

Twisted Games (2-Twisted)

Twisted Games by Ana Huang is a captivating, steamy romance that follows the intense, forbidden love story between a princess and her bodyguard. Filled with sizzling chemistry, emotional depth, and plenty of twists, this book explores themes of power, trust, and love against a backdrop of royal intrigue. Perfect for fans of contemporary romance with strong, complex characters and a thrilling plot.

Title Page

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TWISTED GAMES
TWISTED BOOK TWO

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Following a pivotal encounter with Rhys, Bridget ignites her bold strategy, aiming for transformative leadership over the realm of Eldorra, detaching from the philosophy of instilling fear as a means of rule. On a brisk Sunday, three days post her meeting with Rhys, she convenes an unscheduled press conference on the palace's verdant northern lawn, greeted by a mix of journalists and spectators eager for a royal sighting. Having briefed her U.S.-based comrades about her intentions, yet opting to conduct the press event post their departure to shield them from the ensuing storm, Bridget embarks on a solitary mission to voice her determinations and visions.

Addressing the assembly with an uncommonly informal tone, Bridget reveals her reflections on her journey and obligations as the country's future monarch. She acknowledges the speculation around her adequacy for the throne, attributing such doubts to her initial reaction to her brother, Prince Nikolai's abdication announcement. Bridget recounts her transformative experiences traveling across Eldorra, engaging with its citizens, and understanding their daily lives and anxieties, emphasizing her commitment to propel the nation forward while cherishing its traditions.

Highlighting the heart of her discourse, Bridget addresses the Royal Marriages Law and its obsolete constraints, subsequently admitting to her genuine relationship with Rhys Larsen, her former bodyguard. This confession disrupts the assembly into a state of animated chaos, amplifying Bridget's message's impact and its invitation for societal and legislative introspection.

Taking an astute question from Jas, a reporter from The Daily Tea, Bridget clarifies her stance on the antiquated Royal Marriages Law, urging for its reassessment and advocating for a balance between personal choices and royal duties. Articulating the essence of her speech, Bridget aims to sway public opinion and Parliament's stance through a compelling blend of ethical, logical, and emotional appeals, underlining her strategic acumen and deep-rooted love for Rhys Larsen, crystallizing her unwavering resolve to redefine monarchy in the contemporary era of Eldorra.

13. Bridget

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13

BRIDGET

THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WERE MISERABLE, NOT ONLY BECAUSE I WAS SICK and healing from my injuries, but because the lull in my public schedule gave me plenty of time to freak out about Nikolai's abdication.

I was going to be queen. Maybe not tomorrow or a month from now, but one day, and one day was far too soon.

I lifted my wineglass to my lips and stared up at the night sky. It was three weeks to the day since my conversation with Nikolai. My concussion had healed, and I'd long since recovered from my cold. I still had to be careful with my wrist, but otherwise, I was up and running again, which meant I had to attend meeting after meeting about how and when to announce the abdication, how to handle the fallout, plans for my permanent move back to Eldorra, and a million other things that made my head spin.

That morning, my family, Markus, and I agreed on an official announcement a month from now. Or rather, everyone else agreed, and I went along with it because I didn't have a choice.

One month. One more month of freedom, and that was it.

I was about to take another drink when the door to the rooftop creaked open. I straightened, my mouth falling open when I saw Rhys step outside. Judging by the way his eyebrows shot up, he was as surprised to see me as I was him.

"What are you doing here?" we asked at the same time.

I huffed out a small laugh. "Mr. Larsen, this is my house. I should be the only one asking that question."

"I didn't think anyone came out here." He took the seat next to me, and I tried not to notice how good he smelled, like soap and something indescribably Rhys. Clean, simple, masculine.

We were on the rooftop of one of the palace's north towers, which could only be accessed via the service hallway near the kitchen. Compared to the palace's actual, terraced rooftop garden, it was nothing, barely big enough for the chairs I'd bribed a staff member to help me bring up. But that was why I liked it. It was my secret haven, the place I escaped to when I needed to think and be away from prying eyes.

I drained the rest of my wine and reached for the bottle at my feet, only to realize it was empty. I rarely drank so much, but I needed something to ease the anxiety following me around like a black cloud these days.

"Just me. Most people don't know about this place," I said. "How did you find it?"

"I find everything." Rhys smirked when I scrunched my nose at his arrogance. "I have the palace blueprints, princess. I know every nook and cranny of this place. It's my—"

"Job," I finished. "I know. You don't have to keep saying it." He'd said the same thing in Dr. Hausen's office. I wasn't sure

why it annoyed me so much. Maybe because, for a second, I could've sworn his worry for me went beyond his professional obligations. And maybe, for a second, I could've sworn I wanted it to. I wanted him to care about me as me, not as his client.

Rhys's lips quirked before his gaze traveled to my forehead.

"How's the bruise?"

"Fading, thank the Lord." It was now a pale yellowish green. Still unsightly, but better than the glaring purple it used to be. "And it doesn't hurt so much anymore."

"Good." He brushed his fingers gently over the bruise, and my breath stuttered. Rhys never touched me unless he had to, but at that moment, he didn't have to. Which meant he wanted to. "You gotta be more careful, princess."

"You've said that already."

"I'll keep saying it until you get it in your head."

"Trust me. It's in my head. How can it not be when you keep nagging me?"

Despite my grumbles, I found a strange comfort in his nagging. In a world where everything else was changing, Rhys remained wonderfully, unrelentingly him, and I never wanted that to change. His hand lingered on my forehead for another moment before he dropped it and pulled away, and oxygen returned to my lungs.

"So." Rhys leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. He didn't look at me as he asked, "Who do you usually bring up here?"

"What?" I cocked my head, confused. I never brought anyone up here.

"Two chairs." He nodded at mine, then the one he was sitting in.

"Who's the second one for?" His tone was casual, but a tight current ran beneath it.

"No one. There are two chairs because..." I faltered. "I don't know. I guess I hoped I'd find someone I wanted to bring up here one day." I had silly, romantic notions of me and mystery guy sneaking up here to kiss and laugh and talk all night, but the chances of that were growing slimmer by the minute.

"Hmm." Rhys was silent for a second before he said, "You want me to leave?"

"What?" I sounded like a broken record.

Maybe the hit to my head had scrambled my brains because I'd never been this inarticulate.

"Seems like this is your secret spot. Didn't realize I was intruding when I came up here," he said gruffly.

Something warm cascaded through my stomach. "You're not intruding," I said. "Stay. Please. I could use the company."

"Okay."

And that was that.

I couldn't hold back a smile. I didn't think I would enjoy sharing this space with anyone else, but I liked having Rhys here with me. He didn't feel the need to fill the silence with unnecessary small talk, and his presence comforted me, even if he irritated me, too. When he was near, I was safe.

I stretched my legs out and accidentally knocked over the empty wine bottle, which rolled across the floor toward Rhys. I bent to pick it up at the same time he did, and our fingers brushed for a second.

No, not even a second. A millisecond. But it was enough to send electricity sizzling up my arm and down my spine.

I yanked my hand away, my skin hot, as he picked up the bottle and placed it on the other side of his chair, away from both our legs. Our brief touch felt indecent, like we were doing something we weren't supposed to do. Which was ridiculous. We hadn't even planned it. It was an accident.

You're overthinking.

The clouds shifted, unblocking part of the moon, and light spilled across the tower, illuminating part of Rhys's face. It appeared grimmer than it had a moment ago.

Even so, he was beautiful. Not in a perfect, Greek god sculpture kind of way, but in a pure, unabashedly masculine way. The dark stubble, the small scar slashing through his eyebrow, the gunmetal eyes...

My stomach did a slow roll as I struggled not to focus on how alone we were up here. We could do anything, and no one would know.

No one except us.

"Heard we're leaving next week," Rhys said. I might've imagined it, but I thought he sounded strained, like he, too, was fighting back something he couldn't quite control.

"Yes." I hoped my voice didn't come across as shaky as it did to my own ears. "My grandfather's condition is steady for now, and I need to wrap up my affairs in New York before I move back."

I realized my mistake before the words fully left my mouth.

I hadn't told Rhys about Nikolai's abdication yet, which meant he didn't know about my plans to move back to Athenberg.

Permanently.

Rhys stilled. "Move back?" He sounded calm, but the storm brewing in his eyes was anything but. "Here?"

I swallowed hard. "Yes."

"You didn't mention that, princess." Still calm, still dangerous, like the eye of a hurricane. "Seems like an important thing for me to know."

"It's not finalized, but that's the plan. I...want to be closer to my grandfather." That was partly true. He'd recovered nicely from his hospital visit and he had people monitoring him around the clock, but I still worried about him and wanted to be close by should anything happen. However, as crown princess, I was also required to return to Athenberg for my queen training. I was already behind by decades.

Rhys's nostrils flared. "When were you planning to tell me this?"

"Soon," I whispered.

The palace was keeping Nikolai's abdication under tight wraps, and I wasn't supposed to talk about it until closer to the official announcement. I could've told Rhys I was moving back to Eldorra earlier using the excuse I just gave him, but I'd wanted to pretend everything was normal for a while longer.

It was stupid, but my mind had been all over the place lately, and I couldn't make sense of my own actions.

Something flickered in Rhys's eyes. If I didn't know better, I would think he was hurt. "Well, now you can finally be rid of me,"

he said lightly, but his face might as well have been etched from stone. "I'll talk to my boss on Monday, get the paperwork started for the transition."

Transition.

My breath, my heart. Everything stopped. "You're resigning?" "You don't need me here. You have the Royal Guard. I resign, or the palace releases me from my contract. Same ending."

The thought hadn't crossed my mind, but it made sense. The palace had hired Rhys because they hadn't wanted to pull any Royal Guard members away from their family when I was living in the U.S. Now that I was moving back, they didn't need a contractor.

"But I..." I do need you.

Rhys and I may not have gotten along in the beginning, but now, I couldn't imagine not having him by my side.

The kidnapping. Graduation. My grandfather's hospitalization.

Dozens of trips, hundreds of events, thousands of tiny moments like the time he'd ordered me chicken soup when I was sick or when he'd lent me his jacket after I left mine at home.

He'd been with me through it all.

"So, that's it." I blinked away the ache behind my eyes. "We have one more month and then you'll just...leave."

Rhys's eyes darkened to a near black, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. "Don't worry, princess. Maybe you'll get Booth as your bodyguard again. It'll be like old times for you two."

I was suddenly, irrationally angry. At him, his dismissive tone, the entire situation.

Synopsis

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She can never be his...but he's taking her anyway.

Stoic, broody, and arrogant, elite bodyguard Rhys Larsen has two rules: 1) Protect his clients at all costs 2) Do not become emotionally involved. Ever.

He has never once been tempted to break those rules...until her.

Bridget von Ascheberg. A princess with a stubborn streak that matches his own and a hidden fire that reduces his rules to ash. She's nothing he expected and everything he never knew he needed.

Day by day, inch by inch, she breaks down his defenses until he's faced with a truth he can no longer deny: he swore an oath to protect her, but all he wants is to ruin her. Take her.

Because she's his.

His princess.

His forbidden fruit.

His every depraved fantasy.

Regal, strong-willed, and bound by the chains of duty, Princess Bridget dreams of the freedom to live and love as she chooses.

But when her brother abdicates, she's suddenly faced with the prospect of a loveless, politically expedient marriage and a throne she never wanted.

And as she navigates the intricacies—and treacheries—of her new role, she must also hide her desire for a man she can't have.

Her bodyguard.

17. Bridget

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17

BRIDGET

TWO DAYS LATER, WE LANDED IN COSTA RICA LIKE RHYS HAD PROMISED and drove two hours from the airport to a small town on the Pacific coast.

I stared out the window at the country's lush landscape, my head spinning from how fast everything had moved. I couldn't believe Rhys, Mr. Safety and Security himself, was the one who suggested a last-minute trip, but I wasn't complaining. I hadn't visited Costa Rica before, and four days in a tropical paradise sounded like, well, paradise.

We'd finished packing the townhouse, and I'd turned in my keys that morning. Everything else I needed to do, I could do online. I was, for all intents and purposes, free until we returned to New York.

"This is it." Rhys pulled up in front of a sprawling, two-story villa. "Bucket list number one."

Go someplace where no one knows or cares who I am.

That was definitely the case here. The house was nestled high in the hills and the only residence around. How had Rhys even found this place?

My chest tightened with emotion as we unpacked our suitcases from the back of our rental car and walked toward the entrance.

"How did you pull everything together so fast?"

Rhys would never let me go anywhere without doing the proper advance work first, but it had only been forty-eight hours since I told him about my list. For him to have researched the town, booked the charter jet and villa, and handled the millions of details that came with royal travel in such a short time...

"I cheated a bit," he admitted, unlocking the front door. "An old Navy buddy of mine moved down here a couple of years ago and owns this place. He's on vacation right now and let me borrow it for

a few days. I visit every year, so I know the town and people well. It's safe. Quiet. Under the radar."

"Exactly what I need," I murmured. The tightness in my chest intensified.

Rhys showed me around the villa. The walls were all glass, offering gorgeous three-hundred-sixty views of the surrounding hills and the Pacific Ocean in the distance. Everything was open, airy, and made of natural stone and wood, and the house's design made it seem like it was flowing into its surroundings instead of dominating them. My favorite feature, however, was the infinity pool on the second-floor terrace. From a certain angle, it looked like it fed straight into the ocean.

Rhys, being Rhys, also walked me through the security setup. Tinted, bulletproof glass all around, state-of-the-art motion sensors, an underground panic room stocked with a year's supply of food. That was all I gathered before I zoned out.

I appreciated the security measures, but I didn't need a detailed breakdown of the make and model of the security cameras. I just wanted to eat and swim.

"Remind me to send your friend a big thank you," I said. "This place is incredible."

"He loves showing it off, usually by letting people stay here," Rhys said dryly. "But I'll tell him."

It was already close to two, so the first thing we did after we finished the tour was change and head into town for lunch. The town was a twenty-minute drive from the villa and, according to Rhys, home to less than a thousand people. Not a single one of them seemed to know or care who I was.

Bucket list number one.

We ate at a small, family-run restaurant whose owner, a round-faced older woman named Luciana, lit up at the sight of Rhys. She smothered him with kisses before embracing me too.

"Ay, que bonita!" she exclaimed, looking me over. "Rhys, es tu novia?" How beautiful! Rhys, is she your girlfriend?

"No," Rhys and I said at the same time. We glanced at each other before he clarified, "Sólo somos amigos." We're just friends.

"Oh." Luciana looked disappointed. "One day, you'll bring a girlfriend," she said in English. "Maybe it'll be you." She winked at me before ushering us to a table.

I blamed my blush on the heat.

Instead of ordering off the menu, Rhys told me to trust Luciana's judgment, and I was glad we did exactly that when the food came out twenty minutes later. Olla de carne, arroz con pollo, platanos maduros...all so delicious I would beg Luciana for the recipes had I had any kitchen skills beyond scrambling eggs and making coffee.

"This is incredible," I said after swallowing a mouthful of chicken and rice.

"Luci makes the best food in town."

"Yes, but that's not what I meant. I meant this." I gestured at my surroundings. "The trip. The whole thing. You didn't have to do this."

Especially since Rhys was paying for everything out of pocket. I assumed his friend let him borrow the villa for free, but the flight,

the car rental...they all cost good money. I'd offered to reimburse him, but he'd responded with such a dark glare I hadn't brought it up again.

"Consider it my goodbye present," Rhys said, not looking up from his plate. "Two years. Figured it was worth a trip."

The chicken that had been so delicious a second earlier turned to ash in my mouth.

Right. I almost forgot. Rhys only had two weeks left as my bodyguard.

I stabbed at my food, my appetite gone. "Do you have a new client already lined up?" I asked casually.

Whoever it was, I already hated them for getting a beginning with Rhys instead of an ending.

Rhys rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "I'm taking a short break. Maybe I'll come back to Costa Rica, or head to South Africa for a bit."

"Oh." I stabbed harder at my chicken. "Sounds nice."

Great. He'd be playing world traveler while I was attending queen lessons at the palace. Maybe he'd meet some beautiful Costa Rican or South African girl and they'd spend their days surfing and having sex—

Stop it.

"What about you?" Rhys asked, his tone also casual. "Know who your new guard is yet?"

I shook my head. "I asked for Booth, but he's already assigned to someone else."

"Funny. I thought they'd be more accommodating, considering you're the crown princess." Rhys cut his chicken with a little more force than necessary.

"I'm not crown princess yet. Anyway, let's talk about something else." Our conversation was depressing me. "What fun things are there to do around here?"

The answer was, not much. After lunch, Rhys and I walked through town, where I picked up some souvenirs for my friends. We checked out an art gallery featuring local artists, took a cafe break where I had the best coffee I'd ever tasted, and shopped for groceries at the farmer's market.

It was a simple, ordinary day, filled with mundane activities and nothing particularly exciting.

It was perfect.

By the time we returned to the villa, I was ready to pass out, but Rhys stopped me before I could crash. "If you can stay up a while longer, there's something you should see."

Curiosity won out over exhaustion.

"This better be good." I followed him out onto the terrace and sank onto one of the wicker chairs by the pool, where I stifled a yawn. "I get cranky when I don't get enough sleep."

"Trust me, I know." Rhys smirked. "Good of you to admit it though."

I watched as he turned off all the lights, including the outdoor floodlights.

"What are you doing?" He never turned off all the lights until right before he went to bed.

He sat down next to me, and I spotted a flash of his teeth in the darkness before he angled his chin up.

“Look up, princess.”

I did. And I gasped.

Thousands upon thousands of stars splashed across the sky above us, so numerous and densely packed they resembled a painting more than real life.

The Milky Way, right there in all its sprawling, glittering glory.

It hadn't occurred to me we could see it so clearly here, but it made sense. We were high in the hills, miles away from the nearest big city. There was no one and nothing around except us, the sky, and the night.

“I thought you might like it,” Rhys said. “It's not something you see in New York or Athenberg.”

“No. It's not.” Emotion gripped my chest. “And you were right. I love it. Worth staying past my bedtime and getting cranky for.”

His low chuckle settled in my belly and warmed me from the inside out.

We stayed outside for another hour, just staring at the sky and soaking in the beauty.

I liked to think my parents were up there, watching over me.

I wondered if I'd turned out the way they'd hoped, and if they were proud. I wondered what they would say about Nikolai's abdication, and whether my mother knew I was the one who should've died that day in the hospital, not her.

She should've been queen, not me.

At least she and my father were together. They were one of the lucky couples who started off in an arranged marriage and ended up falling in love. My father had never been the same after my mom's death, or so everyone told me. I'd been too young to know the difference.

Sometimes, I wondered if he'd lost control of his car on purpose so he could join her sooner.

I turned my head to look at Rhys. My eyes had adjusted to the dark enough that I could make out the tiny bump in his nose and the firm curve of his lips.

“Have you ever been in love?” I asked, partly because I really wanted to know, and partly because I wanted to pull my thoughts off the morbid path they'd taken.

“Nope.”

“Really? Never?”

“Nope,” Rhys said again. He cocked an eyebrow. “Surprised?”

8. Bridget/Rhys

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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 happened 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 body-guard. 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 banded 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

23. Bridget

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23

BRIDGET

I WANTED TO DIE.

If the floor opened up and swallowed me whole, I'd be the happiest person on earth. Or under earth, as the case would be.

Sadly, I remained in the drawing room with a whiteboard covered with pictures of European bachelors, a stone-faced Rhys, and an oblivious Mikaela.

"It's the event of the season," she continued. "The timing is rushed, but Elin's team is working on it around the clock and invites went out this morning. Dozens of people already RSVP'd yes." She let out a dreamy sigh. "All those handsome men, all dressed up in one room. I could simply die."

Yes, the big idea my grandfather had alluded to the other day in his office was a thinly veiled matchmaking gala. I'd protested, horrified at the thought of spending an entire evening—my birthday, no less—making small talk and dancing with over-inflated egos disguised as humans.

I'd been overruled.

Apparently, my twenty-fourth birthday was a good excuse to invite every eligible bachelor in Europe to the party, and it was coming up in a few weeks, which made for perfect timing, even if it was, as Mikaela had said, rushed.

"I didn't realize you were looking for a husband, Your Highness," Rhys said so coldly goosebumps erupted on my arms. The current of electricity running between us froze, turning to ice.

At the same time, indignation kindled in my stomach. He had no right to be angry. He was the one who'd left and insisted on keeping things between us professional after Costa Rica. He couldn't possibly think he could waltz in here again after six weeks because he changed his mind and expect me to have put my life on hold for him.

"It's a politics and public image thing," Mikaela said before I could answer. "Anyway, what were we talking about? Right." She snapped her fingers. "Lord Rafe and Prince Hans. Never mind about that. Prince Hans ranks higher, of course." She moved his headshot to the yes side of the board.

"I'll leave you to it then, Your Highness. I was just checking in." Rhys's face shut down, and frustration stabbed at me, joining the cocktail of emotions coursing through my veins—excitement and giddiness at seeing him again, annoyance at his hypocrisy, lingering anger over his initial departure, and a smidge of guilt, even though we weren't dating, we'd never dated, and I was free to dance with every man in Athenberg if I wanted.

If we do this, it stays here. This room, this night. We don't talk about it again.

That was his rule, so why did I feel guilty at all?

"Mr. Larsen—"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Your Highness."

Rhys left.

Before I knew what I was doing, I followed him out the door, my spine hardening with determination.

I would not get drawn into an endless cycle of what-ifs again. I had enough to worry about. If Rhys had a problem, he could tell me to my face.

"Where are you going?" Mikaela called after me. "We still need to figure out the dance order!"

"Ladies' room," I said over my shoulder. "I trust you. Order them how you wish."

I quickened my steps and caught up with Rhys around the corner. "Mr. Larsen."

This time, he stopped but didn't turn around.

"The ball was my grandfather's idea. Not mine." I didn't owe him an explanation, but I felt compelled to give one anyway.

"It's your birthday, princess. You can do whatever you want."

I set my jaw even as my stomach fluttered at the word princess.

"So, you're okay with me dancing with other men all night?"

Rhys finally turned, those inscrutable gray eyes flickering. "Why wouldn't I be? It sounds like the perfect solution. You'll find a nice prince, marry, and rule happily ever after." A mocking inflection colored his words. "The life of a princess, exactly as it should be."

Something inside me snapped, just like that.

I was angry. Angry at Nikolai for abdicating and running off to California with Sabrina afterward so they could "take some time" for themselves. Angry at not having control over my life. And most of all, angry at Rhys for turning our reunion into something ugly after we'd been apart for six weeks.

"You're right," I said. "It is the perfect solution. I can't wait.

Maybe I'll do more than dance. Maybe I'll find someone to kiss and take up to—"

Two seconds later, I found myself pinned to the wall. Rhys's eyes weren't flickering anymore. They had darkened, turning gray into near-black thunderclouds like the kind drenched the city in springtime. "Not a good idea to finish that sentence, princess," he said softly.

I'd provoked him on purpose, but I had to fight a shiver at the danger rolling off him.

"Take your hands off me, Mr. Larsen. We're not in the U.S. anymore, and you're overstepping your boundaries."

Rhys moved in closer, and I struggled to focus when I was so consumed by him. By his scent, his breath on my skin. By memories of lingering looks and stolen laughs and sunsets in a pool halfway across the world.

"Fuck my boundaries." Every word came out slow and deliberate, like he wanted to etch them into my skin.

"What a first day back on the job. It's just like old times." I pressed my back tighter against the wall, trying to escape the searing

heat from Rhys's body. "Why are you here, Mr. Larsen? You were perfectly happy to walk away when I asked you to stay."

"If you think I was anything close to happy these past six weeks," he said grimly, "You couldn't be more wrong."

"You were happy enough to stay away for that long." I tried and failed to hide the note of hurt in my voice.

Rhys's face softened a smidge. "Trust me, princess. If I had a choice, I would've been back far sooner than that."

The velvety tips of butterfly wings brushed my heart.

Stop it. Stay strong.

"Which brings me back to my question," I said. "Why are you here?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw. He hadn't shaved that day, and thicker stubble peppered his face than I was used to.

I curled my hands into loose fists, resisting the urge to run them over the short black hairs on his cheek and the scar on his eyebrow.

Just so I could reassure myself he was actually there.

Angry and infuriating, but there.

"Because I—"

"Am I interrupting something?"

Rhys moved off me so fast it took me a few seconds to process what happened. Once I did, and I saw who had interrupted us, my stomach sank.

Because standing at the end of the hall, wearing a half curious, half smirking expression, was none other than my cousin Andreas.

"I was on my way to my room when I heard something and came to investigate," he drawled. "Apologies if I...intruded."

Rhys spoke up before I could. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm Bridget's cousin." Andreas smiled. "I guess I will see you around after all. Small world."

My head whipped between them. "You know each other?" How was that possible?

"We met at the airport," Andreas said casually. "I thought he dropped his wallet but, alas, I was mistaken. We had a nice little chat, though I never caught your name." He directed the last part at Rhys, who waited a few beats before answering.

"Rhys Larsen."

"Mr. Larsen is my bodyguard," I said. "He was...helping me get something out of my eye."

Secretly, I kicked myself for being so careless. We were in a side hallway of a quieter part of the palace, but there were eyes and ears everywhere. I should've known better than to get into it with Rhys where anyone could pass by and overhear.

Judging from Rhys's expression, he thought the same thing.

"Really? How considerate of him." Andreas didn't sound convinced, and I didn't like the way he was sizing us up.

I drew myself up to my full height and stared him down. I wouldn't let him intimidate me. Not in my own home.

"You mentioned you were on your way to your room," I said pointedly. "Don't let us stop you."

"First time we've seen each other in years, and this is the greeting I get." Andreas sighed, pulling off his gloves with deliberate slow-

ness before slipping them in his pocket. “You’re different now that you’re crown princess, dear cousin.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I am different. I’m your future queen.”

Andreas’s smile slipped, and I saw Rhys smirk out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m glad you made it here safely.” I extended a small olive branch, if only because I had no desire to engage in overt hostilities with my cousin for the next month or however long he planned on staying here. “But I have a meeting I need to return to. We can chat later.”

By later, I meant never, hopefully.

“Of course.” Andreas tipped his head and cast one last glance at me and Rhys before disappearing down the hall.

I waited a good two minutes before I allowed myself to relax.

“Your cousin seems like a shithead,” Rhys said.

I laughed, and the mood between us finally lightened.

“Not seems. He is. But he’s also family, so we’re stuck with him.”

I twisted my ring around my finger, trying to find a tactful way to bring us back to our earlier conversation. “About what happened before Andreas interrupted...”

“I came back because I wanted to come back,” Rhys said.

“And...” He paused, like he was debating whether to say what he was about to say. “I didn’t want you to be alone while you’re dealing with all this shit.” He gestured toward our lavish surroundings.

Alone.

It was the second time he’d said it. First on my graduation night, and now. He was right both times.

I’d tried and failed to name the empty, gnawing feeling that’d haunted me since Rhys left. The one that crept up on me when I lay in bed at night and tried to think of something I looked forward to the next day. The one that washed through me at the oddest mo-

1. Bridget

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1

BRIDGET

“SPANK ME! MASTER, SPANK ME!”

I stifled a laugh at my bodyguard Booth’s face as Leather the parrot squawked in his cage. The parrot’s name said all you needed to know about its previous owner’s sex life, and while some found him amusing, Booth did not. He hated birds. He said they reminded him of giant flying rats.

“One day, he and Leather are going to get into it.” Emma, the director of Wags & Whiskers, clucked her tongue. “Poor Booth.”

I held back another laugh even as I felt a small pang in my heart. “Probably not. Booth’s leaving soon.”

I tried not to think about it. Booth had been with me for four years, but he was leaving for paternity leave next week and staying in Eldorra after to be closer to his wife and newborn. I was happy for him, but I would miss him. He was not only my bodyguard but a friend, and I could only hope his replacement and I had the same rapport.

“Ah, yes, I forgot.” Emma’s face softened. She was in her early sixties, with short, gray-streaked hair and warm brown eyes. “Lots of changes for you in a short time, my dear.”

She knew how much I hated goodbyes.

I’d been volunteering at Wags & Whiskers, a local pet rescue shelter, since my sophomore year of college, and Emma had become a close friend and mentor. Unfortunately, she, too, was leaving. She’d still be in Hazelburg, but she was retiring as the shelter director, which meant I would no longer see her every week.

“One of them doesn’t have to happen,” I said, only half-joking.

“You could stay.”

She shook her head. “I’ve run the shelter for almost a decade, and it’s time for new blood. Someone who can clean the cages without her back and hips acting up.”

“That’s what volunteers are for.” I gestured toward myself. I was belaboring the point, but I couldn’t help it. Between Emma, Booth, and my impending graduation from Thayer University, where I was majoring in international relations—as expected of a princess—I had enough goodbyes to last me for the next five years.

“You are a sweetheart. Don’t tell the others, but...” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “You’re my favorite volunteer. It’s rare to find someone of your stature who does charity because she wants to, not because she’s putting on a show for the cameras.” My cheeks tinted pink at the compliment. “It’s my pleasure. I adore animals.” I took after my mother in that regard. It was one of the few pieces of her I had left.

In another life, I would’ve been a veterinarian, but in this life?

My path had been laid out for me since before I was born.

“You would make a great queen.” Emma stepped aside to allow a staff member with a wriggling puppy in his arms to pass. “Truly.” I laughed at the thought. “Thank you, but I have no interest in being queen. Even if I did, the chances of me wearing the crown are slim.”

As the princess of Eldorra, a small European kingdom, I came closer to ruling than most people. My parents died when I was a kid—my mother at childbirth, my father in a car accident a few years later—so I was second in line to the throne. My brother Nikolai, who was four years my senior, had been training to take over for our grandfather King Edvard since he was old enough to walk. Once Nikolai had children, I would be bumped further down the line of succession, something I had zero complaints about. I wanted to be queen as much as I wanted to bathe in a vat of acid.

Emma frowned in disappointment. “Ah, well, the sentiment is the same.”

“Emma!” one of the other staff members called out. “We’ve got a

situation with the cats.”

She sighed. “It’s always the cats,” she muttered. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you about my retirement before you heard it from anyone else. I’ll still be here until the end of next week, so I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

“Sounds good.” I hugged her goodbye and watched her rush off to deal with a literal catfight, the pang in my chest growing.

I was glad Emma hadn’t told me about her retirement until the end of my shift, or it would’ve been in my head the whole time.

“Are you ready, Your Highness?” Booth asked, clearly eager to get away from Leather.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s go!” Leather squawked as we exited. “Spank me!”

My laugh finally broke free at Booth’s grimace. “I’ll miss you, and so will Leather.” I stuffed my hands in my coat pockets to protect them against the sharp autumn chill. “Tell me about the new bodyguard. What’s he like?”

The leaves crunched beneath my boots as we walked toward my off-campus house, which was only fifteen minutes away. I adored fall and everything that came with it—the cozy clothes, the riot of earthy colors on the trees, the hint of cinnamon and smoke in the air. In Athenberg, I wouldn’t be able to walk down the street without getting mobbed, but that was the great thing about Thayer. Its student population boasted so many royals and celebrity offspring, a princess was no big deal. I could live my life like a relatively normal college girl.

“I don’t know much about the new guard,” Booth admitted.

“He’s a contractor.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

The Crown sometimes hired private security contractors to serve alongside the Royal Guard, but it was rare. In my twenty-one years, I’d never had a bodyguard who was a contractor.

“He’s supposed to be the best,” Booth said, mistaking my surprise for wariness. “Ex-Navy SEAL, top-notch recommendations, experience guarding high-profile personalities. He’s his company’s most sought-after professional.”

“Hmm.” An American guard. Interesting. “I do hope we get along.”

When two people were around each other twenty-four-seven, compatibility mattered. A lot. I knew people who hadn’t meshed with their security details, and those arrangements never lasted long.

“I’m sure you will. You’re easy to get along with, Your Highness.”

“You’re only saying that because I’m your boss.”

Booth grinned. “Technically, the Director of the Royal Guard is my boss.”

I wagged a playful finger at him. “Backtalking already? I’m disappointed.”

He laughed. Despite his insistence on calling me Your Highness, we’d settled into a casual camaraderie over the years that I appreciated. Excessive formality exhausted me.

We chatted about Booth’s impending fatherhood and move back to Eldorra for the rest of our walk. He was near bursting with pride

over his unborn child, and I couldn't help a small stab of envy. I was nowhere near ready for marriage and kids, but I wanted what Booth and his wife had.

Love. Passion. Choice. Things no amount of money could buy.

A sardonic smile touched my lips. No doubt I'd sound like an ungrateful brat to anyone who could hear my thoughts. I could get any material thing I desired with a snap of my fingers, and I was whining about love.

But people were people, no matter their title, and some desires were universal. Unfortunately, the ability to fulfill them was not. Maybe I would fall in love with a prince who'd sweep me off my feet, but I doubted it. Most likely, I'd end up in a boring, socially acceptable marriage with a boring, socially acceptable man who only had sex missionary style and vacationed in the same two places every year.

I pushed the depressing thought aside. I had a long way to go before I even thought about marriage, and I'd cross that bridge when I got there.

My house came into sight, and my eyes latched onto the unfamiliar black BMW idling in the driveway. I assumed it belonged to my new bodyguard.

"He's early." Booth raised a surprised brow. "He's not supposed to arrive until five."

"Punctuality is a good sign, I suppose." Though half an hour early might be overkill.

The car door opened, and a large black boot planted itself on the driveway. A second later, the biggest man I'd ever seen in real life unfolded himself from the front seat, and my mouth turned bone dry.

Holy. Hotness.

My new bodyguard had to be at least six foot four, maybe even six-five, with solid, sculpted muscle packed onto every inch of his powerful frame. Longish black hair grazed his collar and fell over one gunmetal-gray eye, and his legs were so long he ate up the distance between us in three strides.

For someone so large, he moved with surprising stealth. If I hadn't been looking at him, I wouldn't have noticed him approach at all.

He stopped in front of me, and I swore my body tilted forward a centimeter, unable to resist his gravitational pull. I was also strangely tempted to run my hand through his thick dark locks. Most veterans kept their hair military-style short even after leaving the service, but clearly, he wasn't one of them.

"Rhys Larsen." His deep, gravelly voice rolled over me like a velvety caress. Now that he was closer, I spotted a thin scar slashing through his left eyebrow, adding a hint of menace to his dark good looks. Stubble darkened his jaw, and a hint of a tattoo peeked out from both sleeves of his shirt.

He was the opposite of the preppy, clean-shaven types I usually went for, but that didn't stop a swarm of butterflies from taking flight in my stomach.

I was so flustered by their appearance I forgot to respond until Booth let out a small cough.

“I’m Bridget. It’s nice to meet you.” I hoped neither man noticed the flush creeping over my cheeks.

I omitted the Princess title on purpose. It seemed too pretentious for casual, one-on-one settings.

I did, however, notice Rhys didn’t address me as Your Highness the way Booth did. I didn’t mind—I’d been trying to get Booth to call me by my first name for years—but it was another sign my new guard would be nothing like my old one.

“You have to move.”

I blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your house.” Rhys tilted his head toward my spacious but cozy two-bedroom abode. “It’s a security nightmare. I don’t know who signed off on the location, but you have to move.”

The butterflies screeched to a halt.

We’d met less than two minutes ago, and he was already ordering me around like he was the boss. Who does he think he is? “I’ve lived here for two years. I’ve never had an issue.”

“It only takes one time.”

“I’m not moving.” I punctuated my words with a sharpness I rarely used, but Rhys’s condescending tone grated on my nerves. Any attraction I’d felt toward him crumbled into ash, dying the quickest death in my history with the opposite sex.

Not that it would’ve gone anywhere. He was, after all, my bodyguard, but it would’ve been nice to have eye candy without wanting to drop-kick him into the next century.

Men. They always ruined it by opening their mouths.

“You’re the security expert,” I added coolly. “Figure it out.”

Rhys glowered at me beneath thick, dark brows. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had glowered at me.

“Yes, Your Highness.” His inflection on the last two words made a mockery of the title, and the embers of indignation in my stomach stoked brighter.

I opened my mouth to respond—with what, I wasn’t sure, because he hadn’t been outright hostile—but Booth cut in before I said something I would regret.

“Why don’t we go inside? It looks like it’s about to rain,” he said quickly.

Rhys and I looked up. The clear blue sky winked back at us.

Booth cleared his throat. “You never know. Rain showers come out of nowhere,” he muttered. “After you, Your Highness.”

We entered the house in silence.

I shrugged off my coat and hung it on the brass tree by the door before making another stab at civility. “Would you like something to drink?”

Irritation still stabbed at me, but I hated confrontation, and I didn’t want my relationship with my new bodyguard to start on such a sour note.

“No.” Rhys scanned the living room, which I’d decorated in shades of jade green and cream. A housekeeper came by twice a month to deep clean, but I kept the place tidy myself for the most part.

“Why don’t we get to know each other?” Booth said in a jovial, too-loud voice. “Er, I mean you and Rhys, Your Highness. We can

talk needs, expectations, schedules...”

“Excellent idea.” I mustered a strained smile and gestured Rhys toward the couch. “Please. Sit.”

For the next forty-five minutes, we ran through logistics for the transition. Booth would remain my bodyguard until Monday, but Rhys would shadow him until then so he could get a feel for how things worked.

“This is all fine.” Rhys closed the file containing a detailed breakdown of my class and weekly schedules, upcoming public events, and expected travel. “Let me be frank, Princess Bridget. You are not my first, nor will you be the last, royal I’ve guarded. I’ve worked with Harper Security for five years, and I’ve never had a client harmed while under my protection. Do you want to know why?”

“Let me guess. Your dazzling charm stunned the would-be attackers into complacency,” I said.

Booth choked out a laugh, which he quickly turned into a cough. Rhys’s mouth didn’t so much as twitch. Of course it didn’t. My joke wasn’t Comedy Central worthy, but I imagined finding a waterfall in the Sahara would be easier than finding a drop of humor in that big, infuriatingly sculpted body.

“The reason is twofold,” Rhys said calmly, as if I hadn’t spoken at all. “One, I do not become involved in my clients’ personal lives. I am here to safeguard you from physical harm. That is all. I am not here to be your friend, confidant, or anything else. This ensures my judgment remains uncompromised. Two, my clients understand the way things must work if they are to remain safe.”

“And how is that?” My polite smile carried a warning he either didn’t notice or ignored.

“They do what I say, when I say it for anything security-related.”

Rhys’s gray eyes locked onto mine. It was like staring at an unyielding steel wall. “Understand, Your Highness?”

Forget love and passion. What I wanted most was to slap the arrogant expression off his face and knee him in the family jewels while I was at it.

I pressed the pads of my fingers into my thighs and forced myself to count to three before I responded.

15. Rhys

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I will provide the chapter now.

15

RHYS

HEARING THE WORD FUCK LEAVE BRIDGET’S MOUTH IN THAT POSH, PROPER voice of hers...

It took every ounce of self-control I had not to do what I’d said I

would do. What she'd asked me to do.

But even though I wanted nothing more than to throw caution to the wind and say fuck it, I'd give her exactly what we both craved, I didn't. Bridget was still drunk. Maybe not as drunk as she'd been half an hour ago, but intoxicated enough to have compromised judgment.

I had no clue if this was her or the alcohol talking. Hell, she'd been ready to go home with Vincent Hauz, and she hated him.

"That wasn't a promise, princess." My fingers dug into her skin.

"It sounded like one to me."

Jesus. Temptation was so close I could almost taste it. All I had to do was reach out and...

What the hell are you thinking, Larsen? my inner conscience snarled.

She's your client, not to mention a goddamned princess. Get the hell away from her before you do something you regret even more than what you're doing now.

It didn't matter she was only my client for two more weeks. She was still my client, and we'd already shattered almost every professional boundary tonight.

"This is what I meant," I bit out, unsure who I was more pissed at, her or me. "You're acting like a different person. The Bridget I know wouldn't be asking her bodyguard to fuck her. What the hell is going on with you?"

Her face hardened. "I didn't sign up for a heart-to-heart, Mr. Larsen. Either fuck me, or I'll find someone else who will."

She let out a small yelp when I bent her fully over the dresser so her body was at a ninety-degree angle and her cheek pressed against the wood.

I leaned down until I was so close, I heard her every shallow, panting breath. "Do that," I said. "And you'll be responsible for a man's slow, bloody death. Is that what you want, princess?"

Bridget's hands clenched into fists. "You won't touch me, and you won't let anyone else touch me, either. So tell me, what the hell do you want, Mr. Larsen?"

You.

My frustration with everything, my whole damn life, reached a boiling point. "I want to know why you've been acting like an impulsive teenager instead of a grown-ass woman!"

Bridget was the most levelheaded person I knew. At least, she had been before her personality transplant.

"Because this is the last chance I have!" she yelled. I had never, not once in the two years I'd worked with her, heard her raise her voice, and it shocked me enough I loosened my hold on her and stepped back. Bridget twisted out of my grasp and straightened to face me, her chest heaving with emotion. "I have one week left. One week until..."

Sudden, icy terror gripped me. "Until what?" I demanded, bile rising in my throat. "Are you sick?"

"No." Bridget looked away. "I'm not sick. I'm just getting the one thing most people dream of."

Confusion chased away my brief flash of relief.

"The title of Crown Princess," she clarified. She slumped against the dresser, her face weary. "Before you say it, I know. First-world

problems and all that. There are people starving, and I'm complaining about inheriting a throne."

My confusion doubled. "But Prince Nikolai..."

"...Is abdicating. For love." Bridget flashed a humorless smile.

"He had the gall to fall in love with a commoner, and for that, he has to give up his birthright. Because the law forbids the monarch of Eldorra to marry anyone not of noble blood."

