

Chapter 6: Bridget

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TRIAL MONTH ONE

“You’re joking.” I pulled the black vest out of the package, letting it dangle from my fingers like a dirty piece of laundry.

Rhys sipped his coffee and didn’t look up from his newspaper. “I don’t joke about safety.”

“This is a bulletproof vest.”

“I’m aware. I bought it.”

Inhale. Exhale. “Mr. Larsen, please explain why I need a bulletproof vest. Where am I supposed to wear it, class? My next volunteer shift?”

“To protect you against bullets, and sure. If you’d like.”

A muscle twitched beneath my eye. It’d been a month since we agreed to our deal, and I got it. I’d messed up. I never should’ve snuck out with Ava, but she’d been so down about her relationship troubles with Alex, and I’d wanted to cheer her up.

Obviously, it had backfired, big time.

The kidnapping incident had thrown a bucket of cold water over my previously rosy outlook on personal safety, and I was committed to acting more responsibly. I hated admitting when Rhys was right because he was such an arrogant ass about it most of the time, but he put his life on the line for me every day. However, he also seemed intent on making me renege on the deal by throwing the most outrageous suggestions my way.

Like a freakin' bulletproof vest.

"I bought the vest as a just-in-case item," Rhys said mildly. "Now that you mention it, we should take it for a test spin next time you're in public."

Take out the chip, and I'll do what you say, when you say it, as long as it's security-related. I promise.

I gritted my teeth. Rhys had taken the chip out, and I didn't break my promises.

"Fine." A lightbulb flashed in my head, and a slow smile spread across my face. "I'll put it on now."



He finally raised his head, his face dark with suspicion at how easily I'd capitulated.

"Where are we going?"

"Shopping."

If there was one thing Rhys hated, it was accompanying me shopping. It was such a stereotypical male weakness, and I fully intended to exploit it. My smile widened when his face darkened further.

This is going to be fun.

An hour later, we arrived at the Hazelburg Mall, a four-story mecca of stores I could torture Rhys with. Luckily, it was winter, which meant I could hide most of the vest's bulk beneath a chunky sweater and coat.

According to Rhys, he'd bought a lighter version for me, but the vest was still hot, heavy, and awkward. I almost regretted my shopping revenge plan, but Rhys's ferocious scowl made it all worth it... until catastrophe struck.

I was trying on clothes in our dozenth boutique of the day when I got stuck in a dress. I'd accidentally grabbed the wrong size, and the unforgiving material dug into my ribcage while trapping my arms above my head. I couldn't see, and I could barely move.

“Shit.” I rarely cursed, but the situation called for it. One of my lifelong irrational fears was getting stuck in clothing in a store.

“What’s wrong?” Rhys demanded from outside the dressing room. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” I pinched the sides of the dress and tried pulling it up again, to no avail. “I’m fine.”

Ten minutes later, I was sweating and panting from exertion and the lack of fresh air, and my arms ached from being held up so long. Shit, shit, shit.

“What the hell is going on in there?” Rhys’s annoyance came through the door, loud and clear. “You’re taking too long.”

I had no choice. I had to ask for help. “Can you call a sales assistant over? I need their help with a, uh, clothing issue.”

There was a long pause. “You’re stuck.”

Flames of embarrassment licked my skin. “Just call someone over. Please.”

“Can’t. One employee left for lunch, and the other is six people deep at the register.” Figured Rhys would be tracking everyone’s movements while he waited for me. “I’ll help.”

If I could see my reflection, I was sure I’d see a mask of horror staring back at me. “No. You can’t come in here!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m...” Half-naked. Exposed. “Indecent.”

“I’ve seen half-naked women before, princess. Either let me in so I can get you out of whatever jam you’re in, or sit tight for the next hour because that’s how long it’s gonna take the cashier to get through the weekend crowd. They’re moving slower than

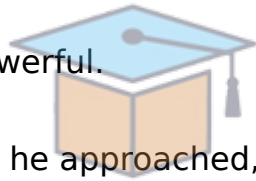
a turtle on morphine.”

The universe hated me. I was sure of it.

“Fine.” I forced the word out, the flames of embarrassment burning hotter. “Come in.”

The dressing room doors didn’t have locks, and a second later, Rhys’s presence filled the tiny space. Even if I hadn’t heard him enter, I would’ve felt him. He exuded an intense energy that charged every molecule of air until it vibrated with him.

