

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 411



Chapter 0411 Veronica was still quiet. I wished I could give her a hug, but I didn't want to disturb her train of thought. She had personally asked me to come with her. "I don't need you to do anything," she had said then. Her eyes had been downcast, like she was embarrassed to be asking for help. "But I would feel better if I knew you were there, supporting me." "I'll always be supporting you," I had said, thinking about what would happen when the competition was done and we all went our separate ways. Coming here tonight was the absolute least I could do for her. "I'm ready," Veronica said now. The rest of us waited in the observation room, as Veronica went alone through the door into the interrogation room. Joyce glanced up as she entered. He seemed confused. "What are you doing here?" "Do you know who I am?" she asked. "From the competition..." he said. He didn't know her name. "I'm Veronica," she said. "And I was just like you. I was recruited into the underground organization from a very young age, and was raised to do their bidding." Joyce looked at her again in renewed interest. "How old were you?" he asked. "Too young." Joyce dropped his gaze down to the table. "And you're out now?"

"Yes. It took a long time, but I was finally exposed to their true colors. They never wanted to save the world like they promised. They trained me to do magic, and then used me to do terrible things." "I'm not like you," Joyce said. He crossed his arms. "Is that why you are here? You think you can just feed me these lines and my life will change?" He looks at Veronica again, and

there's something dark in his eyes. "I may have been uncovered, but I will never be a traitor like you. I believe in this cause."

"They lied to you," Veronica said at the same tone and cadence, seemingly +15 BÔNUS undisturbed by his insults. If being a traitor to a crime organization could be considered an insult. "I don't believe you," Joyce said once, and then louder, "I don't believe you!" "Whatever darkness you are facing, I promise there is a way out of it for you, just like there was for me," Veronica said. Again, this time screaming himself horse, Joyce repeated, "I don't believe you!!" Hearing raised voices, guards went into the room. Veronica turned and left, returning to the observation room with us. I went toward her. "I'm so sorry, Veronica." "It's not over," she said. "This is only the beginning." She looked to Julian. "I'd like to come back again." Julian nodded. "Alright." I didn't understand. "He didn't seem... receptive?" "You saw him lose his temper," Julian said. I did. "He wouldn't have done that if Veronica's words didn't touch a nerve. He has doubts. We'll have to be resilient." Nicholas stepped closer to Veronica now too. "You shouldn't overly trouble yourself, Veronica. We appreciate what you are doing, but "I want to do this," Veronica said. "It feels like this is healing some of the damage I've done to people in the past." No one dared to argue with that. As we were leaving the dungeons, a shiver ran through me. Though modern, the facility did seem to have a sterile, cold feeling too it. Suddenly, Nicholas removed his jacket and placed it around my shoulders. I was instantly warmer and snuggled into it, knowing it had been warmed by Nicholas's skin. "Thank you," I whispered. "Anything for you," he said.

I smiled and lowered my face closer to the collar of the jacket. There, I smelled Nicholas's comforting, masculine scent. Yet under that... faint... was the smell of flowers. Bridget. andisturbed by his insults. If being a traitor to a crime organizatio c be considered an insult. "I don't believe you," Joyce said once, and then louder, "I don't believe you!" "Whatever darkness you are

facing, I promise there is a way out of it for you, just like there was for me,” Veronica said. Again, this time screaming himself hoarse, Joyce repeated, “I don’t believe you!!” Hearing raised voices, guards went into the room. Veronica turned and left, returning to the observation room with us. I went toward her. “I’m so sorry, Veronica,” “It’s not over,” she said. “This is only the beginning.” She looked to Julian, “I’d like to come back again.” Julian nodded. “Alright.” I didn’t understand. “He didn’t seem... receptive?” “You saw him lose his temper,” Julian said. I did. “He wouldn’t have done that if Veronica’s words didn’t touch a nerve. He has doubts. We’ll have to be resilient.” Nicholas stepped closer to Veronica now too. “You shouldn’t overly trouble yourself, Veronica. We appreciate what you are doing, but “I want to do this,” Veronica said. “It feels like this is healing some of the damage I’ve done to people in the past.” No one dared to argue with that. As we were leaving the dungeons, a shiver ran through me. Though modern, the facility did seem to

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Chapter 412



“Maid! Oh, where is my maid!” Bridget called from the center of the ballroom that was once again our makeshift stage. The real stage was currently being

worked on at the far end of the room. Occasionally the sound of hammers or saws would cut through our rehearsal.

Bridget said my cue, so I'm forced now to move to the center of the stage.

"My true lover will be here in a moment. Maid, please! You must help me. Keep watch at the door, and if anyone comes, you must let us know!"

