

Chapter 12: Rhys

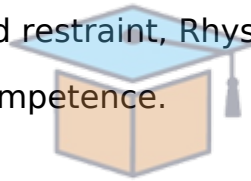
Chapter 12: Rhys began with a gut feeling that something was wrong long before he stepped into the palace's grand reception hall. The low, urgent tones of Prince Nikolai's voice sent a jolt of unease straight down Rhys's spine, sharpening every one of his instincts into high alert. Though he couldn't 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.



Summaryer

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.

