



# Sweet on the Royal Guard

**Author:** Ana Ashley

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Hiding in a foreign country was the perfect plan. Until he waltzes onto my property. Naked.

Tall and blond with thighs that could crush a walnut, it's no wonder I give in minutes after letting Zeke into my place. To help him out, of course. Did I mention he's naked?

Im intrigued by the royal guard but thats not the reason I keep letting him in over and over again.

Zeke's a breath of fresh air I didn't know I needed, and for the first time in my life, I can be myself.

Unfortunately, Zeke isn't the only one knocking at my door. When my secret location is broadcast by the world's media, do I hide again? Or do I stay and fight for a life with him?

Sweet on the Royal Guard is a standalone short story that will have you craving apple and cinnamon donuts and wondering if sexy men really do fall out of the sky if you wish hard enough.

**Total Pages (Source):** 7

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

BENEDICT

A bare ass.

Let me rephrase. A fine bare ass is not the usual sight I get to admire when I look out the kitchen window into my backyard.

Especially when said fine bare ass leads to strong thighs that look like they'd cut off the circulation to your brain if you were lucky enough to get that close, not to mention the sculpted calves you'd happily run your tongue over.

Over the months that I've lived in the small cottage that shares a wall with the Lydovia Royal Palace gardens, I've spent hours admiring the varied creatures that visit my side of the wall. Birds, squirrels, butterflies, even a mouse or two, but this particular specimen is a first.

Mr. Bare Ass moves around the yard, seemingly unworried that someone might take offense to his lack of attire. Or the fact he's in someone else's backyard, for that matter.

He turns around, and I'm unfortunately spared a full-on view of his junk by the box of donuts in his hands.

My mouth hangs open as I watch the surreal scene unfold. The beautiful stranger, seemingly oblivious to his state of undress, plops down on my garden bench, opens the box, pulls out a donut, and stuffs it into his mouth...whole.

My dick reacts to the sight because, at this stage, my brain still hasn't caught up to the fact there's a naked stranger in my yard, which is not normal.

He runs his tongue over his plump pink lips covered in white powdered sugar. Said sugar also falls across his smooth, sculpted chest.

Is this what having a stroke at forty-five feels like?

He wipes the powder off his chest and takes another donut from the box. He plops that one in his mouth with an indulgent smile, and that's it, my dick goes all the way hard.

I groan. It's been way too long since I've had any kind of sex.

Is this an offering from the powers above? Or a tease more like.

Thoughts of the reason for my exile of sorts to a foreign country intrude on my mind, and I come crashing down like someone's dropped a bucket of icy water on my head.

I should probably do something. Call the authorities, or at least let the guy know he's on someone else's property. But a traitorous spark of curiosity flares within me.

Before I decide what to do, the guy closes the box and stands. With a carefree smile, he walks up to the back door and knocks.

I freeze, torn between self-preservation and an inexplicable urge to see how this bizarre situation plays out.

Against my better judgment, I crack open the door. There he stands, all tanned skin and an easy grin, holding out a donut like a naked peace offering.

“Hiya, neighbor! Sorry for the impromptu visit. I’m Zeke. Mind if I borrow some clothes? I seem to have misplaced mine during a rather ill-advised dare involving streaking for donuts.”

I blink at him, momentarily struck dumb by his casual demeanor. “I...you...what?”

Zeke’s grin widens. “Long story short: never challenge a group of bored royal guards to a game of Truth or Dare. Especially when there’s a nearby bakery and a conveniently placed pond involved.

” He waggles the donut enticingly. “Apple cinnamon. Want one? I promise they’re worth the calories.

Not that you need to worry about that.” His eyes roam my body from head to toe, and I hope he doesn’t notice the bulge in my pants.

A reluctant chuckle escapes me. “I think I’ll pass on the baked goods, thanks. Would you like to come inside?”

“I usually know at least a guy’s first name before I come anywhere near inside,” he teases. “I told you mine. What’s yours?”

He follows me, looking around the small kitchen.

“I’m Benedict,” I say, holding out my hand.

He takes it, but instead of shaking, he holds my hand and my gaze captive.

“That’s quite a serious name. Almost stuffy. It doesn’t suit you.”

I shrug. “It’s the only one I have.”

His lips quirk in a smile. “I’m sure I could find you a better one, Benedict,” he says like he’s trying the name out. He turns his nose up a little, which makes me laugh. “What brings you to Lydovia?”

I sit at the kitchen table, unsure how to respond. I gesture for him to join me, but he places the donut box on the table and stands in front of the sink, looking out the window.

Can he tell I was watching him from there?

It’s been a long time since I’ve had a real conversation with anyone, and having it with a naked man I’ve never met before is unsettling. “I needed a change,” I finally say. “Some peace and quiet.”

“I want to say I’m sorry for crashing into your peace, Benny. But I’m really not.” He turns around to face me, and my eyes drift to his beautiful long cock, heavy and thickening against his thigh.

“You like what you see, Benji?”

I meet his eyes and my mouth goes dry when his gaze lands on my lap. The outline of my erection is unmistakable. I’m so turned on by his carefree, come-get-me attitude that I’m beyond caring.

“You were watching me, weren’t you?”

The air around us crackles as I nod.

I can’t tear my eyes away from Zeke’s face as he leans in, his lips brushing against mine. It’s gentle at first, a question more than a demand. I answer by deepening the kiss, my hand sliding to the nape of his neck.

When we break apart, Zeke's eyes are dark with desire. "I want to taste you."

My heart races as Zeke slides to his knees, his hands running up my thighs. I can barely breathe as he unzips my pants, freeing my cock.

"Fuck," I gasp as Zeke's warm mouth envelops me. His tongue swirls around the head, teasing and exploring. I thread my fingers through his light-blond hair, fighting the urge to thrust.

Zeke takes me deeper, his hands gripping my hips. The wet heat of his mouth is incredible, sending waves of pleasure through my body. I'm lost in the sensation, all thoughts of propriety forgotten.

"Zeke, I'm close," I warn, tugging gently at his hair. But he doesn't pull away, instead redoubling his efforts. The tension builds, and with a strangled cry, I come deep inside his mouth.

Zeke grins up at me as I catch my breath, looking thoroughly debauched and utterly pleased with himself. "Next time," he says, voice husky, "I want that gorgeous cock in my ass."

I laugh, a mix of embarrassment and arousal warming my cheeks. "You think there's going to be a next time?"

He points at his cock. "You owe me one. I'll come back to collect."

Framed by a trimmed thatch of blond hair, his cock is thick, long, and hard. The perfect trifecta.

It's not that I don't want a repeat of what just happened or that I wouldn't kill to be inside him, but I'm not going to waste an opportunity when it presents itself.

“I would have taken you for an instant gratification kind of guy,” I say, maneuvering us so Zeke is the one sitting on my chair while I kneel before him. I run my hands over the thighs I admired from afar. His muscles contract under my touch and his breath hitches.

“I am, Benji.”

When my eyes meet his, I see a different Zeke. One who’s craving my touch and needs to be taken care of. This is the most powerful I’ve felt with anyone, and it’s heady.

I lower my mouth to his cock and suck the purple mushroom head.

“Fuck,” he gasps.

I wrap my hands around his thighs so the only part of my body touching his cock is my mouth. My experience with men is limited for a reason, but it only took me a single experience in my twenties to discover I have my own talents. No gag reflex.

Zeke’s muscles strain and his legs shake the more I suck. Relaxing my throat, I slowly take him in until my nose touches the hair at the base of his cock. I feel his balls draw up under my chin.

“Jesus, fucking...argh, Benny, you’re killing me.”

I chuckle, pulling out just a tad so I can swallow his precum and the spit building in my mouth. He runs his hands over my hair, and I look up.

His eyes were a light blue before but are now as dark as mine. His expression is filled with awe.

I pull off with a pop. “Are you going to feed me your cum, Zeke?”

He bites his lower lip and lets his head fall backward. “Fuck yeah, Benedict. I need it.”

The fact he’s stopped with the ridiculous nicknames tells me he’s too lost in lust to try to be funny. I don’t know why, but I love that.

“Hold my head down, Zeke,” I say. “Fuck my mouth.”

Before he can answer, I lower my mouth back to his cock.

