

Chapter 2: Rhys

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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.

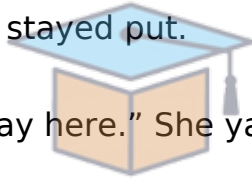
Ava’s face lit up when she saw him. “Alex! I thought you had a business call.”

"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.



Summaryer

"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.



Summaryer

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.”

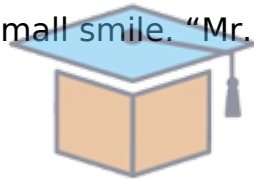
I didn’t have to tell him twice. Frat Boy fled, his pink shirt bobbing in the crowd until he disappeared out the exit.

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.”



Summaryer

“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?”