

Chapter 17: Bridget

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TWO DAYS LATER, WE LANDED IN COSTA RICA LIKE RHYS HAD PROMISED and drove two hours from the airport to a small town on the Pacific coast.

I stared out the window at the country's lush landscape, my head spinning from how fast everything had moved. I couldn't believe Rhys, Mr. Safety and Security himself, was the one who suggested a last-minute trip, but I wasn't complaining. I hadn't visited Costa Rica before, and four days in a tropical paradise sounded like, well, paradise.

We'd finished packing the townhouse, and I'd turned in my keys that morning. Everything else I needed to do, I could do online. I was, for all intents and purposes, free until we returned to New York.

"This is it." Rhys pulled up in front of a sprawling, two-story villa. "Bucket list number one."

Go someplace where no one knows or cares who I am.

That was definitely the case here. The house was nestled high in the hills and the only residence around. How had Rhys even found this place?

My chest tightened with emotion as we unpacked our suitcases from the back of our rental car and walked toward the entrance.

"How did you pull everything together so fast?"

Rhys would never let me go anywhere without doing the proper advance work first, but it had only been forty-eight hours since I told him about my list. For him to have researched the town, booked the charter jet and villa, and handled the millions of details that came with royal travel in such a short time...

"I cheated a bit," he admitted, unlocking the front door. "An old Navy buddy of mine moved down here a couple of years ago and owns this place. He's on vacation right now and let me borrow it for a few days. I visit every year, so I know the town and people well. It's safe. Quiet. Under the radar."

"Exactly what I need," I murmured. The tightness in my chest intensified.

Rhys showed me around the villa. The walls were all glass, offering gorgeous three-hundred-sixty views of the surrounding hills and the Pacific Ocean in the distance. Everything was open, airy, and made of natural stone and wood, and the house's design made it seem like it was flowing into its surroundings instead of dominating them. My favorite feature, however, was the infinity pool on the second-floor terrace. From a certain angle, it looked like it fed straight into the ocean.

Rhys, being Rhys, also walked me through the security setup. Tinted, bulletproof glass all around, state-of-the-art motion sensors, an underground panic room stocked with a year's supply of food. That was all I gathered before I zoned out.

I appreciated the security measures, but I didn't need a detailed breakdown of the make and model of the security cameras. I just wanted to eat and swim.

"Remind me to send your friend a big thank you," I said. "This place is incredible."

"He loves showing it off, usually by letting people stay here," Rhys said dryly. "But I'll tell him."

It was already close to two, so the first thing we did after we finished the tour was change and head into town for lunch. The town was a twenty-minute drive from the villa and, according to Rhys, home to less than a thousand people. Not a single one of them seemed to know or care who I was.

Bucket list number one.

We ate at a small, family-run restaurant whose owner, a round-faced older woman named Luciana, lit up at the sight of Rhys. She smothered him with kisses before

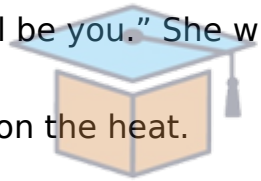
embracing me too.

“Ay, que bonita!” she exclaimed, looking me over. “Rhys, es tu novia?” How beautiful! Rhys, is she your girlfriend?

“No,” Rhys and I said at the same time. We glanced at each other before he clarified, “Sólo somos amigos.” We’re just friends.

“Oh.” Luciana looked disappointed. “One day, you’ll bring a girlfriend,” she said in English. “Maybe it’ll be you.” She winked at me before ushering us to a table.

I blamed my blush on the heat.



Summaryer

Instead of ordering off the menu, Rhys told me to trust Luciana’s judgment, and I was glad we did exactly that when the food came out twenty minutes later. Olla de carne, arroz con pollo, platanos maduros... all so delicious I would beg Luciana for the recipes had I had any kitchen skills beyond scrambling eggs and making coffee.

“This is incredible,” I said after swallowing a mouthful of chicken and rice.

“Luci makes the best food in town.”

“Yes, but that’s not what I meant. I meant this.” I gestured at my surroundings. “The trip. The whole thing. You didn’t have to do this.”

