Chatper 331

Chapter 0331

Fear drove all feeling from my body. Then, at once, in a wave, in all came rushing back, and I was

moving.

Mark had turned to lead us, but he was too slow. I already knew the way, so I started to run.

My little girl was sick. I had to get back to her side as soon as I could.

It didn't make any sense. I was just there with her, eating cookies and having fun. She had seemed fine

then, in good health. How could the illness set in so quickly? Usually there was at least symptoms

before!

1 needed to get back to her. My poor girl was probably as scared as me. She never understood why

her body would just stop working.

I didn't understand it either.

As I ran, two pairs of footsteps followed close behind. Nicholas had followed then. Good. If I didn't have

his presence nearby, I might fall apart when the time for waiting began.

"I've already called the doctor," Mark alerted them as they ran.

"Good," Nicholas said.

Finally, we reached the hallway of my room.

"Paprika!" I shouted as we came closer. The identification answer. "Paprika!" I said again, in case they

didn't hear me the first time.

One of the two definitely worked. They stepped aside as I came close. I shoved the door open, and

Nicholas, Mark, and I flooded into the room.

Charlotte and the nanny were standing beside the bed. Elva was within it. Her cheeks were pale, and

her hair was damp with sweat.

Only when I was at her side, did I stop to take a breath. I placed my hand to her forehead. She was

burning up.

"Mommy…" she said, her voice so small and scared.

"I'm here, honey. It's okay."

"It hurts," she said, and my heart cracked.

I looked behind me, seeing my heartbreak written all over Nichola s's face.

Nicholas turned to Mark. "Where is that doctor?"

Mark brought his phone to his ear.

+15 BONUS

"It doesn't make any sense," Charlotte said. "We were having a tea party, and all of a sudden she

collapsed."

"I'm sorry," the nanny said, sobbing into her hands. "I'm so sorry."

It wasn't her fault, but I couldn't offer comfort to anyone but my whimpering daughter right now. I leaned

into Elva. "Shh. It's okay. The doctor will be here soon."

Charlotte touched the nanny's shoulder. "It's not your fault. Let's go, and give them some space,"

1 gave Charlotte a grateful nod. Later, when and if the danger passed, I would apologize to the nanny

and thank her for everything she did. But for now, my mind was too filled with fears and worries.

Elva lifted her hand and I quickly took it in mine.

"Nick-lass?" she asked.

"I'm here, Elva." Nicholas stepped into the new open space with the nanny's absence. He placed his

hand on the top of Elva's head. Elva closed her eyes, content for a moment, before the pain began and

her eyes squeezed tight.

She sobbed and whimpered, and each tiny sound of pain and discomfort chipped away at my

heart.

The doctor showed a few minutes later. Nicholas and I stepped back to let her work.

"Nick…" My voice trembled.

He pulled me into his arms and tucked my head under his chin. He was being strong for both of us, I

knew, because, and though I'd never admit it, I felt the tremor in his hands.

We stood like that, unmoving, holding each other for a long time. The doctor checked Elva over. She

asked her questions, then she asked questions to Charlotte and the nanny too.

When the doctor returned to Nicholas and me, her face was grim. "The nanny assures me she

hasn't missed any of her pills."

"I swear," I said. I'd been diligent with all of Elva's treatments. She'd been doing so well since coming

here, I wasn't going to risk anything.

Chatper 332

Chapter 0332

The doctor frowned deeper. "And I'm told the symptoms came quickly. I can't make sense of it. There

seems to have been no cause for this reaction. But that's not possible."

For even the doctor to be confused, sent tendrils of worry shooting out in all directions inside of me.

The doctor was supposed to have everything under control. They were the professional.

"I'll need to run some tests," the doctor said. "Let me draw some blood for now, and give her what

medicine I can. But we may need to take her to the hospital."

"The hospital?" Fear choked my voice.

Nicholas rubbed my back. "We'll do whatever is necessary."

"Okay," I said. "Yes. Thank you, doctor."

The doctor nodded and went to draw the blood and inject the medicine.

When she had gone, I moved a chair to Elva's bedside and sat there with her. Nicholas kept vigil,

standing behind me, watching over us both.

Minutes, hours. I had no idea how much time had passed. I was in a trance, watching the unsteady,

struggled breathing of my little girl. When she ached, I ached too. When she cried, I cried too. When

she whimpered, it was all I could do to hold in a so b.

