

### 3. Bridget

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.

3

BRIDGET

ONE OF THE WORST THINGS ABOUT HAVING A ROUND-THE-CLOCK BODY-guard was living with them. It hadn't been an issue with Booth because we'd gotten along so well, but living in close quarters with Rhys put on me on edge.

Suddenly, my house seemed too small, and everywhere I looked, Rhys was there.

Drinking coffee in the kitchen. Stepping out of the shower. Working out in the backyard, his muscles flexing and his skin gleaming with sweat.

It all felt strangely domestic in a way it hadn't felt with Booth, and I didn't like it one bit.

"Aren't you hot in those clothes?" I asked one unseasonably warm day as I watched Rhys do push-ups.

Even though it was fall, the temperature hovered in the high seventies, and a bead of sweat trickled down my neck despite my light cotton dress and the ice-cold lemonade in my hands.

Rhys must be roasting in his black shirt and workout shorts.

"Trying to get me to take my shirt off?" He continued his pushups, not sounding the least bit winded.

Warmth that had nothing to do with the weather spread across my cheeks. "You wish." It wasn't the most inspired answer, but it was all I could think of.

Honestly, I was curious about seeing Rhys shirtless. Not because I wanted to sneak a peek at his abs—which I grudgingly admitted had to be fantastic if the rest of his body was anything to go by—but because he seemed so determined not to be shirtless. Even when he left the bathroom after a shower, he was fully dressed.

Maybe he was uncomfortable getting half-naked in front of a client, but I had a feeling not much discomfited Rhys Larsen. It had to be something else. An embarrassing tattoo, maybe, or a strange skin condition that only affected his torso.

Rhys finished his pushups and moved on to the pull-up bar. "You gonna keep ogling me, or you got something I can help you with, princess?"

The warmth intensified. "I wasn't ogling you. I was secretly praying for you to get heatstroke. If you do, I'm not helping you. I have... a book to read."

Dear Lord, what am I saying? I didn't make sense even to myself. After our moment of solidarity at The Crypt two weeks ago,

Rhys and I had settled right back into our familiar pattern of snark and sarcasm, which I hated, because I wasn't a typically snarky and sarcastic person.

A shadow of a smirk filled the corners of Rhys's mouth, but it disappeared before it blossomed into something real. "Good to know."

By now, I was sure I was beet red, but I lifted my chin and reentered the house with as much dignity as I could muster.

Let Rhys bake in the sun. I hoped he did get heatstroke. Maybe then, he wouldn't have enough energy to be such an ass.

Sadly, he didn't, and he had plenty of energy left to be an ass.

"How's the book?" he drawled later, when he'd finished his workout and I'd grabbed the closest book I could find before he entered the living room.

"Riveting." I tried to focus on the page instead of the way Rhys's sweat-dampened shirt clung to his torso.

Six-pack abs for sure. Maybe even an eight-pack. Not that I was counting.

"Sure seems that way." Rhys's face remained impassive, but I could hear the mocking bent in his voice. He walked to the bathroom, and without looking back, he added, "By the way, princess, the book is upside down."

I slammed the hardcover shut, my skin blazing with embarrassment.

God, he was insufferable. A gentleman wouldn't point something like that out, but Rhys Larsen was no gentleman. He was the bane of my existence.

Unfortunately, I was the only person who thought so. Everyone else found his grumpiness charming, including my friends and the people at the shelter, so I couldn't even commiserate with them over his bane-of-my-existence-ness.

"What's the deal with your new bodyguard?" Wendy, one of the other long-term volunteers at Wags & Whiskers, whispered. She snuck a peek at where Rhys sat in the corner like a rigid statue of muscles and tattoos. "He's got that whole strong, silent thing going on. It's hot."

"You say that, but you're not the one who has to live with him."

It was two days after the upside-down book debacle, and Rhys and I hadn't exchanged any words since except good morning and good night.

I didn't mind. It made it easier to pretend he didn't exist.

