



Royal Valentine

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Description: Princess Ilaria has had it up to her tiara with the paparazzi, her own wild reputation, and the public eye. Trading places with her assistant, Ilaria wants just one blissfully ordinary weekend. Then a handsome photographer with a sexy Scottish burr offers to be her guide. Sparks fly, but how long can they last? Ilaria's secret has to come out—and it could ruin a perfectly serendipitous romance.

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CHAPTER ONE

Anne, my PR assistant, and I stood in front of the full-length mirror, gazing at our reflections.

“I’m telling you this won’t work,” she said. “No one is going to believe that I’m Her Royal Highness, Princess Ilaria of Monterra.”

She was right. If anyone looked at us too closely, they would be able to immediately tell. But people tended to see what they expected to see.

“It will,” I tried to reassure her. Our physical similarities—the same dark hair, same height—were part of the reason why she’d been hired. We often switched places to throw off the paparazzi. Anne would walk through the front door and I would sneak out the exit. But that was always short-term.

I’d never asked her to give me this kind of time before—two whole days all to myself.

Just a few minutes earlier, I’d been standing on the balcony of my suite at the hotel next to the Trinità dei Monti, the cathedral at the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome. I had been watching the sunset over the skyline when I’d noticed a man setting up a camera at the top of the Steps.

Something about him drew my eye—the way the setting sun made his hair look almost red. He had broad shoulders and seemed to be tall—but I couldn’t make out anything beyond that. I wondered if he was handsome.

Tomorrow was Valentine's Day and I didn't have anyone in my life to celebrate with. I wondered what it would be like to be able to walk down there and ask the man about what he was photographing. To engage in a conversation with someone who didn't know my name or my family or about my overly exaggerated past.

To be just like every other tourist out there, taking in the sights.

I had been overcome with a desperate urge to escape. Just for a couple of days.

That's when I'd concocted this scheme, asking Anne to switch places with me for a weekend.

"We're supposed to drive back tonight, and then on Monday you have that ball at the Monterran royal palace," she had reminded me.

The ball was for the Monterran royal family's favorite charity—the Fiorelli Foundation for a Cure. I had studied art history at university, but there wasn't a great need for an art historian within the foundation. Given the constant attention I received from the paparazzi, it had been decided that it would be best for me to fundraise.

I'd just finished up another stuffy, boring party here in Rome, where I'd had to smile and nod and hope that my mere presence would help raise enough money to meet our yearly goals.

"I know. I'll be there. I'm asking for two days where no one's looking over my shoulder or taking my picture. You get in the car and go back to Monterra and stay in my apartment."

"Your bodyguard is going to notice when you're not in the car."

I waved my hand, dismissing her statement. "You know as well as I do that Luigi

desperately needs glasses and refuses to wear them. As long as you stay quiet, he won't notice." Her accent would immediately give her away.

She seemed to be wavering.

"Please, Anne. I promise to be back before the ball. No one will even know."

"What if Lemon finds out?" Lemon was my cousin-in-law, married to Prince Dante. She handled all the PR for the royal family and tended to hire American interns like Anne.

"I will tell her everything was my idea. You won't lose your job. I promise. Please."

She let out a long breath and said, "Okay. Let's switch. But I think Luigi is going to figure it out as soon as I leave the suite."

Giddy that she'd finally agreed, I called the front desk and told them I was extending my stay for two more days and then we spent the next hour packing up and exchanging clothing. I gave Anne my cell phone and promised her that I would pick up a burner. The security office tracked my phone, and they would notice if it was still in Rome while I was supposed to be in Monterra. I did her hair and makeup so that she'd look like me. We switched passports and purses.

Luigi knocked at the door. "Time to go."

"I'm coming, but Anne is going to stay behind and sightsee for a few days," I called back. Then I turned to whisper to her, "There. It's done. Keep your sunglasses on and walk with confidence."

"Like I'm a princess," she muttered. "This is what I get for spending my entire childhood wishing I could be a princess when I grew up." She put on the Chanel

sunglasses that covered half of her face and let out a deep sigh.

“I owe you for this,” I said.

“Enjoy yourself. And get back home safely. Please don’t cause an international incident, because my boss really will murder me.”

I hugged her goodbye and watched as she walked out into the living room. My heart beat hard in my chest and I waited for Luigi to say something, but I heard the front door shut.

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Free! I was free! Giddy excitement welled up inside me. I hadn't been alone like this in years.

I went over to the balcony and waited until Luigi and Anne emerged from the hotel. The paparazzi were waiting, yelling my name, but Anne kept her head down and quickly climbed into the waiting black SUV.

They drove off and the paparazzi dispersed.

I went back into the suite. I was unaccustomed to the silence, to the feeling of being completely alone.

My head started to hurt, and I figured it had to be due to all the stress of what I'd just done. I looked through Anne's purse and found a bottle of 500 mg of aspirin. I took a couple and decided to begin my adventure.

Starting with talking to that possibly cute photographer.

No one paid me any attention as I walked through the hotel, which was the complete opposite of what had happened when I'd arrived. I turned my shoulders inward, ducking my head. I was just an American tourist, not a Monterran princess. I wanted to giggle that it had actually worked.

I walked outside, keeping my head down. Out of habit. But no one wanted my picture; nobody recognized me. I lifted my chin but was struck by a strange feeling.

A wave of sleepiness hit me, stronger than I'd ever felt.

I tried to shake my head, as if that would clear it up, but the sensation got worse.

I reached the Spanish Steps and didn't see the photographer. I yawned, disappointed.

That was okay, though. Rome was full of possibilities. Maybe I'd meet someone and wouldn't spend Valentine's Day alone.

The sun had almost completely set, and I walked down a few steps and collapsed. The city had banned people from sitting or sleeping on the Steps, but I was so exhausted. Like the enormity of what I'd just done was settling in and making even my bones feel weary. My parents would be furious with me for putting myself in a possibly dangerous situation. They were always so sure that I was going to get kidnapped.

I yawned again, my headache feeling even worse, pulsing in every part of my brain. Maybe I should go back to the hotel and sleep this off and start my adventure fresh the next morning.

It was the last thought I had before I passed out.

CHAPTER TWO

I woke up completely panicked. I was lying on a couch and had no idea where I was or what had happened to me.

I'd been kidnapped! I'd been warned about it for so many years and now it had happened because of recklessness. My mother would never let me hear the end of this.

"Buongiorno."

A man was in the kitchen and I sat straight up. He was tall, over six feet. He had light brown hair, and slightly darker stubble lined his jaw. He was broad, muscled, and very handsome, and he had an odd accent.

He added in Italian, “I made you an espresso, and I have biscuits if you’d like them.”

Were kidnappers usually this nice? I wasn’t sure how to respond.

The man switched to English. “I’m sorry—you’re American, right? I’m just so used to speaking Italian now.”

The first thing I noticed was his accent. That Scottish burr was unmistakable. No wonder his Italian had sounded a bit off.

My second thought was about him proclaiming that I was American. I looked down at Anne’s clothes. I’d always had an ear for accents and languages—it was one of the reasons I’d tried my hand at acting when I was eighteen. “Yes. American,” I echoed.

This was good news. Because if he thought I was American, then he definitely didn’t know who I was and I hadn’t been kidnapped in order to blackmail the royal court of Monterra.

But my relief was quickly chased away by an even worse possibility. If he hadn’t kidnapped me for a ransom, then why had he taken me back to his flat? It had to be for nefarious purposes.

A beautiful woman came into the kitchen and smiled at me. She was delicate looking and quintessentially Italian, with dark black hair and perfect curves. She kissed the man good morning on his cheeks and took the mug he offered her.

The relief was back. He wasn’t going to lock me up in his basement. He had a

girlfriend. But this was also strangely disappointing. Something about the man seemed familiar, and I felt drawn to him. Maybe this was due to coming down from my fight-or-flight adrenaline spike, but I had to admit that if I'd met him in a bar, I would have flirted with him.

He was heart-poundingly attractive.

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“Did you find out anything yet?” the woman asked in Italian, and I decided to pretend that I didn’t understand them. I looked away, as if I wasn’t following their conversation closely.

“No,” he replied. “She just woke up. I thought I should feed her first.”

“Somebody will be looking for her. It’s never good when American students go missing.”

Why would they think I was a student? I was twenty-five years old and had graduated from university years ago.

There was a purse on the coffee table in front of me.

Anne’s purse.

They must have looked through it and thought I was Anne, who was young enough to still be a student.

“Where am I?” I asked.

The man switched to English. “In our flat. I found you passed out on the Spanish Steps and, when I couldnae wake you up, brought you here. I wasnae sure what else to do.” He said this sheepishly, as if embarrassed.

Passed out? What?

Then I thought about the fact that this very attractive man had carried me through the streets of Rome, and that created a strange thrill inside me.