Nicholas placed his hand on my shoulder. That point of contact was the only thing that kept me from

fully falling apart.

At some point, day slipped into night, and the light was gone from the windows. Charlotte came around

and closed the curtains. She didn't try to speak with me, though she watched,

worried, from a distance.

Later still, the guards at the door began to speak to one another. I looked up, confused.

"I'll take care of whatever it is," Nicholas said, and started walking toward the door.

He only just arrived there, when Julian burst through the door, Veronica in tow.

"This isn't a viewing gallery," Nicholas said, stepping into their path. "If you don't have purpose to be

here, then leave."

Nicholas was on edge, yet to speak so harshly to Julian and Veronica seemed unwarranted. Maybe he

was more fearful than even I had realized.

Concerned like a father would be.

Fresh tears welled in my eyes.

+15 BONUS

"Piper," Julian called to me. "You trust me, right? I swear I didn't bring Veronica here to gawk. I just

need you to trust me."

I swallowed down my worry to find my voice again. "I do trust you.'

"See?" Julian said to Nicholas and then pushed him aside. He motioned to Veronica, bringing

her closer.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," Veronica said as she came nearer the bed. Her eyes fell onto Elva and she

stopped at once.

"What is this about, Julian?" I asked, firm. I wasn't in the mood for games. "Elva's very sick."

"I know that, Piper," Julian said. He wasn't smiling. There was sadness in his eyes. "And I know even

the doctor is confused. Which is why I thought Veronica could help."

"Help… how?" I asked.

Nicholas returned to his spot behind me. I felt stronger for it.

"She can feel magic," Julian said.

Magic? I looked up at Nicholas. His brow pulled together.

"How would that help Elva?" Nicholas asked.

"Don't you find it strange how Elva has the best medical care in the entire kingdom but still mysteriously

gets sick at the drop of a hat?" Julian asked. "As if someone is dictating when and how badly?"

"Life isn't fair," I said miserably.

"Normally I'd agree with you," Julian said. "But in this case…" He looked at Veronica. I did

too.

Her frown deepened as she regarded me. "I'm sorry, Piper. It appears that Elva is indeed shrouded in

dark magic."

Chatper 333

Chapter 0333

"What do you mean, 'dark magic?'"" Nicholas demanded. I was glad he still had his voice, because

mine was totally gone, I had a suspicion that I knew exactly what Veronica meant, but I wanted to hear

her say the words.

"I mean a curse," Veronica said,

I inhaled a shuttering breath,

"It's possible that Elva has been cursed for a long time, even since she was a baby," Veronica said.

"So… all this time…?" That was the most I could manage,

"The curse, if dormant, would slowly wear down Elva's immune system over time. From the duration

she's already experienced, she will have a weakened immune system for the rest of

her life."

"That's if we stop it now," Nicholas said,

Veronica nodded.

"What happens if we don't stop it?" he asked,

Veronica looked down. "The curse would eventually kill her,"

"Eventually, you said," Nicholas said. "This seems faster than eventually,"

"Yes." Veronica looked at Elva again. I followed the length of her gaze, trying to see what she saw. All I

saw was my little girl, asleep with labored breathing. "The curse is being amplified, It's much stronger

than it had been previously. Before, it had been so latent that I hadn't even noticed it."

As fear clawed away at my insides, desperation took root. "Is there anything you can do?" I

asked.

"I can attempted to ebb the flow of the curse." Veronica came around to Elva's side of the bed, a

I stood up to give her room. Nicholas kept his hand at the small of my back. I was grateful, Without it, I

might have fallen/over.

Veronica stretched her arms, hands hovering over Elva's small body.

At the end of the bed, Julian watched with an unusually grim expression.

Sparks flickered in Veronica's palms, snapping my attention back to her. She closed her eyes, and

muttered some words that I had no hope of hearing.

1/4

Chapter 0333

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and muttered some words that I had no hope of hearing.

+15 BONUS

Then, as if she had been burned, she gasped and snapped her hands back. A sizzling sound filled the

air. I looked down at her hands, they were scorched with black.

"Veronica!" I stepped closer. "Charlotte, get some ice!"

"At once!" Charlotte said and disappeared into the hallway.

"It's fine," Veronica said. I shook my head. It had to be painful. Beneath the black, her skin was red and

inflamed. "It doesn't hurt."

"How?"

She gave me a small, sad smile. "I burned off the nerves in my hands years ago, at my previous

instructor's command."

