THE PRINCE SHE NEVER FORGOT

Scarlet Wilson

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The Prince She Never Forgot

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A kiss at midnight…Ten years ago Ruby Wetherspoon shared a stolen New Year's kiss with enigmatic stranger, Alex. A kiss she has never forgotten…Now a renowned Language Therapist, Ruby is stunned when her Alex – or Crown Prince Alexander of Euronia to the rest of the world! – shows up to ask for her help.Ruby has never been far from Alex's thoughts, but duty to his country has kept him away. Now he has a chance to make both their dreams come true…

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“Are you okay?”

She steadied herself on the wall, taking a deep breath of relief before turning to speak to her rescuer. But the words died in her throat.

Bright blue eyes and a broad chest obstructed her view. Even on a dark Paris night those blue eyes would have attracted her attention. He was tall, dark-haired, with a broad chest, wearing a simple white T-shirt and jeans with a dark wool coat on top.

He smiled as he looked down at all the people below. “I'm sorry if I startled you. But you looked frightened.”

“I was. Thank you.” She shook her coat free, letting some air circulate around her, and pulled her red hat from her hair. “There—that's much better.”

“It certainly is.”

He was smiling appreciatively at her and for a second she was unnerved. But, no. There was nothing predatory about her rescuer. He had kind eyes. And the man exuded sex appeal from twenty paces. If her up-close-and-personal alarm was going off it wasn't because she was scared—it was because it had been jolted back into life. About time too.

She held out her hand towards him. “Ruby. Ruby Wetherspoon from England.”

His warm hand closed around hers. “Alex,” he said simply.

Her eyes glanced up and down his body. The dark wool coat seemed a little strange for a young guy—a little formal.

“Are you from here?”

The corners of his lips turned upwards. “Close enough.”

Mystery. She liked it. Perfect for New Year's Eve.

The Prince She Never Forgot

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SCARLET WILSON wrote her first story aged eight and has never stopped. Her family have fond memories of *Shirley and the Magic Purse,* with its army of mice, all with names beginning with the letter M. An avid reader, Scarlet started with every Enid Blyton book, moved on to the Chalet School series and many years later found Mills & Boon® novels.

She trained and worked as a nurse and health visitor, and currently works in public health. For her, finding Mills & Boon was a match made in heaven. She is delighted to find herself among the authors she has read for many years.

Scarlet lives on the West Coast of Scotland with her fiancé and their two sons.

This book is dedicated to our newest family addition, Luca Cole Dickson, already gorgeous, well-behaved and utterly charming.

The ladies in his later life won't stand a chance!

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PROLOGUE

Ten years earlier

SHE COULD FEEL the electricity in the air, feel the excitement. It seemed as if everyone in the world had decided to celebrate New Year's Eve in Paris.

She was jostled along with the crowd, being practically carried off her feet on the route from the Champs-élysées towards the Eiffel Tower.

'Aren't you glad you came?' her friend Polly screamed in her ear, sloshing wine over her sleeve. 'This is the best place in the world right now.'

'Yes, it is,' murmured Ruby.

It certainly beat sitting at home in her flat, brooding over the job that wasn't to be or the boyfriend who never should have been.

Polly gave a squeal. 'The fireworks will be starting in an hour. Let's try and get near the front!'

Ruby nodded as she was shouldered from behind. There were ten in their group but it was getting harder and harder to stick together. 'I need to find a bathroom before we head to the fireworks,' she whispered to Polly. 'Give me five minutes.'

There were cafés and bars open all the way along the Champs-élysées, but unfortunately for her just about every female in the city seemed to have the same idea that she had.

She waved to Polly, 'Go on without me. I'll meet you at the sign we saw earlier.'

The group had already planned their night with precision. Dinner on a riverboat. Drinks in the hotel. A walk along the Champs-élysées and rendezvous at the Eiffel Tower for the fireworks. They'd already picked the spot they planned to stand at in case anyone got lost—which on a night like tonight was a certainty.

She stood in a queue for an eternity before finally heading back out to the thronging crowds. In the thirty minutes it had taken to get access to a bathroom it seemed the whole of Paris had started to congregate in the streets.

The crowds were sweeping along the Avenue George V, carrying along anyone who happened to be standing close enough. It was one part terrifying, one part exhilarating.

The crowd was even thicker at the Rue de l'Université. The street was packed, with everyone heading directly to the base of the Eiffel Tower. Ruby glanced at her watch. Visiting the bathroom hadn't been such a good idea. There was no way she was going to be able to find her friends in this crowd.

But she wasn't too worried. The mood of the crowd was jubilant. People were drinking wine and singing. The atmosphere and heavy police presence made her feel safe—even if she was alone.

Around her she heard dozens of different accents: snatches of English, Italian and Japanese all mixed in with French. The streets were lit with multi-coloured lights and a variety of decorations and garlands left over from Christmas. She unfastened the buttons on her red wool coat. She'd expected Paris to be cold in December, but the heat from the people around her meant the temperature was rising.

She clutched tightly onto the bag strung diagonally in front of her, keeping her hand clasped over the zipper. Pickpockets were rife in Paris at New Year's. They'd all been warned to keep a close hold of their belongings.

Her phone beeped just as she was in sight of the Eiffel Tower and she struggled to move out of the thronging crowd. It had practically ground to a halt, with people from behind still pressing ahead. The streets were packed. There was no way forward.

She moved sideways, unzipping her bag and pulling out her phone.

Where are you?

It was from Polly. Her friends were obviously waiting at their designated meeting point.

She typed quickly. Not sure if I can get to you, but I'll try. She pressed Send just as someone bumped her from behind and the phone skittered from her hand.

'Oh, no!'

It was kicked one way, then another, quickly going out of sight. She tried to push her way through the crowd sideways, but that proved impossible. It was a sea of people. And she was heading in the wrong direction.

'Hey, watch out. Ouch!'

Her feet were trampled, her ribs elbowed and the wind knocked from her. It was impossible. She looked up for a few seconds, to try and make her way through the crowd, then looked down again amongst the stampeding feet, trying to track down her phone.

A thud to her shoulder sent her flying into a group of rowdy Germans.

'Sorry...sorry.'

They were laughing and joking and smelling of beer. She tried to find her way through but it was virtually impossible. There seemed to be nowhere to go.

Her chest started to tighten. They weren't doing or saying anything untoward, but the sheer amount of people meant they'd started to crowd around her, closing in. She tried to take a deep breath and lifted her elbows up, edging her way to the side. But the only place she seemed to be moving was closer and closer.

There was a waft of beer-soaked breath on her cheek. Too close. Too invasive. A hand at her back, someone pressing against her hip.

'Let me out. Let me through. Move, please!'

A hand reached down between her shoulders, grabbing her coat and pulling her upwards. The air left her lungs momentarily and her feet were still stuck amongst the crowd. A strong arm wound around her waist and pulled her clear. Her feet stopped unsteadily on a wall at shoulder height to the throng.

'Are you okay?'

She was teetering on the wall. The hand and arm that had steadied her had pulled away the instant she was free. She reached and grabbed hold of the dark sleeve in front of her, trying to regain her balance.

The voice sounded again. 'Are you okay? Are you drunk?' There was a slight edge of disappointment to the voice.

She steadied herself on the wall, taking a deep breath of relief before turning around to speak to her rescuer. How dared he accuse her of being drunk?

But the words died in her throat. Bright blue eyes and a broad chest obstructed her view.

Even on a dark Paris night those blue eyes would have attracted her attention. He was tall, dark-haired, with a broad chest, wearing a simple white T-shirt and jeans with a dark wool coat on top. Trust her to find the best-looking guy in Paris and have no reliable witnesses. No one would believe her.

She automatically lifted her hands. 'No. No, I'm not drunk. I just got stuck in a crowd going in the opposite direction from me.'

His demeanour changed. The skin around his eyes creased as he smiled. 'What? You're going home already? You don't want to see the fireworks?'

His accent sent tingles across her skin. He sounded French, with a little something else.

He was teasing her, and now she could actually breathe she could take a little teasing.

She sighed. 'No. I'm not going home. Not tonight anyway. Of course I want to see the fireworks.' She held out her hands to the bodies pressed below. 'Just not like this.' The crowd had ground to a halt. She stared across at the sea of people. 'I was supposed to be meeting my friends.'

'You are lost?' He sounded concerned.

