

~Deleted Scene: Make Up with Ali~

I blew the ink of my scribbled note dry before edging the door open and peering into the hallway. It was abandoned, no sight of love-sick princes in sight. Finally a spot of luck. I tiptoed into the corridor, eased the door shut behind me, and hurried towards Aiden and Eileen's private dining room. I'd no sooner rounded the corner when I literally ran into the very man I was trying to avoid. There was just no shaking him.

"Rosie petal! I was just coming to check on you and see if you were well enough for dinner. I've been beside myself with worry all afternoon."

I mashed my lips together to refrain from saying the many words I knew it was indelicate for a proper heroine to say in her story, no matter that the situation warranted it. "I'm quite well, Your Highness," I managed through gritted teeth. Prince Liam offered his arm.

"It's jewel, my sweet. And excellent, I'm glad to hear it. I've missed you fiercely. Might I escort you?"

"How could you miss me? We've only been separated for a few hours." Hours that had felt far too short for my liking.

"The longest afternoon of my life." His blue gaze captured mine and fought to keep it. "Don't you think so, petal?"

I forced myself to nod. He beamed and escorted me down the corridor. I kept the note I'd written hidden in my hand, hoping I'd be able to deliver it without His Highness' notice, else there'd undoubtedly be quite the scene at dinner.

The moment we entered the dining room, I immediately scanned the room, searching... success! Ali stood against the wall with Guard Duncan. I'd have to pass him to reach my usual seat. Finally, something was going right in my story.

As Prince Liam led me to my seat, I shoved my note into Ali's hand. He cocked an eyebrow and I gave him a warning look not to draw attention to our exchange. The greetings of my fellow diners were lost to me as I gracefully took my seat, my attention riveted to Ali as he unfolded the note and read it. His entire expression lit up. He lifted his bright gaze to meet mine.

'I miss you, too,' he mouthed back. I beamed before turning towards Eileen's inquiring look. Before she could question me, I leaned closer.

"Do you need Alastar after dinner?" For I couldn't go another evening without spending time with him. Eileen brightened.

"Are you two finally friends again?"

I merely smiled. She returned it with a mischievous one of her own.

"I see. And have you finally realized that you're not just friends but something *more*?"

I immediately scowled. "Don't be ridiculous."

She sighed. "I suppose I'm resigned to waiting a bit longer for you two to work everything out." She turned away to dot her husband with attention, leaving me with... unwanted attentions.

"Rosie petal, please look at me. It's been too many seconds since I last saw those gorgeous sapphire eyes of yours."

I sighed and humored Prince Liam, whose gaze was as usual sappy. Heaven help me if he drooled again. "Satisfied?"

"Only if you keep looking at me throughout the meal; I can only go so long. Please petal?"

Ugh. I didn't warrant that with a response and tried to enjoy the multi-course meal as best I could while sensing Ali's presence behind me and squirming beneath the gawking of a prince repeatedly trying to capture my attention. Finally, we finished our pudding and rose from the table, Eileen arm-in-arm with Aiden.

"Liam, won't you join us in the parlor?"

"Will my petal be there?"

Eileen cast me an uncertain glance and I pleaded with my eyes for her to come up with an excuse. She smiled knowingly.

"Rosie wants to take an evening to herself."

"Herself and *me*, right?" Prince Liam asked, so ridiculously hopefully.

"Remember she wasn't feeling well this afternoon. It's best if she retires early."

Those were the magic words, for Prince Liam's concerns for my health apparently eclipsed his constant need to be around me. Thank heavens for small miracles.

He took my hand and stared deeply into my eyes. I shifted uncomfortably. "Rest well, my sweet, and remember that even though we're temporarily apart, you're never out of my heart." He kissed my hand. The moment he dropped it, I wiped it on my gown as subtly as possible.

Prince Liam followed Aiden and Eileen from the room. Eileen paused to whisper something to Ali, whose gaze snapped to mine. A swirl of intense emotions filled me to bursting, feelings I had no name for but which were pleasant all the same.

It took me a moment to realize that we were now alone, Doreen and Duncan having followed the royals to the parlor. For a beautiful moment, we simply stood staring at one another. My cheeks warmed and I lowered my eyes, suddenly feeling inexplicably shy.

"What did Eileen tell you?" I asked after an intense moment of a rather energetic silence. Ali cleared his throat.

"She offered me a surprise break and suggested I use it how you saw fit."

The heat filling my cheeks deepened as I peeked up at him. "Would you spend it with me? I miss you, Ali."

He smiled, full on *smiled*, and I loved it. "As your note stated. I never knew three words could make me feel so happy. I've missed you, too." He gave me a hopeful look that was far different from Prince Liam's frequent ones; unlike his, Ali's felt more... *real*. "Are you no longer angry with me?"

"No." All my reasons for being upset with him paled in comparison to the pain avoiding him had caused me. "I suppose I forgive you."

His lips twitched. "Finally. Why the change of heart?"

"I like it better when we're friends." I stood on tiptoe so I could whisper into his ear. "So I'll see you at midnight for more of our adventuresome wanderings."

"We don't need to wait until midnight." He motioned towards the door. I seized his arm and trailed happily after him into the corridor, where he led me towards the stairs that would take us outside. "Are you sick of the gardens yet?"

