

## 4. Rhys/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.

4

RHYS/BRIDGET

RHYS

Bridget and I arrived in Athenberg, Eldorra's capital, four days after my no-more-walking decree opened a second front in our on-going cold war. The plane ride had been chillier than a winter dip in a Russian river, but I didn't care.

I didn't need her to like me to do my job.

I scanned the city's near-empty National Cemetery, listening to the eerie howl of the wind whistle through the bare trees. A deep chill swept through the cemetery, burrowing past my layers of clothing and sinking deep into my bones.

Today was the first semi-free day on Bridget's schedule since we landed, and she'd shocked the hell out of me when she insisted on spending it at the cemetery.

When I saw why, though, I understood.

I maintained a respectful distance from where she kneeled before two tombstones, but I was still close enough to see the names engraved on them.

Josefine von Ascheberg. Frederik von Ascheberg.

Her parents.

I'd been ten when Crown Princess Josefine died during childbirth. I remembered seeing photos of the late princess splashed across magazines and TV screens for weeks. Prince Frederik had died a few years later in a car crash.

Bridget and I weren't friends. Hell, we weren't even friendly most of the time. That didn't stop the strange tug at my heart when I saw the sadness on her face as she murmured something to her parents' graves.

Bridget brushed a strand of hair out of her face, her sad expression melting into a small smile as she said something else. I rarely gave a damn what people did and said in their personal lives, but I almost wished I were close enough to hear what made her smile.

My phone pinged, and I welcomed the distraction from my unsettling thoughts until I saw the message.

Christian: I can get you the name in less than ten minutes.

Me: No. Drop it.

Another message popped up, but I pocketed my phone without reading it.

Irritation spiked through me.

Christian was a persistent bastard who reveled in digging into

the skeletons of other people's pasts. He'd been bugging me since he found out I was spending the holidays in Eldorra—he knew my hang-ups about the country—and if he weren't my boss and the closest thing I had to a friend, his face would've met my fist by now. I told him I didn't want the name, and I meant it. I'd survived thirty-one years without knowing. I could survive thirty-one more, or however long it took before I kicked the bucket.

I returned my attention to Bridget just as a twig snapped nearby, followed by the soft click of a camera shutter.

My head jerked up, and a low growl rumbled from my throat when I spotted a telltale pouf of blond hair peeking from the top of a nearby tombstone.

Fucking paparazzi.

The asshole squeaked and tried to flee when he realized he'd been caught, but I stormed over and grabbed the back of his jacket before he could take more than a few steps.

I saw Bridget stand up out of the corner of my eye, her expression concerned.

"Give me your camera," I said, my calm voice belying my anger. Paparazzi were an inescapable evil when guarding high-profile people, but there was a difference between snapping photos of someone eating and shopping versus snapping photos of them in a private moment.

Bridget was visiting her parents' graves, for fuck's sake, and this piece of shit had the nerve to intrude.

"No way," the paparazzo blustered. "This is a free country, and Princess Bridget is a public figure. I can—"

I didn't wait for him to finish his sentence before I yanked the camera from his hand, dropped it on the ground, and smashed it into smithereens with my boot.

I didn't like asking twice.

He howled in protest. "That was a five-thousand-dollar camera!"

"Consider yourself lucky that's all that got broken." I released his jacket and straightened it for him, the movement more a threat than a courtesy. "You have five seconds to get out of my sight before that changes."

The paparazzo was indignant, but he wasn't stupid. Two seconds later, he'd disappeared through the trees, leaving the pieces of his now useless camera behind. A minute after that, I heard an engine turn over and a car peel out of the parking lot.

"I recognize him. He's from the National Express." Bridget came up beside me, looking not at all surprised by the turn of events. "The trashiest of the tabloids. They'll probably run a story about me joining a Satanic ring or something after what you did to his camera." I snorted. "He deserved it. I can't stand people who don't respect others' privacy."

