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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Chapter 46: Bridget

Chapter 46: Bridget showcases a turning point in her journey, marked by a bold step toward transformative leadership for Eldorra. After a significant meeting with Rhys, she embarks on a mission to reshape the way her kingdom is governed, moving away from the traditional reliance on fear and control. Rather than accepting the status quo, Bridget takes a radical approach, opting to challenge the norms by addressing the public directly. Three days after her conversation with Rhys, she arranges an unexpected press conference on the northern lawn of the palace, a place that is typically reserved for more formal events. The crowd that gathers includes both journalists and curious onlookers, eager to witness what the young princess has to say. Having already informed her U.S.-based allies of her intentions, she chooses to go ahead with the event alone, shielding them from the potential backlash that might follow her bold declaration.

Bridget’s speech begins with a rare moment of informal tone, a deliberate move that contrasts with the usual gravity expected of her role. She takes the opportunity to share her personal reflections on her journey thus far, discussing the challenges and responsibilities that come with being the future monarch of Eldorra. She openly acknowledges the doubts many people have about her readiness to ascend to the throne, particularly following the unexpected abdication of her brother, Prince Nikolai. Bridget attributes her initial hesitation to these doubts, revealing how they shaped her understanding of her role. Through her travels across Eldorra, she has come into direct contact with the country’s people, learning about their struggles and dreams. This experience has deepened her commitment to moving Eldorra forward while maintaining the traditions that define it, creating a vision for a monarchy that is both progressive and rooted in history.

The heart of Bridget’s address revolves around the Royal Marriages Law, a piece of legislation that she sees as outdated and restrictive. In a move that shocks the crowd, she admits her relationship with Rhys Larsen, once her bodyguard, making her personal life public for the first time. This confession sends ripples through the audience, turning the press conference into a frenzy, and amplifying her message’s significance. Bridget’s willingness to speak openly about her love for Rhys serves as a challenge to the rigid societal expectations that have long been placed on her as a royal. She invites a societal and legislative shift, urging others to reconsider laws that limit personal freedoms in favor of traditional norms. This moment of vulnerability further solidifies her role as a modern monarch, one who is unafraid to break from convention in order to create a more inclusive and just society for her people.

The press conference takes an intriguing turn when Jas, a reporter from *The Daily Tea*, asks a pointed question regarding the Royal Marriages Law. Bridget takes the opportunity to explain her stance on the matter, calling for a thorough reassessment of the law and advocating for a balance between personal choice and royal duty. She expresses her belief that the monarchy should evolve with the times, reflecting the values of a more modern society. Her compelling mix of logical reasoning, ethical considerations, and personal emotion resonates with those listening, as she emphasizes the importance of love and choice in a world where power and tradition have often been intertwined. Through her response, Bridget not only addresses the pressing issue of the Royal Marriages Law but also subtly invites a larger conversation about the role of the monarchy in the contemporary era. Her unyielding love for Rhys and her determination to reshape the monarchy highlight her strategic thinking and her willingness to challenge long-held beliefs in order to forge a new path for Eldorra.

The press conference marks a critical moment in Bridget’s development as a leader, one that shows both her emotional depth and her intellectual capacity. By choosing to address the public directly and openly, she takes the first step in altering the perception of what it means to be a royal in Eldorra. This chapter demonstrates her growth from a young woman unsure of her place in the world to a confident leader ready to face the challenges ahead. Bridget’s decision to speak out against the Royal

Marriages Law reflects her commitment to creating a society where personal choices are valued, and where the monarchy can thrive alongside a more inclusive and progressive culture. As the chapter closes, the ripple effects of Bridget’s speech are felt across the kingdom, signaling that the winds of change are beginning to stir, and with them, the promise of a new era for Eldorra.



Chapter 13: Bridget

Chapter 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.



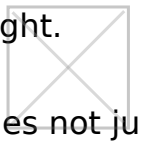
Synopsis

Synopsis becomes the foundation of this explosive and emotionally driven forbidden romance between two people trapped by circumstance, yet drawn together by forces they can no longer resist. Synced in shadows but worlds apart in titles, Rhys Larsen lives by strict personal codes that never bend—until Bridget von Ascheberg steps into his orbit. He was trained to be distant, cold, unshakable; yet something in her fire, her defiance, and the vulnerability she hides behind perfect posture and pointed words begins to dismantle every rule he once held sacred. Duty demands he stay in line. Desire insists otherwise.

Bridget has always walked the fine line between privilege and pressure. As a royal, every step she takes is scrutinized, every decision bound by consequence. But behind closed doors, all she wants is to feel seen—not as a title or symbol, but as a woman with fears, hopes, and wants. With her brother’s abdication, she’s thrust into a role she never prepared for and now must navigate the ruthless expectations of monarchy. All while harboring an attraction to the one man she’s forbidden from loving. Rhys doesn’t just represent temptation—he is the embodiment of everything she’s been told to avoid: danger, desire, and disobedience.

Their chemistry simmers, unspoken and taut, until it combusts—breaking every barrier and unspoken vow. Each moment they steal together deepens the stakes: a stolen glance here, a brushed hand there, until it becomes a need neither of them can deny. He was hired to protect her body, but what he’s safeguarding now is so much more fragile—her heart, and maybe his own. The world sees them as protector and royal, servant and sovereign, but in the quiet, Rhys sees her truth—and Bridget sees his. Their connection isn’t built on fantasy; it’s formed through shared scars, stubborn strength, and the kind of intimacy forged under pressure.

But reality always comes knocking. Rhys knows crossing the line could cost him his job, his reputation, and possibly his freedom. Bridget knows their union would spark political backlash, threaten her country's fragile stability, and destroy her carefully curated image. Their affair is a risk neither should take. Yet, in the darkness of stolen nights, reason loses every fight to desire. And no matter how many times they promise to walk away, something always pulls them back—deeper into a romance destined to crash in the daylight.



The story examines not just lust, but the torment of falling for someone you're not allowed to touch. It's not about power—it's about surrender. And the tragedy isn't that they fall for each other—it's that they fall too hard to ever survive it cleanly. In every royal function, every whispered hallway conversation, and every clipped nod exchanged under flashing cameras, they live in tension. It's the kind of love that asks impossible questions: Would you give up your crown for a kiss? Would you risk your country for a confession? Would you protect her with your body and destroy her with your heart?

Rhys is no prince—but he becomes the fiercest kind of guardian. Bridget is no ordinary woman—but behind the tiara is a pulse that races for the man society tells her she must never claim. Together, they stand at the edge of scandal and sovereignty. What's at stake isn't just reputation—it's everything they've built, hidden, and sacrificed. Yet neither one of them can walk away, not now, not after what they've tasted. Because sometimes, love doesn't ask for permission. It simply demands everything.

And in a world where loyalty is currency and vulnerability is weaponized, Rhys and Bridget are playing a game with no safe moves—where winning could mean losing everything, and losing could be the most honest thing they've ever done.

Chapter 17: Bridget

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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?"

Chapter 8: Bridget/Rhys

Chapter 8: Bridget/Rhys started with chaos that neither of them could have predicted. One moment, Bridget had been standing, and the next, she was flattened against the grass, shielded by Rhys’s solid body as gunfire shattered the peaceful night. Instinct took over, but fear gripped her chest like a vice, refusing to let go as screams echoed all around. Rhys’s calm orders to run and hide steadied her trembling limbs enough to move, even though the entire world seemed to blur. From the moment she saw the shooter, a terrifyingly ordinary man, to the sight of Rhys’s gun drawn with chilling precision, the night morphed into something out of a nightmare. The reality that danger could come so quickly and without warning lodged deep inside her mind, replacing the evening’s earlier lightness with a raw, biting fear that refused to loosen its grip.

Chapter 8: Bridget stayed hidden behind the tree, watching helplessly as Rhys approached the armed man. Despite all logic screaming at her to stay still, she couldn't tear her gaze away from the unfolding scene. Seeing Rhys put himself between danger and an innocent child stirred something fierce inside her, something that made it impossible to remain passive. Memories of her own loss, so vivid and paralyzing, mingled with the current horror of the moment, making the past and present collide. When gunfire erupted again, time seemed to freeze, each second dragging painfully slow until she saw Rhys stagger but stay upright. Relief and panic fought for dominance inside her, and the instinct to run to him overrode every other thought in her mind. She wasn’t just worried about her safety anymore—she was terrified for him.

Chapter 8: Racing to Rhys’s side, Bridget found him already tending to the downed shooter and the wounded father, who lay bleeding on the grass. A child clung desperately to his injured parent, and the scene pierced Bridget’s heart with brutal

clarity. It wasn’t just about survival anymore; it was about protecting hope, love, and the bonds that tethered people to one another. Kneeling to comfort the boy, she used every ounce of strength she had to project calm and reassurance, even though her insides were trembling. She saw a side of Rhys she hadn't fully glimpsed before—gentle, fiercely protective, and surprisingly tender when he reassured the child. As police arrived and demanded compliance, reality snapped back into focus, but the emotional impact of what had happened left an invisible imprint that would linger long after the sirens faded.

Chapter 8: Rhys endured medical checks and endless questioning from the authorities, all while growing increasingly frustrated—not for himself, but for Bridget’s safety. Watching her ignore his order to stay hidden had almost driven him insane with fear, and though he masked it with gruffness, the depth of his concern for her could not be denied. Bridget, equally shaken, confronted him with the harsh truth of what it had felt like to believe he might have been shot. For a man so used to carrying burdens alone, hearing Bridget’s raw concern rattled the iron walls he usually kept around his emotions. Her touch, light and careful against his bandaged wound, spoke volumes more than her words ever could. In that moment, something silent passed between them, a deeper understanding that neither dared name but both clearly felt.

Chapter 8: As they sat in the aftermath, Bridget gently coaxed from Rhys a glimpse into his haunted past—the guilt he carried from witnessing a friend’s death as a teenager and the vow it had etched into his soul. His confession about standing frozen while someone he cared about died explained so much about the man he had become: the relentless protector who would rather risk his life than allow history to repeat itself. Bridget, moved to tears she tried to hide, saw not just a soldier or a bodyguard, but a man scarred by grief, regret, and a fierce sense of duty. She understood now why Rhys had been so determined to save the child and his father that night. It wasn't about heroism or glory; it was about keeping a promise to himself that no more lives would be lost if he could prevent it.

Chapter 8: Unable to hold back any longer, Bridget stepped into Rhys’s embrace when he opened his arms, seeking comfort in the steady strength he offered. The hug was awkward and brief by normal standards but monumental for them, breaking down the final slivers of professional distance that had stubbornly persisted. In his arms, Bridget felt safe in a way she hadn’t since her father's death—anchored against a world that could change in a blink. Rhys, for his part, allowed himself a rare moment of vulnerability, feeling the weight of his emotions shift slightly with her tucked close. Both of them knew reality would come crashing back soon—filled with royal duties, expectations, and lines they shouldn’t cross. But for now, in the cool night air heavy with the scent of rain and gunpowder, they found solace in each other, however fleeting it might be.

Chapter 23: Bridget

Chapter 23: Bridget finds herself at a crossroads in her life, torn between her royal duties and the growing, undeniable feelings she has for Rhys. The royal ball, designed with the intention of finding her a suitable husband, only deepens her internal conflict. Surrounded by countless suitors, none of whom pique her interest, Bridget grows increasingly disillusioned with the superficiality of the event. Her mind constantly drifts back to Rhys, whose presence in her life is both comforting and complicated. The magnetic pull between them is undeniable, yet their relationship continues to be marred by the tension of their different worlds. Bridget longs for something more than the fleeting, shallow connections with her suitors, and it is in Rhys that she finds a rare sense of understanding and belonging.

For Rhys, the situation is equally complex. He remains deeply in love with Bridget but knows that their relationship must stay hidden, and any public acknowledgment of their bond would be fraught with consequences. As a bodyguard, his role demands professional distance, but his feelings for Bridget have long since blurred those lines. The intense emotional chemistry between them becomes harder to deny with each passing moment, and Rhys struggles to reconcile his protective instincts with the growing desire to be with her openly. However, the challenges of his position—coupled with the expectations that Bridget faces as a future queen—make their connection even more difficult to navigate. His feelings for her are no longer just about admiration; they've evolved into something deeper, something that both excites and terrifies him.

