

~Deleted Scene: Waiting for Drake~

I kissed his cheek and practically skipped out of the study. I couldn't wait to tell Drake. Unfortunately, I couldn't find him anywhere. After traipsing the entire palace twice, I encountered Elodie, who informed me Drake had gone to the shops.

I stared at her. "He went to the *shops*?"

"He did." She bounced on the balls of her feet with her usual cheerful expression. "He seemed quite eager. I got the impression he had a specific trinket in mind that he wanted to purchase."

I frowned. Why would he do such a thing? He didn't seem the shopping type, and anything he needed could be purchased by a servant. As I considered the situation, another thought struck me.

"Wait, how do you know about this?"

She gave me the same girlish grin she always wore whenever she fancied herself in love with someone. I narrowed my eyes at it. "Because we spent the morning together before he left."

My stomach tightened. "He...spent the morning with you?"

"He did." Her smile widened. "He's so charming and handsome, but he's also interesting; he says the most unexpected and rather snarky things. He made me laugh. Maybe it's love?"

"No, it's most definitely *not* love," I snapped. "You two barely know one another."

She shrugged. "For now. He's been paying particular attention to me of late. Perhaps he's desirous for a match? Then I could move to Malvagaria with you. Wouldn't that be splendid?"

And with these horrible words, she skipped away, leaving my mind swirling as the negative thoughts that hadn't visited me in quite some time vied for my attention—Drake was more interested in Elodie than me—before I forced them away.

I knew Drake, and after last night I knew his heart. There was undoubtedly a perfectly reasonable explanation for his spending the morning with Elodie while I was speaking with my father. After all, he was a friendly person...when he wasn't being snarky. My lips twitched into a smile, a smile that only grew when I remembered the hope that had filled his eyes when I'd encountered him in the corridor this morning.

He cares for you, just as you care for him enough to choose him, despite the potential consequences. The tension tightening my chest eased. Everything would be alright.

I spent the remainder of the day anxiously awaiting his return, most of it outside pacing the frigid gardens, which were coated in a layer of frost. But enduring the brisk air and the lackluster scenery of the nearly dead foliage was worth it when I saw Drake's carriage the moment it arrived.

It rolled to a stop. He leapt from it from a wide grin, which became uncharacteristically shy as he approached. He paused when I pressed my hands on my hips. "Am I in disgrace?"

"You are indeed, so you best start groveling if you hope to win back my good favor."

He chuckled and wove his fingers through mine. "Is groveling all that's required, or must I also satisfy your curiosity on what I was doing on such an errand?"

"That will certainly help." I raised my eyebrow. "The *shops*, Drake?"

"The shops indeed. And as to the reason why a prince ventured into such a frightening location, the answer to that is: it's a surprise. Intrigued?" He wriggled his eyebrows, causing me to giggle. His grin widened. "Excellent, I got my lady to laugh. I seem to be closer to your good favor than I initially feared."

"Considering I've spent most of the day wanting to see you, it seems foolish of me to harbor a grudge."

"I'm happy to hear that, just as I'm pleased to learn you've been eager to see me." He gave my fingers a gentle squeeze before glancing down at them with a frown. "Your hands are like ice. How long have you been outside?"

"Several hours." I inched closer, eager to tell him why I'd been eagerly awaiting him—I'd spoken to my father, who'd given permission to remove the only obstacle standing between me and Drake—but before I could even begin, Drake dropped my hand with a sigh.

"I'm sorry you'll have to wait a bit longer. I wish we could spend time together now, but there's something else I have to do first. But I'll see you at tea?"

I tried to squelch my disappointment. "I'll see you at tea."

His lips brushed across my knuckles, and after another reassuring squeeze and departing glance, he left. I watched him go up the front steps, noticing for the first time

that he had a package tucked beneath his arm. Just what had he purchased from the shops?