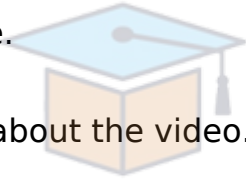


# Chapter 38: Bridget

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I WAS A MESS OF NERVES FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK. I TRIED TO HIDE IT, but everyone noticed—Rhys, Mikaela, my family. I blamed it on stress, but I wasn't sure anyone believed me.



I didn't tell anyone about the video. Not yet. The sender hadn't contacted me since, and my replies to their email all bounced. I convinced Nikolai and Sabrina's security team to sweep their house for bugs as a "preventative measure," but they didn't find anything, not even in the library.

It should've made me feel better, but it only put me more on edge. Whoever the sender was, they could move in and out of one of the city's most highly guarded buildings without being detected, and that wasn't good. At all.

My top suspect was Andreas, but he wasn't the type to hold back. If he had a damning video of me and Rhys, he would hold it over my head. Taunt me with it. Probably blackmail me. He wouldn't send it once and not follow up again for almost a week.

He'd looked for me at the reception—I still didn't know what for, as I hadn't seen him since the wedding and he hadn't contacted me—but that was while Rhys and I were in the library.

If it wasn't Andreas, who could it be? And when would the other shoe drop?

Because there was another shoe. I was sure of it.

"Something's bothering you," Rhys said on our way back to the palace from a charity shop ribbon-cutting ceremony. "Don't tell me it's stress. It's not."

I mustered a weak smile. "You think you know everything."

I should tell Rhys. He'd know what to do. But a small, stupid, selfish part of me was afraid of what telling him would do to us. If he found out someone knew about us, would he withdraw and break things off?

If I didn't tell him, though, the video could blow up in our faces, and I'd lose him anyway.

My head ached with indecision.

"I know everything about you." Rhys's words rolled over me, deep and confident.

Just tell him. Get it over with like ripping off a Band-Aid. Otherwise, the secret would hang over my head for God knew how long, like a guillotine waiting to strike.

Before I could broach the subject, however, the car stopped. I'd been so caught up in my thoughts I hadn't realized we were heading away from the palace instead of toward it.

Rhys had parked on the side of the road, next to a forest on the outskirts of Athenberg. I'd camped there once with Nikolai in high school—under strict supervision, of course—but I hadn't been back since.

"Trust me," he said when he noticed my confusion, which only increased as he led me through the forest. A clear trail snaked between the trees, so other people must've taken the shortcut, even though the forest had a main entrance with a gift shop and parking lot.

"Where are we going?" I whispered, not wanting to break the reverent hush blanketing the trees.

"You'll see."

Cryptic as always.

I sighed, equally annoyed and intrigued.

Part of me wanted to tell him about the video now, but I couldn't very well ruin the mood before I saw the surprise, could I?

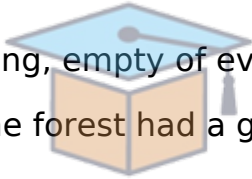
Excuses, excuses, my conscience whispered.

I ignored it.

When we arrived at our destination, though, I couldn't hold back a small gasp.

"Rhys..."

We stood in a clearing, empty of everything except for a large, beautiful gazebo. I didn't even know the forest had a gazebo.



My heart pinched at the clear callback to our first time together.

"If we get caught, pull rank." Rhys held out his hand. I took it and followed him inside the wooden structure. "We're pretty far from the main trail though, so we should be fine."

"How did you find this place? You're like the Gazebo Whisperer."

He laughed. "I planned on hiking here sometime and studied the trail maps. The gazebo isn't a secret. Most people are just too lazy to come all the way out here."

"Why..." I trailed off again when he fiddled with something on his phone and soft music filled the air.

"We never got to dance at the wedding," he said simply.

"You don't like it when I dance," I half-joked, trying to hide the emotion welling in my chest. What happened in the library during Nikolai's reception would forever be etched in my mind.

"I love it when you dance. But only with me." He placed his free hand on the small of my back.

"You don't dance."

“Only with you.”

