

12. Rhys

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

12

RHYS

I SENSED TROUBLE BEFORE I EVEN ENTERED THE PALACE'S RECEPTION hall, where I heard Prince Nikolai talking in low murmurs. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and though I couldn't make out what Bridget's brother was saying, the stressed pitch of his voice set alarms blaring in my head.

My boots squeaked against the reception hall's overly polished marble floors, and Nikolai fell silent. He stood in the middle of the soaring two-story space next to Elin and Viggo, the Deputy Head of Royal Security. I'd memorized every staff member's face and name so I would notice if anyone tried to sneak in by disguising themselves as a palace employee.

I gave the group a curt nod. "Your Highness."

"Mr. Larsen." Nikolai responded with a regal nod of his own. "I trust you're enjoying your day off?"

Since the palace was so heavily guarded, I was off the clock when Bridget was at home, which was most days since her grandfather's hospitalization. It felt strange. I was so used to being by her side twenty-four-seven I...

You do not miss her. I dismissed the ridiculous idea before it became a fully formed thought.

"It's been fine." I'd tried drawing again, but I hadn't gotten much further than a few lines on paper. I ran out of creativity, inspiration—whatever you call it—months ago, and today had been my first time picking up my sketchbook since.

I'd needed something to occupy my hands and mind.

Something that wasn't five-nine with the face of an angel and curves that would fit perfectly beneath my palms.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

I hardened my jaw, determined not to fantasize about my fucking client in front of her brother. Or ever.

"Where's Princess Bridget?" According to her schedule, she was supposed to be horseback riding with Nikolai. But the skies looked ready to pour, so I assumed they'd called it a day early.

Nikolai exchanged glances with Elin and Viggo, and the needle on my trouble radar inched closer to the red zone.

"I'm sure Her Highness is somewhere in the palace," Viggo said. He was a short, heavyset man with a ruddy face and a passing resemblance to a Scandinavian Danny DeVito. "We're looking for her as we speak."

The needle pushed past the red zone into the white-hot emergency zone. “What do you mean, you’re looking for her?” My voice remained calm, but alarm and anger bubbled in my stomach. “I thought she was with you, Your Highness.”

Elin glared at Viggo. She didn’t have to speak for me to hear her scream, Viggo, you idiot.

Whatever was happening, I wasn’t supposed to know about it.

Nikolai shifted his weight, discomfort sliding across his face.

“She was, but we got into an argument and she, ah, took off while we were riding.”

“How long ago?” I didn’t give a damn if I sounded disrespectful.

It was a personal safety issue, and I was Bridget’s bodyguard. I had a right to know what happened.

Nikolai’s discomfort visibly increased. “An hour ago.”

The anger erupted, edging out the alarm by a hair. “An hour ago? And no one thought to call me?”

“Watch your tone, Mr. Larsen,” Elin admonished. “You’re speaking to the Crown Prince.”

“I’m aware.” Elin could take her glares and shove them up her ass along with the stick permanently residing there. “No one has seen the princess since?”

“A groundskeeper found her horse,” Viggo said. “We took it back to—”

“Found her horse.” A vein pulsed in my forehead. “Meaning she wasn’t riding it and she hadn’t returned it to the stables herself.” No matter how angry she was, Bridget would never leave an animal behind. Something had happened to her. Panic grated against my insides as I bit out, “Tell me. Have you searched the grounds, or just the palace?”

“Her Highness wouldn’t be out there,” Viggo blustered. “It’s storming! She’s inside—”

“Unless she fell off her horse and is unconscious somewhere.” Jesus, how the hell had he risen to the deputy security chief position? There were hamsters with more brains than him.

“Bridget is an excellent equestrian, and we have a few people searching outside. She could’ve run off to one of her hiding places. She used to do that as a kid.” Nikolai looked at Viggo. “But Mr. Larsen’s right. It doesn’t hurt to be extra thorough. Shall we send extra men to check the grounds?”

“If you wish, Your Highness. I’ll draw up the quadrants...”

Un-fucking-believable.

