

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 231 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 231

Chapter 231

Chapter 0231

Terry motioned to the men around him, and they began to come closer.

With a growl, Nicholas, in full wolf form, pounced from the dark of the tunnel and tackled two of the men

closest to me at once.

I had never seen him in his wolf form before, but I knew at once it was him. The dark brown fur was the same color as his hair, and those golden eyes flecked with green were unmistakable. As was his fierce.

protection of me.

With two men out, that still left four on their feet, as well as Terry and Jane. In the distance, I spotted Julian, sneaking behind every one. Footsteps were coming closer through the hallways. Backup, maybe.

Julian closed and locked the door with a deft and silent hand.

No one noticed at all until some of the men outside began pounding on the door to get in.

“Julian!” Terry snapped.

Julian shrugged. “You didn’t think we’d let her come alone, did you?”

“Then this must be Nicholas,” Terry said, gesturing wildly at Nicholas’s wolf form.

Nicholas moved directly in front of me, growling lowly.

“Don’t just stand there, get them!” Terry urged the four men still standing. “Isn’t that what you are here.

for? To do as I command?”

The men seemed uncertain for a moment, glancing at each other. But then, they all nodded, one after

the next.

One unsheathed a knife, and lunged for Nicholas. Nicholas pounced, meeting him halfway. He closed his jaws around the man's wrist and wrenched the knife away. It clattered across the ground near Jane's feet.

Jane leaned down and scooped it up. Then she darted forward at a fast pace. I was worried that she was going for Nicholas, so I moved as well, to intercept. I realized too late, she was actually coming for

me. She slammed me up against the barred walls of one of the cages and held the knife to my throat.

I could have fought against her. Nicholas and I hadn't trained for this exact situation, but some of the moves he showed me would have surely helped. If my life was at stake, he wanted me to play dirty.

Yet, even as angry and heartbroken as I was over my sister's betrayal, when I looked at her, I saw that pig-

She was an enemy. She wanted to hurt me.

But I couldn't raise my hand against my twin sister.

"You are weak, Piper. You've always been weak. Undeserving of the strong wolf you carried," Jane said

with a snarl.

Behind her, Nicholas fought off two more men. Julian knocked out a third, with a swift unsuspecting

strike to the back of his head.

"Do you

have any idea what it felt like, to constantly be in your shadow? To watch you receive opportunity after opportunity simply because your wolf was stronger?"

Jane's voice was tightening, raising. Her hand holding the knife trembled.

"You didn't deserve it! None of it!"

I watched her in shock. All those years, she'd only ever seemed happy for me.
"You can't mean this..."

"Can't I? I got my vengeance. I destroyed your life once. I'll be damned before
I let you crawl your way

back to the top."

Jane pressed the knife to my throat, I pressed as far back against the cell as I
could.

"You are nothing." Jane said. "I will take everything from you once again."

"W-why?" I asked, barely able to find my voice.

She dipped her face down, and peered up at me from under her brow. Like
this, she looked menacing

and evil. Nothing like the girl I knew and loved."

Coldly, she said, "Because I want to.

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"Get away from her!" Nicholas shouted, his voice raw and rough in his half-
shifted state. He gripped Jane with his claw-shaped hands and threw her
behind him. Julian ducked as she flew by. She smashed onto the cage along
the opposite wall and fell down to the ground.

Nicholas immediately stepped into the space she vacated. He lifted his hand
to my neck and gently prodded at my skin. He was tender, even before his
hands returned to human-shaped.

"Am I hurt?" I was in shock. I genuinely didn't know.

"A scratch," he replied with a small grow. "But it didn't break the skin."

I nodded, understanding that was good, even as my body was turning cold all
over.

“We have to go, Nick,” Julian said quickly as he came to our side. He glanced me over from head to toe, before his gaze settled on my neck. He narrowed his eyes. “She did that to you?”

Nicholas wrapped one arm protectively around my waist. With the other, he shoved Julian toward the tunnels.

“We have to go, remember?” Nicholas said.

Together, the three of us escaped into the darkness. We walked as quickly as we could go without stumbling. Julian held the flashlight far in front of us so we could see our exit.

When we pushed through the other side, the guards stiffened. They didn’t relax even as it became clear

it was us.

“You were right, Nicholas,” Julian said. “We need to brick this up immediately.”

