

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 311 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 311

Chapter 311

Chapter 0311

There was no question who him meant.

Nicholas.

With Nicholas, I wouldn't be playing pretend.

I looked at Julian. The curves and planes of his face weren't all that different from Nicholas's. If I squinted...

Better yet, if I closed my eyes entirely.

Julian's fingers were softer than Nicholas's, but when he slipped them back through my hair, it was harder to tell.

Julian traced the tip of his nose along my cheekbone. It was a gentle touch, intimate.

I tried to imagine Nicholas doing it. But I couldn't quite manage.

I leaned back.

The producer said, "Hold it. Stop filming."

I opened eyes.

"Let's take a break for a bit," the producer said.

Behind us, Elva was dozing on the chair the King had been using. I watched her for a while. Anything to keep from looking at Julian and seeing the disappointment in his eyes.

"You can't even pretend?" he asked softly. "I know you like Nicholas, but surely you can see that I'm not all that bad."

"I know you aren't," I said. "But..."

“But?” Julian prompted, when I struggled to find the words.

“I can’t be untrue to my own heart. I don’t want to lead you on.”

Julian tilted his head minutely. Then he laughed so suddenly that I startled.

“None of this is real, Piper. I know that. I’m not going to suddenly think you are in love with me.”

“I know, but…” It did seem foolish, when he put it like that.

“Think of it like a game,” Julian said. “Think of yourself as an actress and we’re only doing all this for some great movie.”

“Okay “I said “I can try to that “s

“Good.” His smile softened.

I glanced at Elva again. She seemed to be sleeping soundly. That, at least, was a blessing. I didn’t want her to see what I was about to do. The poor girl would have a hard enough time when Nicholas would have to let us go. I didn’t want her to be even more confused.

Julian nodded to the producer, and the producer signaled to the cameraman, who began to film again.

Julian cupped my face with both hands. The way he looked at me… so soft… so gentle… Almost like he was really in love.

I knew it was pretend, but the intensity of it still stole my breath away.

Julian was an amazing actor. It seemed so real.

He leaned in closer. He brushed the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip.

He was going to kiss me. This was a signal. It had to happen.

I only wanted to kiss Nicholas, but that wasn’t reality. Nicholas would leave me soon. The only thing I could do was make sure he would remain safe here. If my influence could help him

I closed my eyes.

Julian's lips pressed onto mine. His kiss was soft, not demanding at all. He just stayed pressed against me, tender, almost caressing his lips against mine.

His tongue came next, slowly. I wanted to lock my jaw, clamp my teeth, to keep his tongue away. But I had to let him in. For the game we were playing, the movie we were acting...

To keep Nicholas safe...

I parted my teeth, and Julian slipped his tongue into my mouth.

Julian was a good kisser, likely from an immense amount of practice. Maybe if I hadn't known Nicholas, I would have been swept away in him. As it was, I could only think of the man I truly wanted...

"Piper?"

My eyes shot open. I pressed against Julian, shoving him away.

Standing in the doorway, eyes wide with shock, stood Nicholas.

He looked at me in disbelief... in hurt?

Then his gaze shifted to Julian, and he growled.

Chapter 312

Chapter 0312

"What the hell is going on in here?" Nicholas asked. "Julian?"

I was too stunned to speak, but when I looked over to Julian, I saw that he was smirking.

Nicholas turned his rage on the producers. "Why are you filming this?"

The producer jumped, then bowed much lower than was necessary. "It was approved by the crown, Your Royal Highness. The King himself commanded us!"

"Retract your claws before you hurt someone," Julian said casually as he rose to his feet. This isn't their fault."

”

Nicholas reared back to him. “Then explain it to me, brother. And while you are giving that explanation, you can explain why you felt it necessary to summon me to witness this.” The way he say this, with such open disgust, made me want to crawl into a hole.

“Our parents thought we should utilize Piper’s popularity for the benefit of the whole,” Julian said. “Because nothing says, we’re worthy of being liked by commoners, than having one of those commoners make out with a prince.”

“A prince,” Nicholas said. “Why did it have to be you?”

I felt like Nicholas too easily accepted Julian’s explanation of why we were being filmed kissing, and jumped straight to why not me?

“Nicholas,” I said.

When he saw me, he seemed to remember the other things too. “Piper shouldn’t need to do this with anyone.”

“Tell that to Dad,” Julian said. “Or better yet, how about those protesters outside? I bet

they’d love to hear from you.”