'Not exactly.' She turned back to face him, getting a whiff of woody aftershave. 'We were meeting at a sign near the Eiffel Tower.' She shook her head. 'I have absolutely no chance of getting there now.'

She had no intention of leaving the safety of this wall any time soon. She only hoped his friends weren't all about to join them and there'd be no room for her to stay here.

He smiled as he looked down at all the people below. 'You could be right. I'm sorry if I startled you but you looked frightened. I thought you were beginning to panic in the crowd.'

Her heart had stopped fluttering in her chest and her breathing was settling down. It had been an odd feeling, and so not like her. Ruby Wetherspoon didn't tend to panic.

'I was. Thank you. I've never really been in a crowd like that before.

It had definitely been a bit claustrophobic.' She shook her coat free, letting some air circulate around her, and pulled her red hat from her hair.

'There—that's much better.'

'It certainly is.'

He was smiling appreciatively at her and for a second she was unnerved. But, no. There was nothing predatory about her rescuer. He had kind eyes, even if the man exuded sex appeal from twenty paces. If her up-close-and-personal alarm was going off it wasn't because she was scared—it was because it had been jolted back into life. About time too.

He nodded slowly. 'Crowds can be...difficult.'

It was an odd choice of words, but then again her hesitant French would sound much poorer than his English.

'And you'd know?' She was curious.

His face crinkled. It seemed her half-inquisitive, half-sarcastic question was lost on him.

She held out her hand towards him. 'Ruby. Ruby Wetherspoon from England.'

His warm hand closed around hers. 'Alex,' he said simply.

Her eyes glanced up and down his body. White T-shirt, blue jeans and black boots. But the dark wool coat seemed a little strange for a young guy—a little formal.

'Are you from here?'

The corners of his lips turned upwards. 'Close enough.'

Mystery. She liked it. Perfect for New Year's Eve.

Under normal circumstances she might have felt a little nervous, a little wary around a mysterious stranger. But Alex didn't give her those kind of vibes.

Trust your instincts. That was what her gran had always told her. And she should have. Because if she had she probably wouldn't have found her boyfriend in bed with her ex-best friend. Truth was, she couldn't wait to see the end of this stinker of a year.

She glanced around. For the moment they were the only two people perched on this precarious wall. 'Well, Alex from "close enough", where are your friends? Am I about to get trampled and thrown back to the crowd when they all want a place on this wall?'

She sent a silent prayer upwards. What was the betting they were all gorgeous and female?

He shrugged. 'I lost them too. I climbed up here to look for them. Then I decided I liked the view.'

She turned to face where he was looking. Of course. A perfect view of the Eiffel Tower. For now it had a row of white lights running up the outside of its edges. The sun had set a few hours ago and it stood out like a beacon in the dark sky.

She'd been so busy fighting her way through the crowd that she hadn't really had time to stop and take in the sight.

'Wow. I just remembered why I came here,' she breathed.

A few people shouldered past beneath them, knocking into her feet, and she wobbled again. His arm rested around her waist to steady her, and he didn't move it once she'd regained her balance.

'So, why is an English girl in Paris for New Year's Eve?'

Why, indeed? She was still asking herself that question. And Mr Gorgeous Mysterious Stranger didn't really need the whole truth. Maybe just a tiny part.

'Visiting a boyfriend?' he added.

It was a loaded question. Was he really testing to see if she was taken?

She sucked in a deep breath and tried not to let the idiot smile that was whooping and dancing around in her brain actually appear. 'My flatmate Polly persuaded me it was time to try something new. We usually spend every New Year's in London. We did try a Scottish lodge once, but that was a disaster. Snowed in with no power and no booze.'

He was laughing at her now.

She held out her hands. 'What girl would say no to Paris on New Year's? This place is just amazing...' Her voice tailed off. 'And, to be honest, I'm not sorry to see this year go.'

'You've had a bad year?'

'Somewhere between a wrecking ball and a demolition derby.'

She could almost see his brain trying to make sense of her words.

'Ahh. You sound sad. But surely not everything about this year can have been bad?'

Perfect. Her own Pollyanna.

He was right. Of course he was right. She'd just needed someone to remind her.

She gave a little nod. 'Of course not. There have been a few good things. I qualified this year.'

'As what?'

'A speech and language therapist.'

'Well, that sounds great. Congratulations.'

She nodded. 'Yeah. Yes, it is.'

Three years doing a course she'd absolutely loved. Her placements had been fabulous, letting her practice all her skills and making her realise exactly what she wanted to do.

'So why aren't you jumping for joy? You'll get to do the job that you want. Some people would give anything for that.'

His voice sounded a little wistful.

Wow. She must sound an ungrateful misery-guts. But there was something easy about talking to a perfect stranger. Someone who didn't know all the people or personalities involved. Someone completely independent.

‘I should be. I know. It’s just that I really, really wanted to work in one area. I did two training stints there, but by the time I’d qualified there was only one job and they gave it to someone with more experience.’ She shrugged. It still stung. She’d had her heart set on working there.

‘Where was it?’

‘In London. A specialist speech and language unit attached to the biggest children’s hospital. I loved it there. The staff were really special and the kids...they just made my heart melt.’

‘What kind of things did you do there?’

He seemed genuinely interested.

‘I worked with children with specific language impairment and language disorders. Those kids made progress every day.’ She held up her finger and thumb. ‘Even if it was just in the tiniest way.’ She smiled again, caught up in the memories. ‘I even worked with children with hearing problems. Seeing the look on their faces when they got a cochlear implant and heard for the first time...’ She shook her head. ‘It was magical. It was exactly what I wanted to do.’ She lifted her eyes to meet his. ‘These things stay with you for ever.’

He was looking at her with such intensity, such sincerity, that it took her breath away. Here, in a city with over two million people, he was looking only at her.

She couldn’t imagine how she’d done it, but she seemed to have completely captured his attention—just as he’d captured hers.

His voice was low and deep. ‘So you don’t have a job now?’

Even the timbre of his voice sent butterflies along her skin. Those two glasses of wine earlier seemed to have finally hit her system. Any minute now she was going to have to find some food before her brain was truly addled. No guy could have this kind of effect on a girl? Not in real life anyway.

She shook her head in an attempt to find some clear thoughts. ‘I do. And I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. I’ve got a job at a stroke unit, working with patients who’ve suffered a stroke and are having trouble with speech.’

He kept smiling at her—one minute looking serious, the next as if she amused him. Those teeth were perfect. Too perfect. He must be a model. He probably advertised toothpaste.

He raised his eyebrows. ‘But that sounds just as important as the other job.’

Clear, rational thought. Easy when you didn’t dream about the place where you wanted to work every night.

She cringed. ‘I know. I *know*. I don’t mean to sound like that. I’m lucky to have a job. Not everyone on my course got one. And once I get there I know that’ll love it.’ She gave a sad smile. ‘It’s just not what I’d hoped for, that’s all.’

She heard him suck in a deep breath. ‘We don’t always get what we hope for, Ruby.’

His voice was serious. It made her curious.

He couldn’t possibly have any idea of the kind of thoughts that were circulating in her head right now. Her imagination was running riot. Handsome mysterious Frenchman. Gorgeous, smelling good enough to eat. Polly wouldn’t believe a word of this. Any minute now someone would pinch her and she’d wake up.

Time to get back to reality. Time to get a little nosey.

‘So, Alex. What do *you* do? Do you work around here?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m like you—just visiting for New Year. I’m in business. Boring things. Investment banking.’

Smash. The first dream broken. Not a model. But what interested her most was how he’d described his job. This guy gave very little away.

‘Why do you do it if it’s boring?’

‘Because I’m expected to. It’s a job.’

Another tell-nothing answer. The less he said, the more she was curious.

His phone buzzed and he pulled it from his pocket and frowned.

'Is it your friends? Are they looking for you?' She looked through the crowd, expecting to see a bunch of Amazonian blondes charging in to steal their prize back.

He shook his head. 'Nothing like that.' He stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

Ruby bent forward and peered into the crowd below. 'I dropped my phone. It's probably smashed to smithereens.'

'Smithereens? What is that?

He wrinkled his nose. It made him even cuter, if that was humanly possible.

'You know—broken into lots and lots of tiny pieces. Irreparable.'

He nodded. 'Aha. Can't be fixed?'

She smiled. 'You got it.'

His hand tightened on her waist, edging her a little closer, and she didn't object. She liked his hand there. She was happy standing next to his shoulder with his arm anchored around her.

'So, your friends... The ones you're here with. Will they be looking for you?'

