

43. Bridget

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43

BRIDGET

THE PALACE ASSIGNED BOOTH AS MY BODYGUARD AGAIN. I'D BEEN IN A terrible mood since Rhys left, and the palace handlers assumed it would help if someone I knew and liked replaced him.

Booth took the role after Edvard left the hospital two weeks ago, and while no one could replace Rhys, it was nice to see Booth's smiling face again.

"Just like old times, huh, Your Highness?" he said as we waited for Elin and Steffan in my office. I usually didn't have a guard in the palace, but meetings with external guests were an exception. I forced a smile. "Yes."

Booth hesitated, then added, "A lot has changed over the years. I'm no Mr. Larsen, but I'll try my best."

A fierce ache gripped my chest at Rhys's name. "I know. I'm glad to have you back. Truly."

And yet, thoughts of dark hair and gunmetal eyes, scars and hard-won smiles still consumed me.

There was a time when I would've given anything to have Booth as my bodyguard again. In the immediate weeks after his departure, I'd cursed him every day for leaving me alone with Rhys.

Insufferable, domineering, arrogant Rhys, who refused to let me walk on the outside of sidewalks and treated every visit to a bar like a mission into a war zone. Who scowled more than he laughed and argued more than he talked.

Rhys, who'd planned a last-minute trip for me so I could fulfill my bucket list, even though it must've gone against his every instinct as a bodyguard, and who kissed me like the world was ending and I was his last chance at salvation.

The ache intensified and spread to my throat, my eyes, my soul. He was everywhere. In the chair where we'd kissed, the desk where we'd fucked, the painting where we'd laughed over how the artist had drawn one of the subject's eyebrows a little higher and more crooked than the other, giving her a permanent expression of surprise.

Even if I left the office, he would still be there, haunting me.

The door opened, and I curled my hand around my knee to steady myself as Elin and Steffan walked in.

"Thank you for coming," I said as Steffan took the seat opposite me. It was my first time seeing him in person since he'd agreed to the engagement.

He gave me a smile that looked almost as forced as mine felt. “Of course, Your Highness. We are going to be engaged, after all.” The way he said it, I wondered if I hadn’t been the only one forced into this arrangement. He’d seemed eager enough on our first two dates, but he’d been distant and distracted since he returned from Preoria.

My mind flashed back to the tension I’d picked up on between him and Malin.

An awkward silence fell before Elin cleared her throat and pulled out her pen and notebook. “Excellent. Shall we start the meeting then, Your Highness? Top of the agenda is the timing and venue for the proposals. Lord Holstein will propose in three weeks at the Royal Botanic Gardens. It’ll be a good callback to your second date. We’ll tell the press you’ve been in regular correspondence while he was in Preoria so it doesn’t seem like the proposal came out of nowhere...” The meeting dragged on. Elin’s voice blurred into a running stream of noise, and Steffan sat straight-backed in his chair with a glassy look in his eyes. I felt like I was attending a business merger negotiation, which I was, in a way.

Just the fairytale girls dream of.

“...your honeymoon,” Elin said. “Thoughts?”

Her expectant gaze yanked me out of the place I’d mentally escaped to while she droned on about media interviews and outfit options for the proposal.

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“We need to decide on a honeymoon location,” she repeated.

“Paris is classic, if cliché. The Maldives are popular but getting too trendy. We could choose somewhere more unique, maybe in Central or South America. Brazil, Belize, Costa Rica...”

“No!”

Everyone jumped at my uncharacteristic shout. Booth’s eyes grew round, and Elin’s brow creased with disapproval. Only Steffan’s expression remained neutral.

“No, not Costa Rica,” I repeated more calmly, my heart pounding. “Anywhere but there.”

I would rather honeymoon in Antarctica wearing nothing but a bikini.

Costa Rica belonged to me and Rhys. No one else.

Bucket list number four.

Have you ever been in love?

No. But I hope to be one day.

Look up, princess.

A now-familiar burn pulsed behind my eyes, and I forced myself to breathe through it until it passed.

“It’s too soon to talk about the honeymoon anyway.” My voice sounded far away, like that of one speaking in a dream. “We’re not officially engaged yet.”

“We want to iron out the details as soon as possible. Planning a royal marriage and coronation in the same year is no small feat,” Elin said. “The press will want to know.”

“Let’s get through the proposal first.” My tone brooked no opposition. “The press can wait.”

