



NOTE: This story takes place after the epilogue of *Deep* and thus includes **SPOILERS** for all four books in the Pagano Family Series.

TOKENS

*Love shall be our token,
Love shall be yours and love be mine.*
Christina Rossetti, "Love Came Down at Christmas"

"Thanks, Sam. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, don."

Nick slapped Sam on the arm, and his driver and guard went back to climb into the dark SUV and drive off. He walked past his mother's Cadillac and the caterer's van. As he stepped onto the porch, the front door opened with such force that the large, elaborate pine wreath swung. Elisa bolted through the door, Cuddles padding after her. Nick could hear Christmas carols playing. Perry Como—he knew it well from his own childhood. His mother had apparently made the selection.

"Papa! Lia is climbing on the bannister again!"

Nick bent down and picked his eldest daughter up. “Hello to you, too, *signorina*. Where’s Mamma?”

“She’s cooking with Miss Ashley and Miss Gina and Nonna is upstairs with Carina and Lia is climbing on the *bannister* and you said *never* climb on the bannister because we can fall and get hurt and cry and I *told* her but she did it *anyway!*”

“Okay. Let’s go in.”

Once inside, they found Lia sitting quietly on the bottom step, holding Thelma, one of her grandmother’s Yorkies, in her lap. Louise, the other, lay a few steps up. Both dogs had glittery red bows in the fur on top of their heads. When Cuddles came back in, Thelma struggled for freedom and then, achieving it, yapped and ran with her sister down the stairs and toward the back of the house, both stopping midway to yap again. Cuddles just stayed where he was until they gave up and went on without him. Nick had the sense that his daughters’ golden retriever thought his Yorkie cousins were generally pains in his ass.

“Hi, Papa,” Lia said, smiling sweetly.

Nick put Elisa back on her feet. “Hi, *gattina*. Were you on the bannister again?”

She widened her eyes and shook her head, the picture of innocence. “No.”

“Papa, she was!”

“Was not!”

“Were too! You’re a big liar!”

“You are!”

“Girls! I just walked in the door. If I put Rudolph on downstairs, will you sit together without fighting and watch?”

Elisa, ever the hall monitor, said, “Mamma doesn’t want us downstairs. She said she wants us where she can see us.”

“The family room, then.”

“Nonna’s music is on.”

“Nonna can listen to her music later. Come on. I’ll get you set up with Rudolph.”

“We saw Rudolph this morning. Can we have Frosty instead?”

Lia interjected. “Frosty’s boring. I want Barbie Christmas.”

“It is not! Barbie Christmas is dumb. Teresa said so. I want Frosty.” Elisa put her hands on her hips, ready again to go toe-to-toe with Lia over the matter.

Nick was tempted to call Sam back and go back to the office. The problems there were comparatively easy to solve. But when it came down to it, this solution was not terribly different. Set the terms. Find the thing one’s adversary values most, and put it on the block. With a sigh, he drew his brows in and gave them a stern look. “Girls, pick a movie right now, or I’ll tell Santa you were fighting on Christmas Eve.”

Elisa and Lia both stopped in mid-squabble and turned to him, their mouths open with shock. Elisa broke first. “Papa, no! We’ll be good, we’ll be good! We can watch Barbie Christmas!”

Lia simply nodded, agreeing with her older sister at last—because she’d gotten her way.

He held out his hands, and Elisa and Lia laid theirs in his. “Come on, you two. It’s time for Barbie Christmas and some peace and quiet.”

~oOo~

The older girls thus distracted, and the baby apparently upstairs with his mother, Nick went to the kitchen. He was concerned that Beverly hadn’t come out to greet him; she always did. But they hadn’t been getting along all that well the past few days. Maybe he’d gotten in trouble while he was away at work. It was possible: she had been tense and distracted lately, since she’d begun in earnest her preparations for this dinner, and the mood had blindsided him. Beverly loved Christmas and was normally even sunnier than usual at this time of year.