My aching, worried heart broke all over again. What had this girl gone through, to be here with me now,

willing to help Elva even at detriment to herself?

"Don't do that again," I said.

Charlotte returned with ice and brought it over to us. I handed it to Veronica, who placed it in her palms.

"I will do it again," Veronica said. "But not until it's necessary. It would be pointless to continue until we

find the talisman amplifying the power of the curse.

Julian sprang to action at once. Nicholas perked too. Perhaps the promise of doing something lit a fire

within them. I understood the sentiment. We'd been helpless too long, watching. Now maybe we could

finally do something to help Elva.

"What kind of talisman?" Julian asked.

"A member of the organization likely left some type of object nearby that would give strength to the dark

magic. It would have had to been by the person who initially place the curse, and it would be an object

very special to them. Something that exudes a lot of emotion. for them."1

After she was done speaking, everyone looked at me.

"No," I gasped, because I knew what they were inferring. It was the same thing I was

thinking now.

The only person in the underground who had been in this room. The person who wandered the halls.

The one who knew all the secret passages in the palace.

Terry was in prison.

That only left Jane.

Time froze around me. I had known for a long time now that Jane hated me. That she envied

214

+15 BONUS

But for her to want to kill her own child? For her to place a deathly curse on Elva? That felt too much,

too far.

She could hate me if she wanted, I could bear it. But to hate her own child?

Nicholas placed his hand on my hip and squeezed. I tried to concentrate on the feel of him, to bring me

back to the present, but even his touch didn't feel like enough anymore.

Jane had hurt Nicholas too. She didn't even know him.

Maybe amplifying this curse was simply the next step in her advancement of evil.

To try to kill her own child….

I shivered. Nicholas dropped the preamble and pulled me straight into his arms. Veronica didn't bat an

eye, Julian, however, looked away,

"We'll find this talisman," Nicholas whispered into my hair, a promise. "We won't rest until Elva is safe,"

I nodded. He made everything sound so certain, so sure. With his confidence, I could almost believe

him. It would have been easier to if Elva's life wasn't on the line.

Still, when I pulled away from him, I felt stronger than I had just a minute before. I looked at

Veronica.

"How big is the talisman? What is it generally?"

"It can be any size, but usually the curse wielders choose something small and easy to hide,"

Veronica said,

"We should start with searching this room," Nicholas said. "Mark, Charlotte, check the closet. I'm going

to bring in more guards."

"When you find something that could be suspicious, bring it to me and I will be able to determine,"

Veronica said,

"Maybe you should aid in the search," Julian said to her.

"No," Veronica said. "I cannot leave Elva's side. If the worst should happen…" She cast me an

apologetic look that stopped my breath. "I'm the only one who might be able to do something."

"I'll stay too," I said. If Veronica thought Elva's end was so near, I couldn't chance leaving

either.

Nicholas kissed my cheek. Then he approached Elva and touched her cheek with his hand.

"I'll protect you, Elva," he said. "We'll stop this curse, and stop her. And no one will ever be

+15 BONUS

I knew that was a promise Nicholas couldn't truthfully make, but he obviously wanted to. That felt like

enough, for now.

Elva had to hold on. For me. For him. Even for Julian, who was mindlessly making a coin disappear in

his palm, a trick he had shown Elva not all that long ago.

Nicholas pulled away from Elva then, and headed for the door. "Guards!"

Charlotte and Mark disappeared into the closet.

Julian walked to the far side of the room and searched among Elva's toys.

I returned to Elva's side. I slipped her hand into mine and held it.

"Is there anything else I can do?" I asked Veronica.

Veronica didn't say anything for a long moment. She had dark, watchful eyes that made me feel like

she didn't miss a single thing. I'd be unnerved maybe, if I didn't know who she was and what she

suffered.

"Stay by her side," Veronica said. "When I was alone and hurting, I wanted my family close to me. She

might be asleep, but she is frightened. She needs her mother."

Tears fell from my eyes. "I'll never leave her."

Chatper 334

Chapter 0334

Hours passed.

Many items were brought to Veronica. Everything from necklaces to teacups to feathers and books.

With only a passing glance from her, each item was quickly dismissed.

The latest item, a stone found in an odd place in the hallway, was handed to Veronica.

"There's no magic in this," she said and handed it back to the guard who had delivered it. He slumped

his shoulders as he left the room to return to his search.

Night turned to day and then night again. None of us slept.

