

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 381



After Julian's report of Jane being missing, I insisted that I go see for myself if the body was gone.

Nicholas agreed only if he could carry me, so I ended up in his arms in a bridal carry. Due to the gory

state of my ruined dress, we avoided any areas with crowds as we made our way downstairs.

Soon, Julian, Veronica, Nicholas, and I joined Brian and a handful of other guards loyal to Julian who

were standing directly under the balcony where we had been. This was where Jane's body should have

landed.

But Julian's report appeared correct. Even with my new werewolf senses, I couldn't detect any

indications that someone had dropped here. There was no blood splatter. No broken tiles. No kicked up

dirt. No... anything. It was like she never hit the ground.

It was impossible.

"I saw her fall," I said. "She slipped out of my hands and..." I couldn't say the

rest.

No one pushed me to,

“Could she have survived?” Nicholas asked.

“A fall from that height?” Julian said. “Unlikely,”

“But if she never hit the ground...”

The idea made me uneasy. I didn’t want my sister dead, but for her to have vanished...

The others seemed as troubled as me. Even Veronica appeared somewhat puzzled, Julian faced her.

“Could she have been rescued magically, somehow?” Julian asked.

Veronica gave the words serious thought. She crossed her arms. “Magic like that would come at a high

cost. Someone would have to be very powerful and have excessive resources,”

“So it is possible?” I asked.

Veronica looked at me. A touch of concern darkened her eyes. “There are very few people in existence

with the magical ability necessary for teleportation. Even within the underground organization, I can

think of only one.”

“Who?” Julian asked.

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Veronica’s face hardened. “Hawk himself.” o

“The Boss?” Julian groaned. “Great.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Nicholas said. “We should check the perimeter. Teleportation is one

thing, but she could have had a magical item to cushion her fall.”

Julian glanced around. I didn’t know what he was looking for until he spotted a partially hidden camera

overhead. He nodded toward it. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and find some footage.” He nodded to Brian,

who moved at once toward the doors.

“I’ll stay here and meditate,” Veronica said. “If it was teleportation, magic that powerful would have left

traces. I may be able to feel them if I concentrate.”

“Good,” Julian said. He motioned to two of his guard. “Keep them with you.” Then Julian looked at

Nicholas and me. “You should get her cleaned up. She looks like hell.”

“I’m right here,” I said.

“I was being polite. Hell is a compliment compared to what I really think,” Julian said, flashing a grin. It

fell quickly. “The sight of you in all that blood is unsettling, Piper.”

I understood what he meant. It was unsettling for me as well. Every time I looked down, I had to remind

myself that I was alive, and that thanks to my wolf, my wound was healing.

I barely felt any pain anymore. I could probably even walk by myself except I wanted to stay in Nichola

s’s arms just a moment longer.

But, even so, I wasn't ready to return to my room yet. I was full of anxious energy. I'd never be able to

sleep. Instead, I would spend the entire night pacing like a caged animal.

I jostled some in Nicholas's arms, and he seemed to notice my anxiety.

"We'll go talk to with the wolves first," Nicholas said. "If anyone crossed through the forest tonight, they

will know about it,"

Julian nodded, and we went our separate ways. Julian toward the house, and Nicholas and I toward

the forest.

I was relieved to be able to stay in the cool fresh air.

As Nicholas carried me across the lawn, I started to feel a bit guilty. "I can walk

than anything."

Nicholas didn't make move to stop. In fact, he tightened his embrace, pressing me more firmly against

his chest.

"When we reach the trees, I will lower you," he said. "But for now, for me. Let me have this."

Chapter 382



I realized then, what I couldn't see before when I had been drowning under my own feelings. Nicholas

had almost lost me. I had so very nearly died. If he had arrived a second later, if Jane had been quicker

with the knife... There were so many what ifs.

Being near Nicholas was affirming for me, but it was the same for him. When he held me, we both

could confirm I was alive.

"Okay," I said and placed my hand over his head. Oddly, the steady thump of his chest seemed to keep

exact pace with my own, as if our hearts beat as one.

It was a foolish fantasy of a thought, but a comforting one all the same.

I closed my eyes and counted our heartbeats until we reached the edge of the forest. There, gently,

Nicholas kept his word and lowered me down to my feet.

"Night?" I called. "Silver?"

Shadows moved within the forest. I took a half-step back, ready to defend myself, but it was only the

two wolves breaking away from the dark.

Night was near invisible in the darkness. Or at least, he would have been without my wolf. But now, I

could see his outline more clearly, and more, I could feel him there, like a sixth sense. He was pack, as

was Silver, and Nicholas beside me.

Our wolves recognized each other. I touched my chest. Even when I'd had my wolf before, I'd never

truly been pack. Nicholas and I had started to share a bond, but we'd been young. Nothing had truly developed.

A sense of belonging filled me and I was warm and... happy.

The two wolves looked at me strangely for a moment, tilting their heads. But then Nicholas spoke and

brought us all back to the matter at hand.

"Has anyone come through the woods tonight?" he asked. "Particularly Piper's twin."

"No." I heard the soft voice in my head as clear as if Silver had been human and said the word aloud in

my ear. I looked at her. She was watching me. "The woods. have been quiet this night."

"I can hear you," I said.

"Your wolf has returned to you," Night said this time. I looked at him and found him watching me too.

"She has mourned for you, every moment it was with your

"How do you know?" I asked.

"She howled," Silver said. "We listened."

Nicholas placed his hand on the small of my back, and I nearly cried. This was so overwhelming.

Having my wolf, having a pack that felt like home. I wanted to bring Elva here again, and have her, the

wolves, Nicholas, Julian, Veronica, and Susie all in one place. If only Anna could be there too. Then my

whole family would be in one place.

"You should shift," Night said. "You should run. Bond."

"I haven't done that in so long..."

"She's injured," Nicholas said.

"It's not so bad anymore," I said. I was scared for other reasons. "What if I don't remember how?"

Nicholas's stern gaze melted, and he stepped closer to me. "The wolf will remind you."

I hoped with all my heart that was true. Though, as I centered myself and listened to the voices within, I

could hear my wolf's encouragement.

"We remember," it seemed to say.

"I will go with you," Nicholas said. "I will stay by your side."

"A pair bonding," Night said. "Good."

"Pair bonding?" I asked, confused.

"Between mates," Silver said.

My cheeks went hot. "Uh, we aren't... I mean..." I didn't know how to clarify the situation in a way the

wolves would understand.

“Thank you,” Nicholas said to them instead, then guided me toward the woods. “Don’t worry,” he

whispered in my ear. “It doesn’t mean what you think...”

Oh. Disappointment filled me. I tried to push it down.

“Focus on your wolf,” Nicholas said, returning me to the moment. “Bring it to the surface.”

I closed my eyes and tried. I pushed deep into myself and found my wolf waiting.