He gazed across the crowd. 'I'm quite sure they are.' He shrugged. 'But I don't always want to be found.'

Hmmm... More mystery. He was so good at deflecting questions. It was almost an art form.

He turned towards her, pulling her so they were face to face. 'Are you comfortable without *your* friends, Ruby Wetherspoon? Are you happy to watch the Paris fireworks with some strange man who pulled you from the crowd?'

It was the way he said it. The way he looked at her. The gentle smile on his face and the twinkle in his eyes. For a second she didn't want to breathe.

The wind caught her curls and blew them across his face. He laughed and took her hair in his hand, smoothing it down and tucking it behind her ear. She lifted her hand and put it on his chest. She could feel his warm skin on her palm through his thin T-shirt. She could feel the curling hairs on his chest.

The man just oozed sex appeal. If anyone had told her this time last year that she would be standing here, now, like this, she would have shaken her head in disbelief.

But right now there wasn't any place else she'd rather be. 'You're not a stranger,' she said simply. 'You're Alex.'

The countdown started around them.

Dix...neuf...huit...sept...

'Yes,' he murmured. 'Tonight I'm just Alex.'

The world around them exploded. Multi-coloured lights flickered up and down the outside of the Eiffel Tower. And Alex bent to kiss her.

The fireworks around her were nothing to the ones exploding in her brain. She didn't do this. She didn't do any of this. But everything about it felt right.

This was the kind of thing she could tell her grandkids about when she was an old woman. *I once kissed a gorgeous Frenchman in Paris on New Year's Eve*.

Because this *was* a fairytale. This wasn't real life.

Except Alex's kiss was more than a fairytale. It was right up there with an award-winning movie.

Tingles were going to places that tingles hadn't been in a long time. One of his hands was resting gently on her lower back—the other was holding the back of her head. Except it wasn't *holding* the back of her head...it was *caressing* the back of her head. His fingers tangled through her hair, gently moving with tantalising softness to the side of her face.

If she could capture this moment and stuff it in a jar she would keep it for ever.

His lips finally pulled free and she had to stop herself reaching out for more. When her eyes finally opened his blue gaze was on her, his fingers still on her cheek. She'd thought the moment would be gone. But it wasn't.

It was still exploding in the stars all around.

He smiled at her. People were still shouting in the street beneath their feet, jumping up and down, and a million mobile phones were being held aloft to capture the last few seconds of the firework display.

'Happy New Year,' he whispered.

'Happy New Year,' she murmured. She couldn't wipe the smile off her face. It would probably last for eternity.

They stood for a little while as the firework display came to an end and the lights on the Eiffel Tower finally finished.

He grabbed her hand in his. 'What say we get away from all this? Do you want to find something to eat? To drink?'

Her eyes flickered towards the far-off sign where she was to meet her friends. People were still tightly packed around it. There was no way she would be able to find her friends, then fight her way back through the crowd to Alex. The choice was simple.

'Food sounds good.'

The crowd around their feet had dispersed a little. The excitement of the countdown and the end of the fireworks display had sent people dispersing into the surrounding streets.

He jumped down and reached his arms up to catch her around her waist as she sat on the top of the wall, and he placed her gently on the ground.

Getting through the crowd was much easier with Alex in charge. No one seemed to argue with a broad-shouldered, six-foot-four man. He swept her along easily, pulling her behind until most of the crowd was behind them.

For a few seconds she thought there was a strange group of men behind her—all in black, with earpieces. But seconds later they'd vanished and she forgot about them.

By the time they reached Avenue George V the street was still busy but the crowd was gradually beginning to thin out. There were a number of open restaurants and cafés still serving customers. Alex hesitated a second outside of the door of the Four Seasons, then pulled her over to one of the other nearby restaurants with tables on the street.

He pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit down. She rubbed her hands together and smiled at his good manners. It had been a while since she'd met anyone who'd pull out a chair for her.

'Are you cold? We can sit inside.' He pointed at her fingers.

'No, it's fine.' The restaurant looked claustrophobic, packed with people. It was strange, but outside seemed more private.

A waiter appeared quickly and nodded to Alex.

'What would you like, Ruby? Wine? coffee?' He picked up a menu. 'Food?'

She smiled. 'I'll have a cocktail.' Her eyes scanned the menu. 'I'll have a Royal Pink Circus—and the biggest piece of cake they've got.'

Alex grinned and reached forward and grabbed the menu. 'What *is* that? Hmm...vodka, champagne, raspberries and violet syrup. Interesting choice.'

He turned and spoke in rapid French to the waiter.

Under the warm light from the restaurant she got a clear view of the man she'd just kissed. Under dim lights he'd been gorgeous. Under street lights...*wow*.

She couldn't help but smile. No phone. No camera to record the moment. Typical. Her friends would never believe this. His blue eyes stood out even from across the table, complemented by the lightly tanned skin she hadn't noticed before and the shadow along his chin.

'So, what plans do you have?'

She shrugged. 'I don't have my phone so I can't contact my friends.' She waved her arm. 'But it's fine. I know where I am from here. I can find my way back to my hotel.'

She gestured towards the Four Seasons.

'For a second I thought you were going to take me in there.' She glanced down at her red wool coat, jeans and boots. 'Somehow I don't think I would have got inside.'

He gave a little shake of his head. 'Oh, you would have got inside.' He reached over and took her hand. 'But I wasn't talking about right now. How long are you in Paris?'

Mysterious Alex was getting better by the second. He actually wanted to know if she was staying.

'Just another two days. We go home on Friday. What about you?'

'I don't really have a fixed timetable. I can go home any time. Do you want to do some sightseeing for the next two days? See a little more of Paris before you go home?'

Her heart gave a little leap. She was here with a group of friends, but Polly wouldn't mind if she spent some time with a sexy French guy—in fact after this last year she'd probably encourage her.

She nodded as the waiter appeared. 'That sounds fun.'

He set down the raspberry cocktail in a sugar-frosted glass. She took a tiny sip. The alcohol was stronger than she'd expected and the bubbles from the champagne flew up her nose. She choked and laughed.

'Wow! This Royal Pink Circus is a doozy!'

'What does that mean?' asked Alex as he took a sip of his beer.

'You know—extraordinary, spectacular. A doozy.'

Next came the cake. If it could even be described as that. This was no delicate *petit-four*. This was honest-to-goodness the biggest piece of cake in the universe. Seven layers of sponge, cream, raspberries and sauce.

She picked up her fork and took a bite. 'Oh, wow...' She leaned back in the chair. It had been hours since she'd had dinner. Alex was smiling at her again, with a twinkle in his eye. 'Would you like a piece? This is to die for.'

He shook his head. 'Don't let me deprive you. I'm getting enough pleasure seeing the look on your face.'

'Didn't you order anything?' She waved at the empty space in front of him, poising her fork above the cake again.

'I did, but I asked the waiter to bring your cake first.'

She swallowed another heavenly spoonful, 'I could get used to this kind of consideration, you know.'

Something flickered across his face that made her wonder if she'd made some kind of dreadful *faux pas*.

But Alex just nodded in agreement. 'And I think I could get used to Ruby Wetherspoon, who knows how to eat a piece of cake.'

She licked her fork. 'What? Do the people around you not eat?'

He lifted his eyebrows as the waiter reappeared and put a plate down in front of him, with the biggest BLT and portion of French fries she'd seen in a long time. She reached over and grabbed a fry.

'Not like you,' came his amused reply.

She shrugged. 'They certainly don't skimp on portions here. I'll need to remember this place. What's it called?' She looked at the name and screwed up her face. 'Too difficult. I'll just need to remember it's next to the fairytale hotel.'

'The fairytale hotel?' He'd started to eat and was making short work of the fries.

She nodded her head sideways. 'Yeah, next door. Isn't that the hotel every little girl wants to stay in when she comes to Paris?'

'I thought that was Cinderella's Castle at Disneyland?'

'Yeah, well. I'm older now. Tastes change.' She eyed her cocktail again. 'You know, you're going to hate me. But this is going straight to my head. Do you think I could order a coffee instead?'

He gave a wave of his hand and ordered her a coffee.

The cocktail might be a little strong, but the cake was perfect. The restaurant was perfect. The ambience in the street was perfect. And Alex...? Even more perfect.

'Have you been up the Eiffel Tower yet?' he asked.