When his hand lands on my hair, I suck and bob my head on his cock.

For a minute or so, I lose myself in the pleasure of giving pleasure.

My dick rallies for a second round, which isn’t something I’ve experienced before because when you keep secrets, you get used to walking away after the first orgasm.

A second is a luxury I’ve never allowed myself to have.

Until now.

Zeke pushes my head down at the same time his hips roll up. It takes me by surprise, so I almost choke a little, but instead of pulling off, I keep going. My cock is harder than it was before, even when it was in Zeke’s mouth, so I give it a few pulls to take the edge off.

“Oh fuck, you’re going to come again. That’s so hot,” he says.

I double up on my efforts to draw his orgasm as I stroke myself.



It's hard to say what comes first, my second orgasm or Zeke spilling his cum into my throat, but I take it all. Even as my knees ache and my body wants to melt to the floor, I suck him until he's dry and his thighs shake with aftershocks.

Zeke pulls me onto his lap and kisses me like he's looking for remnants of his release in my mouth.

"That was so fucking hot, Benny."

"Oh yeah?" A weird sense of pride fills my chest.

"Definitely in the top ten."

I smile, wanting to ask where in the top ten I rank and if there will be an opportunity to improve my score in the future, but I refrain. As insanely hot as this encounter was, I'm sure I won't see Zeke again. A guy like him is bound to have more men than he can shake a stick at chasing after him.

"How about those clothes?" he asks.

I stand and go to my room. I only packed a single suitcase of clothes when I came to Lydovia, so I haven't got much, but I can spare a pair of joggers and a T-shirt.

They're way too small for him. His muscles strain the shirt and the outline of his soft cock shows through the joggers.

"You're staring, Ben-Ben."

I laugh. "Get out of my house, Zeke," I say with far less meaning than I should.

He walks to the door and then turns around.

“I’ll make sure to bring these back.”

Zeke kisses me, and then he’s gone.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

ZEKE

I scan the crowd, my eyes darting from face to face as I stand at attention. The sea of people swells before me.

It brings me joy to see the Lydovia Royal family is an integral part of our culture, especially considering Prince Charlie's American roots.

It truly shows what my nation is made of and makes me happy and proud to be a Lydovian and a royal guard. It's all I've ever wanted to be, and I love it.

But even as I focus on my duty, thoughts of Benedict keep creeping in.

"Hey, Zeke." Luca's voice crackles through my earpiece. "Are you gonna spill the beans on how you managed to get out of the palace undetected while wearing only your birthday suit the other day?"

I feel heat rising to my cheeks but keep my expression neutral. "Eyes on the crowd, Luca," I mutter. "We've got a job to do."

"Oh, come on, you can multitask. Spill the details already!"

I roll my eyes, grateful Luca can't see my face or eyes beneath the dark shades. "There's nothing to spill. Now drop it."

But even as I say the words, thoughts of Benedict flood my mind—his shy smile, the softness of his hair, the warmth of his body pressed against mine. I shake my head

slightly, trying to clear the images.

Focus, Zeke. Prince Charlie's safety depends on you doing your job.

I redouble my efforts, scanning faces with laser-like intensity. My training kicks in as I note potential security risks, catalog suspicious behavior, and map out evacuation routes. Yet Benedict lingers at the edges of my thoughts like a persistent itch I can't quite scratch.

What is wrong with me? I'm never distracted like this while on duty. But then again, I've never met anyone quite like Benedict.

I don't know why he's gotten under my skin in a way no one ever has. Maybe it's the vulnerability I saw in his eyes, his quiet strength, the way he looked at me like I was someone worth knowing—it's intoxicating. For the first time in my life, I feel nervous around someone, uncertain of myself.

"I saw him get in his car wearing joggers and a T-shirt that were way too small to be his," Gabriel says, coming through the earpiece and joining the "annoy Zeke until he buys us donuts" party.

"I'm not apologizing for being resourceful," I say.

I want to see Benedict again. To talk to him, make him laugh, hold him close. The depth of my feelings scares me because I shouldn't feel like this about someone I only met once and know nothing about, aside from his first name and what he looks and sounds like when he comes.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to refocus on the crowd. I need to be present, alert, ready for anything.

“Resourceful? I bet he knocked on someone’s door and ended up scoring a hookup,” Luca said.

Gabriel’s deep laughter comes through my ears. “You’ve seen him in the shower. Wouldn’t you take a bite if he turned up at your doorstep?”

“The only thing I’m interested in biting is Ryan’s...anything. Just Ryan.”

Gabriel’s groan makes me chuckle. “I don’t want to think of you and my boss together. Thank you very much.”

I ignore their chatter. I trust the team and know that while they’re teasing me, their eyes are on the prince and the crowd around us. The talk is just a way to decompress and keep us all connected.

The crowd swells around me, a pulsing mass of excitement and patriotic fervor.

Flags wave, children squeal, and the scents of grilled sausages and sweet pastries waft through the air.

It’s sensory overload, but I’m trained for this.

I scan faces, track movements, my mind cataloging potential threats even as the festive atmosphere tries to lull me into complacency.

Then I see him.

My heart does a little somersault. Benedict’s here, leaning casually against a lamppost, a newspaper held loosely in his hands. He looks...different. Softer somehow, in a chunky sweater that makes me want to wrap my arms around him.

“Luca,” I say into my comm. “I need to check on something. Can you cover my section?”

There’s a pause, and then Luca’s voice crackles back. “Sure thing, Zeke. I’ve got you covered.”

My feet move before I’ve fully processed the decision. With each step, my nervousness grows. What if he doesn’t want to see me? What if our encounter was just a fleeting moment, already forgotten?

I’m practically on top of him when he looks up, his eyes meeting mine, and a slow smile spreads across his face. My breath catches.

“Well, well,” he says as I approach, his gaze sweeping over my uniform. “Look who cleans up nice. I almost didn’t recognize you without the grass stains.”

I grin, relief and attraction making me feel a bit giddy. I remove my shades. “You like a man in uniform. Good to know.”

Benedict’s eyebrows shoot up, and he lets out a low chuckle that sends a shiver down my spine. “Speaking of clothes,” he says, lowering his voice. “I seem to be missing a pair of joggers and a T-shirt. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

Heat creeps up my neck, but I manage to keep my voice steady. “I might have some intel on that. Top secret though. Classified information.”

“Oh?” Benedict’s eyes sparkle with mischief. “And what would it take to declassify that information, Officer...?”

“Ivanov,” I supply, suddenly hyperaware of how close we’re standing. “Royal Guard

Ezekiel Ivanov. And as for declassification, well...that might require some high-level negotiations.”

I’m torn between professional duty and the magnetic pull I feel toward Benedict. My eyes dart around, scanning for my team, before landing back on his face.

His hand touches mine, lighter than a feather, as he grabs my shades and puts them on his face. Damn, they look good on him.

“Consider negotiations open.”

I swallow hard, caught off guard by his boldness.

He raises a hand holding a small bag, reaches inside it with his other hand, and takes out an apple cinnamon donut. I don’t need to see his eyes to know they’re on me as he takes a bite of the donut.

The way he groans when he tastes the donut goes straight to my dick. “I had to see for myself what the fuss was all about.”

As he walks away, every bone in my body wants to chase after him. Instead, I watch him disappear into the crowd.

“Did you see that, guys?” Luca asks into comms.

My attention is pulled back to work as I look for the threat, but when I spot Luca watching me from his station a few meters away from the prince, I try to keep my face as expressionless as possible.

“Saw it,” Gabriel replies. “That’s the owner of the joggers and T-shirt. I’m betting a whole box of donuts on it.”

I ignore them as I resume my post. These guys are my dudes. I will tell them about Benedict...when I know exactly what's happening. For now, I'm feeling protective of him and whatever this thing between us is.

One thing I do know. I'm returning his clothes soon—as in today.

\* \* \*

The sun's barely dipped below the horizon when I find myself standing outside Benedict's cottage, my heart doing backflips. I take a deep breath, steeling my nerves before rapping my knuckles against the sturdy wooden door.

A moment passes, then another. The door swings open just as I'm contemplating whether I should knock again or cut my losses. Benedict's eyes widen, surprise etched across his features.