The burn intensified. “Careful, Mr. Larsen, or I’ll think you actually like me.”

His mouth curled into a grin. “Baby, we’re way beyond like.”

The butterflies in my stomach exploded, and a sweet, golden warmth filled my veins.

For the first time in days, I smiled.

I stepped into Rhys’s embrace, and we swayed to the music while I buried my face in his chest and inhaled his clean, comforting scent.

Our dances would always be ours. Secret, private...forbidden. Part of me cherished the moments that belonged to us alone, but part of me wished we didn’t have to hide. We weren’t a dirty secret. We were the most beautiful thing in my life, and I wanted to share it with the world the way all beautiful things deserved to be shared.

“Where’d you go, princess?” He skimmed his knuckles down my back, and I smiled through the ache in my heart.

He knew me so well.

“I’m right here.” I tilted my face up and kissed him. We took it slow and sweet, exploring each other with the leisure of people who had all the time in the world.

Except we didn’t.

The kiss, the music, the gazebo...it was the perfect moment. But, like all moments, it couldn’t last.

Eventually, it would end, and so would we.

**“BRIDGET, WAKE UP!”**

The next morning, loud pounding roused me from my sleep.

I groaned, my body resisting movement even as my heart involuntarily galloped at the sheer panic in Mikaela's voice.

"Bridget!" More pounding.

"One moment!" I forced myself out of bed and threw on a dressing gown before I opened the door, taking in Mikaela's wide eyes and nervous expression. Her skin was paler than usual, making her freckles stand out like a dark constellation across her nose and cheeks.

She lived only a few minutes from the palace, but she wouldn't be here so early unless it was an emergency.



"What is it?"

Was it the video?

My stomach lurched. God, I should've told Rhys yesterday, but I hadn't wanted to destroy our time at the gazebo, and then...then... Oh, who was I kidding? I had plenty of time to tell him afterward. I'd just chickened out like a coward, and now, the chickens were coming home to roost.

Breathe. Stay calm. You don't know what's actually happening yet.

"It's..." Mikaela hesitated. "Bridge, turn on The Daily Tea."

The Daily Tea was a celebrity news and entertainment media company that included the country's most-read magazine and one of its most-watched television stations. Some considered it trashy, but it had a huge audience.

Mikaela followed me to the sitting room, where I picked up the remote with shaky hands and turned on the TV.

"...reports Princess Bridget is in a relationship with her bodyguard, an American contractor named Rhys Larsen." The Daily Tea host's voice trembled with excitement. "Larsen has been by her side since her senior year at the prestigious Thayer University

in the U.S., and suspicions about their relationship have abounded for years...”

For years? That was, for lack of better words, utter bull crap. Rhys and I hadn’t even liked each other years ago.

I watched, disbelief searing through me, as candid pictures of us flashed on-screen with the host’s voiceover commentary. Us walking down the street with Rhys’s hand on my lower back—to steer me around a puddle when I wasn’t looking, if I remembered correctly. Rhys helping me out of the car at a charity gala while our eyes locked onto each other. Me standing a little too close to him at an outdoor event a few months ago, but only because it was freezing and I needed the body warmth.

All innocent moments that, framed in a certain way and captured at a certain second, made them look like more than they were.

Then the more damning photos surfaced. Rhys glaring at Steffan during our ice-skating date, looking for all the world like a jealous boyfriend. Him pressing me against the car in the parking lot of the Royal Botanic Gardens. Us leaving the hotel where we’d spent that one glorious afternoon, our heads bent close together.

How the hell had someone captured those pictures? Other than the ice rink, we hadn’t spotted any paparazzi following us. Then again, we’d been distracted—horribly so.

On the bright side, there was no mention of the sex tape. If The Daily Tea had gotten their hands on it, it would be the only thing they talked about.

“Is this true?” Mikaela asked, her eyes huge. “Tell me it’s not true.”

“They’re just pictures,” I deflected.

I breathed a little easier. Only a little, because it was still a huge mess, but it was fixable. They didn’t have the video. “We can—”

“BRIDGET!”

