

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 401



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My body moved on its own. Suddenly, I sprung into full action, grabbing Nicholas and pulling him closer. I put my mouth straight on his neck and started sucking in a mark. I didn't know where her scent was but I had to remove it

now.

"Piper, ah..." Nicholas moaned. His fingers clenched where they sat at my waist.

When my mark was red enough, I placed another and another. All along the column of his neck.

Then I inhaled. Shit. That damned scent was still there.

I felt wild, like I was losing myself. A growl sounded from the back of my throat.

Nicholas finally seemed to notice. He removed his grip from my waist, to grip my hands instead. He pressed them down into the mat, then used that leverage to push himself upright, out of range of my eager mouth.

My growl was deeper, angrier. I needed to get my scent on him. I was desperate for it.

He still smelled like her.

“Piper, stop fighting me.” He was using his Alpha voice again. It was deep and low and shivered through me. I stilled at once. “Good.” The praise felt even better. He noticed that too. “Good girl.”

A soft whimper escaped the back of my throat.

“Piper, keep being a good girl for me and tell me what is going on.”

I licked my lips and tried to focus my thoughts. I still felt wild and scattered, but my Alpha mate was asking me a question and I could answer it.

“You smell like her...” I said. I didn’t recognize my own voice, it was so rough.

Nicholas blinked at me. “What? Who?”

“Bridget,” I spit out the name. “You are carrying her scent.

“I am...? Oh. She hugged me this morning.”

My growl became more prominent.

“”

“You spend so much time with her, that she has begun to scent you.”

“It’s not like that,” Nicholas said, though he seemed less sure now than he had a

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moment ago. Perhaps he was remembering an errant hug, or a stray touch that lingered too long at his wrist or throat.

“She means to claim you...”

“You’ve got the wrong idea,” Nicholas said. His

voice

firmer now. He looked

ly see

his honesty

me straight in my eyes, as if asking that I believe him. I there. “Bridget and I are just friends.”

I swallowed down my rising jealous enough to speak. “You have to admit that you would make a good match.” Tears rose in my eyes. I hated these new emotions, how strong they were, and how difficult they were to control.

“I don’t have to admit anything,” he said.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to the tears that shed from my eyes. Kiss after kiss. Tear after tear.

“I’ve been neglecting you,” he said.

“No...” It felt so damned needy to suggest otherwise. Even if it was the truth.

“Be honest with me,” he said.

I sniffled. “I miss you.”

He kissed my lips then, a chaste little thing. “I’m so sorry, Piper. Please believe me when I tell you that you are the one I want the most.” 2

The most. God, that felt good to hear. I wanted to be the one he wanted most, but in the wake of that comfort and good feeling, came a wash of fresh sadness. I might have been the one Nicholas wanted the most, but we’d still never be together.

In the end, Bridget had the best chance at becoming Nicholas’s Luna. The royal family likely knew that. I wondered if her appearance was truly such a last minute stratagem and not something they had planned from the start.

Maybe this entire competition was a sham to make sure that Nicholas ended up with the person they really wanted.

“Piper. Don’t be sad.”

“Kiss me, Nick,” I said. “Kiss me like tomorrow will never come and we can stay just like this forever.”

“I can do you one better,” he said and lowered his lips down to my neck. He placed his lips to my throat and clasped them over the skin at my throat. Then he sucked.

My whole body shivered. I bucked up, into him.

As he pulled back, he licked at the angry mark he made, easing the pain.

“Let me scent you,” he said, like he needed permission.

Didn’t he know I had always been his? Ever since the Academy? Maybe even long before I met him.

“Please,” I said.

He squeezed my wrists. “Keep your hands here.”

I nodded.

Then he reached down, grabbed the hem of his shirt, and yanked it clean over his head. His chiseled chest was glistening with sweat. My mouth watered at the sight.

He tossed the shirt aside, then looked down at mine. He plucked at my tank top.

“I’m going to take this off of you. I want your hands right back where they were once it’s gone, got it?”

I nodded.

He gripped the sides of my shirt and slowly, gently, brought it up over my head. I leaned upwards to help him remove it. When it was gone, I laid right back down and returned my hands where they had been.

He tossed the shirt to the side.

He smiled devilishly as he slowly lowered himself back down to cover me. I was sweaty too. Our scents mixed pleasantly together, blending. I hummed in delight.

He lowered his lips to my neck again. "I don't want to smell like anyone else but you."

A growl erupted from the back of my throat, low and pleasant.

His chest was hard against my curves, but my sports bra was still between us. I squirmed a little. "I want this gone..."

"Your bra?"

I nodded.

He glanced at the door. When he looked back at me, a fire of possessiveness burned in his eyes. It felt so nice to not be alone with my feelings.

"Anyone could walk it," he said.

"You will cover me," I said, so sure of his protectiveness. "You'll keep me hidden and safe."

My praise of him hit the same mark that his did with me. He growled low and deep, pleased.

His hands reached from the sides of my sports bra and he lifted it up, up over my head and cast it aside.

I was left exposed to him. He eagerly took his fill of the view and licked his lips.

“I want to scent you there, too,” he said.

“Then do it,” I said. I kept my arms above my head, but wriggled my shoulders to tease him.

He watched, slack-jawed, as my breasts shifted their weight.

Then, as if shocked back into life, he dipped his head and licked at my breast. He lapped wide circles around my nipples, making me whimper and whine, before finally taking my nipple into his mouth.

He suckled, then grazed his teeth gently over the tip.

When it was wet enough to satisfy him, he kissed down the valley of my breasts to lavish equal attention on my other nipple.

God, it felt so good.