Nicholas glowered. He frowned so deeply, I thought steam might come out of his ears. He turned to the producers again. “I want to see the footage. Whatever you do, you cannot use

that kiss.”

To Julian, I hissed, “Did you really summon him here?”

Julian shrugged so casually, like it didn’t matter.

“Why would you do that?” I said, my own anger spiking. “You are trying to stir more drama

with Nicholas. He didn’t have to know about this.”

Julian lifted a brow. “You think he wouldn’t have seen it on TV? Trust me, Piper. He was always going

to find out, but this way, novelbin

way, it's more fun."

"It's unnecessarily cruel," I said.

Julian's smirk took on a harsh edge. "He deserves this and more for stealing Bridget from me."

Bridget again. Her name made me pause and ebbed some of my anger. When I opened my mouth again, I half-forgot where I was and what was happening. I so very much wanted to ask him for the truth of what happened between him, Nicholas, and Bridget.

Nicholas spoke before I could, and I was ashamed and grateful at once.

"This is a terrible plan," Nicholas said. His hands were in tight fists, but the rage had

simmered in his voice, likely because he kept glancing at Elva asleep on the chair. "If someone had come to me about it -"

"You would have disapproved, and we'd be in the same terrible pit as before," Julian said. He motioned toward me. "Piper agreed to all this. I didn't just spring it on her. She was asked."

Both pairs of eyes fall on me.

"Is that true?" Nicholas said. "Were you asked? And you agreed to this?"

Either answer would hurt him. He didn't want anyone to force me to do anything, but so few days ago, I

had pushed him away, wanting to shield my heart. Now here I was, so casually kissing someone else.

I had my reasons, and they were sound. But nothing felt good enough now, facing with the reality of his pain.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas," I said. I tried to keep my voice steady, so as not to betray the quaking emotion within me. "It is as Julian says.

I wanted to throw my arms around Nicholas and smother him in my kisses until he knew that he was the only man that I held so dearly in my heart. That Julian and I were only playing pretend.

But I couldn't move. I had to sit very still.

I curled my hands around my knees, holding on to keep from falling.

"And you are comfortable with this?" Nicholas pressed. "You don't have to do this, you know. No matter what Julian or my father said to you."

"I know," I said, a lie. I had to do this, to protect Nicholas himself. I wouldn't let the people rebel. I wouldn't let them tear this palace apart. Since I wielded influence, I would leverage it to protect him. "I am comfortable."

Nicholas frowned.

Even Julian wavered at my obvious lie. "We're getting there. But it really is the best plan to quell all this talk of rebellion. Come on, Nicholas. You know it's true. Like this, we win the hearts of the people, and –"

"I want to talk to Piper alone," Nicholas said.

Julian sighed as he looked at me. His lifted brow seemed to say, Well? What do

you want?

I raised myself to my feet and followed Nicholas to a corner of the room where we could speak privately, while still keeping an eye on everyone else.

"You can tell me the truth now, Piper," he said. He dropped his gaze to me. The green flickered dangerously in the golden depths. "Why are you doing this?"

I licked my lips to give myself a moment's time. If he wouldn't accept a blatant lie, then maybe I could skirt the truth enough that it might not be noticeable.

Either way, I simply could not let him know the truth. If Nicholas knew I was pretending to love Julian just to save him, he would never agree to let it happen. He would be more likely to throw me over his shoulder and haul me out of this room by force than let me kiss Julian without wanting to.

“It’s for the good of the kingdom,” I said. Not an untruth.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes.

That wasn’t going to be enough. “It’s not... terrible. I don’t mind it.”

Kissing Julian was awkward. He wasn’t the person I wanted to be kissing. But he wasn’t unattractive,

and he kissed in a tender way that spoke of experience and respect.

He wasn’t the worst person to kiss, if I had to kiss someone.

He was not nearly as good a kisser as Nicholas. Not as hot or passionate or loving or generous. ³ But Nicholas wasn’t an option. ²

Still, what I said seemed to have been the wrong thing. Nicholas went very still. A fire raged in his eyes, but it was strictly confined there. His face betrayed no emotion.

A cold winter win brewed in my heart, swallowing around me.

I had said the wrong thing.

“Nicholas, I didn’t mean...”

He held up his hand. “You don’t have to explain it to me, Piper.” He turned away from me. “Nick...” I started after him.