Here came my one line of the entire show. "At once, Mistress."

We were playing the parts we were born to play, Bridget had said. Thanks a lot.

The script dictated that I moved toward the door but stay on screen, so I moved toward the edge of where our fake-stage was.

At this point, Nicholas's character was supposed to climb through a window to see Bridget's character. Since the set was still being worked on, Nicholas just walked up instead.

"Oh! There he is! My love!" Bridget held open her arms. Her eyes were full of longing, like they had been separated forever and not just had a lengthy conversation about something from their childhood not twenty minutes ago during a break.

I guessed this was why Bridget was out there making millions and winning awards.

Nicholas, meanwhile, was no trained actor. He stepped to where Bridget had marked his spot with tape the last time he had messed this up. Then, he awkwardly shifted to face Bridget.

"Hello, uh... my love," he said like he was greeting the refrigerator.

Bridget's smile tightened ever-so-much. It must have been painful, going from working with professional actors to us amateurs. Though... truly she brought

this on herself. Julian was the second- best actor in the room, but she didn't want him as the second-biggest part.

She wanted Nicholas, Honest, steadfast Nicholas, who was so straightforward, he didn't know how to lie well enough to act his way out of a wet paper bag.

"My eyes don't deceive me," Bridget said, coming closer to him. She was a true professional. If she was in a scene with a bad actor, she just needed to act well

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enough for the both of them. "Oh, my love, I am so glad you are here. Tell me. Do you bring good news of our engagement?"

Nicholas stared off for a beat too long.

Bridget cleared her throat. "Do you bring good news of our engagement, my love?"

"Oh! Oh. No. Uh, no, my father... that is... he refused to give his... um, blessing? To our thing. Engagement."

At this point, Nicholas was such a bad actor that I was wondering if he was putting it on, on purpose to get out of doing this. But that couldn't be. He was too honest for that.

The scene went on like that for a while. Until it came to the part that I absolutely dreaded the most: the scene where Nicholas and Bridget were supposed to kiss goodbye.

Bridget, holding onto Nicholas's upper arms, closed her eyes and pressed her face upwards. She pursed her lips.

Nicholas looked down at her with a frown. "We don't have to practice this part."

“We should,” Bridget said, with her eyes still closed. “So that it will be believable on the night of the show.”

“We’ll be fine,” Nicholas said.

Bridget righted herself. “Oh.” Even with her high standing, she couldn’t directly argue with a prince, at least not when he wasn’t indulging her. Bridget cleared her throat, and then her bright countenance was back as if it had never left. She bounced back quickly from rejection, I was almost impressed.

Nicholas turned to glance at me. When our eyes met, I saw the whispered promise in his gaze. You are the one I want.

My heart soared. He didn’t want to kiss her unless he absolutely had to. The one he wanted was me.

I was so lost in Nicholas’s golden eyes, that I nearly missed a second pair also looking at me.

Bridget looked away the moment I met her gaze. She turned so quickly, I wondered if I had imagined it.

Either way, blessedly, the scene ended and I was able to return to my friends.

Tiffany was fanning Susie with her script as Susie was nervously reading through hers for the hundredth time the past ten minutes.

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“One of her scenes is next,” Veronica said.

“There’s too many lines,” Susie said. “Why would Bridget think I could do this?”

“Because you can,” Tiffany said. “She sees the potential in you for greatness.”

Maybe that was true. Though the potential Bridget saw in me was to be a maid so I doubted it was as deep as all that. And I didn’t know if Bridget had

more than one conversation with Susie. Did she even know she suffered from severe social anxiety?

“Maybe we should talk to Bridget,” I said. “We could switch parts?”

Susie looked at me with pure hope in her eyes. “Do you really think so?” She clutched my arm so hard, so desperately, that her fingers cut into my skin.

“Let’s see.”

Susie did not release her death grip as together we approached Bridget. She was mostly alone, thank goodness, having a drink of water from a drink table set up for us.

She stopped when she saw us. “Susie? What are you doing over here? You should be going to the stage.”

Susie made a panicked noise.

I cleared my throat, brining Bridget’s attention to me. “Susie and I think it would be a good idea if we switched roles. See, Susie has -”

“Impossible,” Bridget said quickly. “I assigned each person the role that fits them best.”

Irritation zipped through me, remembering once more that Bridget had thought my perfect role was a maid. But that wasn’t my purpose here, so I pushed down the anger. I wanted to help Susie, and I couldn’t do that by losing my temper at Bridget.

Besides, Bridget did seem earnest in this. She probably didn’t even realize what she was doing when I got the maid role. And she probably did want to help Susie, like Tiffany did.

What they didn’t understand was they were pushing the poor girl into an anxiety attack.

