

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 351

Chapter 0351

I couldn't think clearly when faced with such an obvious threat. My protective instincts kicked into high gear. I would do anything to protect those closest to me. But Piper was close to me to.

I swallowed hard. "I care about Piper."

The King's demeanor had shifted. Maybe he could see the hesitation in me, where I had been so firm before, and softened in response.

"You are a prince. Someday, you may very well be a king. Those feelings won't mean anything in the end. Everything is secondary to your duty."

His words cracked through my heart until it blistered. I knew what he meant. Even if I cared for Piper, I

would never be able to marry her. Unlike the others, she hadn't been trained since birth to become a

queen. She'd probably hate the job, even if it meant we could be together.

Piper and I would have to part ways eventually. Shouldn't it be now? When I could help protect my

family and my kingdom with the choice?

I didn't know what to do. I was worse than torn, I was agonized.

"I'll give you time to think it over, but I expect your agreement in the morning," the King said.

I nodded, numb. Then I walked the halls like a ghost, my lost in the riptide of my thoughts. I weighed

every option, but the inner debate mostly came down to my feelings for Piper versus everything else. I

still wasn't ready to decide.

Hours later, as dawn broke, and sunlight crept up above the tree line, I watched from one of the hallway

windows as the protesters began to assemble again. Many had been there all night.

Soft footsteps approached me. I didn't have to look to know it was my mother.

"Did father send you?" I asked.

She took vigil beside me, and watched out the window as I did.

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"He told me what happened," she said in a soft, soothing voice more motherly than she'd sounded

since before this competition began. "I'm worried about you."

She was never the most feeling of mothers, at least outwardly, but I had never doubted her love. It was

only when the contest started that she delved too deeply into it, focusing on finding the perfect bride for

her sons rather than remembering they needed support too.

With how little she had said to me in the past months it wasn't that I thought she hated me. She was my

mother, and that bond was strong. I just thought she didn't like me very

+15 BONUS

Honestly, I hadn't much cared for how she was acting, either. Maybe it was a two-way street. Maybe I

kept my distance too.

"I know you want to do the right thing," my mother said. "And that the right thing may seem unclear to

you now, especially because of your feelings for that girl."

That girl, said with such disdain. "Her name is Piper."

The Luna sighed and her voice regained its softness. Yet now that I'd seen the crack, I was suspicious

of it. Of her.

“I understand your dilemma, Nicholas, but... you must understand that continue seeing that

Piper, puts her at risk too. Her and her little girl.

I looked at her sideways. Her face was doing what it should, showing the correct amount of concern.

Maybe I imagined the distain I had thought I heard.

“They could so easily be caught in the middle of this,” she said. “They might even be hurt in an effort to affect you.”

“The people love Piper.”

“They do, for now. But how often does public opinion sway. How quickly can it drop?” She motioned

toward the protesters beyond the window. I looked too, and that’s when I saw it.

A sign with Piper’s face on it. Her eyes were x’ed out. 2)

The text below it read, TRAITOR.

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When I returned to my room, I changed into my pajamas and slid into bed. Elva was already fast

asleep. Yet no matter how long I laid there, or which way I tossed and turned, I could not find sleep.

My mind was still with Nicholas in that hallway. I could only imagine the terrible things the King was

saying to him.

Would Nicholas be forced to break up with me? Would he volunteer to do so?

I knew Nicholas cared for me, but his duty to the kingdom would always be his first priority. I’d always

known that. I still dreaded the day when it would start to affect us enough to make Nicholas choose

between me and his kingdom. Maybe we’d reached that point at last.

It felt much too soon.

The next morning, I woke early and walked with Elva down to breakfast. I held my breath most of the

way, half-expecting the King himself to jump out of the woodwork to demand I leave the premises. At

the very least, I anticipated Joseph and his guard to give me a stern talking to.

Yet we made it down into the dining room without issue. I spotted Tiffany, Veronica, and Susie in their

usual spots and went to join them. Food was already set at our spots. Elva dug in right away. I picked

for a while.

