

## 5. 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.

5

RHYS

I'LL BE FINE, MY ASS.

Bridget's words, spoken with such confidence a month ago, had come back to bite her, and by extension me, in the proverbial behind. After looking into the concert venue, I'd expressly told her not to attend the performance, which took place in some sketchy warehouse that should've been shut down for breaking a thousand and one safety code regulations. The building was one strong gust of wind away from collapsing.

Yet Bridget had gone against my orders and snuck out in the middle of the night to attend the damn concert, only to get kidnapped afterward.

That was right. Fucking kidnapped by a mercenary who'd grabbed her and Ava off the street.

It wasn't even the concert that pissed me off. If Bridget had insisted on going, I would've gone with her, because she was the client. I couldn't physically restrain her from doing what she wanted.

No, I was pissed about the fact she'd gone behind my back and the whole kidnapping incident could've been avoided had she been honest with me.

I glanced in the rearview mirror to reassure myself Bridget was still there. As furious as I was, the sight of her in the backseat, bruised but safe, eased some of the icy terror that had gripped me since I woke up and realized she was gone.

Luckily, I'd had the foresight to plant a secret tracking chip in her phone a few weeks earlier, and it'd led me to Philadelphia, where I found her and Ava tied up and at the mercy of a gunman for hire. The whole situation resulted from a long, sordid saga involving Alex Volkov, Alex's psycho uncle who'd kidnapped Ava as leverage against his nephew, and years of secrets and revenge.

I honestly didn't give a shit about the drama. All I'd cared about was getting Bridget out of there safely, and I had, if only so I could tear her apart with my own hands.

"Ava's staying with us tonight." Bridget smoothed a hand over her friend's hair, her brow knit in a worried frown. "I don't want her to be alone."

Ava lay curled up in her lap, her sobs softer than before but still frequent enough to make me wince. I had no clue what to do around crying people, especially ones whose now ex-boyfriend confessed to lying to her during their entire relationship to get revenge on the

man he'd thought had murdered his family. And that was only the CliffsNotes version of what had happened.

It was fucked-up shit, but Alex Volkov had always been a little fucked up in an I might murder you if I'm in a bad mood kind of way. At least everyone was alive...except for his uncle and the gunman.

"Fine." The word ricocheted through the car like a bullet.

Bridget flinched, and a small kernel of guilt took root in my stomach. It wasn't enough to drown out my anger, but it was enough to make me feel like an asshole as I pulled up in front of her house. She'd been through hell, and I should let her sleep off the events of the past twenty-hours first before I laid into her.

Keyword: should. But I'd never cared much about what I should do. What mattered was what I needed to do, and I needed Bridget to understand she couldn't fuck around with my rules. They were there to protect her, dammit, and if anything happened to her...

Fresh terror stabbed at me.

We entered the house, and I waited until Ava retreated to Bridget's room before I jerked my head to my right. "Kitchen. Now."

Bridget wrapped her arms around her chest. Another wave of anger crashed over me at the sight of the raw, reddened skin where the ropes had dug into her wrists.

If the mercenary weren't already dead, I'd carve him up myself, and I would take a longer, sweeter time than Alex had.

She walked into the kitchen and busied herself making a cup of tea, avoiding my gaze the entire time.

"Everything worked out," she said in a small voice. "I'm okay." A vein pulsed in my temple. "You're okay," I repeated. It came out as a snarl.

We stood five feet from each other. Me in the doorway, my fists clenched at my sides; Bridget by the sink, her hands wrapped around her mug and her eyes huge in her pale face. Her usual cool, regal demeanor had disappeared, stripped bare by the events of the past twenty-four hours, and I detected a slight tremble in her shoulders.

"I made a mistake, but—"

"A mistake?" Fire scorched my veins, searing me from the inside out. "A mistake is showing up at the wrong class. A mistake is forgetting to lock the door when you leave the house. It's not getting kidnapped and almost killed by a psycho because you snuck out like a high schooler breaking curfew. I'd say that was more than a mistake."

My voice rose with each word until I was yelling. I'd never lost my cool with a client before, but Bridget had an uncanny ability to wring every emotion out of me, good and bad.

"It's not like I wanted to get kidnapped." Some of the fire returned to Bridget's eyes. "The concert was perfectly safe, despite what you said. It was only after..." She took a deep breath. "They weren't targeting me. They targeted Ava, and I happened to be with her. It could've happened at any time."

The vein in my temple pulsed harder. "No. It couldn't have happened anytime." I stalked toward her, my mouth flattening with grim pleasure when I saw her eyes widen in fear. Good. She should fear me, because I was about to rain hell all over her naive little parade. "Do you want to know why?"

Bridget wisely chose not to answer. For every step I took forward, she took one back until her back pressed against the wall, her white-knuckled hands strangling her mug.

“Because I would’ve been there,” I hissed. “I don’t give a flying fuck whether you, Ava, or fucking Big Bird was the target. If I’d been there, I would’ve neutralized the asshole before he ever laid a hand on you.” It wasn’t arrogance; it was the truth. There was a reason I was Harper Security’s most in-demand agent, and it wasn’t my personality. “What did I tell you when we first met?”

Bridget didn’t respond.

“What. Did. I. Tell. You?” I planted my forearm on the wall above her head and my hand by the side of her face, effectively caging her in. We were so close I could smell her perfume—something subtle and intoxicating, like fresh flowers on a summer day—and see the dark ring around her pupils. I’d never seen eyes like that before, so deep and blue it was like staring straight into the depths of the ocean. They were the kind of eyes that lured you in and sucked you under before you knew what was happening.

