

“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?”



Chapter 40: Bridget

Chapter 40: Bridget

DON'T LOOK AT HIM.

If I looked at him, I would lose it, and I was already half out of my mind. The stress, guilt, and exhaustion of the past four days had seeped into my bones, turning me into a walking zombie. But I **couldn't** help myself. I looked. And my heart promptly splintered into even more pieces than it already had.

Rhys stared at me, so still he could've passed for a statue had it not been for the pain flickering in his eyes.

"Had?" That calm, even tone never boded well.

"It was fun while it lasted." The words tasted bitter on my tongue, like poison pills of lies I fed myself to get through the next hour and possibly the rest of my life. "But people know. Everyone's watching us. We can't continue whatever...this is."

"Fun." Still in that dangerously calm voice.

"Rhys." I wrapped my arms tighter around myself. The hospital staff had set the temperature to a comfortable seventy-three degrees, but my skin felt like ice beneath my palms. "Please don't make this any harder than it has to be."

Please let my heart break in peace.

"The hell I won't." His gray eyes had darkened to a near black, and a vein throbbed in his temple. "Tell me something, princess. Are you doing this because you want to, or because you feel like you have to?"

"I don't feel like I have to. I do have to!" Frustration seared through me, sharp and hot. Didn't he get it? "It's only a matter of time before the press confirms the allegations. Elin and Markus and my family already know. What do you think is going to happen once it's all out in the open?"

"Your Majesty!"

"Grandfather!"

Nikolai, Markus, and Elin rushed to Edvard's side while I stood there, unable to move. I should join them. Make sure he was okay.

But of course, he wasn't okay. He'd just collapsed...because of me and what I said. Because I thought, for one second, I could have a semblance of control over my life. If he died, the last conversation we had would have been an argument.

"You will end the relationship and never see Mr. Larsen again."

"No."

Something inside me shriveled into a husk.

"Bridget..."

The sound of my name, deep and raw, scraped against my willpower, leaving dents in something that had never been strong to begin with. Not when it came to him.

I closed my eyes, trying to find the cool, unshakable version of myself I presented to the public. The one who'd smiled through hours of standing and waving while my feet bled through my heels. The one who'd walked behind my father's casket and held back tears until I crumpled into a ball in the bathroom during the wake.

But I couldn't. I'd never been able to hide who I truly was from Rhys.

I heard him walk toward me. Smelled that clean, masculine scent that had become my comfort scent over the years because it meant he was near and I was safe. Felt him rub away a tear I hadn't even noticed had escaped with his thumb.

Don't look at him. Don't look at him.

"Princess, look at me."

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut tighter. My emotions formed a tight knot in my throat, making it near impossible to breathe.

"Bridget." Firmer this time, more commanding. "Look at me."

I resisted for another minute, but the need to save myself from further heartache paled compared to my need to soak in every last bit of Rhys Larsen I could.

I looked at him.

Gray thunderstorms stared back at me, crackling with turmoil.

"The mess with the pictures, we'll figure it out." He grasped my chin and rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip, his expression fierce. "I told you, you're mine, and I'm not letting you go. I don't care if the entire Eldorran military tries to drag me away."

I wished it were that easy and I could sink into his faith, letting it sweep me away.

But our problems went way beyond the pictures now.

"You don't get it. There is no happily ever after for us." We weren't a fairytale. We were a forbidden love letter, tucked into the back of a drawer and retrieved only in the darkness of night. We were the chapter of bliss before the climax hit and everything crumbled into ash. We were a story that was always meant to end. "This is it."

My mother died giving birth to me.

My father died on his way back from buying something I'd asked him to get.

My grandfather almost died because I'd refused to give up the one thing that ever made me happy.

That was what I got for being selfish, for wanting something for me. Future queens didn't live for themselves, they lived for their country. That was the price of power.

No matter how much I tried to change reality, it remained the truth, and it was time I grew up and faced it.

Rhys's grip on my chin tightened. "I don't need a happily ever after. I need to be by your side. I need you happy and healthy and safe. Goddammit Bridget, I need you. In any way I can have you."

His voice broke for the first time in all my years with him, and my heart cracked in response. "If you think I'm leaving you to deal with this bullshit alone, you don't know me at all."

Trouble was, I did know him, and I knew the one thing that would make him snap, but I couldn't bring myself to say it right now.

One last selfish thing.

"Kiss me," I whispered.