A small smile flitted across her face, the first she'd given me in days, and the earlier chill abated. "He's paparazzi. It's his job to invade others' privacy."

"Not when people are at the fucking cemetery."

"I'm used to it. Unless I'm in the palace, there's always a chance what I do will end up in the papers." Bridget sounded resigned.

"Thank you for taking care of that, even if your method was more...

aggressive than I would've advised." A hint of sadness remained in her eyes, and I felt that strange tug in my chest again. Maybe it was because I related to the source of her sadness—the feeling I was all alone in the world, without the two people who were supposed to love me most by my side.

I'd never had that parental love, so despite the hole it left, I didn't understand what I was missing. Bridget had experienced it, at least on her father's side, so I imagined the loss was even greater for her. You're not here to relate to her, asshole. You're here to guard her. That's it. No matter how beautiful or sad she looked, or how much I wanted to erase the melancholy cloaking her.

It wasn't my job to make her feel better.

I stepped back. "You ready? We can stay longer if you want, but you have an event in an hour."

"No, I'm ready. I just wanted to wish my parents a Merry Christmas and catch them up on my life." Bridget tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, looking self-conscious. "It sounds silly, but it's tradition, and I feel like they're listening..." She trailed off. "Like I said, it's silly."

"It's not silly." A tightness formed in my chest and spread until it choked me with memories best left forgotten. "I do the same with my old military buddies." The ones buried in the D.C. area, anyway, though I tried to make it out to the other places when I could.

I was the reason they were dead. The least I could do was pay my respects.

"Do you stay in touch with your friends from the Navy?" Bridget asked as we walked toward the exit.

I kept an eye out for any more paparazzi or ne'er-do-wells, but there was no one else around except for us and ghosts from the past.

"A couple. Not as often as I'd like."

My unit had been my family, but after what happened, it became too hard for the survivors to keep in touch. We reminded each other too much of what we'd lost.

The only person I kept in regular touch with was my old commander from my early days in the Navy.

"What made you leave?" Bridget tucked her hands deeper into her coat pockets, and I resisted the urge to draw her closer so I could share some of my body heat. It was damn cold, and her coat didn't look thick enough to protect her from the wind.

"It got too much. The deployments, the uncertainty, the funerals. Watching the men I served with die right in front of me." The tightness squeezed, and I forced myself to breathe through it before continuing. "It fucked me up, and if I hadn't left when I did..." I would've lost what was left of myself. I shook my head. "It's the same story as a lot of vets. I'm no one special."

We reached the car, but when I opened the door for Bridget to get in, she rested her hand on my arm instead.

I stiffened, her touch burning through my clothes more effectively than any chill or flame.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Both for what happened and for prying."

"I got out years ago. If I didn't want to talk about it, I wouldn't.

It's not a big deal." I pulled my arm away and opened the car door wider, but the imprint of her touch lingered. "I don't regret my time

in the Navy. The guys in my unit were like brothers to me, the closest I ever had to a real family, and I wouldn't give that up for the world. But the frontline stuff? Yeah, I was over that shit."

I'd never shared that with anyone before. Then again, I'd had no one to share it with except my old therapist, and I'd had enough issues to work through with her without delving into why I left the military.

"Yet you chose to be a bodyguard after," Bridget noted. "Not exactly a danger-free occupation."

"I have the skills to be a good bodyguard." A lot of former SEALs went the private security route, and Christian may have been a bastard, but he was a persuasive bastard. He'd convinced me to sign on the dotted line less than a day after I returned to U.S. soil. "Don't think I've ever been in as much danger as since you became my client, though."

Her brow scrunched in confusion, and I almost smiled.

Almost.

"My risk of rupturing an artery increased tenfold."

Bridget's confusion cleared, replaced with an odd combination of delight and exasperation. "Glad to see you found your sense of humor, Mr. Larsen. It's a Christmas miracle."

