

## 44. 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.

44

BRIDGET

I'D LOST MY MIND, ASKING ALEX FOR HELP. HE MIGHT BE DATING AVA, and he might be less...sociopathic since they'd gotten back together last year, but I still trusted the man as far as I could throw him.

Yet for all his faults, he truly loved Ava, and he owed me for kicking his ass into gear before I left for New York. If I hadn't, he'd still be moping over her and terrorizing everyone around him.

Our call four days ago had been short and succinct. I told him what I wanted, and he confirmed he could get it. I didn't doubt his ability to pull through, because this was Alex we were talking about, but he hadn't given me a delivery date and I'd been on pins and needles since.

"Your Highness." Booth spoke at a lower volume than usual, and his body vibrated with nervous energy as we walked to my room. We'd just returned from an event at the National Opera House, and I'd been so distracted by thoughts of my plan I hadn't questioned why Booth was accompanying me to my suite when he usually bid me goodbye at the palace entrance.

"Yes?" I arched an eyebrow at Booth's furtive glances around the empty hall. He was a good bodyguard, but he would make a terrible spy.

"Read it when you're alone." He slipped a piece of paper into my hands, his words almost inaudible.

I frowned. "What—"

A maid turned the corner, and Booth stepped back so fast he nearly crashed into the porcelain vase on a nearby side table.

"Well," he said, his voice now so loud I flinched. "If that's all, Your Highness, I'll be going." He dropped to a whisper again.

"Don't tell anyone else about it."

He waved and speed-walked down the hall until he disappeared around the same corner the maid had rounded.

My frown deepened.

What in the world? It wasn't like Booth to be so cryptic, but I did as he asked and waited until I shut the door behind me before I unfolded the paper. Booth wasn't a secret notes type of person. What had—

Time stopped. My blood rushed to my face, and my stomach swooped at the familiar, messy scrawl before me.

9 p.m. tonight, princess. Two chairs.

No name, but I didn't need one.

Rhys was still in Eldorra.

A whoosh of relief darted through me, followed by anxiety and a twinge of panic. We hadn't talked since the hospital, and we hadn't exactly ended things on a good note. Why was he reaching out now, two-and-a-half weeks later? How had he convinced Booth to sneak me a note? What—

“Bridget!”

For a second, I thought the call of my name came from outside my room, but then I looked up and saw the petite brunette standing in my suite.

Another, wholly different kind of disbelief flooded me.

“Ava? What are you doing here?” I hastily shoved Rhys's note into my pocket, where it seared through the silk and into my skin. Her face broke into a wide smile. “Surprise! I'm here to see you, of course. And I'm not alone.”

On cue, Jules swanned into the sitting room dressed in a familiar-looking green coat. “Good afternoon, Your Highness,” she sang. I cocked my head. “Is that my coat?”

“Yes,” she said with zero shame. “I love it. It makes my hair pop.” The emerald color did, indeed, make her red hair pop. “Your closet is everything. I need an in-depth tour later.”

“You already had an in-depth tour, courtesy of yourself.” Stella came up behind her, clad in a sleek white dress that made her olive skin glow. As the fashion blogger in our group, her closet rivaled mine, though her clothing choices were more casual. “You spent half an hour examining her shoe collection.”

“It's called research,” Jules said. “I'm going to be a lawyer. Power heels are essential for stomping all over the opposition.”

I let out a soft laugh as I hugged my friends, my shock gradually morphing into excitement. I hadn't seen them in person since I moved back to Eldorra, and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed our face-to-face chats until now.

However, I held off on greeting the last person in the group with a hug.

“Alex.” I nodded at Ava's boyfriend, which seemed too tame a word to describe him. Boyfriends were sweet and kind. Alex, with his cold eyes and colder demeanor, was anything but, though his expression did warm a degree when he looked at Ava.

“Bridget.”

Neither of us gave any sign we'd interacted beyond these types of group settings. I felt bad hiding my call from Ava, but the less she knew about what we were up to, the better. Plausible deniability mattered.

“We saw what happened on the news, with your grandfather and Rhys.” Ava's brow knit with concern. “We would've come sooner, but Jules had to wrap up her internship and I couldn't take time off until now. How are you holding up?”

“I'm all right. My grandfather's a lot better.” I purposely didn't mention Rhys.

“I knew something was going on with you and your hottie body-guard. I'm never wrong,” Jules joked before she, too, turned serious.

“Do you need anything from us, babe? Maybe some paparazzi ass you need kicked? A decoy while you sneak off to a midnight ren-

devious with your lover? I can dye my hair blonde.”

“J, you’re like three inches shorter than her,” Stella said.

Jules lifted one shoulder. “Minor issue. Nothing heels won’t solve.”

I laughed again, even as Rhys’s note burned a hole in my pocket.

9 p.m. Two chairs. “How did you guys get in here?”

“We worked with Nikolai on the surprise,” Jules said. “Too bad he’s taken. Your brother’s hot.”

“We’re here for the weekend,” Stella added, brushing a stray curl out of her face. With her green eyes, tanned skin, and leggy grace, she was the most gorgeous person I’d ever met, and while she was fully aware of the effect her looks had on others—especially men—she never flaunted it. “I wish we could stay longer, but we can’t take that much time off from work.”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re here.” The knot of loneliness in my stomach loosened an inch. As much as I wanted to reread Rhys’s note over and over again until I memorized every swoop and curve of the letters, I also wanted to hang out with my friends. It had been far too long. “Tell me. What did I miss?”