When every inch of the bedroom had been searched, everyone moved out into the hallway and

beyond. Last I'd heard, Nicholas was turning the entire palace upside down.

The doctor had been in and out. She'd administered more medicine, but nothing was working. Elva was

growing weaker.

Just then, Nicholas burst through the door. In his hands was the dagger that had nearly taken my head

off, the one Jane had thrown at me in the hallway. He walked to Veronica and presented it.

She didn't even pick it up. "I'm sorry."

He deflated instantly, and I saw the heavy bags under his eyes. He hadn't slept either, and

looked all the worse for it.

In the next moment, Julian burst into the room in the same manner as Nicholas had. In his hand was a

bag of flour from the kitchen.

When I looked at it curiously, he said, "Maybe it was the cookies. But since she ate those, we have to

go to the basics."

"I'm not sure Jane would have an emotional attachment to flour," Nicholas said.

"We've tried everything else," Julian said. "Maybe it's a fond childhood memory or something."

"Bring it here," Veronica said.

Julian did as she asked. She held the bag of flour and closed her eyes. We all held our breath. A

moment later, she shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Da mn it," Julian cursed.

1/4

+15 BONUS

The rest of us exhaled.

I stood up from my chair and came to stand beside Nicholas and Julian. As I drew closer to them, I

noticed that they looked even more tired than they had at a distance.

"You need rest," I told both of them.

"No way," Julian said.

"I'm not giving up," Nicholas said.

"Jane has been all over the palace," Julian said. "It could be anything. We just need to find something

that wasn't here before."

Nicholas nodded. "We'll continue our search."

Julian turned, eager to restart the hunt. Nicholas lingered a moment longer.

His hand touched my arm. "You tell us to rest, but you are the one who needs sleep, Piper. You look

ready to fall over any minute."

"So do you."

Nicholas leaned in and kissed my forehead. "Just try to rest. For me?"

I couldn't, but when he put it like that, I couldn't exactly refuse. I would sit on my chair and watch Elva. I

wouldn't close my eyes, but I could at least rest my bones by not pacing.

"I'll try," I said.

He leaned in and kissed my ear. "Good girl," he whispered there.

The praise warmed me. I liked having his approval, even when all I was agreeing to do was to try to

take care of myself.

Nicholas left me then, following Julian out the door.

True to my word, I returned to my chair and sat to rest my body.

Veronica stood at the end of the bed, diligently watching Elva. After a moment, I felt her gaze slide to

me.

"What is it?" I asked. I was learning that she only let her gaze wander if she wanted or noticed

something.

"Jane is your twin, is she not? And you believe fully that she is the one who created the curse?"

Veronica asked.

"Yes," I said, answering both questions.

"Then as her twin, you know her best," Veronica said.

I lowered my gaze. "We've been estranged many years. I don't know what she values anymore. And,

seeing how she is now, it's likely whoever she was before wasn't real."

Veronica hummed. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. The underground can be tempting… especially to

a girl who feels lost. They make promises to lure you in, and then keep changing the end goal to keep

you constantly on the h ook."

Watching her, I knew she spoke from experience. Her eyes glossed over a little, and I

imagined she was trapped in a place far away, alone as a little girl.

"They… brainwash you and make you see the world differently. But… they can never quiet

reach the same emotion as the memories of your childhood." 1

She shook her head, and seemed to awake from her own memories. "No, even if Jane cared

passionately about their cause, it's unlikely she could attach the same level as emotion to something

from her time with the underground as she could with something from her youth."

But if that were true, then…

"I knew Jane best when we were children. At least I thought I did," I said.

"Yes," Veronica said. "That seems likely."

"So… I should know what she used for the talisman?"

"Yes. Or at least, where she might have hidden it."

What Veronica was saying was sound, so I tried to think about our time as children. It was painful now,

to remember how close I thought we were, when Jane was only feeling anger and resentment. If I had

known then, I could have talked to her. We could have worked it out.

Now, it was much too late. She was cursing my child and trying to kidnap the man I most admired and

attempting to kill me. There could be no redemption for the woman she was now.

"It's hard to remember," I said. "I keep seeing her as she is now."

"She wasn't always this way," Veronica said. "Did she ever have pigtails?"

I thought back. "Yes." Pigtails and scraped up knees, and a gap between her two front teeth.

Though we were twins, she stayed in my shadow, shy when I was bold.

