

Chapter 18: Bridget

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WE SPENT FOUR GLORIOUS, PERFECT DAYS IN COSTA RICA.

I woke up late, went to bed late, and spent my days eating, sunbathing, and reading a romance novel I'd picked up at the airport. Bucket list number two.

On our third day, Rhys drove us two hours to Monteverde for zip lining. He said the company was the best in the area and he'd zip-lined with them several times himself. Still, his face was taut with tension as I prepared to go down the longest zip line. We'd only done the shorter cables until now, and they were fun, but I was ready for more.

The one I was about to get on stretched high above the cloud forest, so long I couldn't see the other end of it. A mixture of excitement and nerves twisted in my stomach.

"Check her again," Rhys said after our guide gave me the thumbs up.

No one bothered arguing. Rhys made the guide triple-check my harness before I went down every line, and arguing was futile.

"If you get stuck, don't panic," Rhys said after the guide okayed me—again. "We'll come get you."

"By 'we'll,' he means me," the guide joked. "But yes, we will come get you. Don't worry, miss."

"I hadn't thought about getting stuck until now, so thank you for that," I said wryly.

Rhys's stern expression didn't budge, but all thoughts of his grumpiness disappeared when I got into position. The guide gave me a push, and I finally raced down the line. The wind whipped through my hair, and I couldn't hold back a huge grin. Ziplining looked scary from the ground, but once I was in the air? It was exhilarating.

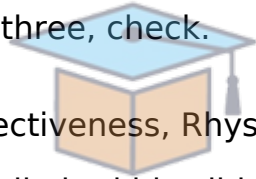
I closed my eyes, savoring the wind and the feeling of being away from it all. No worries, no responsibilities, just me and nature.

When I made it to the next treetop platform, I was still riding high from the zip line, and I couldn't resist teasing Rhys again when he landed shortly after me.

"See? I'm fine," I said. "You didn't have to pick up pieces of me from the ground."

He did not look amused at all, but I didn't care.

Bucket list number three, check.



For all his overprotectiveness, Rhys was more relaxed down here. Not fully relaxed, mind you, but he'd ditched his all-black outfits for shorts and—gasp—white T-shirts, and he agreed to most of the activities I wanted to do with minimal complaint, including parasailing and an ATV tour.

The one thing he refused to do, however, was get in the pool with me, and on our last night, I made a last-ditch effort to change his mind.

"I've never heard of a Navy SEAL who doesn't swim." I stepped onto the terrace, where Rhys was drawing in his sketchbook. He hadn't shown me any of his sketches yet, and I hadn't asked. Art was deeply personal, and I didn't want to force him to show me anything if he didn't want to. "Come on. It's our last day, and you haven't taken advantage of this once." I swept my arm at the gleaming pool.

"It's a pool, princess." Rhys didn't look up from his book. "I've been in pools before."

"Prove it."

No answer.

"Fine. I guess I'll swim by myself. Again." I shrugged off my cover-up and let the filmy white material cascade to the floor before I walked past Rhys toward the water.

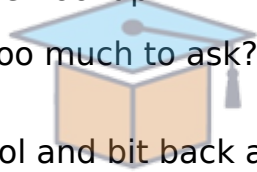
I may have walked more slowly than normal and added an extra sway to my hips.

I may also have worn my skimpiest, most scandalous bikini. I did, after all, have one

more bucket list item to check off.

I'd been drunk when I'd told Rhys about my bucket list, but I was sober now, and I still wanted him to help me fulfill item number four. I was attracted to him; he was attracted to me. That much was obvious after what happened in my room post-Borgia. He wasn't going to be my bodyguard much longer, and no one would know unless we told them.

One wild, passionate hookup with my sexy bodyguard before I took on the duty of a lifetime. Was that too much to ask?



Summaryer

I waded into the pool and bit back a smile when I felt the heat of Rhys's gaze on my skin, but I didn't turn around until I'd reached the far edge of the water. By the time I looked at him, Rhys's head was bent over his sketchbook again, but his shoulders held a tension that hadn't been there before.

"Are you sure you don't want to join me?" I cajoled. "The water feels amazing."

"I'm good," he said curtly.

I sighed and let it go... for now.

While he sketched, I swam laps around the pool, reveling in the water against my skin and the sunshine on my back.

When I finally came up for a break, it was near sunset, and the warmth of golden hour cast a hazy, dreamlike glow over the surroundings.

"Last chance, Mr. Larsen." I slicked my hair back and blinked the water out of my eyes.

"Swim now or forever hold your peace."

It was cheesy, but it made Rhys's lips curve before they flattened into a stern line again. "You gonna stop bugging me if I say no?"

I grinned. "Probably not."

My heart jumped when he closed his book, set it on the table, and stood.

I hadn't expected him to give in.

Rhys walked to the pool, pulling his shirt over his head as he did so, and I lost the ability to breathe.

Broad shoulders, perfectly sculpted muscles, abs one could grate cheese on. Absolute masculine perfection.

My core pulsed as my eyes ate him up. Tattoos swirled across his chest, both biceps, and one side of his ribcage, and a deep V cut arrowed toward what—based on what I'd felt when he'd bent me over my dresser—was a very impressive package.

Rhys entered the water and swam toward me, his big, powerful body slicing through the liquid blue as gracefully as a dolphin.

"There. I'm in the pool." He came up beside me, a lock of damp dark hair falling over his eye, and I resisted the urge to push it out of his face. "Happy?"