A chuckle escaped my throat, the sound so foreign I barely recognized it as my own, and something in my soul stirred, nudged awake by the reminder other things existed besides the darkness that had haunted me for so long.

Surprise flared in Bridget's eyes before she offered a tentative smile in return, and the something lifted its head at the further encouragement.

I shoved it back down.

A laugh was fine. Anything else was not.

"Let's go." I wiped the smile off my face. "Or we'll be late."

**BRIDGET**

If I could sum up my relationship with Rhys with one song, it would be Katy Perry's "Hot N Cold." One minute, we were fighting and giving each other the cold shoulder. The next, we were laughing and bonding over jokes.

Okay, bonding was too strong a word for what had happened in the cemetery parking lot. Acting like normal human beings toward each other was more accurate. And Rhys hadn't so much laughed as slipped up with a half chuckle, but maybe that constituted a laugh in his world. I couldn't picture him throwing his head back with mirth any more than I could picture The Rock dancing ballet.

But if there was one thing I'd learned over the past month, it was I needed to take advantage of the ups in our relationship when I could. So, after my planned "surprise" visit to a local high school, where I gave a speech on the importance of kindness and mental health, I brought up a topic I'd been avoiding for the past week.

"I usually stay in Eldorra longer for the holidays, but I'm glad we're heading back to campus earlier this year," I said casually as we settled into our seats at a restaurant by the school.

No answer.

Just when I thought Rhys would ignore the bait, he said, "Spit it out, princess. What do you want?"

There goes the grumpiness again.

A small frown touched my face. I felt like a kid asking permission from a parent when I talked to him, which was ridiculous, but he radiated such authority I sometimes forgot he was my employee and not the other way around.

Well, technically, he was a contractor with the palace, but that was a minor distinction.

“My favorite band is coming to D.C. in January. Ava and I already bought tickets to see them,” I said.

“Band name and location.”

I told him.

“I’ll check it out and let you know.” Rhys snapped his menu closed when our server approached. “Burger, medium rare, please. Thank you.”

I placed my order and waited for the server to leave before repeating in a tight voice, “I already bought the tickets.” Translation: I’m going whether or not you like it.

“Refundable ones, I hope.” His sharp gaze glided through the restaurant, not missing a single detail about the patrons or room layout.

Aaaand there went the down in our relationship, just like clockwork.

“Your job isn’t to run my life. Stop acting like an overprotective parent.” My frustration mounted. I would rather hate him all the time than have my emotions swing back and forth like a broken gauge. It was exhausting. “How are you still employed? I’m surprised your previous clients haven’t complained to your company about your...your...”

Rhys arched an eyebrow while I fumbled for the right words.

“Your overbearing tendencies,” I finished lamely. Dammit. I needed a bigger arsenal of better insults.

“Because I’m the best. They know it, and so do you,” he said arrogantly. He leaned forward, his eyes darkening. “You think I want to parent you? I don’t. If I wanted kids, I’d get myself an office job and shack up in some cookie-cutter suburban home with a picket fence and a dog. I’m in this field of work to save lives, princess. I’ve taken plenty of ‘em, and now—” He stopped abruptly, but his words lingered in the air.

I flashed back to his words from the parking lot. It got too much.

The deployments, the uncertainty, the funerals. Watching men I considered brothers die right in front of me.

Rhys hadn’t gone into detail about what happened when he was in the military, but he didn’t need to. I could only imagine.

Guilt and sympathy blossomed in my stomach and curled around my heart.

That was why I vacillated so much in my feelings toward him. I disliked Rhys’s attitude and actions, but I didn’t dislike him, because I understood why he did what he did.

It was a conundrum, and unfortunately, I didn’t see a way out of it.

“It only takes one slipup,” Rhys finished. “One second of distraction, and you could walk into a minefield and get blown to hell. One lapse of judgment, and you could end up with a bullet in your

head.” He leaned back, shutters falling over those gunmetal eyes.  
“So no, I don’t give a fuck if you already bought tickets. I’m still