

### \*~Deleted Scene: Dropping a Handkerchief~\*

Over the next several days, Ali guarded Eileen with rigid and unwavering attention, not even looking in my direction whenever we were together. At first I understood he wanted to prove to Aiden he was worthy of the position to which he'd been entrusted, but when his behavior continued long after he was off duty, my panic escalated, especially when I no longer found him wandering the palace at night, no matter how many corridors I traipsed through.

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 I'd been wrong his feelings, just as I'd been wrong about Prince Liam's, and he didn't love me at all. Horror curdled my stomach at the thought.

Ali guarded Eileen out in the gardens as she sketched. Summer was drawing to a close and the feel of autumn not only penetrated the slightly brisk air but had begun to dip the leaves in gold, the perfect setting for this next scene in *The Story of Rosalina*.

I waited until Ali's break and Guard Duncan had taken Ali's place standing protectively behind Eileen before I took a wavering breath and stomped over to stand in front of Ali. I gave him a challenging look, took out my handkerchief, and dropped it with a dramatic flourish.

Eileen actually groaned and buried her face in her hand whereas Ali unsurprisingly cocked his eyebrow. Without breaking eye contact, he bent down to retrieve it. His fingers grazed mine as he handed it to me and my heart felt on the brink of taking flight at this simple contact.

"Thank you, Ali."

"Is this a scheme to talk to me?"

I lowered my gaze to the cobblestone path, the stones seeming less threatening than Ali's large, hazel eyes that seemed to have the uncanny ability to read every word of my heart. "You never fail to serve a damsel in distress."

"Considering it's your usual role, I've gotten a lot of practice."

I finally raised my gaze to meet his. The familiar warmth from our usual playful banter returned, thawing the coldness that had existed between us. "I'm impressed, Mr. Guard; you read your lines."

His lips twitched. "Indeed, for I confess I'm anxious to learn how this scene will play out. Now will you enlighten me as to why you purposefully dropped your handkerchief?"

My cheeks warmed. "We haven't spent much time together. I was hoping..." I couldn't finish but it seemed I didn't need to. By the soft look in Ali's eyes, it seemed he understood the words I couldn't say in the way only he could.

He tipped his head down the path to motion me to follow him, and although I did, he didn't offer me his arm, making the distance between us feel larger than ever. "Considering you dropped your handkerchief on purpose to spend time with me, I must make it worth your while. How can I do that?"

"I wanted to talk to you so that I could ask..." The words trapped in my throat. He peeked down at me, prodding me with those gorgeous eyes of his to continue. I took a deep breath. "Do you hate me?" I squeaked.

He paused and lifted his eyebrow. "Hate you? Why do you think I could ever hate you?"

"You've been ignoring me."

He rested a light hand against my arm, causing heat to ripple up my arm. I savored the sensation, one I'd always read about and was finally experiencing with my real prince. "I thought you realized why. I can't shirk my duty to Her Highness any longer, even for you."

Tears burned my eyes. I hastily blinked them away. "I'm so sorry I got you in trouble. I didn't mean—"

"Please don't worry yourself," he said. "It's not your fault. I just can't help but pay more attention to you than to the princess."

He gently wiped away the moisture clinging my eyelashes with his thumb, an utterly romantic gesture. He must feel for me—but if he did, why was he avoiding me and not saying the beautiful words I so longed to hear?

"Have I eased your worries?" he asked gently.

Almost, but not quite. "You haven't even been taking your usual midnight strolls."

"Sleep has been kinder to me this week."

My heart constricted. It was a feeble excuse. If he really cared for me the way I cared for him, nothing—not even sleep—would keep us apart. He was avoiding me. Guilt flashed across his expression, confirming my fears. My heart sank.

"But I've missed you." I waited for him to say he missed me to but he didn't. Instead his usual stoic expression faltered, revealing his uncertainty, as if stood at a crossroads and had no idea the direction he should go. "Ali?" I asked hesitantly.

He bit his lip and avoided my eyes. I gaped up at him, all while another piece of my heart shattered. What was happening between us? My mind raced, scrambling to come up with an explanation for his behavior. Was he still angry with me? Was he afraid getting too close would make it more tempting to be distracted by me? Or...my heart clenched as another possibility filled my mind, one I didn't want to believe—perhaps I'd been wrong and he'd never cared for me the way I felt towards him. Perhaps there was someone else, someone who wasn't me and never would be.

"Ali?" I asked hesitantly.

"I'm sorry, Rosie." No further explanation than that. My fist clenched, squeezing the handkerchief he'd retrieved, a gesture it appeared he'd done in vain.

"It's that girl, isn't it?"

He raised an eyebrow. "What girl?"

"The one you hold a *tendre* for."

He sighed and stared out across the grounds. "That's...complicated."

"I see." I tightened my jaw in an attempt to keep my embarrassing tears at bay. I'd already cried in front of him and I refused to do so again, but it was impossible to fight them when the pain of my broken heart laced through me like a knife, sharp and agonizing.

"No, I don't think you do," he said. "You only seem to see what you're determined to. It's why you're in your current predicament."

"You're the one who's blind, not me, for in case you didn't notice, I'm trying to untangle myself from my mess."

Ali's gaze met mine, his own wistful. "Really? And what scheme do you have up your sleeve to do that?"

"What you suggested: true love breaks any spell."

He gave a hollow laugh. "Do you even know what true love is, Rosie?"

I felt as if I'd been slapped. It was amazing how piercing words could be, especially when such harsh ones came from one so dear. Before I could stop them my tears escaped. His expression crumpled but he made no move to dry them the way the hero was supposed to do in fairy tales.

"I know what true love is," I stuttered. "But you've ignored me so long you haven't seen me make this precious discovery." I turned and stomped away, hoping he'd come after me, for heroes followed the heroine to the ends of the earth.

He didn't. At the end of the path I paused to glance back at him. He stood where I'd left him with an intense look yet making no motion to come after me. With a breaking heart I realized why: heroes only came after heroines they were in love with, which meant Ali's heart wasn't mine and likely never would be; despite his repeated assurances throughout our adventures together, a happily-ever-after wasn't in my future.

I slowly walked back towards him, my still-hoping heart drawn to him. "Why have you stopped reading my story?"

A storm seemed to rage in his eyes. "Because some stories become too painful to finish."

My lip trembled. "So you don't believe in my happily ever after after all."

He didn't respond and another pang pierced my heart. Just how many pieces could one heart break into? I couldn't bear to find out.

"And with your constant interference I thought you did. Obviously, I was very much mistaken." I turned to leave but paused when a question occurred to me. "What did you do with the rest of the spelled chocolate you confiscated from me?"

His stoic expression finally cracked and his entire manner hardened. "Why do you want to know? Planning on spelling someone else? Having one fake love isn't good enough for you? Obviously, you don't seem to want the real thing."

I glared at him. "How can I have real love when it's not even available?" I spun around and stomped away from my oblivious prince. This time I didn't look back.