



Royal Secret

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Gifted a family heirloom that raises more questions than it answers, Courtney sets out to uncover the mystery...

And soon finds herself on a path toward adventure, romance, and betrayal,

From painful loss, to new life...

Reeling from grief, Courtney Fuller makes an impulsive decision: she'll fly out to the tiny kingdom of Bergovia and discover her late grandmother's story.

She soon meets a dashing handsome stranger who's keen to show her around her ancestral homeland, but can she be sure of his intentions? Could this be the start of something real, or is she just a pawn in a royal game?

Jakob Hofer is a prince with his eyes on the crown. In Bergovia, being the eldest is no guarantee for succession, and an attempt to prove his worthiness to rule only results in a most unexpected connection.

The prince knows he must honor the mission his father gave him. But, torn between duty and desire, it's not long before things get complicated.

And that's not all; bigger revelations are yet to come, and a new royal heir could be on their way...

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CHAPTER 1

COURTNEY

As soon as the car reaches our driveway and parks, I realize that the last thing in the world I want to do is get out. It's the same old red-brick ranch house, with the same short lawn and the wooden swing in the front yard that I played on as a kid.

And yet it's not. It's different. Everything is different now.

The announcement at the hospital was one thing. So was the funeral. But walking into that house, knowing my grandma won't be in there?

That's something else entirely new — the kind of new I'm not sure I can handle.

"Courtney." Someone touches my arm, and it takes me a moment to realize that it's my best friend Ginny.

I give her the best smile I can muster up. "I'm fine," I say. "Really."

It's my mom I'm more worried about. She gets out of the passenger seat, her shoulders hunched over. She's trying her hardest to be strong, but I can only imagine how hard it is to lose your mother.

I bite into my bottom lip, willing myself not to cry. My mom has always been strong for me, and now it's my turn to be strong for her.

Eventually, though, I have to open the door. Other people from the funeral are arriving, carrying casseroles and bustling into our house. Ginny and I head inside as well, and I feel like I'm shrinking against the wall. Everyone is kind, but I can't stand the sad looks in their eyes.

"Your grandmother was such an amazing woman," our neighbor Veronica says, patting my hand.

"Thank you," I choke out, my voice cracking.

It's crazy. Just a few days ago she was with us, and now she's gone for good. At least she lived a long life, and I know I should be grateful for that. Eighty-four years old is nothing to dismiss.

Food is passed around, condolences are offered. Everyone talks about what a beautiful funeral it was, but deep within me there's something hollow. Unfulfilled.

The walls seem to close in, and I slip away, not explaining myself to anyone.

In my bedroom, I sit on the edge of the bed and stare out the window. I grew up in this house, and even once I finished college I never thought about moving out.

How could I? My family has always been me, my mom, and my grandmother. The female version of the three musketeers.

And it's not like I've had any real prospects for love. At thirty, I haven't even had one serious boyfriend. It's only been casual dating here and there that never goes anywhere.

Taking a deep breath, I let the waves of grief wash over me. Everything will be okay... because it has to be.

There's a knock on the door, and even though it's soft, I jerk. My mom opens the door and pokes her head in, the lines in her face somehow deeper than they were last week. In them, I see the same strength I inherited from her. The strength that I'm doing my best to embody now.

"How are you doing?" she asks.

I just shrug. "How about you?"

She shrugs back, then opens the door more fully, and I see for the first time that she has something wrapped in a cloth napkin in her hands.

"What's that?" I ask.

Instead of answering right away, she takes a seat next to me on the bed. Slowly, she draws a breath. "It's... what your grandmother left you."

I stare at her, trying to comprehend. My grandmother was an immigrant who had very little in terms of both belongings and money. Her bedroom was always sparse, without much other than furniture, clothes, some books, and her sewing and knitting projects. I swear I could name every single thing that she owned, and none of those things was worth more than a hundred dollars.

So what would she have to leave me behind?

As if answering my question, my mom slowly sets the object on her lap and unwraps it. The sight of a gold necklace, a huge blue sapphire gem hanging from it, makes me gasp.

"Where did that come from?"

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“From Bergovia. That’s all I know. She never gave me any specifics. You know how she didn’t like to talk about life before she immigrated.”

I bite my lip. The tiny country in Europe that my grandmother lived in until she was fourteen was always a forbidden topic. I never knew why, but I assumed something awful must have happened to her there. The country has been extremely peaceful the last few hundred years, so it couldn’t have been some kind of political violence.

What, then?

I swallow down a knot that’s formed in my throat. The answer is one more thing I’ll have to live without — like my grandma’s laughter and her pumpkin bread.

“She told me a few years ago that you should have this when she died,” my mom explains.

She hands the necklace over to me, and I’m shocked at how heavy it is. How much does a sapphire like this cost? Thousands? Tens of thousands?

I blink at the object, still trying to make sense of it all.

How did an immigrant who was a public-school teacher come by something like this?

“Was it a family heirloom?” I ask.

“I wish I knew.” She sighs lightly.

I touch my mom's hand. "I'm sorry. I'll stop asking questions."

"It's all right, Courtney." She tucks her wavy brown hair — so much like mine, except now it's streaked with gray — behind her ear. "I've wondered all my life, too. She told my father about as much as she told me and you."

I lightly sweep my fingertips over the jewel. The coolness of it sends an unexpected thrill through me, like there's magic built into the gem's structure.

"I'm going to get back out there." Mom stands, the old bed creaking as she does so.

"I can come with."

She pauses before opening the door. "I know you don't want to. Take all the time you need by yourself. All day, if you want."

I nod. We both know that she craves the comfort of people, loves being surrounded by others. I've always been somewhat of an introvert, uncomfortable around crowds.

The door closes behind her, and I stay where I am, looking at the necklace in my hands. It seems odd to imagine my grandmother — modest, humble Anna — wearing something like this. It would have never gone with her wardrobe of khakis and sweaters.

"What was your story, Grandma?" I whisper to the necklace.

Of course it doesn't answer, and so I'm left with lying back in bed and staring out the window, wondering about what has been and how on earth I go forward from here.

CHAPTER 2

JAKOB

With a satisfied sigh, I close the weekly reports. There is little of note, which is good. In the national security department, that's exactly the way that you want to end your week.

Of course, Bergovia has been this way for decades. There's little to worry about here, hardly anything that goes unnoticed. The benefit of being such a small country is that it is fairly easy to keep everything in order, everything buckled up tight.

Standing, I turn the lights off in the office and head to the elevator. All around me, the air crackles with the typical excitement of a Friday. Everyone is looking forward to being with their families, going out, or spending time relaxing.

While I have a family dinner to get to, I wish I could be one of those people looking forward to it.

"Have a great weekend, Your Highness." Frederick, one of the security guards out front, bows to me as I leave.

"Thank you, Frederick. Same to you," I reply.

As I make my way to the parking lot, several curious pedestrians send long glances my way. It's no secret of course that one of Bergovia's princes is also the country's director of national security. I knew years ago that I did not wish to just sit on my hands and hope for the crown to be handed to me. For one, I hate having nothing to do, and charity work and public appearances don't fill that void for me.

For another, I am well aware that taking such an active role in the country's security improves my father's opinion of me, and since the crown is passed on according to the king or queen's preferences, I must do everything possible in order to stay on my

parents' good side.

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Speaking of which... that includes family dinners.

Not that I hate family dinners. It's more that they have become increasingly tense over the years as we inch closer to my father's inevitable retirement. He has it well known that he plans to step aside within the next five years, and that has me and my siblings chomping at the bit.

It doesn't take long to arrive at the palace — no more than fifteen minutes — and the guards open the gates at the sight of my approach.

The scent of roses fills the air, spring in full bloom. It's another gorgeous afternoon in Bergovia, and my mind drifts to thoughts of sailing and lazing in the sun.

Wouldn't it be nice if I had a beautiful woman to join me?

I catch my thoughts before they go any further. There is no point in fantasizing about romance, something that I haven't entertained in several years. My responsibilities as both a prince and the head of national security keep me more than busy. Once I become king, then I can think about building my family life. Until then I must keep my eye squarely on the prize.

An attendant takes my car keys from me with a bow, and I smooth my suit jacket as I walk up the front steps. It's more bows and "Good evening, Your Highness," from every angle. It's the story of my life — one that I should feel comfortable with by now, and yet it puts me oddly on edge.

These formalities are not what being a royal should truly be about. It should be about

sacrifice, responsibility, dedication to your country. When I was a boy, I was enamored with stories of kings and queens who would ride into battle at the head of their armies, people who put their necks on the line in order to care for their land.

That's the kind of ruler I wish to be, and while Bergovia has not participated in a war for many decades, I hope that our people see me as someone who is driven by love for our country above all else.

I weave my way through the palace, each step familiar even though the halls are vast and winding. I grew up here; learned to walk in these halls. Even though I still have quarters here, I only spend part of my time in them. Even someone as devoted as me needs their time away, and that's when my apartment in the city comes into play.

"Oh!" Someone lets out a little gasp as I round a corner, and I stop short just before running into my sister.

Christina smooths her blouse, as if I had rumped it just from getting close. "Where did you come from?" she asks, annoyance filling her voice.

I suck in a long breath and consider how I want to respond. The two of us were close as kids and teens, but the subsequent years have put some distance between us. It's no secret that we both want the crown — as does our younger brother Teddy — and that's driven a bit of a wedge between us.

It's not that I hold anything against her. Absolutely not. It's merely that our conflicting interests make things awkward.

"I came from work," I say, choosing to keep it simple. "And now I'm headed to dinner."

Her lips purse the slightest bit, and I can tell that she'd been hoping to achieve the

same goal as me: to be the first of the royal offspring to dinner, in order to impress our parents with our punctuality.

But she quickly schools her features into pleasantry. “Then we will walk together.”

The doors to the family dining hall are propped open, staff posted in corners waiting to be summoned. My mother and father are already at the table — but so are my brothers, Oliver and Teddy.

Teddy smirks at Christina and I, clearly wise to our plan.

“Good evening, Mother and Father,” I say, ignoring my brother.

My mother stands to kiss Christina and me on the cheeks. “Good evening. How were your days?”

“Wonderful.” Christina takes the seat across from her, immediately launching into a story about how she has extended her nonprofit’s reach to another school in Afghanistan that needs learning supplies.

It’s virtue signaling at the finest, and I catch Teddy rolling his eyes.

My father’s gaze is heavy on me, and it feels as if he’s probing, trying to ask a question without putting it into words.

“And you, Jakob?” he finally asks. “How was your day?”

“Wonderful.” I sit a little taller as the staff serves the first course. “Very productive. The quarterly reports came in and?—”

“Is there even much to do there?” Teddy cuts in. “Bergovia hasn’t had any real

security threats since before we were born.”

I frown at him. “And why do you think that is? It’s not accidental, I can assure you. It’s due to the work of everyone at the security department.”

Oliver smirks at Teddy. “Just because you don’t have anything to share, doesn’t mean you need to undermine Jakob.”

Teddy’s face turns beet red, but before he can retort, our mother delicately clears her throat. It’s the softest sound, but enough to make us all pay attention. “The rose show is coming up. I do hope everyone will be in attendance.”

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The conversation turns to talk of the palace's annual display of its rose gardens, but I take a moment to send Oliver a grateful look. Even though I'm the oldest and he's the youngest, we've always gotten along. He doesn't care much about inheriting the crown, although I know he would honorably accept it were our parents to choose to give it to him.

Sometimes I envy that about him — that lack of desire for something that can make or break a person's happiness. He has his eye on other things. Exploring, traveling, learning.

The way he sees the world, things just slide off his back. It's truly something to aspire to, although I'm so tightly wound, I'm not sure I will ever get there.

Since it is Friday night, the meal lasts longer than it would during the week. We linger over dessert, some of the earlier tension dissipated. It almost feels as if we are a normal family, although truthfully, I haven't a clue what that feels like. My whole life I have been a royal, subject to appearances and expectations that many people cannot imagine.

Then again, at this point, I cannot imagine my life without all of that. I have been given an opportunity to make a massive difference in the world, and despite the things I have had to give up — such as privacy — I am very grateful.

"Jakob, a moment," my father says softly as my siblings drift away from the dining room table.

I nod at him in acknowledgment, intensely curious about what he has to say to me,

and follow him into his study.

He shuts the door behind us, sealing us away from the rest of the world.

“How are you, Father?” I ask, deciding to go ahead and jumpstart the conversation.

He selects a cigar and rolls it between his fingers, then offers one to me. Even though I have never liked them, I take it anyway.

“Your mother worries that you are working yourself too hard,” he says.

I blink at him in surprise. “Why would she think that?”

“She has noticed the bags under your eyes.” He pins me with a hard look.

I swallow that down, unsure how to respond. Out of everyone, he should understand that sometimes long hours are necessary in order to do what is right and important.

“Are you also concerned?” I light the cigar, watching its end glow bright.

He eyes me. “What kind of father would I be if I weren’t? Are you sure that this is the right profession for you?”

The question is a punch to the gut. Why would he even ask me that?

“You have no life outside of work, Jakob,” he goes on.

“Neither do you,” I point out.

He chuckles. “And I wish I did.”

“Father.” I stare him down. “I love what I do. Bergovia is worth it. I do not need a life outside of my job and my royal duties.”

He puffs on his cigar, his attention turning to the dark window. What does he expect of me? That I sit on my hands and watch the days pass by? What good would that do?

It certainly would not bring me the crown, that is for sure. Unless my father is planning on giving it to whichever child of his maintains a better work–life balance.

I suck in a breath, about to say this, when it hits me. He’s testing me, isn’t he? Waiting to see how I respond to his criticism.

I swallow my response, knowing I need to formulate a new plan.

No, not formulate a new plan. Rather, double down on the original one.

I need to prove myself to my father in a way that I haven’t yet, and in a way none of my other siblings can hope to.

I suck in a deep breath, sitting with the heavy truth that I’ve already done everything I can... Or at least everything I thought I could do.

I’ll figure it out, though. I must. That crown is meant to be mine, and no one will stand in my way.

CHAPTER 3

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COURTNEY

“You sure you want to do this?” Ginny pauses before turning on the light in my grandma’s room.

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. “I can’t sit around doing nothing.”

It’s only the day after my grandmother’s funeral, but with my time off from work, there’s little for me to do. Our friends have already cleaned the house from top to bottom, and the fridge is full of enough meals to last for weeks. I’ve tried sitting around, watching movies; tried going for walks. There’s always this empty ache in my chest, though, and the best way I can think of getting rid of it is by getting busy.

So here we are, about to go through my grandmother’s stuff. A part of me wants to never touch this room again, to just leave it exactly as it is until the house falls down around it. That’s not realistic, though, and at least I can take her clothes and donate them to the shelter.

Ginny turns the light on, and we step into the immaculate room. It’s still shocking to me that the woman who lived in this barebedroom had a huge sapphire necklace squirreled away. What’s more, how come she never told me about it?

“Where do you want to start?” Ginny asks.

“Her bedside tables.”

I pick up a well-worn paperback novel from the nightstand, its spine creased from

countless reads, and place it gently into one of the cardboard boxes we brought along.

“Are you sure this is all she had?” Ginny asks, her voice echoing slightly in the nearly bare room.

I nod, dusting off my hands on my jeans. “Yeah, Grandma Anna was always a minimalist. Said she never needed much to be happy.”

Ginny lifts a delicate porcelain figurine from the dresser, examining it before wrapping it carefully in bubble wrap. “She had good taste, though. Everything feels so... curated.”

As we move methodically around the room, the task feels less like a chore and more like a final act of love — a way to honor the memories held within these walls. Ginny pauses by the closet, pulling out a few hangers with clothes that smell faintly of lavender and nostalgia.

“Did she leave you anything special?” Ginny’s eyes meet mine, curious and sympathetic.

I hesitate for a moment, the void of loss still so painful in my chest. “Actually, yes.”

I walk over to the bed and reach under the pillow, retrieving the object that’s been on my mind all day. I kept it in here last night because it felt strange to have it in my own room. Keeping it in here felt like a kind of homage to my grandma.

I can feel Ginny’s gaze on me as I unwrap the cloth to reveal the necklace inside. The sapphire pendant catches the light, sending tiny blue reflections dancing across the walls.

“Wow, that’s stunning,” she breathes, leaning closer.

“I didn’t even know she had it,” I say, the cool gemstone slipping between my fingers. “I don’t know anything about it, but... there’s a story behind it.”

“A story?” Ginny’s interest is piqued, her love for a good mystery written all over her face.

“Grandma never talked much about her past, but she left me this, so it had to be special for her, you know? But what does it... could it have to do with her old home...?” My words trail off as I look at the sapphire, wondering about the untold tales it might hold.

“Old home? You mean Bergovia?”

“Yeah, that’s the place. But she never elaborated. And now...” I swallow the lump forming in my throat. “Now I guess I’ll never know.”

“Or maybe you will,” Ginny says softly, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze.

I allow myself a small smile, finding comfort in her optimism.

Putting the necklace away, I reach for a battered shoebox tucked in the corner of the closet, dust motes dancing in the shaft of sunlight as I pull it into my lap. Ginny sits cross-legged on the carpet beside me, her eyes curious and attentive.

“Let’s see what’s in here,” I murmur, as I ease the lid off the box.

Inside, the past spills out in a cascade of black and white — a collection of photographs, edges softened by time. My fingers stumble upon a picture of my grandma, her youthful face radiant with a smile that mirrors my own. She’s a young teen, standing in front of a quaint stone building, clad in clothing that seems borrowed from another era.

“Look at this,” I say, holding the photo out to Ginny. The image trembles slightly in my grasp. “This is... it’s Bergovia. It must have been not long before she moved to Texas.”

“Wow, she looks so young. And happy.”

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“Grandma never talked about her life there.” A pang of regret threads through my voice, the sorrow of missed stories and unasked questions. “I don’t even know why she left or what her life was like before coming here.”

“Maybe you could find out,” Ginny suggests gently, returning the photo to me. “Have you ever thought about going there? Seeing if you can find anything out about her family?”

I nod, tracing the outline of the stone building behind Grandma’s figure. It feels like a signpost, pointing toward a path I’ve yet to explore.

“Actually, that might be just what I need,” I confess, the idea unfurling like a bloom within me. “To go there, to Bergovia. I mean, I’ve already taken time off for the funeral, and I haven’t used any vacation days this year...”

“Then it’s settled!” Ginny declares, her enthusiasm infectious. “You should definitely go. Discover your grandmother’s secrets, walk where she walked. Who knows what you might find out?”

“Who knows indeed,” I echo, a mixture of excitement and nervousness bubbling up inside me. Bergovia, a place that had been no more than a name, suddenly feels like a beacon calling me forward.

“Maybe that necklace holds the key,” I muse, half-jokingly, but the thought lingers, heavy with possibility.

“Perhaps.” She grins. “And you’ll never know unless you go.”

“Unless I go,” I repeat, the decision crystallizing.

I slide the lid back onto the shoebox, photographs and memories safe within, my heart pounding with the thrill of spontaneous adventure. “Hey, why don’t you come with me?”

The invitation hangs between us, buoyed by hope.

Ginny’s eyes widen, flattered and surprised, but then she shakes her head. “Oh, Courtney, I’d love to, but...” She sighs, her voice trailing off as she glances towards the door that leads to the rest of her life waiting outside the room. “I’ve got the shop, and those two foster dogs, remember? Benji’s still recovering from surgery, and Luna is so skittish; they need someone familiar right now.”

“Of course,” I nod, understanding completely. “Your dog-grooming empire can’t run without its queen.”

A laugh escapes me, softening the sting of disappointment. Ginny’s dedication to her work and the animals she cares for has always been something I admire about her.

Her smile is encouraging as she nudges me gently. “But you, my dear, are free as a bird. You need this. For your grandma. For yourself.”

“Thanks, Gin. I think... I’m gonna get tickets right now.”

If I don’t, I’ll lose my nerve. I’ve never taken a vacation alone, and I need to strike while the iron is hot, before I come up with excuses to not go.

“Do it,” Ginny says.

Without another word, I open the browser on my phone and do a search for plane

tickets. Adrenaline courses through my veins as I select the dates, choose a flight, and fill in my details.

And then, with a final click, it's done. I exhale a shaky breath — my ticket to Bergovia is booked.

"I'm leaving in two days," I announce.

I'm really doing this. Alone.

A mixture of pride and trepidation pulses through me. I offer up a silent promise to Grandma Anna: I'm coming to find your story, to walk the streets you walked, to breathe the air you breathed.

Ginny claps her hands in excitement.

"Here I come, Bergovia," I murmur, a smile touching my lips, my heart already en route to the land of sapphire secrets.

CHAPTER 4

JAKOB

I'm hunched over a stack of security reports in my office, the hum of soft conversations in the hallway drifting in through the cracked door. My thoughts are far from the present, replaying last week's family dinner like an old film stuck on a loop. Like usual, everyone but Oliver had paraded their accomplishments before our parents, vying for the crown with the grace of seasoned courtiers. And there I was, Jakob, the prince who played it safe, the one with no grand trophies to present.

No new ones, anyway.

Because, clearly, my job isn't impressive enough.

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Realizing that makes my ears hot. Part of why I pursued this career was because I expected it to impress my father. Now here he is, asking me to please not work too hard!

“Your Highness,” my assistant interrupts, her voice cutting through the memory like a blade. I look up, my eyes narrowing in focus. “We’ve received intel of a potential threat at the border.”

“Threat?” I echo, the word pulling me back into the now, where my role as head of the security department demands my attention. “What kind of threat?”

“Descendant of an old rival family,” Lena clarifies, placing a file on my desk.

The Jäger name emblazoned on the folder strikes a chord, an echo of family feuds long buried in history. “Courtney Fuller,” she continues. “Granddaughter of Anna Jäger.”

“Jäger,” I murmur. It’s a name that belongs to gossip and cautionary tales, not to modern-day Bergovia.

I flip open the dossier, and the names of the past stare back at me from sheets of paper — history, potentially walking among us once more.

“Thank you,” I tell Lena, even as my mind races. The Jägers were more than just rivals; they were the antithesis of everything our family stood for. A challenge I didn’t expect — but one I cannot ignore.

“Keep this quiet,” I command, already piecing together a plan.

This could be the very opportunity I’ve been searching for. If I can handle this situation, it would prove to my parents that I have what it takes to lead, to wear the crown that eludes me.

“Of course, Your Highness,” Lena assures me, backing out of the room with a nod of understanding.

Alone again, I lean back in my chair, the weight of decades-old conflict settling on my shoulders as I contemplate my next move. The Jägers may have faded into the annals of history, but their descendant’s unexpected arrival could very well reignite a dormant rivalry.

Or it could be the key to my ascension.

I shuffle through the photographs again, my gaze lingering on the image of Courtney Fuller. It’s disconcerting, the way my pulse quickens. She’s beautiful — startlingly so — with a cascade of chestnut hair and eyes that seem to hold a hint of mischief even in a still picture.

I’m taken aback by my own reaction; it’s not like me to get sidetracked by something as trivial as beauty, especially when there’s a potential threat involved.

Shaking my head, I gather the dossier and call in the top members of my team in order to gather their insights onto the situation. A few minutes later and we’re seated around the table in the corner of my office, the view of the park behind my staff.

“Her itinerary isn’t clear,” one of my best intel collectors says. “But she landed this morning from Texas.”

The agent pauses, awaiting my command, but I'm already piecing together my approach.

"Keep monitoring her communications," I instruct, my mind racing ahead. This is a delicate situation, one that requires subtlety and discretion, and while my team is perfectly capable of taking care of it, I'm well aware that this could be the opportunity I've been waiting for.

"I will trail her," I announce.

The room is quiet for a long moment.

"Are you sure you don't want us to handle this, sir?" another voice chimes in, tentative but laced with concern.

I look up from the dossier, resolve hardening in my chest. "I've got this. We can't afford to spook her or draw attention."

My siblings, always so eager to outshine each other, would give anything for this sort of intelligence. But they won't get it. Not this time.

"Your Highness, if she is indeed here to stir trouble?—"

"She won't succeed." I cut off the sentence before it can take flight. "I'll make sure of it."

Their nods are stiff, formal, but I barely notice. My focus narrows to the woman in the photograph, to the challenge she represents, to the opportunity she unwittingly brings with her arrival.

"Keep me updated on her movements," I say as I stand, the burden of responsibility

settling comfortably on my shoulders. “I want to know where she is at all times. I’ll make sure to be one step ahead of her.”

“Understood, Your Highness,” comes the chorus of replies.

Alone once more, I let myself contemplate the full scope of what handling this properly could mean. If I can neutralize the Jäger threat personally, it will solidify my position as the rightful heir in the eyes of my parents. The crown seems almost within reach — a tantalizing promise of power and validation.

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“Courtney Fuller,” I utter her name like a vow, a silent pledge that her presence here in Bergovia will serve my ends.

A slow smile slips across my lips. In one morning, everything has changed. I have a rival to watch and a kingdom to win.

CHAPTER 5

COURTNEY

As the cab weaves through the cobblestone streets in the historic district of Bergovia’s capital city, I press my face closer to the window. This is real. I’m actually here!

And all by myself.

The realization is bittersweet, a reminder that this journey is mine to experience on my own. There’s no one to laugh with, no one to watch my back. At the same time, though, the isolation is freeing.

“Could you stop here, please?” I ask the driver as we approach a quaint café, its windows fogged up from the warmth within.

He nods, and I step out into the embrace of a new world, the air alive with the promise of fresh beginnings. My luggage rolls behind me, a cumbersome contrast to the lightness growing in my chest. I’ll head to a hotel soon to drop my things off, but I just couldn’t wait another minute to get a real taste of Bergovia.

The bell above the door chimes cheerfully as I enter the café, and the aroma of coffee and sweet dough wraps around me like a welcoming hug. I'm drawn to the glass display where rows of golden pastries beckon with a flaky allure. I point to one that seems to be smiling at me, its center oozing with what looks like berry compote.

"Un Krunzj," says the woman behind the counter with a smile. "A traditional Bergovian treat."

I'm embarrassed to not speak Bergovian, but I read that nearly everyone here speaks English as their second language. Maybe, if I can, I'll pick up a little of my grandmother's native tongue while I'm here.

She puts the pastry on a plate and serves me a cup of coffee. I choose the closest table, its top decorated in little pieces of broken ceramics. It looks homemade, like the result of someone's hobby.

I brush crumbs off my fingers and reach for my phone to snap a photo of the half-eaten Krunzj, thinking it would make for a warm memento of this moment. As I lift the screen, I catch sight of the cluster of fox stickers adorning the case — a small tribute to my fixation with the clever creatures.

"Those are adorable," a voice chimes from beside me, tinged with a Bergovian accent that feels as comforting as the pastry's taste.

I glance up to find a woman with chestnut hair tied back in a loose ponytail, her eyes bright with friendliness. She's waiting behind a couple people in the line that's formed up to the counter.

"Thanks," I say, feeling a spark of kinship. "I've always loved foxes."

"Me too," she says, pulling out her own phone to reveal a similar array of fox-themed

decorations.

I feel my eyes widen. “No way.” What are the chances that we both have fox stickers on our phones?

She laughs. “I’m Mimi, by the way. I live just down the street.”

“Courtney.” I can’t help but smile; it seems Grandma Anna’s homeland is full of surprises — and potential friends. “I’m here for the week.”

“You’re American?”

I nod. “But my grandmother was from Bergovia.”

“Looking for a place to stay?” Mimi asks.

“Actually, yes.”

She winks at me. “Hold that thought.” It’s her turn at the counter, so she orders herself a cup of coffee before returning to my table, where I gesture for her to sit across from me.

“Try the Hotel Bergrose,” she says. “It’s just a few blocks away, and the owner, Mr. Schmidt, makes guests feel like family. It’s fairly cheap, too.”

“Thank you, Mimi. That’s exactly what I need.”

“Take my number. Text me if you need anything.” She holds her phone to mine so that we can share contact information. “Or if you would like a tour guide.”

“Thank you. I definitely will.”

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She has to get to work, so she hustles out the door with a wave. My pastry is gone, my coffee cold, and eagerness to see what else this city holds is gnawing at my belly, so I head out as well.

This part of town is so charming, I actually consider staying here and not exploring the rest of Bergovia. Of course, I know I'll feel different by tomorrow. Right now, though, I bask in what feels like a fairy-tale village come to life, with its potted flowers hanging in front of doorways and a sparkling water fountain on every corner.

The hotel emerges at the end of a winding alley, its façade a charming tapestry of ivy and stone. A brass plate engraved with elegant letters confirms I'm at the right place: "Hotel Bergrose."

Inside, the lobby exudes an air of understated elegance, and I approach the reception desk, where a man with a kindly face looks up from his papers.

"Welcome to Hotel Bergrose," he greets me. "You must be Courtney. Mimi called ahead to ensure we had your room ready."