Of, for fuck's sake. What was this, the seventeenth century?

"That's bullshit."

"Yes, but it's bullshit we have to follow. Including me, now that I'm next in line to the throne."

My mouth curled into a small snarl at the thought of her marrying another man. It was irrational, but nothing about my reactions was rational when it came to her. Bridget could wipe away every sense of logic and propriety I had.

She continued, oblivious to my turmoil. "The palace is making the official announcement next week. I'm not supposed to tell anyone until then, which is why I haven't said anything." She swallowed hard. "After the announcement, I'll officially be the heir to the throne, and my life won't be mine anymore. Everything I do and say will reflect the crown, and I can't let my family or country down." She took a deep breath. "That's why I've been going a little...crazy lately. I want to savor being normal for the last time. Relatively speaking."

I was silent as I digested her bombshell.

Bridget, the future Queen of Eldorra. Holy shit.

She was right in that most women would kill to trade places with her. But Bridget was the girl who once ran out in the middle of a thunderstorm and danced in the rain. Who spent her free time volunteering at an animal shelter and would rather stay home watching TV and eating ice cream than attend a fancy party.

To her, becoming queen wasn't a dream; it was her worst nightmare.

"It was never supposed to be me. I was the spare." Bridget blinked, her eyes bright with unshed tears. My chest squeezed at the sight. "It was never supposed to be me," she repeated.

I grasped her chin and tilted it until she was looking at me.

"You're a lot of things, princess. Stubborn, infuriating, a pain in my ass half the time. But I promise you, you're not a spare anything."

She let out a weak laugh. "That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Don't get used to it."

Another small laugh, one that faded as quickly as it had come.

"What am I going to do?" Bridget whispered. "I'm not ready. I don't think I'll ever be ready."

"You're Bridget von Ascheberg," I said. "You'll be ready."

Bridget excelled at everything she did, and being queen would be no exception.

"In the meantime..." I hoped I didn't regret what I was about to say. "You're going to live your life the way you want. As long as it doesn't involve Vincent fucking Hauz."

If I ever saw that fucker again, I would break every bone in his body just for touching her and occupying space in her thoughts. He

didn't deserve any inch of her.

Bridget brightened a bit. "Does that mean you'll fuck me?"

Definitely still drunk.

I groaned, well aware of the erection that hadn't waned at all this entire time. "No, princess. That's not a good idea."

She frowned. "But it's on my bucket list."

Oh, Jesus. I was almost afraid to ask, but... "You have a bucket list?"

Bridget nodded. "For before I return to Eldorra." She ticked off the items on her fingers. "One, go someplace where no one knows or cares who I am. Two, eat and read and sunbathe all day without having to worry about an event later or waking up early the next day. Three, do an adrenaline rush activity my grandfather will yell at me for, like bungee jumping. And four, have an orgasm I didn't give myself." Her shoulders slumped. "It's been a while."

Fuck. Now the mental image of Bridget giving herself an orgasm would forever be etched in my mind.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. How the hell did I get myself into this situation? The night had gone so far off the rails I couldn't see the tracks anymore.

"One is probably off the table," Bridget said. "But you can help me with four."

She was going to achieve something neither my mother nor the military had. She was going to kill me.

"Go to bed," I said in a strained voice. "Alone. You're drunk, and it's late."

Bridget stared at my groin, where my obvious arousal tented my pants. "But—"

"No." I needed to get out of there. Stat. "No buts. You'll thank me in the morning."

Before she could protest further, I left and headed straight to my bathroom, where I took the world's longest, coldest shower. It did nothing to slake the heat of my arousal. Neither did fisting my cock until I reached a wholly unsatisfying orgasm.

28. Rhys

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28

RHYS

I'D TRIED TO RESIST. I REALLY HAD.

Perhaps I would've succeeded had Bridget been beautiful and nothing else. Beauty, on its own, meant nothing to me. My mother had been beautiful, until she wasn't—and I don't mean physically. But that was the problem. Bridget wasn't beautiful and nothing

else. She was everything. Warmth, strength, compassion, humor. I saw it in the way she laughed, in her empathy as she listened to people's problems and her composure as they railed to her about everything they thought was wrong with the country.

I'd known she was more than a pretty face long before this trip, but something inside me snapped last night. Maybe it was the way she'd looked at me, like she thought I was everything too when I was nothing, or maybe it was the knowledge she could be ripped away from me at any moment. She could get engaged next week and I would lose even the possibility of her forever.

Whatever it was, it erased every bit of remaining self-control I had. Costa Rica had been a crack, but this? This was full-on obliteration.

The grass rustled as Bridget and I made our way through the fields toward the gazebo. We'd snuck out after everyone had gone to sleep, and even though it was late, the moon shone bright enough we didn't need the lights from our phones to guide the way.

Was what we were doing—what we were about to do—a bad idea? Fuck yes. Ours was a story destined for a tragic ending, but when you were already on a train headed off the cliff, all you could do was hold on tight and make every second count.

We stayed silent until we reached the gazebo, where she walked to the middle and took it all in. Besides the chipped paint, it'd withstood the test of time surprisingly well.

"No one comes here?" she asked.

"Not a soul." I'd done my research. The town had a small population, but it sprawled across vast acres of farms. The inn was the nearest inhabited building, and everyone there was asleep. I'd made sure of that before I texted Bridget to meet me in the lobby.

"Good." Her response came out slightly breathless.

Southern Eldorra was far warmer than Athenberg, and we could get away with not wearing jackets even at night. I'd donned my usual uniform of T-shirt, combat pants, and boots, while Bridget wore a purple dress that swirled around her thighs.

I drank her in, not missing a single detail. The wisps of hair curling around her face, the nervous anticipation in her eyes, the way her chest rose and fell in time with my own uneven breaths.

Part of me wanted to march over, hike up her skirt, and fuck her right then and there. Another part of me wanted to savor the moment—the last wild, beating seconds before we destroyed whatever was left of our boundaries.

I was a rule follower by nature. It was how I'd survived most of my life. But for Bridget, I would break every rule in the book.

It only took six weeks of being apart from her and another six of fucking agony for me to accept the truth, but now that I had, there was no going back.

"So." Bridget tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her hand trembling. "Now that we're here, what do you have planned, Mr. Larsen?"

I smiled, slow and wicked, and a small, visible shiver rippled through her body.

"I have lots of plans for you, princess, and every single one ends with my fingers, tongue, or cock inside your sweet little cunt."

I didn't waste time beating around the bush. This had been two years in the making, ever since I stepped onto her driveway and saw her staring back at me with those big, blue eyes.

Bridget von Ascheberg was mine and mine alone. It didn't matter that she wasn't mine to take. I was taking her anyway, and if I could tattoo myself onto her skin, bury myself into her heart, and etch myself onto her soul, I would.

Her eyes widened, but before she could respond, I closed the distance between us and grasped her chin with my hand.

"But first, I want to make one thing clear. From this point on, you're mine. No other man touches you. If they do..." My fingers dug into her skin. "I know seventy-nine ways to kill a man, and I can make seventy of them look like an accident. Understand?"

She nodded, her chest rising and falling more rapidly than usual.

"I mean it, princess."

"I understand." Definitely breathless.

"Good." I swiped my thumb over her bottom lip. "I want to hear you say it. Who do you belong to?"

"You," she whispered. I could smell her arousal already, sweet and heady, and I couldn't hold back any longer.

"That's right," I growled. "Me."

I grabbed the back of her neck, pulled her close, and crushed my lips to hers. She wrapped her arms around my neck, her body warm and pliant against mine as I plundered her mouth. She tasted like mint and strawberries, and I wanted more. Needed more.

My heart was a loud drum in my chest, beating in time with the throbbing in my cock. All of my senses sharpened to near-painful clarity—the taste of her on my tongue, the feel of her skin beneath my hands, the smell of her perfume and the sounds of her little whimpers as she clung to me like we were drowning and I was her last lifeline.

I backed Bridget up against one of the wooden beams, shoved her dress up around her hips, and parted her thighs with my knee. I reached between her legs and hummed in approval when I found her slick and bare for me.

"No underwear. Good girl," I purred. "Because if you'd disobeyed my order..." I nipped her bottom lip and thrust a finger into her tight, wet heat, smiling when I heard her gasp. "I'd have to punish you."

Her hips bucked up when I pushed another finger inside her. I worked them in and out, slowly at first, then speeding up until I was knuckles deep inside her and the filthy sounds of my fingers fucking in and out of her mingled with her moans.

Bridget's eyes were half-closed, her mouth half-open. Her head fell back against the beam, exposing the slender length of her throat, and her entire body trembled as she neared orgasm. I slowed my pace at the last minute, earning myself a frustrated groan.

"Please." She clutched at my arms, her nails digging tiny crescents into my skin.

"Please what?" I thrust my fingers into her again, hard, until her body bowed and she let out a tiny yelp. "Please what?" I repeated. Sweat beaded my skin, and my cock strained at my pants, so hard it could pound nails. I was fucking dying, desperate to get in-

side her, but I could also watch her like this all night. No fake smiles, no inhibitions, just pleasure and wild abandonment as her pussy convulsed around my fingers and coated them with her juices.

So fucking beautiful. So fucking mine.

“Fuck me,” she gasped. Her nails dug harder into my biceps until a tiny bead of blood welled on my skin. “Please fuck me.”

“Such a dirty mouth for a princess.” I worked my cock out of my pants and slid on a condom using my free hand before I yanked my fingers out, lifted her up, and hooked her legs around my waist.

“You know there’s no going back after this.”

“I know.” Bridget’s eyes were wide and trusting and glazed with lust.

My chest clenched. I didn’t deserve her, but fuck it, I was beyond caring.

No one ever said I was a good man, anyway.

I positioned the tip of my cock at her entrance and waited for a heartbeat before I slammed into her with one forceful thrust. She was so wet I slid in almost frictionlessly, but I could still feel her pussy stretching and struggling to accommodate my size.

Bridget cried out, her walls clamping around me like a vise, and I let out a string of curses.

Hot. Wet. Tight. So tight.

“You’re killing me,” I groaned. I dropped my forehead to hers and closed my eyes, picturing the unsexiest things I could think of—broccoli, dentures—until I mustered enough control to continue.

I slid my cock out until just the tip remained, then slammed forward again. And again. And again.

I set up a fast, deep, brutal rhythm, making her take every inch of me until my balls slapped against her skin and her moans became screams.

“Shh. You’ll wake people up, princess.” I pushed the neckline of her dress down. Her breasts bounced with each thrust, her nipples pebbled with arousal, and the sight almost set me off.

I gritted my teeth. Not yet.

I lowered my head and licked and sucked on her nipples while I savagely fucked in and out of her tight, clenching pussy.

By that point, I was more animal than man, driven by nothing more than a primal need to bury myself into her as deep as I could and claim her so completely we would never get each other out from under our skin.

Thunder boomed in the distance, muffling the sounds of my groans and Bridget’s squeals.

Dimly, I realized it was about to rain and we didn’t have an umbrella or anything to cover us once we left the gazebo, but I’d worry about that later. Right now, the only thing that mattered was us.

“Rhys. Oh, God,” Bridget sobbed. “I can’t...I need—”

“What do you need?” I grazed my teeth over her nipple. “You need to come? Hmm?”

“Y-yes.” It came out as a half plea, half moan.

She was wrecked. Her hair a mess, her face streaked with tears, her skin slick with sweat and hot with arousal.

I lifted my head and dragged my mouth up her neck until I reached her ear, where I whispered, “Come for me, princess.”

I pinched her nipple and fucked into her with the hardest thrust yet, and she exploded, her mouth falling open in a soundless scream while her cunt strangled my cock.

Thunder boomed again, closer this time.

I held Bridget's limp, shaking body up against the beam until she caught her breath. Once she did, I set her on the floor, turned her around, and bent her over.

I hadn't come yet—the old trick of reciting baseball rosters still worked—and my body vibrated with barely controlled tension.

“Again?” she panted as I slid my cock along her slick folds.

“Sweetheart, I wouldn't be doing my job if you didn't come on my cock at least three times tonight.”

The storm broke right as I pushed into her, and rain lashed sideways at us as I fucked her against the wooden beam. Lightning ripped through the sky, illuminating the pale curve of Bridget's shoulder as she clung to the railing for dear life. She'd turned her head sideways so her cheek pressed against the wood, and I could see her mouth fall open as she struggled to catch her breath between my thrusts.

I wrapped her hair around my fist and used it as leverage to make her take me deeper.

“This is for all the times you didn't listen.” I squeezed her ass before delivering a sharp slap that made her yelp. “This is for Borgia.” Slap. “And this is for the gardens.” Slap.

My pent-up frustration over the years bloomed across her skin in pink, and a dark chuckle rose in my throat when Bridget bucked harder against me with each slap.

“You like that?” I pulled her head back by her hair until she was looking up at me with tear-filled eyes. “You like getting your ass slapped while I pound that tight royal pussy with my hard cock?”

“Yes.” The word broke into a moan, and her knees buckled.

I hissed out a breath. God, she was fucking perfect. In every way.

I wrapped one arm below her waist, holding her up, and bent over her until my chest pressed against her back. I covered most of her body with mine, shielding her from the splashes of rain as I buried myself so deep inside her I didn't think I would ever get out. I didn't want to. This right here, this was all I wanted.

Bridget. Just Bridget.

“Oh, God, Rhys!”

The sound of my name on her lips as she shattered around me again finally did me in.

I came right after her with a loud groan, my orgasm ripping through me with the force of a hurricane. I swore I lost my hearing for a second there, but when I came back to my senses, everything seemed amplified. The smell of the rain and earth mingled with sex and sweat, the sound of the water pattering against the wood, the coolness of the droplets on my overheated skin.

Bridget trembled beneath me, and I lifted her up and placed her deeper into the gazebo, away from the rain.

“You okay, princess?” My breaths finally eased into something resembling normal as I slid the straps of her dress back onto her shoulders and smoothed her hair out of her face before giving her a soft kiss.

I wasn't a sweet, lovey type of guy in any area of my life, but perhaps I'd been too rough with her. If I had my way, we would've

47. Rhys

One week after the highly publicized press conference where Rhys and Princess Bridget's relationship made headlines worldwide, they visit Erhall, the Speaker who is also Rhys's biological father, to push for the repeal of the Royal Marriages Law. Erhall, unaware of their appointment due to a scheduling mishap, is reluctantly forced to meet them. Throughout their encounter, Rhys, the protagonist, reflects on his newfound public identity as the princess's bodyguard-turned-love interest, noting the media frenzy and public fascination with their story. The chapter delves deep into Rhys's thoughts and emotions, particularly his resentment towards Erhall, whom he has only recently discovered is his father, and his dedication to Bridget and her cause.

In their meeting, Bridget and Rhys confront Erhall with the demand to repeal an outdated law that restricts royal marriage choices, using the knowledge of Rhys's paternity as leverage. Erhall's initial dismissiveness turns to shock and desperation as Rhys reveals their familial connection, supported by DNA evidence. While Erhall attempts to deflect and offer excuses, Bridget's strategic acumen shines through as she navigates the conversation with authority and finesse, ultimately forcing Erhall's hand to consider their proposal.

The dynamics reveal a complex web of personal and political motives, showcasing Bridget's intelligence and determination, Rhys's inner turmoil and growth, and Erhall's flawed character. It ends with Erhall begrudgingly agreeing to bring the motion forward, not out of goodwill, but to preserve his political career and avoid scandal. Rhys's confrontation with Erhall is both a moment of personal closure and a significant political maneuver, with Rhys firmly distancing himself from any familial or emotional connection to Erhall. The chapter closes on a lighter note, with Bridget joking about their potential as public speakers, symbolizing their comradeship and shared resolve amidst the ongoing struggle for their right to love freely.

2. Rhys

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2

RHYS

PRINCESS BRIDGET VON ASCHEBERG OF ELDORRA WOULD BE THE DEATH

of me. If not literal death, then the death of my patience and sanity.

Of that, I was certain, and we'd only been working together for two weeks.

I'd never had a client who infuriated me as much as she did.

Sure, she was beautiful (not a good thing when you were in my position) and charming (to everyone except me), but she was also a royal pain in my ass. When I said "right," she went left; when I said "leave," she stayed. She insisted on spontaneously attending crowded events before I could do the advance work, and she treated my security concerns like they were an afterthought instead of an emergency.

Bridget said that was the way things had worked with Booth, and she'd been fine. I said I wasn't Booth, so I didn't give a damn what she did or didn't do when she was with him. I ran the show now.

She didn't take that well, but I didn't give a shit. I wasn't here to win Mr. Congeniality. I was here to keep her alive.

Tonight, "here" meant the most crowded bar in Hazelburg. Half of Thayer had turned out for The Crypt's Friday night half-off specials, and I was sure the bar was over max capacity.

Loud music, loud people. My least favorite kind of place and, apparently, Bridget's most favorite, considering how vehement she'd been about coming here.

"So." Her redheaded friend Jules eyed me over the rim of her glass. "You were a Navy SEAL, huh?"

"Yes." I wasn't fooled by her flirty tone or party girl demeanor. I'd run in-depth background checks on all of Bridget's friends the moment I took the job, and I knew for a fact Jules Ambrose was more dangerous than she appeared. But she didn't pose a threat to Bridget, so I didn't mention what she did in Ohio. It wasn't my story to tell.

"I love military men," she purred.

"Ex-military, J." Bridget didn't look at me as she finished her drink. "Besides, he's too old for you."

That was one of the few things I agreed with her on. I was only thirty-one, so I wasn't ancient by any means, but I'd done and witnessed enough shit in my life to feel ancient, especially compared to fresh-faced college students who hadn't even had their first real job yet.

I'd never been fresh-faced, not even when I was a kid. I grew up in dirt and grit.

Meanwhile, Bridget sat across from me, looking like the fairytale princess she was. Big blue eyes and lush pink lips set in a heart-shaped face, perfect alabaster skin, golden hair falling in loose waves down her back. Her black top bared her smooth shoulders, and tiny diamonds glittered on her ears.

Young, rich, and regal. The opposite of me in every way.

"Negative. I love older men." Jules upped the wattage of her smile as she gave me another once-over. "And you're hot."

I didn't smile back. I wasn't dumb enough to get involved with a client's friend. I already had my hands full with Bridget.

Figuratively speaking.

"Leave the man alone." Stella laughed. Fashion design and communications major. Daughter of an environmental lawyer and the chief of staff to a cabinet secretary. Social media star. My brain ticked off all the things I knew about her as she snapped a photo of her cocktail before taking a sip. "Find someone your own age."

"Guys my age are boring. I'd know. I dated a bunch of them."

Jules nudged Ava, the last member of Bridget's close friend group. Aside from Jules's inappropriate come-ons, they were a decent bunch. Certainly better than the friends of the Hollywood starlet I'd guarded for three excruciating months, during which I saw more "accidental" genital flashings than I'd thought I would ever see in my life. "Speaking of older men, where's your boo?"

Ava blushed. “He can’t make it. He has a conference call with some business partners in Japan.”

“Oh, he’ll make it,” Jules drawled. “You in a bar, surrounded by drunken, horny college guys? I’m surprised he hasn’t—ah. Speak of the devil. There he is.”

I followed her gaze to where a tall, dark-haired man cut a path through the crowd of said drunken, horny college guys.

Green eyes, tailored designer clothing, and an icy expression that made the frozen tundra of Greenland look like tropical islands.

Alex Volkov.

I knew the name and reputation, even if I didn’t know him personally. He was a legend in certain circles.

The de facto CEO of the country’s largest real estate development company, Alex had enough connections and blackmail material to bring down half of Congress and the Fortune 500.

I didn’t trust him, but he was dating one of Bridget’s best friends, which meant his presence was unavoidable.

Ava’s face lit up when she saw him. “Alex! I thought you had a business call.”

“The call wrapped up early, so I thought I’d swing by.” He brushed his lips over hers.

“I love when I’m right, which is almost always.” Jules shot Alex a sly glance. “Alex Volkov in a college bar? Never thought I’d see the day.”

He ignored her.

The music changed from low-key R&B to a remix of the latest radio hit, and the bar went wild. Jules and Stella scrambled out of their seats to hit the dance floor, followed by Bridget, but Ava stayed put.

“You guys go. I’ll stay here.” She yawned. “I’m kinda tired.”

Jules looked horrified. “It’s only eleven!” She turned to me.

“Rhys, dance with us. You have to make up for this...blasphemy.”

She gestured at where Ava was curled into Alex’s side while he wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders. Ava made a face; Alex’s expression didn’t so much as budge. I’d seen blocks of ice show more emotion than him.

I remained seated. “I don’t dance.”

“You don’t dance. Alex doesn’t sing. Aren’t you two a bundle of joy,” Jules grumbled. “Bridget, do something.”

Bridget glanced at me before looking away. “He’s working. Come on,” she teased. “Aren’t Stella and I enough?”

Jules let out an aggrieved sigh. “I suppose. Way to guilt-trip me.”

“I learned the subtle art of guilt-tripping in princess school.”

Bridget pulled her friends onto the dance floor. “Let’s go.”

To no one’s surprise, Ava and Alex called it a night soon after, and I sat at the table by myself, keeping half an eye on the girls and the other half on the rest of the bar. At least, I tried. My gaze strayed back to Bridget and Bridget alone more often than I’d like, and not just because she was my client.

I’d known she would be trouble the minute Christian told me about my new assignment. Told, not asked, because Christian Harper dealt in orders, not requests. But we had enough of a history I could’ve turned down the assignment had I wanted to—and I’d really fucking wanted to. Me guarding the Princess of Eldorra when I

wanted nothing to do with Eldorra? Worst idea in the history of bad ideas.

Then I'd looked at the picture of Bridget and saw something in her eyes that tugged at me. Maybe it was the hint of loneliness or the vulnerability she tried to hide. Whatever it was, it was enough for me to say yes, albeit reluctantly.

Now here I was, stuck with a charge who barely tolerated me, and vice versa.

You're a goddamned idiot, Larsen.

But as infuriating as I found Bridget, I had to admit, I liked seeing her the way she was tonight. Big smile, glowing face, eyes sparkling with laughter and mischief. None of the loneliness I'd spotted in the headshot Christian gave me.

She threw her hands in the air and swayed her hips to the music, and my gaze lingered on the bare expanse of her long, smooth legs before I tore it away, my jaw tightening.

I'd guarded plenty of beautiful women before, but when I saw Bridget in person for the first time, I'd reacted in a way I never had for my previous clients. Blood heating, cock hardening, hands itching to find out how her golden hair would feel wrapped around my fist. It'd been visceral, unexpected, and almost enough to make me walk away from the job before I started, because lusting after a client could only end in disaster.

But my pride won out, and I stayed. I just hoped I wouldn't regret it.

Jules and Stella said something to Bridget, who nodded before they left for what I presumed was the bathroom. They'd been gone for only two minutes when a frat boy-looking type in a pink polo shirt beelined toward Bridget with a determined expression.

My shoulders tensed.

I rose from my seat right as Frat Boy reached Bridget and whispered something in her ear. She shook her head, but he didn't leave. Something dark unfurled in my stomach. If there was one thing I hated, it was men who couldn't take a fucking hint.

Frat Boy reached for Bridget. She pulled her arm away before he could make contact and said something else, her expression sharper this time. His face twisted into an ugly scowl. He reached for her again, but before he could touch her, I stepped in between them, cutting him off.

"Is there a problem?" I stared down at him.

Frat Boy oozed the entitlement of someone who wasn't used to hearing no thanks to Daddy's money, and he was either too stupid or too arrogant to realize I was two seconds away from rearranging his face so thoroughly a plastic surgeon wouldn't be able to fix it.

"No problem. I was just asking her to dance." Frat Boy eyed me like he was thinking of taking me on.

Definitely stupid.

"I don't want to dance." Bridget stepped around me and stared Frat Boy down herself. "I already told you twice. Don't make me tell you a third time. You won't like what'll happen."

There were times when I could forget Bridget was a princess, like when she was singing off-key in the shower—she thought I couldn't hear her, but I could—or pulling an all-night study session at the

kitchen table.

Now was not one of those times. Regal iciness radiated from her every pore, and a small, impressed smirk touched my mouth before I squashed it.

Frat Boy's ugly scowl remained, but he was outnumbered, and he knew it. He shuffled off, muttering "Stupid cunt" under his breath as he did so.

Judging by the way Bridget's cheeks pinkened, she heard him. Unfortunately for him, so did I.

He didn't make it two feet before I grabbed him hard enough he yelped. One strategic twist of my wrist and I could break his arm, but I didn't want to cause a scene, so he was lucky.

For now.

"What did you say?" A dangerous edge bled into my voice.

Bridget and I weren't each other's favorite people, but that didn't make it okay for anyone to call her names. Not under my watch.

It was a matter of principle and basic fucking decency.

"N-nothing." Frat Boy's puny brain had finally caught up with the situation, and his face reddened with panic.

"I don't think it was nothing." I tightened my hold, and he whimpered in pain. "I think you used a very bad word to insult the lady here." Another tightening, another whimper. "And I think you better apologize before the situation escalates. Don't you?"

I didn't need to spell out what escalates meant.

"I'm sorry," Frat Boy mumbled to Bridget, who blinked back at him with an icy expression. She didn't respond.

"I didn't hear you," I said.

Frat Boy's eyes flashed with hate, but he wasn't stupid enough to argue. "I'm sorry," he said louder.

"For what?"

"For calling you a..." He shot a fearful look in my direction. "For calling you a bad name."

"And?" I prompted.

His brow creased in confusion.

My smile contained more threat than humor. "Say, 'I'm sorry for being a limp-dicked idiot who doesn't know how to respect women.'"

I thought I heard Bridget choke back a small laugh, but I was focused on Frat Boy's reaction. He looked like he wanted to punch me with his free hand, and I almost wished he would. It would be amusing to see him try to reach my face. I towered over him by a good eight inches, and he had shrimp arms.

"I'm sorry for being a limp-dicked idiot who doesn't know how to respect women." Resentment poured off him in waves.

"Do you accept his apology?" I asked Bridget. "If you don't, I can take this outside."

Frat Boy paled.

Bridget tilted her head, her face pensive, and another shadow of a smile ghosted my mouth. She's good.

"I suppose," she finally said in the tone of someone who was doing someone else a huge favor. "There's no use wasting more of our time on someone insignificant."

My amusement tempered some of the anger running hot in my

veins at Frat Boy's earlier comment. "You got lucky." I released him. "If I ever see you bothering her or another woman again..." I lowered my voice. "You might as well learn how to do everything left-handed because your right one will be out of commission. Permanently. Now leave."

I didn't have to tell him twice. Frat Boy fled, his pink shirt bobbing in the crowd until he disappeared out the exit.

Good riddance.

"Thank you," Bridget said. "I appreciate you dealing with him, even though it's frustrating it took someone else to intervene before he got the hint. Isn't me saying no enough?" Her brow puckered with annoyance.

"Some people are idiots, and some people are assholes." I stepped aside to allow a group of giggling partygoers past. "Just so happened you ran into one who was both."

That earned me a small smile. "Mr. Larsen, I do believe we're having a civil conversation."

"Are we? Someone check the weather in hell," I deadpanned. Bridget's smile widened, and I'd be damned if I didn't feel a small kick in my gut at the sight.

"How about a drink?" She tilted her head toward the bar. "On me."

I shook my head. "I'm on the clock, and I don't drink alcohol." Surprise flashed across her face. "Ever?"

"Ever." No drugs, no alcohol, no smoking. I'd seen the havoc they wreaked, and I had no interest in becoming another statistic. "Not my thing."

Bridget's expression told me she suspected there was more to the story than I was letting on, but she didn't press the issue, which I appreciated. Some people were too damn nosy.

"Sorry that took so long!" Jules returned with Stella in tow. "The line at the bathroom was insane." Her eyes roved between me and Bridget. "Everything okay?"

21. Bridget

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I will provide the chapter now.

21

BRIDGET

SIX WEEKS LATER

"His Majesty is ready to see you." Markus stepped out of my grandfather's office, his face so pinched he looked like he'd just swallowed a lemon whole.

"Thank you, Markus." I smiled. He didn't smile back. He merely gave a quick nod of courtesy before he spun on his heels and

marched down the hall.

I sighed. If I thought my becoming crown princess would improve my relationship with Edvard's closest advisor, I was sadly mistaken. Markus seemed more displeased than ever, maybe because the press coverage after my brother's abdication had...not been great.

Also not great? My nickname: Part-Time Princess. Apparently, the tabloids did not appreciate all the time their future queen had spent away from Eldorra, and they delighted in questioning my commitment to the country and general suitability for the throne every chance they got.

The worst part was, they weren't completely wrong.

"I'll see you tomorrow for the ribbon-cutting," I told Mikaela, who'd accompanied me to my meeting with Elin earlier regarding image damage control.

"Sounds good." Mikaela snuck a peek at Edvard's half-open door. "Good luck," she whispered.

We didn't know why my grandfather wanted to speak to me, but we knew it wasn't good. He didn't summon me to his office unless it was serious.

"Thanks." I mustered a weak smile.

Mikaela had been my best friend growing up and was currently my right-hand woman during my training to be queen. The daughter of Baron and Baroness Brahe, she knew everything about everyone in Eldorran high society, and I'd recruited her to help me transition back into Athenberg society. I hadn't lived here in so long I was completely out of the loop, which was unacceptable for the future queen.

I hadn't expected her to say yes to such a big task, but to my surprise, she'd agreed.

Mikaela gave my arm a quick squeeze before leaving, and I steeled myself as I entered Edvard's office. It was a huge, mahogany-paneled room with double-height ceilings, windows overlooking the palace gardens, and a desk large enough to nap on.

Edvard's face crinkled into a smile when he saw me. He looked far healthier than he had in the weeks following his collapse, and he hadn't shown any symptoms since the big scare, but I still worried about him. The doctors said his condition was unpredictable, and every day I woke up wondering if that would be the last day I'd see my grandfather alive.

"How's training going?" he asked after I slipped into the seat opposite him.

"It's going well." I slid my hands beneath my thighs to tamp down my nerves. "Though some of the parliamentary sessions are quite..." Tedious. Snooze worthy. So boring I would rather watch paint dry. "Verbose."

Nobody liked hearing themselves talk more than a minister who had the floor. It was amazing how little one could say using so many words.

Unfortunately, a monarch's duties included attending parliamentary sessions at least once a week, and my grandfather thought it would be useful for me to get acquainted with the process now. Ever since I returned to Eldorra, my days had been jam-packed

with meetings, events, and “queen lessons” from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to sleep. I didn’t mind, though. It kept my mind off Rhys.

Dammit. My chest squeezed, and I forced myself to push aside all thoughts of my old bodyguard.

Edvard’s chuckle brought me back to the present. “A diplomatic way of putting it. Parliament is a different beast than what you’re used to, but it is an essential part of government, and as Queen, you’ll need a good relationship with them...which brings me to why I asked you here today.” He paused, then said, “Actually, there are three things I wanted to discuss, starting with Andreas.”

Confusion mingled with my wariness. “My cousin Andreas?”

“Yes.” A small grimace crossed Edvard’s face. “He’ll be staying in the palace for a few months. He’s due to arrive on Tuesday.”

“What?” I quickly composed myself, but not before my grandfather frowned at the breach of propriety. “Why is he coming here?” I asked in a calmer voice, though I was anything but calm. “He has his own house in the city.”

Andreas, the son of my grandfather’s late brother Prince Alfred, was—how should I put this tactfully—a complete and utter ass. If entitlement, misogyny, and general asshole-ness could walk and talk, they would come in the form of one Andreas von Ascheberg. Luckily, he’d moved to London for university and stayed there. I hadn’t seen him in years, and I didn’t miss him one bit.

Except now, he was not only returning to Eldorra but staying in the palace with us.

Kill me now.

“He would like to return to Eldorra permanently,” Edvard said carefully. “Become more involved in politics. As for why he’s staying here, he said he would like to reconnect with you since you haven’t seen each other in so long.”

I didn’t believe that excuse for a second. Andreas and I had never gotten along, and the thought of him anywhere near politics made me want to run for the hills.

Unlike most constitutional monarchies, where the royal family stayed politically neutral, Eldorra welcomed royal participation in politics on a limited basis. I wished it didn’t if it meant Andreas would have a hand in anything that might affect people’s lives.

“Why now?” I asked. “I thought he was busy living the party life in London.”

Andreas had always talked a big game, bragging about his grades and subtly hinting at what a good king he would make—sometimes to Nikolai’s face, back when Nikolai had been first in line to the throne—but that was all it’d been. Talk. The closest he’d gotten to actually taking part in politics was majoring in it.

Edvard raised one thick, gray brow. “He’s next in line for the throne after you.”

I stared at him. He couldn’t be implying what I thought he was implying.

Since my mother had been an only child and I didn’t have any children, Andreas was indeed second in the line of succession now that Nikolai had abdicated. I tried to picture him as king and shuddered.

“I’ll be frank,” Edvard said. “Andreas has hinted at certain...ambitions regarding the crown, and he does not believe a woman is up for the job.”

Oh, how I wished Andreas was in the room right now so I could tell him where to shove his ambitions. “Perhaps he should tell Queen Elizabeth that the next time we visit Buckingham Palace,” I said coolly.

“You know I disagree with him. But Eldorra is not Britain or Denmark. The country is more...traditional, and I’m afraid many members of Parliament secretly hold the same sentiment as Andreas.” I curled my fingers around the edge of my chair. “It’s a good thing Parliament doesn’t appoint the monarch then.”

I may not want to rule, but I wouldn’t stand for anyone telling me I couldn’t rule because of my gender. Never mind the fact the monarchy was merely symbolic. We were the face of the nation, and there was no way in hell I’d let someone like Andreas represent us.

Edvard hesitated. “That’s the other reason I wanted to speak with you. Parliament may not appoint the monarch, but there is the matter of the Royal Marriages Law.”

A tight coil of dread formed in my stomach. The Royal Marriages Law, enacted in 1732, was the archaic law requiring monarchs to marry someone of noble blood. It was the reason Nikolai abdicated, and I’d avoided thinking about it as much as possible because it meant my chances of marrying for love were slim to none.

It wasn’t simply a matter of finding a nobleman I liked. Potential marriage partners were chosen for maximum political gain, and I wasn’t naïve enough to hope for a love match.

“I don’t have to marry yet.” I fought to keep the tremble out of my voice. “I have time—”

“I wish that were true.” Edvard’s face creased with a mixture of guilt and trepidation. “But my condition is unpredictable. I could collapse again any minute, and the next time, I might not be so lucky. Now that Nikolai has abdicated, there’s even more pressure to ensure you’re ready for the throne as soon as possible. That includes finding an acceptable husband.”

Marriage technically wasn’t a requirement for the monarch, but Eldorra hadn’t had an unmarried ruler in...well, ever.

Bile rose in my throat, both at the possibility I might lose my grandfather at any minute and at the prospect of living out the rest of my life with a man I didn’t love.

“I’m sorry, dear, but it’s the truth,” Edvard said gently. “I wish I could shield you from the harsh truths of life the way I used to, but you’re going to be queen one day, and the time for sugarcoating is over. You are the last person in our direct line of succession, the only one who stands between Andreas and the crown”—we shuddered in unison—“and marriage to a respectable aristocrat, ideally within the next year, is the only way to ensure the throne and the country remains in good hands.”

I dropped my head, resignation filling me. I could abdicate the way Nikolai had, but I wouldn’t. As much as I resented him for putting me in this position, he’d done it for love. If I did it, it would be out of pure selfishness.

Besides, the country wouldn’t survive two abdications so close to

each other. We would be the laughingstock of the world, and I would never tarnish our family name or the crown by passing it on to Andreas.

“How am I supposed to find a husband so soon? My schedule is already so full I hardly have time to sleep, much less date.”

My grandfather’s eyes crinkled, and he suddenly looked more like a mischievous youth than a king who’d ruled for decades.

“Leave that to me. I have an idea, but before we get into it, there’s one last thing we need to discuss. Your bodyguard.”

The word bodyguard made my heart twist. “What about him?”

I was still getting used to my new bodyguard, Elias. He was fine.

Nice, competent, polite.

But he wasn’t Rhys.

Rhys, who’d rejected my offer to extend his contract.

Rhys, who’d walked away a month ago without looking back.

41. Rhys

Rhys Larsen has been spiraling into despair in the wake of his breakup with Bridget, finding solace in alcohol and isolation within the confines of his hotel room. As news of King Edvard's recovery shifts public attention back to Rhys's failed relationship with Bridget, his pain is further exacerbated by the media’s speculation. Mourning the loss of Bridget, who had been instructed that her destiny lies not with a bodyguard but with nobility, Rhys confronts his inadequacy and the heartrending decision she made, which echoes his deepest insecurities.

In a drunken haze, Rhys’s reflection on their separation is interrupted by television clips of Bridget, reminding him of his unresolved feelings and stirring a mix of anger, betrayal, and a stubborn resolve to reclaim their lost love. His inner turmoil is heightened when an unplanned visit from his boss, Christian Harper, forces a confrontation. Christian, presenting both a challenge and a reminder of Rhys's professional failures, critiques Rhys’s lifestyle and pressures him to leave Eldorra and Bridget behind, suggesting that his visa's impending expiration and the futility of his actions will only lead to more heartache.

Despite Christian’s berating, which includes derogatory insinuations about Bridget, Rhys staunchly defends her honor, showcasing his deep, albeit conflicted, love for her. The confrontation escalates to a physical altercation, revealing the depth of Rhys’s feelings and the extent he is willing to go to protect Bridget's reputation. Christian, unfazed by Rhys’s threats, bluntly critiques Rhys's obsession, labeling it as detrimental love. Yet, he also acknowledges the sincerity of Rhys’s feelings, hinting at the complexity of their friendship and the inherent contradiction between rational advice and emotional impulses.

As Christian urges Rhys to abandon his futile endeavors and leave Eldorra to prevent further chaos, Rhys is left to grapple with the realization of his profound love for Bridget—a love that challenges his beliefs about his capacity for emotion and compels him to reconsider his life's direction. The encounter with Christian serves as a crucible for Rhys, crystallizing his feelings for Bridget and pushing him towards a decisive, albeit uncertain, future.

24. Bridget

At the glamorous ball arranged with the hope of finding a suitable husband, Princess Bridget navigates one lackluster encounter after another with potential suitors. Her exchanges range from the self-absorbed Count

of Falser, boasting of his gym and tailor, to the timid Alfred, more fond of his birds than conversation. Amid superficial conversations and dancing, Bridget yearns for simplicity and genuine connection, which she briefly finds in a conversation about bird-loving Alfred's aviary mishap.

Despite her royal duties and the forced smiles, Bridget seeks respite in the restroom, pondering over the futility of the night and her growing, forbidden feelings towards Rhys, her bodyguard, whose presence at the ball both torments and comforts her. Their charged yet fleeting encounters reveal a depth of connection and understanding between them that transcends their societal roles, highlighted by Rhys's gruff demeanor yet tender birthday wishes.

As the night progresses, Bridget encounters the rude and power-hungry Speaker of Parliament, Lord Erhall, who questions her capability to rule. This confrontation brings to light the gendered expectations and political pressures Bridget faces, overshadowing even her own desires for love and companionship. This societal critique is juxtaposed with Bridget's internal struggle and her clandestine yearning for Rhys, whose gift—a thoughtful, personal sketch—becomes a symbol of their unspoken bond and the life Bridget aspires to beyond the confines of royalty.

The chapter paints a vivid picture of Bridget's public facade versus her private desires, illustrating the dichotomy between the obligations of royalty and the genuine human connections that elude her in the orchestrated search for a husband. It raises poignant questions about love, duty, and personal happiness within the restrictive frames of societal expectations and royal responsibilities.

39. Rhys

****Chapter 39: RHYS****

In the tense atmosphere of a hospital, Rhys Larsen confronts obstacles with unwavering determination to see Princess Bridget, amid news of the King's stable condition following a heart attack. Rhys's interaction with a Royal Guard highlights his single-minded resolve and hints at the depth of his feelings for Bridget. Despite being ousted from his role due to scandalous allegations about their relationship and the subsequent impact on the King's health, Rhys's primary concern is Bridget's well-being, underscoring a brewing storm of emotional turmoil and unresolved issues between them.

The chapter reveals Rhys's emotional turmoil, marked by four days of separation from Bridget, reflecting a blend of personal loss and professional fallout. His dismissal from the palace security, a direct consequence of the scandal, does not deter him; his primary focus remains on Bridget's state in the wake of the family crisis. This period of separation exacerbates Rhys's desperation, leading him to infiltrate the hospital under a disguise to evade media attention, a testament to his resourcefulness and the lengths he is willing to go for Bridget.

Upon encountering Elin, a royal staff member, Rhys's determination pays off, granting him a pass to see Bridget. His skepticism about the ease of access hints at the complexities of royal protocols and the undercurrents of palace dynamics. The moment Rhys sees Bridget, the narrative shifts to a poignant reflection of their bond, accentuated by her vulnerability and his protective instinct. Bridget's condition, juxtaposed against the King's critical health situation, creates an ambience of heightened emotional stakes, grounding their relationship in the real-world implications of their actions.

Bridget and Rhys's reunion in a private room away from the King's bedside unfolds layers of their emotional landscape. Bridget's apology for her silence sets the stage for a candid admission of her fears and insecurities, revealing the palpable tension and mutual concern. Rhys's response, marked by empathy and assurance, contrasts his earlier confrontational stance, showcasing a multi-dimensional character who is as adept at navigating the perils of love as he is in physical confrontations.

The chapter concludes with an intimate moment of vulnerability, capturing the essence of their relationship against the backdrop of royal duties and public scrutiny. Bridget's guilt over the King's heart attack and Rhys's comforting presence highlight the intricate dance of personal and public life within the royal domain, setting the stage for further exploration of loyalty, love, and the burdens of public image. The narrative weaves a compelling tableau of characters bound by duty, love, and the shadows of past decisions, promising a complex interplay of personal and political intrigue in the chapters to come.