I wasn't feeling very well.

Susie, beside me, watched me mindlessly tear down a blueberry muffin with a fork until it was a pile of

crumbs. Then, leaning closely, she asked me, "Did something happen?"

"I was careless..." I whispered back, extra careful no one else could hear.

"The King found Nicholas

and I together."

Susie gasped. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, Piper..."

"Just be careful, okay? Be more careful than I was."

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Susie had just as much to lose as I did, if not more. My relationship with Nicholas was always doomed.

But she and Mark had a chance at a lasting relationship, if it could be given room and sustenance to

grow. If Susie was found out and disqualified...

They might see each other again, but who knew when?

"I understand," she said, "But what's going to happen to you?"

I didn't know. "I'm waiting for something to happen."

"The King hasn't...?" She didn't finish, instead letting the sentence hang. I didn't want to

1/4

“Not yet.”

+15 BONUS

A worried look crossed Susie’s face. She reached her hand across the table to squeeze my wrist. Her

support gave some comfort to my frayed nerves, yet even with it, I was stressed and

tired.

“If there’s anything you need...” Susie said. Another open sentence.

This time, it was even more foreboding. Susie could offer all the help in the world now, when we were

so close together. But the minute I was excused from the palace, Susie wouldn’t be able to help me.

Likely, she wouldn’t even be able to help me.

I would be on my own again.

After breakfast, as I was walking toward the door, Mark stopped me just outside in the hallway. Elva

looked up at him curiously.

“I apologize,” Mark said, “But I was asked to deliver this to you.” He held out a folded piece of paper.

There was only one person in the palace who would use Mark to send me a message:

Nicholas.

“Thank you,” I said, and accepted the note. My heart raced as I opened it and began to read.

Piper, it said in Nicholas’s perfect scrawl. I wish you and Julian the best. I would never try to stand in

your way. Best wishes, Nicholas.

My stomach dropped. I thought I might be sick.”

This was a break up note.

I wanted to hope that Nicholas didn't actually write this, but I knew his handwriting well from our

Academy days. We'd so often write notes like this to one another.

And then I wanted to believe that Nicholas had written this under duress, but I knew that wasn't true.

Nicholas could certainly be influenced by his family, but he'd never do anything he truly didn't want to

do, especially if he knew it would hurt me.

No. He wrote this because he genuinely wanted out of our arrangement. He didn't give a reason. I

guessed he didn't have to, but I wished I knew.

"I want to talk to him," I said to Mark.

His expression was pitying. "I'm sorry, Piper. That's really not a good idea."

"I deserve to hear this straight from him, not in some note."

Mark shook his head. "It's for both of your sakes that it had to be this way. Please. Just stay away from

him. You will only end up more hurt."

+15 BONUS

I didn't believe that. I couldn't.

If I could just talk to Nicholas, maybe I could talk him out of this. I could help him see that we were

worth staying together for just a little bit longer.

Looking at Mark, I knew I would not be able to budge him. Nicholas had given him a

command and he would never bend or betray that. Not for me. Probably not for anyone, even Susie.

Though Susie would never ask him too. That was part of the reason they worked so well together.

"I understand," I said. I did, that was the truth, but it all still hurt. I felt raw, like I'd been put through the

grinder. Pieces of me were missing. I didn't know how to be whole again.

I left Mark and took Elva back to our bedroom. I spent the entire day numb, not thinking about anything

relating to Nicholas. I helped Charlotte sew the sunshine dress, and I played toys with Elva. I was able

to keep my brain quiet by busying it with tasks.

But then nighttime came. Charlotte retired and Elva fell asleep, and I was left alone with my thoughts.

My dangerous, hurt-filled thoughts.

Nicholas had to have a reason for dropping me. Something more than his father found out. If it wasn't

permanent, what could be the harm of a secret rendezvous? It was an embarrassment, being discover,

but not such a bad one that we needed to drop all that we had.