"Zeke," he says, leaning casually against the doorframe. "What a surprise."

I flash my most charming grin, trying to mask the butterflies in my stomach. "I, uh, hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Benedict's lips quirk into a smile. "Not at all. Come in," he says, stepping aside. "I see you've mastered the art of using the front door this time."

I chuckle as I step inside, the warmth of his cottage enveloping me. "What can I say? I'm a fast learner."

Once inside, I turn to face him, suddenly hyperaware of how close we are. "I came to return your clothes," I blurt out, my voice a touch too loud in the quiet space.

Benedict's eyes dance with amusement. "Oh? Usually, when people return borrowed



clothes, they don't come wearing them."

I glance down at myself. Heat creeps up my neck as I shrug. "My bad."

Grabbing the hem of the T-shirt, I pull it over my head. The cool air hits my skin, and I'm acutely aware of Benedict's gaze.

As I start to push down the joggers, my cock, already half-hard, springs free. It's impossible to hide my arousal now, not that I want to. I knew exactly what I was doing when I came.

Benedict's eyes darken, his breath catching. He steps close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off his body. His hand reaches out, fingers brushing against mine.

"How will you get home without clothes?"

"I guess that's a future Zeke problem."

He runs his fingers up my arm and then back down. "Come with me," he says softly, tugging gently on my hand.

I follow without hesitation, my heart pounding so loudly I'm sure he can hear it as he leads me toward what I assume is his bedroom.

Is he really going along with this? Not many men have ridden the crazy train with me, but as Benedict's fingers intertwine with mine, all those thoughts fade.

The moment we enter the bedroom, his demeanor shifts. There's an intense, almost desperate look in his eyes that sends a shiver down my spine. Before I can fully process it, he's pushing me onto the bed, my back hitting the soft mattress with a gentle thud.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” Benedict breathes, his hands already working at the buttons of his shirt. I watch, mesmerized, as he strips, revealing more of his lean, toned body with each passing second.

He’s smaller than me, and some white hairs are mixed with the dark ones on his chest. I wonder how old he is, but it doesn’t matter to me, and clearly, it doesn’t matter to him either.

He climbs onto the bed, hovering over me, and suddenly, his lips are on mine. The kiss is deep, hungry, filled with an urgency that makes my toes curl. When he pulls back, his eyes search mine. “What are you really doing here, Zeke?”

I squirm under his touch, his fingers trailing fire across my skin. “I...I needed to see you,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you, Benji.”

A slow, sensual smile spreads across his face.

“Funny, I’ve been thinking about you all day too.

Seeing you in your uniform...” He leans in, his breath hot against my ear.

“Your muscles bulging, stretching that shirt. The way those pants hugged your ass and thighs. God, Zeke, you have no idea what you do to me.”

I can’t help the chuckle that escapes me, even as desire pools in my belly. “Sounds like you’ve given me a lot of thought.”

Benedict’s eyes glint mischievously. “Oh, you have no idea,” he purrs, and then he moves down my body, his lips leaving a trail of kisses in their wake.

When he takes my cock into his mouth, I arch off the bed, a gasp tearing from my throat. “Fuck, Ben-Ben,” I moan, my fingers tangling in his hair.

He works my cock with his mouth, driving me to the edge of madness. Then, just when I think I can’t take anymore, he pulls away. I whimper at the loss, but then he’s lifting my legs, pushing them back.

The first swipe of his tongue against my hole has me seeing stars. “Oh god,” I pant. “Benedict, please... I need you to fuck me.”

He looks up at me, his eyes dark with desire. “Now that’s what I was looking for,” he says, reaching for the bedside table.

“What’s that?”

As he positions himself between my legs, I’m filled with anticipation, my body thrumming with need. This is it, I think. This is everything I’ve been wanting, everything my body has been craving since I knocked on Benedict’s back door, before I knew he’d be the one on the other side.

“My name, Ezekiel,” he says, applying lube to my hole and gently pushing a finger inside. “When you call me by my name is when I know you’re ready.” He adds a finger. “When you switch off that busy brain of yours that doesn’t seem to take life that seriously, that’s when I know you’re ready.”

Benedict rolls a condom down his cock and aligns it with my hole, and as he starts to push inside me, I know he’s right. I’ve never been more ready for someone than I am for him.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

### BENEDICT

I can't get enough of Zeke. His body moves with mine in perfect synchronization as I thrust into him, our skin slick with sweat. Every sensation is electric—the heat of his skin, the tightness enveloping me, the little gasps and moans escaping his lips.

“God, Benedict,” Zeke groans, his fingers digging into my back. “Don't stop.”

I have no intention of stopping. I've wanted this since I saw Zeke naked in my yard and dreamed of having him beneath me. Now that it's finally happening, it's even better than I imagined.

I angle my hips, hitting the spot that makes Zeke cry out in pleasure. His back arches off the bed as I pick up the pace, driving into him with renewed urgency. The headboard thumps against the wall in a steady rhythm.

“Is this what you came for?” I ask breathlessly.

Zeke's eyes flutter open, heavy-lidded with desire. A grin tugs at his lips. “You know it is. I couldn't stay away if I tried.”

His words send a thrill through me. I capture his mouth in a searing kiss, swallowing his moans as I continue to move inside him.

“I don't know what it is about you, Benedict,” Zeke pants when we break apart. “I've never met anyone like you.”

I laugh, though it comes out more like a gasp. “Right back at you.”

God, how does he manage to be so effortlessly charming even now? It’s infuriating and endearing all at once. I love how Zeke can make me laugh, even in such an intimate moment.

I’m close now, teetering on the edge. Zeke must sense it because he wraps his legs tighter around my waist, urging me deeper.

“Come on, Benedict,” he whispers. “Let go. I’ve got you.”

His words undo me completely. I bury my face in his neck as the pleasure crests, crying out his name as I find my release.

The waves of ecstasy wash over me, leaving me trembling and breathless. As I come down from the high, I’m acutely aware of Zeke’s warmth beneath me, his hands tracing soothing patterns on my back.

I pull out gently, then lean in to press a tender kiss to Zeke’s lips. When I pull back, I’m struck by the affection in his eyes.

“That was...” I trail off, searching for words.

“Yeah,” Zeke agrees, a soft smile playing on his lips. “It really was.”

I roll to the side, propping myself on one elbow to look at him. “You didn’t come.”

He smiles and opens his mouth to speak, but I place a finger over his lips to stop him.

“I want you to fuck me, Zeke.”

Zeke's eyebrows shoot up, his blue eyes widening in surprise. "Fuck, Benji. Do you really want that?"

I nod, feeling a blush creep up my neck. "Yeah, if you're up for it."

A slow grin spreads across Zeke's face. "If I'm up for it? Benny, I think you just made all my dreams come true."

I laugh at his enthusiasm.

Zeke chuckles, already moving to position himself between my legs. "This is a big moment for me. I might need to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming."

His playful words ease any lingering nervousness I might have felt. As Zeke begins to prepare me with gentle, exploring touches, I'm struck by how safe I feel with him. It's a new sensation, one I'm not used to in my typically guarded life.

"You good?" Zeke asks, his voice unexpectedly tender.

I nod, surprised by how much I want this. "Yeah, I'm good. More than good."

Zeke suits up, and then he enters me. I'm overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensation. It's been a while since I've done this, and the fullness is both strange and exhilarating.

"God, Benson," Zeke breathes, his forehead resting against mine. "You feel amazing."

I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer. "So do you," I say, meaning it more than I can express.

Zeke moves in and out of me with a desperation I feel to my core. He's so big. Stretching me so perfectly I know I'm going to feel it for days.

As his thrusts become more erratic, I wrap my legs tighter around his waist. I want him as deep as he can go.

"Fuck, Benedict. Can you come again?"

I shake my head, but when he changes his angle and his cock hits my prostate, I gasp.

"Jesus, Zeke. You're doing it."

"Hell yeah. Come with me, baby."

One. Two. Three thrusts and Zeke releases deep inside me. I clench around him and come for a second time.

"Fuck," I gasp as Zeke covers my body with his. He's big and heavy. Somehow, I don't feel stifled. I feel grounded. Cared for.

I need to be careful, or I'm going to fall for a younger guy. Something I promised myself I'd never do again.