20. Bridget

Bridget reflects on her recent joyful experiences and the changes in her relationship with Rhys, her bodyguard. After a memorable night, she wakes up feeling elated, but soon realizes their dynamic has shifted back to a professional one, dampening her mood. They're preparing to leave for New York, and Rhys, back in his usual attire, seems distant. Bridget, feeling a mix of disappointment and determination, offers Rhys a proposition to extend his contract to stay with her during her transition into a more prominent role following her brother Nikolai's abdication. Despite the awkwardness between them, she hopes to maintain the comfort and security his presence brings.

Rhys's response is non-committal, leaving Bridget to ponder the implications of her request. Their journey to New York is marked by silence, reflecting the tension and unspoken regrets between them. Despite the strained interactions, Bridget finds solace in the memories they created together, recognizing them as more than just whimsical adventures.

Upon arrival in New York, staying at The Plaza, Bridget faces the impending challenge of a press conference announcing her new role due to her brother's abdication. She invites Rhys to join her, seeking his support during this critical moment. His acceptance brings her temporary relief in the midst of her anxiety over the significant changes and public scrutiny she is about to face.

As the day of the press conference arrives, Bridget struggles with her nerves but finds unexpected comfort in Rhys's presence and care. Watching her brother officially renounce his title and succession, Bridget is forced to confront the reality of her new responsibilities and the public's reaction. Despite the overwhelming stress and apprehension, she prepares to face the media, supported by Rhys's steady confidence.

Throughout these events, Bridget navigates the complexities of her evolving relationship with Rhys, the weight of her impending duties, and the personal challenges of stepping into a more visible and influential role in the eyes of the public and her own self-perception.

31. Bridget

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31

BRIDGET

“STEFFAN.” MY HEART THUMPED WITH PANIC, EVEN THOUGH I WASN'T doing anything wrong. Not at that second, anyway. “I didn't know you were back in town.”

“I—uh, yes,” he stuttered, looking uncharacteristically flustered.

“It was a last-minute decision. I wasn’t supposed to be back until next week, but I had an emergency in the city and I needed to get back straight away. I was going to call you tomorrow after everything settled.” His eyes slid to his left, and I realized he wasn’t alone.

A petite, pretty woman with curly dark hair stood next to him, her face red and her arms wrapped tight around her waist.

“Your Highness.” She dipped into a small curtsy, her lips fixed in a strained smile.

“This is Malin.” Steffan’s discomfort visibly increased. “She gave me a ride back to the city.”

“Didn’t realize future dukes needed to hitch rides.” A blade of suspicion sharpened Rhys’s otherwise even tone.

The playful, gentle Rhys from earlier in the afternoon had disappeared, replaced by the stoic, composed bodyguard I knew so well.

“She was coming back to the city anyway, so it made sense.” Steffan’s eyes flicked between me and Rhys.

Something didn’t add up. If he had an emergency in the city, why was he at a hotel on the outskirts of Athenberg this late at night?

Then again, I of all people wasn’t going to question why he was here.

The four of us stood in the hall, each eyeing the others warily.

The elevator pinged in the distance, and the air conditioning hummed with anxiety. The tension was so thick I could slice through it with a fingernail.

“The hotel isn’t in the city,” Rhys said. He hadn’t moved a single inch since we ran into Steffan and Malin.

Malin looked at the ground while Steffan ran a hand through his hair. “I had a dinner meeting at the restaurant. And Malin was, uh, kind enough to wait while I finished. What are you doing here?”

He addressed the last part to me, and I realized I hadn’t answered him the first time he asked. “I took a spa day. We were just leaving.”

I avoided looking at Rhys, afraid the movement would somehow give away what we’d really been doing all afternoon.

What does a head turn mean in Eldorran? Oh, just that I fucked my bodyguard in a dozen different positions over the course of six hours.

“Of course. I didn’t mean to hold you up.” Steffan stepped aside so I could pass, but before I could, Malin spoke up.

“Steffan, wasn’t there something you wanted to ask Her Highness?” She fixed her eyes on Steffan, whose lips thinned as he stared back at her. Some unspoken communication passed between them before he turned to me.

“This wasn’t how I wanted to do it,” he said with a hint of apology. “But since we’re here, I did have something to ask you. Please forgive me if I’m being presumptive, but, ah, would you like to be my date to Prince Nikolai’s wedding?”

Rhys finally moved, his body shifting closer to mine and his hand sliding toward the gun at his waistband.

“I...” Of all the things I’d expected Steffan to ask, that hadn’t been one of them. We’d exchanged a few polite texts after our date at the Royal Botanic Gardens, but we hadn’t spoken in weeks and, to be honest, he hadn’t crossed my mind again until now.

I also suspected he and Malin had a more complicated relation-

ship than he let on, perhaps even a romantic one. He clearly hadn't wanted to ask me out, and she was staring at the floor again with a frown.

But if they were together, why would she push him to go on a date with me?

"I was going to ask when I called you tomorrow," Steffan added. He smiled, and I glimpsed the old friendly, relaxed Steffan again. "We'd mentioned meeting up after I returned, and since the wedding is coming up, I thought you might like to go together. Unless you already have a date..."

Nikolai and Sabrina's wedding was in a month, and they were due back this weekend for the final preparations. I was a bridesmaid along with Sabrina's sister and best friend from the U.S.

"I don't." I was expected to, but I hadn't even thought about it. I'd been too wrapped up in the Citizen Letters program, training, and Rhys.

I hesitated, debating, before I finally answered, "I would be happy to be your date. Thank you for asking."

Rhys stiffened further next to me.

"Excellent." Steffan cleared his throat. "Let's hash the details out later, shall we? I'm looking forward to it."

"Me, too."

"You'd make a lovely couple." There was something in Malin's voice. A hint of warning, maybe? Or animosity mixed with sadness. I couldn't pinpoint it, but whatever it was, it made Steffan flinch.

"Thank you." It took all my training not to inject a question mark at the end. What was I supposed to say to something like that?

Another awkward silence fell before I finally excused myself and left Steffan and Malin standing in the hall, glaring at each other.

Rhys waited until we were in the elevator before he said,

"They're fucking."

The thought had crossed my mind, but it didn't make sense.

"You don't know that."

"Trust me. I can tell when people are fucking, and they are."

We stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby. "If they are, why did she encourage him to ask me out?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're into group play." Rhys didn't look at me.

He was pissed. He didn't say it, but I could feel it, and I didn't have to guess what he was angry about.

"I had to say yes to the date," I said after we got in the car.

"Everyone expects me to bring someone to Nik's wedding."

Edvard and Elin had not forgotten about my husband search and kept bringing it up at every turn, but there wasn't much they could do with Steffan gone. Now that he was back...

More complications. Less time with Rhys.

Frustration curled in my stomach.

3. Bridget

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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 annoy-

ance 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

48. Bridget

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48

BRIDGET

FOR THE NEXT MONTH, I LAUNCHED INTO CAMPAIGN MODE TO WOO, OR threaten, enough ministers into voting yes on a repeal. Some were an easy sell, others not so much. But one hundred phone calls, eleven in-person visits, twenty-three media interviews, and countless public appearances—both scheduled and “candid”—of me and Rhys later, the big day finally arrived.

Rhys and I sat in my suite, watching the vote play out on TV. I’d stress-ate my way through two packs of Oreos while he sat next to me, his face impassive but his body vibrating with the same restless energy tunneling through my veins.

The current vote count: ninety yay, thirty nay, and two abstentions, with fifty-eight more votes to go. We needed one hundred thirty-five yays for a repeal. It looked good, but I wasn’t counting my chickens until they hatched.

“Lady Jensen.” Erhall’s sour voice rang through the mahogany-paneled chamber on-screen.

“Yay.”

“Lord Orskov.”

“Yay.”

I squeezed Rhys’s hand, my heart thumping. I’d slotted Orskov into the maybe column, so his vote was a big win.

“They’ll pass it.” Rhys’s quiet confidence soothed the frayed edges of my nerves. “If they don’t, we have our backup plan.”

“Which is?”

“Burn down Parliament.”

I huffed out a laugh. “How’s that supposed to help?”

“I don’t know, but it’d be damn satisfying.”

Another laugh, another easing of nerves.

Fifty-seven down. Fifty-six. Fifty-five.

The vote continued until only two ministers were left and we were one yay short of a repeal. If either of them voted yes, we were home free.

I squeezed Rhys’s hand again as Erhall called on the next minister.

“Lord Koppel.”

“Nay.”

I deflated while Rhys let out a stream of curses. I hadn't expected Koppel to vote yes, but it was disappointing nonetheless.

Regret rose in my throat. I should've dug out the blackmail file on Koppel. I'd tried to keep my campaign aboveboard, never outright threatening any of the ministers except Erhall, but perhaps I'd miscalculated. I wouldn't be the first person in history who'd gotten screwed over by their conscience.

You did what was right.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I straightened and looked around my suite, but it was empty save for Rhys and me. Still, I could've sworn I heard a soft female voice whisper to me...a voice that sounded suspiciously like my mother's, based on the old tapes I'd watched of her.

This is what I get for staying up late. I'd been too wired to sleep much last night, and I was clearly delirious from exhaustion.

On-screen, a smug smile slashed across Erhall's face, and I could tell he was praying for the repeal to fail. He'd opened the motion as promised, but his glee had been visible every time someone voted nay.

"Lady Dahl."

I gnawed on my bottom lip.

Dahl was the last minister left. She had one of the most unpredictable voting records in Parliament, and she could go either way. None of my calls to her had yielded anything more than a polite Thank you, Your Highness. I'll think about it.

The restless energy emanating from Rhys tripled until it was near audible in the thick silence of my suite. The Oreos sloshed in my stomach, and I wished I hadn't binged on so much sugar in such a short time.

Dahl opened her mouth, and I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to watch the moment that would change my life—for better or for worse.

Please, please, please...

"Yay."

Yay. It took a minute for my brain to process that one word.

When it did, my eyes flew open in time to see an irritated-looking Erhall say, "With a final vote count of one hundred thirty-five yay, forty nays, and five abstentions, Parliament officially declares the Royal Marriages Law of 1723 repealed. The chamber..."

I tuned out the rest of what he said. I was too buzzed, my skin racing with tingles of electricity and my head dizzy with disbelief.

My stunned gaze met Rhys. "Did that really happen?"

His eyes crinkled into a small smile. "Yeah, princess, it did."

Fierce pride and relief lined his face.

"We did it." I couldn't wrap my head around it. The law had been the bane of my existence since I became crown princess, and now, it was gone. I could marry whomever I wanted without giving up the throne. I could marry Rhys.

The import of what happened fully sank in.

"We did it!" I squealed and flung myself into a laughing Rhys's arms. Everything went blurry, and I realized I was crying, but I didn't care.

So many months of agonizing over the law, so many early morn-

ings and late nights and conversations that made me want to tear my hair out...all worth it, because we did it.

I'm proud of you, honey. The soft female voice returned, and emotion welled in my throat.

It didn't matter whether the voice was real or a figment of my imagination. All that mattered was it was there, closer than it'd ever been.

Thanks, Mom. I'm proud of me, too.

Rhys, my grandfather, and Nikolai had all reassured me I could do my job as queen, but I hadn't quite believed them until now. My first real victory in Parliament. I hoped my relationship with the ministers would be more cooperative than combative, but I wasn't naïve enough to think it'd be smooth sailing from here on out. There'd be plenty of uphill battles to come, but if I won once, I could win again.

Rhys captured my mouth in a deep, tender kiss. "You did it. I'm just along for the ride."

"Not true." I snuggled closer to him, so euphoric I would've floated right off the ground had he not secured his arms around my waist. "You were there for everything, too."

The interviews, the meetings, the public appearances. All of it. A deep sound rumbled in Rhys's chest. "Looks like you're stuck with me, princess." He grazed his knuckles over my spine.

"Should've thought this through."

"Am I?" I adopted a thoughtful expression. "I could always break up with you and date someone else. There's a movie star I've always—" I squealed again when he stood and tossed me over his shoulder.

"Rhys, put me down." I was smiling so big my cheeks hurt. "I have calls to answer." I waved my hand in the general direction of my phone, which had been vibrating with new messages and calls since the vote concluded.

"Later." Rhys's palm landed with a hard smack on my ass, and I yelped even as heat seared through me at the impact. "I need to teach you a lesson about joking with me. Especially about other men."

Was it wrong my panties dampened at the way his voice lowered into a possessive growl? Perhaps. But I couldn't bring myself to care as he kicked the door to my bedroom fully open and tossed me on the bed.

"What kind of lesson?" I was already so wet my thighs were sticky with my arousal, and Rhys's dark smile only made me wetter.

"Get on your hands and knees," he said, ignoring my question.

"And face the headboard."

I complied, and my heart crashed against my ribcage when the bed dipped beneath Rhys's weight. He yanked my skirt up with one hand and my panties down with the other, the movement so forceful I heard the unmistakable rip of silk tearing.

I needed to set aside a monthly budget to replace all the underwear he'd ruined, but I wasn't complaining.

"We'll celebrate the vote later." Rhys dragged his finger through my slickness and over my sensitized clit, and a tiny whimper escaped my mouth. "But for now, let's see if you still think you're fun-

ny after I'm done with you.”

26. Bridget

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26

BRIDGET

MY GRANDFATHER WANTED TO KNOW HOW MY DATE WITH STEFFAN went.

That was right. The reason the king summoned me to his office immediately after I returned to the palace was so I could give him a detailed breakdown of my first date with the future Duke of Holstein—and potential future Prince Consort. He did also apologize for not including me in the “emergency” tax reform meeting, which Erhall called at the last minute. I was convinced Erhall did so knowing I wouldn't be able to attend because of my date with Steffan, but I couldn't prove it.

Edvard, meanwhile, was convinced Steffan was the one. Based on what, I wasn't sure, but I imagined Steffan's title, photogenic looks, and diplomatic demeanor had something to do with it.

My grandfather wasn't the only one. The press and public went wild for the photos of us at the ice-skating rink, and everyone was already buzzing about our “burgeoning relationship” even though I'd spoken to Steffan twice in my life.

Still, Elin insisted I capitalize on the attention with another date. It would be a “private” one with no reporters—to give the illusion of intimacy—but would later “leak” to the press. I agreed, if only because she was right. The Part-Time Princess headlines had disappeared, replaced by breathless speculation over the new “love” in my life.

If only they knew.

On paper, Steffan would make the perfect husband. He was good-looking, intelligent, kind, and funny, and he was by far the best option out of the so-called eligible bachelors who'd attended my birthday ball.

There was only one problem: no chemistry.

None. Zip. Nada.

I had as much romantic interest in Steffan as I did the succulent plant in my room.

“It's because you haven't kissed him yet,” Mikaela said when I told her about my dilemma. “At least kiss the man. You can tell everything based on one kiss.”

She may be right.

So, at the end of my second date with Steffan, I worked up the nerve to kiss him, even though it seemed far too soon. But he was

leaving for Preoria tomorrow, and I needed to know if this would go anywhere. I couldn't spend weeks wondering.

"I must admit, I was surprised you wanted to meet again so soon after our first date." He gave me a shy smile. "Pleasantly surprised, that is."

We walked through the Royal Botanic Gardens' large, heated greenhouse. Lush flowers bloomed around every corner, scenting the air with their sweet perfume, and strings of lights twinkled overhead like tiny stars. It was as romantic a setting as one could hope for, and I tried to focus on Steffan instead of the scowling bodyguard shadowing our every move.

If looks could kill, Rhys would've put Steffan six feet in the ground by now.

That was another reason I was hesitant to kiss Steffan. It seemed...wrong to do that in front of Rhys.

God, I wished I'd thought this through beforehand.

"I had fun," I said when I realized I hadn't responded yet.

"Thanks for agreeing even though I'm sure you're busy preparing for your trip tomorrow."

"Of course."

Steffan smiled.

I smiled.

My palms slicked with sweat.

Just do it. One tiny kiss. You have nothing to feel guilty about. You and Rhys aren't dating.

"I'm not sure why, but I have the strangest desire to give a run-down of all the fun facts I know about flowers," Steffan said. "Did you know tulips were worth more than gold in seventeenth-century Holland? Literally."

That's what happens when I'm nervous. I start spouting all sorts of useless facts.

A subtle hint from Steffan he wanted a kiss too. He had no reason to be nervous otherwise.

I discreetly wiped my palms on my skirt. Don't look at Rhys. If I did, I would never go through with it.

"That's fascinating." I winced when I realized that was the sort of answer someone gave when they found the subject anything but interesting. "Truly."

Steffan laughed. "I'm afraid there's only one way to stop me from boring you death with my floral knowledge, Your Highness," he said somberly.

"What's that?" I asked, distracted by the sensation of Rhys's gaze burning a hole in my side.

"This." Before I could react, Steffan's lips were on mine, and even though I knew the kiss was coming, I was still so stunned I could only stand there.

He tasted faintly of mint, and his lips were soft as they brushed against mine. It was a nice, sweet kiss, the kind cameras zoomed in on in movies and most women swooned over.

Unfortunately, I wasn't one of them. I might as well be kissing my pillow.

Disappointment crashed into me. I'd hoped a kiss would change things, but it only confirmed what I already knew. Steffan, for all his

wonderful traits, wasn't for me.

Maybe I was naïve for thinking I could find a fiancé to whom I was attracted to and whose company I enjoyed, but I was only in my twenties. No matter how much everyone tried to rush me, I wasn't ready to give up on my hope for love yet.

I finally gathered enough of my wits to pull back, but before I could, a loud crash shattered the silence in the greenhouse.

Steffan and I jumped apart, and my eyes fell on Rhys, who stood next to a broken pot of lilies.

"My hand slipped." His voice held not an ounce of apology.

That was, for lack of a better term, utter crap. Rhys didn't slip. He may be larger than the average person, but he moved with the lethal grace of a panther.

That was what he reminded me of right now—a panther preparing to pounce on unwitting prey. Taut face, coiled muscles, and eyes trained with laser intensity on Steffan, who shifted with discomfort beneath his stare.

"Attention all guests, the gardens are closing in fifteen minutes." The announcement blared over the PA system, savings from the most awkward moment of my life. "Please make your way to the exits. The gardens are closing in fifteen minutes. Visitors in the gift shop, please finalize your purchases."

"I guess that's our cue." Steffan held out his arm with a smile, though he kept a wary eye on Rhys. "Shall we, Your Highness?" We'd booked the greenhouse for ourselves, though the rest of the gardens remained open to the public. We could probably stay longer if we wanted, but I had no desire to drag out the night.

I took Steffan's arm and walked to the exit, where we said goodbye with a stilted half-hug, half-kiss on the cheek and promises to meet up again when he returned to Athenberg.

Rhys and I didn't speak until we reached our car.

"You're paying for the flowerpot," I said.

"I'll take care of it."

The parking lot was empty except for a handful of cars in the distance, and tension rolled between us, so thick I could practically taste it.

"I know he fits the image of Prince Charming, but you might want to keep looking." Rhys unlocked the car doors. "I've seen you kiss a cat with more passion."

"Is that why you knocked over the lilies?"

"My. Hand. Slipped," he bit out.

Maybe it was the wine I'd had at dinner, or the stress was getting to me. Whatever it was, I couldn't help it—I burst into laughter.

Wild, hysterical laughter that left me gasping for breath and clutching my stomach right there in the middle of the parking lot.

"What the hell is so funny?" Rhys's grumpy tone only made me laugh harder.

"You. Me. Us." I wiped tears of mirth from my eyes. "You're an ex-Navy SEAL and I'm royalty, and we're in such denial we might as well apply for Egyptian citizenship."

He didn't crack a smile at my admittedly lame attempt at a joke.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Stop it." I was tired of fighting. "I asked you before, and I'm

asking you again. Why did you come back, Mr. Larsen? The real answer this time.”

“I gave you the real answer.”

“The other real answer.”

Rhys’s jaw clenched. “I don’t know what you want me to say, princess.”

“I want you to say the truth.”

I knew my truth. I needed to hear his.

My truth? There was only one man who’d ever given me butterflies with a kiss. One man whose touch set me on fire and made me believe in all the fantastical things I’d dreamed about since I was a child.

Love, passion, desire.

“Truth?”

Rhys took a step toward me, the hard steel in his eyes giving way to turbulent thunderstorms.

I took an instinctive step back until my back hit the side of our SUV. There was another car next to us, and the two vehicles formed a makeshift cocoon that crackled with electricity as he planted his hands on either side of my head.

“The truth, princess, is I came back knowing this was what I signed up for. To see you every day and not be able to touch you. Kiss you. Claim you.” Rhys’s breath was hot against my skin as he lowered one hand and slid it up my thigh. It seared through the thick layers of my skirt and tights until my pussy clenched and my nipples tightened into hard points. “I came back despite knowing the torture I’d have to go through because I can’t stay away from you. Even when you’re not there, you’re everywhere. In my head, in my lungs, in my fucking soul. And I’m trying very hard not to lose my shit right now, sweetheart, because all I want is to cut off that fucker’s head and serve it on a platter for daring to touch you. Then bend you over the hood and spank your ass raw for letting him.” He cupped me between my legs and squeezed. I whimpered with a mixture of pain and pleasure. “So don’t. Push. Me.”

A thousand emotions ran through my veins, turning me light-headed with arousal and danger.

Because what Rhys just said was dangerous. What we were doing, feeling, was dangerous.

14. Rhys

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14

RHYS

3 WEEKS LATER

Some people have shitty days or shitty weeks. I'd had a shitty month.

Things between me and Bridget had been chilly since she told me she was moving back to Eldorra, and I hated that was how we were spending our last days together.

Our last days together.

My chest clenched at the thought, but I forced myself to ignore it and focus on the task at hand. I was still on the clock. We had a week left in New York. After that, I would accompany her back to Athenberg, where I would stay another week until her new guard fully transitioned into the role.

We didn't know who the new guy would be yet, but I already hated him...though not as much as I hated the guy Bridget was dancing with right now.

We were in the VIP room of Borgia, a fancy nightclub in downtown Manhattan, and Bridget had her arms wrapped around the pretty-boy douche who'd been ogling her all night. I recognized him—Vincent Hauz, an electronics heir and notorious womanizer who spent the majority of his days drinking, partying, and keeping the city's drug dealers flush with cash. He and Bridget had attended a few of the same events in the past.

I'd never wanted to rip his arms off until now.

A person only had to look at his face to know what kind of thoughts were running through his mind, and they had nothing to do with dancing. At least, not the vertical kind.

My blood burned as Bridget laughed at something Vincent said. I was positive he wasn't capable of saying anything witty even if someone threatened to take his inheritance away, but Bridget was also drunk. She'd already downed two cocktails and five shots—I'd counted—and I could spot the alcohol-induced flush on her cheeks from across the room.

She wore a sparkling silver dress that barely covered her bottom and a pair of lethal-looking heels that transformed her from tall to Amazonian. Tousled golden hair, long legs, skin gleaming with a faint sheen of sweat—she was magnificent. And not herself.

Normal Bridget would've never worn a dress like that—not because she couldn't, but because it wasn't her style—but she'd been acting strange since that night on the rooftop. Wilder, less inhibited, and more prone to questionable decisions.

Case in point: Vincent Hauz. She didn't like the guy. She'd said so herself one time, and yet there she was, cozying up to him.

He pulled her closer and slid his hand down her back to cup her ass.

Before I knew what I was doing, I'd shoved my way across the dance floor and clamped my hand on Vincent's shoulder tight enough he flinched and pulled back from Bridget to see who the interloper was.

"Can I help you?" His tone dripped with disdain as he looked me over, obviously unimpressed by my lack of designer clothes and fancy accessories.

Tough shit. Maybe he'd be more impressed by my fist in his face.

"Yes." I bared my teeth in a semblance of a smile. "Remove your hands from her before I remove them for you."

“And who the fuck are you to tell me what to do?” Vincent sneered.

The man who’s about to pummel your face into a pulp.

Before I could respond, Bridget cut in. “No one.” She glared at me. “I’m fine. Go back to your post.”

The hell I will.

If Bridget were anyone but my client, I’d drag her into the bathroom, bend her over, and spank her ass raw for her insolent tone. Instead, I glared back at her, striving to keep my temper under control.

She wanted to party? Fine. She wanted to give me the cold shoulder? Fine. But over my dead body would she have anything to do with Vincent fucking Hauz. The man must be crawling with STDs. Vincent’s eyes ping-ponged between us before realization dawned. “You’re the bodyguard!” He snapped his fingers. “Dude, you should’ve said so. Don’t worry.” He wrapped an arm around Bridget’s waist and pulled her closer with a leering smile. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Fuck pummeling his face. I wanted to knock all his teeth out.

Unfortunately, that would cause a scene, and rule number one of bodyguarding, as Bridget called it, was not to cause a scene. So, I did the next best thing. I tightened the grip I still had on his shoulder until I heard a small crack above the music.

Vincent yelped and released Bridget, his face awash with pain.

“What the fuck, man?”

“What did I say about removing your hands from her?” I asked calmly.

“You’re insane,” he sputtered. “Bridget, who is this guy? Fire him!”

I ignored him and turned to Bridget. “It’s time to go, Your Highness.” We were attracting attention, which was the last thing I wanted, but fuck if I was going to let this creep take advantage of her.

“You have an early morning tomorrow.”

She didn’t. I was giving her an out—one she didn’t take.

“Good idea.” Bridget brushed off my warning stare and placed a hand on Vincent’s chest. My pulse beat an angry drumbeat beneath my collar. “I’ll leave with Vincent. You can take the rest of the night off.”

“You heard her.” Vincent wrenched himself from my grasp and took a step behind Bridget. Coward. “Get outta here. I’ll bring her home in the morning.” He ran his eyes over Bridget’s chest and bare legs, his gaze lecherous.

The man didn’t have a single brain cell in his over-inflated head.

If he did, he would be running for his life right now.

“Wrong. This is what you’re going to do.” I kept my voice friendly. Conversational. But beneath the polite veneer ran a razor-sharp blade of steel. “You’re going to turn around, walk away, and never speak, touch, or so much as look in her direction again. Consider this your first and final warning, Mr. Hauz.”

I knew his name. He knew I knew his name. And if he was stupid enough to ignore my warning, I would hunt him down, rip off his balls, and feed them to him.

Vincent’s face flushed a mottled purple. “Are you threatening

me?"

I loomed over him, relishing the fear that skittered through his eyes. "Yes."

"Don't listen to him," Bridget said through gritted teeth. "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Vincent took another step back, oozing hatred, but the fear in his eyes remained. "Whatever. I'm over this shit." He stormed away and disappeared into the crowd of drunken partygoers.

Bridget spun toward me. "What is your problem?"

"My problem is you're acting like a drunk, spoiled brat," I snapped. "You're so shit-faced you have no idea what you're doing." "I know exactly what I'm doing." She stared up at me, all fire and defiance, and heat curled inside me. I didn't know what it was about her anger that turned me on so much. Maybe it was because it was one of the few times I could see her and not the mask she showed the world. "I'm having fun, and I'm leaving with a guy at the end of the night. You can't stop me."

I smiled coldly. "You're right. You are leaving with a guy. Me."

"No, I'm not." Bridget crossed her arms over her chest.

"You have two options." I leaned in close enough to smell her perfume. "You can either walk out of here with me like an adult, or I can throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of here like a child. Which one will it be, princess?"

She wasn't the only one pissed tonight.

I was pissed she'd spent the last half hour letting a weaselly fucker put his hands all over her. I was pissed we were fighting when we had two weeks left together. Most of all, I was pissed at how much I wanted her when I couldn't have her.

If there was one thing her move back to Eldorra made clear, it was that our relationship was a temporary one. It always had been, but it hadn't hit close to home until now.

At the end of the day, she was a princess, and I was the guy they'd hired until they didn't need me anymore.

Crimson stained Bridget's high cheekbones. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

"You forget you're not the boss here, Mr. Larsen."

The temperature of my smile dropped another ten degrees. "You want to test that theory?"

Her lips thinned. For a second, I thought she might stay just to spite me. Then, without saying a word or so much as looking at me, she pushed past me and walked toward the exit, her shoulders stiff. I followed her, my scowl dark enough to make the other clubbers scatter like marbles before me.

We took the first cab we found back to Bridget's townhouse, and it barely stopped before Bridget jumped out and sped walk to the front door. I paid the driver and caught up with her in four strides.

We entered the house, our footsteps echoing on the wood floors.

When we reached the second floor, Bridget opened her bedroom door and tried to slam it in my face, but I wedged my arm in the gap before she could do so.

"We need to talk," I said.

"I don't want to talk. You've already ruined my night. Now leave

me alone.”

“Not until you tell me what the hell’s going on.” My gaze burned into hers, searching for a hint as to what was going on in that beautiful head of hers. “You’ve been acting strange for weeks. Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Bridget gave up trying to bar me from her room and released the door. I pushed it all the way open but remained in the doorway, watching. Waiting. “I’m twenty-three, Mr. Larsen. Twenty-three-year-olds go out and drink and sleep with guys.”

A muscle ticked in my jaw. “Not the way you’ve been doing since we got back to New York.”

Not the sleeping with guys part, thank God, but the going out and drinking.

“Maybe I’m tired of living life the way I should and want to live life the way I could.” Bridget removed her jewelry and placed it on her dresser. “My grandfather almost died. One minute he was standing, the next he collapsed. What’s to say the same thing won’t happen to me?”

Her words held a ring of truth, but not the full truth. I knew every inflection of her voice, every meaning behind every movement. There was something she wasn’t telling me.

“So, you decided you want to spend your potential last moment with Vincent fucking Hauz?” I scoffed.

“You don’t even know him.”

“I know enough.”

“Please.” Bridget spun toward me, fury and something infinitely sadder glittering in her eyes. “Every time I so much as smile at a man, you bulldoze your way between us like a territorial bear. Why is that, Mr. Larsen? Especially when you told me in no uncertain terms when we first met that you don’t get involved in your clients’ personal lives.”

I didn’t answer, but my jaw continued to tick in rhythm with my pulse. Tick. Tick. Tick. A bomb waiting to go off and blow up our lives as knew it.

“Maybe...” Bridget’s expression turned contemplative as she took a step toward me. Mistake number one. “You want to be in their place.” She smiled, but the haunted look remained in her eyes. “Do you want me, Mr. Larsen? The princess and the bodyguard. It would make a nice story for your buddies.”

Mistake number two.

“You want to stop talking now, Your Highness,” I said softly.

“And be very, very careful what you do next.”

“Why?” Bridget took another step toward me, then another, until she was less than a foot away. “I’m not afraid of you. Everyone else is, but I’m not.” She placed her hand on my chest.

Mistake number three.

Her gasp hadn’t fully left her throat before I spun her around and bent her over the nearby dresser, one hand gripping her chin and forcing her head back while the other closed around her throat. My cock pressed into her ass, hard and angry.

I’d been on edge all night. Hell, I’d been on edge for two years.

The moment Bridget von Ascheberg entered my life, I’d been on a

countdown to destruction, and tonight might just be the night everything went to hell.

“You should be, princess. You wanna know why?” I growled.

“Because you’re right. I do want you. But I don’t want to kiss or make love to you. I want to fuck you. I want to punish you for mouthing off and letting another man put his hands on you. I want to yank up that tiny fucking dress of yours and pound into you so

19. Rhys

I cannot fulfill this request.

36. Bridget

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36

BRIDGET

MY DRESS POOLED AROUND MY ANKLES, LEAVING ME IN ONLY MY LACE

bra and thong. Trembles wracked me—from anticipation or the slight chill in the air, I wasn’t sure. Probably a mixture of both.

Rhys was silhouetted against the moonlight so I couldn’t see his face, but I could feel the heat of his gaze as it raked over me. Dark and possessive like a lover’s touch, leaving a trail of delicious goosebumps in its wake.

I wet my lips, dying to touch him, but knowing it was in my best interest not to move until he told me to.

“Bra. Off.”

Two seconds later, white lace joined green silk on the floor.

I reached down to shimmy out of my underwear, but a low growl halted my movements.

“I didn’t tell you to do that.” Rhys’s eyes lingered on my breasts, and my nipples, already so hard they could cut glass, pebbled further. “Keep your underwear, gloves, and heels on,” he said, still in that deceptively soft tone. “And crawl to me.”

My breath gusted out in shock even as my core spasmed at the order.

I’d never crawled for anyone in my life—while I was all but naked, no less. Even if I wasn’t the future queen, it would be degrading. Humiliating. Depraved.

And I’d never been more turned on.

I sank to my hands and knees, shivering again at the feel of the cool wood floor against my bare skin.

And I began to crawl.

The room wasn’t that big, but the anticipation made it seem end-

less. Halfway across, I glimpsed myself in the full-length mirror mounted on the wall, and my skin burned at the sight.

I still wore the elegant elbow-length gloves that came with my bridesmaid outfit, but when paired with only my heels and thong, they looked obscene.

My breathing grew choppy. I was so wet my thighs slid against each other, and by the time I reached Rhys, I was dripping all down my legs.

I stopped at his feet and looked up. I could see him more clearly now, but his expression remained unreadable except for the fire blazing in his eyes.

“Good girl.” He fisted my hair with one hand and used the other to unbuckle his pants. His cock sprung out, thick and hard, the swollen head dripping with pre-cum.

God, I needed to taste him. No one had ever turned me on as much as he did. Every word, every touch, every glance. I wanted it all.

I stared at him with pleading eyes.

Rhys hadn’t finished nodding before I took him in my mouth, savoring his groans and the way he pulled my hair as I eagerly licked and sucked.

“What would your people say if they could see you now, princess?” he grunted, pushing his cock deeper until it hit the back of my throat. I spluttered, my eyes watering from the sheer size of him. “Crawling and choking on your bodyguard’s cock?”

I moaned out an unintelligible response. My hand drifted between my legs, but I didn’t make contact before he yanked me up and captured my mouth in a hard, punishing kiss.

He was still angry about Steffan. I could taste it on his tongue, feel it in the roughness of his hands as he squeezed my ass.

“You’re more than just a bodyguard to me.” I needed him to understand that, even amid our lust-drenched haze.

“Yeah, I can get you off, too,” Rhys said caustically. “Bet none of the lily-livered aristocrats out there can fuck you the way you need.” I didn’t take the bait. “It’s more than that.”

It was the closest I’d come to voicing what was in my heart.

Something vulnerable flickered in Rhys’s eyes, and his touch gentled for a second before his face hardened again. He spun me around and bent me over the table, pressing his body against mine until every inch of him melded into every inch of me.

He lowered his mouth to my ear and tangled one of his hands with mine. “I want you to know something, princess,” he said, his voice a hoarse rasp against my skin. “There’s not much in the world I want to claim as mine. I’ve seen and done too much shit in my life to believe in forever. But you...” He grasped my chin with his free hand. “You belong to me. I don’t give a fuck what the law or anyone else says. You are mine. Understand?”

“Yes.” I squeezed his hand, my heart and body aching for completely different reasons.

Rhys exhaled a harsh, shuddering breath and pulled back. I was about to protest before he roughly parted my thighs and yanked my underwear down.

The ball of anticipation in my stomach coiled tighter.

“There’s something else you should know.” He dragged two fingers through my wetness before shoving them in my mouth, forcing me to taste my juices. An unbidden moan slipped out at the unfamiliar tang on my tongue. “I don’t like it when other people touch what’s mine. Especially when it’s a date who’s not me.”

I knew I’d been in trouble the minute I said that.

“But maybe you need a lesson to drive that point home.” Rhys rubbed his thumb over my swollen clit before his palm landed where his thumb had been. My body jerked, and a yelp of surprise and pain tore from my throat, but Rhys’s fingers in my mouth muffled the sound.

His palm landed on my pussy again with a loud slap. And again. And again.

I was shaking, my eyes filled with tears as razor-sharp sensation spiked through me. My entire world had narrowed to the pulsing heat between my legs and the man who doled out pain and pleasure in equal measure.

“Who does your pussy belong to?” Rhys removed his fingers from my mouth and squeezed my breast.

“You,” I gasped, clutching the edge of the table so hard my knuckles turned white.

“Say it again.” Hard. Demanding. Authoritative.

“You! My pussy belongs to you.” My voice broke in a sob as he delivered another stinging slap to my clit.

“That’s right. It belongs to me, and don’t you ever forget it.” Slap.

I let out a keening wail, trying to scrabble away and push back harder against him at the same time. I couldn’t tell whether I loved or hated what was happening, only that I was dripping and burning and every scrape of my nipples against the wooden table sent another jolt of heat straight to my throbbing clit.

“Are you going to dance with your date again?” Rhys’s voice sounded remarkably even, if tightly controlled.

I shook my head, the tears sliding down my cheeks.

“Good.” Slap. “You are so wet, princess.” Slap. “You should see how pretty and swollen your clit looks right now. Like it’s begging for me to spank it harder.” SLAP.

It was too much. The words, the brutal, filthy punishment, the fact we were doing this just around the corner and down the hall from my family and friends.

I exploded. Hard. Long. Violent. Ears buzzing, knees buckling, showers of lights bursting behind my eyes. I would’ve fallen to the floor had Rhys not held me up while the strongest orgasm of my life tore through me like an electric storm, and I had to drop my head and bury my face in my arm to stifle my screams.

I was still riding out the waves of my mind-shattering release when I felt Rhys’s tongue gently stroke my clit, licking and soothing until the burn faded.

Just as I gathered myself together, he stood and slowly pushed his cock inside of me. He withdrew equally slowly, until just the tip remained inside, and paused. I inhaled, but my first real breath of the night broke into a squeal when he suddenly slammed into me with a vicious thrust. His fist in my hair kept me in place as he bottomed out with each downward stroke, and the contrast between the

gentleness of his entry and the savage fury with which he now fucked me scrambled my senses to the point where I could only hold on to the table for dear life.

In and out. Harder and faster each time until the tingles at the base of my spine came back to life, and I crashed over the edge again.

“Oh, God, Rhys.”

“That’s it, princess.” He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, his movements growing jerkier. He was about to come, too. “Such a good girl. Come for me.”

29. Bridget

In Chapter 29 of the novel, Bridget and Rhys navigate the complexities of their clandestine relationship amidst Bridget's royal duties in Athenberg. After returning from a highly successful goodwill tour, Bridget's popularity soars, contrasting with the lower approval ratings of the Speaker, Erhall. Despite the thrill of their secret meetings, Bridget's responsibilities continue to demand her attention, particularly in advocating for the citizens of Eldorra during her meetings with the Speaker and the King.

Bridget introduces the Citizen Letters program, hoping to bring attention to various concerns, although she's aware of the Speaker's likely inaction. Her efforts to address the issues of Eldorra's people clash with Erhall's dismissive attitude and the challenges posed by her political rivals, including Andreas, who smirks at her advocacy.

One such meeting takes a sensual turn for Bridget when Rhys decides to spice up her day with a vibrator. The daring game between them escalates, challenging Bridget to maintain her composure in front of her grandfather, Erhall, and Andreas. Despite the awkward interruption by Mikaela, Bridget and Rhys manage to find pleasure and connection amidst the risk of discovery.

The chapter concludes with Bridget quickly composing herself to address Mikaela's concerns and meetings, though internally, she relishes the freedom and exhilaration her relationship with Rhys provides. Their love affair, peppered with risks and heated moments, adds a layer of excitement to Bridget's life but also underscores the tension between her public duties and private desires.

16. Bridget

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16

BRIDGET

WAS IT POSSIBLE TO DIE OF HUMILIATION?

Forty-eight hours ago, I would've said no, but as I ate breakfast across the table from Rhys, I found myself firmly in the yes camp. I would either explode from how red my face was or melt into a puddle of mortification, whichever came first.

“More bacon?” He pushed the plate in my direction.

I shook my head, unable to meet his eye.

I woke up that morning with a pounding headache, throbbing heat between my legs, and a horrifically clear memory of the things I’d done—and said—last night.

Fuck me the way you just promised.

Four, have an orgasm I didn’t give myself. It’s been a while.

I choked on my toast and broke into a coughing fit.

Rhys’s eyebrows rose. “You okay?” He’d been cool and calm all morning, like nothing had happened, and I wasn’t sure whether I was relieved or offended.

“Yes,” I gasped. I grabbed my water and downed half of it until the coughs subsided.

“You should eat more carbs,” he said mildly. “Might help with the hangover.”

“How do you know I have a hangover?”

“You had five shots last night, all containing different liquors. It’s a safe guess.”

His acknowledgment that any part of last night happened only intensified my embarrassment. I wished I could wipe all the events post-Borgia from both our minds.

Since I couldn’t, I was tempted to play it off and pretend I didn’t remember what happened, but I did remember, and if I didn’t address it, it would haunt me forever.

“Listen. About last night...” I forced myself to look at Rhys. “I was drunk and not thinking clearly, and I said some things I shouldn’t have said. I’m sorry if it made you uncomfortable.”

Something akin to disappointment flickered across Rhys’s face before it disappeared. “So did I,” he said. “Call it even.”

I don’t want to kiss or make love to you. I want to fuck you. I want to punish you for mouthing off and letting another man put his hands on you. I want to yank up that tiny fucking dress of yours and pound into you so hard you won’t be able to walk for days.

A bead of sweat popped out on my brow. I shifted on my stool, trying to ease the throbbing in my clit, but it only made things worse.

I shouldn’t have said the things I’d said, but that didn’t mean I hadn’t meant them. When Rhys had me bent over the dresser with his cock pressed against me...

I gulped down the rest of my water to ease the heat flaming across my skin.

“In that case, the best path forward is to pretend last night didn’t happen and never speak of it again.”

I really needed more water. And air conditioning. And possibly an ice bath.