I needed to confront Nicholas and hear his reason. Only then could I let this go and move on with my

life.

After everything we shared, after all those whispered promises...

I had to hear it from Nicholas himself.

So I waited long enough that most everyone would be asleep. Then I sneaked out.

I traveled a familiar path to the guest room Nicholas had been using. Once I was there, I lifted

my

hand and knocked.

The light was on under the door. I saw a shift, a shadow.

Nicholas was in there. Even without the shadows, I could feel it in my bones.

I waited a moment, then a moment more. But he did not answer the door.

I knocked again, louder.

His shadow came to the door. He was standing just on the other side of it. But he made no

move to answer it.

Tears welled in my eyes. It couldn't be over. Not this soon. Not through a letter.

I knocked once more.

And he still didn't answer.

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When I slept that night, it was only because pure exhaustion from staying up the entire night before had

finally caught up to me, and sleep pulled me under against my will. Else I would have been shaking

with anger and worry.

For a few, brief hours, I had felt peace. But now, I was awake again. Now I remembered everything that

had happened, from being caught with Nicholas by the King, to Nicholas's break up letter, to standing

outside of his door as Nicholas refused to answer.

I meant to bottle in my worries as much as I could, but the minute Mark entered the room, I pounced

toward him. He sighed, seemingly resigned to his fate.

"Is he alright?" I asked first. One of my lingering fears was that Nicholas had been harmed or was

suffering from some terrible infliction – illness or otherwise. It was by far the most pressing question.

My own feelings were secondary to Nicholas's overall wellbeing. "Is he sick, or hurt?"

Mark smiled a little, sadly. "He is healthy."

I slumped as relief rushed through my body. With the worst out of the way, I could press forward with

my questions.

"Is the King responsible for this? Perhaps Nicholas was backed into a corner?"

“I’m sorry, Piper...”

“Please, Mark. He won’t talk to me. If I only understood...” I worried my hands together. I was a

nervous wreck. Maybe I shouldn’t want to know the answers. Maybe they would only hurt me worse

than I was being hurt right now.

But I was never would who could easily back down from something.

“The King might have suggested it,” Mark said, “But the separation is for the good of the kingdom.”

I blinked, surprised. The good of the kingdom? That felt like a rehearsed line.

“The kingdom hardly

hinges on my secret rendezvous with Nicholas...”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But your very public relationship with Prince Julian is important. If you were to

continue to see Prince Nicholas, I fear it would only be a matter of time before the public caught wind. It

would undermine your relationship with Prince Julian.”

I frowned. I tried to see it from their perspective. The fate of the kingdom was important but...

“I hate that you have to keep seeing Julian if that’s not what you want to do,” Mark said. “You shouldn’t

have to do anything you don’t want to do. But this is a high risk situation with an angry public. You’ve

seen the mobs just outside the gates? It’s growing every day.”

1/4

I had seen them. They had been growing bigger...

“I want to hear all this from Nicholas himself,” I said.

+15 BONUS

Mark lightly shook his head. “Please, stay away from him Piper.” A line creased the center of his brow,

and he suddenly looked troubled. Softly, he admitted, “You aren’t the only one struggling...”

Oh. Oh.

Nicholas wasn't doing this because he wanted to. Of course, he wasn't. But neither was he doing it

because he was coerced.

He genuinely thought this was the right thing to do, for the good of the kingdom. And by thinking

otherwise, by chasing him down and demanding answers, I was being selfish.

Nicholas was struggling too. He still cared for me.

But we just couldn't be together.

"Do you understand now?" Mark asked.

"Yes," I said. I did understand, even if it shattered my entire heart.

The end of Nicholas and me had come much sooner than I had ever expected. I knew it had to happen

eventually but... no, I wouldn't push anymore.

Some things just weren't meant to be, no matter how much the two involved cared about

each other.

"I'll respect Nicholas's wishes," I said, and Mark looked infinitely relieved.

