

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 181 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 181

Chapter 181

The morning of the second elimination ceremony, I awoke with a big pit growing in my stomach.

I still hadn't been able to speak to Julian about his potentially saving me today. I had talked more with

Joyce, but he remained apathetic about the whole thing. Nicholas was avoiding me. Granted, I was also

avoiding him.

Elva, at least, was feeling much like herself again. Even now, she bounced out of bed, ready to face the

day, while I moved much slower.

I had already explained to her that today was another day to pack and be ready to potentially leave, but after the stress of last time, she never seemed to take it too seriously again, no matter what I said.

After Elva and I had dressed in our day clothes, I stepped out into the hallway to speak with one of the guards. Fortunately Mark had not arrived yet. I knew he would eventually hear of my request, but I hoped

to put it off for as long as possible.

For Mark to know meant Nicholas would know. I wanted to delay that.

"May I help you with something, Miss Piper?" one of the guards asked me.

"Yes." I was still embarrassed to ask. But, no, I shouldn't be embarrassed. What I wanted was entirely innocent, despite what Nicholas thought. "Could you keep an eye out and let me know the moment Julian arrives today." I swallowed down my growing nerves. "If he arrives."

The guard watched me curiously, but nodded all the same. "I'm sure he will be here for the ceremony,

miss.”

I prayed to whatever higher power would listen, that would be true.

Back in the room, Elva played with her toys as Charlotte and I went through the gowns hanging in the closet. There were still many I hadn't worn yet, and tonight, I needed something new that would wow the

television audience.

It already felt too late to wow the princes.

I wore a green velvet last time, so this time, I chose a classic magenta gown with ruffles along the hem and across the top of the bodice. For my hair, we brushed it up and away from my face into a tight updo

that curled in the back.

Charlotte was still inserting bobby pins when the guard I had spoken with appeared in the room. I waved

him closer.

“Miss, I have heard that Julian has been seen on the premises,” he said.

Relief surged through my body with such force that I sagged in my chair. I exhaled long and slow.

“Thank goodness,” I said. “I will need to speak with him at once.”

“Unfortunately, miss, that isn't possible at present. The moment he arrived, he was called into the King's chambers. It's likely he will not reemerge until it is time for the ceremony to begin.”

The worry that had just left me came rushing back. “That long?”

The guard nodded. His face was soft with apology. “The King often gives Julian very long lectures after his... rebellious streaks. If it weren't for the ceremony, my guess is he wouldn't emerge from the King's

audience for the rest of the day.”

That certainly did not bode well for me speaking with him. But I supposed knowing he was present in the building was enough of a comfort for now. I had better odds of being selected with him around, even if we didn't get to plan it ahead of time.

"Thank you," I told the guard. He gave a small bow and then saw himself out.

Charlotte added a few more bobby pins into my hair. Then she hit it with the hairspray.

"You're ready," she said when she'd finished, but I didn't move from the chair.

She came around to look at my face. I wasn't sure what kind of expression I offered her. I was a

nervous wreck.

She placed her hand on my shoulder. "One of them will pick you. I'm certain."

I thanked her, but I wasn't so sure. Nicolas surely had a full card already, with so many admirers. And Joyce didn't know me well enough. Julian was my only potential savior, but he was a wild card on all his own. Who knew what he would decide to do in the end?

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I wondered where he had been these past few days. I hoped he was okay. I wished more than anything

that I could ask him what was going on. Did his absence have to do with the investigation? Or was he

truly just being reckless?

Thoughts and worries swirling in my head, I walked over to Elva for a good luck hug. Her thin arms went

round my neck in an instant and she held on tight.

"Don't worry, Mommy," she said, and simple as they were, the words did seem to calm me a bit.

With my good luck hug, I left the room and ventured down into the parlor room where the girls had been told to meet. I saw Susie at once and quickly went to join her. The worry line between her brows matched

my own, and a hint of sadness touched her eyes.

“Did something happen?” I asked her at once.

She shook her head. “Nothing new. I...” She looked down to where she clasped her hands together. “I’m

not ready to go home.”

I knew how she felt. But if we both fell into misery, we’d be in trouble. We needed to stay positive, if only

so we didn’t break down before the ceremony even began. “Who says you are going home?”

She gave me a glance that said she didn’t want to play games. But I wasn’t playing.

“You are closer with Joyce than anyone else,” I said. “He might pick you.”

She sighed. “And what if he does? Wouldn’t that be a lie, then? We both know the person I want may be

here in the palace but he is no prince.”

I moved closer to her so that we could speak in softer tones, especially as Nathan entered the room

and moved toward the stage.

