

## 8. Bridget/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.

8

BRIDGET/RHYS

BRIDGET

One second, I was standing. The next, I was on the ground, my cheek pressed to the grass while Rhys shielded my body with his, and screams rang out through the park.

It all happened so quickly it took my brain several beats to catch up with my pounding pulse.

Dinner. Park. Gunshots. Screams.

Individual words that made sense on their own, but I couldn't string them together into a coherent thought.

There was another gunshot, followed by more screams.

Above me, Rhys let out a curse so low and harsh I felt it more than I heard it.

"On the count of three, we're running for the tree cover." His steady voice eased some of my nerves. "Got it?"

I nodded. My dinner threatened to make a reappearance, but I forced myself to focus. I couldn't freak out, not when we were in full view of the shooter.

I saw him now. It was so dark I couldn't make out many details except for his hair—longish and curly on top—and his clothes. Sweatshirt, jeans, sneakers. He looked like any of the dozens of guys in my classes at Thayer, and that made him all the more terrifying.

He had his back to us, looking down at something, someone—a victim—but he could turn around any second.

Rhys shifted so I could push myself onto my hands and knees, keeping low as I did so. He'd drawn his gun, and the grouchy but thoughtful man from dinner had disappeared, replaced by a stone-cold soldier.

Focused. Determined. Lethal.

For the first time, I glimpsed the man he'd been in the military, and a shiver snaked down my spine. I pitied anyone who had to face him on the battlefield.

Rhys counted down in the same calm voice. "One, two...three."

I didn't think. I ran.

Another gunshot fired behind us, and I flinched and stumbled over a loose rock. Rhys grabbed my arms with firm hands, his body still shielding me from behind, and guided me to the thicket of trees at the edge of the park. We couldn't reach the exit without passing directly by the shooter, where there was no cover at all, so we would have to wait until the police arrived.

They had to be here soon, right? One of the other people in the park must've called them by now.

Rhys pushed me down and behind a large tree.

"Wait here and do not move until I give the okay," he ordered.

"Most of all, don't let anyone see you."

My heart rate spiked. "Where are you going?"

"Someone has to stop him."

A cold sweat broke out over my body. He couldn't possibly be saying what I thought he was saying.

"It doesn't have to be you. The police—"

"It'll be too late by the time they get here." Rhys looked grimmer than I'd ever seen him. "Don't. Move."

And he was gone.

I watched in horror as Rhys crossed the wide-open expanse of grass toward the shooter, who had his gun aimed at someone on the ground. A bench blocked my view of who the victim was, but when I crouched lower, I could see beneath the bench, and my horror doubled.

It wasn't one person. It was two. A man and, judging by the size of the person next to him, a child.

Now I knew why Rhys had that expression on his face before he left.

Who would target a child?

I pressed my fist to my mouth, fighting the urge to throw up.

Less than an hour ago, I'd been teasing Rhys over bread and wine and thinking of all the things I still needed to pack before we left for New York. Now, I was hiding behind a tree in a random park, watching my bodyguard run toward possible death.

Rhys was an experienced soldier and guard, but he was still human, and humans died. One minute, they were there. The next, they were gone, leaving behind nothing more than an empty, lifeless shell of the person they used to be.

"Sweetheart, I'm afraid I have bad news." My grandfather's eyes looked bloodshot, and I clutched my stuffed giraffe to my chest, fear spiraling through my body. My grandfather never cried. "It's your father. There's been an accident."

I blinked away the memory in time to see the man on the ground turn his head a fraction of an inch. He'd spotted Rhys sneaking up behind the shooter.

Unfortunately, the small motion was enough to tip off the gunman, who spun around and fired a third shot at the same time Rhys discharged his gun.

A cry left my mouth.

Rhys. Shot. Rhys. Shot.

The words cycled through my brain like the world's most horrifying mantra.

The shooter crumpled to the ground. Rhys staggered, but he remained standing.

In the distance, police sirens wailed.