Focus.

Focus.

When I opened my eyes again, I was in the body of a wolf. And I took off running.

Chapter 383



I ran and ran, letting my wolf guide me. Nicholas, in his wolf form, stayed close beside me, just a few

inches behind. If I turned left, he followed in a flash. If I moved right, he was there. He was letting me

lead, but staying close enough that he could catch me from falling if I lost myself.

I had not felt this free in such a long time. Like this, I was a brand new person, one with nature, moving

among the grass and under the bright stars. There were no worries out here, just instincts to follow.

I had not felt this happy in a long time.

I looked at Nicholas, and chuffed at him, encouraging him to race. He barked his agreement.

Then, he unleashed his own speed. God, he was so big, an absolute power house of muscle, all of

which he utilized now to push his body forward. And he was fast.

I was out of practice running on four legs, but I gave it my best attempt, handing more of the reins of

control over to my wolf. It barked its contentment as it pushed our legs faster, our body harder, until we

came neck and neck with Nicholas. Oh

I suspected he was going easy on me, but I didn't care. Chasing him was infinitely fun.

We pushed into a small clearing when I knew my legs wouldn't last much longer. So I did the only thing

I could think of: I pounced. I collided with Nicholas and wiped us both out. We toppled over and over in

the grass.

When we separated, we were both on our backs in the grass. I shifted back into human first, laughing. I

was high on life, and on victory. We had plenty of other problems still waiting on us, including Jane's

disappearance, but tonight still felt like a victory.

I had my wolf back. And nothing or no one would take it from me again.

Nicholas shifted back into human form too. His smile was wide as he turned his head toward me. He

was so handsome like this, ruffled and windswept. His golden eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

I desperately wanted to kiss him.

He must have been able to tell. His gaze added heat as it dropped down to look at my mouth.

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+15 BONOS

I didn't know who moved first. In the end, I didn't care.

One minute we were looking at each other, the next his arms were around me, and I was on top of him

with his tongue in my mouth.

"Piper," he gasped, when we came up for air.

Our kiss had been much like an attack, demanding and intense. Both our chests heaved. My breasts

pressed against his muscled pecs. We were wearing way too many clothes. I clawed at his shirt. (3)

He caught my hands at my wrists, stilling me. "Piper, slow down. We've got time."

I shook my head. "I want you."

He startled, and his grip on my arms became more firm. "You don't mean..."

"I want you inside of me, Nicholas. I want you to make me yours for real." My body was on fire with lust

and passion. I wanted to be naked, and I wanted him to be naked too. I wanted to crawl my way into

his ribcage and live in his skin beside him.

"You look... wild," he said as he studied me. The fire still burned in his eyes, but he had it controlled.

Mine burned like a wildfire. "Slow down."

I shook my head. "I want..."

"Not here," Nicholas said. "Not like this."

1

I didn't understand. It was hard to think with how badly I wanted him naked and inside of me. My

fingers curled, clawlike. If he released my hands, I could shred his clothing and mine, and everything

would be better.

"Piper. Look at me."

I tried, but... His clavicle showed at the edge of his opened collar. I really wanted to put my mouth on it.

Suddenly, I was on my back, staring up at the night sky. At least, until Nicholas appeared over me. He

pushed my arms up over my head, then held the rest of me down with the weight of his body. One of

his thighs was between my legs. Such delicious friction. I began to grind.

Mmmmm.”

“Piper. Still.” That was Nicholas’s Alpha voice.

I froze at once, as a delightful shiver ran through me. I really, really liked his

+15 BONOS

“Focus on me,” he said.

I blinked a few times and focused on his face.

“Good,” he said and I preened. “Now, listen to me. When I make love to you the first time, it will not be

out here with me fucking you into the mud.”

for

He cleared his throat, and the shift in his pants made me understand he was not against that image.

Neither was I. I bucked my hips in support. He closed his eyes a moment, groaning.

When he opened them again, his eyes were clear. Burning with flames of lust, but clear.

“When I get to have you for the first time, I will lay you down on bed of feather pillows. I will kiss every

square inch of your body, until you’ve cum at least twice and are begging...”

I whimpered.

“Then, beneath the candlelight, I will push into you and make you mine.”

I imagined it. He would be so gentle, so tender and kind. He would do his best to make my first time

easy for me. God, I adored him for it.

“Later, after we’ve christened every possible inside surface with our lovemaking,” he continued. “Then,

and only then, will I bring you right back here and fuck you in the grass.”

“Nick...”

Now. Later. What did it matter? I just needed something. Anything!

“Please,” I begged.

He leaned down and claimed my mouth. His tongue swiped past my lips and curled with my own. At

the same time, he brought his body down further, pushing into me, pressing his thigh further against my

core.

He was giving me permission.

I decided to take it. I grinded my hips up and up, rubbing my clit against the meet of his thigh. It felt so

good. Not as good as him inside of me, or him using his fingers or his mouth, but he was so close. I

could only smell him and the pine of the forest. His body was hard. His mouth was hot.

It didn’t take long for me to chase my release. Especially when Nicholas began grinding against me in

turn. He broke our kiss to grunt, then immediately dived

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+15 BONOS

His tongue was wicked, showing me tricks in my mouth that I knew felt fantastic on my cl t. It sent my fantasies shooting skyward.

He was still holding my wrists into the dirt.

We rubbed against each other like the horny teenagers we'd been once.

And when I finally crossed the precipice into pleasure, Nicholas fell right alongside me

Our bodies shook and trembled

Then we held each other as we slowly came to our senses.

Nicholas kissed my cheek. My chin. The tip of my nose.

Slowly, I returned back to myself. The fire continued to burn in his eyes, unsated.

I felt my own fire blaze

"Agam?" Nicholas asked.

And I could only beg, "Please"

Chapter 384



Nicholas and I traded lazy kiss after lazy kiss until our backs ached and the sun crept above the tree

line. We'd chased passion all night long, again and again. Despite my continuous begging, Nicholas

never took me in the dirt. Though he'd given me pleasure in nearly every other way.

My body was pleasantly sore. I really needed a bath and a nap. Maybe a good meal.

The wild feeling, I supposed, was wearing off somewhat, and reality was returning.

"We should head back," Nicholas said.

He was naked. I was too. Our clothes definitely went flying sometime in the night. We laughed as we

went searching for them now.

"I found your panties," he said and tossed them to me. I found my bra on a low- hanging tree branch.

Nicholas pulled on his pants.

"Do you see my dress?" I asked.

He stopped moving. I went closer to him, and saw what he saw. My dress was a bloody mess, piled in

a hump at the bottom of a tree trunk.

"Don't put that back on," he said.

"I can't walk home naked."

"Go back as a wolf, then."

"I can't," I said. "Everyone thinks I don't have a wolf. How would I possibly explain?"