I was halfway out the door before Viggo finished his moronic sentence. Too bad the Head of Security, who was actually competent, was on vacation because his deputy was a goddamned idiot. By the time he finished drawing his quadrants, Bridget could be seriously hurt.

“Where are you going?” Elin called after me.

“To do my job.”

I picked up my pace, cursing the size of the palace as I sprinted toward the closest door leading outdoors. By the time I hit the grounds, my panic had escalated into full-blown terror. Thunder boomed so loud it rattled the door as I shut it behind me, and it was raining so hard the gardens and fountains blurred in front of me.

The estate was too large for me to search it all by myself, so I had to be strategic. My best bet would be to start at the official horseback riding trail in the southeast corner and go from there, though the rain would've washed away any hoofprints by now.

Luckily, the palace had a fleet of motorized carts to ferry guests around the grounds, and I made it to the riding trail in ten minutes instead of the half hour it would've taken me on foot.

"Come on, princess, where are you?" I muttered, my eyes straining to see past the thick sheet of water slanting through the air. Images of Bridget lying on the ground, her body twisted and broken, flashed through my mind. My skin turned ice cold, and the wheel slipped against my sweaty palms.

If anything happened to her, I would murder Viggo. Slowly.

I scoured the trails, but twenty minutes later, I still hadn't found her, and I was getting desperate. She could be indoors, but my gut told me she wasn't, and my gut was never wrong.

Maybe she was in an area the cart couldn't reach. It wouldn't hurt to check.

I killed the engine and jumped out, ignoring the harsh sting of raindrops on my skin.

"Bridget!" The rain swallowed her name, and I let out a low curse. "Bridget!" I tried again, my boots sinking into the muddy ground as I searched the area near the trail. The rain plastered my shirt and pants to my skin, making it hard to move, but I'd weathered worse than a puny thunderstorm as a SEAL.

I wasn't giving up until I found her.

I was about to move on to a different section of the grounds when I spotted a flash of blonde out of the corner of my eye. My heart tripped, and I froze for half a beat before I sprinted toward her. Please let it be her.

It was.

I sank onto my knees by her side, my chest hollowing at the paleness of Bridget's face and the large, purplish bruise on her forehead. A small trickle of blood dripped down the side of her face, turning pink when it mingled with the rain. She was unconscious and completely soaked through.

A snarling, protective beast rose in my chest with such ferocity it stunned me.

Viggo was as good as dead. If he hadn't dragged his feet, if someone had fucking called me and told me Bridget was missing...

I forced myself to push the anger aside for now. I had more important things to focus on.

I checked her pulse, which was weak but steady. Thank God. I quickly scanned the rest of her for signs of injury. Normal breathing, no broken limbs, and no blood except for the cut on her forehead.

Her helmet was askew, and dirt smeared her cheeks and clothes.

The beast in my chest snarled again, ready to rip not only Viggo but Nikolai to shreds for not protecting her, or at least being there for her.

He probably couldn't have done anything to prevent Bridget from falling off her horse—judging by her helmet and position on the ground, that must've been what happened—but the beast didn't care. All it knew was she was hurt, and for that, someone had to pay.

Later.

I needed to get her to the doctor first.

I cursed again when I realized I had no cell service. The storm must've knocked it out.

Standard medical advice said I shouldn't move an injured person without professionals present, but I had no choice.

I scooped Bridget up in my arms and carried her to the cart, supporting her neck with one hand. We made it halfway when I heard a low groan.

My heart tripped again. "Princess, you awake?" I kept my voice even, not wanting to panic and scare her.

Bridget let out another groan, her eyes fluttering open. "Mr. Larsen? What are you doing? What happened?" She tried to twist her head to look around, but I stopped her with a firm squeeze on her thigh.

"You're injured. Don't move unless you absolutely have to." We reached the cart, and I set her carefully in the passenger seat before I took the driver's seat and turned on the engine. Relief flooded my veins, so thick it almost choked me.

She was okay. She might have a concussion, judging by the bruise, but she was conscious and talking and alive.

"Do you remember what happened?" I wanted to speed back to the palace, which had an in-house doctor, but I forced myself to drive slowly to minimize any bumps and jerky movements.