“We aren’t trying to ruin your show,” I said. “But there are certain conditions that

you don’t know about. Susie has stage fright.”

Bridget laughed. “Everyone does. Go on, Susie. Just give this scene one shot, okay? You’ll see how easy it is, and we won’t talk about this again.”

“And if it doesn’t go like that?” I said.

Bridget’s good mood disappeared with a sigh. “Then we can talk again. But try first.”

Susie, who had been quiet until now, looked at me.

I wished I had better news, but this might have been the best shot we would get. Do you think you can try it once?”

She hesitated for a good long while. Then, slowly, she nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good for you!” Bridget said brightly. “Knock them dead!”

Susie clutched her script tightly with both hands, crinkling it. Too quickly, she walked toward the center of our fake-stage.

I hadn’t really read this scene, but it was my understanding that Susie was supposed to give some kind of monologue here.

Nathan hushed the room.

Susie, pale as a ghost, opened her script with shaky hands.

“You can start now,” Nathan said.

Susie opened her mouth.

And promptly fainted.

Chapter 413



Gently, I knocked on Susie's door. It was already partially opened. When I knocked, the door pushed farther inward. Susie was resting in bed. Nicholas was standing beside the bed, speaking with her. I had just watched the doctor leave before I knocked.

Susie saw me and waved me closer. As I followed her direction, I noticed she was visibly upset. Her face was red and splotchy. There were tear stains down her cheeks. She was still crying.

"I'll speak again with the doctor," Nicholas said, and after a quick concerned glance at me rushed to chase after the doctor. At that pace, he'd catch her in the hallway.

With him gone, I took his place at Susie's side. With her crying like she was, it still felt too far, so I stepped closer until I was leaning on the bed.

"I'll speak with Bridget again," I said. "I'll absolutely insist that she change our parts. Susie, I'm so sorry that I didn't fight harder. I never should have made you go up there."

Susie shook her head.

When she didn't speak, I continued, "I promise that we'll find a way to protect you from your stage fright. I'll beg Bridget if I have to. Surely she'll be able to see

reason now.

"Piper..."

"I'm serious, Susie. I'll do whatever it takes -"

"I'm not upset about the play anymore," Susie said.

I cut off my words. I closed my open mouth. Gave it some thought. Then opened it again. "Are you okay?"

Oh G od, she wasn't sick or something, was she? She was my oldest friend here, and one of the dearest. If something happened to her, I didn't know what I would do. But, surely, she would be okay. The best doctors in the kingdom were here attending to the royal family.

If Susie needed medical care, she was in the right place.

"Piper," Susie said. Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "I'm pregnant."

I stared at her.

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My thoughts fizzled into static white noise.

I had known that Susie and Mark had been intimate, but... pregnant? They weren't married. They weren't even officially a couple. Susie was here, supposedly, to be trying to win the heart of one of the princes. I wasn't even sure she'd ever been alone with Joyce!

Now she was pregnant!

"What did Mark say?" I asked.

More tears spilled down her cheeks, this time with a so b.

Oh, no. That ba st ard. Mark had always seemed like an upstanding guy, but if he had dared to hurt Susie, I would never forgive him.

"He didn't..." I started, unsure how to ask what I wanted to. What could have Mark said that would make Susie this upset? Had he broken things off? Had he wanted to terminate the baby?

“He doesn’t know,” Susie said through her cries.

Oh. Oh, thank God. I placed my hand to my chest to steady my out of control, furious heartbeat. I’d been half-ready to chase Mark down and punch him myself. I have a wolf now. He would have felt it.

Discovering that he didn’t know yet was an absolute relief. I had so few friends, I couldn’t really afford to lose any.

Before I could finish processing any of this, Nicholas returned through the door. He crossed the room in a few large strides and joined us by standing again at Susie’s side.

“Okay, the doctor will keep this quiet for now, but soon you will have to make a decision about what to do, Susie,” Nicholas said.

A decision? What an understatement. She’d have to make several life-altering decisions in very quick succession.

Questions like: Are you keeping the baby? How will you tell Mark? Will you and Mark make your relationship public? Will you voluntarily drop from the competition or will you wait until you have to leave? How will you tell your parents?

Chapter 414



I rubbed my own forehead, the questions making my head ache. I could only imagine what Susie was going through.

“You have to tell Mark,” I said, because that should be the starting point. Mark was half to blame here, so he should carry half the burden of whatever happens

next.

"I agree," Nicholas said. "He will do the right thing."

Susie shook her head. "I'll be such a bother to him."

A bother? "Susie, the man got you pregnant. If he thinks you are a bother..."
He isn't worth your time.

