

Chapter 329

Chapter 0329

In full view of the watchful cameras, Julian and I stood side by side in the kitchen, a plate of cookies on

the counter before us. We'd already rolled out the dough, cut the shapes, and baked them in the oven.

These were the finished results.

It had been difficult to relax in front of the camera crew, including the producer who would call out

random commands like, "Put flour on her nose, Julian!" Or, "Smile at him, Piper!"

At least, cookies now existed. The sweet treat might make the awkwardness of this fake date worth it. I

reached for one of the cookies. They should be warm enough now.

"Feed her one of the cookies, Julian," the producer said.

I froze. Beside me, Julian did too. He glanced at me.

What could I do? We were supposed to be on a date. Feeding each other treats was a common date

practice. Nicholas and I had shared from each other's plates all the time when we had been together.

So I nodded.

Julian plucked one of the cookies from the plate. Slowly, giving me time to prepare himself, he brought

it up to my face.

“Open wide,” he said with a cheeky grin. It might have been for show, or he was just enjoying himself.

He was hard to read on the best of days, let alone when he was actively playing a role.

I opened my mouth.

Julian placed the cookie on my tongue. I bit down and chewed. It was delicious, as I expected.

Julian brought the rest of the cookie up to his own mouth and ate it. After he chewed and swallowed,

his smile grew wide. “Delicious.” He inched closer. “But not as sweet as you.”

He was saying it for the cameras, I knew. I still blushed. What a line.

“Great,” the producer called. “Now kiss her, Julian!”

Julian’s gaze dropped to my lips. He was so good at this game. Meanwhile, my whole body locked up. I

could do most things, but kissing Julian still made me feel off-balance. It was a line I didn’t want to

cross, but I had to or I’d risk losing everything.

I licked my lips. They were chapped. This wasn’t going to be a good kiss.

I wished I was going to kiss Nicholas instead.

Julian gripped my upper arms. Then, he leaned down.

+15 BONUS

My whole body tensed. I squeezed my eyes closed. Hopefully he'd make this quick. How much of a

kiss did the producers need? Surely they could extend it out in post-production, if they needed to.

Julian came closer. I could feel his breath against my lips. Yet just as I expected him to press down, he

pulled away.

I peeked open one eye and saw him frowning at me.

"Julian?" I asked.

He whispered his answer, "I don't like kissing girls who don't want me to." He kept his voice soft, too

quiet for the cameras to hear over the bustle of the kitchen.

His words were kind, but I knew they meant trouble. "I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

"I'll take care of it." He turned toward the cameras. "Piper is not feeling very well. I worry to kiss her in

such a state wouldn't end well for either of us."

The producer didn't seem pleased, but what could he possibly say against a prince? "A kiss would look

better for the public," the producer said, "but if you are sure..."

"I'm sure," Julian said, and left no room for argument.

The producer lamented. "Very well." To the crew, he said, "Let's

he said, "Let's wrap it up here."

Julian looked back at me. "I'll take you back to your room."

“I want to take the cookies back for Elva,” I said. Julian nodded, and helped me find a container to carry them safely. We lingered there in the kitchen after the camera crew had gone. “We should probably have a talk about this,” Julian said, and I felt my stomach sink. “We need to think about what our relationship will have to look like going forward. We don’t just have to fool the cameras now, but also the King.”

I knew that. “I really am trying.”

“I know but...” He sighed. “Piper, we are going to have to kiss again to sell our intimacy properly.”

“I know that,” I said.

Julian looked at me. I couldn’t quite meet his gaze. We had kissed before, and it wasn’t terrible. Julian was a good looking guy and a practiced kisser. The problem was that he wasn’t the one I wanted to kiss.

My heart and body wanted Nicholas. And kissing Julian felt like a betrayal to my own feelings.

“Maybe you should talk to Nicholas about this,” Julian said.

+15 BONUS

Startled, I did look back at him now. He couldn’t be serious? But his smile was kind rather than smug like usual.