Somehow, she had managed to get his cousins to abandon their own family tradition and have Christmas Eve dinner here instead of at their house. Nick had no idea how she’d done it; he had not been any part of the decision. When she’d raised the thought with him, he’d said that their holiday traditions were iron-clad and there was no way they’d change them to have dinner here.

Nick’s smaller part of the family had had traditions of their own—they had spent Christmas Eve and Day with Uncle Ben, Aunt Angie, and his mother, and they’d gone over to the cousins’ for a while on Christmas afternoon. But Angie had died just after the previous Christmas, and Ben had followed her in the summer. Nick was done now, and he and Beverly had three children. She wanted to start a tradition of their own.

He’d shot her down when she’d first brought it up. And then, right after Thanksgiving, Beverly had announced that they were hosting Christmas Eve dinner, and that the entire family and some dear friends would be joining them. Twenty-four people in all. Twenty-five, counting Carina, almost six months old.

Christmas Eve dinner was a traditionally important meal in all the Pagano homes, and in all the Italian homes Nick had ever known. More important than any meal on the next day, although those were elaborate as well. Before Midnight Mass, they abstained from meat, so the meal was fish-based. In Nick's memory—and he knew it was true for his cousins, too—the tradition had been relaxed in the family over the years, and the fish had been restricted to the entrée. Beverly, however, had decided that, since she had been granted what she saw as a true honor, she would serve the very traditional Feast of the Seven Fishes.

She wasn't Italian. She wasn't Catholic, though she attended Mass with him and the girls. She was a good cook, but a much, much more casual cook than this meal she'd chosen made room for. His wife had taken on a great deal more than she could handle, he thought, with three daughters to raise, a house to manage, and a business to run, but pointing that out to her had earned him a very cold night indeed.

She'd gotten one key thing wrong. She had invited his family as guests, rather than assume that they would all come early and that the women would be part of the preparations. When he'd mentioned that she'd have all the help she needed, she'd waved him off with a WASPy hand, saying she couldn't possibly invite people and expect them to work for their supper, totally disregarding the fact that she routinely and happily helped out when they went to family for a holiday.

When he'd come home one evening to find her sitting at her kitchen desk looking stressed and weepy, scheduling tasks to the minute on the whiteboard she normally used to keep track of the girls' activities, Nick had insisted she hire help, since she wouldn't consider taking the free help available. Hence "Miss Ashley and Miss Gina," from the catering service at Dominic's.

Now he stood at the entrance to the kitchen and watched, unnoticed for the moment. The three women were bustling about, and it felt almost like the kitchen at Dominic's. The smell of the mingled fishes was strong but not unpleasant—of course, living on the Rhode Island coast, the smell of fish was a familiar, homey scent.

Clams, anchovies, mussels, salt cod, shrimp, lobster, and eel. Baked, roasted, grilled, sautéed, tossed with pasta, served over vegetables. For dessert, cannoli and struffoli. He'd seen the menu repeatedly over the course of the past couple of weeks. Nick thought Beverly must have read up on every conceivable iteration of traditional Italian holiday foods, and she was trying to put on a spread that hit every note.

There was no way Lia was eating anything on this menu. Except the struffoli. If every other large family meal was any indication, their pathologically picky middle daughter would have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on her china plate. Or possibly some plain linguine with butter—if Beverly insisted that she at least approximate the family's meal.

As he thought of the sweet little monster that was Lia, Nick grinned and stepped in, ready to make himself known. At just that moment, Elisa ran in from the family room entrance.

"Mamma! Lia won't quit making the movie go back and forth!"

Beverly slammed a wooden spoon onto the island and wheeled on their girl. “Elisa! Would you stop tattling! Just stop! Handle it your fucking self!”

The whole room froze. Even Ashley and Gina stopped, glancing at each other and stepping back, out of range of the family triangle.