"It doesn't matter. You don't have to explain. Let them think whatever they want."

"It's just a dress," I said, and took a step toward it.

"Don't," Nicholas said and wrapped his arms around my waist. He pulled me back against him. He had

on his pants but no shirt yet. My skin pleasantly tingled where our bare skin touched.

"Nick..."

"You almost died, Piper." His voice was soft as a whisper, barely louder than the wind. "Please do not

put that dress on. I can't see you like that again."

+15 BONOS

The fight left me in a rush. I wasn't all that keen to see myself as a bloody mess again either. I

imagined it might be worse for him. I tried to think what it would be like if our roles were switched: if he

had nearly died, and I was now supposed to watch him change back into his bloody suit.

I didn't need the dress. I'd find another way. Even if I had to walk back naked.

Or as a wolf.

"Okay," I said. "You win."

"Thank you," he said and kissed my cheek. He let me go and found his shirt. It was wrinkled beyond

repair but he still put it on and did up as many buttons as he could – as many that weren't littered

around on the forest floor.

Last night, once Nicholas had released his grip on my hands, some of his clothes ... suffered the wrath

of my temporary confinement. Not that I'd minded. I just really wanted him naked.

Now, he started the trek back to the palace, Nicholas dressed as much as he could be, with me

following behind in wolf form. Fortunately, his phone had not been damaged in our night of wild passion

and he used it now to coordinate efforts with Julian and his Beta Brian.

Brian was an expert at sneaking around unseen, and helped guide us back to the guards at my door

with minimal effort. I thought I might have to shift then, so the guards could see me and I could give the

password, but Nicholas overruled that idea.

"They can verify it's you after you've changed," Nicholas said, within earshot of the guards.

If I wasn't in wolf-form, I likely would have blushed.

Nicholas opened the door for me and I sneaked inside. Elva, blessedly, wasn't here. The room was

empty. They must have all gone down to breakfast. Thank goodness. I didn't know how I would explain

it.

"I'll see you later," Nicholas said.

I shifted back into human form. I must have looked a mess, but Nicholas still took in his fill of the view.

"I have to go," he said.

"Then go," I teased.

"You make it difficult."

+15 BONOS

I wanted to pull him closer by his belt loops and kiss him senseless. But I also wanted a shower. And

clothes that didn't have mud-stains.

"Later," I eventually relented.

"Later," he said, and it seemed like a promise. He glanced back twice as he exited the room. I didn't

move until the door latched behind him, half expecting him to change his mind.

I was only mildly disappointed when he didn't.

Instead, I rushed into the closet, grabbed some fresh clothes, and then went into the bathroom to

shower and change. I cranked the shower as hot as it could and only felt clean when my skin was near

burning.

If we ever did decide to make love outside, we needed to remember to bring a blanket or something.

Mental note.

go,

I threw my dirty panties and bra right in the trash. They were torn and grass-stained beyond repair.

There really was no saving them.

When I was clean and dressed, I stepped out of the bathroom. Elva, the nanny, Charlotte, and Mark

were all standing in the room now. They all glanced at me. Only Elva's gaze lingered.

"Mommy?" she asked.

I came closer at once. I was so happy to see her. I hadn't seen her before everything happened. I

remembered the pain on that balcony after being stabbed, when I had wished so badly that I could see

Elva one last time, to say goodbye.

I didn't want to say goodbye anymore. I hoped I wouldn't have to for a long, long time.

I wanted to see my baby girl grow up.

As I came closer, Elva tilted her head more and more, inquisitive... a bit confused.

"Mommy, you... seem..." her little voice trailed.

I knelt in front of her. "What is it, honey?"

She tapped a finger to her chin. "Mommy, do you have a wolf now?"

I nearly fell down in shock.

All the other eyes in the room snapped back to me at once.

“Miss Piper?” Charlotte asked, coming closer.

+15 BONOS

Mark did too. He looked me over, but I had no injuries anymore. The cuts on my hands healed totally.

The one on my leg still had a thin scar, but even that was fading by the hour.

“I mean... yeah?” I smiled at them, one at a time, before looking at miracle.

“It’s kind of a miracle, I

guess.”

“Is that the wolf’s name? Mir—cle?” Elva asked.

“Uuh...” I thought back. I couldn’t remember ever giving or receiving a name from my wolf. She didn’t

talk much, relying more on instincts to tell me how she felt.

She seemed pleased now, at the name. Miracle, then. A fine name for a miracle of a wolf.

“Yes,” I said. “Miracle.”

Elva smiled wide and rushed in for a hug. “Hi, Miracle!” she said.

My wolf rumbled happily. It had never met Elva before. I’d lost her in exchange for Elva’s life.

A worthy trade, my wolf, Miracle, whispers now. Protect our pup.

My heart warmed at once. For my wolf, who had never had the chance to bond before with Elva to

immediately see her as its pup... its pack... its family...

I held Elva tightly against me. We wouldn’t be alone anymore. No matter what happens, from now on, I

wasn't alone in protecting Elva against the horrors of the world.

We will keep her safe, Miracle said like a promise. Against the many dangers yet

to come.

Fear curdled with hatred in my heart.

Jane was still out there, and possibly an even greater threat: Hawk.

Chapter 385



Susie arrived around lunchtime, carrying a basket full of sandwiches for us all to share. Julian,

strangely, arrived ten minutes later with a bottle of wine, He seemed surprised to see so many others.

"Thought you might fancy a drink," he said, holding the bottle high. "I know! do."

I welcomed him. Charlotte went and got us some glasses, and everyone but Mark and Elva had a bit of

wine. Mark insisted he was working, Susie smiled at him from behind her glass. His eyes sparkled

when they caught hers.

Julian groaned, drank his full glass, and then poured himself another. He usually tolerated their secret

love well enough, so I wondered about the change. I lifted a brow at him when he glanced at me, and

he sighed,

“I don’t come with the greatest of news,” he said.

“Did something happen?” I asked. What I meant was, something else. Last night was a mountain of

some things all on its own.

“My parents aren’t sure what to do with Joyce right now,” Julian said. “There’s talk of removing him

from the competition.”

“What?” Susie asks sharply. Everyone looks at her, and she blushes. “I mean...”

Joyce being cut would affect her more than any of the rest of us, as Joyce was the one who selected

her to stay. Would she be sent home if Joyce was removed from the competition?

What would that mean for Susie and Mark?

Mark looked away. His brow was furrowed.

Susie frowned miserably into her wine glass.

“He made a big splash on television,” Charlotte said. “Commenters on the forums who were live-

updating nearly broke their keyboards, I think.”

“Did they believe him?” Julian asked.

Charlotte shook her head. "The biggest opinion was that he was vying for popularity. Most believe both

Prince Nicholas and you, Prince Julian, are vying for Piper's hand. By that account, she would have no

reason to chase after the third son. There's always outliers of course, but that's the main consensus."