"He wouldn't think that," Nicholas said.

"He'll think I'm trapping him," Susie said.

That seemed unlikely. It took two to tango, after all. "Did you use a condom?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I didn't even think about it. We were so... And then..."
She cried more. "I care about him so much. I'm going to lose him."

"You won't," I tried to say.

But Susie was inconsolable. She buried her face in her hands and cried so hard I didn't know what to do but to gently reach out and wrap my arms around her.

She sobbed into my shoulder then, totally soaking my shirt.

I looked up at Nicholas, but he seemed as lost as I did. What could we possibly say to a girl who was going through something like this? She was the one who would have to face the ridicule and the hardships.

I knew what she would face. I had been there before myself. I still face those hardships every day when someone knew discovers about me and Elva.

When Susie was feeling a little stronger, I would tell her the full truth of it.

That,

yes,

it was hard as hell sometimes. There were plenty of days when I wanted to quit the whole world.

But then Elva smiled at me and every hardship ever was worth it.

Susie cried until she was absolutely exhausted. Then she asked to be alone for a while.

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“Of course,” I said, and together, Nicholas and I moved to the edge of the room, all the way by the door.

There Nicholas spoke quietly, though furiously, “I can’t believe Mark was this careless. If he meant to bed Susie outside of wedlock, then he dam ned well should have used protection.”

“Do you really think he’ll do the right thing?” I asked, soft as a pin drop.

“Yes,” Nicholas said. “If he doesn’t, he’s not the man I thought he was.”

“He’d have to give up his career, wouldn’t he?” I asked. Betas were supposed to remain fully loyal to their assigned masters. For a Beta to take a wife, to have a child, meant they were compromised.

“I’ll speak to him,” Nicholas said, which wasn’t an answer to my question. Maybe Nicholas hated that rule too. Maybe someday, when he was king, he could change it. Susie’s pregnancy wouldn’t last that long, however.

Mark would have to make a choice. And I prayed for Susie’s sake that he made the right one.

“I’m going to buy him a box of condoms,” Nicholas growled.

A little late for that, I thought, but let Nicholas have his angry moment.

Though... thinking on it...

I couldn't help but wonder...

If we had sex out in that forest the night I had been half-wild and desperate for him inside of me, there was a good chance that I would be pregnant too.

Would he still be this angry if he had lost himself to the moment, too? What if I had been the one to get pregnant? What would he have done then?

Chapter 415



she

At the next rehearsal, Susie still hadn't left her room. When I had visited her, hadn't even left the bed. She remained inconsolable, always crying and lost in thought. I had held her tightly, told her she was my dear friend and I would be her for there no matter what, and then left the room.

Now, I walked straight up to Bridget. I didn't care that she was flanked by Olivia and Lilliana and in deep conversation. I walked to her and I interrupted their conversation, and I said, "Susie and I are switching parts."

Bridget frowned at me for a moment. "I'm not thrilled about this, I want you to know that. Susie's part was perfect for her, just as your part was perfect for you."

Yes, the maid who had to watch the biggest kiss in the show from a distance. That was my destiny.

"We'll live," I said, only barely hiding my annoyance.

Bridget shrugged in reluctant acceptance. "If Susie's stage fright is as severe as it appears to be, then we truly have no choice. Fine. You can have Susie's

part, though..." Her eyes brightened like she thought of something. "Your eagerness makes me wonder if you have properly researched Susie's part?"

Admittedly, I had not. I had been too busy being annoyed at my own nameless part, and worried about Susie's anxiety that I hadn't done so much as glance through the rest of the script.

"I can see on your face that you haven't," Bridget said. "Maybe you should read it before you decide."

"Whatever it is, it will be fine," I said with complete confidence. "I'll do it."

Bridget smiled kindly. Olivia and Lilliana, meanwhile, smiled much-less-kindly.

"Susie's part is that of Nicholas's spurned lover," Bridget said. Softly, she added, "Perhaps that is the best part for you, after all."

I blinked, startled by her words. "What?"

"Nicholas's spurned lover," she said.

"No. What did you say after that?"

She tilted her head with total innocence. "I didn't say anything after that."

I knew I had heard something, but her innocent expression was so convincing that I began to doubt myself. Had I imagined her saying it? Was my jealous wolf

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acting up again? I thought I had been doing such a good job containing my distrust of Bridget. Maybe I let my guard down too much.

I needed to keep a handle on myself or I'd do something embarrassing. Like snap at Bridget when she didn't actually say anything.

This time, I decided to take the high road, and exited myself from the conversation.

I was still going to do the part.

I didn't need to fight over nothing.

Even if the thought of being Nicholas's spurned lover, even in the context of a play, hurt my soul a little bit.

