

## THE KING'S LOVER

### Chapter 21: Nobody Likes A Blabbermouth

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"Nobody likes a blabbermouth," Martha said and picked up Rose's bowl of soup.

The meetup with the Queen at the courtyard had ended a while ago, but this was the first time she had seen Martha since then. Now that Martha had appeared in front of her, it was safe to assume that Henry spoke to them and from Martha's reaction, she didn't like what he told her.

Rose gave Martha an unimpressed look. All she had done was ask for a bed. She turned her attention to the bowl—she was more interested in getting some food into her stomach than anything Martha might want to do or say. The maids sitting at the same table all lifted their heads from their meals to watch. Rose could tell they were entertained and wanted to see where this would go.

"Did you hear me?" Martha asked when Rose didn't answer.

Rose simply nodded and stretched out her hand for her bowl. She didn't have time for this. She knew they were going to give her even more chores now that Henry had spoken to them, but at least let her eat something first.

Martha laughed. "What do you think this is?"

Rose knew what was going to happen even before it did and wondered if she should have begged. She was that hungry, but she knew better than to encourage their bullying—mostly Martha's. The other maids just laughed, snickered and made a lot of snide comments, she could handle all that.

Martha tilted the plate, pouring the soup onto the ground. Some splattered on the table and onto Rose's clothes. "You're nothing more than a whore! Clean this up." She dropped the bowl on the ground. It made a clang that echoed in the hall before Martha walked out of the kitchen.

Rose sighed and looked around. Everyone turned their gaze away. She glanced at the cook, but the woman wouldn't meet her eyes. Rose knew not to bother—they wouldn't give her more food. She pushed herself from the table. She had to clean the mess.

Rose gathered the ends of her dress and scooped as much as she could with the spoon into the bowl. She needed a piece of rag and water to wipe up the rest. She was about to stand to her full height when something hit her head and fell to the ground—a brush.

"While you're at it, might as well scrub the kitchen clean. You made a mess."

Rose looked up and then around. She sighed loudly enough for all of them to hear. She picked up the bowl, slowly stood to her full height, and walked past Martha. But the maid wasn't having it. She grabbed Rose's arm tightly and pulled her back.

Rose didn't budge. She might not look it, but her father didn't have a son who could help him move the wood he worked with, which meant Rose had done some heavy lifting. Compared to a maid who probably only attended to the Queen, Rose wasn't worried if a fight broke out.

Martha's eyes widened, and she tried again, but she couldn't move Rose an inch. "I said you should scrub the floor," she barked, trying to regain control of the situation.

Rose didn't speak at first, just stared at her, but Martha wouldn't meet her gaze. "I 'eard ye. Except ye want me to use the soup to clean it, I am goin' to get some water."

Martha let go of her hand, and Rose walked past her a little too closely, their shoulders brushing. She noticed no one laughed when she spoke. She could tolerate some of it, but she needed the maids to know there was a limit, and she wasn't to be trifled with.

By the time Rose was done with the floor, it was already noon. She had been lied to—no one scrubbed the floor. She had thought the ground was just darker, but no. It was coal and grime. Rose scrubbed until her knuckles and knees hurt. At least they didn't bleed, but her knuckles were so sore by the time she was done that she couldn't even make a fist.

The annoying part was, she was satisfied with her work. A few maids had come through while she was still scrubbing, and she could see their approval. Right now, the floor sparkled. Rose stood with her hands on her waist, staring at the floor with a smile on her face. She needed to wash herself from head to toe, and she needed a change of clothes.

"Wow!" a voice said, and Rose turned to see Edna at the doorway. The petite woman looked impressed. "I have never seen the kitchen look so clean."

Rose didn't reply to this. "Can I get new clot'es?" she asked.

"Of course. I will even show you to your room."

Rose nodded and stepped out of the kitchen, taking the brush and bucket with her. She was about to return them, but Edna stopped her.

"Just drop them in front. Someone will take care of it."

Rose didn't hesitate. She dropped the bucket of dirty water and followed Edna. They walked down the brighter hallway, passing through several doors. They didn't stop walking until they reached a room near the end of the path.

Edna pushed a door open. It creaked a little as it swung, and Rose was greeted with a small room. It was ironic that she thought it was small, considering it was almost the size of the main room in her father's house.

"You and Martha will share this room. It used to be mine and hers, but Martha can be too much sometimes, so I decided to stay with the other girls. Mistress Edith doesn't mind, and Martha likes having a room to herself, but I don't know about now. Never mind. You can also use that bed."

Rose turned to the direction Edna pointed. It was a rolled-up hay bed, but it was just like the one back home. Rose had to fight the urge to unroll it and lay down, but she was happy to know there would be somewhere for her to sleep later.

"Thank ye," Rose mumbled.

"You don't have to thank me," Edna said. "We haven't been exactly very nice. As for clothes, I will ask around. I'm sure I'll find something you can use. For now, wear this."

