

35. 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.

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RHYS

AS EXPECTED, PRINCE NIKOLAI AND SABRINA'S WEDDING WAS A MAD-house. Half the city's roads were closed, helicopters buzzed overhead capturing aerial footage of the procession, and thousands of people crowded the streets, eager for a glimpse of the fairytale unfolding in real life. Press flew in from all over the world, breathlessly covering every detail from the length of Sabrina's wedding dress train to the star-studded guest list. The only reporters allowed inside the actual ceremony were those from Eldorra's national newspaper and broadcaster, who'd received exclusive first coverage rights, but that didn't stop the others from fighting for the best view outside the church.

Bridget spent the day running around doing whatever bridesmaids did. While they got ready in the bridal suite, I kept watch in the hall with Sabrina's bodyguard Joseph, who was also an American contractor since Nikolai had given up his rights to the Royal Guard when he abdicated.

While Joseph rambled on about the exploits of his previous client—unprofessional as hell, but I wasn't the man's boss—I monitored the surroundings. There was all sorts of potential for a big day like today to go wrong.

Luckily, all seemed quiet, and before long, the door opened and Sabrina stepped out, beaming in her fancy white gown and veil. The bridesmaids filed out after her, with Bridget rounding up the rear. She wore the same pale green dress as the other bridesmaids, but she glowed in a way no one else could. My eyes lingered on the shadow of her cleavage and the way the dress hugged her hips before I dragged them up to her face, where my breath got stuck in my throat.

Half the time, I couldn't believe she was real.

Bridget flashed me a secretive smile as she passed by, her gaze sweeping over my suit and tie with appreciation. "You clean up nice, Mr. Larsen," she murmured.

"So do you." I fell into step behind her and lowered my voice until it was barely audible. "Can't wait to tear that dress off you later, princess."

She didn't respond, but I saw enough of her profile to spot the rosy glow on her cheeks.

I grinned, but my good mood didn't last long, because when we entered the wedding hall, the first person I saw was Steffan fucking

Holstein sitting in one of the front pews. Shiny shoes, hair coiffed, and eyes fixed on Bridget.

I was convinced he was fucking the woman we saw him with at the hotel, but if he didn't stop looking at Bridget like that, I was going to rip his tongue out and choke him to death with it.

I forced myself to focus on the ceremony and not the violent thoughts swarming through my head. It hadn't been included in Elin's instructions, but I assumed murdering a high-ranking guest in the middle of a royal wedding was frowned upon.

Bridget took her place at the altar while I remained in the side shadows, drinking her in. She stood on the side facing me, and as Nikolai and Sabrina recited their vows, she caught my eye and gave me another one of her little smiles, the kind so subtle one would miss it unless they were attuned to her every micro expression. My shoulders relaxed, and my mouth tipped up in its own ghost of a smile.

A moment just for us, stolen beneath the noses of hundreds of people in Athenberg's grandest church.

After the ceremony ended, everyone drove to the palace's ballroom for the grand first reception. The second, more intimate evening reception took place at Tolose House, Nikolai and Sabrina's new residence, which was located only a ten-minute walk from the palace. Only two hundred of the family's closest friends and relatives received invites, no press allowed.

It was where the guests really let loose...and where I had to watch Bridget and Steffan dance together. One of his hands rested on her lower back, and she smiled at something he said.

Jealousy clawed at me, sharp and ruthless.

"They make a nice-looking couple," Joseph said, following my gaze. "The princess and the duke. Fairytale shit." He shook his head and chuckled. "Too bad she'd never go for an average Joe like you or me, huh? I would fuck—"

"Be careful what you say next." Lethal quiet razored my words.

"Or it'll be the last thing you say."

Steffan may be untouchable, but Joseph? I could tear him apart and use his bones to pick my teeth.

He must've known it too, because he fell silent and moved an inch away from me. "It was a joke," he muttered. "Take your job a bit too seriously, don't you?"

"Show some respect. That's the crown princess." And you're not worthy of scraping the dirt off her shoes.

How the hell had Sabrina ended up with Joseph as her bodyguard? The man had the social tact of a brick, and that was coming from me, someone who couldn't—and wouldn't—kiss ass if someone glued my lips to one.

Joseph was smart enough not to talk again. He stood a few feet away with a surly expression, but I didn't give a crap if he was offended. I had other things to worry about.

The song changed, but Steffan and Bridget remained on the dance floor. I knew she was staying out of social obligation, but it didn't suck any less to see them together, especially since Joseph was right. They did make a well-matched couple. Bridget, angelic and regal. Steffan, clean-cut and debonair in his fancy tuxedo.

Then there was me, tattooed and scarred, haunted by the things I'd done and the blood on my hands.

By all accounts, Steffan was the better, and easier, option for Bridget. Her grandfather, the palace, the press...they were all salivating for a Princess and the Duke love story.

I didn't give a flying fuck.

Bridget was mine.

She wasn't mine to take, but I was taking her anyway. Her laughs, her fears, her joy and her pain. Every inch of her body and beat of her heart. All mine.

And I'd had enough of watching her in another man's arms.

I left my post and stalked across the dance floor, ignoring Joseph's noise of protest. I was breaking every rule of protocol, but it was late and most guests were already too drunk to pay attention to me. I was an employee, beneath most of their notice, and in that instance, it worked in my favor.

"Your Highness." A dark edge bled through my otherwise even voice. "Sorry to interrupt, but Jules called. There's an emergency."

I was holding Bridget's phone while she danced, so the excuse made sense.

Alarm crossed her face. "Oh, no. It must be serious. She never calls for emergencies." She glanced at Steffan. "Would you mind terribly if I—"

"Of course not," he said. There was no trace of the awkward, uncomfortable Steffan from the hotel. "I understand. Please, take the call. I'll be here."

I bet you will. Maybe I could bribe a server to slip something into his drink. Not enough to kill him, but enough to incapacitate him for the rest of the night.

I handed Bridget her phone to keep up the ruse as we exited the reception room, but I said, "Jules didn't call."

"What?" Her brow knit in confusion. "Then why did you—"

"He was getting too close." I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw hurt.

A beat passed before Bridget's face cleared. She glanced around before whispering, "You know I had to dance with him."

"You danced with him twice."

"Rhys, he's technically my date."

It was the wrong thing to say, and judging by the way Bridget winced, she knew it.

I stopped in front of what I knew was the library from my pre-wedding advance work. "Get in," I said curtly.

A hard swallow disturbed the delicate lines of Bridget's throat, but she obeyed without argument.

I followed her inside and locked the door behind us with a soft click. The room wasn't fully furnished yet, and it was empty save for a rug, a table, and a large mirror. The lights were off, but there was enough moonlight streaming through the curtains for me to spot Bridget's wary expression.