“I’m doomed, Piper,” Susie sniffled. “I’ve fallen for a man I can’t have, no matter what I do.”

I wanted to encourage her. Surely, we could think of some way for her and Mark to be together. But, on

the surface, yes, it did seem impossible. Mark, as a Beta, had pledged his life in service to his prince.

Betas, traditionally, didn't seek or find happiness of their own.

Still, I had seen the way Mark looked at Susie. It was clear he was in love with her too. If I could speak

with Nicholas, maybe he would allow their romance to blossom. But that couldn't happen if he and I

weren't speaking, or if Susie was eliminated today.

I didn't know what to say so instead, I took one of her hands in mine and squeezed.

Nathan began speaking, reminding us of the proper etiquette for the elimination ceremony and that if we were not selected, we were to quietly leave the room, collect our things, and find the cars out front to

drive us home.

None of what he said was new information, but after those rules had been blatantly disregarded by the eliminated girls at the last ceremony, I supposed he felt the need to reiterate them.

I looked once more to Susie.

"Whatever happens, we'll face it together," I said softly, so as not to draw any attention away from Nathan's, except for that of Susie. "And if the worst should happen, we will always be friends."

She squeezed my hand in return.

Our friendship affirmed gave me the courage I needed to face this ceremony.

If I was eliminated, I didn't know how but I would find a way to save Elva. No matter what I had to do, or who would help me, I'd never let that underground organization lay their hands on her.

Even if I had to bring the whole thing down myself.

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I continued to hold Susie's hand as we were led into the staged area for the ceremony. The 14 of us that

were left were lined up into three rows.

Camera crews were setting up in front of us. On the other side, three small stages were arranged side by side, each with their own set of stairs. A throne was arranged at the far end of the room for the King and

Queen.

Sometime after we arrived, the royal family came in together. I tried to catch Julian's eye, but he wouldn't look at me. He didn't look at any of the candidates. His typical bored façade was in place.

I worried about him for a moment. Just what had the King wanted to talk to him about?

But then I saw Nicholas and all other thoughts flew straight out of my head. I hadn't seen him since our

kiss in the hallway outside Julian's door, when I'd lost myself and wanted to be ravaged.

He wasn't looking at me either, but this one, I understood. I only hoped he didn't regret it. Our

relationship was... complicated. Impossible, probably. But the way he held me in that moment... I wouldn't

trade it away.

The King and Queen moved to their thrones. The producers then directed the princes up onto the

stages. Each had their own.

Nathan stood in front of us and explained, "If your name is called, move up the stairs of the stage

belonging to the prince who selected you. You will be expected to thank them personally."

The girls all nodded. I did too.

When the cameras were set up, the producers nodded to Nathan. We waited a few minutes until the

clock hit 7pm, then the camera lights turned red.

My heart was in my throat.

The elimination ceremony was about to begin.

Nathan turned on his 1000-watt smile and faced the cameras, his microphone in hand.

“Welcome to the main event, ladies and gentleman. Tonight, your three princes will each select three ladies of their choice to stay through the elimination. This will bring our count down from 14 to 9! Who

will survive? We’re about to find out.”

One of the cameras panned over the candidates and we all smiled. The other cameras zoomed in on each of the princes. Joyce looked bored. Julian winked and waved. Nicholas was entirely stoic.

When the cameras returned to Nathan, he continued to explain the rules. The princes would submit their three names and then one by one, the chosen candidates would be called until all 9 were announced.

The princes were given scraps of paper and a pen. They each wrote their selections and handed them in to waiting servants. The servants then brought the names to the producers.

Nathan sent the audience to commercial, and no sooner, one of the producers started yelling at the

other.

“There’s only 8 names!”

The second producer hushed the first. “Think of the drama, man. This is going to make for great TV.”

“What are they talking about?” Susie whispered to me.

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. Only 8 names? Could that mean only 8 girls were going to be picked?

But how could that be? Didn’t it break the rules?

When the producers spoke with Nathan, he immediately seemed confused.

“We should speak with the King,” he started to say, but the producers were insistent.

“There’s no time. We’re coming back from commercial in 3... 2... 1...” They pointed at Nathan.

Nathan’s eyes were wild with panic, but he pressed on regardless. “W—welcome back! We will now begin with the ceremony! Each prince will read the names of their selections, one at a time. Prince Nicholas, we will begin with you. If you could please say the name of one of your selections.”

Nicholas cleared his throat. I held my breath.

“Lilliana.”

”

My breath came out a long, low exhale. I wasn’t surprised, but I still wanted it to be me.

Lilliana stepped forward without any outward reaction. She crossed the floor, walked up the stairs in front of Nicholas, and said, “Thank you.”