## Chapter 22: Like A Lighthouse

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It was nighttime again. The rest of Rose's day was pretty uneventful. The maids left her alone, and she did end up taking a nap on the bed after eating lunch. It was the best nap she had had in a long time, and she didn't wake up until Martha walked into the room, glaring at her as she lay on the floor. Neither said a word to the other and after a few moments Rose just turned and faced the wall.

Edna found her some clothes. They were decent enough to wear around, and even if they weren't, Rose was just glad she didn't have to wear the night dress anymore. The dress she had on was heavy with different layers, and it was pretty clear it must have belonged to a noble at some point. The dress was still pretty, but the color was completely faded.

It was almost dinner time, but Rose found that she wasn't hungry. She sat up on the bed; she was too nauseous to be hungry. It was finally nighttime, and she would have to fulfill the reason she was here. She took a deep breath. She had already made up her mind, and she would properly apologize to the crown prince.

She looked around the partly empty room, which was dark except for the streaks of moonlight that came from the tiny window. Martha had more items than she did, even a dresser. All Rose had was the little satchel that held all her clothes, given to her by Edna.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Rose turned her head to see Martha march into the room with a light in her hands. "Get up; you've been sleeping all day."

Rose rested her eyes on Martha and then slowly turned away. Martha didn't like this and walked closer, shoving the light in Rose's face. "Didn't you hear me? Did you forget what your job in the castle is, or should I tell Mister Henry you said we shouldn't get you ready for tonight?"

Rose sighed and gently pushed the light away from her face. "I don't understand why ye don't like me, and tha's fine. Just know I'd rat'er not be 'ere. If ye can find a way for me to leave, I'll be more than 'appy to listen."

Martha snorted. "Listen to how smug you sound. We all know this is the best you've ever—"

"Martha, if we don't start now, we won't finish before dinner is over. She must be in His Royal Highness's chambers before he gets there, remember?"

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Rose was back in the room again. Not much had changed since she left, except this time, the drapes of the four-poster bed were drawn. Rose looked down at her clothes, wondering why they always dressed her like this. Was it a preference of the crown prince? The night dress was made of silk and it felt very soft against her skin. She didn't even think the maids had access to such quality material. It had an inner layer that wasn't much for coverage, but the robe did a decent job.

She wrapped it tighter and made her way to the bed. She sat on it and lay down with her legs stretched out and her arms on her torso, closing her eyes as she waited. Rose didn't know how long she lay there, but she suddenly stood up. She had to do something to buy the time or she would go mad.

She walked toward the fireplace. There was a head of a buffalo above it. She hadn't noticed it before now. She wondered if the crown prince had hunted it himself. The curved horn looked very sharp and it felt like the lifeless eyes were staring right at her. Rose raised her hand to touch it but lost her footing and her entire body slammed against the fireplace.

Rose stretched out her arms in front of her to protect her face from hitting the wall when she heard the oddest sound, but she didn't have time to react before the fireplace flipped. Since she was resting on it, it turned with her. Rose was swung onto the ground before she could even realize what was happening and started to slide down while screaming. The fireplace returned to its position as though nothing had happened, with the sounds of Rose screaming as she slid down, barely escaping the hidden path.

Rose slid down for a very long time, and at some point, she just stopped screaming and tried to enjoy the ride as best as she could, which was hard to do with her terrible choice of clothes and the fact that she couldn't see a thing. She had tried to stop herself several times but had only ended up with bruises. Her only silver lining was that couldn't slide forever, she would have to stop at some point.

No sooner she thought about this than she was slammed against a wall, shoulder first. Rose yelled out in pain, and she could swear she heard a crack in her shoulder as it made contact with the wall. She stayed still, grabbing her shoulder as she waited for the pain to subside.

With her hand on her shoulder, she slowly lifted her body up. Rose shoved her head right into spiderwebs, covering her eyes, nose, and mouth. Rose instantly panicked, moving about as she tried her best to remove them, coughing hard. The space was dusty, it also smelled damp and musty and now she had to worry about spider webs trying to kill her.

The worst part of it was that she couldn't see anything—not even her hand in front of her. She didn't know what direction she could possibly go. She bent her knees and grabbed her head as she screamed. How was she going to find her way out of here?

Rose screamed again, but when she got tired of screaming, she was still in the dark, in the secret passageway. She knew she couldn't remain here. The dark would make her go crazy. She moved her hands, trying to feel the walls. The path definitely led somewhere. She just hoped it was out. Rose treated the secret passageway like a maze, using the wall as a guide. Sadly, her eyes didn't get used to the dark, and whether she kept them open or closed, it made no difference.

Suddenly, the path curved. Rose frowned, slowing down a bit. She had been walking for quite some time, and her soles were sore. She walked, wondering if she was going to a dead end, but she couldn't stop now.



Rose's face brightened as she saw it. It wasn't much, but in a place so dark, even the tiniest bit of light was like a lighthouse. She picked up her pace, rushing toward it.