Maybe more than a little bit.

Maybe so much that later, when the kitchen was empty and most of the hallways clear, I sneaked down into the kitchens and opened the freezer. I had only grabbed the ice cream when a voice spoke up from behind me.

"Get me a pint, too."

I glanced behind me at Julian. His hands were shoved in his pockets and he seemed as dejected as me.

"What kind?" I asked.

Julian and I sat on the floor in the kitchen, our pints of ice cream in one of our hands, a spoon in the others. Mostly we ate from our own pint, but occasionally, we would steal from each other. I had rocky road. He had chocolate mint.

"So," he said. "We know why I'm here. Why are you here?"

"I switched parts with Susie," I said. "Bridget thought she needed to tell me what exactly that part is."

"What is the part?" Julian asked. Of course, he didn't read the script either. Though, unlike me, Julian didn't need to bother reading it all to still do a good job. If he hadn't been born a royal, he would have been an actor.

"Nicholas's spurned lover," I said.

Julian burst out laughing. "You're kidding?"

"I wish," I said, mostly with false irritation now. Julian's laughter did make the whole thing seem funnier.

"Do you know what my part is?" he asked.

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"The villain," I said.

"I chase after Bridget the whole time, just to get beat up by Nicholas in the end." He was still laughing, so I knew it was safe to laugh now too.

Julian held out his ice cream to me like he meant to click it against mine in a toast. I immediately knocked my own pint against his in solidarity.

"We have the worst luck in the universe, don't we?" he asked.

"It's not great," I admitted. "I wouldn't say the worst ever."

"It's up there."

We laughed together a little longer, finding connection in our shared love life hardships. Then, eventually, even that laughter ceased and we went back to eating our ice cream in relative quiet.

I wondered once more about the past, that lead Julian to be like this around this one particular woman. Since I'd known him, he'd had plenty of dates, but nothing had ever left him as bereft as this. In fact, none of those relationships had even seemed to faze him at all.

In this quiet moment with just the two of us and our ice cream, I felt a little bold.

So I opened my mouth and asked the question I had wanted to ask for months now, ever since first hearing about Bridget's existence.

"Julian," I said.

He hummed in response, letting me know he was listening.

“What exactly happened with Bridget?”

He stared into his ice cream. He’d eaten most of his by now and was scrapping the bottom with his spoon. “You want the whole story?”

“Just the parts you are willing to tell me,” I said. Curious as I was, I didn’t want to pressure him. He would tell me when he was ready.

“I’ll give you the very abridged version,” Julian said.

“Alright.”

He dropped his spoon in the pint and then set it aside on the floor. He still didn’t look at me though. Instead, he found a spot on the wall to focus on and kept his gaze there.

His eyes went hazy, like he was traveling to a time long ago. A memory of a distant past.

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“The three of us grew up together. Nicholas, Bridget, and me. When we got older, my feelings became deeper. She was my first love. My only love. When we were young teens, I confessed my love to her, and she accepted it. I was so happy. She was my first kiss. We stayed up kissing all night, that night.”

That all seemed good. Positive. A first kiss was special, I knew that. Nicholas had been my first.

“But...” he said, and his lips quirked downwards. “I only went to get a shower. I smelled like grass stains and sweat and I wanted to be fresh for her. I came downstairs and saw her holding hands with Nicholas.”

He paused a moment, and I could plainly see the hurt cross his face.

“Julian...” I began. He didn’t have to continue if it was too painful.

But he continued anyway. “She caught me before I could confront them. She pulled me aside and told me straight to my lovesick face that she was in love with Nicholas, and she was going to be with him instead.”

Chapter 416



The next day at rehearsal, I couldn't keep my eyes off of Julian, Nick, and Bridget, watching their interactions. I tried to see them in a new way, now with some more of their past acting like a lens.

If Bridget had kissed Julian all night after his love confession, only to break up with him the next morning to be with Nicholas, surely some of those lingering feelings would remain and shine through in their actions with each other.

So far, what I was seeing was what I had been seeing since the start.

Across the room, Bridget showed Nicholas something in the script. She leaned very far into him, making certain that her chest touched his arm. Nicholas didn't seem to notice. He

pointed at the script where Bridget must have been referring to.

I wished I was closer, to hear the words, but I wasn't sure how to move over there with any kind of subtly. Veronica and Tiffany were standing beside me as part of our own little group. People would notice if I suddenly broke off to go stand on my own.

Instead, I continued to keep watch.

Julian was on the other side of Bridget. Though he wasn't a part of the conversation between Bridget and Nicholas, he clearly wanted to be, as he followed along in his own script.

