

22. 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.

22

RHYS

“THAT MAKES US EVEN.”

I stuck my phone between my ear and shoulder so I could grab my suitcase out of the overhead bin. “I told you already that it does.”

“I want to make sure it sinks in.” Christian’s drawl seeped over the line, its smooth, lazy veneer hiding the razor blades beneath the surface. It reflected the man behind the voice, a debonair charmer who could kill you with one hand and a smile on his face.

Many a person had failed to look beyond the smile until it was too late.

It was what made Christian so dangerous and such an effective CEO of the world’s most elite private security agency.

“I didn’t realize you’d become so attached to the princess,” he added.

My jaw flexed at the insinuation, and I nearly bowled over an older man wearing an unfortunate mud brown jacket in my haste to get off the plane. “I didn’t become attached. She’s the least annoying client I’ve had, and I’m sick of rotating between random pop stars and spoiled heiresses every few months. It’s a practical decision.”

In truth, I knew I’d fucked up less than twenty-four hours after I turned down her offer to extend my contract. I’d been on the plane back to D.C., and I would’ve forced the pilot to turn back if doing so wouldn’t have landed me on the no-fly list and resulted in a very unpleasant detention courtesy of the U.S. government.

But Christian didn’t need to know that.

“So you move to Eldorra, the country you hate most.” It wasn’t a question, and he sounded less than convinced. “Makes sense.”

“I don’t hate Eldorra.” The country came with a lot of baggage for me, but I had nothing against the actual place. It was a me problem, not a them problem...for the most part.

The woman walking next to me in an I Heart Eldorra T-shirt stared at me, and I glared back until she blushed and hurried past.

“If you say so.” A note of warning crept into Christian’s voice. “I agreed to your request because I trust you, but don’t do anything stupid, Larsen. Princess Bridget is a client. The future queen of Eldorra, at that.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Christian was technically my boss, but I’d never been good at kissing ass, not even when I was in the military. It’d gotten me into my fair share of trouble. “And you didn’t do this because you trust me. You did it because I spent the past month

dealing with your mess.”

If I hadn't, I would've taken the next plane back to Eldorra after I landed in D.C.

Then again, if I hadn't, Christian might not have agreed to pull his many strings for me. He didn't do anything purely out of the good of his heart.

“Either way, remember why you're there,” he said calmly. “You are to protect Princess Bridget from bodily harm. That's it.”

“I'm aware.” I exited the airport and was immediately hit with a blast of frigid air. Winter in Eldorra was cold as shit, but I'd survived colder in the Navy. The wind barely fazed me. “Gotta go.”

I hung up without another word and took my place in the taxi line.

What had Bridget's reaction been when she found out I was returning? Happy? Angry? Indifferent? She hadn't refused my request to be reinstated as her bodyguard, which was a good sign, but I also wasn't sure the palace gave her a choice.

Whatever it was, I'd deal with it. I just wanted to see her again.

I'd left because I thought it was the right thing to do. We'd agreed what happened in Costa Rica would stay in Costa Rica, and I'd tried my best to distance myself afterward. To give us both a fighting chance. Because if we stayed near each other, we would end up in a place that could destroy her.

Bridget was a princess, and she deserved a prince. I wasn't that. Not even close.

But it only took a day away from her for me to realize I didn't give a damn. I couldn't act on my feelings, but I also couldn't stay away, so here I was. Being by her side without actually being with her would be a special form of torture, but it was better than not being near her at all. The past six weeks were evidence of that.

“You dropped this.”

My muscles coiled, and I did a quick five-second assessment of the stranger who came up behind me.

He looked to be in his early to mid-thirties. Sandy hair, expensive coat, and the soft hands—both in full view—of someone who'd never done more taxing physical labor than lifting a pen.

Nevertheless, I kept my guard up. He wasn't a physical threat, but that didn't mean he couldn't be a threat in other ways. Plus, I didn't take well to random people approaching me.

“That's not mine.” I flicked my eyes to the cracked black leather wallet in his hand.

“No?” He frowned. “I thought I saw it fall out of your pocket, but it's so crowded. I must've seen wrong.” He examined me, his hazel eyes piercing. “American?”

I responded with a curt nod. I hated small talk, and something about the man unsettled me. My guard inched up further.

“I thought so.” The man spoke perfect English, but he had the same faint Eldorran accent as Bridget. “Are you here on vacation? Not many Americans come in the winter.”

“Work.”

“Ah, I came back for work too, in a manner of speaking. I'm Andreas.” He held out his free hand, but I didn't move.

I didn't shake random strangers' hands, especially not at the

airport.

If Andreas was fazed by my rudeness, he didn't show it.

He slid his hand into his pocket and smiled, but it didn't quite

reach his eyes. "Enjoy your stay. Maybe I'll see you around."

To some, it might've sounded friendly or even like a come-on. To me, it sounded vaguely like a threat.

"Maybe." I hoped not. I didn't know the guy, but I knew I didn't trust him.

I reached the head of the taxi line, and I didn't spare Andreas another glance as I tossed my suitcase in the trunk and gave the driver the palace's address.

It took almost an hour to reach the sprawling complex thanks to traffic, and my body tightened with anticipation when the familiar gold gates came into view.

Finally.

It'd only been six weeks, but it felt like six years.

It was true what people said about not knowing what you had until it was gone.

After the entrance guard cleared me, I checked in with Malthe, the head security chief, then with Silas, the head of the royal household, who informed me I would stay in the palace's guesthouse. He showed me to the stone cottage, located fifteen minutes from the main building, and rambled on about household rules and protocol until I interrupted him.

"Is Her Highness here?" I stayed at the guesthouse every time I came to Eldorra, and I didn't need to listen to the whole song and dance again.

Silas heaved a deep sigh. "Yes, Her Highness is in the palace with Lady Mikaela."

"Where?"

"The second-floor drawing room. She's not expecting you until tomorrow," he added pointedly.

"Thank you. I can take it from here." Translation: Go away.

He let out another huge sigh before leaving.

After he left, I took a quick shower, changed, and headed back to the palace. It took a full half hour for me to reach the drawing room, and my steps slowed when I heard Bridget's silvery laugh through the doors.

God, I'd missed her laugh. I'd missed everything about her.

I pushed open the doors and stepped inside, my eyes immediately zeroing in on Bridget.

Golden hair. Creamy skin. Grace and sunshine, clad in her favorite yellow dress, which she always wore when she wanted to look professional but relaxed.

She stood in front of a giant whiteboard with what looked like dozens of tiny headshots taped to it. Her friend Mikaela was waving her hands around and speaking animatedly until she noticed me.

"Rhys!" she exclaimed. She was a petite brunette with a head of curly hair, freckles, and an unnervingly perky personality. "Bridget told me you were coming back. It's so good to see you again!"