## Chapter 23: Find Her

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"Where is she?!" Caius's thunderous voice echoed in his room.

The maids jerked, yelping simultaneously. They looked from one to the other, clustering together in fear. Henry stood to the side, distraught. He had been the one to discover she was missing. Arriving in the prince's room first, he noticed it was empty. Thinking the maids forgot to bring Rose in time, he had rushed to the servants' quarters to rectify this.

It didn't take him long to discover that wasn't the case. He had immediately requested the castle be searched, and the result had been fruitless. Relaying the news to the crown prince was the hardest part. Henry kept touching his neck, praying he wouldn't lose it on the account of a peasant.

"W-we led her here, Y-your Royal Highness," Martha spoke. She was the only one who could muster some courage; the rest of the girls just shivered in fear.

They had never entered the crown prince's wing in all the years they had stayed in the castle, let alone into his private chambers. Women were more or less prohibited; it wasn't a known rule, but any woman who was found here simply had one job.

Caius took a step closer to them, and the maids shrank. Edna had tears running down her face, and the other two covered their mouths with their hands to keep from crying out. Only Martha didn't look on the verge of a breakdown.

"Do you see her here?" he asked darkly.

Martha shriveled. This was the first time the crown prince had addressed her directly, and the fact that it was because of Rose dampened her joy. He was as scary and handsome as they said. What did he see in the peasant?

Martha hurriedly shook her head. "B-but she said if I found a way she could escape the castle, I should let her know."

Caius's brown eyes narrowed. He suspected this was the case, and the maid just gave him conclusive information. "Get out!"

The maids scrambled, screaming as they rushed for the door.

"Not you, Henry!"

Henry shut his eyes before slowly turning around. "Your Highness?" he said softly. The crown prince looked very pissed off, and Henry knew the smallest things could set him off.

"Send for Delphine," Caius said.

*The courtesan?* But Henry didn't ask this out loud. "As you wish, Your Highness."

"Also, increase the number of guards searching for her and make sure you find her!"

"Yes, Your Highness," Henry bowed before he left the room.

Caius knew Rose must have found one of the many secret passageways in his room. There was no way to guess which one she must have found, and the worst part was they all led to very different places—a different room, a different wing, outside the castle, and even outside the castle walls. Trying to figure out which one would take all night and even if he eventually did, she would be far gone by then. It was best to put people in places where she might appear.

This was the third time she would elude him. Caius's gaze darkened. Letting her off easy the second time was where the problem lay. He could remember how she groveled to save her father's life. Perhaps he would have to repeat that method. She didn't seem to have a clue as to who she was dealing with, he would enlighten her.

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There was something above Rose's head, like a door—more like two doors. That was where the light was coming from; it seeped through a little crack in the wood. It wasn't much light, but it was bright enough to guide her to it. Rose lifted her hand and pushed, but the door wouldn't budge. She tried again and winced as she put pressure on her injured shoulder.

Rose moved her hand around the door, wondering if there was a latch or a bar, something that prevented the doors from opening, but she didn't find anything. It was hard to search for anything with such minimal light.

"A key?" Rose yelled out in horror. If a key was the only way out, she was trapped.

"Nay, nay, nay, nay," she cried as she frantically moved her hands around the door, but she found nothing.

Frustrated, she pulled, and the doors opened, dumping sand all over her. Rose wasn't even mad; she was just happy she found a way out. She stretched out her arms, feeling the cool breeze on her sand-covered face. Rose wiped as much of the sand as she could, wondering why the doors were made in such a strange manner. She got out and tried to shut the door back. It was a bit of a hassle, but when it eventually clicked into place, Rose couldn't help the bright smile that appeared on her face.

There was sand in her hair, eyes, nose, and mouth, and try as she might, she couldn't get rid of the musty smell from the secret passageway. Even the fresh air didn't help, but she was finally out, and that was all that mattered. Standing up, she looked around as she tried to figure out where she was. Rose gasped at the sight before her.

She was somewhere—the problem was where. There was a field of trees not far from where she stood, and when she turned to the left, she could see the castle. The distance was unexpected; it was quite far. Rose winced as she looked at it. Her soles were sore, and she just wanted to sit and not move an inch.

Rose squinted her eyes as she looked some more. She could see the castle walls. Could she scale it? It was a simple thought, but as soon as it appeared, she crushed it. She might be able to escape the crown prince, but her family couldn't, and they were more important than anything else.

Rose winced as she took a step forward, and a pebble dug into her sole. Rose sighed. It was going to be a long walk back. She couldn't clearly see the ground, but at least the castle was like a beacon, leading her with all the lights around it. Who would have thought a secret passageway would lead this far from the castle?

Rose had not gotten far when she heard the sound of dogs barking. She stood rooted to the spot. From the sound of their barks, there were at least three dogs. She knew better than to run; they would rip her to shreds. The barks got louder as the dogs got closer, and Rose could pick out two people coming toward her.