Once, he tried nudging Bridget, to get her to pay attention to him, as if to ask her a question. She held up a finger, asking him to give her a minute, and then otherwise ignored him.

For the life of me, I couldn't understand why Julian continued to hold onto her. She clearly wasn't interested. Was this simply a case of Julian needing to learn how to take no for an answer, no matter

how abrupt? I was starting to suspect.

But then I saw it.

Bridget placed her hand on Julian's arm and squeezed. While she was talking to Nicholas, she turned to Julian and winked.

It was subtle, barely—there flirting, but now that I was looking for it, I could see it plain as

day.

While Nicholas received most of Bridget's attention, Julian was not ignored. It almost seemed like Julian was her little secret.

Or like she was doing just enough to keep him on the hook while she primarily pursued

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Nicholas.

Maybe I was looking too hard. Maybe it was innocent. But it sure as heck seemed like she was stringing Julian along. I wondered if that was how it had been in the past too.

Watching it happen, seeing the hope in Julian's eyes, made something uncomfortable churn in my gut. I also hated how openly Bridget was flirting

with Nicholas, laughing at whatever he said and looking up at him through her eyelashes.

“Piper?” Tiffany said, dragging my attention away.

“Hm?”

“They’re calling you on stage,” Tiffany said.

“Oh!”

I hurried toward the stage. Admittedly, I hadn’t been paying attention at all, so I had no idea even what scene we were supposed to be doing. I still hadn’t even finished reading the script. When I thought I had only one line, I didn’t bother. Now that I was doing Susie’s part, I really need to go back. I just hadn’t yet.

As I took the stairs to reach the stage, I was surprised to find Nicholas right behind me. Were we doing a scene together?

My stomach sank. My new part was that of Nicholas’s spurned lover. Any scene we shared together was unlikely to be a pleasant one.

As we stepped onto the stage, Nicholas touched the small of my back, guiding me toward the center where we would perform. I looked at him.

“Which scene is this?” I whispered.

He gave me a small, fond smile. “Scene 14.” Nodding, I flipped open the script to the correct scene.

Chapter 417



“Get in your places, please,” Nathan called from the bottom of the stage. Bridget hurried to take point beside him. “Are you two ready?”

“Ready,” Nicholas said. He had his script out too.

“Ready,” I echoed. My heart hammered in my chest as I skimmed the first line. This was going to be even worse than I thought.

“Begin!” Nathan called.

I braced myself. Nicholas was set to start off the scene.

His eyes were locked on the script. He didn’t speak right away.

“I said, begin!” Nathan said again.

Nicholas cleared his throat. When he looked up at me, his eyes were hard. “We have to end things between us,” he said.

God, I knew he was acting but the words still speared through me. He was just reading the

script, but my

my heart crumbled up in my chest. It was too real. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t. I had to.

“Why?” I asked. It was my line but it was also the question in my heart.

He swallowed hard. “There’s someone else.”

“Who?” I read.

“It doesn’t matter who.”

“I think it does.” I paused, tried to collect myself. Just keep reading. The sooner this was over, the sooner I could pretend this never happened. “...I love you.”

Nicholas hesitated again. “Well, I don’t love you.”

He's acting, I reminded myself, again and again. But I couldn't help thinking that this was eerily close to how the end of our whatever—we—are might end. By nature of the contest, Nicholas would have to marry someone. We already knew it wouldn't be me.

He could so easily tell me there's someone else. I almost had to expect it.

And telling him I love him for him not to feel it back was one of my deepest fears. We hadn't

+15 BONUS

put a name on what we are to each other right now, nor have we fully admitted the extent of our feelings for one another. It felt... safer that way.

Now I realized I was simply being a coward.

Hearing I don't love you was shattering my heart like it was made of glass.

It was not shocking then, as the tears began to fall.

Nicholas, alarmed, started forward, but I held up my hand. I didn't want comfort here. How could I ever accept it? We were on stage with the whole of the competition watching, and Nathan. If he gave me a

hint of special treatment, everyone one would.

We had to finish the scene.

"Why would you hurt me like this?" I asked, reading the lines.

Nicholas frowned at me. There was worry in his golden eyes. The flecks of green sparkled under the stage lights.

"I love her," he said. The words came out flat. He didn't sound like he meant them. Still, they sliced through me as surely as if they had been real.

More tears fell. "I never want to see either of you again!" I shouted. That was my cue to leave, thank God. I swiveled on my heels and walked straight to the stairs. I hurried down them, ready to make my escape.

Unfortunately, Bridget was waiting for me at the bottom.

"Bravo! Piper!" Bridget clapped her hands. "What an amazing performance! Why, this is the part for you, after all. I'm sorry to have doubted." Her smile was big and friendly, but I was battle-wounded and just wanted to heal.

