

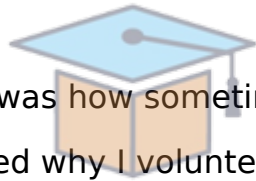
Chapter 3: Bridget

Chapter 3: Bridget reminded me just how complicated it could be living with a bodyguard around the clock. Sharing space with Rhys wasn't like it had been with Booth; everything with Rhys was heightened, tense, and oddly intimate in a way that unsettled me more than I liked admitting. Our small house suddenly felt even smaller, with Rhys's constant presence looming in the corners of every room. He was always there, whether brewing coffee in the kitchen, emerging fully clothed after a shower, or punishing the backyard pull-up bar with a workout that would humble Olympic athletes. It felt strangely domestic in a way that made my chest tighten, and I hated it. I couldn't stop noticing things I shouldn't, like the way his muscles bunched under his black shirts or how easily sweat trailed down his temple in the late fall heat. Every encounter chipped away at the wall I tried to rebuild after our last temporary ceasefire.

I fumbled for distance, clinging to sarcasm like a life raft, but Rhys caught every slip with infuriating precision. That afternoon, while he was working out in clothes clearly meant for autumn weather, I found myself watching instead of reading, much to my own horror. I accused him of trying to cook himself alive, but he shot back a comment about me secretly wanting him to strip. The worst part? A tiny, ridiculous part of me actually wondered what he looked like without the ever-present barrier of cotton and discipline. I tried to brush it off, retreating inside with whatever scraps of dignity I had left, but even the air-conditioning couldn't cool the heat burning beneath my skin. Our constant sniping was supposed to keep him at arm's length. Instead, it added to the strange, simmering tension neither of us dared to name aloud.

Time didn't soften things much. Over the next few days, Rhys's silent judgment followed me everywhere, including to my volunteer shifts at Wags & Whiskers. If it weren't for Wendy and the playful shelter animals, I might have lost my mind. Wendy thought Rhys was mysterious and hot, like some forbidden romance novel hero. I

almost choked when she suggested switching lives with me. She didn't have to live with the man glaring at my every move like I was seconds away from getting myself killed. Rhys's vigilance never wavered, not even when the only danger around was a parrot named Leather shouting scandalous things from his cage. Watching him be so hyper-aware even in a room full of cats and chew toys made me wonder how exhausting it had to be, living with every nerve stretched tight like a bowstring. But when I asked, he just answered with one word—no—and shut me out again, like he always did.



The strangest part was how sometimes, he slipped. Little cracks appeared between us, like the day he asked why I volunteered at the shelter. His question wasn't mocking or condescending; it was almost...curious. For a moment, I dropped my guard and told him about my mother, how she passed down her love for animals to me, and how working at shelters made me feel closer to her. I hadn't shared that with anyone outside my close circle, but Rhys's steady presence drew it out without trying. His simple response—"I understand"—was so unexpected, so genuine, that it lodged in my heart before I could shield myself. We had this moment, this strange connection where the walls between us wavered. But, like always, it didn't last. Leather's inappropriate squawk shattered the fragile peace, and we both retreated to our respective corners, pretending it hadn't happened at all.

Even after that, something had shifted. Rhys wasn't quite as sharp-edged around me, and though we didn't speak much, the silences felt less hostile. I let myself hope that maybe, just maybe, we could get through this strange living arrangement without killing each other. That hope evaporated during one of our walks back from the shelter. Hazelburg was one of the safest towns in America, but when a car screeched around the corner too fast, Rhys reacted with military precision, shoving me into an alley and covering me with his body. For several heartbeats, all I could feel was his heat, his strength, and the wild rhythm of both our pulses hammering through the thin space between us. He didn't move until the car disappeared and the adrenaline began to ebb, but the imprint of his body on mine lingered long after we stepped back into

the street.

The incident sparked another argument—no more walking, he insisted. Drive or nothing. I argued back, frustrated by the constant control, but deep down I knew he wasn't trying to control me because he wanted power. He did it because the idea of me getting hurt twisted him up inside. I didn't know what scared me more: the idea that he cared, or the idea that one day, I might care too much in return. For a girl who had spent her whole life dodging emotional attachments, that thought was dangerous. Safer to keep our battles about logistics and stubbornness than to even glance at the battlefield stirring under the surface. Yet no matter how much I told myself it was all professional, the way his eyes softened for a split second after checking me for injuries said otherwise.

During our final few days before leaving for Eldorra, a new, heavier tension hung between us. It wasn't just the usual friction anymore; it was layered with something heavier, something neither of us wanted to acknowledge. Packing my bags became an exercise in avoidance, shoving things into suitcases with unnecessary force while pretending I didn't notice how Rhys watched from the doorway. Eldorra meant Christmas, family, duties—and now him, woven into all of it. The idea of Rhys in the palace unsettled me in ways I didn't want to admit. The contrast between his brooding strength and the fragile traditions of the royal court would be stark. Worse, it would be a constant reminder that no matter how well I wore my crown, the life I really wanted might always be just out of reach.

I thought maybe distance would make it easier, but as we boarded the plane to Eldorra, Rhys's solid, silent figure next to me said otherwise. He was already too close, even when he didn't speak a word. I pressed my forehead to the cold window and closed my eyes, wishing I could leave my tangled feelings behind like forgotten luggage on the tarmac. But the truth clung to me stubbornly, whispering that no matter how many continents we crossed, some battles you couldn't outrun. And some people you couldn't ignore, no matter how desperately you tried.