Nicholas turned toward the waiting guard. Call the bricklayer. I want this whole thing sealed off. Get

some wood and nails first. We’ll seal it as best we can while we wait.”

“Yes, sir!” the guard said. He turned and sprinted from the small room.

Nicholas led me to the wall, and I slumped against it, trying to compose myself. I was having trouble

processing all I had seen and heard and felt.

The shattered pieces of my heart felt irreparable, like a broken windshield too chaotic to put back novelbin

together.

“It’s obvious our dear uncle is deeper in this than we previously suspected,” Julian said. He dusted off

his pant legs with obvious disdain. “As is Piper’s sister.”

Nicholas didn't say anything but he nodded.

I watched them both, unable to do more than that.

"Who knows how deeply this truly goes. Is Mom involved? Is Dad?" Julian continued.

"They've been funding the effort to stop the organization," Nicholas said.

Julian rubbed his forehead. "Maybe it's just a front. Maybe that's why they put me in charge of the investigation. Let the screw-up busy himself for a while."

"Julian..." I mumbled. I couldn't truly find my voice, but I didn't like him speaking of himself that way.

"Sorry, Piper." He cast me a brief, sympathetic glance.

"They can't be involved," Nicholas said. "Because if they are, we are in way worse trouble."

"So your argument is wishful thinking?" Julian asked.

Nicholas shrugged. "Until we find some proof otherwise, then yes."

Julian fell silent. None of us moved much, beyond watching the mouth of the tunnel. Soon, the guard

returned with two servants in tow, carrying wood and hammers.

"I don't care what you have to do. I don't care how much of an eyesore it is." Nicholas waved toward the

tunnel. "Seal this up."

"Yes, sir," the servants said in unison.

"The bricklayer has been notified," the guard added. "He said he is gathering his supplies and will drive

to the palace at once."

"Good," Nicholas said. "The minute he arrives, bring him down here. And in the meantime, send for more

guards. I want three guards in this room day and night. No more secrecy, or stakeouts, or anything else. Nothing is to come through this opening, is that clear?"

The guard snapped to attention. "Yes, sir."

Silently, we watched the servants work as they boarded up the opening of the tunnel. I still didn't feel safe

until the entire thing was sealed away and the three guards were standing watch.

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Eventually, Nicholas returned to my side. "Let me take you back to your room."

"But my sister –"

"Is safely on the other side of that door. Come on." He spoke slowly and calmly. He must have seen me trembling. "You'll feel better when you are at Elva's side. Mark just checked on her, she is safely sleeping."

Some relief washed through me. It wasn't enough to totally quiet the anxiety that had taken root, but it

did help smooth the edge a bit.

Nodding, I looped my arm with Nicholas and he began leading me from the room.

At the door, Julian touched my shoulder. "Goodnight, Piper,"

"Goodnight," I said, though there was nothing good about it. And I doubted I would sleep. None of that

was Julian's fault.

Nicholas slowly walked me away. We didn't say a word, but I found strength in his steady comfort. He was always so sturdy and strong, so dependable. I know I could count on him in any situation.

Even this.

His closeness gave me the strength I needed to finally give voice to heartbreak that plagued me.

“It hurts so much.” I blinked and tears fell down my cheeks. I hadn’t even felt them well.

Nicholas stopped in the hallway. He faced me as much as he could without releasing my arm. I gripped fiercely at his sleeve, my only anchor in this hurricane of torment.

“Jane was always the rebel. The troublemaker. She acted out against authority, and never listened to anyone.” I sniffled. “But even with all that, I never would have thought that she’d...”

Nicholas inched closer. Finally I released his arm and he wrapped both around me. I buried my face in

his chest and released a terrible sob.

“She hates me, Nick. Maybe she always did.” The tears left hot tracks on my face. I couldn’t stop them. I

didn’t even know how,

Even in my darkest moments, I’d always believed that someday Jane would find her way back to me and

Elva. I was her twin and Elva was her child. How could she just throw us away like we meant nothing at

all?

“I wished the best for her. I’d hoped she would come back.”

I gripped at Nick’s shirt with both hands. I ruined it with my tears. He didn’t seem to care, he just kept

holding me.

“What am I supposed to do now? What should I hope for? My own sister wants to torture me.

It was too much. My heart was aching, tearing in my chest. Anguish.