“Beverly!” Nick wasn’t sure whether the swearing or the tone itself had shocked him more. Beverly’s parenting style was almost maniacally gentle and positive. She had been raised by a hypercritical mother, and she was trying to be as different from Jane Maddox as she could be. She saved her irritation, frustration, and weariness for their quiet moments together, when she could get it off her chest without getting it on their children. Nick didn’t think he’d ever heard her yell at the girls, except simply to be heard over their din.

And Elisa was a quiet, extremely sensitive child. She would take this moment to heart for weeks.

Elisa, in fact, looked devastated and terrified. She stood with her eyes and mouth wide, and then turned abruptly and ran past Nick, down the hall, and up the stairs, wailing at the top of her lungs.

And that was when Beverly saw Nick. Her face crumpled, and then she ran from the kitchen in tears, too—heading around the corner, to his study.

Alone now with the alarmed kitchen staff, Nick turned to them. He didn’t bother to smile or do anything to ease their minds. “Can you carry on without her?”

Gina nodded. “Yes, sir.” Both girls worked at Dominic’s, so they knew him well enough to know what kind of respect he commanded.

“Good. Do so.” He turned and went up to follow after his firstborn. Her crisis needed the most immediate attention, and he was as angry at Beverly as he was worried about her. He’d do better to wait to sort her out until the anger had cooled.

His mother was at the top of the stairs, about to head down. “Nicky—is everything all right?”

“Just a little meltdown, Ma.” He kissed her cheek.

“She shouldn’t be doing all this by herself—that’s what family’s for! I tell her, but she won’t listen.”

“I know, Ma. But this is the first time we’ve had family here like this. She’s wrapped up in making it perfect.”

His mother huffed and shook her head. “Family is what makes it perfect.”

Not the first time in the past few weeks he'd heard this from his mother. She and Beverly got along beautifully and loved each other deeply. This was, as far as he knew, the first time they'd clashed. He changed the subject. "The baby's okay?"

"Down for her nap, finally." Carina was a distinctly fussy baby. Beverly was convinced her discontent was due to their decision to supplement breast milk with formula. Nick thought maybe his littlest angel was simply impatient and disgruntled with her helplessness. She was almost never still—even in sleep, she'd been moving around in the crib from the time she was only a few weeks old. He thought her temper would cool when she could get about on her own more.

"Thanks. Will you go down and keep an eye on Lia and the kitchen while I sort this out?"

"Of course. Is Bev okay? She's been off today."

He'd left the house early, while she was getting the girls going for the morning. She'd seemed tired, but not unduly, by recent standards. She hadn't really bounced back from Carina's birth, so recent standards had been a bit cloudier than her norm. But she covered well, so Nick was the only one who knew that she'd been struggling at all. The rest of the world got all the sun she had to give. "She's my next stop. Thanks, Ma."

He found Elisa on her bed, curled up under the covers. Cuddles had followed after her, and she was hugging his head. She was still crying, more quietly now. The dog's ears were wet.

Nick sat on the side of her bed. "*Signorina*. Mamma is very tired. She didn't mean to yell."

Elisa sniffed and sat up. Cuddles, freed of his comforting duties for the moment, shook his head. "I try to be good, Papa. Lia doesn't try at all."

"I know you do." He brushed the tears from her cheeks. "But Lia isn't your job, Elisa. Couldn't you have found something else to do if she was bothering you?"

"She'd just come bother me wherever I was. And she was being *annoying!*" She sighed and sniffed again. "Mamma said a ugly word, not a loving word." Elisa was using the language that they used when the girls asked about the things people said. Swearing and words like 'stupid' and 'retarded' were ugly words. "If I'm good and let Lia do what she wants, will Mamma love me again?"

"Ah, *signorina*. Your mamma loves you. There's nothing you could ever do to make her stop. She's just tired and very busy today. You'll see. She'll come up and make it better. Why don't you read for a while, and I'll go talk to her. Okay?"

Elisa nodded and climbed onto his lap. He hugged her and kissed the top of her auburn head. "I love you, little miss."

"I love you, Papa."