“Nick... ah... oh...”

He leaned up then, smiling at the mess he made of me.

“You are so beautiful,” he said.

“Kiss me,” I begged, so he did.

Chapter 402



Much later, after Nicholas and I had gone our separate ways for the day, I received notice from a servant that the candidates were required to go to the foyer for announcements from Nathan. I was already a bit late, having been so thoroughly lost all morning, so I hurried to join the others.

I was the last one to arrive in the foyer. Though from what I could tell as the stage was still empty, Nathan had yet to arrive. He came in only a handful of seconds after I joined Veronica, Tiffany, and Susie at the base of the stage. Beside us Lilliana and Olivia were speaking quietly. The others were scattered around.

All except Bridget were accounted for. I discovered why when e walked in with Nathan. She had her arm laced through his like he was escorting her. He laughed at something she said, and she grinned, pleased.

So much for no favoritism. Although, I guessed that was never a hard rule.

Nathan leads Bridget to the base center of the stage, then dipped his head as he backed away. He rounded toward the stairs then stood in front of all of us. He picked up the microphone and clicked it on.

“Hi, everyone,” Bridget said, looking around. She was met with mostly frowns or mere grunts of acknowledgement.

“Hello,” Susie said, because she was nice.

“Hi,” I said, because I was trying to be kind like Susie. Inside, I was viciously wondering if she had run into Nicholas and found my scent on him instead of hers. I hoped she did.

“Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us here.” He smiled down at Bridget. “And welcome once more to Bridget. It’s great to see you here. I’m sure we can all agree.”

No one agreed.

Still Bridget kept her bright smile. “Thank you, Nathan.” She placed a hand to her heart. “Truly.”

“It does seem strange,” Olivia said loudly, claiming everyone’s attention, even Nathan’s. “Bridget’s sudden appearance, I mean. Weren’t all the candidates supposed to be pulled from the choosing ceremony?”

Bridget continued to smile. “What a darling question, Olivia. I’m sure you have an answer that would satisfy her, don’t you, Nathan?”

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“I do,” Nathan said. “A private choosing ceremony was held with only the King, Queen, and myself present. After the... results of the last elimination, our numbers were left off–balance. The King and Queen thought it best to even the numbers again. And the choosing ceremony provided the result.”

Olivia’s face was politely neutral, but I doubted she believed such an obvious lie.

For the choosing ceremony to select Bridget, Nicholas’s previous entanglement, from a list of every single woman in the kingdom felt like a longshot at best, pure deception at worst.

But to say so out loud would be to go against the word of the King’s Beta, and likely the King and Queen themselves. That was flat out treason.

“I do so hope we can all get along,” Bridget said.

“Are there any more questions?” Nathan asked, looking squarely at Olivia.

She, however, was as diplomatic and high–bred as they came. She knew better than anyone when to back down. “No, sir. I thank you for your explanation.”

“You are very welcome,” Nathan said. “Now. I would like to announce the next event. All candidates will work together to put on a performance of a famous local stage play for the enjoyment of the royal family. This will showcase your acting abilities. The Luna is a very talented individual herself.”

“Oh, how lucky!” Bridget gasped in delight. She clapped her hands together. Looking around, she said, “I promise to give you all pointers.”

“Forget packing my bags,” Tiffany muttered under her breath. “I should just start walking home.”

“It will be fine,” Veronica whispered back. “She may win the most points but she can’t win them all.”

Looking at Bridget, at her movie star good looks and trained smile, complete with dimples, I wasn’t so sure. If anyone could sweep an entire event, it would be superstar Bridget in an event undoubtedly built just to showcase her.

“I can’t be on stage,” Susie whispered. She worried her hands together. There was fear in her eyes. With her social anxiety, she was likely to lock up or have a panic attack or both. A terrible thing that I didn’t want to see happen to her.

“Maybe they need stage hands,” I suggested. A stage hand could be talented too. Or perhaps she could help design the sets. “We’ll figure something out.”

She nodded but it was nervous still. “Thank you.”

I looked across the room to see how the others were reacting. Only Bridget seemed happy. Lilliana wore a small smile though. She’d be a player in this event, that was for sure.

Olivia wore an expression that gave me pause: With her upbringing, she always seemed to have a cool expression that would weather any drama. But this was something else. When she looked over at Bridget, she looked downright vicious.

Maybe she never considered herself to have a rival before, and now there was one here, right in front of her. One even her haughty ego couldn’t deny was a threat.

Yet, while Olivia was glaring at Bridget, Bridget was smiling back at me. I swallowed nervously.

“That is all,” Nathan said. “Thank you for your time.”

The girls slowly began to file out. Tiffany was grumbling to Veronica. Susie had her arms wrapped around herself. Olivia walked with her head held high. Lilliana seemed smugger than usual.

As I was about to follow them, Bridget approached me. Her smile and manner were friendly, but my wolf whispered a warning.

“She is plotting something.”

“Piper, hello, so great to see you,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. If friendliness was the game she wanted to play now, I could match it. “How are you adjusting to the palace? I can only imagine what your home look like. This might be quaint.”

She laughed. “Oh, you are kind. It’s true my efforts and talents have gifted me much good fortune in life. My mansion is spacious. Well, many of them are, I should say.”

She’s rich, got it. Nice of her to want to rub that in my face.

“But the palace is something else,” she said. “It always has been. A true gem of our kingdom. A place full of so much rich history, including some of my own. Do

that I spent much time here in my youth and my teen years.”

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“I heard a thing or two,” I said.

“From Nicholas, I presume?” Her smile grew wider.

“No. From the staff,” I said. “Nicholas hasn’t said much, other than you are an old friend.”