As the evening unfolds, Bridget and Rhys find themselves unable to ignore the deep emotional bond that continues to pull them toward one another. Despite the whirlwind of duties that plague Bridget, from her royal obligations to her increasingly complex relationships with her suitors, her thoughts constantly return to Rhys. In a world where

love and duty often clash, Bridget is forced to choose between the life that has been planned for her and the one she desires. Yet, despite the challenges they face, their bond remains unshakable, defined not only by passion but by a deep sense of connection and mutual understanding.

Rhys, for his part, wrestles with his growing feelings, knowing that the consequences of pursuing a relationship with Bridget are far-reaching. The risks of their connection becoming public could jeopardize not only their personal lives but also Bridget's future as queen. The chapter reveals the emotional complexity of their relationship, with both characters struggling to navigate their feelings while balancing the weight of responsibility that comes with their positions. The passion between them is undeniable, but it is tainted by the harsh realities of their circumstances. Each stolen moment they share feels like a brief escape from the pressures of their respective worlds, but it also highlights the fact that their love is forbidden by the very structures that define their lives.

In the midst of these growing tensions, Bridget begins to question her future. She finds herself yearning for a life where she is not confined by the rigid expectations of royalty, a life where her personal desires are no longer at odds with her duties. Rhys's unwavering support and the intimacy they share provide her with a glimpse of the life she could have if she dares to defy convention. However, the reality of the political landscape surrounding her makes such a decision seem impossible. Bridget is caught between two worlds: one that demands obedience and sacrifice, and the other that offers the possibility of love and freedom.

As the chapter progresses, both Bridget and Rhys must face the complexities of their relationship head-on. The emotional intensity of their connection, the sacrifices they have made for one another, and the tensions that arise from their different social roles create a compelling narrative of love and duty. Their struggle to be together amidst the constraints of their world is both heart-wrenching and inspiring. The chapter sets the stage for Bridget's eventual decision to take control of her own future, even if it means breaking away from the traditions that have defined her life. Rhys, too, will be

forced to confront his feelings and make difficult choices that could forever alter the course of their relationship. Together, they must navigate the delicate balance between love, duty, and the sacrifices required to stay true to themselves.

In the broader context of the story, Chapter 23 explores the themes of personal growth, forbidden love, and the clash between societal expectations and personal desires. Bridget’s journey toward understanding herself and her place in the world is just beginning, and her relationship with Rhys plays a pivotal role in that journey. Rhys’s growth as a character is also explored, as he grapples with his emotions and his role in Bridget’s life. Both characters are on the verge of making life-altering decisions, and the tension between them serves as the driving force of the narrative. The chapter paints a vivid picture of two people who are willing to sacrifice everything for the chance at love and happiness, despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them.

Chapter 1: Bridget

Chapter 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.

Chapter 15: Rhys

Chapter 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.

Chapter 28: Rhys

Chapter 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 inside 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

Chapter 47: Rhys

Chapter 47: Rhys offers a powerful turning point, both personally and politically, as Rhys and Princess Bridget meet with Erhall, Rhys’s biological father, who also holds the influential position of Speaker. The meeting, aimed at addressing the restrictive Royal Marriages Law, begins with Erhall’s unawareness of the scheduled visit due to a scheduling mix-up. This initial lack of preparation sets the stage for a confrontation that reveals the emotional tension brewing between Rhys and Erhall. In this moment of unexpected intensity, Rhys reflects on the intense media attention he and Bridget have received following their highly publicized relationship announcement, and how this newfound fame has irrevocably changed his life. Transitioning from his role as the princess's loyal bodyguard to a figure in the public eye has brought unwanted scrutiny. His growing resentment towards Erhall, his recently discovered father, bubbles up as he confronts him with the very issue that has defined much of his life—his place in Bridget's world and the obstacles standing in the way of their love.

As the meeting continues, Rhys and Bridget forcefully present their case to Erhall, demanding that the outdated Royal Marriages Law be repealed. Using the revelation of Rhys’s paternity as leverage, the pressure mounts on Erhall as he realizes he can no longer dismiss their request. Initially, Erhall attempts to deflect, using political excuses, but the undeniable proof of Rhys’s familial connection shakes him. Bridget’s sharp intellect comes to the forefront as she navigates the conversation, skillfully guiding Erhall toward the realization that his personal interest must yield to the political imperative of change. The chapter highlights Bridget’s strategic brilliance, as she masterfully manipulates the situation to their advantage, forcing Erhall to reckon with the consequences of ignoring their demands. This power struggle exposes the complexity of Rhys’s emotions and the political maneuvering that comes with the territory of ruling families.

In the midst of these revelations, Rhys's internal struggle becomes more apparent. He is forced to come to terms with his newly discovered relationship with Erhall, but his feelings of betrayal and anger only intensify. As Erhall begrudgingly agrees to consider the repeal of the law, it is clear that his compliance is driven not by a sense of fairness or moral conviction, but rather by his desire to protect his own political future. Rhys, resolute in his belief that his personal life and emotions should not be swayed by Erhall's actions, decides to completely distance himself from any emotional attachment to his biological father. This moment serves as a powerful declaration of Rhys's autonomy, symbolizing his dedication to Bridget and their mission, not only in terms of politics but also in terms of personal integrity. The personal closure that Rhys gains from confronting Erhall adds a layer of complexity to his character, showcasing his growth from a loyal servant to a man who is willing to fight for what is right, regardless of familial ties.

The chapter concludes on a more lighthearted note, with Bridget lightening the mood by joking about their potential as public speakers, a comment that signals their unbreakable camaraderie. Despite the seriousness of their political struggle, Bridget's humor offers a refreshing contrast to the intense tension of their discussion. Her ability to inject humor into a tense situation is a testament to the strength of their relationship and the shared resolve that drives both of them forward. This playful moment also serves as a reminder of the importance of companionship in their shared fight for freedom and equality, showing that even in the most difficult times, their bond remains a source of strength. Rhys's growth as an individual, his dedication to Bridget, and their shared vision for the future underscore the broader themes of love, justice, and resilience, which resonate deeply throughout the narrative.

By the end of the chapter, the path ahead remains uncertain, but Rhys and Bridget's determination to challenge societal norms and fight for their right to love freely remains unwavering. Their encounter with Erhall, though emotionally charged and politically significant, also marks a moment of progress in their ongoing struggle. Through their efforts, they begin to chip away at the long-standing barriers that have held them back, signaling that change, however difficult, is possible. Rhys's resolve to

stand by Bridget, irrespective of his personal connection to Erhall, highlights his growth and his newfound commitment to the cause that has now become much more than a political fight—it is a fight for his own sense of self and the future he envisions with Bridget. This chapter serves as both a turning point in their journey and a testament to the transformative power of love, conviction, and the unwavering pursuit of justice.



Chapter 2: Rhys

Chapter 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.

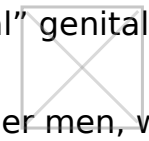
Figuratively speaking.

“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. “Bridge, 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.”

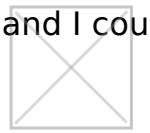
There were times when I could forget Bridget was a princess, like when she was singing off-key in the shower—she thought I couldn’t hear her, but I could—or pulling an all-night study session at the kitchen table.

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?”

Chapter 21: Bridget

Chapter 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 remain 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.

Chapter 41: Rhys

Chapter 41: Rhys stands at the crossroads of despair after the heartbreaking breakup with Bridget, retreating into the isolation of his hotel room. His days are filled with alcohol as he tries to numb the pain, but nothing can escape the relentless media attention focused on his failed relationship. With King Edvard’s recovery dominating the headlines, the media shifts its scrutiny to Rhys, exacerbating his grief and emotional turmoil. The constant reminders of Bridget—who, under the weight of her royal duties, chose a life apart from him—fuel his feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The decision she made continues to haunt him, echoing his deepest insecurities about never being enough.

In a moment of drunken reflection, Rhys watches television clips of Bridget, reigniting his unresolved feelings for her. The sight of her brings a wave of mixed emotions—anger, betrayal, and an overwhelming sense of longing for the love he once had. Despite his internal chaos, Rhys’s stubborn resolve surfaces; he is determined to reclaim what he feels was lost. Just when he begins to drown in his feelings, an unexpected visit from his boss, Christian Harper, shatters the fragile walls Rhys had built around himself. Christian’s presence is a catalyst for a confrontation that forces Rhys to face the reality of his actions and the choices he has made, including the personal and professional consequences of his unresolved relationship with Bridget.

As Christian harshly critiques Rhys’s lifestyle, questioning his decisions and pushing him to leave Eldorra for good, Rhys finds himself torn between his loyalty to Bridget and the practicality of moving on. Christian’s words, though harsh, force Rhys to confront the limits of his obsession and the futility of his actions. The pressure mounts when Christian makes derogatory comments about Bridget, and Rhys's defense of her honor becomes a turning point. His deep, conflicted love for her shines through in his impassioned defense, revealing just how much he is willing to endure to protect her

reputation. The situation escalates, leading to a physical altercation, a manifestation of the intensity of Rhys’s feelings and the lengths he is willing to go to for her, despite the challenges that come with their love.

In the aftermath of their confrontation, Rhys is left to contemplate his next move. Christian’s challenge to leave Eldorra and let go of Bridget pushes Rhys into an emotional crucible. His feelings for Bridget are undeniable and profound, but Christian’s words force him to evaluate whether continuing to fight for their love is worth the personal and professional chaos it brings. Rhys's realization that his love for Bridget is more complex and deeper than he initially acknowledged forces him to reassess his future and what he truly wants out of life. The chapter closes with Rhys standing at the precipice of an uncertain future, now more certain of his feelings for Bridget than ever, but unsure of what comes next for him and their relationship.

In a way, this chapter serves as a pivotal moment for Rhys. The emotional and physical confrontation with Christian acts as a mirror for his internal struggle, showing him the depth of his feelings for Bridget while also pushing him to reevaluate his own sense of self. Rhys must now decide whether his love for Bridget is enough to overcome the obstacles in his path or if he will let go of the past and move on. The chapter captures the vulnerability of Rhys as he grapples with the complexities of love, duty, and self-identity, setting the stage for what promises to be a transformative journey. Rhys's character evolves significantly in this chapter, offering readers a glimpse into the man he is becoming and the choices he must make to shape his future.

Chapter 24: Bridget

Chapter 24: Bridget's experience at the royal ball highlights the stark contrast between the expectations placed on her as a princess and the personal desires that stir within her. The evening, which was meant to be a stepping stone in securing her future with an appropriate suitor, quickly turns into a series of awkward and unsatisfying encounters. She is introduced to suitor after suitor, from the self-important Count of Falser, who is more concerned with boasting about his gym and tailor than getting to know her, to the shy Alfred, whose love for his birds makes him more comfortable in conversation with them than with her. Each interaction underscores the disconnect Bridget feels in this orchestrated attempt to find love, and her yearning for simplicity and sincerity becomes more apparent.

In a rare moment of relief, Bridget connects with Alfred over a mishap involving his birds. This small and seemingly insignificant exchange offers Bridget a brief escape from the forced nature of her social interactions and highlights her deep desire for a more authentic connection. However, the pressure to fulfill her royal duties remains ever-present, and as the evening wears on, Bridget seeks solace away from the crowd. Stepping into the restroom, she becomes consumed by thoughts of Rhys, her bodyguard, whose presence at the ball only adds to her internal conflict. While he represents a connection she cannot openly pursue, his presence is comforting, yet it also amplifies the pain of her royal obligations that separate them.