He nodded, and she moved to stand behind him.

“Very nice,” Nathan said. “Prince Julian, you are next.”

This was it. This was the moment. If Julian didn’t save me here, no one would.

Julian opened his mouth with a smile, but it wasn’t my name that came out of it. Some of the girls

gasped and looked at me for reaction. The cameras zoomed in close to my face. novelbin

I kept a smile on my face but it wasn't genuine. Inside, my heart was breaking. How much time would they give me to pack my bags? Would Elva have time to say goodbye to Nicholas, or would we simply be

whisked off into the night like we'd never been here at all?

The ceremony continued. Joyce selected Jessica. For his second round, Nicholas picked Olivia. Julian and Joyce picked girls who clapped in excitement and hurried forward when they were called.

When it was nearing the final round, Susie and I looked at each other. We said goodbye with our eyes.

We both knew our moments were numbered here, and soon we'd be sent home.

The producers pulled Nathan aside quickly to whisper in his ear.

"For the final round, we'd like to change things up and start with Joyce," Nathan said, when he was back

on camera.

Joyce glanced at us remaining girls. Then his gaze fell on Susie.

"Susie."

She inhaled sharply and looked at me. I smiled and nodded, urging her forward.

"Go on, then," I said. I was so happy for her, even as my heart was breaking for myself. Joyce had saved her for another few weeks, and in those weeks, she could be with the man she truly loved, Mark.

Susie moved forward, weaving through the remaining girls. When she finally reached Joyce, she was

crying.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you so much."

Joyce seemed uncomfortable by her attention but he shook her hand all the same. "Of course. Sure."

Susie moved to her spot behind him.

“Now,” Nathan said, reclaiming everyone’s attention. “We have a special circumstance for our final selection.”

“Final?” whispered one of the girls. “They’ve only said 7 names, not 8. There should be two more.”

Nathan continued, “Prince Nicholas and Prince Julian have both selected the same candidate for their final choice.”

“What?” the King gasped, rising from his throne. A producer immediately stepped forward to intercept him.

Nicholas and Julian glanced at each other. Julian smirked. Nicholas glowered.

My heart pounded so loudly I could hear it in my ears, but I didn’t dare dream that I was the one they had chosen. Too much had happened to convince me otherwise. Julian’s disappearance. Nicholas’s cold

shoulder after our heated kiss.

So many people wanted me gone. The public wanted me to stay, but I wasn’t so foolish to believe that would make much difference now as we neared the midpoint of the competition.

“We ask Prince Nicholas and Prince Julian to together name the person that they have chosen. I will

countdown to 1,” Nathan said.

I held my breath.

“3…”

I twisted my hands together.

“2...”

I felt sick in my stomach, like I might throw up.

“1...”

Nicholas and Julian glanced at each other once more. Then they both looked at me.

Together, they said, “Piper.” 9

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After Nicholas and Julian said my name, many things happened all at once.

My breath was so shaky I felt lightheaded.

The King and Queen both jumped to their feet in outrage.

Many of the remaining girls descended from their standing places to complain aggressively to the

producers and Nathan and anyone who would listen.

“We were cheated!” one of them shouted.

“How can Piper be chosen twice?” cried another.

“This is rigged!” said a third.

One of the producers weaved through the angry crowd to whisper in my ear.

“Go on, Piper. Go get your

prince.”

I started forward but immediately hesitated. The problem, of course, was that two princes had chosen

1. me. Now I had to choose one of them.

If I was true to my heart, I would go for Nicholas. But he already had so many prospects. I’d be shooting

myself in the foot by going to him. Julian was the safer choice, by numbers alone, though his

unpredictability, like his recent disappearance, kept him from being the obvious one.

I was torn, but in the end, I decided to go with my heart. I walked up the stairs to Nicholas. I held out my

hand to thank him and he took mine in both of his.

“Thank you,” I said. His gaze was steady on mine. It lacked the heat from that night, but not the intensity.

“I’d never leave you behind,” he said softly, so only I could hear it.

Behind us, the King’s ravings were growing louder.

“End the show,” Nathan said at once, threatening a producer. He waved to the cameramen, and the

cameras shut off at once.

Nicholas quickly ushered me behind him, just in time as the King rushed up the stairs.

“You and your brother have directly disobeyed my orders”

unfair orders father Nicholas said, standing tall

dread. His eyes found mine and he looked at me like he wan

“Husband,” the Luna said from the floor by the stairs. Her sharp gaze sliced back and forth around them.

“We should discuss this in private.”

The King straightened at once, though his face remained red as a cherry tomato. “Yes. Correct as ever, dearest.” He pointed at Nicholas and at Julian. “In my rooms. Now.”