Especially since Rhys was paying for everything out of pocket. I assumed his friend let him borrow the villa for free, but the flight, the car rental... they all cost good money. I’d offered to reimburse him, but he’d responded with such a dark glare I hadn’t brought it up again.

“Consider it my goodbye present,” Rhys said, not looking up from his plate. “Two years. Figured it was worth a trip.”

The chicken that had been so delicious a second earlier turned to ash in my mouth.

Right. I almost forgot. Rhys only had two weeks left as my bodyguard.

I stabbed at my food, my appetite gone. “Do you have a new client already lined up?” I asked casually.

Whoever it was, I already hated them for getting a beginning with Rhys instead of an ending.

Rhys rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I’m taking a short break. Maybe I’ll come back to Costa Rica, or head to South Africa for a bit.”

“Oh.” I stabbed harder at my chicken. “Sounds nice.”

Great. He’d be playing world traveler while I was attending queen lessons at the palace. Maybe he’d meet some beautiful Costa Rican or South African girl and they’d spend their days surfing and having sex—

Stop it.

“What about you?” Rhys asked, his tone also casual. “Know who your new guard is yet?”

I shook my head. “I asked for Booth, but he’s already assigned to someone else.”

“Funny. I thought they’d be more accommodating, considering you’re the crown princess.” Rhys cut his chicken with a little more force than necessary.

“I’m not crown princess yet. Anyway, let’s talk about something else.” Our conversation was depressing me. “What fun things are there to do around here?”

The answer was, not much. After lunch, Rhys and I walked through town, where I picked up some souvenirs for my friends. We checked out an art gallery featuring local artists, took a cafe break where I had the best coffee I’d ever tasted, and shopped for groceries at the farmer’s market.

It was a simple, ordinary day, filled with mundane activities and nothing particularly exciting.

It was perfect.

By the time we returned to the villa, I was ready to pass out, but Rhys stopped me before I could crash. "If you can stay up a while longer, there's something you should see."

Curiosity won out over exhaustion.

"This better be good." I followed him out onto the terrace and sank onto one of the wicker chairs by the pool, where I stifled a yawn. "I get cranky when I don't get enough sleep."



"Trust me, I know." Rhys smirked. "Good of you to admit it though."

I watched as he turned off all the lights, including the outdoor floodlights.

"What are you doing?" He never turned off all the lights until right before he went to bed.

He sat down next to me, and I spotted a flash of his teeth in the darkness before he angled his chin up.

"Look up, princess."

I did. And I gasped.

Thousands upon thousands of stars splashed across the sky above us, so numerous and densely packed they resembled a painting more than real life. The Milky Way, right there in all its sprawling, glittering glory. It hadn't occurred to me we could see it so clearly here, but it made sense. We were high in the hills, miles away from the nearest big city. There was no one and nothing around except us, the sky, and the night.

"I thought you might like it," Rhys said. "It's not something you see in New York or Athenberg."

"No. It's not." Emotion gripped my chest. "And you were right. I love it. Worth staying past my bedtime and getting cranky for."

His low chuckle settled in my belly and warmed me from the inside out.

We stayed outside for another hour, just staring at the sky and soaking in the beauty.

I liked to think my parents were up there, watching over me.

I wondered if I'd turned out the way they'd hoped, and if they were proud. I wondered what they would say about Nikolai's abdication, and whether my mother knew I was the one who should've died that day in the hospital, not her.

She should've been queen, not me.

At least she and my father were together. They were one of the lucky couples who started off in an arranged marriage and ended up falling in love. My father had never been the same after my mom's death, or so everyone told me. I'd been too young to know the difference.

Sometimes, I wondered if he'd lost control of his car on purpose so he could join her sooner.

I turned my head to look at Rhys. My eyes had adjusted to the dark enough that I could make out the tiny bump in his nose and the firm curve of his lips.

"Have you ever been in love?" I asked, partly because I really wanted to know, and partly because I wanted to pull my thoughts off the morbid path they'd taken.

"Nope."

"Really? Never?"

"Nope," Rhys said again. He cocked an eyebrow. "Surprised?"