

Chapter 336

Chapter 0336

I could only cry and cry.

“I’m sorry,” Nicholas said.

“We’re not giving up,” Julian said, louder. “Maybe it’s in someone else’s garments. Which room is next door?”

“Jessica’s,” Charlotte said.

“With me, then, Charlotte,” Julian said, and the two rushed out of the closet.

Nicholas stayed with me. He rubbed my back.

“It’s not over, Piper. This was as good a guess as we could have managed. The best idea any of us

had so far. Please just keep thinking. Don’t give up.”

I didn’t want to. To give up would mean to accept Elva would die.

But I felt so hopeless, and so trapped.

“How will I ever survive this?” I said. “My sister is trying to kill my daughter.” I wrapped my arms tightly

around myself, but nothing could stop the hurt that quaked through me. I was ruined down to my

foundation. Even if everyone lived, how would I?

I was losing everything.

And if Elva didn't make it...

"You're strong," Nicholas said. "You've made it this far. You've survived so many things. Elva is just like

you. She'll hold on. And you'll hold on for her. And I'll hold on for both of you."

His words gave me pause.

"I won't lose you or Elva, not to Jane, not to some curse. I don't care if I have to pull the truth out of Terry

through his eyeballs, or tear down the entire organization myself, I will never let them take you and Elva

from me."

His words shook in their ferocity. He was earnest and pure.

And with his strength filling me, I didn't feel so alone anymore.

I opened my eyes. And that's when I saw the curled edge of a photograph jammed into the crevice

between two shoe drawers.

A picture? That didn't belong. I didn't bring any photos from home.

Surely it had been previously noticed? Why wouldn't anyone have brought it to Veronica?

+15 BONUS

I twisted my body, and reached into the crevice. I yanked the photo free, then brought it

closer.

Sitting upright on my haunches, I understood at once why no one thought this was suspicious.

It was a picture of me and Elva, from when Elva was very young. A mother cradling her baby to her chest. A mother who looked very tired and very thin. Elva, a newborn, rested peacefully in the cradle of her mother's arms.

A mother who wasn't me, but Jane.

To any onlooker, they would think I kept this photo as a keepsake of a tender, precious moment. The truth, however, was Jane did.

This was the talisman. It had to be. I had not placed the picture here. I didn't know anyone else who would have, but Jane.

But for this to be the talisman meant that Jane had strong emotions for this photo. If that were true, she must feel something for her girl. But if that were true, why would she try to kill Elva?

Nicholas looked over my shoulder. "It's a beautiful keepsake," he said. But then he frowned. He looked closer. "That's not you."

I looked at him, surprised. Though maybe I shouldn't have been. Who else knew me as well as he did, especially from that time?

"That's Jane," he said, meeting my gaze. His eyes were wide, hopeful. "The talisman."

Together, we scrambled to our feet, then rushed out into the bedroom.

Veronica was standing beside Elva, frowning down at her with worry. She looked up as we came

nearer. Immediately, her eyes zeroed onto the photo in my hands.

“That’s it,” she said. “That’s the talisman.”

And my heart both soared and crumbled at once.

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I handed the photo to Veronica and she held it out over Elva’s body. She began to chant, but they

weren’t words I recognized. Sparks flickered in her hands. Purple-blue flames fanned out across the

photo, and then twisted down toward Elva.

“Elva!” I gasped and started forward.

Nicholas gripped me around the waist and held me back. I struggled, desperate to get to Elva.

What if this was actually hurting her? What if it was doing more harm than good? I couldn’t let anyone

hurt my little girl!

“Nick! Don’t! Let me go!”

“Wait!” Nicholas said back. His voice was strained. This must have been hurting him too. ” Please,

Piper. Just wait!”

I couldn’t. I couldn’t.

Those flames were so close to Elva. If they touched her, then –

All at once it was over.

The flames shot back up to the talisman and burned the photo down to ashes. Then even the ashes

dissipated into nothing.

Veronica turned over her hands. She exhaled long and slow. Then she opened her eyes.

Elva did too. She turned her head to look at me. "Mommy?"

Nicholas released his hold at once, and I barreled forward, desperate to hold my little girl in my arms.

She was still feverish, but it wasn't as bad as before. She was awake, that was what

mattered.

"You should send for the doctor," Veronica told Nicholas, who pulled out his phone at once. The worst

of the curse is gone, but she will still need medicine to fight back the fever.'

"Curse?" Elva asked, eyes going wide.

"She's playing, honey," I lied. I kissed Elva's forehead. "You just have a bad cold. You need to rest

okay."

Veronica gave me a sheepish look. "Sorry," she mouthed.