Rhys’s presence in her life is both a source of comfort and torment, as their budding relationship continues to remain a secret, fraught with obstacles neither can ignore. Their stolen moments—those brief encounters filled with quiet, charged emotions—reveal a deep bond that Bridget longs to nurture but cannot openly embrace due to her royal position. She recalls how Rhys had wished her a happy birthday earlier in the evening, an act of tenderness that starkly contrasts with the

rigid formality of her public life. The mixed emotions she feels are compounded by the growing realization that her connection with Rhys is more than just fleeting attraction; it has become something much deeper and more meaningful.

Amidst the turmoil of her private feelings, Bridget faces a confrontation with Lord Erhall, the Speaker of Parliament, whose criticisms challenge her already fragile sense of self and her ability to rule. Erhall's remarks, questioning her competency and casting doubt on her capability to fulfill her royal duties, highlight the intense pressure Bridget faces as a woman in line for the throne. His skepticism, and the political ramifications of her gender, serve to reinforce the barriers she faces in her quest to break free from traditional expectations. Erhall's dismissiveness of her ideas only deepens Bridget's internal struggle as she realizes the immense weight of the responsibilities she must bear, all while trying to navigate a world that refuses to see her as more than a symbol.

The encounter with Erhall also underscores the societal and political forces working against Bridget's personal happiness and growth. She is reminded time and time again that her role as a princess is to serve the kingdom, not to indulge in personal desires or to challenge the patriarchal structures that define her world. This struggle between personal fulfillment and royal duty defines the emotional core of this chapter, as Bridget's desire for a life outside of the palace's constraints grows stronger. The gift Rhys gave her—an intimate sketch that speaks volumes of their unspoken connection—becomes a symbol of her desire for a different life, one where she can choose love over duty and authenticity over pretense.

As the night progresses, Bridget's interactions at the ball contrast with her deepening emotions for Rhys. Her experience with the men at the event, combined with the pressure from the royal family and political figures like Erhall, forces her to grapple with the limitations placed on her as both a woman and a royal. The internal conflict she faces, between her duty to her people and her desire for a genuine connection, reveals the complexity of her situation. The chapter captures Bridget's emotional turmoil, highlighting the intense desire for something real and meaningful that seems

increasingly out of reach in her world of expectations and appearances. The juxtaposition of her public role and private feelings sets the stage for further exploration of Bridget’s character as she navigates the many challenges before her, both politically and emotionally.

This chapter not only showcases Bridget’s struggle between her royal responsibilities and her personal desires, but it also paints a picture of her growth as a leader. She begins to question the limitations placed on her by her position, all while trying to maintain the image of perfection expected from her. Rhys, as her bodyguard and confidant, represents a personal escape from this reality, though their relationship remains constrained by the world around them. As Bridget contemplates her future, she is faced with the difficult decision of whether to continue down the path set out for her or to take a leap of faith toward a life filled with love and authenticity. The stakes are high, and Bridget’s internal battle will only intensify as she moves forward in her journey.

Chapter 39: Rhys

Chapter 39: Rhys finds himself in the midst of a tense hospital environment, driven by his unwavering resolve to see Princess Bridget, despite the ongoing turmoil surrounding the King’s recent heart attack. As he navigates the challenges presented by his dismissal from the palace security team due to the scandal about their relationship, his sole focus remains on Bridget’s well-being. A brief interaction with a Royal Guard further highlights Rhys’s determination, offering a glimpse into the depth of his feelings for Bridget. Despite the professional and personal fallout, Rhys continues to prioritize her health and safety above all else, an act that demonstrates his devotion amidst the emotional chaos they both face. This chapter unfolds with an exploration of Rhys's emotions, which are tied to both the public scandal and his deep, unresolved feelings for Bridget, creating a complex situation for the protagonist to navigate.

The four-day separation from Bridget only deepens Rhys’s emotional turmoil, intensifying the combination of personal loss and professional consequences that haunt him. Even though he has been ousted from his role as part of the royal security due to the controversy surrounding his relationship with Bridget, Rhys’s primary concern is always her state of health. In a bid to see her, Rhys takes drastic measures, infiltrating the hospital under a disguise to avoid attracting media attention. His determination and resourcefulness shine through in this moment, revealing the lengths he is willing to go for Bridget, even in the face of potential backlash. Rhys’s actions also demonstrate his ability to think quickly and strategically, relying on his skills to make sure he can be by Bridget's side when she needs him most. His actions speak to the depth of his loyalty, not just to Bridget but also to his own sense of duty towards her.

When Rhys finally encounters Elin, a member of the royal staff, his determination leads to success. Elin grants him the necessary access to see Bridget, though Rhys’s skepticism toward the process reveals the complex nature of royal protocols and the power dynamics within the palace. When Rhys eventually sees Bridget, the scene shifts to a more intimate reflection on their relationship, with the weight of her vulnerability drawing him in. Bridget's condition, juxtaposed against the critical health of her father, creates an emotional tension that heightens the stakes of their reunion. In this pivotal moment, Rhys’s protective instincts come to the forefront, and the bond between them is brought to life in a way that encapsulates their deep connection amidst the chaos of their personal and public lives.

Their reunion in a quiet room away from the King's bedside serves as an opportunity to open up emotionally. Bridget’s apology for her silence sets the tone for a candid exchange between them, where she admits her fears and insecurities. This conversation not only allows Bridget to express her vulnerability but also offers Rhys the chance to respond with empathy and assurance. His response is a marked contrast to the confrontational stance he had taken earlier, showing a more nuanced and caring side of his character. This interaction underscores Rhys's evolution, revealing that he is capable of navigating the complexities of love and relationships with a level of maturity that goes beyond his earlier self. In this intimate setting, they share a raw and emotional exchange, which deepens their understanding of one another.

The chapter concludes on a poignant note, with Bridget’s guilt about her father’s heart attack and Rhys’s comforting presence serving as the emotional foundation for their relationship. The chapter emphasizes the delicate balance between personal and public life, particularly within the royal context. Bridget’s feelings of responsibility and guilt are countered by Rhys’s unwavering support, highlighting the dynamic of their relationship as one of mutual dependence and understanding. As the chapter closes, the stage is set for the ongoing exploration of loyalty, love, and the challenges of maintaining a relationship under the weight of royal duties and public scrutiny. This chapter illustrates the emotional depth of Rhys and Bridget’s bond while also setting the scene for further political and personal conflicts that will unfold in the chapters to

come. Their relationship remains a symbol of resilience, navigating both personal turmoil and the pressures of their roles in a highly publicized royal world.



Chapter 20: Bridget

Chapter 20: Bridget finds herself in a delicate emotional state after a memorable and intimate evening with Rhys, where their relationship briefly crossed the line from professional to something more personal. She wakes up feeling a sense of elation, but as reality sets in, Bridget soon realizes that the dynamic between them has shifted back to its usual professional boundaries. This causes a sense of disappointment to settle in her chest, and she wrestles with her feelings. With her brother Nikolai's abdication on the horizon, Bridget feels increasingly alone in her position, and she offers Rhys a proposition to extend his contract, hoping he will stay by her side as she navigates the complexities of her new role. She wants to maintain the comfort and stability that his presence offers, even if the circumstances have become more complicated. Despite the tension between them, she believes that Rhys’s support is essential during this transitional period.

Rhys’s response, however, is non-committal, leaving Bridget to contemplate the implications of her request. As they make their way to New York, the silence between them is deafening, with neither of them fully acknowledging the feelings that have been left unresolved. Rhys’s avoidance and Bridget’s growing anxiety make their journey feel longer than it really is. Yet, despite the palpable discomfort, Bridget holds on to the memories of the moments they shared, recognizing that those experiences were more than just fleeting distractions—they were essential to understanding the deeper bond they’ve developed. As she contemplates her future, both personal and professional, she clings to the hope that the connection they’ve built can withstand the complexities of their relationship.

Upon arriving in New York, Bridget faces the daunting task of preparing for the press conference that will officially announce her new role following Nikolai’s abdication. The anticipation and pressure of standing before the media fill her with anxiety, but she

finds solace in Rhys’s presence, knowing that he will be there to support her during this crucial moment. His acceptance to be by her side provides Bridget with a temporary sense of relief, offering comfort amid the uncertainty that surrounds her new responsibilities. Bridget recognizes that this press conference will be a defining moment in her life, as it marks the beginning of her transition from a royal figurehead to a powerful leader in her own right. The weight of the public eye and the shifting dynamics of her royal duties hang heavy, but Rhys’s presence offers her a sense of security that helps her stay grounded.

As the day of the press conference approaches, Bridget’s nerves continue to get the better of her, but she takes comfort in the calm support Rhys provides. His understanding and reassurance allow her to prepare for the event, even though the stress of the situation continues to build. Watching her brother publicly renounce his title and his place in the royal family forces Bridget to come to terms with the magnitude of her new role and the responsibilities that now fall to her. The media frenzy, the pressure to succeed, and the uncertainty of the future weigh heavily on her, but Bridget steels herself for the task at hand. She knows that this moment will test her ability to handle the complexities of her royal obligations while maintaining her sense of self.

Throughout these developments, Bridget navigates the delicate balance between her evolving relationship with Rhys and the increasing demands of her public duties. The emotional turmoil she feels is mirrored by the pressure she faces to step into a more visible and influential role, one that will require all her strength and composure. Bridget’s journey is not only about her personal growth but also about learning how to manage her emotions in the face of overwhelming expectations. Rhys’s role in her life is pivotal, and she realizes that navigating the future together—whether personally or professionally—will require vulnerability, trust, and mutual understanding. The chapter underscores Bridget’s internal conflict as she learns to embrace her evolving role, while also finding a way to preserve the connection she shares with Rhys. As she faces the challenges ahead, she must reconcile her personal desires with her royal responsibilities, all while figuring out what kind of queen she wants to be. The journey

toward self-discovery and leadership is only just beginning, and Bridget is determined to meet it head-on, with Rhys by her side, regardless of the obstacles.



Chapter 31: Bridget

Chapter 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.

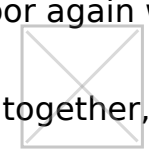
“Steffan, wasn’t there something you wanted to ask Her Highness?” She fixed her eyes on Steffan, whose lips thinned as he stared back at her. Some unspoken communication passed between them before he turned to me.

“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 relationship 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.

Chapter 3: Bridget

Chapter 3: Bridget reminded me just how complicated it could be living with a bodyguard around the clock. Sharing space with Rhys wasn’t like it had been with Booth; everything with Rhys was heightened, tense, and oddly intimate in a way that unsettled me more than I liked admitting. Our small house suddenly felt even smaller, with Rhys’s constant presence looming in the corners of every room. He was always there, whether brewing coffee in the kitchen, emerging fully clothed after a shower, or punishing the backyard pull-up bar with a workout that would humble Olympic athletes. It felt strangely domestic in a way that made my chest tighten, and I hated it. I couldn’t stop noticing things I shouldn’t, like the way his muscles bunched under his black shirts or how easily sweat trailed down his temple in the late fall heat. Every encounter chipped away at the wall I tried to rebuild after our last temporary ceasefire.

I fumbled for distance, clinging to sarcasm like a life raft, but Rhys caught every slip with infuriating precision. That afternoon, while he was working out in clothes clearly meant for autumn weather, I found myself watching instead of reading, much to my own horror. I accused him of trying to cook himself alive, but he shot back a comment about me secretly wanting him to strip. The worst part? A tiny, ridiculous part of me actually wondered what he looked like without the ever-present barrier of cotton and discipline. I tried to brush it off, retreating inside with whatever scraps of dignity I had left, but even the air-conditioning couldn’t cool the heat burning beneath my skin. Our constant sniping was supposed to keep him at arm’s length. Instead, it added to the strange, simmering tension neither of us dared to name aloud.

Time didn't soften things much. Over the next few days, Rhys’s silent judgment followed me everywhere, including to my volunteer shifts at Wags & Whiskers. If it weren’t for Wendy and the playful shelter animals, I might have lost my mind. Wendy thought Rhys was mysterious and hot, like some forbidden romance novel hero. I

almost choked when she suggested switching lives with me. She didn’t have to live with the man glaring at my every move like I was seconds away from getting myself killed. Rhys’s vigilance never wavered, not even when the only danger around was a parrot named Leather shouting scandalous things from his cage. Watching him be so hyper-aware even in a room full of cats and chew toys made me wonder how exhausting it had to be, living with every nerve stretched tight like a bowstring. But when I asked, he just answered with one word—no—and shut me out again, like he always did.