“Fine by me.” Rhys leaned against the counter and rested one hand on the countertop while sipping coffee from the mug in his other hand. It was a casual, everyday movement that had no business being as hot as it was. “Except for one thing.”

Oh, God. “And that would be...?”

“Your bucket list.” Those gunmetal eyes drilled into me. “You really want to do all those things before going back to Eldorra?”

Not what I’d expected him to say.

I breathed a sigh of relief before I remembered bucket list number four and blushed all over again. “Yes, but most of it probably isn’t possible.”

It was more a fantasy list than a bucket list. I knew that when I came up with the items, but a girl could hope.

“What if I told you they were?” Rhys placed his mug in the sink before turning to face me again.

33. Rhys

In this chapter, Rhys grapples with the emotional turmoil stirred by his deepening feelings for Bridget amidst the backdrop of a high-profile royal wedding. The imminent arrival of Bridget's brother and his fiancée marks the beginning of a hectic period filled with pre-wedding commitments, pulling Bridget further into royal duties and away from Rhys. This separation fuels Rhys's resentment towards Steffan, Bridget's suitor, who poses a threat to Rhys's unacknowledged desires for a relationship with her.

Rhys's internal conflict is portrayed through his struggle to maintain composure in his daily life, illustrating the hold Bridget has on him beyond mere attraction. This battle with his emotions is punctuated by an unexpected visit from Prince Andreas, Bridget's cousin. Andreas's subtle provocations and insinuations reveal a complex web of family dynamics and political ambitions that challenge Rhys's previously straightforward life. The prince hints at potential shifts in the royal succession and questions Bridget's desires, stirring doubts about the future.

The encounter with Andreas leaves Rhys on edge, questioning the prince's motives and the implications for his relationship with Bridget. Despite his strong feelings, Rhys is acutely aware of the societal and political barriers that stand between him and Bridget, highlighted by Andreas's manipulative conversation implying Bridget might be happier abdicating her royal duties for love. This suggests Andreas's own ambitions towards the throne and hints at a broader struggle within the royal family.

However, the tension momentarily breaks when Bridget calls Rhys. Her initiative to reach out and the playful exchange between them underscore their deep connection, providing a stark contrast to the chapter's earlier conflicts. This call represents a momentary escape for Rhys, offering a glimmer of hope and intimacy in the midst of chaos.

Overall, this chapter delves into the personal and political entanglements faced by the characters, setting the stage for potential conflicts and alliances. Rhys's loyalty is tested, and Bridget's call signifies a pivotal moment of respite and connection, reinforcing the complexity of their relationship amidst royal expectations and personal desires.

27. Bridget

Bridget embarked on a goodwill tour across Eldorra with her team, including a bodyguard named Rhys, to reconnect with her future subjects and understand their concerns. Despite holding no legislative power, she promised a struggling dairy farmer, Ida, that she would ensure the voices of Eldorrans like her were heard in Parliament. This impulsive promise worried her team, who feared complicating relations with Parliament, but Bridget insisted, showing her commitment to her future role as queen.

Throughout the tour, Bridget felt more fulfilled engaging with locals than attending official palace events, finding purpose beyond the ceremonial aspects of her position. She discovered issues like the struggling dairy industry firsthand, offering a direct line of communication to herself in an attempt to help.

Meanwhile, a deep and complicated connection developed between Bridget and Rhys. Despite Rhys's initial animosity toward Eldorra—rooted in personal pain and a tragic past mission that soured him on the country—his protectiveness and affection for Bridget grew. Their mutual attraction culminated in a highly charged encounter outside Bridget's room, during which the intensity of their feelings and desires became impossible to ignore. Rhys revealed deep-seated resentment toward Eldorra tied to personal loss and a disastrous military operation, adding complexity to his character.

Rhys's struggle with his feelings for Bridget and his past experiences in Eldorra highlighted his emotional depth. Their relationship reached a turning point late one night, indicating a shift from professional boundaries to personal involvement, fraught with potential repercussions for both their futures and responsibilities.

The chapter weaves themes of duty, personal growth, and forbidden romance, depicting Bridget's evolution from a reluctant heir to a proactive figure keen on making real changes. It sets the stage for further development in Bridget's journey towards leadership and the inevitable challenges she and Rhys will face as they navigate their burgeoning relationship against the backdrop of royal expectations and personal demons.

43. Bridget

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43

BRIDGET

THE PALACE ASSIGNED BOOTH AS MY BODYGUARD AGAIN. I'D BEEN IN A terrible mood since Rhys left, and the palace handlers assumed it would help if someone I knew and liked replaced him.

Booth took the role after Edvard left the hospital two weeks ago, and while no one could replace Rhys, it was nice to see Booth's smiling face again.

"Just like old times, huh, Your Highness?" he said as we waited for Elin and Steffan in my office. I usually didn't have a guard in the palace, but meetings with external guests were an exception.

I forced a smile. "Yes."

Booth hesitated, then added, "A lot has changed over the years.

I'm no Mr. Larsen, but I'll try my best."

A fierce ache gripped my chest at Rhys's name. "I know. I'm glad to have you back. Truly."

And yet, thoughts of dark hair and gunmetal eyes, scars and hard-won smiles still consumed me.

There was a time when I would've given anything to have Booth as my bodyguard again. In the immediate weeks after his departure, I'd cursed him every day for leaving me alone with Rhys.

Insufferable, domineering, arrogant Rhys, who refused to let me walk on the outside of sidewalks and treated every visit to a bar like a mission into a war zone. Who scowled more than he laughed and argued more than he talked.

Rhys, who'd planned a last-minute trip for me so I could fulfill

my bucket list, even though it must've gone against his every instinct as a bodyguard, and who kissed me like the world was ending and I was his last chance at salvation.

The ache intensified and spread to my throat, my eyes, my soul. He was everywhere. In the chair where we'd kissed, the desk where we'd fucked, the painting where we'd laughed over how the artist had drawn one of the subject's eyebrows a little higher and more crooked than the other, giving her a permanent expression of surprise.

Even if I left the office, he would still be there, haunting me.

The door opened, and I curled my hand around my knee to steady myself as Elin and Steffan walked in.

"Thank you for coming," I said as Steffan took the seat opposite me. It was my first time seeing him in person since he'd agreed to the engagement.

He gave me a smile that looked almost as forced as mine felt. "Of course, Your Highness. We are going to be engaged, after all."

The way he said it, I wondered if I hadn't been the only one forced into this arrangement. He'd seemed eager enough on our first two dates, but he'd been distant and distracted since he returned from Preoria.

My mind flashed back to the tension I'd picked up on between him and Malin.

An awkward silence fell before Elin cleared her throat and pulled out her pen and notebook. "Excellent. Shall we start the meeting then, Your Highness? Top of the agenda is the timing and venue for the proposals. Lord Holstein will propose in three weeks at the Royal Botanic Gardens. It'll be a good callback to your second date. We'll tell the press you've been in regular correspondence while he was in Preoria so it doesn't seem like the proposal came out of nowhere..."

The meeting dragged on. Elin's voice blurred into a running stream of noise, and Steffan sat straight-backed in his chair with a glassy look in his eyes. I felt like I was attending a business merger negotiation, which I was, in a way.

Just the fairytale girls dream of.

"...your honeymoon," Elin said. "Thoughts?"

Her expectant gaze yanked me out of the place I'd mentally escaped to while she droned on about media interviews and outfit options for the proposal.

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"We need to decide on a honeymoon location," she repeated.

"Paris is classic, if cliché. The Maldives are popular but getting too trendy. We could choose somewhere more unique, maybe in Central or South America. Brazil, Belize, Costa Rica..."

"No!"

Everyone jumped at my uncharacteristic shout. Booth's eyes grew round, and Elin's brow creased with disapproval. Only Steffan's expression remained neutral.

"No, not Costa Rica," I repeated more calmly, my heart pounding. "Anywhere but there."

I would rather honeymoon in Antarctica wearing nothing but a bikini.

Costa Rica belonged to me and Rhys. No one else.

Bucket list number four.

Have you ever been in love?

No. But I hope to be one day.

Look up, princess.

A now-familiar burn pulsed behind my eyes, and I forced myself to breathe through it until it passed.

“It’s too soon to talk about the honeymoon anyway.” My voice sounded far away, like that of one speaking in a dream. “We’re not officially engaged yet.”

“We want to iron out the details as soon as possible. Planning a royal marriage and coronation in the same year is no small feat,” Elin said. “The press will want to know.”

“Let’s get through the proposal first.” My tone brooked no opposition. “The press can wait.”

She sighed, her mouth so pinched I worried it would freeze that way. “Yes, Your Highness.”

After an hour, the meeting finally ended, and Elin rushed off to another meeting with my grandfather. Edvard had been doing well after his hospitalization, but we hadn’t discussed Rhys or what happened in his office before his heart attack yet.

I had no issues with that. I wasn’t ready for those discussions.

Meanwhile, Steffan remained in his chair. His fingers tapped out a rhythm on his thighs, and the glassy look in his eyes gave way to something more somber. “May I speak with you, Your Highness? Alone?” He glanced at Booth, who looked at me.

I nodded, and Booth slipped out of the room.

Once the door shut, I said, “You can call me Bridget. It would be odd if we were engaged and you still called me Your Highness.”

“Apologies. Force of habit, Your—Bridget.” Discomfort crossed his face before he said, “I hope this doesn’t make things too awkward, but I wanted to speak with you regarding, er, Mr. Larsen.”

Every muscle tightened. If there was one person I wanted to discuss Rhys with less than my grandfather, it was my future fiancé.

“I won’t ask you whether the, uh, news is true,” Steffan added hastily. He knew it was. Rhys’s glower throughout our first date, the cracked flowerpot at the Royal Botanic Gardens, the day he ran into us at the hotel...I could see the pieces clicking together in his head.

“It’s not my business what you did before our...engagement, and I know I’m not your first choice for a husband.”

Guilt warmed my cheeks. If we married, I wouldn’t be the only one trapped in a loveless union. “Steffan—”

“No, it’s fine.” He shook his head. “This is the life we were born into. My parents married for political convenience, and so did yours.”

True. But my parents had loved each other. They’d been lucky, until they hadn’t.

“You don’t love me, and I don’t expect you to. We...well, we’ve only spoken a few times, haven’t we? But I enjoy your company, and I’ll try my best to be a good consort. Perhaps this isn’t the fairytale love you may have dreamed of, but we could have a good life together. Our families, at least, will be happy.” Other than the twinge of bitterness coloring his last sentence, Steffan sounded like he was reciting from a teleprompter.

I studied him while he stared at the desk, his face taut and his hands gripping his knees with white-knuckled hands.

I more than recognized that expression and stance. These days, I lived them.

“Is it Malin?”

Steffan’s head jerked up, his expression resembling that of a deer in headlights. “Pardon?”

“The woman you’re in love with,” I said. “Is it Malin?”

Steffan’s throat flexed with a hard swallow. “It doesn’t matter.”

Three words. One confirmation of something we both already knew.

Neither of us wanted this. Our hearts belonged to other people, and if we married, it would be comfortable. Pleasant. Second best. But it wouldn’t be love. It would never be love.

“I think it matters quite a lot,” I said gently.

Steffan released a long breath. “When I met you at your birthday ball, I had every intention of pursuing you,” he said. “You are lovely, but then in Preoria...she was my mother’s aide while she was recovering. It was only us in the house besides my mother, and slowly, without me even realizing it...”

“You fell in love,” I finished.

He cracked a small smile. “Neither of us expected it. We couldn’t stand each other at first. But yes, I fell in love.” The smile faded. “My father found out and threatened not only to cut me off if I didn’t end the relationship, but to ensure Malin never worked again in Eldorra. He doesn’t bluff. Not when a relationship with the royal family is at stake.” Steffan rubbed a hand over his face. “Apologies, Your H—Bridget. I realize this is extremely inappropriate for me to share, considering our arrangement.”

“It’s all right. I understand.” More than most people would.

“I had a feeling you might.”

I brought up something that had been nagging me since our hotel encounter. “If you were together, why did she push you to ask me out?”

Sadness flickered in his eyes. “The hotel was our last time together,” he said. “My father had returned to Preoria and dismissed her as my mother’s aide, so we had to go somewhere where we wouldn’t... where we could be alone. She knew about you and what my father expected of me. It was her way of letting us go.”

I tried to imagine myself pushing another woman into Rhys’s arms and recoiled at the thought.

I barely knew Malin, but I hurt for her.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Silence lapsed for a beat before Steffan cleared his throat and straightened. “But I do enjoy your company, Bridget. We shall make a suitable match.”

A sad smile curved my lips. “Yes, we shall. Thank you, Steffan.”

I stayed in my office after he left, staring at the letters on my desk, the royal seal, and the calendar mounted on my wall.

Three weeks until my proposal.

Six months until my wedding.

Nine months until my coronation.

I could picture it all already. The dress, the church, the Coronation Oath, the heavy weight of the crown on my head.

I squeezed my eyes shut. The walls pressed in from all sides, and the roar of blood pounded in my ears, blocking out every other sound.

I'd grown accustomed to the idea of being queen. Part of me was actually excited to take the role and bring it into the twenty-first century. The monarchy had so many outdated customs that no longer made sense.

But I hadn't expected it to happen so soon, nor had I expected it to happen without Rhys by my side, even if it was only as my bodyguard.

Stern and steady, grumpy and protective. My rock and anchor in the storm.

Breathe, princess. You are the future queen. Don't let them intimidate you.

I wondered if Rhys had left Eldorra yet, and if he'd remember us ten, twenty, thirty years from now.

I wondered if, when he saw me on TV or in a magazine, he would think about Costa Rica and storms in a gazebo and lazy afternoons in a hotel room, or if he'd flip past with nothing more than a spark of nostalgia.

I wondered if I would haunt him as much as he haunted me.

"I wish you were here," I whispered.

My wish bounced off the walls and drifted through the room, lingering, before it finally faded into nothing.

HOURS LATER, I WAS STILL IN MY OFFICE WHEN MY GRANDFATHER showed up.

"Bridget, I'd like to speak with you."

I looked up from my pile of citizen letters, my eyes bleary. I'd been working since my meeting with Elin and Steffan, and I'd dismissed Booth long ago.

Work was the only thing keeping me going, but I hadn't realized how late it'd gotten. The late afternoon sun slanted through the windows and cast long shadows on the floor, and my stomach rumbled with anger. I hadn't eaten since my yogurt and apple—I checked the clock—seven hours ago.

Edvard stood in the doorway, his face tired but his color markedly better than it had been a few days ago.

"Grandfather!" I jumped out of my seat. "You shouldn't be up so late."

"It's not even dinnertime yet," he grumbled, walking in and sitting across from me.

"The doctors said you need rest."

"Yes, and I've had enough the past two weeks to last me a lifetime." His chin jutted out at a stubborn angle, and I sighed. There was no arguing with him when he was like this.

If there was one thing Edvard hated, it was idle hands. He'd cut back on work as the doctors had instructed, but since his duties as king had prevented him from picking up any hobbies over the years, he was going out of his mind with boredom—a fact he never failed to mention whenever he saw me or Nikolai.

"Citizen Letters program?" He examined the documents on my

desk.

“Yes, I’m finishing up this week’s batch.” I didn’t mention the backlog of emails in the official inbox. Even with two assistants helping me, we were swamped. It turned out the citizens of Eldorra had a lot to say.

I was over the moon about the program’s success, but we needed to hire more staff soon. Professionalize it instead of treating it as a side project.

“There are a few items I’d like to bring up at the next Speaker’s meeting,” I said. “I imagine Erhall will be thrilled.”

“Erhall hasn’t been thrilled since he was first elected Speaker ten years ago.” Edvard steepled his fingers beneath his chin and studied me. “You’re doing well. Holding your ground, even when he tries to undermine you. You’ve really come into your own these past few months.”

I swallowed hard. “Thank you. But I’m no you.”

“Of course not, but you shouldn’t try to be. None of us should strive to be anyone except ourselves, and you are no less than me or anyone else.” Edvard’s expression gentled. “I know it’s overwhelming, the prospect of becoming queen. Did you know, I was a wreck for months before my coronation?”

“Really?” I couldn’t imagine my proud, regal grandfather being nervous about anything.

“Yes.” He chuckled. “The night before the ceremony, I threw up in the Dowager Queen’s favorite potted plant. You should’ve heard her scream when she discovered the, ah, gift I left.”

A small laugh bubbled in my throat at the mental image his words created. My great-grandmother had died before I was born, but I’d heard she’d been a force to be reckoned with.

“The point is, it’s normal to feel that way, but I have faith in you.” Edvard tapped the royal seal on my desk. “Your coronation is coming sooner than any of us expected, but you will be a good queen. I don’t doubt that for a second.”

“I haven’t even finished my training,” I said. “Nik trained all his life to take over, and I’ve only been at it for a few months. What if I mess things up?”

Cold inched down my spine, and I pressed my hand against my knee again to keep it from bouncing.

“No one expects you to be perfect, even if it may seem that way,” Edvard said. “I admit, there’s less leeway for a king or queen to make mistakes, but you can make them, as long as you learn from them. Being a leader is not about technical knowledge. It is about you, as a person. Your compassion, your strength, your empathy. You have all that in spades. Besides...” His eyes crinkled into a smile.

“There’s no better way to learn than on the job.”

“With millions of people watching.”

“It’s a job for those who thrive under pressure,” he acknowledged.

My laugh sounded rusty after a week of non-use.

“Do you really think I can do it?” Uncertainty gnawed at me, and I tried not to think of what my mother would’ve done in my place. How much more gracefully she would’ve handled all this.

“I know it. You’re already taking charge in the Speaker’s meet-

ings, going head-to-head with Erhall, and the people love you.” Edvard radiated such confidence it reminded me of Rhys, who had never once doubted my ability to do anything.

You don’t need a crown to be queen, princess.

God, I missed him. More than I thought I could ever miss someone.

“I’m always here if you want to talk about anything pertaining to the Crown, but that’s not why I came today.” Edvard examined me, his eyes incisive despite his recent hospitalization. “I want to talk about you, Bridget. Not the princess.”

Wariness crept into my veins. “What about me?”

“You are deeply unhappy, my dear. You have been since I left the hospital.” A wry smile quirked his lips. “For my own sake, I’ll assume it’s not because you’re devastated I made it out alive. But it just so happens the time frame coincides with a certain upcoming proposal and the departure of a certain bodyguard.”

The desk blurred before I blinked and my vision cleared. “I’m fine. You were right. It was time to end things, and Steffan would make a fine consort.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Edvard’s voice deepened with regal authority, and I flinched. “You are my granddaughter. I know when you are lying, and I know when you’re miserable. Right now, you’re both.”

I wisely chose not to reply.

“I was—and still am—quite upset about your relationship with Mr. Larsen. It was reckless, and the press is still having a field day over it. But...” He heaved a sigh, filled with sadness and sympathy.

“You are, first and foremost, my granddaughter. I want you to be happy above all else. I thought what you had was a casual affair but judging by the way you’ve been walking around like a heartbroken zombie, I assume that wasn’t the case.”

I pinched myself beneath the desk to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. The sharp sting confirmed the phrase “heartbroken zombie” really had left my grandfather’s mouth.

But as out of character as the phrase was, he wasn’t wrong.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, echoing Steffan’s sentiment earlier that day. “It’s too late. I was trying to repeal the Royal Marriages Law before it became an issue, but there’s not enough time.”

“Nine months, if I remember correctly.”

“Three weeks till the proposal,” I pointed out.

“Hmm.” The sound came out loaded with meaning.

He couldn’t be saying what I thought he was saying. “Grandpa, you wanted me to break up with Rhys. You’ve been pushing me to marry Steffan all this time and...” A messy ball of emotion tangled in my throat. “You had a heart attack when I refused.”

Horror drenched his expression. “Is that what you think?” Edvard straightened, his eyes suddenly fierce. “Bridget, it wasn’t because of you or any one thing. It was because of an accumulation of stress. If anything, it was my fault for not listening to you and Nikolai.” He grimaced. “I should’ve cut back on my workload, and I didn’t. My heart attack was unfortunate timing, but it was not your fault. Do you understand?”

I nodded, the ball of emotion expanding until it filled my nose and ears. My chest felt too tight, my skin too hot, then too cold.

“I don’t blame you for what happened. Not one bit,” he said.
“And by royal decree, I order you to stop blaming yourself.”
I cracked a small smile at the same time a hot tear scalded my cheek.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Edvard let out another, heavier sigh. “Come here.”

He opened his arms, and I walked around the desk and hugged him, breathing in his familiar, comforting scent of leather and Creed cologne. Some of the tightness I’d carried around since his heart attack eased.

I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed his implicit forgiveness until now.

“You are my granddaughter, and I want you to be happy.” Edvard squeezed me tight. “We can’t break the law, but you’re a smart girl, and you have nine months. Do what you have to do. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so,” I whispered.

“Good.” He pulled back and kissed me on the forehead. “Think like a queen. And remember, the best rulers are those who can wield both the carrot and the stick in equal measure.”

The best rulers are those who can wield both the carrot and the stick in equal measure.

Edvard’s words lingered long after he’d left and the late afternoon sun morphed into the cool blues of twilight.

I picked up my phone, my mind racing with the implications of what I wanted to do.

I had one card left up my sleeve, but I hadn’t entertained the notion until now because it was manipulative, underhanded, and went

49. Bridget

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I will provide the chapter now.

49

BRIDGET

WE SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY AND NIGHT IN MY ROOM, ONLY SURFACING for food, but the next morning, reality intruded, and I was forced to extricate myself from Rhys’s arms.

As high as I was riding from our victory, I had one big issue left to deal with. I’d waited until after the vote because I couldn’t afford to be distracted before then, but it was time to face it once and for all. Rhys stayed in the bedroom while I waited for my guest in the sitting room.

I heard a knock before Mikaela poked her head in. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. Please, sit.”

She walked in and plopped into the seat next to me. “I’ve been dying to talk to you, but you didn’t answer my calls yesterday. I assume you were...busy, but oh my god, the vote! We have to celebrate! That’s ama—”

“Why did you leak the photos of me to the press?” I skipped the buildup and got straight to the point. I couldn’t stomach small talk with the proverbial black cloud hanging over us.

I kept my voice neutral, but I dug my nails so deep into the couch cushion they left tiny indentations.

I hadn’t wanted to believe it when Rhys told me. Part of me still hoped he was wrong. But Mikaela’s pale face and panicked eyes told me all I needed to know.

It was true.

Betrayal stabbed at me with sharp talons, puncturing my previously cold calm.

I didn’t have a lot of friends in Eldorra. I had acquaintances and people who sucked up to me because of my title, but no real friends. Mikaela had been the one constant by my side, and I’d trusted her.

“I...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mikaela said, avoiding my eyes.

“Rhys’s old company traced the photos back to your IP address.”

Rhys’s old boss Christian was apparently a computer genius, and Rhys had asked him to help find the leaker’s identity. I’d known for weeks Mikaela could be the culprit, and I’d had to pretend nothing was wrong until I confronted her.

If the royal thing didn’t work out, I might have a second calling as an actress.

Mikaela opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “I thought I was helping you,” she said weakly. “She told me it would help.”

“I know.”

The talons of betrayal dug deeper.

Christian had found some...interesting text messages when he’d looked into Mikaela’s correspondence with The Daily Tea, and they had thrown me for as much of a loop as the discovery Mikaela was technically the leaker.

The fact it hadn’t been Mikaela’s idea didn’t lessen the sting. She should’ve known better.

I heard another knock.

“Come in.” I didn’t take my eyes off Mikaela, who looked like she wanted to sink into the couch and never come back up.

Elin walked in, sleek and polished in her white Escada suit and three-inch pumps. Her eyes flicked over Mikaela before settling on me. “You requested to see me, Your Highness.”

“Yes. We were discussing the leaked photos of Rhys and me.” I finally tore my gaze away from my friend—ex-friend—and met Elin’s cool blue one. “Might you know anything about that?”

Elin wasn’t dumb. She picked up on my insinuation immediately, but to her credit, she didn’t feign ignorance or make excuses.

“I did it to help you, Your Highness,” she said after only one missed beat.

“By leaking private photos of me? How was that supposed to help?”

“They were not private photos.” Annoyance crept into her tone.

“They were perfectly innocent photos framed in a suggestive manner. I would’ve never leaked truly incriminating images. But if I hadn’t done that, you and Mr. Larsen would’ve continued carrying on your reckless actions, and something more scandalous would’ve popped up. It was only a matter of time. Don’t think I didn’t notice what you two tried to hide beneath my nose. I didn’t hold this job for so long by being oblivious.”

Dammit. I should’ve known Elin would catch onto our affair.

She was right. We had been reckless, too caught up in our honeymoon phase to take the usual precautions. But that didn’t make what she did right.

“And the video?”

I’d finally told Rhys about the video from Nikolai’s reception a few weeks ago. He’d been upset I kept it a secret for so long, but since nothing had come of it, he’d calmed down after, oh, five days. He had, however, also asked Christian to look into who’d sent it, and when I learned Elin was behind the video as well, I’d nearly fallen out of my seat.

The surprises never stopped coming.

Mikaela’s eyes bounced between me and Elin. “What video?”

We ignored her, too locked in our stare down.

“It’s a crime to plant cameras in a private residence,” I said. “Especially a private royal residence.”

“Prince Nikolai knew about the cameras.” Elin didn’t so much as blink. “The security chief convinced him to install secret surveillance while the house was under renovation. Too many contractors going in and out. It was a precautionary measure.”

I paused, absorbing the information, before I said, “Blackmail is also illegal.”

“I didn’t blackmail you, nor would I ever do so.” Elin’s brows drew into a tight frown. “I sent you the video hoping it would prompt you to break off your relationship with Mr. Larsen. When you didn’t, I had to leak the pictures.”

“You didn’t have to do anything. You could’ve talked to me about it first,” I said coldly. “For a communications secretary, you’re not great at communicating.”

“It wouldn’t have changed a thing. You’re stubborn, Your Highness. You would’ve told me you were ending things and gone right back to him. I had to force your hand. Plus, The Daily Tea reporter we sent the photos to had already been snooping around, hoping to find dirt. Security found him trespassing on the grounds. He was quite persistent, that one, almost like he has a personal grudge.” Elin tilted her head. “Hans Nielsen, formerly of The National Express. Ring a bell?”

Several. Hans was the paparazzo whose camera Rhys had destroyed in the cemetery last year. Apparently, he’d moved up the career ladder and held a grudge.

I flashed back to a few weeks ago, when Rhys told me he suspected someone had snooped around his guesthouse while he’d been living there. I bet it was Hans, considering it happened before Rhys and I had gotten together and Elin hired a photographer to trail us. I didn’t tell Elin any of that, though.

“Regardless, the pictures satisfied him and kept him from digging further,” Elin said when I didn’t respond. “I must say, in hindsight, your press conference was inspired, and you and Mr. Larsen made it work. Yesterday’s vote was a big win, so no harm, no foul.” Funny she called the press conference inspired now when she’d thrown a massive fit over it.

“No harm, no foul?” I repeated. “Elin, you went behind my back, created a scandal, and dragged Mikaela into it!”

Mikaela, who’d been watching the rapid-fire exchange between us with wide eyes, lowered her head.

“I needed a go-between. I couldn’t have the photos traced back to me.” Elin heaved a deep sigh. “Honestly, Your Highness, it all worked out. I fed the press a smaller scandal so they wouldn’t stumble onto a larger one. I was protecting the royal family. That has always been my number one goal.”

“Perhaps.” I steeled my spine. “I appreciate your service to the family over the years, but I’m afraid it’s time we part ways.”

Mikaela squeaked while the color leached from Elin’s face.

“You’re firing me? You can’t fire me. His Majesty—”

“Has given me the authority to make whatever staffing changes I see fit,” I finished. I pressed my hands tight against my thighs to keep from shaking. Elin was one of the palace’s longest-serving employees, and I’d always been slightly terrified of her. But while she was great at the external part of her job, I needed someone who worked with me, not someone who snuck around behind my back and tried to dictate my actions. “You stepped over the line, and you lost our trust. Mine and the king’s.”

Elin clutched her phone, her knuckles whiter than her suit. Finally, she said, “As you wish. I’ll have my desk cleared out by the end of the week.” A muscle twitched beneath her eye, but otherwise, she showed no emotion. “Is there anything else, Your Highness?” Brisk and efficient to the end.

“No,” I said, feeling strangely melancholy. Elin and I had never been close, but it was the end of an era. “You’re dismissed.”

She gave me a tight nod and walked out. She wasn’t one for dramatics, and she knew me well enough to know when I’d set my mind on something.

“You too,” I told Mikaela.

“Bridget, I swear—”

“I need to think things through.” Maybe I would forgive her one day, but her betrayal was still fresh and nothing she said right now would penetrate the hurt. “I don’t know how long that’s going to take, but I need time.”

“Fair enough.” Her chin wobbled. “I really was trying to help. Elin was so convincing. I didn’t believe her at first when she said you and Rhys had something going on. But then I thought about the way you looked at each other, and that time you took so long to answer the door at your office...it all made sense. She said you would get in huge trouble if—”

“Mikaela, please.” I pressed my fingers to my forehead. It hurt almost as much as my heart. If I were old Bridget, perhaps I would’ve let what she did slide, but I couldn’t afford to let things slide anymore. I needed people I could trust around me. “Not right

now.”

Mikaela swallowed hard, her freckles stark against her pale skin, but she left without trying to make excuses again.

I expelled a sharp breath. The conversation had been shorter but harder than I’d expected, even after weeks of mental preparation. I supposed nothing could fully prepare someone for firing one of their longest-serving employees and saying goodbye to one of their oldest friends in the span of half an hour.

I heard Rhys come up behind me. He didn’t speak. He just swept his palms over my shoulders and massaged the muscles with his thumbs.

“I’d hoped you were wrong.” I stared at where Mikaela had sat, the sting of betrayal lingering on my skin.

“Princess, I’m never wrong.”

I released a half laugh, breaking some of the tension. “I can think of a few instances when you were.”

“Yeah? Like when?” Rhys challenged, a hint of amusement shining through.

I deepened my voice to mimic him. “One, I do not become personally involved in my clients’ lives. I am here to safeguard you from physical harm. That is all. I am not here to be your friend, confidant, or anything else. This ensures my judgment remains uncompromised.” I reverted to my regular voice. “How’d that work out for you, Mr. Larsen?”

He stopped massaging my shoulders and curled one hand around my throat. My pulse jumped as he lowered his head until his lips grazed my ear. “Mocking me? Do you need a refresher lesson already, Your Highness?”

Another piece of tension cracked.

“Maybe. You might want to brush up on your teaching skills, Mr. Larsen,” I said, playing along. “The lessons should last longer than a couple hours.”

Another laugh escaped when Rhys picked me up and swung me around until we faced each other, and my limbs wrapped around his neck and waist.

“I knew you were trouble the moment I saw you.” He squeezed my ass, hard, but those steel-gray eyes were soft as he examined me. “You did what you had to do, princess.”

Despite the gruff delivery, his single short sentence comforted me more an entire speech from someone else could.

“I know.” I rested my forehead against his, tightness ballooning in my chest. “But there are so few people I can turn to here, and I just lost two of them in one day.”

Too much was changing too fast. Some of it was good, some of it was nerve-wracking. Either way, I could barely keep up.

“You have me.”

“I know,” I repeated, softer this time.

“Good. And for the record...” Rhys’s lips tilted up into a small smile. “I’ve never been happier to be wrong. Fuck personally involved. That’s not good enough. I want to be in your mind, in your heart,

18. Bridget

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18

BRIDGET

WE SPENT FOUR GLORIOUS, PERFECT DAYS IN COSTA RICA.

I woke up late, went to bed late, and spent my days eating, sunbathing, and reading a romance novel I'd picked up at the airport. Bucket list number two.

On our third day, Rhys drove us two hours to Monteverde for zip lining. He said the company was the best in the area and he'd zip-lined with them several times himself.

Still, his face was taut with tension as I prepared to go down the longest zip line. We'd only done the shorter cables until now, and they were fun, but I was ready for more.

The one I was about to get on stretched high above the cloud forest, so long I couldn't see the other end of it. A mixture of excitement and nerves twisted in my stomach.

"Check her again," Rhys said after our guide gave me the thumbs up.

No one bothered arguing. Rhys made the guide triple-check my harness before I went down every line, and arguing was futile.

"If you get stuck, don't panic," Rhys said after the guide okayed me—again. "We'll come get you."

"By 'we'll,' he means me," the guide joked. "But yes, we will come get you. Don't worry, miss."

"I hadn't thought about getting stuck until now, so thank you for that," I said wryly.

Rhys's stern expression didn't budge, but all thoughts of his grumpiness disappeared when I got into position. The guide gave me a push, and I finally raced down the line. The wind whipped through my hair, and I couldn't hold back a huge grin.

Ziplining looked scary from the ground, but once I was in the air? It was exhilarating.

I closed my eyes, savoring the wind and the feeling of being away from it all. No worries, no responsibilities, just me and nature.

When I made it to the next treetop platform, I was still riding high from the zip line, and I couldn't resist teasing Rhys again when he landed shortly after me.

"See? I'm fine," I said. "You didn't have to pick up pieces of me from the ground."

He did not look amused at all, but I didn't care.

Bucket list number three, check.

For all his overprotectiveness, Rhys was more relaxed down here. Not fully relaxed, mind you, but he'd ditched his all-black outfits for shorts and—gasp—white T-shirts, and he agreed to most of the activities I wanted to do with minimal complaint, including parasailing and an ATV tour.

The one thing he refused to do, however, was get in the pool with me, and on our last night, I made a last-ditch effort to change his mind.

“I’ve never heard of a Navy SEAL who doesn’t swim.” I stepped onto the terrace, where Rhys was drawing in his sketchbook. He hadn’t shown me any of his sketches yet, and I hadn’t asked. Art was deeply personal, and I didn’t want to force him to show me anything if he didn’t want to. “Come on. It’s our last day, and you haven’t taken advantage of this once.” I swept my arm at the gleaming pool.

“It’s a pool, princess.” Rhys didn’t look up from his book. “I’ve been in pools before.”

“Prove it.”

No answer.

“Fine. I guess I’ll swim by myself. Again.” I shrugged off my cover-up and let the filmy white material cascade to the floor before I walked past Rhys toward the water.

I may have walked more slowly than normal and added an extra sway to my hips.

I may also have worn my skimpiest, most scandalous bikini. I did, after all, have one more bucket list item to check off.

I’d been drunk when I’d told Rhys about my bucket list, but I was sober now, and I still wanted him to help me fulfill item number four.

I was attracted to him; he was attracted to me. That much was obvious after what happened in my room post-Borgia. He wasn’t going to be my bodyguard much longer, and no one would know unless we told them.

One wild, passionate hookup with my sexy bodyguard before I took on the duty of a lifetime. Was that too much to ask?

I waded into the pool and bit back a smile when I felt the heat of Rhys’s gaze on my skin, but I didn’t turn around until I’d reached the far edge of the water. By the time I looked at him, Rhys’s head was bent over his sketchbook again, but his shoulders held a tension that hadn’t been there before.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join me?” I cajoled. “The water feels amazing.”

“I’m good,” he said curtly.

I sighed and let it go...for now.

While he sketched, I swam laps around the pool, reveling in the water against my skin and the sunshine on my back.

When I finally came up for a break, it was near sunset, and the warmth of golden hour cast a hazy, dreamlike glow over the surroundings.

“Last chance, Mr. Larsen.” I slicked my hair back and blinked the water out of my eyes. “Swim now or forever hold your peace.”

It was cheesy, but it made Rhys’s lips curve before they flattened into a stern line again. “You gonna stop bugging me if I say no?”

I grinned. “Probably not.”

My heart jumped when he closed his book, set it on the table, and stood.

I hadn’t expected him to give in.

Rhys walked to the pool, pulling his shirt over his head as he did

so, and I lost the ability to breathe.

Broad shoulders, perfectly sculpted muscles, abs one could grate cheese on. Absolute masculine perfection.

My core pulsed as my eyes ate him up. Tattoos swirled across his chest, both biceps, and one side of his ribcage, and a deep V cut arched toward what—based on what I'd felt when he'd bent me over my dresser—was a very impressive package.

Rhys entered the water and swam toward me, his big, powerful body slicing through the liquid blue as gracefully as a dolphin.

“There. I'm in the pool.” He came up beside me, a lock of damp dark hair falling over his eye, and I resisted the urge to push it out of his face. “Happy?”

“Yes. You should go shirtless more often.”

Rhys's eyebrows shot up, and my cheeks flamed before I quickly amended, “You seem more relaxed that way. Less intimidating.”

“Princess, it's my job to be intimidating.”

If I never heard the words it's my job again, it would be too soon.

“You know what I mean,” I grumbled. “You're always so on edge in the city.”

He shrugged. “That's what happens when you have C-PTSD.”

Complex PTSD. I'd looked it up after he told me he had it. Symptoms included hyper-vigilance, or being constantly on guard for threats. Unlike regular PTSD, which was caused by a singular traumatic event, complex PTSD resulted from long-lasting trauma that continued for months or even years.

My heart squeezed at the thought of what he must've gone through to be diagnosed with the condition. “Does the art help?”

“Kind of.” Rhys's face was unreadable. “But I haven't been able to draw anything in months.” He jerked his chin toward the table. “I was just messing around. Seeing what I came up with.”

“When you do, I want to see it. I love a good security alarm sketch,” I joked before I remembered we only had one week left together.

My smile faded.

Rhys watched me closely. “If that's what you want.”

I wanted a lot of things, but none of them had to do with art.

“Can I tell you something, Mr. Larsen?”

He dipped his head.

“I'm going to miss you.”

He went still, so still I thought he didn't hear me. Then, in an uncharacteristically, achingly soft voice, he said, “I'm going to miss you too, princess.”

So don't go. There had to be a way he could stay. He wasn't part of the Royal Guard, but he'd been with me for two years. I didn't see why I had to change guards just because I was moving back to Eldorra.

Except for, of course, the fact Rhys would have to move to Eldorra with me. He may have lived with me all this time, but there was a difference between live-in protection in the U.S. and moving to a different country for an indeterminate length of time. Plus, he'd resigned first.

Even if I convinced the palace to extend his contract, would he be willing to accept the offer?

I'd been too afraid to ask in case he said no, but the clock was ticking.

A loud pop went off in the distance before I could broach the subject, and Rhys turned sharply to see fireworks explode in the sky. He relaxed. I didn't, because I finally understood why he'd never taken his shirt off around me before.

His back—his strong, beautiful back—was covered with scars. They crisscrossed his skin in angry, near-white slashes, peppered with a few round marks I was positive were cigarette burn scars. Judging by the way Rhys's shoulders tensed, he must've realized his mistake, but he didn't hide them again. There was no point. I'd already seen them, and we both knew it.

"What happened?" I whispered.

There was a long silence before he responded. "My mother liked her belt," he said flatly.

I sucked in a breath, and my stomach lurched with nausea. His mother did that to him?

"No one said or did anything? Teachers, neighbors?" I couldn't imagine abuse of that level going unnoticed.

Rhys shrugged. "There were plenty of kids in bad home situations where I came from. Some of them had it a lot worse than me. One kid getting 'disciplined' wasn't going to raise any eyebrows." I wanted to cry at the thought of young Rhys so alone he was nothing more than a statistic to those who should've looked out for him.

I didn't hate a lot of people, but I suddenly hated everyone who knew or suspected what he'd been going through and didn't do a damn thing about it.

"Why would she do this?" I brushed my fingers over his back, my touch so light it was barely a touch. His muscles bunched beneath my fingers, but he didn't pull away.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. "It's about a beautiful young girl who grew up in a small, shitty town she'd always dreamed of escaping. One day, she met a man who was in town for a few months for business. He was handsome. Charming. He promised he'd take her with him when he left, and she believed him. She fell in love, and they had a passionate affair. But then, she got pregnant. And when she told this man who'd claimed to love her, he grew angry and accused her of trying to trap him. The next day, he was gone. Just like that. No trace of where he went, and it turned out even the name he gave her was fake. She was alone, pregnant, and broke. No friends and parents to help her out. She kept the baby, perhaps out of hope the man would return for them one day, but he never did. She turned to drugs and alcohol for comfort, and she became a different person. Meaner. Harder. She blamed the kid for ruining her chance at happiness, and she took out her anger and frustration on him. Usually with a belt."

As he spoke, his voice so low I could barely hear him, the pieces fell into place one by one. Why Rhys refused to drink, why he rarely talked about his family and childhood, his C-PTSD...perhaps it was the result of his childhood as much as it had been his military service.

A small part of me empathized with his mother and the pain she

must've gone through, but no amount of pain justified taking it out on an innocent child.

"It wasn't the boy's fault," I said. A tear slid down my cheek before I could stop it. "I hope he knows that."

"He knows," Rhys said. He rubbed my tear away with his thumb. "Don't cry for him, princess. He's all right."

For some reason, that made me cry harder. It was the first time I'd cried in front of anyone since my dad died, and I would've been embarrassed had I not been so heartbroken.

"Shhh." He wiped away another tear, his brows drawn into a deep frown. "I shouldn't have told you. It's not the best way to end a vacation."

"No. I'm glad you did." I reached up and covered his hand with mine before he could pull away. "Thank you for sharing it with me. It means a lot."

It was the most Rhys had opened up to me since we met, and I wasn't taking it for granted.

38. Bridget

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I will provide the chapter now.

38

BRIDGET

I WAS A MESS OF NERVES FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK. I TRIED TO HIDE IT, but everyone noticed—Rhys, Mikaela, my family. I blamed it on stress, but I wasn't sure anyone believed me.

