

# 31. 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.

31

BRIDGET

“STEFFAN.” MY HEART THUMPED WITH PANIC, EVEN THOUGH I WASN'T doing anything wrong. Not at that second, anyway. “I didn't know you were back in town.”

“I—uh, yes,” he stuttered, looking uncharacteristically flustered. “It was a last-minute decision. I wasn't supposed to be back until next week, but I had an emergency in the city and I needed to get back straight away. I was going to call you tomorrow after everything settled.” His eyes slid to his left, and I realized he wasn't alone.

A petite, pretty woman with curly dark hair stood next to him, her face red and her arms wrapped tight around her waist.

“Your Highness.” She dipped into a small curtsy, her lips fixed in a strained smile.

“This is Malin.” Steffan's discomfort visibly increased. “She gave me a ride back to the city.”

“Didn't realize future dukes needed to hitch rides.” A blade of suspicion sharpened Rhys's otherwise even tone.

The playful, gentle Rhys from earlier in the afternoon had disappeared, replaced by the stoic, composed bodyguard I knew so well.

“She was coming back to the city anyway, so it made sense.” Steffan's eyes flicked between me and Rhys.

Something didn't add up. If he had an emergency in the city, why was he at a hotel on the outskirts of Athenberg this late at night? Then again, I of all people wasn't going to question why he was here.

The four of us stood in the hall, each eyeing the others warily. The elevator pinged in the distance, and the air conditioning hummed with anxiety. The tension was so thick I could slice through it with a fingernail.

“The hotel isn't in the city,” Rhys said. He hadn't moved a single inch since we ran into Steffan and Malin.

Malin looked at the ground while Steffan ran a hand through his hair. “I had a dinner meeting at the restaurant. And Malin was, uh, kind enough to wait while I finished. What are you doing here?” He addressed the last part to me, and I realized I hadn't answered him the first time he asked. “I took a spa day. We were just leaving.”

I avoided looking at Rhys, afraid the movement would somehow give away what we'd really been doing all afternoon.

What does a head turn mean in Eldorran? Oh, just that I fucked my

bodyguard in a dozen different positions over the course of six hours.

“Of course. I didn’t mean to hold you up.” Steffan stepped aside so I could pass, but before I could, Malin spoke up.

“Steffan, wasn’t there something you wanted to ask Her Highness?” She fixed her eyes on Steffan, whose lips thinned as he stared back at her. Some unspoken communication passed between them before he turned to me.

“This wasn’t how I wanted to do it,” he said with a hint of apology. “But since we’re here, I did have something to ask you. Please forgive me if I’m being presumptive, but, ah, would you like to be my date to Prince Nikolai’s wedding?”

Rhys finally moved, his body shifting closer to mine and his hand sliding toward the gun at his waistband.

“I...” Of all the things I’d expected Steffan to ask, that hadn’t been one of them. We’d exchanged a few polite texts after our date at the Royal Botanic Gardens, but we hadn’t spoken in weeks and, to be honest, he hadn’t crossed my mind again until now.

I also suspected he and Malin had a more complicated relationship than he let on, perhaps even a romantic one. He clearly hadn’t wanted to ask me out, and she was staring at the floor again with a frown.

But if they were together, why would she push him to go on a date with me?

“I was going to ask when I called you tomorrow,” Steffan added. He smiled, and I glimpsed the old friendly, relaxed Steffan again.

“We’d mentioned meeting up after I returned, and since the wedding is coming up, I thought you might like to go together. Unless you already have a date...”

Nikolai and Sabrina’s wedding was in a month, and they were due back this weekend for the final preparations. I was a bridesmaid along with Sabrina’s sister and best friend from the U.S.

“I don’t.” I was expected to, but I hadn’t even thought about it.

I’d been too wrapped up in the Citizen Letters program, training, and Rhys.

I hesitated, debating, before I finally answered, “I would be happy to be your date. Thank you for asking.”

Rhys stiffened further next to me.

“Excellent.” Steffan cleared his throat. “Let’s hash the details out later, shall we? I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me, too.”

“You’d make a lovely couple.” There was something in Malin’s voice. A hint of warning, maybe? Or animosity mixed with sadness.

I couldn’t pinpoint it, but whatever it was, it made Steffan flinch.

“Thank you.” It took all my training not to inject a question mark at the end. What was I supposed to say to something like that?

Another awkward silence fell before I finally excused myself and left Steffan and Malin standing in the hall, glaring at each other.

Rhys waited until we were in the elevator before he said,

“They’re fucking.”

The thought had crossed my mind, but it didn’t make sense.

“You don’t know that.”

“Trust me. I can tell when people are fucking, and they are.”

We stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby. “If they are,

why did she encourage him to ask me out?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're into group play." Rhys didn't look at me.

He was pissed. He didn't say it, but I could feel it, and I didn't have to guess what he was angry about.

"I had to say yes to the date," I said after we got in the car.

"Everyone expects me to bring someone to Nik's wedding."

Edvard and Elin had not forgotten about my husband search and kept bringing it up at every turn, but there wasn't much they could do with Steffan gone. Now that he was back...

More complications. Less time with Rhys.

Frustration curled in my stomach.