Yet when I had agreed to respect Nicholas's wishes, I had thought I might have a day or two to lick my

gaping wounds before I saw him again. Unfortunately, I was immediately summoned by Julian to join a

meeting with him, Veronica, and Nicholas to discuss trapping

Jane.

So now, I stood in Julian's private rooms as far as possible as I could from Nicholas. Julian and

Veronica both gazed between us, as Nicholas and I did our very best to ignore the other.

I wasn't going to so much as glance his way, even if he spoke. It was easier if I pretended he

didn't exist at all.

That was easier said than done, of course, and when he cleared his throat, I immediately glanced. He

glanced too, and our eyes caught. The moment slowed, the world melted around

us.

I wanted to walk closer. I wanted to hold him and bridge this new distance between us.

But that could never be.

+15 BONUS

I looked away first.

“Right,” Julian said, confused. “Okay. Well, I have no idea what awkward thing is going on. here.” He

pointed between Nicholas and me. “But, Veronica has come up with a possible plan to trap Jane.”

Thoughts of heartbreak slipped out of my mind. Yes, I could focus on capturing Jane. Bringing down

the underground organization. These were achievable goals that had nothing to do with Nicholas.

“What’s the plan?” I said, probably too eager.

Julian looked at me with surprise.

Veronica less so, though she did pause a moment before speaking.

“I assume you all remember that collar that diminished Prince Nicholas’s wolf powers,”

Veronica said.

“All too well,” Nicholas grumbled.

“Yes,” I said, not eager to relive those memories either. How close I had come to physically losing

Nicholas that day. Whatever we were going through now paled in comparison to him nearly losing his

life... or his freedom.

Veronica went to a nearby coffee table and retrieved a small box. Carrying it, she moved to the center

of us so we could all see. We each inched closer. Unfortunately this placed Nicholas and I right next to

each other.

We glanced at each other again. He looked away first this time. A pain pinged in my heart.

Veronica lifted the top of the box and revealed a simple leather cuff bracelet sitting within.

“After studying the collar, I dismantled it and retooled it into this more subtle bracelet,” Veronica said.

“The power remains the same. It will diminish the power of whoever wears it.”

“That’s brilliant,” Julian said, smiling wide.

Veronica dipped her head ever so slightly and a hint of pink touched her cheeks.

“Like this, it will be much easier to get on Jane if she shows up to the event,” Julian said.

“When she shows up,” I said with confidence. My twin would never miss a chance to embarrass and

hurt me, not the way she is now. And what better opportunity would she have than on a world-stage

during an event meant to celebrate joy and happiness?

Julian hummed thoughtfully. “We only need a volunteer to get close enough –

”

“I’ll do it,” I said, just as Nicholas said, “It has to be me.”

+15 BONUS

We both stopped. We looked at each other.

Deep in his eyes was the same affection I always saw in him, though now, it seemed to be buried

behind a shield of ice. A shield that made him frown deeply.

I frowned too. If he thought I was going to let him win this argument, he was far off.

Jane was my sister. My responsibility.

I would be the one to capture her.

No matter what Nicholas wanted.

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+16 BONUS

“It should be me,” Nicholas said, just as I told him once more, “I should be the one to do it.”

We glared at each other.

“Jane and I have the history,” I said, impassioned. “She is my sister. It is my not just my right to be the

one to bring her down, but it is my obligation.”

“That obligation does not circumvent my responsibilities as a prince of this kingdom to see justice

brought,” Nicholas said, matching my fiery tone. “Need I remind you that Jane nearly had me

kidnapped, and possibly killed

“No, I don’t need a reminder of something that I think about whenever my mind begins to wander.

Every free moment I have from now to eternity is forever ruined by that particular

memory.”

“Then you understand why I have the right to take action.”

I crossed my arms. “She only went after you because of me. I’m the one she wants to hurt

“All the more reason for you to stay out of the way before she actually does hurt you =

“She can only hurt me by hurting the people I care about -”

“We know that’s not true, or the underground organization never would have gone after you in the first

place.”