I had not cried this hard since I had to leave Nicholas. And even then, I'd felt like I had saved him. There had been anguish and tears, but it had come with the belief that Nicholas would live a good life.

What hope did Jane have for happiness? Could she only feel joy when witnessing my utter destruction?

"I can't give her what she wants this time," I cried, "Because what she wanted was my demise. My

torture. Maybe even my death.

She'd held that knife to my throat like she had been ready to use it. She'd left a mark on my neck.

I wanted to mourn the girl my sister used to be, but maybe this vicious, vile woman was always my

sister. Maybe I started kidding myself at even a young age.

"Nick..."

He softly combed his fingers through my hair. "I won't lie to you and say it will be alright. It won't." He swallowed hard. "But I will be with you, Piper, through every step of your grief." novelbin

"She isn't dead," I sniffed.

He didn't reply.

No, I knew what he meant.

The sister who had been my shadow. She was gone. She wasn't coming back.

And it was time to mourn her.

Nicholas shielded me from the rest of the world, and I cried until I couldn't cry anymore..

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Although perhaps Julian's initial plan to hold a contest event at Terry's mansion would bear fruit. At this point, I felt so directionless, I wasn't sure what was even possible anymore.

"Leave it to Julian and me for now," Nicholas whispered. "We'll give it more thought." When I started to say something, he quickly amended, "We won't keep you out of the loop."

I nodded. Truthfully, I wanted some distance from it all, if only to catch my breath. But I couldn't just do

nothing

"I have to do something."

"Focus on the competition," Nicholas said. "If you continue to inspire the public, you might have a

chance at winning, no matter what the King and Queen say.

Winning? There was no way. novelbin

"You have to stay as long as you can." Nicholas dropped his voice even lower. "I can only protect you.

and Elva while you are here."

His voice was so earnest, his concern so clear, I could only agree.

"I'll try," I said, a quiet promise in the dim morning light.

Later that morning, after Nicholas had sneaked out and Elva had awoken, Charlotte walked into the room carrying bolts of a new fabric. It wasn't the shimmering purple that Elva and I had loved, and Jane.

had stolen, but was a beautiful glittery gold instead.

"I like this better," Elva said, nodding seriously in approval. Holding some of the fabric in her hands, she

lifted it up and down rapidly to watch it sparkle. "It's bright and sparkly."

I considered her words. "Yes, the other one was too dark, wasn't it? We could use some brightness in

our lives."

"It's definitely better than the old fabric. Sturdier, too. It will be much easier to work with," Charlotte said.

“In fact, I bet I can have the base of the dress started by this afternoon. After you try it on, we can see

what adjustments we want to add.”

True to her word, Charlotte whipped up the dresses in a flash. She moved so quickly and expertly, she

barely even needed my help/I mainly stitched hemlines while she molded the fabrics into gowns

themselves.

When the dresses were finished, Elva tried hers own first.

“I’m like a Queen!” she giggled, then went to hold court with her stuffed animals and dolls.

Trying on my own dress, I had to agree. By now, Charlotte knew my dimensions perfectly, and the dress reflected that. It hugged my curves. The bodice dipped tastefully low, enough to show just a hint of my cleavage. It was sleeveless. With my hair down around my shoulders, I felt absolutely beautiful.

“Perhaps a golden shawl,” Charlotte said, tapping her chin. She lifted the bolt of fabric and brought it

closer to my shoulders.

I couldn’t tell what would look best, so I left it to her judgement. The shawl didn’t seem to satisfy her,

however.

Suddenly, a knock sounded on the door.

“Who is it?” I called.

“Prince Julian to see you, miss,” Mark replied through the door.

I checked myself again. Perhaps I should spare the sight of my dress. After all, many girls were still looking to copy me. But no, Julian wouldn’t share my secrets.

“Let him in.”

The door opened and Julian swaggered in.

“Piper, I was thinking that we... should...”

His gaze fell onto me, then trailed slowly down from my face to the floor. As he looked, his words totally

fell off.

“Julian?”

He didn’t say anything right away. He just looked and looked, and looked some more.

Looking at me, he’d gone totally speechless. A feat I never would have thought possible from him.

I spread my arms and swayed back and forth, showing off how the dress sparkled. He continued to stare

so much so much, I started to feel self-conscious.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

He swallowed hard. “Yeah... uh, you look...”