He came over with the espresso and put it on the table in front of me, backing up slightly after he'd put it down. Like he was making sure not to crowd me or frighten me.

I found it endearing.

But I was unsettled a little by the fact that this strange man had found me, brought me back to the apartment he shared with his girlfriend, and I had no recollection of any of it.

And admittedly I was a little disappointed that I couldn't remember what it felt like to be held by him.

"Were you drinking?" the woman asked, also switching to English.

"No. I hadn't had anything to drink at all yesterday," I said, reminding myself to be careful with my accent. I liked the idea of being Not Ilaria. "In fact, I only took some aspirin because I had a headache ..."

My voice trailed off as I reached for Anne's bag. I opened the aspirin bottle and emptied the contents into my hand.

These were not aspirin. I'd been so excited to be on my own that I hadn't even noticed.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. I couldn't believe I'd accidentally drugged myself and missed out on ten precious hours of freedom in Rome.

The woman came over and peered into my open hand. “Zolpidem. I believe you call it Ambien. How many did you take?”

“Two.”

She gave me a very disapproving look. “The highest recommended dose is ten milligrams, or one pill.”

No wonder I’d passed out.

“Lucia’s a pharmacist,” the man said approvingly, as if proud of her.

My heart twinged. I wished that I had someone who felt like that about me. My last relationship had ended disastrously, splashed all over the headlines of every tabloid in the world.

Lucia spoke in Italian again. “She shouldn’t be left alone today.”

“Do you have anyone you can call?” he asked me in English. “Are you staying with friends?”

“No, I’m traveling alone.” I hadn’t been, but now I technically was. And I wasn’t going to call anybody and tell them where I was.

“There could be some side effects from taking that dose. Extreme drowsiness, difficulty breathing, confusion, or loss of consciousness. You’ll have to watch her,” Lucia said to him in Italian. “I have to work today.”

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I half expected him to protest, but he just nodded.

This was all very strange. Lucia left the room, presumably to get ready for her job, and I stood up. “I should go. Back to my hotel. Thank you for not leaving me on the Steps.” If even one of those paparazzi had stumbled over me, I would have shamed my entire family. The headlines would have said I had some kind of alcohol or drug problem or something equally horrific.

Not to mention what some random pervert might have done to me, given the state I was in. I shuddered at the thought.

“You’re quite welcome,” he said. “May I walk you back?”

I supposed there wasn’t any harm in that. It felt a bit torturous, given how handsome yet unavailable he was. I tried to imagine how Anne would respond. “Sure.”

I got her purse and put her jacket back on. I wondered which one of them had removed it and put me under a blanket on the couch.

I suspected that it had been him.

He also got a jacket and slung a bag over his shoulder. He called out a goodbye to Lucia, who said she’d see him later. He and I walked down several flights of stairs in silence. When we left the building, I said to him, “I don’t even know your name.”

“My apologies. Callum Stewart. A pleasure to meet you.” He offered me his hand, and after a tentative pause, I took it.

He'd meant for us to shake, but all I could think about were the tingles racing up and down my veins from just the touch of his warm, firm hand.

I hadn't ever felt this kind of immediate attraction to anyone else. I jerked my hand away, wondering if he'd noticed the way I had started trembling.

I was supposed to be regal and instead I was shaking.

Ridiculous.

"And you're Anne Smith?" he prompted, and I nodded.

"I am." Some part of me had worried that he or his roommate might have recognized me. My existence was strange—anyone who read entertainment websites or tabloids knew exactly who I was, but to everyone else I was just a regular person. Given that he was calling me Anne, I seemed to be in the clear.

"On holiday?" he asked as we walked.

It was such a surreal experience to be walking along a sidewalk in the Eternal City with a gorgeous man and not have to worry that someone was about to jump out of the bushes and try to take my photograph. I relaxed and smiled, feeling as if I could finally breathe deeply and enjoy the time I had left on my mini-vacation. It was so freeing.

"Yes. For the next two days, and then I have to go back home."

"I'm guessing that accidentally knocking yourself out on a national monument was nae part of your travel plans," he teased, and I put a hand over my stomach as it fluttered in response.

He was so friendly and charming ... and that smile of his? It made the whole world seem brighter.

“Not quite. I’m hoping to see all the touristy places, though.”

“Hopefully you’ll manage to stay awake while you do,” he said, and I smiled. “I’d be happy to be your tour guide while you’re here.”

“Oh.” His offer was far too tempting and I wanted desperately to accept. “You don’t have to babysit me.”

“I wasnae intending to,” he said. “I love this city and would be happy to share it with a beautiful woman.”

I felt lightheaded, and I wasn’t sure if it was due to his words or the medication. I knew I should put a bit of distance between myself and the very charming man. “Your girlfriend wouldn’t mind if you spend Valentine’s Day with me?”

“Girlfriend?” Callum frowned, as if he didn’t know what I meant.

“Lucia?”

He grinned and said, “Lucia isnae my girlfriend. She’s my roommate and friend. I’m not her type.”

I had a very hard time imagining that Callum Stewart wasn’t anyone’s type. Not only because of how attractive he was, but also how kind and friendly he seemed to be. “Not her type?”

“She isnae into men.”

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Oh. Definitely not his girlfriend, then. Which meant ...

“I’m single,” he said, as if reading my mind.

I found myself grinning and immediately tried to rearrange my lips into a flat line.

The gleam in his eye let me know that he’d seen my response, though.

“Me too,” I couldn’t help but say, and he nodded like this pleased him. That frisson of awareness and attraction burned through me, making me feel a bit like I’d swallowed a match.

It had been a very long time since I’d felt this way.

We were walking past the block where the Trevi Fountain was located when it occurred to me that I couldn’t let him walk me back to my hotel. Rooms there started at five figures a night. He would quickly realize that I wasn’t some poor American college student. If he found out that I was HRH, Princess Ilaria of Monterra, his feelings would change and everything would be ruined.

I’d had far too much experience in this area to expect any other outcome.

I came to a sudden stop. Someone cursed at me in Italian as they nearly crashed into me, and I stepped closer to the nearest building to get out of the way. “Are you all right?” Callum asked, looking concerned.

“Yes. I ... just realized that we were close to the Trevi Fountain and wanted to see it.

You don't have to come with me," I hurriedly added. "I don't want you to feel obligated."

I really didn't want him to be with me because Lucia had told him to. I wasn't feeling any kind of side effects. Yes, I was a bit breathless and slightly dizzy, but I suspected that was due to Callum and not any medication that I'd taken last night. I would be fine on my own. I would rather have the memory of our very odd meeting than see the look on his face when he realized who I was and how it would destroy his entire life to be seen with me.

His expression was serious when he said, "I ken that I'm not obligated. But I would like to spend the day with you, if you'll have me."

CHAPTER THREE

If I'd have him? I could feel my face turning red as I thought of all the ways I would like to have this extremely sexy man.

"Yes, please. Er, I mean ..." I was falling over myself. "Sure. Okay." Being flustered was making it difficult to hold on to my American accent and slang.

Another amazing grin from him and my heart butterflied around my chest. This had the potential to be disastrous, but I wanted this time with him. I wasn't going to admit to anything that might cause our day to come to a premature end.

This would be my version of a fairy tale. Other girls wanted to be princesses, but all I wanted was this—to be a regular girl touring a beautiful city with a handsome man.

"Good," he said with a smile. "The fountain is this way."

We walked together and he seemed to radiate warmth. I found myself wanting to lean

into him and soak it up, especially given the chill in the February air.

“Are you still at university?” he asked.

“No, I graduated a while ago,” I said, forgetting the fact that I was supposed to be Anne. I hoped he hadn’t looked too closely at her age.

He didn’t seem to notice my slipup, though. “What did you study?”

“Art history.”

Callum nodded. “Then you must love Rome.”

“In a way that’s hard to explain,” I said. “The entire city is like an outdoor museum filled with history, architecture, and art everywhere you look.”

“It’s why I moved here eight months ago,” he said.

“You majored in art history, too?”

“No. I’m a photographer.” He gestured at the bag he’d strapped on earlier.

Pieces started to fall into place. “Were you taking photos at the Spanish Steps yesterday evening?”

“Aye, that’s how I found you.”

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My pulse hammered hard in my throat. He was the man I'd seen, the one who had inspired me to break away and experience real life for once. It seemed fated, like we were supposed to meet, even if it had been in a very strange way.

"I saw you," I admitted. "I wanted to meet you."

"Passing out in front of me isn't typically how women try to get my attention," he said, and I laughed.

"And what do they typically do?" I asked.

"They take me to the Trevi Fountain," he said with a wink. We came around a corner and I gasped, a reaction that happened every time I saw the fountain in person. It was so magnificent that it almost seemed unnatural. Larger than life, beautiful, astonishing, luxurious.

There were few things like it in the world.

