

9. 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.

9

BRIDGET

SOMETHING CHANGED THE NIGHT OF MY GRADUATION. PERHAPS IT WAS

the shared trauma, or the fact Rhys had voluntarily opened up to me about his past, but the longstanding antagonism between us transformed into something else—something that kept me awake late at night and drove the butterflies in my stomach nuts.

It wasn't a crush, exactly. More like attraction paired with...curiosity? Fascination? Whatever it was, it put me on edge, because on the list of the worst ideas I could have, sneaking out and getting kidnapped was number two. Developing non-platonic feelings for my bodyguard was number one.

Luckily, my schedule in New York kept me so busy I barely had time to breathe, much less indulge in inappropriate fantasies.

Rhys and I moved to Manhattan three days after graduation, and the following summer was a whirlwind of charity board meetings, social functions, and house hunting.

By the time August rolled around, I'd signed the lease on a beautiful Greenwich Village townhouse, worn down two pairs of heels from trekking through the city, and met everyone on the social circuit, some of whom I wished I hadn't met.

"It's slipping." Rhys scanned the surrounding crowd.

We were at the opening for a new Upper East Side exhibit celebrating Eldorran artists, which normally wouldn't be a big deal, but the guest list included action movie star Nate Reynolds and the paparazzi were out in full force.

"What?" I said through my smile as I posed for the cameras. The appearances got tiresome after a while. There was only so much smiling, waving, and small talk a girl could stand before she keeled over from boredom, but they were part of my job, so I grinned and bore it. Literally.

"Your smile. It's slipping."

He was right. I hadn't even noticed.

I re-upped the wattage of my smile and tried not to yawn. God, I can't wait till I'm home. I still had a luncheon, two interviews, a board meeting for the New York Animal Rescue Foundation, and a couple of errands to run, but after that...PJs and sweet sleep.

I didn't hate my job, but I wished I could do something more meaningful than be a walking, talking mannequin.

And so it went. Day after day, month after month of the same thing. Fall turned into winter, then into spring and summer, then fall

again.

Rhys stood next to me through it all, stern and grumpy as always, but he'd dialed down the overbearing attitude. For him, anyway. Compared to a normal person, he was still overprotective to the point of neuroticism.

I loved and hated the shift in equal measure. Loved it because I had more freedom, hated it because I could no longer use my irritation as a shield against whatever was crackling between us.

And there was a thing. I just wasn't sure whether I was the only one who saw it, or if he did too.

I didn't ask. It was safer that way.

"Do you ever think about doing anything except bodyguarding?"

I asked on a rare night in. For once, I had no plans other than a date with the TV and ice cream, and I loved it.

It was September, almost two years since Rhys and I first met and over a year since I moved to New York. I'd gone full out with the seasonal decorations, including a fall wreath over the fireplace, earth-toned cushions and blankets, and a mini pumpkin centerpiece for the coffee table.

Rhys and I were watching a screwball comedy that'd popped up in my Netflix recommendations. He sat ramrod straight, fully dressed in his work outfit while I was curled up with my feet on the sofa and a pint of ice cream in my hand.

"Bodyguarding?"

"It's a word," I said. "If it's not, I'm declaring it one by royal decree."

He smirked. "You would. And to answer your question, no, I don't. The day I do is the day I stop 'bodyguarding.'"

I rolled my eyes. "It must be nice to see everything in black and white."

Rhys's gaze lingered on me for a second before he looked away.

"Trust me," he said. "Not everything is black and white."

Inexplicably, my heart skipped a beat, but I forced myself not to demand he tell me what he meant. It probably meant nothing. It was a throwaway line.

Instead, I refocused on the movie and concentrated on not looking at the man sitting next to me.

It worked. Sort of.

I laughed at something a character said, and I noticed Rhys looking at me out of the corner of my eye.

"It's nice," he said.

"What?"

"Your real smile."

Forget a skipped beat. My heart skipped a whole song.

This time, however, I covered it up by pointing my spoon at him.

"That was a compliment."

"If you say so."

"Don't try to play it off." I was proud of how normal I sounded when my insides were doing things that were anything but normal.