“Ah.” She lowered her head. Maybe hiding her disappointment? I couldn’t tell, and it was gone by the time she looked back up. “Well, no matter. You know I am an old friend, and that is enough of a backdrop for what I need to tell you now.”

I didn’t understand. Because I wasn’t a great actress, my confusion showed on my face.

“I care about Nicholas, you see. And I’ve heard plenty of rumors of my own. About you. About him. About the two of you together. So I am asking you straight out, Piper. What exactly was your past relationship with Nicholas?”

Chapter 403



“I heard he had dated another person after he was with me,” she said. “Back then, he had a little more freedom so I suppose anything is possible.”

That wasn’t a compliment, but then, her entire demeanor had seemed to shift now that we were alone. Her smile had an edge. Her voice was curter. This felt less like the cute actress persona she had at the ready for the rest of the world, and more like this might be her true self.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if Nicholas hadn’t confirmed himself to me these past few days,” Bridget said.

I felt a hint of pride. Nicholas didn’t talk about Bridget, but he did, it seemed, talk about me.

"We had a very happy relationship together while we were at the Academy," I said. "He is the kindest man I've ever known and he treated me with such respect and passion..." All of it was true, but I may have been talking it up a bit more than necessary, out of my jealousy.

"You had no idea who he was. Is that right?" she asked.

"He was Nicholas."

"But you didn't know he was a prince."

"No. He didn't tell me that."

She smiled a bit as she tilted her head. "A shame that he thought to keep so many secrets from you. When I knew him, he prided himself so much on his honesty."

"He is still an honest, stalwart kind of man," I said, a little annoyed at her implication otherwise.

"Maybe he is now, after your split. But you must admit that the man kept secrets from you. His lineage, for one. His closeness to me, for another."

Unfortunately, she was right. I did have to admit that. Even though I hated to.

"He had his reasons," she said.

"I'm sure." Bridget tilted her head, her movie star smile slipped back into place. "I suppose I have nothing to worry about then."

I didn't like the way she said that. Like she was crossing me off as a threat, just like she did everyone else. Maybe she truly did not know how Nicholas and I had

held each other in the gym just this morning. His scent was still all over me.

Or maybe she was so confident that she didn't think it mattered.

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The thoughts gave me an upset stomach, and my friendliness was much harder to fake all the sudden. Bridget didn't seem to care one way or the other. She mind had shifted onto other things.

"Most of the girls here don't seem to like me. It can feel a bit... isolating. I'm sure you understand," she said.

I could, but I didn't like the way she was saying it, suggesting so easily that I was obviously an outcast here. I had plenty of friends now, thank you very much.

But... if I looked under my initial irritation. Yes, she was right. I did understand how isolating it could feel to believe none of the other girls liked you. To be so alone.

Bridget might have been a famous movie star with a huge following, but loneliness was a universal experience. Money and fame didn't matter if no one near you treated you with kindness and respect.

Nicholas and Julian did, but... potential love interests weren't exactly the same thing as girl friends.

"I hope I can rely on you, Piper, to be my friend," she said, and she seemed so da mned earnest. G od, she was a good actor. I wanted to believe her.

I didn't want anyone to feel alone, not even someone I viewed so thoroughly as a rival.

"Anyone would be lucky to be your friend, Bridget," Julian says as he slinks into

the room.

Bridget laughs, bright and happy again, as if Julian's flirtation has filled up some kind of energy gauge inside of her.

"Oh, Julian. You are too much."

“Aww, shucks,” he walked farther into the room, moving right up to her. He was laying the charm on thick. His vow not to let Nicholas win again seemed to be in full action here.

Unfortunately, that seemed to put the blinders on him. He didn’t once look at me. He didn’t acknowledge me at all. His entire focus was affixed to Bridget like she had some kind of tractor beam in her face.

It wasn’t like him, at all. What was it with these princes? Bridget comes back and they both fall out of character.

“May I escort you to lunch, Bridget?” Julian offered his arm. “It would be my honor to dine with you.”

“Why, Julian, you charmer,” she laughed again. “Do any girls ever tell you no?” She slid her arm through his.

His grin grew wider. It looked painful, frankly, though it was still attractive on his handsome face.

“Not many,” he said. Was he thinking that she did, when she went with Nicholas instead?

I still had so many questions about that circumstance, and not really anyway to find answers. I wondered if the cook Charlotte talked about would know? The one who had been here way back when. I wondered if she’d be willing to talk.

I shook my head. It wasn’t my business. I wanted to help Julian, but it would be wrong to pry into his life more than I already have.

For now, at least.

When Julian and Bridget were gone, I heaved a great sigh and finally left the foyer. I was headed back to my room, but I changed course when I saw Nicholas on a walk with Elva.

They were holding hands and walking side by side. Nicholas had shortened his gait to keep pace with Elva, who seemed more intent on waddling back and forth, swinging off of Nicholas's arm, than she did actually getting anywhere.

"Nick-lass," Elva said. She sounded like she had a question.

"Yes, Elva," Nicholas replied. It sounded like this wasn't the first question she had on this walk.

"What's that pretty new lady's name?" Elva asked.

I had meant to catch up to them and make my presence known, but the ask of that question gave me sudden pause. Talking with Bridget had unraveled me somewhat. I felt like I was standing on uneven ground.

It was wrong of me to eavesdrop, but maybe hearing Nicholas talk about Bridget to Elva would reassure my wounded and frightened heart.

"Her name is Bridget," Nicholas said.

"Bid...jet?" Elva asked. The word was strange to her.

"Bridget," Nicholas said.