And there were so many people standing in front of it that I was feeling a bit claustrophobic.

Callum took his camera out and started snapping pictures. I watched him, liking the way he concentrated so intensely.

As if he was aware of what I was doing, he turned his lens toward me.

I put my hand up in front of my face. I was so tired of being seen primarily through a

camera lens, offered up as a commodity to be consumed by the masses. Not to mention that if I was going to be photographed, I at least wanted to look my best. I wasn't wearing any makeup. I hadn't brushed my teeth today or showered. I was sure my hair was a frizzy mess. "Don't. I look terrible."

"You look beautiful," he said as he put his camera down.

Callum wasn't trying to consume me or sell my image to the highest bidder. He was using his camera to celebrate this moment.

To celebrate me.

I forgot that we were in a piazza surrounded by hundreds of people, and I was struck with an overwhelming urge to kiss him.

From the way his gaze had dropped to my lips, I wondered if he felt the same way.

Someone shoved into me and I fell against Callum. His arms immediately went around me, both to protect me and to help me stay upright. I let my hands rest on his biceps, and some detached part of my brain noticed how big they were. I felt safe being held by him. My breathing was unsteady as I lifted my face up to his.

The intensity in his eyes, the fiery desire I saw there, made the air in my lungs solidify.

To my surprise, he released me and took a step back. "So Miss Art Historian, tell me about the fountain."

Was I imagining it or did his voice sound tight? Like he was holding back? I sucked in a deep breath, desperately needing the oxygen. "It was designed by Nicola Salvi after his plans were chosen by Pope Clement XII. It's a combination of baroque and

classical design.” Regurgitating facts was helping to clear my mind so that I wouldn’t think about how warm and strong he’d felt. How badly I’d wanted him to kiss me. “The fountain is made of the same type of travertine stone used in the Colosseum.”

Then I explained what each of the statues was, the allegories of pure water and mythology represented, the papal coat of arms depicted on the Palazzo Poli behind the fountain, how the water came from an aqueduct created by Romans two thousand years earlier.

Callum hung on to my every word, but he seemed to already know everything I was explaining.

“Oh no, am I artsplaining this to you?” I asked.

He grinned. “I do know quite a bit about it, but I’m enjoying how you explain it. I suspect that I could happily listen to you talk all day.”

“I feel the same way,” I confessed.

“All that knowledge. You must be fun at parties,” he said.

“Hey!” I protested and then laughed. “People like to hear about the history of things.”

“Only sometimes,” he said, but he was clearly teasing me.

“You like it.”

“Aye, you’re right. I do.”

I liked this, too. There didn’t seem to be any games with Callum. I wasn’t having to consider how our flirtation would play out in the press, or wonder about his motives.

We didn't have to dance around any royal politics or protocols or my publicist's rules. He was attracted to me, I was attracted to him, we wanted to spend the day together in Rome, getting to know one another, taking advantage of our strange but serendipitous meeting.

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No need for subterfuge.

Except you're lying to him about who you are, a cranky internal voice said.

A necessary lie, I reminded myself.

"We should make a wish," he said as we made our way through the crowd, managing to find a place right next to the basin after a couple of people left. He dug into his pocket and handed me a euro. "You're supposed to toss it over your left shoulder with your right hand so that your wish can come true."

I turned my back to the fountain and closed my eyes. I wished that every day could be like today. Free from scrutiny and public opinion. Full of possibilities.

Maybe even romance.

"What happens if I don't make a wish?" I asked him.

"Then I will abandon you here and you'll be forced to spend the rest of your days telling uninterested tourists about the various features of the fountain," he said with a wink.

"Which both they and I would enjoy," I insisted. "That's not a real punishment."

"I'm sure I could come up with something," he said. "There should be a punishment for anyone who isnae caught up and swayed by the beauty of Rome."

I shook my head. “I’m very swayed by the beauty of Rome.” More like the beauty of him.

His eyes heated. “Aye, as am I.”

There was a movement off to my right, and I had to wrench my gaze away. I made eye contact with a middle-aged woman. I saw the moment when she recognized me. My heart started to pound hard in my chest as she lifted her phone. I turned my head away.

“We should go.”

“Already? We only just fought our way through the masses for a prime spot.”

Now I had my back completely to the woman. “Yes, please.”

“I see what you’re about. You just want to tell me the complete history of another monument.”

My pulse raced. We had to go. Now. He finally seemed to notice my strong desire to leave.

“You didnae eat this morning. Are you hungry?” he asked, and my stomach growled loudly enough that he could hear it.

Callum laughed and I could feel my cheeks flaming in response.

“I’ll take that as a yes. I ken the best bakery a few blocks from here.”

I nodded and we waded through the crowd in the direction he’d pointed. There wasn’t any shouting, and no one was trying to reach me. Maybe the woman hadn’t known

who I was and I'd freaked out over nothing. To distract myself I asked, "How long have you been a photographer?"

A strange expression rippled across his face, gone so quickly that I couldn't see what it had been. "I've only been trying my hand at it since I moved to Rome. I did study it at university."

"What did you do before that?"

Another grimace. "I worked at the family business."

"I'm guessing they're not happy that you've changed careers."

"That would be putting it lightly," he said. "What about you?"

"I work at a nonprofit. It's kind of a family business, too. They're happy that I'm back in the fold. When I turned eighteen I made the horrible mistake of moving to California and trying to become an actress."

I still remembered what my father had said, how angry and disappointed he'd been. "Actresses become princesses. Princesses don't become actresses."

"And it didnae work out the way you'd hoped?"

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“Total understatement.” I’d met a famous Hollywood actor in his forties and we’d hit it off. Looking back at it, I suspected that some part of me wanted to irritate my parents. But the end result had been that I had been dubbed the “wild princess” dating a man old enough to be my father. There had been many embarrassing photos of me, wasted, at some party or premiere.

I’d been totally out of control.

My bodyguard had been reassigned, which I still felt guilty about even all these years later, and Luigi had been sent to bring me back home. Monterra had a law against paparazzi, and having my life quiet again had made me realize that I didn’t actually want to become an actress, or to have my life put up for constant scrutiny.

I went to university and tried to get away from my past reputation. But the tabloids weren’t willing to let me go. They continued to follow me and document my every movement.

I’d only dated men who shunned the limelight. My last serious boyfriend had been a French schoolteacher, but when the press got wind of our relationship, all hell broke loose. He lost his job due to the constant publicity and broke up with me.

It had made me scared to fall in love again because I wouldn’t keep letting my heart get broken by men who couldn’t handle my public reputation.

“Did you land any parts while you were in the US?” he asked, and I told him about the two roles I’d had, keeping the details very vague so that he wouldn’t be able to look me up. I also didn’t tell him that I suspected I’d only gotten those parts because

of who my family was.

We walked into a tiny bakery and the woman behind the counter greeted Callum by name. Her eyes passed over me. I was just another customer. He ordered two bottles of water and cornettos with chocolate, which made my stomach grumble again.

I looked through Anne's purse, intending to pay for mine, but quickly realized that she had no cash. There were a couple of credit cards, but I couldn't use them. That wouldn't be right.

I didn't have any money with me. Last night I had only intended to go for a short walk, grab some fresh air, before heading back to the hotel. I obviously hadn't expected to accidentally drug myself, so I hadn't been able to grab the cash from the safe in my suite. And I couldn't take Callum back to the hotel without revealing who I really was.

I wanted to keep the ruse going. Given that we hadn't come across any fleets of black SUVs filled with royal bodyguards intending to return me home, it seemed like I was still safe. I just needed Anne to stay inside my apartment for the rest of the weekend and everything would be fine.

The bakery filled up quickly with tourists, and it made me feel uncomfortable. Like I was on display. "I'll wait out front," I told him.

He nodded and I went outside, sucking in a deep breath. A little girl, probably ten or eleven years old, was also waiting in front of the bakery. She was holding the leash of a very large dog. I smiled at her.

She smiled back. "You are very pretty," she said in Italian.

"Thank you. So are you. Is this your dog?" I asked.

“Yes. You can pet him.”

I crouched down and scratched the dog between the ears and his tongue lolled out.

“You’re a princess,” the girl said. “I’ve seen your picture before.”

It never made me feel bad when a child recognized me. If anything, it made me happy because of how excited it usually made them. “I am.”

Now she was beaming at me. “I always wanted to meet a princess.”

I offered her my hand and she shook it. “It’s my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

This was the part of being royal that I loved the most. I might have needed a small break every now and then, but the delight and joy on her face? Knowing that I was the one who had caused that to happen?

I wouldn’t have traded that for anything.

The little girl’s mother came out of the bakery and took her by the hand. We waved goodbye to each other, and I heard her excitedly telling her mother that she’d just met a real-life princess.

Which was my cue to leave.

Fortunately, Callum stepped outside and handed me my food.