“Do whatever you want,” he said, sharp and cruel. I froze to the spot, chilled.

Nicholas stormed from the room then, not looking back. The producers watched him leave. Julian did too, before looking at me.

Julian came to my side. “You alright?”

I shook my head. I didn’t cry, but the tears welled in the corners of my eyes.

It took everything I had not to chase after him.

I hurt him, and I hated it.

Chapter 313

Chapter 0313

"I'm afraid to ask," I said to Charlotte over tea a couple of days later, "But what does the public think of Julian and my fake relationship?"

Charlotte closed her eyes. She clapped her hands together and inhaled deeply. "I don't even know where to begin." novelbin

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" I asked.

"A good thing. A very good thing." When she opened her eyes, her gaze was intense, as if she'd been waiting for this moment to share everything with me. "It's totally taken over the news cycle. Outside of the palace, it's all anyone can talk about."

"I'd been Julian's favorite for a while..."

"Yeah, but it was nothing like this," Charlotte said. "The way you two acted on camera has claimed everyone's attention. People are barely even talking about Terry anymore. Instead, it's all about the great debate."

I looked at her strangely. When she didn't elaborate, I pressed, "The debate?"

"On who you should be with," Charlotte said. She took a sip of her tea. "Julian or Nicholas."

Being on a dating competition that was viewed publicly by most of the kingdom, I understood that my love life would generate some type of discussion. But to actually hear about it happening feels so

surreal, I can hardly believe it.

"What are they saying?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Some people think Julian's bad boy behavior might be too much for you. Others think you might be the one who could 'fix' him."

"Fix him?" Julian didn't need fixed. He was fine the way he was and whoever he ended up with needed to see that.

I tried to imagine what a ‘fixed’ Julian would even look like. Would he need to become the son his father wanted him to be, obedient and perfect? I cringed. That was not Julian.

Julian’s rebellious streak was part of who he was. If that was taken away, he would be a fundamentally different person.

“What are they saying about Nicholas and me?” I asked, mostly to drag my thoughts away from such an unsettling image.

Charlotte lowered her head. She’d been so keen to talk about Julian only a moment ago, but now she was clamming up.

“Charlotte?”

She sighed. When she spoke, it was with reluctance, as if the words were dragged out of her. “ They don’t know if you would make the best Luna...”

“Oh.” The words struck me in the gut, punching harder than they had any right to. They were right to question me, I had no experience with leading a kingdom. I had no wolf. I dropped out of the Academy.

Most of the time, I didn’t know what I was doing here at all. Sometimes everything felt like a dream. Reunited with Nicholas, Elva being healthy, have three meals a day with a solid roof over my head...

I knew it was temporary, and my time here had not been without strife. But to not worry about the basic needs of Elva and me was such a relief.

A true Luna would have bigger concerns than herself and her immediate family. With the way my life had been, I’d had to focus on Elva and me just to survive.

The public had a right to question if I would be a good Luna. They had a right to doubt me as the best match for Nicholas.

Because I doubted all those things too.

“I’m sorry,” Charlotte said.

I felt bad. She had been excited to tell me the gossip. I felt like I stole some of her sunshine away.

“No,” I said. “It’s nothing I shouldn’t have expected.”

Later that afternoon, Nicholas came to visit to spend time with Elva. Today, he and Elva had taken perch at the table and were taking turns drawing horses. Elva’s were mostly stick-figures with four long legs. Nicholas’s weren’t much better.

They would show each other and laugh and it was very sweet. When they had taken a break, I sneaked away some drawings from both their piles to cherish as keepsakes.

Elva was introducing Nicholas to her dolls when I came closer. I caught Nicholas’s eye and smiled at him, he made no return gesture. He simply blinked at me and looked back at Elva.

Elva received all of his smiles today. While I was glad for it – I would never be jealous of my child – I felt the growing rift between Nicholas and me. He had not forgiven me, then, for kissing Julian. For doing what needed to be done to both save the kingdom, and him.

When playtime was over, Nicholas gave Elva a big hug.

“I’ll see you out,” I told him as they parted.

“Please visit again, Nick-lass!” Elva called.

“I will,” he said. “I promise.”

That was good enough for Elva. She returned to her dolls.

When Nicholas and I reached the door, I turned to face him. “Nick, we need to talk about this

“What is there to talk about, Piper?”