“He’s the reason you’re holding back right?” Julian asked. “If you sort out what you need to, then

maybe you can get your head back into the game.”

I hooked my fingers together. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Just make him understand,” Julian said. “If Nicholas fully understands that this isn’t real, and that you

actually feel for him instead, that might make it easier for you.”

As I watched him, I began to notice a slight downward turn to the corner of his mouth. Did he not

believe what he was saying? No. That didn’t seem right.

It more seemed like he was... pained by the words. But trying to hide it.

When we had first met, I never would have been able to notice. The dip was that slight. But now that I

had hung out with Julian a lot, I was able to more clearly discern the honest emotions behind Julian’s

playboy façade.

But why would the words hurt him? That was what I didn’t understand. It couldn’t be that he had

feelings for me. It had to be more something to do with his constant competition with

Nicholas. 1

“Come on,” Julian said, and, carrying my cookies, I followed him into the stairwell.

As we walked by a front facing window, I paused. The number of protestors had increased again. The

seemed to stretch down the road as far as they could go.

The guard had reacted by adding a line of soldiers to stand at the gate.

The situation seemed a powder keg, ready to ignite.

Angry protestors on one side, armed guards on the other.

Julian stopped beside me and looked out the window as I did. I glanced at him in an attempt to assess

his reaction. Julian was more observant than me, and more astute. He could likely read this situation

better than me. He would know more clearly if we had reason to worry.

His face was a careful blank slate. His smile remained but it was hollow.

“Are we in trouble?” I asked him.

He hesitated in his reply, and that was answer enough.

The people still didn't trust the royal family, even with the interviews from the candidates, and the other

efforts from within the palace.

+15 BONUS

What else could we do? There had to be something.

Yes, the people had reason to be frustrated and angry with their lot in life. I knew the hardships of the

commoner more than anyone else in the palace. But to revolt? It seemed too much.

Too violent. Too dangerous.

Julian looked at me. "Our fake relationship might not be enough to stop this."

Chapter 330

Chapter 0330

After bringing the cookies to Elva and spending some time with her, I set out again, this time in search of Nicholas.

My intentions were dual purpose. I wanted to speak with him as Julian suggested, as well as check on

his wounds. He was a fast healer, but his bruises were many. I'd rest easier when I could see him

healed with my own eyes.

After checking where he was staying with Mark, I located the correct guest room. The door was already

open, Nicholas was sitting inside at a desk, reading through some papers. A line of worry creased the

center of his brow.

I knocked and he glanced up from his paperwork. Immediately, that worry line vanished.

"Piper."

"May I come in?"

"Please." He stood up from behind the desk.

I entered the room and closed the door behind me. "I was hoping to check on your bruises."

"I'm doing much better." He began to roll up his sleeves.

I came closer to see. Some of the bruises were still there, but they were more faded than they had

been the last time I'd inspected them. After another day, they'd probably disappear entirely.

Relief flooded through me so much that I slumped where I stood. Nicholas, worried, stepped closer as

if to catch me from falling. I wasn't going to fall, though I sort of wished I was, just to be in his arms

again.

"This isn't the only reason I came here," I said.

He lifted a brow. "No?"

I pressed my lips hard together. I didn't really know how to begin this discussion. I supposed the best

way over was through, though, so I pushed forward, albeit somewhat clumsily.

"I have to kiss Julian."

Nicholas straightened. His arms went rigid at his sides. His jaw clenched.

"Things are more complicated now. The producers are making demands. I had thought we could just

hold hands or something," I said, "But they want more intimacy. And with the King keeping track now...

I don't think there's a way around it. I have to kiss him."

"I've known that from the start, Piper," Nicholas said.

+15 BONUS

"You have?"

He gave a curt nod. "I have been trying to... contain my jealousy. I know I have no right to it."

I swallowed hard. My heart thundered in my ears. "You're jealous?" I knew it, but to hear him say it...

"Yes," he said instantly, with more force than strictly necessary.

I stepped closer to him. I licked my lips. I'd applied lip balm since my date with Julian. My lips weren't

chapped anymore.