"Good," Julian said. He sipped at his wine.

+15 BONOS

When the sandwiches were eaten, and the bottle emptied, Julian asked to speak with me privately.

Susie had already pulled Mark into the other corner where she seemed to be softly crying. My heart

broke, glancing at them.

"Don't look so sad," Julian said, as he led me to the opposite corner, near the closet. "If they want to be

together, all Mark has to do is propose. There's no way Nicholas would deny him."

"It would cause a scandal," I said. Susie would hate fielding a scandal like that. Falling for someone

outside of the princes was breaking a major rule of the competition.

"People will rally around true love," Julian said, and shrugged. This wasn't what he wanted to privately

talk about so I quietly waited for him to continue. He looked at me grimly, and I held my breath. "Joyce

is in the underground."

“What?!” I gasped, far too loudly. Looking around, I noticed many eyes on me. Sorry... Sorry...” I

lowered my voice again. “What?” I whispered.

Julian rubbed his forehead. “My family confronted him last night. He’s got the tattoo. It was... stretched,

like he had it for a long time.’

“Oh my G od. Like Veronica.”

“Yeah. My parents believe Joyce was taken in at a young age. Brainwashed, like Veronica was. And

then once Jane got her claws in him, any hesitations were right out the window.”

“How terrible,” I said. Who had taken him in, then? Terry? I couldn’t even fathom it. “I can see why your

parents want to hide him.”

“They want to break the brainwashing,” Julian said. “But on the other hand, hiding him away will only

make the public even more suspicious. I’m sure they have many questions about his outburst, despite

what Charlotte says. No one knows where to even begin on answering them. What a mess.”

No wonder he needed the wine.

“Have you spoken with Veronica from last night?” I asked. I immediately wished I didn’t, because Julian

seemed even more stressed. It was strange, watching the lines form in his forehead, when he was

usually so relaxed. Or at least, pretended to be.

“She definitely felt traces of dark magic that could be teleportation. She admitted she doesn’t know all

that much about it. She’s researching now.” He sighed.

+15 BONOS

“I’d never heard of anyone being able to teleport before,” I said, “even with dark magic.” Granted, I

didn’t know all that much about dark magic to begin with.

“Never say never,” Julian said. “There’s always some asshole in the world dabbling in something.”

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling suddenly cold. This conversation has left me unnerved.

Julian touched my shoulder. When I looked at him again, his sunshine smile was back, pushing away

the rainclouds. “Chin up, Piper. We’ve made it this far, and you got your wolf. We’ll make it to the end.”

God, I hoped he was right.

Then, suddenly, my stomach growled.

Julian blinked. “Didn’t you eat a sandwich?”

Yeah. I’d had three of them. I covered my stomach with my hands.

“Susie!” Julian called. She wiped her eyes as she stepped away from Mark and hurried over.

“Yes, Prince Julian?”

“They should still be serving lunch in the dining room, shouldn’t they?” Julian asked.

“I believe so. Are you hungry, Sir?”

Julian hitched his thumb toward me. “Piper’s stomach is making an argument.”

Just then, it growled again. How embarrassing.

“Oh!” Susie’s eyes went wide. “I can run down at once.”

“No,” I said quickly. “I’ll go.”

“Let’s go together,” Susie said with a small, shaky little smile. Maybe she wanted to get away for a

while. Had she and Mark had a fight? I’d never find out keeping her in this room.

“Let’s go together,” I said.

I excused myself from Julian. He winked as I left.

Susie didn’t say a word more to Mark, even though he watched her walk all the way to the door.

+15 BONOS

In the hallway, I waited until we were out of earshot of the guards, then I asked, “What happened with

—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Susie said, then she looked embarrassed. “If that’s okay...”

“No, it’s fine.” I bumped my shoulder into hers. “You never have to tell me anything you don’t want to,

okay? We're friends."

She nodded, and seemed to relax more.

We continued on for a while, and then saw Nicholas coming toward us.

"Ladies," he said as he came closer. His eyes were locked on me. I couldn't look

away.

"Prince Nicholas," Susie said with a curtsy.

"...Nicholas," I echoed, slower.

Nicholas and I continued looking at each other until we passed each other and physically couldn't

anymore.

Susie looked behind us. "He's still looking at you," she whispered.

I didn't dare look back myself, or I'd stare at him all day.

Susie's sharp gaze came to my face. "You are blushing."

I brought my hands to my cheeks. They did feel warm.

"Did something happen?" Susie asked.

"Huh?"

—

"With you and Prince Nicholas? Did you oh!" She gasped sharply and her eyes went wide. In a whisper

yell, she asked, "Did you have sex?!"





My fierce blush gave me away, but still I hushed Susie. I leaned closer to her to admit, “We’ve fooled

around but I wouldn’t say we’ve had sex...”

“Oh?”

“In the woods, I think was ready to, but he’s such a gentleman. He wanted to wait until we could do so

more comfortably.”

Susie nodded. “I’m not surprised he’s so romantic, especially with you.”

I didn’t ask her what she meant. She was one of the few who was invited into our

collective fold. She was privy to the truth of Nicholas and my affections for each other.

“The truth is...” A bit of pink dusted Susie’s cheeks. “I’m no longer a virgin.”

My eyes went wide. “You and Mark?”

I supposed I shouldn’t be so surprised, but it did so go against the competition’s rules, I would have

thought they would wait until Susie either left the competition willingly or was eliminated. Going against

the rules is dangerous, especially when the person she slept with wasn’t a prince.

Mark wasn’t exactly in a position to defend Susie should the rules catch up her.

to

I would keep the secret for her to my death bed, if necessary. Though hopefully when the competition

would end, the two would be able to find a way to be together for real.

“He was so gentle,” Susie said, a bit of starlight in her eyes. “I felt so safe.” She smiled and it was so

honest and pure, my heart did a little dance in her honor.

“I’m happy for you,” I said. Too soon, my caring heart gave way to worry. “Be careful though. If you are caught...”

Susie nodded seriously. “That’s partially why I didn’t want to wait. If we get separated...” She brought

her hands to her heart. “I wanted him to be my first. I wish he could be my only.”

I had to speak to Nicholas. Surely there was some way we could bring the two together and keep them

there. I couldn’t assuage that fear now, however, so I just nodded in earnest companionship.

We continued walking toward the dining room. When we arrived, I reached for

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+15 BONOS

the door and yanked.

The door ripped straight off its hinges. I looked at it in surprise as I held it in my

hand.

Susie's wide-eyed expression mirrored my own. "Piper..."

"Uh... sorry..." I set the door down against the wall. Several servants looked from it to me and back

again. "Guess I don't know my own strength," I said, and chuckled a little. They didn't know that I was

being serious.

It had been so long since I'd had a wolf. I supposed the merging wasn't going quite as smoothly as I

would have liked.