She nodded, then leaned across the table and whispered, 'Don't tell anyone, but I thought I was going to be sick. It was okay looking into the distance, but when I looked down...' She made a swaying motion in her seat and shook her head. 'Bad idea.'

He laughed. 'And have you been to Versailles and the Louvre?'

She nodded. 'I queued for ever to see the Mona Lisa.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'What did you think?'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Honestly? Smaller than I expected—and a bit dark. But do you know the strangest thing? I still wanted to reach out and touch it.'

'She mesmerised you. Just like she did Leonardo. What about Notre Dame? Have you been there yet?'

She nodded again.

He held up his knife and fork. 'How long have you been here?'

'Just a few days. We've tried to cram in as much as possible.'

'Is there anywhere you'd still like to see?'

'Of course! This is Paris.' She counted off on her fingers, 'I still want to visit the Sacré Coeur and Montmartre—oh, and the Père Lachaise cemetery.'

He took a drink of his beer. 'So, I offer to take you sightseeing and you want to visit dead people?'

He slid down in his chair a little—he seemed to be relaxing more and more as their conversation continued.

'Well, I guess I bring out the best in you.'

She laughed. 'It's supposed to be beautiful—enchanting. Haven't you ever walked around a cemetery before? In the summer it can be so peaceful. I actually quite like wandering around and looking at the inscriptions in the gravestones. There's a few in our local church that have a skull and crossbones on them, showing that people had the plague. It's fascinating.'

His smile spread from ear to ear. 'Ruby, every time I think I might know you a little you say something else that surprises me.'

'Is that bad?'

He shook his head. 'No, it's good. *Very* good.' He reached over and took her hand. 'I'm sure I can find some things in the next two days for us to visit.'

'But today's New Year's Day. Everywhere will be closed.'

'Don't worry about that. I'll work something out.'

She was so wrapped up in him—in the way he was smiling at her, the way he was flirting with her—that she almost didn't notice the men in long black coats until they were almost on top of them.

One of them put a black-gloved hand sternly on Alex's shoulder, bent down and spoke quietly in his ear. She couldn't make out a word.

'Alex? What's wrong? Who is this?'

The expression on his face changed instantly. First it was a flare of anger, then it was a pure panic. He stood up, sending his chair flying.

'Alex?'

The black-coated man barely even acknowledged her presence.

'Ruby, I'm sorry—I have to go.' He fumbled in his coat for his phone. 'Give me your number. I'll call you.'

Her hands went automatically to her bag. No phone. She'd lost it.

'I don't have my phone, and I can't remember what my number is.'

She felt like an idiot. Everyone should know their mobile number. And she did—she had it written down at home—but right now she couldn't tell him if her life depended on it.

'What's wrong, Alex?'

He shook his head. He wasn't focused on her any more. He looked shocked.

'It's my family. Tell me where you're staying. I'll send you a message.'

She rattled off the name of the low-budget hotel where they were staying. He mumbled something to the man behind him.

'I'm sorry. I need to go. I'll send you a message later.'

He walked around to her side of the table and bent to kiss her. It was the briefest moment, but his lips came into contact with hers in the lightest of kisses. A brush like a butterfly's wings.

And then he was gone.

Surrounded by black coats, disappearing down the street.

The fairytale was over.

January

Ruby crashed through the door with her shopping bags, work folders and uniform over her arm.

Polly was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, eating a plate of noodles. She nodded towards the kitchen. 'Come and sit down, Ms Misery. Noodles in the pot and wine in the fridge.'

She was knackered. Honestly and truly exhausted. Between the long hours and the killer commute every day, this job was proving tougher than she'd ever thought. But today had been a winner. Today she'd finally believed that her work had helped a patient regain a little part of his speech. 'No' had been the finest word she'd heard in a while.

She poured the wine and tipped the rest of the noodles into a bowl, kicking off her shoes and thudding down sofa next to Polly. 'What are you watching?'

'Just the news. How was your day?'

She put the first spoonful of noodles into her mouth. It was like a chilli explosion. Polly had a penchant for spicy foods, and as she was the cook in the house Ruby was getting used to it. She took a few quick gulps of wine to try and quell the burn.

Her eyes flickered to the screen and she inhaled quickly, coughing and spluttering as her noodles went down the wrong way.

Polly turned and laughed, leaning over and slapping her hand on Ruby's back. 'Was the chilli kick that strong?'

But Ruby couldn't answer. Her eyes were streaming. She swallowed as best she could. 'Turn that up,' she said, pointing at the screen.

'What?' Polly mumbled, her mouth still full of food.

'Turn it up!'

She started throwing cushions and newspapers around, searching for the TV remote, which seemed to have an innate ability to hide whenever she left the house. Finally she spied it, hiding partway under the sofa. She pointed it at the TV and pressed the volume button hard.

Polly just stared at her open-mouthed.

'There are unconfirmed reports that King Leopold of Euronia is seriously unwell.

'The normally quiet principality has seen a flurry of activity in the last few days as private jets have been seen landing at the state airport. Crown Prince Alexander has returned home after a recent sojourn in the US, where he was apparently working with MIT and Harvard University.

'Prince Alexander, the only child of widowed King Leopold, is rarely seen. He is an astute businessman who is passionate about his country. Rumours have circulated in the last few years about King Leopold's declining health and his lessening public engagements.

'Crown Prince Alexander was seen returning in a private jet in the early hours of New Year's morning, quickly followed by dignitaries from the surrounding area. We've been told to expect a statement in the next few minutes.'

'It's him,' Ruby croaked, pointing at the screen. 'It's Alex.'

It was almost as if an elephant had sat on her chest, stopping her breathing.

Polly dropped her fork and bowl on the table. 'What?' She glanced from Ruby to the TV and back again. 'Him? *He's* your Alex? Crown Prince...whatever?'

'Apparently.'

Her throat had dried like an arid desert. She picked up the wine and gulped it down as if it were a glass of water, grimacing as it hit her tastebuds.

Her brain was in overdrive. Tiny words, tiny phrases, looks that had fleeted across his face and disappeared in an instant. Tiny pieces of a jigsaw puzzle she'd had no idea even existed.

A close-up picture of Alex emerging from a plane appeared on the screen and she gasped. He looked awful. He was still handsome, but his tanned skin was pale and there were lines around his eyes—even their blueness had dimmed.

He hadn't called. He hadn't left a message at all. At first she'd been irritated. Then, she'd been angry. Finally, she'd admitted to herself she was devastated.

But this was something else entirely. Her fairytale in Paris had never included a real live prince.

Polly started chattering in her ear. 'No wonder you were miserable. What a catch. Ruby—you kissed a *prince*!' She stared back at the screen. 'I wonder what's going on.'

The newsreader interrupted the next report mid-story. 'We're going to cross live now to Euronia for an announcement.'

A sombre-faced grey-haired, black-suited man stood on a podium. A sign appeared beneath him: 'Palace Principale'.

'What does that mean?' asked Polly.

'I have no idea.' Ruby shook her head.

The man started speaking. 'After consultation with the Crown Council, the principality of Euronia would like to announce that, with immediate effect, Crown Prince Alexander de Castellane will be taking over as Regent of Euronia as His Majesty King Leopold is no longer able to exercise his royal functions. The Crown Prince Alexander will now be known as Prince Regent.'

The picture cut back to the newsreader as he glanced up from reading the piece of paper in his hands. 'There are unconfirmed reports that King Leopold has suffered a catastrophic stroke, but no one at the palace is willing to comment on his medical condition. We'll bring you an update whenever we get one.'

Polly turned to face Ruby. 'Wow. Just...*wow*.'

Ruby felt sick. Her heart had squeezed when she'd seen the expression on Alex's face. How on earth must he be feeling?

She wanted to be angry with him—she really did. Why couldn't he have told her who he really was?

But deep down she knew the answer to that.

A real live prince wouldn't be looking for a girl like her.

Not in this lifetime anyway.

CHAPTER ONE

Ten years later

'RUBY?' THE DEPARTMENT receptionist shouted at her again.

Too many things were circulating in her brain. She needed to refer one child to someone else, another to an oral surgeon, and speak to the dietician about another.

She turned round and was nearly knocked over by a giant flower display. Her stomach tied itself up in little knots.

Rena smiled as she tried to hold up the giant display. 'You've got flowers again. Even more gorgeous than the last time. And, oh, *so* expensive.' She looked thoughtful for a moment. 'It's been a little while since the last bunch. Do you realise that, on and off, it's been six years you've been

getting these mysterious flowers? Right from when you started here. Surely you must have guessed by now who they're from?'