Fluttering, skipping, twisting. My doctor would have a field day.

"We've passed a milestone. Rhys Larsen's first compliment to Bridget von Ascheberg, and it only took two years. Mark it down."

Rhys snorted, but humor filled his eyes. "One year and ten

months,” he said. “If we’re counting.”

Which he was.

If my heart skipped any more songs, it’d have no playlist left.

Not good. Not good at all.

Whatever I felt toward Rhys, it couldn’t develop past what it was now. So, in an effort to rid myself of my increasingly disturbing reactions to my bodyguard, I agreed to go on a date with Louis, the son of the French ambassador to the United Nations, when I ran into him at an event a month after my movie night with Rhys.

Louis showed up for our date at seven o’clock sharp with a bouquet of red flowers and a charming smile, which wilted when he saw the scowling bodyguard standing so close behind me I could feel the heat from his body.

“These are for you.” Louis handed me the flowers while keeping a wary eye on Rhys. “You look beautiful.”

A low growl rumbled behind me, and Louis noticeably gulped.

“Thank you, they’re lovely,” I said with a gracious smile. “Let me put them in water and I’ll be right back.”

My smile dropped when I turned my back to Louis and faced Rhys. “Mr. Larsen, please follow me.” Once we entered the kitchen, I hissed, “Stop threatening my dates with your gun.”

I hadn’t needed to see him to know he’d probably pushed his jacket aside just enough to flash his weapon.

Louis wasn’t the first guy I’d dated in New York, though the last time I’d gone on a date had been months ago. Rhys kept scaring off my romantic prospects, and half the men in the city were afraid to ask me out for fear he would shoot them.

It hadn’t bothered me until now because I hadn’t cared for my previous dates, but it was annoying when I was actively trying to move on from whatever weird hold Rhys had on me.

Rhys’s glare intensified. “He’s wearing shoe lifts. He deserves to be threatened.”

I pressed my lips together, but a quick glance at Louis’ feet through the kitchen doorway confirmed Rhys’s observation. I thought he seemed taller. I had nothing against shoe lifts per se, but three inches seemed excessive.

Unfortunately, while I could overlook the shoe lifts, I couldn’t overlook the utter lack of chemistry between us.

Louis and I dined at a lovely French restaurant, where I struggled not to fall asleep while he rambled on about his summers in St. Tropez. Rhys sat at the next table with a glower so dark the diners on his other side requested to move tables.

By the time dinner ended, Louis was so flustered by the menacing presence less than three feet away he knocked over his wineglass and nearly caused a server to drop his tray of food.

“It’s all right,” I said, helping a mortified Louis clean up the mess while the server fussed over the stained linen tablecloth. “It was an accident.”

I glared at Rhys, who stared back at me without a hint of remorse.

“Of course.” Louis smiled, but the mortification in his eyes remained.

When we finished cleaning up, he left a generous tip for the

server and bid me a polite good night. He didn't ask me on a second date.

I wasn't sad about it. I was, however, pissed at a certain gray-eyed pain in my butt.

"You scared Louis half to death," I said when Rhys and I returned home. I couldn't control the anger from seeping into my voice. "Next time, try not to unnerve my date so much he spills his drink all over himself."

"If he scares that easily, he's not worthy of being your date."

Rhys had dressed up to adhere to the restaurant's dress code, but the tie and dinner jacket couldn't mask the raw, untamed masculinity rolling off him in potent waves.

"You were armed and glaring at him like he killed your dog. It's hard not to be nervous under those conditions." I tossed my keys on the side table and slipped off my heels.

"I don't have a dog."

"It was a metaphor." I unpinned my hair and ran my hand through the waves. "Keep it up and I'll end up like one of those spinsters from historical romance novels. You've scared off every date I've had in the past year."

One thing that hadn't changed after all this time? My refusal to call him anything except Mr. Larsen, and his refusal to call me anything except princess.

Rhys's scowl deepened. "I'll stop scaring them off once you get better taste in men. No wonder your love life is in the dumps. Look at the twerps you insist on going out with."

