

CHAPTER 1

Bridget

“Spank me! Master, spank me!”

I stifled a laugh at my bodyguard Booth’s face as Leather the parrot squawked in his cage. The parrot’s name said all you needed to know about its previous owner’s sex life, and while some found him amusing, Booth did not. He hated birds. He said they reminded him of giant flying rats.

“One day, he and Leather are going to get into it.” Emma, the director of Wags and Whiskers, clucked her tongue. “Poor Booth.”

I held back another laugh even as I felt a small pang in my heart.
“Probably not. Booth’s leaving soon.”

I tried not to think about it. Booth had been with me for four years, but he was leaving for paternity leave next week and staying in Eldorra after to be closer to his wife and newborn. I was happy for him, but I would miss him. He was not only my bodyguard but a friend, and I could only hope his replacement and I had the same rapport.

“Ah, yes, I forgot.” Emma’s face softened. She was in her early sixties, with short, gray-streaked hair and warm brown eyes. “Lots of changes for you in a short time, my dear.”

She knew how much I hated goodbyes.

I’d been volunteering at Wags and Whiskers, a local pet rescue shelter, since my sophomore year of college, and Emma had become a close friend and mentor. Unfortunately, she too was leaving. She’d still be in Hazelburg, but she was retiring as the shelter director, which meant I would no longer see her every week.

"One of them doesn't *have* to happen," I said, only half joking. "You could stay."

She shook her head. "I've run the shelter for almost a decade, and it's time for new blood. Someone who can clean the cages *without* her back and hips acting up."

"That's what volunteers are for." I gestured toward myself. I was belaboring the point, but I couldn't help it. Between Emma, Booth, and my impending graduation from Thayer University, where I was majoring in international relations—as expected of a princess—I had enough goodbyes to last me for the next five years.

"You are a sweetheart. Don't tell the others, but..." She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You're my favorite volunteer. It's rare to find someone of your stature who does charity because she wants to, not because she's putting on a show for the cameras."

My cheeks tinted pink at the compliment. "It's my pleasure. I adore animals." I took after my mother in that regard. It was one of the few pieces of her I had left.

In another life, I would've been a veterinarian, but in this life? My path had been laid out for me since before I was born.

"You would make a great queen." Emma stepped aside to allow a staff member with a wriggling puppy in his arms to pass. "Truly."

I laughed at the thought. "Thank you, but I have no interest in being queen. Even if I did, the chances of me wearing the crown are slim."

As the princess of Eldorra, a small European kingdom, I came closer to ruling than most people. My parents died when I was a kid—my mother at childbirth, my father in a car accident a few years later—so I was second in line to the throne. My brother, Nikolai, who was four years my senior, had been training to take over for our grandfather King Edvard since he was old enough to walk. Once Nikolai had children, I would be bumped further down the line of succession, something I had zero complaints about. I wanted to be queen as much as I wanted to bathe in a vat of acid.

Emma frowned in disappointment. “Ah, well, the sentiment is the same.”

“Emma!” one of the other staff members called out. “We’ve got a situation with the cats.”

She sighed. “It’s always the cats,” she muttered. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you about my retirement before you heard it from anyone else. I’ll still be here until the end of next week, so I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

“Sounds good.” I hugged her goodbye and watched her rush off to deal with a literal catfight, the pang in my chest growing.

I was glad Emma hadn’t told me about her retirement until the end of my shift, or it would’ve been in my head the whole time.

“Are you ready, Your Highness?” Booth asked, clearly eager to get away from Leather.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s go!” Leather squawked as we exited. “Spank me!”

My laugh finally broke free at Booth’s grimace. “I’ll miss you, and so will Leather.” I stuffed my hands in my coat pockets to protect them against the sharp autumn chill. “Tell me about the new bodyguard. What’s he like?”

The leaves crunched beneath my boots as we walked toward my off-campus house, which was only fifteen minutes away. I adored fall and everything that came with it—the cozy clothes, the riot of earthy colors on the trees, the hint of cinnamon and smoke in the air.

In Athenberg, I wouldn’t be able to walk down the street without getting mobbed, but that was the great thing about Thayer. Its student population boasted so many royals and celebrity offspring, a princess was no big deal. I could live my life like a relatively normal college girl.

“I don’t know much about the new guard,” Booth admitted. “He’s a contractor.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

The Crown sometimes hired private security contractors to serve alongside the royal guard, but it was rare. In my twenty-one years, I’d never had a bodyguard who was a contractor.

"He's supposed to be the best," Booth said, mistaking my surprise for wariness. "Ex-Navy SEAL, top-notch recommendations, experience guarding high-profile personalities. He's his company's most sought-after professional."

"Hmm." *An American guard. Interesting.* "I do hope we get along."

