

~Deleted Scene: A Game of Secrets~

Ali's mysterious planned adventure seemed to be another night wandering the palace hallways. The dark, shadowy corridors had become incredibly familiar, like dear friends, almost more so after midnight than they were during the day. The familiar corridors soothed the anxiousness that had suffocated me back in the kitchens, each step causing it to melt away.

We wandered passage after passage, no particular destination in mind, but even though I quickly lost all sense of where I was I didn't feel lost, walking in content silence. Who would break it first? Not that it was a game...or perhaps it was. Everything seemed to be a delightful game between us. Each interaction we shared left me eager to discover what story we were currently reenacting, for we were cowriters in this tale, a tale that was us.

I peeked up at him only to discover his sweet smile. What was the story behind his smile? He'd been smiling more and more lately, as if he saved it just for me, and even though it was becoming increasingly familiar it still filled me with joy to see it.

"Do you want to know a secret?" I finally whispered. His smile broadened, causing my heart to flutter.

"And which secret are you itching to tell me, your own or another's? Whomever it belongs to, naturally you can't keep it to yourself."

As always, he was correct. "How about you guess? It'll be a game."

"Another game, Rosie?"

Warmth filled my heart at the fondness filling his tone. Did he relish in our interactions as much as I did?

"Of course it's a game." I reached for his sleeve and tugged on it imploringly. "Won't you play?"

"Since I know you'll burst if you keep this secret of yours any longer, I'll humor you. Won't you explain the rules?"

I smirked. "And ruin half the fun?"

He arched his eyebrow; goodness, that eyebrow got a lot of exercise. "You're not going to tell me how to play?"

"And ruin the thrill of you discovering how yourself?"

His lips twitched, thankfully amused by my usual antics. "Then I'll commence playing 'Discover Rosie's Secret.' What remains to be discovered is whether you'll be able to keep it for the duration of the game."

"Of course," I said. "I enjoy playing games as much as I enjoy sharing secrets."

"Hmm, but the question is: which do you like just a little bit more." Mischievousness filled his eyes, as if he had a plan. "I suppose we'll find out."

I pressed my hand on my hip. "Are you trying to best me?"

"Isn't that how this continuous game of ours works?"

He leaned against the wall between two expensive-looking vases that appeared as if they held a multitude of secrets. Being royal vases, they likely did. Perhaps an ancient king had discovered them on a noble quest, stealing them from a dragon's lair, which meant they were enchanted. Or perhaps they held a dastardly secret, such as a stolen cursed artifact. I'd have to sneak back to investigate them later...

"Please share your latest story with me, Rosie, before I go mad."

I blinked rapidly, emerging from my fantasies. "How did you know?"

"You had your 'Rosie is lost in the wild fields of her remarkable imagination' look that's become as familiar to me as any of your other features. Won't you share?"

"I was just thinking how those vases probably contain something extraordinary and mysterious, such as a map to a treasure hidden within the palace, stolen jewels, the lost diary pages of an ancient king, or perhaps even ingredients to a mystical spell." A reversal spell, if I was fortunate.

Not budging from his folded-arms pose, Ali peered inside the one nearest to him. "Or a dragon's egg. Come look."

"Really?" I scampered over and peered inside only to find it empty. I whacked him. "You spoiled the story."

"I did nothing of the sort. It's not my fault you can't see invisible things."

And while I knew he was likely taking advantage of my usual gullibility, I loved how he'd created the possibility he wasn't teasing me. "Then I won't look in the other vase so I may forever imagine it contains something fantastic. Now stop stalling me, Ali, and let's play 'What's Rosie's secret.'"

"As you wish. Now I'm assuming you mean for me to ask questions in order to guess it?"

I tilted my head. "Do I?"

That earned me my coveted Ali chuckle and I beamed. He tipped his head down the corridor and we walked away from the vases that may or may not contain an invisible dragon egg or a map to a secret and likely stolen treasure.

"First question: is this your secret?"

I blinked up at him innocently. "Is it?"

He cocked his eyebrow. "You're not going to even tell me that much?"

"That seems too big of a hint."

"Then how in the world am I supposed to ever guess it?"

My twitching lips broke into a smirk. "Who says that's the outcome I'm hoping for?"

He rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. "Of course. The real game isn't to guess your secret at all but to torment me with it for as long as possible."

I pouted. "No fair. It was supposed to take you longer to discover what I'm up to."

He smirked, triumph flashing in his eyes. "I know you better than that, Rosie."

I sighed in defeat. "Fine, you win. New game: now you're to guess my secret."

He eyed me suspiciously. "Is this really the new game we're playing or is this another trick?"

"It's the new game, I promise, and to prove it I'll answer your question: this is *my* secret we're guessing, no one else's."

"That eases my conscience in trying to wriggle it out of you." He thought for a moment. "Is this a secret you've recently discovered or have you possessed it for a long time?"

"It's a recent one."

He stroked his chin. "I thought as much. If you'd kept it long you'd have spilled it already."

He continued questioning, and while his first ones were sensible, he quickly began asking rather strange ones. After ten minutes of this, I became utterly bewildered at the workings of his mind.

"'Is this a secret that can be kept in a locked box?' What sort of a question is that? It's a secret, not an object."

Up went *both* eyebrows. "Are you poking fun at my brilliant questions? I'll have you know I spent all day today coming up with them."

"You claim you knew we'd be playing this game tonight?" I challenged.

"Of course. Haven't we long since established I have mystical powers? I used them to look into the future."

"So you already know what my secret is?"

"That's correct. I suppose you won't have to share it with me after all, considering you've already done so."

He ceased his questioning and walked on ahead with a bounce in his step, whistling far too cheerfully. I gaped after him before his latest plot hit me. I growled in frustration and scampered after him to seize his arm and yank him to a stop.

"You've been toying with me!"

His lips twitched into a rather wicked smile. "Ah, so you've finally discovered the game I've been playing: make Rosie so impatient she shares her secret of her own volition."

I stomped my foot. "You ogre. Just for that, I won't tell at all."

"Ah, but here's the secret I've discovered during the course of this delightful game of ours." He leaned down to my ear and I instinctively leaned upwards, as usual gravitated towards him. "You love sharing secrets more than you enjoy playing games."

He pulled away and continued down the hall. I watched him for a moment, debating whether I should make him wonder forever or reluctantly declare him the winner in tonight's battle. I sighed in defeat when I realized which side of me would win for he was correct: I preferred sharing secrets more than playing games. My secret was aching to burst, despite it being a small one.

I caught up to him. "Fine, I concede. You win. My secret isn't worth all of this aggravation, so I'll just tell you."

"Excellent. I sure hope it's worth the build-up."

"Then prepare to be disappointed, which will be my victory tonight."

I hooked my arms around his neck and gently tugged him down so his ear was level with my lips. I paused to relish in the intimacy of our position, especially when I experienced the strange urge to never let him go.

"Is the secret that there's no secret at all, or are you plotting to make me burst with anticipation?"

My cheeks flared with heat when I realized I'd been holding him for a bit too long. My lips grazed his ear as I stood on tiptoe; to my delight he shuddered at the

accidental gesture. "Here's the secret your victory earned: I desperately hoped to encounter you tonight."

He beamed, full on *beamed*. "Ah Rosie, that was a wonderful secret. Thank you for sharing it with me."

I grinned. "Did you really like it?"

"Very much." He ran his hand down my cheek once, his eyes smoldering. "And now I have my own secret to share with you." He pulled away—leaving me yearning for the warmth of his closeness—and held out his hand. My breath hitched. For a moment I just stared at it. He wriggled his fingers. "Step one: you're supposed to take my hand."

Slowly, I did. The moment I rested mine in his, his fingers gently enfolded my hand to cradle it within his own. Ripples of heat pulsed up my arm. How could I experience such a reaction from a mere touch? But it wasn't a mere touch at all but an incredibly heavenly one.

"No one's ever held my hand before," I murmured.

He tilted his head. "Is this as precious an experience for you as your first kiss? I'm not taking away anything in your fairy tale, am I?"

I shook my head. While I'd always considered my hand being held as sacred as the act of true love's kiss, I didn't mind sharing this experience with Ali. I peeked through my lashes to stare into his not-so-handsome but somehow incredibly-handsome-anyway face. "This is exactly how I want the experience to go."

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze before leading me down the hall. "Then let's commence tonight's adventure to discover a most spectacular secret...or rather *secrets*."