Nicholas nodded and Julian shrugged. Still, they both diligently followed their father. Joyce did too, trailing behind. When the royal family exited the room, the tension in the room seemed to lessen, as if the room itself let out a deep breath.

In Nicholas's absence, Lilliana and Olivia turned their attention to me.

"Congratulations, Piper," Olivia said. "It's quite the accomplishment for someone like you to reach this

level. You probably couldn't even imagine it in your wildest dreams."

It was a backhanded compliment, meant primarily to insult me.

"Prince Nicholas is such a talented statesman," Lilliana chimed in. She spoke in her faux demure manner

but her eyes were piercing daggers at me. "He keeps you around knowing it inspires the commoners. Of course, you must know that he has no intention of keeping you beyond that."

"We're all lucky to be here," I said, attempting to be the bigger person, even though I kind of wanted to

push them both off the stage.

"Some of us rely on luck," Olivia said. "Others have enough talents and skills that they don't need to

depend on luck."

"You should enjoy what time you have left, Piper." Lilliana offered me a fake smile. "Many of the girls

here won't be happy with your continued presence. I'm sure they might even work together to make sure

you are not selected this time."

"We'll see." I wasn't afraid of Lilliana, Olivia, or any of the girls here, and I'd already survived much of

their sabotage. I supposed it was kind of Lilliana to at least let me know the target on me was now even

bigger than before, but I wasn't going to be intimidated.

I knew I was lucky to be here. I'd been planning on going home. That Nicholas and Julian had both

picked me made me feel like I was in a dream. I was so grateful.

The threats of these girls would not ruin this moment for me.

was lying We all knew they weren't truly

thank you both for your concern, but I'm sure I will be fine

cerned and I wasn't truly grateful But it would be rude for me to simply snub them, and though they

snubbing. I would rather they think they hadn't affected me at all

"Ladies!" Nathan called, claiming our attention. "If you will follow me to the ballroom, we will have another post-ceremony celebration!"

I noticed then that the unchosen girls had been escorted from the room. I still couldn't truly believe that

I wasn't among them.

Together, the surviving girls and I followed Nathan down the hallway to the ballroom. Some privileged guests were already within it. They clapped as we descended the staircase.

At the base of the stairs, Susie immediately came to my side. "Piper, I can't believe it! I mean, I can, in a way, and I'm so relieved, but both princes! I knew one of them would save you, but both!"

Her excitement was electric and helped fill the hollow void Lilliana and Olivia's cattiness had carved

into me. I pulled her into a quick hug.

"And you!" I said. "I didn't know you were that close with Joyce!"

"I'm not really, I don't think. I've said a few words to him now and then. Asked him how he's doing or what he's reading." She frowned a little. "I don't think enough people take notice of him." novelbin

"Well, you do. And Jessica...?"

"She's so thrilled," Susie said. "Just look at her."

I glanced across the room to where Jessica was greeting some of the guests. She was bouncing in her heels, her face all smiles. It had been a good long while since I had seen someone so genuinely happy.

She added a little light to me just from watching her.

I looped my arm with Susie. "I think we should celebrate our continued success and Jessica's

happiness."

"What did you have in mind?" Susie asked.

I pointed at the drinks table where servants were beginning to pour flutes of champagne.

I was a bit nervous to drink again, since last time Terry had laced my drink and attempted terrible things.

Yet here in the public ballroom with Susie beside me, I felt safe enough to try. This was a party and we'd

both done something no one thought possible.

What better time and place to let loose? Within moderation, of course. Cameras still crept through the

room, capturing everything on film. Getting drunk was totally off the table, lest I end up as a top news

story for the rest of my life

or three, however, was not out of the question.

Susie and I approached the drinks table, and a smiling servant passed us each a flute. We both smiled and thanked her. I took a sip. The champagne was delicious.

Yet as Susie and I were walking away from the table, an unwelcome individual stepped directly into our

path.

Terry looked down at us with his serpent smile. He glanced at my drink, then back up to my face. "Did you miss me, Piper?"

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"I can tell by the look on your face that you've been thinking about me," Terry said.

My stomach twisted. The champagne I had enjoyed only a moment ago soured in my mouth.

Susie shrunk, half-hiding behind me. Terry didn't even look at her, his entire attention was focused on

1. me.

I didn't reply to him. I simply stood there trying not to be sick on the ballroom floor.

Terry didn't seem to mind. He continued on without even a dent to his smile.

"Congratulations, Piper. You've enamored two different brothers. No simple act. Though I can

understand why they are taken with you."