“Thank you. Cornettos are my favorite,” I confessed as he handed me the warm croissant filled with gooey chocolate.

“Mine too,” he said with a grin. Then he took a big bite and let out a groan that made my stomach clench with desire. I wished I’d been the reason he’d made that sound.

To distract myself, I ate my cornetto, trying not to devour it like a ravenous wolf.

“You have some chocolate on your lip,” he said after I finished.

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“I do?” I reached up, trying to find it and missing.

“May I?”

I nodded, holding my breath as he reached out with his thumb to wipe the chocolate away from my mouth. I felt a jolt when he made contact with my lips, and I tried to stay still.

He made me feel like a teenager dating for the first time. Like everything was new and exciting.

His dark brown eyes were burning, and he looked like all he wanted to do was use his mouth instead of his thumb.

“There.” His voice was soft and deep and it made my stomach twitch. His Adam’s apple bobbed while his jaw clenched tightly. “I got it.”

“Okay,” was all I managed to say. I supposed it was better than “Don’t stop” or “Are you going to kiss me yet?”

He cleared his throat. “Did you want to tell me the history of that trash can over there? The company that manufactured it? The year it was installed?”

I pursed my lips so that I wouldn’t smile. “You’re not as funny as you think you are.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Perhaps it’s an additional side effect—you cannae properly appreciate top-notch humor because of your excessive drowsiness.”

“If I’m drowsy, maybe it’s because my tour guide is boring me to sleep.”

“No, that cannae possibly be it. I’m quite charming and entertaining. It has to be the medication.”

Now I did laugh.

He offered me his arm. “You should hold on to me for safety reasons. In case you suddenly fall asleep again and I need to catch you.”

I was eager to touch him, to put my arm through his, to rest my shoulder against his biceps. “If you insist.”

“I do. Where to next?”

Anywhere, so long as I’m with you, I wanted to say. Instead I settled on, “You’re the expert. I leave myself in your capable hands.”

Another grin. “You dinnae ken what you’re agreeing to.”

Maybe not, but I was very much looking forward to finding out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Despite my overactive and fevered imagination, Callum Stewart was, unfortunately, a total gentleman. While we toured the Colosseum, he told me his favorite book was *War and Peace*. When I told him that wasn’t anyone’s favorite book, he admitted that it was actually *Peter Pan*, written by a fellow Scot. His mother used to read it to him every night before he went to bed. It was a completely endearing admission.

At the Roman Forum I spotted a tour group whispering and pointing at us. I headed

into a crowd, intending to lose them. Not wanting Callum to notice, I asked him, “What’s your favorite type of music?”

“Classical.”

That made me come to a complete stop, and he nearly slammed into me. “You don’t mean classical like something from the 1990s, right?”

“No, like Bach and Mozart. Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 is probably my favorite.”

If I’d needed a sign from the universe that we had been meant to meet, this was it. “That’s one of mine, too.”

“It doesnae put you to sleep?” he asked, and I elbowed him while he laughed.

While we explored Palatine Hill, he asked me what I would pick if I could have any superpower.

“Invisibility.” No question.

“Out of all the possibilities? That seems a weird choice,” he said in a joking tone.

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“Like picking up strange girls from the Spanish Steps and bringing them back to your apartment weird?” I teased and he grinned.

Then his smile faltered. “All jokes aside, I do know what it’s like to want to disappear.”

My heart fluttered that he understood so perfectly where I was coming from. Then he outlined for me why flying was clearly the superior superpower.

All the sites we were visiting I had seen before, but it felt different seeing them with Callum. Despite his earlier teasing, he insisted that I tell him the history of the art and buildings we saw. He hung on my every word, seeming fascinated.

It made me feel seen in a way that I hadn’t in a long time. I wasn’t a title to him. Not a photo op or a way to make a name for himself. He enjoyed hearing my thoughts, the things that I knew, what I enjoyed.

And I felt exactly the same way about him.

There were no awkward or uncomfortable pauses between us. We talked about everything.

He told me about how he’d grown up with three older brothers and the sorts of pranks they’d played on each other. He seemed delighted by the fact that I was also from a big family and had four older brothers and one younger sister. I shared as many stories as I could without revealing that I’d grown up in a massive villa not far from the palace.

We talked about our university days. He'd gone to the University of St. Andrews. "Although I did spend one year studying abroad at UW–Madison in Wisconsin. I made a good friend there, also named Callum. Callum Sundberg." He glanced at his phone. "I usually hear from him today. He has a habit of reaching out to friends on Valentine's Day."

"Why Wisconsin?" I asked, a little surprised.

"It's a bit of a long story. But what about you? Where did you go to university?"

When I said I'd attended the University of Imperia, he raised both of his eyebrows.

"Isn't that in Monterra?"

I wanted to curse at my inability to remember the role that I was supposed to be playing. "It is."

"Lucia's mother is from Monterra," he said.

My heart slammed hard into my rib cage, like it was trying to escape. I had to take in a deep breath. Had Lucia recognized me? Had she said something to him?

Or would she?

Was everything about to come falling down around me like a house of cards?

I told myself I was being ridiculous. My grandfather had five sons and a daughter, and they all had large families. There were so many princes and princesses running around Monterra that we liked to joke we made up half the population.

Lucia's mother being from Monterra didn't automatically mean Lucia would know

who I was.

“Oh?” I responded, recognizing that I needed to immediately change the subject. I pointed at his camera. Callum had been taking pictures all day. “When do I get to see the finished product?”

“I have to develop them. But if you’re really interested, there’s a gallery not too far from here that has some of my photos.”

“Really? That’s amazing!”

He shrugged in a self-deprecating way. “I met the gallery owner at a party and he offered to show my work. I think he was just being kind.”

I doubted that.

He glanced at his phone, noting the time. “It would be faster by taxi,” he said and I nodded. We went to the nearest taxi station, and I was amazed that I didn’t feel even a little bit tired, despite all the hours we’d spent exploring. There was something about being with him that made me feel rejuvenated.

His phone buzzed and he glanced at the screen and scowled.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My father reminding me that I need to come home and do my duty,” he said. It sounded so much like something my own father would say that I nearly tripped over the curb.

Callum was there, steadying me by my elbow. “Careful. Maybe I should get you another espresso.”

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“I’m fully awake. It’s just ... I know exactly how you feel,” I told him. “The only thing my extended family seems to care about is me not tarnishing the family name.”

“How would you embarrass them?” He sounded genuinely confused.

“It’s a very long story.” And it would involve me having to tell him the truth.

Which I strangely found myself wanting to do.

After a moment’s hesitation he reached for my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. My nervous system lit up like a switchboard, exuberant over this situation.

“I’d like to hear it, if you wish to share it,” he said. “I want to ken everything about you.”

“I want to know everything about you, too,” I whispered back, leaning against his arm, holding on to him tightly. The hours we’d spent talking and sightseeing had flown by, and despite the fact that I’d just met him, I felt like I’d known him my whole life.

A taxi came and we climbed into the back seat, still holding hands. I asked him about the gallery.

“It’s a small place. As I mentioned, I met the man who runs it at a party a few months ago, and after he looked at my website, he said he wanted to show some of my photographs.”

“Website?” I repeated.

“Aye. With my portfolio.”

I was cursing the fact that I’d sent my phone back with Anne. I wanted to look him up.

“Was your phone stolen? I noticed that you didnae have one.”

“When you went through my things?” I asked teasingly, attempting to deflect.

“I was trying to discover who you were, to see if you had a phone with an emergency contact number on it. I wasnae trying to invade your privacy.”

“I know that,” I said. “I was giving you a hard time.”

“As I’ve already told you, I have three older brothers to do that,” he said, and I laughed.

“Since you want to make up for your gross invasion of my privacy, could I borrow your phone? I have someone I want to check in with.”

He handed it to me without hesitation and I sent a text to Anne’s number. I’d been forced to memorize a plethora of numbers, including Luigi’s, as a security precaution. I tried to keep my message vague.

I’m texting from a friend’s phone. Just wanted to let you know that everything is going great. How are you?

She responded immediately and seemed to understand my stealthy vibe.

All quiet on the Western Front. Looking forward to seeing you soon. Text/call when you need a ride home.

I gave the cell back to Callum and he tucked it into his pocket, then quickly went back to holding my hand. As if he'd missed the contact in the tiny bit of time it had taken me to text.

We arrived at the gallery, and for the first time that day, he didn't seem entirely confident and sure of himself.

So I tugged his hand as I walked into the gallery. "Which way?" I asked.

"To the left," he said.

We walked around a corner, and I found myself struck by the urge to gasp again. "You're an artist," I told him. "Look at your composition. The lighting. The way you frame things. The use of negative space here. You have an incredible attention to detail."

He smiled shyly and it was so endearing.