The entire scene, from the first shot to now, had played out in less than ten minutes, but terror had a way of stretching time out until each second contained an eternity.

Dinner felt like years ago. Graduation might as well have hap-

pened in another lifetime.

Instinct propelled me to my feet, and I ran toward Rhys, my heart in my throat. Please be okay.

When I reached him, he'd disarmed the gunman, who lay bleeding and moaning on the ground. A few feet away, the man the shooter had been targeting also lay bleeding, his face pale beneath the moonlight. The child, a boy who looked about seven or eight, knelt by his side, his eyes huge and terrified as he stared at me and Rhys.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rhys bit out when he saw me.

I scanned him frantically for injuries, but he was standing and talking and grumpy as ever, so he couldn't be too hurt.

The boy, on the other hand, needed reassuring.

I ignored Rhys's question for now and crouched until I was eye level with the boy.

"It's okay," I said gently. I didn't move any closer, not wanting to spook him further. "We won't hurt you."

He clutched what I assumed was his father's arm tighter. "Is my dad going to die?" he asked in a small voice.

A clog of emotion formed in my throat. He was around my age when my dad died, and—

Stop. This isn't about you. Focus on the moment.

"The doctors will be here soon, and they'll fix him right up." I hoped. The man was fading in and out of consciousness, and blood oozed around him, staining the boy's sneakers.

Technically, the EMTs were coming, not doctors, but I wasn't about to explain the distinction to a traumatized kid. "Doctors" sounded more reassuring.

Rhys knelt next to me. "She's right. The doctors know what they're doing." He spoke in a soothing voice I'd never heard from him before, and something squeezed my chest. Hard. "We'll stay with you until they get here. How does that sound?"

The boy's lower lip wobbled, but he nodded. "Okay."

Before we could say anything else, a bright light shone on us, and a voice blared through the park.

"Police! Put your hands up!"

**RHYS**

Questions. Medical checkups. More questions, plus a few claps on the back for being a "hero."

The next hour tested my patience as nothing had before...except for the damned woman in front of me.

"I told you to stay put. It was a simple instruction, princess," I growled. The sight of her running toward me while the shooter was still out in the open had sent more panic crashing through me than having a gun pointed at my face.

It didn't matter that I'd disarmed the shooter. What if he had a second gun I'd missed?

Terror raked its claws down my spine.

I could handle getting shot. I couldn't handle Bridget getting hurt.

"You were shot, Mr. Larsen." She crossed her arms over her chest.

I sat in the back of an open ambulance while she stood before me, stubborn as ever. "You'd already neutralized the gunman, and I thought you were going to die."

Her voice wobbled at the end, and my anger dissipated.

Other than my Navy buddies, I couldn't remember the last time anyone really cared about whether I lived or died. But Bridget did, for some unknown reason, and it wasn't just because I was her bodyguard. I saw it in her eyes and heard it in the faint waver of her usually cool, crisp voice.

And I'd be damned if the knowledge didn't hit me harder than a bullet to the chest.

"I'm fine. Bullet grazed me, is all. Didn't even go under the skin." The EMTs had bandaged me up, and I'd be good as new in two or three weeks.

The shooter had been surprised and fired using instinct, not aim. A quick dodge and I'd escaped what would've been a much nastier wound to my shoulder.

The police had hauled him into medical custody. They were still investigating what happened, but from what I'd gathered, the shooter had deliberately targeted the kid's father. Something about a business deal gone wrong and bankruptcy. The shooter had been high as a kite, to the point where he hadn't cared about exacting his revenge in a park full of people.

Thankfully, he'd also been so high he kept rambling about how the kid's father had done him wrong instead of shooting to kill. The ambulances had taken the kid and his father away a while ago. The father had suffered heavy blood loss, but he'd stabilized and would pull through. The kid was okay too. Traumatized, but alive. I'd made it a point to check on him before they left.

Thank God.