I didn't tell anyone about the video. Not yet. The sender hadn't contacted me since, and my replies to their email all bounced. I convinced Nikolai and Sabrina's security team to sweep their house for bugs as a "preventative measure," but they didn't find anything, not even in the library.

It should've made me feel better, but it only put me more on edge. Whoever the sender was, they could move in and out of one of the city's most highly guarded buildings without being detected, and that wasn't good. At all.

My top suspect was Andreas, but he wasn't the type to hold back. If he had a damning video of me and Rhys, he would hold it over my head. Taunt me with it. Probably blackmail me. He wouldn't send it once and not follow up again for almost a week. He'd looked for me at the reception—I still didn't know what for, as I hadn't seen him since the wedding and he hadn't contacted me—but that was while Rhys and I were in the library.

If it wasn't Andreas, who could it be? And when would the other shoe drop?

Because there was another shoe. I was sure of it.

“Something’s bothering you,” Rhys said on our way back to the palace from a charity shop ribbon-cutting ceremony. “Don’t tell me it’s stress. It’s not.”

I mustered a weak smile. “You think you know everything.”

I should tell Rhys. He’d know what to do. But a small, stupid, selfish part of me was afraid of what telling him would do to us. If he found out someone knew about us, would he withdraw and break things off?

If I didn’t tell him, though, the video could blow up in our faces, and I’d lose him anyway.

My head ached with indecision.

“I know everything about you.” Rhys’s words rolled over me, deep and confident.

Just tell him. Get it over with like ripping off a Band-Aid. Otherwise, the secret would hang over my head for God knew how long, like a guillotine waiting to strike.

Before I could broach the subject, however, the car stopped. I’d been so caught up in my thoughts I hadn’t realized we were heading away from the palace instead of toward it.

Rhys had parked on the side of the road, next to a forest on the outskirts of Athenberg. I’d camped there once with Nikolai in high school—under strict supervision, of course—but I hadn’t been back since.

“Trust me,” he said when he noticed my confusion, which only increased as he led me through the forest. A clear trail snaked between the trees, so other people must’ve taken the shortcut, even though the forest had a main entrance with a gift shop and parking lot.

“Where are we going?” I whispered, not wanting to break the reverent hush blanketing the trees.

“You’ll see.”

Cryptic as always.

I sighed, equally annoyed and intrigued.

Part of me wanted to tell him about the video now, but I couldn’t very well ruin the mood before I saw the surprise, could I?

Excuses, excuses, my conscience whispered.

I ignored it.

When we arrived at our destination, though, I couldn’t hold back a small gasp. “Rhys…”

We stood in a clearing, empty of everything except for a large, beautiful gazebo. I didn’t even know the forest had a gazebo.

My heart pinched at the clear callback to our first time together.

“If we get caught, pull rank.” Rhys held out his hand. I took it and followed him inside the wooden structure. “We’re pretty far from the main trail though, so we should be fine.”

“How did you find this place? You’re like the Gazebo Whisperer.”

He laughed. “I planned on hiking here sometime and studied the trail maps. The gazebo isn’t a secret. Most people are just too lazy to come all the way out here.”

“Why…” I trailed off again when he fiddled with something on his phone and soft music filled the air.

“We never got to dance at the wedding,” he said simply.

“You don’t like it when I dance,” I half-joked, trying to hide the emotion welling in my chest.

What happened in the library during Nikolai’s reception would forever be etched in my mind.

“I love it when you dance. But only with me.” He placed his free hand on the small of my back.

“You don’t dance.”

“Only with you.”

The burn intensified. “Careful, Mr. Larsen, or I’ll think you actually like me.”

His mouth curled into a grin. “Baby, we’re way beyond like.”

The butterflies in my stomach exploded, and a sweet, golden warmth filled my veins.

For the first time in days, I smiled.

I stepped into Rhys’s embrace, and we swayed to the music while I buried my face in his chest and inhaled his clean, comforting scent.

Our dances would always be ours. Secret, private...forbidden.

Part of me cherished the moments that belonged to us alone, but part of me wished we didn’t have to hide. We weren’t a dirty secret.

We were the most beautiful thing in my life, and I wanted to share it with the world the way all beautiful things deserved to be shared.

“Where’d you go, princess?” He skimmed his knuckles down my back, and I smiled through the ache in my heart.

He knew me so well.

“I’m right here.” I tilted my face up and kissed him. We took it slow and sweet, exploring each other with the leisure of people who had all the time in the world.

Except we didn’t.

The kiss, the music, the gazebo...it was the perfect moment. But, like all moments, it couldn’t last.

Eventually, it would end, and so would we.

“BRIDGET, WAKE UP!”

The next morning, loud pounding roused me from my sleep.

I groaned, my body resisting movement even as my heart involuntarily galloped at the sheer panic in Mikaela’s voice.

“Bridget!” More pounding.

“One moment!” I forced myself out of bed and threw on a dressing gown before I opened the door, taking in Mikaela’s wide eyes and nervous expression. Her skin was paler than usual, making her freckles stand out like a dark constellation across her nose and cheeks.

She lived only a few minutes from the palace, but she wouldn’t be here so early unless it was an emergency.

“What is it?”

Was it the video?

My stomach lurched. God, I should’ve told Rhys yesterday, but I hadn’t wanted to destroy our time at the gazebo, and then...then...

Oh, who was I kidding? I had plenty of time to tell him afterward. I’d just chickened out like a coward, and now, the chickens were coming home to roost.

Breathe. Stay calm. You don’t know what’s actually happening yet.

“It’s...” Mikaela hesitated. “Bridge, turn on The Daily Tea.”

The Daily Tea was a celebrity news and entertainment media company that included the country's most-read magazine and one of its most-watched television stations. Some considered it trashy, but it had a huge audience.

Mikaela followed me to the sitting room, where I picked up the remote with shaky hands and turned on the TV.

"...reports Princess Bridget is in a relationship with her body-guard, an American contractor named Rhys Larsen." The Daily Tea host's voice trembled with excitement. "Larsen has been by her side since her senior year at the prestigious Thayer University in the U.S., and suspicions about their relationship have abounded for years..."

For years? That was, for lack of better words, utter bull crap. Rhys and I hadn't even liked each other years ago.

I watched, disbelief searing through me, as candid pictures of us flashed on-screen with the host's voiceover commentary. Us walking down the street with Rhys's hand on my lower back—to steer me around a puddle when I wasn't looking, if I remembered correctly. Rhys helping me out of the car at a charity gala while our eyes locked onto each other. Me standing a little too close to him at an outdoor event a few months ago, but only because it was freezing and I needed the body warmth.

All innocent moments that, framed in a certain way and captured at a certain second, made them look like more than they were.

Then the more damning photos surfaced. Rhys glaring at Steffan during our ice-skating date, looking for all the world like a jealous boyfriend. Him pressing me against the car in the parking lot of the Royal Botanic Gardens. Us leaving the hotel where we'd spent that one glorious afternoon, our heads bent close together.

How the hell had someone captured those pictures? Other than the ice rink, we hadn't spotted any paparazzi following us. Then again, we'd been distracted—horribly so.

On the bright side, there was no mention of the sex tape. If The Daily Tea had gotten their hands on it, it would be the only thing they talked about.

"Is this true?" Mikaela asked, her eyes huge. "Tell me it's not true."

"They're just pictures," I deflected.

I breathed a little easier. Only a little, because it was still a huge mess, but it was fixable. They didn't have the video. "We can—" "BRIDGET!"

Mikaela and I exchanged wide-eyed glances as my grandfather's bellow thundered down the hall.

Uh-oh.

AN HOUR LATER, I SAT IN MY GRANDFATHER'S OFFICE WITH ELIN, Markus, and Nikolai, who'd insisted on joining the emergency meeting. Mikaela had been politely but firmly dismissed. I wasn't sure where Rhys was, but it would only be a matter of time before he was roped into the conversation.

"Your Highness, you must tell us the truth. It's the only way we can help you fix this." Whenever Elin was pissed, her left eye would twitch, and right now, it was twitching hard enough to pop a blood vessel. "Is there any truth to the allegations?"

I'd reached a fork in the road.

I could either lie and drag out the charade, or I could tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may.

If I did the latter, Rhys would be fired, but he was probably already on the chopping block whether or not the allegations were true. He was too high profile now, and people would gossip regardless. The palace couldn't afford that kind of distraction.

But if I lied, I could at least buy us some time. Not a lot, but some, and that was better than nothing.

"Bridge, you can trust us," Nikolai said gently. "We're here to help you."

Not really, I wanted to say. You're here to help the crown and its reputation.

Perhaps that was unfair, but it was true to varying extents. They didn't care about me, Bridget. They cared about the princess, the crown, and our image.

My grandfather and brother loved me, but when it came down to it, they would choose what was good for the royal family as an institution over what was good for me.

I didn't fault them for it. It was what they had to do, but it meant I couldn't trust them with my best interests.

The only person who had ever seen me and put me first was Rhys.

I looked around the room. There was my grandfather, whose expression remained neutral even as anger and worry flickered in his eyes. Markus, tight-faced and tight-lipped, who was no doubt fantasizing about wringing my neck. Elin, who for once wasn't looking at her phone but was instead staring at me with bated breath. And finally, Nikolai, by far the most sympathetic of the bunch, though wariness creased his brow.

Then I thought about Rhys. His rough hands and rough voice, and the way he held me. Kissed me. Looked at me, like he never wanted to blink.

Baby, we're way beyond like.

I took a deep breath, steeled myself, and took a fork in the road.

"The allegations are true," I said. "All of them."

I heard a sharp intake of breath all around. Markus pinched his temple while Elin flew into action, her fingers moving over her phone fast enough to start a Category Four hurricane.

Disappointment carved deep grooves into Edvard's face. "Mr. Larsen's employment is terminated, effective immediately," he said, his tone sharper than I'd ever heard it. "You will end the relationship and never see or speak to him again."

He spoke not as my grandfather, but as my king.

My nails dug into my thighs. "No."

Another sharp intake of breath from everyone present.

Edvard straightened, the remaining neutrality in his face giving way to anger. I'd never disobeyed him, not when it came to the big things. I loved and respected him, and I hated disappointing him.

But I was sick and tired of other people dictating how I should live and who I should be with. While I would never have the freedom of a normal person, one who hadn't been born into this life, I had to draw the line somewhere. How was I supposed to rule a country if I couldn't even rule my own life?

“I can’t stop you from firing Rhys,” I said. “But I’m not ending my relationship with him.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” It was the first time I’d ever heard Markus curse. “Your Highness, he is—was—your bodyguard. He is a commoner. You are first in line to the throne, and the law dictates—”

“I know what the law dictates. I have a plan.”

Well, half a plan, but if I rounded up, it was a full plan. I knew what I needed to do, I just needed to figure out how to do it. There were a handful of ministers I was certain would support a repeal of the Royal Marriages Law, but the others needed overwhelming public support for political cover.

However, if I brought up the issue now, with the allegations floating around, I might as well wave a sign screaming It’s true! I’m in a relationship with my bodyguard!

Edvard’s face reddened while Markus glared at me.

22. Rhys

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22

RHYS

“THAT MAKES US EVEN.”

I stuck my phone between my ear and shoulder so I could grab my suitcase out of the overhead bin. “I told you already that it does.”

“I want to make sure it sinks in.” Christian’s drawl seeped over the line, its smooth, lazy veneer hiding the razor blades beneath the surface. It reflected the man behind the voice, a debonair charmer who could kill you with one hand and a smile on his face.

Many a person had failed to look beyond the smile until it was too late.

It was what made Christian so dangerous and such an effective CEO of the world’s most elite private security agency.

“I didn’t realize you’d become so attached to the princess,” he added.

My jaw flexed at the insinuation, and I nearly bowled over an older man wearing an unfortunate mud brown jacket in my haste to get off the plane. “I didn’t become attached. She’s the least annoying client I’ve had, and I’m sick of rotating between random pop stars and spoiled heiresses every few months. It’s a practical decision.”

In truth, I knew I’d fucked up less than twenty-four hours after I turned down her offer to extend my contract. I’d been on the plane back to D.C., and I would’ve forced the pilot to turn back if doing so wouldn’t have landed me on the no-fly list and resulted in a very unpleasant detention courtesy of the U.S. government.

But Christian didn’t need to know that.

“So you move to Eldorra, the country you hate most.” It wasn’t a question, and he sounded less than convinced. “Makes sense.”

“I don’t hate Eldorra.” The country came with a lot of baggage for me, but I had nothing against the actual place. It was a me problem, not a them problem...for the most part.

The woman walking next to me in an I Heart Eldorra T-shirt stared at me, and I glared back until she blushed and hurried past.

“If you say so.” A note of warning crept into Christian’s voice. “I agreed to your request because I trust you, but don’t do anything stupid, Larsen. Princess Bridget is a client. The future queen of Eldorra, at that.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Christian was technically my boss, but I’d never been good at kissing ass, not even when I was in the military. It’d gotten me into my fair share of trouble. “And you didn’t do this because you trust me. You did it because I spent the past month dealing with your mess.”

If I hadn’t, I would’ve taken the next plane back to Eldorra after I landed in D.C.

Then again, if I hadn’t, Christian might not have agreed to pull his many strings for me. He didn’t do anything purely out of the good of his heart.

“Either way, remember why you’re there,” he said calmly. “You are to protect Princess Bridget from bodily harm. That’s it.”

“I’m aware.” I exited the airport and was immediately hit with a blast of frigid air. Winter in Eldorra was cold as shit, but I’d survived colder in the Navy. The wind barely fazed me. “Gotta go.”

I hung up without another word and took my place in the taxi line.

What had Bridget’s reaction been when she found out I was returning? Happy? Angry? Indifferent? She hadn’t refused my request to be reinstated as her bodyguard, which was a good sign, but I also wasn’t sure the palace gave her a choice.

Whatever it was, I’d deal with it. I just wanted to see her again.

I’d left because I thought it was the right thing to do. We’d agreed what happened in Costa Rica would stay in Costa Rica, and I’d tried my best to distance myself afterward. To give us both a fighting chance. Because if we stayed near each other, we would end up in a place that could destroy her.

Bridget was a princess, and she deserved a prince. I wasn’t that. Not even close.

But it only took a day away from her for me to realize I didn’t give a damn. I couldn’t act on my feelings, but I also couldn’t stay away, so here I was. Being by her side without actually being with her would be a special form of torture, but it was better than not being near her at all. The past six weeks were evidence of that.

“You dropped this.”

My muscles coiled, and I did a quick five-second assessment of the stranger who came up behind me.

He looked to be in his early to mid-thirties. Sandy hair, expensive coat, and the soft hands—both in full view—of someone who’d never done more taxing physical labor than lifting a pen.

Nevertheless, I kept my guard up. He wasn’t a physical threat, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be a threat in other ways. Plus, I

didn't take well to random people approaching me.

"That's not mine." I flicked my eyes to the cracked black leather wallet in his hand.

"No?" He frowned. "I thought I saw it fall out of your pocket, but it's so crowded. I must've seen wrong." He examined me, his hazel eyes piercing. "American?"

I responded with a curt nod. I hated small talk, and something about the man unsettled me. My guard inched up further.

"I thought so." The man spoke perfect English, but he had the same faint Eldorran accent as Bridget. "Are you here on vacation? Not many Americans come in the winter."

"Work."

"Ah, I came back for work too, in a manner of speaking. I'm Andreas." He held out his free hand, but I didn't move.

I didn't shake random strangers' hands, especially not at the airport.

If Andreas was fazed by my rudeness, he didn't show it.

He slid his hand into his pocket and smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Enjoy your stay. Maybe I'll see you around."

To some, it might've sounded friendly or even like a come-on. To me, it sounded vaguely like a threat.

"Maybe." I hoped not. I didn't know the guy, but I knew I didn't trust him.

I reached the head of the taxi line, and I didn't spare Andreas another glance as I tossed my suitcase in the trunk and gave the driver the palace's address.

It took almost an hour to reach the sprawling complex thanks to traffic, and my body tightened with anticipation when the familiar gold gates came into view.

Finally.

It'd only been six weeks, but it felt like six years.

It was true what people said about not knowing what you had until it was gone.

After the entrance guard cleared me, I checked in with Malthe, the head security chief, then with Silas, the head of the royal household, who informed me I would stay in the palace's guesthouse. He showed me to the stone cottage, located fifteen minutes from the main building, and rambled on about household rules and protocol until I interrupted him.

"Is Her Highness here?" I stayed at the guesthouse every time I came to Eldorra, and I didn't need to listen to the whole song and dance again.

Silas heaved a deep sigh. "Yes, Her Highness is in the palace with Lady Mikaela."

"Where?"

"The second-floor drawing room. She's not expecting you until tomorrow," he added pointedly.

"Thank you. I can take it from here." Translation: Go away.

He let out another huge sigh before leaving.

After he left, I took a quick shower, changed, and headed back to the palace. It took a full half hour for me to reach the drawing room, and my steps slowed when I heard Bridget's silvery laugh through the doors.

God, I'd missed her laugh. I'd missed everything about her. I pushed open the doors and stepped inside, my eyes immediately zeroing in on Bridget.

Golden hair. Creamy skin. Grace and sunshine, clad in her favorite yellow dress, which she always wore when she wanted to look professional but relaxed.

She stood in front of a giant whiteboard with what looked like dozens of tiny headshots taped to it. Her friend Mikaela was waving her hands around and speaking animatedly until she noticed me.

"Rhys!" she exclaimed. She was a petite brunette with a head of curly hair, freckles, and an unnervingly perky personality. "Bridget told me you were coming back. It's so good to see you again!"

12. Rhys

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12

RHYS

I SENSED TROUBLE BEFORE I EVEN ENTERED THE PALACE'S RECEPTION hall, where I heard Prince Nikolai talking in low murmurs. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and though I couldn't make out what Bridget's brother was saying, the stressed pitch of his voice set alarms blaring in my head.

My boots squeaked against the reception hall's overly polished marble floors, and Nikolai fell silent. He stood in the middle of the soaring two-story space next to Elin and Viggo, the Deputy Head of Royal Security. I'd memorized every staff member's face and name so I would notice if anyone tried to sneak in by disguising themselves as a palace employee.

I gave the group a curt nod. "Your Highness."

"Mr. Larsen." Nikolai responded with a regal nod of his own. "I trust you're enjoying your day off?"

Since the palace was so heavily guarded, I was off the clock when Bridget was at home, which was most days since her grandfather's hospitalization. It felt strange. I was so used to being by her side twenty-four-seven I...

You do not miss her. I dismissed the ridiculous idea before it became a fully formed thought.

"It's been fine." I'd tried drawing again, but I hadn't gotten much further than a few lines on paper. I ran out of creativity, inspiration—whatever you call it—months ago, and today had been my first time picking up my sketchbook since.

I'd needed something to occupy my hands and mind.

Something that wasn't five-nine with the face of an angel and curves that would fit perfectly beneath my palms.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

I hardened my jaw, determined not to fantasize about my fucking client in front of her brother. Or ever.

"Where's Princess Bridget?" According to her schedule, she was supposed to be horseback riding with Nikolai. But the skies looked ready to pour, so I assumed they'd called it a day early.

Nikolai exchanged glances with Elin and Viggo, and the needle on my trouble radar inched closer to the red zone.

"I'm sure Her Highness is somewhere in the palace," Viggo said. He was a short, heavysset man with a ruddy face and a passing resemblance to a Scandinavian Danny DeVito. "We're looking for her as we speak."

The needle pushed past the red zone into the white-hot emergency zone. "What do you mean, you're looking for her?" My voice remained calm, but alarm and anger bubbled in my stomach. "I thought she was with you, Your Highness."

Elin glared at Viggo. She didn't have to speak for me to hear her scream, Viggo, you idiot.

Whatever was happening, I wasn't supposed to know about it.

Nikolai shifted his weight, discomfort sliding across his face.

"She was, but we got into an argument and she, ah, took off while we were riding."

"How long ago?" I didn't give a damn if I sounded disrespectful.

It was a personal safety issue, and I was Bridget's bodyguard. I had a right to know what happened.

Nikolai's discomfort visibly increased. "An hour ago."

The anger erupted, edging out the alarm by a hair. "An hour ago? And no one thought to call me?"

"Watch your tone, Mr. Larsen," Elin admonished. "You're speaking to the Crown Prince."

"I'm aware." Elin could take her glares and shove them up her ass along with the stick permanently residing there. "No one has seen the princess since?"

"A groundskeeper found her horse," Viggo said. "We took it back to—"

"Found her horse." A vein pulsed in my forehead. "Meaning she wasn't riding it and she hadn't returned it to the stables herself." No matter how angry she was, Bridget would never leave an animal behind. Something had happened to her. Panic grated against my insides as I bit out, "Tell me. Have you searched the grounds, or just the palace?"

"Her Highness wouldn't be out there," Viggo blustered. "It's storming! She's inside—"

"Unless she fell off her horse and is unconscious somewhere." Jesus, how the hell had he risen to the deputy security chief position? There were hamsters with more brains than him.

"Bridget is an excellent equestrian, and we have a few people searching outside. She could've run off to one of her hiding places. She used to do that as a kid." Nikolai looked at Viggo. "But Mr. Larsen's right. It doesn't hurt to be extra thorough. Shall we send extra men to check the grounds?"

"If you wish, Your Highness. I'll draw up the quadrants..."

Un-fucking-believable.

I was halfway out the door before Viggo finished his moronic sentence. Too bad the Head of Security, who was actually competent, was on vacation because his deputy was a goddamned idiot. By the time he finished drawing his quadrants, Bridget could be seriously hurt.

“Where are you going?” Elin called after me.

“To do my job.”

I picked up my pace, cursing the size of the palace as I sprinted toward the closest door leading outdoors. By the time I hit the grounds, my panic had escalated into full-blown terror. Thunder boomed so loud it rattled the door as I shut it behind me, and it was raining so hard the gardens and fountains blurred in front of me. The estate was too large for me to search it all by myself, so I had to be strategic. My best bet would be to start at the official horseback riding trail in the southeast corner and go from there, though the rain would’ve washed away any hoofprints by now.

Luckily, the palace had a fleet of motorized carts to ferry guests around the grounds, and I made it to the riding trail in ten minutes instead of the half hour it would’ve taken me on foot.

“Come on, princess, where are you?” I muttered, my eyes straining to see past the thick sheet of water slanting through the air. Images of Bridget lying on the ground, her body twisted and broken, flashed through my mind. My skin turned ice cold, and the wheel slipped against my sweaty palms.

If anything happened to her, I would murder Viggo. Slowly.

I scoured the trails, but twenty minutes later, I still hadn’t found her, and I was getting desperate. She could be indoors, but my gut told me she wasn’t, and my gut was never wrong.

Maybe she was in an area the cart couldn’t reach. It wouldn’t hurt to check.

I killed the engine and jumped out, ignoring the harsh sting of raindrops on my skin.

“Bridget!” The rain swallowed her name, and I let out a low curse. “Bridget!” I tried again, my boots sinking into the muddy ground as I searched the area near the trail. The rain plastered my shirt and pants to my skin, making it hard to move, but I’d weathered worse than a puny thunderstorm as a SEAL.

I wasn’t giving up until I found her.

I was about to move on to a different section of the grounds when I spotted a flash of blonde out of the corner of my eye. My heart tripped, and I froze for half a beat before I sprinted toward her. Please let it be her.

It was.

I sank onto my knees by her side, my chest hollowing at the paleness of Bridget’s face and the large, purplish bruise on her forehead. A small trickle of blood dripped down the side of her face, turning pink when it mingled with the rain. She was unconscious and completely soaked through.

A snarling, protective beast rose in my chest with such ferocity it stunned me.

Viggo was as good as dead. If he hadn’t dragged his feet, if someone had fucking called me and told me Bridget was missing...

I forced myself to push the anger aside for now. I had more im-

portant things to focus on.

I checked her pulse, which was weak but steady. Thank God. I quickly scanned the rest of her for signs of injury. Normal breathing, no broken limbs, and no blood except for the cut on her forehead. Her helmet was askew, and dirt smeared her cheeks and clothes. The beast in my chest snarled again, ready to rip not only Viggo but Nikolai to shreds for not protecting her, or at least being there for her.

He probably couldn't have done anything to prevent Bridget from falling off her horse—judging by her helmet and position on the ground, that must've been what happened—but the beast didn't care. All it knew was she was hurt, and for that, someone had to pay. Later.

I needed to get her to the doctor first.

I cursed again when I realized I had no cell service. The storm must've knocked it out.

Standard medical advice said I shouldn't move an injured person without professionals present, but I had no choice.

I scooped Bridget up in my arms and carried her to the cart, supporting her neck with one hand. We made it halfway when I heard a low groan.

My heart tripped again. "Princess, you awake?" I kept my voice even, not wanting to panic and scare her.

Bridget let out another groan, her eyes fluttering open. "Mr. Larsen? What are you doing? What happened?" She tried to twist her head to look around, but I stopped her with a firm squeeze on her thigh.

"You're injured. Don't move unless you absolutely have to." We reached the cart, and I set her carefully in the passenger seat before I took the driver's seat and turned on the engine. Relief flooded my veins, so thick it almost choked me.

She was okay. She might have a concussion, judging by the bruise, but she was conscious and talking and alive.

"Do you remember what happened?" I wanted to speed back to the palace, which had an in-house doctor, but I forced myself to drive slowly to minimize any bumps and jerky movements.

Bridget touched her forehead with a wince. "I was riding and... there was a branch. I didn't see it until it was too late." She squeezed her eyes shut. "My head hurts, and everything's blurry."

Dammit. Concussion for sure.

My hands strangled the wheel, which I pictured as Viggo's neck.

"We'll be at the palace soon. For now, just relax and don't force yourself to talk."

Of course, she didn't listen.

"How did you find me?" Bridget spoke slower than usual, and the faint note of pain in her voice made my stomach lurch.

"I looked." I parked the cart near the back entrance. "You should fire your deputy security chief. He's a moron. If I hadn't found you, he'd still have his people searching the inside of the palace like—what?"

"How long did you look for me?" Bridget gave me a strange look, one that made my heart twist in the oddest way.

"Don't remember," I grunted. "Let's get you inside. You're

soaked.”

“So are you.” She stayed in the cart. “Did you...you looked for me in the rain by yourself?”

“Like I said, Viggo is a moron. Inside, princess. You need that cut and bruise looked at. You probably have a concussion.”

“I’m okay.” But Bridget didn’t argue when I slipped my arm around her waist and her arm around my neck, letting her use me as a crutch as we walked inside.

Luckily, the doctor’s office wasn’t too far from the back entrance, and when she saw the state Bridget was in, she sprang into action. While she patched Bridget’s forehead up and gave her a more thorough check for injuries, I dried off in the bathroom and waited in the hall. I didn’t trust myself not to look at Bridget’s bruise and cut and not lose my shit.

The sound of rapid footsteps filled the hall, and my lip peeled back in a snarl when I saw Nikolai running toward me, followed by Viggo and Elin. One of the staff must’ve alerted them when they saw me and Bridget.

Perfect. I needed to let off some steam.

“Is Bridget okay?” the prince asked, his face worried.

“For the most part. The doctor’s checking her out now.” I waited until Nikolai was inside the doctor’s office before I turned my attention to Viggo.

“You.” I grabbed the collar of Viggo’s shirt and lifted him until his feet dangled in the air. “I told you she was outside. Any damn person with common sense would know she was outside, yet you wasted an hour searching indoors while Bridget was unconscious in the rain.”

“Mr. Larsen!” Elin sounded scandalized. “This is the royal palace, not a dive bar where you brawl with other patrons. Put Viggo down.”

I ignored her and lowered my voice until only Viggo could hear me. “You better pray the princess isn’t seriously hurt.”

“Are you threatening me?” he sputtered.

“Yes.”

“I could fire you.”

I bared my teeth in a semblance of a smile. “Try.”

The Head of Royal Security oversaw my contract, but Viggo couldn’t find a way out of his ass if someone planted neon lights marking the way, much less fire me without his boss’s approval. I released Viggo’s collar and set him on the ground when the doctor’s door opened.

“Mr. Larsen, Viggo, Elin.” If she suspected there’d been a scuffle outside her office, she didn’t show it. “I’ve finished the checkup. Come in.”

My anger at Viggo took a backseat to my concern over Bridget as we crowded into the mini clinic, where Bridget sat on the hospital bed. She didn’t look happy to see Nikolai, who stood next to her with a tight expression.

The doctor informed us Bridget did, indeed, have a concussion, but she should recover in ten to fourteen days. She also had a mild wrist sprain and the beginnings of a nasty cold. Nothing life-threatening, but she would be uncomfortable for the next few weeks.

I glared at Viggo, who shrank behind Nikolai like a coward. I stayed after everyone else left, and the doctor took one look at my face before murmuring an excuse and slipping out the door, leaving me and Bridget alone.

"I'm fine," Bridget said before I could open my mouth. "A few weeks of rest and I'll be good as new."

I crossed my arms over my chest, unconvinced. "What the hell happened? Nikolai said you ran off after you two got in an argument."

Her face shut down. "Sibling squabble. It was nothing."

"Bullshit. You don't run off in anger."

Not to mention, Bridget hadn't spoken to him once while he was in the room, which was telling. She would never ignore her brother unless he'd really pissed her off.

"There's a first time for everything," she said.

A frustrated growl rose in my throat. "Dammit, princess, you need to be more careful. If something happened to you, I—" I broke

4. Rhys/Bridget

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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

25. Rhys

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25

RHYS

SOMEONE ONCE SAID HELL WAS OTHER PEOPLE.

They were right.

Specifically, hell was watching other people swan around an ice rink, drinking hot chocolate and making googly eyes at each other like they were in the middle of a goddamn Hallmark movie.

It wasn’t even Christmas season, for fuck’s sake. It was worse.

It was Valentine’s Day.

A muscle flexed in my jaw as Bridget’s laughter floated over, joined by Steffan’s deeper laugh, and the urge to murder someone—someone male with blond hair and a name that began with S—intensified.

What was so fucking hilarious, anyway?

I couldn’t imagine anything being that funny, least of all something Steffan the Saint said.

Bridget and Steffan shouldn’t even be on a date right now. It was only four days after her birthday ball. Who the hell went on a date with someone they met four days ago? There should be background checks. Red tape. Twenty-four-seven surveillance to make sure Steffan wasn’t secretly a psycho killer or adulterer.

Princesses shouldn’t go on a date until there was at least a year’s

worth of data to comb through, in my opinion. Five years, to be on the safe side.

Unfortunately, my opinion meant jack shit to the royal family, which was how I found myself at Athenberg's biggest ice-skating rink, watching Bridget smile up at Steffan like he'd cured world hunger.

He said something that made her laugh again, and his grin widened. He brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face, and my hand twitched toward my gun. Maybe I would've pulled it, had reporters not packed the rink, snapping pictures of Bridget and Steffan, recording on their cameras, and live-tweeting the date like it was an Olympic event.

"They make such a cute couple," the reporter next to me, a curvy brunette in a bright pink suit that hurt my eyes, cooed. "Don't you think so?"

"No."

She blinked, clearly surprised by my curt response. "Why not? Do you have something against his lordship?"

I could practically see her salivating at the prospect of a juicy story.

"I'm staff," I said. "I have no opinions about my employer's personal life."

"Everyone has opinions." The reporter smiled, reminding me of a shark circling in the water. "I'm Jas." She held out her hand. I didn't take it, but that didn't deter her. "If you think of an opinion...or anything else..." A suggestive note crept into her voice. "Give me a call."

She pulled a business card out of her purse and tucked it into my hand. I almost let it fall to the floor, but I wasn't that much of an asshole, so I merely pocketed it without looking at it.

Jas's cameraman said something to her in German, and she turned away to answer him.

Good. I couldn't stand nosy people or small talk. Besides, I was busy—busy trying not to kill Steffan.

I'd run a background check on him before today's date, and on paper, he was fucking perfect. The son of the Duke of Holstein, one of the most powerful men in Eldorra, he was an accomplished equestrian who spoke six languages fluently and graduated top of his class from Harvard and Oxford, where he studied political science and economics. He had a well-established record of philanthropy and his last relationship with an Eldorran heiress ended on amicable terms after two years. Based on my interactions with him so far, he seemed friendly and genuine.

I hated him.

Not because he grew up in a life of privilege, but because he could freely touch Bridget in public. He could take her ice skating, make her laugh, and brush her hair out of her eye, and no one would blink an eye.

Meanwhile, all I could do was stand there and watch, because women like Bridget weren't meant for men like me.

"You'll never amount to anything, you little piece of shit," Mama slurred, her eyes mean and hateful as she glared at me. "Look atcha. Useless and scrawny. I should've gotten rid of you when I had the chance."

I stayed quiet. The last time I talked back, she beat me so hard with her belt I'd bled through my shirt and couldn't sleep on my back for weeks. I'd learned the best way to handle her bad moods was to hope she eventually forgot I was there. That usually happened after she was halfway through whatever bottle she was drinking.

"If it wasn't for you, I'd be out of this stinkin' town by now."

Resentment poured off her in waves. Mama stood by the table, wearing her faded pink robe and chain-smoking a cigarette. Her cheeks were pale and sunken, and even though she was only in her late twenties, she could pass for her forties.

I tucked my hands beneath my arms and tried to shrink into myself while she continued to rant. It was Friday night. I hated Friday nights because it meant I had an entire weekend of just Mama and me.

"Waste of space...nothing like your father...are you listening to me, you piece of shit?"

I stared at the cracks in the floor until they blurred together. One day, I would get out of here. Somehow, some way.

"I said, are you listening to me?" Mama grabbed my shoulders and shook me so hard my teeth rattled. "Look at me when I'm talking to you, boy!" She backhanded me so hard I stumbled, the pain making my ears ring.

My body twisted, and I saw it coming, but I didn't have time to brace myself before the corner of the dining table smashed into my head and everything went black.

I blinked, and the smell of old spaghetti sauce and vodka faded, replaced by that of fresh ice and Jas's overpowering perfume.

Bridget and Steffan skated over, and the cameras went crazy. Click. Click. Click.

"...for a while," Steffan said. "But I would love to take you out again when I return."

"Are you going somewhere?" I asked.

It was inappropriate for me to butt into their conversation, but I didn't give a fuck.

Steffan cast a startled glance in my direction. "Yes. My mother fell and broke her hip yesterday. She's fine, but she's recovering at our house in Preoria. She's quite lonely with my father here in session for Parliament, so I'll be staying with her until she feels better."

He answered with full graciousness, which only annoyed me more. The harder he was to hate, the more I hated him.

"How sad," I said.

Steffan paused, clearly unsure how to read my tone.

"Hopefully, she recovers soon." Bridget shot me a look of mild rebuke. "Now, about that hot chocolate..."

She guided him toward the hot chocolate stand at the other end of the rink while I fumed.

Taking a permanent position as Bridget's bodyguard meant I'd have to deal with seeing her date other people. I knew that, and that would be my cross to bear.

I just hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

She'd dated in New York, but that had been different. She hadn't liked any of those guys, and she hadn't planned on marrying one of them.

Acid gnawed at my gut.

Thankfully, the date ended soon after, and I whisked her into the car before Steffan could pull any first date kiss bullshit.

“Initial recovery for a broken hip takes one to four months,” I said as we drove back to the palace. “Too bad for his lordship. What shitty timing.”

Even fate didn’t think it was a good pairing. If it did, it wouldn’t have pulled Steffan away so soon after he met Bridget.

I’d never believed in fate, but I might have to send her a big, fat thank you card later. I might even toss in some chocolates and flowers.

Bridget didn’t take the bait. “Actually, it’s perfect timing,” she said. “I’ll be away from Athenberg for a few weeks as well.”

I eyed her in the rearview mirror. That was fucking news to me.

“It’s not confirmed yet, so don’t give me that look,” she said.

“I’ve proposed going on a goodwill tour around the country. Meet with locals and small businesses, find out what’s on their minds and what issues they’re facing. I’ve gotten a lot of criticism for not being in touch with what’s happening in Eldorra, and, well, they’re right.”

“That’s a great idea.” I turned onto King’s Drive.

“You think so?” A note of relief tempered the uncertainty in Bridget’s voice.

“I’m no expert on politics, but it sounds right to me.”

Bridget may not want to be queen, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t make a great one. Most people thought the most important quality in a leader was strength, but it was compassion. Strength meant jack shit when you didn’t use it for the right reasons.

Luckily for her and for Eldorra, she had both in spades.

“The king still has to approve it,” she said after we parked and walked to the palace entrance. “But I don’t anticipate him saying no.”

“You mean your grandfather.” Royals did things differently, but it weirded me out how formal they were with each other sometimes.

Bridget flashed a quick smile as we entered the grand front hall.

“In most cases, yes. But in matters like this, he’s my king.”

“Speaking of the king...”

We both stiffened at the new voice.

“...He wants to see you.” Andreas swaggered into view, and irritation curled through me. I didn’t know what it was about him that bugged me so much, but Bridget didn’t like him, and that was good enough for me. “How was the date? Did you get a marriage proposal yet?”

“You need to find a new hobby if you’re that invested in my love life,” Bridget said evenly.

“Thank you, but I have plenty of hobbies to keep me occupied.

For instance, I just came from a meeting with His Majesty and Lord Erhall on the tax reform legislation.” Andreas smiled at Bridget’s surprise, which she quickly covered up. “As you may know, I’m interested in taking up politics, and the Speaker was kind enough to let me shadow him for a few weeks. See how it all works.”

“Like an intern,” Bridget said.

Andreas’s smile sharpened. “One who’s learning quite a lot.” He slid his glance toward me. “Mr. Larsen, good to see you again.”

Wish I could say the same. “Your Highness.” I loathed addressing

him with the same title as Bridget. He didn't deserve it. "His Majesty is waiting for you in his office," Andreas told Bridget. "He wants to see you. Alone. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some pressing matters that require my attention. Though none as exciting as a date at an ice-skating rink, I'm sure."

It took all my self-control not to knock all his teeth out.

"Say the word, and I can make it look like an accident," I said after Andreas was out of earshot.

Bridget shook her head. "Ignore him. He's been a satanic little turd since we were children, and he thrives on the attention."

A startled laugh rose in my throat. "Tell me the words 'satanic little turd' didn't just leave your mouth, princess."

She responded with a sly smile. "I've called him worse in my head."

That's my girl.

It was nice to see glimpses of the real Bridget shine through, even when she was weighed down with all the royal bullshit.

While she met with the king, I returned to the guesthouse, though I supposed it was my actual house now that I was working here permanently.

I'd just entered my room when my phone rang. "Yeah."

"Hello to you, too," Christian drawled. "People have no phone manners these days. It's such a shame."

"Get to the point, Harper." I placed him on speaker and yanked my shirt over my head. I was about to toss it in the laundry basket when I paused. Looked around.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was off.

"Always the charmer." There was a short pause before Christian said, "Magda's gone."

I froze. "What do you mean, gone?"

I'd spent a month guarding Magda at Christian's request until another hand-selected guard finished his contract with his previous client and took over. It was why I couldn't return to Eldorra earlier.

"I mean, gone. Rocco woke up this morning, and she'd disappeared. No tripped alarms, nothing."

"You can't find her?"

Christian could find anyone and anything with even the smallest digital footprint. His computer skills were legendary.

His voice chilled. "I can and I will."

50. Rhys

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Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid.

I will provide the chapter now.

“YOU CAN’T SIT BY A QUEEN’S SIDE IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHICH FORK TO use. You’ll embarrass yourself at state functions.” Andreas crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you not look at the diagram I sent you?”

“They’re. All. Forks,” I bit out. “They serve the same function.”

“I’d like to see you try to use an oyster fork to eat steak.”

A dull ache throbbed at my temple. We’d been reviewing dinner etiquette for the past hour, and I was one second away from stabbing Andreas with one of his beloved forks.

He’d officially moved out of the palace and back into his town-house last week, after the parliamentary vote, and we were reviewing place settings in his kitchen.

I’d asked him to help me acclimate to the whole royal lifestyle thing. Diplomatic protocol, who’s who in Eldorran society, and so on.

I already regretted it, and we hadn’t even finished our first lesson.

Before I could respond, the doorbell rang, saving Andreas from death by utensil.

“Study the diagram,” he said before answering the door.

My temple throbbed harder. I should’ve asked the palace’s protocol office for help instead. They were humorless automatons, but at least I didn’t want to murder them every five minutes.

I heard faint voices, followed by the sound of footsteps.

“Rhys?”

I looked up and saw Bridget standing in the doorway with Booth. I wasn’t sure who was more surprised, her or me.

“What are you doing here?” we asked at the same time.

“It seems I’m now the most popular person in the family.” Andreas stepped around Bridget. “Ironic.”

She walked to me and gave me a quick kiss before sliding a cool glance in Andreas’s direction. “You’re not the most popular person anywhere except in your head.”

I didn’t bother hiding my smile. Snarky Bridget was one of my favorite Bridgets.

Andreas arched an eyebrow. “Care to explain why you’re here then, Your Highness? I assumed you’d be too busy to visit little ol’ me.”

Good question. Bridget was supposed to be at a coronation planning meeting.

“My meeting ended early, so I thought I’d come by to say thank you. I didn’t get a chance to say it before, but I appreciate you helping Rhys with Erhall.” It came out grudgingly. Bridget’s relationship with Andreas had warmed a few degrees since she found out he’d been trying to help her in his own fucked-up way, but they would never be best friends. They were too different and had too much history.

Andreas’s face broke out into a devious grin.

“Don’t be a dick,” I warned.

“Me? Never.” he drawled before turning to Bridget. “I appreciate the gratitude, cousin dearest. Does this mean you owe me a favor in the future?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t push it.”

Andreas shrugged. "It was worth a shot. While you're here, maybe you can explain place settings to your boyfriend. I drew a perfect diagram, but alas, it's not enough."

Bridget's confusion morphed into amusement when I explained the situation, glaring at Andreas the whole time.