"Bid-jet," Elva repeated, more confident. She was still saying it wrong.

Nicholas sighed but didn't correct her again. "She's an old friend of mine, Elva. So you can trust her, okay? I'd trust her with my own life. If you ever need anything, you can trust her to help you."

My stomach twisted and my wolf began to growl in my mind. I bit it back before it could escape my lips.

Nicholas trusted Bridget. He told Elva to trust her. He wouldn't do that if he wasn't a hundred percent confident that he meant his words.

Was I wrong about Bridget then? Was I being too harsh?

Was she simply from a different life than mine and I was struggling to see how she truly was? Or was it my wolf and my rampaging feelings making me feel so much suspicion.

I trusted Nicholas.

If he trusted Bridget... Why couldn't I?

Chapter 404



I bullied myself for a good long while after that. I tried to push back against my wolf that wanted to distrust Bridget at every turn. Jealous was what drove these feelings, I just knew it.

Nicholas and Bridget had a past, but that didn't mean they had a future, right? I needed to get myself under control or I risked potentially losing what could be a very nice friendship. Bridget must have been great for both Nicholas and Julian to think so highly of her.

I needed to give her a chance. But it was a struggle.

The only person in the whole world who might understand what I'm going through and who might have answers

—

was Veronica.

So I searched. It didn't take long. I knew exactly where she would be. Same place she'd been since the night of the happiness ball: in the library, researching.

She didn't seem at all surprised at my arrival. She didn't even look up as I plopped in the chair opposite her at her little wooden table covered in old books and tomes.

We sat in companionable silence for a while. It was relaxing, being surrounded by the smell of old books and parchment, with the only sounds my own breath and the rustling of pages.

"You want to ask me something," Veronica said. She still didn't look up from her book, though she placed her finger down onto the page as if to keep her spot should she become distracted.

"I don't trust Bridget," I said.

Veronica hummed in response, like she already knew that.

"But it makes no sense. I have no reason to distrust her. She's never personally treated me unfairly. And Nicholas trusts her so much that he told Elva she can trust her too." I drop my elbows onto the table and then bury my face in my hands. My next words come out muffled. "I don't know what's wrong with me." "She is a woman from the past of your current lover," Veronica said. She turned a page. "You will, of course, feel some discomfort being around her, even if she's an absolute saint. In fact, that might make your feelings of hatred worse, since they have nothing to focus on."

"But it feels like more than that. Even if I feel threatened in my relationship, I

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shouldn't personally distrust her. The thought of leaving her alone around Elva

"Prince Nicholas should have consulted with you before telling that to Elva."

"Yeah..." I would have to speak with him about that later. Though I wasn't sure how, without revealing my nonsensical distrust, which I doubted he would understand given his deep friendship with Bridget.

I peeked at Veronica through my fingers. "Could it be related to me adjusting to my wolf?" I asked

"It's possible. It could at least be exemplifying your feelings, as it has before. Jealousy could lead to distrust."

The wolf did make me feel everything so much worse. Forget jealousy. Maybe my feelings of distrust were being amplified too.

"I am not to blame," Miracle grumbles in my head. "That one smells... wrong..." "Perhaps you should speak with Prince Nicholas," Veronica said. "He is not an unreasonable man. He may be able to quell

some of your worries. At the very least, you can reaffirm your feelings. I take it you haven't been alone since Bridget's arrival."

That was true.

"You should speak with him," Veronica said again. "See how he acts around you now that Bridget is here."

That made sense. If I truly had no cause to be jealous, then Nicholas would act the same as always. And if Nicholas acted the same as always, then there likely wasn't anything to worry about with Bridget.

I hoped.

"But what if she -" I started.

"Piper?"

My mouth immediately shut.

Nicholas stood in the doorway of the library. When he spotted me, he came closer with a tiny hint of a smile.

"There you are," he said. "I've been looking everywhere for you, Veronica, good to see you, too,"

“Prince Nicholas,” Veronica said politely. Finally, she looked up from her book, but not to properly greet Nicholas. Instead, she set me a flat look.

I got the message loud and clear.

“Did you need something from me, Nicholas?” I asked him.

“No,” he seemed surprised by the question. “I just wanted to see you.”

My heart filled with warmth. Maybe things weren’t so different after all.

“I’d be happy to take a walk with you,” I said and stood from the table.

Veronica’s eyes dropped back down to her book.

Nicholas held out his arm for me, and I laced mine through his.

For the length of our walk, everything seemed normal. We chatted about this and that. Nicholas squeezed my arm and made me blush.

The moment was so perfect that I didn’t know how to bring up Bridget. I knew that I needed to, as Veronica suggested, to clear the air between us. And I wanted to speak with him about what he had said to Elva.

But I struggled to find the words. I knew I had to be brave, but it just felt so good to spend time with Nicholas, that Bridget felt like the furthest thing from my mind.

Still, I know what I have to do, so during a lull in our conversation, I open my mouth and say, “Nick, if=

“Nicholas!” Bridget came walking down the hallway toward us, coming from the other way. Julian was two steps behind her. Her eyes were only for Nicholas. ” I have something I need your help with.”

“I can help you,” Julian said.

“I told you, Julian,” Bridget said. “This is a distinctly Nicholas task.”

Julian’s jaw tightened.

“Well, I was talking with Piper,” Nicholas said. He looked at me, as if he needed my permission. “You were about to say something.”

Well, I couldn't very well say it now! Bridget was standing right there, and now she was looking at me too. Go d help me. I had to hold my tongue.

“It's fine, Nicholas,” I say. “Go help Bridget. We can talk later.”

“You are so sweet, Piper,” Bridget said. She smiled brightly at me.