I swallowed down the rising bile in my throat. "Thank you." It was all I could manage. I knew what lied beyond his friendly façade, and now that the image of him had been permanently tainted, I struggled to

rebuild my own fake friendly face to deal with him.

"You must forgive me," he said. "Our time was cut so short the last time we were together. But I am

hoping we can claim more along time again soon.”

“I’d rather not,” I said quickly.

I noticed then that my words turned a few heads around me. People were eavesdropping our novel

conversation. They were judging me.

I cleared my throat and softened my tone. “The competition organizers keep us all very busy. I couldn’t

possibly find time...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about them if I were you. Don’t forget who I am, Piper. I can sneak you away for a

little chat at any time and no one would say a word.”

A few onlookers laughed, like Terry had said something charming and not unbelievably creepy. I

couldn’t blame them exactly, since they didn’t know what Terry had tried to do to me, but I still hated

them in that moment, that they couldn’t see how uncomfortable he was making me.

I wanted to dig a hole and bury myself in it. Anything to get away from him and this moment.

Terry leaned in closer. “I do enjoy our time together, Piper” Softer, so the eavesdroppers couldn’t hear, he added, “I cannot wait to add you to my collection of broken things.”

My skin crawled at his possessive tone and the unwanted fire in his eyes as he dragged his slimy gaze

+15 BONUS

There was no one here to save me. I had to save myself. I drew courage from the knowledge that he couldn’t touch me here, even though he clearly wanted to. Too many witnesses, too many cameras.

If I screamed, everyone would look.

So I lifted my chin, and told him, “You are going to be disappointed, because you will never own me.”

His smile added teeth. “You say that now. I’ll let you think what you want. But no one escapes from me,

Piper. I’m a powerful man. I get what I want.”

This was a much greater threat than those given to me on the stage by Lilliana and Olivia, and sent

terrible shivers up my spine.

“Announcing the Royal Family!” Nathan called from the top of the stairs. Everyone turned to look, even

Terry.

I glanced behind me at Susie. Her eyes were wide with worry. I nodded my head in a direction away from Terry. Susie nodded.

Quietly and slowly, while everyone was clapping for the King, Queen, and princes as they came down

the stairs, Susie and I started to move away from Terry.

But then Terry reached out and snatched my wrist, immediately stilling me.

“You wouldn’t want to miss my family’s grand entrance, would you, Piper?”

“I’m just going over there for a better look,” I lied.

I glanced at Susie, who was watching me with wild fear. I didn’t know what I wanted her to do. There wasn’t anything she could do, really. But I didn’t want to be alone.

Unfortunately, Susie then turned from me and darted into the crowd.

“I think you had better stay right here beside me,” Terry said. “After all, I wasn’t finished speaking with

you. Or looking my fill.” He slid closer to me, pressing his front along my back. I felt a twitch against my

backside. Deep dread curdled in my gut.

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+15 BONUS

I couldn't give up. There had to be a way out of this. I glanced around, desperate, but no one was

looking at me anymore. Even if they did see me, they wouldn't notice Terry pressing himself against me

from the way he was so closely angled to my back.

I felt hopeless, powerless. I missed my wolf now more than ever, though I knew that even if I had a wolf,

I couldn't lash out at the Queen's brother without consequence. I'd take the consequence if it kept this

asshole away from me.

The only thing I could do now was struggle and make a scene. I devised a plan. I'd be shamed, maybe

even disqualified, but I'd be away from Terry, at least for now.

Though if I was disqualified and cast back onto the street, no cameras would follow me. It would be so

easy for Terry to find me and snatch me up without anyone knowing.

That alone stilled the elbow that I had planned to throw back into his gut. I've dealt with these kind of

assaults before. If I just stayed very still, maybe it would be over quickly. Maybe I could escape when he

was done.

“Piper! There you are!” Julian called. He and Nicholas, with Susie following closely behind, were walking

quickly toward me.

I could have cried seeing them. My friends. My saviors.

“Uncle, thank you for keeping Piper company, but we will take her off your hands now.” Julian gave Terry

a too-sharp smile. His brows were low, his eyes angry.

Nicholas, his face all stern lines, reached for me and physically tugged me away from Terry and to his

own side. He kept his arm around me as I let out a shaky breath.

“Boys.” Terry grit his teeth. “Your timing as always remains most unfortunate. I take it the little songbird

is to blame this time” His gaze landed on Susie.

The geoped and hid behind Julian

untented his head. Fortune, misfortune. It’s all relative, isn’t it? Let’s not forget that Piper is part of

this compaction, so she has other duties. Duties pertaining mainly to us, her suitors and not to you, an

derme you undertalled”

Terry’s hoped fully get res face. Rabe what i want Julian You should know that by now

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+15 BONUS

Terry narrowed his eyes at Nicholas. Then he shrugged, faking nonchalance. "Time will tell." It was a threat. We all knew it. But he made no further comment and simply walked away.

