

37. 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.

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BRIDGET

RHYS AND I NEVER MADE IT BACK TO THE RECEPTION. BY THE TIME HE

finished with me, there was no way I could've fixed myself up enough to face other people, so we slipped out a side door and snuck back to the palace. By some miracle, no one saw us.

It was horrible form for a bridesmaid to leave early without a word, but the party had already been winding down by the time we excused ourselves, and most people had been too drunk to notice my absence, anyway.

I did, however, feel awful about leaving Steffan high and dry. I called him the next morning and apologized profusely, claiming my friend's emergency took longer than expected. He was, as expected, gracious about it. He hadn't been as jumpy during the reception as he'd been at the hotel, but he'd been distracted, and I suspected he might've been relieved by my abrupt departure.

"Where did you go?" Mikaela asked after I wrapped up my call.

We were in my room, brainstorming ways to get Erhall to bring the repeal motion for the Royal Marriages Law to the floor. "You disappeared halfway through the reception."

"One of my college friends called with an emergency." I avoided her gaze as I studied Erhall's parliamentary voting record.

"Really?" She sounded doubtful. "Even though you're in different countries?"

"She needed advice on a personal issue."

Another lie. They were piling up, one after another, and soon I wouldn't be able to dig myself out.

I turned the page with more force than necessary.

"Okay." A hint of doubt remained, but Mikaela didn't press the issue. "I only ask because your cousin was looking for you."

I froze. "Andreas? He was looking for me at the reception?"

"Yeah, he said he had something important to tell you."

My heart rate kicked into overdrive. You're overreacting. I'd thought Andreas had already left. I'd heard him say goodbye to Nikolai and Sabrina long before Rhys and I exited. Had I heard wrong, or had he returned for some reason? Did he see me and Rhys leave? Even if he had, he couldn't have known what we were doing...unless he followed us. But if Andreas did know, he would've thrown it in my face the minute he could, and an entire day had already passed.

My head spun as I ran through every possible scenario.

“Did you tell him where I was?”

“No,” Mikaela said slowly. “I didn’t know where you were. Remember?”

“Right. Sorry.” I pressed my fingers to my temple, trying to sort through my thoughts. “My brain is fried right now. Can we pick this up later?”

“Sure. I have a dinner reservation soon anyway.” Worry slid across her features as she packed her bag and slung the strap over her shoulder. “Are you sure nothing else is the matter? You’ve been acting weird for weeks.”

“Yes, I’m just stressed. I need a vacation.” I forced a laugh. “I’ll talk to you later. Enjoy dinner.”

After Mikaela left, I set my notes on Erhall aside and answered that week’s letters from citizens instead. The mail volume, both physical and electronic, had grown so much I’d had to bring on assistants, but I still liked to reply personally when I could. Besides, it was a good distraction from my worries over Andreas.

I was reading too much into one throwaway comment from Mikaela. Andreas could’ve been looking for me for any number of reasons, and he had a skewed idea of what was important. He’d probably wanted to complain about being seated at the wrong table for the reception or something.

I’d made it halfway through the pile of letters when my laptop pinged with a new email notification. I almost ignored it, but something compelled me to click into it, and my suspicion spiked when I saw the sender’s email message—a random string of numbers and