He trailed off again.

“Julian?”

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“Julian?” I prompted. “You must have come for some reason?”

“Right,” he said, then rubbed his forehead. “That’s true.”

He cleared his throat again, then stood straighter. When he started forward once more, his usual smirk novelbin

slipped back into place. Whatever weakness that had taken over him was long gone now.

“I thought we could utilize our time for more mental self–defense, but I had not considered you would be so indisposed.” As Julian approached, he glanced at Charlotte, who still held up the fabric like a shawl.‘

I’m not sure that works.”

“No,” Charlotte said, frowning. “But she might get cold with her arms bare. Even with the gloves.”

“Perhaps a lighter fabric. Or a white lace.”

“Lace? Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.” Charlotte nodded critically, then seemed to remember who she was

talking to and jumped. “Uh, Prince Julian, sir.”

“No need for such formality,” he said. “Simply Prince Julian would do.”

She nodded, but her cheeks were turning red. “If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’ll look through the rest of

the fabrics.” She scurried away.

I gave Julian a chastising look. “You shouldn’t tease her.”

“Who’s teasing?” Julian shrugged innocently. “I don’t need to be both sir and Prince Julian at once.” His smile sharpened as he leered in my direction.

“Unless you’d prefer to use both, Piper.”

I rolled my eyes. On a different day, any of them before last night, his teasing me would have made me smile. As it was, the drama with Jane weighed heavy on my heart, shackling me only to misery no matter

how hard I tried to feel other emotions.

For Elva’s sake, I was putting on a façade. But even she eyed me warily now and again. She was intuitive,

I needed to remember that. I had to do better.

Then Elva was suddenly there, tugging at Julian's sleeve. My breath caught as he looked down at her.

They'd met before but only interacted a handful of times.

Unlike Nicholas, who had made clear he adored children and wanted many of his own, Julian seemed entirely indifferent to the matter. And though he'd been courteous to Elva in the past, I had no idea how

he would respond to her in a more relaxed atmosphere.

One where she would ask a lot of questions.

Elva looked up at Julian with her wide eyes and asked, "Do you like Mommy too?"

"Too?" Julian asked.

"Nick—lass likes Mommy. I can tell. He stayed here last night. All night."

"Elva!" My face burned in embarrassment. I had thought she slept the whole night through. Apparently

not!

"Oh, he did, did he?" Julian cast me a playful look, waggling his eyebrows.

I covered my face with both hands. I would likely never live this down.

Elva tugged on Julian's sleeve. "Do you like Mommy too?"

"I'm quite fond of her, yes," Julian said.

I waited for him to add a teasing caveat. Something like, Not as much as Prince Nicholas, or, She

constantly makes a fool of herself to my endless amusement.

But he doesn't say either of those things. He doesn't add anything at all, actually. He just lets the small

sentence hang there, like it is a full and complete thought. (1)

My mind reeled. I had no idea what to think. Ever since he touched my cheek, and we almost kissed, I

hadn't been able to find level footing around Julian.

I believed he cared for me, as a friend if nothing else, but sometimes I swore he maybe felt more. It felt

foolish to even consider it. He'd always enjoyed teasing me. He was likely teasing me now.

Yet something felt different when he looked at me. Like he'd leave his eyes on me a beat longer than necessary. Or his smile would soften ever so slightly when he was speaking to me, compared to anyone

else.

Maybe I was imagining it. I shook my head, trying not to think of it now.

Julian kneeled down onto one knee to be at Elva's level. A pulled a quarter from his pocket and showed

it to her. "Watch this," he said. He held the quarter up, clear as day. With one swoop of the hand, the quarter entirely vanished from his palm.

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Elva gasped. "How did you do that?"

Julian laughed. "Sleight of hand, my dear. Would you like to learn?" In a flash, the quarter was back in his

hand. He held it out for Elva, who greedily accepted it.

"Yes!" she said excitedly.

"No," I said a second later.

Elva turned her doe eyes on me. "Mommy! Please?"

I placed my hand on my hips. “Julian. I can’t have you teach her these bad skills.”

“No skill itself is bad, Piper. It’s how you use it.” He winked at me, and I was as charmed by him as Elva’s doe eyes. With the two combining forces, I didn’t stand a chance of telling them no. “It’s actually

incredibly useful and could even save a life someday.”