Ruby shook her head. 'I have no idea. The cards never say anything specific.' She pulled out the latest one. 'See? *"Thinking of you and wishing you well."*'

Rena frowned at the card in her hands. 'Have you tried phoning the florist to find out who sent them?' She was a regular amateur detective and could usually find a missing set of case notes in less than five minutes.

'Of course I have. But these places are used to things like this. They don't give anything away.'

'Well, whoever it is, money certainly isn't an object. These must have cost a fortune.' Rena reached up and touched one of the coloured petals. 'They smell gorgeous.' She frowned. 'Who have you seen lately that could have sent these?' She paused and bit her lip. 'Maybe it's Paul? Maybe he's trying for a reunion?'

Ruby shook her head. 'Paul would never send flowers like these.' Then she smiled. 'Paul would never send flowers full-stop. Which is why we're not together any more. That, and a whole lot of other things.'

Paul could never live up to the memory of Alex. Sometimes it felt like a figment of her imagination. Something so special that only she could remember. The only person she ever spoke to about it was Polly.

She'd tried to forget about him—she really had. She'd even lived with a lovely guy called Luke for a couple of years. But things just hadn't worked out between them, and in her heart she knew why. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't forget about her mysterious prince.

Rena smiled and touched Ruby's arm. 'Well, you've obviously got a devoted, secret admirer. It's romantic. It's mysterious. I could probably work it into a book somewhere.'

Ruby laughed. 'Rena, you write about murder and mayhem. I'm not sure I want to end up in one of your books!'

She cast her eyes over the flowers again. Stunning. Really stunning. Beautiful tropical colours. Red, pinks, yellows and oranges. Like a burst of sunshine on a rainy day.

She swallowed. The flowers had stopped for a few years. Right around the time when it had been all over the news that Prince Alex had married Princess Sophia of Leruna. A perfect fairytale princess. Dainty and blonde—nothing like Ruby. A baby had followed quickly afterwards. Followed by her tragic death due to breast cancer.

All that crammed into the space of two years. And not a single bunch of flowers over that time.

The coincidence played on her mind. The deliveries had started again around eighteen months ago. Could the flowers have been from Alex all along?

Something coiled deep inside her.

She walked over to the window and stared outside at the pouring rain of London. Another wasted five minutes thinking about her prince.

Her prince. What a joke. She'd never used those words out loud and never would. It was bad enough that they circulated around her brain.

Alex might have had tragedy, but he'd also had a life. Promotion for Ruby had come at a price. She'd been working so hard these last few years. Trying to change the lives of children who had been born with speech difficulties. It had left no time for her, no time for relationships, and no time to think about having a family.

The responsibilities of being in charge of a department in one of the best hospitals in London were relentless.

Sometimes she felt like a hamster, running in a wheel that she could never get off.

A porter brushed past, sending the scent of the beautiful flowers to meet her. It brought her back to reality quickly.

There was no point dreaming. She was nobody's princess.

And it was time to get back to work.

* * *

She was dashing around like a mad woman. Everyone in this hospital was the same. It had taken five different attempts for him to finally get some directions.

He stopped for a second to breathe. Ten years. Ten years since that night in Paris.

How different his life might have been. If his father hadn't been taken ill he would have met Ruby a few hours later in Paris and taken her sightseeing. That thought still made his stomach tighten.

She looked almost the same. Her dark curls were a little shorter. Her figure was just as curvy. But the expression on her face was more serious. Tired, even. And there were little lines around her eyes.

He didn't even want to look in the mirror lately. Although only ten years had passed since they'd last seen each other he was sure he'd aged about twenty.

The flowers he'd sent were sitting on the desk behind her. She wasn't even looking at them. Everyone else was oohing and aahing over them. But Ruby was too busy. Ruby was focused.

He watched her hurry around; she had a pile of cards in her hands.

'Seventeen new referrals,' she said to a nearby colleague, 'and Caroline is stuck in a traffic jam in the middle of London. How on earth are we going to get all these children assessed?'

He sucked in a breath. He'd never doubted for a second that Ruby would be dedicated to her work. But would it stand in the way of what he wanted her to do?

She tucked a curl behind her ear. It made his fingers tingle. *He'd* done that once.

'Can I help you?' someone asked him.

He shook his head. It was now or never.

He stepped forward. 'One of those referral cards will be from me.'

Ruby spun around to face him. The professional mask fell as quickly as the cards from her hand. His accent was unmistakable; she couldn't fail to recognise it.

'Alex,' she said. Nothing else. Her eyes locked on to his.

'Ruby.'

She tilted her head to the side, as if she were contemplating a million different questions, before sucking in a deep breath and giving a visible little shake of her head.

Ten years. Ten years since he'd run his fingers through those soft dark curls and looked into those chocolate-brown eyes. Ten years since he'd felt the silky softness of her skin, tasted the sweetness of her lips.

Every sensation, every touch, every taste flashed in front of him in an instant.

But Ruby wasn't caught in the same spell that he was.

She bent down to retrieve the cards and he knelt to help her. It was inevitable that their hands touched as they reached out towards the same card.

She pulled her hand away as if she'd been stung. 'Why, Alex? Why are you here?'

It was as if someone had reached into his chest and twisted his heart. There it was. In a few simple words a whole multitude of hurt. No one else would hear it. No one else would understand. But Ruby's deep brown eyes were fixed on his and he could see everything there. She looked wounded. Ten years on and her hurt was still easily visible.

But what did she see when she looked at him? He wasn't Alex the twenty-four-year-old any more—the bachelor Crown Prince with the world at his feet. He was a father. He was a widower. He was Prince Regent. The Prince continually in waiting.

And he was desperate.

In his head this had all been so easy. *Find someone you would trust with your daughter. Find Annabelle the expert help she needs.*

It had even seemed sensible to the palace advisors. If they'd questioned his choice of therapist at first, once they'd researched Ruby's qualifications and seen her recent publications all queries had vanished.

But now he was here in the flesh it was so much harder. Now he could see her. Now he could hear her. Now he could smell her. Her light floral scent was drifting around him.

He'd had no idea of the effect seeing Ruby again would have on him. Ten years... Ten years lost. Ten years of what might have been.

'Alex?'

The word jolted him and he smiled. No one called him Alex any more. No one had ever really called him just Alex.

He straightened up and handed her the final cards.

'I'm here because I need your help, Ruby.'

* * *

Any minute now a bunch of unicorns would come cantering along the hospital corridor, with exploding rainbows all around them.

She'd dreamt about Alex before. But never like this. Never in her workplace. All those dreams had been set back in Paris. Or in the Euronian palace that she'd looked at online.

But Alex standing in front of her at work, asking for her help...? She was obviously losing her mind.

He reached out and touched her bare arm. Short sleeves were essential in a hospital environment, to stop the spread of infection. This time she didn't pull away. This time she let the feel of the pads of his fingers spread warmth through her chilled arm.

He was really here.

This wasn't a strange hallucination due to overwork or lack of chocolate.

Ten years she'd waited to talk to this man again. Ten years waiting to ask him what the hell had happened back in Paris and why he'd never contacted her.

Alex—her Alex. *Her prince* was finally standing right in front of her.

He was every bit as handsome as she remembered. Better, even.

Tanned skin, dark hair and bright blue eyes. She'd sometimes wondered if she'd imagined how blue they were. But she hadn't. If anything she'd underestimated their effects. But, then again, she'd never seen Alex in daylight.

She wasn't imagining any of this. All six foot four of him was standing right in front of her.

Her eyes lowered to where his hand was touching her. Tiny electric pulses were shooting up her arm. She didn't know whether to cry or be sick.

Every part of her imagination had just turned into reality.

In a way, it was a relief. She *had* met Alex. He *did* remember her. So why was that making her so darn angry right now?

He pulled his hand back from her arm and she lifted her head, pulling her shoulders back. *He'd taken his hand away.* And it had left her feeling bereft. Now she was feeling angry with herself. She didn't have a sensible thought in her head right now.

She swallowed and looked him in the eye. 'How can I help you, Alex?' The words were automatic. It was all she could manage right now.

He looked around. 'Is there somewhere we can talk?'

She nodded and gestured with her arm for him to walk down the corridor, stopped at a door, pulled a key from her pocket and unlocked the door.

Her office. It even had her name on the door: 'Ruby Wetherspoon, Head of Speech and Language'. She'd done well. Most days she was proud. Today she had no idea how she felt.