She sighed, her mouth so pinched I worried it would freeze that

way. “Yes, Your Highness.”

After an hour, the meeting finally ended, and Elin rushed off to another meeting with my grandfather. Edvard had been doing well after his hospitalization, but we hadn’t discussed Rhys or what happened in his office before his heart attack yet.

I had no issues with that. I wasn’t ready for those discussions.

Meanwhile, Steffan remained in his chair. His fingers tapped out a rhythm on his thighs, and the glassy look in his eyes gave way to something more somber. “May I speak with you, Your Highness? Alone?” He glanced at Booth, who looked at me.

I nodded, and Booth slipped out of the room.

Once the door shut, I said, “You can call me Bridget. It would be odd if we were engaged and you still called me Your Highness.”

“Apologies. Force of habit, Your—Bridget.” Discomfort crossed his face before he said, “I hope this doesn’t make things too awkward, but I wanted to speak with you regarding, er, Mr. Larsen.”

Every muscle tightened. If there was one person I wanted to discuss Rhys with less than my grandfather, it was my future fiancé.

“I won’t ask you whether the, uh, news is true,” Steffan added hastily. He knew it was. Rhys’s glower throughout our first date, the cracked flowerpot at the Royal Botanic Gardens, the day he ran into us at the hotel...I could see the pieces clicking together in his head. “It’s not my business what you did before our...engagement, and I know I’m not your first choice for a husband.”

Guilt warmed my cheeks. If we married, I wouldn’t be the only one trapped in a loveless union. “Steffan—”

“No, it’s fine.” He shook his head. “This is the life we were born into. My parents married for political convenience, and so did yours.”

True. But my parents had loved each other. They’d been lucky, until they hadn’t.

“You don’t love me, and I don’t expect you to. We...well, we’ve only spoken a few times, haven’t we? But I enjoy your company, and I’ll try my best to be a good consort. Perhaps this isn’t the fairytale love you may have dreamed of, but we could have a good life together. Our families, at least, will be happy.” Other than the twinge of bitterness coloring his last sentence, Steffan sounded like he was reciting from a teleprompter.

I studied him while he stared at the desk, his face taut and his hands gripping his knees with white-knuckled hands.

I more than recognized that expression and stance. These days, I lived them.

“Is it Malin?”

Steffan’s head jerked up, his expression resembling that of a deer in headlights. “Pardon?”

“The woman you’re in love with,” I said. “Is it Malin?”

Steffan’s throat flexed with a hard swallow. “It doesn’t matter.”

Three words. One confirmation of something we both already knew.

Neither of us wanted this. Our hearts belonged to other people, and if we married, it would be comfortable. Pleasant. Second best. But it wouldn’t be love. It would never be love.

“I think it matters quite a lot,” I said gently.

Steffan released a long breath. “When I met you at your birthday ball, I had every intention of pursuing you,” he said. “You are lovely, but then in Preoria...she was my mother’s aide while she was recovering. It was only us in the house besides my mother, and slowly, without me even realizing it...”

“You fell in love,” I finished.

He cracked a small smile. “Neither of us expected it. We couldn’t stand each other at first. But yes, I fell in love.” The smile faded. “My father found out and threatened not only to cut me off if I didn’t end the relationship, but to ensure Malin never worked again in Eldorra. He doesn’t bluff. Not when a relationship with the royal family is at stake.” Steffan rubbed a hand over his face. “Apologies, Your H—Bridget. I realize this is extremely inappropriate for me to share, considering our arrangement.”

“It’s all right. I understand.” More than most people would.

“I had a feeling you might.”

I brought up something that had been nagging me since our hotel encounter. “If you were together, why did she push you to ask me out?”

Sadness flickered in his eyes. “The hotel was our last time together,” he said. “My father had returned to Preoria and dismissed her as my mother’s aide, so we had to go somewhere where we wouldn’t... where we could be alone. She knew about you and what my father expected of me. It was her way of letting us go.”

I tried to imagine myself pushing another woman into Rhys’s arms and recoiled at the thought.

I barely knew Malin, but I hurt for her.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Silence lapsed for a beat before Steffan cleared his throat and straightened. “But I do enjoy your company, Bridget. We shall make a suitable match.”

A sad smile curved my lips. “Yes, we shall. Thank you, Steffan.”

I stayed in my office after he left, staring at the letters on my desk, the royal seal, and the calendar mounted on my wall.

Three weeks until my proposal.