“Really?” Elva asked. “I could be a hero.”

Julian made his smile kinder as he looked at her. “Absolutely.”

Elva cranked up the doe eyes, turning to me with renewed determination.

“Please, Mommy! I want to be

a hero!”

I sighed. “Okay. Fine. But no thievery.”

Julian crossed his heart with one hand. I imagined his other was behind his back, fingers crossed.

“I want to support animal conservation,” Susie said later, as we talked during lunch. “I was thinking of

something like that for my cause at the fundraising gala.”

That sort of cause suited Susie well. She’d seemed more at ease in the company of animals rather than

people.

“You should probably find one specific charity to represent,” I suggested. “If you narrow your focus, it

might make it easier to talk about with the potential benefactors.”

She worried her hands together nervously. “I’ll do that. Though I worry even if I had notecards I wouldn’t

be able to talk to them.”

“You only have to be yourself,” I said. “Tell them how much you love the animals. That will convince them.”

“I hope so.” She still seemed unsure.

Elva, in the chair beside me, was trying to palm a dinner roll off of her plate. While I didn’t necessarily approve of Julian’s training, her effort was admirable.

I lifted a wrapped peppermint from a dish on the table and placed it on her plate, pushing back the roll.

“Try something smaller,” I told her. “Work your way up to the rolls.”

Elva nodded. She tried again with the peppermint. While her actions were not nearly so smooth and practiced as Julian’s, she was still able to lift the peppermint into her palm without using her fingers.

She gasped in excitement, but then huffed when the peppermint dropped back onto the plate.

I leaned over and kissed the side of her head. “You’ll get it,” I said, while I added in my head, but novelbin

hopefully not too soon.

“Piper,” said Tiffany from behind me, shaking me from my thoughts. When I looked at her, she said, “Can

we speak for a moment?”

The last time we had spoken, she had told me about the strange behavior of someone who looked just like me. She wore a similar dire expression now. I wasn’t about to let whatever she wanted to say wait.

I glanced at Susie.

“I’ll watch Elva for a minute,” Susie said.

With that confirmation, I rose and followed Tiffany to a far corner of the room, out of earshot of the

others. From here, I could still see Elva, which set me at ease.

I trusted Susie, but with everything going on, I wasn't yet ready to let Elva out of my sight.

"I saw her again," Tiffany said. "The girl who's impersonating you."

Wait. She said impersonating. She wasn't accusing me anymore.

"You believe me, then. That I wasn't the one sneaking around?"

Tiffany nodded. "I saw her outside in the hallway, and then I walked in here, and here you are. You can't

be in two places at once."

I blinked, startled. "You... saw her? Just now?"

"Yeah." Tiffany motioned back toward the door. "She was walking into the courtyard."

No. That couldn't be. The tunnel was sealed. Jane shouldn't have been able to get over here.

The floor of my stomach dropped.

Jane had another way inside.

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After thanking Tiffany, I excused myself from lunch and ushered Elva back to the safety of our room. I

kept my eyes peeled for any sight of my twin in the hallways, but I saw no sight of her myself. Yet I had no

reason to doubt Tiffany.

When we were back in the room, I called Mark to the side. "I need to meet with Prince Nicholas and

Prince Julian at once. We have to make sure the tunnel is secure.”

Mark’s face immediately grew grim. He had his phone in his hands an instant later, texting. To me, he

asked, “Has something happened?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted.

With the princes’ busy schedules, we couldn’t meet until the evening. I was a nervous wreck all

afternoon.

When it finally came time, I met Julian and Nicholas down in the cellar. Mark and the nanny watched

Elva back in our room. novelbin

I stared at where once had been the tunnel opening. Now, there was only a brick wall. It was recently

laid, but hadn’t been clearly tampered with. Julian lightly ran his fingers around the outer edges. He

pressed on the bricks, checking their sturdiness.

“It’s solid,” he said.

“So there’s another way in.” I wrapped my arms around myself for comfort, but I could not seem to fight

the chill. Nicholas stepped closer to me. He didn’t touch me, instead merely stood a few inches off, but

the relative closeness warmed more than I could have alone.

“I can check the blueprints again, but this seemed to be the only passage that led off the property. The

rest connected rooms or hallways.” Julian rubbed his hand over his mouth.

“We can try checking the

passages to find where she's hiding, but she could just as easily move when we get close."