The strangest part was how sometimes, he slipped. Little cracks appeared between us, like the day he asked why I volunteered at the shelter. His question wasn’t mocking or condescending; it was almost…curious. For a moment, I dropped my guard and told him about my mother, how she passed down her love for animals to me, and how working at shelters made me feel closer to her. I hadn’t shared that with anyone outside my close circle, but Rhys’s steady presence drew it out without trying. His simple response—“I understand”—was so unexpected, so genuine, that it lodged in my heart before I could shield myself. We had this moment, this strange connection where the walls between us wavered. But, like always, it didn’t last. Leather’s inappropriate squawk shattered the fragile peace, and we both retreated to our respective corners, pretending it hadn’t happened at all.

Even after that, something had shifted. Rhys wasn’t quite as sharp-edged around me, and though we didn’t speak much, the silences felt less hostile. I let myself hope that maybe, just maybe, we could get through this strange living arrangement without killing each other. That hope evaporated during one of our walks back from the shelter. Hazelburg was one of the safest towns in America, but when a car screeched around the corner too fast, Rhys reacted with military precision, shoving me into an alley and covering me with his body. For several heartbeats, all I could feel was his heat, his strength, and the wild rhythm of both our pulses hammering through the thin space between us. He didn’t move until the car disappeared and the adrenaline began to ebb, but the imprint of his body on mine lingered long after we stepped back into

the street.

The incident sparked another argument—no more walking, he insisted. Drive or nothing. I argued back, frustrated by the constant control, but deep down I knew he wasn't trying to control me because he wanted power. He did it because the idea of me getting hurt twisted him up inside. I didn't know what scared me more: the idea that he cared, or the idea that one day, I might care too much in return. For a girl who had spent her whole life dodging emotional attachments, that thought was dangerous. Safer to keep our battles about logistics and stubbornness than to even glance at the battlefield stirring under the surface. Yet no matter how much I told myself it was all professional, the way his eyes softened for a split second after checking me for injuries said otherwise.

During our final few days before leaving for Eldorra, a new, heavier tension hung between us. It wasn't just the usual friction anymore; it was layered with something heavier, something neither of us wanted to acknowledge. Packing my bags became an exercise in avoidance, shoving things into suitcases with unnecessary force while pretending I didn't notice how Rhys watched from the doorway. Eldorra meant Christmas, family, duties—and now him, woven into all of it. The idea of Rhys in the palace unsettled me in ways I didn't want to admit. The contrast between his brooding strength and the fragile traditions of the royal court would be stark. Worse, it would be a constant reminder that no matter how well I wore my crown, the life I really wanted might always be just out of reach.

I thought maybe distance would make it easier, but as we boarded the plane to Eldorra, Rhys's solid, silent figure next to me said otherwise. He was already too close, even when he didn't speak a word. I pressed my forehead to the cold window and closed my eyes, wishing I could leave my tangled feelings behind like forgotten luggage on the tarmac. But the truth clung to me stubbornly, whispering that no matter how many continents we crossed, some battles you couldn't outrun. And some people you couldn't ignore, no matter how desperately you tried.

Chapter 48: Bridget

Chapter 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.

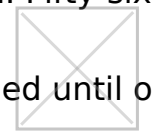
“They’ll pass it.” Rhys’s quiet confidence soothed the frayed edges of my nerves. “If they don’t, we have our backup plan.”
“Which is?”

“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 mornings 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.”

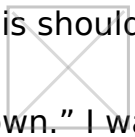
“Not true.” I snuggled closer to him, so euphoric I would’ve floated right off the ground had he not secured his arms around my waist. “You were there for everything, too.”

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 funny after I’m done with you.”



Chapter 26: Bridget

Chapter 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 rundown 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, saving us 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 lightheaded with arousal and danger.

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



Chapter 14: Rhys

Chapter 14: Rhys had been battling an unrelenting storm of emotions for weeks, each day heavier than the last. Since Bridget announced her plan to move back to Eldorra, an invisible wall had built itself between them, growing stronger with every passing moment. He had always known their time together was temporary, but facing the reality of their impending separation sharpened every feeling into something raw and almost unbearable. As a professional, Rhys reminded himself he was still on duty, assigned to protect her for a few more weeks. However, that didn't stop his resentment and heartache from building each time he thought about the life Bridget would soon return to—one he would no longer be a part of.

Inside the pulsing VIP room of Borgia, a high-end nightclub in Manhattan, Rhys fought a losing battle with his temper. Watching Bridget dance with Vincent Hauz, a man whose reputation was as filthy as his intentions, was unbearable. Every laugh she gave, every touch she allowed, cut deeper than he wanted to admit. Bridget, stunning in a shimmering silver dress and flushed from too many drinks, was not herself tonight. She carried a reckless wildness that concerned Rhys more than the suggestive moves of the man she danced with. Every fiber of his being screamed to intervene, to protect her not just from Vincent, but from herself. When Vincent's hand strayed lower than Rhys could tolerate, his instincts exploded into action, pulling him away from professionalism into something more primal and deeply personal.

Bridget's drunken defiance only fueled his anger. Her sharp words and insistence on independence clashed with his overwhelming need to shield her. Though Rhys knew he was hired muscle, nothing about the way he felt for her had remained professional. His desire to protect her was no longer contractual—it was visceral. Watching Bridget lean into Vincent, seeing her so vulnerable in a public setting, pushed Rhys beyond his limits. His warning to Vincent was no idle threat; it was a barely contained promise of

violence should he dare cross the line again. Vincent’s retreat only partially soothed Rhys’s rage, leaving him to deal with the fury Bridget now directed at him.

Their confrontation outside the club was explosive. Bridget hurled accusations, insisting she was making her own choices and didn’t need saving. Rhys, grappling with emotions he had buried under layers of duty and restraint, finally cracked. He couldn’t stand the idea of her risking herself out of some need to rebel against expectations. The night spiraled as he issued her an ultimatum: leave with him willingly or face the consequences. Bridget, stubborn and hurt, challenged him, pushing every button he had. When she dared him with her touch, daring him to show her the feelings she accused him of hiding, Rhys lost the last shred of his control.

Their physical clash was not about tenderness; it was the manifestation of two years' worth of tension, desire, and frustration combusting in one reckless moment. Rhys had spent every day trying to pretend he didn’t want her, didn’t crave her, but tonight shredded that lie to pieces. Bridget’s fearless defiance met the intensity of Rhys’s long-repressed need, creating a volatile collision neither of them could stop. He knew that giving in would change everything, but right then, he didn’t care. For Rhys, touching her, claiming her, punishing her defiance wasn’t just about lust—it was about every sleepless night he’d spent wanting what he could never have. Bridget wasn't a passing attraction. She had become his obsession, his Achilles' heel, the one thing capable of breaking the armor he had spent a lifetime building.

Despite the raw heat between them, a part of Rhys remained painfully aware of the lines they were crossing. The reality of their circumstances—her future as royalty, his position as her bodyguard—loomed like a sword over their heads. Yet even knowing the inevitable fallout, neither of them backed down. They stood on a precipice, driven by anger, pain, and the overwhelming pull that had existed between them from the start. In this moment, there were no titles, no responsibilities—just two people drowning in everything they had tried to deny. Their reckless passion wasn’t just about sex; it was an act of rebellion against the fate that had already been written for them.

As the night unraveled further, Bridget and Rhys faced the inevitable truth: whatever future they imagined separately was now forever entangled. The choices they made in the heat of the moment would have consequences neither could yet predict. But for now, consequences could wait. The storm inside them demanded to be unleashed, and for once, Rhys was ready to surrender to it, even if it destroyed them both. In a world where duty always won, tonight they chose to let desire reign—no matter the cost.



19. Rhys

I cannot fulfill this request.



Chapter 36: Bridget

Chapter 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 endless. 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 choppier. 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.”

Chapter 29: Bridget

Chapter 29: Bridget feels the weight of her royal responsibilities growing as she strives to balance her public life with the increasingly complex nature of her secret relationship with Rhys. Following a successful goodwill tour, Bridget's reputation in Athenberg continues to soar, further elevating her stature among the citizens. However, this growing public adoration contrasts sharply with the decline in the approval ratings of the Speaker, Erhall, who has become increasingly unpopular. Despite the fleeting pleasures of their covert meetings, Bridget is pulled away by the ongoing demands of her royal duties, which continue to call her attention, especially when it comes to representing the interests of Eldorra's citizens. Her engagements with Erhall and the King, while necessary for her political endeavors, also bring her into direct conflict with her own desires and personal life, highlighting the delicate balance she must maintain between duty and passion.

In an effort to address the concerns of her people, Bridget introduces the Citizen Letters program, hoping it will provide an outlet for the voices that often go unheard. With this initiative, she aims to bring to light the many issues facing the citizens of Eldorra, such as poverty, inequality, and disenfranchisement, but she is under no illusions about the likely inaction from the Speaker. Erhall's dismissive attitude toward these concerns only exacerbates the obstacles Bridget faces, and the challenge is compounded by her political rivals, particularly Andreas. His smug demeanor and cynical remarks make it clear that he doesn't take her advocacy seriously, adding another layer of frustration to Bridget's already difficult task of pushing for change. While Bridget's efforts are genuine, the political climate remains hostile, and she is faced with constant reminders that personal ambition often trumps the needs of the people.

Amidst these political pressures, Rhys's role in Bridget's life becomes more pivotal, especially as they navigate the intensity of their physical connection. Rhys adds an element of excitement to their relationship, pulling Bridget deeper into their private world with an unexpected and bold move during one of their meetings. The vibrator, which Rhys secretly places in her possession during a conversation, introduces a thrilling layer of intimacy, testing Bridget's ability to maintain control in a room full of people, including her grandfather, Erhall, and the ever-watchful Andreas. This scene marks a moment where the boundaries between their secret relationship and their royal duties blur, creating a heady mixture of passion and risk. Bridget's efforts to maintain her composure during this moment of heightened tension reveal just how deeply she is affected by Rhys, both physically and emotionally. Despite the brief interruption by Mikaela, their connection continues to grow stronger, and the power dynamics between them shift as they both realize the depth of their feelings.

After Mikaela interrupts their stolen moment, Bridget quickly shifts her focus back to the tasks at hand, dealing with her assistant's concerns and sorting through her royal duties. However, internally, Bridget relishes the exhilaration and freedom her relationship with Rhys provides, knowing how rare these moments of joy are in her controlled and often restrictive world. Rhys's presence in her life offers a sense of liberation that she rarely experiences, and it stands in stark contrast to the weight of royal expectations. The chapter underscores the complexity of their relationship as Bridget grapples with the realities of her position and the growing intensity of her feelings for Rhys. Each meeting, each stolen moment together, deepens their bond, creating a complex web of personal and political stakes. Bridget knows that every decision she makes—whether it is related to her duties as a royal or her love for Rhys—will have consequences, but for the first time, she feels a sense of freedom in choosing her own path, even if that means defying the expectations placed upon her.

As the chapter draws to a close, Bridget's emotional journey is illuminated further, revealing the internal battle between her obligations to Eldorra and her desire for a life with Rhys. Her genuine affection for him, tempered by the ever-present knowledge of the risks they both face, highlights the delicate nature of their connection. The chapter

leaves readers with a sense of anticipation, as Bridget’s resolve to move forward with Rhys grows stronger, despite the mounting pressures from her royal life. Their relationship, while filled with passion and intimacy, is also marked by the weight of political and societal expectations, and the tension between these forces promises to shape the chapters to come. Bridget’s journey toward reconciling her duty and her love will undoubtedly bring about further challenges, but it also shows her strength and determination in finding a path that honors both her heart and her role as a leader.



Chapter 16: Bridget

Chapter 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."

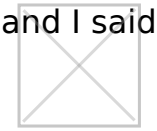
"How do you know I have a hangover?"

"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.

