?"

The amusement surfaced. No question about it now. And with it came the crooked grin that had curled her toes inside her black suede boots the first time he'd aimed it her way.

Memories slapped at her again. The gray, blustery November day, the cold wind biting at her cheeks, the icicles hanging like frozen tears from the eaves. Kate and Callie and Dawn had bundled up and were just heading out to the mall when Dawn's older brother pulled into the drive. All three girls had gone goggle-eyed when Aaron introduced the roommate he'd brought home for Thanksgiving.

Although Travis's cheery hello had encompassed the three friends equally, he'd soon cut Kate out of the herd. She'd been a sophomore at Boston College at the time, he a senior at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. All it took was two dates that magical Thanksgiving vacation. Just two. Then she... "Finding you wasn't hard."

Her husband's reply jerked her back to the here and now.

"You told me often enough that tossing a coin in the Trevi Fountain topped your to-do list for Rome." He hooked a thumb toward a busy café on the other side of the piazza. "So I staked out a table and waited for you to show."

She hadn't told his mom where she was staying. Hadn't told anyone except her assistant, and David knew better than to divulge her itinerary. Kate wasn't that high up the banking world, but she'd negotiated several multibillion-dollar deals and had recently been featured as one of five up-and-comers on a prominent financial website. Common sense—and her bank's director of security—had advised her to maintain a low profile while traveling abroad. Trust Travis to have tracked her down.

"How long have you been waiting?" she asked with reluctant curiosity.

"Since early morning."

Dawn gave a surprised huff. "You anchored a table in this crowded tourist mecca *all day*? That must have cost a few euros."

"Only enough to feed a family of four for a week. But..." His glance swung back to Kate. "It was worth every euro."

Dammit! How did he do it? A grin, a shared glance, and she was almost ready to forget her angry wish of a few moments ago. Almost.

The bitterness that had spawned it came back, leaving a sour taste in her mouth and a ragged hole in her heart. "You wasted your money, Trav. We said all we needed to when we met with the lawyer."

"Not hardly." The smile left his eyes. "I was served with divorce papers the day after I returned from a classified mission. The meeting with the attorney was set for less than a week later."

"At which point you evoked the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act to delay the proceedings for another ninety days!"

"Only because you—"

He broke off and blew out a slow breath. With a nod that encompassed the elbow-to-elbow tourists cocooning them in a bubble of noise and laughter, he tried again.

"Cm'on, Kate. Let me at least buy you a glass of vino. All of you," he added belatedly.

"You bet your booty all of us," Dawn shot back.

"And only if Kate feels inclined to accept your invitation," Callie put in coolly but no less adamantly.

The Invincibles ride again.

Their united front didn't surprise Travis any more than their fierce protectiveness. He'd known from day one that Kate and her two friends were closer than most sisters. Different personalities, different family backgrounds, but so many shared interests and experiences that they could finish each other's sentences.

And as different as they were physically, each one spelled trouble for the male of the species. With her auburn hair, vivacious personality and lush curves, Dawn drew men like a magnet. Callie was quieter, more reserved, the kind of attentive listener who made men think they were a whole lot smarter than they really were.

But it was Kate who'd sparked his interest that snowy November day. She'd been bundled into a bulky jacket, her brown eyes barely visible above the scarf muffling the lower half of her face, her curly blond hair streaming from a colorful knit stocking cap.

Her lower half hadn't been as bulked up as the upper half. Her snug jeans had given Travis plenty of

opportunity to admire world-class legs above calf-high black suede boots, trim hips and a nice little butt. Yet he'd sensed instantly the whole was so much more than the sum of those enticing parts. Maybe it was the intelligence in those cinnamon-brown eyes. Or the smile when she nudged the scarf down with her chin. Or the way she countered Aaron's teasing with a quick quip.

Whatever it was, by the time Travis headed back to UMass, he was halfway in love and all the way in lust. He'd plunged in the rest of the way in the two years that followed, a hectic time crammed with weekend visits to either his campus or hers and shared summer adventures. Then had come USAF officer training school, followed by the thrill of being accepted for flight school. When Kate flew down to pin on his air force pilot's wings, he'd capped the ceremony with an engagement ring. Between her grad school and his follow-on flight training, it had been another two years before he slid the matching diamond-studded wedding band on her finger.