The next photo was one that he'd taken of a sunrise with the light and the city of Rome out of focus and an elderly couple holding hands in the lower right third of the foreground, separating them from the background by having them in focus. They looked like they were very much in love. "You have such a unique perspective. There's so much emotion in your photos," I said, letting out a deep breath. "Beautiful."

"And here I was thinking the same thing," he said, his gaze pointed at me.

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Then he took a step toward me, his hand cupping my face. “Thank you for your kind words.”

“I was only telling the truth,” I said, my heart thrumming in anticipation of his mouth on mine.

“You dinnae ken what it means to me.” He lifted his fingers up to run them along the length of my hair, and I was torn between wanting him to touch me more and not wanting him to notice how messy my hair was. “All I ever hear is how I’m wasting my life.”

“If this is what you’re doing, you’re not wasting anything. You’re a man who feels deeply.”

“You can tell that from my photographs?”

I nodded. “I can.”

“Are you someone who feels deeply?” he asked, tracing the outline of my face with one finger.

At this moment? I felt so much that I didn’t know how to deal with it. “I ...”

“Callum!” An older man interrupted whatever had been about to happen. He turned out to be the gallery owner, and Callum introduced him to me.

“Signor Emiliano Greco, this is Anne Smith.”

I tried not to flinch when he said Anne and instead held out my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Signor Greco leaned in and kissed my cheeks instead. It was such a familiar gesture that it made my heart clench in response.

“Buonasera, my little American! Isn’t Callum’s work magnificent? I feel fortunate that I discovered him!”

I nodded. “He is brilliant.”

“This is your Valentine’s date?” Signor Greco asked Callum in Italian. “She is darling.”

“I agree,” he responded, and I pressed my lips together. “She’s beautiful inside and out.”

It was so hard not to react to his words, but I did my best.

Maybe I really could have had a career as an actress.

“You should take her someplace more romantic than my art gallery,” Signor Greco chided him.

“I have plans,” he said.

Plans? What kind of plans? My heart beat a bit faster with anticipation.

“Excellent!” Signor Greco shifted back to English for my benefit. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Smith. Make sure he treats you like a princess this evening.”

Every cell in my body froze in panic. Did he know?

But instead of revealing who I was, he walked us back to the front door and told us to have a good night.

“Lucia’s uncle is having a large family dinner if you’d like to go,” Callum said when we were alone again.

“Yes. I don’t want this day to end.”

“Nor do I.”

I was going to have to tell him the truth. If I wanted more than just this one day with him, I would have to be honest.

But not yet, though.

I wanted more memories first.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lucia's family lived in an apartment in Trastevere, a neighborhood filled with ivy-covered medieval buildings and cobblestone streets. We walked past multiple cafés and trattorias and through busy piazzas filled with actual Italians, who were smoking, drinking, and talking loudly to each other. There were no cars here and even fewer tourists. The twisting labyrinth of alleyways was lined with laundry and fairy lights.

We went through an open-air market, and Callum stopped to buy a bottle of wine to bring to Lucia's uncle. He paid with a credit card instead of the euros that he'd been fishing out of his pockets all day. I couldn't help but glance at the shoppers around us, wondering if anyone recognized me. But it seemed like everyone was happily ignoring us.

"What is Lucia's family like?" I asked. I was worried that her mother would be there. That she might recognize me. "Have her parents been together for a long time?"

"They divorced when Lucia was little. Her mother moved to America a long time ago. Her father's family are the ones who live in Rome."

Relief bubbled up inside me. Hopefully there wouldn't be anyone to tell on me.

Callum headed to another stall and bought a red rose from a florist.

"For me?" I asked in surprise when he handed it to me. I had thought he'd meant for it to be another host gift.

“Aye. As I keep being reminded, it is Valentine’s Day.”

I’d once had a boyfriend of six months end our relationship the day before Valentine’s Day because he didn’t want me to “get the wrong idea” about where things were headed.

And here was Callum giving me a rose to celebrate the day, without hesitation.

I buried my nose in the flower and smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

We made our way through a crowd waiting to get into a lively bar while I told him about the Cavallini frescoes in a basilica not far from where we were.

“Aye, I’ve seen them,” he said, again surprising me. “They’re stunning.”

“How do you know so much about art?” I asked, but we had arrived at the apartment and he knocked on the door.

Lucia threw it open. “Callum! And Anne! You made it. Welcome!”

Approximately two dozen members of her family waited behind her, all kissing me and Callum hello, welcoming us to their home. There was so much warmth and love that it made me homesick.

Even if I had disappointed my parents in the past, I knew how much they loved me. I adored them and my entire noisy, enthusiastic family.

But then I looked at Callum and those pangs of homesickness faded.

I was right where I wanted to be.

I put my rose into my purse and set it down in the small foyer before I walked into the dining room.

We were seated at a large table, and after Lucia's grandfather said a prayer, we began to eat. Lucia's aunt kept offering me more and more pasta, and there was no way for me to refuse. I looked to Callum, who was seated across the table from me, for help, but he was laughing quietly to himself.

"You need to eat more," Lucia's aunt told me in English. "You are too skinny."

I was doing my best to get down everything she put in front of me, but I suspected that I was going to throw up soon if I didn't stop stuffing myself full.

Conversation swirled around me in Italian as people laughed and shouted and food was devoured. Lucia's aunt had made enough to feed a small army.

Lucia was sitting next to Callum, and I heard her say in Italian, "Did you tell her the truth yet?"

"Not yet."

"You have to tell her."

That alarmed me. What did Callum have to tell me?

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Was I not the only one keeping secrets?

Shaking my head, I decided I must have misheard. I wasn't going to let myself get caught up in some imagined drama. I wanted to enjoy myself.

I offered to assist in clearing the table and was told by more than one person that I was a guest, and I wasn't to help.

Lucia's family's apartment had doors that opened to a little private courtyard, and her grandfather was out there playing his accordion. Callum nodded his head in that direction and then got up to go outside.

I was about to join him when Lucia was at my side, putting a mint in my hand. "Just in case," she said with a wink.

"You're my favorite person in the world," I said.

"For the next ten seconds, anyway."

I popped the mint into my mouth and chewed it quickly. Then I went and joined Callum.

"Dance with me?" he asked.

Lucia's grandfather began to sing softly along with the music he was playing. I glanced back at the apartment, but nobody was paying us any attention.

I nodded and stepped into Callum's waiting arms. He held my hand to his chest, his other around my waist. I was the one who closed the distance between us and pressed my body against his as I put my hand on the back of his neck.

There was a relief in touching him, but a thrill of excitement, too. Goose bumps broke out along my arms, and I wondered if he could feel my erratic heartbeat against his chest.

It was like he'd been created just for me, for this moment.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked.

Right now? More than words could say. "I didn't know I could eat my body weight in pasta. I'm worried I might explode. However, Lucia's aunt told me that any pasta you eat on holidays doesn't count, and I'm not looking for any further dietary advice at this time."

He laughed and his hand flexed against my back while we gently swayed to the music. "Are you going to pass out on me, then? Now that your stomach is probably ready to burst?"

"No. I'm not tired. I intend to be fully present."

Callum didn't seem to notice my hint and instead was humming along to the music, close to my ear. Which was sending shivers of anticipation skating along my skin.

"This feels very *Lady and the Tramp*," I told him.

"We aren't sharing a piece of spaghetti. I could go inside and get one—"

I tightened my arm around him and he laughed again. I didn't want him going

anywhere.

“Thank you for bringing me here. Tonight has been fun. I like Lucia’s family. They remind me a lot of my own,” I said.

“Mine as well. Are you close to your family?”

“I am. They’re very important to me. What about you?”

“Aye, they drive me mad but I dinnae ken what I’d do without them. Especially my mam.”

“A mama’s boy?” I teased.

“Guilty.”

“Maybe that’s why you treat women so well,” I mused, and he smiled at me.

“She wouldnae tolerate any kind of disrespect,” he agreed. “To herself or anyone else. She insisted that my brothers and I be courteous and kind at all times.”

“That sounds like my mother.” In fact, I had actually heard her use those very words.

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“Perhaps we should introduce them.”

Tingles of delight passed through me at the idea that he seemed to think that someday our mothers might meet. “Perhaps.”

We continued dancing. He had started running his fingers lazily up and down my spine, and it had the effect of disconnecting my brain from the rest of my body.

The still-functioning part of my mind wondered if I’d heard Lucia correctly and what Callum might be keeping from me, but I didn’t want to ask him. Honestly, how bad could it be? He didn’t strike me as someone who would think *The Rise of Skywalker* had a great ending. I wasn’t willing to bring up anything that might ruin the magic being created between us.

He murmured to me in Italian, “You’re like a dream come true.”

I wasn’t supposed to be able to understand him, and again I had to fight my natural inclination to react.

