

# 51. Rhys

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.

51

RHYS

THREE MONTHS LATER

"Rhys!" Luciana's face creased into a huge smile. "Como estas?" She looked Bridget over with a twinkle in her eye, and when she spoke next, her words held a teasing note. "Es tu novia?"

I laughed and tangled my fingers with Bridget's. "Si, es mi novia."

"I knew it!" Luciana said with delight. "Finally. Come, come. I have food for you."

She ushered us to the same table we'd sat at during our last trip to Costa Rica. I couldn't believe that had only been a year ago. So much had changed since then.

Hell, so much had changed in the past three months alone. Bridget and I could finally enjoy being together, even as preparations for her coronation ramped up and I slowly acclimated to the spotlight. I didn't enjoy the attention, but I was more comfortable with it, and that was the best I could hope for.

"This was a good idea." Bridget sighed with happiness when Luciana brought out a feast of meat and rice. "I needed a vacation." I smirked. "I always have good ideas."

Bridget hadn't wanted to go on a trip until after her coronation, but I could tell she was buckling under the stress. She needed a getaway to reset. Plus, my mouth could be pretty damn persuasive, especially when I used it for purposes other than talking.

It was our first vacation as an official couple, and I'd chosen Costa Rica not only for sentimental purposes but because no one in town knew or cared Bridget was a princess. Even after all the recent press coverage, they treated her as they would anyone else—warm and friendly, sometimes inquisitive, but never prying.

"Five days in paradise," I drawled. "Swimming, sunbathing, fucking—"

"Rhys."

"What, you don't like the itinerary?"

"Lower your voice," she hissed, her face the color of the tomatoes on her plate. "People will hear."

"No one's listening."

We were the only ones on the trip. No Booth, no entourage. It took a helluva lot of convincing, but the palace finally agreed to my plan. I was still qualified to guard Bridget, even if I was no longer officially employed in that capacity.

Since I quit working for Christian, I'd taken on a few freelance

security consulting gigs. I didn't need the money—Harper Security had paid very well, and I wasn't a big spender—but I'd go out of my mind with boredom if I didn't have something to occupy my days.

"You don't know that." Bridget tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She wore a tank top and shorts, and her skin already glowed from the sun. No makeup or fancy clothes, and she was still the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. "People could definitely be listening." "Trust me. I know." The closest people to us sat three tables over, their eyes glued to the soccer game on TV. "Even if they are, ain't nothing wrong with fuck—"

"Rhys."

I chuckled but stopped trying to get a rise out of her lest her face explode from embarrassment. It never failed to amaze me how prim Bridget was in public compared to how wild she was in bed. It made our sex even hotter, knowing I got to see a side of her no one else did.

After lunch, we walked around town for a bit before I convinced her to return to the villa.

I couldn't wait much longer.

"I have a surprise for you," I said as we drove up the hill. I couldn't resist dropping a hint, and talking kept my focus off the knot of nerves in my stomach.

I wasn't used to being nervous.

Bridget perked up. "I love surprises. What is it?"

I kept one hand on the steering wheel and twined the fingers of my other hand with hers. "It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you."

"I like surprises I'm prepared for," she said. "Just a hint?"

I shook my head with a grin. I'd been doing a lot more of that lately—grinning.

Something had changed over the past few months. The dark, heavy cloud that'd hung over me all my life had dissipated. It still came back now and then, but sunny days were the default now, not thunderstorms.

It was...strange. The darkness had been a protective shield, and without it, I felt stripped bare. Defenseless, which was not something I ever wanted to feel. But in moments like this, when it was just me and Bridget, I didn't need defenses. She'd broken through all of them, anyway.

"Here we are." I parked in front of the villa. "Surprise."

Bridget looked around slowly. "Okay..." She shot a confused glance in my direction. "I hate to tell you this, but we've been here before, remember? Luggage drop-off this morning? Bucket list number four?"

"Trust me, that's not something I'll ever forget." My mouth quirked up at the warm rose creeping over her cheeks. "But that's not the surprise. This is." I held up a set of keys. "I bought the house."

Her mouth fell open. "What?"

"My buddy was thinking of selling anyway. He and his family are moving further down south. So, I bought it." I shrugged.

We could stay in the nicest hotels in the world, but I wanted a place that belonged to us.

"Rhys, you can't..." Bridget's eyes darted to the villa. "Really?"

“Yep.” My grin widened when she squealed in a decidedly un-princess-like manner and jumped out of the car.

“We’re coming here every year!” she yelled over her shoulder.

“And we need more hammocks!”

I followed her inside, a laugh rumbling from my chest as she visited every room like they were long-lost friends.

I loved seeing her like this, wild and carefree, her guard down and her face lit with a smile. A real one.

“I love this place.” She slid open the glass door to the terrace and sighed when she saw the pool. “Perfection.”

“Why do you think I bought it?”

A teasing sparkle brightened her eyes. “Rhys, are you a secret romantic?”

“I don’t know.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small velvet box, the knot of nerves in my stomach doubling. Bridget sucked in an audible breath, but otherwise everything hushed—the wind, the birds, the roar of the Pacific in the distance. It was like the entire world held its breath, waiting to see what happened next.

“You tell me.”

I opened the box, revealing the glittering diamond ring that had burned a hole in the back of my dresser drawer for two months. I’d wanted to wait until the perfect moment. Now it was here, and I felt like an eighteen-year-old walking into Navy training for the first time again, determined but scared as hell about how the next chapter of my life would unfold.

A proposal was inevitable. I knew it, Bridget knew it, the world knew it. But just because something was inevitable didn’t mean it wasn’t important, and this was the most important moment of my life.

“I’m not the best at flowery language, so I’ll keep it simple.”

Fuck, was my voice shaking? I hoped not. “I never believed in love. Never wanted it. I didn’t see the practical value and, to be honest, I was doing just fine without it. But then I met you. Your smile, your strength, your intelligence and compassion. Even your stubbornness and hardheadedness. You filled a part of my soul I always thought would be empty, and you healed scars I never knew existed. And I realized...it’s not that I didn’t believe in love before. It’s that I was saving it all for you.”

A half sob bled through the hand pressed to Bridget’s mouth.

I took a deep breath. “Bridget, will you marry me?”

The question hadn’t fully left my mouth before Bridget threw her arms around me and kissed me. “Yes. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!”

Yes. One word, three letters, and it filled me up so completely I was sure I’d never hunger again.

I slipped the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly.

“There’s no taking it back,” I said gruffly, hoping she couldn’t hear the hitch in my voice. “You’re really stuck with me now.”