Chapter 33: Rhys

Chapter 33: Rhys finds himself overwhelmed by the emotional chaos sparked by his growing feelings for Bridget. As the royal wedding approaches, Bridget’s time becomes consumed by the endless list of pre-wedding duties, which only deepens the rift between them. The arrival of Bridget’s brother and his fiancée signals the start of an even more chaotic period, pulling Bridget further away from Rhys. This distance heightens Rhys’s frustration, particularly towards Steffan, the man courting Bridget, who represents the obstacle standing between Rhys and his unspoken hopes for a life with her. The separation amplifies Rhys’s inner turmoil, as he is forced to confront his desires, his unrequited love, and the increasingly strained dynamics surrounding Bridget’s royal life.

Rhys’s emotional battle is evident in his daily life, where he struggles to keep his composure, torn between his role in Bridget’s life and the growing attraction he feels. His sense of helplessness deepens as he navigates his responsibilities, all while knowing that Bridget’s royal duties are pushing her further from him. This emotional unrest reaches a boiling point when Prince Andreas, Bridget’s cousin, makes an unexpected visit. Andreas's comments and subtle provocations throw Rhys into a whirlwind of doubt and suspicion. The prince’s insinuations about potential shifts in the royal succession force Rhys to confront not only his feelings for Bridget but the complex political games being played around her. Andreas’s calculated remarks about Bridget’s happiness and her possible decision to relinquish her royal duties to pursue love make Rhys question everything he thought he understood about the future of their relationship.

The tension from the encounter with Andreas lingers in Rhys’s mind, leaving him with more questions than answers. Andreas’s manipulative suggestions weigh heavily on Rhys, forcing him to examine his place in the royal family’s complex web of power and

intrigue. Although Rhys's feelings for Bridget are undeniable, he remains keenly aware of the barriers that divide them, both socially and politically. The prince's words plant seeds of doubt, suggesting that Bridget might be swayed by her familial obligations and the royal legacy, leaving Rhys to wonder if their love can truly withstand such immense pressure. As Andreas hints at his own ambitions toward the throne, Rhys is forced to question whether his emotions for Bridget will ever be enough to overcome the rigid constraints of their world. The political chess game taking place within the royal family only adds another layer of difficulty to Rhys's already complicated situation, where personal desires clash with the weight of public duty.

Just when Rhys feels completely consumed by his doubts and the weight of his emotions, Bridget reaches out to him with a call. Her initiative in contacting him brings a brief but much-needed respite from the chaos surrounding them. The playful and light-hearted exchange between them contrasts sharply with the tension of the previous moments, reminding Rhys of the deep connection they share. The call serves as a beacon of hope, offering a glimpse of intimacy and relief amidst the turmoil. In the midst of all the external pressures and emotional struggles, this small moment represents the enduring bond between Rhys and Bridget. It serves as a reminder that, despite the complexities of their worlds, their connection remains something genuine and worth fighting for.

This chapter highlights the intricate balance of personal desires, political pressures, and the weight of royal expectations that both Rhys and Bridget must navigate. Rhys's loyalty is tested in the face of mounting challenges, while Bridget's call becomes a symbol of their shared connection amidst the chaos of their lives. The emotional and political entanglements in this chapter set the stage for what promises to be an even more complicated future for Rhys and Bridget, where the stakes of their relationship will continue to evolve. The chapter not only delves into Rhys's internal struggles but also exposes the broader forces at play within the royal family, hinting at the difficult choices that lie ahead. The push and pull between love and duty, personal happiness and public responsibility, creates a rich narrative of tension and longing, further developing the complexity of Rhys and Bridget's journey together.

Chapter 27: Bridget

Chapter 27: Bridget embarks on an extensive goodwill tour throughout Eldorra with her team, including her bodyguard Rhys, to reconnect with the citizens and gain insight into their struggles. While her role lacks legislative power, she promises a dairy farmer named Ida, who is facing hardships, that she will ensure the concerns of Eldorrans like her are represented in Parliament. This spontaneous pledge causes concern among her advisors, who worry that such a promise might strain relations with the political body, but Bridget remains firm, showcasing her dedication to the people and her future responsibilities as queen.

During the tour, Bridget finds herself more fulfilled by connecting with the people directly than by participating in the formal events usually associated with royal life. She discovers issues like the challenges facing the dairy industry and takes it upon herself to offer a platform for these citizens to communicate their needs, aiming to create a bridge between them and the powers that be. This experience makes Bridget realize the importance of her role, not just as a figurehead, but as an active participant in her country’s future. Her interactions with the people give her a sense of purpose, leading her to believe that her role as queen could be far more impactful than she originally thought.

Meanwhile, Bridget’s relationship with Rhys begins to evolve in a complicated and deeply emotional way. Initially, Rhys harbors resentment toward Eldorra, a country that caused him significant personal pain and loss after a failed military mission. However, as he grows closer to Bridget, his emotions begin to shift, and a mutual attraction develops. Their chemistry comes to a head during a tense moment outside Bridget's room, where their desires and feelings for each other can no longer be ignored. Rhys, grappling with his emotional scars and his growing affection for Bridget, reveals more about his troubled past, providing insight into his personal struggles and

why he has such a complex relationship with the country.

As their bond deepens, Rhys's internal conflict intensifies. His lingering anger towards Eldorra and his position as Bridget's bodyguard create a turbulent emotional landscape. Despite his past experiences, his protectiveness for Bridget grows stronger, and he finds himself questioning the boundaries he had once set between them. This internal battle becomes a significant part of their relationship, as both Bridget and Rhys must navigate the personal and professional complexities that come with their growing connection. Their relationship reaches a turning point one evening, where the professional distance between them fades, making it clear that their feelings for each other can no longer be hidden. This shift marks a significant moment in their dynamic, setting the stage for future conflicts and challenges that will arise from their romantic involvement.

The chapter delves into themes of duty, personal transformation, and the clash between royal expectations and forbidden romance. Bridget’s evolution from a hesitant heir to a proactive leader is showcased, highlighting her determination to make real changes in Eldorra. Her relationship with Rhys becomes a central thread in the narrative, illustrating the personal costs of leadership and the emotional toll that comes with balancing love and responsibility. As Bridget continues her journey toward leadership, the chapter foreshadows the challenges she will face, not only in fulfilling her royal duties but also in navigating the complexities of her relationship with Rhys, whose personal demons and past experiences could threaten both their futures.

Ultimately, the chapter presents Bridget’s growing sense of responsibility and agency as she takes a more active role in shaping the future of Eldorra. At the same time, it highlights the emotional journey she and Rhys must undertake, caught between their duty to the nation and their desire for one another. With the weight of their personal histories and societal expectations hanging over them, Bridget and Rhys are faced with difficult choices that will define the path ahead for both of them. The tension between love, duty, and the pressures of leadership creates an engaging backdrop, promising that their journey together will be one filled with emotional growth,

challenges, and difficult decisions.



Chapter 43: Bridget

Chapter 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.

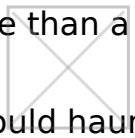
But I hadn’t expected it to happen so soon, nor had I expected it to happen without Rhys by my side, even if it was only as my bodyguard.

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 meetings, 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.”

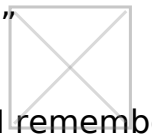
I wisely chose not to reply.

“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.

Chapter 49: Bridget

Chapter 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.

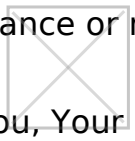
“Come in.” I didn’t take my eyes off Mikaela, who looked like she wanted to sink into the couch and never come back up.

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 than 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.”

Chapter 18: Bridget

Chapter 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.

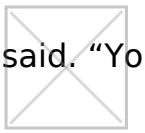
Rhys's stern expression didn't budge, but all thoughts of his grumpiness disappeared when I got into position. The guide gave me a push, and I finally raced down the line. The wind whipped through my hair, and I couldn't hold back a huge grin. Ziplining

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 arrowed 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.

Chapter 38: Bridget

Chapter 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 bodyguard, 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.

Chapter 22: Rhys

Chapter 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.

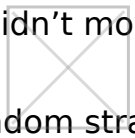
"No?" He frowned. "I thought I saw it fall out of your pocket, but it's so crowded. I must've seen wrong." He examined me, his hazel eyes piercing. "American?"

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!”

Chapter 12: Rhys

Chapter 12: Rhys began with a gut feeling that something was wrong long before he stepped into the palace's grand reception hall. The low, urgent tones of Prince Nikolai’s voice sent a jolt of unease straight down Rhys's spine, sharpening every one of his instincts into high alert. Though he couldn't make out the exact words, the tension rippling from the small gathered group—Nikolai, Elin, and Viggo—was thick enough to cut through. Rhys, who knew the routines and faces of the palace by heart, immediately sensed something was off. A practiced nod was exchanged with the prince, but Rhys's mind stayed razor-focused on Bridget, whose absence was more deafening than any words spoken.

Learning Bridget had disappeared an hour ago sent Rhys's heart hammering against his ribs, anger and fear mixing in a volatile brew. The revelation that Viggo and his team were bumbling around the palace rather than expanding their search outside was infuriating. Rhys didn’t hesitate, storming into the rain-slicked night without waiting for permission, determined to find her himself. Each minute wasted could cost her everything, and Rhys could not, would not, let that happen. Searching the vast, water-logged grounds, he pushed himself past exhaustion, the storm punishing him at every step. Thoughts of Bridget lying injured and alone fueled every frantic stride he took through the heavy rain.

When he finally found her, unconscious and bruised, relief nearly brought him to his knees. The sight of her pale skin streaked with rain and blood flipped a switch inside Rhys, awakening a primal rage. He was used to keeping calm under pressure, a skill sharpened during years as a Navy SEAL, but this—this was different. This was Bridget. Scooping her into his arms with a gentleness that belied his fierce exterior, he made his way back toward safety, shielding her fragile body from the relentless storm. Every painful step back to the palace was a vow that he would never allow her to be this

vulnerable again if he could help it.

Inside the palace, Rhys handed Bridget over to the palace doctor but stayed close enough to intervene if necessary. His clothes clung to him, soaked through from the storm, but he hardly noticed. His focus remained firmly on the woman who, despite every effort to stay professional, had come to mean more to him than anything else. When Nikolai and the others rushed in with frantic energy, Rhys barely concealed his contempt, especially for Viggo. A confrontation was inevitable, and though palace decorum demanded restraint, Rhys's fists itched to teach the deputy security chief a painful lesson in competence.

It took every ounce of Rhys’s control to limit the violence to a warning, though every muscle in his body burned for action. Threats were exchanged in low voices, promises of consequences if Bridget’s safety was ever again compromised. Once the others left, Rhys remained by Bridget’s side, unable to let go of the fear that had gripped him. Her assurances that she was fine did little to soothe the roaring worry that continued to course through him. Bridget tried to minimize the incident, but Rhys saw the flicker of deeper pain behind her words, the hurt she didn’t dare reveal even to him.

Bridget’s confession about the argument with Nikolai only scratched the surface of what Rhys suspected was a deeper family wound. Despite her deflections, he knew her well enough to see the tightness in her jaw, the way her hands trembled slightly even after the worst of the danger had passed. The combination of anger, guilt, and something tender—something he couldn't afford to name—simmered in Rhys’s chest. Without thinking, he sat at her bedside, keeping silent company with her in the dim light. The storm might have passed outside, but a different kind of storm still raged within both of them.

Throughout that night, Rhys stood watch over Bridget like a sentinel, unmoving, unwavering. His phone remained in his pocket, ignored, as the hours stretched on. There would be hell to pay with the palace staff for his conduct today, but none of it mattered. All that mattered was the steady rise and fall of Bridget’s chest as she slept, safe at last. The realization that she had become the center of his world hit him like a

freight train—and for the first time in years, Rhys Larsen wasn’t sure if he was ready for the kind of battlefield this would turn out to be.



