

The original first kiss scene.

~Deleted Scene: Playful First Kiss~

He leaned towards my ear, as if to share a secret. "You're blushing again." He beamed, as usual pleased by his effect on me. "Why are you blushing?" he asked, still whispering.

I wasn't sure how to answer. I couldn't very well tell him it was because of *him*. "It's a secret."

Desperate for a distraction, I lay back on my elbows and tipped my head back, enjoying the soft breeze caressing my cheeks. I felt so incredibly content and I knew it wasn't because of the beautiful sunshine, the glorious summer manifested in the spectacular palace grounds, or our delicious picnic—it was because of the man sitting beside me, a man becoming more and more dear to me the longer I knew him.

I peeked shyly over at him and noticed the tender way he stared at me, his eyes soft. "I'm hoping your blushing is because of me." He playfully tapped my nose; his casual touch sent my heart aflutter. "Are you happy, Lavena?"

"I am." I'd never been happier. The only thing tainting my joy was the knowledge I was deceiving Liam, that our relationship would eventually end, and that any affection he gave me wasn't towards *me* at all, but towards Princess Lavena. I severed our gazes and glanced out across the fauna surrounding us.

Liam scooted closer, and I shuddered when he brushed my dark hair aside. "You're so...soft." He lightly traced my cheek and I instinctively leaned against his fingers. "Before our marriage you seemed more hardened, more unhappy, so different than you are now."

My heart beat frantically, not just from the way his touch affected me, but from my ever-present fear—the fear that with every difference Liam noticed between me and the real Princess Lavena, our scheme would be exposed and I'd lose him forever. Only the fact that Liam wouldn't suspect his wife to be an imposter, especially since he didn't know the real Princess Lavena well, assured me my secret was safe...for now.

His fingers wove through my hair. "This is the real you. I wish I'd seen it earlier, for it would have made everything so much easier. But I see you now, and I'll never not be able to ever again."

I leaned closer, drawn to his sunshine and warmth that was so *Liam*. "Do you like what you see?"

"Very much."

My heart warmed. "And are you happy, Liam?"

"Extremely." He rubbed his nose with mine before leaping to his feet and extending his hand to help me up. "We've been sitting too long. I have an idea. Come." He intertwined our fingers and gently tugged me through the garden gate to the rolling hills surrounding the palace. At the top of the tallest one, he seized both my hands and started spinning us.

"What are you doing?" I asked breathlessly.

"Spinning, of course. Dizzy yet?"

"Almost." My giggle escaped as the world around me blurred as we spun faster and faster. "Liam!"

He laughed buoyantly, a warm sound that reverberated through me. "A bit more, Lavena; you need to get *really* dizzy."

We spun faster and faster, laughing. Suddenly, Liam released me, and we both tumbled to the ground and rolled down the grassy hill. At the base, I stared up at the cloudless blue sky as the world swirled around me.

Liam appeared above me. "Have you survived my most recent bout of immaturity?"

I managed a smile. "I think so."

He chuckled as he propped himself above me and stroked my hair. My heart ignited at his touch, at the soft, tender look filling his eyes. "You know what, Lavena?"

"What?" I could barely speak, not with the smoldering way he looked at me.

"You surprise me."

I cupped his face, delighting in the way he leaned against my hand, as if my touch meant something to him. "I like surprises."

"I do, too. Are you ready for another?" And before I could prepare myself for it, he leaned down and, after a moment's hesitation and the tenderest look, he kissed me.

It was the most beautiful first kiss—warm, soft, sweet, and gentle, everything that was Liam and more. His fingers wove through my hair as he passionately yet still tenderly explored our kiss. I hesitantly joined him, shy about doing it wrong, but the way Liam groaned made me feel that perhaps I'd done it right after all.

I kissed Liam not as Princess Lavena but as Anwen. The ever-present pain that came from pretending faded away, so that there was only this moment with him, my wonderful husband, the man who had somehow stolen my heart and would keep it forever...the man who didn't even know the woman he called wife.

That thought caused me to yank away, breaking the kiss. "What is it, Lavena?" he asked. "Was that not—*Lavena!*"

He frantically brushed away the tears streaking my cheeks, first with his thumbs, and then to my horror and delight his lips, a gesture which only made me cry harder.

He broke away. "Are you alright, darling? I'm sorry, I should have asked your permission before kissing you, especially after you'd resisted it the other day. I just got caught up in the moment." He stroked my hair back, as if his touch were an apology.

"That's not why I'm crying," I stuttered. "It's because—" But I couldn't tell him that the most beautiful moment of my life had been marred by the thought that while I'd been kissing him, the man I adored, he hadn't been kissing *me*, but instead a mask, a mask I'd never wanted to yank off more than I did now.

Liam sat us up, bringing me gently with him. He embraced me and began gently rocking me and rubbing my back soothingly. I melted at his touch.

"Then what's wrong? Was it...not a good kiss?"

"It was perfect. I loved it. Thank you."

"I loved it, too. I..." He stared into my eyes, his gaze smoldering once more. I knew the words he wanted to express, ones I both ached for and desperately didn't want to hear.

I pressed my fingers to his lips. "Not now. Please."

He obediently closed his mouth with a sigh. "As you wish, sweetheart."

Sweetheart... My heart, if possible, cracked open even further.

"Can you just hold me?" I asked, needing his arms around me. He gathered me back to him.

"Of course." He nestled against my hair. "I'm sorry I didn't ask your permission; I got caught up in the moment. I won't kiss you again until you're ready. Alright, darling?"

I nodded before nestling myself against his shoulder, wishing I could express the secret in my heart—that I was ready *now*. But I knew that such a confession would only cause the pain from this façade to grow until I was certain it'd swallow me whole.

How could the most beautiful moment of my life also be the most heartbreaking? For Liam hadn't kissed *me*, and he likely never would. Being so close to something I desperately wanted—but which I'd never be able to truly have—was akin to torture.