I smiled a little in return. It was entirely fake. She didn't seem to mind. Instead she looked again to Nicholas,

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“Shall we?”

Nicholas gave me a brief goodbye and then followed Bridget as she started back down the hallway, the way she came.

Julian, not acknowledged by Bridget, stopped to stand by me. He was usually so good at hiding his features, but like this right now, I could see his anger.

I hated seeing him like this, so unlike himself.

“I have something you can help me with, actually, Julian,” I said.

Julian glanced at me, a quirk in his brow. “What is it?”

I smiled. “Something only you can do.”

Finally, his harsh mood cracked and I started to see some semblance of the man I knew from before Bridget's sudden return. His eyes were bright.

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

“Come back to my room with me,” I said.

His grin grew wider, more devilish. “Oh, I definitely like the sound of that.” I rolled my eyes.



Back in my room, I immediately set Julian to work on his assigned task: teaching Elva more magic tricks. This time he had a pack of playing cards and started to show Elva how to shuffle them. Elva's tiny hands could hardly wrap around the deck. When she tried to shuffle like he showed her, it made a big mess.

Elva looked at the mess nervously at first, then her wide eyes found Julian's. She probably expected him to yell at her.

Instead, he just laughed. "We'll work on that."

Seeing his bright smile and laugh, Elva immediately mimicked it, until they both were a giggling mess in a sea of cards.

I couldn't help but feel warmth watching them. It was nice to see so many people I care about making each other happy.

I wondered if some of my hostility was related to the changes in Julian. He was usually so confident and charismatic, but put him in the room with Bridget, he shifted into a shy schoolboy. It was pretty alarming..

To see him shift back just as easily gave me a sense of relief.

Elva and Julian played with the cards for a while. Julian correctly guessed Elva's chosen card every time. Elva made a mess of the deck every time she tried to cut it. It was chaos and fun, and when it was over, I felt a little sad that it had ended

so soon.

Julian left Elva for a moment. She was busying trying to flip the cards between her fingers like Julian could do, but of course, her small fingers struggled to grip the cards, let alone turn them.

Julian came to join me instead. I was sitting at a small table with a cup of coffee, not doing much of anything. Julian took the open seat beside me.

“Something’s bothering you,” he said.

I hated how transparent I was, that everyone who cared about me could see straight through me as if I was made of glass.

Still, I thought Bridget might be too sensitive a subject. Julian would likely only deny he acted differently around her. Or worse, he would clam up and stop talking to me altogether. Julian’s feelings for Bridget ran deeply, in ways I didn’t truly understand since I didn’t know the full story.

But, with a laundry list of things that were bothering me, it wasn’t difficult to simply jump to the next thing.

“I’m nervous about the upcoming event,” I said.

“The stage play?”

I nodded. “I’m not sure I would make a convincing actress.” I was very bad at hiding my true thoughts, for instance. Or my true emotions.

“Oh, it’s not that hard,” Julian said. “The only thing you have to do is not care a tiny bit about what anyone else thinks.”

I laughed. “You make that sound so easy.”

“Isn’t it?” Julian grinned.

I groaned good-naturedly. “No!”

“Here, come here, I’ll show you.”

Julian stood from his chair and I stood too. He walked closer to me.

“We don’t have the script yet, but consider this. A man, much like me, comes walking into your life with no right to be there, and you want to tell me off. How would you do it?”

I rolled my eyes.

“There!” he said, pointing. “That’s perfect.”

“I’m rolling my eyes at you, Julian, not at the character you are trying to play.”

“Same difference,” he said.

“No it’s not!” I laughed.

“It is if you imagine I’m the one doing it.”

“You are ridiculous,” I said. “This is never going to work.”

“Humor me.”

Julian continued his lesson for a while yet, though as we spent more time laughing than we did any actual training, while Julian shot off totally useless phrases like, “Be the person you need to be,” and, “Acting is like dancing.”

Whatever that meant.

Chapter 406



Chapter 0406 After a while, I began to suspect he was just trying to make me laugh. Maybe putting me at ease was part of his helping me? I didn’t know. By the end of Julian’s visit, I had no misconceptions that I was going to be a better actor, but I did at least feel better about it, knowing Julian would be

there to support me and make me laugh. Later that afternoon, the candidates were called into the ballroom to start practice for the show, I immediately found Veronica, who seemed totally indifferent beside Susie, who seemed so nervous she was about to shake right out of her skin. Her eyes kept darting around. She worried her hands together. Tiffany was helping pass out the scripts for Bridget, who seemed to be handing out orders like they were candy. Nathan took the full brunt of it. Bridget, at his ear, was waving his arms in dramatic fashion. I waited patiently until Tiffany reached us. "Isn't this great?" she said as she gave us each a copy of the script. "I'm so excited. Bridget says I'll have a big part." Bridget says? Wasn't this supposed to be a competition for the candidates? Why would Bridget get to decide anything? I looked at the title of the script. Fated Love Forever. A love story.

A love story with only one romance. Who would be the leads? "Are we going to do auditions?" I asked Tiffany before she could get away. "Oh, no," Tiffany said. "Bridget already picked the parts that are best for us." "She did?" Susie asked. "Yes, each of your scripts are marked," Tiffany said. Susie immediately opened her script, reading through. I did the same. Obviously, I wasn't selected as lead. In fact, the more I looked, I didn't see any lines at all. Wait. There was one.