The office was small, but neat and tidy. She pointed to a chair and invited him to sit. It was almost a relief to sit at the other side of the desk and have the heavy wooden structure between them.

'How exactly do you think I can be of assistance to you, Alex?'

Her words were formal, her professional façade slipping back into place. The juggling of the cards on the table-top was the only sign of her nerves. She hoped he wouldn't notice.

'It's not me. It's my daughter Annabelle. She's three years old now and she isn't speaking.'

Ruby nodded automatically. His daughter. Of course. Why else would be come to her?

She had this sort of conversation every day. This one wouldn't be much different.

'Three years old is still an acceptable age for speech development. All children develop at a different rate. Some children have a delay in their speech and language development. Have you had her hearing checked?'

He sighed. She was going back to basics—which was the correct thing for a health professional. But she could tell from his expression he'd heard it all before.

'I've had ten different professional opinions on Annabelle. The latest of which is selective mutism. Her hearing is fine. Her comprehension is fine. She doesn't seem to *want* to speak.'

She could feel herself bristle. Ten assessments on a child? Talk about overkill. Why not just let her develop at her own pace? She tried to be pragmatic.

'How does she communicate with those around her?'

'She signs.'

Ruby was surprised. 'Proper signing?'

He nodded. 'We have a member of staff who's deaf. She's been able to sign since she was young.'

It wasn't particularly unusual in children who were deaf, or in children who had deaf siblings. But it *was* unusual in a child who could apparently hear and speak.

She lifted her hands. 'Then maybe she thinks that's normal?'

He shook his head.

It was time to ask some more questions.

'Has Annabelle ever spoken? Ever said a few words?'

'Only on a few select occasions.'

Strange... Ruby couldn't help but be a little curious. Selective mutism was certainly unusual but she'd dealt with a few cases before. She'd even published some professional papers on it.

Ruby lowered her voice. 'Does she speak to you, Alex?'

The question was straight to the heart of the matter. It was a natural question for any health professional, but she saw him recoil. She'd seen this before. He felt this was his fault. She'd dealt with lots of parents who felt guilty about whatever issue their child had. Most of the time it was just hard luck. Genetics. A developmental delay. A head injury or similar accident.

She asked the most practical question. 'Does Annabelle have anything significant in her medical history?'

'No. Nothing.'

They sat in silence for a few seconds. She couldn't take it. She couldn't take it a second longer. Her professional façade was slipping. After all this time—just to turn up like this and expect her to help him—just because he asked? Did she have *mug* stamped across her forehead?

She couldn't even acknowledge the flutters in her stomach. She couldn't even explain her feeling when she'd heard his voice and turned to see him again after all this time. It had been like a sucker punch.

It was time to stop being so polite.

Ruby leaned back in her chair. 'I don't get it, Alex. After all this time, why come to me? Why come here? You must have plenty of people in Euronia willing to help with your daughter.'

His brow was lined with deep furrows that marred his handsome face. It made her feel self-conscious. She only had the lightest dusting of make-up on, to emphasise her brown eyes and pink lips. How much had she changed in the last ten years? Would he be disappointed by what he saw?

Why was he here? Why, after all this time, had he been convinced that this was the right thing to do?

'I want to feel as if I've tried everything possible for Annabelle. I haven't had faith in any of the people who have seen her and assessed her. And, whilst the latest diagnosis seems reasonable, I'm not happy at the treatment plan for Annabelle.'

Maybe that's because you should have left her alone to be a normal toddler. Ruby was still imagining what ten assessments had done to that poor child. But she couldn't say those words out loud.

It was difficult. This was Alex, her mysterious Frenchman—who wasn't a Frenchman after all. She'd never thought she'd come into contact with him for *work*. She never thought she'd come into contact with him again.

'What *is* the treatment plan for Annabelle?'

He pushed a folder he'd been carrying across the desk towards her. She opened it and scanned it quickly. Whilst the assessment might have been thorough, she didn't agree at all with what was in the plan, or with the conclusions it had already surmised.

Ever the professional, she raised her head and selected her words carefully. 'Every professional will have a different idea of the correct plan for your daughter. It's not really my place to disagree.'

He pointed to the file. 'What would *you* do?'

She opened her mouth automatically to speak, then closed it again. 'What does it matter?'

'Because I'd like you to come to Euronia and assess Annabelle for yourself. I'd like you to be the one to plan her care and treat her.'

He might as well have dumped a bucket of ice-cold water over her head. She was stunned. 'That's impossible.'

'No. It's not. I know you have a job here, and patients, but I've offered your Director of Services a generous annual bequest if you'll agree to come and work for me—for Annabelle,' he added quickly.

'What?' She stood up, the chair behind her flying backwards. 'You've done *what*?'

She couldn't believe her ears. The tiny glimmer of hope that he'd searched her out for any reason other than his daughter died in an instant. He might be a prince in another country, but he didn't seem much like a prince to her now.

'And you did that without speaking to me first?' She walked around the desk, reached down, and grabbed hold of his jacket, pulling him to his feet. 'How dare you, Alex? How *dare* you? Ten years later you think you can just walk into my life and *buy* me?'

Anger and the untold resentment that had festered for ten years came spilling out. This wasn't her. She never acted like this. But she just couldn't help it.

She shook her head fiercely, blazing with fury. 'You can't buy me, Alex. I'm not for sale.' She held out one hand. 'I have a job. Responsibilities. I have staff to take care of—patients to take care of.'

She stared at her other hand, still gripping tightly to the lapel of his jacket. What on earth was she doing? Her knuckles were white and she quickly loosened her grip and took a step backwards. Her heart was thudding in her chest. Her head was thumping.

'And you could do it better if you had two more permanent members of staff.' He cut her off before she had more time to think about it.

Her mouth fell open. 'What?'

'That's what I promised your director. Permanent funding for two more members of staff if they'll release you to work with Annabelle. Plus filling your post while you're gone.'

Her brain was whizzing. Two more members of staff could make a world of difference to this place. Time. It would give her staff time. The one thing she couldn't conjure up for them.

She hated rushing assessments. She hated not having enough time to allocate to the children who needed her. She hated having to turn children away because there just wasn't enough space for any more patients. Two more members of staff was a luxury she couldn't afford to ignore.

'Why on earth would you do this?'

He sat back down in his seat and put his head in his hands.

She'd read about everything that had happened to him in the last ten years. Now here he was, right in front of her, and she actually felt sorry for him.

She started shaking her head. 'It feels like blackmail, Alex. I haven't seen you in ten years. *Ten years!* Not a word from you—nothing. And now this.' She started pacing around the small office. 'I know what happened to your father. The whole world knows. But you never contacted me. You never said anything. I was left sitting in that hotel for two days, wondering if I'd imagined everything. Thank goodness Polly dragged me out and about.'

His head shot up. 'I did contact you. I sent a message.'

'I never got any message!' She was still angry.

'But I sent one. My head of security—he took it to the hotel. Gave it to the reception clerk. You *must* have got it.'

She shook her head and lowered her voice. 'There was no message, Alex. None. I waited and waited.'

She hated the way the words made her feel. She hated the way she wanted to reach out and grab them. Grab the fact that Alex *had* tried to reach her—no matter what else had happened in his life. But it was the expression on his face that was worse. He looked hurt. He looked injured.

But, most importantly, he looked tired.

She knelt down in front of him. His father had been sick for ten years. He had a country to run. His wife had died from cancer—she was assuming he'd nursed her through that—and he had a daughter whom he clearly loved but needed help with.

She reached up and touched his hand. Her skin coming into contact with his almost made her smile. Her pale skin against his tanned skin. A world of difference.

The sensation she felt touching his skin was still there. Still electrifying. But she had to put a reality check on things.

She spoke quietly. 'Why now, Alex? Why me?'

It was only a few words but they meant so much more than she was actually saying. He knew that. He must.

He reached up and touched her cheek. *Zing*.

'Because there is no one else. No one else I could trust with the thing that is most precious to me.'

She blinked, trying to stop the tears forming in her eyes.

Nothing about wanting to see her again. Nothing about wanting to know how she was.

But he had just told her he trusted her with the thing most precious in the world to him. His daughter.

She didn't know whether to be happy or sad.

He pulled a picture from his wallet. A sad-looking blonde-haired toddler. She was beautiful. Just like her mother had been. But she wasn't laughing. She wasn't playing. She didn't look happy.

'Oh, Alex...' she breathed.