"Kissing Julian feels dishonest," I said. "I would much rather be kissing someone else."

"Oh?" Nicholas asks. His lip twitches, an almost smile. "And who would that be?"

He knew very well who I'd rather be kissing, but I appreciated the game. It felt fun, to be flirted with by the man I held such affection for.

"Maybe I should show you," I said, sliding closer to him. I was right in front of him now. I placed my hand on his chest.

"You had better," Nicholas said. "That way I know exactly who you mean."

I hummed as I pressed up onto my toes, closing the distance between our mouths. At once, he

gathered me into his arms, pulling me closer, as close as could be.

Nicholas's lips are soft yet insistent. He takes control of the kiss at once, and I'm blissfully at

his mercy.

I hum into his mouth. He growls into mine.

His kiss is claiming, marking my lips as he had my neck. The producers had smirked when they saw

the bruises there. They had assumed Julian had left them, and Julian was eager to let them think so.

He'd made a point of touching my neck a lot while we had been together.

Nicholas put his mouth over them now, refreshing them.

"Oh, Nick," I sighed. I could happily live in this moment alone if I had the power to stop time.

He lapped at each mark, soothing the pleasure pain he'd caused. I wished he could mar my entire body

with those same love bites. Maybe someday we would have the time.

No. I condemned those selfish thoughts. Nicholas and I shouldn't be overly intimate, for the sake of his

future bride if not for my heart alone. If we laid together, and then were forced to part... That moment

would haunt me the rest of my life.

I didn't know if I was strong enough to survive it.

With the marks refreshed, Nicholas dropped his forehead onto my shoulder.

7/4

+15 BONUS

“I hate the thought of you kissing him, but I know why you have to,” he said. “I wish more than anything

that you didn’t have to. But for the good of the kingdom...” 1

He squeezed me in his embrace. I glanced back at his desk, at the papers there. Were they some kind

of report? He likely knew about the increase in protestors.

“Are things worse than they look?” I asked. They already looked pretty bad.

“Yes,” he said. “If they weren’t... If this wasn’t absolutely necessary...”

He lifted his head to gaze down into my eyes.

“Julian is going to try to take you from me.”

I blinked. “No. He knows we are only playing pretend.”

“Maybe,” Nicholas said. “But...” His voice lowered, rough and sexy. “When he tries anything ... When

he kisses you... I want you to remember one thing.”

A shiver trembled pleasantly up my spine. “What’s that?”

“This.” He kissed me again.

My eyelids fluttered closed, and I fell into the feel of him once more. My heart warmed in delight.

“Tell me when it happens,” he said against my lips. “So I know when not to watch the broadcast. I know

it has to happen, but I don’t want to see it.”

“I promise,” I said.

His mouth covered mine once more. He turned me and pressed me up against the wall. I gripped at his

shoulders with both hands. His hands trailed from my backside around my hips. His grip was strong. I

wanted him to push me up the wall and keep me there.

He growled against me like he just might.

But then a knock sounded on the door.

“Ignore it,” he said, then bit my bottom lip.

“Ah!” I gasped.

His hand flitted up and covered my breast through my clothes.

“Nick...”

The knock came again, louder. This time, a voice followed it, “Prince Nicholas!”

That was Mark’s voice. Shouldn’t he be with Elva?

Nicholas stepped back from me at once. He dropped both hands to my waist, steadying me as

3/4

+15 BONUS

My legs felt weak, and not just from that kiss. For Mark to be here meant something had to be wrong.

But what?

“Mark,” Nicholas called out. “Come in.”

As the door opened, Mark hurried through. Nicholas kept his hands on my waist. Mark already knew

about us. He didn’t so much as bat an eye at our closeness.

However, his usually composed face was twisted with concern.

“Piper, thank G od, you are here too,” he said.

“Mark?” I asked. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He took a breath.

I tried to prepare myself, but nothing could stop the fear that shot through me at hearing the

words he finally said.

“Elva has a fever.”