Rhys didn't question the sudden shift in my tone. Instead, he curled his hand around the back of my neck and crushed his lips to mine. Deep, hard, and possessive, like nothing had changed between us.

He always knew what I needed without me saying it.

I drank up every drop of him I could. His taste, his touch, his scent...I wished I could bottle it all up so I had something to keep me warm in the nights and years to come.

Rhys picked me up and carried me to the couch, where he pulled my skirt up and my panties down and sank into me with exquisite, deliberate slowness. Stretching me. Filling me. Breaking me into a thousand pieces and putting me back together, over

and over again.

Even if my heart ached, my body responded to him the way it always had: eager, willing, and desperate for more.

Rhys palmed my breast and swiped his thumb over my nipple, playing with the sensitized nub until a fresh wave of heat crested in my stomach. All the while he pumped into me, the slow, leisurely slides of his cock hitting a spot that made me see stars.

“Rhys, please.”



Summaryer

“What do you want, princess?” He pinched my nipple, the sudden roughness of the action causing my mouth to fall open with a gasp.

You. Forever.

Since I couldn’t say that, I settled for a panted, “Faster. Harder.”

He lowered his head and replaced his hand with his mouth, swirling and licking while he picked up the pace. My nails dug into his back, and just as I teetered over the precipice, he slowed down again.

I nearly screamed with frustration.

Faster. Slower. Faster. Slower.

Rhys seemed to intuit the precise second I was about to come, and he varied his speed, edging me until I was a dripping, whimpering mess. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he groaned and slammed into me, his mouth claiming mine in a bruising kiss as he fucked into me so hard the couch inched across the floor with a squeak.

Lights exploded behind my eyes. I arched up, my cry swallowed by his kiss as another orgasm tore through me and left me drained.

Rhys came right after me with a silent shudder, and we sank into each other's arms, our heavy breaths mingling as one.

I loved sex with him, but I loved the quiet moments afterward even more.

"Again." I wrapped my limbs around him, not ready to break free of our cocoon yet. Just a little more time.

"Insatiable," he whispered, running the tip of his nose up my neck and along my jawline.



I smiled at the reminder of our afternoon at the hotel. Our last truly happy time together before everything went to hell.

"You love it," I said.

"Yeah princess, I do."

We spent the next hour like that, climbing high and crashing down together.

It was perfect, as were all our stolen moments together. We fucked hard and fast and made love sweet and slow. We pretended this was our life, not just a snapshot in time, and I pretended like my heart still beat in my chest when the pieces lay scattered at our feet.

"There's no other way, Your Highness." Elin's eyes flickered with sympathy for a second before it vanished and her expression hardened again. "It has to be done."

"No." I shook my head, denial digging its claws deep into my skin. "It's too soon. He's fine. The doctors said—"

"The doctors said he'll recover...this time. The fact is, His Majesty was hospitalized twice in one year. We can't risk a third hospitalization."

"We can cut back on his workload," I said desperately. "Have his aides handle the more strenuous paperwork and meetings. He can still be king."

Elin glanced at Markus, who stood in the corner looking grimmer than I'd ever seen him.

"We'd discussed this with His Majesty after his first hospitalization," he said. "He expressly said that if he collapses a second time, he would step down."

I vaguely remembered my grandfather saying something like that in the weeks after his first collapse, but I'd been so focused on Nikolai's abdication that the implications of it had gone right over my head.

"I realize this is perhaps not the best time to discuss this," Elin said with another flicker of sympathy. "But His Majesty's condition is stable, and we need to start preparations right away."

"Preparations." Something terrible took root in my stomach and spread. It seeped into my chest, my neck, my arms and my legs, numbing me from inside out.

Elin and Markus exchanged glances again.

"Yes," Elin said. "Preparations for your coronation as queen."

I'd thought I had more time, both with Rhys and to convince Parliament to repeal the Royal Marriages Law, but I didn't. Time was up.

"Do you remember Costa Rica?" Rhys's lips brushed against mine as he spoke. He lay on top of me, his powerful body swallowing me up, but he'd propped a forearm on the couch so he didn't crush me with his weight.

"How could I forget?" It was one of the happiest memories of my life.

"You asked me if I'd ever been in love. I said no." He pressed a soft kiss to my mouth.

"Ask me again, princess."

My lungs constricted. Breathe.

But that was hard when everything hurt to the point where I couldn't remember what it felt like not to hurt. My heart, my head, my soul.

"I can't." I forced myself to push Rhys away.

