

# 49. 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

WE SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY AND NIGHT IN MY ROOM, ONLY SURFACING for food, but the next morning, reality intruded, and I was forced to extricate myself from Rhys's arms.

As high as I was riding from our victory, I had one big issue left to deal with. I'd waited until after the vote because I couldn't afford to be distracted before then, but it was time to face it once and for all. Rhys stayed in the bedroom while I waited for my guest in the sitting room.

I heard a knock before Mikaela poked her head in. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Please, sit."

She walked in and plopped into the seat next to me. "I've been dying to talk to you, but you didn't answer my calls yesterday. I assume you were...busy, but oh my god, the vote! We have to celebrate! That's ama—"

"Why did you leak the photos of me to the press?" I skipped the buildup and got straight to the point. I couldn't stomach small talk with the proverbial black cloud hanging over us.

I kept my voice neutral, but I dug my nails so deep into the couch cushion they left tiny indentations.

I hadn't wanted to believe it when Rhys told me. Part of me still hoped he was wrong. But Mikaela's pale face and panicked eyes told me all I needed to know.

It was true.

Betrayal stabbed at me with sharp talons, puncturing my previously cold calm.

I didn't have a lot of friends in Eldorra. I had acquaintances and people who sucked up to me because of my title, but no real friends. Mikaela had been the one constant by my side, and I'd trusted her.

"I...I don't know what you're talking about," Mikaela said, avoiding my eyes.

"Rhys's old company traced the photos back to your IP address."

Rhys's old boss Christian was apparently a computer genius, and Rhys had asked him to help find the leaker's identity. I'd known for weeks Mikaela could be the culprit, and I'd had to pretend nothing was wrong until I confronted her.

If the royal thing didn't work out, I might have a second calling as an actress.

Mikaela opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "I

thought I was helping you,” she said weakly. “She told me it would help.”

“I know.”

The talons of betrayal dug deeper.

Christian had found some...interesting text messages when he'd looked into Mikaela's correspondence with The Daily Tea, and they had thrown me for as much of a loop as the discovery Mikaela was technically the leaker.

The fact it hadn't been Mikaela's idea didn't lessen the sting. She should've known better.

I heard another knock.

“Come in.” I didn't take my eyes off Mikaela, who looked like she wanted to sink into the couch and never come back up.

Elin walked in, sleek and polished in her white Escada suit and three-inch pumps. Her eyes flicked over Mikaela before settling on me. “You requested to see me, Your Highness.”

“Yes. We were discussing the leaked photos of Rhys and me.” I finally tore my gaze away from my friend—ex-friend—and met Elin's cool blue one. “Might you know anything about that?”

Elin wasn't dumb. She picked up on my insinuation immediately, but to her credit, she didn't feign ignorance or make excuses.

“I did it to help you, Your Highness,” she said after only one missed beat.

“By leaking private photos of me? How was that supposed to help?”

“They were not private photos.” Annoyance crept into her tone.

“They were perfectly innocent photos framed in a suggestive manner. I would've never leaked truly incriminating images. But if I hadn't done that, you and Mr. Larsen would've continued carrying on your reckless actions, and something more scandalous would've popped up. It was only a matter of time. Don't think I didn't notice what you two tried to hide beneath my nose. I didn't hold this job for so long by being oblivious.”

Dammit. I should've known Elin would catch onto our affair.

She was right. We had been reckless, too caught up in our honeymoon phase to take the usual precautions. But that didn't make what she did right.

“And the video?”

I'd finally told Rhys about the video from Nikolai's reception a few weeks ago. He'd been upset I kept it a secret for so long, but since nothing had come of it, he'd calmed down after, oh, five days. He had, however, also asked Christian to look into who'd sent it, and when I learned Elin was behind the video as well, I'd nearly fallen out of my seat.

The surprises never stopped coming.

Mikaela's eyes bounced between me and Elin. “What video?”

We ignored her, too locked in our stare down.

“It's a crime to plant cameras in a private residence,” I said. “Especially a private royal residence.”

“Prince Nikolai knew about the cameras.” Elin didn't so much as blink. “The security chief convinced him to install secret surveillance while the house was under renovation. Too many contractors going in and out. It was a precautionary measure.”

I paused, absorbing the information, before I said, "Blackmail is also illegal."

"I didn't blackmail you, nor would I ever do so." Elin's brows drew into a tight frown. "I sent you the video hoping it would prompt you to break off your relationship with Mr. Larsen. When you didn't, I had to leak the pictures."

"You didn't have to do anything. You could've talked to me about it first," I said coldly. "For a communications secretary, you're not great at communicating."

"It wouldn't have changed a thing. You're stubborn, Your Highness. You would've told me you were ending things and gone right back to him. I had to force your hand. Plus, The Daily Tea reporter we sent the photos to had already been snooping around, hoping to find dirt. Security found him trespassing on the grounds. He was quite persistent, that one, almost like he has a personal grudge." Elin tilted her head. "Hans Nielsen, formerly of The National Express. Ring a bell?"

Several. Hans was the paparazzo whose camera Rhys had destroyed in the cemetery last year. Apparently, he'd moved up the career ladder and held a grudge.