"Thank you," I reply, taken aback by the unexpected consideration.

"Anything you need, just ask," he assures me, handing me a vintage brass key with a tassel.

"Thank you, Mr. Schmidt," I say.

"Tobias," he corrects. "Mimi is an old family friend, so a friend of hers is a friend of

mine. Your room is on the second floor, the last one at the end of the hallway.”

I head upstairs, my footsteps cushioned by the thick carpet, and find my room, which overlooks a serene garden blooming with the promise of spring. Dropping my bags by the bed, I open the windows to let in some fresh air. The streets are full of laughter and people calling to each other, the traffic in this area light due to some streets being closed to automobiles. I’m already halfway to moving here permanently.

Leaving the tranquility of my room behind, I head out without any plan as to where I’m going or what I’ll do. This whole trip is an adventure, and I’m letting spur-of-the-moment impulses guide me. Stepping out onto the cobblestone street, I let my feet take me through the heart of Bergovia, each step an echo against the stones that have known countless stories before mine.

Trees line the streets, their branches heavy with the tender green of new leaves, and I feel a kinship with them — both of us embarking on growth in unfamiliar soil.

I meander through the town square, where yet another fountain dances under the touch of the sun’s rays, casting rainbows in its misty arc. Children laugh as they chase each other around it, their joy as infectious as the melodies of the street musicians who serenade passersby with violins and accordions. It’s as though the whole city is alive with the vibrancy of spring.

Is this what heaven is like? How is it that such a place has existed for years and yet I’ve known nothing about it until now?

Drawn by the sound of church bells, I follow their call to a park where couples lounge on benches, sharing sweet words and gelati beneath a sky so blue it seems to have been painted just for them. For a moment, I imagine my grandma here, young and carefree, her laughter carried on the breeze, a reminder that life, in all its forms, marches on.

Did she live here in the city? Or somewhere in the country? Perhaps in a small town?

The more I think about it, the crazier it is that I know nothing about her life growing up. She tucked those years away, never wanting me to discover them, I guess.

But why? Was there something in her past that she was ashamed of? Afraid of?

With a deep breath, I tear myself away from the park and continue my exploration. The architecture is a tapestry of history; Gothic spires reach towards the heavens, while Baroque façades hint at a time of opulence and grandeur. Each building tells a story, and I wish for the ability to unravel them all.

My wanderlust eventually leads me to the doors of the Bergovian National Museum. A beautiful building, I'm shocked to find that admission is free — as is admission to every museum in the country, the guard informs me. Inside, the air is cool and still, a sanctuary for the artifacts that hold secrets of an age gone by.

The museum unfolds before me like a treasure chest. Cases of intricately crafted jewelry glint under soft lights, and I find myself lingering by a display of sapphire pieces that rival the beauty of the one back in my hotel room. Armor and weapons speak of battles fought and won, tales of heroism and sacrifice etched into every dent and scratch.

I trace my fingers over glass that protects ancient manuscripts, marveling at the delicate script, the ink still bold after centuries. There are tapestries that color the walls with scenes of harvests and hunts, of stories about unicorns and dragons.

Here, amongst these relics of the past, I sense my grandmother's spirit walking beside me, guiding me through the annals of our lineage. And for the first time since her passing, I don't feel quite so adrift. In the silent company of history, I am home.

I round a corner and the air shifts subtly, as if charged with a new energy. Amidst the rows of ancient vases, my gaze snags on something — or rather someone — unexpected. There's a man across the room, partially hidden in the shadow cast by a towering suit of armor. He stands with casual ease, but the intensity of his focus lands solely on me.

He's wearing a baseball cap pulled low over his brow, and sunglasses obscure his eyes, yet there's an unmistakable draw to him. I can't deny it; he's attractive in a way that stirs something long dormant within me.

My heart skips a beat, and I wonder when was the last time I felt this flutter of excitement at the mere sight of someone. I've dated, had a few casual boyfriends, but over the years my focus has turned away from that. At this point, I've stopped dating altogether, assuming that if I'm meant to find my happily ever after, it will happen naturally.

I allow myself a small smile, turning back to the exhibit before me. The handsome stranger remains in my peripheral vision, a silent observer. It's strange, this feeling of being seen, truly seen, after spending so many days lost in grief. Bergovia, with its fresh air and spring blooms, has begun to lift the weight from my shoulders, and now this unexpected encounter adds another layer of warmth to my newfound comfort.

His presence is a hint of possibility, a sign that maybe, just maybe, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. My grandma always believed in signs, in the serendipitous moments that guide us where we need to go.

"Enjoying the artifacts?" His voice finally breaks the silence, smooth and inviting.

Turning towards him fully, I muster up a response. "Yes, they're incredible. It's like walking through history."

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“Indeed,” he replies, his cap nodding in agreement as he steps a bit closer. “Bergovia has many stories to tell.”

“Looks like I picked the right place to listen,” I say, meeting his hidden gaze with renewed confidence.

His lips quirk into a smile. “Would you... mind if I join you? I see that you are by yourself, as am I, and I would...” He trails off, some pink coloring his cheeks.

I bite into my own smile. “I would love it if you joined me.”

This, here, is exactly what I hoped to find: connection, mystery, a hint of adventure.

And perhaps, just maybe, a touch of romance.

CHAPTER 6

JAKOB

I edge closer to the marble statue that dominates the room, pretending to admire its contours, but my focus is on Courtney. She’s peering intently at an oil painting, her brow furrowed in concentration. The museum buzzes with the soft murmur of visitors, but I only have eyes and ears for one of them.

She’s even more beautiful in person than in her pictures, if that’s possible. Softly waved hair falls against her shoulders, and her chin has a subtle upturn to it, her lips rosy pink and pursed in focused study.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I say, nodding toward the canvas she’s eyeing. My voice is casual, the timbre designed to soothe and engage.

Courtney looks over, and her eyes, a vivid shade of green, meet mine. There’s still no flicker of recognition, just a polite curiosity. Either my disguise is working well, or she has no clue who I am.

“It really is,” she agrees, tucking a strand of chestnut hair behind her ear. “The play of light and shadow is incredible.”

“Jakob,” I introduce myself, extending a hand. It’s a common name here in Bergovia, unremarkable enough to blend into the background. Giving her my actual name will do nothing to suggest that I’m a prince — or that I work for the security department.

“Courtney,” she replies with a smile, her handshake firm yet gentle.

We talk about the painting, how the artist has captured the essence of Bergovian landscapes, and I find myself genuinely enjoying the conversation. Her insights are thoughtful and she speaks with a passion that’s infectious.

We drift through the gallery, pausing before each piece that catches our interest. The more we discuss — from the impressionistic brushstrokes of one painting to the bold colors of another — the more I sense a connection forming between us. It’s effortless, this dance of dialogue and shared admiration for the art around us.

As we stand before a sculpture depicting an ancient Bergovian legend, I find myself wanting to tell her everything: my royal lineage, my role as head of national security, the weight of my responsibilities. But duty silences those confessions, and instead, I ask her about her favorite exhibition piece.

She points to a small, intricate landscape painting tucked away in a corner. “That

one,” Courtney says. “There’s something about it that feels like home, even though I’ve never been to this part of the world before.”

“Ah, it’s an underrated piece,” I reply, admiring her taste. “The artist spent his life capturing the essence of our countryside. You have a good eye.”

“Thank you,” she beams, her cheeks flushing with pleasure.

As we continue our tour, I still wonder if she’s as genuine as she appears. Could she be playing me? Does she know exactly who I am and why I’m here? If so, what are her plans? Why did she enter Bergovia? Does it have anything to do with the political discord between our families decades ago?

The questions linger, but the warmth in her laughter and the sparkle in her gaze make it hard to believe she’s anything but sincere.

Courtney may not know who I am, but in this moment, surrounded by art and history, I realize that I’m relishing the anonymity. It’s rare that I take time for myself away from my career or royal duties, and even though I feel silly hiding behind sunglasses, I’m enjoying what feels like a mini vacation.

In too little time, we’re finished with the whole museum. It’s too soon to let Courtney out of my sight, though; I need to be absolutely sure she isn’t a threat to Bergovia.

“There’s a lovely little café near here,” I say. “Would you like to join me there?”

“Sure.” Her smile lights up the room. “I would love to.”

I guide Courtney out of the museum, across the street, and down a narrow cobblestone alley, where the chatter of tourists fades into a quiet hush. The scent of freshly ground coffee beans grows stronger as we approach a nondescript door, half-

hidden by ivy.

“This place,” I murmur, “is a local secret.”

“Looks cozy,” she says, the smile alive in her eyes.

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As we step inside, the dim lighting and intimate space envelop us. I slip off my hat and sunglasses, relishing the freedom anonymity affords me here. It's the moment of truth. Will she recognize me?

And — if she does — will she give that recognition away or try to hide it?

The tension in my shoulders eases as I catch Courtney's gaze, but she offers no sign of recognition. "You like to cover up, huh?"

I shrug, my story already prepared. "I work in private security. I cover celebrities sometimes, so I can be recognized because of that. As a result, I prefer to keep a low profile. Do you like espresso?"

"I just had one... but I could have another." She laughs.

"Private security?" she asks, after we've ordered and picked out two overstuffed armchairs to sit in.

"Yes," I reply, settling into the conversation as easily as into the chair. "My job can be... demanding." That much, at least, is the truth.

"Sounds exciting," she says, stirring her espresso delicately. "I'm a data analyst, back in Houston. Texas. Numbers are my forte, not danger."

"Numbers have their own kind of thrill, I imagine," I say, keen to know more about her world — so distant from mine.

“Sometimes,” she admits with a laugh. Then her smile turns wistful. “But when I can, I escape through photography.” She gestures towards her bag, where the corner of a camera peeks out.

“And you’re here for what? To take pictures?”

“Just to visit.” She looks into her espresso. “I’d never been.”

There’s something there she doesn’t want to share, and it heightens my suspicion. Now, I know for sure, I can’t let her go.

“May I?” I ask, gesturing toward the camera.

“Of course,” she responds, passing it to me with a trust that tugs at something deep within my chest.

The device feels solid in my hands, a tangible piece of her passion. I thumb through the captured images on the screen — vivid splashes of color, candid snapshots of life, all seen through her lens. Each photo is a window into how she perceives the world: vibrant, nuanced, beautiful.

“Your work is remarkable,” I say, handing back the camera. “You have a real talent.”

“Thank you,” she replies, her cheeks coloring with pleasure.

“And how do you like Bergovia?”

“I love it.” She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and looks off toward the window as if tracing her thoughts. “My grandmother was from here. She never really talked about growing up here, though. She died last week and... I guess I wanted to see it through my own eyes, you know?”

Her innocence is palpable, her gaze clear and devoid of any hidden agenda. She knows nothing of the royal family or the old feuds — of that, I'm certain. Her connection to this place is personal, untainted by politics or intrigue.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I set my espresso cup on the table, momentarily shocked.

"Thank you," she whispers.

The tone is shifted, and I worry that it's my fault for bringing it down. I've only just met this woman, and yet I can't bear seeing her unhappy. It's a primal urge to do something — anything — to cheer her up.

"Would you like to make a wish at the fountain?" I suggest, nodding towards the one through the window, which sits in a small courtyard. It's an impromptu invitation, but one I hope she'll accept.

"Really? Like throwing in a coin and making a wish?" she asks with raised eyebrows, amusement lighting up her features.

"Exactly like that," I confirm, standing up and offering my hand to help her from her seat.

"Sounds like something out of a fairy tale," she comments as she places her hand in mine, warm and soft.

"Perhaps," I concede with a chuckle, opening the door for her. "But sometimes life could use a touch of whimsy."

At the fountain, I pull two coins from my pocket and hand one to her. The metal is cool in my palm, spray from the fountain striking my face. Standing side by side, we look into the shimmering water. I can feel the warmth of her arm against mine, a

gentle reminder of the unexpected turn my day has taken.

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Just like that, I find that I'm perfectly happy. I don't want this moment to end. I could stay here forever, standing next to Courtney, our coins never making it into the water, the upcoming evening a promise that never arrives.

But time does move on, and she's looking at me expectantly, waiting for me to take the lead.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Ready," she confirms with a nod.

Together, we throw our coins, watching as they arc gracefully before plunging into the fountain with a soft plop, ripples spreading outward.

"May I ask what you wished for?" I inquire, though knowing better than to expect an answer.

She turns to me, a secretive gleam in her eye. "If I tell you, it won't come true."

"Fair enough," I say, contented.

I didn't even make a wish. Did not even think to.

And why? Because I'm perfectly happy as I am, right here, right now, with her. If anything changed, then the perfection we are experiencing would dissipate faster than the fountain's mist.

In truth, I could have left by now, assured of her harmless intentions. But there's something about her — something guilelessly enchanting — that compels me to linger.

“Let's just say...” She trails off. “It involves seeing more of Bergovia than I had planned.”

“Then I hope your wish is granted,” I reply, unable to resist the pull of her optimism.

And for reasons I can't fully explain, even to myself, I silently add a wish of my own: that this unforeseen encounter might unfold into something more than what it already is.

I brush a stray leaf from the edge of the fountain, suddenly unsure of what to do with myself. There's an electric current between us, a spark that has nothing to do with the cool spring air. Courtney laughs — a soft, melodic sound that tugs at something deep within me.

“Your turn,” she says. “What did you wish for?”

“Can't say or it won't come true, remember?” I tease back, but the intensity in her eyes suggests she's not buying the evasion.

“All right, then.” I draw a deep breath. “I wished for this day to... continue getting better.”

“Smooth,” she counters, her cheeks flushing a beautiful shade of rose.

“Guilty as charged,” I admit.

“However, I made the wish after I tossed the coin. I suppose that means it cannot

come true now.”

Courtney lets out a small laugh, airy and playful. “Wishes are funny things,” she murmurs, green eyes sparkling in the spill of sunlight. “They don’t work on schedules or follow coin tosses. They bloom within hearts and souls, untouched by our human conventions.”

I glance at her, captivated by her eloquence and the wisdom lacing her words. “You put it beautifully,” I say. The air between us thickens with unspoken promises, and I can feel my careful walls of professionalism crumble in the warmth of her gaze.

“Jakob...” Her voice is a whisper, questioning, expectant.

“Sorry, I—” I begin, but the words falter on my lips as she leans in, her breath mingling with mine.

This is wrong, every protocol and rule screams within me. But then her lips are on mine, soft and tentative, searching. And suddenly, all those rules seem insignificant compared to the rightness of this moment.

The kiss deepens, and with it, the fluttering in my chest transforms into a steady drum, urging me on. Courtney’s hand finds its way to my cheek, and I respond instinctively, pulling her closer. Every alarm bell in my head is silenced by the warmth of her touch, the sweetness of her mouth.

It’s unprofessional. It’s reckless. Yet as I kiss her back, I find myself thinking that if she is some unforeseen threat, then I need to keep her this close, to understand her motivations, to anticipate her moves.

But as we part, breathless and flushed, I know the truth is far simpler: I don’t want to let her go. Not yet. Not when there’s still so much left to learn about the enigma that

is Courtney, the woman who's managed to capture the attention of a man who should know better.

"Wow," she murmurs, her eyes reflecting the same stormy mix of emotion I feel swirling inside me.

“Indeed,” I reply, my voice barely above a husky whisper.

I offer a half-smile that carries a promise I never intended to make — one of more laughter, more touches, more moments like this, where duty and desire collide in the most unexpected ways.

CHAPTER 7

COURTNEY

The warmth of Jakob’s lips lingers on mine long after he pulls away, leaving me breathless and a little dizzy. I’ve been kissed before, but nothing like this — nothing that sends a current through my veins and leaves every nerve ending tingling for more.

Jakob is the kind of handsome that seems to have walked straight out of a fairy tale — the kind Bergovia appears to specialize in — with his deep blue eyes, floppy blond hair, and a smile that makes you want to spill all your secrets. His kindness is just as disarming, his gentle but firm touch sending butterflies through my stomach.

I find myself not wanting this day to end, not wanting to sever this connection that feels like it’s been forged in some kind of magic that can only exist in this small European country.

“Would you like to grab dinner?” I ask, the words tumbling out before I can second-guess them.

He rubs the back of his neck, a sheepish grin on his face. “You know, I think I’ve had enough of crowds for one day.”

My heart sinks a fraction, but I’m quick to mask it with a determined smile. The thought of him walking away now, disappearing into the cobblestone streets and out of my life, sends a wave of panic through me.

“Then how about room service at my hotel?” The suggestion is bold, bolder than anything I would normally consider, but there’s something about Jakob, something about this place that makes me want to throw caution to the wind.

“Room service?” He raises an eyebrow, his smile turning into a playful smirk.

“Yep. Just us, no crowds, and we can pick whatever we want from the menu.” My attempt at nonchalance is probably completely see-through, but I’m not smooth and never have been.

“Sounds perfect,” Jakob agrees, and relief floods through me.

As we walk to my hotel, the idea of having a man — a near-stranger — in my room prickles at the edges of my consciousness. It’s so unlike me. This isn’t something Courtney Fuller does; this isn’t something Courtney who color-codes her bookshelf and has a five-year plan does. But then again, that Courtney hasn’t had much fun in the last year, and maybe it’s time for a change. Maybe it’s time for a vacation fling to become part of the new Courtney narrative — one where I’m not afraid to take chances, especially when it comes to a man who kisses like sin and looks at me like I’m the only one in the room.

Thankfully, I haven’t even taken the time to unpack, which means my hotel room is still pristine. Jakob and I get settled, and I crack open a bottle of red wine. My nerves are finally calming down, and I realize that I’m not feeling any sort of pressure.

Jakob and I kissing doesn't mean anything other than we are attracted to each other and are having a nice time together. It doesn't mean he needs to spend the night. Or even that we need to kiss again.

Although... those things are most definitely on my mind.

They aren't important, though. I'm here in the moment, enjoying the evening with the hottest man I've ever touched. We're ordering room service — a limited menu from the tiny kitchen but one that still looks good — and opening the balcony doors to let in the warm breeze. Life couldn't be better.

I perch on the edge of the wrought-iron railing, a glass of rich red wine cradled in my hands as Jakob leans against the doorframe, watching me.

"Can I see some more of your photos?" he asks.

I hesitate. Showing them to him was nerve-racking, but also validating. The only person I ever showed my photography to was my grandmother — well, and the random strangers on my anonymous Instagram.

"Okay," I say, drawing out the word. "Here."

Pulling out my phone, I open the secret Instagram page and hand my greatest secret over. My breath lingers in my throat as I watch his face, waiting for a reaction.

"Hey, these are really good." He comes closer, showing me which one he is looking at.

His breath is warm on my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. He points to a photo of a street musician, his violin caught mid-note. "This one's my favorite. You've captured the passion in his eyes perfectly."

“Really?” I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face at his words. “I thought it was a bit blurry.”

“Life’s a bit blurry,” he replies with a shrug, his lips curving into an easy smile. “It makes it more real, you know?”

“Maybe you’re right.” I let out a little laugh, feeling a newfound appreciation for my own work through his eyes.

The room service arrives then, breaking our moment as we move inside to set up the spread on the coffee table. There’s a comfortable ease between us as we share bites of gourmet grilled cheese and sip Bordeaux, legs tangled together on the plush hotel sofa.

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“What do you like?” I ask.

He blinks, looking perplexed. “Honestly? Work is my life.”

“Yeah, but aside from that.”

He has to take some time to think about it. “Music. I love going to jazz clubs. I used to play piano.”

“Used to?”

“Adulthood.” He smiles.

“Yeah,” I laugh. “I know how that is. Can you... play something for me? Something that’s your favorite?” I nod at the Bluetooth speaker in the corner.

He brightens up and quickly pulls out his phone. In a minute, an upbeat instrumental song floats from the speaker.

“Shall we?” Jakob stands, offering his hand with a dramatic flourish as if he’s about to lead me in a waltz.

We dance — or something like it, since I never actually learned how to dance — in the small open space of the hotel room. His hands rest lightly on my waist, and it’s only natural for me to move closer into him. Our movements are playful and uncoordinated, more giggles than grace, but it feels so right.

“Sorry I’m messing you up,” I say. “I can tell you know what you’re doing.”

He shrugs. “I was in dance lessons from the time I could walk.”

I cock my head. “Is that a Bergovian thing?”

“Ah... more like a family thing.”

I nod, the questions piling up. It seems very posh, learning to dance as soon as you can walk. What sort of family is he from? They sound rich and high-class.

Before I can wonder any more, the music fades and he draws me in for a kiss. It’s tender, yet filled with the promise of more, stirring a whirlwind of desire within me. For a moment, I lose myself in the sensation, the taste of wine lingering on his lips mixing with the thrill of the unexpected.

And, just like that, I know that we’ve stepped over the line of innocence. He wants to stay the night, and I want him to stay.

I pull back, my heart racing with the possibilities of the night ahead. Can I really do this — have just one night of carefree intimacy and wake up tomorrow without any regrets? It goes against everything I’ve been raised to believe, every self-imposed rule I’ve followed.

But as I look into Jakob’s eyes, those deep pools reflecting a warmth and understanding that seem to pierce right through to my soul, I realize that he’s not the kind of man that I can let slip through my fingers.

“Stay,” I hear myself say, the word slipping out like a secret I hadn’t meant to share.

For a heartbeat, the world seems to pause, my question hanging between us, fragile as

the curtains billowing softly at the window.

Jakob's eyes search mine, and I fear for an instant that I've overstepped, misread the easy intimacy that's grown between us. I brace for rejection, my heart thudding in my chest, the tick of the wall clock suddenly too loud in the quiet room.

But then, he smiles — a slow, genuine expression that eases the tension from my shoulders — and nods. "I would like nothing more," he says, his voice low and sincere.

Relief floods through me, mingling with a sense of anticipation that sends a shiver down my spine. As he steps closer, any lingering doubts evaporate under the warmth of his touch. Tonight, caution is the last thing I want.

Tonight, I am finally and fully alive.

CHAPTER 8

JAKOB

I blink my eyes open, the memories from last night hitting me in raw, sensual waves. My hands in Courtney's hair, her lips against my chest...

It was the material of dreams, the kind of experience that is so wonderful that you're left wondering if perhaps it even happened.

Rolling onto my side, I find her curled on her side, still asleep. My chest tightens, both from a feeling of sweetness and a pang of worry. I didn't plan for this, never meant to stay the night. But as we talked, as she laughed — a sound as clear and refreshing as a mountain spring — I knew I was lost to her charm.

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She knows nothing of my true identity, of the responsibility of a crown I may never wear, or of the centuries-old feud entwining our families like thorny vines. And yet, I find myself wanting more time with her, craving the simplicity of these stolen moments.

With a soft sigh, I slip out of bed, careful not to disturb her slumber. The rug feels cool under my feet as I pad toward the table, where my phone lies abandoned from the night before. Room service, a simple breakfast for two — that sounds perfect. Something to extend the magic of last night, if only for a little longer.

But there, amid the casual scatter of Courtney's belongings, a glint of deep blue catches my eye. A familiar sapphire, set in an ornate gold pendant, winks up at me, its facets reflecting fractured light.

My heart hammers against my ribs as recognition dawns — it's the necklace, the one from the portraits of women in my lineage, their poised figures captured in oil paint and gilded frames. That very necklace vanished decades ago, whispered about in hushed tones and longing sighs. It's more than just a jewel; it's a legacy, a symbol of our family's history.

And here it is now, in Courtney's bag.

There's only one answer. Her grandmother gave it to her. But how did Anna get her hands on it in the first place?

I bite my lip, the question leading to another one. Does Courtney know about the necklace's history? Has she been playing me all along? Does she actually know who I

am?

Courtney stirs, a soft murmur escaping her lips, and I glance back to see her shift, still deeply enmeshed in dreams. In that moment, decision wars with desire, duty clashing with newfound affection. I reach out, fingers trembling as they close around the precious heirloom.

Courtney is something special, but recovering this necklace is another thing entirely. This could be my chance, the opportunity to prove my worth, to restore honor to my name in the eyes of my parents.

“Forgive me,” I sigh, although I know she cannot hear.

The necklace feels heavy in my pocket, heavier still on my conscience. As I take one last look at her, the woman who unknowingly held a piece of my heritage close to her heart, I understand the gravity of what I’ve done.

Yet, despite the turmoil churning inside me, the decision is made. I need to leave now, with the morning still fresh and before Courtney realizes what I’m doing and starts a fight or calls the police. The authorities would side with me, but I would rather keep Courtney out of such drama. This should be as easy on her as possible.

With the sapphire’s weight anchoring me to the reality of who I am and who I might become, I move toward the window, my path diverging from hers with the silent promise of duty over desire.

I could go out the front, of course, but it’s a busy weekday morning and I would prefer to avoid attention — both from the staff and people on the street. If I can get into the alley next to the hotel, I can call a driver or summon a car to whisk me away with very little hubbub.

The cool morning air brushes against my skin as I ease the window open, guilt twisting my stomach. I wish it didn't have to be this way, but I have no other choice, and so there is no point in dwelling on the matter.

I slip through the gap with the grace of one accustomed to avoiding the spotlight, the sapphire necklace still secure in my pocket. The fire escape greets me like an old friend, its metal rungs cold and unyielding beneath my hands.

I descend swiftly, my movements precise, each step away from Courtney's room a reminder of the choice I've made. The dawn light casts long shadows across the alleyway, hiding me from prying eyes. It's a path I've taken before, not out of necessity but for the thrill of anonymity, the freedom it offers — a freedom that now feels like a shackle.

Suddenly, without meaning to, I pause, my breath visible in the crisp air. My gaze lifts to the hotel-room window now far above, and a pang of regret strikes my chest. Would Courtney understand? Could she ever forgive this betrayal woven into an interaction that was nearly unbearably sweet?

Shaking off these thoughts, I focus on the task at hand. I need to blend into the crowd, become just another face in the bustling city. Without my hat and glasses, which I must have misplaced in the whirlwind of last night's events, recognition is a risk I can't afford. Not when I'm so close to redemption.

Cutting through the alleyway, I step onto the street with my head ducked. I stride briskly along the sidewalk, my eyes searching for a taxi. One slows near me, and I slide into the back seat with a nod to the driver.

"To the palace, please," I instruct, my voice steady.

The driver doesn't even glance at me, which is good. After what just happened —

what I had to do — I don't have the emotional bandwidth to even talk to anyone.

As we weave through the streets, my mind races with possibilities. Bringing home the lost heirloom could change everything; it might finally convince my father of my commitment to our country, my worthiness to carry on the royal legacy. I can picture the pride in his eyes, the potential for my ascension to the crown suddenly tangible.

Yet, amid the thrill of success, a hollow ache blooms in my heart. Courtney — her laughter, her warmth, the way she looked at me, seeing the real me, not a prince, not a title — she gave me a taste of something genuine. And I crave more.

But duty has always been my compass, guiding my actions, shaping my destiny. For Bergovia, for my family, I must put aside personal desires. The weight of the sapphire in my pocket is a constant reminder of that duty, a symbol of the sacrifices made by those who came before me.

"Here we are, sir," the driver announces, pulling up to the palace gates.

"Thank you," I reply automatically, swiping my card for the fare.

I step out of the taxi, squaring my shoulders as I face the grandeur of my future. With one last fleeting thought of what might have been, I turn toward the palace gates, ready to embrace the life laid out for me. A life where the crown always and forever outweighs the heart.

CHAPTER 9

COURTNEY

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Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am

The room is quiet as I open my eyes and sit up, my heart a flutter of wings against my rib cage as I scan the room. The other side of the bed is empty, a dent in the pillow where Jakob's head was.

"Jakob?" I rub sleep from my eyes and lean over to peer through the open bathroom door. It's empty.

I frown. Where did he get to?

I crane my head, listening. There are the sounds of footsteps in the hall, but they approach and then pass right by my room. As they slowly fade away, my heart sinks, the truth a heavy stone.

He left. Without saying goodbye.

And without leaving his number, a quick glance at all the surfaces of the room tells me.

I bite my lip, pushing back the disappointment. I knew this might happen, of course, but living through it is another matter entirely now that I'm here, Jakob's absence a silent echo bouncing off the walls of the hotel suite.

I tell myself it's foolish to feel this sting of abandonment; after all, what were the chances? He's from here, and I'm just passing through, a visitor with a return ticket already burning a hole in my pocket. We're worlds apart, Jakob and I.

"Get a grip, Courtney," I mutter under my breath as I push back the covers.

My feet touch the plush rug, and I shuffle towards the suitcase perched on the luggage rack. It's time to get dressed and face the day, even if it means doing so without the charming stranger who swept me off my feet last night.