'Will you come?' His voice sounded as if it was breaking.

She stood up, her mind whirling. 'I'll need to think about it. You'll need to give me some time.'

How ironic. Ten years later she was asking him for time.

How on earth could she not do this? The picture of the little girl had broken her heart. She had no idea if she could help or not—but she could try.

Outside her office she could see figures rushing past. The hospital was always busy—never enough time to do everything. It was wearing her down. She loved her job, but the truth was she'd spent the last few months searching the vacancy bulletins.

One thing. If she did this one thing she could help this department and these kids for ever. Was it really such a hard task?

A chair scraped along the floor behind her. Alex had stood up, a resigned look on his face. He nodded at the desk, 'I'll leave those things for you to look at. My contact details are there. Let me know when you make up your mind.'

He thought she was going to say no. And right now that was the way she was leaning. What would she do with her flat—her cat—if she left to go abroad?

The file and the photo of Annabelle sat on her desk. He had his hand on the door handle.

'Alex? How did you know where I was?'

It had bothered her since he'd first arrived.

His bright blue eyes fixed on hers. It was the first time she'd seen anything resembling the eyes she'd looked into ten years ago.

'I've always known where you were, Ruby,' he said quietly as he opened the door and walked down the corridor.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PLANE JOURNEY was smooth. The private jet immaculate. Any other person might have taken the opportunity to relax, but Ruby's stomach had been jittery ever since they'd left London.

She stared out of the window as the plane came into land. Her first sight of Euronia. A stunning, winding coastline overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. A population of two hundred thousand people over an area of only seventy kilometres. The rich and famous flocked here because of the tax benefits. The press loved Euronia because it seemed to host every celebrity wedding that had ever existed.

The plane landed quickly and glided to a halt on the Tarmac. She hadn't spoken to Alex since she'd seen him at the hospital. The number he'd given her had been for his secretary—a chirpy little man who'd been delighted when she'd said she would come to Euronia and had spoken with great fondness about Annabelle. He'd arranged everything. Even advising on what kind of clothing to bring and asking her for her dress and shoe size so he could provide some extra items if required.

The pilot and the stewardess had both been polite but formal. She wondered if they were used to fading into the background.

A black limousine was waiting for her.

'Welcome to Euronia, Ms Wetherspoon. It will only take ten minutes to reach the palace. Please make yourself comfortable and help yourself to refreshments.'

Another man in black. She hid her smile. Any minute now she would hear the theme tune to that movie in her head. It was the same garb that the men in Paris had been wearing all those years ago. Those men had made her uncomfortable. This man was a little different. His eyes were scanning the horizon constantly. Was he a chauffeur or security?

She settled into the comfortable leather seats. The 'refreshments' in front of her were wine, champagne and beer. It was ten-thirty in the morning. What she'd actually like was a cup of tea.

She watched the scenery speed past.

Polly's words echoed in her ears. *'This isn't a movie. He's using you, Ruby. Don't get any ideas about this at all.'*

Her disdain had been apparent as soon as she'd heard what had happened. Polly had long since abandoned any romantic notions of her prince. She'd been the one to see exactly how devastated Ruby had been. But it was all right for Polly. She'd got her happy-ever-after—a doting husband and a baby in her arms.

'How long will you be gone?' she'd asked Ruby moodily.

'I have no idea.' And she really didn't. She couldn't plan anything until she'd assessed Annabelle.

The car swept through some regal gates, past armed guards and down a long pale yellow sweeping drive. The view over the Mediterranean was breathtaking.

No turning back. She was here now. She tugged at her pale green dress. It was a little more formal than what she normally wore, but at least it didn't crumple.

The palace came into view. Nicknamed the Pink Palace, the Palace Principale was built from pink and red sandstone. She'd seen pictures on the internet, but seeing it in reality was entirely different.

Ruby took a deep breath. There must be a million little girls' birthday cakes all over the world based on this palace. Four square turrets and it seemed like hundreds of slim windows looked down on her. The palace doors were enormous, with wide sweeping steps leading up to them.

Intimidating. Definitely intimidating.

She would be lying if she claimed she'd never thought about this. Of course she had. Every girl had.

But every girl hadn't kissed a prince.

Oh, boy. She squeezed her eyes shut for a second. This was harder than she'd thought.

Actually being here in Euronia was much harder than she'd imagined it to be.

In her head this was a job. This was professional. So why was her heart fluttering so much? And why did she want to run back along that yellow driveway?

A man was standing at the top of the steps to greet her. It wasn't Alex. Of course it wasn't Alex. He hadn't even spoken to her on the phone.

She climbed the steps and looked out over the Mediterranean Sea. Lots of little white boats bobbed up and down on the beautiful blue water. *Little* boats? They probably cost more than she would earn in her lifetime. This was a whole other world.

But she was here to do a job, not to admire the scenery—no matter how beautiful it was.

The sooner she got started the better.

* * *

He watched her step from the car. She was picture-perfect. Her elegant legs were the first hint of what was to come as her slim figure emerged in a pale green dress that fluttered around her in the strong sea winds. It was an occupational hazard of having a palace on the sea.

His mother had always joked that one day a press photographer would get a picture of something they shouldn't. She'd been born before her time, and had been taken much too soon. She would have known exactly what to do with Annabelle.

He watched as Rufus, his private secretary, bustled around about Ruby. He would probably give her a headache in the first five minutes, but his heart was in the right place.

Rufus had organised everything once he'd known Ruby would be coming. From her favourite foods and TV shows to her clothes—everything would be taken care of. The only thing he'd asked for some input with was where to put her in the palace.

Alex hadn't been quite sure, but had finally decided she should be in the West Wing, overlooking the sea. The rooms there had always been his mother's favourites.

It only took a few moments before his phone rang.

'Your Majesty? I'm afraid there's a problem with our guest. Her accommodation is unsuitable. She's requesting rooms next to Princess Annabelle.' Rufus was so overwrought he was practically squeaking.

'Take her to the library. I'll be along directly.'

Five minutes. That was all it had taken for Ruby to cause turmoil in his life. He just hoped this wasn't a decision he'd live to regret.

He strode down the stairs and along the corridor towards the library. Rufus was flapping around the doorway. He wasn't used to people not going along with his plans.

'Where is she?' Alex looked around the empty room.

'She went upstairs to Princess Annabelle's quarters. She knows Annabelle isn't there but she said she wanted to make herself familiar with the place.'

Rufus cringed. The whole thing was probably giving him palpitations. It didn't take much these days.

Alex waved his hand. 'Leave this to me.'

He didn't need Rufus getting over-excited. What on earth was Ruby *doing*? She'd barely put her feet across the front door.

He bit his lip as he climbed the stairs at a rapid pace. She wasn't used to things like this. Maybe he should try and exercise a little patience. Ruby wasn't used to royal palaces and protocols. She was here because he'd asked her to be. She might have a job to do, but she was also his guest.

He reached Annabelle's rooms quickly. The door was open wide, giving a clear view of the palace gardens and the sea. Ruby was sitting on one of the window seats, but she wasn't admiring the view. One of Annabelle's stuffed toys was in her hands. It was a koala left by the Australian ambassador after his last visit. Ruby was looking around the room carefully.

He stood behind her, looking at her outline, seeing every curve of her body. It sent a rush of blood around his own body.

He hadn't quite imagined how this would feel. Ruby, sitting in his palace, with the backdrop he'd looked at every day for years behind her. It almost seemed unreal.

'Ruby, what are you doing in here?'

She sighed and turned to face him. The first thing that struck him was her big brown eyes. So dark, so deep, so inviting... He really needed to get hold of himself.

'There are rooms right next door to Annabelle's. It would be best if I stayed there.'

'Why?' The rooms he'd chosen for her in the West Wing were brighter, more spacious. The ones next to Annabelle were smaller, usually reserved for staff. 'The other rooms are nicer. They have more space.'

She waved her hand. She didn't look happy. Was she already regretting coming here?

'I need to be next to her, Alex. You forget—I live in London. These rooms will be a penthouse compared to my flat. I need to see her, Alex. I need to see her in her own environment. I need to see how she functions. I need to see how she communicates with those around her. She's three. I need to watch her in the place where she's most comfortable. I'm not just here to assess whether she can actually speak or not. I need to assess her ability to understand—her cognitive abilities. I need to see how she interacts with those around her.'

She held out her arm across the immaculately kept room.

'Is this Annabelle's world?'