I remembered how I had chased Jane before, and how she had seemed to vanish when I'd thought I'd

cornered her.

Julian shrugged. "Unfortunately, all it would take is for Terry to sneak her in once, and she could simply

hide out here for as long as she wants. If she does get spotted, she can just pretend to be you."

Terry, as the Luna's brother, could more easily pass through security than other guests. Theoretically, all

Jane would have to do was lie down on the floor of the backseat as the security gate waved Terry's car

through.

But for that to happen, that meant...

"Terry is here?" My chills returned tenfold, and I shivered.

A muscle ticked in Nicholas's jaw. "He's one of the benefactors for the fundraising gala event."

Of course he was. He had money and close ties to the royal family. Why wouldn't he be a benefactor?

My body trembled. I wasn't ready to face him again so soon, but if he was a benefactor, I would have no choice. I was obligated to speak to each of them, to give them my pitch and to convince them to donate to the orphanage. The entire thing would be monitored so no girl or benefactor would be missed.

Nicholas's arm wrapped around my shoulders. "There's nothing else we can do for right now. Let me

walk you back to your room."

I couldn't find my voice, so I nodded.

We came out from the cellars, left the kitchen, and walked through the main hallway when I noticed we were being followed. By the deep set of Nicholas's frown, he had likely noticed even sooner than me.

As we turned a corner, Nicholas urged me to stop. Sure enough, a few seconds later, a pair of guards

rounded that same corner. When they spotted us, they quickly halted.

These were not part of Nicholas's personal guard. No. From the design of their uniform, these were

clearly under command of Joseph.

"You're following us," Nicholas said.

The guards glanced at each other. One opened his mouth but immediately closed it. The other lowered

his head.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes as the wait for a reply grew longer and longer. Finally, he added some

authoritative tone to his voice, as he said, "Under whose orders were you told to keep secrets from your

prince?"

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The guard who had opened his mouth immediately did so again. "Many apologies, Your Royal Highness. We meant no offense. It was not meant to be a secret from you, though..." His gaze shifted to me.

Beside me, Nicholas straightened, body tense as a bow string. "So you are following us?"

"Following Miss Piper, Sir." The guard started to sweat. "There have been reports of suspicious behavior.

For the safety of all, the captain thought we should keep an eye on her.”

I remembered Lilliana speaking with Joseph in the hallway, as they both glared at me. Shortly after,

Lilliana had made accusations at me that I hadn't understood at the time.

“And you suspect she will perform this suspicious behavior even when she is in my company?” Nicholas's voice was going eerily emotionless. His anger must have been skyrocketing.....

I touched his arm, hoping to soothe him. “They only mean to protect you, Prince Nicholas.” I lowered my

voice. “Perhaps it is best if they continue to do so.”

He glanced at me sharply. “What?”

To the guards, I said, “I understand your precautions, gentlemen, and take no offense.”

The one who had spoken nodded at me, but then looked to Nicholas. The other had yet to lift his chin.

from his chest.

Nicholas searched my face. I didn't know what he saw there, but he eventually dismissed the guards.”

Carry on, then.”

He tugged me forward. When a buffer of space had opened between us and our tail, he said to me, novelbin

What are you thinking, Piper? They don't need to be following you around. That's ridiculous.”

“We both know I wouldn't do something,” I said. “But isn't it safer if they keep a lookout for who they

think is me? They can follow her, too. This way, if she tries to hurt someone, they might be there. They can

step in and stop her.”

In my heart, I doubted Jane would be so careless as to let herself be trapped by the guard. If even I had

noticed them following us, Jane, with her years of on-the-run experience, would never have been caught

unawares.

Still, even if the guards’ presence only made her more cautious, that was time she spent hiding rather

than carrying out whatever plan she and Terry had up their sleeves. I only hoped it would give us enough

of a chance to catch up.

“If Jane does do something, and the guards see, you will take the blame, Piper,” Nicholas said. “A guard’s word holds weight. You could even be tried.”

I understood the risk. “I’d never put the weight of my future over the potential life of anyone else.”

“We don’t know she would kill anyone,” Nicholas said.

I thought of Jane with her knife to my throat. “We don’t know she wouldn’t either.”