“Alright,” Julian said. He stepped forward, hands up, palms forward in a placating gesture.” We get it.

You both have your reasons-

Nicholas inhaled a huffy breath. “If Piper would listen to reason –

“Reason?” I threw up my arms. “What reason do you want me to listen to, Nick? Because all I hear is

you continuing to take the path of self-sacrifice!” I couldn’t help it, my voice raised. Suddenly it didn’t

feel like we were talking about trapping Jane anymore.

I should have probably taken it back as soon as I said it, but the longer it sat there between us, the

more weight it seemed to gain, until it was too heavy for me to retrieve.

Truth was, I wanted him to know how I felt about him not talking to me. About him choosing to protect

the kingdom on his own without at least consulting me.

I would have stepped away if he thought it best, but that should have been a decision that we made

together.

He didn’t have to be the bad guy. He didn’t have to carry the burden alone.

If I couldn’t be a partner to him in this relationship, I at least wanted to be a partner in the

+15 BONUS

Slowly, the longer we were quiet, the air between us changed. The spark of anger slowly melted away

until it felt muted and distance. In its place, a solemn sort of sadness began to swell.

“Better me than you,” Nicholas said, a whisper.

I lightly shook my head. “Better two carry the weight than none.”

“Great!” Julian clapped his hands and whatever spell that had been brewing between Nicholas and I

snapped like a popped balloon. “Then you two should do it together.”

My gaze snapped to Julian. Nicholas's did too.

"What?" I said.

"Who said anyone should have to do this alone?" Julian said with a shrug.

"We've been a team from

the start. We're all going to be at the event. We should continue working as a team."

"I should be the one who puts the cuff on her," I said firmly.

Nicholas opened his mouth, likely to argue.

Julian made a dramatic gesture of rolling his eyes. Then, smoothly, he stepped toward me and slipped

his arm around my shoulders. He smirked at me, and I knew instantly he was up to something.

"I'll be at your side all night, Piper. Maybe you and I can catch Jane together. If we aren't too busy

with... other activities, that is." Julian's smirk grew.

Nicholas's glare deepened. "Julian, you -" He took a threatening step forward.

Julian shifted his gaze to him languidly, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Yes, brother?"

Nicholas looked for all the world like he wanted to say something. Argue, maybe, or yell. Knowing

Nicholas, he had to be jealous from what Julian was up to.

Instead, he pressed his lips hard together. His eyes dropped to the ground.

Looking at Veronica, he asked, "Are we done?"

Veronica shrugged. That was enough of an answer for Nicholas. He turned toward the door

and stormed out of it.

I knew we weren't together anymore, and he clearly had a reaction. It wasn't as if he lacked jealousy.

But that he hadn't intervened with Julian's flirting. That he'd simply exited himself.

It hurt.

It shouldn't have. But it still did, all the same.

”

+15 BONUS

Julian's smirk slipped away with Nicholas's quick departure. He looked at me again.

“What in the world is going on with you two?” he asked.

I thought of maybe keeping it a secret, but with my hurt, I just wanted to confide in some. Julian,

Veronica, and I had already shared so many secrets with each other. They knew I had been in

something of a relationship with Nicholas.

I could trust them. They were safe.

So I told them, “The King caught Nicholas and me kissing.”

That was all Julian needed to piece together the full story. “Oh, s hit.”

Veronica was a little more confused. She didn't have previous knowledge of Nicholas's history of self-

sacrifice to protect those he cared about. So she gave me a curious look.

Julian, fortunately, filled her in when words failed me. “My brother is enamored with Piper. But he's also

under my father's thumb. If father somehow convinced Nicholas leaving Piper would be good for the

kingdom...”

“Oh,” Veronica said at once. She stepped closer to me. “I'm sorry, Piper.”

“It's fine,” I lied.