Six months until my wedding.

Nine months until my coronation.

I could picture it all already. The dress, the church, the Coronation Oath, the heavy weight of the crown on my head.

I squeezed my eyes shut. The walls pressed in from all sides, and the roar of blood pounded in my ears, blocking out every other sound.

I’d grown accustomed to the idea of being queen. Part of me was actually excited to take the role and bring it into the twenty-first century. The monarchy had so many outdated customs that no longer made sense.

But I hadn’t expected it to happen so soon, nor had I expected it to happen without Rhys by my side, even if it was only as my bodyguard.

Stern and steady, grumpy and protective. My rock and anchor in the storm.

Breathe, princess. You are the future queen. Don’t let them intimidate

you.

I wondered if Rhys had left Eldorra yet, and if he'd remember us ten, twenty, thirty years from now.

I wondered if, when he saw me on TV or in a magazine, he would think about Costa Rica and storms in a gazebo and lazy afternoons in a hotel room, or if he'd flip past with nothing more than a spark of nostalgia.

I wondered if I would haunt him as much as he haunted me.

"I wish you were here," I whispered.

My wish bounced off the walls and drifted through the room, lingering, before it finally faded into nothing.

HOURS LATER, I WAS STILL IN MY OFFICE WHEN MY GRANDFATHER showed up.

"Bridget, I'd like to speak with you."

I looked up from my pile of citizen letters, my eyes bleary. I'd been working since my meeting with Elin and Steffan, and I'd dismissed Booth long ago.

Work was the only thing keeping me going, but I hadn't realized how late it'd gotten. The late afternoon sun slanted through the windows and cast long shadows on the floor, and my stomach rumbled with anger. I hadn't eaten since my yogurt and apple—I checked the clock—seven hours ago.

Edvard stood in the doorway, his face tired but his color markedly better than it had been a few days ago.

"Grandfather!" I jumped out of my seat. "You shouldn't be up so late."

"It's not even dinnertime yet," he grumbled, walking in and sitting across from me.

"The doctors said you need rest."

"Yes, and I've had enough the past two weeks to last me a lifetime." His chin jutted out at a stubborn angle, and I sighed. There was no arguing with him when he was like this.

If there was one thing Edvard hated, it was idle hands. He'd cut back on work as the doctors had instructed, but since his duties as king had prevented him from picking up any hobbies over the years, he was going out of his mind with boredom—a fact he never failed to mention whenever he saw me or Nikolai.

"Citizen Letters program?" He examined the documents on my desk.

"Yes, I'm finishing up this week's batch." I didn't mention the backlog of emails in the official inbox. Even with two assistants helping me, we were swamped. It turned out the citizens of Eldorra had a lot to say.

I was over the moon about the program's success, but we needed to hire more staff soon. Professionalize it instead of treating it as a side project.

"There are a few items I'd like to bring up at the next Speaker's meeting," I said. "I imagine Erhall will be thrilled."

"Erhall hasn't been thrilled since he was first elected Speaker ten years ago." Edvard steepled his fingers beneath his chin and studied me. "You're doing well. Holding your ground, even when he tries to undermine you. You've really come into your own these past few months."

I swallowed hard. "Thank you. But I'm no you."

"Of course not, but you shouldn't try to be. None of us should strive to be anyone except ourselves, and you are no less than me or anyone else." Edvard's expression gentled. "I know it's overwhelming, the prospect of becoming queen. Did you know, I was a wreck for months before my coronation?"

"Really?" I couldn't imagine my proud, regal grandfather being nervous about anything.

"Yes." He chuckled. "The night before the ceremony, I threw up in the Dowager Queen's favorite potted plant. You should've heard her scream when she discovered the, ah, gift I left."

A small laugh bubbled in my throat at the mental image his words created. My great-grandmother had died before I was born, but I'd heard she'd been a force to be reckoned with.

"The point is, it's normal to feel that way, but I have faith in you." Edvard tapped the royal seal on my desk. "Your coronation is coming sooner than any of us expected, but you will be a good queen. I don't doubt that for a second."

"I haven't even finished my training," I said. "Nik trained all his life to take over, and I've only been at it for a few months. What if I mess things up?"

Cold inched down my spine, and I pressed my hand against my knee again to keep it from bouncing.