He shook his head. “Maybe it’s time to simply reveal the secret of your sister’s existence. She’s been in

the shadows too long. If we force her out into the light –”

“No,” I said, cutting him off. I understood his heart was in the right place, and was so grateful for it, but that was one secret that needed to stay buried as long as possible. “How would I ever explain to Elva?” 1

“She wouldn’t make the connection.”

“Not right away, maybe. But she’s bright, Nick. She sees everything. Eventually she will start asking questions. And I don’t know that I have the answers to give her.”

“Maybe she should find out the truth,” Nicholas said. “Would that be so bad?”

“She’s practically still a baby. I can’t shatter her whole world like that.”

I tried to imagine a universe where Elva stopped calling me Mommy and it took everything in me not to

cry again.

“Please, Nicholas. Keep this secret. For me.” (1

His jawline tensed. But, after a moment, he said, “Fine.” A beat later, he added, “For now.”

Chapter 240

Chapter 0240

The evening of the fundraising gala, Elva and I changed into our glistening golden dresses and waited in the parlor with the other candidates for Nathan to come and bring us to the event.

We stood near Susie for a while, but she was distracted. She had prepared notecards for her pitch, as well as some responses to questions she might be asked. She read through them aloud, over and over.

“I’ll hide them up my sleeve if I have to,” she said, when I asked her about them.

Elva twisted and turned, catching light on her puffy shirts. Then she tried to catch it with her hands. She

giggled at her own antics. “So pretty...” she whispered to herself.

“Piper. Speak with us.”

I glanced up to see Veronica approaching, with Tiffany close behind. novelbin

My nerves spiked, and I worried they had seen Jane again. But when I looked closer at Tiffany, she

wasn’t carrying her tension in quite the same way she had the previous two times she approached me.

This time, she seemed more excited than anxious.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked, forcing myself calm.

“How we should split Julian’s time during the gala,” Tiffany said. The two came to stand before Elva and

me. Tiffany waved at Elva, smiling. Elva blinked up at her and shyly waved back.

“Splitting his time evenly would be the most logical,” Veronica said. “We will already be competing with

each other in our pitches to the benefactors. It would be fruitless to compete for Julian’s attention as

well.”

“Plus, bickering amongst ourselves won’t look good to the benefactors,” Tiffany added. “Not to mention,

the uncomfortable position it would put Julian in.”

Veronica gave a quick, curt nod. “Julian shouldn’t need to trouble himself with that.”

I stared at them both in disbelief. Compared to Linda, Lilliana, Olivia, and almost every other candidate I had dealt with, aside from Susie, these two genuinely seemed to have Julian’s best intentions at heart,

even more than their own.

I couldn’t help but be in awe of them, as well as incredibly grateful that they were the ones I was working

with now. At least, in part.

Across the room, Lilliana and Olivia were in a conversation of their own, all fake smiles and dagger-

I doubted this same conversation with them would go half so well.

“Piper, you take the first hour with Julian,” Veronica said. “Then Tiffany. Then me.”

Tiffany and I both agreed.

“May the best candidate win,” Tiffany said.

Veronica looked at her. “I intend to,” she said, deadpan. A tense moment passed, but then the edge of

her lip curled up into a smile. She’d been joking.

Tiffany immediately burst into a laugh.

I smiled too, just a little. One of my few real smiles since Jane held a knife to my throat. I knew I would

have to smile a lot tonight, to win over the benefactors, so I had been practicing in the mirror, trying to

find the smile that looked the most convincing.

It was nice not to have to fake it, even if only for a passing moment.

Not long after, Nathan came into the room to collect us, and we were being herded to the ballroom.

As with each of the previous balls, each candidate was announced and led down the stairs. When it was

our turn, I lifted Elva into my arms and carried her. As soon as she reached the bottom, she squirmed to

be let down. I complied but made her hold my hand instead.

“I don’t want to hold hands.”

“You have to,” I said. “Those are the rules.”

“What rules?”

She seemed cranky tonight. I wondered if she was getting enough sleep.

“We talked about this, Elva. It’s unsafe to let go of Mommy’s hand.”

Elva pouted but didn’t argue. She hung her arm like a wet noodle, perhaps her last line of defiance. I could hold her hand even if she didn’t put any effort in, so I didn’t mind.

As per the agreement with the other candidates selected by Julian, I began to search him out in the

ballroom. He found me first, suddenly appearing at my side.