

Chapter 26: Bridget

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MY GRANDFATHER WANTED TO KNOW HOW MY DATE WITH STEFFAN went.

That was right. The reason the king summoned me to his office immediately after I returned to the palace was so I could give him a detailed breakdown of my first date with the future Duke of Holstein—and potential future Prince Consort. He did also apologize for not including me in the “emergency” tax reform meeting, which Erhall called at the last minute. I was convinced Erhall did so knowing I wouldn’t be able to attend because of my date with Steffan, but I couldn’t prove it.

Edvard, meanwhile, was convinced Steffan was the one. Based on what, I wasn’t sure, but I imagined Steffan’s title, photogenic looks, and diplomatic demeanor had something to do with it.

My grandfather wasn’t the only one. The press and public went wild for the photos of us at the ice-skating rink, and everyone was already buzzing about our “burgeoning relationship” even though I’d spoken to Steffan twice in my life.

Still, Elin insisted I capitalize on the attention with another date. It would be a “private” one with no reporters—to give the illusion of intimacy—but would later “leak” to the press. I agreed, if only because she was right. The Part-Time Princess headlines had disappeared, replaced by breathless speculation over the new “love” in my life.

If only they knew.

On paper, Steffan would make the perfect husband. He was good-looking, intelligent, kind, and funny, and he was by far the best option out of the so-called eligible bachelors who’d attended my birthday ball.

There was only one problem: no chemistry.

None. Zip. Nada.

I had as much romantic interest in Steffan as I did the succulent plant in my room.

"It's because you haven't kissed him yet," Mikaela said when I told her about my dilemma. "At least kiss the man. You can tell everything based on one kiss."

She may be right.

So, at the end of my second date with Steffan, I worked up the nerve to kiss him, even though it seemed far too soon. But he was leaving for Preoria tomorrow, and I needed to know if this would go anywhere. I couldn't spend weeks wondering.

"I must admit, I was surprised you wanted to meet again so soon after our first date." He gave me a shy smile. "Pleasantly surprised, that is."

We walked through the Royal Botanic Gardens' large, heated greenhouse. Lush flowers bloomed around every corner, scenting the air with their sweet perfume, and strings of lights twinkled overhead like tiny stars. It was as romantic a setting as one could hope for, and I tried to focus on Steffan instead of the scowling bodyguard shadowing our every move.

If looks could kill, Rhys would've put Steffan six feet in the ground by now.

That was another reason I was hesitant to kiss Steffan. It seemed...wrong to do that in front of Rhys.

God, I wished I'd thought this through beforehand.

"I had fun," I said when I realized I hadn't responded yet. "Thanks for agreeing even though I'm sure you're busy preparing for your trip tomorrow."

"Of course."

Steffan smiled.

I smiled.

My palms slicked with sweat.

Just do it. One tiny kiss. You have nothing to feel guilty about. You and Rhys aren't dating.

"I'm not sure why, but I have the strangest desire to give a rundown of all the fun facts I know about flowers," Steffan said. "Did you know tulips were worth more than gold in seventeenth-century Holland? Literally."

That's what happens when I'm nervous. I start spouting all sorts of useless facts.

A subtle hint from Steffan he wanted a kiss too. He had no reason to be nervous otherwise.

I discreetly wiped my palms on my skirt. Don't look at Rhys. If I did, I would never go through with it.

"That's fascinating." I winced when I realized that was the sort of answer someone gave when they found the subject anything but interesting. "Truly."

Steffan laughed. "I'm afraid there's only one way to stop me from boring you death with my floral knowledge, Your Highness," he said somberly.

"What's that?" I asked, distracted by the sensation of Rhys's gaze burning a hole in my side.

"This." Before I could react, Steffan's lips were on mine, and even though I knew the kiss was coming, I was still so stunned I could only stand there.

He tasted faintly of mint, and his lips were soft as they brushed against mine. It was a nice, sweet kiss, the kind cameras zoomed in on in movies and most women swooned over.

Unfortunately, I wasn't one of them. I might as well be kissing my pillow.

Disappointment crashed into me. I'd hoped a kiss would change things, but it only confirmed what I already knew. Steffan, for all his wonderful traits, wasn't for me.

