



A Queen for the Taking? (The Diomedei Heirs Book 3)

By *Kate Hewitt*

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Innocent in the king's bed...

Spare to the throne, Alessandro Diomedei never expected to be dragged back to Maldinia and thrust beneath the crown. Upheaval has ravaged his country, but one thing has stayed the same: the woman he must now marry.

Trained from birth to be the perfect queen, it's finally time for Liana Aterno to do her duty. But Sandro is not the man she remembers. Cynical and brooding King Sandro unexpectedly ignites a fire in her that sparks rebellion!

When their first electrifying kiss nearly proves both their undoing, Sandro is determined to unleash all the passion his mysterious queen has learned to hide so well!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Hewitt has worked a variety of different jobs, from drama teacher to editorial assistant to youth worker, but writing romance is the best one yet. She also writes women's fiction and all her stories celebrate the healing and redemptive power of love. Kate lives in a tiny village in the English Cotswolds with her husband, five children, and an overly affectionate Golden Retriever.

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Alessandro Diomedei, king of Maldinia, opened the door to the opulent reception room and gazed resolutely upon the woman intended to be his bride. Liana Aterno, the daughter of the duke of Abruzzo, stood in the centre of the room, her body elegant and straight, her gaze clear and steady and even cold. She looked remarkably composed, considering the situation.

Carefully Sandro closed the door, the final click seeming to sound the end of his freedom. But no, that was being fanciful, for his freedom had surely ended six months ago, when he'd left his life in California to return to Maldinia and accept his place as first in line to the throne. Any tattered remnant of it had gone when he'd buried his father and taken his place as king.

'Good afternoon.' His voice seemed to echo through the large room with its gilt walls and frescoed ceilings, the only furniture a few ornate tables of gold and marble set against the walls. Not exactly the most welcoming of spaces, and for a moment Sandro wished he'd specified to put Lady Liana into a more comfortable chamber.

Although, he acknowledged cynically, considering the nature of their imminent discussion-and probable relationship-perhaps this room was appropriate.

'Good afternoon, Your Highness.' She didn't curtsy, which he was glad of, because he hated all the ostentatious trappings of royalty and obeisance, but she did bend her head in a gesture of respect so for a moment he could see the bare, vulnerable nape of her neck. It almost made him soften. Then she lifted her head and pinned him with that cold, clear-eyed gaze and he felt his heart harden once more. He didn't want this. He never would. But she obviously did.

'You had a pleasant journey?'

'Yes, thank you.'

He took a step into the room, studying her. He supposed she was pretty, if you liked women who were colourless. Her hair was so blonde it appeared almost white, and she wore it pulled back in a tight chignon, a few wispy tendrils coming to curl about her small, pearl-studded ears.

She was slight, petite, and yet she carried herself with both pride and grace, and wore a modest, high-necked, long-sleeved dress of pale blue silk belted tightly at the waist, an understated strand of pearls at her throat. She had folded her hands at her waist like some pious nun and stood calmly under his obvious scrutiny, accepting his inspection with a cool and even haughty confidence. All of it made him angry.

'You know why you're here.'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

'You can dispense with the titles. Since we are considering marriage, you may call me Alessandro, or Sandro, whichever you prefer.'

'And which do you prefer?'

'You may call me Sandro.' Her composed compliance annoyed him, although he knew such a reaction was unreasonable, even unjust. Yet he still felt it, felt the deep-seated desire to wipe that cool little smile off her face and replace it with something real. To feel something real himself.

But he'd left real emotions-honesty, understanding, all of it-behind in California. There was no place for them here, even when discussing his marriage.

'Very well,' she answered evenly, yet she didn't call him anything; she simply waited. Annoyance warred with reluctant amusement and even admiration. Did she have more personality than he'd initially assumed, or was she simply that assured of their possible nuptials?

Their marriage was virtually a sealed deal. He'd invited her to Maldinia to begin negotiations, and she'd agreed with an alacrity he'd found far too telling. So the duke's daughter wanted to be a queen. What a surprise. Another woman on a cold-hearted quest for money, power, and fame.

Love, of course, wouldn't enter into it. It never did; he'd learned that lesson too many times already.

Sandro strode farther into the room, his hands shoved into the pockets of his suit trousers. He walked to the window that looked out on the palace's front courtyard, the gold-tipped spikes of the twelve-foot-high fence that surrounded the entire grounds making his throat tighten. *Such a prison.* And one he'd reentered willingly. One he'd returned to with a faint, frail hope in his heart that had blown to so much cold ash when he'd actually seen his father again, after fifteen years.