We take a quick shower together. Zeke doesn't stop touching me throughout. Damn, if I were a few years younger, he would draw a third orgasm out of me.

The bathroom is filled with steam, the mirror foggy as we clean up in comfortable silence. I steal glances at Zeke, watching water droplets trace paths down his skin. There's a slight awkwardness now. The heat of the moment has faded, leaving us in this strange limbo.

I grab a towel, wrapping it around my waist. “So, um...” I start, then falter. Come on, Benedict. Use your words . “It’s getting late.”

Zeke nods, running a hand through his damp hair. “Yeah, I should probably head out.”

My heart sinks a little. Against my better judgment, I blurt out, “Or you could stay.”

Zeke’s eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance but probably missing by a mile. “If you want. No pressure.”

A slow smile spreads across Zeke’s face. “I’d love to stay.”

Relief washes over me, followed quickly by a wave of nerves. What am I doing? This isn’t like me at all. But as we make our way to the bedroom, I can’t bring myself to regret the invitation.

We settle into bed, and I turn to face Zeke. “Tell me something about yourself,” I say, stifling a yawn. “Something I don’t know.”

Zeke chuckles. “Well, I once won a hot-dog-eating contest in college. Not my proudest moment, but?—”

I try to focus on his words, but my eyelids are getting heavy. The last thing I remember is the warm rumble of Zeke’s voice and thinking how nice it feels to not be alone.

I jolt awake. The room is pitch black, and for a moment, I wonder if what happened last night was a product of my imagination. The result of being on my own for too



long. But the soreness in my ass and muscles is sufficient proof that Zeke is very real.

My hand reaches out, patting the empty space beside me.

“Zeke?” I whisper, my voice rough with sleep.

Silence.

A familiar ache settles in my chest. Of course he’s gone. What was I expecting? I sit up, running a hand through my hair.

I fumble for my phone, squinting at the harsh light of the screen. Two-seventeen a.m. Great. I swing my legs over the side of the bed, searching for my discarded underwear. Might as well get some water since sleep seems like a lost cause now.

A flicker of movement catches my eye as I shuffle toward the kitchen. I freeze, my heart leaping into my throat. Then I see him—Zeke, standing by the kitchen table, a glass of water in his hand.

“Oh,” I breathe, relief flooding through me. “You’re still here.”

Zeke turns, his smile visible even in the dim light. “Where else would I be?”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “I don’t know. I woke up, and you were gone, so I thought...”

“That I’d done a midnight runner?” Zeke sets down his glass, moving closer. “Not a chance. I just got thirsty.”

“Right.” I nod. “Of course. That makes sense.”

Zeke's eyes twinkle with amusement. "Were you worried?"

"Worried? Me? Nah," I scoff, but even I can hear the lack of conviction in my voice. "Okay, maybe a little. It's just... This isn't really my usual thing, you know?"

"What, having incredibly hot sex with a devastatingly handsome man?" Zeke grins, closing the distance between us.

I roll my eyes, but a smile tugs at my lips. "The staying over part, smartass."

"Ah." Zeke nods sagely. "Well, if it helps, it's not my usual thing either. But I'm glad I stayed."

His hand finds mine in the darkness. "Yeah," I whisper. "Me too."

Zeke's gaze drifts back to the table, curiosity sparking in his eyes. "What's all this?" he asks, gesturing to the scattered papers. "Looks important."

My heart skips a beat. I'd forgotten about those. "Oh, that?" I try to keep my voice casual, but there's a slight tremor I can't quite hide. "Just a project I'm working on. Nothing too exciting."

Zeke raises an eyebrow, his lips quirking into a playful smirk. "Now, Benjamin, if there's one thing I've learned about you tonight, it's that you're far from boring. I bet it's plenty exciting."

I laugh nervously, running a hand through my hair. "Trust me, it's not. Just some...personal stuff." I move toward the table, fighting the urge to gather up the papers and hide them away.

"Personal, huh?" Zeke's voice is gentle, but I can hear the curiosity lingering beneath

the surface. “Like a secret diary or something?”

“Not exactly,” I hedge, my mind racing. How do I explain this without revealing too much? “It’s more like...a work in progress. Something I’m not ready to share yet.”

Zeke nods slowly, his eyes searching my face. “I get it. We all need our secrets, right?”

I feel a rush of gratitude for his understanding, mixed with a twinge of guilt for being so evasive. “Right. Thanks for...you know, not pushing.”

“Hey, I’m just here for the incredibly hot sex, remember?” Zeke winks, breaking the tension. “Although I gotta say, the air of mystery is pretty intriguing.”

I laugh, the knot in my chest loosening slightly. “Oh yeah? Well, maybe someday I’ll let you in on the big secret. If you’re lucky.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Zeke grins, pulling me close. As his lips meet mine, I push thoughts of the papers and all they represent to the back of my mind. For now, at least, I can just be here, in this moment, with him.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

ZEKE

I squint at the sunlight streaming through unfamiliar curtains, momentarily disoriented. Then it all comes rushing back—Benedict, last night, the mind-blowing sex. I grin, stretching like a cat in his impossibly soft sheets.

Reality sets in as I check my phone. Shit. I'm gonna be late for work.

I bolt out of bed, searching frantically for my clothes. No luck. Then I spot a neatly folded stack on the dresser—Benedict's joggers and a T-shirt. He must have set them out for me. My heart does a little flip at the thoughtful gesture.

As I tug on the joggers, I remember they're a bit snug in certain areas. The T-shirt isn't much better, clinging to my chest and arms. I look like I'm cosplaying as Benedict's slightly buffer evil twin. But it'll have to do.

I find Benedict drinking coffee outside in the garden. On the same bench I took when I jumped the palace wall the day we met. He smiles as he sets the cup down.

“You were sleeping so soundly I didn't want to wake you. Have I made you late?”

I rush over and steal a coffee-flavored kiss.

“Not at all. It just means I can't have my way with you before I go.”

His eyes scan my body. “And you're wearing my clothes again. I guess I'll expect you to return them at some point.”

“You bet.” I give him another kiss and then dash out the door, jumping in my car. Thank fuck I’m close to the office and have a spare uniform in my locker. As I speed through the city streets, I can’t wipe the dopey grin off my face. Last night was...wow. Just wow.

I’m still floating on cloud nine when I walk into the security office. Big mistake.

“Well, well, well,” drawls Luca, leaning back in his chair with a shit-eating grin. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

I roll my eyes, heading for the coffee maker. “Morning to you too, asshole.”

Gabriel wolf-whistles. “Damn, Zeke. Those joggers leave nothing to the imagination.”

I pour my coffee, steadfastly ignoring them. But I can feel my cheeks heating.

“Is that...is that a hickey?” Ryan gasps in mock horror. “Our Zeke? Scandalous!”

I clap a hand to my neck, cursing internally. Benedict must have left his mark after all.

“All right, all right,” I grumble, facing my gleeful coworkers. “Get it all out of your systems. And quick because I gotta go change.”

They’re practically vibrating with glee. Luca clasps his hands together dramatically. “Our little boy is all grown up. Doing the walk of shame like a champ.”

“It’s not shameful if you’re not ashamed of it,” I shoot back, unable to keep the grin off my face.

That sets off a fresh round of catcalls and teasing. I take it all in stride, laughing along with them. This is what I love about this crew—we bust each other’s balls, but there’s real affection underneath.

“All right, you vultures. I don’t kiss and tell, so you can stop fishing for details.”

“Oh, come on!” Gabriel whines, perching on the edge of my desk. “You can’t leave us hanging like this. We need the gossip!”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “A gentleman never reveals his secrets. Besides, I’m sure you all have much more exciting things to focus on than my love life.”

Gabriel snorts.

“Nope. We love hearing about your love life. For inspiration, you know?” Ryan mutters, earning a playful shove from Luca.

I’m about to retort when Gabriel’s eyes light up with mischief. “Okay, Casanova. How about this—either you spill the juicy details or buy us all donuts. Your choice.”

The others perk up, nodding enthusiastically at the ultimatum. I pretend to consider it for a moment, tapping my chin thoughtfully. “Hmm, let me weigh my options. Betray the trust of a potential...whatever this is...or spend a few bucks on sugary goodness for my favorite coworkers?”

