

## 23. Bridget

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

23

BRIDGET

I WANTED TO DIE.

If the floor opened up and swallowed me whole, I'd be the happiest person on earth. Or under earth, as the case would be.

Sadly, I remained in the drawing room with a whiteboard covered with pictures of European bachelors, a stone-faced Rhys, and an oblivious Mikaela.

"It's the event of the season," she continued. "The timing is rushed, but Elin's team is working on it around the clock and invites went out this morning. Dozens of people already RSVP'd yes." She let out a dreamy sigh. "All those handsome men, all dressed up in one room. I could simply die."

Yes, the big idea my grandfather had alluded to the other day in his office was a thinly veiled matchmaking gala. I'd protested, horrified at the thought of spending an entire evening—my birthday, no less—making small talk and dancing with over-inflated egos disguised as humans.

I'd been overruled.

Apparently, my twenty-fourth birthday was a good excuse to invite every eligible bachelor in Europe to the party, and it was coming up in a few weeks, which made for perfect timing, even if it was, as Mikaela had said, rushed.

"I didn't realize you were looking for a husband, Your Highness," Rhys said so coldly goosebumps erupted on my arms. The current of electricity running between us froze, turning to ice.

At the same time, indignation kindled in my stomach. He had no right to be angry. He was the one who'd left and insisted on keeping things between us professional after Costa Rica. He couldn't possibly think he could waltz in here again after six weeks because he changed his mind and expect me to have put my life on hold for him.

"It's a politics and public image thing," Mikaela said before I could answer. "Anyway, what were we talking about? Right." She snapped her fingers. "Lord Rafe and Prince Hans. Never mind about that. Prince Hans ranks higher, of course." She moved his headshot to the yes side of the board.

"I'll leave you to it then, Your Highness. I was just checking in." Rhys's face shut down, and frustration stabbed at me, joining the cocktail of emotions coursing through my veins—excitement and

giddiness at seeing him again, annoyance at his hypocrisy, lingering anger over his initial departure, and a smidge of guilt, even though we weren't dating, we'd never dated, and I was free to dance with every man in Athenberg if I wanted.

If we do this, it stays here. This room, this night. We don't talk about it again.

That was his rule, so why did I feel guilty at all?

"Mr. Larsen—"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Your Highness."

Rhys left.

Before I knew what I was doing, I followed him out the door, my spine hardening with determination.

I would not get drawn into an endless cycle of what-ifs again. I had enough to worry about. If Rhys had a problem, he could tell me to my face.

"Where are you going?" Mikaela called after me. "We still need to figure out the dance order!"

"Ladies' room," I said over my shoulder. "I trust you. Order them how you wish."

I quickened my steps and caught up with Rhys around the corner. "Mr. Larsen."

This time, he stopped but didn't turn around.

"The ball was my grandfather's idea. Not mine." I didn't owe him an explanation, but I felt compelled to give one anyway.

"It's your birthday, princess. You can do whatever you want."

I set my jaw even as my stomach fluttered at the word princess.

"So, you're okay with me dancing with other men all night?"

Rhys finally turned, those inscrutable gray eyes flickering. "Why wouldn't I be? It sounds like the perfect solution. You'll find a nice prince, marry, and rule happily ever after." A mocking inflection colored his words. "The life of a princess, exactly as it should be."

Something inside me snapped, just like that.

I was angry. Angry at Nikolai for abdicating and running off to California with Sabrina afterward so they could "take some time" for themselves. Angry at not having control over my life. And most of all, angry at Rhys for turning our reunion into something ugly after we'd been apart for six weeks.

"You're right," I said. "It is the perfect solution. I can't wait.

Maybe I'll do more than dance. Maybe I'll find someone to kiss and take up to—"

Two seconds later, I found myself pinned to the wall. Rhys's eyes weren't flickering anymore. They had darkened, turning gray into near-black thunderclouds like the kind drenched the city in springtime. "Not a good idea to finish that sentence, princess," he said softly.

I'd provoked him on purpose, but I had to fight a shiver at the danger rolling off him.

"Take your hands off me, Mr. Larsen. We're not in the U.S. anymore, and you're overstepping your boundaries."