Veronica let me off the hook by speaking to Julian again. “But... Nicholas being so obviously unhappy

is not going to inspire the kingdom.”

Julian shrugged. “The crown hardly cares about Nicholas's happiness.”

I slumped into myself, falling more and more into despair. Nicholas made his choice, but if

he was coerced...

No. I couldn't follow this path.

Julian watched me closely. "Eh, you don't need him, do you, Piper?"

My dire thoughts stopped. "What do you mean?"

That sly smirk returned to Julian's lips. It warned of encroaching danger.

I still was unprepared for when Julian's arm slipped down to my waist, and his lips came so

near my ear.

"Just say the word," he cooed, "And I can slide right into the hole he's made in your life. Any role you

need me to be."

I laughed as I shoved him away. The laugh didn't last long, but it felt good for a moment. Julian was like

that sometimes. He could startle the depression straight out of me.

"Be serious," I said.

3/4

+15 BONUS

"Who's not serious?" he asked, but his smile remained wide. He had to be kidding.

Veronica watched us both with a bemused expression on her face. As our antics dwindled, she moved

closer. She touched my arm.

"You truly care about him, don't you?" she asked me.

I didn't know what to say right away. Things were certainly complicated. Much of the time, I ran from my

feelings.

But I couldn't deny those feelings existed. Even if I didn't truly understand their full depth. Sometimes

my admiration for him felt like a bottomless trench that might go on forever.

I couldn't face that now.

The best I could say, and it still hurt to say it, was, "I do."

Chapter 355

Chapter 0355

The next morning at breakfast, the candidates were gossiping as per usual. Topics were sparse,

especially since we weren't allowed to watch any television. But the girls amused themselves with who

was feeling under the weather, and who was wearing what to the ball.

I tried to participate more than I had before. My heart still ached some, but talking with Veronica and

Julian had helped more than I realized. Though Susie had previously known, it was difficult to speak

freely with her, as we were always around others when together.

It was nice to have so many friends around me, ready to support me.

Beside me, Elva was digging into her waffles. She had two cheeks full when Nicholas walked through

the door.

She tried shouting his name, but I quickly reminded her, "Finish chewing. Then you can go say hello."

She eagerly nodded and chewed at a faster pace.

"Slowly, now," I reminded her, worried she might choke.

Nicholas continued walking as if he hadn't noticed. Maybe he hadn't. He seemed laser-

focused today as he marched straight to Olivia.

Olivia slowly lowered her fork. She tapped at the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

A camera crew followed Nicholas in and quickly found different positions as Nicholas stopped

at Olivia's side.

"Olivia," he said.

She batted her eyelashes up at him. I didn't hate her for it. I knew this was part of the game, and Olivia

very well could have been the best contender in the place. She came from a well-connected pack. She

was well-trained and strong, both in physicality and mentality.

So I didn't hate her. But I did hate what was taking place right in front of me.

I would have run away if I could have. But that would only draw the camera lenses to me. For Nicholas's

sake, for the sake of his sacrifice of our near-relationship, I had to keep my backside in my chair and endure.

"Yes, Prince Nicholas?" Olivia said sweetly.

"Will you accompany me on a date tomorrow?" he asked.

"Why, I would be honored," Olivia replied.

"Good."

1/4

+15 BONUS

My already-tattered heart shattered further in my chest. But I tried to keep my expression

muted, as the other girls' eyes widened in excitement. It had been some time since there had been any

kind of fresh gossip. This would sustain them for days.

Only Susie frowned at the news, and glanced at me. Veronica held no reaction; she merely continued

eating breakfast.

Elva, however, heard every word, and did not have the experience to know how to hide her reaction. Or

the knowledge that she should.

"No!" she shouted.

"Shh, Elva," I said gently.

But Elva wouldn't hear of it. As I reached for her, she scurried under the table, only to reappear on the

other side, closer to Nicholas.

I rushed toward them, desperate to stop the scene, but I couldn't get close enough before Elva spoke.

