

# Chapter 34: Bridget

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"IS EVERYTHING OKAY?" SABRINA ASKED AFTER I EXITED THE BATHROOM. She'd knocked to check on me, and I realized I'd been gone for almost half an hour.

"Yes. I just had to deal with some last-minute prep for an event next week," I said, ashamed of how easily the lie rolled off my tongue. "Apologies."

"No need to apologize." Sabrina gestured to her sister and best friend, who'd passed out on the couch while *The Devil Wears Prada* played on-screen. "At least you're awake."

I let out a small laugh. "We should go to sleep soon. You have a big day tomorrow."

"You're probably right. I can't believe it's almost here." Sabrina fiddled with her engagement ring, looking overwhelmed and a little lost. "It feels surreal. I wanted a small wedding, but..."

"You got a three-ring circus?" I sank onto the couch next to her. "Welcome to the royal life. Even if Nik abdicated, he's still a royal by blood, and everything he does is a reflection of the crown."

"I know. I just hope I don't embarrass myself." Sabrina gave me a nervous smile before her expression grew serious. "Bridget, I know we don't know each other that well, but I wanted to thank you for agreeing to be part of my bridal party. Truly. It means a lot to me."

"Of course. You're going to be my sister-in-law."

When Nikolai first told me about his abdication, I resented her. It wasn't something I was proud of, but it was true. If he hadn't met Sabrina, he'd still be Crown Prince, and

I'd be living my life in New York.

But as I stared at her now, I realized I wouldn't go back to my life in the U.S. even if I could. It had been an illusion of freedom, nothing else. I'd been trapped in the same day-in, day-out monotony of fake smiles and mind-numbing events. Being crown princess came with more rules and a smaller cage, but it also came with more purpose, and that was the one thing that'd always been missing in my life. Somehow, somewhere along the way, I'd grown into my new role. It would take a while before I was fully comfortable with it, but I was getting there.

"Yes. Good ones, I hope." Sabrina squeezed my hand. "I love Nikolai, and I'd be lying if I said I'm not happy he abdicated. But I also know what a huge burden it placed on you, and for that, I'm sorry."

"No apologies needed. You did nothing wrong except fall in love."

I knew that. I'd always known that. But it wasn't until I said it at that moment that any lingering resentment I had toward Nikolai and Sabrina faded away.

It wasn't their fault. There were no wrong choices. If Nikolai had chosen the throne over Sabrina, it would've been devastating for him, but it would've been understandable. If he'd chosen Sabrina, as he had, that was understandable too. Love or country. An impossible choice when the future of a nation rests on your shoulders.

The only thing at fault was the system that forced him to choose.

"My brother adores you," I added. Nikolai and I weren't super close, but I knew him well enough to spot the difference. He changed into a different person when he was around Sabrina, a happier one, and I would never begrudge him that.

Sabrina's face lit up, erasing some of the earlier stress. "It still feels like a dream sometimes," she admitted. "To meet someone who sees me for who I am, faults and all, and loves me regardless." She squeezed my hand again, her eyes wise beyond her twenty-five years. "I hope you find that kind of love one day, too. Whether it's with

Steffan or someone else.”

Trust me, princess. I would rather end my own life than ask you to do anything that might hurt you.

I forced a smile. “One day.”

But later that night, as I stared at the ceiling and thought about Rhys, Steffan, and my less-than-certain efforts to repeal the Royal...



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