I stand, fishing my wallet out of Benedict’s joggers. “Donuts it is, you nosy bastards.”

A chorus of cheers erupts. As I head for the door, I call over my shoulder, “But don’t think this means you’re off the hook for mercilessly teasing me!”

I step out of the office into the warm morning sun, squinting as I adjust to the

brightness. The streets of Lydovia's capital city are bustling with the usual mid-day crowd, and I can't help but feel a little self-conscious in Benedict's borrowed clothes.

Donuts first. Change into uniform second.

The bell above the door jingles as I push it open, the cool air-conditioned interior a welcome respite from the heat outside. I'm making a beeline for the bakery section when I spot a familiar figure browsing the magazine rack.

My heart does a little flip as Benedict looks up, his eyes meeting mine. A slow smile spreads across his face, mirroring my own.

"Fancy meeting you here," I say, closing the distance between us.

Benedict's eyes twinkle with amusement. "Yes, this is a pleasant coincidence."

I notice how good he looks in a crisp button-down and slacks, a far cry from my borrowed athleisure. "Well, you certainly clean up nice," I tease, gesturing to my outfit. "Unlike some of us."

He laughs, the sound warming me from the inside out. "I don't know. I think my clothes suit you rather well. Though perhaps we should get you some that actually fit?"

I'm about to respond when I remember my mission. "As tempting as that sounds, I'm actually here on official donut duty. Apparently, my colleagues aren't satisfied with wild speculation about my whereabouts last night."

Benedict's eyebrows raise slightly. "Oh? And what have you told them?"

"Nothing," I assure him quickly. "Hence the donut bribe. I don't kiss and tell."

His expression softens, and I swear I see a hint of relief in his eyes. “I appreciate that, Zeke. Really.”

We stand there for a moment, just smiling at each other like idiots, and I can’t help but think how easy this feels. How right. But a small voice in the back of my head wonders how long it can last.

“Well,” I say finally, breaking the silence. “I should probably grab those donuts before my coworkers stage a mutiny.”

Benedict nods, still smiling. “Of course. Don’t let me keep you.”

As I turn toward the bakery section, I can’t shake the feeling that this chance encounter means something. That maybe, just maybe, there’s more to this than I initially thought.

“Hey, are you free this weekend?” I ask, stopping again to face him.

“Sure.”

“I’ll pick you up Saturday morning. There’s a place I want to show you.”

He nods and smiles.

I finally go. I have a donut debt to settle and questions to avoid answering.

I grab the nearest box of apple cinnamon donuts, trying not to fumble as I feel Benedict’s gaze on me. My heart’s doing that weird fluttery thing again, and I’m pretty sure it’s not from the sugar rush I’m anticipating.

As I push through the glass doors of the store, I can’t wipe the grin off my lips.



I pause on the sidewalk, watching Benedict through the window as he browses the aisles. There's something about the way he moves, graceful yet unassuming, that tugs at something deep inside me.

"Get it together, Ivanov," I mutter, shaking my head. "It's barely been a week."

But as I start the short walk back to the office, my mind keeps drifting to Benedict's teasing smile, the warmth in his eyes. It's been a long time since I've felt this...alive? Excited? Terrified?

A couple passing by gives me an odd look, probably wondering why the guy in ill-fitting clothes is talking to himself and grinning like an idiot. I can't bring myself to care.

As I wait at a crosswalk, I find myself wondering how long this can last when my last relationship crashed and burned. The light changes, and I step off the curb, my thoughts racing faster than my feet.

Maybe it doesn't have to last forever. Maybe it's enough to just enjoy it while it's here.

I reach the office, pausing with my hand on the door. Through the glass, I can see my colleagues eagerly awaiting their sugary bribes.

I fucking love them, and as I walk into the sounds of more ribbing, I try not to think of the man on the other side of the wall who could so easily own my heart.

\* \* \*

"So, are you finally going to tell me where we're going?" Benedict asks, his voice a mix of curiosity and amusement. "Or is this the part where you reveal you're actually

a serial killer, and I'm your next victim?"

I snort, turning onto a narrow dirt path that winds through towering pines. "If I was a serial killer, I wouldn't bring you here. It's too exposed. I'd have my way with you at your place and then erase all traces of my presence."

"Oh, so you've thought about this, have you?" he teases, eyes sparkling.

"Constantly," I deadpan, then wink at him. "But today, I promise there's no murder on the agenda. Just a little surprise."

The trees part, revealing a secluded clearing nestled against a bubbling stream. I park and hop out, gesturing for Benedict to wait. "Give me two seconds."

I pop the trunk, retrieving a wicker basket I'd hastily packed this morning. When I turn back, Benedict's standing there, eyes wide as he takes in the scene.

"Zeke," he breathes, "this is...wow."

I shrug, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious. "It's not much. I just thought you might like to escape the city for a bit."

Benedict's smile is soft and genuine. "It's perfect."

We make our way to a grassy spot by the water's edge, and I spread out a blanket. As Benedict settles down, I marvel at how he looks in this setting—the dappled sunlight playing across his features, the breeze ruffling his hair.

"I can't believe you planned all this," he says, helping me unpack the basket.

I laugh. "Planned might be a strong word. More like threw together in a panic this

morning hoping it wouldn't be a total disaster.”

Benedict's hand finds mine, squeezing gently. “Well, consider me thoroughly impressed by your panicked throwing-together skills.”

As I look into his eyes, I'm struck by how easy this feels. How right. And for a moment, I let myself believe that maybe, just maybe, this could be the start of something real.

I pop a grape into Benedict's mouth, savoring the way his lips brush against my fingertips. “So,” I say, aiming for casual but probably missing by a mile, “tell me more about the enigmatic Benedict Montgomery.”

He chews thoughtfully, his expression growing distant. “I'm...not sure how to answer that.”

“Hey, no pressure,” I assure him, though my curiosity is definitely piqued. “We could start with your favorite color if that's easier.”

Benedict's laugh is soft, almost sad. “It's not that. It's just... I'm on a break, I suppose. From being Benedict Montgomery.”

I raise an eyebrow. “A break from yourself? That's some next-level vacation planning.”

He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. “Sometimes it's necessary, you know? To step away, figure out who you are without all the...expectations.”

I lean in, cupping his face gently. “Well, for what it's worth,” I murmur, “I like Benedict Montgomery.”

I kiss him then, soft and slow, trying to pour everything I feel into that single point of contact. When we break apart, his eyes are shining.

“You barely know me,” he whispers.

“I’m working on changing that,” I reply with a grin. “Now, how about some cheese to go with those grapes?”

As we nibble and chat, I find myself falling deeper. Benedict’s quick wit, his quiet strength, the way he listens like every word matters—it’s intoxicating.

“So,” Benedict says eventually, “what about you? You must have some fascinating stories from your job.”

I grin, thinking of the chaos that is my daily life. “Oh, you have no idea. Just last week, I had to tackle a guy trying to sneak a ferret into a black-tie gala.”

Benedict’s eyes widen. “You’re joking.”

“I wish I was.” I laugh. “But seriously, I love it. Every day is different, you know? And I get to help people, make them feel safe.”

“That’s beautiful, Zeke,” Benedict says softly, and the sincerity in his voice makes my heart skip a beat.

I lean in, unable to resist kissing him again. This time, it’s deeper, more urgent. Benedict responds with equal fervor, and soon, we’re tangled together on the blanket, the picnic forgotten.

When we finally come up for air, Benedict’s cheeks are flushed, his hair adorably mussed. “Thank you,” he murmurs, “for bringing me out here. It’s... I didn’t realize

how much I needed this.”

I brush a strand of hair from his face, marveling at how lucky I am to be here, in this moment, with him. “Anytime,” I say, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

The drive back to the city is filled with comfortable silence and stolen glances. Benedict’s hand rests on my thigh, a warm weight that sends sparks through my entire body. As I pull up to his place, the sky’s turned a deep indigo, stars just starting to peek out.

I kill the engine and turn to Benedict. “Well, here we are.”

He doesn’t move to get out. Instead, he bites his lip, looking at me with those soulful brown eyes. “Zeke...would you like to stay over?”