"No one expects you to be perfect, even if it may seem that way," Edvard said. "I admit, there's less leeway for a king or queen to make mistakes, but you can make them, as long as you learn from them. Being a leader is not about technical knowledge. It is about you, as a person. Your compassion, your strength, your empathy. You have all that in spades. Besides..." His eyes crinkled into a smile.

"There's no better way to learn than on the job."

"With millions of people watching."

"It's a job for those who thrive under pressure," he acknowledged.

My laugh sounded rusty after a week of non-use.

"Do you really think I can do it?" Uncertainty gnawed at me, and I tried not to think of what my mother would've done in my place. How much more gracefully she would've handled all this.

"I know it. You're already taking charge in the Speaker's meetings, going head-to-head with Erhall, and the people love you." Edvard radiated such confidence it reminded me of Rhys, who had never once doubted my ability to do anything.

You don't need a crown to be queen, princess.

God, I missed him. More than I thought I could ever miss someone.

"I'm always here if you want to talk about anything pertaining to the Crown, but that's not why I came today." Edvard examined me, his eyes incisive despite his recent hospitalization. "I want to talk about you, Bridget. Not the princess."

Wariness crept into my veins. "What about me?"

"You are deeply unhappy, my dear. You have been since I left the hospital." A wry smile quirked his lips. "For my own sake, I'll assume it's not because you're devastated I made it out alive. But it just so happens the time frame coincides with a certain upcoming

proposal and the departure of a certain bodyguard.”

The desk blurred before I blinked and my vision cleared. “I’m fine. You were right. It was time to end things, and Steffan would make a fine consort.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Edvard’s voice deepened with regal authority, and I flinched. “You are my granddaughter. I know when you are lying, and I know when you’re miserable. Right now, you’re both.” I wisely chose not to reply.

“I was—and still am—quite upset about your relationship with Mr. Larsen. It was reckless, and the press is still having a field day over it. But...” He heaved a sigh, filled with sadness and sympathy. “You are, first and foremost, my granddaughter. I want you to be happy above all else. I thought what you had was a casual affair but judging by the way you’ve been walking around like a heartbroken zombie, I assume that wasn’t the case.”

I pinched myself beneath the desk to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. The sharp sting confirmed the phrase “heartbroken zombie” really had left my grandfather’s mouth.

But as out of character as the phrase was, he wasn’t wrong.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, echoing Steffan’s sentiment earlier that day. “It’s too late. I was trying to repeal the Royal Marriages Law before it became an issue, but there’s not enough time.”

“Nine months, if I remember correctly.”

“Three weeks till the proposal,” I pointed out.

“Hmm.” The sound came out loaded with meaning.

He couldn’t be saying what I thought he was saying. “Grandpa, you wanted me to break up with Rhys. You’ve been pushing me to marry Steffan all this time and...” A messy ball of emotion tangled in my throat. “You had a heart attack when I refused.”

Horror drenched his expression. “Is that what you think?” Edvard straightened, his eyes suddenly fierce. “Bridget, it wasn’t because of you or any one thing. It was because of an accumulation of stress. If anything, it was my fault for not listening to you and Nikolai.” He grimaced. “I should’ve cut back on my workload, and I didn’t. My heart attack was unfortunate timing, but it was not your fault. Do you understand?”

I nodded, the ball of emotion expanding until it filled my nose and ears. My chest felt too tight, my skin too hot, then too cold.

“I don’t blame you for what happened. Not one bit,” he said.

“And by royal decree, I order you to stop blaming yourself.”

I cracked a small smile at the same time a hot tear scalded my cheek.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Edvard let out another, heavier sigh. “Come here.”

He opened his arms, and I walked around the desk and hugged him, breathing in his familiar, comforting scent of leather and Creed cologne. Some of the tightness I’d carried around since his heart attack eased.

I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed his implicit forgiveness until now.

“You are my granddaughter, and I want you to be happy.” Edvard squeezed me tight. “We can’t break the law, but you’re a smart girl, and you have nine months. Do what you have to do. Do you

understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so," I whispered.

"Good." He pulled back and kissed me on the forehead. "Think like a queen. And remember, the best rulers are those who can wield both the carrot and the stick in equal measure."

The best rulers are those who can wield both the carrot and the stick in equal measure.

Edvard's words lingered long after he'd left and the late afternoon sun morphed into the cool blues of twilight.

I picked up my phone, my mind racing with the implications of what I wanted to do.

I had one card left up my sleeve, but I hadn't entertained the notion until now because it was manipulative, underhanded, and went