I flip open the clasps of my suitcase, rummaging for something to wear. As I pull out a soft cotton dress, I frown. Something's not right. I dig deeper, tossing aside scarves and skirts, a growing sense of dread twisting in my stomach. And then it hits me — the hollow emptiness where my grandmother's necklace should be, its delicate gold chain and the tiny sapphire pendant passed down through generations, now missing.

My hands freeze, and I feel the blood drain from my face. "No, no, no..."

The words are screams of disbelief as the truth dawns on me: Jakob. He's taken it. That's the only explanation.

Panic swells, and my thoughts scatter like leaves in the wind. I trusted him, let him charm me with his smile and his soft touches. How could I have been such an easy mark?

"He scammed me," I breathe, the words tasting bitter on my tongue.

All at once, the memories of last night — his laughter, his warm hand enveloping mine — twist into something sinister. He must have planned this from the moment he laid eyes on me. The realization is a slap, a betrayal that stings more than the loss of the heirloom itself.

How many times has he done this before? Picked up a woman and gone to her hotel room only to rob her? For all I know, I'm the hundredth person he's done this to — and I can't decide if that makes me feel better or worse.

Fury replaces the shock, heating my veins as I stand here amid the chaos of my

belongings. This was no chance encounter. I was targeted, not special like he made me think. Jakob wasn't just a thief; he was a master at his game.

But I'm not leaving Bergovia — not yet. Not without my grandmother's necklace. I'll find Jakob, and when I do, he'll wish he'd never crossed paths with Courtney Fuller.

I march down to the hotel lobby, my resolve firming with each step, the anger, sense of betrayal, and determination building as I go. I reach the front desk, where a young woman with a polite smile greets me.

"Good morning. How may I assist you?" Her voice is sweet, but it grates against the turmoil inside me.

I lean in, trying to keep my voice steady. "I need to report a theft. Last night, someone— I mean, something very valuable was taken from my room."

Her smile fades as she listens, nodding sympathetically. She motions for the security guard standing by the entrance. "Let's check the cameras," she says.

Together, we watch the grainy footage, scanning for any sign of Jakob's departure. But the lobby is a ballet of guests and staff, nothing out of place. No Jakob. No evidence. It's as if he's vanished into thin air, a ghost among the living.

"Unfortunately, there's nothing here that can help us," the guard says apologetically, his face etched with genuine regret.

"Thank you," I whisper, my heart sinking further. I should have known better than to hope for easy answers.

"You should report it to the authorities." He writes down a number and address for me. "The closest station is just down the street."

It's something, at least. The hotel can't help me, but maybe the police can. My feet carry me through the cobblestone streets, past the buildings and gardens that yesterday made me feel like I was in heaven and that this morning only remind me of the trick I fell for.

The police station is an austere building that feels unwelcoming despite its open doors. Inside, officers move about with purpose, their attention on matters far greater than a tourist's lost jewelry.

"May I help you?" A stern-faced officer looks up from his desk, his eyes skeptical as I approach.

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I recount the story, watching as his expression remains unchanged. He takes notes, asks for a description, but the absence of a photograph of Jakob makes it clear; they have little to work with, and even less interest.

“We will file a report, miss, but you must understand — we have more pressing cases.” His words echo the sentiment of his disinterested gaze.

“Of course,” I murmur, feeling the dismissal deep in my bones. The station suddenly feels colder, and I wrap my arms around myself.

I should have taken a photo of Jakob. I had my camera with me, after all! Of course, he probably wouldn’t have let me, even if I’d asked. He likely already knew he would rob me of whatever good stuff he found in my room, and he would be an idiot to leave me with something I could ID him with.

Stepping back onto the street, I realize I’m alone in a hunt that seems increasingly futile. But I won’t give up. Not yet. Not until I’ve turned over every stone in this quaint country. My grandmother’s necklace means too much to surrender without a fight.

Trudging down the street, I find myself at the café where I met Mimi yesterday. It seems forever ago now, like it was another lifetime. Ordering a coffee, I take a seat at the same table I was at the day before and stare dismally at the wall. What now?

I clutch the ceramic mug, the warmth barely registering against my numb fingers. The café is a cozy alcove away from the bustling streets, yet I’m as cold inside as the stone buildings lining the old town square. I take a sip of the coffee, knowing I should

eat something but not having an appetite.

“Maybe it’s time to go home,” I murmur to myself, staring into the dark liquid as if it holds answers. My grandmother’s necklace, more than a simple chain and jewel, was a connection to a past that I now feel slipping away. How could I let something so precious end up in the hands of a thief?

I blink rapidly, tears threatening to spill over. This isn’t how my trip was supposed to end. Not with heartache and loss. Not with deception by someone who... No, I can’t even think about Jakob without a mix of anger and sorrow tangling up inside me.

I rise from my chair, needing some fresh air. Maybe a walk will clear my head, help me plan my next move. I can call Mimi and see if she has any advice about what to do.

But before I can take a step, my gaze catches on a newspaper held by an older gentleman at a neighboring table. My heart lurches, then races — Jakob’s face stares back at me from the front page.

“May I?” I gesture towards the paper, my voice quivering with disbelief. The man nods, perplexed by my urgency, but he hands it over.

“Prince Jakob,” the headline exclaims, below a photo of the man whose memory haunts me. He looks regal, untouchable — not like someone who would spend an evening with a tourist. And certainly not someone who’d need to steal.

“Why?” I breathe out.

The man frowns at me, probably thinking I’m loony.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “Um, thank you.”

I step away, my balance off and the room oddly bright. A prince? It doesn't make sense. The story beneath his image mentioned charity events, diplomatic meetings — nothing that hints at why he'd take my grandmother's necklace.

Determination ignites within me, pushing the despair aside. This isn't just about the necklace anymore; it's about the truth. And I won't leave Bergovia without it.

CHAPTER 10

JAKOB

I stride through the wide halls of the palace, my boots echoing against the marble floors — each step a reminder of the duty I carry as a prince of Bergovia. The grandeur of the royal residence, with its gilded cornices and ancestral portraits peering down at me, feels more important today than it ever has.

I grew up in this palace, but for most of my life it was nothing other than my home — a home filled with staff that hosted an array of dignitaries. Today this building is something different, though. It's a source of pride, a reminder of the responsibility that I have been fortunate enough to inherit.

Today, for the first time in a long time, I will make my father truly proud.

This morning's sunrise found me falling for Courtney, her laughter an echo in my heart. But as the morning casts longer shadows, my feelings are shrouded in doubt and confusion. How could she possess our family's long-lost heirloom, a sapphire necklace of such significance?

My jaw tightens. No matter the tendrils of affection binding me to her, I must sever them. My involvement with Courtney has already twisted the threads of propriety and royal expectation into a complicated knot.

Reaching the heavy oak door of the king's study, I knock with restrained force.

"Father, may I have a word?" I call out, knowing he is busy but also knowing that this matter cannot wait.

"Enter, Jakob," comes the voice from within.

I push open the door and step inside, the familiar scent of cigars and leather enveloping me. My father sits behind his massive desk, a bastion of regal composure. His discerning eyes meet mine, and for a fleeting second, I wonder if he can see the battle waging in my soul.

"Father." I reach into my jacket pocket, withdrawing the sapphire necklace that has been part of our family lore for generations. Its stones catch the light, casting azure reflections across the room.

“Is that?—?”

“Yes,” I confirm, handing it over to him. “I found it with Courtney Fuller — the granddaughter of Anna Jäger.”

He examines the necklace, a flicker of emotion crossing his otherwise impassive features. He holds a piece of our history between his fingers, a relic we believed forever lost.

“Good work, Jakob,” he says, but there’s a question there. He’s waiting for me to reveal more.

“I trailed her, saw it in her bag,” I explain, omitting the details of everything else that happened between myself and Courtney. My time with her was anything but professional, and if my father knew, it would sour his opinion of me in an instant.

“Very well,” Father says, placing the necklace in a drawer of his desk, locking away both the jewel and the subject. He peers at me, his gaze piercing yet proud. “You’ve done your duty to your heritage.”

“Thank you, Father.” I can’t stop glancing at the drawer that now hides the necklace.

As much as I want to distance myself from Courtney, I cannot shake the feeling that this isn’t the end of our story. But for now, I must keep my heart under lock and key, just like the sapphire that ignited this entire affair.

Turning, I reach for the doorknob, but the sound of my father clearing his throat stops

me.

“Before you leave... there is more to be done.”

I freeze, not daring to turn around. My fingers tighten around the handle.

“Keep watch over Miss Fuller,” he instructs. “Ensure her intentions toward our family — and the crown — are as innocent as she portrays.”

My throat tightens, and I swallow the objection that threatens to escape. Staying away from Courtney was supposed to simplify things, keep my head clear for the duties that lie ahead. Now, the prospect of being near her again sends a jolt of both dread and desire through me. My mind flashes to her misty eyes, the curve of her smile in the dappled sunlight next to the water fountain.

“She’s no threat, Father,” I assure him, hoping to sound more convinced than I am. “She knows nothing of our... lives.”

“Be discreet, Jakob,” he says, not even acknowledging what I just said. “We don’t need the press sniffing around a potential scandal.”

I swallow against a knot in my throat. So that’s that, then. The king has given me an order, and I must obey it.

“Of course,” I say, but inside, my resolve wavers like a candle in the wind.

With a nod, I push open the door and step into the hallway, my heart and feet heavy. The door thuds shut behind me, and I stand still for a long moment, my head swirling. Taking a deep breath, I start walking.

Father wants me to continue to watch Courtney? Fine. I can do so. It will be

challenging to keep myself emotionally distanced, but I've done harder things.

"Jakob!" The sharp call of my name halts me mid-stride. Christina's piercing blue eyes meet mine, her perfectly arched brows drawing together in suspicion.

"What were you doing in Father's study?" She moves closer, her heels clicking against the marble floor with the precision of a ticking clock.

"Speaking," I reply nonchalantly, schooling my features into an expression of indifference. She studies me for a moment longer, searching for a crack in my façade.

"What are you doing to angle for the crown now?" Her hands rest on her hips, the emerald silk of her dress rustling softly.

"Christina," I say, letting out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, "you know that's not how it works."

Her lips purse. She's not buying it. She knows that I'm doing something secretive, and she wants in on it.

Which will never happen. I'm onto something big here. I've already proven myself once to my father by returning him the necklace, and now I can double my brownie points by keeping an eye on Courtney. If Christina knew anything about what I'm up to, she would find a way to sabotage it, and I can't have that.

"Have a good day, Christina." I smile brightly. "See you at supper."

She scowls, and I walk away still feeling twisted up over Courtney but at least having the satisfaction of one-upping my sister. It's a small win, but today is a day where I will take anything I can get.

CHAPTER 11

JAKOB

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:12 am

Itap the pen against my desk, the rhythmic click a poor distraction from the knot of anxiety in my stomach. The office is unusually quiet today, the silence punctuated only by the occasional murmur of conversation from the hallway and the soft clack of my keyboard. My mind should be on the reports I need to finalize before the end of the day, but instead, it's swirling with thoughts of Courtney.

My father wants me to keep an eye on her, and I already know I will be best able to do that by getting close to her again, rather than spying on her from a distance. But how can I possibly bridge the gulf I've created between us?

And can I handle it? It will be a test of my strength, of my devotion to the crown and my country. No woman has ever tempted me like Courtney, and I already fear that, once I show up at her hotel after work, I will lose all strength and beg her to kiss me.

Then again, she might punch me the moment she sees me. In that case, I will be doing very little talking with a swollen lip.

The clock on the wall ticks away the minutes as I shuffle papers, sign documents, and halfheartedly sort through emails. It's busywork, really; anything to keep my hands occupied while my mind races for a solution.

I will need to explain away the necklace. She will likely think I stole it —knowI stole it, that is. So, should I deny it? Or tell her the truth? That it belongs to my family and that I needed to return to it my father? In that case, should I tell her who I really am? Or does she already know by now?

Even if I am fully honest, it still won't look good. How do you apologize for a

betrayal that cuts so deep? How do you seek forgiveness when you're not sure you even deserve it?

A sudden commotion in the hallway snaps me out of my reverie, and I stand abruptly, the chair rolling back with a thud. The voices outside are growing louder, tinged with urgency and confusion. I stride to the door, flinging it open just in time to see two burly security guards blocking Courtney's path.

"You Highness, I'm sorry, but she insists—" one of the guards begins, but I cut him off with a raised hand.

"Let her go," I command, fixing my gaze on Courtney's face. She's a storm of emotions — anger, determination, vulnerability — and it stirs something protective within me. "It's okay. Ms. Fuller is here to see me."

The guards glance at each other, silently questioning, but they know better than to disobey. They step aside, and Courtney brushes past them like a force of nature, her eyes locked onto mine. There's an electricity in the air, a current that pulses with unspoken words and pent-up frustrations.

"Come into my office," I say softly, stepping aside to let her pass.

As she moves by me, a hint of her perfume lingers, a sweet floral scent that reminds me of the gardens in spring, and it's all I can do not to reach out and pull her into an embrace. But I hold back, because right now, what Courtney needs is space and respect.

"Thank you," she says, though the gratitude doesn't quite reach her eyes. They're still clouded with emotions I can't quite read, and I wonder if there's any way to clear the storm brewing behind them.

As we enter the sanctuary of my office, I close the door behind us, shutting out the rest of the world. It's just the two of us now, and whatever comes next, I know I must face it head-on.

Her presence fills the room, her anger palpable. Before I can even attempt to mollify her with an explanation or a plea for understanding, she rounds on me.

"Jakob, where is it? The necklace!" Her hands are balled into fists at her sides, her chest rising and falling with each breath. "It was the last thing I had of my grandmother's!"

I swallow hard, the words I need to say lodged in my throat like shards of broken glass. "Courtney, I'm so sorry. The necklace... it's been reclaimed by the royal family."

"Reclaimed?" She blinks rapidly, confusion etching her features. "But... but how could it belong to them? To...you?"

The last word is a hiss. So, she knows who I am. Of course, it couldn't stay hidden forever. Bergovia is a small country, after all. I'm surprised she didn't find out who I was while we were spending our magical day together.

"Your grandmother..." I start, then hesitate.

Should I unravel the threads of her family history? The silence stretches out, fraught and heavy.

"Jakob?" she prompts, her voice softer now, tinged with vulnerability. "Why would my grandmother have something that belonged to royalty?"

The question hangs in the air, an invitation for me to step into the breach. But I hold

back, uncertain if it's my place to reveal what little I know. Instead, I opt for caution, for kindness.

"Your family history is yours to discover. If you want to know more, I will tell you everything I can." I pause, giving her space to process. "But only if you ask."

She looks away, wrestling with the shock that has settled over her like a cold fog. In the stillness of the office, I see her grappling with the unknown, a puzzle she hadn't anticipated needing to solve. Her eyes meet mine again, searching for something — perhaps comfort, perhaps clarity. All I can offer is my presence and the hope that when she's ready, she'll let me help her piece together the missing parts of her story.

"You know I want it back," she says softly.

I draw a sharp breath, hating this part. "I do. But I hope you understand that I cannot give it back."

Her head drops, hair shielding her face like a curtain. I wish so much to push it aside and be invited into her private world, but I stay where I am, anchored to the carpet.

"Then that's that, I guess." Her shoulders slump as she turns away from me, her hand reaching for the doorknob.

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“Where are you going?” My voice catches on the question.

“I need to leave — catch the next flight out.”

“Wait, Courtney.” The words escape me before I can think them through. She stops, poised on the threshold, the line of her back rigid with defeat yet brimming with an urge to flee.

“Please, just hear me out,” I say, my voice low, hoping to convey a sincerity that might bridge the distance between us.

Guilt gnaws at my conscience — the role I’ve played in her current distress, and the duty I owe my father, which has ensnared her in its web.

She turns slowly, her gaze wary, an ocean of emotions I fear I’m drowning in. “What? I really don’t have time for?—”

“Your grandmother wouldn’t want you to leave like this,” I say, stepping closer but careful not to crowd her. “Bergovia... it’s part of you, Courtney. And there’s so much more you haven’t seen; places steeped in history, landscapes that would take your breath away.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, suspicion threading through the hurt. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because...” I start, swallowing hard against the lump forming in my throat, “you have a heritage here — a lost heritage — that’s worth knowing. I could show it to

you. Teach you it.”

My offering hangs in the air, fragile as a soap bubble, reflecting the myriad possibilities of what could be if she chooses to stay.

“Teach me?” Her voice is a mere murmur, laced with a hesitancy that matches the tremor in my hands. “About my family?”

“About Bergovia. I can take some time off work and show you around. If you’ll let me.” The words are a promise, one I intend to keep, even if it means I won’t get to do it in exactly the way I want to.

She chews on her bottom lip, contemplating the offer, her decision suspended like the last golden leaf on a tree, ready to fall but still holding on.

“Maybe,” she breathes out at last, leaving the word to float between us, unanchored and undefined.

“Maybe” isn’t a no, but neither is it a yes. It’s a sliver of hope, though, and for now, that’s enough for me to hold on to.

CHAPTER 12

COURTNEY

The immensity of what I’ve just found out presses heavily on my shoulders as I stand in Jakob’s office, surrounded by his expensive furniture and framed photos of men and women in suits. This still doesn’t make sense.

How could my grandmother have taken something that wasn’t hers? The idea seems alien, impossible even, yet here I am, face-to-face with a prince who claims the

necklace belongs to his family.

“Listen,” I say, voice barely more than a breath. “The necklace — my grandmother cherished it. It was the one thing she left me when she died.” My eyes lift to meet his, searching for some understanding. “I can’t reconcile the woman I knew with theft. It doesn’t make sense.”

He watches me with a look that’s part pity, part regret. “Courtney, I understand this is difficult. But sometimes, history has a way of hiding its less favorable chapters.”

I nod slowly. Despite the turmoil inside me, if the necklace is rightfully theirs, then I won’t keep it. That’s not who I am or who my grandmother and mom raised me to be. But the sting of betrayal still lingers, turning the air between us thick with unsaid words. Did he get close to me just for this piece of jewelry?

I glance around his office, at the espresso machine that looks like it cost tens of thousands of dollars, and the amazing view of the city. A world so removed from mine, a world where Jakob isn’t just a man — he’s a prince and a bigwig in this security department, with all the responsibilities and expectations those titles carry. And yet, he’s offered to show me around Bergovia, his home, his realm.

“Is this your way of apologizing?” I ask, the question hanging like a fragile ornament in the space between us.

“Partly,” he admits. He steps closer, and I’m acutely aware of the warmth radiating from him. “But also, I want you to see the beauty of Bergovia. Through your lens, perhaps even through your heart.”

My breath hitches. His words weave a spellbinding image, tempting and sweet, but I can’t forget how we got here — that he played me.

Then again... could it be that he wants to spend more time with me? Does he feel something beyond duty and obligation? Or is it just the guilt of using me to retrieve a lost heirloom?

“Jakob, I...” The words tangle in my throat, uncertainty clouding the desire I still shamelessly have to spend more time with him.

Despite what he did, last night’s touches and kisses still linger, and I can’t just shed them. They cling to my skin, to my heart, impacting my every thought and breath.

“Please,” he says, and there’s an earnestness in his voice that makes it hard to stay guarded. “Let me show you my country. Let me make this right.”

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The offer is compelling and, despite my better judgment, incredibly enticing. There's a part of me that yearns to say yes — to explore the cobblestone streets, the rolling hills, and the ancient castles that make up the tapestry of Bergovia. To possibly unravel more about my grandmother's past. And maybe, just maybe, to understand the enigmatic prince before me. And to even...

No, I can't think that way about the two of us. Jakob is off the table. For one, I can't trust him. For another, he's a prince! How could we ever make anything beyond a one-night stand or a fling work?

"Okay," I utter, giving in to curiosity, to the adventure, to the chance of discovering what lies beneath the crown. "Show me Bergovia, Jakob."

His smile is gentle, a soft curve that reaches his eyes and, for a moment, I allow myself to believe that there's more to him than just royal blood and hidden agendas.

"Under one condition." I hold up my finger. To my satisfaction, he looks disappointed.

"And what is that one condition?" He quirks a blond eyebrow.

"We start with a trial day," I say. "So we can see if we can even stand each other."

He looks like he's trying not to smile. "I am fairly certain we can do more than stand each other."

I stare him down, my eyes narrowing. "A lot has changed since last night."

That makes the smirk fall right off his face. And it should. He's the one who royally — no pun intended — messed things up between the two of us. If he wants to make things better, he'll have to try a whole lot harder.

Also, on my end, this is my way of testing him a bit. Of seeing if he's actually willing to show up and put in some effort. After him stealing away with the necklace, it would be foolish of me to just automatically trust him.

"Then one day it is," he says. "But I have a feeling you'll find Bergovia quite captivating and want to continue for more than only one day."

FindBergoviacaptivating? Orhim? Which one is it that he really wants to say?

I'm sure he's used to women falling all over him, jumping at his smallest whim and treating him like a god. Well, not me. He might be handsome and slick, but the prince thing won't work on me. Not since I've already gotten a taste of the real Jakob.

His fingers dance across his phone screen, likely notifying someone of his change in plans. "Let's not waste any more time."

I watch, amazed, as he issues instructions to postpone meetings and shuffle appointments. Each spoken word is deliberate, each command carrying the authority of someone who knows they will be obeyed. The prince is clearing his schedule for me — for us — to have this day together.

And I have to admit... I'm impressed.

"Where do you think we should go?" There's a lilt to his question, playful and brimming with possibilities.

"Somewhere historical," I suggest, the idea sparking sudden excitement within me.

“How about one of Bergovia’s old castles?”

“Perfect,” he agrees, and I notice the glimmer of enthusiasm in his eyes. It mirrors my own. “I know just the place.”

Before I can ask where, he’s on his phone again, speaking in rapid Bergovian to someone on the other end. He hangs up with a smile that’s both triumphant and conspiratorial. “It’s settled. We’ll visit the Schloss Klein. They’re preparing for a private tour as we speak.”

“Private?” I echo, surprised by the exclusivity of it all.

“Of course,” he responds, his smile never wavering. “I wouldn’t want our trial day marred by crowds or distractions. This way, you’ll see the castle as few ever do.”

The idea of exploring the castle with him thrills me more than I care to admit. I won’t show it, though. I’m taking a page from Jakob’s book and holding my cards close, making sure that I don’t reveal too much.

“Ready?” He opens the door for me.

“Um... sure.”

“Do you need to stop at your hotel first?”

“No. I’m ready to go.”

Twenty minutes ago I was ready to tear into him for taking the necklace and deceiving me. Now I’m headed out for a day of sightseeing with him. Should I feel manipulated?

Maybe, but this is also what I want. I came here to see Bergovia, and no one has more exclusive access than a prince and the head of the security department. I doubt there's anywhere in the country he can't get us into, so why squander a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

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He leads me downstairs, past the guards, who bow and address him as “Your Highness,” and out to the curb. A sleek black car glides to a stop in front of us, and something about its quiet arrival makes my pulse quicken. Jakob opens the door for me with a courteous bow, and I slide into the plush leather seat, feeling every bit the stranger in a fairy tale that’s not mine.

As the driver pulls away from the curb, I’m acutely aware of the curious stares following us through the window. Heads turn, whispers flutter like leaves in the wind, and for a moment, I imagine what it must be like to live under such scrutiny every day.

“Is it always like this?” I ask, unable to tear my eyes away from the onlookers who seem both intrigued and respectful.

“More or less,” Jakob replies, his voice tinged with a note of resignation. “One learns to find privacy in plain sight, or not at all.”

I nod, still processing. Prince Jakob. It’s strange to reconcile the man I thought I knew with the royal before me now. He catches my gaze, a question in his eyes, but I have no answer to give. Instead, I focus on the changing scenery as we leave the city behind.

The castle emerges on the horizon like a sentinel watching over Bergovia. Its ancient stones are a testament to history, standing proud and unyielding against the passage of time. I catch my breath as we approach, the grandeur of Schloss Klein dwarfing everything around it.

“Welcome,” Jakob says, as if he can sense the awe spilling through me.

We’re greeted at the entrance by a guide whose knowledge seems limitless. Each room is more stunning than the last, with tapestries that recount tales of old, and chandeliers that sparkle like constellations. Jakob remains close by, a constant presence, pointing out hidden details and sharing anecdotes that bring the stone walls to life.

“Go ahead, take pictures,” he encourages, gesturing to an ornate fresco that stretches across the ceiling. “You’ll want to remember this.”

I pull out my camera, trying to capture the essence of each moment. Through the lens, I see not just the beauty of the castle but also the care with which Jakob treats his heritage. His pride is palpable, and as he watches me frame a shot, there’s a softness in his eyes that I haven’t seen before.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he says, and I’m not sure if he’s talking about the view or something else entirely.

“Very,” I reply, and in that second, it’s true.

The castle, the country, this unexpected journey — it’s all breathtakingly beautiful. And maybe, just maybe, so is the prince beside me. But I tuck that thought away, focusing instead on the here and now as we continue our tour through the heart of Bergovian history.

The tour guide, to my surprise, leaves us, telling us to take our time looking around.

“She trusts us?” I ask Jakob, before remembering who I’m talking to.

Correction: she trusts Jakob. A prince of Bergovia. Me, she doesn’t know from

anyone else.

“I want to show you something,” is all he says.

Jakob leads me through a set of heavy double doors into a secluded garden, and I find myself grappling with more than just the beauty surrounding us. The air here is sweet with the scent of roses and lavender, and the air feels different here. More precious.

“Most visitors don’t get to see this part,” he says, a hint of pride lacing his words. “It’s my mother’s favorite retreat.”

I trail my fingers over the petals of a blooming rose. Jakob watches me, and there’s that same tenderness in his gaze. It occurs to me then; he’s trying so hard to win me over.

But why? Can a prince truly be interested in a commoner like me? Or is guilt over the necklace compelling him to kindness?

“Thank you for showing me this,” I say, not wanting to accuse or question him yet, instead expressing genuine gratitude.

His smile deepens, reaching his eyes, and there’s an unspoken connection that passes between us — a current of what we experienced last night. Or maybe just of what I experienced. For all I know, Jakob faked even being interested in me.

“Would you like to see the rest of the gardens?” he asks, gesturing toward a cobblestone path that snakes through the foliage.

“Sure,” I reply.

As we walk, the chemistry between us seems to thicken, tangible in the shared

glances and light touches as he guides me past a fountain, his hand briefly resting on my back. I'm not imagining it. He's here because he wants to be. He wants to be next to me.

The idea of extending our trial day bubbles up inside me, and I already know I'll ask. Teasing myself with possibilities seems foolish — after all, he is a prince — but then again, when will I ever get another chance to experience Bergovia like this? I didn't come all this way for nothing, and the allure of spending more time with Jakob, learning about his world, is too tempting to resist.

“Jakob,” I begin, pausing beside a bed of tulips that paint the ground in splashes of color. “Would it be possible to... extend our day together? There's so much more I'd love to see.”

He turns to me, eyes alight with pleasure. “So, our little trial day worked after all.”

My cheeks warm. “Don't pat yourself too much on the back.”

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“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he chuckles.

Too soon, the sun is setting and it’s time to go. The cobblestones are uneven under my feet as we step out of the castle, its ancient stones casting long shadows in the waning light. Jakob pauses at the edge of the manicured lawn that stretches out before us, looking every inch the storybook prince with the grandeur of legacy rising behind him.

“Mind if I take a picture?” I ask, already reaching for the camera slung around my neck. It feels natural to capture this moment, to freeze him in time against the backdrop of history and heritage.

“Of course,” he replies, offering me a relaxed, boyish grin that takes me by surprise.

I peer through the viewfinder, focusing on the way the golden-hour sun drapes over him, highlighting the angles of his face. He’s undeniably handsome, more so than any photograph could convey, with an ease and charm that seem to radiate from within. The shutter clicks, and I take a few steps back to frame him from another angle.

“Okay,” I call out, not lifting my gaze from the camera, “look off to the side, like you’re pondering your kingdom or something.”

He chuckles, obliging with a thoughtful expression directed toward the rolling hills in the distance. Another click, and I know I’ve captured something special — something candid and unguarded.

I lower the camera, suddenly struck by the reality of the man before me. How did I

end up here, at an old castle with a prince? The urge to step closer, to bridge the gap between royal and commoner, is nearly overwhelming.

“Beautiful,” I murmur, but I’m not just talking about the photos.

“Thank you.” His voice is softer now, filled with something that sounds like hope. Or maybe it’s desire.

I swallow hard, feeling the pull of attraction, but I have to be careful. He may be charming and sincere in this stolen moment away from the world, but there’s no forgetting the crown that awaits him, nor the ordinary girl I am. Falling in love with a prince isn’t just unlikely; it’s the sort of fantasy that can’t survive in the harsh light of reality.

“Let’s keep going,” I say, tucking away the camera as I fortify the walls around my heart.