Raw. Masculine. Powerful.



Summaryer

I held my breath as he approached, his boots soft on the linoleum floor. For someone so large, he moved with the grace of a panther. The dress covered my chest, but my lace panties were on full display, and I tried not to think about how much skin I was showing as Rhys stopped in front of me. He was close enough I could feel the heat radiating from his body and smell his clean, soapy scent.

Tension and silence hummed in equal measure when he gripped the hem of the dress above my head and pulled. It slid up half a centimeter before it stopped again, and I winced when the fabric dug into a fresh section of flesh.

“I’m going to try from the bottom up,” Rhys said, his voice detached and controlled.

Bottom up. Meaning he had to put his hands on my bare skin.

“Okay.” It came out squeakier than I would’ve liked.

Every muscle tensed when he rested his palms on the top of my ribcage. He smoothed his thumbs briefly over the chafed area where the dress had dug into my skin before he hooked his fingers beneath the material as much as he could and inched it up.

I couldn’t hold my breath anymore.

I finally exhaled, my chest heaving like it was trying to push itself deeper into Rhys’s rough, warm touch. The breaths sounded embarrassingly loud in the silence.

Rhys paused. The dress was halfway up my shoulders now, enough to bare my bra-clad chest.

“Calm your breathing, princess, or this ain’t gonna work,” he said, sounding a touch more strained than he had a minute ago.

Heat scorched my skin, but I wrestled my breathing under control, and he resumed his work.

Another inch...another...and I was free.

Fresh air assaulted my nostrils, and I blinked to adjust to the light after being trapped in the dress for the past twenty minutes.

I clutched the material in front of me, my face hot with embarrassment and relief.

“Thank you.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Rhys stepped back, his jaw like granite. Instead of responding, he picked up the bulletproof vest and T-shirt I’d worn beneath it and crooked his finger. “Come here.”

“I can put it on myself.”

Again, no response.

I sighed and walked to where he stood. I was too tired to fight, and I didn’t resist when he slipped the T-shirt over my head, followed by the vest. I watched him in the mirror while he worked, adjusting the vest and straps until it sat comfortably on my torso. I still held my dress in front of me, angling it so it covered my underwear.

I didn’t know why I bothered. Rhys showed as much interest in my half-naked form as he would in a foam mannequin.

A strange needle of irritation pricked at me.

Rhys finished fixing the vest, but before I could step away, his hands closed around my biceps in an iron grip. They were so large they easily encircled my arms.

He locked eyes with me in the mirror and lowered his head until his mouth hovered next to my ear.

My heart skipped a frantic beat, and I clutched the dress tighter in front of me.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve been doing all day.”

Rhys’s breath whispered across my skin in a dark warning. “I indulged you this time, princess, but I don’t like games. Lucky for you, you passed the test.” He slid his hands up my arms until they rested on my vest-clad shoulders, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. “You need to learn how to follow instructions without arguing. I don’t care if you think I’m being ridiculous. A second’s delay can mean the difference between life and death. I say duck, you duck. I say wear a bulletproof vest to the fucking beach, you wear the vest. Understand?”

My grip strangled the dress. “The vest was a test to see if I would wear it? That is so...underhanded.” An entire day wasted on a stupid test. Indignation unfurled in my stomach. “I hate when you do stuff like this.”

A grim half-smile touched Rhys’s lips. “I’d rather you hate me alive than love me dead.” He released my shoulders. “Get dressed. We’re leaving.”

The door shut behind him.

I could finally breathe easy again, but I couldn’t stop his words from echoing in my mind.

I’d rather you hate me alive than love me dead.

The problem was, I didn’t hate him. I hated his rules and restrictions, but I didn’t hate him.

I wished I did.

It would make my life a lot simpler.

TRIAL MONTH THREE

"I can't go."

"What do you mean you can't go?" Jules's disbelief oozed over the line. "We've been talking about the festival since sophomore year. We have coordinated outfits. Stella rented a car! We might die on the road because she's a terrible driver—"

"I heard that!" Stella yelled in the background.

"—but she's the only one with a license."

"I know." I glared at Rhys, who sat on the couch polishing a knife like a psycho. "A certain bodyguard deemed it unsafe."

My friends and I had planned on attending the Rokbury music festival for years, and now, I had to sit it out.

"So? Come anyway. He works for you, not the other way around."