“This.” I wavered between us. I hated feelings so distant from him, like he was giving me the cold shoulder. “I understand you don’t like the idea of Julian and me, but...”

He crossed his arms. This wasn’t going to be an easy conversation.

“Can’t you see what I’m doing is exactly what you’ve been doing with Olivia and Lilliana? It’s not real,” I said.

“This is different than that,” he said, voice flat.

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“How?” I pressed.

He locked his jaw. He didn’t have a good enough answer then.

“It’s okay to be jealous,” I said.

“I’m not jealous.” Suddenly emotion was back in his voice, fierce and sharp, and totally contradictory to his words.

It made something inside of me snap.

“Oh, no? Then what is it? Because whatever is going on between Julian and me isn’t real. It’s trying to punish me for it?”

I hadn’t meant to say so much, but my heart was so battle worn from the growing distance between us. I hadn’t been able to shield my feelings at all. If anything, I only felt more heartsick, being apart from him.

Could he feel it too? Was that part of why he was so cold? Did our distance make him just as miserable?

Finally, at once, Nicholas sighed and all of the tension slipped away with him. A bit of warmth returned to his voice and his eyes. He seemed almost sad, looking at me now.

“I’m not trying to punish you, Piper. I’m just... infuriated by the situation. You shouldn’t be in this position. None of this should fall on you.”

“I’m strong,” I said. “I can handle it.”

“I know that, but I still don’t like it.” Clenching his jaw, he looked away. “I also don’t trust Julian.”

“Julian would never hurt me.” Of that, I was entirely certain.

Nicholas shook his head. “I’m not worried about him hurting you...”

I frowned. "Then what?"

His gaze slid back to me and for a long moment, he stared down at me, as if he could see into the depths of my soul. He stepped closer, right into my space, forcing me to look up at him.

He could kiss me like this. I wanted him too. I held my breath, anticipating.

His eyes slipped down to my lips. I licked them.

He swallowed hard.

Time slowed. If he tried to kiss me, I would let him. Putting distance between us felt like a terrible mistake. I'd regret it now, if he'd let me. I'd kiss him until we both needed to come up for air.

Instead, he stepped back. "Goodnight, Piper," he said, then turned and left the room.

The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 315 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 315

Chapter 315

Chapter 0315

Nicholas

After leaving Piper's room, I knew what I had to do. What I should have done from the start, as soon as I learned of Piper and Julian's fake relationship.

I went to my father's rooms and requested an audience. Nathan didn't seem thrilled about it, but announced me all the same. The King generally had an opened-door policy with his sons, assuming no other matter was pressing, so I was welcomed inside.

The King was at the head of his long table, shuffling through some documents I didn't recognize. At a glance, they appeared to be reports from our border patrols. More unrest in the North?

My father lowered the documents as I approached. He did not address them. Instead, he kept his gaze on me.

“Something’s bothering you,” he said.

My father appreciated straight-forwardness, so I dove in without preamble. “Piper should not need to be in a relationship with Julian.”

The King sighed. “I knew you would disapprove. But you must understand that their relationship is of vital importance to our public relations.”

“Find a different way to improve it,” I said firmly. “Something that doesn’t involve Piper.”

“Using Piper is the easiest way.

“I don’t care about easy,” I said. “I don’t want her involved in this.”

“She’s already involved, Nicholas. Her entire presence here at the competition has only ever been to improve our image with the common people.” The King rubbed his temple. He seemed bored with this discussion, which irked me to no end.

He didn’t care about Piper. Maybe he didn’t care about any of the commoners. He only seemed invested in optics.

“Piper is a tool in our repertoire. One we need to properly utilize,” he said.

“She is not a tool. She is a person.”

The King sighed. He wasn’t listening, not really. If I didn’t turn this conversation around, he’d likely just dismiss me without a resolution.

From his demeanor, I could tell he wasn’t going to change his mind on this. Piper was in the thick of it here, and I wouldn’t be able to convince him to let her out of it.

Perhaps I could offer a compromise instead.

“Let me be the one to date her,” I said. “If she has to be with one of us, I’m the more stable choice.”

“Absolutely not,” the King said flatly. I opened my mouth to argue, but he beat me to it. “We all expect that you will be the one to inherit the throne, Nicholas. We cannot have you tangled in scandals like this.”

“It won’t be a scandal “

“It’s already a scandal!” He smacked his hand down on the table. “Do not think for one minute that I have forgotten your antics at the last elimination ceremony. Already there is talk of what is going on between you and Piper. But let me make one thing very clear.”

