

Chapter 13: Bridget

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THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WERE MISERABLE, NOT ONLY BECAUSE I WAS SICK and healing from my injuries, but because the lull in my public schedule gave me plenty of time to freak out about Nikolai's abdication.

I was going to be queen. Maybe not tomorrow or a month from now, but one day, and one day was far too soon.

I lifted my wineglass to my lips and stared up at the night sky. It was three weeks to the day since my conversation with Nikolai.

My concussion had healed, and I'd long since recovered from my cold. I still had to be careful with my wrist, but otherwise, I was up and running again, which meant I had to attend meeting after meeting about how and when to announce the abdication, how to handle the fallout, plans for my permanent move back to Eldorra, and a million other things that made my head spin.

That morning, my family, Markus, and I agreed on an official announcement a month from now. Or rather, everyone else agreed, and I went along with it because I didn't have a choice.

One month. One more month of freedom, and that was it.

I was about to take another drink when the door to the rooftop creaked open. I straightened, my mouth falling open when I saw Rhys step outside. Judging by the way his eyebrows shot up, he was as surprised to see me as I was him.

"What are you doing here?" we asked at the same time.

I huffed out a small laugh. “Mr. Larsen, this is my house. I should be the only one asking that question.”

“I didn’t think anyone came out here.” He took the seat next to me, and I tried not to notice how good he smelled, like soap and something indescribably Rhys. Clean, simple, masculine.

We were on the rooftop of one of the palace’s north towers, which could only be accessed via the service hallway near the kitchen. Compared to the palace’s actual, terraced rooftop garden, it was nothing, barely big enough for the chairs I’d bribed a staff member to help me bring up. But that was why I liked it. It was my secret haven, the place I escaped to when I needed to think and be away from prying eyes.

I drained the rest of my wine and reached for the bottle at my feet, only to realize it was empty. I rarely drank so much, but I needed something to ease the anxiety following me around like a black cloud these days.

“Just me. Most people don’t know about this place,” I said. “How did you find it?”

“I find everything.” Rhys smirked when I scrunched my nose at his arrogance. “I have the palace blueprints, princess. I know every nook and cranny of this place. It’s my—”

“Job,” I finished. “I know. You don’t have to keep saying it.”

He’d said the same thing in Dr. Hausen’s office. I wasn’t sure why it annoyed me so much. Maybe because, for a second, I could’ve sworn his worry for me went beyond his professional obligations. And maybe, for a second, I could’ve sworn I wanted it to. I wanted him to care about me as me, not as his client.

Rhys’s lips quirked before his gaze traveled to my forehead. “How’s the bruise?”

“Fading, thank the Lord.” It was now a pale yellowish green. Still unsightly, but better than the glaring purple it used to be. “And it doesn’t hurt so much anymore.”

“Good.” He brushed his fingers gently over the bruise, and my breath stuttered. Rhys never touched me unless he had to, but at that moment, he didn’t have to. Which meant he wanted to. “You gotta be more careful, princess.”

“You’ve said that already.”

“I’ll keep saying it until you get it in your head.”

“Trust me. It’s in my head. How can it not be when you keep nagging me?”

Despite my grumbles, I found a strange comfort in his nagging. In a world where everything else was changing, Rhys remained wonderfully, unrelentingly him, and I never wanted that to change.

His hand lingered on my forehead for another moment before he dropped it and pulled away, and oxygen returned to my lungs.

“So.” Rhys leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. He didn’t look at me as he asked, “Who do you usually bring up here?”

“What?” I cocked my head, confused. I never brought anyone up here.

“Two chairs.” He nodded at mine, then the one he was sitting in. “Who’s the second one for?” His tone was casual, but a tight current ran beneath it.

“No one. There are two chairs because...” I faltered. “I don’t know. I guess I hoped I’d find someone I wanted to bring up here one day.” I had silly, romantic notions of me and mystery guy sneaking up here to kiss and laugh and talk all night, but the chances of that were growing slimmer by the minute.

“Hmm.” Rhys was silent for a second before he said, “You want me to leave?”

“What?” I sounded like a broken record.

Maybe the hit to my head had scrambled my brains because I’d never been this inarticulate.

“Seems like this is your secret spot. Didn’t realize I was intruding when I came up here,” he said gruffly.