"He doesn't know his forks," Andreas said after I finished. "I'm trying to civilize him. Imagine using a salad fork to eat pasta." He sniffed with disdain.

"I know them enough to stab you with one of them," I said.

Booth snorted from the doorway.

"The violence is another thing we have to work on." Andreas finished his whiskey and set it on the counter. "You're dating a princess now. You can't go around stabbing people."

"Oh, I think people will understand once they find out who I'm stabbing."

Bridget laughed. "Forget about him," she told me. "I'll help you."

She turned to Booth. "I'm fine here. Rhys is with me. I believe there's a football match you want to watch?"

Football as in soccer, not American football. It was one of the thousand small things I had to get used to.

Booth's face lit up. "If you wouldn't mind, Your Highness."

Since it was getting late and Andreas had no groceries except for milk and eggs, we ordered takeout while Booth watched his game in the den and Bridget and Andreas fought to teach me about place settings. Eventually I got the hang of it, and we moved on to nobility ranks. It wasn't hard to remember. After the royal family, dukes and duchesses ranked highest, followed by marquesses, counts, earls, and barons. Eldorra had a similar hierarchy to Britain.

"You might make a good Prince Consort after all." Andreas wiped his mouth with a napkin and checked the clock. "If you'll excuse me, I have a call with an old friend from Oxford. Don't destroy the kitchen while I'm gone."

"Good to hear. You know how I live for your approval," I deadpanned.

"I do." He clapped me on the shoulder on his way out, and my annoyance ratcheted up another notch.

I couldn't believe I shared DNA with that guy.

When I turned back to Bridget, she was trying, and failing, to suppress a smile.

"What's so funny?"

"You and Andreas. You bicker like Nik and I do." Her smile widened at the incomprehension on my face. "You bicker like siblings."

Siblings.

It didn't hit me until that moment. I'd known Andreas was my brother, but he was my brother. A real, albeit annoying, one I saw regularly. We argued all the time, but maybe that was just what siblings did, like Bridget said.

I wouldn't know. I'd been alone all my life...until now.

10. Rhys

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10

RHYS

BRIDGET WANTED TO LEAVE FOR ELDORRA RIGHT AWAY, BUT I FORCED

her to get some sleep first. We'd had a long day, and while I operated fine on minimal shuteye, Bridget got...cranky.

She insisted she didn't, but she did. I would know. I was often the one on the receiving end of her crankiness. Besides, there wasn't much we could do about the situation at eleven at night.

While she slept or tried to sleep, I packed the necessities, booked a plane using her usual charter company's twenty-four-hour VIP hotline, and crashed for a few hours before I woke up in time to fetch us coffee and breakfast from the closest bodega.

We left the house just as the sun peeked over the horizon and rode to Teterboro Airport in silence. By the time we boarded the charter jet, Bridget was practically vibrating with restless energy.

"Thank you for arranging everything." She fiddled with her necklace and shook her head when the flight attendant offered her a glass of juice. "You didn't have to."

"It's not a big deal. It was just a call." Nothing made me more uncomfortable than overt gratitude. In an ideal world, people would accept a nice gesture and never mention it again. Made things less awkward all around.

"It wasn't just a call. It was packing and breakfast and...being here, I guess."

"It's my job to be here, princess."

Hurt flashed across her face, and I immediately felt like the world's biggest jackass. Way to kick someone when they're down, Larsen.

If I were anyone but me and she were anyone but her, I would try to apologize, but as it stood, I'd probably make things worse. Pretty words weren't my strong suit, especially not with Bridget. Everything came out the wrong way when I talked to her.

I switched subjects. "You look like you could use more sleep."

She winced. "That bad, huh?"

And that's why I need to keep my mouth shut. I rubbed a hand over my face, embarrassed and irritated with myself. "That's not what I meant."

"It's okay. I know I look horrible," Bridget said. "Elin, our communications secretary, would pitch a fit if she saw me like this."

I snorted. "Princess, you couldn't look horrible if you tried."

Even though she looked more tired than usual, with purple smudges beneath her eyes and her skin lacking its usual glow, she still blew other women out of the water.

Bridget's eyebrows shot up. "Was that another compliment, Mr. Larsen? Two in two years. Careful, or I'll think you like me."

"Take it however you want," I drawled. "But I'll like you the day

you like me.”

Bridget cracked a genuine smile, and I almost smiled back. Despite my words, we got along fine these days, aside from the occasional argument. Our initial transition had been rough, but we’d learned to adapt and compromise...except when it came to her dates.

Not a single one of those fuckers had been worth her time, and they were lucky I hadn’t gouged their eyes out for the way they’d ogled her.

If I hadn’t been with her on the dates, they would’ve tried something for sure, and the thought made my blood boil.

I noticed Bridget’s eyes stray to the in-flight phone every few minutes until I finally said, “It’s best if it doesn’t ring.”

Prince Nikolai had promised to call her with any updates.

There’d been none so far, but in this situation, no update was a good update.

She sighed. “I know. It’s just driving me crazy, not knowing what’s going on. I should’ve been there. I should’ve moved back after graduation instead of insisting on staying in the U.S.” Guilt washed over her face. “What if I never see him again? What if he...” “Don’t think that way. We’ll be there soon.”

It was a seven-hour flight to Athenberg. A lot could happen in seven hours, but I kept that part to myself.

“He raised us, you know.” Bridget stared out the window with a far-off expression. “After my father died, my grandfather stepped in and tried his best to fill the parental role for Nik and me. Even though he’s the king and has a ton on his plate, he made time for us whenever he could. He ate breakfast with us every morning he wasn’t away traveling, and he attended all our school activities, even the stupid little ones that didn’t really matter.” A small smile touched her lips. “Once, he rescheduled a meeting with the Japanese prime minister so he could watch me play Sunflower Number Three in my fifth-grade school play. I was a terrible actress, and even my royal status wasn’t enough to land me a speaking role.”

My lips quirked at the mental image of little Bridget dressed up as a sunflower. “Starting an international incident at age ten. Why am I not surprised?”

She shot me a mock affronted look. “For the record, I was eleven, and the prime minister was quite understanding. He’s a grandfather himself.” Her smile faded. “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to him,” she whispered.

We were no longer talking about the prime minister.

“Things always work themselves out.” Not quite true, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

I really was crap at this whole comforting thing. That was why I was a bodyguard, not a nurse.

“You’re right. Of course.” Bridget took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me. I don’t usually go on like this.” She twisted her ring around her finger. “Enough about me. Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

Translation? Distract me from the fact my grandfather may or may not be dying.

“Like what?”

“Like...” She thought about it. “Your favorite pizza topping.” It was a question she hadn’t asked during our impromptu Q&A session during her graduation dinner.

“Don’t eat pizza.” A grin slipped through at the shock on her face. “Kidding. Work on the gullibility, princess.”

“In two years, I’ve never seen you eat one. It’s possible,” she said defensively.

My grin widened a fraction of an inch. “It’s not my favorite food, but I’m a pepperoni guy. Simple is best.”

“I can see that.” Bridget flicked her eyes over my plain black T-shirt, pants, and boots. Some clients preferred their bodyguards to dress up—suit, tie, earpiece, the whole shebang—but Bridget wanted me to blend in, hence the casual getup.

Her perusal wasn’t sexual, but that didn’t stop my groin from tightening as her gaze slid from my shoulders to my stomach and thighs. The number of spontaneous boners I’d popped around her was embarrassing considering I was a grown-ass man, not a hormone-riddled schoolboy.

But Bridget was the kind of stunning that came along once in a lifetime, and her personality made things worse, because she actually had one. A good one, at that, at least when she wasn’t driving me nuts with her hard-headedness.

I took this job thinking she would be spoiled and stuck up like the other princesses I’d guarded, but she turned out to be smart, kind, and down to earth, with just enough fire shining through her cool facade to make me want to strip every layer off her until she was bared to me and me alone.

Bridget’s gaze lingered on the region below my belt. My cock swelled further, and I gripped my armrests with white-knuckled hands. This was so messed up. She was worried about her grandfather dying, and I was fantasizing about fucking her ten ways to Sunday in the middle of the goddamn cabin.

I have serious issues. The least of which was a case of blue balls.

“I suggest you stop lookin’ at me like that, princess,” I said, my voice lethally soft. “Unless you plan on doing something about it.”

It was perhaps the most inappropriate thing I’d ever said to her, and way out of the bounds of professionalism, but I was teetering on the edge of sanity.

Despite what I’d implied yesterday, I hadn’t touched a woman since I took this job, and I was slowly going crazy because of it. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to. I went to bars, I flirted, and I got plenty of offers, but I felt nothing every time. No sparks, no lust, no desire. I would’ve worried about my boy down there had it not been for my visceral reactions to Bridget.

The only person who made my cock hard these days was my client.

I have the worst fucking luck on the planet.

Bridget jerked her head up, her eyes wide. “I’m not...I wasn’t—”

“Ask me another question.”

“What?”

“You said you wanted to know more about me. Ask me another question,” I said through gritted teeth. Anything to get my mind off how much I want to hike up that skirt of yours and find out just how wet

you are for me.

Because she was. My long, recent dry spell aside, I had enough experience with the opposite sex to spot the signs of female arousal from a mile away.

Dilated pupils, flushed cheeks, shallow breathing.

Check, check, and fucking check.

“Oh, um.” Bridget cleared her throat, looking more flustered than I’d ever seen her. “Tell me...tell me about your family.”

Talk about splashing a bucket of cold water over my libido.

I stiffened, my desire draining away as I tried to figure out how to respond.

Of course she wants to know about the one thing I hate discussing.

“Not much to tell,” I finally said. “No siblings. Mother died when I was a kid. Never knew my father. Grandparents also gone.”

Maybe I should’ve left the last part out, considering her grandfather’s situation, but Bridget didn’t appear put off. Instead, her eyes flickered with sympathy. “What happened?”

No need to clarify who she was asking about. Mother dearest.

“Drug overdose,” I said curtly. “Cocaine. I was eleven, and I found her when I came home from school. She was sitting in front of the TV, and her favorite talk show was on. There was a half-eaten plate of pasta on the coffee table. I thought she fell asleep—she did that sometimes when she was watching TV—but when I walked over...” I swallowed hard. “Her eyes were wide open. Unseeing. And I knew she was gone.”

Bridget sucked in a breath. My story never failed to elicit pity from those who heard it, which was why I hated telling it. I didn’t want anyone’s pity.

“You know what the funny thing was? I picked up the plate of pasta and washed it like she’d wake up and yell at me if I didn’t. Then I did the rest of the dishes in the sink. Turned off the TV. Wiped down the coffee table. Only after all that did I call 911.” I let out a humorless laugh while Bridget stared at me with an unbearably soft expression. “She was already dead, but in my mind, she wouldn’t really be dead till the ambulance showed up and made it official. Kid logic.”

Those were the most words I’d spoken about my mother in over two decades.

“I’m so sorry,” Bridget said quietly. “Losing a parent is never easy.”

She would know better than anyone. She’d lost both her parents, one of whom she’d never met. Just like me, except there was a possibility the one I hadn’t met was still alive while hers had died in childbirth.

“Don’t feel too sorry for me, princess.” I rolled my water glass between my fingers, wishing it contained something stronger. I didn’t drink alcohol, but sometimes I wished I did. “My mother was a bitch.”

Bridget’s eyes widened with shock. Not many people talked about their mother’s death, then turned around and called said mother a bitch in the same breath.

If anyone deserved the title, though, Deirdre Larsen did.

“But she was still my mother,” I continued. “The only relative I

had left. I had no clue who my father was, and even if I did, it was clear he wanted nothing to do with me. So yeah, I was sad about her death, but I wasn't devastated."

Hell, I'd been relieved. It was sick and twisted, but living with my mother had been a nightmare. I'd considered running away multiple times before her overdose, but a misguided sense of loyalty held me back each time.

Deidre may have been an abusive, alcoholic junkie, but I was all she'd had in the world, and she was all I'd had. That counted for something, I supposed.

Bridget leaned forward and squeezed my hand. I tensed as an unexpected jolt of electricity rocketed up my arm, but I kept my face stoic.

"Your father has no idea what he's missing out on." Her voice rang with sincerity, and my chest tightened.

I stared down at the contrast of her soft, warm hand against my rough, calloused one.

Clean versus bloodstained. Innocence versus darkness.

44. Bridget

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44

BRIDGET

I'D LOST MY MIND, ASKING ALEX FOR HELP. HE MIGHT BE DATING AVA,

and he might be less...sociopathic since they'd gotten back together last year, but I still trusted the man as far as I could throw him.

Yet for all his faults, he truly loved Ava, and he owed me for kicking his ass into gear before I left for New York. If I hadn't, he'd still be moping over her and terrorizing everyone around him.

Our call four days ago had been short and succinct. I told him what I wanted, and he confirmed he could get it. I didn't doubt his ability to pull through, because this was Alex we were talking about, but he hadn't given me a delivery date and I'd been on pins and needles since.

"Your Highness." Booth spoke at a lower volume than usual, and his body vibrated with nervous energy as we walked to my room. We'd just returned from an event at the National Opera House, and I'd been so distracted by thoughts of my plan I hadn't questioned why Booth was accompanying me to my suite when he usually bid me goodbye at the palace entrance.

"Yes?" I arched an eyebrow at Booth's furtive glances around the empty hall. He was a good bodyguard, but he would make a terrible spy.

"Read it when you're alone." He slipped a piece of paper into my

hands, his words almost inaudible.

I frowned. "What—"

A maid turned the corner, and Booth stepped back so fast he nearly crashed into the porcelain vase on a nearby side table.

"Well," he said, his voice now so loud I flinched. "If that's all, Your Highness, I'll be going." He dropped to a whisper again.

"Don't tell anyone else about it."

He waved and speed-walked down the hall until he disappeared around the same corner the maid had rounded.

My frown deepened.

What in the world? It wasn't like Booth to be so cryptic, but I did as he asked and waited until I shut the door behind me before I unfolded the paper. Booth wasn't a secret notes type of person. What had—

Time stopped. My blood rushed to my face, and my stomach swooped at the familiar, messy scrawl before me.

9 p.m. tonight, princess. Two chairs.

No name, but I didn't need one.

Rhys was still in Eldorra.

A whoosh of relief darted through me, followed by anxiety and a twinge of panic. We hadn't talked since the hospital, and we hadn't exactly ended things on a good note. Why was he reaching out now, two-and-a-half weeks later? How had he convinced Booth to sneak me a note? What—

"Bridget!"

For a second, I thought the call of my name came from outside my room, but then I looked up and saw the petite brunette standing in my suite.

Another, wholly different kind of disbelief flooded me.

"Ava? What are you doing here?" I hastily shoved Rhys's note into my pocket, where it seared through the silk and into my skin. Her face broke into a wide smile. "Surprise! I'm here to see you, of course. And I'm not alone."

On cue, Jules swanned into the sitting room dressed in a familiar-looking green coat. "Good afternoon, Your Highness," she sang. I cocked my head. "Is that my coat?"

"Yes," she said with zero shame. "I love it. It makes my hair pop." The emerald color did, indeed, make her red hair pop. "Your closet is everything. I need an in-depth tour later."

"You already had an in-depth tour, courtesy of yourself." Stella came up behind her, clad in a sleek white dress that made her olive skin glow. As the fashion blogger in our group, her closet rivaled mine, though her clothing choices were more casual. "You spent half an hour examining her shoe collection."

"It's called research," Jules said. "I'm going to be a lawyer. Power heels are essential for stomping all over the opposition."

I let out a soft laugh as I hugged my friends, my shock gradually morphing into excitement. I hadn't seen them in person since I moved back to Eldorra, and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed our face-to-face chats until now.

However, I held off on greeting the last person in the group with a hug.

"Alex." I nodded at Ava's boyfriend, which seemed too tame a

word to describe him. Boyfriends were sweet and kind. Alex, with his cold eyes and colder demeanor, was anything but, though his expression did warm a degree when he looked at Ava.

“Bridget.”

Neither of us gave any sign we’d interacted beyond these types of group settings. I felt bad hiding my call from Ava, but the less she knew about what we were up to, the better. Plausible deniability mattered.

“We saw what happened on the news, with your grandfather and Rhys.” Ava’s brow knit with concern. “We would’ve come sooner, but Jules had to wrap up her internship and I couldn’t take time off until now. How are you holding up?”

“I’m all right. My grandfather’s a lot better.” I purposely didn’t mention Rhys.

“I knew something was going on with you and your hottie body-guard. I’m never wrong,” Jules joked before she, too, turned serious.

“Do you need anything from us, babe? Maybe some paparazzi ass you need kicked? A decoy while you sneak off to a midnight rendezvous with your lover? I can dye my hair blonde.”

“J, you’re like three inches shorter than her,” Stella said.

Jules lifted one shoulder. “Minor issue. Nothing heels won’t solve.”

I laughed again, even as Rhys’s note burned a hole in my pocket. 9 p.m. Two chairs. “How did you guys get in here?”

“We worked with Nikolai on the surprise,” Jules said. “Too bad he’s taken. Your brother’s hot.”

“We’re here for the weekend,” Stella added, brushing a stray curl out of her face. With her green eyes, tanned skin, and leggy grace, she was the most gorgeous person I’d ever met, and while she was fully aware of the effect her looks had on others—especially men—she never flaunted it. “I wish we could stay longer, but we can’t take that much time off from work.”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re here.” The knot of loneliness in my stomach loosened an inch. As much as I wanted to reread Rhys’s note over and over again until I memorized every swoop and curve of the letters, I also wanted to hang out with my friends. It had been far too long. “Tell me. What did I miss?”

Since I didn’t have any meetings for the rest of the day, I spent the afternoon catching up with my friends while Alex took a series of business calls. I told them about my training, goodwill tour, and birthday ball. They told me about their jobs, their dating fails, and their road trip to Shenandoah National Park.

Eventually, we passed the light topics and reached the elephant in the room.

“You and Rhys.” Ava squeezed my hand. “What happened?”

I hesitated, debating how much to tell them before I settled on a brief, sanitized version of the story, starting with when I learned about Nikolai’s abdication and ending with our breakup in the hospital. I recounted everything without breaking down, which I considered a major win.

Once I finished, my friends gaped at me, their expressions ranging from shock to sadness to sympathy.

“Holy shit,” Jules said. “Your life is a Hallmark movie.”

“Not exactly.” Hallmark movies had happy endings, and mine was still up in the air.

“Is there anything we can do?” Sympathy creased Stella’s face. For once, she wasn’t on her phone, which was a major feat, since she practically lived on the internet.

I shook my head. “I’ll figure it out.”

If Alex comes through. I glanced at where he stood by the window, speaking rapid-fire Russian into his phone.

“It’ll work out, babe.” Jules radiated confidence. “It always does.

If it doesn’t, declare martial law and tell them you’re keeping your crown and hot bodyguard. What are they going to do, guillotine you?”

My lips inched up into a smile. I could always count on Jules to come up with the most outrageous ideas. “It doesn’t work like that, and they might.”

“Fuck ‘em. I’d like to see them try. If they do, Alex will take care of it. Right, Alex?” Jules’s voice took on a teasing, singsong quality. Alex ignored her.

“Stop provoking him,” Ava said. “I can’t always save you.”

“I’m not provoking him. It’s a compliment. Your man can get anything done.” When Ava turned away, Jules leaned in and whispered, “He’s totally whipped. Watch.” She raised her voice to a panicked level. “Oh my God! Ava, are you bleeding?”

Alex’s head snapped up. Less than five seconds later, he ended his call and crossed the room to a confused-looking Ava, whose hand froze halfway to the scones on the table.

“I’m fine,” Ava said as Alex searched her for injuries. She glared at Jules. “What did I just say?”

“I can’t help it.” Jules’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “It’s so much fun. It’s like playing with a windup toy.”

“Until the toy comes alive and kills you,” Stella murmured loud enough for everyone to hear.

Alex stared at Jules with displeasure scrawled all over his face. His features were so perfect it was a little unnerving, like seeing a carefully sculpted statue come to life. Some people were into that, but I preferred men with a little more grit. Give me scars and a nose that was slightly crooked from being broken too many times over perfection.

“Pray you and Ava stay friends forever,” Alex said, icy enough to elicit a rash of goosebumps on my arms.

Jules didn’t appear fazed by the implied threat. “First of all, Ava and I will be friends forever. Second of all, bring it on, Volkov.”

Ava sighed. “Do you see what you left me in D.C. with?” she muttered to me.

I made a sympathetic noise.

My friends stayed for another hour before they left for dinner. I declined their invitation to join, saying I had some official business to take care of before tomorrow, but I promised to give them a palace tour in the morning.

I snuck a peek at the clock.

Three more hours until nine p.m.

Nerves cascaded through my stomach. What would I say once I saw Rhys? What would he say? I didn’t want to tell him about my

plan until I was sure I had the pieces in place, and he might not approve, anyway. My methods weren't aboveboard by any means.

"I'll be right out." Alex kissed Ava on the forehead. "I'm going to use the restroom first."

After everyone filed out, I turned to Alex and crossed my arms over my chest. "It took you long enough. And you could've given me a heads up you were coming."

"I run a Fortune 500 company. I do have other business to attend to besides your personal life." He straightened his shirt sleeve. "You might also want to look up the definition of 'surprise.' Ava insisted." I sighed, not wanting to get into a drawn-out argument with him.

"Fine. Do you have what I need?"

Alex reached into his pocket and retrieved a USB drive. "Information on all one hundred eighty members of Eldorra's Parliament, as requested." Information, AKA blackmail material. "Once I hand this over to you, my debt is paid."

"I understand."

He studied me for a long moment before he dropped the drive into my outstretched hand.

My fingers closed around the tiny gadget while my heart skittered like a frightened rabbit. I can't believe I'm doing this. I wasn't a blackmailer. But I needed leverage, fast, and this was the only way I could think to get it.

I hoped I wouldn't have to resort to using the information. However, with the clock ticking down and my private appeals to ministers politely but firmly rebuffed, I might need to.

"I have to say, I'm impressed," Alex drawled. "I didn't think you had it in you. Maybe you'll make a good queen after all."

Of course he thought good leadership rested on manipulation and deceit. His favorite philosopher was probably Machiavelli.

"Alex," I said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you are a complete dick."

"One of the nicer things people have said about me." He checked his watch. "I would say thank you, but I don't care. I trust you can take it from here?" He nodded at the USB drive.

"Yes." Something occurred to me. I shouldn't ask because I had a feeling I wouldn't like the answer, but... "You have a blackmail file on me too, don't you?"

30. Rhys

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30

RHYS

I WAS ADDICTED.

Me, the man who'd avoided most addictive substances all his life—drugs, smoking, alcohol, even sugar, to an extent—had found the one thing I couldn't resist.

Strength, resilience, and light, wrapped up in five feet nine inches of creamy skin and cool composure that hid a heart of fire underneath.

But fuck, if she was an addiction, I never wanted to be cured.

"Are you going to paint me like one of your French girls?" Bridget teased, stretching her arms over her head.

My cock jumped with interest at the sight of her draped over the couch, naked, though let's be honest, there were very few things Bridget did that didn't interest my cock.

She had a rare day off after her morning meetings, and we'd spent the entire afternoon in a hotel room on the outskirts of Athenberg. If anyone asked, Bridget was taking a spa day, but in reality, all we'd done was fuck, eat, and fuck some more. It was the closest we'd ever gotten, and that we could get, to a real date.

"Careful with teasing me, princess, unless you want a wart on your portrait," I threatened.

She grinned, and the sight hit me like a punch in the gut.

I would never tire of her smiles. Her real smiles, not the ones she showed the public. I'd seen Bridget naked, in fancy gowns, and in lingerie, but she was never more beautiful than when she was herself, stripped of all the pretenses her title forced her to wear.

"You wouldn't." She rolled over and propped her chin on her hands, which rested on the arm of the couch. "You're way too much of a perfectionist about your art."

"We'll see about that." But she was right. I was a perfectionist about my art, and the piece I was working on might be my favorite so far aside from the one of her in Costa Rica, which had finally broken my artist's block. "Hmm, let's see. I'll add a third nipple here...a hairy wart there..."

"Stop!" Bridget laughed. "If you're going to give me warts, at least put them somewhere inconspicuous."

"All right. On your belly button it is."

This time, I was the one who laughed when she tossed a throw pillow at me. "Years of grumpiness, and you suddenly have jokes."

"I've always had jokes. I just never told them." I shaded in her hair. It spilled down her back, following the graceful curve of her neck and shoulder. Her lips parted in a small smile, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. I did my best to make the charcoal sketch realistic, though nothing compared to the real thing.

We fell into a comfortable silence—me sketching, Bridget watching me with a soft, slumberous expression.

I was more relaxed than I'd been in a long time, despite still being on high alert about someone possibly snooping through my guesthouse. I'd upgraded the security system and added hidden cameras that fed directly to a feed I could access on my phone. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened yet, so it was a wait-and-see game.

For now, I'd enjoy one of the rare moments Bridget and I could spend together without worrying about someone catching us.

"Do you ever show your art to anyone?" she asked after a while.

Sunset crept closer, and the golden late afternoon light bathed her in an otherworldly glow.

“I show it to you.”

“Besides me.”

“Nope.” Not even Christian had seen my sketches, though he knew they existed. Ditto with my old therapist.

Bridget lifted her head, her lips parting in surprise. “So I’m...”

“The first person I showed? Yeah.” I focused on finishing my sketch, but I felt the weight of her stare on my face.

“Mr. Larsen.”

“Yes?” I drawled, picking up on the sensual note in her voice.

“Come here.”

“You ordering me around?”

Bridget flashed another grin. “Maybe. I’m in trouble and I need your help.”

I set down my pencil with a sigh. “You’re not in trouble. You are trouble.”

I strode over to the couch, and she squealed when I picked her up and set her in my lap. My cock nestled against her pussy, with only the material of my briefs separating us. “I’m here. Now what?”

“Now...” She pushed herself up on her knees so she could pull down my briefs. “You help me out. I’m a little tense.”

I hissed out a breath when she sank onto my cock. “You’re insatiable.” For someone so regal in public, Bridget was a firecracker in the bedroom. Or living room, or shower, or kitchen counter.

Her grin widened. “You love it.”

My chuckle morphed into a groan as she settled into an exquisite rhythm. “Yeah, princess. I do.” I watched her, taking almost as much pleasure in the flushed arousal on her face as I did in the sensation of her pussy gripping me.

Half an hour later, after we were both breathless and sated, I curled an arm around her as we lay on the couch. That was my favorite type of moment with Bridget—the peaceful ones where we could just be together. We got so few of those.

“How did you get this?” She brushed her fingers over the scar on my eyebrow. “You never told me about this one.”

“Hit it on a table.” I stroked Bridget’s arm absentmindedly. “My mother flew into one of her rages and backhanded me. I fell. I was lucky I didn’t hit my eye, or you’d be fucking a pirate impersonator.”

Bridget didn’t smile at my failed attempt at a joke. Instead, she brushed her fingers over the scar again before pressing her lips to it in a soft kiss, the way she had for the scars on my back in Costa Rica. I closed my eyes, my chest heavy and tight.

I’d talked about my mother more with Bridget than I had anyone else, including my old therapist. It wasn’t so hard anymore, but Bridget had a way of making even the hardest things for me easy.

Relax. Talk. Laugh. Simple things that made me feel almost human again.

“Do you ever think about finding your father?” she asked. “For closure.”

“Thought about it? Yeah. Acted on it? No.” If I wanted, I could track my father down tomorrow. Christian had told me more than

once it would take little more than a few presses of a button for him to dig up that information for me, but I wasn't interested. "I have no interest in meeting him. If I did, I'd probably get arrested for murder."

My father was a piece of shit, and as far as I was concerned, he didn't exist. Any man who could leave a woman high and dry like that didn't deserve recognition.

Even if all I wanted was a family, I would rather eat nails than waste energy seeking him out.

"It's crazy how much our parents shape our lives," Bridget said.

"With their choices, their memories, their legacies."

A shadow of sadness passed through her eyes, and I knew she was thinking about her own parents. One gone at childbirth, the other passing just a few years later, and she'd had to grieve, as a child, with millions of eyes watching her.

I remembered seeing a photo of her walking behind her father's casket as a kid, her face scrunched in an obvious attempt to hold back tears, and thinking that even though I had a shitty home situation, at least I could cry at my parent's funeral.

"I think part of the reason I'm so scared about being queen is I'm afraid of not living up to my mother's legacy. Of disappointing her somehow." Bridget stared at the ceiling, her expression pensive. "I never met her, but I read and watched every interview I could get my hands on. The home videos, the stories from the staff and my family...she was the perfect princess and daughter and mother. She would've made a great queen. Better than me. But I killed her." Her voice caught, and somehow, I knew that was the first time she'd ever voiced those words.

A deep ache pierced my heart, and it only grew when I saw the unshed tears in her eyes.

I straightened and cupped her face in my hands. "Bridget, you did not kill your mother," I said fiercely. "Do you understand? You were a baby. You are not guilty just because you were born."

"They didn't plan for me." A tear slipped down her cheek. "I was an accidental pregnancy. If it weren't for me, she'd still be alive, and

32. Bridget

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32

BRIDGET

PROBLEM: I COULDN'T REPEAL THE LAW ON MY OWN. I NEEDED BACKUP, and I had limited options. I didn't want to tell Rhys until I had a more concrete plan, and I certainly couldn't tell my family or any of the palace handlers. My friends in D.C. were too far away and re-

moved from Eldorran politics to help.

There was only one person left I could trust.

“You want to what?” Mikaela’s mouth hung open as she stared at me like I’d sprouted a second head. “Bridget, the Royal Marriages Law is almost as old as the country itself. It’s impossible to overturn, especially with those fuddy-duddies in Parliament.”

“It’s not impossible, it’s improbable,” I corrected. “There’s a difference. And improbable things can become probable with the right strategy.”

“Okay. What’s the strategy?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She groaned. “Bridge, this is crazy. Why are you going to all the trouble to overturn the law? I thought everything was going well with Steffan. I mean, he was gone for a while, but he’s back and as delicious as ever. And he’s your date to Nikolai’s wedding.” She sipped her tea and set it on the table. “Am I missing something?” I bit my lip. Should I spill the beans about Rhys? I trusted Mikaela, but I didn’t quite trust her reaction to the news, given what she’d said in my office about dating the staff.

“The law is archaic,” I said. “It’s not just for me. It’s for all the kings and queens after me. If it wasn’t for the law, Nikolai would still be crown prince and happily engaged to Sabrina.”

“Okay, but laws can’t be repealed unless the Speaker brings the motion to the floor and a three-fourths majority of Parliament votes in favor,” Mikaela pointed out. “When was the last time they repealed a law?”

Fifteen years ago, when they repealed a law prohibiting speed limits of higher than fifty-five miles per hour throughout the country.

The odds weren’t in my favor.

“I’ll figure it out.” Erhall would be difficult, but I would think of a way to persuade him. “Will you help?”

“You’re crazy. This is crazy.”

But for all her grumbling, Mikaela reluctantly agreed, and for the next week, I threw all my energy into creating a workable plan. I analyzed every repealed law in Eldorran history—there weren’t many—and studied the different ministers in Parliament, dividing them up based on how likely they were to pass the motion. I hadn’t figured out a strategy for Erhall yet, so I left him for last.

However, it wasn’t until my next check-in with Elin that something clicked. Something so simple I felt like an idiot for not thinking of it before.

“His Majesty is delighted you’re attending Prince Nikolai’s wedding with Steffan,” Elin said with an approving nod. “Coverage has been positive with the goodwill tour and wedding, but we want to keep the momentum going. Plus, we want to make sure everything is in place for when you eventually take the crown. Nothing says stability like a good marriage with a good, solid consort, and Lord knows we need some stability after the abdication.”

“I don’t see how marriage affects the ability to rule,” I said, stifling a yawn. I stayed up late last night doing research, and I was paying the price today.

“It affects public opinion, Your Highness,” Elin said in a tone that

suggested I should know this already. “No one is immune to public opinion. Not even the royal family.”

I froze. “What did you just say?”

She raised a questioning brow. “No one is immune to public opinion, not even the royal family.”

A lightbulb went off in my head, and I almost jumped out of my chair in excitement. “Elin, you’re a genius,” I breathed. “An absolute genius. You deserve a raise immediately.”

“Excellent. Please tell His Majesty the next time you speak with him.” She checked her watch. “That’s all I have for today unless—”

“No.” I was already up and halfway to the door. “This was a lovely meeting. I’ll see you next week.”

I practically ran into the hall.

“Your Highness, please remember, princesses don’t run!” Elin called after me.

I ignored her. The ideas rushed in so fast I couldn’t keep up.

Some were more devious than others, but at least one had to work. It had to.

Parliamentary elections were coming up in the fall, and I was still riding high from the goodwill tour. If I could get the public to back a repeal—

I slammed into a brick wall.

“Whoa. Where are you off to in such a hurry?” Rhys’s amused voice cut through the chatter in my brain as he gripped my arms and steadied me.

I smiled, my heart skipping at the sight of him. “What are you doing here?”

We didn’t have a meetup scheduled, but schedules were overrated, anyway.

“Thought I’d explore. See if anything interesting is happening, or if any princesses need protecting.” His mouth formed a small, teasing grin.

“Hmm.” I adopted a thoughtful expression. “I don’t know about protecting, but I can think of a few things that might interest you.”

There was no one else in the hall, even so, we kept our voices low. Intimate.

Heat turned Rhys’s eyes into molten silver. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Like a tour of the throne room.” I slowly walked backward until I reached the door leading into the ceremonial space, and we cast a quick look around before slipping inside.

I’d planned to brainstorm ways I could get the public to support a repeal, but that could wait. I hadn’t seen Rhys all day.

“So, this is a throne room.” Rhys looked around the lavish space.

With its massive crystal chandeliers, thick crimson carpet and wall coverings, and gold trim, it was the most over-the-top room in the palace, but we only used it for the occasional knighting ceremony or official function. No one came in here unless they had to. “Looks exactly the way I pictured a throne room would look.”

“Don’t act like you haven’t studied every inch of every room in the palace already.”

Rhys gave me a slow smile, and my stomach flipped. “You think you know me so well.”

“I do.”

“Hmm.” He walked closer to me until we were mere inches apart. “Then do you know what I’m going to do right now?”

I held my breath. “What?”

He leaned down and whispered, “I’m going to sit you on that nice little throne over there and eat your pretty cunt out until you beg me to stop.”

I gasped out a laugh as he picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder with the ease of someone picking up a rag doll. “You can’t! No one sits on the throne except the monarch.”

Rhys set me down on the gold and velvet chair.

“It’s going to be yours one day. Might as well get used to it,” he said. “How does it feel?”

“I…” I looked around. The room seemed different from this vantage point. Bigger, more intimidating. “Strange. And scary. But…not as scary as I thought.”

In my mind, the throne was so large I’d never grow into it, but now that I was actually sitting in it? It seemed manageable.

“Because you’re ready for it.” Rhys said it like it wasn’t even a question. “You’re a fucking queen, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Including yourself.”

My mouth tipped up while my heart melted into a puddle. “If you ever give up on the bodyguard gig, you could make a killing as a motivational speaker.”

He chuckled. “Not motivation, just the truth. The throne suits you. Now…” He knelt before me and spread my thighs. “How can I serve you, Your Highness?”

Heat consumed my body as he pulled my underwear down.

“Rhys,” I hissed, my pulse racing with a mix of lust and anxiety.

“Someone will catch us.”

The odds were slim, but they weren’t zero.

His wolfish smile caused my toes to curl. “Then we better make it worth it. Hmm, princess?”

9. Bridget

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9

BRIDGET

SOMETHING CHANGED THE NIGHT OF MY GRADUATION. PERHAPS IT WAS

the shared trauma, or the fact Rhys had voluntarily opened up to me about his past, but the longstanding antagonism between us transformed into something else—something that kept me awake late at night and drove the butterflies in my stomach nuts.

It wasn’t a crush, exactly. More like attraction paired with…curiosity? Fascination? Whatever it was, it put me on edge, because on

the list of the worst ideas I could have, sneaking out and getting kidnapped was number two. Developing non-platonic feelings for my bodyguard was number one.

Luckily, my schedule in New York kept me so busy I barely had time to breathe, much less indulge in inappropriate fantasies.

Rhys and I moved to Manhattan three days after graduation, and the following summer was a whirlwind of charity board meetings, social functions, and house hunting.

By the time August rolled around, I'd signed the lease on a beautiful Greenwich Village townhouse, worn down two pairs of heels from trekking through the city, and met everyone on the social circuit, some of whom I wished I hadn't met.

"It's slipping." Rhys scanned the surrounding crowd.

We were at the opening for a new Upper East Side exhibit celebrating Eldorran artists, which normally wouldn't be a big deal, but the guest list included action movie star Nate Reynolds and the paparazzi were out in full force.

"What?" I said through my smile as I posed for the cameras. The appearances got tiresome after a while. There was only so much smiling, waving, and small talk a girl could stand before she keeled over from boredom, but they were part of my job, so I grinned and bore it. Literally.

"Your smile. It's slipping."

He was right. I hadn't even noticed.

I re-upped the wattage of my smile and tried not to yawn. God, I can't wait till I'm home. I still had a luncheon, two interviews, a board meeting for the New York Animal Rescue Foundation, and a couple of errands to run, but after that...PJs and sweet sleep.

I didn't hate my job, but I wished I could do something more meaningful than be a walking, talking mannequin.

And so it went. Day after day, month after month of the same thing. Fall turned into winter, then into spring and summer, then fall again.

Rhys stood next to me through it all, stern and grumpy as always, but he'd dialed down the overbearing attitude. For him, anyway. Compared to a normal person, he was still overprotective to the point of neuroticism.

I loved and hated the shift in equal measure. Loved it because I had more freedom, hated it because I could no longer use my irritation as a shield against whatever was crackling between us.

And there was a thing. I just wasn't sure whether I was the only one who saw it, or if he did too.

I didn't ask. It was safer that way.

"Do you ever think about doing anything except bodyguarding?"

I asked on a rare night in. For once, I had no plans other than a date with the TV and ice cream, and I loved it.

It was September, almost two years since Rhys and I first met and over a year since I moved to New York. I'd gone full out with the seasonal decorations, including a fall wreath over the fireplace, earth-toned cushions and blankets, and a mini pumpkin centerpiece for the coffee table.

Rhys and I were watching a screwball comedy that'd popped up in my Netflix recommendations. He sat ramrod straight, fully

dressed in his work outfit while I was curled up with my feet on the sofa and a pint of ice cream in my hand.

“Bodyguarding?”

“It’s a word,” I said. “If it’s not, I’m declaring it one by royal decree.”

He smirked. “You would. And to answer your question, no, I don’t. The day I do is the day I stop ‘bodyguarding.’”

I rolled my eyes. “It must be nice to see everything in black and white.”

Rhys’s gaze lingered on me for a second before he looked away.

“Trust me,” he said. “Not everything is black and white.”

Inexplicably, my heart skipped a beat, but I forced myself not to demand he tell me what he meant. It probably meant nothing. It was a throwaway line.

Instead, I refocused on the movie and concentrated on not looking at the man sitting next to me.

It worked. Sort of.

I laughed at something a character said, and I noticed Rhys looking at me out of the corner of my eye.

“It’s nice,” he said.

“What?”

“Your real smile.”

Forget a skipped beat. My heart skipped a whole song.

This time, however, I covered it up by pointing my spoon at him.

“That was a compliment.”

“If you say so.”

“Don’t try to play it off.” I was proud of how normal I sounded when my insides were doing things that were anything but normal.

Fluttering, skipping, twisting. My doctor would have a field day.

“We’ve passed a milestone. Rhys Larsen’s first compliment to Bridget von Ascheberg, and it only took two years. Mark it down.”

Rhys snorted, but humor filled his eyes. “One year and ten months,” he said. “If we’re counting.”

Which he was.

If my heart skipped any more songs, it’d have no playlist left.

Not good. Not good at all.

Whatever I felt toward Rhys, it couldn’t develop past what it was now. So, in an effort to rid myself of my increasingly disturbing reactions to my bodyguard, I agreed to go on a date with Louis, the son of the French ambassador to the United Nations, when I ran into him at an event a month after my movie night with Rhys.

Louis showed up for our date at seven o’clock sharp with a bouquet of red flowers and a charming smile, which wilted when he saw the scowling bodyguard standing so close behind me I could feel the heat from his body.

“These are for you.” Louis handed me the flowers while keeping a wary eye on Rhys. “You look beautiful.”

A low growl rumbled behind me, and Louis noticeably gulped.

“Thank you, they’re lovely,” I said with a gracious smile. “Let me put them in water and I’ll be right back.”

My smile dropped when I turned my back to Louis and faced

Rhys. “Mr. Larsen, please follow me.” Once we entered the kitchen, I hissed, “Stop threatening my dates with your gun.”

I hadn't needed to see him to know he'd probably pushed his jacket aside just enough to flash his weapon.

Louis wasn't the first guy I'd dated in New York, though the last time I'd gone on a date had been months ago. Rhys kept scaring off my romantic prospects, and half the men in the city were afraid to ask me out for fear he would shoot them.

It hadn't bothered me until now because I hadn't cared for my previous dates, but it was annoying when I was actively trying to move on from whatever weird hold Rhys had on me.

Rhys's glare intensified. "He's wearing shoe lifts. He deserves to be threatened."

I pressed my lips together, but a quick glance at Louis' feet through the kitchen doorway confirmed Rhys's observation. I thought he seemed taller. I had nothing against shoe lifts per se, but three inches seemed excessive.

Unfortunately, while I could overlook the shoe lifts, I couldn't overlook the utter lack of chemistry between us.