When we were teenagers, everything began to change. Jane acted out, while I stayed in the lines. She

was rebellious. She hated authority. She called me a goody two-shoes.

No, I reminded myself. I needed to go back further.

Before Jane was a monster, before she was a furious, rebellious teen, she was just a little girl.

"Siss y," Jane had called me. "Do you know what this is?" She handed me a hand-woven

"Is it for me?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Did

you make it?" I asked.

+15 BONUS

She nodded again.

"I love it!" I took it from her. "Help me tie it."

She did, tying the bracelet around my wrist.

"Do you know what it means?" she asked.

"What?"

"It means we'll be friends forever."

I laughed. "We don't need a bracelet to tell us that. You are my sister."

Jane had rubbed her hands together. "Yeah, but the bracelet makes it official!"

To my child brain, that had made perfect sense. "Yes, of course."

"Did you think of something?" Veronica asked now, returning me to the present.

"No…" I turned my head.

It couldn't be that bracelet. When she started straying from me, I had confronted her, showing her the

bracelet and giving her a heartfelt plea. "We're friends forever."

She'd snatc hed the bracelet from my hands and held it above her lighter.

I had watched it burn.

Jane had snarled, her voice echoing in my head, "You've never been my friend."

Chatper 335

Chapter 0335

By the end of the third day of searching, everyone is dead on their feet. Nicholas, Julian, and their men

had searched most of the palace, with very few exceptions, like the King's quarters.

Since Veronica said the talisman had to be close, most of the places they had searched would be too

far, but they still felt it necessary to scour every nook and cranny. Anything to help save Elva.

Elva, who was growing weaker and weaker in the bed. She was so pale. She hadn't opened her eyes

in several hours. She hadn't said a word to me in days.

Her weakness only drove Nicholas further into his determination. But without sleep, his thought process

seemed sluggish. He started bringing Veronica things that didn't make sense, like the adornments from

the banisters or the cutlery from the kitchen.

Anything Jane could have touched was on the table for him at this point.

Veronica continued to implore me to think on the past.

It hurt. But for Elva, I did. Yet every hobby or every item I remembered Jane attaching herself to as a

child, she ripped out of her life as a teenager.

Still, I continued to think. And remember.

And then I remembered when Jane taught herself how to sew. She'd been clumsy with it, stabbing

herself with the needle. But her diligence had been something to be admired. I recognized that, even

as a child.

Once, I had h ooked my chin over her shoulder from behind and looked down at her work.

"Whatcha doing?" I had asked.

Initially she'd tried to hide it from me, but after a pout she'd never been able to ignore, she gave in and

showed me.

"Mom wanted me to get rid of my sk ipping stone, but it's the best one on the block." Jane lifted the

garment she'd been sewing and then I could see it was her jacket. Inside, she had stitched in a piece of

fabric, a crude inner pocket that our Mom might not have noticed.

Maybe a rock wasn't too far from the mark, after all.

Could that be the answer then? Was the item a rock? Or… no, was it stitched into one of my

garments?

I jumped to my feet at once.

"Remember something?" Veronica asked.

+15 BONUS

I called for the guard. "Please bring back Prince Nicholas and Julian at once! I have a potential lead."

Ten minutes later, the three of us plus Charlotte stood in my walk in closet.

"How weil did you search the gowns?" I asked Charlotte.

"I looked for any that were new or off-looking. We checked every pocket."

"This pocket would be secret," I said, "Likely stitched inside the dress."

Charlotte frowned. "No, we didn't think to turn the dresses inside out."

"Let's do it, then," Julian said, and reached for a gown.

"You take that side," Nicholas said. "I will look over here."

Charlotte and I did the same, splitting one of the racks. We carefully and thoroughly searched every

dress. We tugged at every lose string. Julian cut into a few of them with a knife, any spot that looked

suspicious.

By the time we were finished, every garment of clothes in the closet, both Elva's and mine, was ripped

up and thrown on the floor.

A waste that would have been well worth it had we found the talisman.

As it was, we'd come up empty. 1

"Sh it," I cursed, and my legs gave out. I slumped down to the carpet. I tried to hold back the tears, I

knew they wouldn't solve anything. But I was so tired, so bereft, I couldn't hold back.

So bs racked through my body and I crumbled. I dropped my forehead down to the ground.

Nicholas was at my side in an instant, down on his knees beside me. He held back my hair and

whispered soothing gentle words to me. I couldn't hear them.