An unusual fire burned in his eyes, something like betrayal and hatred, likely stowed by Terry and simmering since. I knew he didn’t hate me. He didn’t hate Julian either. But his position forced him to see shadows when there were none.

“Piper will marry none of my sons, not even Julian. When the time is right, and it will no longer reflect badly on us, they will go their separate ways. And a public breakup with Julian would be far less damaging for the entire family than anything involving you, Nicholas.”

“Father, if you would hear me out...”

“There’s nothing more to be said on this matter,” the King said. “If you stay, I expect you to speak only of different matters.”

I closed my mouth.

“That’s what I thought.” The King sighed. “Do not let this trouble you overmuch, son. When the competition progresses, Piper will soon enough be gone and we can all move forward.”

I didn’t want to move forward. I didn’t want to move any direction that would not include Piper.

But arguing with my father was useless. Once he set his mind to something, he would not be swayed.

So I did the only thing I could do. I nodded and saw myself out.

As soon as I opened the door, Julian stumbled away from it, backing up into the hallway. novelbin

I narrowed my eyes at him. He had clearly been eavesdropping. I would have called him out right away, but I didn’t want father to overhear. So I stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind me.

“So I eavesdropped... slightly,” Julian said, waving one hand. “That’s not a crime.”

“It is, if it’s the King you’re eavesdropping on.”

“It’s not, if you are the King’s son.”

My frown deepened. He exhaled long and slow.

“I can see you aren’t in the mood for games,” he said.

“Do you even know how to have a conversation without them?” I asked.

He placed a hand over his heart like I had hurt him. “Honestly, brother, it’s not you I’m worried about, anyway. It’s our Piper that concerns me.”

“What about her?”

Memories of Julian cupping Piper’s face, his mouth on hers, made a storm erupt within me. I wanted to throttle him until I felt better, but I knew I’d never feel better.

I’d told Piper I wasn’t jealous but that was a damn lie. I didn’t want anyone’s arms around Piper but my own. That Julian had kissed her, made me want to riot.

“She likes you,” Julian said. “It’s obvious to everyone. Even when she was sweet with me, I had to convince her to pretend I was you.”

That warmed something chilly inside of me. I hadn’t necessarily thought that Piper would prefer Julian to me, but having the confirmation was nice.

“You could have her if you weren’t such a damn coward,” Julian said.

My good feelings vanished. What the hell did he mean by that? I glared at him.

He shrugged. “All you would have to do is actually stand up to our father.”

“The King is to be obeyed,” I said.

Julian snorted out a harsh laugh. “Go d, you are ever the perfect, most obedient son. No wonder you are the favorite, following around on his heels all the time.”

“The King has the best interests of the kingdom at heart,” I said, because that’s what I always said:

trusted my father. I had to. If I didn’t, how could I support him as the leader of the kingdom I loved?

“Do you ever wonder why you lost Piper that first time?” Julian asked, startling me into silence. “She didn’t trust you with her secrets. She didn’t know you were a prince, but she knew you would never put her first.”

“I’m a prince,” I said, like that held all the answers. Maybe, at one point in my life, it had. It seemed to be much less significant now. “I can’t put Piper first in my life. The kingdom will always come first.”

Julian shrugged. “That’s why you’ll never have her. And why you’ll never deserve her.”

I felt rooted to the spot. His words cut into me more than I wanted to admit to him, or to myself.

I knew I was right. I was the oldest prince. I was the one most likely to inherit the crown. I had to live my life a certain way and always follow my father’s rules.

Maybe Piper did deserve better than me.

“That’s the difference between you and I, brother. She can be my number one priority,” Julian said. “And when the time comes for father to tell me to drop her, maybe I won’t.”

I went very still. “What are you saying?”

Julian shrugged. “Maybe I’m the one Piper needs.”

Chapter 316

Chapter 0316

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Julian shrugged. “Maybe I’m the one Piper needs.”

Chapter 317

Chapter 0317

The next morning, I awoke early and shuffled down with the rest of the candidates and their personal guards into the foyer for announcements. Nathan was already on the stage, rummaging through his phone.

I spotted Susie and stood in the open spot between her and Tiffany. Veronica was there too, but stood a few feet behind. Heavy bags hung under her eyes. Had she been up late researching again?