But there had to be another way to get him to say it to me. “At Trevi Fountain, what did you wish for?”

“You already know what I wished for.” His lips brushed against the outer rim of my ear and my knees nearly buckled.

“I don’t,” I said breathlessly. “That’s why I asked.”

He stopped dancing and reached under my chin to tilt my face up to his. “You do. I told you—I dinnae want this day to end. I feel like I made you up. Like you can’t be real.”

“I know the feeling,” I said. I’d never met someone that I’d been so instantly attracted to, and everything I found out about him made me like him even more. I kept thinking he’d say or do something that would be a turnoff, but so far it hadn’t happened.

He seemed ridiculously perfect.

There had to be a catch, but I didn’t know what it was.

Callum stopped moving and framed my face with his hands. I held on to him tightly, knowing what he was about to do but not sure if I was ready for it. I was probably going to combust.

“Anne.” He breathed the name over my lips.

“Ilaria,” I corrected him. If he was going to kiss me, I wanted him to use my real name. “It’s ... what everyone calls me.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise and I wanted to kick myself. Obviously it was very weak as far as explanations went, but he didn’t seem too concerned. I was truly terrible at thinking on my feet. I promised myself that I would explain it all to him later.

Not right now.

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. “Ilaria.” His accent deliciously rolled the consonants of my name in a way that made my brain buzz.

It was either that or the fact that he was finally calling me by my name.

“I should stay away from you,” he murmured as he nuzzled his nose against mine.

“Why?” That made no sense to me.

“Because I can see myself falling for you, and that’s dangerous.”

I didn’t understand what he meant but didn’t ask. He said he could see himself falling for me.

He meant it. If I’d been Princess Ilaria, I never would have believed him. Men had said those sorts of things to me before, wanting fame from my notoriety or my title or hoping to get their hands on my money.

But Callum didn’t know about any of those things. He saw Ilaria, the woman.

And he liked what he saw.

His lips ghosted over mine, tantalizingly out of reach. “Would it be all right with you if I kissed you?”

CHAPTER SIX

It would be pathetic if I begged him to do it, wouldn’t it?

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I couldn't help myself, though. I was fairly desperate. My stomach tightened in anticipation. "Please."

"I shouldn't," he said, his voice intoxicating.

"Why?" I was feeling very desperate.

"Because I'm afraid that if I do, I'll never stop."

My nerve endings hummed with anticipation. "That is fine by me."

"Are you sure?"

"If you don't kiss me soon, I am going to—"

He grinned and cut me off by finally, finally, finally pressing his mouth against mine.

My blood seemed to swirl with heat inside my veins as I immediately caught fire, ready to go up like a raging inferno. His mouth moved against mine gently, pressing and then pulling back before kissing me again. Lingering, exploring.

Thrilling.

He was teasing me and the sensations he caused were so intense that they made me burn and shiver all at the same time. Like my lips were directly connected to my nervous system, overloading it.

I let out a soft moan of pleasure against his lips that had him tightening his arms around me as he deepened the kiss, causing a tornado of desperate passion that threatened to overwhelm me. I was floating in a haze of dizzy warmth, focused completely on the feel of his mouth against mine, his hands touching me and holding me close.

He tasted like mint. I smiled slightly as I realized that Lucia must have given him one, too.

His kiss was as perfect as the rest of him. Callum kissed me like he'd been waiting his whole life to do it, like the artist that he was, with a harmonic precision that made me breathless.

Signor Greco could have hung Callum's kisses in his gallery.

I ran my fingers up to his head, trapping him in place against me, then lightly scratched my fingers along his scalp. I was rewarded with a sound from the back of his throat that let me know how much he enjoyed it.

There was so much of him I wanted to explore, to see his reaction to my touch, my kiss. I wondered if this felt as good for him as it did for me.

I hadn't known a kiss could be tender, sweet, fiery, and explosive all at the same time. He was exquisitely slow and thorough. Like he was committing it all to memory so that he wouldn't ever forget what it had been like to kiss me.

He made me feel like I had been a sleeping princess under a spell, and his kiss was waking me up.

I wanted more of it.

More of him.

I could feel his restraint, the way he kept the kiss from veering into NSFW territory, but I was very happy to let things head in that direction. I wanted him to let go.

But then he let go in a way I wasn't expecting. Callum suddenly stopped kissing me and I was bereft, letting out a protest that he'd stopped.

Then I slowly became aware of people cheering. Lucia's family had apparently enjoyed the show.

My cheeks burned. I had completely forgotten where we were.

That hadn't ever happened to me before.

Callum was more intoxicating than anything I'd ever experienced in my entire life. I reached up to touch my fingertips to my lips, still not able to believe what had just passed between us. His gaze followed the motion, and my pulse stuttered when I saw in his expression that he wasn't done kissing me yet.

My heart was like a butterfly trapped in my chest, beating hard and fast.

Despite the rightness in everything he'd done, this was wrong. I couldn't kiss him like this.

Not only because we had an audience hooting and hollering their approval, but because I realized that nothing could happen between us until I told him the truth about who I was.

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Because I wanted more than just this one night.

I wanted to see him again.

And I wouldn't let anything serious happen under false pretenses. It wasn't fair to either one of us. I came up with a quick scheme of how I would tell him the truth—I needed a gentle way to do it so that it wouldn't feel like such a shock.

“Should we go?” he asked.

“Yes. There's something I want to show you.”

“I am happy to see anything you'd like to show me,” he said with a wolfish grin that made me laugh.

And I realized that had been his intent. To help me relax and take the edge off the explosive interaction that had just occurred between us. Like he was plugging my brain back in so that my legs would work. He helped me back into the apartment to say our goodbyes and I grabbed my purse.

Lucia's aunt handed me leftovers, insisting that I take them. I thanked her for having us over and kissed the cheeks of everyone that Lucia shared DNA with as we tried to make our exit.

The family was teasing Callum, clapping him on the back, and he grinned while also thanking our hosts. It took longer to leave than either one of us would have liked, but finally we were outside and heading away from the apartment with our hands linked.

“What is it you want to show me?” he asked.

“You’ll see.” My plan probably wasn’t the best, but to be fair, I’d come up with it while my brain was still addled from his kisses. I was going to take him to my hotel. I thought if I could show him where I was staying, it would be easier to believe my explanation about being a princess.

Not because a part of me was hoping I might persuade him to come upstairs with me after I told him the truth.

Okay, maybe I was planning on that a little.

Callum made sure that it was more than a little because he couldn’t seem to keep his hands to himself. We lost the leftovers in the first two minutes after we left Lucia’s family because he kept ducking into alleyways to kiss me senseless, making me ache with a blinding need for him.

“I feel like I should apologize,” he said. “I usually have more self-control than this. But there is something about you. You’re irresistible. Do you feel it?”

“Yes.”

I felt so connected to him already.

It should have scared me. I’d sworn off dating. I didn’t want to mess up his life when we inevitably made headlines.

But when he had me pushed up against a brick wall, his mouth hot on my throat, I decided he could make that choice for himself.

“We should go,” I told him weakly, barely able to stay upright. If he kept kissing me

like this, I was going to lose all of my resolve to be honest with him. We were only a couple of blocks away from the hotel.

“If you insist.” He said the words against my skin, and I had to force my eyes to not roll back in my head.

“I do. Insist.” Although it would take very little from him to get me to change my mind.

I felt a bit like I’d been bewitched, totally under his spell.

Callum took a step back and offered me his hand. I was grateful for it because it took me a couple of minutes to regain control of my limbs and regulate my breathing.

“What do you like best about your job?” he asked as we strolled together along the empty sidewalk.

“We want to find a cure for every kind of cancer, and the scientists that we fund are doing really excellent work. I also enjoy visiting sick people in the hospital. Especially the children.”

He let out a little laugh.

“What?” I asked, nudging him with my elbow.

“The universe is entirely unfair. How can you be this beautiful, this smart, this cultured, and this kind?”

“How can you be this romantic, intelligent, gorgeous, fun, and talented?” I asked back, and he came to a stop, turning toward me.

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But I didn't get to discover what he was going to say or do next because we were interrupted. The first thing I noticed was someone yelling. Then there were multiple voices.

I turned my head to look, and camera bulbs started flashing and I had to raise my hand to my eyes to block out the bright glare.

My heartbeat thundered inside me and my breathing turned shallow.

Oh no. This couldn't be happening.

Not paparazzi. Not now.

They were descending on us like a pack of wolves.

"How did they find me?" I moaned as he said, "I cannae believe they've found me!"

We stared at each other as the paparazzi surged toward us, jockeying for position to get the best shot.

"They're after you?" we asked each other at the exact same moment.

He grabbed me by the hand and we started to run.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We slipped into a tiny church and Callum shut the door quietly behind us. We stood

in the doorway, listening as the paparazzi ran past.