Wendy laughed. "I'll gladly change places with you. My roommate keeps microwaving fish and stinking up the kitchen, and she looks nothing like your bodyguard." She tightened her ponytail and stood. "Speaking of changing places, I have to head out for study group. Do you have everything you need?"

I nodded. I'd taken over Wendy's shift enough times by now to have the routine down pat.

After she left, silence descended, so thick it draped around me like a cloak.

Rhys didn't move from his corner spot. We were alone, but his eyes roved around the playroom like he expected an assassin to pop out from behind the cat condo at any minute.

“Does it get exhausting?” I scratched Meadow, the shelter’s newest cat, behind the ears.

“What?”

“Being on all the time.” Constantly alert, searching for danger. It was his job, but I’d never seen Rhys relax, not even when it was just the two of us at home.

“No.”

“You know you can give more than one-word answers, right?”

“Yes.”

He was impossible.

“Thank God I have you, sweetie,” I said to Meadow. “At least you can carry on a decent conversation.”

She meowed in agreement, and I smiled. I swore cats were smarter than humans sometimes.

There was another long stretch of silence before Rhys surprised me by asking, “Why do you volunteer at an animal shelter?”

I was so startled by the fact he’d initiated a non-security-related conversation I froze mid-pet. Meadow meowed again, this time in protest.

I resumed my petting and debated how much to tell Rhys before settling on the simple answer. “I like animals. Hence, animal shelter.”

“Hmm.”

My spine stiffened at the skepticism in his voice. “Why do you ask?”

Rhys shrugged. “Just doesn’t seem like the kinda thing you’d like to do in your free time.”

I didn’t have to ask to know what types of things he thought I liked doing in my free time. Most people looked at me and made assumptions based on my appearance and background, and yes, some of them were true. I enjoyed shopping and parties as much as the next girl, but that didn’t mean I didn’t care about other things too.

“It’s amazing how much insight you have into my personality after knowing me for only a month,” I said coolly.

“I do my research, princess.” It was the only way Rhys addressed me. He refused to call me by my first name or Your Highness. In turn, I refused to call him anything except Mr. Larsen. I wasn’t sure if it accomplished anything, since he gave no indication it bothered him, but it satisfied the petty part of me. “I know more about you than you think.”

“But not why I volunteer at an animal shelter. So, clearly, you need to brush up on your research skills.”

He flicked those steely gray eyes in my direction, and I thought I spotted a hint of amusement before the walls crashed down again.

“Touché.” He hesitated, then added reluctantly, “You’re different from what I expected.”

“Why? Because I’m not a superficial airhead?” My voice chilled another degree as I tried to cover up the unexpected sting of his words.

“I never said you were a superficial airhead.”

“You implied it.”

Rhys grimaced. “You’re not the first royal I’ve guarded,” he said.

“You’re not even the third or fourth. They all acted similarly, and I

expected you to do the same. But you're not..."

I arched an eyebrow. "I'm not...?"

A small smile ghosted across his face so fast I almost missed it.

"A superficial airhead."

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

Me, laughing at something Rhys Larsen said. Hell must've iced over.

"My mom was a huge animal lover," I said, surprising myself. I hadn't planned on talking about my mother with Rhys, but I felt compelled to take advantage of the lull in our normally antagonistic relationship. "I got the gene from her. But the palace didn't allow pets, and the only way I could regularly interact with animals was by volunteering at shelters."

I held out my hand and smiled when Meadow pawed at it like she was giving me a low five. "I enjoy it, but I also do it because..." I searched for the right words. "It makes me feel closer to my mom. The love for animals is something only we shared. The rest of my family likes them fine, but not in the same way we do. Or did." I didn't know what prompted my admission. Was it because I wanted to prove I wasn't volunteering as a PR stunt? Why did I care what Rhys thought of me, anyway?

Or maybe it was because I needed to talk about my mom to someone who hadn't known her. In Athenberg, I couldn't mention her without people shooting me pitying looks, but Rhys was as calm and unruffled as ever.

"I understand," he said.

Two simple words, yet they crawled inside me and soothed a part of me I hadn't known needed soothing.