~oOo~

When he got downstairs, his mother and Lia were plinking around on the piano. Elisa's fifth birthday had happened earlier in the month. She wanted to learn the piano, so they'd bought her one. So far, Lia seemed more interested in the instrument than her older sister did. A very rough rendition of 'Jingle Bells' was happening now.

Beverly was back in the kitchen, trying to return to her work. She met his eyes and sent him a silent apology. Her eyes were swollen and rimmed red; she had cried harder than Elisa.

He went to her and put his hand on her hip. "Come, *bella*. Let's talk."

"I have to focus on all this. The tables aren't set, and I don't have the kids' meal started. People are going to be here in less than four hours."

He took her hand and pulled her from the island. "That's why we hired help. We need to talk. Come." She stopped resisting and let him lead her back to his study. There, he sat her down on a black leather sofa. "Tell me."

And she put her face in her hands and cried. He brought her close and held her, letting her go until she could stop on her own. When she was quiet, he said, "I can call and get somebody here to finish it all. If you want Dominic himself, I can have him here within half an hour. It's Christmas. We should be enjoying the girls. You shouldn't be so overwhelmed over a family dinner."

She sat back and wiped her face. "It's not that. It is more than I thought, but it would be fine. I was enjoying it, mostly. But...Nick..." Her lip started to tremble again, and he put his thumb gently on it.

"Easy, *bella*. What is it?"

"I'm pregnant again!" This time she folded over onto her lap and sobbed hard.

Nick stared at her back for a second, stunned for the second time since he'd walked in the door. Shit. Carina wasn't even six months old, and it had not been an easy six months. Beverly just hadn't been the same. She was still gentle and kind and loving. She was an amazing mother and wife. The bookshop was enjoying greater success than it ever had before. But she had been quieter and more reserved since Carina. She said she was fine and the girls were just keeping her on her toes, but he felt sure there was something more. He didn't know what it might be, but she was changed.

They weren't ready for another baby. Carina was still waking twice a night to feed. Elisa wasn't even in kindergarten yet and wouldn't be until the following fall. And he wanted his sun back at her full brilliance.

Lia was only ten months younger than Elisa. After that, Beverly had said she wanted only one child in diapers at a time. So they'd been careful, and Carina was three and a half years younger than Lia. They were nowhere near ready to think about a fourth yet. Not, apparently, that it mattered.

They'd been careful this time, too. Hell, they hadn't had all that many opportunities *not* to be careful. There was at least one child in their bed at night more than half the time.

But Nick knew when it had to have happened. Their anniversary. He'd taken her to New York City for the weekend. For those three days, Beverly had been her old self, and they'd made up for a lot of lost time. Since she was nursing, they'd been using condoms.

Almost all the time. Except in the elevator. Rubbing Beverly's shaking back as she wept, he couldn't help but smile at that memory.

"It's okay, *bella*."

"It's not! I can't, Nick. I'm so tired. I haven't gotten myself back from Carina. My body and my head and my everything still feels... *flabby*. And pregnant and nursing again? That was so hard with Elisa and Lia. I can't do it. I just can't."

He knew she wasn't saying what it sounded like she was saying. He moved off the sofa and squatted in front of her, taking her hands. "Look at me, Beverly." She lifted her eyes. "You can. You don't have to do it alone. We'll make Brenda full time." Brenda, their nanny, now came in about twenty hours a week so Beverly could work at the shop. "And you can cut back at the shop. Katrynn is a great manager. Hire more staff so you can go in when you want and stay home when you want." They could also wean Carina onto formula entirely, he thought, but he knew better than to say it right now. "You know when it happened, right?"

"New York," she sniffed. "It has to be New York."

He nodded. "Yes, but remember when?"

Her look was blank. He was a little hurt that she didn't remember.

"Coming back from our anniversary dinner, late...after that cab ride..."

She smiled a little. "Oh."

"Yes. 'Oh.' I like the thought that we conceived when I had you face-first on the elevator wall." The hotel security team had probably gotten a real show that night.