My heart does a backflip. “I, uh?—”

“You don’t have to,” he adds quickly. “I just...I’m not ready for this day to end.”

A grin spreads across my face. “Neither am I,” I admit.

Benedict’s smile is like sunshine breaking through clouds. “Really?”

“Really.” I nod, already unbuckling my seatbelt. “Though fair warning, I might need to borrow more clothes.”

He laughs, a sound I’m quickly becoming addicted to. “I think we can manage that.”

As we walk to his front door, I realize I’m in deep. Like, drowning-but-don’t-want-to-be-rescued deep. Every logical part of my brain is screaming that this is moving too fast, that I barely know him, that there are a million reasons why this is a bad

idea.

But as Benedict fumbles with his keys, shooting me a shy smile over his shoulder, I know I'm already gone. I'm falling for him, hard and fast, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

BENEDICT

The words flow from my fingertips like water, filling the screen with the story that's been buzzing in my head all morning. I'm in the zone, that magical writerly trance where the real world fades and all that exists is the world in my head.

A heavy knock on the door nearly makes me jump out of my skin.

Grumbling, I push away from my desk and shuffle to the cottage door. When I swing it open, my irritation evaporates, replaced by a jolt of anxiety.

A royal guard stands ramrod straight on my doorstep.

"Mr. Montgomery?" His voice is clipped, all business.

"Yes?" My own voice comes out embarrassingly squeaky. I clear my throat. "Can I help you?"

"You need to come with me to the palace immediately."

My stomach does a backflip. "The palace? Why? What's going on?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss details."

Zeke. My heart rate kicks up a notch. "Is everything okay with Zeke? He works with you, right?"

The guard's gaze warms a little. "Zeke's fine. He's waiting for you."

"Um, okay. Just let me grab my things."

I duck back inside, snatching my wallet and phone. I follow the guard to a sleek black car with windows so tinted they're practically opaque.

Did someone find out about us? Is Zeke in trouble? Am I in trouble? Is this because he jumped the palace wall that one time?

I slide into the backseat, my palms sweaty. As we pull away from the cottage, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being whisked off to my doom.

"So," I venture, trying for casual. "Nice day for a drive to the palace, huh?"

The guard's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. His expression doesn't change. "We'll arrive shortly, Mr. Montgomery."

Right. Clearly not a chatty fellow.

I slump back against the leather seat, my thoughts spiraling. What have I gotten myself into?

The car glides to a stop, and I step out, my jaw dropping at the sight before me. The Lydovian Palace looms, a breathtaking confection of gleaming white stone and gilded spires that make my cottage look like a shoebox.

I can't see inside the walls from my yard, and I've never done one of the many guided palace tours. I never thought my first time inside would be with a royal guard on my heels.



“This way, Mr. Montgomery,” the guard says, leading me up marble steps.

I follow, acutely aware of my faded jeans and rumpled shirt. “I’m a little underdressed for the location,” I mutter.

The guard doesn’t respond, but I swear I see a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

We enter a grand foyer, and I’m surprised at how modern it looks, considering the architecture of the building.

Finally, we reach a set of glass doors. When we go through it, I see Zeke immediately.

He’s wearing his royal guard uniform and his light-blond hair has been combed into submission.

His posture is rigid, hands clasped behind his back. It’s jarring to see him like this—no easy smile, no warmth in those blue eyes.

“Thank you,” Zeke says to the guard, and then he turns to me. “Please follow me.”

I do as he asks and follow him into a conference room with a large oval glass table and a wall filled with screens.

We’re alone, but Zeke maintains his distance. My heart sinks. What’s going on?

“Benni—Benedict,” he says, his voice formal. “I’m sorry for making you come here all of a sudden.”

I swallow hard. “Zeke, what’s happening? You’re scaring me.”

He takes a step closer, and I see the struggle in his eyes—duty warring with the desire to comfort me. “I’m sorry,” he says softly. “Something happened, and I need you to help me.”

My mind races. “Help you? I’ll help you with anything. I hope you know that.”

He opens a folder on the table and takes out a newspaper.

His professional mask slips for a moment, revealing a flash of concern. “Benedict, who are you?”

He unfolds the paper, and my world implodes.

There, splashed across the front page in full color, is a photo of us. Kissing. In my backyard. It must have been taken the morning after he stayed over. The headline screams: REVEALED: The Secret Hideout of Benedict Montgomery!

I can’t breathe. The room spins as memories flood back—paparazzi, invasive questions, my privacy shattered. Everything I’d run from, everything I’d built my quiet life to avoid. It’s all crashing down around me.

“No,” I whisper, stumbling backward. “No, no, no...”

Zeke reaches for me, but I flinch away. “Benedict,” he says, his voice gentle. “Talk to me. Why is this photo such a big deal? I know it’s an invasion of privacy, but your reaction... There’s more to it, isn’t there?”

I want to explain, but panic claws at my throat. My thoughts are a jumbled mess of fear and flight instincts. Run. Hide. Protect yourself.

“I can’t,” I choke out. “I can’t do this again. The scrutiny, the judgment, my whole

life picked apart...”

Zeke’s brow furrows. “Again? Benedict, what do you mean?”

But I’m spiraling, my breath coming in short gasps. The walls feel like they’re closing in. I need air. I need to escape.

“I have to go,” I manage, backing toward the door. “I’m sorry, Zeke. I just... I can’t.”

I fumble for the doorknob, my vision blurring with unshed tears. As I wrench the door open, I hear Zeke call after me, his voice a mix of confusion and concern. “Benedict, wait! Please, let me help you!”

I pause, my hand on the doorknob, Zeke’s plea echoing in my ears. My heart pounds like it wants to break free from my chest, but something in his voice makes me hesitate. I turn back, meeting his concerned gaze, and suddenly, the words I’ve held back for so long come tumbling out.

“I come from media royalty.” I laugh at the words I’ve heard all my life because now I’m standing in an actual royal palace. “My dad owned one of the biggest news agencies in the US. I grew up in the public eye and learned early on that I was expected to behave a certain way.”

Zeke’s eyes widen, but he doesn’t interrupt. He just nods, encouraging me to continue.

“When I was fourteen, I was caught kissing a friend. The photo wasn’t that clear, but the tabloids, the paparazzi...

? They were relentless,” I say, sinking into a nearby chair.

“My dad sat me down and told me he would take care of it for me. I didn’t know what it meant.

It wasn’t until weeks later that I discovered my friend had moved to a different state.

I was so upset because he was my best friend, and I thought he liked me like I liked him.

He was going to be my first boyfriend. Of course my dad couldn’t have the image of his perfect family tarnished by a gay heir. ”

“Oh, Benedict, I’m so sorry that happened to you,” Zeke says, reaching over to hold my hand.

“It was fine. I also learned very quickly that there were many other guys like me in the social circles. We were all in the closet together, and as long as we could keep it that way, we could keep pretending to the rest of the world.”

“Why did you run to Lydovia?” Zeke asks.

I meet his eyes. Zeke plays the player so well, but I know he has much more depth than he lets show.

“My parents both died a few years ago. I didn’t come out then because old habits die hard, and I was in love with someone who was also not out.

Nothing would change for us, so I was happy to have what I could from him.

Someone we both knew orchestrated a stunt with the press and outed us.

I found out later that the guy I’d been seeing was also seeing the other guy. ”

“So you were outed and hurt all at the same time,” Zeke says.

“Yes.” I run a hand through my hair, feeling the familiar weight of those memories pressing down on me. “That’s why I came to Lydovia. To disappear. To just...be me. Without the world watching.”

Zeke moves closer, his presence oddly comforting. “Benedict, I had no idea. That must have been incredibly difficult.”

I nod, feeling a strange mix of relief and terror at having shared this part of myself. “It was. And now, with this photo... God, Zeke, I can feel it all coming back. The panic, the loss of control. I don’t know if I can face that again.”

As I speak, I feel the old urge to retreat, to return to the cottage, pack my bags, and run.

Zeke leans in, his blue eyes filled with understanding. “Thank you for sharing that with me. I can’t imagine how scary this must be for you.”

I laugh, but it comes out more like a sob. “Terrifying. But also...kind of liberating? I’ve never told anyone about what happened. You know, what wasn’t reported by the media. It feels... I don’t know. Real.”