Two days before, she had pulled me aside to discuss what little progress she’d made in finding ways to return my wolf. She promised she wouldn’t give up, however, and seemed to work even harder since then.

I wanted her to find an answer, though I didn’t want her to hurt herself. Maybe I would talk to her again soon, and tell her to take care of herself first.

“If I can have your attention, please,” Nathan said loudly. When everyone had quieted to look at him, he continued, “Thank you all for your patience these past several days as we’ve worked to repair the damage Terry had done to the reputation of the royal family and the competition itself.”

Around the group, several of the girls nodded, Olivia included, most critically.

“Unfortunately we have no new event planned yet for the competition,” Nathan continued.

A disappointed exhale sounded around the room.

“However...”

The group inhaled again.

“The royal family and the producers have decided that we would like complete interviews with the candidates. This will give the public more time to get to know your individual personalities, as well as provide an opportunity for you to express how much you’ve enjoyed your time here with us.”

Ah, so that was it. The royal family was continuing to hope we'd be able to improve their diminished reputation. It made sense, and I was glad to have the help. My fake relationship with Julian could only go so far.

Honestly, though, deep inside, I was dreading what questions I might be asked.

And as I was sitting in the small room arranged for the individual interviews, I realized I had right to worry.

Two producers, Nathan, and the cameraman were behind the camera. I alone was in front of it, sitting on a single tall-back chair, with the lens right up in my face.

"Love is in the air for you most of all, Piper!" the producer said, overly excited. "We've all seen the special kiss you traded with Julian. The public is dying to know, what is it like to have met your soulmate?"

"Uh..." My soulmate? That was much too far, but I couldn't say so. Not without potentially embarrassing

Julian, the people who felt that way, and the entire royal family. I cleared my throat. "Julian and I are... very close."

"Was it love at first sight?" the other producer asked.

"No," I said. The producer's bright smile fell. "N-no, uh, our affection began there, sure, but it took longer for our, uh, deeper feelings to grow."

The producer bounced back. "Ah, because he's such a bad boy. You must have been nervous, being so attracted to him."

"Yes, that's right." That narrative felt safe enough for now.

"Tell us, Piper," said the first producer, "How do you feel when he walks into the room?"

I knew they wanted something romantic to sell the viewers at home. I wanted to comply, to help improve relations, but the truth was, when Julian walked into the room, I didn't feel much of anything. He was my friend, and I was pleased to see him. But that wouldn't move anyone at home. novelbin

So instead, I thought of Nicholas.

It was like night and day, a world of difference. If Nicholas walked into this room right now, he would have stolen my breath away.

“My heart races,” I said. “Whatever other light was in the room seems to dim, and he becomes the brightest thing in the room. I can’t help myself from staring, though I tell myself I shouldn’t. I don’t want to give too much away.”

Chapter 318

Chapter 0318

The producer giggled. “What about when he takes your hand?”

“No,” cut in the second producer. “Tell us what it feels like when he kisses you?”

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth. Somethings were private, but I could share some others. For the good of the Kingdom. For Nichola s’s sake.

“I feel like I’m flying,” I said. “Like the rest of the world has slowed down, and the only two people who exist in the whole universe are me and Nicholas.”

“Cut!” Nathan said, pushing forward.

I blinked, startled. Hadn’t I been doing well? The producers had seemed to eat it all up. Although they both seemed surprised now, and not from Nathan’s interruption.

What had I done? What had I said?

I thought back. Then I remembered.

I said Nicholas.

“Uh...” I swallowed hard. “I meant Julian.”

“Delete that footage,” Nathan demanded at once. “We’ll start again.”

“Of course,” the cameraman worked quickly.

Nathan glared at me. “Do you think you can remember which prince you are dating, Piper?” His words were unkind, his tone even less so.

I understood the upset. If that had been lied, it would have made a terrible scandal.

“Yes,” I said and lowered my head.

They made me do two more takes. On the first retry, I looked guiltier than in love. The third and final, they deemed, “Good enough.”

By the time my interview was complete, I was exhausted and ready to sleep for a hundred years. As I shuffled my way back to my room, one of Nicholas’s guards in my shadow, I was stopped by another guard.

I didn’t recognize this one, but he seemed friendly enough, greeting me, “Good afternoon, Miss.”

He held out a folded piece of paper. “For you.”

I accepted it. “Thank you.”

“Love is in the air for you most of all, Piper!” the producer said, overly excited. “We’ve all seen the

special kiss you traded with Julian. The public is dying to know, what is it like to have met your soulmate?”