I wished I could, but we were still in the trial period of our deal, and Rhys's concerns weren't totally off base. Rokbury took place at a campground an hour and a half outside New York City, and while it looked like a blast, something inevitably went wrong every year—a festival-goer's tent catching fire, a drunken group fight leading to several hospitalizations, a panic-induced stampede. It was also supposed to storm the weekend of this year's festival, which meant the campground would probably turn into a giant mud pit, but my friends were risking it, anyway.

"Sorry, J. Next time."

Jules sighed. "Tell your man he's hot as hell but a total buzzkill."

"He's not my man. He's my bodyguard." I lowered my voice, but I thought I saw Rhys pause for a millisecond before he resumed polishing his knife.

"Even worse. He's running your life and you're not getting any dick from it."

“Jules.”

“You know it’s true.” Another sigh. “Fine, I get it. We’ll miss you, but we’ll catch up when we’re back.”

“Sounds good.”

I hung up and sank into the armchair, FOMO—Fear of Missing Out—hitting me hard. I’d bought the festival tickets months ago, before Rhys started working for me, and I’d had to sell them to a random junior in my political theory class.

“I hope you’re happy,” I said pointedly.

He didn’t respond.

Rhys and I had settled into a more functional dynamic over the past three months, but there were still times I wanted to chuck a textbook at him. Like now.

When the day of the festival rolled around the following weekend, however, I woke up to the shock of my life.

I walked into the living room, bleary-eyed, only to find it transformed. The furniture had been pushed to the side, replaced with a pile of boho-printed pillows and cushions on the floor. The coffee table groaned beneath various snacks and drinks, and the Rokbury festival played out in real time on-screen. The pièce de résistance, however, was the indoor tent decorated with string lights, which looked exactly like the ones people set up on the festival grounds.

Rhys sat on the couch, which was now pressed flush against the wall beneath the window, frowning at his phone.

“What...” I rubbed my eyes. Nope, I wasn’t dreaming. The tent, the snacks, they were all there. “What is this?”

“Indoor festival,” he grunted.

"You put this together." It was a statement of disbelief more than a question.

"Reluctantly, and with help." Rhys glanced up. "Your redheaded friend is a menace."

Of course. That made more sense. My friends must've felt bad I was missing the festival, so they put together a consolation party, so to speak. But something didn't add up.

"They left last night."

"They dropped everything off beforehand while you were in the shower."

Hmm, plausible. I took long showers.

Appeased and delighted, I grabbed an armful of chips, candy, and soda and crawled into the cushioned tent, where I watched my favorite bands perform their sets on the TV. The sound and picture quality was so good I almost felt like I was there.

Admittedly, I was more comfortable than I would've been at the actual festival, but I missed having people to enjoy it with.

An hour in, I poked my head out from the tent, hesitant. "Mr. Larsen. Why don't you join me? There's plenty of food."

He was still sitting on the couch, frowning like a bear who'd woken up on the wrong side of the cave.

"No, thanks."

"Come on." I waved my hand around. "Don't make me party alone. That's just sad."

Rhys's mouth tugged in a small smirk before he unfolded himself from his seat. "Only because you listened about not attending the festival."

This time, I was the one who frowned. "You say it like you're training a dog."

"Most things in life are like training a dog."

“That’s not true.”

“Show up to work, get paid. Woo a girl, get laid. Study, get good grades. Action and reward. Society runs on it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he had a point.

“No one uses the word woo anymore,” I muttered. I hated when he was right.

His smirk deepened a fraction of an inch.

He was too large to fit in the tent with me, so he settled on the floor next to it. Despite my cajoling, he refused to touch the food, leaving me to inhale the snacks on my own.

Another hour later, I’d ingested so much sugar and carbs I felt a little sick, and Rhys looked bored enough to fall asleep.

“I take it you’re not a fan of electronic music.” I stretched and winced. The last bag of salt and vinegar chips had been a bad idea.

“It sounds like a Mountain Dew commercial gone wrong.”

I almost choked on my water. “Fair enough.” I wiped my mouth with a napkin, unable to hide my smile. Rhys was so serious I delighted whenever his stony mask cracked.

“So, tell me. If you don’t like EDM, what do you like?”

“Don’t listen to much music.”

“A hobby?” I persisted. “You must have a hobby.”

He didn’t answer, but the brief flash of wariness in his eyes told me all I needed to know.