I flashed back to a few weeks ago, when Rhys told me he suspected someone had snooped around his guesthouse while he'd been living there. I bet it was Hans, considering it happened before Rhys and I had gotten together and Elin hired a photographer to trail us. I didn't tell Elin any of that, though.

"Regardless, the pictures satisfied him and kept him from digging further," Elin said when I didn't respond. "I must say, in hindsight, your press conference was inspired, and you and Mr. Larsen made it work. Yesterday's vote was a big win, so no harm, no foul." Funny she called the press conference inspired now when she'd thrown a massive fit over it.

"No harm, no foul?" I repeated. "Elin, you went behind my back, created a scandal, and dragged Mikaela into it!"

Mikaela, who'd been watching the rapid-fire exchange between us with wide eyes, lowered her head.

"I needed a go-between. I couldn't have the photos traced back to me." Elin heaved a deep sigh. "Honestly, Your Highness, it all worked out. I fed the press a smaller scandal so they wouldn't stumble onto a larger one. I was protecting the royal family. That has always been my number one goal."

"Perhaps." I steeled my spine. "I appreciate your service to the family over the years, but I'm afraid it's time we part ways."

Mikaela squeaked while the color leached from Elin's face.

"You're firing me? You can't fire me. His Majesty—"

"Has given me the authority to make whatever staffing changes I see fit," I finished. I pressed my hands tight against my thighs to keep from shaking. Elin was one of the palace's longest-serving employees, and I'd always been slightly terrified of her. But while she was great at the external part of her job, I needed someone who worked with me, not someone who snuck around behind my back and tried to dictate my actions. "You stepped over the line, and you lost our trust. Mine and the king's."

Elin clutched her phone, her knuckles whiter than her suit. Final-

ly, she said, "As you wish. I'll have my desk cleared out by the end of the week." A muscle twitched beneath her eye, but otherwise, she showed no emotion. "Is there anything else, Your Highness?"

Brisk and efficient to the end.

"No," I said, feeling strangely melancholy. Elin and I had never been close, but it was the end of an era. "You're dismissed."

She gave me a tight nod and walked out. She wasn't one for dramatics, and she knew me well enough to know when I'd set my mind on something.

"You too," I told Mikaela.

"Bridget, I swear—"

"I need to think things through." Maybe I would forgive her one day, but her betrayal was still fresh and nothing she said right now would penetrate the hurt. "I don't know how long that's going to take, but I need time."

"Fair enough." Her chin wobbled. "I really was trying to help. Elin was so convincing. I didn't believe her at first when she said you and Rhys had something going on. But then I thought about the way you looked at each other, and that time you took so long to answer the door at your office...it all made sense. She said you would get in huge trouble if—"

"Mikaela, please." I pressed my fingers to my forehead. It hurt almost as much as my heart. If I were old Bridget, perhaps I would've let what she did slide, but I couldn't afford to let things slide anymore. I needed people I could trust around me. "Not right now."

Mikaela swallowed hard, her freckles stark against her pale skin, but she left without trying to make excuses again.

I expelled a sharp breath. The conversation had been shorter but harder than I'd expected, even after weeks of mental preparation. I supposed nothing could fully prepare someone for firing one of their longest-serving employees and saying goodbye to one of their oldest friends in the span of half an hour.

I heard Rhys come up behind me. He didn't speak. He just swept his palms over my shoulders and massaged the muscles with his thumbs.

"I'd hoped you were wrong." I stared at where Mikaela had sat, the sting of betrayal lingering on my skin.

"Princess, I'm never wrong."

I released a half laugh, breaking some of the tension. "I can think of a few instances when you were."

"Yeah? Like when?" Rhys challenged, a hint of amusement shining through.

I deepened my voice to mimic him. "One, I do not become personally involved in my clients' lives. I am here to safeguard you from physical harm. That is all. I am not here to be your friend, confidant, or anything else. This ensures my judgment remains uncompromised." I reverted to my regular voice. "How'd that work out for you, Mr. Larsen?"

He stopped massaging my shoulders and curled one hand around my throat. My pulse jumped as he lowered his head until his lips grazed my ear. "Mocking me? Do you need a refresher lesson already, Your Highness?"

Another piece of tension cracked.

“Maybe. You might want to brush up on your teaching skills, Mr. Larsen,” I said, playing along. “The lessons should last longer than a couple hours.”

Another laugh escaped when Rhys picked me up and swung me around until we faced each other, and my limbs wrapped around his neck and waist.

“I knew you were trouble the moment I saw you.” He squeezed my ass, hard, but those steel-gray eyes were soft as he examined me. “You did what you had to do, princess.”

Despite the gruff delivery, his single short sentence comforted me more an entire speech from someone else could.

“I know.” I rested my forehead against his, tightness ballooning in my chest. “But there are so few people I can turn to here, and I just lost two of them in one day.”

Too much was changing too fast. Some of it was good, some of it was nerve-wracking. Either way, I could barely keep up.

“You have me.”

“I know,” I repeated, softer this time.

“Good. And for the record...” Rhys’s lips tilted up into a small smile. “I’ve never been happier to be wrong. Fuck personally involved. That’s not good enough. I want to be in your mind, in your heart,