With Terry's departure I could breathe again, and think again. I looked at my position, tucked into Nicholas's side, clutching his suit coat with my hands, and my face burned with embarrassment.

Instantly, I stepped back from Nicholas. He let me go, returning his arm to his side, though he gave me a curious glance.

I couldn't face him, even after thanking him for saving me. This was all too much. I was overwhelmed.

So I turned to Julian instead. "Prince Julian, we must speak privately at once. I have so much to tell you."

Julian wagged his eyebrows. "Privately, 'eh?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean."

Nicholas started to growl in earnest. His face was even more severe than when we'd talked with Terry.

His whole body was tense. He glared at his brother, but his eyes softened when he looked at me.

"It would be rude without dancing with me first," he said. "Since I was one of the princes who chose you."

That made sense. What would it look like for me to disappear with Julian, abandoning Nicholas?

These political games made my head spin.

Nicholas held up his hand for me. "Dance with me, Piper."

I half-wanted to run away, embarrassed by my desires for Nicholas, but the bigger half of me wanted to

be near him, no matter what we were doing.

So I placed my hand on his and let him pull me to the dance floor.

Behind us, Julian laughed and laughed.

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On the dance floor, Nicholas placed his hand on my hip. I placed mine on his shoulder. The orchestra

began to play, and Nicholas led me forward in a dance.

His jaw was clenched and he wasn't looking at me. Even compared to our previous dances, his

movements now were stiff and unnatural.

He was mad at me, unjustly, and knowing that made me equally mad at him.

"You can't keep me from talking with your brother," I said. "You can't dictate who I talk to at all."

Nicholas huffed a sharp breath, too full of disdain to be a laugh. Then he glanced down at me and entirely dropped the façade of humor.

"It's inappropriate for you to leave in the middle of the celebration to run off and fuck my brother." novelbin

I missed a step and stumbled over my own feet. Nicholas's firm grip was the only reason I stayed upright.

"What?" I hissed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Don't lie to me, Piper," Nicholas hissed back. "You are always sneaking off with him. And then that night

Why else would you knock on his door so late?"

“I am not having sex with Julian!” I said the words too loud. A few of the dancing couples around us

stopped to turn and look. I was so embarrassed I wanted to die.

Nicholas urged me to keep dancing and he led me away from that group.

Julian would not be a good lover for you, Piper. He’s selfish. He’s going to break your heart.”

“Apparently we’re just fucking,” I snapped. I couldn’t believe he would think me capable of indulging in a carnal relationship with Julian right in the middle of the competition. It hurt me a bit, so I lashed out, wanting to hurt him too. “Who said anything about getting our hearts involved?”

“Piper.”

“Is this why you kissed me that night? You thought I’d jump from one brother to another?”

No,” he said, firm.

Then why did you kiss me?”

He looked away from me again. “It was a mistake.”

+15 BONUS

Ouch. That hurt worst of all. “You can’t mean that.”

“It didn’t mean anything, Piper. Not to me.” The words were clipped. They didn’t sound true. But he still

said them. He wanted me to believe them.

“If you believe that, then it shouldn’t matter who I fuck,” I said.

His hand clenched on my hip, bunching my dress into his fist. “He’ll hurt you.”

“No, Nicholas. You’re the only one doing that.”

That seemed to shock him, and he stumbled this time. He caught himself quicker than I did however,

and was never in danger of falling.

“Just stay away from him,” Nicholas said. His voice was softer now. “Please.”

I'd heard enough. I pushed away from Nicholas, ending our dance. He hesitated but eventually let me go.

“You're such an asshole, Nick.” I blinked back tears from my eyes.

I turned from him then, and found Julian where he waited at the side of the dance floor. He smirked at

1. me.

“Trouble in paradise, Piper?”

I was in no mood to humor him. I shook my head, hoping he would take the hint. “I need to speak with

you. Now.”

Julian shrugged but took my arm. Together we left the main ballroom. I glanced back at the door and

found Nicholas watching, his face dark and brooding.

Julian led me to a sitting room, where we sat at a small table. Brian was already there and poured us each a cup of coffee. I looked at Julian. Of course he would know that I would want to talk to him, and he

planned ahead. I bet he even knew I would fight with Nicholas.

“Let me guess,” Julian said, as he added sugar to his coffee. I took a sip of mine. “Nicholas thinks we're fucking.”

Chapter 188

I spit my coffee out back into the cup.

Julian smiled wide. “I guess right?”