"You were bleeding." Bridget brushed her fingers over the bandaged wound, her touch searing straight through the gauze into my bones.

I stiffened, and she froze. "Did that hurt?"

"No." Not in the way she'd meant anyway.

But the way she was looking at me, like she was afraid I might disappear if she blinked? It made my heart ache like she'd ripped off a piece of it and kept it for herself.

"Bet this wasn't the way you pictured your graduation night going." I rubbed a hand over my jaw, my mouth twisting into a grimace. "We should've gone straight home after dinner."

I'd used the lame excuse of walking off our food to justify the trip to the park, but in truth, I'd wanted to extend the night because when we woke up, we would go back to what we were. The princess and her bodyguard, a client and her contractor.

It was all we could be, but that hadn't stopped crazy thoughts from infiltrating my mind during dinner. Thoughts like how I could've stayed there with her all night, even though I normally hated answering questions about my life. Thoughts about whether Bridget tasted as sweet as she looked and how much I wanted to strip away her cool demeanor until I reached the fire underneath. Bask in its warmth, let it burn away the rest of the world until we were the only ones left.

Like I said, crazy thoughts. I'd shoved them aside the second they popped up, but they lingered in the back of my mind still, like the lyrics to a catchy song that wouldn't go away.

My grimace deepened.

Bridget shook her head. “No. It was a good night until...well, this.” She waved her hand around the park. “If we’d gone home, the kid and his dad might have died.”

“Maybe, but I fucked up.” It didn’t happen often, but I could admit it when it did. “My number one priority as a bodyguard is to protect you, not play savior. I should’ve gotten you out of here and left it at that, but...” A muscle rolled in my jaw.

Bridget waited patiently for me to finish. Even with her hair mussed and dirt smearing her dress from when I’d pushed her onto the ground, she could’ve passed for an angel in the fucked-up hell of my life. Blonde hair, ocean eyes, and a glow that had nothing to do with her outer beauty and everything to do with her inner one. She was too beautiful to be touched by any part of my ugly past, but something compelled me to continue.

“When I was in high school, I knew a kid.” The memories unfolded like a blood-stained film, and a familiar spear of guilt stabbed at my gut. “Not a friend, but the closest thing I had to one. We lived a few blocks away from each other, and we’d hang out at his house on the weekend.” I’d never invited Travis to my house. I hadn’t wanted him to see what it was like living there.

“One day, I went over and saw him getting mugged at gunpoint right in his front yard. His mom was at work, and it was a rough neighborhood, so those things happened. But Travis refused to hand over his watch. It’d been a gift from his old man, who died when he was young. The mugger didn’t take kindly to the refusal and shot him right there in broad daylight. No one, including me, did a damn thing about it. Our neighborhood had two rules if you wanted to survive: one, keep your mouth shut, and two, mind your own business.”

An acrid taste filled my mouth. I remembered the sight and sound of Travis’s body hitting the ground. The blood oozing from his chest, the surprise in his eyes...and the betrayal when he saw me standing there, watching him die. “I went home, threw up, and promised myself I would never be such a coward again.”

What’s your biggest regret? Inaction.

I’d joined the military to gain a purpose and family I’d never had. I became a bodyguard to absolve myself of sins I could never cleanse.

Lives saved in exchange for lives taken, directly or indirectly.

What’s your biggest fear? Failure.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Bridget said. “You were a kid too. There was nothing you could’ve done against an armed attacker. If you’d tried, you might have died too.”

There it was. Another hitch on the word died.

Bridget looked away, but not before I caught the suspicious sheen in her eyes.

I clenched and unclenched my fists.

Don’t do it. But I’d already fucked up multiple times tonight.

What was one more?

“Come here, princess.” I opened one arm. She stepped into it and buried her face in my non-injured shoulder. It was the most vulnerable we’d been in front of the other since we met, and it chipped away

at something inside me.

“It’s all right.” I patted her awkwardly on the arm. I was shit at comforting people. “It’s over. Everyone’s fine except for the shithead