Maybe I was naïve for thinking I could find a fiancé to whom I was attracted to and whose company I enjoyed, but I was only in my twenties. No matter how much everyone tried to rush me, I wasn't ready to give up on my hope for love yet.

I finally gathered enough of my wits to pull back, but before I could, a loud crash shattered the silence in the greenhouse.

Steffan and I jumped apart, and my eyes fell on Rhys, who stood next to a broken pot of lilies.

"My hand slipped." His voice held not an ounce of apology.

That was, for lack of a better term, utter crap. Rhys didn't slip. He may be larger than the average person, but he moved with the lethal grace of a panther.

That was what he reminded me of right now—a panther preparing to pounce on unwitting prey. Taut face, coiled muscles, and eyes trained with laser intensity on Steffan, who shifted with discomfort beneath his stare.

"Attention all guests, the gardens are closing in fifteen minutes." The announcement blared over the PA system, saving us from the most awkward moment of my life.

"Please make your way to the exits. The gardens are closing in fifteen minutes. Visitors in the gift shop, please finalize your purchases."

"I guess that's our cue." Steffan held out his arm with a smile, though he kept a wary eye on Rhys. "Shall we, Your Highness?"

We'd booked the greenhouse for ourselves, though the rest of the gardens remained open to the public. We could probably stay longer if we wanted, but I had no desire to drag out the night.

I took Steffan's arm and walked to the exit, where we said goodbye with a stilted half-hug, half-kiss on the cheek and promises to meet up again when he returned to Athenberg.

Rhys and I didn't speak until we reached our car.

"You're paying for the flowerpot," I said.

"I'll take care of it."

The parking lot was empty except for a handful of cars in the distance, and tension rolled between us, so thick I could practically taste it.

"I know he fits the image of Prince Charming, but you might want to keep looking."

Rhys unlocked the car doors. "I've seen you kiss a cat with more passion."

"Is that why you knocked over the lilies?"

"My. Hand. Slipped," he bit out.

Maybe it was the wine I'd had at dinner, or the stress was getting to me. Whatever it was, I couldn't help it—I burst into laughter.

Wild, hysterical laughter that left me gasping for breath and clutching my stomach right there in the middle of the parking lot.

"What the hell is so funny?" Rhys's grumpy tone only made me laugh harder.

"You. Me. Us." I wiped tears of mirth from my eyes. "You're an ex-Navy SEAL and I'm royalty, and we're in such denial we might as well apply for Egyptian citizenship."

He didn't crack a smile at my admittedly lame attempt at a joke.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Stop it." I was tired of fighting. "I asked you before, and I'm asking you again. Why did you come back, Mr. Larsen? The real answer this time."

"I gave you the real answer."

"The other real answer."

Rhys's jaw clenched. "I don't know what you want me to say, princess."

"I want you to say the truth."

I knew my truth. I needed to hear his.

My truth? There was only one man who'd ever given me butterflies with a kiss. One man whose touch set me on fire and made me believe in all the fantastical things I'd dreamed about since I was a child.

Love, passion, desire.

"Truth?"

Rhys took a step toward me, the hard steel in his eyes giving way to turbulent thunderstorms.

I took an instinctive step back until my back hit the side of our SUV. There was another car next to us, and the two vehicles formed a makeshift cocoon that crackled with electricity as he planted his hands on either side of my head.

"The truth, princess, is I came back knowing this was what I signed up for. To see you every day and not be able to touch you. Kiss you. Claim you." Rhys's breath was hot against my skin as he lowered one hand and slid it up my thigh. It seared through the thick layers of my skirt and tights until my pussy clenched and my nipples tightened into hard points. "I came back despite knowing the torture I'd have to go through because I can't stay away from you. Even when you're not there, you're everywhere. In my head, in my lungs, in my fucking soul. And I'm trying very hard not to lose my shit right now, sweetheart, because all I want is to cut off that fucker's head and serve it on a platter for daring to touch you. Then bend you over the hood and spank your ass raw for letting him." He cupped me between my legs and squeezed. I whimpered

with a mixture of pain and pleasure. “So don’t. Push. Me.”

A thousand emotions ran through my veins, turning me lightheaded with arousal and danger.

Because what Rhys just said was dangerous. What we were doing, feeling, was dangerous.