I had no choice. If I could have, I'd have left you to rot in California, or, better yet, in hell.

Sandro swallowed and turned away.

'Tell me why you're here, Lady Liana.' He wanted to hear it from her own mouth, those tightly pursed lips.

A slight pause, and then she answered, her voice low and steady. 'To discuss the possibility of a marriage between us.'

'Such a possibility does not distress or concern you, considering we have never even met before?'

Another pause, even slighter, but Sandro still felt it. 'We have met before, Your Highness. When I was twelve.'

'Twelve.' He turned around to inspect her once again, but her cold blonde beauty didn't trigger any memories. Had she possessed such icy composure, as well as a resolute determination to be queen, at twelve years old? It seemed likely. 'You are to call me Sandro, remember.'

'Of course.'

He almost smiled at that. Was she provoking him on purpose? He'd rather that than the icy, emotionless composure. Any emotion was better than none.

'Where did we meet?'

'At a birthday party for my father in Milan.'

He didn't remember the event, but that didn't really surprise him. If she'd been twelve, he would have been twenty, and about to walk away from his inheritance, his very self, only to return six months ago, when duty demanded he reclaim his soul-or sell it. He still wasn't sure which he'd done. 'And you remembered me?'

For a second, no more, she looked...not disconcerted, but something close to it. Something distressing. Shadows flickered in her eyes, which, now that he'd taken a step closer to her, he saw were a rather startling shade of lavender. She wasn't so colourless, after all. Then she blinked it back and nodded. 'Yes, I did.'

'I'm sorry to say I don't remember you.'

She shrugged, her shoulders barely twitching. 'I wouldn't have expected you to. I was little more than a child.'

He nodded, his gaze still sweeping over her, wondering what thoughts and feelings lurked behind that careful, blank mask of a face. What emotion had shadowed her eyes for just a moment?

Or was he being fanciful, sentimental? He had been before. He'd thought he'd learned the lessons, but perhaps he hadn't.

Liana Aterno had been one of the first names to come up in diplomatic discussions after his father had died, and he'd accepted that he must marry and provide an heir-and soon.

She was related to royalty, had devoted her life to charity work, and her father was prominent in finance and had held various important positions in the European Union-all of which Sandro had to consider, for the sake of his country. She was eminently and irritatingly suitable in every way. The perfect queen consort-and she looked as if she knew it.

'You have not considered other alliances in the meantime?' he asked. 'Other...relationships?' He watched her pale, heart-shaped face, no emotion visible in her eyes, no tightening of her mouth, no tension apparent in her lithe body. The woman reminded him of a statue, something made of cold, lifeless marble.

No, he realised, what she really reminded him of was his mother. An icy, beautiful bitch: emotionless, soulless, caring only about wealth and status and fame. About being queen.

Was that who this woman really was? Or was he being stupidly judgmental and entirely unfair, based on his own sorry experience? It was impossible to tell what she felt from her carefully blank expression, yet he felt a gut-deep revulsion to the fact that she was here at all, that she'd accepted his summons and was prepared to marry a stranger.

Just as he was.

'No,' she said after a moment. 'I have not...' She gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. 'I have devoted myself to charity work.'

Queen or nun. It was a choice women in her elevated position had had to make centuries before, but it seemed archaic now. Absurd.

And yet it was her reality, and very close to his. King or CEO of his own company. Slave or free.

'No one else?' he pressed. 'I have to admit, I am surprised. You're- What? Twenty-eight years old?' She gave a slight nod. 'Surely you've had other offers. Other relationships.'

Her mouth tightened, eyes narrowing slightly. 'As I said, I have devoted myself to charity work.'

'You can devote yourself to charity work and still be in a relationship,' he pointed out. 'Still marry.'

'Indeed, I hope so, Your Highness.'

A noble sentiment, he supposed, but one he didn't trust. Clearly only queen would do for this icy, ambitious woman.

Sandro shook his head slowly. Once he'd dreamed of a marriage, a relationship built on love, filled with passion and humour and joy. Once.

Gazing at her now, he knew she would make an able queen, a wonderful queen-clearly she'd been grooming herself for such a role. And the decision of his marriage was not about desire or choice. It was about duty, a duty he'd wilfully and shamefully ignored for far too long already.

He gave a brisk nod. 'I have obligations in the palace for the rest of this afternoon, but I would like us to have dinner together tonight, if you are amenable.'

She nodded, accepting, unsmiling. 'Of course, Your Highness.'

'We can get to know each other a bit better, perhaps, as well as discuss the practical aspects of this union.'

Another nod, just as swift and emotionless. 'Of course.'