There’s a part of me that wishes I could let go, to see where this chemistry might lead, but he’s given me more reasons to trust him than not to, and even if he hadn’t slipped away with the necklace, I would still be wary.

“Lead the way.” He gestures with a sweep of his hand, and I wonder if he senses the battle waging within me. But I offer him a smile, stepping forward into the remnants of daylight, determined to enjoy the here and now without worrying about the impossibilities of tomorrow.

CHAPTER 13

JAKOB

The cool country breeze plays with the hem of Courtney’s skirt as we step out from

the shadow of the ancient castle, and suddenly it feels like I'm walking out of a dream. My heart races, pounding against my chest with an intensity that matches the crunch of gravel under our feet.

"Perfect light today," she says, oblivious to the chaos she's igniting inside me. I can only nod, my throat tight, because right now, all I can think about is the curve of her smile, the way her eyes find beauty in the mundane, how she sees the world — and, somehow, sees me too.

Her camera hangs around her neck, a black strap adorned with little silver charms that clink softly with each step. She captures Bergovia in ways that make even a prince rediscover his homeland. And yet, it's not just her artistry that has me entranced; it's everything about her — the way she laughs, the passion in her voice when she talks about her work, the gentle kindness in her green eyes.

"Jakob?" Her voice pulls me from my reverie.

"Sorry, just... lost in thought." That's half true. I'm also lost in desire, in the dangerous notion of what it would mean to give into it — again.

We reach the car, and I open the back door for her, watching as she slides into the seat. Her thank-you is soft, almost as if she's aware of the tension between us. I close the door gently and circle to the other side, taking a moment to collect myself. I can't afford to lose control, not when there's so much at stake.

As my driver starts the engine, a part of me wishes we could drive away from everything — my responsibilities, the drama surrounding the necklace, the unspoken truths hanging between us. But escaping isn't an option for either of us. Especially not for me. With every mile that brings us closer to her hotel, a sinking feeling settles in my gut. Because I know, despite the pull drawing me toward her, I need to keep a safe distance.

Sleeping with her again would be a sweet surrender but a reckless mistake. My duty to my country, to my position, looms over me like the towering peaks of the Bergovian Alps. The risk of romance, of hearts entangled and my father's disapproval, is a gamble I cannot afford to take.

The car rolls to a stop in front of Courtney's hotel.

"Thank you for today," she says.

I nod, all the things I really want to say jumbled up in a ball in my throat. "With the necklace... it's unfortunate how things turned out. I hope you understand that I had no choice."

Her eyes flash, and I can feel her disagreement, palpable as it is in the confines of the car. "There are always choices."

I suck in a sharp breath. She's right, but my goal is the crown, and when it comes to that, my options are truly limited.

"Good night, Jakob," she says, her voice cold.

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Before I can muster up any words that might bridge the chasm between us, she's out the car door. Her bag slung over her shoulder, she doesn't glance back as she strides toward the hotel door and disappears inside.

I should feel relieved; duty prevails, emotion tucked away for another day, another lifetime perhaps. But my chest tightens in regret. She's hurt — I know it. The way she held herself, so rigid, so guarded. It's my fault. And yet, my apology lingers, unspoken, swallowed by the greater need to protect the crown, its image pristine and unblemished.

"Good night, Courtney," I murmur to no one, a futile gesture, an unseen olive branch extended toward an empty space on the street.

"I will walk back to the palace," I announce to the driver. It's a nice evening, and I could use some fresh air to clear my head.

He looks at me in the rearview mirror and nods. "As you wish, Your Highness."

With a deep breath, I shake off the lingering unease and step out of the car. I tug on the hem of my jacket, steeling myself against the brisk evening air — and my own tumultuous thoughts.

"Your Highness!" A chorus of high-pitched calls greets me as I turn the corner.

A throng of women, clustered like vibrant wildflowers, waits just outside a hip restaurant. Autograph seekers, admirers, each with their smartphones held aloft like digital shields, ready to capture a moment with Bergovia's most eligible bachelor.

“Jakob! Over here!”

“Please, just one picture!”

Their voices blend into a melody of yearning, their hands reaching, stretching toward me as if I were salvation itself. A part of me longs to indulge them, to play the role they all expect. But not today. Today, their touch feels intrusive, their attention a garish spotlight when all I crave is shadow.

“Sorry, ladies,” I say, mustering a polite smile. “I have urgent matters to attend to.”

I weave through the crowd, careful not to brush against the outstretched fingers, the perfumed wrists. But they’re persistent, ebbing and flowing around me like the tide chasing the moon. They follow me down the street, a cascade of giggles and pleading words. My pace quickens, desperate now to escape, to find sanctuary from prying eyes and grasping hands.

“Your Highness, please wait!”

“Jakob, look this way!”

Their voices chase me through a park, into a bar, out its back, and down an alley. The cool darkness of the alley welcomes me like an old friend, and I lean against the brick wall for a moment, catching my breath, my heart a chaotic drumbeat in my chest.

Most of the time, it’s not like this. With Bergovia as small as it is, it’s common to see royalty out and about, and celebrity isn’t worshipped here the way it is in some places. Still, there are moments where I get an excited squeal or a woman begging me to marry her — or, like tonight, a whole crowd of them chasing after me.

The sound of a door opening makes me look over. Several of the women have

emerged from the bar and into the alley.

“There!” One of them points at me in excitement.

Cursing under my breath, I take off at a clip for the end of the alley. The hum of a car engine cuts through the clamor, and I see the familiar black sedan rolling up to the curb. Relief floods me as the window rolls down, revealing the stern face of Stefan, one of my most trusted security guards.

“Your Highness,” he says, with a nod that is both respectful and urgent.

“Stefan,” I exhale, sliding into the back seat as quickly as I can. The door shuts with a satisfying thud, silencing the calls of the women outside. “Thank you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Part of the job, sir,” he replies, though I catch a hint of a smile in his eyes through the rearview mirror. Poor little prince, being chased down by a hoard of women. I’m sure it looks silly.

The car pulls away smoothly, and I sink back into the plush leather, trying to ease the tension in my muscles.

“Everything well, Your Highness?” Stefan asks.

“Fine now, thanks to you,” I say, meaning every word. “There was just a bit more... enthusiasm than usual.”

I need to be more careful. My mind travels back to Courtney, her shutter clicking, capturing moments with an artist’s eye, and how easily our paths crossed. The press would have a field day if they caught wind of anything between us. It’s not just my privacy at stake — it’s hers too, and she doesn’t deserve to be hounded by

paparazzi because of my indiscretion.

“Stefan, I’m sure you know where I was earlier. Who I was with.”

He nods. “Yes, sir, I do. Miss Courtney Fuller.”

“We need to make sure this evening stays off the record,” I say firmly. “No one needs to know about my... appointment today.”

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“Understood, sir,” Stefan replies, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror again. “We’ll keep it quiet. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly, staring out the window at the blur of passing shops, restaurants, and bars.

It’s a reassurance, but the weight of responsibility still rests heavy on my chest. I already had a lot to balance before, and Courtney’s presence in my life has brought on even more complications.

The car’s engine hums a steady rhythm as we drive through the cobblestone streets, the soft glow of streetlights casting shadows that play against the tinted windows. My thoughts churn with the same tumultuous energy that had my heart racing back at the castle. Despite my resolve, images of Courtney linger in my mind — her focused gaze behind the camera lens, the way her smile unfolded effortlessly, and that spark of something genuine that seems so rare to find.

I lean back into the leather seat, attempting to compose myself. The shield of privacy has always been my armor against the world, but as I stare into the darkening sky, a rebellious thought takes root.

Would it truly be so terrible? Throwing caution to the wind? Pursuing her despite what my father thinks — what anyone else thinks?

I would be risking the crown. I know it. Despite everything else I have done, the woman I choose to invite into my life could be a determining factor when it comes to whether or not my father elects to pass his mantle on to me.

Yet I'm still thinking about it. About her.

A corner of my mouth quirks upward involuntarily. Pictures of us together, splashed across the glossy pages of magazines... It sends an unexpected thrill through me, one I'm not accustomed to indulging.

Courtney, with her chestnut waves and knowing eyes, standing beside me, her presence commanding even without a title. I wonder if the public would see in her what I do — an unexpected complement to my life of structure and duty. We'd probably make a fine pairing indeed, her vibrancy against my restraint, a balance of shadow and light.

For a moment, I allow the fantasy to bloom, unguarded and lush. It spreads warmth through my chest, a feeling both foreign and intoxicating. But as quickly as the dream arises, reality sets in again, sobering and cold. Dreams are for those who have the luxury of living them, and I am bound by more than my own desires.

As the car slides beneath the archway and into the courtyard, I tuck away the daydream of a different life — one where Courtney and I could be anything more than stolen glances and hushed words.

"Home safe, Your Highness," Stefan announces, parking with precision.

"Thank you, Stefan." I nod, stepping out into the night air, crisp and promising. It carries on its breath the faintest scent of possibility, one I dare not chase. Not ever.

CHAPTER 14

COURTNEY

Steam swirls around me, the hot water cascading down my back almost enough to

wash away the tension knotted between my shoulder blades.

Almost, but not quite.

Because as I close my eyes, it's Jakob's touch that lingers on my skin — a ghost of a caress that stirs something deep within me, something I'm not ready to name.

The droplets mingle with memories, and I lean my forehead against the cool tile. It's ludicrous, really, how just a single evening has imprinted him so indelibly in my mind. If only he were just Jakob — just a man with a charming smile and an easy laugh. Not Prince Jakob of Bergovia, entangled in a tale of accusation and stolen heirlooms. And definitely not the man who believes my own sweet grandmother is a thief.

A sudden, urgent ringing cuts through my thoughts, and my heart leaps. Jakob told me to be ready for eleven thirty, but maybe he's early.

The possibility propels me out of the shower with a haste that leaves caution — and a trail of water — behind me.

I grab the towel and wrap it around myself, rushing out into the main room of the hotel suite. Water drips onto the carpet as I snatch up the phone, my pulse thrumming with a blend of hope and trepidation, not even bothering to check the name on the screen.

“Hello?” My voice is breathless, a hum of steam.

“Hey, Court! Have you had any big adventures yet?”

It's Ginny. Disappointment sours the hope, but it's quickly tempered by the familiarity of my best friend's voice. She always had a knack for lightening my

spirits, and I hadn't realized till now just how badly I've been missing her.

"Hey, Gin," I say. "You could say that."

"Spill it, girl. You sound like you've got a story." Her intuition never fails; she reads my silences as clearly as my words.

I can't help but smile, despite the conflict that still resides in my heart.

"I'm not sure you'll believe it, though," I say, pressing the phone between my shoulder and ear as I use the towel to dry myself off. "I've had more than my share of adventures."

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“Ooh, you gotta tell me now!”

Taking a deep breath, I launch into the tale that sounds too fantastical to be real, even to my own ears. “I met this guy, Jakob. We spent the night together...” My words falter for a moment, but I shake off the hesitation. “Then I woke up to him taking that sapphire necklace Grandma left me.”

“Wait, what?! He stole from you?” Her voice is sharp and angry.

“Yes, but there’s more.” I hesitate, considering how insane the next part sounds. “He’s a prince, Gin. Of Bergovia. And he says the necklace is actually his family’s heirloom.”

Silence crackles over the line before Ginny exhales a long, slow whistle. “Courtney, that’s...wow. That’s not your usual type at all.”

I burst into laughter. “You’re right. I don’t usually go for princes,” I say sarcastically. “I went and found him after he took the necklace, and he... he offered to show me around Bergovia, like some kind of personal tour guide.”

“Really?” She gets quiet.

“I know.” I bite my lip. “Is that weird?”

“He stole the necklace, and now he wants to hang out with you? If it were anyone else, I would say yes, it’s weird. But this is you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Girl, it means you have no clue how hot and cool you are.”

My cheeks warm. “I dunno...”

“You think he has some ulterior motive?”

“Maybe?” I sigh. “I don’t know what that would be, though, so maybe I’m just being paranoid.”

“Or it’s your intuition.”

“Hold on; I’m going to do some quick digging.”

Phone still pressed to my cheek, I open up my laptop. My fingers fly over the keys, pulling up a search engine. I type in “Bergoviaroyal family, sapphire necklace” and hit enter, my heart thumping against my ribs. Images begin to populate the screen, and there it is — a black-and-white photo of a regal woman, her confident gaze timeless. Around her neck is the unmistakable glimmer of the sapphire necklace.

“So, from what I can see, he’s telling the truth about the necklace.” I zoom in on the image, the stones catching the light even in the grainy photograph. “I found a picture of Jakob’s great-grandmother wearing it.”

“Okay, so maybe he wasn’t lying about it being his family’s. But that doesn’t explain how it ended up with your grandma.”

“Exactly.” I sit down on the bed, the pieces of the puzzle jumbling in my head. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“I just can’t see your grandma doing something like that,” Ginny insists. “There’s got to be more to Jakob’s story.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I admit, chewing on my lower lip. “But what can I do? It’s not like I can waltz into his family’s vault and take it back.”

“True,” Ginny concedes with a laugh, though there’s a hint of mischief in her tone. “But wouldn’t that be an adventure? Just imagine sneaking around a royal palace. VeryOcean’s Eight, minus the heist part.”

The corners of my mouth tilt up. “Tempting, but I’m pretty sure it’s tucked away behind steel doors and laser grids by now. Anyway, it belongs to them. Jakob was right. I shouldn’t demand it back... I can’t demand it back.”

“Then at least promise me you’ll have fun,” Ginny urges. “Don’t let this prince stop you from enjoying Bergovia.”

I bite my lip again. Usually, I tell my best friend everything, but I’m hesitant to reveal that Jakob is the biggest thing I’m enjoying about Bergovia.

“And stay safe,” she adds before we say our goodbyes.

Hanging up, I shake off the last remnants of doubt and grab my clothes. A glance at the clock tells me Jakob will be here any minute. I slip into a simple sundress, its fabric brushing against my skin and making me feel free and lighter than I’m used to.

There’s a knock on the door just as I’m fastening the clasp on my sandals — a sound that sends my heart into a gallop. I inhale deeply, trying to steady myself, and open the door to find Jakob standing there, his presence commanding even in a T-shirt and jeans.

“Good morning,” he says, his eyes lighting up with a warmth that feels as if it’s just for me.

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“Morning,” I manage.

His smile is disarming, and as I step out of the hotel room and follow him to his car, I’m acutely aware of the conflicting currents within me. He’s hurt me, yet there’s an undeniable magnetism about him that I can’t ignore.

We get into the car, and as he navigates the city streets, I steal glances at him. Each look reveals more layers — the relaxed set of his shoulders, the softness in his eyes when he speaks of his homeland. This man is a tapestry of contrasts — royal and rogue, distant and disarmingly close.

And as we drive on to whatever awaits us this morning, the city unfolding before us, no matter what happens next, I’m captivated. By the mystery, by the country, by Jakob himself.

He ends up parking on a side street, coming around to open the car door for me before my touch is even on the handle. It’s so unexpected, so gentlemanly, that heat rises in my cheeks.

“Thank you,” I murmur, trying not to read into the fact that he came alone today. No driver. No security guards.

Just me and him. Alone.

He guides me through a narrow alley, his hand gently resting on the small of my back. The hidden path seems almost secretive, as if we’re slipping into another world far from the rest of the city.

“Here we are,” he announces, stopping in front of an unassuming wooden door that I would have walked past without a second glance. The sign above reads “Kuchyne srdce” in faded paint — the heart’s kitchen, if my limited grasp of the language serves me right.

We step inside, and the cozy warmth envelops us immediately. “What is this place?”

“Trust me, this is the best-kept secret in Bergovia,” Jakob whispers, a hint of pride lacing his words.

The restaurant is quaint, with only a handful of tables cloaked in red-checkered tablecloths. A fire crackles quietly in a stone fireplace, the flames dancing merrily. We choose a corner spot, secluded from the few patrons scattered about.

No sooner have we settled than a pair of elderly women at a nearby table glance in our direction. Their eyes widen, and they begin to chatter fervently to each other, casting furtive glances toward Jakob.

“Looks like you’ve been recognized,” I murmur.

He lets out a soft sigh, a small frown creasing his brow. “It happens,” he says, reaching for the menu. “I prefer to avoid it when I can. The attention can be... overwhelming.”

The way he says it, I believe him. Despite his loyalty to his country — and I’ve done my research and read all about it — he’s also a man who wants to carve out a piece of normalcy in a life that has been anything but.

“Is it hard?” I ask, tilting my head. “Being in the public eye all the time?”

“Sometimes,” he says, his voice lowering. “But I love my country, and I try to do

what's best for it. Being a celebrity isn't part of that job description."

"What do you love most about your country?" I ask, eager to deflect the conversation away from the vulnerability I see in him.

The question seems to lighten his mood. A smile plays on his lips as he leans back contemplatively.

"Well," he begins, his eyes taking on a faraway look, "I love the people. Their resilience, their spirit. You won't believe how warm people here can be, despite the hardships they've had to endure." He turns his gaze on me, sincerity shining in its depths.

"I know I've only been here for a few days... but I love it. Is it strange to say I never want to leave?"

Something sparks in his eyes — he looks excited, maybe afraid... but then it's quickly gone as he leans back towards the table. "I don't blame you for that at all."

I look down at the menu, suddenly embarrassed, afraid I've said too much, not wanting him to think that he's the reason I want to stay here. And he's not. Well... not the main reason, anyway.

"What's the best thing on the menu here?" I ask, desperate to change the conversation.

His face lights up, and it's like the sun breaking through clouds. "Everything is good here, but their goulash is legendary."

"Legendary goulash," I repeat, feeling a laugh bubbling up inside. "Sounds like an adventure in itself."

He chuckles. “Courtney Fuller, every moment with you is an adventure.”

I freeze. There it is. The way his eyes shine when he looks at me, the way they dart to my lips...

My heartbeat picks up. Jakob suddenly sucks in a sharp breath, and, as if realizing what he’s doing, he gestures for the waitress.

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“I’ll order all of the best,” he says, not looking at me.

“Sure.” I nod, my gaze falling down, a lump in my throat.

I’m doing what I told Ginny I would do. I’m having a good time. Underneath that good time, though, something else bubbles. The awareness of the possibility that Jakob might be interested in me for something more than casual friendship.

And that scares me more than anything else.

CHAPTER 15

JAKOB

I’m up at dawn, feeling the most excited I have in years. I stretch, sensing an unusual lightness in my chest. Today marks the third day of showing Courtney around Bergovia, and I can’t suppress the smile blooming on my face. It’s as if every cell in my body is vibrating with anticipation.

I saunter down to breakfast, trying to keep my buoyant mood under wraps. But it seems to radiate from me like heat from a fire, impossible to conceal. My family all glance up from their plates, a chorus of forks pausing mid-air.

“Good morning,” I greet them, reaching for the carafe of coffee. “Sleep well?”

“Jakob, you seem... different today,” my mother observes, studying me over her reading glasses.

“Is there something you’re not telling us?” Christina teases, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

I purse my lips at her. She’s trying to come across as playful, but I know for a fact that she’s digging for some sort of information to use against me.

“Nothing’s changed,” I reply, keeping my tone light and neutral.

The truth is, I can’t risk them finding out about Courtney. With our families’ history, they might think I’m betraying them by harboring feelings for her.

And so I deflect further inquiries with talk of mundane palace affairs, and finish my breakfast hastily.

Excusing myself, I stride out of the breakfast room. I can feel their curious stares on my back, but I don’t look back.

I arrive at Courtney’s hotel, its quaint charm bringing a smile to my face. She steps out, looking effortlessly beautiful, and my breath hitches slightly. She’s wearing a soft, floral dress that sways with her every move, and her hair cascades down her shoulders, catching the morning light. There’s a scent around her, delicate and sweet, like the lilacs that bloom in the palace gardens.

“Good morning, Jakob,” she greets me with that radiant smile I’ve grown so fond of.

“Morning, Courtney,” I manage to say, my voice steady despite the fluttering in my stomach.

We set off in my convertible, and I sneak glances at her when I’m sure she’s absorbed in the surroundings.

“Today is going to be special,” I promise, more to myself than to her.

The road unwinds before us, a ribbon threading through the lush tapestry of Bergovian countryside. With every mile that slips under the car’s wheels, I watch Courtney’s expression transform, wonder lighting up her eyes as rolling hills and verdant fields spread out before us.

“Jakob, this is... it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen,” she murmurs, leaning forward in her seat to gaze out the window.

I feel a swell of pride. “It’s one of my favorite places in all of Bergovia,” I reply, guiding the car along a narrow lane flanked by towering oaks.

The landscape here is part of my heritage, a scene I know by heart, yet sharing it with Courtney lends it a new vibrancy, a freshness I hadn’t known it lacked.

We come upon a meadow, where the wildflowers paint the ground in splashes of color and the air hums with the tranquil buzz of life. I park near an ancient stone wall, remnants of some long-forgotten boundary, and we step out into the open air.

Courtney reaches into her bag and retrieves her camera, holding it reverently in her hands. She is a hunter in search of beauty, her lens the trap that captures and tames it. With careful steps, she moves around the field, the click of the shutter punctuating the silence between us.

“Here,” she says suddenly, excitement lacing her voice. “This is it.”

She has found a particular vista, a view framed by two gnarled trees, their branches entwined like lovers’ fingers. Courtney sets up her shot, peering through the viewfinder, adjusting the focus, and finally capturing the image with a satisfied press of the button.

“My grandmother photographed this same spot over half a century ago,” she explains, her eyes gleaming with a blend of nostalgia and triumph. “I found it in her old photos before I left Texas. I never thought I’d see it with my own eyes.”

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“Your grandmother had good taste,” I say, though what I really want to tell her is how much I admire this connection she has to her past, how it makes her even more intriguing to me.

She looks up from her camera, her smile soft and genuine. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Of course,” I respond, though the words seem inadequate for the gratitude I feel — that she’s here with me, that she’s letting me into her world, piece by precious piece.

I lean against the hood of the car, my gaze fixed on her as she moves through the field with an artist’s grace. The sunlight dances across her hair, creating a glow about her that makes it hard for me to look away. There’s a lightness in her step, an ease in her smile that I’ve come to cherish over these past days.

A laugh bubbles up from her direction, pure and infectious, and I find myself smiling even though she’s too far to see it. She’s different from anyone I’ve ever known — unaffected by the pomp and circumstance of my title, more interested in the stories etched into the landscape of Bergovia than in the gossip permeating its grand halls.

But as I watch her, a knot forms in my stomach. The joy of our shared moments is overshadowed by the weight of history, by a feud that our great grandparents started and that my parents continue. How could I ever explain to her that the burgeoning warmth in my chest feels like a betrayal?

“Hey, you have to see this!” she calls out, beckoning me over.

Her enthusiasm is contagious as I join her side, but the conflict within me grows. I don't want this day to end, don't want to return to a world where our names dictate who we should be. Yet, the reality of our situation looms over us, unspoken but ever-present.

"Beautiful," I comment, looking at the scene she's captured on her camera but secretly referring to her.

"Isn't it just?" She looks up at me, eyes sparkling, unaware of the turmoil beneath my calm exterior.

In that moment, I make a decision. I will not let the shadows of the past darken our future, not when I have the power to create a new narrative. I pull out my phone, thumbing through my contacts until I find the number I need.

"Good morning," I say into the phone. "I need a favor..."

Courtney's questioning gaze meets mine, but I offer only a mischievous grin in response. "Trust me," I tell her. "You're going to love this."

The call is brief — a few words, a promise to repay the favor — and then it's done. An outing unlike any other awaits us, one that will take us soaring above the mountains and valleys of Bergovia. A hot-air-balloon ride at sunset, just the two of us, leaving the ground — and our family's old grievances — far behind.

"Are you up for an adventure?" I ask her, heart racing with anticipation.

"For sure," she replies, her hand grazing against mine.

I know it must be an accident — she didn't mean to touch me — but I don't draw away. Nor do I break my gaze from hers.

As she gazes back at me, I know that, whatever comes next, I want to face it with Courtney by my side. No matter what anyone else has to say about it.

CHAPTER 16

COURTNEY

The clink of porcelain and the soft hum of early conversations greet me as I push open the door to Café Viennois, the quaint little brunch spot Mimi suggested. Bergovia's charm has not lost its allure, even after several days exploring its nooks and crannies, but Jakob's absence casts a quiet shadow over the picturesque scenes. He's been caught up in his work, leaving me with my own thoughts and the incessant ticking of the hotel-room clock.

Which is why I'm extra glad to be here, getting some time with my new friend who I haven't seen in person since meeting her.

"Hey, Courtney!" Mimi waves from a corner table by the window, her bright smile slicing through my muddled reflections.

"Hi, Mimi," I say, returning her grin as I slide into the chair across from her.

The waitress comes over, her apron dusted with flour, and we order two of the house specials — omelets stuffed with fresh local herbs and cheeses.

Once the waitress flits away, Mimi leans in, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "So, spill it. How has your vacation been? Did you fall in in love with Bergovia yet?"

I take a deep breath and pour myself some coffee from the carafe between us. "Promise me this stays between us?"

“Cross my heart.” She draws an X over her chest, and I believe her.

“Okay.” I fidget with the edge of the napkin, finding courage in the weave of the linen. “I met someone. His name is Jakob.”

“Ooh, tell me everything!” Her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper.

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I recount our chance meeting, how his easy charm left me reeling. I describe the way he took me under his wing, showing me Bergovia through his eyes, all history and hidden beauty intermingled with his personal anecdotes that made the city come alive. With each memory, Jakob's image grows sharper in my mind, and I wonder if he's thinking of me too, despite his busy schedule.

Mimi listens intently, her elbows propped on the table, chin resting in her hands. She doesn't interrupt, just nods and lets out a soft "wow" every now and then. It feels good to share, like releasing butterflies from a jar — one flutter at a time, my experiences with Jakob take wing in the sunlit space between us.

Her eyes widen, the sunny hue of her irises seeming to smile. "It sounds like you're falling hard for this guy."

I swallow, feeling the weight of her words settle like stones in my stomach. She's right. I'm plummeting headfirst into uncharted emotional territory with Jakob, and the thought of the impact makes my hands go clammy.

I haven't told Mimi the biggest details. That he's a prince — Prince Jakob — and that he stole back the family necklace that somehow ended up with my grandmother. I'm pretty sure I can trust Mimi, but she is Bergovian, and I don't know how she'll react to my hanging out with royalty.

"I think I am falling for him," I admit. "But it could never work out. We live across the ocean from each other."

"Hey, never say never! Long-distance relationships work out all the time."

“You’re right. They do.” I pause, suddenly desperate to change the subject. “How was work this week? Will you tell me about your job?”

The conversation turns to other things — easier things — and I do what I can to forget about Jakob, although every once in a while I wonder if he’s texted me. I keep my phone in my purse, though, resisting all temptation to bring it out.

We part ways outside the brunch spot with a promise to meet up again before I leave town. My feet carry me back to the hotel, each step heavy with the sadness that comes with an infatuation that can’t turn into reality. In the solitude of my room, the walls close in like concerned friends, urging me to protect what’s left of my heart.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I reach for my phone, thumb hovering over the travel app. One change, one swipe, and I could be on a plane heading home before my heart has the chance to shatter. But just as I’m about to confirm an earlier departure, my phone buzzes — a call from Jakob.

“Hello?” I answer, hating how excited I am to get a call from him.

“Good morning.” His deep vibrato sends shivers through me. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything, but I was wondering if you’re free tomorrow? There’s somewhere special I’d like to take you.” His voice is a warm caress, and I’m powerless against its pull.

“Somewhere special?” Curiosity piques, mingling with the careful resolve I’d just mustered.

“Yep, but it’s a surprise. You’ll have to trust me.” The playful lilt in his tone is infectious, and I can almost see his charming smile through the phone.

“Okay, Jakob. I’ll trust you.” The words slip out, wrapped in hope and a silent prayer

that I'm not making a mistake.

"Great! I'll pick you up in the morning. How is nine? Wear something comfortable for walking."

"Sounds good. See you then."

"I look forward to it. Goodbye, Courtney."

The way he makes my name sound that good, like it's dripping in diamonds and wrapped in velvet, should be a crime.

"Bye." I hang up and set the phone down, then pull the travel app back up.

My finger lingers over the "book" button on the screen. But instead of pressing it, I let out a long sigh, allowing myself to be swept up in the possibility of magic rather than the certainty of heartache. For now, Bergovia — and Jakob — still hold me in their enchanting embrace.

CHAPTER 17

JAKOB

I lean back in my chair, the leather creaking softly under my weight, my mind wandering away from the to-do list and the calls I don't want to make. It's been days since I've seen Courtney, and her absence feels like a weight on my chest.

Every report I file, every meeting I attend, it's her laughter that echoes in my mind, her smile that I see when I close my eyes. She extended her stay here in Bergovia for me, and guilt gnaws at me for not being there for her as promised.