Mikaela and I exchanged wide-eyed glances as my grandfather's bellow thundered down the hall.

Uh-oh.

AN HOUR LATER, I SAT IN MY GRANDFATHER'S OFFICE WITH ELIN, Markus, and Nikolai, who'd insisted on joining the emergency meeting. Mikaela had been politely but firmly dismissed. I wasn't sure where Rhys was, but it would only be a matter of time before he was roped into the conversation.

"Your Highness, you must tell us the truth. It's the only way we can help you fix this." Whenever Elin was pissed, her left eye would twitch, and right now, it was twitching hard enough to pop a blood vessel. "Is there any truth to the allegations?"

I'd reached a fork in the road.

I could either lie and drag out the charade, or I could tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may.

If I did the latter, Rhys would be fired, but he was probably already on the chopping block whether or not the allegations were true. He was too high profile now, and people would gossip regardless. The palace couldn't afford that kind of distraction.

But if I lied, I could at least buy us some time. Not a lot, but some, and that was better than nothing.

"Bridge, you can trust us," Nikolai said gently. "We're here to help you."

Not really, I wanted to say. You're here to help the crown and its reputation.

Perhaps that was unfair, but it was true to varying extents. They didn't care about me, Bridget. They cared about the princess, the crown, and our image.

My grandfather and brother loved me, but when it came down to it, they would choose what was good for the royal family as an institution over what was good for me.

I didn't fault them for it. It was what they had to do, but it meant I couldn't trust them with my best interests.

The only person who had ever seen me and put me first was Rhys.

I looked around the room. There was my grandfather, whose expression remained neutral even as anger and worry flickered in his eyes. Markus, tight-faced and tight-lipped, who was no doubt fantasizing about wringing my neck. Elin, who for once wasn't looking at her phone but was instead staring at me with bated breath. And finally, Nikolai, by far the most sympathetic of the bunch, though wariness creased his brow.



Then I thought about Rhys. His rough hands and rough voice, and the way he held me. Kissed me. Looked at me, like he never wanted to blink.

Baby, we're way beyond like.

I took a deep breath, steeled myself, and took a fork in the road.

"The allegations are true," I said. "All of them."

I heard a sharp intake of breath all around. Markus pinched his temple while Elin flew into action, her fingers moving over her phone fast enough to start a Category Four hurricane.

Disappointment carved deep grooves into Edvard's face. "Mr. Larsen's employment is terminated, effective immediately," he said, his tone sharper than I'd ever heard it. "You will end the relationship and never see or speak to him again."

He spoke not as my grandfather, but as my king.

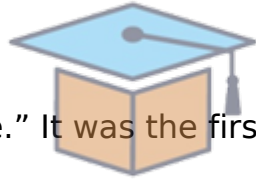
My nails dug into my thighs. "No."

Another sharp intake of breath from everyone present.



Edvard straightened, the remaining neutrality in his face giving way to anger. I'd never disobeyed him, not when it came to the big things. I loved and respected him, and I hated disappointing him. But I was sick and tired of other people dictating how I should live and who I should be with. While I would never have the freedom of a normal person, one who hadn't been born into this life, I had to draw the line somewhere. How was I supposed to rule a country if I couldn't even rule my own life?

"I can't stop you from firing Rhys," I said. "But I'm not ending my relationship with him."



Summarver

"Oh, for fuck's sake." It was the first time I'd ever heard Markus curse. "Your Highness, he is—was—your bodyguard. He is a commoner. You are first in line to the throne, and the law dictates—"

"I know what the law dictates. I have a plan."

Well, half a plan, but if I rounded up, it was a full plan. I knew what I needed to do, I just needed to figure out how to do it. There were a handful of ministers I was certain would support a repeal of the Royal Marriages Law, but the others needed overwhelming public support for political cover.

However, if I brought up the issue now, with the allegations floating around, I might as well wave a sign screaming It's true! I'm in a relationship with my bodyguard!

Edvard's face reddened while Markus glared at me.