Susie continued to give me worried glances, even as we made our way into the dining room and took

our seats.

My stomach growled. I felt ravenous. The servants brought out plates, and I ate my first. Then my

second. Then a third.

The other girls watched me, stunned, as I continued to eat and eat.

"Are you... feeling okay, Piper?" Susie asked.

"I'm so hungry," I said, and asked for fourths.

"You are acting like you haven't eaten in days," Tiffany said from across the table.

"Let her eat," Veronica said. She was the only one at the table who didn't seem bothered by the sheer

amount of my food consumption. Granted, she was the only one who really knew what was going on

with me. She knew the process of restoring wolves better than I did, even.

I ate my fourths. I could have probably had fifths, but everyone was looking at me so strangely, like I

was some kind of attraction on display at the carnival. So I stopped myself from eating more.

As the meal came to a close, I rushed to join Veronica before she could get too far. When I was at her

side, I whispered, "What is happening to me?"

Veronica placed a finger to her lips and then led me to a sitting room where we could speak privately.

"Your body has been without a wolf for so long, it will take time to acclimate yourself to having one

again," Veronica said. "The process is similar for those who claim someone else's wolf."

"But this is my wolf," I said. I was feeling slightly indignant. Miracle had already

been my wolf once. Why was this process the same as if I had never had one?

+15 BONOS

"Your body will adjust, likely quicker than those who never had a wolf," Veronica said. "But it will take

time. It's not a process that can be rushed. You'll have to relearn to control yourself. This includes your

strength, your hunger, and your... other impulses.”

I frown. “What other impulses?” At Veronica’s hesitation, I pressed, “Please, Veronica. I need to know

what I’m up against here. I don’t want any more surprises.”

Veronica seemed reluctant only a moment more, before she inhaled a deep breath and answered, “If

your wolf recognizes someone as its mate, you are going to feel very strong feelings for that person.

Romantic. Possessive. And sexual. Very strong sexual feelings.”

Oh. “That should be fine,” I said. “I don’t have a mate.”

Veronica gave me a flat look. “Are you so sure about that?”

Why wouldn’t I be?

“You didn’t have a wolf before, Piper. So you might not have been as perceptive to your natural

attraction to your mate. But now that you have one, you will feel that attraction tenfold.”

“Veronica,” I said. “I would know if I have a mate. I’m sure of it.”

Veronica continued to stare at me like she didn’t believe me.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and Nicholas walked through. When he saw us he

smiled. He looked relieved.

“There you are,” he said, as his gaze locked onto mine. “I heard about the door. I just wanted to check on you.”

My vision seemed to narrow down, focusing entirely on this man in front of me. A growl built up in the back of my throat. My fingers curled, claw like. My breaths became deeper, heavier.

All of my nerves felt alive. My muscles tensed, ready to pounce. My core tingled pleasantly, and my panties got a bit wet.

I blinked, surprised at myself. I was suddenly, unbelievably horny.

I glanced at Veronica. She gave me a subtle nod.

“I will leave you two to talk privately,” she said. She nodded at Nicholas as she passed him. Then she was out the door, closing it behind her.

+15 BONOS

Nicholas stood very still. I knew he had heightened senses courtesy of his werewolf. If he couldn't

deduce what was happening to me from sight alone, the smell would give me away.

I maybe would have been embarrassed, if I wasn't so unbelievably hot for him in that moment.

“Nick,” I said, and it came out a growl.

He swallowed thickly. Something twitched in his pants.

He took a step toward me. I took two toward him.

Then we both moved at once, and I stopped keeping track.

We collided with each other. Our mouths sought each other, then our tongues.

His hands went under my ass, and he lifted me. He carried us both to the sitting room sofa, where he

sat down with me directly in his lap.

His dick was hard for me.

I growled again, deeper. "Mine."

Chapter 387



"Piper," Nicholas said against my lips as I kissed him and then kissed him again. I felt ravenous again,

but this time, instead of food, I wanted this man. I wanted him around me and inside of me. I wanted to

claim Nicholas as mine so

there could be no more confusion.

No more games. The competition was over. Nicholas belonged to me and that was that.¹

"Piper," he said again. He placed his hands on my shoulders and gently eased me back away from him.

"Talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

"My wolf," I said. I fought to reclaim control of myself and my rampaging emotions and lust. God, the

lust was so strong, I felt like I might implode. "Everything is amplified.

Veronica says... it will take time

to remember how to control these feelings.”

“So your lust for me...?”

“Off the charts,” I said. “If you want to stop...”

“No,” he said, and laughed a little. “It’s a relief, actually.”

I tilted my head, giving him a curious look.

“The way you feel now, is how I have been feeling around you since the moment you reentered my

life,” he said. “It has been a near-impossible struggle to control myself in front of the public, when all I

want is to have you.”

Digging my knees into the cushion at either side of Nicholas’s hips, I pushed upwards until I was

kneeling over him, looking down at his face from above.

“I feel it,” I said. “I feel it so much.”

Nicholas dragged his palms up the back of my thighs to my ass, where he squeezed.

I closed my eyes and moan at the feel of the touch. It was electric, like it was tingling everywhere

through my body at once.

“You feel that?” he asked. At my shaky nod, he added, “That’s how it’s felt for me, every time that

you’ve touched me since the first.”

I wanted more. I wanted to feel him everywhere.

So I surged forward to claim his mouth. He was waiting. His tongue ambushed me. One of his hands trailed up from my ass to my back where he kept me in place while he licked his way into my mouth.

+15 BONOS

God, he tasted so good. How had I never noticed before?

When we broke for breath, I felt lost to this desire. "Nick, please... I need... I need

My body writhed against his. In his pants, I felt his growing hardness. "Tell me what you need, Piper."

I struggled to articulate my words. I wasn't even sure what I wanted, I just knew he was the only one who could give it to me.

I whimpered in my distress. He relented at once.

"Shhh," he hushed gently. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. He had nothing to apologize for. I was the one struggling with words.

"It's hard to talk, right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Okay. That's okay. I'm going to take care of you."

He turned and pressed me down onto the couch so that my back rested on the cushion. One of my

legs hooked over the back of the sofa. The other dangled off the side. Nicholas found a perfect resting spot between them.

“I’ll make you feel good.” He leaned over me and kissed me. I arched into him, desperate to feel the press of his body to mine.

“I want y-you...” I managed, voice breaking. A growl emerged.

“You have me, Piper.” Over my head, he placed his hand against one of mine and laced our fingers together.

Then, blessedly, he began to move, pumping his rock-hard dick, bulging in his pants, up against my clothes-covered core. The zipper of his pants pressed against my clit, offering delicious friction.

I flung my head back. The feel of it was so overwhelming. We’ve done more than this in the past, but it

was like I was feeling everything again for the first time. My body was so sensitive now, my senses heightened.