Something warm cascaded through my stomach. “You’re not intruding,” I said. “Stay. Please. I could use the company.”

“Okay.”

And that was that.

I couldn’t hold back a smile. I didn’t think I would enjoy sharing this space with anyone else, but I liked having Rhys here with me. He didn’t feel the need to fill the silence with unnecessary small talk, and his presence comforted me, even if he irritated me, too. When he was near, I was safe.

I stretched my legs out and accidentally knocked over the empty wine bottle, which rolled across the floor toward Rhys. I bent to pick it up at the same time he did, and our fingers brushed for a second.

No, not even a second. A millisecond. But it was enough to send electricity sizzling up my arm and down my spine.

I yanked my hand away, my skin hot, as he picked up the bottle and placed it on the other side of his chair, away from both our legs.

Our brief touch felt indecent, like we were doing something we weren’t supposed to do. Which was ridiculous. We hadn’t even planned it. It was an accident.

You’re overthinking.

The clouds shifted, unblocking part of the moon, and light spilled across the tower, illuminating part of Rhys’s face. It appeared grimmer than it had a moment ago.

Even so, he was beautiful. Not in a perfect, Greek god sculpture kind of way, but in a pure, unabashedly masculine way. The dark stubble, the small scar slashing through his eyebrow, the gunmetal eyes...

My stomach did a slow roll as I struggled not to focus on how alone we were up here. We could do anything, and no one would know.

No one except us.

“Heard we’re leaving next week,” Rhys said. I might’ve imagined it, but I thought he sounded strained, like he, too, was fighting back something he couldn’t quite control.

“Yes.” I hoped my voice didn’t come across as shaky as it did to my own ears. “My grandfather’s condition is steady for now, and I need to wrap up my affairs in New York before I move back.”



I realized my mistake before the words fully left my mouth.

I hadn’t told Rhys about Nikolai’s abdication yet, which meant he didn’t know about my plans to move back to Athenberg.

Permanently.

Rhys stilled. “Move back?” He sounded calm, but the storm brewing in his eyes was anything but. “Here?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“You didn’t mention that, princess.” Still calm, still dangerous, like the eye of a hurricane. “Seems like an important thing for me to know.”

“It’s not finalized, but that’s the plan. I...want to be closer to my grandfather.” That was partly true. He’d recovered nicely from his hospital visit and he had people monitoring him around the clock, but I still worried about him and wanted to be close by should anything happen. However, as crown princess, I was also required to return to Athenberg for my queen training. I was already behind by decades.

Rhys’s nostrils flared. “When were you planning to tell me this?”

“Soon,” I whispered.

The palace was keeping Nikolai's abdication under tight wraps, and I wasn't supposed to talk about it until closer to the official announcement. I could've told Rhys I was moving back to Eldorra earlier using the excuse I just gave him, but I'd wanted to pretend everything was normal for a while longer.

It was stupid, but my mind had been all over the place lately, and I couldn't make sense of my own actions.

Something flickered in Rhys's eyes. If I didn't know better, I would think he was hurt. "Well, now you can finally be rid of me," he said lightly, but his face might as well have been etched from stone. "I'll talk to my boss on Monday, get the paperwork started for the transition."

Transition.

My breath, my heart. Everything stopped. "You're resigning?"

"You don't need me here. You have the Royal Guard. I resign, or the palace releases me from my contract. Same ending."

The thought hadn't crossed my mind, but it made sense. The palace had hired Rhys because they hadn't wanted to pull any Royal Guard members away from their family when I was living in the U.S. Now that I was moving back, they didn't need a contractor.

"But I..." I do need you.

Rhys and I may not have gotten along in the beginning, but now, I couldn't imagine not having him by my side.

The kidnapping. Graduation. My grandfather's hospitalization. Dozens of trips, hundreds of events, thousands of tiny moments like the time he'd ordered me chicken soup when I was sick or when he'd lent me his jacket after I left mine at home.

He'd been with me through it all.

“So, that’s it.” I blinked away the ache behind my eyes. “We have one more month and then you’ll just...leave.”

Rhys’s eyes darkened to a near black, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. “Don’t worry, princess. Maybe you’ll get Booth as your bodyguard again. It’ll be like old times for you two.”

I was suddenly, irrationally angry. At him, his dismissive tone, the entire situation.