The fact I noticed those stupid things in the middle of the worst day of my career only pissed me off more.

“Do what you say, when you say it.” A hint of defiance tempered her whisper.

“That’s right. You didn’t, and you almost died.” If I hadn’t gotten there when I had... My blood iced over. Alex had been there, but that crazy fucker was as liable to shoot Bridget as he was to save her. “Do you know what could’ve—” I stopped mid-sentence. I was yelling again. I clenched my jaw and forced myself to take a deep breath. “I know you think I’m overbearing and paranoid, but I don’t say ‘no’ because I want to torture you, princess. I want to protect you, and if you keep defying me at every turn, you’re gonna get yourself and those around you killed. Is that what you want?”

“No.” The defiance was still there, but I didn’t miss the suspicious sheen in Bridget’s eyes or the slight wobble in her chin. Tough love worked, and she needed a big heap of it.

Still, I softened the harsh edge of my voice when I spoke next.

“You need to trust me. Stop fighting me on everything, and for fuck’s sake, don’t sneak behind my back. Talk to me first next time.”

“Every time I try to talk to you, we end up fighting and the conversation goes nowhere.” Bridget stared at me, daring me to say otherwise. I didn’t. I was used to doing things my way, and my way was usually right. “Trust is a two-way street. You placed a secret chip in my phone—”

“It’s a good thing I did, or you’d probably be dead right now,” I growled.

She pressed her lips together, and my gaze inadvertently dropped to her mouth. Lush, pink, and capable of more sass than one would expect from a prim and proper princess. Except there was nothing prim and proper about what lay beneath her surface...or about the thoughts running through my mind.

It was the worst possible time for me to be thinking about anything remotely related to sex. She’d gotten kidnapped less than forty-eight hours ago, for Christ’s sake. But adrenaline and arousal had always gone hand in hand for me, and if I were honest, there

were very few instances when she didn't turn me on. Even when I was pissed at her, I wanted her.

My cock thickened, and my hands clenched into fists once more. I'd guarded the most beautiful women on the planet—movie stars, supermodels, heiresses, many of whom had made it clear they were more than willing to submit to my orders both inside and outside the bedroom—but I'd never taken them up on their offers. Never been tempted to.

Figured the one woman who'd rather see me burn than touch me was the one I ended up lusty after.

"You said I need to trust you. How can I do that if you don't trust me?" Bridget slipped into her negotiation voice, which I recognized from the countless public events I'd accompanied her to.

The voice irked me beyond belief. I'd much rather her snap at me than treat me like some damn stranger she needed to get off her back.

"I propose a compromise. Take out the chip, and I'll do what you say, when you say it, as long as it's security-related." Bridget's gaze burned into mine. "I promise."

Un-freaking-believable. She was in the wrong here, and she was negotiating with me.

And I was thinking of saying yes.

"Why should I believe you?" My breath came out in a harsh exhale, and a small shiver rolled through her body. I could see her nipples clearly through the thin black silk of her dress. Hard and pebbled, begging for my touch. Maybe it was because of the chill—the one thick walls and double-glazed windows couldn't quite keep out—but judging by Bridget's flushed cheeks, I wasn't the only one aware of the charged air between us.

My nostrils flared. I was still hard as a rock, and I loathed it.

Loathed her, for tempting me this way. Loathed myself, for not having more self-control when it came to her.

"I don't break my promises, Mr. Larsen." Bridget insisted on calling me by my last name the same way I insisted on calling her princess. It irritated us both, but neither of us would back down first. Story of our entire relationship. "Do we have a deal?"

My jaw ticked in rhythm with my pulse. One. Two. Three.

My first instinct was to say hell no. The chip was the only reason she was alive right now. But this was the closest we'd ever gotten to a truce, and while I had no problem playing the bad cop, I would much rather work with a cooperative Bridget than breathe down her neck every day.

"Fine," I ground out. "We start with a trial period. Four months. You keep up your end of the bargain, and I back off. If you don't, I will handcuff you to me until you can't even piss in peace. Understand?"

Her lips thinned further, but she didn't argue. "A four-month trial. Fine." She hesitated, then added, "One more thing..."

Disbelief filled my veins. "You've got to be kidding me."

Red stained her cheeks. "You can't tell anyone what happened. Especially not the palace."

"You're asking me to lie." I was required to write up every incident with a client and submit it to Christian. The last guy who

hadn't...let's just say he regretted his decision. Big time.

"Not lie, omit," Bridget corrected me. "Think about it. If my grandfather finds out what happened, you'll be fired, and your reputation will be trashed."

Appealing to my ego. Nice try, princess.

"My reputation can handle it." I raised an eyebrow. "I thought you'd be happy to get rid of me."

The red on her cheeks deepened. "You know what they say. Better the devil you know..."

"Hmm." Aside from the occasional civil interaction, we couldn't stand each other, my hard cock and her hard nipples notwithstanding. Lust was one thing, but if we kept this up, we'd kill each other. Not to mention, I would be breaking all sorts of rules if I kept what happened in Philadelphia secret. I should report it to Christian and let him deal with the palace. He was better at that diplomatic crap, anyway.

But the thought of walking away from Bridget and never seeing her again caused a strange twinge of discomfort. As infuriating as she was, she was one of the more interesting clients I'd had. Smarter, kinder, less spoiled and entitled.

"I don't suppose your request has anything to do with the fact you'll never breathe a second of free air again once the king finds out