“N-nick...” I grit my teeth. I didn’t want to moan too loudly, too aware of our closeness to the others. We couldn’t let them know what we were doing in here.

Even though I really wanted them to know. I wanted to scream Nicholas’s name

so loudly there could be no doubt who he was with. Who he was claiming.

+15 BONOS

But even in my lustful overdrive, I held on to enough of my senses to remember why I needed to be

quiet. And why the bonding bite wasn't coming this time.

Or ever. 1

I shook the thoughts away. Now wasn't the time to think of that.

For now, I just wanted to feel.

So I threw my head back, squeezed my eyes shut, and enjoyed the rock of Nich ola s's hard body

against mine, as he pushed me farther and farther into the cus hions.

He grunted in my ear with each of his thrusts. That sound alone could bring me over the edge, but I

held on, wanting more. I wanted everything he could give me. I wasn't going to let go until he did.

The feel of him was so delicious. His scent so intoxicating.

I was close far too soon. "Nick," I said in warning. I wanted us to come together.

"Almost," he said, and his voice was as ravaged as my own. "Piper."

He was still holding my hand. He clenched it. I held back just as firmly.

One more thrust, then two. The pressure on my cl it hit just right, and I gasped. At the same time, his

hips stuttered.

Together, we crested the peak of pleasure and went careening over the other

side.

his head to my chest.

Nicholas collapsed on top of me, his head to

My breath was heavy. His was too.

With my free hand, I carded my fingers through his hair. He hummed in contentment.

Deep inside of me, my wolf whispered, "My mate."

No, I corrected.

My wolf's confusion pushed through me. It was hurt, and that hurt felt raw within me, as if it was my own. It was my own.

I pushed some of my memories toward Miracle for her to see.

Nicholas and I could never be together. He was the prince of the nation, likely to be the next queen.

And I was a waitress, in this competition to be Luna as only a

+15 BONOS

publicity stunt. I had no hope's prayer of actually winning, despite what I wanted.

Even despite what Nicholas wanted.

The Luna would have to be the person best suited to leading the kingdom, and no one else. No one lesser.

"We are not lesser," Miracle growled.

But we were, at least in terms of kingdom politics. I certainly didn't know how to run a country.

"Your kind heart would make for a good leader."

1

I disagreed. My kind heart would only shatter under the weight of such responsibility. Such... animosity

that would be sure to come my way simply by my existing.

No, I wasn't fit to be a queen.

And that meant Nicholas would have to marry someone else.

A growl escaped the back of my throat. I couldn't tell if it was from Miracle or from me. It felt like both of

us, voicing our displeasure in unison.

Nicholas lifted himself up off my chest. "Piper?" There was concern in his eyes.

His lips were kiss-red. Someday he would kiss someone else, and they would leave him like this.

The growl came out deeper, more primal.

Veronica had said my emotions would be amplified.

I should have known that would have extended to jealousy.

Chapter 388



Nicholas, for his part, only looked more concerned. He wasn't alarmed. He wasn't even startled. He just watched me closely.

"Talk to me, Piper," he said. "I can't understand your growls yet."

I tried to bite back my growl, but I couldn't manage. It erupted, curling around my words even as I

attempted to speak. "Jealous."

That was all Nicholas needed to hear. His concern ebbed somewhat. "Yeah. I know how that feels too."

"Like this?" I asked.

He nodded. "It's practically overwhelming."

"How...?" I started, failed, tried again. "How do you manage?"

"I've broken five or six punching bags," Nicholas said, smiling a little. "Exercise is good for it. If you

wear down your energy, you have less to spend on anger."

I sighed, trying to reclaim myself. I was in no mood to jog, but... with our recent exertion, I was feeling a

bit tired. I urged my inner wolf to rest.

"You okay now?" Nicholas asked.

My body felt more relaxed. On top of me, Nicholas must have noticed.

"It's difficult to control my emotions," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize."

"I hate it," I said, only that wasn't true. Feeling everything amplified was fine when we were being

intimate. So I corrected, "I hate feeling this jealousy." I blinked back frustrated tears. "I wish we could

just be together."

Nicholas's face crumpled a little. He looked down and away, hiding himself from me. "I would give up

just about anything for you Piper."

Just about anything wasn't the same as anything.

I knew the one thing he would never be able to give up: the crown. And that was the one thing keeping

us apart.

A growl elicited from my throat again. "Maybe I should go for a run."

Nicholas pushed himself off of me. As he stood, he offered me a hand to help me up from the couch,

but I ignored it. I was afraid to touch him again. I didn't know

+15 BONOS

what kind of reaction I would have.

My nerves twitched. My fingers twitched with unused energy.

My wolf and I were tired from the sex, but... if we didn't get out of here, I would scream. I needed to

push myself until I couldn't think anymore.

If I couldn't think, I couldn't be jealous.

I didn't say a word of goodbye to Nicholas. Instead, I pushed past him and walked out the door. I

headed toward the back courtyard. I was barely out the door before I shifted into my wolf form.

Silver and Night met me at the tree line. Silver chuffed at me in greeting.

Night's mind pressed to mine, "We run?"

I barked in agreement. Then, as a pack, the three of us began to run.

I didn't know if they stuck to me like glue because Nicholas had asked them to look out for me, or if

they genuinely saw me as pack, and pack stayed together. Maybe both. It felt like both, and that was

enough for me...

I

We ran and ran, until the stars hung high in the sky. And the moon was so big and bright. I stopped and

I howled. Silver and Night joined me. In the distance, heard more. One of them sounded like Nicholas.

He sounded almost... sad.

Lonely.

My heart ached, and I pushed forward again.

Silver barked at me, likely trying to get me to stop. We'd run very far already, but I wasn't ready to quit.

I wanted to push myself to exhaustion and I was nowhere near that yet.

So I ran and I ran, until the moon rounded overhead and disappeared behind me. Then, I continued to

run, even as the sun lifted.

At some point, I totally shut off my mind and succumbed entirely to the instincts of my wolf.

It was better like this. I didn't have to worry about kingdom politics or fears. I didn't have to think about

how my mate would soon find another to marry and have pups with.

Out here, I was one with nature. It would protect me. The troubles of humans seemed so far away.

I didn't know when I lost sight of Night and Silver.

+15 BONOS

But eventually, around midday, my legs eventually gave out and I collapsed in a clearing. I purposefully

hadn't ventured overly far. Knowing there was danger lurking in every direction outside the forest, I'd

taken to completing laps within

it.

Though perhaps I had purposefully avoided running into other people and wolves.

Collapsed though, I could no longer escape the worries that meant to catch me.

Too soon, Julian, in his sleek wolf, jumped in front of me. He sniffed at me, then shifted into human

form.

"What the actual hell, Piper?" His usual smirk was missing. Instead, he looked pissed at hell. "Do you

have any idea how long you've been missing?"