"Thanks," I grumbled.

"Those tears," Bridget said, leaning closer. "They look so real."

I didn't want her to know that they were, but I was having a hard enough time trying to keep myself together.

"Excuse me," I managed to say, and pushed my way past her.

I was halfway to the exit, when I heard Nicholas behind me. "Piper, wait!"

Chapter 418



"Piper!" Nicholas called after me.

I continued walking, not slowing down until I was in the hallway, with the stage and all of the other candidates safely out of view. Then, I turned toward the wall and truly let the tears

fall.

I knew Nicholas wouldn't give up his chase, even though I hoped he would. So I wasn't, terribly surprised when he burst into the hallway like a bat out of

hell. He looked up and down the hallway before spotting me, then, much slower, came to stand at my side.

“Piper,” he says softly.

I shied away from him, not wanting him to see the evidence of my heartbreak. I know the scene we played wasn’t real, but I couldn’t stop the wave of emotions running through me. The addition of my wolf wasn’t helping, as I now felt everything so keenly.

“Piper, I’m sorry,” Nicholas said. His voice was pitched low. The apology was for me only. He and I were the only ones who would know exactly why that scene we just performed would hurt me. “I’m so sorry. Believe me, I was only reading the script.”

“I know that,” I said through my sniffing.

He stepped closer to me. He pressed his hand to the small of my back. It felt so good there, I backed up into it a little.

“Then why are you crying?” he asked.

“It still hurt to hear those things,” I admitted. “But don’t worry. I’ll be fine by the final performance.” I would have to be, or risk my placement in the event’s rankings. If I wanted to stay in the competition for as long as possible, then I couldn’t just run away after every scene.

“I don’t want you to have to be fine, Piper. I just want –

“Nicholas? Oh, there you are. You are needed on stage.” Bridget’s high heels click–clacked on the floorboards as she came closer to us. “Piper? Are you upset?”

“She just needs a little space,” Nicholas said. He turned, placing himself firmly between Bridget and me, likely to hide my crying.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Bridget said. “I see it all the time. Actors get so into character that it’s hard to come back out of it. Why, I even once cried in a bathroom for a full

+15 BÔNUS

hour after a difficult scene.”

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and, sneaking past Nicholas, who let her by, handed the handkerchief to me. I looked at it for a moment, and then accepted it.

I supposed it was a good thing that she had this misunderstanding. I wouldn’t want her to know my heart was actually breaking a little.

“You have a few minutes before your next scene, Piper,” Bridget said. “Clean yourself up, and then meet us back in the ballroom, okay? Let’s go, Nicholas.”

Bridget started to walk away, but Nicholas didn’t move. Bridget stopped a few feet away.

“Nicholas?” she called back to him.

He turned to me. “Piper...”

“It’s okay,” I told him. “I just need a moment.”

He stubbornly stayed. I glanced at him. My tears were drying up some now, I wanted him to

see that.

He stared hard at me. His expression did not shift as he glanced at the tear tracks on my

cheeks.

I knew he wouldn’t leave unless I actually demanded it, so I lied and said, “I kind of want to be alone, okay?”

His lips twitched downward ever—so—slightly like he didn't quite believe me. But he couldn't argue in front of Bridget, not without giving too much away. So he said, "Okay. But I'll be looking for you in the ballroom."

"I'll be there," I said. "Just give me a few minutes."

"Ten and I start looking," he said.

"Fifteen."

"Ten," he said, more firmly.

I sighed. "Ten."

He nodded. His gaze stared hard on me for a moment more, but then he turned and went to Bridget. Bridget waved at me, before they both turned and disappeared back into the ballroom.

The minute they were out of sight, I turned and booked it toward one of the bathrooms

+15 BONUS

nearby. It had a powder room attached, with a small little sofa tucked against the wall. I immediately flopped down there.

Bridget's handkerchief was soft and smelled like lavender. It had her initials embroidered on the corner. I hated how much I liked it. It was soft on my cheeks as I wiped my tears away.

I was maybe in the bathroom for all of two minutes before the door burst open without a knock. Thank God I was sitting on the sofa in the powder room and not actually in the bathroom itself, although it had a door separating.

I could have sworn I locked the door.

When Julian sauntered in, I realized yeah, I probably had locked the door. Julian just picked it.

“What if I’d been in the actual bathroom?” I asked as he plopped down into the narrow

space beside me on the sofa. It was a smallish sofa, our hips were smashed together for us both to fit.

“We both know you only came here to hide,” Julian said.

“I’m not hiding.

))

“Oh no? What would you call this then?”