I glance at the clock, its hands inching closer to the time I'm supposed to pick her up. Today has to be perfect. I need to make up for the lost time, make her see that my showing her around isn't about...

Isn't about what, exactly? Isn't a façade covering something else up?

Because, as I hate to remember, that's exactly what it is. I'm whisking her through the countryside, from small town to small town, deep into the oldest parts of the city, because my father wants me to keep an eye on her.

If I had it my way, I'd be doing it anyway. Yes. Of course I would. The guilt would be there either way, though.

So, what does that mean for me?

That I'm screwed either way? As long as Courtney is in my life, I'll be hopelessly tempted by something I can't have due to my fear of losing the crown.

As I rise from my chair, smoothing out the front of my shirt, the soft buzz of my phone catches my attention. My heart races at the text that appears. Father wants to see me in his study — now.

“Jakob,” he greets me, his voice stern as I enter the study.

“Father.” I nod, taking a deep breath. “You wanted to see me?”

“Sit down,” he instructs, pointing to the chair across from him.

As I comply, I get the feeling that I'm about to be cross-examined.

“Tell me about Courtney,” he begins, folding his hands on the desk. “Has she done anything... unusual during her stay?”

I feel my cheeks warm slightly as her image dances before my eyes — the way her hair falls over her shoulders, the curious tilt of her head when she's pondering something deeply.

“Nothing at all, Father,” I stammer, trying to maintain my composure. “She's just interested in her family history, the culture. That's all. I've been showing her around... some.”

A brief look of surprise crosses his face, but he quickly composes himself.

“Are you sure she is only curious?” His tone carries an edge of skepticism, and I wonder who he’s more curious about. Courtney or me.

“Absolutely,” I assert more confidently this time. “Courtney is harmless. She’s genuinely fascinated by Bergovia, nothing more.”

Father watches me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. I can almost hear the cogs turning in his head as he deliberates my words. Finally, he nods, dismissing me with a wave of his hand. “Very well. Carry on, Jakob. But remember, vigilance is paramount. And don’t get... distracted.”

My throat tightens. I know what he means, of course. He’s seen photos of Courtney. He knows how attractive she is; it would be hard for any man to resist her.

But I am not any man. I am a prince of Bergovia. Duty, my country, comes before all else.

“Of course, Father.” I rise quickly, eager to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the study.

His words prick the back of my neck as I head to the garage, get into my convertible, and drive off. Am I already too distracted? If so, how would I know it? At what landmark have I passed the point of no return?

In front of Courtney’s hotel, I pause to adjust the cuffs of my shirt before heading into the lobby. My heart thrums with anticipation at the thought of seeing her again after days absorbed in work. The guilt of neglecting her simmers within me, but I’m determined to make today count.

The moment she steps into the lobby, time seems to slow. She's wearing a light-blue dress that complements her green eyes — a shade reminiscent of Bergovia's summer skies. Her hair cascades over her shoulders in soft waves, and the subtle hint of blush on her cheeks adds an innocent glow that captivates me. She's effortlessly beautiful, and for a second, all my prepared words slip away.

"Good morning," I manage. "You look... absolutely stunning."

She smiles, but there's a hesitance in her eyes that wasn't there the last time I saw her. "Thank you. I'm excited to see what you've planned for today."

"Trust me, it's something special." In an attempt to bridge the distance I sense between us, I reach out to gently touch her arm. "I've really missed spending time with you these past few days."

Her smile falters just slightly, and she subtly shifts away from my touch. "That's nice of you to say," she says, her words measured.

I instantly regret my forwardness, realizing that perhaps I've misread the signs, mistaking her gratitude for something more.

Perhaps it's just that she is keeping her head about her, whereas I am not. She knows that things could never work between us, and she does not need the information I have in order to be assured of that. I did her dirty, as much as I hated to. A decade of playing tour guide would not make up for that.

"Shall we?" I gesture toward the door, eager to recover from my blunder.

"Of course," Courtney agrees, and together we step outside into the fresh morning.

The drive to our destination is filled with casual conversation, but I still feel that my

earlier flirtation has cast a shadow over our rapport. Determined to focus on the surprise I've prepared, I steer the topic to her life in Texas, and she tells me about her job, the farmers markets she and her grandmother would go to every weekend, and the occasional weekends spend volunteering at animal-shelter fundraisers with her best friend.

Upon arrival at the Bergovian History Museum, I reveal the day's agenda. "I've organized a private tour for us," I tell her, gesturing to the grand building. "There's an expert on Bergovian heritage who will guide us through the exhibits."

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“That sounds great.” She seems to be trying to temper her excitement, but it sneaks through anyway.

“Nothing but the best for your exploration of Bergovia,” I reply with a warm smile, relieved to see her enthusiasm reignited.

As we enter the hushed halls of the museum, flanked by artifacts and treasures of ages past, I feel a sense of pride sharing this piece of my country’s soul. Courtney and I have this in common — a love of history, of the stories behind the obvious. When she eventually does leave Bergovia, I’m not sure what I’ll do with myself. I’ve gotten closer to her than I ever expected to, and she makes every woman I’ve ever dated look extremely dull in comparison.

There is not, to put it quite simply, anyone else in the world quite like her.

I’ve saved this museum in particular for a special day. It’s Bergovia’s finest, one that my family has supported for years. Not only that, but it is renowned throughout the world. To say I feel pride bringing Courtney here would be selling myself short.

The tour guide, a woman who is clearly in love with her job, animatedly takes us to each case. Courtney asks questions here and there, while I just listen. I know almost all of what’s being said, but from time to time a new, interesting fact catches my attention.

“Did you know about this?” I ask, pausing before a tapestry that depicts a pivotal battle in our nation’s past. The intricate stitching tells stories of valor and sacrifice, the threads woven as tightly as the bond between the people and their land.

Courtney shakes her head, her expression rapt. “No. That’s a beautiful tapestry.”

My gaze catches on a detail in the tapestry I’d never noticed before — a small emblem in the corner that resembles the crest I’ve seen in my own family’s archives. A sense of connection to these ancient threads courses through me, linking me to ancestors whose blood I share but whose lives are cloaked in the mystery of time.

“Come, this next part is especially for you,” I say, guiding her gently by the elbow to where the guide awaits beside the next display.

“Ms. Fuller,” the guide says, “we have records that suggest your ancestral family were not only nobles but also esteemed confidants to the royal family. It’s quite an extraordinary lineage.”

Courtney’s hand flies to her mouth, her eyes wide with wonder. “My family... they were close to the royals?”

“Indeed,” the guide confirms, pointing to a faded letter encased beside portraits of stern-faced nobles and gentle-looking royals. “The Jägers played a crucial role in advising the crown and were greatly respected for their wisdom and loyalty.”

Watching Courtney absorb this revelation, I feel a twinge of sadness — sadness for the disconnection she has endured from her heritage. But there’s also joy; joy in witnessing the unfolding of her understanding, the reclamation of her family’s place in Bergovian history.

“Jakob, did you know about this?” she asks, turning towards me, her face alight with a mixture of emotions.

I nod, offering a smile that conveys both my happiness for her discovery and my wish to bridge the gap between her past and present. “Yes. I did.”

Her eyelashes flutter. Is she upset that I didn't tell her this myself?

"I thought it would be a nice surprise," I explain, hoping I did not get this wrong. "Seeing it here."

She nods, mute, seemingly in shock. Is she thinking the same thing as I am? Wondering again about how the sapphire necklace ended up with her grandmother?

The tour guide seems to sense the tension in the air. "I will give you some time with the exhibit. Please let me know if you have any questions."

She moves on to the next room, leaving Courtney and me alone.

"Do you know something I don't?" Courtney stares at me, eyes big and unblinking.

I square off to face her. "No. Now, we know all of the same details. There was a political disagreement between my family and yours, and shortly after that the Jägers left Bergovia."

She bites her bottom lip, contemplating that. "Why would my grandmother hide her life here?"

I sigh. "I do not know. Perhaps she wanted to start afresh. Cut all ties with the past."

"Perhaps," she murmurs, her eyes becoming unfocused.

Fearing that I've brought the mood down significantly, I reach for her hand without giving it proper thought. "I think your grandmother would be happy to see you here now."

To my surprise, she doesn't pull her hand away. In fact, her fingers tighten around

mine. “I think so, too. Thank you, Jakob.”

Her words are so heartfelt, so sweet. My chest swells with pride, and it feels as if I’m standing two feet taller. For now, a brief moment in all of time, I am the happiest man in the world.

CHAPTER 18

COURTNEY

There's more to see in the museum — rooms upon rooms. But there's only one topic that interests me now.

My grandmother's story. My family's story.

My gaze drifts across the gilded frames, each one a frozen moment in time, capturing smiles and grandeur now long faded. A black-and-white photograph catches my attention, its edges worn but the faces within it unmistakable. There's my grandmother, Anna, a young girl with eyes full of mischief, playing tag with a boy about her age.

I recognize her right away, thanks to her photos back home. While she didn't bring a lot to America, there were a few photos of her from childhood in her small collection.

"Your grandmother had quite the childhood, didn't she?" Jakob's voice is gentle beside me, but I barely register it.

"Is that...?" My words trail off as I lean closer, studying the image. Beneath the photo, a caption reads: Anna Jäger and Prince Rolph enjoying summer days at the Royal Palace.

"Prince Rolph?" I ask.

"My grandfather. He lives outside the city, at his own house. He never had much of an interest in royal life, and retired young. I suspect he would choose to have not been

born noble, given the option.”

I nod, unsure of what to say. I’m still dazed by everything I’ve found out, and I suspect there’s more around the corner.

I turn to Jakob, noticing the hopeful glint in his eyes — he wants this to be the answer to all my questions, the key that unlocks my family’s past. But the heavy velvet ropes separating us from the displays feel like barriers around my heart. I thought I was prepared to uncover secrets — but this?

“Are you all right?” Jakob’s brow furrows with concern.

I muster a half-smile, feeling disconnected. “It’s just a lot to process. I knew she kept secrets, but... a noble?”

The word feels foreign on my tongue, an ill-fitting title for the woman who taught me to make apple pies and bandaged my scraped knees. A woman who worked as a maid and then a teacher before spending her retirement in a tiny ranch house. A woman who volunteered weekends at her tiny Texas food pantry.

“Let’s take a break, shall we?” Jakob suggests.

“Sure,” I agree, my heart heavy with a sadness I can’t quite explain. It’s as if with every new discovery, the grandmother I knew slips further away, replaced by this stranger in sepia tones.

As we walk through the corridors, passing by other families immortalized in oil paints and marble, I wonder what it would have been like to grow up in Bergovia, surrounded by this splendor. Would I have been happy? Or would I always have felt the burden of social responsibilities I never asked to take on?

We thank the tour guide for her time, and Jakob leads me out of the museum and into the warm afternoon. “Fancy a walk?” he asks.

I nod. “That sounds good.” I don’t want to go back to my hotel just yet. Don’t want to sit alone in that room with all of this information swirling around me, making me seasick.

“Here,” he says, guiding me into a bookstore that has a café in the back of it. Its windows are adorned with hanging plants, and the soft strumming of a guitar flows from the speakers. It’s nearly empty, save for an elderly couple sipping tea by the window and a young man lost in the pages of a book.

We slip behind a curtain into a secluded corner. The world outside fades away, and it’s just Jakob and me in this quiet sanctuary.

“Are you hungry?” Jakob asks, his voice gentle.

I shake my head, trying to smile. “No, thank you. Just some tea would be lovely.”

He orders from a passing waiter, then turns his attention back to me, his blue eyes searching mine. “Courtney, about your family...”

I brace myself, wrapping my arms around my torso as if holding myself together.

“Your grandmother’s parents... they were quite influential and vocal in their beliefs,” he begins, his tone careful. “They stood against the royal family on a critical political matter. It was about the future of Bergovia, the direction the country should take.”

My hands clench into fists beneath the table. I can almost picture them — my great-grandparents — standing tall and proud, unafraid to voice their convictions. I know next to nothing about them, but if they were anything like my grandmother, they did

not back down easily when they believed in something.

The waiter sets down a pot of tea and, perhaps noticing the tension between me and Jakob, scurries away.

“They didn’t cave, even when things got heated.” Jakob pauses, his lips pressing into a thin line. “Eventually, the conflict reached boiling point, and, for their safety and the stability of the nation, they had to leave Bergovia. Your grandmother Anna was only fourteen at the time.”

Fourteen. The same age I was when I started high school, fretting over friendships and algebra tests, not exile and political strife.

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“And they went to the United States,” I finish for him.

“The way that I heard the story, they thought it would be temporary, but... they never returned.”

A cold draught seeps into my bones. My family, uprooted and cast adrift because they dared to defy. And all this time, I was oblivious, living a life devoid of any inkling of royalty or rebellion.

“Thank you for telling me,” I manage to say, though the words sound hollow in my ears.

“Of course. You deserve to know the truth,” he replies, reaching across the table to cover my hand with his.

His touch is warm, reassuring, yet I feel so far removed from the woman who once roamed these historic streets.

I can’t help but feel a surge of anger at the royal family, his family, for the pain they’ve caused mine. The irony isn’t lost on me — I’m sitting across from a prince, someone whose ancestry once decided my family’s fate.

“My great-grandparents... they made decisions they thought were right,” Jakob says carefully, as if navigating a minefield. “But that was a different time, Courtney. And it certainly wasn’t me.”

I know he’s right, and yet, the unfairness of it all stings sharply. If history had taken

another path, if stubborn pride hadn't gotten in the way, I could have grown up here, amid these ancient streets and grand palaces. Nobility might have been my birthright, not just a fascinating tale to uncover.

"Jakob, I— I just need some time alone." Whereas before I couldn't bear the thought of going back to my empty hotel room, suddenly I feel like I can't stand to be around anyone.

I need to process all of this, and that might involve tears. It might involve yelling or punching a pillow. Either way, I want all of that to happen in private.

He nods, his eyes reflecting a worry that perhaps he's revealed too much, too soon. "Of course. Let me take you back to your hotel."

We rise from our hidden booth, leaving behind the still-hot tea and a silence filled with history.

"Thank you for understanding," I say, though part of me is upset that he didn't share this information sooner.

Then again, why should he? He owes me nothing, and I already know that his allegiance is to his family and his country. Once I go back to Texas, I'll be nothing but a memory to him.

"Certainly," he replies, offering a small smile that doesn't entirely reach his eyes.

He's clearly worried about today, about the revelations that may have opened old wounds rather than healed them. And while I appreciate his concern, what I crave most now is solitude, a moment to gather the scattered pieces of my identity.

We barely clear the threshold of the bookstore when a soft murmur sweeps through

the crowd gathered outside. Jakob's presence draws people towards him with an almost gravitational pull. I hang back a step, watching as he greets each person with a warmth that seems to come as naturally to him as breathing.

"Prince Jakob, could we please have a photo with you?" A young woman clutches a book to her chest, her eyes alight with admiration.

"Of course," Jakob replies, his voice laced with genuine warmth. He positions himself beside her, flashing a charming smile that will no doubt make its way into countless social-media feeds within the hour.

"Thank you so much, Your Highness!" she beams, and my heart twists at the affection in her voice. It is clear how much he means to these people.

"Jakob, may I have your autograph?" another asks, holding out a pen and a well-worn notepad.

His hand moves with practiced ease, this being something I can tell he's done hundreds, maybe thousands, of times.

"Thank you for your kindness," he says, handing back the notepad with a gracious nod.

The crowd murmurs their thanks, their faces lit with joy from the simple act of acknowledgment from someone they hold in such high esteem.

"Your people really love you," I comment, more to myself than to him as he finishes and turns back to me.

He shrugs modestly, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. "I am here to serve them, in any way I can."

I watch him, this man who navigates fame with such ease and grace, who has found his place in the fabric of his country's heart. He belongs here, rooted in Bergovia's rich soil and history. Unlike me. I'm an outcast, a person who kind of belongs to this country but doesn't really.

As we begin walking again, I feel like a leaf caught in the wind — drifting, searching for where I might land. Perhaps, like my grandmother, I am meant to find my own path — one that strays from the expected course and into the unknown.

“Thank you for today,” I say, waiting until we've left the crowd behind and we can speak in private again. “It was... enlightening.”

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“Anytime, Courtney.” Jakob’s smile is gentle, and there’s a promise in his tone, an unspoken vow that he’ll be there, wherever my search for belonging takes me.

But as we walk on, I can’t shake the feeling that, while Jakob has found his anchor, I am still adrift, caught between worlds and wondering if I’ll ever truly find my place.

CHAPTER 19

JAKOB

Outside Courtney’s hotel, I linger beside her, not yet ready to part ways, my mind a whirlwind of emotions. The stories I grew up with, painting her family in monstrous strokes, now seem like little more than cruel caricatures. Her resilience, her grace — how could such qualities stem from the villainous roots I was taught to believe were true?

“Jakob?” Courtney’s voice, tentative and soft, pulls me out of my thoughts.

“Sorry, I was just...” I struggle for the right words. “I’ve been thinking a lot about... our families. About history.” I look into her eyes, trying to convey the depth of my newfound understanding. “No one should be exiled for standing up for what they believe in. I want to — no, I need to — start making amends.”

She watches me, clearly surprised by the intensity of my confession. A small smile touches her lips, but it doesn’t reach her guarded eyes. “That’s very noble of you,” she says quietly.

“Would you join me for dinner tonight?” The question escapes before I can weigh its implications. It’s an innocent enough invitation, but behind it lies a hope for something more, something deeper between us.

Today has changed things for me. First showing her the history of her family. Then having the photos taken outside the café. She was in some of them, I know, and the internet is probably already abuzz, people wondering who the beautiful woman seen with Prince Jakob is.

It makes me realize how short life is, how much I’ve been overthinking things. Sowhatif Courtney and I were to become an item? The world would not come crashing down; the days of such a courtship causing political instability are long over.

And my father...

Well, I would need to explain it to him. Explain it and cross my fingers, hoping that this turn of events would not impact my running for the crown.

Courtney hesitates, glancing away. “Jakob, I don’t think— that is, we can’t get personally involved.” Her words are careful, measured, but they don’t soften the blow.

The pang hits me harder than expected, a sharp ache right through my chest. But pride won’t let me show the true extent of my disappointment.

“It’s not a date,” I manage to say, even though that’s exactly what I was asking her on. “Just two people sharing a meal, trying to bridge a decades-old divide.”

“Okay,” she finally concedes, offering a cautious nod. “Dinner, then. As friends.”

“Friends,” I repeat, the word bittersweet on my tongue.

As she turns to enter the hotel, I force a smile, pretending that my heart isn't yearning for so much more.

With the front door closing behind her, I stride away from the hotel, my mind a whirlwind of plans and emotions. If she doesn't want a date with me, I will respect that.

And I will still do everything I can to make the evening wonderful. She was dealt a bit of a blow today, and if I can soften that in any way, then I will. I want tonight to be perfect — something she won't forget.

"Somewhere with a view," I murmur to myself as I walk.

The mountains here are an artist's dream, their peaks like strokes of white against the sky. That's where I'll take her. A place where the beauty of Bergovia can soften the past, even if only for the evening.

Back in the quiet haven of my office, I spread out maps and brochures across my desk, searching for the ideal location. There's an abrupt knock on the door, and Oliver saunters in, the ever-present grin on his face doing little to lift my focused mood.

"Brother," he greets, flopping down onto one of the leather chairs, "Christina has been on a mission, you know? She's convinced you're harboring some state secret."

"Is she now?" I say, barely glancing up from the colorful pamphlets.

"Indeed," Oliver continues, stretching out his legs. "But I told her I'm as clueless as she is — which is the truth. Whatever you're hiding, you've kept it well."

"Nothing to hide," I reply, trying to sound nonchalant. "Just... busy with things."

“Things,” Oliver echoes with a teasing lilt. “Very mysterious. But there’s something, isn’t there? A woman?”

“What makes you think that?”

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He grins at me. “I know how a man acts when his attention is on a beautiful girl.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “She is... a friend.”

He nods, then pauses, as if waiting for more. I think I won’t give it to him, and then suddenly I find myself spilling.

“A friend,” I repeat. “But I wish her to be more.”

“I thought so.” He straightens up. “And do you have a chance with her?”

I drop my gaze to my desk. “The chances are most likely close to zero.”

“What did you do wrong?”

“I...” My hands curl into fists. “It’s a situation that is out of my control.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I assume you are saying it has something to do with your royal title.”

I glance up at him. “Yes.”

And more than that.

“Hmm.” He nods, watching me.

I lick my lips, considering. I had been prepared to take what happened between

Courtney and myself to the grave, but suddenly I can't do it any longer. I crack.

"What if," I venture, carefully watching his face, "there was someone — a woman — that our parents wouldn't approve of? What would you do?"

Oliver leans back in his chair, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "If she was the one for me, I'd climb mountains, cross oceans, defy gravity itself. Why let anyone else decide who you love?"

I don't know how to respond. The words shake me. "I..."

He's right. What have I been doing?

I hope to be king one day, and that means my choices carry weight far beyond my personal happiness. But if I am not happy, then how can I properly lead?

"Thank you, Oliver." I straighten up and nod at him. "I appreciate your insight."

The rest of the afternoon passes in a haze. I'm stuck in my head, thinking about Courtney and where to go from here.

Does she hate me for everything that's happened? It's hard to believe that. Despite some moments of coldness, there has also been a lot of warmth between us. Secret looks, shared smiles.

If I'm correct, then that connection we made on the first day is still there, bubbling just below the surface, waiting for an opportunity to be allowed to boil over.

I can't return to Courtney's hotel fast enough. Seeing her step outside, her hair pinned back, her skirt billowing around her legs, does something to me. Blows me apart into a million little pieces and puts me back together, a fresh man.

The sun dips low, casting a warm, golden hue over the hills as I drive along the winding country road. Courtney sits beside me, her profile serene against the backdrop of the picturesque mountains. I can't help but steal glances at her, wondering how I got so lucky as to be here with her this evening.

As we pull up to the secluded restaurant, its lights twinkling like earthbound stars, Courtney's gasp is music to my ears. I've rented the whole establishment, ensuring privacy and an intimate atmosphere. She looks at me, eyes wide with wonder, and I feel a surge of satisfaction knowing I've managed to surprise her.

"Jakob, this is incredible," she breathes out as we step inside.

The maître d' greets us with a bow, ushering us to a table with panoramic views.

Throughout dinner, we talk about everything and nothing — art, history, the quirks of Bergovian culture. With each shared laugh and lingering look, I can feel the walls around my heart crumbling. Courtney is intelligent, passionate, and her laughter is a sound I want to capture and keep forever.

I can no longer tell myself our time together is just about righting wrongs, about keeping an eye on her for my father. It's become so much more than that. Or perhaps it always has been, from the very moment I set my gaze on her.

I'm falling for her. Harder than I have ever fallen in my life.

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The realization hits me gently, like the first snowflake of winter; unique, unexpected, and changing the landscape of my emotions in silent flurries. It's dangerous, this path I find myself on, yet I can't bring myself to turn back. I know that she told me we cannot become personally involved, and I will respect that. I will not make a move on her unless she wants me to.

But I cannot shutter my heart. It beats for her now, whether I intend for it to or not.

"Thank you for this, Jakob," Courtney says as dessert arrives. "It's more than I ever expected. You said you would show me around the country... but this. Everything you've done..."

"Only the best," I reply, the unspoken words hanging between us: for you.

As the night wears on, I know this is only the beginning. There are challenges ahead, mountains to climb, but for now, the only thing that matters is the way she looks at me, like I've hung the moon.

And that is as it should be, because she has done the same for me.

CHAPTER 20

COURTNEY

The last bite of the chocolate mousse lingers on my tongue, rich and sweet, just like the evening has been so far. The restaurant, with its golden lights and intimate setting, is a scene straight out of a fairy tale — a fitting backdrop for a prince's dinner.

Jakob's gaze meets mine across the table, a stormy sea in his eyes that I've learned to navigate. "I want to tell you something," he begins, his voice a soft baritone that commands attention even in whispers. "I haven't been completely honest with you."

My heart skips a beat, yet I stay silent, giving him the space he needs. He takes a deep breath, as if bracing himself against the tide.

"My life... it isn't just about my work at the security department and charity balls and ribbon-cuttings. My siblings and I... we're in a constant struggle for our father's approval, vying for the throne."

A piece of the puzzle falls into place, explaining the burden he often seems to carry on his shoulders, hidden behind the charming smiles.

"The sapphire necklace," he continues, the words pained as if they're thorns piercing his tongue. "I took it back to appease my father. It was never about hurting you, Courtney. I hope you believe that."

There's a sharp pang in my chest at the mention of the necklace, a reminder of betrayal. Yet, looking into Jakob's earnest eyes, I see the regret, the internal war he is fighting between duty and desire. I understand — more than he realizes. Royal or not, we're all prisoners to our family's expectations in one way or another.

"Let's go outside for a bit," he suggests, perhaps sensing how hot it suddenly is getting in here. "The balcony?"

"Sure." We're done eating anyway, and I could do with moving around a bit.

We stand, and he offers me his hand, strong and reassuring. I take it, allowing his warmth to seep into my skin.

We step through the French doors onto the balcony, the night air refreshing and welcoming. The lights of the capital twinkle in the valley below, the image one that almost seems too perfect to be real.

The staff brings us two glasses of wine before retreating to give us some space, and I take a sip of the best thing I've ever tasted, the ruby liquid reflecting the starry sky. Tonight is so beautiful that it almost makes me sorry I will need to continue on with life after this. I wouldn't mind being forced to live this evening over and over again through the rest of eternity.

With our glasses in hand, we lean against the balcony railing, shoulder to shoulder, and gaze out into the vastness above us. The stars gleam like diamond dust scattered across a canvas of midnight blue.

"Look," Jakob says, pointing upwards. A streak of light zips across the sky — a shooting star, carving its brief journey for all to wish upon.

"Make a wish," he says softly, his eyes not leaving the heavens.

A wish. Such a fanciful concept, yet here, with this man who is both forthright and an enigma, it seems fitting. I close my eyes, the star's afterglow imprinted on my lids. I envision a life where moments like these stretch into eternity.

I wish that life could always be as amazing as it has been since I arrived in Bergovia. Despite the tangled web of royal expectations, the necklace drama, and family feuds, there's an undeniable magic here — an enchantment woven through every street, every hint of history, and especially through Jakob.

"Did you make it?" Jakob asks.

"Made and sent off into the universe," I reply with a smile, opening my eyes to find

his gaze locked onto mine.

In this suspended moment, the world shrinks until it's just the two of us. His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining naturally, as if they've known each other for lifetimes. He steps closer, bending slightly... and then pauses.

"I'm sorry." His fingers slip from mine, and he starts to step back, but it's right then that I make a split-second decision to do what I've been aching to do for days.

Stepping forward, I press my lips against his.

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The kiss is a soft question and a firm answer all at once. It speaks of apologies, of longing, and of new beginnings. Our breath mingles, our hearts sync, and the worries about lineage and duty momentarily dissolve. There's just Courtney and Jakob — two people beneath a canopy of stars, daring to dream beyond the lives they were born into.

As we part, my heart thunders against my rib cage, echoing through the silence of the night. The city below us sleeps, oblivious to the walls crumbling down, to the silent wishes being cast into the sky. And for now, that's okay, because up here, we're untouchable, and maybe, just maybe, the wish I've clung to is already taking flight.

"Wow," I breathe out, stealing a glance at the lips that were pressed against mine just a moment ago.

"More than wow," Jakob says, his voice low. "Courtney, I know this might seem sudden, but I'm falling for you."

His words send a wave of warmth cascading through me, melting away the icy tendrils of doubt. The future is an uncharted map, dotted with potential pitfalls, but at this moment, with his confession hanging between us, I feel a profound sense of peace.

"Well," I say, allowing myself to linger in the possibility of us. "I'm scared, but... I'm falling too."

We stand here, wrapped in each other's gaze, until the chime of the clock from a distant tower calls us back to the passage of time. Jakob offers his hand, and I take it,

our fingers lacing together as we step inside the now-empty restaurant.

“Now what?” he asks.

I bite into a smile. “Can we go somewhere? Somewhere we can be alone?”

His chest rises, and I hear his breath hitch. “My apartment. I stay there when I want to get away from the palace.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“It’s a bachelor pad,” he chuckles. “But I would love to show it to you.”

We say goodnight to the staff and exit the building, and he leads me to his car that is parked out front. The drive back into the city and through its streets feels different now; every turn, every cobblestone seems to carry a piece of our story.

He parks in a private garage, and we walk into a lobby that’s more luxurious than any place I’ve ever called home. The elevator ride to the top floor is quick, a silent ascent punctuated only by our intertwined fingers and shared anticipation.