Exactly one. And the line was assigned to a nameless character: Maid. 1/2 +15 BONUS I frowned. Okay, so I knew I wasn't the greatest actress, but... to not even have a name? I felt like I was being set up for failure. Since Tiffany seemed to be so in the know, I tugged her arm to get her attention. "Who are the leads?" I knew Bridget would be one, of course. Surely Julian would be the male lead. Out of him and Nicholas, Julian would be the better actor by far. Nicholas was far too earnest. Tiffany looked at me and her bright smile wavered. "You aren't going to like it." I knew before she said a single word who the leading man would be. "Nicholas," Tiffany said. I looked across the room, where Bridget had stopped giving direction to Nathan to talk to Nicholas

instead. He was holding his script and frowning out it. Every now and then, he would motion to the edge of the room, where Julian was talking with Brian. Julian was frowning again. Olivia and Lilliana, nearby, were frowning too. As a silence swept over the room, Olivia raised her hand. "You have a question, Olivia?" Nathan asked. "Forgive me," Olivia said. "I am just curious how these parts were decided." She was being diplomatic. We all wanted to know why Bridget got to decide anything. But if Olivia so obviously called out Bridget, a favorite of the crown, she would diminish her own standing. Bridget placed her hand on Nathan's arm, stopping him from replying. "I can cover this question, Nathan," she said. He nodded, allowing her. "It's simple really. As a professional actress, I've been able to assess your abilities these past few days that I've been here. So, I assigned each person the part that would be the absolute very best for you to excel. These are the parts you were born to play."

I looked at my script again. The parts we were born to play... A maid?

Chapter 407



After we each reviewed our individual scripts for a few minutes, we began to have our first rehearsal. We didn't have a stage yet. The actors in the scene just stood in the center of the ballroom with everyone else gathered around in front.

We did a dry run through the entire play with Nathan doing his best to direct everyone if Bridget was busy with her scene. She was in most scenes, as the lead. Nicholas was in several as well, though he seemed much less happy about that.

He wore a frown most of the time, even when Bridget told him, “Your character isn’t supposed to be this glum, Nicholas.”

Julian as the main antagonist, also had quite a few scenes. Between line reads, he would try to start conversations with Bridget, usually by lavishing her with compliments.

“You did so well in that last scene, Bridget. I almost believed you were your character,” he said once.

Each time, she had a different short reply. This time, she said, “Almost?’ Seems like I need to try harder then.” Then she turned her back to him to talk to Nicholas instead.

Julian’s smirk wavered. “That’s not what I meant,” he said, though she was no longer paying attention to him. With his shoulders slightly slumped, he exited the fake-stage area and came to stand beside me. “You didn’t see that, did you?”

“Sorry,” I told him. “We can pretend I didn’t if it makes feel better.’

you

I still don’t know the full story between what happened with these three. I’m starting to wonder if Julian was only ever so drawn to Bridget because she was the only girl to turn him down.

But, no, that seemed unfair. Julian harbored this crush of his for a long time. He might not hear no very often, but I doubted he would have held on this long from a simple rejection.

There had to be something else.

Maybe they actually did have a love triangle. Would Bridget date two men at once? But if Nicholas knew about it, he never would have gone along with it.

As I mulled over the possibilities, I didn't notice Julian move until his arm was already slung over my shoulders. He tugged me closer to him, until the side of my body slotted against his.

I looked at him with a lone lifted brow.

He turned into me. Nudging his nose against my cheek, he whispered, "We're dating, remember?"

"Yeah, but..." Usually our moments of closeness were talked about beforehand. This sudden closeness was decidedly not discussed previously.

"Please, Piper," Julian said into my ear. "I want to make her jealous."

I really, really doubted that was going to work, but I didn't want to hurt Julian more than he was already hurting. Who knew what would happen? Maybe it would work?

We were supposed to be dating anyway, so it didn't hurt to try. At the very least, it would further convince the other candidates that I was Julian's favorite.

"Fine," I said. I leaned into him. Then, I turned toward him too. Our faces were close. "But if this backfires, it's on you."

"I'll take that chance," Julian said. His gaze dropped to my mouth. I licked my lips.

There was movement from the stage. Surprise struck me. Was this actually working?

When I glanced over, yes, Bridget was on her way toward us, but that was only because she was hanging onto Nicholas's arm. He was the one storming over.

I had to stop myself from physically flinching backwards away from Julian. Nicholas, after all, was the one I truly wanted. But we were playing a game, and if I moved, Bridget would know right away it was fake.

If she didn't already know. My acting skills truly were atrocious.

"Piper," Nicholas said as he came to stand before us. My name was spoken quickly, clipped. As were the following words, "I think I heard Susie calling you."

I glanced over to where Susie stood. She was talking to Veronica, not paying attention to me at all.

I wasn't the only atrocious liar here. Nicholas just wanted to get me away from Julian.

I didn't know what to say in response. Julian needed me here, and I wasn't about to abandon him just to avoid Nicholas's jealousy. Nicholas should know where my heart truly lied. Although... with how jealous I routinely felt about Bridget, perhaps we had more to clear up after all.

+15 BONUS

"Bridget," Julian said. "Did you know Piper and I are dating?"

Bridget looked at Julian then, and his entire body tensed at my side. Now, if Bridget were jealous, she might give us a tight smile and a backhanded compliment.

Instead, she smiled brightly and said, "That's wonderful, Julian. I'm so happy you finally found someone."

Julian's hand on my shoulder suddenly clutches me tighter.

God, she seemed genuine. That must have been like a dagger to Julian's heart.

Although, she was an actress, so maybe it was an act? That seemed doubtful though, because as soon as she was done talking, she turned her full attention back on Nicholas, who was still looking at me. Nicholas's entire face was blank of emotion.

I would need to talk to him later, to remind him of who truly belonged to who. At least for now.