"How could you, Nick-lass?"

"Elva," Nicholas said. His eyes held sympathy. "Please understand -"

"Why don't you ask Mommy on date?" Elva said. She had real tears now.

I froze. The cameras panned up from Elva to my face. Nicholas looked too. I didn't know

which was worse.

Quickly, Nicholas cleared his throat and dropped down to one knee, joining Elva at her level.

"Now, Elva," Nicholas said softly. He wasn't his usual unguarded self with Elva, not with the cameras

watching, but he at least curbed some of the edge. "I have to spend time with every

lady."

Elva only frowned deeper. "Then why not Mommy?"

"Elva, honey," I said, stepping toward her. I placed my hands on her shoulders. "It's okay. Please don't

bother Prince Nicholas."

"It's all part of being a prince," he said.

Elva touched my hands with her much smaller ones. "Why are you talking so weird?"

Nicholas blinked, startled.

"You are being mean," Elva said.

"I'm not..." Nicholas started to say, but I could see how Elva must have felt. Compared to his

usual charm, this colder version of him must have seemed like night and day.

2/4

+15 BONUS

Nicholas's panic was clear on his face. The kingdom wasn't ready to handle who he was in private. Or,

perhaps more accurately, Nicholas wasn't ready to share that side of himself.

I immediately stepped in. "Oh, Elva. You know Prince Nicholas is a very important prince. He

has

many duties and responsibilities and plays many roles."

"I guess..." Elva didn't seem convinced.

I laughed for the cameras. "I think we've all read too many stories about prince charming."

Some of the other girls laughed in solidarity. Every little girl enjoyed the fairy tales of princes

and white horses. Even, it seemed, the girls who had known princes personally.

Elva's face switched from annoyed to confused, and the cameramen seemed to grow bored of

it. They turned the cameras onto Nicholas instead.

Nicholas rose to his feet. His relief lasted only a moment, before vanishing under his cool

princely veneer.

Eventually, I was able to coax Elva back to her pancakes, and Nicholas made his retreat.

Later, as Charlotte helped me tailor the base of the dress we'd made for the ball, she couldn't keep

from sharing her own gossipy news. Having a friendship with Charlotte was ideal. Not only was she a

great conversationalist, and a staunch ally, but she could also watch television and fill me in on the

outside world.

The outside world right now, apparently seemed really invested in my love life.

"What," I said, my voice tinged with disbelief. "You are telling me that people are making polls for which

of the princes I should choose?"

"Not all the princes," Charlotte said. "Just Julian or Nicholas."

“But I’m only dating Julian.” As far as they knew. Charlotte knew better but didn’t call me on it, with Elva and the nanny in the room.

“It doesn’t matter,” Charlotte said. “A certain part of the public has become borderline obsessed. They

analyze every stolen glance and touch you have ever shared with Prince Nicholas. There’s several

compilations on the internet.”

Compilations of touches? Looks?

“Sometimes they cover it on the evening news,” Charlotte said.

“That kind of gossip can’t be considered news.

“It can, when it’s included with the day’s recap. Since things have been slow, they’ve been looking to

the fans to fill in some of the content to fill the daily program,” Charlotte said. She stuck a pin into the

dress to mark where we needed to hem.

314

+15 BONUS

“Then surely, the majority are siding with Julian. I must have twice as many clips with him.”

Charlotte shrugged, but didn’t say a word. That didn’t bode well.

“Charlotte...” I prompted.

She avoided my gaze. “It’s fairly evenly split.”

“Evenly split? How?”

“The looks, Piper,” Charlotte said, and gave me a look of her own right now – one that said, they can

see right through you.

Was I giving too much away? The heart wanted what it wanted, that was true. And I was never a very

good liar.

Was the public truly able to see straight through me, to see that Nicholas was the one I truly wanted?

Maybe they saw through Nicholas too.

Whatever else this meant, one important thing was clear to me.

I needed to try harder to sell my fake relationship with Julian.