I rubbed my forehead. “It doesn't matter what he thinks.”

“Oh, no?”

I wasn't telling the truth and we both knew it. Of course I cared what Nicholas thought. Our kiss in the

hallway the other night had rekindled in me a fire I hadn't felt since we had split years ago. I didn't think

my body capable of wanting anyone anymore, yet here I was, wanting Nicholas as strongly as ever.

“Go easy on him, yeah?” Julian said. “For years, the guy thought you left him for another man. Of course

his jealous over you burns too hot.”

“If you are so worried about it, why don't you tell him we aren't together?”

Julian sipped his coffee. “Mostly because I think it's funny.”

“You're terrible.”

Julian shrugged but didn't deny it.

“This isn't why I wanted to talk to you,” I said.

“Oh, I know. You missed me so bad when I was gone, huh? You just can't stay away.”

“Cut the act,” I said with a sigh. I knew Julian well enough by now to know that his rebellious streaks

were mostly put on, to hide whatever he was truly up to. He played most people like a magician with an

audience, wowing them with forced misdirection while playing tricks right under their nose.

“You disappeared for a reason, and I would like to know what it is.”

“The gig is up, huh?” He leaned his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. “Well, fair's fair.

You're right, I didn't just disappear for the fun of it, although it was fun."

He reached into his pocket and produces the feather I had found when I searched the sitting room

where Terry had assaulted me.

"Brian and I spent the past few days visiting several dress and fabric stores to try to find a match to this

feather. When we did find a store with feathers that matched, we had to check if those feathers were

recently purchased. Then, when we found a store with those criteria, we had to search through hours

upon hours of surveillance footage to see if we could find the buyer"

+15 BONUS

"And did you?" I asked.

His smile told me he did. He reached into his pocket again and this time retrieved his phone.

"I don't want to shock you, so I will say this clear. You won't like what's on this footage." His smile

dimmed now, as he clicked through his phone. novelbin

I couldn't imagine seeing any footage of the person responsible for stolen my wolf as something I

would like, so I didn't put much thought into the comment.

Instead, I let my excitement grow. With this footage, we finally had a lead. Something we could act on.

Someone we could track down and interrogate.

Julian primed the footage. He paused it on a screenshot and then passed his phone to me.

The footage was black and white and grainy, but it was clearly a fabric store with rows and rows of

fabrics and ribbons. The camera here was positioned directly over a collection of embellishments, the

feathers among them.

A woman was reaching into the feathers. She had more in the plastic store basket hanging off her arm.

The footage was speckled and a bit blurry, but I still recognized that woman.

I knew her face, because it was my own.

A curse fell from my lips.

No wonder I had thought I recognized her at the party.

This woman at the store, the one buying the feathers, the one at the party, the one with my wolf. They

were all the same.

They were all my twin sister.

Chapter 189

My heart dropped down to the floor.

I couldn't believe my sister would be involved in this, yet there could be no denying it. That was her right

there in their in the video. I certainly hadn't bought those feathers myself.

"The woman in black..." Julian watched me as he spoke. "He thought she was you. This could explain

how she got through security, especially if she was with Terry."

"I don't understand," I said. I could hear Julian's words but he sounded so far away. I felt like I was

falling down, deep down into a bottomless well. “Why did it feel like she had my wolf?”

“Piper...”

Julian inched his chair closer to mine. He reached out and placed his hand on my shoulder. It was

grounding, dragging me back to the moment. Though I shrugged off his touch. I didn't want to live in this

moment.

If I gave it too much thought, I could piece it together.

It felt like she had my wolf because she had my wolf. Somehow, for some sick reason, I had lost my

wolf just for her to gain it.

And then she led me purposefully to Terry for him to attack me. What had he said? He wanted the full

set. Was this what he meant? Was my twin sister one of this thralls?

Was this the tie we needed to connect Terry to the underground organization?

And was my sister involved by choice, or had she been caught up in it all again, unable to help herself

escape?

What would I have to do to help save her this time? I didn't have much to give up anymore.

“Why does she have my wolf?” I felt lost, like I was cast adrift in the ocean with no life raft, no

lighthouse to lead me back to shore.

“I'm sorry, Piper,” Julian said, frowning. He seemed so genuine. I hated it. I wanted him to crack a smile

and tell me this whole thing was just a big, tasteless joke.

But deep down, I knew it wasn't. I had seen her for myself, after all. Under the feathers and fabrics, the

woman in black had been my sister.

My mind was a sea of questions with no hope for answers. Julian continued to apologize. Eventually he

+15 BONUS

"I don't have any answers for you, but I'll keep looking," he said.