"Bridget, Nathan called. "We need you and Prince Nicholas back on stage."

Bridget tugged on Nicholas's arm. "Come on, Nicholas. We need to get back to work."

Nicholas nodded, though he continued to stare at me as long as he could, even when he started turning. He stopped only when he physically couldn't anymore.

Slowly, Julian let his arm around me drop. He didn't say a word. Neither did I, not wanting to hurt him further.

By the time rehearsal was over, I was so exhausted of all the mind games and jealousy and everything else. I lingered around the ballroom for a bit, not wanting to have to walk back with anyone and maintain my half of a conversation.

My mind was tired, and I honestly just wanted to hide.

When the room had finally mostly cleared out, I left too. I made it almost the entire way back to my room, when two familiar arms closed around me and dragged me into a closet.

At once, the door slammed shut behind me, I was shoved against it, and Nicholas's mouth was on my mine. He licked his way into my mouth, and I gave him easy access.

His arms were at my sides, his hands pressed flat against the door on either side

+15 BONUS

of me, boxing me in.

I dragged my hands up his chest to his shoulders, where I then wrapped them around the back of his neck to drag him closer.

He complied immediately, giving me more. His body moved closer, fully pinning me to the door.

A growl escaped the back of my throat. From being so near Bridget for all those scenes, he still smelled like her. Though I supposed I couldn't complain too hard. I knew I had to smell like Julian for similar reasons.

His hands moved to my hips and then traced up my sides in an intimate caress.

I broke the kiss to breathe. "Nick..."

He kissed me once more, soft and sweet. Then he physically moved me from the door. He opened and left me standing there, watching after him in confusion as he walked away.

Chapter 408



The next morning, Julian showed up at my door. I had only just changed out of my pajamas. Elva was still in hers.

"I want to escort you to breakfast," he said.

I blinked. "Breakfast?" Usually the royal family avoided breakfasts and lunches with the candidates, unless there was an event. The meals were typically entirely informal. It gave the girls a while to let their hair down and get to know each other without having to be on to impress anyone.

1-1

Julian's presence would change that dynamic. Though maybe most of the girls would appreciate more chances to speak with him. Tiffany would like it, anyway. Veronica too. Susie would, just because she thought Julian could be funny.

Yet, I suspected Julian's sudden desire to attend the informal breakfasts had everything to do with Bridget and nothing to do with anyone else.

In the end, I didn't even have to confront him about his intentions. All I had to do was lift a single brow.

"I want to try to make Bridget jealous again. This time without Nicholas around." Julian looked so young when he seemed so unsure. It was difficult to look at him. He was like a different person. I didn't like it. "Maybe it will work this time."

"Julian..."

"We have to try," he said. "It will be good publicity for us, anyway?"

I wasn't so sure. Our publicity hadn't looked great since Julian started chasing Bridget around like a lost little puppy. I was willing to bet that his fans among the commoners weren't feeling so great about his behavior either.

Still, the sooner Bridget flatout rejected him, maybe the sooner he would go back to being himself.

"Alright," I said, sighing/and went to finish helping Elva get ready.

Julian escorted Elva and me down into the dining room for breakfast. Everyone seemed a bit surprised when Julian entered in beside me, but no one said a word other than hello.

Tiffany slid over to make room for Julian in his usual spot, but as soon as he spotted Bridget sitting near Olivia and Lilliana, he physically dragged me that way

+15 BONUS

“Sorry,” I whispered toward Tiffany as we passed. Julian didn’t even glance at her, or at Veronica, or Susie, who were all trying to say hello.

With Bridget around, Julian had laser-focus. I wasn’t even sure he remembered me and Elva.

“Mommy,” Elva said as she hurried along with his. This pace was fast for her little legs. “Susie is over there!”

“I know, sweetheart,” I told her. “But Julian wants us to sit over here today.”

Elva pouted a little. She mumbled, more to herself than to me. “I don’t want to sit here.”

I couldn’t scold her for that. Honestly, I didn’t want to sit over here either.

Julian stopped us at Bridget’s side. Fortunately there were three open spots to her left side. Julian immediately plopped into the open seat beside her.

I rolled my eyes as I helped Elva into her chair, and then settled into mine between Elva and Julian.

“Hello, Bridget,” Julian said.

I leaned forward to see around him. “Hi, Bridget.”

“Hello to you both.” She gave us both a big, movie star smile, bright as flashing camera bulbs. “How are you both today?”

"I'm well, thank you," I started to say, but Julian talked over me, "How are you?"

"I'm fine." She started to turn back to Olivia and Lilliana, like she meant to talk to them and not the prince sitting beside her.

Julian glanced at me, a bit of hopelessness in his eyes. God, I hated it. And I hated how it made my heart ache. Julian was not meant to ever have that look on his face.

Yet, even if he didn't...

How jaded was Bridget for her not to want to engage in conversation with a prince who clearly wanted to talk to her. I understood they were old friends, but how she was acting – Ignoring Julian to talk to Olivia instead – was just plain rude.

Chapter 409



She was probably used to rubbing elbows with celebrities. But polite manners were polite manners.

I was suddenly very annoyed on Julian's behalf.

Maybe it was time I really lean into this and give this fake relationship my all.

I leaned forward again. "Bridget?"

Bridget stopped talking to Olivia to glance at me. "Yes, Piper?"

"Did I ever tell you how great of a boyfriend Julian is?" I hadn't because I had never told anyone because it was all lies. "He's so attentive and exciting. We're always doing something new."

“That’s nice,” she said, smiling kindly. “I’m really very glad that you two found each other.”

God help Julian, she seemed so genuine, like she really was glad her old friend found someone who cared about him and vice versa.”