Her smile grew and her cheeks pinked up. “That was nice. With that start, this one will probably be our boy.”

He grinned. Maybe so. But it didn’t matter. “You can do this, *bella*. *We* can.” He’d been thinking about the next thing he was going to say for a while, as he’d watched Beverly struggle over the past few months, but he hadn’t brought it up yet. This moment seemed an apt time. “And I’ll get cut. We stop at four.”

She sat up a little, surprised. “If this is our boy, you mean.”

“No. I’ll make an appointment right after the holidays. It doesn’t matter whether this one is a boy or not. I love my girls. I love the pink and the glitter and the Barbies and princesses and all of it. I don’t need a son to make my family complete. Every one of our children is a token of our love, *bella*. My family was complete when I put this ring on your finger.” He brought her hand to his lips. “*Sei tutto per me. Sei il sole della mia vita. Ti amo.*”

She put her hand on the side of his face. “I love you. Don’t make the appointment yet. I’m not ready to be pregnant again, but I’m not ready to be so final about it, either.” She laughed shyly. “I’m sorry about being crazy today.”

“You are the farthest thing from crazy. You need help you’re not asking for—but now I’m going to make sure you get it.” He kissed her hand again. “And it’s not me you owe an apology, Mamma.”

The color drained again from her face. “Oh, God. Poor Elisa! I can’t believe I spoke to her like that!”

“I talked to her. She’s okay. I told her you’d come up and see her.”

“Okay. I need to check on dinner first.”

“No. You need to talk to our girl. Do you want me to get Dominic here and take over in the kitchen?”

“No, no. Ashley and Gina know what they’re doing, and I don’t want to just hand it all over. Okay. I’ll... okay. I’ll go talk to Elisa. The girls need to nap before dinner, anyway, so they’ll still be awake for Mass.”

He stood and helped her to her feet. “Go. I’ll put Ma in the kitchen and I’ll get Lia up to bed.”

~oOo~

A few hours later, their house was full of every living Pagano. Nick’s mother. His Uncle Carlo and his wife, Adele. His cousins and their families: Carlo, Sabina, Trey, and Little Ben; Carmen,

Theo, and Teresa; Luca and Manny; John; Joey; and Rosa, Eli, and Teddy. Eli's brother, Theo's other son, Jordan, was there. Katrynn was there. And Donnie, too. All of the most important people in their lives.

After a nap—Nick had insisted that Beverly lie down for a few minutes, too—all his girls were restored, and Beverly had dressed them in red velvet dresses with white faux-fur trim. They matched, but each was different, too. Beverly was also dressed in red velvet. To see all his girls looking like a matched set made Nick smile.

Beverly had checked in on the progress of the kitchen, but she ultimately let Nick's mother take over—a position Betty had been chomping at the bit for, anyway. While she delegated the food prep, Beverly had enlisted Elisa and Lia to help her set the tables—elegant and traditional for the adults, and Santa-themed for the kids. While Nick paced a crabby Carina around the house, in what they had come to call 'walkies,' doing laps around the first floor because only movement would keep her settled, Beverly had given Elisa a large gift bag filled with small gold-foil-wrapped boxes for the grownups, and Lia another bag filled with boxes wrapped in paper with sparkling snowflakes for the children, and the girls set a box on the top of each place setting. Little tokens for each member of their family.

Despite the afternoon's drama, and despite the less-than-picture-perfect settings created by small but eager hands, the tables were wonderful. When family had begun to arrive, everything had been ready, and Beverly had been flush with pride in that.

And, of course, it was all torn to shreds within minutes of the house being full of people. The kids ripped open the little packages at their places long before dinner was served, and there were Christmas LEGOs scattered all over the house seconds later. The adults nibbled at the food as it was laid out and left their drinks about, losing track of them. Lia was wearing a stripe of virgin eggnog on the front of her velvet dress.

Norman Rockwell had left the building.

Nick kept an eye on Beverly, concerned that, in her current state, she'd stress about the mess, but she had most of the women in the kitchen now, and the room was full of chatter and laughter, as it should have been all day.