There was tinge of sadness to her words. As if to her the beautiful rooms were clearly lacking.

'Where is she now?'

Professional Ruby. The one he'd never really experienced before. She wasn't having wishful thoughts about *him*. She was concentrating on the job she was here to do.

He glanced at his watch. 'She's with her nanny. She goes to the local nursery for a few hours twice a week. Her nanny thought mixing with other children might be good for her. She's due back any minute.'

Ruby nodded and smiled.

Alex continued. 'This isn't a big country. Annabelle will go to the local school with the other children, just like I did. My father always believed that to lead the people you had to be part of the people.'

'He sounds like a very wise man.' She turned and looked out over the sea. 'Where is your father? Is he here?'

He hesitated. They kept details about King Leopold closely guarded. But this was Ruby. He trusted her with the details of his daughter—why not his father?

'He's not here. He's in Switzerland.'

'Switzerland?'

'His stroke was severe. We have a hospital in Euronia, but we don't have ICU facilities.'

She walked towards him, concern lacing her brow. Clearly no one had told her about the protocol of remaining ten steps away from the Prince. He was glad. He could see a tiny smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Had they been there before?

If asked, he would have said that every part of her face had been etched on his brain. But these were new. It was disconcerting. A part of Ruby he hadn't kept in his head.

She put her hand on his chest. He could practically hear the alarms going off around the building.

'Ten years on your father still needs ICU facilities?'

He was trying not to concentrate on her warm skin penetrating through his shirt. 'Yes—and no. He did at first. His recovery was limited and slow. He was moved to a specialist rehab unit. But now he has frequent bouts of pneumonia and he needs assistance with breathing. He has to be kept near an ICU. Euronia doesn't have those facilities.'

'You could get them.'

Her voice was quiet. She knew exactly what she was saying. It was enough. The rest of the words didn't have to be said out loud. No one else around him would do this.

'I could,' he said gently. 'But my father wouldn't want people to see him the way he is now. It would break his heart.' His voice was strained. Even he could hear it.

It was so strange to have Ruby standing right here in front of him, in his daughter's room. He'd imagined her in many different scenarios over the years, but this had never been one of them.

In his darkest moments, when everything had seemed insurmountable, he'd always been able to close his eyes and go back to Paris, the fireworks and Ruby.

A perfect night. With a disastrous end.

She'd suited her red coat and hat that cold night. And for the last ten years that was the way he'd remembered her.

Ruby—with the sparkle in her eyes, the flirtatious laugh and the easy chatter. Every time he thought of her there were fireworks in the background. Fireworks that matched her personality and her vitality.

But today, in the sun, the pale green chiffon complemented her dark brown curls and brown eyes. The dress covered every part of her it should, but he hadn't expected her to look quite so elegant.

It was just the two of them. No palace staff. No interruptions.

'I've met so many different people, Ruby. I see masks, façades, the whole time. I've never seen any of that with you. Ten years ago I saw someone who was devastated at not getting her dream job—someone who wasn't afraid to say that to a stranger. All the people who have assessed Annabelle...'

He shook his head.

'None of them have felt genuine to me. Oh, they might be professionals in their field. They might have letters after their names. But most of them only tell me what they think I want to hear. Others try and blind me with science. I don't think any of them have ever wanted to find out who the real Annabelle is. They might be interested in the theory or psychology of why a three-year-old won't talk...'

He put his hand on his chest, directly over hers. One set of fingers intertwined with another.

'But none of them have cared in *here* about why she isn't speaking.'

He could lean forward right now. He could lean forward and capture her lips the way he did ten years ago.

Ruby's eyes were fixed on his. 'Well, no wonder.'

'No wonder what?'

'No wonder you came looking for me.'

CHAPTER THREE

IT TOOK ANNABELLE four long days to acknowledge Ruby's existence. At first she completely ignored her, preferring to communicate in her own way with her nanny.

The nanny, Brigette, was thankfully a dedicated and sensible woman. She'd spent all her life in Euronia and had been with the family since Annabelle's arrival. The little girl trusted her completely, but once Brigette realised Ruby was here to stay and help with Annabelle it was clear she was glad of the assistance. She loved the little girl but felt frustrated that she wasn't able to help more.

Ruby was patient. But Alex was hovering around her constantly, asking her questions, destroying her concentration and patience. Any time he appeared her senses went into overdrive. The timbre of his voice, the accent, could make her legs turn to mush.

She had to drive a little bit of her anger back into her head. Her anger that she was here for Annabelle—not for Alex. It didn't matter that it might be irrational. It was the only thing currently keeping her sane.

He appeared at her shoulder, his scent drifting around her. She didn't even turn around.

'Alex, you need to leave me to get on with the job. That's what I'm here to do.'

Annabelle was playing quietly in her room. Flitting between colouring at the table and drawing chalk pictures on her board. There was a television in her room, which she rarely watched, and a tablet on the chair next to her.

She was definitely an interesting study. She was a creative little girl. The drawers at her desk were filled with cardboard, paint, ribbon, glitter and glue. She was never happier than when she was covered in the stuff. But the life of a royal princess meant that she was continually being cleaned, tidied and paraded elsewhere.

The only time she showed interest in the tablet—which she could use easily—was when she watched clips of singing and dancing from films. *Annie*, *The Sound of Music* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* seemed to be the favourites.

There was a mixture of melancholy and frustration that emanated from Alex when he watched Annabelle.

'But I'm her *parent*. Aren't you supposed to talk to me and give me a report?'

Ruby nodded and gave a little sigh. 'I suppose... But I haven't finished my full assessment of Annabelle yet. I can only give you my first impressions.'

She turned around to face him, conscious of the fact that she'd be subjected to his killer blue eyes.

'This will take longer than I thought. I have to wait until Annabelle is ready to communicate with me—to work with me. I'm not going to force myself on her. She's not that type of kid.'

The smile that spread across his face was one of complete relief. He put his warm hands on her shoulders. '*That's* why you're here, Ruby. You're the first person who's assessed Annabelle that has said that to me. You don't care about the time span. You care about the child.'

Because you're paying me to.

It was an uncomfortable thought racing around in her brain. She was used to working for the health service. She'd never seen private patients before. Every child she'd assessed had been given the best possible assessment. But the health services were pushed for time and it sometimes frustrated her. Here she didn't have those worries.

Everything about this was a whole new experience. Staying in a palace. Knowing that after ten years she might bump into Alex at any second. The *you're paying me to* thought had a tiny bit of self-preservation about it. It kept things in perspective. It kept her grounded. It reminded her why she was actually here.

Alex was still touching her shoulders. She was wearing a sundress and his fingers were in direct contact with her skin. The sensations that were currently running like little pulses down her arms were conflicting with all her previous thoughts.

'Why don't we do this somewhere else?

'What?'

Do what somewhere else? She felt panic rush through her. How exactly had she been looking at him?

He lifted his hand from her shoulder and waved it towards the window. 'I've not been a very good host. Let me show you a little of Euronia.' He looked down at her sandals. 'How do you feel about a walk?'

Her sandals were pretty, but flat and comfortable. Her curiosity had definitely flared. 'I feel fine about a walk.'

'Then let's go.'

'Don't you need to let your security team know first, Alex?'

He smiled again and shook his head. 'You know, you're the only person that actually calls me that.'

'What?'

'Alex. No one else calls me that.'

She shook her head in disbelief. 'What on earth *do* they call you?'

He shrugged. 'Prince Regent or Your Majesty. If it's someone I've known a long time they might call me Alexander.'

A different world.

She stepped right up to him, her nose only inches away from his. 'But I know you as Alex. Always have. Always will.'

He smiled and gestured for her to follow him, and led her down a huge array of corridors and out through one of the back doors of the castle.

The gardens were beautiful—colourful and perfectly groomed. She recognised the marble fountain from an old black and white picture she had seen of Alex and his future wife as children.

They walked across the immaculate expanse of green lawn towards the city. It was officially the smallest city in the world—not much bigger than an average town. But it had grown exponentially as the economy of Euronia had grown.

'Did you play in these gardens when you were a child?'

He nodded. 'Yes. There's a secret maze in the forest over there. And my father ordered a tree house to be built and it took the carpenter nearly a whole year.' He gave a little sigh. 'Annabelle is still a little young to play in it. I don't even think she'll like it.'

'Haven't you ever shown it to her?'

He shook his head. 'I've been too focused on other things when it comes to Annabelle. We haven't got around to anything like that.'

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