“It is real,” Zeke says softly. “You’re real, Benedict. Not the image they created, not the headlines. Just you. And that’s more than enough.”

I feel a lump forming in my throat. “Even with all this baggage?”

Zeke smiles, reaching out to take my hand. “Especially with the baggage. It’s part of what makes you...you.”

For a moment, we just sit there, hands clasped, the weight of my revelation hanging between us. And for the first time since seeing that damned newspaper, I feel like maybe, just maybe, I'm not facing this alone.

Zeke's thumb traces gentle circles on my hand, and I focus on that small point of contact, anchoring myself in the present.

"Listen, Benedict," he says, his voice low and earnest. "You're not alone in this. Whatever happens, we'll face it together."

I want to believe him. God, I want to. But the cynic in me, the part that's been burned before, can't help but push back.

"You say that now, but..." I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze. "Zeke, this could cost you your job. Your entire career. I can't ask you to risk that for me."

His brow furrows, a flash of worry crossing his face. "I won't lie, the security breach is...concerning. You're in the media, and I'm a royal guard. There will be consequences." He takes a deep breath. "But what we have is special too."

What we have. The words echo in my mind, and I feel a surge of panic. It's too much, too fast. I can already see the headlines, the scrutiny, the loss of the quiet life I've built here in Lydovia. I'm not even meant to still be here, but the peace I feel in this country has fueled my creativity.

"I—I need some air," I stammer, pulling my hand away and standing abruptly. The room feels too small, too confining. "I'm sorry, I just...need a minute."

I don't wait for his response, just hurry to the balcony doors and step outside. The warm air hits my face, and it feels stifling.

“Benedict?” Zeke’s voice is soft, tentative. I hear his footsteps approaching, slow and deliberate. “I know this is overwhelming. But please, don’t shut me out.”

I close my eyes, willing the panic to subside. “I’m not...I’m not trying to,” I manage. “It’s just... It’s a reflex at this point.”

Zeke comes to stand beside me, close but not touching. I can feel the warmth radiating from him, and it takes everything in me not to lean into it.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he says gently. “Even if it’s messy or doesn’t make sense. I want to understand.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “You might regret asking that.” But I face him, forcing myself to meet those kind blue eyes. “I’m thinking... I’m thinking I’m terrified. I want to run and hide and never come out again. I’m not sure I’m strong enough to face all of this.”

Zeke nods, his expression serious. “Those are valid feelings, Benedict. But you don’t have to be strong alone. That’s what I’m trying to tell you—we can face this together.”

“But at what cost to you?” I counter, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. “Your career, your reputation... I’ve been through this before, Zeke. It’s not just headlines and gossip. It’s relentless. It changes everything.”

He reaches out slowly, giving me time to pull away. When I don’t, he takes my hand, his thumb tracing soothing circles on my skin. “Maybe it does,” he admits. “But some changes are worth it.”

I stare at our joined hands, torn between the urge to cling tighter and the instinct to pull away. “I don’t know if I can do this,” I whisper. “I need to be alone. I’m sorry.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

ZEKE

I stare at the mess of papers on my desk, but the words blur together like alphabet soup.

My mind keeps replaying the words in that article over and over: Royal Guard's Secret Tryst with American Media Heir .

God, could they have made it sound any sleazier?

I run a hand through my hair for the millionth time today.

I probably look like I stuck my finger in an electrical socket.

My stomach churns at the thought of Benedict packing his bags, fleeing back to the States because he's scared. But a week later, even though there haven't been any more headlines, I'm still not sure how to protect him.

I try to focus on the incident report in front of me, but the letters might as well be hieroglyphics. "Suspect was observed...blah, blah, blah." Come on, Zeke, get it together. You're on duty, for crying out loud .

The door suddenly swings open and I practically levitate out of my chair, knocking over my World's Okayest Guard mug in the process.

"Your Highness!" I stammer, hastily trying to look like I wasn't just having an existential crisis at my desk. "How may I assist you today?"



Prince Charlie stands in the doorway, one eyebrow raised as he takes in my disheveled state. Great. Nothing says competent royal protection like looking like you just rolled out of bed after a three-day bender.

“At ease, Zeke,” Charlie says, a hint of amusement in his voice. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Everything all right?”

I force what I hope is a convincing smile. “Of course, Your Highness. Just a bit tired from the night shift. What can I do for you?”

As Charlie enters the office, I frantically try to smooth down my hair and straighten my uniform. God, I probably have ink on my face or something equally mortifying. Why couldn’t it have been literally anyone else who walked in?

I clear my throat, desperately grasping for some semblance of professionalism. “Did you need an update on security protocols for the upcoming gala?”

Charlie settles into the chair across from my desk, studying me with those piercing green eyes that manage to see right through my bullshit. I resist the urge to squirm like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Actually,” he says slowly, “I wanted to discuss that rather interesting article in last week’s paper...”

Oh shit. This is it. I’m about to get fired or be exiled to some remote outpost guarding goats or something. I open my mouth, ready to launch into damage control mode, when Charlie holds up a hand.

“Relax, Zeke. You’re not in trouble. But I think we need to chat about how to handle this situation. For both your sake and Benedict’s.”

I sink back into my chair, relief washing over me even as anxiety still gnaws at my insides. Whatever happens next, at least I'm not getting the boot. Yet.

Charlie leans forward, his expression softening. "Look, I get it. I've been in your shoes, sort of. When I first started dating Kris, the media went absolutely crazy. American Commoner Steals Prince's Heart ! headlined every tabloid from here to Timbuktu."

I chuckle, remembering those headlines. "Yeah, they had a field day with that one. I think my favorite was Royal Romeo Finds His Yankee Julio ."

"Oh God, don't remind me." Charlie groans, but there's a twinkle in his eye. "Point is, I know what it's like to suddenly have your private life splashed across every newspaper and gossip site. It's overwhelming, to say the least."

His words hit home, and I feel a knot in my chest loosen slightly. "How did you handle it?" I ask, genuinely curious. "I mean, Benedict's already talking about leaving Lydovia. I can't blame him, but..." I trail off, not wanting to admit how much the thought of him leaving hurts.

Charlie nods, understanding written all over his face. "It's not easy, but here's the thing about being part of the royal circle—we've got some tricks up our sleeves when it comes to the press."

I lean forward, intrigued. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Charlie says, a mischievous grin spreading across his face, "let's just say we have ways of...redirecting attention. Creating more interesting stories for the vultures to chase after."

My mind races with possibilities. Could we really throw the press off Benedict's

scent? Give him the peace and privacy he deserves?

“So you’re saying we could make this whole thing...disappear?” I ask, hardly daring to hope.

Charlie winks. “Not disappear, exactly. But we can certainly make it old news very quickly. Trust me, by this time next week, no one will care about some media prince and a guard because they’ll be busy speculating about, oh, I don’t know, Prince Kristoff’s secret passion for competitive llama racing or something equally ridiculous.”

I burst out laughing, relief and excitement bubbling inside me. “Your husband is going to kill you for that one.”

“Eh, he owes me.” Charlie shrugs, still grinning. “The point is, Zeke, we can handle this. Benedict doesn’t have to leave. You two can have a chance to figure things out without the whole kingdom watching your every move.”

For the first time since that damned article came out, I feel like I can breathe again. Maybe, just maybe, this isn’t the end of the world after all.

I lean forward, clasping Charlie’s hand in both of mine. “Prince Charlie, I...I don’t know how to thank you. This means more than you know.”

Charlie’s blue eyes sparkle with warmth as he squeezes my hand. “That’s what friends are for, Zeke. What am I doing as a prince if not facilitating some happily ever afters, huh?”

We share a laugh, and I’m struck by how lucky I am to have Charlie in my corner. He may be royalty, but he’s also a genuinely good guy.

“Seriously though,” I say, “you’re a lifesaver. I owe you big time.”

Charlie waves me off. “Consider us even for all those times you’ve kept me safe out there. Now, shouldn’t you be somewhere? Perhaps checking in on a certain American visitor?”

“You’re right,” I say, jumping to my feet. “I should go. But first...”

I dash to my locker, rummaging through until I find what I’m looking for—a slightly squashed box of apple cinnamon donuts that I bought this morning but haven’t had the heart to eat because they remind me too much of Benedict, and right now, they feel like the perfect peace offering.