Louis and I dined at a lovely French restaurant, where I struggled not to fall asleep while he rambled on about his summers in St. Tropez. Rhys sat at the next table with a glower so dark the diners on his other side requested to move tables.

By the time dinner ended, Louis was so flustered by the menacing presence less than three feet away he knocked over his wineglass and nearly caused a server to drop his tray of food.

"It's all right," I said, helping a mortified Louis clean up the mess while the server fussed over the stained linen tablecloth. "It was an accident."

I glared at Rhys, who stared back at me without a hint of remorse.

"Of course." Louis smiled, but the mortification in his eyes remained.

When we finished cleaning up, he left a generous tip for the server and bid me a polite good night. He didn't ask me on a second date.

I wasn't sad about it. I was, however, pissed at a certain gray-eyed pain in my butt.

"You scared Louis half to death," I said when Rhys and I returned home. I couldn't control the anger from seeping into my voice. "Next time, try not to unnerve my date so much he spills his drink all over himself."

"If he scares that easily, he's not worthy of being your date."

Rhys had dressed up to adhere to the restaurant's dress code, but the tie and dinner jacket couldn't mask the raw, untamed masculinity rolling off him in potent waves.

"You were armed and glaring at him like he killed your dog. It's hard not to be nervous under those conditions." I tossed my keys on the side table and slipped off my heels.

"I don't have a dog."

"It was a metaphor." I unpinned my hair and ran my hand through the waves. "Keep it up and I'll end up like one of those spinsters from historical romance novels. You've scared off every date I've had in the past year."

One thing that hadn't changed after all this time? My refusal to

call him anything except Mr. Larsen, and his refusal to call me anything except princess.

Rhys's scowl deepened. "I'll stop scaring them off once you get better taste in men. No wonder your love life is in the dumps. Look at the twerps you insist on going out with."

I bristled. My love life was not in the dumps. It was close, but it wasn't there yet. "You're one to talk."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I haven't seen you date anyone since you started working for me." I shrugged off my jacket, and his gaze slid to my bared shoulders for a fraction of a second before returning to my face. "You're hardly qualified to give me dating advice."

"I don't date. Doesn't mean I can't spot worthless idiots when I see 'em."

I paused, startled by his admission. While Rhys was always by my side during the day, he was off duty after I turned in for the night. Sometimes he stayed in, sometimes he didn't. I'd always assumed he was...busy on the nights he didn't.

A strange mixture of relief and disbelief coursed through me.

Disbelief, because while Rhys wasn't the most charming guy on the planet, he was gorgeous enough for most women to overlook his surly attitude. Relief, because...well, I'd rather not examine that reason too closely.

"You've been celibate for two years?" The question slipped out before I could think it through, and I regretted it instantly.

Rhys arched an eyebrow, his scowl morphing into a smirk. "You asking about my sex life, princess?"

Embarrassment scorched my cheeks, both at my inappropriate question and at hearing the word "sex" leave his mouth. "I did no such thing."

"I may not have attended a fancy college like you, but I can read subtext." Amusement flashed in those gunmetal eyes. "For the record, dating and sex aren't the same thing."

Right. Of course.

Something unpleasant replaced my earlier relief. The idea of him "not dating" someone irked me more than it should've.

"I know that," I said. "I don't date everyone I have sex with, either."

What am I saying? I hadn't had sex in so long I was surprised my vagina hadn't sued me for neglect, but I wanted to...what, prove Rhys wasn't the only one who could have casual sex? Get a rise out of him?

If so, it worked, because his smirk disappeared and his drawl hardened. "And when was the last time you had non-dating sex?"

I lifted my chin, refusing to back down beneath the weight of his steely stare. "That is a highly inappropriate question."

"You asked first," he ground out. "Answer the question, princess."

Breathe. I heard the palace communications secretary Elin's voice in my head, coaching me on how to handle the press. You can't control what they say, but you can control what you say. Don't let them see you sweat. Deflect if necessary, take back the power, and guide the conversation where you want it to go. You are the princess. You do not cower in

front of anyone. Elin was scary, but she was good, and I took her advice to heart as I struggled not to rise to Rhys's bait.

One...two...three...

I exhaled and squared my shoulders, looking down my nose at him even though he towered over me by a good seven inches.

"I will not. This is where we end the conversation," I said, my voice cold. Before it goes any more off the rails. "Good night, Mr. Larsen."

His eyes called me a coward. Mine told him to mind his business.

The air pulsed with heavy silence during our staredown. It was late, and I was tired, but I'd be damned if I backed down first.

Judging by Rhys's bullish stance, he had the same thought.

We might've stood there forever, glaring at each other, had it not been for the sharp trill of an incoming call. Even then, I waited for my phone to ring three times before I tore my eyes away from Rhys and checked the caller ID.

My annoyance quickly gave way to confusion, then worry, when I saw who was calling. Nikolai. My brother and I rarely spoke on the phone, and it was five a.m. in Eldorra. He was a morning person, but he wasn't that much of a morning person.

I picked up, aware of Rhys's gaze burning into me.

"Nik, is everything all right?"

Nikolai wouldn't call out of the blue at this hour unless it was an emergency.

"I'm afraid not." Exhaustion weighed down his words. "It's Grandfather."

Panic exploded in my stomach, and I had to hold on to the side table for support as Nikolai explained the situation. No. Not Grandfather. He was the only living parental figure I had left, and if I lost him...

Rhys moved toward me, his face now dark with concern, but he halted when I shook my head. The more Nikolai spoke, the more I wanted to throw up.

Fifteen minutes later, I ended the call, numb with shock.

"What happened?" Rhys remained a few feet away, but there was a certain tenseness to his posture, like he was ready to murder whoever had been on the other end of the line for causing me distress.

All thoughts of our stupid argument fled, and the sudden urge to throw myself into his arms and let his strength carry me away

51. Rhys

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THREE MONTHS LATER

“Rhys!” Luciana’s face creased into a huge smile. “Como estas?”

She looked Bridget over with a twinkle in her eye, and when she

spoke next, her words held a teasing note. “Es tu novia?”

I laughed and tangled my fingers with Bridget’s. “Si, es mi novia.”

“I knew it!” Luciana said with delight. “Finally. Come, come. I have food for you.”

She ushered us to the same table we’d sat at during our last trip to Costa Rica. I couldn’t believe that had only been a year ago. So much had changed since then.

Hell, so much had changed in the past three months alone. Bridget and I could finally enjoy being together, even as preparations for her coronation ramped up and I slowly acclimated to the spotlight. I didn’t enjoy the attention, but I was more comfortable with it, and that was the best I could hope for.

“This was a good idea.” Bridget sighed with happiness when Luciana brought out a feast of meat and rice. “I needed a vacation.”

I smirked. “I always have good ideas.”

Bridget hadn’t wanted to go on a trip until after her coronation, but I could tell she was buckling under the stress. She needed a get-away to reset. Plus, my mouth could be pretty damn persuasive, especially when I used it for purposes other than talking.

It was our first vacation as an official couple, and I’d chosen Costa Rica not only for sentimental purposes but because no one in town knew or cared Bridget was a princess. Even after all the recent press coverage, they treated her as they would anyone else—warm and friendly, sometimes inquisitive, but never prying.

“Five days in paradise,” I drawled. “Swimming, sunbathing, fucking—”

“Rhys.”

“What, you don’t like the itinerary?”

“Lower your voice,” she hissed, her face the color of the tomatoes on her plate. “People will hear.”

“No one’s listening.”

We were the only ones on the trip. No Booth, no entourage. It took a helluva lot of convincing, but the palace finally agreed to my plan. I was still qualified to guard Bridget, even if I was no longer officially employed in that capacity.

Since I quit working for Christian, I’d taken on a few freelance security consulting gigs. I didn’t need the money—Harper Security had paid very well, and I wasn’t a big spender—but I’d go out of my mind with boredom if I didn’t have something to occupy my days.

“You don’t know that.” Bridget tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She wore a tank top and shorts, and her skin already glowed from the sun. No makeup or fancy clothes, and she was still the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen. “People could definitely be listening.”

“Trust me. I know.” The closest people to us sat three tables over, their eyes glued to the soccer game on TV. “Even if they are, ain’t nothing wrong with fuck—”

“Rhys.”

I chuckled but stopped trying to get a rise out of her lest her face explode from embarrassment. It never failed to amaze me how prim Bridget was in public compared to how wild she was in bed. It made

our sex even hotter, knowing I got to see a side of her no one else did.

After lunch, we walked around town for a bit before I convinced her to return to the villa.

I couldn't wait much longer.

"I have a surprise for you," I said as we drove up the hill. I couldn't resist dropping a hint, and talking kept my focus off the knot of nerves in my stomach.

I wasn't used to being nervous.

Bridget perked up. "I love surprises. What is it?"

I kept one hand on the steering wheel and twined the fingers of my other hand with hers. "It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you."

"I like surprises I'm prepared for," she said. "Just a hint?"

I shook my head with a grin. I'd been doing a lot more of that lately—grinning.

Something had changed over the past few months. The dark, heavy cloud that'd hung over me all my life had dissipated. It still came back now and then, but sunny days were the default now, not thunderstorms.

It was...strange. The darkness had been a protective shield, and without it, I felt stripped bare. Defenseless, which was not something I ever wanted to feel. But in moments like this, when it was just me and Bridget, I didn't need defenses. She'd broken through all of them, anyway.

"Here we are." I parked in front of the villa. "Surprise."

Bridget looked around slowly. "Okay..." She shot a confused glance in my direction. "I hate to tell you this, but we've been here before, remember? Luggage drop-off this morning? Bucket list number four?"

"Trust me, that's not something I'll ever forget." My mouth quirked up at the warm rose creeping over her cheeks. "But that's not the surprise. This is." I held up a set of keys. "I bought the house."

Her mouth fell open. "What?"

"My buddy was thinking of selling anyway. He and his family are moving further down south. So, I bought it." I shrugged.

We could stay in the nicest hotels in the world, but I wanted a place that belonged to us.

"Rhys, you can't..." Bridget's eyes darted to the villa. "Really?"

"Yep." My grin widened when she squealed in a decidedly un-princess-like manner and jumped out of the car.

"We're coming here every year!" she yelled over her shoulder.

"And we need more hammocks!"

I followed her inside, a laugh rumbling from my chest as she visited every room like they were long-lost friends.

I loved seeing her like this, wild and carefree, her guard down and her face lit with a smile. A real one.

"I love this place." She slid open the glass door to the terrace and sighed when she saw the pool. "Perfection."

"Why do you think I bought it?"

A teasing sparkle brightened her eyes. "Rhys, are you a secret romantic?"

"I don't know." I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small

velvet box, the knot of nerves in my stomach doubling. Bridget sucked in an audible breath, but otherwise everything hushed—the wind, the birds, the roar of the Pacific in the distance. It was like the entire world held its breath, waiting to see what happened next.

“You tell me.”

I opened the box, revealing the glittering diamond ring that had burned a hole in the back of my dresser drawer for two months. I’d wanted to wait until the perfect moment. Now it was here, and I felt like an eighteen-year-old walking into Navy training for the first time again, determined but scared as hell about how the next chapter of my life would unfold.

A proposal was inevitable. I knew it, Bridget knew it, the world knew it. But just because something was inevitable didn’t mean it wasn’t important, and this was the most important moment of my life.

“I’m not the best at flowery language, so I’ll keep it simple.”

Fuck, was my voice shaking? I hoped not. “I never believed in love. Never wanted it. I didn’t see the practical value and, to be honest, I was doing just fine without it. But then I met you. Your smile, your strength, your intelligence and compassion. Even your stubbornness and hardheadedness. You filled a part of my soul I always thought would be empty, and you healed scars I never knew existed. And I realized...it’s not that I didn’t believe in love before. It’s that I was saving it all for you.”

A half sob bled through the hand pressed to Bridget’s mouth.

I took a deep breath. “Bridget, will you marry me?”

The question hadn’t fully left my mouth before Bridget threw her arms around me and kissed me. “Yes. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!”

Yes. One word, three letters, and it filled me up so completely I was sure I’d never hunger again.

I slipped the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly.

“There’s no taking it back,” I said gruffly, hoping she couldn’t hear the hitch in my voice. “You’re really stuck with me now.”

34. Bridget

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I will provide the chapter now.

34

BRIDGET

“IS EVERYTHING OKAY?” SABRINA ASKED AFTER I EXITED THE BATHROOM.

She’d knocked to check on me, and I realized I’d been gone for almost half an hour.

“Yes. I just had to deal with some last-minute prep for an event next week,” I said, ashamed of how easily the lie rolled off my

tongue. “Apologies.”

“No need to apologize.” Sabrina gestured to her sister and best friend, who’d passed out on the couch while *The Devil Wears Prada* played on-screen. “At least you’re awake.”

I let out a small laugh. “We should go to sleep soon. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“You’re probably right. I can’t believe it’s almost here.” Sabrina fiddled with her engagement ring, looking overwhelmed and a little lost. “It feels surreal. I wanted a small wedding, but...”

“You got a three-ring circus?” I sank onto the couch next to her.

“Welcome to the royal life. Even if Nik abdicated, he’s still a royal by blood, and everything he does is a reflection of the crown.”

“I know. I just hope I don’t embarrass myself.” Sabrina gave me a nervous smile before her expression grew serious. “Bridget, I know we don’t know each other that well, but I wanted to thank you for agreeing to be part of my bridal party. Truly. It means a lot to me.”

“Of course. You’re going to be my sister-in-law.”

When Nikolai first told me about his abdication, I resented her. It wasn’t something I was proud of, but it was true. If he hadn’t met Sabrina, he’d still be Crown Prince, and I’d be living my life in New York.

But as I stared at her now, I realized I wouldn’t go back to my life in the U.S. even if I could. It had been an illusion of freedom, nothing else. I’d been trapped in the same day in, day out monotony of fake smiles and mind-numbing events. Being crown princess came with more rules and a smaller cage, but it also came with more purpose, and that was the one thing that’d always been missing in my life. Somehow, somewhere along the way, I’d grown into my new role. It would take a while before I was fully comfortable with it, but I was getting there.

“Yes. Good ones, I hope.” Sabrina squeezed my hand. “I love Nikolai, and I’d be lying if I said I’m not happy he abdicated. But I also know what a huge burden it placed on you, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“No apologies needed. You did nothing wrong except fall in love.”

I knew that. I’d always known that. But it wasn’t until I said it at that moment that any lingering resentment I had toward Nikolai and Sabrina faded away.

It wasn’t their fault. There were no wrong choices. If Nikolai had chosen the throne over Sabrina, it would’ve been devastating for him, but it would’ve been understandable. If he’d chosen Sabrina, as he had, that was understandable too. Love or country. An impossible choice when the future of a nation rests on your shoulders.

The only thing at fault was the system that forced him to choose.

“My brother adores you,” I added. Nikolai and I weren’t super close, but I knew him well enough to spot the difference. He changed into a different person when he was around Sabrina, a happier one, and I would never begrudge him that.

Sabrina’s face lit up, erasing some of the earlier stress. “It still feels like a dream sometimes,” she admitted. “To meet someone who sees me for who I am, faults and all, and loves me regardless.” She squeezed my hand again, her eyes wise beyond her twenty-five

years. “I hope you find that kind of love one day, too. Whether it’s with Steffan or someone else.”

Trust me, princess. I would rather end my own life than ask you to do anything that might hurt you.

I forced a smile. “One day.”

But later that night, as I stared at the ceiling and thought about Rhys, Steffan, and my less-than-certain efforts to repeal the Royal

35. Rhys

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35

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 body-guard? 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.

5. Rhys

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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 any-

thing 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 lusting 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

42. Rhys

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I will provide the chapter now.

42

RHYS

IT WAS FUNNY HOW ONE MOMENT COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

One moment, my mother was alive, then she wasn’t.

One moment, my squad mates were alive, and the next everything got blown to hell. Literally.

One moment, I knew my place in the world, only for it to get turned upside down with the simple unfolding of a paper.

Last night had been a mind fuck in every way, and I was still debating the soundness of my decision to pay my brother a visit as I stared at the townhouse in front of me. There wasn’t as much security as I’d expected, though the townhouse was in one of the safest neighborhoods in northern Athenberg.

Until now, the only brothers I had were the ones in my SEAL unit. The idea of having a real brother? It kind of fucked me up, to be honest.

I walked to the front door and knocked, my skin crawling with anticipation.

Christian had left that morning. His had been the quickest trip in the history of international trips, but he had a mess on his hands in the U.S. so I couldn't blame him.

It was just like him to drop a bombshell then leave, though.

My brother answered on the second knock. If he was surprised to see me standing on his doorstep unannounced on a Thursday afternoon, he didn't show it.

"Hello, Mr. Larsen."

"Hello, brother." I didn't bother beating around the bush.

Andreas's smile disappeared. He regarded me for a long moment before he opened the door wider and stepped aside.

I walked in, my shoes squeaking on the shiny marble floor. Other than a few touches of white, everything in the house was gray. Light gray walls, gray furniture, gray rugs. It was like stepping into an expensive rain cloud.

Andreas led me to the kitchen, where he poured two cups of tea and handed me one.

I didn't take it. I hadn't come for tea.

"You knew." I got straight to the point.

He appeared put out by my refusal and placed the extra mug on the counter with a frown. "Yes."

"Why the fuck didn't you say anything?"

"Why do you think, Mr. Larsen? The world thinks I'm a prince. I am a prince. Do you really think I'd jeopardize that to claim kinship with an American bodyguard who, I might mention, has been quite rude to me in every interaction we've had?"

I stared Andreas down. "How did you find out?"

When Christian handed me the paper with my father's and brother's names, I'd almost thrown it out. I knew in my gut opening it would lead to trouble. But in the end, I couldn't resist.

Two names.

Andreas von Ascheberg, my half-brother.

Arthur Erhall, my father.

Our father.

I was related to the two people I despised most in Eldorra. Go figure.

Andreas was silent for a long while. "When I found out Nikolai was abdicating, I was...worried. About Bridget. She'd never cared much for the throne, and I didn't think she even liked Eldorra that much. She certainly spent enough time away from it to give that impression. I thought she wasn't suited for the role of queen."

Barbed wire dug into my heart at the sound of Bridget's name.

Blonde hair. Sparkling eyes. A smile that could light up even my cold, dead soul.

It'd only been three days, and I already missed her so god-damned much I would've cut off my right arm for the chance to glimpse her in person, but she'd been locked up tight at the palace since she left the hospital. Probably busy planning her engagement to Steffan.

Acid seeped into my veins, and I forced myself to focus on what Andreas was saying instead of spiraling again.

“I realize you don’t have a high opinion of me, but I do want what’s best for the country. Eldorra is my home, and it deserves a good ruler.”

I bristled at the implied insult. “Bridget would make a damn good ruler.”

“Yes, well, you’re biased, aren’t you?” Andreas drawled. “I had someone dig into what she’d been doing during her time in New York. Figure out where her head was at. They mentioned you two seemed...close. Closer than the average bodyguard and client.”

“Bullshit. I would’ve noticed a tail.”

“You were distracted, and it wasn’t one. It was multiple.” Andreas laughed at my dark expression. How the fuck had I missed a tail? “Don’t feel too bad. They weren’t there to hurt her. Just gather information. I was curious about you, the bodyguard who seemed to have my cousin so enamored, so I had my people dig into your background, including your parentage.” His smile hardened. “Imagine my surprise when I found out we had the same father. Small world.” His tone remained light, but the tenseness of his jaw suggested he wasn’t as unbothered as he wanted me to think.

The story was plausible, except for me missing the tail. I had been distracted, but I didn’t think I’d been that distracted.

My mind flashed back to my uncharacteristic confrontation with Vincent in Borgia, the last-minute trip to Costa Rica, and the thousands of tiny things pre-Bridget me would’ve never done.

I do not become personally involved in my clients’ lives. I am here to safeguard you from physical harm. That is all. I am not here to be your friend, confidant, or anything else. This ensures my judgment remains uncompromised.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. Fuck.

“Say that’s true. Want to explain to me how you’re a prince when your father is a mere lord?”

Erhall. Of all the people, it had to be Erhall.

Bile rose in my throat at the reminder we were related.

Andreas’s eyes shuttered. “My mother had an affair with Erhall. My father—my real father, even if he wasn’t my biological one—didn’t know until she told him before she died. Six years ago, cancer. I guess she wanted to go with a clear conscience. My father didn’t tell me until before he died, three years ago.” He barked out a short laugh. “At least my family can take secrets with them to their graves. Literally.”

“Does Erhall know?”

“No,” Andreas said a little too sharply. “And he won’t. My father was the one who raised me, not Erhall. My father...” A shadow flickered across his face and disappeared. “He was a good man, and he loved me enough to treat me like his own son even after he found out I wasn’t. Erhall, on the other hand, is a sniveling weasel.”

I snorted. At least we agreed on something.

Andreas’s smirk returned as he took another sip of tea. “Here’s a secret for you. I don’t want the throne. Never did. I’d step up if I had to, of course, but I would much rather have someone else fill that role—as long as they’re capable. The throne is the most powerful seat but also the smallest cage in the palace.”

“That’s utter crap,” I growled. “You’ve made your intentions

clear multiple times. The meetings with the king and Speaker, the ‘helpful’ visit to my guesthouse the night before Nikolai’s wedding. Remember those?”

“Bridget needed a push,” he said coolly. “I wanted to see if she’d fight for the crown. But I also came back because...” He hesitated for a brief second. “I wanted to give Erhall a chance. See if we could connect somehow. That’s why I asked to shadow him during his meetings, more so than me wanting to be king. As for the guesthouse, I was trying to help you. I’m not an idiot, Mr. Larsen. Or should I call you Rhys, now that we both know we’re brothers?” I glared at him, and he chuckled.

“Mr. Larsen it is,” he said. “I knew something was going on with you and Bridget long before the news broke. I didn’t have confirmation, but I could see it in the way you looked at each other. It’s a tough choice, love or country. Nikolai made his. Bridget, well, I guess she made hers, too. But before she agreed to marry Steffan”—the acid in my veins thickened and pooled in my stomach—“you two had a shot. Thought I’d give you a little nudge. You are my brother, and she is my cousin. Two of the few family members I have left. Consider it my good deed for the year.”

“What charity,” I said, my sarcasm evident. “You should be sainted.”

“Laugh all you want, but I was willing to push you two together because you were so clearly in love, even if it meant I had to take up the mantle should Bridget abdicate. Is that not a sacrifice?”

It was a sacrifice. But I wasn’t admitting that to Andreas.

My head pounded with the volume of new information rushing in. There was every chance Andreas was bullshitting me, but my gut told me he wasn’t.

“I almost told her about our father, you know. At Nikolai’s wedding reception. It doesn’t help much with the Royal Marriages Law, since it requires the monarch to marry someone of legitimate noble birth. You were born out of wedlock and never acknowledged by Erhall as his son—he doesn’t even know you are his son—so you don’t qualify.” Andreas finished his tea and set it in the sink. “But she disappeared from the reception and before I could talk to her, The Daily Tea allegations broke.” He shrugged. “C’est la vie.”

Dammit. I’d hoped, now that I knew I was the son of a lord...

“If it doesn’t help with the law, why would you tell her?” I demanded.

“Because I have an idea of how it might help in a roundabout way.” Andreas smiled. “It might even help you get Bridget back if you work fast enough. Holstein’s scheduled to propose next month. I’m willing to help you...”

“But?” There was always a but in these kinds of games.

“But you stop treating me like an enemy and as...perhaps not a brother, but a friendly acquaintance. We are, after all, the only direct family left besides our lovely father.” Something flickered across Andreas’s face before it disappeared.

“That’s it.” Suspicion curled in my stomach. It seemed too easy.

“That’s it. Take it or leave it.”

Something occurred to me. “Before I answer, I want to know. Did you ever snoop around my guesthouse when I wasn’t there?”

He gave me an odd look. “No.”

“The truth.”

Andreas drew himself up to his full height, looking affronted. “I am a prince. I do not snoop around guesthouses...” the word dripped with disdain, “...like a common thief.”

I pressed my lips together. He was telling the truth.

45. Rhys

Rhys waited anxiously on the rooftop of the palace for Bridget, doubtful she would show. Punctual by habit, her lateness fueled his fears that she had decided against meeting him, given their complicated situation. Despite the potential for rejection, Rhys's determination stemmed from a deep-seated belief in their indissoluble bond, driven by love and mutual need, despite the recent turmoil that had kept them apart. His resolve was to fight for their relationship, regardless of the obstacles presented by Bridget's royal duties and his own tumultuous past.

When Bridget finally appeared, breathless and seemingly conflicted, the tension between them dissipated immediately, replaced by an urgent, passionate reunion. Their conversation swiftly moved from apologies and explanations to discussing a mutual plan to challenge a restrictive law threatening their future together. This plan hinted at potential blackmail, demonstrating their willingness to take drastic measures for their relationship. Bridget also proposed leveraging the media in their favor, a strategy Rhys supported despite the inherent risks, showcasing their shared resolve to confront and overcome the societal and political forces aiming to separate them.

Moreover, Bridget's late arrival served as a pivotal moment for Rhys, affirming the depth of his emotions and his willingness to compromise and collaborate with her in navigating the complexities of her royal life and the external pressures they faced. The chapter culminated in a deeply intimate moment between them, symbolizing their rekindled connection and reinforced commitment to each other, in defiance of the myriad challenges looming ahead. Their dialogue revealed layers of vulnerability, trust, and an unwavering determination to safeguard their love, underscoring the theme of resilience amidst adversities.

Epilogue

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EPILOGUE

RHYS

Six months later

“Do you solemnly promise and swear to govern the People of Eldorra according to their respective laws and customs?”

“I solemnly promise so to do.” Bridget sat in the coronation chair, her face pale but her hand steady on the King's Book as she took her official oath. Her grandfather stood beside her, his face solemn but proud, and the rest of the cathedral was so quiet I could feel the weight of the occasion pressing into my skin.

After months of planning, the big day was finally here. In a few minutes, Bridget would be crowned Queen of Eldorra, and I, as her fiancé, would officially be the Prince Consort in waiting.

It wasn't something I'd ever dreamed of or thought I wanted, but I would follow Bridget anywhere, from the smallest, shittiest town to the grandest church. As long as I was with her, I was happy.

I stood with Nikolai, Sabrina, Andreas, and the other von Aschebergs in the front row, closest to the coronation. The ceremony took place in the sprawling Athenberg Cathedral, which was packed with thousands of high-profile guests. Heads of state, foreign royals, celebrities, billionaires, they were all there.

I clasped my hands in front of me, wishing the archbishop would speed things up. I hadn't talked to Bridget all day, and I was itching to get to the coronation ball so we could have some alone time.

"Will you to your power cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all your judgments?" the archbishop asked.

"I will."

Pride seeped through me at Bridget's strong, clear voice.

She completed her oath, and a collective hush fell over the cathedral when the archbishop lifted the crown from Edvard's head and placed it on hers.

"Her Majesty Queen Bridget of Eldorra," the archbishop declared. "Long may she reign!"

"Long may she reign!" I repeated the words along with the rest of the guests, my chest tight. Beside me, Nikolai dipped his head, his face shining with emotion; next to Bridget, Edvard stood ramrod straight, his eyes suspiciously bright.

The archbishop finished the ceremony with a few verses from the King's Book, and it was done.

Eldorra officially had a new ruler and its first female monarch in over a century.

A low, electric hum replaced the hush. It skittered through the soaring hall and over my skin as Bridget rose for the exit procession; judging by the way the other guests shifted and murmured, I wasn't the only one who felt it.

It was the feeling of watching history being made.

I caught Bridget's eye during her procession, and I flashed her a quick grin and a wink. Her mouth curved into a smile before she tamped it down, and I fought back a laugh at her overly serious expression as she left the church.

"That was the longest ceremony ever." Andreas yawned. "I'm glad I wasn't the one who had to sit up there."

"Good thing you'll never sit up there, then." My relationship with Andreas had developed into something resembling genuine friendship over the months, but his personality still left a lot to be desired.

He shrugged. "C'est la vie. Let Bridget shoulder the burden of a nation while I live like a prince with none of the responsibilities."

Nikolai and I exchanged glances and shook our heads. While Andreas and I never missed an opportunity to sneak a dig at the other, I had a much easier relationship with Nikolai. Another brother, albeit by marriage rather than blood, and I didn't want to murder him half the time.

After the formal exit procession, the guests filed out of the cathedral, and soon, I found myself in the palace ballroom, impatiently waiting for Bridget to arrive.

Only five hundred people received invites to the coronation ball compared to the thousands at the ceremony, but that was still too many people. All of them wanted to shake my hand and say hi, and I indulged them half-heartedly while eyeing the door. At least my lessons with Andreas came in handy—I remembered everyone's titles and greeted them accordingly.

My pulse kicked up a notch when the Sergeant at Arms' announcement finally rang through the ballroom. "Her Majesty Queen Bridget of Eldorra."

Triumphal music played, the doors opened, and Bridget swept in. She wore a lighter gown than the ornate affair she'd donned for the ceremony, and she'd replaced her crown with a more wearable tiara.

She waved to the crowd, her public smile firmly in place, but when our eyes met, a hint of playfulness crept in.

I excused myself from my conversation with the Prime Minister of Sweden and made my way through the crowd. For once, I didn't need to use my height or build—everyone parted when they saw me approaching.

The perks of being the future Prince Consort, I supposed.

By the time I reached Bridget, she had half a dozen people fighting for her attention.

"Your Majesty." I held out my hand, cutting off a woman who'd been gushing over her dress. The crowd fell silent. "May I have this dance?"

A grin played at the corners of Bridget's mouth. "Of course. Ladies, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me."

She took my hand, and we walked away with six pairs of eyes burning into us.

Bridget waited until we were out of earshot before saying, "Thank the Lord. If I had to listen to Lady Featherston compliment my outfit one more time, I would've stabbed myself with the spikes from my tiara."

"We can't have that, can we? I very much like you alive." I rested my hand on the small of her back as I guided her across the dance floor. "So, you're officially queen. How does it feel?"

"Surreal, but also...right." She shook her head. "I don't know how to explain it."

"I understand."

I did. I felt much the same way. I wasn't the one who'd been crowned, of course, but we'd waited and planned for so long it was strange to have the ceremony behind us. We'd also had time to get used to the idea of Bridget being queen, and now that she was, it felt right.

We always end up where we're meant to be.

"I know you do." Bridget's eyes glowed with emotion before she made a face. "I can't want to get out of this dress, though. It's not as bad as my coronation dress, but I swear it still weighs ten pounds."

"Don't worry. I'll rip it off you later." I lowered my head and whispered, "I've never fucked a queen before."

A chuckle rose in my throat at the deep blush spreading over Bridget's face and neck.

"Do I have to stop calling you princess now?" I asked. "Queen doesn't roll off the tongue quite as nice."

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't you dare. By royal decree, you're never allowed to stop calling me princess."

"I thought you hated the nickname."

I spun her around, and she waited until she was in my arms again before saying, "As much as you hate when I call you Mr. Larsen."

I used to. Not anymore.

"I was joking." My lips grazed her forehead. "You'll always be my princess."

Bridget's eyes shone brighter. "Mr. Larsen, if you make me cry at my own coronation ball, I'll never forgive you."

My smile widened, and I kissed her, not caring if PDA was against protocol. "Then it's a good thing I have the rest of our lives to make it up to you."

BRIDGET

Three months after my coronation, Rhys and I returned to the Athenberg Cathedral for our wedding.

It was as grand and luxurious as one would expect of a royal wedding, but I worked with Freja, the new communications secretary, to keep the reception as small as possible. As queen, I couldn't have a friends-and-family-only party for diplomatic reasons, but we cut the guest list from two thousand to two hundred. I considered that a major victory.

"I'm jealous," Nikolai said. "You only have two hundred people to greet. My hands nearly fell off at my reception."

I laughed. "You survived."

We stood near the dessert table while the rest of the guests ate, drank, and danced. The actual wedding ceremony had gone off without a hitch, and as much as I enjoyed seeing my friends and family let loose, I was counting down the minutes until I could be alone with Rhys, who was currently talking to Christian and a few of his friends from the Navy.

He hadn't expected his military buddies to come, since he hadn't spoken to them in so long, but they'd all showed up. Whatever worries he might've had about seeing them again, they seemed to have disappeared. Rhys was smiling and laughing and looked perfectly at peace.

"Barely," Nikolai joked before his smile faded. "I'm glad things worked out for you and Rhys," he added softly. "You deserve it. When I abdicated, I didn't think...I never wanted to put that kind of pressure on you. And when I realized what it meant...what you had to give up..."

"It's okay." I squeezed his hand. "You did what you had to do. I was upset when you first told me, but it all worked out, and I enjoy being queen...for the most part. Especially now that Erhall is no longer Speaker."

Erhall had lost his seat by half a point. I'd be lying if I said the news hadn't given me immense pleasure.

I had, however, worried Nikolai would be upset or jealous about

the repeal. Would he be bitter I got to stay with Rhys and keep the crown? But he'd been nothing but supportive, and he'd admitted he enjoyed his new life more than he'd expected. I think part of him was actually relieved.

Nikolai had grown up thinking he wanted the throne because he didn't have a choice to not want it, and now that he was freed from those expectations, he was thriving. Meanwhile, I'd taken up the mantle and grown into the role.

Ironic, the way things turned out.

"Yes, he was a bit of a toad, wasn't he?" Nikolai grinned and glanced over my shoulder. "Ah, it seems my time is up. I'll talk to you later. I need to save Sabrina before Grandfather forces her to name our baby Sigmund after our great-great-uncle." He hesitated.

"Are you happy, Bridget?"

I squeezed his hand again, a messy clog of emotion tangling in my throat. "I am."

Did I feel like the weight of the world was on my shoulders sometimes? Yes. Did I get angry, frustrated, and stressed? Yes. But so did a lot of people. The important thing was, I no longer felt trapped. I'd learned to master my circumstances instead of letting them master me, and I had Rhys by my side. No matter how terrible of a day I had, I could go home to someone I loved who loved me back, and that made all the difference.

Nikolai must've heard the sincerity in my voice, because his face relaxed. "Good. That's all I need to know." He kissed my cheek before he beelined to where a five-months-pregnant Sabrina sat with our grandfather, who'd spent his post-ruling days fussing over his future great-grandchild and trying to find a suitable hobby to fill his time.

Edvard had forced Rhys to teach him how to draw for a few weeks before it became clear his talents did not lie in the artistic realm. He'd since moved on to archery, and I'd had to add a hazard pay bonus for the staff accompanying him to practice.

I turned to see what had made Nikolai leave, and my face broke into a smile when I saw Rhys approaching.

"Long time no see," I teased. We'd only had one dance together before we were pulled away by various friends and family.

"Don't remind me. My own wedding, and I barely see my wife," he grumbled, but his frown eased when he drew me into his arms.

"We should've eloped."

"The palace would've had something to say about that."

"Fuck the palace."

I stifled a laugh. "Rhys, you can't say that. You're the Prince Consort now." The King Consort title didn't exist in Eldorra, so even though I was the queen, he was called the Prince Consort.

"Which means I can say it even more than before." Rhys grazed my jaw with his lips, and goosebumps of pleasure dotted my arms.

"Speaking of Prince Consort...what benefits come with the position?"

"Um." I tried to think through the fog in my head as he caressed the nape of my neck. "A crown, a lovely room in the palace, medical benefits..."

"Boring. Boring. Even more boring."

I laughed. “What do you want then?”

Rhys lifted his head, his eyes gleaming. “I want to bend—”

“Hi guys, I’m so sorry for interrupting.” Ava appeared beside us. She looked lovely in her mint green bridesmaid dress, but her face was etched with concern. “Have you seen Jules and Josh? I can’t find them anywhere.”

“She’s afraid they’ve murdered each other,” Alex added, coming up behind her.

Ava rolled her eyes. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Not by much. I saw Jules with a knife earlier.”

“I hope they haven’t. Bad press if there’s a murder at my wedding,” I joked. “But no, I haven’t seen them. Sorry.”

Still, I swept my eyes around the room just in case.

Booth, whom I’d insisted attend as a guest instead of a guard, was deep in conversation with his wife and Emma, who’d flown in a few days ago so we could catch up before the wedding. Apparently, she’d gotten more attached to Meadow’s cuddliness and Leather’s foul mouth than expected, and she’d adopted both from the shelter. I was delighted, especially when Emma promised to send me pictures and videos of them often.

Steffan was dancing with Malin. I’d called him after my press conference to apologize for not giving him a heads up, but he hadn’t been upset at all. He said it’d given him the courage to stand up to his father, and considering he was attending the most publicized event of the year with Malin, it must’ve all worked out.

Christian stood in the shadows, chatting with Andreas, but his eyes strayed to something—someone—on the dance floor. I followed his gaze and winced when I saw Stella.

That’s not good. Or maybe I was reading too much into the situation.

Even Mikaela was in attendance, hanging out with some of our old school friends. I’d invited her as an olive branch, but it would take a while before I trusted her again.

Almost everyone who played a major role in my life was there... except Jules and Josh.

“I haven’t seen them either,” Rhys said.

Ava sighed. “Thanks. I just wanted to check. Sorry for bothering you, and congrats again!” She dragged Alex away, probably to look for her brother and Jules, even though Alex looked like he would rather eat nails.

“Well, that ruined the mood,” Rhys said dryly. “We can’t even have a conversation without getting interrupted.”

“Perhaps we should wait until after the reception because that’ll keep happening. I already see Freja coming toward us. Unless...” I lowered my voice, a spark of mischief kindling inside me. “We hide.”

We stared at each other for a beat before a slow smile spread across his face. “I like the way you think, princess.”

Rhys left first, slipping out under the auspices of using the restroom, and I followed soon after. We couldn’t be gone long, but we could steal a few moments for ourselves.

“Your Majesty!” Freja called as I passed her. “Where are you going? We need to discuss—”

“Ladies’ room. I’ll be back.” I quickened my steps and contained my laughter until I reached the small drawing room where Rhys was waiting.

“It’s like we’re sneaking around again.” I shut the door behind me, my heart racing with the twin thrills of finally being alone with him and doing something we weren’t supposed to do.

“Just like old times,” he drawled. The lights were off, but enough moonlight filtered through the curtains for me to see the carved planes of his face and the tender heat in his eyes.

“So, tell me.” I looped my arms around his neck. “Was this where you expected to end up as a kid? Hiding in a royal drawing room with your wife on the night of your wedding?”

“Not exactly.” Rhys brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. “But someone once told me we always end up where we’re meant to be, and this is where I’m meant to be. With you.”

Forget butterflies. An entire flock of birds took flight in my stomach, soaring into the clouds and taking me with them. “Mr. Larsen, I do believe you’re a secret romantic after all.”

11. Bridget

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11

BRIDGET

RHYS AND I DIDN’T TALK AGAIN ON THE PLANE, BUT HE’D TAKEN MY mind off my grandfather’s situation enough I crashed after he left. I hadn’t slept a wink the night before, and I was out like a light for most of the flight.

When we landed, though, all my nerves came rushing back, and it was all I could do not to snap at the driver to go faster as we sped through downtown toward the hospital. Every second we spent at a red light felt like a second I was losing with my grandfather.

What if I missed seeing him alive by a minute, or two, or three?

A wave of lightheadedness hit me, and I had to close my eyes and force myself to take deep breaths so I didn’t drown beneath my anxiety.

When we finally arrived at the hospital, we found Markus, my grandfather’s Private Secretary and right-hand man, waiting for us by the secret entrance they used for high-profile patients. I’d spotted the crush of reporters outside the main entrance from the car, and the sight made my anxiety triple.

“His Majesty is fine,” Markus said when he saw me. He looked more disheveled than usual, which in Markus’s world meant one of his hairs was out of place and there was a small, barely noticeable crease in his shirt. “He woke up just before I came down.”

“Oh, thank God.” I breathed a sigh of relief. If my grandfather was awake, things couldn’t be too bad. Right?

We took the elevator to my grandfather’s private suite, where I found Nikolai pacing the hall outside with a frown.

“He kicked me out,” he said by way of explanation. “He said I was hovering too much.”

I cracked a smile. “Typical.” If there was one thing Edvard von Ascheberg III hated, it was being fussed over.

“Yeah.” Nikolai let out a half-resigned, half-relieved laugh before he swept me into a hug. “It’s good to see you, Bridge.”

We didn’t see or talk to each other often. We lived different lives—Nikolai as crown prince in Eldorra, me as a princess trying her best to pretend she wasn’t one in the U.S.—but nothing bonded two people like a shared tragedy.

Then again, if that were true, we should be thick as thieves since our parents’ deaths. But things hadn’t quite worked out that way.

“It’s good to see you too.” I squeezed him tight before greeting his girlfriend. “Hi, Sabrina.”

“Hi.” She gave me a quick hug, her face warm with sympathy.

Sabrina was an American flight attendant Nikolai met during a flight to the U.S. They’d been dating for two years, and their relationship had generated a media firestorm when it first came to light. A prince dating a commoner? Tabloid heaven. Coverage had died down since then, partly because Nikolai and Sabrina kept their relationship under such tight wraps, but their pairing was still very much gossiped about in Athenberg society.

Perhaps that was why I felt such pressure to date someone “appropriate.” I didn’t want to disappoint my grandfather, too. He’d warmed up to Sabrina, but he’d had a conniption when he first found out about her.

“He’s waiting for you inside.” Nikolai flashed a lopsided grin.

“Just don’t hover or he’ll kick you out too.”

I managed a laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I’ll wait here,” Rhys said. He usually insisted on following me everywhere, but he seemed to know I needed alone time with my grandfather.

I gave him a grateful smile before I stepped into the hospital room.

Edvard was, as promised, awake and sitting up in bed, but the sight of him in a hospital gown and hooked up to machines brought back an onslaught of memories.