Olivia then pulled away Bridget’s attention again, bringing her back into their conversation.

I glanced at Julian. His jaw was clenched tightly.

The rest of the meal, he only picked at his breakfast.

Afterwards, we said goodbye to Bridget, who was still talking to Olivia and Lilliana, then started to make our exit.

Elva wanted to say hi to Susie, so we stopped there. While Elva and Susie were speaking, I looked at Julian.

“I’m sorry,” I told him.

She shook his head. “Don’t.”

The word was like ice. It startled me, being frozen out like that, by Julian of all people. He immediately noticed the look on my face and relented.

“I’m not mad at you, Piper. I appreciate you trying.” He laughed a little, though it was weak. “Honestly, you’ve been the best friend I’ve ever had.”

His words warmed me up from the inside out. I smiled at him. “You are a good friend to me, too.”

+15 BÔNUS

He matched my smile. “Come on, that’s bullshit. I’m a terrible friend.” He said it so matter-of-factly that it made me laugh.

“No,” I said when I sobered. “I mean it. You’ve been there for me. I haven’t had many people in my life that I can trust, but you are one of them.”

"I'm the same," he said. He took my hand then, and squeezed my fingers.

I felt closer to him than I ever had before. I kept waiting for him to ruin the moment with some smartass comment, but this time, he never did.

In our comfortable silence, Veronica approached us.

"Prince Julian," she said. He nodded at her in acknowledgement. "How is Prince Joyce?"

The question startled both me and Julian.

"Joyce?" Julian asked.

Though maybe it shouldn't have been such a surprise. Having once been in the underground organization herself, Veronica could relate to Joyce in ways that the rest of us would have never been able to.

Julian pitched his voice lower. "What was done to him is not so easily undone. As I'm sure you understand."

"I do," she said. "That's why I asked."

Julian tilted his head as he studied her. He seemed to be assessing something. She held his gaze steadily, as if she was aware of the silent test happening and was meeting it with confidence.

Meanwhile, I looked between the two of them, terribly confused.

Finally Julian sighed.

And Veronica spoke, "I want to speak to him."

Julian hummed, like he'd already gathered that, and also already knew which answer he was going to give.

"It won't change anything," Julian said.

"It might," she said. "And doesn't that make it worth the try?"

I tugged Julian's sleeve. "Let her. If anyone can help, she can." Julian looked at me, then sighed again. "Very well."

Chapter 410



Chapter 0410 That night, I left Elva with the nanny, and met with Nicholas, Julian, and Veronica in one of the sitting rooms. "Why are we meeting here?" I asked as I entered the room. "Wouldn't it be easier to meet near the royal family wing?" "It would be, if that's where Joyce was," Julian said. I blinked, surprised. Julian stuffed shook his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He didn't seem likely to explain so I looked to Nicholas instead. It was so nice to see Nicholas without his Bridget shadow. I wondered what he had to do to escape her for this long. But he didn't say, and I didn't ask. I wanted to enjoy him on his own for as long as I could, without bringing Bridget into it. Plus, talking about her in front of Julian would hurt him. "Joyce isn't in his rooms," Nicholas said, bringing me back to the matter at hand.

I pulled my brow together. "Then where is he?" "He's in the dungeons," Julian said finally. Now I was even more surprised. A direct member of the royal family locked in the dungeons? It seemed so unheard of. Sure, that's where they had put Terry, but he'd never been a true royal by blood. Only his relation to his sister kept him close enough to gain the royal benefits. Joyce was a prince, the son of the King. Nicholas must have seen my confusion. "He kept trying to escape." "Don't worry," Julian said. "His cell is not like you are imagining." I didn't know how Julian knew what I was imagining, but... yeah, I was imagining something pretty bad. Dark and cold with water dripping down and a bucket for the bathroom. Dirt floors. A straw bed. Maybe chains

connecting him to the walls. "You'll see," Nicholas said. He held out his arm for me, and I slid my arm through his.

Julian did the same for Veronica, who seemed lost in thought. I wasn't sure she was even listening to our previous conversation. Though from her plain-er-than-usual clothes, it was likely she had already guessed where we were going. +15 BÔNUS As a group, we moved slowly and stealthily to the dungeons. We couldn't sneak past the guards stationed at the dungeons, but when they saw the princes with us, they waved us through. No, when we had been stealthy, it was mainly to avoid the cameras. The very last thing that we needed was the public wondering why two princes and two candidates were descending down into the dungeons. The dungeons were housed under the barracks where the guards stayed. We went down two flights of stairs before we went through another checkpoint and then entered the dungeon proper. It was nothing like the medieval torture rooms I had imagined. No, this facility was entirely... modern. Cameras and clean concrete floors, and glass everywhere. The doors were metal, but there were no bars. Guards patrolled the hallways. Others were stationed in watch rooms with monitors that viewed every corner of this place. "This is his room here," Nicholas nudged me as we passed. The room was empty presently, but... wow! It looked like a prince's room: a plush bed, a wooden desk, and tall-back sitting chairs. Dozens upon dozens were scattered throughout. He had his own personal bathroom with a door. It was the nicest prison I'd ever seen, and so far beyond even the nicest thing I could think of. "He's not there," I said. "We moved him into one of the discussion rooms, in preparation of our visit," Nicholas said. Discussion room seemed like a nice way of saying interrogation room. Farther down the hallway, the princes led us into a small room with a giant glass window on one side. In the room beyond the window, Joyce sat at a simple table, waiting.

"He can't see us in here," Nicholas said. "But we can see him. We can stay here and watch, if Veronica needs our help."