When the doors open, Jakob guides me into his private sanctuary. It’s vast, with windows that offer a panoramic view of the city. Nighttime Bergovia is a tapestry of light and shadow, enchanting and alive.

“Wow,” I say again, stepping closer to the glass, drawn by the view.

“Like it?” he asks, coming up behind me, his hands resting gently on my shoulders.

“It’s beautiful,” I reply, leaning back into his embrace. “A fitting retreat for a prince.”

“Tonight,” he murmurs near my ear, “it’s just a man showing a woman his favorite view, hoping she likes it.”

I turn to face him, lost in the sincerity of his words, in the truth that perhaps love could be the bridge over the moat that has been dug between us.

“What do you like to do when you’re here?” I trail my fingers down his strong chest.

He grins. “Honestly? Listen to music.”

“What sort of music?” I smile back.

“I can show you.”

He pulls out his phone and selects a song. Soft melodies flow from the speakers, something sweet and slow, a song that seems to capture the very essence of the moment. He extends his hand, and I take it, allowing him to draw me into the center of the living room.

“May I have this dance?” he asks, a playful formality in his voice.

“Of course,” I reply, my heart picking up its pace, not just from the closeness but from the anticipation of what this dance might symbolize.

He leads with a gentle confidence, one arm securely around my waist, the other holding my hand. We move together in time with the music, a slow waltz that carries us across the polished floor. The world beyond his apartment fades until there’s nothing but the two of us, swaying in a rhythm that feels as old as time and as new as the feelings blossoming in my chest.

I lay my head on his shoulder, breathing in the scent of him. My fingers brush against

the fabric of his jacket, the texture grounding me in the reality that this is not a dream, but a tangible, heart-stopping moment with a man who has stepped out of a fairy tale and into my life.

The doubts that had been pulling at the edges of my mind begin to quiet as we continue to dance. With each step, I feel more anchored in the present, letting go of the uncertainties about our future. Jakob's heartbeat is steady against my ear, a testament to the calmness that flows off of him.

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“Are you okay?” he murmurs, his breath warm on my hair.

“More than okay,” I whisper back, not daring to lift my head lest the magic of the evening dissipates with the movement.

In his embrace, under the soft glow of his apartment lights, with the night sky watching over us, I wonder if this is the beginning of the wish I made on the shooting star coming true. Not a wish for crowns or gilded thrones, but a simple, earnest yearning for moments like these — where love is a dance, tender and true, and the future is a guaranteed promise of more good things to come.

“Thank you for this,” I say, my voice barely above the music, wanting him to know how much this night means to me.

“Thank you for being here,” he replies, as if I’ve given him a gift greater than my presence, as if my willingness to share this dance has brought something precious into his world too.

And maybe it has. For both of us.

CHAPTER 21

JAKOB

It’s early. So early.

And yet I don’t mind waking up at all, because I happen to have next to me the

greatest company in the world. I stretch languidly, the sheets a silken caress against my skin, and turn to find Courtney still slumbering. Her peaceful expression tugs at something deep within me, and warmth unfurls in my chest. I am, without a shadow of a doubt, the luckiest man in the world.

Perhaps feeling my gaze on her, she stirs.

“Good morning,” she murmurs, her voice still husky with sleep. She blinks open green eyes that hold the freshness of Bergovian meadows after rain.

“Good morning,” I reply.

The urge to reach out, to trace the contours of her face is overwhelming, but I resist, not wanting to break the tranquility of the moment.

“Shall we make breakfast?” Courtney suggests, her smile as inviting as the thought of the first meal of the day shared together.

“Let’s.” I push back the duvet and guide her hand to help her out of bed.

Her dress lies on the floor, so I offer her a pair of pajama pants and a T-shirt. They’re too big for her, but seeing her in my clothes makes me hungry to kiss her again.

And so I do. Over and over, until she’s laughing and pushing me away.

We pad into the kitchen, a space designed for elegance and utility, the marble countertops pristine and the copper pans gleaming from their hooks. I don’t use the kitchen much, and it shows, but this morning I am excited to roll my sleeves up and get messy.

Courtney ties her hair up in a loose bun, a few strands framing her face in a way

that's effortlessly charming. I watch her for a moment, how she navigates my kitchen with ease, finding the eggs and the skillet as if she's done this a thousand times before in this very spot.

"Can you handle the toast?" she asks, a playful challenge in her eyes.

"Watch me become the master of the toaster," I quip, accepting her gauntlet with a grin.

We whisk eggs and butter toast, our movements harmonious. It's as if we've found a shared rhythm that neither words nor music could adequately express. I catch her looking at me, her gaze carrying a tender curiosity, as if she's trying to memorize the way I move, the way I smile when I'm with her.

"Jakob, this is perfect," she says as I hand her a plate laden with golden-brown toast, our fingers brushing in a spark of connection.

"Only because you're here," I respond.

"Because we're together," she corrects, and I have no reason to argue.

Our breakfast comes together on the island counter, a simple feast bathed in the gentle morning light. We sit side by side, knees touching under the table. Each bite is savored, each glance exchanged carries a sense of new affection, and the world beyond these walls feels infinitely distant.

The world... the one thing that could steal all of this away. Unless I do something about it.

Fork in hand, I twirl the scrambled eggs on my plate, working up the courage to dive into a conversation that could change everything. Courtney, her sun-kissed hair now

free from the bun and cascading over her shoulders, takes a sip of orange juice, her eyes catching mine.

“Hey,” I start, setting down my fork, “I’ve been thinking about something.”

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She tilts her head, curious, an expectant smile playing on her lips. “Oh? What’s on your mind?”

“Texas,” I say, and her eyebrows rise in surprise. “I want to visit you there. See your world, meet the people in your life you talk so fondly of.” The idea sends a wave of excitement through me, but I’m cautious not to let on too much.

“Really?” she asks, her voice a blend of delight and disbelief. “You’d come to Texas?”

“More than that,” I add quickly, before my resolve can falter, “I want you to come back to Bergovia with me afterwards, as soon as possible.”

Her hand pauses mid-air, the piece of toast forgotten. “Jakob, that’s... that’s amazing, but what about your work? You’ve already lost so much time there showing me around.” Her concern is genuine, but it’s my family that weighs on my mind, their expectations towering like the ancient castles that dot this country.

“Work will manage without me for a little while,” I assure her, deciding to ignore the inevitable upheaval for now. I don’t let on about that part, though; I need to shield her from the brewing storm until I’m ready to face it myself.

“Okay,” she breathes out, a radiant grin spreading across her face, dispelling my anxieties. “Yes, let’s do it!”

The room fills with her laughter, and for a moment, I bask in the sound of our shared joy before reality nudges again. I pat my pockets, looking for my phone, needing to

make arrangements. Yet, it's nowhere to be found.

"Can't find my phone," I murmur, more to myself than to her.

"Mine's dead," she responds cheerily, not a hint of worry in her tone.

A chuckle escapes her, and I find myself joining in. It's liberating, this accidental disconnection from the rest of the world.

"Looks like we have the day to ourselves, then," I say, the irony not lost on me.

On any other day, I'd be swamped with duties, but today, fate seems to have conspired to give us this uninterrupted time together.

"Best unplanned day off ever," Courtney declares, and I can only nod in agreement, feeling the luckiest man in the world.

"How about a latte?" I ask, clearing our empty plates.

"I would love that."

"You get cozy on the couch," I instruct.

But as I open the cupboard where the beans are usually stashed, I'm met with emptiness. A little frown creases my forehead; it's unlike me to run out of something as vital as coffee beans, even in the apartment that I only spend part of my time at.

"Seems like we're fresh out," I announce. "Give me five minutes. I'll run to the market across the street."

"Take your time." She picks up the TV remote.

With a quick smile, I grab my keys and wallet and head downstairs. The crisp morning air greets me as I step outside, the streets just beginning to bustle with life. My feet carry me automatically across the street to the familiar grocery store, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of Courtney's laughter and the softness of her lips.

"Your Highness!" a familiar voice calls out just as I reach the coffee aisle.

It's Mrs. Petrov, the shop owner, her eyes alight with curiosity. "Your face is all over town today! And who's the lovely lady?"

What is she talking about?

"Uh... a friend," I say, not willing to give anything away until I know exactly what's going on.

"Looks like more than a friend to me," she teases, holding up her phone.

There on her screen is a grainy photo of Courtney and me. It's our time on the balcony last night, a kiss captured from afar, now a digital whisper riding the morning airwaves.

"Beautiful girl," Mrs. Petrov adds, a knowing smile etched into her features.

"Thank you," I say, grabbing my coffee beans and swiping my card.

Nerves rush through me. I'm not ashamed of being with Courtney; I'm proud. I had expected to reveal our relationship on our own timeline, though, and in our own way. Now, without our consent at all, it's public fodder.

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What this entirely means, I'm not sure. I do know, though, that things are about to change.

"Enjoy your day, Jakob," Mrs. Petrov says, her gaze lingering a moment longer than necessary.

"Will do," I respond, eager to return to the sanctuary of my apartment and the woman who unknowingly holds my world in her hands.

Instead of going straight into the apartment building, I duck into the building's garage, the attendant opening the gate and bowing once he sees me coming. I need to check the news. See what people are saying. See who has called me.

Reaching my car, I search for my phone, finding it stashed in the center console. It buzzes angrily in my hand, a constant vibration of incoming calls and texts. A digital pulse of curiosity from family, friends, acquaintances, and those who believe they have a stake in my personal life. My thumb hovers over the screen, scrolling through messages that all ask about "the new woman in my world." The one whose laughter has begun to sound like home.

Amongst the flurry of inquiries sits a lone message from my father — two words that carry more weight than any headline: Call me.

A knot tightens in my stomach as I turn on my heel, heading back to the sanctuary of my penthouse. With each floor ascended in the elevator, the knot coils tighter, until I'm struggling to keep my hands from shaking.

In the apartment, the sound of running water greets me. Courtney is in the shower. I sneak up to the cracked door, catching her silhouette through the frosted glass. This could've been another fragment of time stolen just for us, but responsibility — or, rather, the expectation of it — looms overhead.

Before I can even contemplate a response to my father, my phone rings again, the screen lighting up with his name. I answer, moving to the farthest corner of the living room, away from the innocent hum of Courtney's tune.

"Jakob," my father's voice is stern, each syllable laced with disappointment.

It's as if I'm a child again, caught with a hand in the cookie jar. But this isn't about cookies; it's about matters of the heart, and the consequences that come with being born into a legacy.

"I see the tabloids are having a field day," he continues, and I feel the scowl in his tone.

I glance at the bathroom door, ensuring it remains closed, the sound of water still cascading down.

"Father, it's not what it seems," I start, my voice steady despite the undercurrent of panic. "I'm handling it. Keeping her close is strategic — better to manage the narrative than let rumors run wild."

"You are keeping her close by kissing her?"

I rake my fingers through my hair in frustration and turn to the windows. "You asked me to watch her, and I am. I'm making absolutely sure that she is not a threat to national security. Trust me, please. I understand your concerns about the Jägers."

There's silence on the other end, a pause long enough to make me second-guess each word I've just spoken. Then he sighs, a sound of resignation that doesn't quite convey understanding.

“Very well. But we will discuss this further, Jakob. Soon.”

As the call ends, I lower the phone, staring at the now blank screen. The lie tastes bitter, its residue clinging to me. I'm not just managing a narrative; I'm entangled in the very story I'm trying to control. And as I hear the shower cease, signaling Courtney's return to a world that's all too interested in her presence, I realize that honesty is a luxury I can ill afford — at least, not yet.

I slip the phone back into my pocket, the burden of deceit heavy against my thigh. I rub a hand over my face, trying to erase the lines of worry that crease my forehead. Every word I told my father was a calculated misstep on a dance floor I never desired to tread upon.

Keeping Courtney close — yes, that part is true, but not for the reasons I claimed. Not to control the narrative or prevent her from speaking to the press. No, it's because when she's near, the chaos of my life fades into soft murmurs, and all that remains is the clarity of her laughter, the warmth in her eyes.

I have admitted that to myself... but admitting it to my father, well, that feels a long way off.

CHAPTER 22

COURTNEY

The steam from the shower still clings to my skin as I stand in the fogged-up bathroom, the towel wrapped hastily around me. My heart is a wild thing in my chest,

beating furiously against my rib cage. I press my hand to the cool tile wall, trying to steady myself.

I overheard everything. Every single word Jakob said to his father. I'm not just some girl he happened to like; I'm a project, an assignment handed down by the King of Bergovia himself. The thought makes my stomach twist. How could I have been so naïve? To think that someone like Jakob... that he could actually care for someone like me?

Peeling off the towel, I quietly pad into the attached master bedroom and slip into the dress from last night. It's crumpled and smells faintly of the evening's revelry. My reflection in the mirror is a stranger's: flushed cheeks, eyes bright with unshed tears, betrayal etched into every angle of my face.

I can't stay here, locked away with the truth gnawing at my insides. I need answers, and there's only one person who can give them to me.

Pushing the door open, I step into the living room. Jakob is there, his back to me, putting his phone on a charging stand. He looks regal even in his jeans and T-shirt, every bit the prince — but now I see the lies woven into his expensive clothes.

“Jakob.” My voice breaks, and he turns, startled. There's a flicker of something in his expression — guilt, maybe, or surprise. It doesn't matter. “We need to talk.”

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He takes a step toward me without taking his eyes off me. “Courtney, what’s?—”

“Did you ever actually like me?” The question bursts from me, raw and aching. “Or was I just a task? Something to check off your royal to-do list?”

He opens his mouth, but I don’t want his practiced apologies or polished lies. I’ve had enough of feeling like a pawn in someone else’s game. And I’m done playing.

His eyes widen, a plea perched on his lips. “Courtney, please, let me explain?—”

“Explain?” My voice cracks like ice beneath the weight of my anger. I cross my arms, guarding against the chill of his betrayal. “How do you explain lying to me? Pretending to care?”

He steps forward, his hands reaching for me, but I recoil. “I did care — Idocare,” he insists, desperation tinging his words.

“Stop.” I hold up a hand, needing space between his deceit and my shattered trust. “You were watching me because your father told you to. Because I might be a... athreat?” The last word tastes bitter on my tongue.

“Look, it started that way, yes, but—” His jaw clenches, and I can nearly hear his wheels spinning as he tries to find some way out of the confrontation.

“Started that way.” The phrase echoes in the hollow space where warmth used to flicker. “It doesn’t matter how it ended, Jakob. It shouldn’t have started at all.”

“Please, Courtney,” he begs, his composed veneer cracking.

“Goodbye, Jakob.” The words tumble out, firm and final.

Turning on my heel, I rush toward the door, refusing to look back at what could have been. My fingers fumble with the latch, a clumsy escape from a fairy tale gone wrong.

Once outside, the morning air bites at my cheeks, and the first tear runs down my face. I don’t get far before someone steps right in front of me. Squinting through my pain, I manage to process that there’s a man standing in front of me, phone raised up to film me.

“Hey, it’s her! The girl who was with Prince Jakob!” He shouts it loud, as if he wants the whole world to hear.

Panic knots in my stomach as I quicken my pace. Another shout. Another shutter click. Tears blur my vision as I push through the growing crowd, their cries swirling around me like vultures over prey.

“Is that the prince’s new flame?” someone shouts too loudly.

“American gold digger,” another sneers.

Each word is a dagger, each picture taken a reminder of the love story that never was. I wrap my arms around myself as I flee from the piercing eyes and prying lenses.

I need to get away. But where to? There are people everywhere, all looking, all dissecting me with their eyes. One woman points out to her friend that I’m wearing last night’s dress, and another one shakes her head at me, as if embarrassed that her prince would stoop so low.

A grocery store's automatic doors slide open, offering a temporary haven from the relentless phones and gossips outside. My high-heeled feet click against the cold linoleum floor, and I quickly disappear inside.

I dart past the rows of colorful produce, the faces of curious shoppers blurring into a single canvas of confusion. They can't possibly understand the storm I'm running from, the hurricane of emotions tearing through my chest. I spot the sign for the restrooms and veer towards it, my refuge now just a few strides away.

"Miss, are you all right?" A store employee eyes me with concern, but I can't afford to stop, not even to craft a lie.

"Fine, thank you," I mumble without slowing down, pushing through the bathroom door and locking it behind me.

My reflection in the mirror shows a stranger — red-eyed, disheveled, a princess stripped of her illusory crown. Sobs choke out between breaths, and I lean on the sink for support. It's only when I find my phone in the clutch I've somehow managed to hold on to that I remember Mimi, my lifeline in this country.

With trembling hands, I pull the phone out and give her a call. If she doesn't answer, I don't know what to do. There must be car services here in Bergovia, but I don't know which ones they are.

"Hey, Courtney." Her voice is the lighthouse in the darkest storm, soothing over the raw edges of my panic.

"Mimi, can you come get me? Please, I— I'm at the grocery store on Rue de la Paix." My words are a plea, a tether thrown into the storm.

"What's wrong?" Her voice sharpens. "Are you okay?"

“Not really.” I bite my bottom lip, holding back a sob. “I’m not in danger, but... I just need a ride. I can send you my location.”

“Of course. Stay put. I’m on my way.” She doesn’t ask any more questions, doesn’t push for explanations she knows I’m not ready to give.

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“Thank you,” I whisper before sliding down to sit on the cool tile floor, knees hugged tight to my chest.

Time crawls by in the sterile quiet of the bathroom, each minute an eternity until Mimi arrives. Eventually, my phone buzzes again, her text a beacon: I’m here.

Taking deep breaths, I steel myself for the onslaught. I unlock the door, stepping back into the chaos. The crowd has swelled, the store’s entrance now a stage for the curious and the cruel. But I’ve played the damsel in distress for the last time today.

With newfound resolve, I weave through the onlookers, their voices fading to a distant hum. There’s no prince coming to save me; I’m claiming my own escape.

Mimi’s car is at the curb, the window rolled down so she can wave me onward. I launch myself into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut with a finality that matches the closing chapter of my Bergovian adventure.

“Drive,” I gasp, and she doesn’t hesitate. The engine roars to life, and we zoom away.

The car speeds through the city, a blur of morning light and shadows. I don’t look back as Mimi weaves through traffic, each turn putting distance between me and the life I thought I was building with Jakob. My heart pounds in my chest, and I feel like I might vomit any moment. I keep it down, though, not wanting her to stop the car at any cost.

“Hey, so...” Mimi’s voice breaks through my daze. “I saw the pictures of you with Prince Jakob. When you told me about him, I had no clue he was royalty!”

I turn to face her, feeling the sting of betrayal afresh. “Neither did I, at first,” I confess, my words heavy with sorrow. “But finding out who he is wasn’t the worst part.”

She glances at me, her brow furrowing in suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“Jakob... he was shadowing me,” I admit, a lump forming in my throat. “His father thinks I’m some sort of national threat because of my family’s history with the royal family. We’re old rivals, apparently.”

“Wait, what?” Her eyes widen. “That’s insane!”

“Tell me about it.”

The pain is raw as I curl into myself, hugging my arms tight around my middle. I stare out the window, watching the city pass by in a haze. Memories of Jakob’s smiles, his gentle touches, play on loop in my mind — each one now tainted by doubt. Did any of it mean anything to him?

“Are you okay?” Mimi reaches over, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“No,” I reply quietly, a single tear tracing its way down my cheek. “I thought... I really believed he cared about me.”

“Hey, listen to me,” she says firmly, squeezing my shoulder. “You are strong, Courtney. You’ll get through this.”

Her words are meant to be soothing, but they can’t reach the hollow space where my trust in Jakob once lived. My heart feels like it’s been cleaved in two, the fracture line jagged and deep.

“Let’s get you somewhere quiet,” she murmurs.

I just nod, grateful for her presence yet unable to shake the heartbreak that feels like it will always and forever more be with me.

CHAPTER 23

JAKOB

After Courtney leaves, I don’t know how much time passes while I sit on the couch and stare at the wall. Our conversation replays over and over in my head, the hurt in her eyes tearing my soul in two.

I was only trying to tie together the jagged pieces of my life, but I should have known that is an impossible task. For a man who is living a double life, there is no seamlessly tying the parts together. I should have told my father the truth, to hell with his anger. Now Courtney never wants to see me again, and I have lost the best thing that ever happened to me.

Perhaps.

There must still be something I can do, something I can say, to win her back. If only she will give me a few minutes.

I bolt out of the apartment, my heart pounding, desperate to catch Courtney before she disappears from my life completely. But as I rush towards the elevator, my elderly neighbor Mariana steps out, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

“Jakob, dear,” she calls in a voice that’s seen more years than I can even fathom. “Who was that lovely young lady? She looked quite smitten with you!”

“Can’t talk now, Mariana,” I say, trying to sidestep her without being rude. “It’s urgent.”

“Ah, young love,” she sighs, clutching her hands to her heart. “Always in such a hurry.”

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The elevator dings, mercifully sparing me further delay, but I can feel the seconds slipping through my fingers like sand. When the doors finally close, I hit the ground-level button repeatedly, as if that will hasten the descent.

Once outside, the usually charming narrow streets become my adversary. Cars inch along, trapped in the morning congestion that clogs the arteries of the city. I weave through the traffic on foot, my hope diminishing with every honk and screech of tires.

Finally breaking free from the gridlock, I make it to her hotel, my breath ragged and my shirt clinging to my back. The lobby is cool and calm, the few people in it staring at me with interest. I approach the front desk, where a man in a neatly tailored suit greets me with a professional smile.

“Your Highness.” His eyes widen a bit at the sight of me. “What an honor. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for Courtney Fuller,” I manage between gulps of air, trying to steady my voice. “Please, it’s important.”

He taps away at his keyboard, his brow furrowing slightly. My chest tightens with anticipation. Please let her still be here.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness,” he says after what feels like an eternity. “Ms. Fuller checked out not long ago. She seemed to be in quite a rush; mentioned something about a last-minute flight back to the US.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. Last-minute flight. Back to the US. The

phrases echo in my head, a litany of finality. I lean against the counter for support, my mind reeling. I waited too long. I should have gone after her the second she left my apartment.

“Did she... did she say anything else?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to hear the answer.

The clerk shakes his head apologetically. “No, Your Highness. She was very discreet.”

“Thank you,” I reply, my voice barely audible.

I turn away from the desk, the enormity of my mistakes ready to crush me. Courtney is gone, and with her, the chance to explain, to make things right. I’ve lost her, and in doing so, I’ve lost a piece of myself.

Back at my apartment, I slam the door shut behind me, the sound echoing through the empty space like the final chord of a tragic symphony. My hands are shaking — anger, grief, disbelief — they all meld into a tumultuous storm within me. Courtney is on a plane back to the US, and I am here, in Bergovia, grappling with the magnitude of my blunder.

The polished wood floor feels cold underfoot as I pace back and forth, my mind racing. What could I have done differently? Should I have been honest from the start? Or was it that moment by the fountain when I hesitated, when I should have poured out my heart? A litany of *could-haves* and *should-haves* taunt me, each one a sharp jab to an already bruised soul.

I bypass the neat stack of work documents on my desk; they seem trivial now, irrelevant. Forgetting about any semblance of professional responsibility, I find myself drawn instead to the cabinet where I keep a modest collection of spirits. The

smooth glass bottle of whiskey feels heavy in my hand, its contents the only relief I can think of for a wound that seems incurable.

As the amber liquid burns its way down my throat, the sharp edges of my emotions begin to blur. First comes the anger, hot and fierce, at myself more than anyone else. I hurl a pillow across the room, and it thuds against the wall, harmless and ineffective. Then the anger fades to grief — a deep sorrow that seems to consume the very air I breathe.

“Damn it, Courtney,” I mutter to her memory, to the ghost of her laughter that haunts the corners of this place. “I tried. I did the best I could.”

Hours slip away unnoticed, the level in the bottle steadily dropping as shadows lengthen across the floor. Finally, there’s a knock at the door. I open it, foolishly hopeful, only to find my youngest brother waiting on the other side.

Oliver doesn’t say anything at first, just stands there in the doorway, his expression a mix of concern and resignation.

“Jakob,” he finally says, his voice cutting through the haze, “I’ve been calling.”

I shrug. “I can’t talk now, Oliver.”

“What happened?” he asks, not listening.

I stare at the floor. “Courtney... left.”

My grip on the bottle slackens as I meet his gaze, the clear blue eyes so much like our mother’s. Oliver never was one to mince words or to wallow in self-pity.

“Look at yourself, Brother,” he continues, stepping into the room and gently prying

the bottle from my fingers. “This isn’t the way to fix things.”

Oliver’s gaze holds mine, earnest and unwavering. He settles onto the armchair, the leather creaking under his weight. I draw in a deep breath, the stench of alcohol as I do so reminding me of the depth I’ve sunk to. It’s time to unburden myself, to lay bare the ugly truth.

“I’ve made a mess of things, Oliver,” I begin, my voice rough with emotion. “Courtney... she was never supposed to be more than a mission.”

“A mission?” He leans forward, his brow furrowing in confusion.

I nod, feeling the familiar pang of guilt. “I followed her, made sure she wasn’t here to cause trouble for the family. Then I saw it — the sapphire necklace. It belonged to our family, and she had it.”

“You stole it back,” Oliver surmises, his tone flat.

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“Right out of her hotel room.” The words taste bitter now, remembering the thrill that had once accompanied the act.

“And Father?” he prompts, knowing there’s more.

“Father wanted me to continue watching her, to ensure she didn’t have other... intentions.” My hands clench at the memory. “But something happened along the way. I fell for her, Oliver. Really fell for her.”

There’s a long pause, and I can see him processing the information, piecing together the shards of my shattered tale.

“Then she overheard me talking to Father about everything. She left without letting me explain.” My voice cracks at that.

Oliver’s expression softens, but when he speaks he doesn’t go gentle on me. “And you think the crown, this pursuit of power and legacy, is worth it? Worth losing someone as amazing as Courtney must be? And I assume she is amazing, as not once before this have I seen you so torn up over a woman.”

His question hangs in the air, and I’m struck by the enormity of its implication. In chasing the ghost of duty and tradition, I’ve lost sight of what truly matters. The answer has been in front of me all along, obscured by the blinding allure of the crown.

“You’re right,” I admit, the realization settling heavy in my chest. “None of it was worth it. Not the chase, not the crown, not when it meant losing her.”

“Jakob,” he says, “it’s not too late. You know what you need to do.”

And I do. In my heart, stripped of pride and pretense, I understand that I must make amends, no matter how daunting the path ahead may seem. It’s time to get Courtney back. And not only that; it’s time to discover who I am — beyond the shackles of an ancient crown.

CHAPTER 24

COURTNEY

As I push open the white picket gate, the familiar scent of Texas bluebonnets greets me like an old friend. My feet tread the well-worn path to the porch where Mom sits, rocking gently in her favorite chair, a glass of sweet tea sweating in the afternoon heat. Her eyes, so much like my own, lift and lock onto mine.

“Hey, sugar,” she greets with that warm southern lilt that I didn’t realize I missed so much. “You look like you’ve got stories to tell.”

I take a deep breath, feeling the burden of secrets untold and revelations uncovered. Before I can speak, though, I set my bags down and give her a long hug. It’s good to be home.

“Mom.” I take the rocking chair next to her. “A lot happened on my trip, but... most importantly, there’s something about Grandma I learned in Bergovia.”

Her hand stills on the armrest, the creaking of the rocker coming to a halt. “What is it, Courtney?”

“Grandma... she was noble. She had ties to the royal family there.” The words spill out, almost too surreal to believe, even now.

Mom's mouth parts slightly, shock registering across her face before it blooms into a soft, wistful smile.

"Noble?" she echoes, disbelief and pride mingling in her voice. "Your grandmother always had an air about her, but to think..."

I nod, a small chuckle escaping me despite the tumultuous emotions. "Yeah, it's true. It explains so much about her."

"Goodness," Mom murmurs, shaking her head as if to clear it. "To think of all the stories she must've carried in her heart." Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, but they're not sad — just full.

"Are you okay with this? With knowing?" I ask tentatively, watching her closely.

"Of course. It's like she's still here, giving us gifts from beyond." Mom reaches out, her fingers wrapping around mine, grounding me. "And you brought this piece of her back to us. That means the world to me."

Despite all the pain I'm still carrying, I feel a surge of gratitude. The trip to Bergovia wasn't a waste after all.

"Good. If nothing else, I'm glad I could do that for you, for us." I squeeze her hand, the simple touch speaking volumes.

"Tell me everything about Bergovia. Start from the beginning."

And so I do. I even tell her about Jakob, as hard as that part is. As I talk, though, I find that sharing the story shakes loose some of the pain in my heart. Here, with Mom, under the vast Texassky, I find a different kind of peace, one that fills the cracks left by betrayal and loss.