I bristled. My love life was not in the dumps. It was close, but it wasn't there yet. "You're one to talk."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I haven't seen you date anyone since you started working for me." I shrugged off my jacket, and his gaze slid to my bared shoulders for a fraction of a second before returning to my face. "You're hardly qualified to give me dating advice."

"I don't date. Doesn't mean I can't spot worthless idiots when I see 'em."

I paused, startled by his admission. While Rhys was always by my side during the day, he was off duty after I turned in for the night. Sometimes he stayed in, sometimes he didn't. I'd always assumed he was...busy on the nights he didn't.

A strange mixture of relief and disbelief coursed through me.

Disbelief, because while Rhys wasn't the most charming guy on the planet, he was gorgeous enough for most women to overlook his surly attitude. Relief, because...well, I'd rather not examine that reason too closely.

"You've been celibate for two years?" The question slipped out before I could think it through, and I regretted it instantly.

Rhys arched an eyebrow, his scowl morphing into a smirk. "You asking about my sex life, princess?"

Embarrassment scorched my cheeks, both at my inappropriate question and at hearing the word "sex" leave his mouth. "I did no such thing."

"I may not have attended a fancy college like you, but I can read subtext." Amusement flashed in those gunmetal eyes. "For the

record, dating and sex aren't the same thing."

Right. Of course.

Something unpleasant replaced my earlier relief. The idea of him "not dating" someone irked me more than it should've.

"I know that," I said. "I don't date everyone I have sex with, either."

What am I saying? I hadn't had sex in so long I was surprised my vagina hadn't sued me for neglect, but I wanted to...what, prove Rhys wasn't the only one who could have casual sex? Get a rise out of him?

If so, it worked, because his smirk disappeared and his drawl hardened. "And when was the last time you had non-dating sex?"

I lifted my chin, refusing to back down beneath the weight of his steely stare. "That is a highly inappropriate question."

"You asked first," he ground out. "Answer the question, princess."

Breathe. I heard the palace communications secretary Elin's voice in my head, coaching me on how to handle the press. You can't control what they say, but you can control what you say. Don't let them see you sweat. Deflect if necessary, take back the power, and guide the conversation where you want it to go. You are the princess. You do not cower in front of anyone. Elin was scary, but she was good, and I took her advice to heart as I struggled not to rise to Rhys's bait.

One...two...three...

I exhaled and squared my shoulders, looking down my nose at him even though he towered over me by a good seven inches.

"I will not. This is where we end the conversation," I said, my voice cold. Before it goes any more off the rails. "Good night, Mr. Larsen."

His eyes called me a coward. Mine told him to mind his business.

The air pulsed with heavy silence during our staredown. It was late, and I was tired, but I'd be damned if I backed down first.

Judging by Rhys's bullish stance, he had the same thought.

We might've stood there forever, glaring at each other, had it not been for the sharp trill of an incoming call. Even then, I waited for my phone to ring three times before I tore my eyes away from Rhys and checked the caller ID.

My annoyance quickly gave way to confusion, then worry, when I saw who was calling. Nikolai. My brother and I rarely spoke on the phone, and it was five a.m. in Eldorra. He was a morning person, but he wasn't that much of a morning person.

I picked up, aware of Rhys's gaze burning into me.

"Nik, is everything all right?"

Nikolai wouldn't call out of the blue at this hour unless it was an emergency.

"I'm afraid not." Exhaustion weighed down his words. "It's Grandfather."

Panic exploded in my stomach, and I had to hold on to the side table for support as Nikolai explained the situation. No. Not Grandfather. He was the only living parental figure I had left, and if I lost him...

Rhys moved toward me, his face now dark with concern, but he halted when I shook my head. The more Nikolai spoke, the more I

wanted to throw up.

Fifteen minutes later, I ended the call, numb with shock.

“What happened?” Rhys remained a few feet away, but there was a certain tenseness to his posture, like he was ready to murder whoever had been on the other end of the line for causing me distress.

All thoughts of our stupid argument fled, and the sudden urge to throw myself into his arms and let his strength carry me away