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I shook my head. It was okay. She'd done so much for us, I couldn't be mad at her if I wanted to. As far

as I was concerned, I was indebted to her for the rest of my life.

I held Elva tightly. I wouldn't let go, even as Julian and Charlotte were brought back.

1/2

+15 BONUS

"We might have trashed Jessica's wardrobe," Julian said. He was smiling in relief. He didn't seem sorry

at all.

"We'll buy her a new one," Nicholas said. I'd need a new one too. "None of that matters now."

"I agree," Julian said.

I thirderd that opinion.

Julian sat on the other side of the bed. He smiled down at Elva, who tried to return it with one of her own. Hers was wobbly.

“Jul-an.”

“How’s my little mischief-maker?” Julian asked.

“Tired,” Elva said with a yawn.

“I believe that,” Julian said. “You’ve been a good soldier today. Fighting hard against this fever. It’s

liable to take it out of anyone. Even Nicholas gets brought so low, all he does is sleep.”

Elva’s eyes twinkled. “Even Nick-lass?”

“Yep,” Julian said.

“It’s true,” Nicholas said, as he stepped into the space behind me. “You’re so much stronger than me,

Elva. And braver too.”

“I didn’t do nothing,” she said.

“Yes, you did,” I told her. “My brave little girl.”

Only when the doctor finally arrived, did I loosen my hold on Elva and step back enough for the doctor

to have enough room to work.

Nicholas was waiting for me, and pulled me against his chest as soon as he was able. He kissed the

top of my head.

“Elva isn’t the only brave one,” he whispered.

I shook my head. “I’m not brave.” I felt like a coward. Even now, I was avoiding thinking about my

feelings, and what it meant to have that picture be the talisman.

It proved that Jane still felt strong feelings for Elva. She had to, or the curse would not have been so

strong. But how could anyone who loved their daughter so much, amplify a curse meant to kill her?

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It didn't make any sense. Unless Jane was trying to cut out that part of herself that loved Elva. Maybe

she saw Elva as a weakness that needed to be purged,

Gods, either way, it was just too sad. Not just for Jane, who had truly become a monster, but also for

Elva, who nearly became a victim of her own mother's love.

"This can never happen again," I said to Nicholas.

"It won't," he vowed. "I will protect you both. Even if that means..."

He didn't say it, wouldn't for my sake. But I knew what he meant.

To protect Elva and me, he would kill Jane himself.

Everything was just so sad. Tears welled in my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, misunderstanding.

I shook my head. "My sister has been dead a long time. It's her as a little girl that I mourn now. The one

who stitched rocks into her pockets and gave me a friendship bracelet. I feel like that photo was the last

hold the person she is now had to the person she was. And now it's burned away."

Nicholas tightened his hold. I buried my face in his chest to hide my tears.

The doctor took her time inspecting Elva, then gave her more medicine. By the time she was ready to

address Nicholas and I, I had shed most of my tears and was ready to face the world

again.

"She's going to be okay," the doctor said, and no, I lied. I definitely had more tears to cry. They were

happy ones this time, at least.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you." I pulled the doctor into a quick hug, unable to help myself. I jumped back

as soon as I realized I had done it. "I'm sorry," I said.

She smiled at me. "It's fine. Honestly, I am so relieved. All our tests returned inconclusive. I wasn't sure

what to think. But she's a strong little girl. She's a fighter."

"She is," I agreed.

The doctor left some medicine with Charlotte and then saw herself out.

By now, Elva was fast asleep once more. I crawled onto the bed beside her and held her in my

arms.

"Do you mind if I stay?" Nicholas asked.

1/2

+15 BONUS

I motioned him closer and he sat on the bed beside me.

Julian yawned. "I'd like to stay too. Not on the bed of course, but that couch over there looks

comfortable."

He hadn't slept either. He'd been so worried about Elva. It seemed unfair to send him away now, when

the matter was mostly resolved. Adrenaline was giving way, and everyone was exhausted.

"It's okay," I told him. "You can stay.

In the end, only Mark saw himself out, but I imagined that was to go see Susie.

Charlotte stayed in the room as well, taking watch on the chair near the sewing machines.

Nicholas wrapped his arms around me, and I felt sleep calling me.

Soft snores already sounded from the other side of the room.

"Sleep," Nicholas said.

"Only if you do, too."

"I promise."

My eyelids were too heavy to keep open much longer. Soon, sleep pulled me over.

I slept a full night without dreaming.

In the morning, I awoke with Nicholas's strong chest pressed against my back. His arms were wrapped

around me and Elva both. Across the room, Julian snored where he was on the couch. Charlotte's

head had dipped down onto her shoulder from where she sat on the chair.

Warmth filled my chest. This was my family.

A bittersweet feeling surged at the thought.

I had them now, but for how much longer?