After several heartbeats of complete silence, he said, “I think we owe each other an explanation. Who are you?”

I let out a sigh. “This wasn’t how I wanted to tell you. I’m Princess Ilaria of Monterra. King Dominic is my cousin.”

His face went slack.

“I know you thought I was an American student. I switched places with my public relations assistant, and I have her wallet. I just wanted one weekend to myself to enjoy Rome without being hounded by the press. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth earlier. I was literally just about to tell you—I wanted to take you to my hotel because I thought if you could see where I was staying, it would make my claim easier to believe. Although I guess the horde of paparazzi probably makes it pretty believable.”

I’d been hoping he might laugh, but he took a step back from me and stayed quiet. Something was very wrong. My heart was beating so loudly, and there was a sick taste in my mouth.

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to steady myself. Maybe I was imagining things. “Why did you think they were chasing you?”

Another long pause before he finally answered, “I’m His Royal Highness, Prince Callum of Doune.”

It was like someone had set off a bomb. My ears were ringing, my body rigid, total shock. “Doune?” I repeated. I was racking my brain to remember where that country was located.

“It’s an island off the coast of Scotland. A tiny nation formed after the Stewarts rebelled against the king. Many were arrested and executed, but my ancestor escaped and started his own kingdom. It was far enough away that King Robert III didnae bother with them.” He said this mechanically, as if he’d had to explain where he was from many, many times.

I knew the feeling.

“I don’t know what to say,” I told him. I hadn’t misunderstood Lucia. Callum had been keeping a secret from me. I hadn’t even considered the possibility that he was royalty, too.

“You can drop the American accent,” he said. Then after a beat he asked, “You are fluent in Italian?”

“Yes.”

He seemed to realize that this meant I’d understood every “private” conversation he’d had today. He shook his head and took another step away from me. He was putting distance between us.

We’d both been lying to each other all day. But now we were being honest and could be our real selves. That seemed like a good thing to me.

But it didn’t seem like a good thing for Callum.

“I don’t understand why you’re this upset,” I said, wringing my hands. It seemed like we had both done the same thing. I knew why he’d kept it a secret. He should be the one person who got it.

He let out a short, bitter laugh. “You dinnae? I thought you were just some American

girl.”

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“And I thought you were just a Scottish photographer.”

“That’s why I moved to Rome.” Now he sounded frustrated. “To escape the royal expectations pressing down on my shoulders. I want to live my life on my own terms, not one dictated by centuries of tradition.”

“I understand that,” I told him. “It’s why Anne is sitting in my apartment in Monterra right now, so that everyone thinks I’m home and I can have this holiday.”

“But this isn’t a holiday for me,” he said. “This is my life now.”

“What are you saying?” I asked as my heart beat slow and hard inside me, my throat closing in on me. I already knew what he was saying.

This was over.

Someone running away from his royal responsibilities wouldn’t want to date a princess.

“I’m not looking for a relationship,” he said, and it felt like an attempt to avoid the real reason.

Now I was the one who felt bitter. “So much for me being your dream come true.”

Shame and regret filled his face.

“I suppose it’s better that I know now,” I said. “Instead of letting myself really fall for

you and getting my heart broken.”

He closed his eyes briefly and said, “You dinnae understand. It isnae that—”

“I’m not interested in hearing your explanation that’s designed solely to make you feel better.”

Callum crossed his arms against his chest. His accent seemed to thicken. “Nay, I’m nae explaining it properly and—”

“I don’t like the paparazzi and what they’ve done to my life,” I interrupted him. I had meant it when I said I didn’t want to hear his rationalizations. “But I’m aware of my obligations and duties. And I like helping people. When I visit sick children in hospitals and get to see the way their faces brighten when they meet a real princess? I don’t want to take that away from them. I love my family and my nation. It’s taken me a few years to get here, but I like myself. I’m proud of who I am.”

Another step back. “We’re in different places in our lives. Maybe if we’d met at another time ...”

His voice trailed off, and I knew a dismissal when I heard one.

Drawing on all the fortitude and strength of my royal ancestors, I lifted my head and squared my shoulders. “Thank you for today. I’ll never forget it.”

I put my hand on the door and he said, “Ilaria, wait. I’ll walk you back to your hotel.”

“No, thank you.”

“It’s my duty to see you safely home.” He sounded so stiff, so formal, so unlike the man I’d thought I knew.

“I know you aren’t interested in fulfilling your royal duties, so please don’t concern yourself,” I told him and left the church.

Despite me telling him not to, he did follow me back to the hotel, staying at a distance. Which I had to begrudgingly admit was probably a good thing, as Luigi had told me repeatedly how unsafe the city could be at night.

I was worried that we would run into the horde of photographers again, but that didn’t happen. So many concerns raced through my mind. How had the paparazzi found us? Did my parents know what I’d done? Did Luigi? Had they contacted someone for help and that’s how the press found out?

When I went into the hotel lobby, I was greeted by name by several different members of the staff and I was glad that they recognized me again. I was done trying to hide who I really was.

I took the elevator up to my suite and sat down on the couch, not sure what to do with myself. I took my purse off and set it down. I remembered the rose Callum had given me and opened the purse to get it out.

It had been completely crushed.

Which felt symbolic.

After a moment’s hesitation, I picked up the suite’s phone and called Anne.

“Hello?” she mumbled. I could tell that I’d woken her up.

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“I need to come home. Please tell Luigi what we did and have him come get me.”

“Okay.” She sounded more awake now. “Is everything all right?”

“No. Please hurry.”

“I will. He’ll be there in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you.”

I put the receiver back on the base and glanced over at my rose.

I hated how final this all felt.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Luigi lectured me the entire way home, reminding me that I had not only put myself in danger but risked his job, Anne’s job, and the reputation of the royal family.

I was very meek and kept apologizing, which seemed to mollify him. Paparazzi waited at the border, and despite my bodyguard’s best efforts, they got several pictures of me fleeing the country.

I tried not to think about what the headlines would be tomorrow. I hated that I was about to disappoint my family.

When we crossed over into Monterra, I was so relieved because the paparazzi weren’t

allowed in my home country. One less thing for me to worry about.

My mother was up and waiting for me. Despite the fact that I'd resolved not to cry, my face crumpled when I saw her holding her arms out for me.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I didn't want to embarrass the family."

"Oh, piccola mia, come here."

She hadn't called me her little one in a long time, and I cried against her shoulder.

We went over to the couch in her receiving room and sat down together. She listened quietly, stroking my hair, as the whole story poured out of me.

When I was finished she asked, "Do you want me to call your cousin? I'm sure he could muster a special strike force and have this Callum character assassinated."

That made me smile. "Let's not bother the king. It's probably better if we don't cause a world war."

"True, true," she said, smiling back at me.

"And I don't want to hurt him. We had a perfect day together. Maybe it could have been more, but now I'll never know. It feels so ridiculous to be crying over a man I didn't even know twenty-four hours ago."

"I knew your father was the one for me the first hour of our first date, so I'm not going to tell you that you're silly. I understand."

I knew she meant to comfort me, but that somehow made it worse. Like I had missed out on something really special. That it was brand new didn't matter. My mother said

something about fish and the sea, but I wasn't in the mood to hear it. She sent for gelato and wine, and we ate and drank until we both eventually fell asleep on the couch. When I woke up the next morning, I took my mother's phone from the coffee table and braced myself.

I didn't want to cause any more scandal for this family.

But there was ... nothing. No pictures, no stories about me and Callum.

It was almost like the whole thing hadn't happened.

I didn't know what to think of that.

I kissed my mother on the cheek and found her secretary waiting in the front room. I let him know that she was still sleeping. I went back to my own apartment, where Anne was waiting for me.

"What is going on?" she asked. Part of me was so exhausted and wanted nothing more than to go to bed and pretend my Roman holiday hadn't happened, but it had helped to tell my mother all of the gory details. Maybe if I talked about it enough, it would make the hurt sting a little less.

My theory was wrong, though. Telling her didn't help me stop missing him.

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After I told her what had occurred, she grabbed her phone. “How are there no stories about this? A picture of you and Prince Callum together on Valentine’s Day would have been worth a lot of money.”

“I know.” The public would eat that story up. While it used to be how things worked—princes and princesses marrying each other—these days most European royals seemed to wind up with commoners that they’d fallen in love with.

“I’ll have to call my boss and tell her everything,” she said apologetically, and I nodded at her. My cousin’s wife would get to the bottom of this situation, and there was no one better equipped to handle this sort of thing.

“Let me know if she’s upset and I’ll speak to her.” I didn’t want Anne to be in trouble for doing what I’d asked. “I’m going to take a shower.” It had been a long time since I’d done that, and I hoped it would help to lift my spirits.

But it didn’t. I kept seeing Callum’s face, hearing the romantic things he’d said to me. No wonder we’d gotten along so well and had so many similar interests. We’d basically been raised the same way and had the exact same background.

