

~Deleted Scene: Garden Secrets~

Happily ever afters were positively enchanting. Even though I'd just barely started mine, it was already sheer magic, just as I'd always imagined. I, Rosalina, currently sat in the imperial rose garden with my prince, surrounded by the color and sweet perfume of hundreds of blooming roses. This enchanting and most perfect romantic experience that already seemed straight out of a fairy tale was made even better by the fact I was curled up with my newly-discovered prince charming, *cuddling*. Ah, bliss.

I sat nestled securely in Ali's lap, a place that was not only remarkably cozy but one I was determined to never, ever leave. I snuggled even closer, resting my head on his chest directly above his heartbeat, a heart that was now *mine*. I beamed at the thought.

"What's the story behind your delightful smile?" Ali murmured into my hair. My grin widened as I tipped my head back to stare into his gorgeous hazel eyes.

"I'm just thinking that your heart I've so coveted is now *mine*."

He smiled, too; I traced it with my fingertip. "You've finally realized which villain you are. Are you going to carve it out for your collection, Stealer of Hearts?"

"I'll take very good care of it." And I pressed my lips directly above his heartbeat.

"You already do," he murmured, and oh, I couldn't help appreciating what a perfect dialogue response that was. "You have no need to carve it out and steal it," he continued, his lips now caressing my hairline. "You took it long ago. Not to worry, I gave it to you willingly."

"You can have mine in return."

"I'll protect it for as long as you want me to." His lips paused in caressing my cheek and he groaned. "Oh no."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Those fairy tales you made me read have rubbed off of me. I sound as if I've walked straight out of the pages of one. I never thought myself capable of being so... *sappy*."

I giggled. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"As long as it pleases you and my fellow guards never hear me say such things." And he resumed trailing light, fluttery kisses along my jawline. As heavenly as it felt, I

was anxious for more. I wriggled impatiently. He chuckled. "Something wrong, my Rosie?"

"Must you always torture me?"

"That seems to have always been my role where you're concerned. Are you tired of this game of ours?"

"Only because I have a new one in mind." I twisted around on his lap and met his exploring lips with my own. His fingers wove through my hair to deepen our kiss and I happily complied. Goodness, if I'd thought my first kiss had been magical, this one was positively extraordinary.

"You know," he said sometime later when we'd been kissing for a beautifully long time. "I'm beginning to truly believe magic exists after all."

Only wonderful news such as this was powerful enough to end our incredible kiss. "How did you make such a wonderful discovery?"

He caressed my cheek. "It was here, beside this very rose bush, where I discovered your secret, the same place the hero and heroine have just been united."

I recalled the afternoon-in-question when we strolled the garden together and Ali became preoccupied with tracing these pink roses after informing me he'd discovered a secret of mine.

"Won't you finally share my own secret with me? I don't want there to be any secrets between us."

"Well, considering you'll most definitely do your part to never keep a secret from me..." He rubbed his nose playfully against mine. "...and considering you've *finally* discovered this secret of yours, I'll share it with you." He rested his forehead against mine and held me, if possible, even tighter. "That was the day I suspected that you may be falling in love with me, too."

I blinked at him in astonishment. "*Really? How?*"

His lips twitched. "Because you were being adorably jealous."

"Well of course I was. I had every right to be; your heart belongs to me and *only* me." I rested my hand on it, relishing in the feel of his heartbeat pulsing against my palm. "I can't believe you knew for so long yet I remained oblivious."

"Your ignorance often made me fear I was wrong in my assumption, that I believed you felt anything for me simply because I desperately hoped my own feelings were requited, especially the longer I waited. But there would be precious moments when

you'd look at me with your secret shining in your eyes, and I knew I really was your hero, even though you didn't yet realize it. So I waited, and hoped, and am now finally rewarded with you now in my arms."

"I can't believe you knew what I was feeling long before I did," I said.

"You were so determined for your story to play out the way you thought it should. I was willing to be patient."

I kissed the tip of his nose. "The perfect trait for my hero."

"I had ample motivation to be patient should your quest to discover your heart end in the outcome I desperately hoped for."

I smiled against his throat. "What a wonderful journey it's been, full of danger, adventure, dragons, and plenty of midnight strolls."

"Speaking of midnight strolls..." He cupped my chin. "Won't you share the secret you've kept from me since our midnight dance? It's been driving me mad with wondering."

I smirked wickedly. "Then that scheme is a success."

He chuckled. "Come on, Rosie. Please?"

"I'm surprised you haven't guessed it." I cradled his face. "That was the night I discovered I was in love with you."

His eyes widened. "The dance?"

"Of course. Heroines always discover true love when dancing with their prince. That was the moment everything changed."

The tenderest look filled his usually stoic expression. "Even though I was quite terrible?"

"It was still the most romantic moment of my life... until now, that is." I pressed another kiss on his lips. "Afterwards I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure of your feelings so I determined to win your heart by implementing the advice I gleaned from fairy tales."

"Hence you were suddenly so flirty."

My cheeks warmed and I lowered my eyes. "If you knew what I was up to, why did it push you away?"

"I was afraid," he confessed, eyes bashful. "It seems far too incredible that someone as wonderful as you could possibly love someone as average me. So when

you suddenly started flirting with me I thought it was a game. I pulled away in a futile attempt to protect my heart from what I felt convinced would be inevitable rejection."

"Oh Ali." I stroked his face, hoping the gesture could erase the pain of his own past heartache. "I'm sorry I took so long to realize you're the only man for me, but please be assured you're not average at all. You're my prince and thus you're perfect."

"Even though I'm rather serious?"

"That shall be cured after a lifetime of giving you smiling spells," I said. "But even if you never smile again I'll love you anyway."

"I believe your magic will work, for I can't help but smile when I'm with you."

And he spoiled me with another adorable one. I was so pleased to see it I couldn't help kissing it. "Won't you share another secret with me?"

He lightly kissed first one corner of my mouth, then the other. "Which portion of my heart would you like me to share next? Every bit is yours."

"When did you discover you were in love with me?"

"Much earlier than you did."

I groaned. "I'm so sorry."

"While it was admittedly agonizing at moments, I caught enough glimpses of your own feelings for me to hope I had more pieces of your heart than I could have ever dreamed." He leaned towards my ear. "I was fiercely jealous at Their Highness' wedding reception when you first spotted Prince Liam and thought he might be your true love, but I didn't realize why or that I was in love with you until the carriage ride on the way to the ball at the Dracerian palace when you decided to try and ensnare Prince Liam. The envy I felt then and later as I watched you two dance made me realize you'd utterly bewitched me."

Despite his sweet admission I gasped. "Prince Liam! He's still spelled! Oh Ali, I've made such a mess. What will I do? He's completely besotted and it's quite annoying."

His lips twitched. "It's quite the dilemma."

"You're failing to understand my tragedy."

"You're wrong, darling flower, for your heart is infinitely precious to me, and thus I want to protect it." He rubbed my back, his forehead furrowed in thought. "If our true love's kiss hasn't broken the spell, perhaps you should tell him you spelled him."

I gasped in horror. "Are you out of your mind? I couldn't do that."

He stroked my cheek. "I'm not in jest, darling. You should tell His Highness what happened."

"And die of utter humiliation?" My cheeks burned at the thought. He lightly traced my blush, eyes incredibly tender.

"I'll come with you. We'll slay the dragon together."

And despite my terror of the upcoming battle, I knew I could face the fearsome beast, for now that I'd found my prince, I knew every obstacle in my fairy tale would be conquered thanks to the gallant knight by my side.