Rhys moved in closer, and I struggled to focus when I was so consumed by him. By his scent, his breath on my skin. By memories of lingering looks and stolen laughs and sunsets in a pool halfway across the world.

“Fuck my boundaries.” Every word came out slow and deliberate, like he wanted to etch them into my skin.

“What a first day back on the job. It’s just like old times.” I pressed my back tighter against the wall, trying to escape the searing heat from Rhys’s body. “Why are you here, Mr. Larsen? You were perfectly happy to walk away when I asked you to stay.”

“If you think I was anything close to happy these past six weeks,” he said grimly, “You couldn’t be more wrong.”

“You were happy enough to stay away for that long.” I tried and failed to hide the note of hurt in my voice.

Rhys’s face softened a smidge. “Trust me, princess. If I had a choice, I would’ve been back far sooner than that.”

The velvety tips of butterfly wings brushed my heart.

Stop it. Stay strong.

“Which brings me back to my question,” I said. “Why are you here?”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. He hadn’t shaved that day, and thicker stubble peppered his face than I was used to.

I curled my hands into loose fists, resisting the urge to run them over the short black hairs on his cheek and the scar on his eyebrow. Just so I could reassure myself he was actually there.

Angry and infuriating, but there.

“Because I—”

“Am I interrupting something?”

Rhys moved off me so fast it took me a few seconds to process what happened. Once I did, and I saw who had interrupted us, my stomach sank.

Because standing at the end of the hall, wearing a half curious, half smirking expression, was none other than my cousin Andreas.

“I was on my way to my room when I heard something and came to investigate,” he drawled. “Apologies if I...intruded.”

Rhys spoke up before I could. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m Bridget’s cousin.” Andreas smiled. “I guess I will see you around after all. Small world.”

My head whipped between them. “You know each other?” How was that possible?

“We met at the airport,” Andreas said casually. “I thought he dropped his wallet but, alas, I was mistaken. We had a nice little chat, though I never caught your name.” He directed the last part at Rhys, who waited a few beats before answering.

“Rhys Larsen.”

“Mr. Larsen is my bodyguard,” I said. “He was...helping me get something out of my eye.”

Secretly, I kicked myself for being so careless. We were in a side hallway of a quieter part of the palace, but there were eyes and ears everywhere. I should’ve known better than to get into it with Rhys where anyone could pass by and overhear.

Judging from Rhys’s expression, he thought the same thing.

“Really? How considerate of him.” Andreas didn’t sound convinced, and I didn’t like the way he was sizing us up.

I drew myself up to my full height and stared him down. I wouldn’t let him intimidate me. Not in my own home.

“You mentioned you were on your way to your room,” I said pointedly. “Don’t let us stop you.”

“First time we’ve seen each other in years, and this is the greeting I get.” Andreas sighed, pulling off his gloves with deliberate slowness before slipping them in his pocket. “You’re different now that you’re crown princess, dear cousin.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I am different. I’m your future queen.”

Andreas’s smile slipped, and I saw Rhys smirk out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m glad you made it here safely.” I extended a small olive branch, if only because I had no desire to engage in overt hostilities with my cousin for the next month or however long he planned on staying here. “But I have a meeting I need to return to. We can chat later.”

By later, I meant never, hopefully.

“Of course.” Andreas tipped his head and cast one last glance at me and Rhys before disappearing down the hall.

I waited a good two minutes before I allowed myself to relax.

“Your cousin seems like a shithead,” Rhys said.

I laughed, and the mood between us finally lightened.

“Not seems. He is. But he’s also family, so we’re stuck with him.”

I twisted my ring around my finger, trying to find a tactful way to bring us back to our earlier conversation. “About what happened before Andreas interrupted...”

“I came back because I wanted to come back,” Rhys said.

“And...” He paused, like he was debating whether to say what he was about to say. “I didn’t want you to be alone while you’re dealing with all this shit.” He gestured toward our lavish surroundings.

Alone.

It was the second time he’d said it. First on my graduation night, and now. He was right both times.

I’d tried and failed to name the empty, gnawing feeling that’d haunted me since Rhys left. The one that crept up on me when I lay in bed at night and tried to think of something I looked forward to the next day. The one that washed through me at the oddest mo-