I shook my head a little. I was still in wolf form and couldn't talk.

Julian pointed at the sky. "Two days, Piper. Two full days. Elva and Nicholas have worried themselves sick."

Elva and Nicholas...?

Just then, in the distance, I heard another howl, very similar to the one I had heard in the night that

sounded so lonely. This one sounded sad, and a bit desperate.

I knew it was Nicholas.

"So you are pissed at Nicholas, I couldn't care less," Julian said. "But what did Elva do to deserve this?

You wouldn't abandon your own pup, would you, Piper? Miracle?"

How did he learn Miracle's name? From Elva? Was Elva really talking to him? Was she truly afraid of being abandoned?

I began to whimper. I never wanted her to feel that way. I would be here for her always. What was I

thinking giving myself over to nature?

Maybe if I had been well and truly alone, it could be forgiven. Even if only Nicholas was waiting for me,

I could be excused.

But I had a toddler crying for me, and I was out here running around, losing myself to the wolf? What a

shameful, selfish existence! I whimpered further, dropping low into the dirt. Julian, watching me, went from angry as hell to more annoyed to slightly concerned.

+15 BONOS

“Piper, it’s okay. She’ll forgive you. Nicholas will too, you know that. But you have to shift back. You

have to come back to us scaring all of us.”

I was scaring Julian too, that’s what he meant.

I was scaring myself as well.

I had to let go. I had to come back to myself.

—

to them. They need you. You are

So I closed my eyes. I remember the sight of Elva’s smile and the feel of Nicholas’s embrace.

I was a wolf now, but I was also human. I had a human family that needed me. To abandon my

humanity was to abandon them, and I would never do that.

I wanted to see them again: Nicholas, Elva, Susie, Veronica, Tiffany, Mark... and Julian.

They were my friends. My home.

I exhaled long and slow, centering myself. The exhaustion helped. My wolf was entirely complacent as I

shifted back into my human form.

I was underdressed for the chill in the air. Julian shook off his jacket and draped

it around my shoulders. I felt like crying as I held it close around me.

He notched his finger under my chin.

“Welcome back,” he said.

Chapter 389



“I’m sorry,” I said. My voice felt raw from disuse. “I’m so sorry.”

“Save it for Elva and Nick, yeah?” Julian’s easy smile was back. Truly, he seemed relieved. “Just a second, alright?”

He stepped backwards from me and suddenly shifted into his wolf. Then, he threw his head back and howled.

An answering howl sounded, closer than the last.

Julian shifted back into human form. “That will bring Nicholas.”

I wiped at my tears. “T-thank you...”

Julian had saved me in a way, I wasn’t sure anyone would have been able to. I trusted him. He was my friend. But h o

wasn’t my mate. My emotions around him

weren't as out of control as Nicholas.

If Nicholas had appeared in an attempt to calm me down, I likely would have run further in the opposite

direction. Nicholas had been one of the many worries I had been running from.

"You scared the s hit out of him, Piper," Julian said, and despite the way they bicker and fight, I could

see the twinge of anger Julian felt on his brother's behalf.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't do it again," Julian said.

In the next instant, before I could reply, a giant wolf bounded into our little clearing. He immediately

shifted, and in the following moment, I was wrapped up in Nicholas's arms.

For a long while, he held me wordlessly. He buried his face into the corner of my neck and shoulder

and simply breathed.

I leaned into him, accepting his warmth and the comfort of his embrace. I'd been out here two days

running away from him, but it felt like an eternity.

Every single one of my muscles ached from overuse. They ached in Nicholas's presence. With him

here, I could relax, and my body could remind me of how hard I pushed it.

"You ran from me," he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Nick.'

+15 BONOS

He held me tighter. "I let you go. I should have chased sooner. Hell, I put the idea into your head. I told

you to exercise. Then when you rushed out, I knew your feelings were overwhelming. I should have

known this would happen. I should have stopped you. This is all my fault."

Why should he blame himself? "It isn't," I told him. "I promise it isn't."

He shook his head. He didn't believe me. "Promise me. The next time you feel like you need to shift,

you have to promise to talk to me first. I can help you. You shouldn't have to do it alone."

I didn't want to admit to him that he was one of the reasons I ran away so hard, but not for the reasons

he thought. He thought he put the thought in my head. Maybe he did, but my jealousy drove me to it. I

couldn't be around him anymore without losing myself.

"I'd also be happy to run with you if you need a plus one," Julian chimed in.

"She can go with me," Nicholas growled, and I could see the fringes of his jealousy. So he did feel it

then, same as me. And like me, it was so hard to control.

A shame we were destined to be apart. This jealousy would never heal. We'd likely feel it for the rest of

our lives. (1

Nicholas had learned to control his better than mine. Maybe, someday, I would be able to hold mine

back just as well.

“You aren’t always around, brother,” Julian said. “It doesn’t hurt her to have options.”

Nicholas growled low, but did not argue that point. Julian smirked, pleased with

himself.

I stepped in to end the argument before it could erupt again.

“I would like to go back to the palace now,” I said.

“I can carry you,” Nicholas said.

“I can carry you, if you need space from him,” Julian offered.

Nicholas glared at Julian. Julian shrugged innocently.

I rubbed my forehead. “I can walk.”

“Your legs...” Nicholas said.

I was so tired I could barely stand, but I was determined to anyway. Last thing I needed was to

reappear in front of Elva looking hurt. I had scared the poor little

+15 BONOS

girl enough already,

“At least let me help you to your feet,” Nicholas offered.

That I could accept He stood first, then held out his hand for me. I accepted it and he pulled me onto

my feet. I wobbled at first, unsteady. His hands came to my waist, keeping me upright.

I leaned into him on instinct. I forced myself to step away.

I had to focus. Getting to Elva and reinforcing our mother-daughter bond was my primary concern. My

love for her filled me with determined energy and, even though it hurt, I was able to force one leg

before the other on my trek back to the palace,

Or, at least, I thought I was on my way.

Julian whistled. When I looked back, he pointed in the opposite direction.

I turned and began walking in that direction instead. Now, I was on my way.

Nicholas fell in step directly behind me, so close he could catch me if I fell.

Julian stayed a few more

steps behind.

We walked for a long time. Even though I had raced in circles, each circle had led me deeper and

deeper into the forest. It felt like an eternity making my way back

out now,

Yet finally, when I crossed the tree line, I saw a group of people standing around as if waiting for me.

I recognized Susie and Mark, Veronica, Tiffany, and... there. My darling little girl.

"Mommy!" she cried, spotting me first. She starting running toward me.

Tired as I was, I wasn't about to make her think this was to be a one-sided happy reunion. I forced my

legs to pump, pulling from the very last of my energy reserves,

I ran to Elva and caught her in my arms. I lifted her, swung her around, then pulled her against my

chest. She wrapped her thin noodle arms around my neck.