"Yes. You should go shirtless more often."

Rhys's eyebrows shot up, and my cheeks flamed before I quickly amended, "You seem more relaxed that way. Less intimidating."

"Princess, it's my job to be intimidating."

If I never heard the words it's my job again, it would be too soon.

"You know what I mean," I grumbled. "You're always so on edge in the city."

He shrugged. "That's what happens when you have C-PTSD."

Complex PTSD. I'd looked it up after he told me he had it. Symptoms included hyper-vigilance, or being constantly on guard for threats. Unlike regular PTSD, which was caused by a singular traumatic event, complex PTSD resulted from long-lasting trauma that continued for months or even years.

My heart squeezed at the thought of what he must've gone through to be diagnosed with the condition. "Does the art help?"

"Kind of." Rhys's face was unreadable. "But I haven't been able to draw anything in months." He jerked his chin toward the table. "I was just messing around. Seeing what I came up with."

"When you do, I want to see it. I love a good security alarm sketch," I joked before I remembered we only had one week left together.

My smile faded.



Summaryer

Rhys watched me closely. "If that's what you want."

I wanted a lot of things, but none of them had to do with art.

"Can I tell you something, Mr. Larsen?"

He dipped his head.

"I'm going to miss you."

He went still, so still I thought he didn't hear me. Then, in an uncharacteristically, achingly soft voice, he said, "I'm going to miss you too, princess."

So don't go. There had to be a way he could stay. He wasn't part of the Royal Guard, but he'd been with me for two years. I didn't see why I had to change guards just because I was moving back to Eldorra.

Except for, of course, the fact Rhys would have to move to Eldorra with me. He may have lived with me all this time, but there was a difference between live-in protection in the U.S. and moving to a different country for an indeterminate length of time. Plus, he'd resigned first.

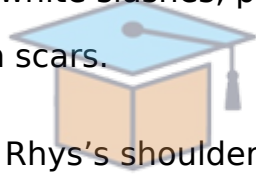
Even if I convinced the palace to extend his contract, would he be willing to accept the offer?

I'd been too afraid to ask in case he said no, but the clock was ticking.

A loud pop went off in the distance before I could broach the subject, and Rhys turned sharply to see fireworks explode in the sky.

He relaxed. I didn't, because I finally understood why he'd never taken his shirt off around me before.

His back—his strong, beautiful back—was covered with scars. They crisscrossed his skin in angry, near-white slashes, peppered with a few round marks I was positive were cigarette burn scars.



Summaryer

Judging by the way Rhys's shoulders tensed, he must've realized his mistake, but he didn't hide them again. There was no point. I'd already seen them, and we both knew it.

"What happened?" I whispered.

There was a long silence before he responded. "My mother liked her belt," he said flatly.

I sucked in a breath, and my stomach lurched with nausea. His mother did that to him?

"No one said or did anything? Teachers, neighbors?" I couldn't imagine abuse of that level going unnoticed.

Rhys shrugged. "There were plenty of kids in bad home situations where I came from. Some of them had it a lot worse than me. One kid getting 'disciplined' wasn't going to raise any eyebrows."

I wanted to cry at the thought of young Rhys so alone he was nothing more than a statistic to those who should've looked out for him.

I didn't hate a lot of people, but I suddenly hated everyone who knew or suspected what he'd been going through and didn't do a damn thing about it.

“Why would she do this?” I brushed my fingers over his back, my touch so light it was barely a touch. His muscles bunched beneath my fingers, but he didn’t pull away.

“Let me tell you a story,” he said. “It’s about a beautiful young girl who grew up in a small, shitty town she’d always dreamed of escaping. One day, she met a man who was in town for a few months for business. He was handsome. Charming. He promised he’d take her with him when he left, and she believed him. She fell in love, and they had a passionate affair. But then, she got pregnant. And when she told this man who’d claimed to love her, he grew angry and accused her of trying to trap him. The next day, he was gone. Just like that. No trace of where he went, and it turned out even the name he gave her was fake. She was alone, pregnant, and broke. No friends and parents to help her out. She kept the baby, perhaps out of hope the man would return for them one day, but he never did. She turned to drugs and alcohol for comfort, and she became a different person. Meaner. Harder. She blamed the kid for ruining her chance at happiness, and she took out her anger and frustration on him. Usually with a belt.”

As he spoke, his voice so low I could barely hear him, the pieces fell into place one by one. Why Rhys refused to drink, why he rarely talked about his family and childhood, his C-PTSD... perhaps it was the result of his childhood as much as it had been his military service.

A small part of me empathized with his mother and the pain she must’ve gone through, but no amount of pain justified taking it out on an innocent child.

“It wasn’t the boy’s fault,” I said. A tear slid down my cheek before I could stop it. “I hope he knows that.”

“He knows,” Rhys said. He rubbed my tear away with his thumb. “Don’t cry for him, princess. He’s all right.”

For some reason, that made me cry harder. It was the first time I’d cried in front of anyone since my dad died, and I would’ve been embarrassed had I not been so

heartbroken.

“Shhh.” He wiped away another tear, his brows drawn into a deep frown. “I shouldn’t have told you. It’s not the best way to end a vacation.”

“No. I’m glad you did.” I reached up and covered his hand with mine before he could pull away. “Thank you for sharing it with me. It means a lot.”

It was the most Rhys had opened up to me since we met, and I wasn’t taking it for granted.



Summaryer