As I head for the door, Charlie calls out, “Go get him, tiger!”

I turn back, grinning. “Thanks, Prince. For everything.”

With the donut box tucked under my arm, I practically sprint through the palace corridors toward the gardens. My mind races with what I’ll say to Benedict, how I’ll explain everything. But mostly, I just can’t wait to see his face, to reassure him that everything’s going to be okay.

As I burst into the gardens, the sweet scent of flowers mingling with the sugary aroma of the donuts, I feel a surge of determination. Whatever happens next, I know one thing for sure—I’m not letting Benedict go without a fight.

I’m at the garden wall before I know it, the same one I scaled in nothing but my shoes and a box of donuts just weeks ago. This time, I’m fully clothed—thank god—but the box of donuts makes the climb familiar. I wedge it under my chin, praying I don’t drop it as I haul myself up and over.

My feet hit the grass on the other side with a soft thud, and I'm moving again, heart pounding. Benedict's cottage comes into view, its quaint stone exterior bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun. It's beautiful, just like him, and the sight of it only fuels my urgency.

I'm out of breath by the time I reach his door, partly from the sprint and partly from the nerves coursing through me. What if he doesn't want to see me? What if I'm too late?

No. I can't think like that. I raise my hand and knock, three sharp raps that echo in the quiet garden.

Seconds tick by, feeling like hours. I shift from foot to foot, clutching the donut box like a lifeline. Just as I'm considering knocking again, the door swings open.

And there he is.

Benedict stands in the doorway, his expressive brown eyes widening in surprise. He's wearing one of those endearing granddad sweaters I love so much, the soft beige making him look cozy and huggable. But there's tension in his shoulders, uncertainty in his gaze.

"Zeke," he says, his voice a mix of confusion and something else I can't quite place. "What are you doing here?"

I swallow hard, suddenly aware of how dry my mouth is. "I, uh...I brought donuts?" I hold up the box lamely, feeling like an idiot. Smooth, Zeke. Real smooth .

Benedict's eyes flick from my face to the box and back again. A small furrow appears between his brows, and I resist the urge to smooth it away with my thumb.

“Apple cinnamon,” I add, as if that explains everything. “Your favorite.”

For a moment, we just stand there, the air between us thick with unspoken words. I can practically feel the war going on behind Benedict’s eyes—caution battling with the same longing I feel deep in my bones.

Finally, he steps back, opening the door wider. “You’d better come in,” he says softly.

As I cross the threshold, the scent of earth and flowers envelops me—Benedict’s scent. It feels like coming home, and I clench my fists to keep from reaching for him.

Instead, I offer what I hope is a reassuring smile. “We need to talk,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “And not just about pastries.”

Benedict nods, his lips quirking into a small, wry smile. “I figured as much. Unless you’ve developed a habit of scaling palace walls with baked goods.”

I chuckle, grateful for the momentary break in tension. But as we move into his cozy living room, the weight of what I need to say settles on my shoulders again.

“Benedict,” I start, setting the donut box on a nearby table. “I know things have been...complicated. But I can’t keep pretending that what happened between us was nothing.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am*

I run a hand through my hair, feeling exposed under his intense gaze. “The truth is, you’ve gotten under my skin in a way I never expected. These past few days, not knowing if you’d want to talk to or see me again...it’s been driving me crazy.”

Benedict’s eyes widen slightly, but he remains silent, waiting for me to continue. I take a deep breath, steeling myself.

“I know it’s fast, and maybe I’m crazy for feeling this way, but I can’t deny it anymore. I want to explore this—us—further. Whatever this is between us, it feels...important.”

The words hang in the air, and for a moment, I’m terrified I’ve said too much. But then Benedict’s expression softens, a mix of wonder and hesitation crossing his features.

“Zeke, I...” he starts, then pauses, seeming to gather his thoughts. “I feel it too. This connection. But...”

He turns away, moving to the window that overlooks his garden. The late afternoon sun casts a golden glow on his profile, highlighting the conflict etched on his face.

“I was planning to leave Lydovia,” he says quietly, and my heart drops. “The media attention, the loss of privacy... It’s all becoming too much.”

I want to interrupt, to tell him we can figure it out, but I force myself to let him finish.

“This place was supposed to be my sanctuary,” Benedict continues, his voice tinged

with sadness. “A place where I could just be myself, away from the spotlight. But now...”

He turns back to me, and the vulnerability in his eyes makes my chest ache. “I don’t know if I can handle being in the public eye again, Zeke. The thought of reporters digging into my past, scrutinizing my every move...it terrifies me.”

I step closer, fighting the urge to pull him into my arms. “I understand,” I say softly. “And I won’t pretend it’ll be easy. But, Benedict, please don’t run away because of this. We can figure it out together.”

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of Benedict’s confession settle between us. His eyes, warm and uncertain, search my face for answers. I’ve got to make this right.

“Benedict,” I begin, my voice steady despite the nerves fluttering in my stomach. “The press issue? It’s handled. Prince Charlie’s got our backs.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Prince Charlie? How did he?—”

“Let’s just say he’s got experience dealing with media circuses,” I explain, a small smile tugging at my lips. “He’s redirecting their attention. You won’t have to worry about intrusive reporters or your privacy being violated.”

Benedict’s shoulders relax slightly, but I can still see the doubt lingering in his eyes. I step closer, my hands itching to reach out and touch him.

“I know it’s scary,” I continue, my voice softening. “But I promise I’ll do everything in my power to protect you, to give us a chance to explore...whatever this is between us.”

A ghost of a smile flickers across Benedict’s face. “You’d do that for me?”



“In a heartbeat,” I reply, then add with a grin, “You know, I think I might be Benadicted to you.” I continue, reaching for the box I brought with me, “You’re like these apple cinnamon donuts. Sweet, comforting, and impossible to resist.”

I pop open the lid, the warm, spicy scent filling the air between us. Benedict’s eyes widen, a mix of surprise and amusement dancing in their depths.

“Did you really just compare me to a pastry?” he asks, a hint of laughter in his voice.

I shrug, feeling my cheeks heat up. “What can I say? I’m a man of refined tastes.”

Benedict’s laugh, warm and genuine, fills the room, easing the tension that had built up. As he reaches for a donut, I hope that maybe, just maybe, we’ve turned a corner.

As our laughter subsides, Benedict’s eyes lock onto mine. There’s a shift in the air, electric and intense. Before I can process what’s happening, he’s pulling me close, his lips crashing against mine in a kiss that sets every nerve ending on fire.

I melt into him, tasting the sweetness of apple and cinnamon on his tongue. My hands find their way to his waist, pulling him flush against me. The warmth of his body, the soft sigh that escapes him—it’s intoxicating.

When we finally break apart, both breathless, I grin. “Wow,” I gasp, “that was...”

“Long overdue,” Benedict finishes, a mischievous glint in his eye. He takes my hand, intertwining our fingers. “Come on.”

My heart races as he leads me through the cottage. “Where are we going?”

“My room,” he says simply, throwing a smile over his shoulder that makes my knees weak.

When we get to the bedroom, he throws himself on the bed, pulling me with him so I land on top of him. My lips seek his immediately.

As we break apart, both breathless, I grin. “You know,” I say, running my fingers through Benedict’s soft hair, “I think I might be more addicted to you than to apple cinnamon donuts. And that’s saying something.”

Benedict laughs, the sound warming me from the inside out. “I’m flattered to outrank pastries in your affections,” he teases, his hands sliding down to rest on my hips.

I lean in, nuzzling his neck. “Mmm, you’re definitely sweeter,” I murmur against his skin.

He shivers, tightening his grip on me. “Zeke,” he breathes, “are you sure about this? About us?”

I pull back to meet his gaze, seeing the vulnerability there. It hits me how much we’ve both risked to be here, how much we stand to gain—or lose.

“I’ve never been surer of anything,” I say firmly.

As we laugh and kiss, I’m filled with an overwhelming sense of rightness.

Whatever comes next, we’ll face it head-on.

For now, though, I’m content to lose myself in Benedict, in the promise of our future, and in the knowledge that sometimes, the best things in life are worth jumping a few walls for.