She was crying. Her tears made tears spill from my eyes too.

"Mommy... I'm sorry, Mommy... I'm sorry..." she sniffed. "Please don't leave again. I'll be good."

My entire heart broke, She thought this was her fault.

Unable to hold her weight anymore, I knelt down on the grass. I set her onto her

+15 BONOS

feet and kneeled before her. I clutched her shoulders so she could see straight into my face. I did not

want her to doubt my sincerity, not now. Not ever.

"This was not your fault, Elva. Nothing you did made this happen, okay? It was my fault. My wolf

overwhelmed me. But I'm going to fight it now, you hear? This will never happen again. I will never

leave you."

Elva snuffles. Her eyes are big and damp, and I want to hold onto her forever, or at least until she stops

crying. "Promise?"

"I promise, my darling."

I pulled her into my arms again. She sobbed openly against my shoulder. I memorize every heart-wrenching sound she makes.

I would remember them the next time my wolf instincts threatened to overwhelm me. I would never disappear like this again, no matter what.

The call of nature was strong, but my love for Elva was stronger. Never again would I hurt her this way.

Chapter 390



The next day, Elva and I spent some time with Veronica in the library. Veronica was nose deep in her books. Elva had begun their time together by flittering through the stacks pretending to be a dragon. Now, she was dozing on a big, comfortable, high-back chair. Watching her sleep so soundly helped quell some of the rebelling instincts within me. Every once in a while, I would catch myself glancing out the window at the forest. My instincts were difficult to ignore. But I could do it. For Elva. For Nicholas. For Julian. For everyone,

even myself.

Veronica slid me a book across the table we were sitting at. "Read this."

I looked down where she pointed and read through the passage. It was an innocuous, boring diatribe

about the rise and fall of the grain industry in the late seventeenth century.

I lifted a brow at Veronica. "This has nothing to do with teleportation."

She shrugged. "I know that. It was to help you focus. Did it work?"

I blinked a few times. Yeah, it did kind of work.

"When your urges feel overwhelming, find a way to refocus them," Veronica said. "Read a book. Start a

conversation. Play hopscotch. It doesn't matter what it is. Just put your brain somewhere else."

"Okay," I said, and pulled the book closer. For the next hour, every time my instincts heightened, I read

another passage. I was going to be an expert on late seventeenth century agriculture before the end of

this.

Eventually, Elva woke up from her nap and grew bored. The nanny offered to take her for a walk and

Elva agreed. But not before she came to give me a hug first.

"We'll meet after," I said.

Elva nodded.

When she left out the door with the nanny, I heaved a heavy sigh.

Veronica watched me. "You are struggling."

“Non-stop,” I said. “But I can’t do that to her again. I scared her so much.”

+15 BONOS

“You scared all of us,” Veronica said.

That surprised me. Veronica and I were friends, but I didn’t expect that kind of emotion from her.

“I knew what was happening,” she explained, “But knowing what was happening and being able to do

anything about it are so different. Nicholas and Julian came to me for solutions but I couldn’t give them

one. It frustrated me. Did they think if I knew how to stop the urges, that I wouldn’t have suggested it

first off?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I had apologized a lot since my return, but only because I had so much to apologize

for. Veronica was just one more victim to my carelessness.

“I know you couldn’t help it,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t have answers.”

“I never blamed you for a moment.

Her eyes met mine, and though she didn’t exactly smile, her eyes were kind with friendship.

I took the agricultural history book with me when I left Veronica to her research. Throughout the day, I

referenced it several times, whenever my desire to run felt too strong. Yet, each time I read through it, it

seemed less effective than the last.

By the time I made it to the eighteenth century in the book, my hands were shaking so much I couldn't

hold the book straight enough to read it.

I had to run. Elva was busy playing dress up with Charlotte and the nanny. No one would notice if I

slipped out. Just for a small run. A tiny run. No more than a few steps really. Then I would come right

back here. They wouldn't even know I was gone.

I left the book in my chair and headed for the door. I said hello to the guards at my bedroom then

hurried through the hallways.

I just needed to get outside without Veronica, Julian, or Nicholas seeing. They were the only ones who

would really know where I was going and why. Susie and Tiffany would know, but I was confident I

could talk my way around them.

Yet just as I was about to reach the stairwell, a pair of arms snatched me around from behind. They

dragged me to the side and suddenly I found myself in a very familiar closet. Nicholas clicked on the

overhead light.

His eyes were filled with disapproval. "Where were you headed, Piper?"

I felt like a petulant child as I crossed my arms, but I couldn't make myself stop.

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"Out,"

415 BONOS

"Out where?" Nicholas asked, voice dropping, lower, dangerous.

I didn't have a good lie not one he would believe. So I crumpled. "I just thought if I had a tiny little run, it would take the edge off..."

"Veronica warned me about this," Nicholas said.

"She did?" I asked, surprised,

He hummed. "She said the book might stop working."

"She told you about the book?"

"She did. And she said you might need other distractions before long."

Distractions? "What did she suggest?"

"It wasn't what she suggested. It's what I offered," he said.

"Which is?" I asked.

At once, he leaned forward and kissed me.

I melted in his arms. He deepened the kiss, taking my pliancy for the green light it was. His tongue

delved into my mouth. I clung to his shoulders.

"Nick," I whispered against his lips.

"Is it helping?" he asked.

It was. "Do it again to be sure."

He smiled. "As many times as you need."

"I might need all night."

"Then you'll have it."

He kissed me again, and again. His hands were firm on my back. He had no intention of pushing this

moment toward anything. He merely stayed in each other's company trading lazy kisses and secret

smiles.

As I laughed, he kissed the corner of my mouth, then my cheek, my ear, and the tip of my nose.

So easily, I was a relaxed puddle of happy goo in his arms.

"This is so much better than the book," I said.

He smiled. "What was it about?"

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"Agriculture."

He laughed. He was so handsome like that, I had to kiss him again.

As we returned to ourselves, Nicholas said to me, "When you start to feel the urge again, come find

me. I will help you, even if I have to kiss you all night and all day long."

I laugh a little, light and happy. "You'll kiss the sense back into me?"

"I will, if you'll let me."

“Of course, I’ll let you.” I throw my arms around his neck and drag him back for more. “I might need a

bit more reinforcement right now, before I head back out on my own.’

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His hands stretched out over my back as he deepened the kiss once more. God, he tasted so good.

He was such a good kisser too, so diligent and giving. If this was the only way to return to myself, I was

absolutely fine with that.

I’d love to be in his arms more, as much as possible.

I’d live and breathe in his embrace if he would only let me. If only such a thing were possible.

If only the entire world didn’t pull us apart the minute we stepped out the door.

“I swear, Piper. I’m here for you. Trust in me.”

I did, so I told him so. “I trust you, Nick. With my life.”