"Not with you. I'm pleased I decided to forgive you. Count yourself fortunate— this was the shortest grudge I've ever harbored, but I couldn't stand being separated from you a moment longer."

"I shared similar feelings," he said. "I didn't realize how much I'd come to rely on our interactions until they were stolen from me. You do like to take things of mine, don't you?"

"Never intentionally," I said. "I assure you any mind reading I do is inadvertent."

"I wasn't referring to your mind reading skills." He said nothing more, which this being Ali was unsurprising.

We stepped outside, bathed in golden-rose sunset. I paused to allow the loveliness of the setting to wash over me. "Oh Ali, I didn't think the gardens would ever be beautiful again."

"How could you doubt, Rosalina?"

"Rosie," I corrected. His lips twitched. How I loved that quirk of his.

"I was hoping you'd correct me. We must be friends again after all."

"Indeed we are. Shall we explore?"

Ali guided me to the rose garden where I'd encountered him earlier. We walked through the artistic splendor of the dozens of blossoming rose bushes, all different colors and aglow in the settling dusk. We settled in a comfortable silence, not dull like those with Prince Liam, for this silence was full of unspoken yet wonderful conversations.

I broke our tranquil silence first. "I never thanked you for coming to my rescue earlier when I was trying to slip away from a certain prince."

He bowed. "I was pleased to be of service. Where did you end up hiding?"

"A broom cupboard."

He nodded. "An excellent choice. And how long did you manage to remain hidden before His Highness found you?"

I sighed. "Unfortunately, not long enough."

"I take it the courtship isn't going as well as you dreamed?"

"Oh, it's going splendidly," I said airily. Ali cocked an incredulous eyebrow, calling me on my lie. I bit my lip. "It's fine," I altered. "After all, he's rather... princely."

"Indeed. That seems to be all that's needed for a relationship. I'm in trouble when I eventually start courting myself."

I froze. "You're planning on courting someone?"

"I'm hoping to." He gently tugged on my arm to resume our walk but I'd been transformed into a statue by an evil spell and wouldn't be able to move ever again.

"Has someone caught your fancy?"

He nodded. My heart plummeted.

"Oh." I remained rooted to the spot, but while I stood unmoving, inside my heart was a hurricane of emotions. "Oh."

His frown deepened. "Are you alright?"

"Is it a maid you fancy?"

"No."

"A kitchen girl?"

"No."

"One of Eileen's ladies?"

"No."

"Then..." I struggled to come up with another position on the royal staff but I found it impossible to even breathe, let alone think coherently. Ali gently tugged on my arm again and this time I managed to unthaw enough to stumble after him. "Then who do you love?"

"That's a secret, Rosie."

"Won't you tell me?" For I'd never wanted to know a secret as fiercely as I wanted to know this one. The moment he gave his answer, a trip to the imperial library was in order so I could research how to conduct a foul-proof murder.

"Perhaps one day you'll wriggle it out of me."

We continued our stroll but I suddenly no longer wanted to be on Ali's arm; I needed a secluded hiding place where I could break down and cry.

"Are you alright, Rosie?" Ali gazed down at me with concern. I bit the inside of my lip to keep my tears at bay. I refused to cry in front of him.

"I'm fine."

"You're a terrible liar, Rosie."

I glared at him, for he was the perfect target for the agony now lacing through me for reasons I didn't quite understand. "Stop reading me like an open book."

"I admit I'm too curious not to when you so conveniently leave it open. Might I suggest getting a lock? Although I must confess I hope you don't."

His gaze was smoldering, intensifying the strange feelings igniting my insides, causing me to yearn for him to read every single page of my story for the rest of our lives.

"I don't want to get a lock," I whispered. He stepped closer and touched my cheek. I leaned against his fingers.

"Rosie..." He said my name both like a caress and as if he was in fierce pain. He stroked my cheek, each touch causing me to be on the brink of melting. "Prince Liam's blind, you know," he whispered gently. "Your eyes aren't like sapphires; they're like an ocean, brimming with life, mischievousness, and *stories*."

He smiled at me, another *real* smile, one soft and tender. His words danced through my mind. I had ocean eyes that were full of stories. Never had a compliment touched me so deeply.

"You agreed with him earlier when he called me beautiful," I said. A blush caressed his cheeks and his expression softened.

"You are beautiful, not just you but your imagination. I noticed it the moment we met. I've missed not just you but your stories, *our* stories. I can't lose you or them again."

He suddenly dipped down, as if he meant to... but he couldn't be, not Ali. Despite whatever was happening being utterly impossible, without conscious thought I leaned upwards to meet him. He yanked away with a gasp, causing my heart to crack.

He panted for breath, as if he'd just run a mile. "Forgive me, Rosie." He glanced towards the horizon, where the sun was sinking further. "My break is nearly over. I'll see you later tonight."

It took me a moment to find my voice and once I had it took even longer for me to still my pounding heart enough to speak. "We will, for the midnight wanderers are friends again."

But later at midnight as I laid awake staring up at my canopy, I didn't get out of bed to meet with Ali, suddenly too shy and far too confused to face him. My mind revisited the scene in the garden, trying to make sense of not only what had almost happened, but of the lingering disappointment that it hadn't.