I got out of the shower and wiped the steam off my mirror, studying my sad reflection.

Well, I had wanted a romantic adventure.

I’d certainly gotten what I’d asked for.

Between my mother, Anne, Lemon, and getting ready for the Fiorelli Foundation ball, I was kept busy for the next couple of days. No stories ever came out, no photosever popped up. We were all mystified. I had no idea how long we'd been followed—there could have been all kinds of incriminating pictures that I'd been unaware of because I'd been so consumed by Callum.

I tried to stop myself from conjuring his face up in my mind because every time I did, there was pain and regret and a sense that I'd lost something unique.

But no matter how much I told myself not to, I kept thinking about him.

The night of the ball, I attempted to fake a headache in order to beg off from attending. I wasn't up for dancing and smiling and pretending like everything was okay.

"You have to go," Anne told me. "We already have your ball gown and your glam squad is here and the man being honored tonight is a major donor for the foundation. You have to at least make an appearance."

She'd gotten a lot bossier since I'd returned. I wondered if that was Lemon's doing, if she'd told my assistant to handle me better.

"Yes, ma'am," I said and curtsied to her. She just rolled her eyes in response.

Even if I'd wanted to skip the event, I really did love getting dressed up and putting on a tiara. It felt magical every single time.

I traveled with my parents to the ball. They always enjoyed these royal events and catching up with my uncle and aunt, the former reigning monarchs of Monterra. I planned on making an appearance and then sneaking upstairs to spend time with my cousins' army of children.

King Dominic's oldest son had beaten me at Mario Kart the last time I'd seen him, and I owed him a rematch.

We were formally announced at the door and immediately surrounded by a small crowd of people who wanted to greet us. I shook hands and smiled until my cheeks hurt. I skirted along the edge of the ballroom, heading for the back stairs that led to my cousins' private apartments. Despite being stealthy, it felt like I was being watched.

When I got to the doorway, I glanced around the room to see if I was being followed. Luigi was probably going to take his duties far too seriously now and would be my constant shadow.

My heart stopped when I saw who was looking at me.

It wasn't Luigi.

It was Callum.

CHAPTER NINE

He was wearing a formal black dinner jacket with a bow tie, a crisp white shirt, and a red-and-black sash over his left shoulder. The tartan of his kilt was red and black squares. He was so handsome and it shocked me so much he was in Monterra that, for a full three seconds, I thought I was imagining him.

Callum walked through the ballroom, and I was torn between a desire to flee and a conflicting one to stay put so that I could properly take in all his magnificence.

Then he was standing in front of me. "Ilaria, may I speak to you in private?"

My voice wasn't working. I nodded and took him into a parlor not far from the ballroom. I walked into the center of the room and waited while he closed the doors and then joined me.

"You are a vision," he said. "Too beautiful to be real."

I put a gloved hand over my fluttering stomach. "What are you doing here?"

“I needed to see you.”

“Why? What else is there to say?”

“So much. First, I must apologize to you for my reaction and the things I said in that church.”

“You were being honest about what you wanted and I appreciate that.” Someday it was going to help me move past my time with him.

“That’s the thing. I wasn’t being honest. Just selfish. And I regret that.”

It wasn’t often that I was at a loss, unsure of myself or what the situation called for. I’d been raised my whole life for royal protocol, to always know the right thing to say and do.

But this?

“Thank you.” That usually worked in most cases. “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He reached out and put his hands on my bare shoulders, and my skin went up in flames, like he was using a blowtorch on me. “Ilaria, please. Stay. I’m begging you.”

His plea touched me, and even though part of me still wanted to storm out, I nodded and sat down on the nearest sofa.

Callum sat next to me. Not close enough to touch me, but closer than he would if we

were only acquaintances.

“When I got back to my flat, I rang my parents and told them everything that had happened. My father’s press secretary bought all the photos so that they wouldnae be released.”

Oh. That’s why there hadn’t been any pictures. “Why?”

“I looked you up online and saw how obsessed the tabloids are with you. I ken how dedicated you are to your work and your family, how important they are to you, and I didnae want my actions to embarrass you. Or them.”

“Thank you.” I was being so polite, so cool. My mother would have been proud of me.

“It was my fault the paparazzi found us. I used my credit card at that market, which I ken not to do. I dinnae ken if someone called them or if they have some kind of tracker on my card, but I’m responsible for it.” He took in a deep breath and then added, “I also ken that I was reckless with your feelings, with your heart, and I am sorry. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you.”

I opened my mouth to speak but he interrupted me. “Please dinnae say ‘thank you’ again. I cannae stand it. Not from you.”

He was teasing, but I was so close to tears that I opted to stay silent.

“My mam tore into me and called me a doaty walloper.”

“A what?”

He grinned and said, “She was questioning my intelligence. And she added several

choice words in Gaelic that I willnae repeat.”

I couldn't help but smile. “I like your mother already.”

“And she would love you,” he said. “She's already your greatest advocate. She reminded me that life was about change and taking hold of wonderful gifts when they're offered. She told me I was being shortsighted and ridiculous and that I shouldnae walk away from someone that I liked so much just because of your royal status. That I was attempting to reject my crown again through you.”

That made sense. “And?”

“And she was right. She usually is, which I cannae tell her as it would make her even worse.”

I smiled again. “You came here just to tell me that?”

He reached for my hand and I let him take it. I saw the way the tension left his body when I didn't reject him, and he brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it softly. “I thought the easiest and best thing to do was to walk away, but I was wrong. Which has been known to happen from time to time.”

Callum was teasing, but I was holding my breath, waiting for him to finish.

“It was the hardest thing. The worst. The connection we have is special and I should have stayed. I havenae been able to stop thinking about you and realized that I was the world's greatest fool. I came here because I needed to see you again.”

“You're seeing me again right now.”

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Callum smiled. “I meant beyond today. I thought I wanted a typical life. But I realized that what I want is a life filled with beauty and music and love. I dinnae ken what my future holds, but I do ken that I would like to have you by my side while I figure it out. If you can forgive me, that is. And if you’re interested.”

Of course I could forgive him. I understood the pressure of being royal all too well. I knew why he had said what he did. Why he wanted to walk away from his royal duties.

From me.

I also knew that he was probably the one man on earth that I could seriously date whose life I wouldn’t ruin just by being myself. That he was already well equipped to deal with any negative publicity or paparazzi ambushes. That if I made another headline, it wouldn’t matter to him.

He would understand.

I tapped one finger against my lip. “I’ll have to think about it. Yes.”

He laughed, a glorious sound, and I couldn’t help but grin at him.

“I think that might work better if you actually made me wait,” he teased.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to meet someone like you. I don’t want to wait any longer for the rest of my life to begin,” I confessed.

“Nor do I. Although Rome was not the first time we’ve met.”

“It wasn’t?” I asked in surprise.

“No. We first met fifteen years ago. When the crown princess of Sweden got married. I was eleven, you were ten.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, and then it came rushing back to me. I gasped in outrage. “You put the frog on my lap during the ceremony and made my dress dirty!”

“Aye, that was me.”

I balled up my fist and lightly punched his shoulder. “So Valentine’s Day wasn’t the first time you’ve made me cry.”

He leaned in, putting his forehead against mine, our breaths mingling. “I dinnae ever want to be the reason for your tears.”

“Don’t be a doaty walloper and we’ll be just fine.”

He smiled and then said, “It might be difficult for us to see one another as often as we’d like. And I ken that at some point I will have to go home and be the dutiful son. But until then I hope we’ll have many more nights filled with pasta and accordion music and Rome.”

“That sounds perfect.”

His lips gently brushed mine, again as if he was afraid that I might reject him, but I put my hand on the back of his neck and pulled his mouth against mine so that we could really kiss.

When we were both breathless, our hearts beating fast, he lifted his head and said, “Have I already told you how beautiful you look tonight?”

“You did. And you’re looking very handsome yourself. I could get used to kilts. You have extremely sexy legs.”

“Oh, aye?” he asked with a wicked glint in his eye.

“Aye,” I told him. “How did you know about the ball? That I’d be here?”

“Your assistant, Anne. You texted her from my phone, and once I’d realized what a terrible mistake I’d made, I rang her and got her on board as a coconspirator.”

I was going to have to ask Lemon to give Anne a raise. “I still can’t believe you came all the way to Monterra for me.”

Callum sweetly pressed his lips to mine. “I’ll always come for you. You’re my princess. It’s my duty to wake you with a kiss every morning. It’s required that I make certain you have your fairy-tale ending.”

This was what I’d been waiting for. A man willing to fight for me, to stand by my side, to accept all of me.

“Promise?” I asked, again fighting off tears.

“I promise. You have my royal, solemn vow,” he said, and then he sealed his words with another kiss.