Since I didn’t have any meetings for the rest of the day, I spent the afternoon catching up with my friends while Alex took a series of business calls. I told them about my training, goodwill tour, and birthday ball. They told me about their jobs, their dating fails, and their road trip to Shenandoah National Park.

Eventually, we passed the light topics and reached the elephant in the room.

“You and Rhys.” Ava squeezed my hand. “What happened?”

I hesitated, debating how much to tell them before I settled on a brief, sanitized version of the story, starting with when I learned about Nikolai’s abdication and ending with our breakup in the hospital. I recounted everything without breaking down, which I considered a major win.

Once I finished, my friends gaped at me, their expressions ranging from shock to sadness to sympathy.

“Holy shit,” Jules said. “Your life is a Hallmark movie.”

“Not exactly.” Hallmark movies had happy endings, and mine was still up in the air.

“Is there anything we can do?” Sympathy creased Stella’s face.

For once, she wasn’t on her phone, which was a major feat, since she practically lived on the internet.

I shook my head. “I’ll figure it out.”

If Alex comes through. I glanced at where he stood by the window, speaking rapid-fire Russian into his phone.

“It’ll work out, babe.” Jules radiated confidence. “It always does.

If it doesn’t, declare martial law and tell them you’re keeping your crown and hot bodyguard. What are they going to do, guillotine you?”

My lips inched up into a smile. I could always count on Jules to come up with the most outrageous ideas. “It doesn’t work like that, and they might.”

“Fuck ‘em. I’d like to see them try. If they do, Alex will take care of it. Right, Alex?” Jules’s voice took on a teasing, singsong quality. Alex ignored her.

“Stop provoking him,” Ava said. “I can’t always save you.”

“I’m not provoking him. It’s a compliment. Your man can get anything done.” When Ava turned away, Jules leaned in and whispered, “He’s totally whipped. Watch.” She raised her voice to a panicked level. “Oh my God! Ava, are you bleeding?”

Alex’s head snapped up. Less than five seconds later, he ended his call and crossed the room to a confused-looking Ava, whose hand froze halfway to the scones on the table.

“I’m fine,” Ava said as Alex searched her for injuries. She glared at Jules. “What did I just say?”

“I can’t help it.” Jules’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “It’s so much fun. It’s like playing with a windup toy.”

“Until the toy comes alive and kills you,” Stella murmured loud enough for everyone to hear.

Alex stared at Jules with displeasure scrawled all over his face. His features were so perfect it was a little unnerving, like seeing a carefully sculpted statue come to life. Some people were into that, but I preferred men with a little more grit. Give me scars and a nose that was slightly crooked from being broken too many times over perfection.

“Pray you and Ava stay friends forever,” Alex said, icy enough to elicit a rash of goosebumps on my arms.

Jules didn’t appear fazed by the implied threat. “First of all, Ava and I will be friends forever. Second of all, bring it on, Volkov.”

Ava sighed. “Do you see what you left me in D.C. with?” she muttered to me.

I made a sympathetic noise.

My friends stayed for another hour before they left for dinner. I declined their invitation to join, saying I had some official business to take care of before tomorrow, but I promised to give them a palace tour in the morning.

I snuck a peek at the clock.

Three more hours until nine p.m.

Nerves cascaded through my stomach. What would I say once I saw Rhys? What would he say? I didn’t want to tell him about my plan until I was sure I had the pieces in place, and he might not approve, anyway. My methods weren’t aboveboard by any means.

“I’ll be right out.” Alex kissed Ava on the forehead. “I’m going to use the restroom first.”

After everyone filed out, I turned to Alex and crossed my arms over my chest. “It took you long enough. And you could’ve given me a heads up you were coming.”

“I run a Fortune 500 company. I do have other business to attend to besides your personal life.” He straightened his shirt sleeve. “You might also want to look up the definition of ‘surprise.’ Ava insisted.”

I sighed, not wanting to get into a drawn-out argument with him.

“Fine. Do you have what I need?”

Alex reached into his pocket and retrieved a USB drive. “Information on all one hundred eighty members of Eldorra’s Parliament, as requested.” Information, AKA blackmail material. “Once I hand this over to you, my debt is paid.”

“I understand.”

He studied me for a long moment before he dropped the drive

into my outstretched hand.

My fingers closed around the tiny gadget while my heart skittered like a frightened rabbit. I can't believe I'm doing this. I wasn't a blackmailer. But I needed leverage, fast, and this was the only way I could think to get it.

I hoped I wouldn't have to resort to using the information. However, with the clock ticking down and my private appeals to ministers politely but firmly rebuffed, I might need to.

"I have to say, I'm impressed," Alex drawled. "I didn't think you had it in you. Maybe you'll make a good queen after all."

Of course he thought good leadership rested on manipulation and deceit. His favorite philosopher was probably Machiavelli.

"Alex," I said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you are a complete dick."

"One of the nicer things people have said about me." He checked his watch. "I would say thank you, but I don't care. I trust you can take it from here?" He nodded at the USB drive.

"Yes." Something occurred to me. I shouldn't ask because I had a feeling I wouldn't like the answer, but... "You have a blackmail file on me too, don't you?"