“Whew.” She blows out a breath. “That’s quite the story, Court.”

“I know.” I lean back in my rocking chair, more exhausted from sharing it than I am from the long flight.

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“How are you now?”

“I’m... already better.” I smile, realizing just how much I mean that.

“Dinner is almost ready. Lasagna.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I pause. “Actually, if we have a bit of time, there’s something I’d like to do first. An errand. I’ll be quick.”

“You take your time.” She reaches over and smooths my hair.

The cemetery is close, only about ten minutes in the car. I drive over, feeling odd that it’s the first time I’ll have been here since the funeral.

Navigating my way down the path, I find the foot of my grandmother’s grave, the Texas sun shining over the marble headstone. The wind rustles the leaves, carrying with it the scent of wildflowers and earth.

“Hey, Grandma,” I murmur, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips despite the bittersweet pang in my chest. “I visited Bergovia, you know? It was beautiful — like stepping into a fairy tale.”

My fingers trace the engraved letters of her name. “Castles, gardens, and those snow-capped mountains. Now I see where I get my taste for adventure.”

I settle onto the neatly trimmed grass, folding my legs beneath me. “But I’m home now, and there’s no place like Texas. I understand why you left it all behind and

never looked back.” A lump forms in my throat as I think of the secrets and lies that beat at the edges of my mind. “The royal family... they’re not what they seem. You protected us from that, didn’t you?”

Sighing, I let my gaze drift to the horizon, where the sky melds into a canvas of dusky pinks and oranges. “I can’t say I’m not hurt by what happened. Jakob... he betrayed me in a way I never thought possible.” The words hang heavy in the air, but speaking them here feels right — like Grandma is listening, her spirit offering silent solace.

As the sun dips lower, casting long shadows across the graveyard, I push myself to my feet. “I should go. Tomorrow’s my first day back at work. Back to reality.” I offer a small, wistful smile to the headstone. “Thanks for listening, Grandma.”

The drive home is quiet, the roads familiar and comforting in their own right. Each passing block brings me closer to the life I’ve built here — the one that’s real and tangible, not a fantasy wrapped in deception.

In the embrace of my own house, setting the table with my mom, I find a different kind of peace — one that promises new beginnings and the chance to heal. Jakob left an imprint on my heart, but he’s not the entire world. Life goes on, and so will I.

CHAPTER 25

COURTNEY

Itap away at the keyboard, equations and graphs populating my dual monitors in a rhythmic dance. It’s strangely soothing, the quiet click of keys, the soft hum of computers, and the occasional murmur of voices from neighboring cubicles. My routine is a welcome distraction from thoughts that have no place here — thoughts of Bergovia, a small country I’ve tried to lock away in the back of my mind.

“Did you hear about Prince Jakob of Bergovia?” Emily, one of my coworkers, says somewhere behind me.

The sudden intrusion of his name slices through my concentration like a knife through silk. I stiffen, fingers pausing mid-air.

“Ugh, yes! He’s on that list for the world’s most eligible bachelors, right? So hot.” Fatima’s voice, laced with excitement, drifts over the partition.

“Top ten hottest men, actually,” another corrects with a giggle. “Can you imagine dating royalty?”

I close my eyes. Seriously? Before Bergovia, I had no clue who Jakob was. Sure, I knew they had royalty there, but he wasn’t on my radar at all. And now, in a cruel twist of fate, it’s like I can’t escape him.

The women’s words spark images I desperately wish to douse — crystal-blue eyes, a smile that once set my heart racing, a touch that hinted at promises and secrets. But it was all a lie, all pretend. Even if it felt as real as the computer sitting in front of me.

I force my thoughts back to numbers and charts, the safe monotony of work. I succeed, somewhat, as the conversation becomes a dull buzz in the background.

But my body seems to rebel against my efforts to ignore Jakob’s existence, a stir of unease bubbling in my stomach. I try to blame the nausea on the half-eaten bagel from breakfast or maybe too much coffee. I’ll just stick it out till lunch, and then I can?—

The screen starts to blur, and I press a hand to my mouth as a wave of dizziness hits. No, not now. Not here. I stumble to my feet, gripping the edge of my desk. I need air, or water, or?—

“Are you okay, Courtney?” The concerned voice of my desk neighbor barely registers as I bolt toward the restroom, footsteps echoing in the suddenly claustrophobic space.

I barely make it to the stall before my stomach heaves, and I’m clutching the cold porcelain as if it’s a lifeline. The retching seems endless, and when it finally subsides, I’m left trembling, a cold sweat clinging to my skin.

This isn’t just some random sickness. I know my body, and this feels different, wrong. I rinse my mouth out, splashing water on my pale face, avoiding my own reflection. With shaky hands, I text my supervisor: Not feeling well. Going home.

Once outside, the fresh air does nothing to alleviate the tightness in my chest or the tremble in my limbs. I slide into my car, resting my head back against the seat, taking deep breaths that taste like freedom and fear.

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Gripping the steering wheel, I navigate through the heavy traffic with a single-minded focus. The dashboard clock ticks away, the nausea slowly climbing in my belly once more. It's only when the car hums to a stop at a red light that realization crashes into me — I've missed my period.

A cold shock runs through my body, and without conscious thought, I find myself pulling into the parking lot of a pharmacy. My hands shake a little as I swipe a pregnancy test from the shelf, avoiding eye contact with the cashier who rings me up.

The drive home is a blur, my mind racing faster than the car. My mother won't be home for hours; she's always been the type to bury herself in her work, something I've inherited along with her stubbornness.

Once inside the safety of our small, cluttered house, I waste no time. The sound of the package tearing open seems too loud in the silence. Instructions are skimmed, then read again more carefully — I can't get this wrong. And then, it's just waiting, watching the little hourglass icon blink on the digital screen.

Positive.

The word stares back at me, unyielding. A tiny plus sign confirming a new life, changing everything. I stumble back against the bathroom wall, the test clattering to the floor as my knees give out. This isn't how I pictured motherhood — alone, scared, and the father...

Jakob.

My heart aches with the enormity of the decisions yet to be made. Fear coils tightly around my resolve, but deep down, the decision has already been made — I'm keeping this baby. Single motherhood may not be ideal, but I have enough love for two.

My hands tremble as I reach for my phone, scrolling through my contacts until Ginny's name pops up. She's been my rock since childhood, the sister I never had.

"Hey," she answers. "How are you?"

"Hey, Gin. You're off work today, right? Can you come over? I... I need you." My voice breaks, betraying the chaos within.

"Of course. I'm on my way," she responds without hesitation, and suddenly, the heaviness crushing my chest eases just a fraction.

I sit curled up on the couch, the positive test on the coffee table like some sort of judgment. Ginny's arrival brings a gust of fresh air into the room, and because this is so hard to say, too crazy to even wrap my head around, I just go for it.

"I'm pregnant," I blurt out before pleasantries can be exchanged, my walls crumbling.

Ginny doesn't say a word, just pulls me into a hug that speaks volumes. We stay like that for a moment, her strength seeping into me.

"Jakob doesn't know." The words tumble out, laced with a bitterness I can't suppress. Bergovia and its prince took so much from us — my family's history a tangled mess of lost titles and forgotten nobility. "Why should he ever know?" I add.

But Ginny doesn't answer, and we sit in silence, the question hanging in the air

between us. Her eyes — steady, unwavering — meet mine as I unravel the turmoil that's knotted inside.

“What?” I ask.

“Every child deserves a father, Court. Or at least, the chance to see if their father is good enough to be in their life.” Her voice is soft but firm. “You of all people know what it's like to grow up with that void.”

She's right. Even though I barely remember my dad, his death so long ago it feels like his life might have been a dream rather than reality, I know she's right. My heart has been an echo chamber for longing, the emptiness a constant hum through every milestone I faced alone. The thought of my own child facing that same hollow ache clenches my insides.

“Seeing Jakob will reopen wounds,” I murmur, the lingering taste of betrayal bitter on my tongue.

“Maybe so,” Ginny concedes, squeezing my hand gently. “But this isn't about you and Jakob anymore. It's about what's best for this little one.” She nods toward my still-flat belly, her gaze tender.

I take a deep breath, feeling the walls I've built around my heart tremble. A father's love is a foreign concept, one I've cobbled together from books and movies, but it's a dream I can't deny my child. Even if that father isn't perfect, even if he hurt me... maybe he will be good for this child.

“Okay,” I whisper, the word a key unlocking a future I hadn't planned. “I'll tell him. Not for me, not for us, but for our baby.”

“Courage, Courtney.” Her hug is fierce, protective. “And who knows? Jakob might

just surprise you.”

“Or he could be the royal jerk I remember,” I say, trying for lightness despite the storm clouds brewing within me.

“Then he doesn’t deserve either of you.” Her eyes blaze with loyalty. “But you’ll never know unless you try.”

After she leaves, I’m left in the quiet aftermath, the reality of motherhood settling over me like a mantle. It’s empowering and terrifying all at once. With a shaky exhale, I acknowledge the truth — I want this baby to have everything I didn’t. And that starts with knowing their father, no matter how daunting the prospect.

“Okay, Jakob,” I speak into the silence, a vow to the life growing within me. “You’re going to be a dad. Let’s see if you’re up to the task.”

CHAPTER 26

JAKOB

The old wooden gate creaks on its hinges as I push it open, a familiar sound that has always signaled a safe haven from the rest of the world. The garden is thick and plentiful, vegetables growing in rows. Grandfather Rolph's house, nestled in the hills outside the capital, stands as a silent sentinel against the chaos of royal expectations.

I tread the sandy path, my shoes crunching softly in the quiet afternoon. Despite the tranquility here, a storm brews within me — one of guilt, confusion, and betrayal. Except for Oliver, I've been ignoring my phone and haven't talked to anyone. I need this respite, however fleeting, to gather my scattered thoughts.

"Jakob!" Grandfather's voice rings out from the back garden, rich and warm.

I round the corner to find him, sleeves rolled up, tending to his beloved birds. His eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles, offering me a kind of peace no one else can provide.

"Come, help me with feeding them," he beckons, gesturing towards the assortment of seeds and breadcrumbs on the weathered stone bench.

I join him, scattering seeds into the small ceramic dishes positioned around the garden. Finches and sparrows flit down from the trees, their chirps creating a symphony. Watching them peck away contentedly, a laugh bubbles up from my chest, unbidden yet sincere.

"Perhaps I should just move in with you, Grandfather. Abandon all this talk of

succession and leadership,” I say, half-jesting, half-desperate to escape the life that I have twisted into an unrecognizable mess.

Rolph turns to look at me, his gaze penetrating and all-knowing. “You could,” he says slowly, “but that wouldn’t be you, Jakob. Your heart is too intertwined with Bergovia and her people.”

He’s right, of course. My dreams have always been colored with visions of leading my country, of making a difference for those who call it home. Yet, in this moment of uncertainty, the thought of a simpler life is a temptation I struggle to ignore.

“Your dedication to Bergovia is what makes you who you are,” Grandfather continues, his words ringing with truth. “It’s in your blood, much like these birds are drawn to their sanctuary.”

I nod, knowing he is correct and wishing — for perhaps the first time in my life — that he were not.

“Tell me,” he says, “what is new in your life?”

Surely he knows about Courtney. Even though my grandfather does his best to live separated from any sort of drama or hubbub, the biggest news always finds its way to him.

I don’t want to talk about Courtney, though. What I want is to find some subject that will actually make me feel good, as feeble of an attempt as that seems right now.

I clear my throat, trying to dislodge the unease that has settled there. “Grandfather, there’s a sapphire necklace...”

He freezes, hand in the bowl of bird feed, his eyes unblinking.

“You know the one I am talking about, correct?” I ask. “It was stolen from the palace years ago. I’ve managed to retrieve it. It’s back with our family now, where it belongs.” My words, meant to be triumphant, hang in the air — a fragile attempt to soothe the sting of Courtney’s absence.

Rolph tosses a handful of seeds, but his movements are slower now. His eyes, usually warm and twinkling like stars on a clear night, cloud over with an emotion I can’t quite place. It’s not the joy I expected; it’s something deeper, tinged with sorrow.

“Where did you find this necklace?” he breathes.

“From a woman.” I clear my throat. “Courtney Fuller. Father asked me to keep an eye on her. Make sure she wasn’t a threat. She is a descendant of the Bergovian Jägers and?—”

“Oh, Jakob,” he murmurs, his voice barely above a breath.

“Isn’t it good news?” I ask, the intensity of his gaze heavy upon me.

My grandfather lowers his hand, allowing the birds to flutter away unattended. He turns to face me fully, and his next words are delivered with an unexpected gravity that roots me to the spot. “I’ve never told you the full story behind that necklace, have I?”

I shake my head, a sense of foreboding coiling in my gut. “Do you... know who Courtney is?”

“What is her relation to Anna Jäger?”

“Anna was her grandmother,” I say, not entirely sure why my blood is suddenly running cold.

“Anna Jäger and I, we were childhood friends,” he begins, his voice wistful. “And then... we were sweethearts, in secret. Our parents’ dispute was only part of the reason her family left Bergovia.”

“Sweethearts?” I echo, stunned. The history of our families had always been painted in broad strokes of political strife, not clandestine love affairs.

“Yes,” Rolph continues, a melancholic smile playing on his lips. “I gave her that necklace as a promise of my undying love when we were fourteen, right before she had to leave. I believed, foolishly perhaps, that one day we would find each other again.”

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The garden around us falls into a hushed silence, the earlier tranquility now a specter of regret and lost time. I feel my throat tighten, understanding dawning upon me like the cruelest sunrise.

“Anna...” My grandfather blinks. “Washer grandmother?”

“Yes.” It pains me to say what comes next. “She died several weeks ago.”

His shoulders slump.

“Grandfather, I am dreadfully sorry,” I add, thinking about him growing up, growing old, always holding on to the hope that his first love will come back to him.

Is that how it will be with me and Courtney? Will I always be watching the road for her to drive up?

He shakes his head. “I finally accepted I would likely never see her again. Not in this lifetime, anyway. Do not feel sorry for me, Jakob. I am an old man, but I have had a good life. As far as the necklace... your father did not know. I never told him.”

“Then... the necklace...” I struggle to find my voice. “It should belong to Courtney?”

“Indeed,” he says, his eyes glistening. “It was never really ours to claim back.”

I reel from the revelation, feeling the foundations of my actions crumble beneath me. I thought I had done something noble, something right — but the truth is far more complicated than I could’ve imagined. Guilt gnaws at me, the image of Courtney’s

angry face when I took the necklace resurfacing with newfound clarity.

“Grandfather, I— I didn’t know.” My words are a mere breath, a feeble attempt to mend what I’ve unwittingly broken.

“Sometimes, the right thing is not the easiest one, Jakob,” Rolph says, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “But there is always a way to make amends.”

As the finality of his words sinks in, I’m left with a heart fraying at the edges, wondering how many more threads will unravel before I can begin to weave them back together.

CHAPTER 27

JAKOB

I’m pacing the length of the palace library, the significance of my grandfather’s words settling like lead in my chest. The silence is thick, broken only by the soft ticking of the antique clock on the mantel.

“Take it back casually,” my grandfather had said with a dismissive wave of his hand, as if talking about borrowing a book and not a royal heirloom.

I stop mid-step, still grappling with the suggestion. My hands clench into fists at my sides; it’s so unlike him, so underhanded. But the gnawing guilt over how things ended with Courtney pushes me forward.

“Right,” I mutter to myself, my resolve firming.

It’s the right thing to do. For Courtney. For Bergovia. For my own conscience that refuses to give me peace.

With a determined stride, I leave the library and make my way down the cool, stone corridors of the palace. The walls are adorned with portraits of people who, even in death, seem to bejudging me. But I no longer care. I am doing what is right; what I need to do.

I descend the spiral staircase to the family vault, my footsteps echoing off the ancient stones.

The vault door groans open, a sound fitting for the chamber of treasures it guards. The air inside is musty, filled with the scent of old metal and dust. I step inside, the dim light from the overhead bulbs casting long shadows. My eyes scan the shelves lined with artifacts and jewels, each piece a chapter in Bergovia's rich history.

But I'm here for one item alone.

Moving to the inventory ledger resting on its pedestal, I flip through the pages with a sense of urgency. The detailed script lists every item accounted for, but as I reach the section where the necklace should be noted, my heart sinks. The space next to its description is glaringly empty. No sign-out date. No mention of its whereabouts.

My breath catches in my throat. It's not here.

Panic flares briefly before I tamp it down. There has to be an explanation. A loan to a museum, perhaps? Misplaced paperwork?

Yet deep down, a voice murmurs the truth I don't want to acknowledge: the necklace isn't lost. It's just not here.

So then where would it?—

The answer comes to me in a flash. The necklace is not in the vault, because it was

never returned to the vault!

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With the echo of my heartbeat loud in my ears, I close the ledger, the finality of the motion reverberating in my chest.

The moment I step into Father's study, the air feels charged with silent secrets. It's a room of power and decisions, where every object is laden with intent and history. I move past the imposing mahogany desk, towards the antique walnut cabinet where I know for a fact he puts things he does not wish to misplace.

I hesitate before the top drawer, my hand hovering over the ornate brass handle. This is more than just a breach of trust — it's an act of defiance against the very lineage I've been raised to uphold. But the ache in my chest, the longing for Courtney, the desire to do right by my grandfather and Anna, it all gives me strength. With a deep breath, I pull open the drawer.

There, nestled among papers and various random objects, lies the necklace. Its stones catch the faint light, a kaleidoscope of remorse and beauty. A part of me warns me to leave it be, to close this chapter with dignity. Yet, I remember the look in Courtney's eyes — the hurt I caused — and my resolve hardens.

Gently lifting the necklace, its weight in my palm is both heavy and freeing. With careful fingers, I place it inside the inner pocket of my jacket, feeling its cool presence against my heart. Then, I retrieve a sheet of official stationery and pen a note with a steady hand.

“Forgive me. I must do this in order to right history.”

The words are a vow, not just to my father, but to myself and to Courtney. The crown

may slip from my grasp, but I cannot let our story end with such dishonor.

I leave the note in the center of the desk, a silent testament to my choice, before stepping out of the study. The corridors of the palace are quiet, almost expectant, as if they too sense the gravity of this moment.

I don't want to linger in the palace too long. If I am to make my next move, I need to tie up all the loose ends at work. Make sure as many of my tasks as possible are done ahead of time and that there is enough staff to cover me. If all goes well, I will be taking a short vacation from the office. And so I jump into my car and hightail it to my workplace.

I nod at everyone I pass, from the security guards to the receptionists, always being polite and prompt, but also eager to get into the privacy of my office. Eager to continue to put my plan into play.

In my office, I pick up the phone and call the number for the aviation crew. "Prepare one of the jets for departure to the United States," I instruct. "Houston, Texas. I need to make a personal delivery as soon as possible."

"Of course, Your Highness," comes the prompt reply. "We'll have everything ready for your flight."

"Thank you," I say, and with that, the plans are set in motion. The necklace will be returned to where it belongs — in Courtney's hands — and with it, a piece of my soul.

But destiny, it seems, has other ideas. As I glance up toward the door, there she stands. Courtney. The woman who unknowingly holds my future in her gaze. She's here, in Bergovia, in my office.

Time narrows down to this singular point, our shared past and uncertain future converging in the space between us. We simply look at each other, and for a heartbeat, nothing else exists.

I stand motionless behind my desk, a million thoughts racing through my mind.

“I snuck in,” she says. “Past security. If you’re going to throw me out, please wait until I tell you what I came here to say.”

“I won’t be throwing you out,” I breathe.

“Good.” She lifts her chin a little higher. “For the national security department, I would have expected better security. Especially since a prince works here.”

A chuckle slips from my lips. God, it’s good to see her. “I suppose you were too smart for them.”

The weight of the necklace in my pocket feels like the anchor of a ship long adrift, finally ready to come home. My breath catches, held captive by the intensity of the moment. She’s here — Courtney, the woman who never left my heart, standing mere feet away from me. The air between us crackles with a thousand unspoken promises and regrets, the history we share hanging heavy in the room.

I don’t know what she has to say. I don’t know why she came all this way after leaving just days before. I don’t know if she will accept my apology or the necklace. What I do know, however, is that whatever comes next, it will change everything forever.

CHAPTER 28

COURTNEY

Standing before Jakob's imposing figure, I feel like I'm caught in the middle of a winter storm — vulnerable, exposed, and quaking in my boots. The opulent room swirls around me, but all I can focus on is his intense gaze, searching mine for answers I'm not sure I'm ready to give.

"Jakob," I begin, my voice a mere breath against the magnitude of what I'm about to divulge.

The silence stretches between us, thick as the velvet drapes framing the windows behind him. I worry he might fill it with words of dismissal or disdain — or worse, the cold chime of gold coins meant to silence me forever.

I brace myself for his anger, the possibility that he'll lash out or turn his back on me, on us. I can almost hear the sharp intake of breath, the harsh words that will cut deeper than anything else ever could.

But then, he breaks the silence first, his voice carrying a note of something unreadable. "I thought you'd left Bergovia for good," he says, and there's an undercurrent of something like relief in his tone.

His expression softens, just slightly, as if the idea of my permanent absence had been a blow he wasn't prepared to take.

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The admission cracks the dam holding back my own resolve. “I— I came back because I have something important to tell you,” I manage to say, my voice steadier now. It’s the truth that propels me forward, the undeniable reality that has grown within me since those two lines appeared.

His eyes lock onto mine, waiting, anticipating.

“Jakob, I’m pregnant.”

The words hang in the air between us, fragile and momentous, and I search his face for any sign of what comes next.

His eyes widen, and for a heart-stopping moment, he looks as if someone has knocked the wind out of him. He steps back, his hand raking through tousled hair as he processes my revelation. I’m frozen, waiting for the storm, but it doesn’t come.

“Okay,” he breathes out, and there’s a firmness to his voice that wasn’t there before. “I’m here for this — for you and our baby. No matter what.”

His words wrap around me like a blanket, warm and unexpectedly protecting. But can I trust them? The Jakob I knew was always caught in the tangle of family expectations. Yet, here he stands, looking at me with resolve in his eyes.

“Even with your family?” My skepticism hangs between us, an unspoken challenge.

“Even with them.” He steps closer, closing the distance I didn’t realize had grown. Reaching into his jacket, he pulls out something that shines even in the soft light.

My breath catches when I see it — the necklace, my grandmother's. The same necklace his family claimed as their heirloom.

"Is that...?" I can't finish the sentence; emotions knot in my throat.

"It belongs to you," he says, his voice laced with conviction, and there's something rebellious in his gesture, something beautifully defiant.

This act, reclaiming what's mine from the clutches of his own blood — it's more than just metal and stone. It's proof. Proof that he'll stand with me, even against the gilded walls of his legacy.

"I love you, Courtney," he breathes. "I am sorry for what happened, for hurting you. This necklace... it should have always stayed with you."

I'm on him before I know it, my arms wrapping around his neck, holding him close. "I love you, Jakob."

In this embrace, in the beat of his heart against mine, I find the truth I'd been searching for. He's all in — just as scared, just as giddy, but all in. And with this, we step into the unknown together, bound by something far stronger than fear or obligation. Love.

CHAPTER 29

JAKOB

This is it. The day that I didn't even know I was waiting for. In one minute, everything changed. Courtney loves me. She's pregnant with my child.

And here she is, right next to me in my car, her fingers threaded through mine. We

are together. Two people. One heart.

I navigate the winding roads that lead to my apartment, feeling like I'm steering through a dreamscape. A father. Me, a soon-to-be dad. My mind whirls with images of tiny fingers and toes, and a life infinitely more complicated and beautiful than I ever imagined.

"Jakob?" Courtney's soft query pulls me back from the edge of my reverie.

"Sorry, I'm just... It's a lot to take in," I admit.

"I know," she says, squeezing my hand. "I feel the same."

An idea sparks, and before I can second-guess it, I act on impulse. "There's someone I'd like you to meet before we go to my place," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. This is important, more so now with the news of our child.

"Who?" Courtney tilts her head, her forehead creasing in confusion.

"Rolph, my grandfather," I answer, leaving out the why.

I could explain the whole story, but I would rather take her to my grandfather first. Introduce the two of them and let the truth unfurl from there.

"Okay," she agrees, though I catch the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. She trusts me, though. That much is clear, and it bolsters my confidence.

As we drive, the landscape shifts from urban to pastoral, quaint homes giving way to rolling hills. The familiarity of the route soothes some of the anxiety churning inside me. Grandfather Rolph's house, which I was at just yesterday, comes into view.

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“Is he expecting us?” Courtney asks.

“Trust me. He will be happy to meet you,” I assure her.

I’ve never introduced him to a girlfriend before — let alone the mother of my future child. In addition to that, I already know he will be greatly moved to meet the granddaughter of his childhood sweetheart.

I park the car, and together we walk up the path to the front door. It’s a walk I’ve done countless times, yet each step feels buoyant, a promise of our new and exciting future.

“Ready?” I ask, glancing at Courtney. Her hand finds mine, a silent pact formed in the space between our intertwined fingers.

“Ready,” she echoes.

I ring the doorbell and see a curtain moving in the adjacent window. My grandfather’s housekeeper motions for us to enter, and so I push open the door.

We step into the cool shade of the entryway, and there he is — Grandfather Rolph, a figure as sturdy and timeless as the oak beams that cradle the roof overhead. His smiles at me before his gaze slowly travels over Courtney.

“Grandfather, meet Courtney,” I say, guiding her forward.

“Ah, my dear boy,” he begins, but his words trail off as his gaze falls to the sapphire

pendant resting just above Courtney's heart.

The room fills with a silence thick enough to touch, and then the dam breaks; tears glisten in his eyes, carving rivers down his weathered cheeks.

"Is this...?" He reaches out, his hand trembling slightly as it hovers near the necklace.

Courtney nods, gently taking his hand in hers. "It belonged to my grandmother, Anna."

"Anna," he murmurs, the name a sacred utterance. "I gave her that necklace when we were no more than children ourselves." His voice catches, a lifetime of memories flooding back in an instant.

Courtney's own eyes brim with compassion as she steps closer, enfolding Rolph in an embrace that bridges generations. "She kept it all these years," she says softly, pulling back just enough to look into his eyes.

"Anna was..." Rolph starts again, clearing his throat. "She was very special to me."

"Let me tell you about her life," Courtney offers.

"Yes, that would be amazing." He leads her to an ottoman, where they sit next to each other.

"She spent her later years in Texas, volunteering at the food pantry every week. And she was a teacher, Rolph. She touched so many lives."

He listens, rapt, each word painting a portrait of a life lived with love and purpose. A faint smile plays upon his lips, and I understand now why he once told me true love never dies — it transforms, it gives, and it lingers long after we're gone.

“Thank you, Courtney,” Rolph says when she finishes, his eyes reflecting a peace I’ve not seen in years. “You’ve brought her back to me, if only for a moment.”

Courtney swipes a tear away from the corner of her eye. “Thank you.”

“You two are a blessing to each other,” he says, and there’s a tremble in his voice that speaks volumes of the joy he feels. He leans forward, pressing a tender kiss to Courtney’s forehead, then clasping my shoulder with surprising strength for a man of his age. “Go on, live your lives together. You have my blessing.”

As we walk out of Rolph’s cozy house, the affection of his words settles over me like an embrace. It’s not just his acceptance I feel — it’s the responsibility, the exhilaration of what comes next.

“Thank you, Rolph,” Courtney says, turning to wave at the figure in the doorway. Her voice is soft, but I hear the emotion threaded through it.

“Are you all right?” I ask as I unlock the car and we slide into the leather seats.

She nods, her fingers tracing the sapphire at her throat. “I’ve never felt more connected to my grandmother than I do now.”

I start the engine, the purr breaking the silence of the late afternoon. “Courtney,” I begin, “stay with me, here in Bergovia.”

She turns to look at me, her brow creasing ever so slightly. “Jakob, I?—”

“Listen,” I interject, perhaps a bit too hastily. “I will take care of everything. Financially, you won’t need to worry.”

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Her hesitation dances across her features, a silent ballet of conflict. “But my job, my family...” She bites her lip. “And I don’t want to be dependent on someone else, even if that someone is you.”

The road stretches before us, winding and uncertain, much like our future. Marrying Courtney isn’t just an option — it’s the answer. My heart has known this truth long before my mind caught up.

“I understand,” I say softly. “And whatever it takes, I will prove to you that I am here for you. Even if it takes some time... I will wait.”

“I do want to be here,” she breathes. “I do.”

“Actually, there’s something else,” I continue, seizing the moment, determined to lay all my cards on the table. “Would you come with me to the palace tonight? To meet my family?”

“Tonight?” The word hangs between us. Excitement kindles within her gaze, but there’s a twinge of nervousness in her smile.

