

~Deleted Scene: Changing the Story~

I frantically flipped through the pages of *Enchanted Sweets and Delights*, desperate to find the spell I needed. Considering the first reversal spell had ended in failure, I wondered if perhaps I'd used the wrong one. Perhaps there was another I could try? But even though I'd combed the volume half a dozen times, I found no other counter spell.

"You useless paper weight." I slammed the book shut and tossed it across the kitchen. To my great satisfaction it fell face down with a spectacular thud. That would teach the book to be so unhelpful.

"I never thought I'd ever see the Lover of Stories throw a book."

I spun around to glare in the doorway of the palace kitchen where Ali stood. I felt strangely flustered to see him but did my best to school the strange reaction. "It's about time you showed up. You're late."

"Am I?" He stepped fully into the kitchen. "I didn't realize we had an appointment."

"We always have an appointment after midnight."

He leaned against the counter. "Thus I've been looking for you for nearly an hour. I'd been beginning to think you hadn't taken your usual midnight stroll."

"It's a palace. No matter how many nights I've spent here, I still can't get over that amazing fact, making sleep impossible. Besides, I'm on a mission."

"Unsurprising." He glanced around the room, as if finally realizing where he'd ended up. His gaze lingered on the dozens of empty bowls waiting to be used and the flour I'd already spilled all over the counter.

"Brewing up another spell? You can never rest when there's trouble to create."

I folded my arms with a scowl. "Just for that comment I'm not going to tell you what I'm up to."

"Ah, a secret. In that case, it's going to discover what it is very shortly." He glanced at the clock. "I give you a minute. No worries, I can wait." He settled back to whistle cheerfully. Aggravating man.

Since he expected me to tell him, naturally I became determined not to. But that was the problem with secrets; the ones that one was supposed to keep were the most slippery and difficult holding onto. I mashed my lips together, determined to keep it inside where it belonged, but this only aggravated it further. My secret banged against

my lips, begging and pleading for release. Stubborn thing, but it wouldn't vanquish me, for I had a battle with a certain guard that I was determined to win.

He waited with annoying guard-like patience and far too much bemusement as the war, Rosalina vs. the secret, raged within me. He smirked and leaned towards my ear. "Don't fight it, Rosie."

His words broke the dam I was trying hard to suppress and the secret tumbled out. "If you must know, you nosy guard, I'm looking for another counter spell."

The moment the words escaped I ached to snatch them and shove them back inside where they belonged, bound and chained and locked away. I slapped my hand over my mouth, as if the action could revert the damage.

He arched his eyebrow. "A counter spell? For which spell, Rosie?"

He already knew which spell. I could see the triumph in his eyes, as if my lowest point were his personal victory. "None of your business."

He glanced back at the clock. "It will be in about—"

"Fine, the love spell. Happy? You were right and I was wrong. I've never been more wrong about anything as much as this. Now gloat away."

He didn't gloat. Instead, he stared at me with incredible compassion. "Are you alright, Rosie?"

I blinked back my tears. "No."

I returned to my recipe book only to discover it was across the kitchen. Ali pushed himself from off the counter to retrieve it. He examined it. "It appears you've broken the spine."

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. He returned to my side and after a moment's hesitation rested his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry the story didn't go as planned."

"That's the problem with stories," I grumbled. "They never do."

"But isn't that what makes them so thrilling? It's always an adventure when you turn the page and discover the direction your tale will go next."

I peeked at him through my fingers. "But what if my story's current direction is an unhappy one?"

"Keep believing in your happily ever after, Rosie. Don't give up."

I sighed and unburied myself. "It'll be easier to believe if I can find a way out of this mess, for I'm not in love with Prince Liam and thus don't want him to think he's in love with me. He'll never be my prince."

Ali beamed at my words. I eyed it suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." But he was still smiling. "So no more being pursued by lovesick princes?"

I pulled a face. "Absolutely not. He's really getting on my nerves." I frowned at his expression. "Why are you smirking?"

"I'm just glad you finally realized I've been right the entire time."

And there was his belated gloating. I rolled my eyes and picked up *Enchanted Sweets and Delights* to ease it open, wincing at the crack the damaged spine made. My parents were going to kill me when they discovered it. I'd think of an elaborate cover-up story later.

"I'm now determined to change the story I unwittingly now find myself in, but the task feels impossible considering my first reversal spell didn't work, and there doesn't seem to be another in here. I've looked and looked, which means I'm trapped. Oh, this is the worst ending ever." My panic that had been brewing beneath the surface boiled over. "What am I going to do?"

"The story isn't over yet, Rosie, we'll figure something out." He took the book from me and thumbed through it, pausing to squint at a recipe. "A spell to spill another's secrets?" He raised his now suspicious gaze to mine. "Why is this bookmarked, Rosie? You weren't planning on trying this one on me, were you?"

My face flushed with heat. "Of course not," I lied.

He continued staring intensely. I wriggled beneath his scrutiny. "Note to self: never accept a home-baked dessert from Rosie." He un-dogearred the page before shutting the book. "Perhaps the key to breaking His Highness' spell has nothing to do with magic."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely, you know the answer. What's the most powerful force in any fairy tale?"

I gasped. "True love."

He smiled. "Exactly."

He was right: true love could break any curse, no matter how powerful and sinister. But my elation at the idea quickly faltered. "And where am I supposed to find true love?"

"Like anything worthwhile, it has to be discovered."

"Great. When you find a treasure map leading to it, please let me know."

He frowned. "I don't think anyone can help you on that quest of yours."

The notion of embarking on another adventure wasn't as thrilling as it used to be. But rather than crumpling in defeat, I found myself lost in Ali's smoldering gaze as the increasingly familiar warmth filled my heart, nudging me towards him with a strange need I couldn't explain. He stared intensely back and for the longest, most perfect moment, neither of us looked away.

"Is true love the answer, Ali?" I managed to whisper breathlessly when the spell had broken enough for me to speak.

He leaned closer, bathing me in his honey-lemon warmth. I ached to nestle closer and allow it to envelop me, and once there, never ever leave.

"I think, Rosie dear," he murmured, his lips grazing my ear, causing me to shudder. "That's an excellent place to start." He wound my arm through his, his touch as usual causing my heart to patter wildly. "Now I have another adventure in mind." And he gently led me out of the kitchens.