Too soon, we'd be ripped away from each other.

I tried to live in the happy now, but dread lingered, just under the surface.

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A few days later, all of the candidates were called into the foyer for another of Nathan's meetings. By

now, Elva was fully recovered, although very angry that I would not let her leave

the room.

"There's a bad guy on the loose," I said. "It's too dangerous for you until that person is caught."

Elva crossed her arms and pouted. "But you go out."

"Because I have to. Trust me, I'd rather stay in here with you."

That, along with a hug, seemed to pacify her for now, and I was able to leave peacefully.

Down in the foyer, I found Susie, Veronica, and Tiffany standing together and went to join them.

“How is Elva?” Susie asked. I had talked to each of them since the incident, down at breakfast and

dinner, but every time Susie asked me the same question. I was glad for it, honestly. It was

nice to feel cared about.

“Better,” I said. “She was so mad I wouldn’t let her join us.”

“It’s safer where she is,” Veronica said, and she would know.

She had placed some talismans of her own around my room, designed to keep the curse at bay. She’d

also given Elva a necklace to wear that carried a talisman as a pendant, but Veronica had said it was

better if she was entirely surrounded by the protections.

“She’s a free spirit,” Susie said fondly.

“Glad she’s better,” Tiffany said. “Most of the girls were really worried.” Most. I wondered which were

the ones who weren’t. I immediately suspected Olivia and Lilliana, though I’d hoped they weren’t so

callous as to actively want Elva harmed.

Being uncaring was different than malice though, so I tried not to dwell on it.

Nathan cleared his throat, drawing all of our gazes.

“Attention, please,” Nathan said. When he had it, he continued, “It has been decided by the royal family

that we are going to attempt to progress the competition.”

A few gasps sounded around the candidates. Most seemed excited. I didn't know what to think yet so I

stayed quiet. Beside me, Susie looked worried.

“Due to Terry's betrayal,” Nathan continued, “the scores from his event will be removed from the

standings.”

+15 BONUS

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2/2

+15 BONUS

This time, I did exhale in relief. So did Susie. No thanks to Terry, we'd both managed a truly terrible

standing. With Terry's scores dismissed, we stood a much better chance.

“I can now announce that the next event will be another ball.”

Softer, as if speaking to himself, he said, “Since those receive the best ratings and reaction. from the

public.”

Then he raised his voice once more, “The royal family asks that all candidates to wear bright colors in their outfits and do their best to appear cheerful and exuberant. We want the world to see how much you enjoy being here.”

The girls looked at each other. Those seemed like rather unusual requests.

“Therefore, the best scores for this event will go to the candidates that seem to be having the best time.”

A few mouths opened.

I frowned. This couldn’t bode well for what was happening beyond the palace gates. Things were so

bad, our contest was now over who could smile the most.

“The Luna must always wear a bright face,” Nathan said.

I tried to remember but came up short with all the times I could remember the Luna smiling. Did she

ever smile? Not at me, that was for sure.

I decided to keep that opinion to myself.

As Nathan concluded his meeting, Tiffany turned to the rest of us. “Things must be worse than they are

letting on out there, if they are throwing an event as simple as this.”

For her to notice it too, did not bode well at all.

As the girls began to file out, Julian weaved his way in.

“Piper! I’ve been looking for you.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Ready for the limelight?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Veronica. Tiffany. Susie. Nice to see you all too.”

Tiffany curtsied. Veronica just stared.

“Nice to see you, too, Prince Julian.”

Julian held out his arm for me, and I accepted it.

“I’ll see you all later!” I called out behind me, as Julian led me from the room.

Outside the room, we immediately turned to the left, breaking off from the rest of the group.

2/4

+15 BONUS

“Where do you want to get caught tonight?” Julian asked.

“Julian, you know where. We’ve already planned this. The camera crew knows where to look.”

He sighed. “It’s no fun when they know. Isn’t it supposed to be a game?”

“Maybe to you,” I grumbled good-naturedly. “I’d prefer we stick to the plan.”

He gave a second, more dramatic sigh. “Very well.”

As we continued walking, some more worries began to take hold of my thoughts and heart. Tiffany had

the right of it. For the contest to be so simple, it had to be an ill-omen.

Who would know more about it than Julian?

“How are things outside the palace?” I asked him, straight to the point. I lifted a brow, trying to appear only vaguely interested.

He saw through me in a second. “You don’t have to put on the act.”

I deflated. “Sorry. It’s just that everyone’s worried. Me, included. You should hear about the next event.”

“Trust me, I know all about it,” Julian said. “My father’s grand scheme to save the monarchy. A lavish ball. That will win impoverished people’s hearts and minds.”

