

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.