Our eyes met, and the air developed another layer of thickness. Dark, mysterious, piercing. Rhys had the kind of eyes that saw straight into a person's soul, stripping past layers of elaborate lies to reach the ugly truths underneath.

How many of my truths could he see? Could he see the girl beneath the mask, the one who'd carried a decades-long burden she was terrified to share, the one who'd killed—

"Master! Spank me, Master!" Leather chose that moment to let loose one of his notoriously inappropriate outbursts. "Please spank me!"

The spell shattered as quickly as it had been cast.

Rhys flicked his gaze away, and I looked down, my breath gusting out in a mixture of relief and disappointment.

"Mas—" Leather quieted when Rhys leveled it with a glare. The bird ruffled its feathers and hopped around its cage before settling into a nervous silence.

"Congratulations," I said, trying to shake off the unsettling electricity from a moment ago. "You might be the first person who's ever gotten Leather to stop mid-sentence. You should adopt him."

"Fuck no. I don't do foul-mouthed animals."

We stared at each other for a second before a small giggle slipped from my mouth and the iron curtain shielding his eyes lifted enough for me to spot another glimmer of humor.

We didn't talk again for the rest of my shift, but the mood between us had lightened enough that I'd convinced myself Rhys and I

could have a functional working relationship.

I wasn't sure if it was optimism or delusion, but my brain always latched onto the smallest evidence things weren't so bad to cope with discomfort.

The wind nipped at the bare skin on my face and neck as we walked home after my shift. Rhys and I had fought over whether to walk or drive, but in the end, even he had to admit it would be silly to drive somewhere so close.

"Are you excited to visit Eldorra?" I asked. We were leaving for Athenberg in a few days for winter break, and Rhys had mentioned it would be his first time in the country.

I'd hoped to build on our earlier flash of camaraderie, but I'd misjudged because Rhys's face shut down faster than a house party raided by cops.

"I'm not going there for vacation, princess." He said there like I was forcing him to go to a prison camp, not a place Travel + Leisure had named the ninth-best city in the world to visit.

"I know you're not going for vacation." I tried and failed to keep the annoyance out of my voice. "But you'll have free ti—"

The high-pitched squeal of tires ripped through the air. My brain didn't have time to process the sound before Rhys pushed me into a nearby alleyway and pressed me tight against the wall with his gun drawn and his body covering mine.

My pulse kicked into high gear, both at the sudden spike of adrenaline and the proximity to him. He radiated heat and tension from every inch of his big, muscled frame, and it wrapped around me like a cocoon as a car sped past blasting music and leaking laughter out of its half-open windows.

Rhys's heartbeat thumped against my shoulder blades, and we stayed frozen in the alleyway long after the music faded and the only sound left was our heavy breathing.

"Mr. Larsen," I said quietly. "I think we're okay."

He didn't move. I was trapped between him and the brick, two immovable walls shielding me from the world. He'd braced one hand protectively against the wall next to my head, and he stood so close I could feel every sculpted ridge and contour of his body against mine.

Another long beat passed before Rhys re-holstered his gun and turned his head to look at me.

"You sure you're okay?" His voice was deep and gruff, and his eyes searched me for injuries even though nothing had happened to me.

"Yes. The car took a turn too fast. That's all." I let out a nervous laugh, my skin too hot for comfort beneath his fierce perusal. "I was more startled by you throwing me into the alley."

"That's why we should've driven." He stepped back, taking his heat with him, and cool air rushed to fill the void. I shivered, wishing I'd worn a thicker sweater. It was suddenly too cold. "You're too open and unprotected walking around like this. That could've been a drive-by."

I almost laughed at the thought. "I don't think so. Cats will fly before there's a drive-by in Hazelburg." It was one of the safest towns in the country, and most of the students didn't even own cars.

Rhys didn't look impressed by my analogy. "How many times do I have to tell you? It only takes once. No more walking to and from the shelter from now on."

"It was literally nothing. You're overreacting," I said, my annoyance returning full force.

His expression turned to granite. "It is my job to think of everything that could go wrong. If you don't like it, fire me. Until then, do