“You don’t think it will work?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. Nothing else has, so maybe it will. At least, maybe it will distract people long enough to give us a moments peace. In addition to the potential uprising, we’re also dealing with tensions along the borders. We’re holding on by a miracle.”

My frown deepened and my shoulders drooped. Were things so bad that even Julian was this worried?

Julian noticed my wilting demeanor. “But don’t worry!” he said, too brightly. “It will all work out. And even if it doesn’t, you’ll be safe. The people love you.”

“I’m not worried about me,” I said. “I’m most concerned for you and Nicholas.

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“Nicholas, sure,” Julian laughed. “But I can’t imagine you worrying about little ole me.”

“Of course I do,” I said. I stopped in the hallway to face him fully. I wanted him to fully understand my

sincerity. “You are very dear to me, Julian. If anything were to happen to either of you, I... I wouldn’t be

able to stand it.”

“Piper...”

Something crossed over his face. His features softened as if he was moved by my words. He dropped

my arm to lift both hands up to my cheeks. He cupped my face, and traced his thumbs

3/4

+15 BONUS

“Piper...” he said again, even more gently.

It was natural for friends to worry about friends. I didn’t understand the sudden change that came over

him.

Unless...

Were the cameras already here? We weren’t even to the spot yet.

Time for my game face then, I realized. I pushed down my confusion and brought forward my

admiration.

Julian wasn't Nicholas. How I admired him was different, but no less real. I did care for Julian in his

own way. It wasn't all that hard to bring that forward.

But then Julian leaned forward.

I tried to stay loose. I tried to make it natural.

Julian kissed me.

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I relaxed as best I could, letting the kiss happen for the cameras. Julian's lips were soft on my own,

gentle and non-demanding. It was a kind sort of kiss, and for that I was grateful.

Though I would still have to remember to tell Nicholas not to watch the broadcast tonight. He'd made

clear that while he was dealing with the thought of me and Julian's pretend relationship, having to see it

would be too much.

I could relate. The thought of Nicholas kissing someone else made my stomach twist, even though I

knew it was an inevitability.

Julian broke the kiss first. He pulled back, a small smile in the corners of his mouth. He looked ..happy.

Satisfied, maybe. And not just in his usual smug, self-satisfied kind of way.

"Are the cameras gone?" I asked.

Julian's smile slipped away. "What?"

"The cameras?" I glanced around. "You saw them, right? That's why you kissed me?"

He swallows hard. That's odd.

“Yes,” he says. The words sound almost... hollow. “Yes, they’re gone now.” He cleared his throat.

“Actually, we should continue on now, with our charade. I’m sure there’s more cameras up ahead, in the spot we arranged.”

“Oh, okay.” I laced my hand through his again, and we continued forward.

Julian sneaked a few sideways glances at me. I pretended not to notice, not sure what he wanted.

Perhaps the cameras were still upon us, and he was pretending to check me out. In that case, I

couldn’t call him out and embarrass him and myself.

A lady would pretend not to notice the attentions of her wanted suitor.

I tried to play the part as best I could. I couldn’t see the cameras, but they had to be there. Or maybe

the King was around. I’d better not give anything away.

What did girls do when they were with the boys they liked? Oh, I knew.

I threw my head back and started to laugh.

Julian fully turned to look at me now. “Are you ill? What happened?”

I stifled my laughter. “Oh... uh... I just thought...”

Julian blinked once,

twice.

“Don’t people in love laugh a lot?” I asked. Although now that I thought about it, Nicholas

+15 BONUS

love. We were simply fond of each other.

My chest hurt at the thought. Now I’d done it and made myself sad again.

“I suppose they do,” Julian said. He shrugged. “I haven’t really been in love in a good long while ”

Ah, yes. Julian had loved the mysterious Bridget, who had been stolen by Nicholas. A story that still

perplexed me. And another thing I shouldn't have thought about right now, when I was trying to pretend

to be in love with Julian.

"Maybe we should keep walking," I said.

"Good idea," Julian said, and we did just that.

A few more feet, took us past the entrance to the gardens. They were beautiful through the paned

glass windows. I missed walking among them. It had been so long since I'd been outside of the palace

walls.

It could have been worse, of course. The palace was huge. There were lots of places to sit and visit.

But nothing could replace the feeling of being outdoors, surrounded by fresh air and the scent of

blooming flowers.

I'd stopped walking without realizing it. Julian looked at me curiously. I motioned toward the outdoors.

"I just miss it, I guess."

He followed my gaze out to the gardens. When he looked at me again, he had mischief in his eyes.

"Want to sneak out?"

Treacherous hope fluttered in my heart. "You mean...?"

"I'm a prince. These are our gardens. No one can tell me where to go, and you are with me. So ...

would you like to?"