

### **\*~Deleted Scene: Brawny Strength~\***

Despite doing all in my power to obtain Ali's heart, he remained both entirely unaffected and as allusive as ever. I no longer found him wandering the palace at night, no matter how many corridors I traipsed through, meaning either his frequent insomnia had been miraculously cured or else he'd stopped exploring the dark hallways in case he encountered me.

He was definitely avoiding me. Why did he feel further away than before I realized I loved him? Had I discovered my feelings too late? Or was his avoidance because he was currently courting another woman? Horror curdled my stomach at the thought.

I refused to give up but unfortunately my efforts were made more difficult when my attempts to woo Ali weren't lost on a certain lovesick prince, whose advances, while annoying before, were sheer torture now that I yearned not for his attentions but those of the man who'd unwittingly stolen my heart.

"Rosie petal, you're looking at that guard again," Prince Liam frequently whined whenever I caught a glimpse of the object of my affections and proceeded to stare hungrily at him in hopes he'd finally notice me. He didn't. "You love him more than me, don't you?"

Yes I ached to scream but I was terrified admitting my feelings would result in the prince challenging Ali to a duel. The thought of anyone hurting Ali was torturous. So as desperate as I was to remove Prince Liam's spell, I continued to endure his infatuation, clinging to the hope that true love would eventually break the unwanted spell. But if Ali remained uninterested I'd be trapped forever.

I nibbled my fingernail as I studied my "Flirting Advice from Literature's Greatest Heroines—A Romantic Guide Compiled by Heroine Rosalina, Seeker of Her Happily Ever After" plan for the tips I hadn't yet tried. My gaze settled on 'utilizing his brawny strength' and 'staging a dramatic rescue.' I brewed up a plan.

I tracked down Eileen to give her a whispered plea to send Ali to the corridor outside the library in a few minutes. She cocked her eyebrow but thankfully made no objections. I went to the library and yanked several books from the shelves until I had a teetering stack. I waited outside the doors, shifting my weight back and forth impatiently. Where was Ali? He needed to hurry, for these books were getting rather heavy.

My heart gave an excited flutter when he turned the corner. I promptly made my move, stumbling a few feet before dropping my books. I winced at the heinous act of purposefully dropping sacred volumes but I was a desperate heroine.

I frowned at the books now in a heap at my feet. "Oh bother." I peeked up at Ali. "Perfect timing. Are you here to serve a damsel-in-distress?"

He eyed me suspiciously. My heart hammered as I soaked in his gaze, relishing that it was finally fixated on *me* after far too long. He shook his head and knelt on the ground to begin stacking the fallen books.

"What are you up to now?"

"What does it look like? Reading."

He examined the books as he picked them up. "These aren't your usual genre." He held up *The Murderous Ghost* rather accusingly, as if he knew exactly why I found myself with a book I'd never actually read myself. I bit back an unladylike curse. My scheme would seem more convincing if I hadn't chosen such random books.

"It's a new storytelling game I've invented for myself to read bits of a variety of stories and try to weave them all together. I need a new challenge considering my usual storytelling partner hasn't been around."

Guilt flashed across his expression and my heart sank. So he had been avoiding me, just as I'd feared.

"Why?" I asked quietly.

He preoccupied himself with straightening the stack of books and didn't meet my gaze. "I've been... busy."

"Busy doing what? Avoiding me?"

"Not...intentionally." He finished gathering the books and I sensed his impending departure. I refused for our first conversation in nearly a week to end so soon. Time to stall.

"You haven't even been taking your usual midnight strolls. I've missed you."

"Sleep has been kinder to me this week." He stood and held the books out to me. "Your books."

"Can you carry them for me? I find I'm in need of a hero's brawny strength." I closed my eyes in utter mortification as my cheeks flamed. *Brawny strength?* Please let me evaporate from this scene for having spoken such horrible dialogue out loud.

A silence I couldn't even begin to decipher followed my words. "You want to use my *what?*"

I peeked one eye open to survey his expression, which was as usual blank and devoid of any emotion.

"Well you're rather muscly..." Oh goodness, this just kept getting worse. Why did words have the tendency to become so jumbled when one least wanted them to?

"I see." He nodded as if I'd said something deeply profound rather than unbearably stupid. "The day has finally come when you, like all the other girls, finally appreciate my muscles."

My private admission that yes, I had come to admire such a thing in his well-toned, guard physique ground to a halt. All thoughts of appreciation fizzled away as the feelings I'd always felt whenever he mentioned other girls rushed to the surface. I finally recognized this raging emotion that burned through me at the mere mention of the faceless competitors for the heart I so desperately wanted: jealousy, searing through my veins like poison.

"How many?" I hissed.

