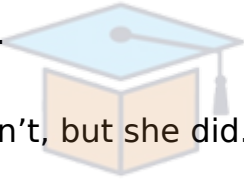


Chapter 10: Rhys

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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..."



Summaryer

"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.”



Summaryer

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.”

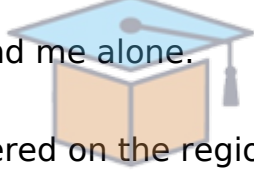
“I can see that.” Bridget flicked her eyes over my plain black T-shirt, pants, and boots. Some clients preferred their bodyguards to dress up—suit, tie, earpiece, the whole shebang—but Bridget wanted me to blend in, hence the casual getup.

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.



Summaryer

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.