When two people were around each other 24/7, compatibility mattered. A lot. I knew people who hadn't meshed with their security details, and those arrangements never lasted long.

"I'm sure you will. You're easy to get along with, Your Highness."

"You're only saying that because I'm your boss."

Booth grinned. "Technically, the director of the royal guard is my boss."

I wagged a playful finger at him. "Backtalking already? I'm disappointed."

He laughed. Despite his insistence on calling me *Your Highness*, we'd settled into a casual camaraderie over the years that I appreciated. Excessive formality exhausted me.

We chatted about Booth's impending fatherhood and move back to Eldorra for the rest of our walk. He was near bursting with pride over his unborn child, and I couldn't help a small stab of envy. I was nowhere near ready for marriage and kids, but I wanted what Booth and his wife had.

Love. Passion. *Choice.* Things no amount of money could buy.

A sardonic smile touched my lips. No doubt I'd sound like an ungrateful brat to anyone who could hear my thoughts. I could get any material thing I desired with a snap of my fingers, and I was whining about love.

But people were people, no matter their title, and some desires were universal. Unfortunately, the ability to fulfill them was not.

Maybe I would fall in love with a prince who'd sweep me off my feet, but I doubted it. Most likely, I'd end up in a boring, socially acceptable marriage with a boring, socially acceptable man who only had sex missionary style and vacationed in the same two places every year.

I pushed the depressing thought aside. I had a long way to go before I even *thought* about marriage, and I'd cross that bridge when I got there.

My house came into sight, and my eyes latched onto the unfamiliar black BMW idling in the driveway. I assumed it belonged to my new bodyguard.

"He's early." Booth raised a surprised brow. "He's not supposed to arrive until five."

"Punctuality is a good sign, I suppose." Though half an hour early *might* be overkill.

The car door opened, and a large black boot planted itself on the driveway. A second later, the biggest man I'd ever seen in real life unfolded himself from the front seat, and my mouth turned bone dry.

Holy. Hotness.

My new bodyguard had to be at least six foot four, maybe even six five, with solid, sculpted muscle packed onto every inch of his powerful frame. Longish black hair grazed his collar and fell over one gunmetal-gray eye, and his legs were so long he ate up the distance between us in three strides.

For someone so large, he moved with surprising stealth. If I hadn't been looking at him, I wouldn't have noticed him approach at all.

He stopped in front of me, and I swore my body tilted forward a centimeter, unable to resist his gravitational pull. I was also strangely tempted to run my hand through his thick dark locks. Most veterans kept their hair military-style short even after leaving the service, but clearly, he wasn't one of them.

"Rhys Larsen." His deep, gravelly voice rolled over me like a velvety caress. Now that he was closer, I spotted a thin scar slashing through his left eyebrow, adding a hint of menace to his dark good looks. Stubble darkened his jaw, and a hint of a tattoo peeked out from each sleeve of his shirt.

He was the opposite of the preppy, clean-shaven types I usually went for, but that didn't stop a swarm of butterflies from taking flight in my stomach.

I was so flustered by their appearance I forgot to respond until Booth let out a small cough.

"I'm Bridget. It's nice to meet you." I hoped neither man noticed the flush creeping over my cheeks.

I omitted the *Princess* title on purpose. It seemed too pretentious for casual, one-on-one settings.

I did, however, notice Rhys didn't address me as *Your Highness* the way Booth did. I didn't mind—I'd been trying to get Booth to call me by my first name for years—but it was another sign my new guard would be nothing like my old one.

"You have to move."

I blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your house." Rhys tilted his head toward my spacious but cozy two-bedroom abode. "It's a security nightmare. I don't know who signed off on the location, but you have to move."

The butterflies screeched to a halt.

We'd met less than two minutes ago, and he was already ordering me around like *he* was the boss. *Who does he think he is?* "I've lived here for two years. I've never had an issue."

"It only takes one time."

"I'm not moving." I punctuated my words with a sharpness I rarely used, but Rhys's condescending tone grated on my nerves.

Any attraction I'd felt toward him crumbled into ash, dying the quickest death in my history with the opposite sex.

Not that it would've gone anywhere. He was, after all, my bodyguard, but it would've been nice to have eye candy *without* wanting to drop-kick him into the next century.

Men. They always ruined it by opening their mouths.

"You're the security expert," I added coolly. "Figure it out."

Rhys glowered at me beneath thick, dark brows. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had glowered at me.

"Yes, *Your Highness*." His inflection on the last two words made a mockery of the title, and the embers of indignation in my stomach stoked brighter.

I opened my mouth to respond—with what, I wasn’t sure, because he hadn’t been outright hostile—but Booth cut in before I said something I would regret.

