

Chapter 25: Rhys

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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."

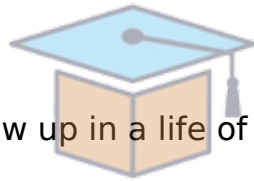
She pulled a business card out of her purse and tucked it into my hand. I almost let it fall to the floor, but I wasn't that much of an asshole, so I merely pocketed it without looking at it.

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.

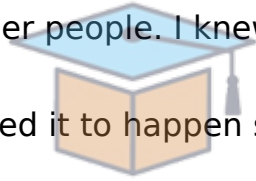
Steffan paused, clearly unsure how to read my tone.

“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.



Summaryer

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."