My skin immediately chilled at the absence of his heat, and small shivers wracked me as I got off the couch and walked to the bathroom. I cleaned myself and straightened my clothes with shaky hands while his gaze burned a hole in my back through the open door.



Summaryer

"Why not?"

"Because." Tell him. Just tell him. "I'm going to be queen."

"We already knew that."

"You don't understand." I washed my hands and returned to the room, where I finally looked at him again. Tension lined his face and notched a deep groove between his brows. "I don't mean someday. I mean I'm going to be queen in nine months."

Rhys froze.

"That's not all." I could barely speak past the lump in my throat. "Because of the Royal Marriages Law, I have to—"

"Don't say it." His voice was so quiet I almost didn't hear him.

"I have to marry or at least get engaged before my coronation."

There would already be backlash against me taking the throne so soon. You need all the political goodwill you can get, Markus had said. I hated it, but he was right. "I—"

"Don't. Fucking. Say it."

"I'm marrying Steffan. He already agreed."

It wasn't a marriage of love. It was a political contract. Nothing more, nothing less. Markus had reached out to the Holsteins yesterday and made them sign an NDA before making the proposition. They'd agreed a few hours later. It'd all happened so quickly it made my head spin.

Just like that, I had a fiancé, at least in theory. Per the agreement, Steffan would officially propose next month, after the furor over my grandfather's hospitalization died down. As a bonus, the engagement would drive the allegations about me and Rhys out of the headlines, as Elin had not so subtly pointed out.

Rhys unfolded himself from the couch. He'd already fixed his clothes. All black. Black shirt, black pants, black boots, black expression.

"The fuck you are."

"Rhys, it's done."

"No," he said flatly. "What did I tell you in the gazebo, princess? I said from that point on, no other man touches you, and I meant it. You sure as fuck aren't marrying someone else. We have nine months. We will figure. It. Out."

I wanted to agree. I wanted to be selfish and steal more time with him, but that wouldn't be fair to either of us.

I'd already had Rhys for three years. It was time to let him go.

No more being selfish.

"What if I want to marry someone else?"

Rhys's nostrils flared. "Don't lie to me. You barely know Steffan. You went on three fucking dates with the guy."

"Royal marriage isn't about knowing someone. It's about suitability, and the fact is, he's suitable and you're not." I hoped Rhys didn't notice the wobble in my voice. "Plus, Steffan and I have the rest of our lives to get to know each other."

A shudder rippled through his body, and hurt slashed across his face, so raw and visceral it cut through my soul.

"I'm the crown princess, and I need to act like one," I said, hating myself more with every second. "In all areas of my life. I can't be with a bodyguard. I..." Tears clogged my throat, but I pushed past them. "I'm meant to be with a duke. We both know that."

Rhys flinched. One tiny movement, but it would haunt me forever.

"So we're over. Just like that." It came out low and dangerous, edged with pain.

No, not just like that. You'll never know how much my heart is breaking right now.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I wished I could tell him I'd never been happier than when I was with him.

I wished I could tell him it wasn't about the throne or power, and that if I could, I would give up a kingdom for him.

But I'm sorry were the only words I was allowed to say.

The emotion wiped clean from Rhys's eyes until I was staring at steel walls, harder and more guarded even than when we'd first met.

"No, Your Highness," he said. "I'm sorry."

He walked out.

One minute, he was there. The next, he was gone.

I crumpled, my knees giving out beneath me as I sank onto the floor and hot tears scalded my cheeks and dripped off my chin. My chest heaved so hard I couldn't draw enough oxygen into my lungs, and I was sure I would die right there on the hospital floor, just a few feet away from the best doctors and nurses in the country. But even they wouldn't be able to fix what I'd just broken.

“You have to move.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your house. It’s a security nightmare. I don’t know who signed off on this location, but you have to move.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“No. But I hope to be one day.”

“Good night, princess.”



Summaryer

“Good night, Mr. Larsen.”

Snippets of memories crowded my brain, and I pressed my face into the blanket draped over the couch, muffling my sobs.

“Your Highness?” Elin’s voice floated through the door, followed by a knock. “Can I come in?”

No. I would be happy if I never talked to you again.

But I had responsibilities to fulfill, and an engagement to plan.

I forced my sobs to slow until they tapered off.

Deep, controlled breaths. Head tilted up. Tensed muscles. It was a trick I’d learned that had come in handy quite a few times over the years.

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