Bridget touched her forehead with a wince. "I was riding and... there was a branch. I didn't see it until it was too late." She squeezed her eyes shut. "My head hurts, and everything's blurry."

Dammit. Concussion for sure.

My hands strangled the wheel, which I pictured as Viggo's neck.

"We'll be at the palace soon. For now, just relax and don't force yourself to talk."

Of course, she didn't listen.

"How did you find me?" Bridget spoke slower than usual, and the faint note of pain in her voice made my stomach lurch.

"I looked." I parked the cart near the back entrance. "You should fire your deputy security chief. He's a moron. If I hadn't found you, he'd still have his people searching the inside of the palace like—what?"

"How long did you look for me?" Bridget gave me a strange look, one that made my heart twist in the oddest way.

"Don't remember," I grunted. "Let's get you inside. You're soaked."

"So are you." She stayed in the cart. "Did you...you looked for me in the rain by yourself?"

"Like I said, Viggo is a moron. Inside, princess. You need that cut and bruise looked at. You probably have a concussion."

"I'm okay." But Bridget didn't argue when I slipped my arm around her waist and her arm around my neck, letting her use me as a crutch as we walked inside.

Luckily, the doctor's office wasn't too far from the back entrance, and when she saw the state Bridget was in, she sprang into action.

While she patched Bridget's forehead up and gave her a more thorough check for injuries, I dried off in the bathroom and waited

in the hall. I didn't trust myself not to look at Bridget's bruise and cut and not lose my shit.

The sound of rapid footsteps filled the hall, and my lip peeled back in a snarl when I saw Nikolai running toward me, followed by Viggo and Elin. One of the staff must've alerted them when they saw me and Bridget.

Perfect. I needed to let off some steam.

"Is Bridget okay?" the prince asked, his face worried.

"For the most part. The doctor's checking her out now." I waited until Nikolai was inside the doctor's office before I turned my attention to Viggo.

"You." I grabbed the collar of Viggo's shirt and lifted him until his feet dangled in the air. "I told you she was outside. Any damn person with common sense would know she was outside, yet you wasted an hour searching indoors while Bridget was unconscious in the rain."

"Mr. Larsen!" Elin sounded scandalized. "This is the royal palace, not a dive bar where you brawl with other patrons. Put Viggo down."

I ignored her and lowered my voice until only Viggo could hear me. "You better pray the princess isn't seriously hurt."

"Are you threatening me?" he sputtered.

"Yes."

"I could fire you."

I bared my teeth in a semblance of a smile. "Try."

The Head of Royal Security oversaw my contract, but Viggo couldn't find a way out of his ass if someone planted neon lights marking the way, much less fire me without his boss's approval. I released Viggo's collar and set him on the ground when the doctor's door opened.

"Mr. Larsen, Viggo, Elin." If she suspected there'd been a scuffle outside her office, she didn't show it. "I've finished the checkup. Come in."

My anger at Viggo took a backseat to my concern over Bridget as we crowded into the mini clinic, where Bridget sat on the hospital bed. She didn't look happy to see Nikolai, who stood next to her with a tight expression.

The doctor informed us Bridget did, indeed, have a concussion, but she should recover in ten to fourteen days. She also had a mild wrist sprain and the beginnings of a nasty cold. Nothing life-threatening, but she would be uncomfortable for the next few weeks.

I glared at Viggo, who shrank behind Nikolai like a coward.

I stayed after everyone else left, and the doctor took one look at my face before murmuring an excuse and slipping out the door, leaving me and Bridget alone.

"I'm fine," Bridget said before I could open my mouth. "A few weeks of rest and I'll be good as new."

I crossed my arms over my chest, unconvinced. "What the hell happened? Nikolai said you ran off after you two got in an argument."

Her face shut down. "Sibling squabble. It was nothing."

"Bullshit. You don't run off in anger."

Not to mention, Bridget hadn't spoken to him once while he was

in the room, which was telling. She would never ignore her brother unless he'd really pissed her off.

"There's a first time for everything," she said.

A frustrated growl rose in my throat. "Dammit, princess, you need to be more careful. If something happened to you, I—" I broke