He stared at her hard, wanting her to show some kind of emotion, whether it was uncertainty or hope or simple human interest. He saw nothing in her clear violet gaze, nothing but cool purpose, hard-hearted determination. Suppressing a stab of disappointment, he turned from the room. 'I'll send one of my staff in to see to your needs. Enjoy your stay in the palace of Averne, Lady Liana.'

'Thank you, Your Highness.'

It wasn't until he'd closed the door behind him that he realised she'd never called him Sandro.

Liana let out a long, slow breath and pressed her hands to her middle, relieved that the fluttering had stopped. She felt reassuringly calm now, comfortably numb. So she'd met Alessandro Diomedi, king of Maldinia. Her future husband.

She crossed to the window and gazed out at the palace courtyard and the ancient buildings of Averno beyond the ornate fence, all framed by a cloudless blue sky. The snow-capped peaks of the Alps were just visible if she craned her neck.

She let out another breath and willed the tension to dissipate from her body. That whole conversation with King Alessandro had been surreal; she'd almost felt as if she'd been floating somewhere up by the ceiling, looking down at these two people, strangers who had never met before, at least not properly. And now they intended to marry each other.

She shook her head slowly, the realisation of what her future would hold still possessing the power to surprise and even unnerve her although it had been several weeks since her parents had suggested she consider Alessandro's suit.

He's a king, Liana, and you should marry. Have children of your own.

She'd never thought to marry, have children. The responsibility and risk were both too great. But she knew it was what her parents wanted, and a convenient marriage, at least, meant a loveless one. A riskless one.

So marry she would, if King Alessandro would have her. She took a deep breath as the flutters started again, reminded herself of the advantages of such a union.

As queen she could continue to devote herself to her charity work, and raise the profile of Hands To Help. Her position would benefit it so much, and she could not turn away from that, just as she could not turn away from her parents' wishes for her life.

She owed them too much.

Really, she told herself, it was perfect. It would give her everything she wanted-everything she would let herself want.

Except it didn't seem the king wanted it. *Her*. She recalled the slightly sneering, incredulous tone, the way he'd looked at her with a kind of weary derision. She didn't please him. Or was it simply marriage that didn't please him?

With a wary unease she recalled his sense of raw, restless power, as if this palace could not contain him, as if his emotions and ideas would bubble over, spill forth.

She wasn't used to that. Her parents were quiet, reserved people, and she had learned to be even more quiet and reserved than they were. To be invisible.

The only time she let herself be heard was when she was giving a public address for Hands To Help. On stage, talking about what the charity did, she had the words to say and the confidence to say them.

But with King Alessandro? With him looking at her as if... Almost as if he didn't even *like* her?

Words had deserted her. She'd cloaked herself in the cool, numbing calm she'd developed over the years, her only way of staying sane. Of surviving, because giving into emotion meant giving into the grief and guilt, and if she did that she knew she'd be lost. She'd drown in the feelings she'd never let herself acknowledge, much less express.

And King Alessandro, of all people, wasn't meant to call them up. This marriage was meant to be *convenient*. Cold. She wouldn't have agreed to it otherwise.

And yet the questions he'd asked her hadn't been either. And the doubt his voicing of them stirred up in her made her insides lurch with panic.

Tell me why you're here, Lady Liana.... Such a possibility does not distress or concern you, considering we have never even met before?

He'd almost sounded as if he *wanted* her to be distressed by the prospect of their marriage.

Perhaps she should have told him that she was.

Except, of course, she wasn't. Wouldn't be. Marriage to King Alessandro made sense. Her parents wanted it. She wanted the visibility for Hands To Help. It was the right choice. It had to be.

And yet just the memory of the king's imposing figure, all restless, rangy muscle and sinewy grace, made her insides quiver and jump. He wore his hair a little too long, ink-black and streaked with silver at the temples, carelessly ruffled as if he'd driven his fingers through it.

His eyes were iron-grey, hard and yet compelling. She'd had to work not to quell under that steely gaze, especially when his mouth had twisted with what had looked-and felt-like derision.

What about her displeased him?

What did he want from her, if not a practical and accepting approach to this marriage?

Liana didn't want to answer that question. She didn't even want to ask it. She had hoped they would be in agreement about this marriage, or as much as they could considering she hadn't wanted to marry at all.

But then perhaps King Alessandro didn't either. Perhaps his seeming resentment was at the situation, rather than his intended bride. Liana's lips formed a grim smile. Two people who had no desire to be married and yet would soon be saying their vows. Well, hopefully they wouldn't actually be seeing all that much of each other.

'Lady Liana?'

Users Review

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Holly Flynn:

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