“I love you, Jakob,” she asserts, gripping my hand tightly. “I want to meet them, no matter what they might think of me.”

“They will adore you,” I reassure her, though a knot forms in my stomach at the thought of my father’s potential disapproval. The longstanding hostility between our families means little to me now, but its shadow looms large over the palace walls.

“Let’s do it,” she says, a brave tilt to her chin. “I’m ready.”

As I drive toward my apartment, my — hopefully — future queen beside me, I feel the tides of destiny pulling us along. And I know, rivalries or not, I would cross any divide for her.

CHAPTER 30

COURTNEY

I roll over and stretch across Jakob’s massive bed, joy bubbling through my every cell. The nap has done wonders for my energy, but as I sit up and smooth the crinkles from my shirt, a flutter of anxiety tickles my chest. Tonight, I’m to meet Jakob’s family, and my suitcase is laughably devoid of anything remotely appropriate for a palace visit.

I rise, pacing the plush carpet, my mind racing through a wardrobe that won’t materialize out of thin air. How does one even dress to meet a king and queen?

A knock at the door pulls me from my fretful reverie. Jakob enters, a soft smile playing on his lips that makes my heart do an involuntary leap.

“Are you ready?” he asks, though his eyes are teasing, knowing full well I’m far from it.

I let out a sigh edged with frustration. “Jakob, I can’t possibly go to the palace like this. My clothes are...” I gesture hopelessly to the worn suitcase sitting in the corner.

“Ah,” he says, his blue eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief. “I thought you might say that.” He steps aside, revealing a rack of dresses behind him, their colors rich and varied, fabrics shimmering even in the dimming light.

“Last-minute deliveries are quite efficient here in Bergovia,” he explains with a modest shrug, as if summoning haute couture with the snap of his fingers were an everyday occurrence. “When you’re a prince, anyway.”

I’m momentarily stunned, speechless at the sight of the beautiful gowns. My gaze travels over each one, from the elegant black sheath to a breathtaking emerald number that seems to pull me toward it with an invisible thread. But it’s the deep-blue dress, its fabric flowing like midnight water, that captures the essence of what I’d envisioned — if I had dared to envision anything at all.

“Jakob, they’re beautiful,” I breathe out in awe.

I step forward, my hand grazing the luxurious materials, my mind whirring with the thoughtfulness of his gesture.

He watches me with warmth. “Only the best for you,” he says softly, and something about the way he looks at me, so full of care and adoration, crumbles the last of my nerves.

“Thank you,” I whisper, reaching up to press a grateful kiss to his cheek.

His stubble tickles my lips, and I linger there for a brief moment longer than necessary, savoring the closeness.

“Try them on. See which one feels right,” he encourages, stepping back to give me space. “I will go and take a shower.”

I choose the blue — it reminds me of his eyes, of Bergovian nights, of new beginnings — and slip into the changing area with an excited flutter in my stomach. As I smooth the fabric over my curves, I feel transformed. The dress fits as if it was made just for me.

Catching my reflection in the mirror, a glamorous stranger blinks back at me with wide, green eyes. The sparkle of the delicate sequins on the gown seems to echo the new sparkle in my life. Jakob and I are together! We're expecting a baby!

It's all almost too much to believe.

I twist, and the dress twirls with me, the skirt billowing softly. My heart does a little dance of its own. Being with a prince... The thought sends my mind spiraling into possibilities that yesterday seemed galaxies away. How will my life change? Will there be protocols, etiquette lessons, or scrutinizing glances from courtiers?

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A wave of apprehension tightens my chest, but it's swiftly washed away by a tide of excitement. This isn't just about the glitz or the title; it's about us, Jakob and I — and our little one. A complete family. That's the real adventure I'm looking forward to.

"Okay, Courtney, you've got this," I say to my reflection, trying to steady the butterflies that have taken up residence in my stomach.

As I wait for Jakob to finish his shower, I pull out my phone and dial Mimi's number. She answers after the second ring, her voice bubbling with the same infectious cheer it always has.

"Guess who's back in Bergovia?" I say, unable to keep the grin from my voice.

"You are? Courtney!" Mimi squeals, her excitement palpable even through the phone. "When can we meet up? I want to hear everything!"

"Soon," I assure her. "There's a lot to catch up on, Mimi. Trust me, you won't want to miss a single detail."

"Are you in the city? Tell me you're staying for good this time!" she presses, ever the detective.

"Let's just say my visit might extend 'extra long' this time." I tease, knowing full well the news of my pregnancy will send her over the moon when I'm ready to share it.

"Ooh, cryptic! Now you've got me all curious," she laughs. "We'll talk soon, then?"

“Definitely,” I promise. “I’ll call you. And Mimi... thank you. For everything.”

“Anytime. Take care and stay safe.”

“I will. Bye.”

I’m smoothing down the folds of the dress once more when the bathroom door opens. Jakob steps out, a vision of regal charm wrapped in a perfectly tailored suit that accentuates his broad shoulders and lean figure.

“Wow,” escapes from my lips before I can catch it. It’s an entire sonnet compressed into a breath, as Jakob stands there, looking every bit the prince he is.

He strides over with that confident yet tender walk of his, and my heart does a little pirouette in my chest.

“You look...” His voice trails off as his eyes roam over me, drinking in the sight. The dress, a delicate concoction of silk and lace, feels like it was spun from dreams specifically for tonight.

“Stunning,” he finishes, reaching for me.

Our kiss is a promise, a silent language we’ve grown fluent in. His lips are warm, a gentle pressure that speaks of love and a shared future. Pulling back slightly, Jakob cradles my face in his hands, his thumbs caressing my cheeks as if to memorize the feel of this moment.

“I have never felt so fortunate,” he murmurs, his gaze conveying depths of gratitude and wonder. “To think that soon... we’ll be a family.”

My heart swells, a tide of emotion that threatens to spill over.

“I can’t wait either,” I whisper back, my hands finding their way to his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart against my palms. For a man who carries the responsibility of a kingdom, he has a way of making me feel like we are the only two souls in it.

“Let’s go make some memories.” Jakob’s smile lights up his entire face, his arm sliding around my waist as he leads me toward the door and into the next chapter of our story.

CHAPTER 31

JAKOB

The palace gates loom before us, imposing in a way they’ve never seemed before, guarding the secrets of the royals who reside beyond their iron embrace.

My palms are slick against the steering wheel as I guide the car smoothly through the open archway, my heart thumping a bit too loudly in my chest. I sent a text to my family earlier, a heads-up that I’m bringing “someone special” to dinner. But no amount of forewarning eases the butterflies rioting in my stomach.

Courtney, her hand resting gently on my thigh, gives me an encouraging squeeze. She can sense my nervousness, attuned as she is to my emotions in a way that both comforts and disarms me. Her smile is soft, yet there’s an undeniable strength in her eyes — a resilience that tells me she’s ready for whatever reactions we might face.

We park in the shadow of the palace, and I waste no time. If I so much as pause, then my worry might get the best of me. As we walk towards the grand entrance, I take a deep breath. This is it — no turning back now.

“Are you okay?” Courtney asks gently.

“Perfectly,” I lie, offering her a reassuring smile in return.

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The door attendants swing open the doors at our approach, and we are greeted by the butler before being directed to the drawing room where my family awaits. There's a collective pause as everyone turns toward us, recognition lighting up their faces as they see the woman by my side — the mystery woman from the photos of us on the balcony that had set the media abuzz.

“Everyone.” I nod my head at my parents and three siblings. “Good evening. This is Courtney.”

“Ah, the lovely Courtney,” my mother says, her tone warm, even though I can nearly feel her intense curiosity. “It is wonderful to meet you. Thank you for joining us tonight.”

Christina comes forward to shake Courtney's hand. “Courtney...?”

“Courtney Fuller,” I finish. “Granddaughter of Anna Jäger.”

Not to my surprise, there's a hitch in the room's atmosphere.

A murmur ripples through my family, a mixture of shock and curiosity painting their features. No one wants to mention the tense history between us and the Jägers, but everyone is thinking about it. Feeling it. Questioning why Courtney is here with me, tonight.

But then, my mother — grace personified — steps forward and embraces Courtney like a summer breeze sweeping away the remnants of a storm. “Well, that is quite the revelation,” she says with a genuine smile as she pulls back. “But today, you are our

esteemed guest. Please, come sit next to me.”

Courtney looks at me, her eyes alight with gratitude for the kindness being shown, easing some of the tension from my shoulders. This is what I love about her — her ability to inspire the best in those around her, even in potentially uncomfortable situations.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Courtney does a curtsy, and I bite into a smile. She must have done some research on Bergovian customs when I wasn’t looking.

“Please, no ‘Majesty’ or ‘Highness’ here,” my mother insists, leading Courtney into the dining hall.

As they walk ahead, I trail behind, my nerves settling into a tickle of pleasant anticipation. The evening has only just begun, and already Courtney is charming her way into the heart of my family. A small, hopeful part of me starts to believe that maybe, just maybe, this dinner might unfold into something resembling peace.

As Courtney settles into the plush chair beside my mother, laughter and light conversation flutter around the table like butterflies. My siblings exchange courteous smiles with our guest, their etiquette flawless despite the undercurrent of surprise that still lingers in the air.

Across from me, however, my father’s stern face is a dark cloud threatening to burst. His brow is furrowed, eyes narrowed — not at all concealed by his attempt at a smile when catching my gaze.

“Jakob,” he says, his voice low and even. “A word, if you please.”

I excuse myself, following him out of the dining hall and into a small sitting room lined with shelves of leather-bound books. The door clicks shut behind us, and the

jovial atmosphere of the dinner feels worlds away.

“Father,” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“Is this your idea of keeping an eye on her?” His voice is a dangerous rumble, anger seeping through every syllable. “And what’s this about the necklace?”

From his pocket, he pulls out the note that I left in his study and waves it in the air between us.

“Father,” I say, “I am sorry that I had to take the necklace back, but you have it all wrong. I didn’t just ‘keep an eye’ on Courtney; I fell in love with her.”

He scoffs, pacing before the fireplace where embers glow with dying warmth. “And the necklace?”

“Grandfather Rolph gave it to Anna, Courtney’s grandmother.” I watch his face for any sign of softening, the history between our families heavy in the room. “It belongs to her by right. And no, Courtney’s family are no threat to Bergovia; they haven’t been for years.”

“My father did what?” He stops in his tracks, the weight of generations of discord pressing upon him.

“Isn’t it time we put the past to rest?” I ask. The room is quiet enough to hear the distant clink of silverware and the muted laughter from the dining hall. “Courtney has brought nothing but good into my life, Father.”

“Is that so?” he probes, skepticism laced through his tone.

“There’s one more thing...” I swallow hard, confident in the path that I have chosen

but nervous to share it with him. “Courtney and I are having a baby.”

For a moment, he simply stares at me, as if the words need time to take root. Then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, his shoulders drop.

We stand in silence, the echo of my announcement hanging between us like mist. I search for any trace of the storm I expect to roll from my father’s eyes, but instead, I find a rare flicker of vulnerability.

“Father?” My voice is hesitant in the heavy quiet.

“Come,” he says at last, his voice gruff with unspoken emotion as he strides toward the door. “Let’s not keep everyone waiting.”

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I trail behind him, returning to the warm glow of the dining hall, where Courtney sits amid a circle of curious, polite faces. She looks up as we enter, her smile unsure but brave. The air shifts subtly, as if everyone senses the undercurrents swirling beneath the surface.

“Everyone,” my father begins, his voice commanding the room’s attention. Inwardly, I brace myself. “Courtney,” he continues, and there’s something unexpected in his tone now, a graciousness that wasn’t there before. “It is a pleasure to have you as our guest.”

My breath hitches slightly. This isn’t the reaction I anticipated. He steps forward, extending a hand toward her in a gesture of formal welcome. “Bergovia is, after all, your family’s homeland too.”

A collective pause grips the room, my siblings exchanging glances that mirror my own surprise.

“Furthermore,” my father adds, turning his gaze to both of us, “I approve of this union.”

For a moment, I can only stare at him, trying to reconcile the man before me with the one who raged just minutes ago. Disappointment still lingers — the conversation was cut short, unfinished — but it is quickly overshadowed by the profound relief washing over me.

“Thank you, Father,” I manage, my voice steady despite the emotion clawing at my throat.

Courtney's eyes meet mine, and I see the reflection of my own wonder in them. It's a new beginning, fragile and bright, and I silently vow to protect it, come what may.

It's almost too much to handle. Courtney. The baby. Now this. Emotions crest within me like the rolling waves hitting the coast. My father's approval, unexpected and warming, ignites something deep inside my chest.

"Father." I clear my throat, trying to stop my voice from cracking. "This means more to me than you know."

The room — usually so loud when all of the family gathers for a meal — is still as I turn toward Courtney. Her eyes, wide with a blend of surprise and hope, lock onto mine. The air is thick with anticipation, each breath shared between us like a whispered promise.

In this moment, everything that has happened between us, all the expectations, all the fears and worries, it all fades away; it's just Courtney and me, surrounded by the silent witnesses of those closest to me. It's now or never.

And now happens to be the closest thing to perfection that I have ever felt.

"Actually," I start, my heart threatening to beat its way out of my chest, "there's something I've been wanting to do since you arrived today."

I step toward her, aware of every pair of eyes upon us. Dropping to one knee, I take her hand gently in mine, the polished marble floor cool against my leg.

"Courtney Fuller," I say, taking my time, savoring my every word, her every breath. "Will you marry me?"

A gasp sweeps through the gathered family, but all I see is the joy blooming across

Courtney's face. "Yes," she says, her voice barely above a breath but clear as a bell in the silence. "Yes, Jakob, I will."

I rise to my feet, my heart soaring — but falter slightly. I have no ring to offer, no tangible symbol of the promise we've just made.

"Wait," my mother says, stepping forward with a grace that is both practiced over a lifetime and natural. She slips off a ring — a delicate band crowned with a stone that holds a century of love stories.

"Here," she offers, her voice soft but certain. "This was my grandmother's. I want Courtney to have it."

I take the ring from her outstretched palm, feeling the strength of tradition and the warmth of acceptance. Sliding it onto Courtney's finger, I marvel at how something so small can signify something so vast.

"Thank you, Mother," I say, my gratitude echoing through the room.

I pull Courtney into my arms and kiss her, sealing our commitment amid the silent applause of ancestors who've graced these halls before us. We step back, hands entwined, her new ring catching the light. In her eyes, I see our future unfolding. All the worries I had, all the fears, they dissipate into the air.

Almost as if they had never existed in the first place.

CHAPTER 32

COURTNEY

Another beautiful, beautiful day

And here I am... with nothing to do.

I've straightened up the apartment — not that it really needs it, since Jakob has a housekeeper come by every couple days — and organized the bookshelves. With nothing left to do, I wander through Jakob's home, tracing the delicate carvings on the mantel with my fingertips.

It's only been a few weeks since I left Texas behind, the place where I built my career, but it feels like a lifetime ago. The decision to quit my job and move here to be with Jakob feels right, though. We are engaged. A family.

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The most important thing to me right now is that our child has a solid life, a secure family. That means we're sticking together.

And to be honest, I never loved my job anyway. It was only a way to make money. I would much rather be out all day, every day, taking photos. I never pursued photography seriously, though. I was too focused on making money to support my family, and a career in the arts always felt too unstable.

But now I'm free of that. I can do what I want — as Jakob has repeated to me several times already.

Which begs the question... what do I want now? Aside from being with Jakob and raising our child together?

I glance around at the cozy space that's become my new world, wondering how to fill my days now that I'm no longer tethered to a desk and a slew of emails and numbers. Maybe I could learn to cook traditional Bergovian dishes or take up painting again, something I loved in college but let fall by the wayside in the rush of deadlines and corporate life.

I could make an itinerary for Mom and Ginny's upcoming visit. Scout out some places first. Maybe find the best bakery in the city.

"Thinking hard?" Jakob's voice startles me out of my reverie.

He steps through the front door, loosening his tie with a smile that never fails to make my stomach do somersaults.

“Something like that,” I answer, moving towards him so that he can wrap his arms around me. “Just trying to figure out my next chapter.”

He chuckles, a warm sound that fills the room. “Well, before you write the entire book, I have something to show you.” His eyes are alight with mischief, and I can tell he’s barely containing his excitement.

“A surprise?” I ask, my curiosity piqued.

“Something like that,” he says, grinning. “Grab your shoes. We’re going for a little drive.”

A wave of adrenaline washes over me. With Jakob, surprises could mean anything from a last-minute picnic in the countryside to an impromptu dance on a rooftop. As I slip into my shoes, I let go of my worries about the future for a moment. Right now, all that matters is the thrill of the unknown and the man whose hand is firmly holding mine, leading me towards whatever magic he has in store.

Our drive takes us out of the city and into the country. Jakob’s hand rests on my knee, a comforting weight as the cityscape gives way to rolling hills and picturesque vistas. He turns off the main road onto a gravel path lined by towering oaks, their leaves fluttering in the gentle breeze.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my heart skipping with anticipation.

“Just wait,” he says.

We come to a stop before a towering wrought-iron gate, intricate patterns creeping over the metalwork. Beyond it, nestled amidst meticulously landscaped grounds, stands a house so grand it steals my breath away. A small palace or a stately mansion — it could be either — with its elegant architecture and windows winking in the

sunlight.

“Jakob...” I start, my eyes wide, taking in the splendor before us.

“Wait here,” he says, leaning over to kiss my forehead before stepping out of the car.

I watch as he strides toward the “For Sale” sign planted in the ground, his movements filled with purpose. With a swift tug, he uproots it, holding it aloft for a moment before setting it aside. My hands fly to my mouth as realization dawns.

“Welcome home, Courtney,” he calls out, his arms opening wide as he turns back to me. “I bought it for us — our family.”

Tears glimmer in my eyes, a mix of joy and disbelief tangling in my chest. I step out of the car, legs shaky with emotion, and rush into his waiting embrace. His arms fold around me, strong and sure, and I melt into him, my heart soaring.

“Jakob, this... How? It’s incredible!” I marvel, pulling back just enough to meet his gaze. The pride and love shining there are palpable.

“Everything for you and our baby,” he murmurs, his lips finding mine in a kiss that speaks of promises and shared dreams.

And then, suddenly, I feel it — a flutter, light and unexpected, in my lower belly. Our baby’s first movement, a tiny but profound declaration of life joining in our celebration.

“Jakob,” I breathe out, breaking the kiss, wonder etched into every syllable. “The baby just moved.”

His eyes widen, mirroring my awe, and his hand gently covers mine, hoping to catch

the next flutter. We stand here, united, basking in the beauty of our future home and the new life we're about to welcome into the world.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER: COURTNEY

A song slips easily from my lips as I move about, stepping my way among the flowers that decorate our front yard. I bend down, my hands cradling a cluster of daisies, their petals as bright as the future unfolding before us.

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It's been two years since Jakob and I settled into this house, our haven nestled amongst Bergovia's rolling hills. We've let life unfurl at its own pace, savoring each moment like the slow bloom of spring. Now, with Reya toddling around, her laughter the sweetest melody, things almost feel complete.

Almost, because there is one thing left to do.

"Momma!" Reya's tiny voice pulls me from my reverie.

Her chubby hand points excitedly at a butterfly flitting from one flower to another. Her wonder is infectious, and I smile, scooping her into my arms to spin her around, her giggles filling the air.

"Today's a special day, little one," I smile, pressing a kiss to her rosy cheek.

The significance of the day makes it feel like my chest is full of glitter — it's mine and Jakob's wedding day, the beginning of yet another chapter in our amazing life.

"Dada?" she asks, eyes wide with innocence and curiosity.

"Yes, sweetheart. Mommy and Daddy are getting married today."

I set her down gently, watching as she darts off towards the house, her small feet navigating the familiar path. My mom meets her at the door, where she scoops Reya up and carries her inside.

The sound of footsteps alerts me to someone else's presence, and I turn to see Jakob's

father approaching, his gait dignified, an unspoken gravity in his stride. What is he doing here so early? And on the wedding day, at that?

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” I greet him, hoping I don’t sound as perturbed as I’m feeling.

“Courtney,” he nods, his eyes finding mine with an intensity that suggests more than just pleasantries are to be exchanged. “May I speak with Jakob?”

“Of course.” I call for Jakob, who emerges from the house, his hair tousled, the hint of a beard framing his strong jaw — a man who has grown into his role as a father with a grace that humbles me.

“Jakob.” His father looks between the two of us and then nods. “I understand that today is a special day, so I will not take up an unnecessary amount of your time. However, I have made an important decision and wished to tell you it in person. After considerable thought, you are the one I choose to inherit the throne.”

I watch as myriad emotions flicker across Jakob’s face — surprise, honor, a touch of trepidation. His gaze meets mine, searching for reassurance. My heart swells with pride, and an unspoken promise passes between us — we’re in this together, as we’ve always been.

He will be king, and I will be queen — a role I never could have imagined for myself growing up in Texas, but that I will embrace with the same dedication I have embraced partnership and motherhood.

“Father.” Jakob stands taller, proud, but I can see the sheen in his eyes. “I am honored.”

“Congratulations,” I say, stepping closer to wrap my arm around Jakob.

His father nods, a rare smile gracing his lips, before he turns and walks away, leaving us to absorb the magnitude of his words.

“Can you believe it?” Jakob murmurs, his eyes alight with the reflection of new possibilities.

“Believe it? I’m ecstatic for you — for us. This is your destiny, Jakob.”

He leans down, capturing my lips in a kiss that holds the promise of a thousand tomorrows, and I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that this is exactly where we are meant to be.

“I should go,” Jakob says. “You must get ready, and is it not bad luck for me to see you in your dress?”

“Hmm. Something like that.” I snuggle my face into his neck, too distracted by his scent and the feel of being close to him to care about much else.

“See you at the altar,” he says.

“Can’t wait,” I reply, only the promise of what’s to come giving me the strength to step out of his embrace.

I head inside and up the staircase. Ginny and Mimi, my closest friends and chosen sisters, await me in the room that’s been transformed into bridal headquarters. Their excited chatter fills the space as they help each other with their makeup. The sight of them, here for me on this momentous day, warms my heart.

“Look at you, Courtney! You’re already glowing,” Ginny exclaims, her eyes sparkling with tears of joy.

“Today’s the day,” Mimi adds, her voice tender. “Everything will be perfect.”

“Thanks to you two,” I say, my gratitude deep and genuine. If Ginny had never encouraged me to go to Bergovia, if Mimi hadn’t helped piece my heart back together on that awful day, then I don’t know where I would be right now.

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“Aww. Your mom sent me some pictures.” Ginny holds up her phone to display images of Reya adorned in her tiny flower-girl dress. “She’s having the time of her life. She looks so excited.”

“Good,” I breathe out, enchanted by the sight of my little girl looking every bit the angel.

With my dress now hugging my frame, my bridesmaids add the finishing touches — a veil pinned gently into my hair, the light brush of blush across my cheeks, and a swipe of gloss to highlight my lips. It feels so surreal, looking into the mirror and seeing myself as a bride.

“Ready?” Mimi asks, her hand resting on the doorknob.

“More than ever,” I answer, my resolve firm.

We step outside, the clean air greeting us with the freshness of new beginnings. The car waits for us at the head of the driveway, and we clamber into the back of it, a little wedding party composed of lace, flowers, and giggles.

The palace is swarmed today, photographers, journalists, and onlookers hoping to catch a glimpse of the wedding. As the driver slows at the front gate, I roll down my window and wave to everyone. Excited well-wishes are thrown my way, and my chest swells with pride. This is my land. My people.

Everything seems to happen very quickly after that. We park close to the palace gardens, and my bridesmaids help me carry my train along the walkway. The gardens

come into view, a verdant oasis meticulously cared for, not unlike the garden at our own home where I've spent hours nurturing life from the soil.

But today, the palace gardens are more than just a collection of flora — they are the canvas for our future.

I pause at the entrance, taking in the beauty that surrounds me. This is where Jakob and I will pledge our lives to each other, under the open sky, amidst the splendor of nature and in the middle of a country that always, even when I didn't know it, held a piece of my heart and soul.

"Absolutely breathtaking," I sigh, my heart full.

"Like something out of a fairy tale," Ginny comments, her voice soft with awe.

"Your fairy tale, Courtney," Mimi reminds me, linking her arm with mine.

Together, we step into the garden, the murmurs of assembled guests reaching my ears like a gentle wave. It's here, among the gentle rustle of leaves and the quiet symphony of nature, that I'll become Jakob's wife, solidifying a bond that feels as ancient as the earth beneath our feet and as fresh as the blooms that witness our union.

I take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and move forward, ready to embrace the destiny that unfolded the moment I booked that flight to Bergovia two years ago — the impulsive act that led me to the life I was always meant to live.

And there he is, already waiting for me, like this simple act is exactly what he was created for. Jakob stands at the altar, a vision of poise and quiet strength. His eyes, brimming with emotion, lock onto mine as I make the final steps down the aisle lined with an abundance of wildflowers. The delicate lace of my dress brushes against the

petals, a soft caress that echoes the fluttering in my heart.

“Courage,” I murmur to myself, though it’s not fear that courses through me — it’s pure, unbridled joy.

I reach Jakob, and the warmth of his hand envelops mine, a silent promise that’s more powerful than any words could ever be.

The ceremony unfolds like the most tender of melodies, each vow a note strung perfectly to the next. Our voices tremble with the strength of the love we profess, and when Jakob slips the ring onto my finger — a perfect fit — I know that this is the truest form of destiny.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Our lips meet, and there’s a cheer from the crowd — a sea of familiar faces all sharing in our bliss. When we part, it’s only to see the reflection of our happiness mirrored back at us, in the tears and smiles of those we hold dear. In the front row, my mom bounces Reya, who claps her hands in excitement, on her lap.

Jakob’s siblings are among the first to embrace us, their own paths to fulfillment shining in their eyes. Their pride is palpable — each one has carved out a niche where their passions and talents have flourished, yet they stand united in their support for Jakob.

“Brother, there’s no one better suited to lead,” Teddy says, clapping Jakob on the back with a broad smile.

“Absolutely,” agrees Christina. “Your heart is what will guide Bergovia to greatness.”

“Here, here!” choruses Oliver, the explorer, his adventurous spirit never dimming, even in the formality of this grand occasion.

With every word, every heartfelt congratulation, I feel like I might burst from joy. It’s not just a marriage that’s been celebrated today — it’s the binding of a family, a country, to the hope that Jakob represents.

We’re ushered forward, on to photos and cake and dances. Hugs and kisses. Speeches and gifts. Reya falls asleep halfway through the afternoon, exhausted from all of it, her two grandmothers fluttering over her like the little princess she is.

As twilight approaches and people lounge across the lawn, drinks in hand, I let out a contented sigh. Jakob’s hand finds mine, our fingers intertwining naturally, like the roots of the ancient oak under which we’ve just spoken our vows. The chatter of our guests fades into a gentle hum as I cast my gaze upwards, where the first stars are beginning to twinkle in the dusky sky.

“Can you believe it?” I whisper, not quite to Jakob, but to the evening itself, to the universe that spun me into this moment. “This is our life now.”

Two years ago, the impulsive click on a flight-booking app felt like tossing a pebble into an ocean — small, inconsequential. But now, here in Bergovia, with my heart full and my world expanded in ways I’d never imagined, I realize that pebble caused ripples that have shaped my very existence.

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Jakob squeezes my hand, bringing me back to the celebration around us. He doesn't need to hear my words to understand; his cerulean eyes mirror my thoughts, reflecting a shared history that is both incredibly brief and as deep as time itself.

"Your grandmother would have loved to see this," he says softly.

I nod, feeling a swell of emotion rise within my chest. My grandmother, who lived multiple lifetimes in one and who taught me to work hard and love even harder, would indeed be brimming with joy. In my mind's eye, I see her smiling down at us, her spirit woven into the tapestry of stars above.

"Thank you, Grandma," I breathe out, the words a silent prayer of gratitude. For her heart, her courage, and the values she instilled in me.

In the embrace of the night, surrounded by new family and old friends, by the love of my life and the daughter who has become the center of our universe, I am exactly where I am meant to be. A heartbeat in a country that pulses with history and promise, a page in a story that is only just beginning.

"Let's make her proud," I say to Jakob, my eyes meeting his with a conviction that flows from my very soul.

"We will," he promises.

In the echo of those words, I feel the legacy of my grandmother's spirit intertwine with the future of Bergovia — a future I leaped towards on a whim, a future that now holds everything precious to me.

“Come on, my queen,” Jakob teases, tugging me gently toward the festivities awaiting our return, the laughter and music beckoning us back to celebrate.

“Lead the way, my king,” I reply.

Our smiles are as bright as the constellations above, my heart soaring with a joy that knows no bounds. Together, we step forward, hand in hand, into the rest of our lives.

The End