Carina was in Luca's arms, giggling as he swooped her back and forth through the air, her little red dress billowing out around her chubby legs. Nick laughed, realizing that it was Luca he thought Carina was most like.

John and Katrynn were talking in a corner, apart from the rest of the circus. Their talk seemed serious and intense, and Nick lingered for a moment, curious. But then Elisa ran up and asked him to help her put her LEGO reindeer back together, and John and Katrynn were forgotten.

Nick had started the day by okaying a hit. Two of J.J.'s men were spending Christmas Eve ending the life of a man who'd thought to challenge Nick, while Nick himself leaned against the bar in his living room with a glass of scotch in his hand and talked football with his cousins—

and Trey, who had surprisingly knowledgeable opinions about the Pats—and his children and their cousins ran and squealed through the rooms of his home.

When he took the call confirming that the job was done, he'd wedged his phone between his shoulder and his ear so he could fix the bow on the back of Elisa's dress.

The violence of his life would never change, even though now his own hands stayed clean. But it no longer darkened him as it once had. This was his balance—this home, his wife, his children, his family. And another child on the way. He smiled. He knew it would be hard for this one to be so close in age with Carina, for Beverly more than anyone else, but he couldn't be sorry to know that their love would bring forth another token. Another happy voice in this chorus.

Speaking of which, Beverly walked into the living room, looking lovely and radiant in her own red velvet. She came over and kissed him, stepping back just as he started to wrap her in his arms. "It's time to eat, people!" she called, raising her voice above the chattering din.

It took some time to get even a hungry crowd of this size moving in tandem. Gina and Ashley took control of the kids' table. At the adults' table, everyone, without being prompted, began opening the little foil-wrapped boxes Elisa had placed on their plates. Sterling silver key chains engraved with the Pagano family crest—another of his wife's ideas. Small tokens of the thing that bound them all together. Family. Even Donnie and Katrynn got one—they had become, over the years, members of the family, through their tight bond with Beverly.

Once everyone was seated, the kids at their table, the adults at theirs, Nick at the head and his Uncle Carlo directly across from him, a spread of gorgeous fish dishes arrayed for the adults and more kid-friendly tuna tetrazzini for the children, Nick raised his glass.

"Before we set in, I'd like to toast you all. I know this is a break in long-standing traditions, and it means a lot to me and Beverly both that you've joined us here tonight. We lost Uncle Ben and Aunt Angie this past year, and they left holes we'll never be able to fill. Family was important to them, and I think they'd be glad to see us all together for this important meal. Thank you." He lifted his glass to a mingled chorus of "*Salute!*" and "*Cin cin!*"

Then he nodded to his uncle. "Uncle Carlo, would you do us the honor of saying grace?"

Carlo Sr., obviously moved, nodded. "I'd be honored, Nick. You mind if I say something first?"

Nick shook his head and held out his hand, indicating that his uncle should go ahead.

Carlo Sr. cleared his throat. "You're right that being here, eating at your table on Christmas Eve, isn't our tradition. When my father passed, my brothers and I went our own ways—in many things. But I'm the last of my generation now, and our children are making a new generation. It's time for new traditions. These children should grow up in a family that's together." He looked at Beverly and smiled. "I guess it took a woman like Bev, who sees things like they should be, and thinks the way they are is no excuse, to remind us that we belong together. So thank you, Bev—and Nick, too—for bringing us all together on this holy night."

“Hear, hear!” Luca exclaimed, grinning at Beverly. All of the diners raised their glasses and toasted her. She blushed and smiled down at her place setting.

Then Carlo Sr., the patriarch of the Pagano family, nodded to Nick, the don of the Pagano Brothers. The older man bowed his head and folded his hands. The rest of the table followed suit.

But Nick reached out and took Beverly’s hand, linking their fingers together. He had thought many times over the years that she had given him his family. Now he understood that she had bestowed that gift on all of them.

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