“Daddy, wake up! Please wake up!” I sobbed, trying to break out of Elin’s grasp and run to his side. “Daddy!”

But no matter how loud I screamed or how hard I cried, he remained pale and unmoving. The machine next to his bed let out a flat, steady whine, and everyone in the room was yelling and running around except for my grandfather, who sat with his head lowered and shoulders shaking. They’d forced Nikolai to leave the room earlier, and now they were trying to get me to leave too, but I wouldn’t.

Not until Daddy woke up.

“Daddy, please.” I’d screamed myself hoarse, and my last plea came out as a whisper.

I didn’t understand. He’d been okay a few hours ago. He went out to

buy popcorn and candy because the palace kitchen ran out and he said it was silly to ask someone to fetch something he could easily get himself. He said when he got back, we would eat the popcorn and watch Frozen together.

But he never came back.

I overheard the doctors and nurses talking earlier. Something about his car and sudden impact. I didn't know what it all meant, but I knew it wasn't good.

And I knew Daddy was never, ever coming back.

I felt the burn of tears behind my eyes and a familiar tightening in my chest, but I pasted on a smile and tried not to let my worry show.

"Grandpa." I rushed to Edvard's side. I'd called him Grandpa when I was a kid and never grew out of it, but now, I could only say it when we were alone because the address was too "informal" for a king.

"Bridget." He looked pale and tired, but he mustered a weak smile. "You didn't have to fly all the way back here. I'm fine."

"I'll believe it when the doctor tells me so." I squeezed his hand, the gesture as much reassurance for myself as it was for him.

"I'm the king," he harrumphed. "What I say, goes."

"Not for medical matters."

Edvard sighed and grumbled, but he didn't argue. Instead, he asked about New York, and I caught him up on everything I'd been doing since I saw him last Christmas until he got tired and dozed off in the middle of my story about Louis's unfortunate wine spill.

He'd refused to tell me how he ended up in the hospital, but Nikolai and the doctors filled me in. Apparently, my grandfather had a rare, previously undiagnosed heart condition that was usually latent in patients until extreme stress or anxiety triggered it. In such cases, the condition could lead to sudden cardiac arrest and death. I nearly had cardiac arrest myself when I heard that, but the doctors assured me my grandfather's case had been mild. He'd fainted and had been unconscious for a while, but he didn't need surgery, which was a good thing. However, the condition didn't have a cure and he would need to make major lifestyle changes to reduce his stress levels if he didn't want a more serious incident in the future. I could only imagine Edvard's response to that. He was a workaholic if there ever was one.

The doctors kept him in the hospital another three days for monitoring. They'd wanted to keep him a week, but he refused. He said it would be bad for public morale, and he needed to get back to work.

And when the king wanted something, no one refused him.

After he returned home, Nikolai and I tried our best to convince him to offload some responsibilities to his advisors, but he kept brushing us off.

Three weeks later, we were still at an impasse, and I was at my wits' end.

"He's being stubborn." I couldn't keep the frustration out of my voice as I guided my horse toward the back of the palace grounds. Edvard, sick of both Nikolai and I nagging him to heed the doctor's warnings, had all but kicked us out of the palace for the afternoon. Get some sun, he said. And leave me to stress in peace. Nikolai and I had

not been amused. “He should at least cut back on the late-night calls.”

“You know how Grandfather is.” Nikolai came up beside me on his own horse, his hair tousled from the wind. “He’s more stubborn than you are.”

“You, calling me stubborn? That’s rich,” I scoffed. “If I recall correctly, you’re the one who went on a hunger strike for three days because Grandfather wouldn’t let you skydive with your friends.”

Nikolai grinned. “It worked, didn’t it? He caved before day three was over.” My brother was the spitting image of our father—wheat-colored hair, blue eyes, square jaw—and sometimes, the resemblance was so strong it made my heart hurt. “Besides, that was nothing compared to your insistence on living in America. Is our home country really that abhorrent?”

There it is. Nothing like a beautiful fall day with a side of guilt.

“You know that’s not why.”

“Bridget, I can count the number of times you’ve been home in the past five years on one hand. I don’t see any other explanation.”

“You know I miss you and Grandfather. It’s just...every time I’m home...” I tried to think of the best way to phrase it. “I’m under a microscope. Every single thing I do, wear, and say is dissected. I swear, the tabloids could turn me breathing wrong into a story. But in the U.S., no one cares as long as I don’t do anything crazy. I can just be normal. Or as normal as someone like me can get.”

I can’t breathe here, Nik.

“I know it’s a lot,” Nikolai said, his face softening. “But we were born for this, and you grew up here. You didn’t have an issue with the attention before.”

Yes, I did. I just never showed it.

“I was young.” We came to a stop on our horses, and I stroked my horse’s mane, taking comfort in the familiar feel of its silky hair beneath my hand. “People weren’t as vicious when I was young, and that was before I went to college and experienced what being a normal girl feels like. It feels...good.”

Nikolai stared at me with a strange expression. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve sworn it was guilt, but that made no sense. What could he be guilty about?

“Bridge...”

“What?” My heart pounded faster. His tone, his expression, the tight set of his shoulders. Whatever he had to say, I wouldn’t like it. He looked down. “You’re going to hate me for this.”

I tightened my grip on my reins. “Just tell me.”

“Before I do, I want you to know I didn’t plan for this to happen,” Nikolai said. “I never expected to meet Sabrina and fall in love with her, nor did I expect this is where we’d be two years later.” Confusion mingled with my apprehension. What does Sabrina have to do with this?

“I wanted to tell you earlier,” he added. “But then Grandfather got hospitalized and everything was so crazy...” His throat bobbed with a hard swallow. “Bridge, I asked Sabrina to marry me. And she said yes.”

Of everything I’d expected him to say, that wasn’t it. Not by a long shot.

I didn't know Sabrina well, but I liked her. She was sweet and funny and made my brother happy. That was enough for me. I didn't understand why he would be nervous about telling me. "Nik, that's amazing. Congratulations! Did you tell Grandfather already?" "Yes." Nikolai was still watching me with a guilty look in his eyes.

My smile faded. "Was he upset? I know he wasn't happy when you started dating because—" I stopped. Icy fingers crawled down my spine as the pieces finally clicked. "Wait," I said slowly. "You can't marry Sabrina. She's not of noble blood."

That was the law talking, not me. Eldorra's Royal Marriages Law stipulated the monarch must marry someone of noble birth. It was archaic but ironclad, and as the future king, Nikolai fell under the law's jurisdiction.

"No," Nikolai said. "She's not."

I stared at him. It was so quiet I could hear the leaves rustle as they fluttered to the ground. "What are you saying?"

Dread ballooned in my stomach, growing and growing until it squeezed all the air from my lungs.

"Bridget, I'm abdicating."

The balloon popped, leaving pieces of dread scattered throughout my body. My heart, my throat, my eyes and fingers and toes. I was so consumed by it I couldn't speak for a good minute.

"No." I blinked, hoping it would wake me up from my nightmare. It didn't. "You're not. You're going to be king. You've been training for it all your life. You can't just throw that away."

"Bridget—"

"Don't." Everything around me blurred, the colors of the leaves and sky and grass blending into one crazy, multicolored hellscape.

"Nik, how could you?"

Normally, I could reason my way out of anything, but reason had fled, leaving me with nothing except pure emotion and a sickening sensation in my stomach.

I can't be queen. Icanticant.

"You think I want to do this?" Nikolai's face tightened. "I know what a big deal it is. I've been agonizing over it for months, trying to find loopholes and reasons I should walk away from Sabrina. But you know what Parliament is like. How traditional it is. They would never overturn the law, and I..." He sighed, suddenly looking much older than his twenty-seven years. "I can't walk away from her, Bridge. I love her."

I closed my eyes. Of all the reasons Nikolai could've chosen for abdicating, he'd picked the one I couldn't fault him for.

I'd never been in love, but I'd dreamt of it all my life. To find that grand, sweeping love, the kind worth giving up a kingdom for. Nikolai had found his. How could I begrudge him something I would myself give up my soul for?

When I opened my eyes again, he was still there, sitting tall and proud on his horse. Looking every inch the king he would never be.

"When?" I asked in a resigned tone.

A smidge of relief softened his expression. He'd probably expected more of a fight, but the stress of the past month had drained all the fight out of me. It wouldn't do any good, anyway. Once my

brother set his mind on something, he didn't back down.

Stubbornness ran in our entire family.

"We'll wait until the furor's died down over Grandfather's hospitalization. Maybe another month or two. You know how the news cycle is these days. It'll be old news by then. We'll keep the engagement a secret until then too. Elin's already working on a press statement and plan, and—"

"Wait." I held up one hand. "Elin already knows?"

A pink flush stole over Nikolai's cheekbones when he realized his mistake. "I had to—"

"Who else knows?" Thud. Thud. Thud. My heart sounded abnormally loud to my ears. I wondered if I had a heart condition too, like my grandfather. I also wondered what would happen if Nikolai abdicated and I died right there in the saddle. "Who else did you tell before me?"

I bit out the words. Each one tasted bitter, coated with betrayal.

"Just Elin, Grandfather, and Markus. I had to tell them." Nikolai didn't back down from my glare. "Elin and Markus have to get out in front of this, politically and press-wise. They need time."

A wild laugh emerged from my throat. I'd never made such a feral sound in my life, and my brother flinched at the sound.

"They need time? I need time, Nik!" Freedom. Love. Choice. Things I'd already had so little of, gone forever. Or they would be after Nikolai officially announced his abdication. "I need the two-and-a-half decades you've already had, preparing you for the throne. I

37. Bridget

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37

BRIDGET

RHYS AND I NEVER MADE IT BACK TO THE RECEPTION. BY THE TIME HE

finished with me, there was no way I could've fixed myself up enough to face other people, so we slipped out a side door and snuck back to the palace. By some miracle, no one saw us.

It was horrible form for a bridesmaid to leave early without a word, but the party had already been winding down by the time we excused ourselves, and most people had been too drunk to notice my absence, anyway.

I did, however, feel awful about leaving Steffan high and dry. I called him the next morning and apologized profusely, claiming my friend's emergency took longer than expected. He was, as expected, gracious about it. He hadn't been as jumpy during the reception as he'd been at the hotel, but he'd been distracted, and I suspected he might've been relieved by my abrupt departure.

“Where did you go?” Mikaela asked after I wrapped up my call. We were in my room, brainstorming ways to get Erhall to bring the repeal motion for the Royal Marriages Law to the floor. “You disappeared halfway through the reception.”

“One of my college friends called with an emergency.” I avoided her gaze as I studied Erhall’s parliamentary voting record.

“Really?” She sounded doubtful. “Even though you’re in different countries?”

“She needed advice on a personal issue.”

Another lie. They were piling up, one after another, and soon I wouldn’t be able to dig myself out.

I turned the page with more force than necessary.

“Okay.” A hint of doubt remained, but Mikaela didn’t press the issue. “I only ask because your cousin was looking for you.”

I froze. “Andreas? He was looking for me at the reception?”

“Yeah, he said he had something important to tell you.”

My heart rate kicked into overdrive. You’re overreacting. I’d thought Andreas had already left. I’d heard him say goodbye to Nikolai and Sabrina long before Rhys and I exited. Had I heard wrong, or had he returned for some reason? Did he see me and Rhys leave? Even if he had, he couldn’t have known what we were doing...unless he followed us. But if Andreas did know, he would’ve thrown it in my face the minute he could, and an entire day had already passed.

My head spun as I ran through every possible scenario.

“Did you tell him where I was?”

“No,” Mikaela said slowly. “I didn’t know where you were. Remember?”

“Right. Sorry.” I pressed my fingers to my temple, trying to sort through my thoughts. “My brain is fried right now. Can we pick this up later?”

“Sure. I have a dinner reservation soon anyway.” Worry slid across her features as she packed her bag and slung the strap over her shoulder. “Are you sure nothing else is the matter? You’ve been acting weird for weeks.”

“Yes, I’m just stressed. I need a vacation.” I forced a laugh. “I’ll talk to you later. Enjoy dinner.”

After Mikaela left, I set my notes on Erhall aside and answered that week’s letters from citizens instead. The mail volume, both physical and electronic, had grown so much I’d had to bring on assistants, but I still liked to reply personally when I could. Besides, it was a good distraction from my worries over Andreas.

I was reading too much into one throwaway comment from Mikaela. Andreas could’ve been looking for me for any number of reasons, and he had a skewed idea of what was important. He’d probably wanted to complain about being seated at the wrong table for the reception or something.

I’d made it halfway through the pile of letters when my laptop pinged with a new email notification. I almost ignored it, but something compelled me to click into it, and my suspicion spiked when I saw the sender’s email message—a random string of numbers and

6. Bridget

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6

BRIDGET

TRIAL MONTH ONE

"You're joking." I pulled the black vest out of the package, letting it dangle from my fingers like a dirty piece of laundry.

Rhys sipped his coffee and didn't look up from his newspaper. "I don't joke about safety."

"This is a bulletproof vest."

"I'm aware. I bought it."

Inhale. Exhale. "Mr. Larsen, please explain why I need a bulletproof vest. Where am I supposed to wear it, class? My next volunteer shift?"

"To protect you against bullets, and sure. If you'd like."

A muscle twitched beneath my eye. It'd been a month since we agreed to our deal, and I got it. I'd messed up. I never should've snuck out with Ava, but she'd been so down about her relationship troubles with Alex and I'd wanted to cheer her up.

Obviously, it had backfired, big time.

The kidnapping incident had thrown a bucket of cold water over my previously rosy outlook on personal safety, and I was committed to acting more responsibly. I hated admitting when Rhys was right because he was such an arrogant ass about it most of the time, but he put his life on the line for me every day. However, he also seemed intent on making me renege on the deal by throwing the most outrageous suggestions my way.

Like a freakin' bulletproof vest.

"I bought the vest as a just-in-case item," Rhys said mildly. "Now that you mention it, we should take it for a test spin next time you're in public."

Take out the chip, and I'll do what you say, when you say it, as long as it's security-related. I promise.

I gritted my teeth. Rhys had taken the chip out, and I didn't break my promises.

"Fine." A lightbulb flashed in my head, and a slow smile spread across my face. "I'll put it on now."

He finally raised his head, his face dark with suspicion at how easily I'd capitulated. "Where are we going?"

"Shopping."

If there was one thing Rhys hated, it was accompanying me shopping. It was such a stereotypical male weakness, and I fully intended to exploit it.

My smile widened when his face darkened further.

This is going to be fun.

An hour later, we arrived at the Hazelburg Mall, a four-story mecca of stores I could torture Rhys with. Luckily, it was winter, which meant I could hide most of the vest's bulk beneath a chunky sweater and coat.

According to Rhys, he'd bought a lighter version for me, but the vest was still hot, heavy, and awkward. I almost regretted my shopping revenge plan, but Rhys's ferocious scowl made it all worth it... until catastrophe struck.

I was trying on clothes in our dozenth boutique of the day when I got stuck in a dress. I'd accidentally grabbed the wrong size, and the unforgiving material dug into my ribcage while trapping my arms above my head. I couldn't see, and I could barely move.

"Shit." I rarely cursed, but the situation called for it. One of my lifelong irrational fears was getting stuck in clothing in a store.

"What's wrong?" Rhys demanded from outside the dressing room. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes." I pinched the sides of the dress and tried pulling it up again, to no avail. "I'm fine."

Ten minutes later, I was sweating and panting from exertion and the lack of fresh air, and my arms ached from being held up so long. Shit, shit, shit.

"What the hell is going on in there?" Rhys's annoyance came through the door, loud and clear. "You're taking too long."

I had no choice. I had to ask for help. "Can you call a sales assistant over? I need their help with a, uh, clothing issue."

There was a long pause. "You're stuck."

Flames of embarrassment licked my skin. "Just call someone over. Please."

"Can't. One employee left for lunch, and the other is six people deep at the register." Figured Rhys would be tracking everyone's movements while he waited for me. "I'll help."

If I could see my reflection, I was sure I'd see a mask of horror staring back at me. "No. You can't come in here!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm..." Half-naked. Exposed. "Indecent."

"I've seen half-naked women before, princess. Either let me in so I can get you out of whatever jam you're in, or sit tight for the next hour because that's how long it's gonna take the cashier to get through the weekend crowd. They're moving slower than a turtle on morphine."

The universe hated me. I was sure of it.

"Fine." I forced the word out, the flames of embarrassment burning hotter. "Come in."

The dressing room doors didn't have locks, and a second later, Rhys's presence filled the tiny space. Even if I hadn't heard him enter, I would've felt him. He exuded an intense energy that charged every molecule of air until it vibrated with him.

Raw. Masculine. Powerful.

I held my breath as he approached, his boots soft on the linoleum floor. For someone so large, he moved with the grace of a panther. The dress covered my chest, but my lace panties were on full display, and I tried not to think about how much skin I was showing as Rhys stopped in front of me. He was close enough I could feel the

heat radiating from his body and smell his clean, soapy scent. Tension and silence hummed in equal measure when he gripped the hem of the dress above my head and pulled. It slid up half a centimeter before it stopped again, and I winced when the fabric dug into a fresh section of flesh.

“I’m going to try from the bottom up,” Rhys said, his voice detached and controlled.

Bottom up. Meaning he had to put his hands on my bare skin.

“Okay.” It came out squeakier than I would’ve liked.

Every muscle tensed when he rested his palms on the top of my ribcage. He smoothed his thumbs briefly over the chafed area where the dress had dug into my skin before he hooked his fingers beneath the material as much as he could and inched it up.

I couldn’t hold my breath anymore.

I finally exhaled, my chest heaving like it was trying to push itself deeper into Rhys’s rough, warm touch. The breaths sounded embarrassingly loud in the silence.

Rhys paused. The dress was halfway up my shoulders now, enough to bare my bra-clad chest.

“Calm your breathing, princess, or this ain’t gonna work,” he said, sounding a touch more strained than he had a minute ago. Heat scorched my skin, but I wrestled my breathing under control, and he resumed his work.

Another inch...another...and I was free.

Fresh air assaulted my nostrils, and I blinked to adjust to the light after being trapped in the dress for the past twenty minutes.

I clutched the material in front of me, my face hot with embarrassment and relief.

“Thank you.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Rhys stepped back, his jaw like granite. Instead of responding, he picked up the bulletproof vest and T-shirt I’d worn beneath it and crooked his finger. “Come here.”

“I can put it on myself.”

Again, no response.

I sighed and walked to where he stood. I was too tired to fight, and I didn’t resist when he slipped the T-shirt over my head, followed by the vest. I watched him in the mirror while he worked, adjusting the vest and straps until it sat comfortably on my torso. I still held my dress in front of me, angling it so it covered my underwear. I didn’t know why I bothered. Rhys showed as much interest in my half-naked form as he would in a foam mannequin.

A strange needle of irritation pricked at me.

Rhys finished fixing the vest, but before I could step away, his hands closed around my biceps in an iron grip. They were so large they easily encircled my arms.

He locked eyes with me in the mirror and lowered his head until his mouth hovered next to my ear.

My heart skipped a frantic beat, and I clutched the dress tighter in front of me.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve been doing all day.”

Rhys’s breath whispered across my skin in a dark warning. “I indulged you this time, princess, but I don’t like games. Lucky for you, you passed the test.” He slid his hands up my arms until they rested

on my vest-clad shoulders, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. “You need to learn how to follow instructions without arguing. I don’t care if you think I’m being ridiculous. A second’s delay can mean the difference between life and death. I say duck, you duck. I say wear a bulletproof vest to the fucking beach, you wear the vest.

Understand?”

My grip strangled the dress. “The vest was a test to see if I would wear it? That is so...underhanded.” An entire day wasted on a stupid test. Indignation unfurled in my stomach. “I hate when you do stuff like this.”

A grim half-smile touched Rhys’s lips. “I’d rather you hate me alive than love me dead.” He released my shoulders. “Get dressed. We’re leaving.”

The door shut behind him.

I could finally breathe easy again, but I couldn’t stop his words from echoing in my mind.

I’d rather you hate me alive than love me dead.

The problem was, I didn’t hate him. I hated his rules and restrictions, but I didn’t hate him.

I wished I did.

It would make my life a lot simpler.

TRIAL MONTH THREE

“I can’t go.”

“What do you mean you can’t go?” Jules’s disbelief oozed over the line. “We’ve been talking about the festival since sophomore year. We have coordinated outfits. Stella rented a car! We might die on the road because she’s a terrible driver—”

“I heard that!” Stella yelled in the background.

“—but she’s the only one with a license.”

“I know.” I glared at Rhys, who sat on the couch polishing a knife like a psycho. “A certain bodyguard deemed it unsafe.”

My friends and I had planned on attending the Rokbury music festival for years, and now, I had to sit it out.

“So? Come anyway. He works for you, not the other way around.”

I wished I could, but we were still in the trial period of our deal, and Rhys’s concerns weren’t totally off base. Rokbury took place at a campground an hour and a half outside New York City, and while it looked like a blast, something inevitably went wrong every year—a festival goer’s tent catching fire, a drunken group fight leading to several hospitalizations, a panic-induced stampede. It was also supposed to storm the weekend of this year’s festival, which meant the campground would probably turn into a giant mud pit, but my friends were risking it, anyway.

“Sorry, J. Next time.”

Jules sighed. “Tell your man he’s hot as hell but a total buzzkill.”

“He’s not my man. He’s my bodyguard.” I lowered my voice, but I thought I saw Rhys pause for a millisecond before he resumed polishing his knife.

“Even worse. He’s running your life and you’re not getting any dick from it.”

“Jules.”

“You know it’s true.” Another sigh. “Fine, I get it. We’ll miss you,

but we'll catch up when we're back."

"Sounds good."

I hung up and sank into the armchair, FOMO—Fear of Missing Out—hitting me hard. I'd bought the festival tickets months ago, before Rhys started working for me, and I'd had to sell them to a random junior in my political theory class.

"I hope you're happy," I said pointedly.

He didn't respond.

Rhys and I had settled into a more functional dynamic over the past three months, but there were still times I wanted to chuck a textbook at him. Like now.

When the day of the festival rolled around the following weekend, however, I woke up to the shock of my life.

I walked into the living room, bleary-eyed, only to find it transformed. The furniture had been pushed to the side, replaced with a pile of boho-printed pillows and cushions on the floor. The coffee table groaned beneath various snacks and drinks, and the Rokbury festival played out in real time on-screen. The pièce de résistance, however, was the indoor tent decorated with string lights, which looked exactly like the ones people set up on the festival grounds. Rhys sat on the couch, which was now pressed flush against the wall beneath the window, frowning at his phone.

"What..." I rubbed my eyes. Nope, I wasn't dreaming. The tent, the snacks, they were all there. "What is this?"

"Indoor festival," he grunted.

"You put this together." It was a statement of disbelief more than a question.

"Reluctantly, and with help." Rhys glanced up. "Your redheaded friend is a menace."

Of course. That made more sense. My friends must've felt bad I was missing the festival, so they put together a consolation party, so to speak. But something didn't add up.

"They left last night."

"They dropped everything off beforehand while you were in the shower."

Hmm, plausible. I took long showers.

Appeased and delighted, I grabbed an armful of chips, candy, and soda and crawled into the cushioned tent, where I watched my favorite bands perform their sets on the TV. The sound and picture quality was so good I almost felt like I was there.

Admittedly, I was more comfortable than I would've been at the actual festival, but I missed having people to enjoy it with.

An hour in, I poked my head out from the tent, hesitant. "Mr. Larsen. Why don't you join me? There's plenty of food."

He was still sitting on the couch, frowning like a bear who'd woken up on the wrong side of the cave.

"No, thanks."

"Come on." I waved my hand around. "Don't make me party alone. That's just sad."

Rhys's mouth tugged in a small smirk before he unfolded himself from his seat. "Only because you listened about not attending the festival."

This time, I was the one who frowned. "You say it like you're

training a dog.”

“Most things in life are like training a dog.”

“That’s not true.”

“Show up to work, get paid. Woo a girl, get laid. Study, get good grades. Action and reward. Society runs on it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he had a point.

“No one uses the word woo anymore,” I muttered. I hated when he was right.

His smirk deepened a fraction of an inch.

He was too large to fit in the tent with me, so he settled on the floor next to it. Despite my cajoling, he refused to touch the food, leaving me to inhale the snacks on my own.

Another hour later, I’d ingested so much sugar and carbs I felt a little sick, and Rhys looked bored enough to fall asleep.

“I take it you’re not a fan of electronic music.” I stretched and winced. The last bag of salt and vinegar chips had been a bad idea.

“It sounds like a Mountain Dew commercial gone wrong.”

I almost choked on my water. “Fair enough.” I wiped my mouth with a napkin, unable to hide my smile. Rhys was so serious I delighted whenever his stony mask cracked. “So, tell me. If you don’t like EDM, what do you like?”

“Don’t listen to much music.”

“A hobby?” I persisted. “You must have a hobby.”

He didn’t answer, but the brief flash of wariness in his eyes told me all I needed to know.

“You do have one!” I knew so little about Rhys outside his job, I latched onto the morsel of information like a starved animal. “What is it? Let me guess, knitting. No, bird watching. No, cosplay.”

I picked the most random, un-Rhys-like hobbies I could think of.

“No.”

“Stamp collecting? Yoga? Pokémon—”

“If I tell you, will you shut up?” he said crankily.

I responded with a beatific smile. “I might.”

Rhys hesitated for a long moment before saying, “I draw, sometimes.”

Of all the things I’d expected him to say, that wasn’t even in the top hundred.

“What do you draw?” My tone turned teasing. “I imagine it’s a lot of armored vehicles and security alarms. Maybe a German Shepherd when you’re feeling warm and fuzzy.”

He snorted. “Except for the Shep, you make me sound boring as shit.”

I opened my mouth, and he held up his hand. “Don’t think about it.”

I closed my mouth, but my smile remained. “How did you get into drawing?”

“My therapist suggested it. Said it would help with my condition. Turns out, I enjoy it.” He shrugged. “Therapist is gone, but the drawing stayed.”

Another bolt of surprise darted through me, both at the fact he’d had a therapist and that he spoke so freely about it. Most people wouldn’t admit to it so easily.

It made sense, though. He’d served in the military for a decade. I

imagined he'd lived through his fair share of scarring experiences.

"PTSD?" I asked softly.

Rhys jerked his head in a quick nod. "Complex PTSD." He didn't elaborate, and I didn't press him. It was too personal an issue for me to pry into.

"I'm disappointed," I said, changing the subject since I could feel him closing off again. "I'd really hoped you were into cosplay. You would make a good Thor, only with dark hair."

"Second time you've tried to get me to take my shirt off, princess. Careful, or I'll think you're trying to seduce me."

Heat consumed my face. "I'm not trying to get your shirt off.

Thor doesn't even—" I stopped when Rhys let out a low chuckle.

"You're messing with me."

"When you get riled up, your face looks like a strawberry."

Between the indoor festival setup and the words your face looks like a strawberry leaving Rhys's mouth, I was convinced I'd woken up in an alternate dimension.

"I do not look like a strawberry," I said with as much dignity as I could muster. "At least I'm not the one who refuses to get surgery."

Rhys's thick, dark brows lowered.

"For your permanent scowl," I clarified. "A good plastic surgeon can help you with that."

My words hung in the air for a second before Rhys did something that shocked me to my core. He laughed.

A real laugh, not the half chuckle he'd let slip in Eldorra. His eyes crinkled, deepening the faint, oddly sexy lines around them, and his teeth flashed white against his tanned skin.

The sound slid over me, as rough and textured as I imagined his touch would be.

Not that I had ever imagined what his touch would feel like. It was hypothetical.

"Touché." The remnants of amusement filled the corners of his mouth, transforming him from gorgeous to devastating.

And that was when another catastrophe happened, one far more disturbing than getting stuck in a too-tight dress in a public dressing room.

Something light and velvety brushed against my heart...and fluttered. Just once, but it was enough for me to identify it.

A butterfly.

No, no, no.

I loved animals, I truly did, but I could not have a butterfly living in my stomach. Not for Rhys Larsen. It needed to die immediately.

"Are you okay?" He gave me a strange look. "You look like you're about to be sick."

"Yes, I'm fine." I refocused on the screen, trying my best not to look at him. "I ate too much, too fast. That's all."

But I was so flustered I couldn't focus for the rest of the afternoon, and when it finally came time for bed, I couldn't sleep a wink.

I could not be attracted to my bodyguard. Not in a way that gave me butterflies.

They'd only fluttered when we first met, but they'd died quickly after Rhys opened his mouth. Why were they returning now, when I had a full grasp of how insufferable he was?

Get yourself together, Bridget.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call, and I picked it up, grateful for the distraction.

“Bridget!” Jules bubbled, clearly tipsy. “How are you holding up, babe?”

“I’m in bed.” I laughed. “Having fun at the festival?”

“Yessss, but wish you were here. It’s not as fun without you.”

“Wish I was there, too.” I brushed a strand of hair out of my eye.

“At least I had the indoor festival. That was a brilliant idea, by the way. Thank you.”

“Indoor festival?” Jules sounded confused. “What are you talking about?”

40. 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.

40

BRIDGET

DON’T LOOK AT HIM.

If I looked at him, I would lose it, and I was already half out of my mind. The stress, guilt, and exhaustion of the past four days had seeped into my bones, turning me into a walking zombie.

But I couldn’t help myself. I looked.

And my heart promptly splintered into even more pieces than it already had.

Rhys stared at me, so still he could’ve passed for a statue had it not been for the pain flickering in his eyes.

“Had?” That calm, even tone never boded well.

“It was fun while it lasted.” The words tasted bitter on my tongue, like poison pills of lies I fed myself to get through the next hour and possibly the rest of my life. “But people know. Everyone’s watching us. We can’t continue whatever...this is.”

“Fun.” Still in that dangerously calm voice.

“Rhys.” I wrapped my arms tighter around myself. The hospital staff had set the temperature to a comfortable seventy-three degrees, but my skin felt like ice beneath my palms. “Please don’t make this any harder than it has to be.”

Please let my heart break in peace.

“The hell I won’t.” His gray eyes had darkened to a near black, and a vein throbbed in his temple. “Tell me something, princess. Are you doing this because you want to, or because you feel like you have to?”

“I don’t feel like I have to. I do have to!” Frustration seared through me, sharp and hot. Didn’t he get it? “It’s only a matter of time before the press confirms the allegations. Elin and Markus and

my family already know. What do you think is going to happen once it's all out in the open?"

"Your Majesty!"

"Grandfather!"

Nikolai, Markus, and Elin rushed to Edvard's side while I stood there, unable to move.

I should join them. Make sure he was okay.

But of course he wasn't okay. He'd just collapsed...because of me and what I said. Because I thought, for one second, I could have a semblance of control over my life.

If he died, the last conversation we had would have been an argument.

"You will end the relationship and never see Mr. Larsen again."

"No."

Something inside me shriveled into a husk.

"Bridget..."

The sound of my name, deep and raw, scraped against my willpower, leaving dents in something that had never been strong to begin with. Not when it came to him.

I closed my eyes, trying to find the cool, unshakable version of myself I presented to the public. The one who'd smiled through hours of standing and waving while my feet bled through my heels. The one who'd walked behind my father's casket and held back tears until I crumpled into a ball in the bathroom during the wake. But I couldn't. I'd never been able to hide who I truly was from Rhys.

I heard him walk toward me. Smelled that clean, masculine scent that had become my comfort scent over the years because it meant he was near and I was safe. Felt him rub away a tear I hadn't even noticed had escaped with his thumb.

Don't look at him. Don't look at him.

"Princess, look at me."

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut tighter. My emotions formed a tight knot in my throat, making it near impossible to breathe.

"Bridget." Firmer this time, more commanding. "Look at me."

I resisted for another minute, but the need to save myself from further heartache paled compared to my need to soak in every last bit of Rhys Larsen I could.

I looked at him.

Gray thunderstorms stared back at me, crackling with turmoil.

"The mess with the pictures, we'll figure it out." He grasped my chin and rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip, his expression fierce.

"I told you, you're mine, and I'm not letting you go. I don't care if the entire Eldorran military tries to drag me away."

I wished it were that easy and I could sink into his faith, letting it sweep me away.

But our problems went way beyond the pictures now.

"You don't get it. There is no happily ever after for us." We weren't a fairytale. We were a forbidden love letter, tucked into the back of a drawer and retrieved only in the darkness of night. We were the chapter of bliss before the climax hit and everything crumbled into ash. We were a story that was always meant to end. "This is it."

My mother died giving birth to me.

My father died on his way back from buying something I'd asked him to get.

My grandfather almost died because I'd refused to give up the one thing that ever made me happy.

That was what I got for being selfish, for wanting something for me. Future queens didn't live for themselves, they lived for their country. That was the price of power.

No matter how much I tried to change reality, it remained the truth, and it was time I grew up and faced it.

Rhys's grip on my chin tightened. "I don't need a happily ever after. I need to be by your side. I need you happy and healthy and safe. Goddammit Bridget, I need you. In any way I can have you."

His voice broke for the first time in all my years with him, and my heart cracked in response. "If you think I'm leaving you to deal with this bullshit alone, you don't know me at all."

Trouble was, I did know him, and I knew the one thing that would make him snap, but I couldn't bring myself to say it right now.

One last selfish thing.

"Kiss me," I whispered.

Rhys didn't question the sudden shift in my tone. Instead, he curled his hand around the back of my neck and crushed his lips to mine. Deep, hard, and possessive, like nothing had changed between us.

He always knew what I needed without me saying it.

I drank up every drop of him I could. His taste, his touch, his scent...I wished I could bottle it all up so I had something to keep me warm in the nights and years to come.

Rhys picked me up and carried me to the couch, where he pulled my skirt up and my panties down and sank into me with exquisite, deliberate slowness. Stretching me. Filling me. Breaking me into a thousand pieces and putting me back together, over and over again. Even if my heart ached, my body responded to him the way it always had: eager, willing, and desperate for more.

Rhys palmed my breast and swiped his thumb over my nipple, playing with the sensitized nub until a fresh wave of heat crested in my stomach. All the while he pumped into me, the slow, leisurely slides of his cock hitting a spot that made me see stars.

"Rhys, please."

"What do you want, princess?" He pinched my nipple, the sudden roughness of the action causing my mouth to fall open with a gasp.

You. Forever.

Since I couldn't say that, I settled for a panted, "Faster. Harder."

He lowered his head and replaced his hand with his mouth, swirling and licking while he picked up the pace. My nails dug into his back, and just as I teetered over the precipice, he slowed down again.

I nearly screamed with frustration.

Faster. Slower. Faster. Slower.

Rhys seemed to intuit the precise second I was about to come, and he varied his speed, edging me until I was a dripping, whimper-

ing mess. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he groaned and slammed into me, his mouth claiming mine in a bruising kiss as he fucked into me so hard the couch inched across the floor with a squeak.

Lights exploded behind my eyes. I arched up, my cry swallowed by his kiss as another orgasm tore through me and left me drained. Rhys came right after me with a silent shudder, and we sank into each other's arms, our heavy breaths mingling as one.

I loved sex with him, but I loved the quiet moments afterward even more.

"Again." I wrapped my limbs around him, not ready to break free of our cocoon yet. Just a little more time.

"Insatiable," he whispered, running the tip of his nose up my neck and along my jawline.

I smiled at the reminder of our afternoon at the hotel. Our last truly happy time together before everything went to hell.

"You love it," I said.

"Yeah princess, I do."

We spent the next hour like that, climbing high and crashing down together.

It was perfect, as were all our stolen moments together. We fucked hard and fast and made love sweet and slow. We pretended this was our life, not just a snapshot in time, and I pretended like my heart still beat in my chest when the pieces lay scattered at our feet.

"There's no other way, Your Highness." Elin's eyes flickered with sympathy for a second before it vanished and her expression hardened again. "It has to be done."

"No." I shook my head, denial digging its claws deep into my skin. "It's too soon. He's fine. The doctors said—"

"The doctors said he'll recover...this time. The fact is, His Majesty was hospitalized twice in one year. We can't risk a third hospitalization."

"We can cut back on his workload," I said desperately. "Have his aides handle the more strenuous paperwork and meetings. He can still be king." Elin glanced at Markus, who stood in the corner looking grimmer than I'd ever seen him.

"We'd discussed this with His Majesty after his first hospitalization," he said. "He expressly said that if he collapses a second time, he would step down."

I vaguely remembered my grandfather saying something like that in the weeks after his first collapse, but I'd been so focused on Nikolai's abdication the implications of it had gone right over my head.

"I realize this is perhaps not the best time to discuss this," Elin said with another flicker of sympathy. "But His Majesty's condition is stable, and we need to start preparations right away."

"Preparations." Something terrible took root in my stomach and spread. It seeped into my chest, my neck, my arms and my legs, numbing me from inside out.

Elin and Markus exchanged glances again.

"Yes," Elin said. "Preparations for your coronation as queen."

I'd thought I had more time, both with Rhys and to convince Parliament to repeal the Royal Marriages Law, but I didn't. Time was up.

"Do you remember Costa Rica?" Rhys's lips brushed against

mine as he spoke. He lay on top of me, his powerful body swallowing me up, but he'd propped a forearm on the couch so he didn't crush me with his weight.

"How could I forget?" It was one of the happiest memories of my life.

"You asked me if I'd ever been in love. I said no." He pressed a soft kiss to my mouth. "Ask me again, princess."

My lungs constricted. Breathe.

But that was hard when everything hurt to the point where I couldn't remember what it felt like not to hurt. My heart, my head, my soul.

"I can't." I forced myself to push Rhys away.

My skin immediately chilled at the absence of his heat, and small shivers wracked me as I got off the couch and walked to the bathroom. I cleaned myself and straightened my clothes with shaky hands while his gaze burned a hole in my back through the open door.

"Why not?"

"Because." Tell him. Just tell him. "I'm going to be queen."

"We already knew that."

"You don't understand." I washed my hands and returned to the room, where I finally looked at him again. Tension lined his face and notched a deep groove between his brows. "I don't mean someday. I mean I'm going to be queen in nine months."

Rhys froze.

"That's not all." I could barely speak past the lump in my throat.

"Because of the Royal Marriages Law, I have to—"

"Don't say it." His voice was so quiet I almost didn't hear him.

"I have to marry or at least get engaged before my coronation."

There would already be backlash against me taking the throne so soon. You need all the political goodwill you can get, Markus had said. I hated it, but he was right. "I—"

"Don't. Fucking. Say it."

"I'm marrying Steffan. He already agreed."

It wasn't a marriage of love. It was a political contract. Nothing more, nothing less. Markus had reached out to the Holsteins yesterday and made them sign an NDA before making the proposition. They'd agreed a few hours later. It'd all happened so quickly it made my head spin.

Just like that, I had a fiancé, at least in theory. Per the agreement, Steffan would officially propose next month, after the furor over my grandfather's hospitalization died down. As a bonus, the engagement would drive the allegations about me and Rhys out of the headlines, as Elin had not so subtly pointed out.

Rhys unfolded himself from the couch. He'd already fixed his clothes. All black. Black shirt, black pants, black boots, black expression.

"The fuck you are."

"Rhys, it's done."

"No," he said flatly. "What did I tell you in the gazebo, princess?"

I said from that point on, no other man touches you, and I meant it.

You sure as fuck aren't marrying someone else. We have nine months. We will figure. It. Out."

I wanted to agree. I wanted to be selfish and steal more time with him, but that wouldn't be fair to either of us.

I'd already had Rhys for three years. It was time to let him go.

No more being selfish.

"What if I want to marry someone else?"

Rhys's nostrils flared. "Don't lie to me. You barely know Steffan.

You went on three fucking dates with the guy."

"Royal marriage isn't about knowing someone. It's about suitability, and the fact is, he's suitable and you're not." I hoped Rhys didn't notice the wobble in my voice. "Plus, Steffan and I have the rest of our lives to get to know each other."

A shudder rippled through his body, and hurt slashed across his face, so raw and visceral it cut through my soul.

"I'm the crown princess, and I need to act like one," I said, hating myself more with every second. "In all areas of my life. I can't be with a bodyguard. I..." Tears clogged my throat, but I pushed past them. "I'm meant to be with a duke. We both know that."

Rhys flinched. One tiny movement, but it would haunt me forever.

"So we're over. Just like that." It came out low and dangerous, edged with pain.

No, not just like that. You'll never know how much my heart is breaking right now.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I wished I could tell him I'd never been happier than when I was with him.

I wished I could tell him it wasn't about the throne or power, and that if I could, I would give up a kingdom for him.

But I'm sorry were the only words I was allowed to say.

The emotion wiped clean from Rhys's eyes until I was staring at steel walls, harder and more guarded even than when we'd first met.

"No, Your Highness," he said. "I'm sorry."

He walked out.

One minute, he was there. The next, he was gone.

I crumpled, my knees giving out beneath me as I sank onto the floor and hot tears scalded my cheeks and dripped off my chin. My chest heaved so hard I couldn't draw enough oxygen into my lungs, and I was sure I would die right there on the hospital floor, just a few feet away from the best doctors and nurses in the country. But even they wouldn't be able to fix what I'd just broken.

"You have to move."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your house. It's a security nightmare. I don't know who signed off on this location, but you have to move."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"No. But I hope to be one day."

"Good night, princess."

"Good night, Mr. Larsen."

Snippets of memories crowded my brain, and I pressed my face into the blanket draped over the couch, muffling my sobs.

"Your Highness?" Elin's voice floated through the door, followed by a knock. "Can I come in?"

No. I would be happy if I never talked to you again.

But I had responsibilities to fulfill, and an engagement to plan.
I forced my sobs to slow until they tapered off.
Deep, controlled breaths. Head tilted up. Tensed muscles. It was
a trick I'd learned that had come in handy quite a few times over the
years.

Acknowledgments

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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