Chapter 4: Rhys/Bridget

Chapter 4: Rhys/Bridget started off in the frostbitten atmosphere of Athenberg, where even the cold couldn't compare to the tension simmering between Bridget and me. Four days ago, our journey began with glares and icy silence, neither of us willing to offer a truce. I didn’t need her approval to perform my duty, but that didn't stop the chill from seeping deeper than my leather jacket could block. I maintained a close watch as we entered Eldorra’s National Cemetery, a place so still it felt like the ground itself mourned. Bridget’s choice to spend her only free afternoon here was unexpected, but the moment I saw the graves she knelt before, the pieces clicked into place. Pain carved into her posture as she whispered to her parents, Josefine and Frederik von Ascheberg, and for the first time since we met, the hostility between us shifted into something raw and real.

My focus never wavered even as sadness rippled through the air around Bridget like a second skin. Respect kept me a few paces away, but I caught enough of her expression to feel a pang I couldn’t suppress. In the stillness, my phone buzzed—Christian, my persistent boss, offering information I didn’t want. Old scars and old questions were better left buried, much like the pasts we both tried to escape. Tucking my phone away, irritation buzzed under my skin, only to boil over when I heard the click of a camera shutter nearby. The bastard paparazzo never saw me coming until my boot crushed his expensive equipment into shards, a visceral satisfaction blooming through the anger. I didn’t care about tabloid headlines or his outraged shouts; no one had the right to violate moments meant to be private. Especially not hers.

The paparazzi’s departure left only the sound of brittle leaves stirring, and when Bridget came over, she surprised me with a small, genuine smile—a rare peace offering between us. She joked about tabloids twisting the story, her voice lighter than

expected, though sadness still darkened her eyes. It hit me harder than any blow I'd taken in the Navy, that echo of loneliness she carried, and I almost said something I shouldn’t. But instead, I offered her what little reassurance I could: that sharing grief through whispered conversations at gravesides wasn’t silly. As we left, Bridget's casual question about my Navy buddies tugged another piece of my guarded past into the open. Memories of deployments, losses, and friendships too painful to maintain rose unbidden, yet I managed to answer her honestly. For the first time in years, I felt something thaw—a dangerous thing to happen around someone like her.

Bridget slipped her hand on my arm briefly, her gratitude clear even without words, and though instinct screamed at me to pull away, I let it linger. Her touch burned through my jacket, warmer than any winter coat could offer, and that terrified me more than the wind cutting across the cemetery. Shaking off the moment, I ushered her into the car with my usual gruffness, determined not to allow the lines between us to blur. But when she called me out on choosing bodyguard work after the Navy, her curiosity chipped away at my defenses. She didn’t realize the truth yet: protecting others wasn’t about bravery. It was penance. If anything, guarding Bridget made me feel like I was clawing my way back from the wreckage of who I used to be. Whether she saw it or not, she was more than just another assignment.

In the following days, the tension between Bridget and me continued its exhausting dance. If our relationship had a soundtrack, it would flip between battle anthems and ballads, depending on which side of the hour you caught us. After a heartfelt visit to the cemetery, a lighter mood followed us briefly as we attended a charity event and a school visit. Bridget gave a speech so genuine and moving it left even the toughest staffers dabbing their eyes. She smiled at the students, spoke about mental health with the conviction of someone who had fought battles no one could see, and for a moment, I forgot why I kept my distance. Moments like those made it harder to remember why keeping the lines clear mattered. She was still my principal, but every laugh, every smile cracked my armor a little more, and I knew deep down that one day it might shatter completely.

Small moments of humanity stitched themselves into our interactions, but mistrust still hovered, waiting to tear the fragile truce apart. After the school event, Bridget brought up the concert tickets she had bought with Ava, trying to sound casual but failing miserably. I recognized the tactic immediately—bait me with information and hope I'd nod along. My instincts went rigid. Even if she didn’t realize it, every public outing came with risks, and I wasn’t about to let her dive headfirst into a crowd without vetting the venue first. She bristled when I insisted on checking everything before approving her attendance, but stubbornness had always been one of her defining traits. She wasn’t wrong to want freedom; she just didn't see the whole chessboard the way I did. I didn’t enforce rules to control her—I did it because the price of one mistake was too high to pay.

Beneath her frustration, I saw something else flash in Bridget’s eyes: fear and weariness, the same emotions that haunted me too often at night. She masked them with sarcasm and an icy tone, but the truth was as clear as day. She had lost too much already—her parents, parts of her childhood, and pieces of her identity under the glare of constant scrutiny. Being her bodyguard wasn’t just about keeping bullets away; it was about shouldering the invisible weight she carried. For all her strength, Bridget was still fighting battles that went unseen by the world. That realization didn’t make me softer, but it made me steel my resolve even more. Protecting her wasn’t just a duty; it was a responsibility I would bear until the day I no longer could. And God help anyone who tried to take her away from me.

Chapter 25: Rhys

Chapter 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."

Chapter 50: Rhys

Chapter 50: Rhys

“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 townhouse 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.

Chapter 10: Rhys

Chapter 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.

Chapter 44: Bridget

Chapter 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 bodyguard. 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."

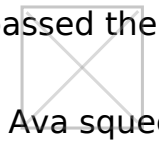
"We're here for the weekend," Stella added, brushing a stray curl out of her face. With her green eyes, tanned skin, and leggy grace, she was the most gorgeous person I'd ever met, and while she was fully aware of the effect her looks had on others—especially men—she never flaunted it. "I wish we could 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?”

Chapter 30: Rhys

Chapter 30: Rhys feels the full weight of his addiction, but it isn't to anything he can easily avoid—it's Bridget herself. Throughout his life, Rhys had prided himself on steering clear of substances that could trap him, whether it be drugs, alcohol, or even an overindulgence in sugar. Yet here he was, completely consumed by a woman whose resilience, elegance, and hidden fire drew him in deeper with each passing day. For once, he didn't want to resist the pull. Spending the afternoon together in a quiet hotel on the outskirts of Athenberg, away from the prying eyes of the public, gave them the rare chance to experience something that almost resembled a normal date. Between the shared meals, tender moments, and hours tangled together in bed, they created a bubble where nothing else mattered. In those fleeting hours, Rhys allowed himself to forget the reality they would soon have to face.

As Rhys sketched Bridget, he reveled in the sheer simplicity of the moment. She teased him playfully, and he responded with mock threats of adding silly imperfections to his drawing. Bridget’s real smile—so different from the polished ones she wore in public—struck him harder than any physical blow could. To Rhys, her beauty wasn't just in her appearance but in the way she let her guard down with him. Their banter came easily, a testament to the intimacy they had built outside the public eye. Despite knowing that danger loomed, with increasing security concerns around his guesthouse, Rhys chose to hold on to this afternoon. These peaceful moments were rare jewels in their turbulent world, and he cherished them with an intensity that surprised even him. In those quiet hours, he could almost believe they had a future untouched by royal expectations or societal scrutiny.

Their conversation turned deeper as Bridget asked whether Rhys ever shared his art with anyone else. When he admitted she was the only one, the magnitude of that confession hung heavily between them. Bridget’s reaction was tender, teasing at first,

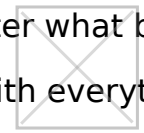
but full of an understanding that few others could offer him. Rhys knew he didn’t trust easily, but with Bridget, opening up was less a conscious choice and more a natural response. When she called him over with a mischievous glint in her eye, the playful mood returned. The connection between them wasn’t just physical—it was emotional, intricate, and rooted in a level of trust that neither of them had shared with many others before. Their intimacy deepened in ways that went beyond lust, revealing a vulnerability Rhys rarely allowed anyone to see.

Later, as they lay together, Bridget gently touched the scar on Rhys’s eyebrow, leading him to share a piece of his painful past. Her simple gesture of affection—pressing a kiss to the scar—spoke louder than any words. For Rhys, these small acts chipped away at the armor he had built over years of hardship. Bridget had a way of making him feel human again, someone worthy of love, rather than a shadow weighed down by his childhood. Their talk shifted to the topic of his absent father, a man Rhys had no interest in finding. Despite the ease with which Christian could uncover the truth, Rhys knew there was nothing he wanted from the man who had abandoned him. He carried enough wounds without reopening that chapter. Yet, having Bridget there, listening without judgment, made the pain of those memories easier to bear.

Bridget’s own fears and insecurities surfaced, shedding light on the heavy expectations she carried. Haunted by the legacy of a mother she had never known, Bridget confessed her deepest fear: that she would somehow fail the memory of the perfect queen her mother was supposed to be. Worse, she blamed herself for her mother's death—a burden no child should have to carry. Rhys listened, his heart breaking for her, and responded with fierce, unwavering love. He made sure Bridget knew that her life was not a mistake, and her mother’s death was not her fault. His words were an anchor in the storm of her grief, pulling her back from the self-imposed guilt she had carried for so long.

Their exchange underscored a powerful truth about their relationship: beyond the physical attraction, beyond the public personas they were forced to maintain, they saw

each other in a way no one else did. In a world that demanded perfection from them both, Bridget and Rhys found solace in each other's imperfections. They were each other's safe harbor, a place to rest and heal, even as the world around them grew increasingly chaotic. With every shared secret, every moment of vulnerability, their bond deepened, becoming something too strong to be easily severed. As night crept in and they lay in the quiet aftermath of love and confessions, one thing became certain—no matter what battles awaited them beyond the hotel walls, they would fight for each other with everything they had.



Chapter 32: Bridget

Chapter 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 removed 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?”

Chapter 9: Bridget

Chapter 9: Bridget realized something had shifted the night of her graduation. Whether it was the bond forged through shared vulnerability or the moment Rhys trusted her enough to reveal part of his painful past, the animosity that once defined their relationship had morphed into something more complicated. It wasn’t a simple crush; it felt deeper, tangled with curiosity and a kind of fascination that gnawed at the edges of her resolve. Busy days and endless social events filled her time in New York, giving her little space to dwell on the confusing feelings building inside her. Yet no matter how busy she stayed, every encounter, every stolen glance with Rhys left a lingering warmth she couldn't explain. She knew getting emotionally attached to her bodyguard ranked at the top of disastrous ideas, but knowing didn’t stop the emotions from blooming anyway.

Chapter 9: Bridget continued navigating the hectic whirlwind of Manhattan life, attending charity galas and committee meetings, all with Rhys silently anchoring her side. His brooding presence was both a comfort and a curse—steady and dependable, yet an ever-present reminder of the boundary she shouldn't cross. A rare quiet evening between them, filled with simple conversation and the glow of autumn decorations, cracked open a door she had tried hard to keep closed. In those small, unguarded moments, Bridget saw glimpses of a man beyond the stern protector—the man who noticed her slipping smiles and cherished her unfiltered laughter. It made resisting her feelings even harder, forcing her to confront how much space Rhys had taken up in her mind and heart without her permission. The attraction was no longer something she could ignore; it pulsed between them, strong and unspoken.

Chapter 9: Bridget's attempt to move on led her to accept a date with Louis, the polished son of a French diplomat. Unfortunately, what was meant to be a step forward turned into a disaster, thanks to Rhys’s intimidating presence looming nearby. Though

Louis arrived with a bouquet and a genuine smile, he stood no chance against Rhys’s protective glare, which quickly drained the fun from the evening. While Bridget struggled to engage in conversation about luxury yachts and summer escapades, it became painfully clear that Louis lacked the spark she sought. More troubling was her awareness of Rhys at every moment—the man who wasn't her date, yet whose opinion mattered far too much. Even when Bridget tried to distance herself emotionally, Rhys’s disapproval still found a way under her skin, leaving her both frustrated and bewildered.

Chapter 9: After the disastrous date, tension simmered between Bridget and Rhys as they clashed over his heavy-handed behavior. Their sharp exchange unearthed buried truths: neither had truly moved on from the complicated emotions simmering beneath their professional relationship. Rhys’s admission that he didn’t date—and his pointed questions about Bridget’s own experiences—only stirred the pot further, exposing vulnerabilities both had tried to keep hidden. Bridget, remembering the palace training drilled into her, attempted to reclaim control of the conversation but found herself emotionally rattled. The way Rhys looked at her, the way he called out the walls she tried to erect, left her feeling raw and seen in a way that few ever managed. Despite the anger flaring between them, the magnetic pull refused to weaken; if anything, it grew stronger, feeding the tension that thickened the air around them.