He'd caught the sparkle of that band when she tossed the coin a few minutes ago. The sight had given him a visceral satisfaction that sliced deep. His rational mind understood a wedding band was merely a symbol. A more primal male instinct viewed it as something more primitive, more possessive. Kate of the laughing brown eyes and lively mind was his mate, his woman, the only one he'd ever wanted to share his life with. And knowing she still wore his ring only intensified Travis's determination to see she didn't take it off.

That would take some doing. He couldn't deny their marriage had hit the skids. He knew his frequent deployments had strained it to the breaking point. Knew, too, that he hadn't sent a strong enough *hands off* signal to the young captain who'd mistaken his interest in her career for something a lot more personal. Travis still kicked himself for not handling that situation with more finesse. Especially since she'd reacted to his rejection by putting a fanciful but too-close-to-the-truth post about her involvement with a certain sexy C-130 pilot on Facebook.

He'd had no excuse for letting the captain get so close in the first place. None that Kate had bought, anyway. And it didn't help that his wife's intelligence and quick smile came packaged with a stubborn streak that would make a Kentucky mule look like a wuss in comparison. She took her time and weighed all factors before making a major decision. Once she did, however, that was it. Period. *Finito*. Done.

Not this time, he swore fiercely. Not this time.

Under Massachusetts law, a divorce didn't become final until three months after issuance of a nisi judgment. That gave Travis exactly two weeks to breach the chasm caused by so many separations and one exercise of monumental stupidity. Determined to win back the wife he still ached for, he issued a challenge he knew she wouldn't refuse.

"Too scared to share a bottle of wine, sweetheart?"

"What do you think?"

The disdainful lift of her brows told him she knew exactly what he was doing, but Travis held his ground. "What I think," he returned, "is that we should get out of this crowd and enjoy the really excellent chianti I have waiting."

The raised brows came together in a frown. Catching her lower lip between her teeth, Kate debated for several moments before turning to her friends.

"Why don't you two go on to the Piazza Navona? I'll catch up with you there. Or," she amended with a glance at the shadows creeping down the columned facade behind the fountain, "back at the hotel."

"We shouldn't separate," Callie protested. "Rome's a big city, and a woman alone makes a tempting target."

Travis blinked. Damned if the slender brunette hadn't just impugned his manhood, his combat skills and his ability to fend off pickpockets and mashers.

"She won't be alone," he said drily. "And I think I can promise to keep her out of the line of fire."

"Riiiiight." The redhead on Kate's other side bristled. "And we all know what your promises are worth, Westbrook."

Jaw locked, he heroically refrained from suggesting that a woman who'd left two grooms stranded at the altar probably shouldn't sling stones. His wife read the signs, though, and hastily intervened.

"It's okay," Kate told her self-appointed guard dogs. "Travis and I can remain civil long enough to share a glass of wine. Maybe. Go on. I'll see you at the hotel."

The still-aggressive Dawn would have argued the issue, but Callie tugged her arm. The redhead settled for giving Travis a final watch-yourself glare before yielding the field.

"Whew," he murmured as the two women wove through the crowd. "Good thing neither of them was armed. I'd be gut shot right now."

"You're not out of danger yet. I haven't had to resort to any of the lethal moves you taught me to take down an attacker. There's always that first instance, however."

Travis figured this wasn't the time or place to admit those training sessions had generated some of his most erotic memories. He couldn't count the number of times he'd bedded down in yet another godforsaken dump of an airstrip and treated himself to the mental image of his wife in skintight spandex, sweaty and scowling and determined to wrestle him to the mat.

"I'll try not to become your first victim," he said as she started toward the café.

Without thinking, he put a hand to the small of her back to guide her through the milling crowd. As light as it was, the touch stopped Kate in her tracks. He smothered a curse and removed his hand.

"Sorry. Force of habit."

Users Review

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