He tilted his head, as if my question puzzled him. "How many what?"

"How many girls like your muscles?" For I *had* to know. I wouldn't rest until I came up with the most elaborate serial murder plot ever concocted.

Ali shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't know, I haven't conducted an interview of every female in the palace but I've received enough comments..."

*Comments*, as in more than one? Just how many enemies were interested in my Ali? My fists clenched. "From *who*, exactly?"

Up went my favorite eyebrow. "Why Rosie, are you perhaps jealous?"

No way would I admit that. I refused for him to find out my feelings for him in the least romantic, petty way possible. "I'm not *jealous*. It was just a question, Alastar."

"Alastar? My, my, my, you're suddenly rather formal."

I scowled. "You're not interested in any of these girls, are you?"

"Any particular reason you want to know, Rosalina?"

I stomped my foot. "It's Rosie."

Cue his eyebrow lift again. "Forgive me but you resorted to formality first."

My scowl deepened. "You never answered my question."

He sighed. "I'm only interested in one woman so be rest assured only one of the girls who's ever expressed such admirations holds my attention."

Tears burned in my eyes. I hastily severed my gaze from his so he wouldn't see them. "Which one?"

"I really need to teach you about secrets, Rosie. Now, since you've not-so-subtly roped my services, would you like me to carry these books back to the library for you, considering they've now achieved their intended purpose?"

"What do you mean?" I squeaked, still determinedly staring daggers at the floor.

"If you were so desperate to talk to me you didn't need such a dramatic gesture."

I snapped my gaze up and glared. Of course he'd easily see through my scheme. What's more, by the amusement in his eyes, he found the entire thing ridiculous and likely childish. Obtaining his heart had never felt so futile.

I was suddenly desperate to escape. "I don't want you to take those books anywhere," I said coldly. "Just give them back and be on your way wooing your girl."

I held out my arms for them but he held them close, refusing to relinquish them. "I don't mind carrying them for you. Where do you want them?"

"Drop them for all I care. Just go away."

Incredulity filled his expression. "Why are you upset with me?"

"You claim to be an expert on my story. Why do you think?" I made to grab the books, he continued holding them out of reach, and in our struggle they all toppled again. He winced as they fell.

"We're going to be thrown into the dungeons for damaging so many royal books."

"Fine, haul me off, I don't care." I knelt on the marble floor and began re-stacking them. He haunched beside me to help me, so closely I could feel his warmth, smell his honey-lemon scent. How I yearned to bury myself in his arms and never leave.

Instead I chose the more ridiculous option, as if this particular scene in my story wasn't mortifying enough; I cried, and Ali being his usual annoyingly observant-guard self, noticed.

"Oh Rosie, what is it? Did I upset you?"

I buried my face in my pulled up knees and refused to answer. His hand brushed my shoulder. I shuddered at the contact while bemoaning the fact it wasn't more.

"Rosie?" His tone was tortured.

"Go away," I mumbled, even while my heart screamed for him to stay with me forever and never leave.

"Not happening, Rosie." He settled beside me and wrapped his arm around my quivering shoulders. I instinctively nestled against him, needing to be close to him more than I'd ever needed anything else. "Please tell me what's wrong."

I buried myself against his chest. "Why aren't we friends anymore?"

"Of course we are, silly Rosie. We'll always be friends."

"I may live in my own world most of the time but I'm not blind. You've been ignoring me."

He sighed. "Perhaps a bit. I'm sorry if doing so has hurt you."

I flinched at his confession and suddenly his arm wrapped so tenderly around me burned. I shook it off and clambered to my feet. Ali stared up at me, eyes wounded.

"Rosie?"

I brushed my lingering tears away before bending down to re-stack the books. Ali began helping me but froze at my skewering glare. "Did I ask for your help?"

"I recall you desiring to use my *brawny strength*."

"That was before. I no longer want you or your muscles anywhere near me."

He sighed. "So I'm to become the villain once more. Can you at least tell me why?"

"I will once you explain why you've been purposefully ignoring me."

He lowered his eyes, his refusal. My jaw tightened to keep back another swell of tears. I refused to embarrass myself further in front of him. Besides, blubbery heroines didn't win princes.

"You'll come to discover I'm getting better at keeping secrets, especially from you. Since you're determined to no longer be friends, go guard Eileen with far too much attention than is necessary, continue to sleep rather than wander the palace at night, and keep ignoring me so I can live out the remainder of my story in peace."

Without another word, I whirled around and stomped back into the library, where I dumped the books on one of the tables, collapsed into the chair, and promptly started crying again, for my scheme had not only utterly failed but I'd once again impeded my quest by pushing Ali away in my hurt, making him further away than ever.