Chapter 9: Just as emotions reached a boiling point, an urgent call from Nikolai shattered the fragile truce between them. Hearing that her grandfather, the king, had fallen seriously ill tore Bridget out of her spiraling frustration and thrust her into a well of fear and helplessness. In that moment, all the noise of petty arguments and forbidden feelings faded away, replaced by a primal need for family and stability. Rhys, sensing her distress, stood ready to offer his support, though Bridget still tried to carry the burden alone. The reality that she might lose the only parental figure she had left felt unbearable, and even the strength she’d honed over years of royal life wavered under the weight of the news. Panic, grief, and uncertainty consumed her, but somewhere in the corner of her mind, she knew Rhys would not let her face it alone.

Chapter 9: In the aftermath of the call, Bridget struggled to pull herself together, knowing that panic wouldn’t change reality. The ache in her chest deepened as she replayed Nikolai’s words over and over, each one carving fresh fear into her heart. Everything she had depended on—her carefully balanced life, her hopes for a future slightly removed from royal expectations—suddenly felt fragile. She hated feeling helpless, yet beneath the surface anger at fate and fear for her grandfather, there was a stubborn ember of resolve. No matter how overwhelming the pressure became, Bridget vowed she would step up if needed, even if it cost her the life she had quietly built for herself. She just hadn't expected that the biggest battles she would face would not be fought against the public or politicians—but against her own heart, her own desires, and the impossible choices waiting ahead.

Chapter 51: Rhys

Chapter 51: RHYS

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 getaway 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.”

Chapter 34: Bridget

Chapter 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.

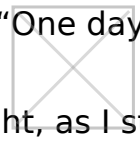
“My brother adores you,” I added. Nikolai and I weren’t super close, but I knew him well enough to spot the difference. He changed into a different person when he was around Sabrina, a happier one, and I would never begrudge him that.

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...

Chapter 35: Rhys

Chapter 35: Rhys

As anticipated, Prince Nikolai and Sabrina's wedding was nothing short of chaos. Roads were blocked off, helicopters hovered overhead capturing aerial footage of the grand procession, and the streets were packed with eager onlookers hoping to catch a glimpse of the fairytale come to life. Reporters from around the world clamored to cover every detail, from Sabrina's wedding dress train to the glamorous guest list. Only a select few journalists from Eldorra's national media were permitted inside the ceremony, while others scrambled to find a prime spot outside the church.

Bridget spent the day performing the typical duties of a bridesmaid. While the other bridesmaids prepared in the bridal suite, I stood by with Sabrina’s bodyguard, Joseph. As an American contractor, Joseph was the substitute for Nikolai's usual Royal Guard, following his abdication. While he rambled about his previous client’s exploits—unprofessional, but not my concern—I stayed alert, scanning the surroundings. With a big day like this, anything could go wrong.

Fortunately, everything remained calm, and before long, Sabrina emerged, radiant in her white gown and veil. The bridesmaids followed, with Bridget bringing up the rear. She wore the same pale green dress as the others, but there was something about her that made her stand out. My gaze drifted to the way the fabric hugged her curves before I forced myself to look up to her face, where my breath caught in my throat.

I could hardly believe she was real.

Bridget flashed me a secretive smile as she walked by, her eyes appraising my suit. “You clean up nice, Mr. Larsen,” she whispered.

“So do you,” I replied, matching her pace as I leaned in closer. “Can’t wait to tear that dress off you later, princess.”

She didn’t reply, but the faint blush on her cheeks told me everything.

However, my mood shifted when we entered the wedding hall and I saw Steffan Holstein sitting in one of the front pews. His perfectly polished shoes and coiffed hair caught my attention, but it was the way he looked at Bridget that stirred something dark inside me. If he didn’t stop staring at her, I was going to have to take action.

I tried to focus on the ceremony, but the image of Steffan eyeing Bridget relentlessly made my blood boil. Murdering a high-ranking guest during a royal wedding wasn't ideal, so I forced myself to control my thoughts.

Bridget took her place at the altar while I stayed hidden in the shadows. As Nikolai and Sabrina exchanged vows, I caught Bridget’s eye. She smiled at me—a subtle, almost imperceptible smile—just for me. It was a brief, stolen moment amid hundreds of people, and it was ours.

After the ceremony, we headed to the ballroom for the grand reception. Later, the second, more intimate reception would be held at Tolose House, Nikolai and Sabrina's new residence, a short walk from the palace. Only 200 family members and close friends were invited, no press allowed.

But it was there, at the second reception, where I had to watch Bridget dance with Steffan. His hand rested on her lower back, and she smiled at something he said. The jealousy clawed at me, relentless and bitter.

“They make a nice-looking couple,” Joseph commented, following my gaze. “The princess and the duke. Fairytale stuff.” He laughed. “Too bad she’d never go for an average Joe like you or me, huh?”

“Be careful what you say next.” My voice was cold, lethal. “Or it’ll be the last thing you say.”

Joseph must have known the danger in my words, because he fell silent, taking a small step back. “It was a joke,” he muttered, clearly intimidated. “Take your job a bit too seriously, don’t you?”

“Show some respect. That’s the crown princess,” I retorted. He wasn’t worthy of even scraping the dirt off her shoes.

How had Sabrina ended up with Joseph as her bodyguard? The man had zero social tact, and that was coming from me, someone who couldn't care less about social niceties.

Joseph wisely kept quiet, though his surly expression said it all. I had bigger concerns to deal with.

Steffan and Bridget remained on the dance floor as the song changed, and though I knew it was out of obligation, it still hurt to watch them together. They made a perfect pair—Bridget, regal and angelic, and Steffan, debonair and clean-cut in his tuxedo.

Then there was me—tattooed, scarred, and haunted by the things I’d done.

By all accounts, Steffan was the better and easier option for Bridget. Her family, the palace, and the press all wanted the Princess and the Duke love story.

But I didn’t give a damn.

Bridget was mine. She wasn’t mine to take, but I was taking her anyway—every laugh, every joy, every fear, every inch of her body, and every beat of her heart. All mine.

And I couldn’t take watching her dance with another man any longer.

I left my post and made my way across the dance floor, ignoring Joseph’s protests. I was breaking every rule of protocol, but most of the guests were too drunk to notice me. I was an employee, barely beneath their notice, and in that moment, it worked in my favor.

“Your Highness,” I said, my voice dark. “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 looked at Steffan. “Would you mind terribly if I—”

“Of course not,” he replied, unbothered. “Please, take the call. I’ll be here.”

I bet you will. Maybe I could bribe a server to slip something into his drink—nothing lethal, 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 as we stepped into the hallway, I said, “Jules didn’t call.”

“What?” Bridget’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Then why did you—”

“He was getting too close.” My teeth clenched, and my jaw ached.

A beat passed, and 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 the library, a place I’d scouted earlier. “Get in,” I said curtly.

Bridget swallowed hard, but she obeyed without hesitation.

I followed her inside and locked the door behind us with a soft click. The room was mostly empty, with only a rug, a table, and a large mirror. The lights were off, but moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting enough light for me to see Bridget’s wary expression.

Chapter 5: Rhys

Chapter 5: Rhys was a phrase that looped in my mind as rage simmered through my veins. Bridget had once assured me she would be fine, but that misplaced confidence had nearly gotten her killed, dragging me into a night I wouldn’t forget anytime soon. I'd warned her about the shady concert venue, a collapsing warehouse that screamed danger, yet she defied every word of caution and snuck out without backup. That decision led to her kidnapping, along with Ava, by a mercenary whose loyalty was bought by blood money. Even now, glancing in the rearview mirror and seeing her bruised but breathing wasn’t enough to erase the sickening terror I had felt hours earlier. I hated disobedience, but even more than that, I hated how close we had come to disaster. No matter how composed I appeared, the fear had dug itself deep into my bones, refusing to let go.

The situation escalated quickly, dragging Ava and Bridget into a web of revenge centered around Alex Volkov and his criminal family drama. Honestly, I didn’t give a damn about Volkov’s vendettas; all that mattered was getting Bridget back in one piece. I had foreseen the possibility of trouble and installed a hidden tracker in her phone weeks ago—a decision that might have saved her life. Following the signal to Philadelphia was like chasing a ghost through the shadows, but eventually, I found them tied up and terrified. Despite the successful rescue, fury brewed inside me with every mile back to her townhouse, each minute sharpening my anger. A part of me wanted to scream at her the moment we crossed the threshold, but I clenched my fists and focused on Ava first. She needed Bridget’s comfort more than she needed to hear my rage unleashed.

When Ava disappeared into the guest room, I wasted no time pulling Bridget aside, my voice low but lethal. She tried to soften the blow with a whispered apology, saying it all worked out because she was safe now, but that only made my blood boil hotter. I

demanded she meet me in the kitchen, away from Ava’s fragile ears, and she obeyed, hugging herself tightly. It wasn’t just the bruises on her wrists that angered me; it was the sheer recklessness, the betrayal of my trust, and the cold fear that gripped my chest thinking about what could have happened. She claimed it had been a mistake, but mistakes didn’t land you at gunpoint. As I cornered her against the wall, forcing her to acknowledge the gravity of her actions, I glimpsed something raw and broken in her eyes that tempered my fury just enough not to explode completely.



There was no way to sugarcoat the truth: Bridget’s choices had put herself and Ava in mortal danger, and next time we might not be so lucky. Her protest that the attack wasn’t about her, but Ava, didn’t excuse the recklessness that night. If I had been there, I would have neutralized the threat before a hand even touched her, and she knew it. It wasn’t ego speaking; it was fact, honed from years of military training and a career built on saving lives in the worst circumstances imaginable. When I reminded her what I had told her from day one—to do what I say without question—she visibly flinched but didn’t argue. That tiny moment of surrender lit a stubborn pride in me that even her glare couldn’t extinguish. She could hate me all she wanted; I'd rather her alive and furious than dead and silent.

In an unexpected twist, Bridget offered a compromise that I didn’t see coming: remove the tracker from her phone, and she would follow my security orders without question. The logic appealed to me—having her cooperation would be a tactical advantage—but every instinct in me screamed not to loosen control. Watching her stare me down with fire flashing in her sea-blue eyes made it hard to think clearly. Against better judgment, I agreed to a four-month trial. If she failed once, all bets were off, and I’d revert to treating her like a full-time hostage until I could guarantee her safety. Bridget’s acceptance of the terms came with a condition of her own: to omit the incident from my security reports. While I should have refused immediately, a tiny crack inside me widened, the thought of walking away from her settling in my chest like a heavy stone.

The reality was simple—if the king found out, not only would my contract be shredded, but Bridget would suffer even harsher consequences. The media would devour the story, the palace would tighten its leash, and she would lose even the fragile freedom she clung to now. I hated the idea of being forced into a lie, but seeing the pleading in her eyes crushed my resolve more effectively than any royal decree ever could. I told myself it was a strategic decision: keep her close, keep her safe. But deep down, I knew the truth was far more complicated and dangerous. Because somewhere between the threats, the arguments, and the endless stubbornness, Bridget had become more than just a client. She had somehow become someone I couldn't stand to lose.

The moment ended with a reluctant truce, both of us tense, wary, and battered from the night’s ordeal. Yet beneath the anger and exhaustion, a new current had formed between us, something fragile and raw that neither of us dared acknowledge out loud. Bridget had survived the night, but the battle for her safety—and maybe something far more complicated between us—was just beginning. The simple truth remained: as much as I hated the risks, the arguing, and the temptation she presented, there wasn’t a force on earth strong enough to keep me from protecting her. Even if it meant breaking every rule I’d ever lived by.

Chapter 42: Rhys

Chapter 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 goddamned 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.