"If she's trapped with them again... What could they even want this time? Elva?" My voice shook and my

hands trembled. "I can't... I'd never let them have her."

"We don't know what they want. We don't know how your sister is involved. Speculating will only upset

you. We need to wait until we have all the facts."

What he was saying made sense, but it was so difficult to think straight. I felt like my whole world was

falling apart.

"What am I supposed to say to Elva?" I whispered.

"Nothing yet," Julian said.

I wasn't sure if that was true. If my twin was in the organization, against her will or not, she might use novelbin

our face to earn Elva's trust. Or to get past the guards.

I jumped to my feet in an instant. "I have to talk to Nicholas."

Julian leaned back on his chair, looking up at me. "What? Why? Didn't we agree to keep him in the dark?"

I didn't have time to explain. I needed to act now.

I hoped Mark wouldn't be followed by someone wearing my face, but I wasn't sure. He might not know I had a twin. He might not suspect any danger. And if his guard was down.

I rushed to the sitting room door and threw it open. Then I startled.

Nicholas was standing on the other side of the door.

"Piper, I –" he started to say, but cut himself short when he saw my face.
"Piper? Are you okay? What

happened?"

I didn't know how to answer. In his presence, I felt natural comfort. Tears fell from my eyes, unbidden,

but exactly what I needed.

Chapter 190

He was my lighthouse, guiding me back to the shore, safe through tumultuous waters.

I stepped into him and fell into his chest. His arms wrapped around me on instinct. Gently, he eased me

back into the room I'd left, and away from the hallway where anyone could have happened upon us.

"Oh, shit," Julian muttered. "It's not what it looks like I swear."

Nicholas's arms came around me, protective yet soft, treating me as if I was made of glass. His voice

exuded anger, however, as he snapped at his brother, "What the hell did you do?"

"I didn't do anything!" Julian said at once. He quickly amended, "Well, not like you're thinking, anyway!"

Nicholas started to growl.

“Piper,” Julian said. “I know you are going through a thing but can you please explain to my very furious

brother that I did not do anything untoward?”

I sniffled, then looked up at Nicholas. He wasn’t looking back, so I reached a hand up and cupped his

cheek. That claimed his attention, and his fiery eyes found mine. Immediately he softened.

“Did he hurt you?” he asked.

I shook my head. “He only told me the truth.”

That wasn’t the right answer. The fire sparked anew in his gaze, a raging wildfire out of control.

“I warned you that he would break your heart,” he said.

“What?” I blinked, not fully understanding. My mind was too caught up in my own misery at the

revelation of my sister.

“Oh my God, Nicholas. Your jealousy really is ugly,” Julian said. He was standing now, when I glanced at

him over my shoulder. His wicked smirk was back. “Maybe I was actually confessing my undying love to

her and she was just overwhelmed?”

“Don’t lie to me,” Nicholas said. “Piper is a good girl and she deserves better treatment than your quick

fuck and forget bullshit. She is a genuine heart and should be treated with love and respect, and not

“What are you even going on about?” Julian said.

“She deserves better than you,” Nicholas snapped.

“Oh, let me guess. She deserves you instead. Don’t make me laugh. You are so emotionally constipated,

”

+15 BONUS

“She’s my friend.”

That all? Then why did you get so mad when you thought she and I were fucking? You can’t even admit

when you are jealous!”

“I’m not jealous,” Nicholas growled, though his arms tightened around me. He held me closer to him.

One of his hands sat low on my backside, just above the curve of my ass. Possessive. novelbin

“Now who’s lying to who?” Julian teased.

“Stop,” I said, but my voice was still weak. “Nicholas...”

“I’ll handle this, Piper,” Nicholas whispered to me. “When I’m done with him, he won’t bother you again.”

“Don’t try to stop him, Piper. I could use the entertainment,” Julian said. “Let him think whatever he will.

If he wants to make an ass out of himself, we should let him.”

I shook my head. I didn’t have time for their childish games.

I tapped my hand against Nicholas’s chest. “This is important, Nick. Please stop.”

He looked down at me again. His brow furrowed some in confusion. “What’s important, Piper?”

Julian and I had agreed to keep Nicholas in the dark about our investigation, but that no longer seemed

possible. To protect Elva, and potentially everyone in the palace, I had to share what I knew. His guards

needed to be prepared.

“It’s my sister,” I said. “She’s back.”

“What?” Nicholas looked even more confused. “Since when? Where? What happened?”

Julian sighed. “God damn it, Piper.”

I didn’t let his disapproval get to me.

I told Nicholas the truth. “Julian and I are still investigating the underground organization.”

Nicholas’s confusion ebbed, but in its place grew anger, bright and hot. “You... what?”