“Why don’t we go inside? It looks like it’s about to rain,” he said quickly.

Rhys and I looked up. The clear blue sky winked back at us.

Booth cleared his throat. “You never know. Rain showers come out of nowhere,” he muttered. “After you, Your Highness.”

We entered the house in silence.

I shrugged off my coat and hung it on the brass tree by the door before making another stab at civility. “Would you like something to drink?”

Irritation still stabbed at me, but I hated confrontation, and I didn’t want my relationship with my new bodyguard to start on such a sour note.

“No.” Rhys scanned the living room, which I’d decorated in shades of jade green and cream. A housekeeper came by twice a month to deep clean, but I kept the place tidy myself for the most part.

“Why don’t we get to know each other?” Booth said in a jovial, too-loud voice. “Er, I mean you and Rhys, Your Highness. We can talk needs, expectations, schedules...”

“Excellent idea.” I mustered a strained smile and gestured Rhys toward the couch. “Please. Sit.”

For the next forty-five minutes, we ran through logistics for the transition. Booth would remain my bodyguard until Monday, but Rhys would shadow him until then so he could get a feel for how things worked.

“This is all fine.” Rhys closed the file containing a detailed breakdown of my class and weekly schedules, upcoming public events, and expected travel. “Let me be frank, Princess Bridget. You are not my first, nor will you be the last, royal I’ve guarded. I’ve worked with Harper Security for five years, and I’ve never had a client harmed while under my protection. Do you want to know why?”

"Let me guess. Your dazzling charm stunned the would-be attackers into complacency," I said.

Booth choked out a laugh, which he quickly turned into a cough.

Rhys's mouth didn't so much as twitch. *Of course it didn't.* My joke wasn't Comedy Central worthy, but I imagined finding a waterfall in the Sahara would be easier than finding a drop of humor in that big, infuriatingly sculpted body.

"The reason is twofold," Rhys said calmly, as if I hadn't spoken at all. "One, I do not become involved in my clients' personal lives. I am here to safeguard you from physical harm. That is all. I am not here to be your friend, confidant, or anything else. This ensures my judgment remains uncompromised. Two, my clients understand the way things must work if they are to remain safe."

"And how is that?" My polite smile carried a warning he either didn't notice or ignored.

"They do what I say, when I say it for anything security-related." Rhys's gray eyes locked on to mine. It was like staring at an unyielding steel wall. "Understand, Your Highness?"

Forget love and passion. What I wanted most was to slap the arrogant expression off his face and knee him in the family jewels while I was at it.

I pressed the pads of my fingers into my thighs and forced myself to count to three before I responded.

When I spoke again, my voice was frigid enough to make Antarctica look like a beach paradise. "Yes." My smile sharpened. "Luckily for us both, Mr. Larsen, I have no interest in being your friend, confidant, or 'anything else.'"

I didn't bother dignifying the second part of his statement—the one about me doing what he said, when he said it—with a response. I wasn't an idiot. I'd always heeded Booth's security advice, but I'd be damned if I fed into Rhys's inflated sense of self.

"Good." Rhys stood. I hated how tall he was. His presence obliterated everything else in the vicinity until he was the only thing

I could focus on. "I'll assess the house before we discuss next steps, including upgrading your security system. Right now, any teenager with access to YouTube tutorials can bypass the alarm." He shot me a disapproving glare before he disappeared into the kitchen.

My jaw dropped. "He—you..." I sputtered, uncharacteristically speechless. "Why, I never!" I turned to Booth, who was trying to melt into the giant potted plant by the front door. "You're not leaving. I forbid it."

Rhys *could not* be my bodyguard. I would murder him, and my housekeeper would murder *me* for staining the carpet with blood.

"He probably has first-day jitters." Booth looked as uncertain as he sounded. "You'll get along just fine after the, ah, transition period, Your Highness."

Perhaps...*if* we made it out of the transition period alive.

"You're right." I pressed my fingers to my temple and took a deep breath. *I can do this.* I'd dealt with difficult people before. My cousin Andreas was the spawn of Satan, and a British lord once tried to grope me under the table at Monaco's Rose Ball. He only stopped after I "accidentally" stabbed his hand with a fork.

What was one surly bodyguard compared to entitled aristocrats, nosy reporters, and evil family members?

Rhys returned. Surprise, surprise, his glower hadn't melted.

"I've detected six security vulnerabilities we need to address ASAP," he said. "Let's start with number one: the windows."

"Which ones?" *Stay calm. Stay reasonable.*

"All of them."

Booth covered his face with his hands while I contemplated turning my hairpin into a murder weapon.

Rhys and I *definitely* weren't making it out of the transition alive.

CHAPTER 2

Rhys

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 redhead 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 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 fairy-tale 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 and 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