“Uh...” My soulmate? That was much too far, but I couldn’t say so. Not without potentially embarrassing Julian, the people who felt that way, and the entire royal family. I cleared my throat. “Julian and I are... very close.”

“Was it love at first sight?” the other producer asked. novelbin

“No,” I said. The producer’s bright smile fell. “N-no, uh, our affection began there, sure, but it took longer for our, uh, deeper feelings to grow.”

The producer bounced back. “Ah, because he’s such a bad boy. You must have been nervous, being so attracted to him.”

“Yes, that’s right.” That narrative felt safe enough for now.

“Tell us, Piper,” said the first producer, “How do you feel when he walks into the room?”

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I accepted it. "Thank you."

As the guard walked away, I flipped it open. Inside was a note, seemingly typed with a typewriter. It had been a while, but Nick and I, back at the Academy sometimes left notes for each other like this.

He hadn't done this yet since my arrival. Maybe he was trying to win me over,

I was ready to be won.

The note read, "Meet me at the ballroom balcony at midnight. Come alone."

A secret rendezvous was incredibly romantic. It wasn't like Nicholas, really, but God, I was so desperate to see him and right all the mistakes I'd made these past several days.

I was quickly learning, no matter how much distance I tried to place between us, my heart would never frost over to him. He could thaw me with a look, even across the room, and all the effort I'd made into steeling my heart against him was instantly for not,

I was coming to realize now that being close to him was what I truly wanted. Instead of trying to push him away, maybe what I needed was to keep him as close as I could, until I simply couldn't anymore.

Nothing would stop the encroaching hurt.

All I could do was love while I still had a chance.

I rushed to my room, Nicholas's kisses on my mind.

Waiting until midnight was a challenge. I couldn't seem to stop my bouncing knee. During dinner, I would rise, walk around the table, and sit again.

I couldn't sit still. I was simply too excited.

At ten to midnight, I sneaked out of my room. It was difficult to convince the guard to let me go alone, but I somehow managed. Maybe they were used to me sneaking out by now, knowing I was going to see Nicholas.

I wandered the hallways in the dark, then pushed out onto the balcony.

A man was leaning on the banister, looking out over the forest. I went to his side, a smile bright on my face.

The smile dropped when he turned toward me.

This was not Nicholas.

It was Joyce.

Chapter 319

Chapter 0319

Joyce regarded me with a cool expression. His gaze trailed over me with disinterest. I felt suddenly exposed in my thin nightgown and robe. I wrapped my arms around myself.

"Joyce? You were the one who wanted to see me?" I asked in disbelief.

He nodded curtly. "I wanted to see if you were reckless enough to follow that note out onto a balcony, even knowing all the safety measures we have in place right now."

“Oh...” I lowered my head, ashamed and embarrassed. novelbin

“My brothers are fond of you,” he said. “That gives me enough reason to be concerned for you too.”

“I see...”

I thought back on my actions since receiving that note. My overwhelming desire to see Nicholas had tainted my own self-preservation. I’d even sneaked away from the guards who were supposed to protect me.

Thank God it was only Joyce out here and not someone who actually meant to do me harm or I would have walked straight into a trap.

The note had even been typed rather than handwritten. I should have known better. Even if Nicholas and I had left similar notes to each other in the past, he wouldn’t recreate that now – not with the

danger I’d been in.

Nicholas would have never wanted me to endanger myself by shaking loose my guard and meeting him out here in the cold night.

Joyce was right for having called me out. I was being dangerously reckless.

“Thank you, Joyce,” I said. “I’ll keep this lesson close.”

He tilted his head. He didn’t say anything, just watched me closely.

I shifted slightly, feeling like a sample under a microscope.

Joyce and I had been friendly enough, but our conversations had been few and far between. With my closeness to both Nicholas and Julian, it made sense for him to be curious about me.

But now that I thought about it... Wasn’t the balcony a strange place to meet?

I was proven reckless, so what would happen now? What was Joyce’s actual plan beyond this moment?

And why did I feel a chill run down my spine, suddenly unnerved?

No, that wasn't fair. Joyce was a prince – Nicholas and Julian's brother! throw suspicions on.