“You do have one!” I knew so little about Rhys outside his job, I latched onto the morsel of information like a starved animal. “What is it? Let me guess, knitting. No, bird watching. No, cosplay.”

I picked the most random, un-Rhys-like hobbies I could think of.

“No.”

“Stamp collecting? Yoga? Pokémon—”

“If I tell you, will you shut up?” he said crankily.

I responded with a beatific smile. “I might.”

Rhys hesitated for a long moment before saying, “I draw, sometimes.”

Of all the things I’d expected him to say, that wasn’t even in the top hundred.

“What do you draw?” My tone turned teasing. “I imagine it’s a lot of armored vehicles and security alarms. Maybe a German Shepherd when you’re feeling warm and fuzzy.”

He snorted. “Except for the Shep, you make me sound boring as shit.”

I opened my mouth, and he held up his hand. “Don’t think about it.”

I closed my mouth, but my smile remained. “How did you get into drawing?”

“My therapist suggested it. Said it would help with my condition. Turns out, I enjoy it.”

He shrugged. “Therapist is gone, but the drawing stayed.”

Another bolt of surprise darted through me, both at the fact he’d had a therapist and that he spoke so freely about it. Most people wouldn’t admit to it so easily.

It made sense, though. He’d served in the military for a decade. I imagined he’d lived through his fair share of scarring experiences.

“PTSD?” I asked softly.

Rhys jerked his head in a quick nod. “Complex PTSD.” He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t press him. It was too personal an issue for me to pry into.

“I’m disappointed,” I said, changing the subject since I could feel him closing off again. “I’d really hoped you were into cosplay. You would make a good Thor, only with dark hair.”

“Second time you’ve tried to get me to take my shirt off, princess. Careful, or I’ll think you’re trying to seduce me.”

Heat consumed my face. “I’m not trying to get your shirt off. Thor doesn’t even—” I stopped when Rhys let out a low chuckle.

“You’re messing with me.”



Summaryer

“When you get riled up, your face looks like a strawberry.”

Between the indoor festival setup and the words “your face looks like a strawberry” leaving Rhys’s mouth, I was convinced I’d woken up in an alternate dimension.

“I do not look like a strawberry,” I said with as much dignity as I could muster. “At least I’m not the one who refuses to get surgery.”

Rhys’s thick, dark brows lowered.

“For your permanent scowl,” I clarified. “A good plastic surgeon can help you with that.”

My words hung in the air for a second before Rhys did something that shocked me to my core. He laughed.

A real laugh, not the half chuckle he’d let slip in Eldorra. His eyes crinkled, deepening the faint, oddly sexy lines around them, and his teeth flashed white against his tanned skin.

The sound slid over me, as rough and textured as I imagined his touch would be.

Not that I had ever imagined what his touch would feel like. It was hypothetical.

“Touché.” The remnants of amusement filled the corners of his mouth, transforming him from gorgeous to devastating.

And that was when another catastrophe happened, one far more disturbing than getting stuck in a too-tight dress in a public dressing room.

Something light and velvety brushed against my heart...and fluttered. Just once, but it was enough for me to identify it.

A butterfly.

No, no, no.



I loved animals, I truly did, but I could not have a butterfly living in my stomach. Not for Rhys Larsen. It needed to die immediately.

“Are you okay?” He gave me a strange look. “You look like you’re about to be sick.”

“Yes, I’m fine.” I refocused on the screen, trying my best not to look at him. “I ate too much, too fast. That’s all.”

But I was so flustered I couldn’t focus for the rest of the afternoon, and when it finally came time for bed, I couldn’t sleep a wink.

I could not be attracted to my bodyguard. Not in a way that gave me butterflies.

They’d only fluttered when we first met, but they’d died quickly after Rhys opened his mouth. Why were they returning now, when I had a full grasp of how insufferable he was?

Get yourself together, Bridget.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call, and I picked it up, grateful for the distraction.

“Bridge!” Jules bubbled, clearly tipsy. “How are you holding up, babe?”

“I’m in bed.” I laughed. “Having fun at the festival?”

“Yessss, but wish you were here. It’s not as fun without you.”

“Wish I was there, too.” I brushed a strand of hair out of my eye. “At least I had the indoor festival. That was a brilliant idea, by the way. Thank you.”

“Indoor festival?” Jules sounded confused. “What are you talking about?”