Chapter 45: Rhys

Chapter 45: Rhys waited with bated breath on the rooftop of the palace, anxiously glancing at the clock as the minutes ticked by. Bridget had always been punctual, and her absence made Rhys question if she had changed her mind about meeting him. His heart raced with doubt, imagining that perhaps the complexities of their relationship, compounded by their respective roles in society, had become too much for her. Despite these fears, Rhys held onto the unwavering belief that their connection was something truly unbreakable, driven by a deep love and a mutual need for each other. The obstacles they faced were many, but Rhys was determined not to let them sever the bond that had been so important in their lives. His resolve to fight for their future together was what pushed him to stay put on the rooftop, awaiting Bridget’s arrival, no matter how difficult the path forward seemed.

As the door finally opened, Bridget appeared, breathless and looking conflicted. The tension that had been building in Rhys, from his initial fears to his growing uncertainty, dissipated the moment their eyes met. The emotional walls that had separated them seemed to vanish as they came together in an intimate embrace, one that expressed everything words couldn’t. Their long-awaited reunion was passionate and full of urgency, as if their bodies were reminding them of the strength of their connection. The conversation that followed quickly shifted from apologies and attempts to explain their time apart to a clear focus on the future. Bridget and Rhys knew that in order to preserve their love, they had to confront the realities of the law that restricted their ability to be together, a law that stood in the way of their happiness. With a sense of determination in their voices, they began to discuss a strategy to challenge the Royal Marriages Law.

Rhys listened intently as Bridget outlined her thoughts on the matter, her strategic thinking evident in the way she calmly approached the situation. She proposed using

the leverage of Rhys's paternity, the revelation of which had caught Erhall off guard, to push for the repeal of the law. The suggestion hinted at the use of blackmail, a risky but powerful move that demonstrated Bridget's willingness to do whatever it took to protect their relationship. Rhys, though hesitant at first, couldn't deny the weight of the stakes and knew that the only way to move forward was to take bold actions. Bridget also proposed utilizing the media to garner support for their cause, a strategy that would amplify their message, despite the inherent dangers it posed. Rhys, recognizing the strength of her plan, gave his full support, understanding that the risk was necessary to overcome the political and societal forces that sought to keep them apart.

Bridget's late arrival had a profound impact on Rhys, forcing him to reflect on just how far he had come emotionally and how much he was willing to compromise for their relationship. He realized in that moment that he wasn't just fighting for their love but for the future they both envisioned. This wasn't just about defying the law; it was about choosing each other in a world that continually tried to pull them apart. Rhys felt a deep sense of responsibility, not just for his own happiness but for Bridget's well-being as well, as her royal duties were often weighed down by societal expectations. The conversation they shared in that moment was not just a tactical discussion; it was a reaffirmation of their commitment to one another, despite the heavy pressures they both faced. Their partnership had grown stronger through adversity, and Rhys was resolute in his decision to stand by Bridget, no matter the cost.

As their conversation continued, it became clear that their bond was not just a product of shared love, but of mutual respect and shared goals. Bridget's intelligence and quick thinking had always impressed Rhys, but now he saw her not just as a princess, but as a leader in her own right. She was not afraid to challenge the status quo, and that was something that Rhys admired deeply. He, too, understood that change would not come easily, but the conviction they both shared in their cause made them a formidable team. This chapter closed with a powerful moment of shared resolve, as Bridget's determination to move the nation forward aligned with Rhys's commitment to her and their relationship. Together, they were ready to face the challenges ahead,

knowing that their love and shared vision for the future would guide them through the obstacles they would encounter. Their unity, strengthened by their shared struggles, would be the foundation upon which they would build their future.



Epilogue

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.

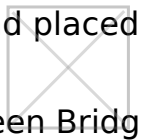
I stood with Nikolai, Sabrina, Andreas, and the other von Aschebergs in the front row, closest to the coronation. The ceremony took place in the sprawling Athenberg Cathedral, which was packed with thousands of high-profile guests. Heads of state, foreign royals, celebrities, billionaires, they were 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 Featherton 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.”

Chapter 11: Bridget

Chapter 11: Bridget found herself slipping between emotional extremes as she tried to process everything happening around her. Rhys’s presence on the flight offered a brief distraction from her spiraling worries, allowing her a rare moment of rest, but when the plane touched down, reality crashed back in full force. The anxiety over her grandfather’s health had gnawed at her so fiercely that every second stuck in traffic toward the hospital felt like agony. Panic gripped her, fueling terrifying thoughts about arriving too late. Even deep breaths barely kept her fear in check, and by the time she reached the hospital’s hidden entrance, she was on the brink of falling apart. Seeing Markus’s composed, albeit slightly disheveled, appearance was the first flicker of hope that her grandfather had made it through the worst.

Relief washed over Bridget when Markus confirmed that King Edvard was awake, but her heart didn't settle until she laid eyes on him herself. Walking into the sterile hospital suite, she had to fight back memories of her father's sudden death, memories that flooded her mind with painful clarity. Her grandfather looked frail yet stubborn as ever, scolding her gently for worrying and trying to brush off his condition with the kind of gruff affection that had always defined him. Bridget clung to the small comfort his words offered, but deep down, she knew nothing about the situation was truly fine. As she recounted tales of her life in New York to keep his spirits up, her mind drifted between gratitude for this second chance and dread over what the future now demanded of her.

The official medical explanation for Edvard’s condition left her rattled. It wasn’t just a fainting spell—it was a serious, lifelong vulnerability triggered by stress. No amount of royal command could wish it away, no matter how much the king tried to act invincible. Doctors insisted on major lifestyle changes to protect him, but Bridget and Nikolai both knew convincing Edvard to slow down would be like trying to stop a flood

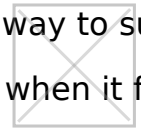
with a broom. As Bridget watched her grandfather insist on being discharged early and return to work, she realized how deeply ingrained duty was in their bloodline, and how terrifying that legacy could be. She didn't want to lose him the way she lost her father—suddenly, without warning, and with no chance to say goodbye.

Weeks later, as she rode with Nikolai across the palace grounds, the weight of her new reality pressed heavily on her shoulders. Their conversation, at first lighthearted with sibling teasing, soon veered into dangerous emotional territory. Nikolai's revelation that he planned to abdicate sent Bridget’s carefully reconstructed world crashing down again. She understood his reasons—love was rare and precious—but the cold truth was that his decision left her trapped. The Royal Marriages Law, rigid and archaic, wouldn't allow Nikolai to marry Sabrina, and so the crown would pass to Bridget instead. The freedom she had tasted living abroad, pretending to be just another young woman, would be stripped away permanently.

Bridget tried to keep her voice calm, but rage and betrayal churned within her as she realized Nikolai had shared his plans with palace officials before telling her. Even worse, she had no time to prepare. Everything she knew about her future was being rewritten without her consent, and the suffocating expectations she had managed to avoid for years now loomed closer than ever. Her mind raced with images of royal duties, endless scrutiny, and a lifetime spent fulfilling a role she had never truly chosen. Meanwhile, Nikolai, visibly burdened with guilt, tried to explain himself, but no words could fix what had already been shattered between them.

The raw ache in Bridget’s heart wasn’t just fear for herself—it was mourning for the life she would never get to reclaim. Her days of anonymity were numbered, and the idea of falling in love freely, living without calculation, became a fantasy she had to bury. The palace walls, once merely symbolic, now felt like real prison gates closing in around her. Though she loved her family fiercely, the resentment building inside her was undeniable. It wasn’t fair that the dreams she had nurtured so quietly had to die for traditions written centuries before her birth. Yet the burden of history and duty was not one she could escape—not if she wanted to honor the people she loved.

In the silent space between her and Nikolai, Bridget saw the heavy cost of royalty laid bare. Love could move kings off thrones, and devotion to country could break hearts. She recognized the courage it took for her brother to make his choice, even if it left her feeling abandoned. As the horses trudged back toward the palace, Bridget squared her shoulders and swallowed the bitterness gathering in her throat. No matter how much it hurt, she would meet her fate with dignity. Somewhere deep down, she knew she would find a way to survive this too. After all, survival was a skill every royal had to master—even when it felt like the world they knew had been stolen right out from under them.



Chapter 37: Bridget

Chapter 37: Bridget finds herself caught in the whirlwind of emotions following her unexpected departure from the reception with Rhys. With the evening unfolding in ways she had not anticipated, Bridget couldn’t bring herself to return to the festivities. By the time Rhys had finished with her, there was no way to regain composure, so they slipped out discreetly, avoiding notice by the crowd. The decision to leave early, without informing anyone, weighed heavily on her, especially as she reflected on her bridesmaid duties. Fortunately, the reception had already started winding down, and most guests were too intoxicated to notice her absence. However, she still felt a pang of guilt about leaving Steffan in the lurch, so she immediately reached out the next day to apologize. Her excuse about a friend's emergency was met with grace, but Bridget couldn’t shake the feeling that Steffan’s behavior had shifted during the evening, maybe even secretly relieved by her early exit.

As Bridget and Mikaela sit in her room the following day, the focus shifts from the aftermath of the reception to the more pressing matter at hand: persuading Erhall to bring the Royal Marriages Law repeal to the parliamentary floor. While brainstorming ideas, Mikaela casually asks about Bridget’s sudden disappearance, raising the tension between the two. Bridget quickly deflects, claiming it was a college friend's emergency, though the doubt in Mikaela’s voice suggests she’s not entirely convinced. More lies pile up, each one adding weight to Bridget’s already strained conscience. When Mikaela mentions that her cousin Andreas had been looking for her at the reception, Bridget's heart skips a beat. She had thought Andreas had already left, but now doubts began to cloud her mind. Had he seen her leave with Rhys? If so, how much did he know? The thought of Andreas finding out about her secret relationship with Rhys unsettles her, but the uncertainty of what he might know keeps her on edge.

Bridget's mind races as she contemplates the possibilities. What if Andreas had followed them, witnessed everything, and was now planning to confront her? Despite the anxiety, she reassures herself that her reaction might be overblown. Still, the thought lingers in her mind, causing her to feel more paranoid with each passing moment. She’s left questioning whether Andreas truly was looking for her for trivial reasons or if something more significant is at play. The conversation with Mikaela only intensifies Bridget’s internal conflict, as she tries to maintain control over the situation. She brushes off Mikaela’s concerns, opting for a laugh to downplay her stress and dismiss the mounting pressure. With Mikaela leaving for dinner, Bridget’s mind refocuses on the work in front of her, but the anxiety over Andreas’s potential discovery never fully leaves her thoughts.

After Mikaela departs, Bridget distracts herself by attending to a growing stack of letters from citizens. Despite her assistants handling much of the workload, she still takes pride in responding personally when she can. It offers a much-needed distraction from her spiraling thoughts about Andreas. Bridget tries to convince herself that her worries are irrational, that Andreas could have been seeking her for any number of insignificant reasons. However, the more she attempts to convince herself, the more her doubts continue to gnaw at her. As she sifts through the letters, the constant worry about Andreas hangs over her, making it difficult to concentrate. Just as she begins to settle into a more productive rhythm, her laptop pings with a new email notification. She hesitates but is compelled to open it, only to find an unsettling, cryptic email address—a string of random numbers that raises a fresh wave of suspicion. What was this email about? Could it be linked to her concerns over Andreas, or was it just another distraction?

Bridget is now caught between her personal anxieties and the political realities she must face. The Royal Marriages Law continues to loom large in her mind, alongside the constant pressure to act decisively for her kingdom’s future. Meanwhile, her complex relationship with Rhys and the secrets she keeps from those closest to her continue to complicate her emotional landscape. This chapter underscores the weight of Bridget’s responsibilities, not only as a royal figure but as a person grappling with love, duty,

and the consequences of her actions. The tension between her personal desires and her public role intensifies, with each decision pulling her further into a labyrinth of emotions. As the narrative unfolds, Bridget’s internal conflict takes center stage, setting the stage for the battles she must face both within herself and against the forces that seek to control her.



Chapter 6: Bridget

Chapter 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.

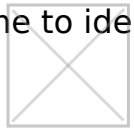
The sound slid over me, as rough and textured as I imagined his touch would be.

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.

“Bridge!” 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?”



Chapter 40: Bridget

Chapter 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, whimpering 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 that 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.

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