

My favorite Scene from Kiss Me in Italy: A Travel Medical Romance

[Chloe and Maxwell argue about the vegan diet. Told from Chloe's POV]

“Your loss!” I shrug, concealing my amusement. “I bet, if you tried the vegan lifestyle for a month, you’d be amazed how your energy improves.”

Maxwell struggles to suppress an eye roll. “I deeply respect people who become vegetarians because of a cause—animal rights, religious reasons. But for health reasons? I’m sorry; I don’t buy it. And *vegan*? Come on!” He throws his arms in the air. “How can you be a vegan while in Italy? Don’t you miss lasagna, cheese-stuffed ravioli? Buffalo mozzarella?”

A twinge of nostalgia tugs at my heart. Darn it, I used to love those foods.

I’m a vegetarian at heart, but becoming a vegan hasn’t come easy. Truth be told, I probably would’ve never undertaken it if it hadn’t become the health trend among my peers.

Maxwell continues, “How can you live without parmesan?”

I reluctantly agree. “Yes, I used to like it. But there’s a vegan cheese substitute—”

“Romano and pecorino.”

“Yes, I miss them, but...”

“Provolone, asiago, fontinella, fontina...”

I cover his mouth with my hand. “I get your point.” The warmth of his lips and his hot breath under my fingers send a zing through my body and I withdraw them immediately. My palm burns and tingles deliciously and I can only imagine what those lips could do elsewhere on my skin.

Wait, what were we talking about?

Oh yes, dairy products.

“I’m used to living without dairy now,” I raise my chin. “I don’t even miss it.” *I’m such a liar.*

“How about gelato?” He points a deliberate hand across the square.

I turn to look and the sight of a colorful gelato display hits me like a gust of wind. That’s hitting below the belt. There are few things in the world I used to love more than gelato. Trust me, it’s *not* the same as ice cream. I didn’t believe it myself until I tried it.

As if sensing my weakness, Maxwell signals me to follow him into the *gelateria*. Under a long glass case, two rows of succulent brimming tubs lure me. “Delicious, mouthwatering *gelato*

artesanale in all those silky flavors, from *nocciolla* and cappuccino to lemon and strawberry. And a dozen different versions of chocolate.”

I swallow. “No. I’m fine.” My voice sounds higher-pitched than usual.

“Oh, come on!” He waves a hand at the luscious treat. “We’re not talking about murdering the cow here; we’re just milking it. And guess what. Cows actually like to be milked.”

Is this man serious? “Cows like to be milked,” I repeat in a flat voice.

“They love it!” His eyes sparkle.

I still can’t believe it. Is he actually making a joke right now? Stiff and proper Maxwell Steele is joking?

I keep a straight face. “Have you ever asked a cow if she consented to be milked?”

“No, but I grew up spending summers at my grandparents’ farm and never heard any of them complain.”

Blindsided, I pull back a few inches and stare at him. I never expected Brown-Haired Captain America to have a sense of humor. It’s been hard enough to deal with this attractive man when he’s displaying the personality of an oyster. But now...

He’s dangerous.

When Iris suggested that I could win him over, I never considered that he’d be doing the same for me. The last thing I want in the world is to lose my head over a guy who hates my kind.

I must be wearing a funny puzzled expression, because he cracks up. The beautiful sound of his laughter seeps through me, giving me goose bumps. Suddenly, finding that taxi seems much more urgent.

I recompose myself. “I... See you tomorrow, Maxwell.”

Before I can exit the place, he grabs my wrist and I jolt in surprise. “Chloe?”

I freeze at the delicious sound of my first name coming from his bass voice. And even more at his warm fingers on the skin of my wrist.

He sends me a regretful look. “I’m sorry; I don’t know why I can’t stop goofing around. I guess what I wanted to say was...” He releases my wrist to indicate the display. His tone is tentative. “Can you cheat on your diet just *one* day so I can treat you to a cone?”

Something in his eyes tells me that this is an olive branch, a moment when we could put aside our differences to share the same treat. It might be wishful thinking, but my intuition whispers his real goal is to prolong our time together. Unexpected joy bubbles inside me.

I address the young man behind the counter who wears a pin announcing he speaks English. “Do you have anything without milk?”

“We have a most delicious sorbet in town!” He points to an end of the display. “It’s a proud family recipe, sweetened with honey.”

I wince. “Sorry, I’m a vegan. I can’t have honey.” I turn to Max and extend a counteroffer. “Well, maybe if we keep looking, we’ll find a place where I can treat you to an almond milk smoothie?”

He gives an apologetic grimace. “Actually, almonds give me a rash.”

We step out of the *gelateria* and my eyes fly to the nearby restaurant tables. “How about a glass of wine?”

Glee vanishes from his features. “I’m sorry, I don’t drink alcohol.”

Of course he doesn’t. Squeaky-clean alert.

His gaze shifts to the couple having coffee nearby. “Espresso?”

“I can’t have any caffeine this late or I won’t be able to sleep. Decaf tea?”

“Sorry, I hate tea.” His face darkens another level.

I grapple for an acceptable alternative. “Well, soda’s too unhealthy but maybe…” I snap my fingers and point at the nearby bar where they’re serving fresh squeeze orange juice. “Orange juice!”

His eyes beg for forgiveness. “It gives me heartburn. Maybe hot cocoa?—Dang it, never mind!” He squeezes his eyelids shut. “It also has milk in it.”

It’s official. Max and I have irreconcilable differences of beverages.

I give a mirthless chuckle. “I guess it’s not written in the stars that we’ll share a drink today.” I readjust my bag strap on my shoulder and wave goodbye.

I’m already crossing the street, signaling a taxi, when Max blurts, “Water!”

I stop in my tracks and rotate toward him, and our eyes meet across the street for a few heartbeats.

“Yes.” My small smile doesn’t do justice to the blast of joy inside me. I dismiss the taxi and pace back to him. “I can have that.”

He rewards me with another captivating grin. “Sparkling or flat?”

“Neither.” I signal him to follow me to a nearby *nasone*. “Maxwell Steele, you’re about to have the treat of your life.”