He had a different way of doing things. This could simply be an extension of that. I had enough enemies. Imagining more would do nothing to help me. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness," I said, hoping to end this entire scene. My embarrassment was immense. I wanted to hurry back to my room and bury myself under my covers until I stopped feeling so foolish. Joyce nodded, and I felt relief. "I'll leave first," he said. "Okay," I said, though I wasn't sure why that would matter. It was so late, I doubt anyone would see us together unless they knew to look. Although with the way tensions were so high, perhaps it was better to be cautious. If I was seen afterhours in the presence of yet another prince, I wasn't sure the public would be so accepting.

Joyce went through the door, leaving me alone on the balcony.

I waited five minutes. I counted to sixty five times.

"59... 60...'

Then I headed for the door. I tried to turn the knob. It wouldn't budge.

I blinked, surprised. That couldn't be right.

I tried to turn the handle harder, but it wouldn't move.

It was locked.

Joyce locked it behind him?

Had he done so intentionally? No, no, that couldn't be. It had to be an accident. He seemed the absent- minded type. Likely he walked through and locked the door on reflex. 2

Why would he want to purposefully lock me out here? That didn't make any sense.

But, even accidental, this left me with a problem. The temperature was dropping, and I was stuck out on the balcony in my nightgown. Anyone could happen by. I had no way of defending myself. Without a cell phone, I had no way of contacting anyone, either.

Chapter 320

Chapter 0320

Looking around, I searched for another exit. There was another door further down, but it was more barred than the first, not just latched but also wedged with a piece of wood.

Okay. So the doors were out.

Giving up on the doors, I looked along the banister instead.

There. An old oak stood nearby with long, sturdy-looking branches. If I crawled up onto the banister, I could reach out and catch one of the limbs. Then I could climb down.

It wouldn't be the most delicate maneuver. I'd likely ruin my nightgown and my thin slippers, but ruining a few pieces of delicate clothing seemed a fair trade for not freezing to death.

I used to climb trees all the time when I was a kid. This wouldn't be any different than that, right?

Like riding a bicycle, once you learn, you never truly forgot. At least, that's what I hoped.

I climbed up onto the banister, and reached out for the tree. I put some weight on it. It didn't creak or crack. Safe, then.

Carefully, I lifted myself up onto the branch, then shimmied closer to the trunk. Once there, I began the arduous process of descending. The balcony had been on the second floor, so the ground wasn't too far. This gave me more confidence than it should have.

I jumped down to the next lowest branch. I had not tested the weight this time.

The branch snapped in half, and down, down I fell.

I reached my hands out, desperate to cling to something. I grabbed handfuls of leaves, a few acorns, but nothing to stop my fall.

"Hey!" someone called from the ground.

I braced myself.

A loud thud sounded. Someone said, "Oof."

The ground was a lot softer than I thought it would be.

I opened my eyes and found myself on top of Julian.

Quickly, I rushed up to my feet. "I'm so sorry!"

"Are you alright?" he asked, each word a pained grunt. "I'm fine," I said. "And you?"

Groaning, he pushed himself onto his feet. I grabbed him by the elbow to help him up. "I'll live," he said, and dusted away some of the grass from his backside.

"What were you doing out here?" I asked him. No one else was around, not even Brian. And Julian was still wearing his day's clothes, like he hadn't gone to bed yet. novelbin

"Sometimes I like to walk and clear my head," he said. He looked up. "Piper, why were you in that tree?"

"Oh," I said and pointed to the second floor. "I had gotten accidentally locked on the balcony."

Julian frowned at me. "Why in the world were you on the balcony at this time of night?"

"I'd gotten a note..." My cheeks began to burn. The embarrassment that had dissipated with the fall returned tenfold. Of course, of all people, Julian would be the one to rescue me.

If I told him the truth, he'd never let me live it down. But why lie would I even tell? He's see right through it. T

"It said to meet someone there at midnight..."

"And you thought it would be Nicholas." He crossed his arms.

I nodded.

His gaze narrowed. "Who was it really?"

"Joyce," I said.

His eyes widened a little. "My brother Joyce?"

"I don't know any others..."

Julian looked troubled. It was unusual, even I knew that. Julian seemed to know more than me.

"We should go," he said and took hold of my arm. "Now."

His urgency seemed unwarranted.

"Back to my room? I don't think anyone's awake yet."

"Not to your room," Julian said. "To find Nicholas."

I nearly tripped, but Julian's hold on my arm kept me upright. "Nicholas? Why?"

Julian's frown seemed permanent. "I have a very bad feeling."