“Catching my breath.” I dabbed at my eyes. Fortunately, at least, the tears had stopped for

now.

Julian hummed. He was letting me get away with that. I was a bit surprised. I must have looked like hell to affect Julian that way.

“It was a good scene,” Julian said. “It looked good, anyway. I imagine it must have felt like hell.”

“Worse,” I grumbled. With my face dry, I crumpled up the handkerchief in my hand. “It’s like I was looking into my inevitable future.”

It was funny how I could talk to Julian about this, when it was so much harder to tell Nicholas. Maybe because Julian and I were friends. Maybe because I knew he could relate to my heartbreak.

He’d shared things with me. I could share this with him.

“You really think Nicholas would say any of that to you?” Julian asked.

“Outside of the scene, I mean.”

+15 BÔNUS

I lift one shoulder and let it drop. “We’ll go our separate ways eventually. We have to. It would be an easier break for him if he found someone else before then.’))

“Bullshit,” Julian huffed. “You are just feeling sorry for yourself, Piper. We both know Nicholas would never treat you in real life the way he has to for the play, even if you do have to go your own ways at some point in the future.”

I turned my head to look closer at him. He seemed... indignant. It surprised me. “I would have thought you’d enjoy the chance to tarnish Nicholas’s character, since you still hold such anger toward him.”

Julian snorted. “Please. Nicholas being so earnest is one of the reasons we don’t get along. If he was more like me, maybe we’d have a chance.”

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“A charmer?” I asked.

“A devil,” he replied.

Now it was my turn to shake my head. “Julian, you are not nearly as bad as you want everyone to believe.”

“Yeah...” Julian said begrudgingly, like he resented it. “If only Bridget could see that too...”

Chapter 419



With Julian on my arm, we returned to the ballroom. Nicholas noticed immediately, gaze

this time. zeroing in on where Julian and my arms were interlocked. I didn't move away After all, Bridget had her arm, at that very moment, wrapped around one of Nicholas's too. 3

On stage, Tiffany and Jessica are performing a scene. From what I can tell, they are playing Bridget's disapproving sisters. Since I hadn't read that far, I could only guesstimate based on one-half of the current conversation.

I could only hear one half.

Tiffany was speaking too loudly, like she was talking to someone on the other side of the room. Jessica, meanwhile, was speaking too softly, barely a whisper. They would both wear microphones for the performance, but I suspected even then, Jessica's voice would go unheard.

At the base of the stage, Bridget releases Nicholas's arm to rub at her temples. "No, girls. We've talked about this. Tiffany, you don't need to project your voice so much. But Jessica, I need you not to whisper."

Beside her, Nathan nodded along. He looked tired too. This had clearly been going on for a while.

"I thought I was being quieter," Tiffany said, and the people down the street might have been able to hear her.

Nicholas whispered something to Bridget and she heaved a great sigh.

"Everyone, let's take a small break for water and snacks," Bridget announced. "Then we'll try again."

Odd, how Nathan continued to take orders from Bridget and not the other way around. At this point, maybe I should have been used to it. It seemed strange no matter how many times I witnessed it.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Julian said. “Do you want anything?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Honestly, my stomach felt kind of queasy. I wasn’t sure I could even keep water down.

Julian shrugged, released my arm, and said, “Just come over if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

+15 BONUS

I watched Julian walking away, not noticing until it was far too late to make a casual getaway that Bridget was approaching me.

“Piper! How are you feeling now? Better, I trust?” she asked, her friendly disposition firmly in place. I couldn’t help but wonder if her approach had anything to do with Julian leaving, but then decided I was overthinking it. Surely she wouldn’t go out of her way to avoid Julian when she was still flirting with him.

“Better,” I said. “I’ll have your handkerchief cleaned before I return it. Thank you for lending it to me.” (1)

Bridget smiled. “I’m glad I could help.” She clapped her hands together.

“Listen, I have something to ask you. I was looking through the script, and I was thinking about your charming little girl Elva. I think I have a perfect part for her. Do you think she would want to take part in the play?”

To say that Elva would want to participate in the play was an understatement. She would be absolutely overjoyed. But I still hesitated to answer, remembering Elva’s talk with Nicholas, about how Elva can trust Bridget implicitly. I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of the two being together.

“Before you say anything, let me put your worries at ease,” Bridget said. “She wouldn’t need to come to every rehearsal. The part I have in mind is small

with no lines. She would simply walk across the stage and drop a few flowers. Our own little flower girl. Wouldn't that be so sweet?"

It would be sweet. But I was still alarmed this idea was coming from Bridget.

Why was she being so thoughtful? What was she

up

to?

Or was I the one at fault here, being so suspicious of someone who just wanted to kindly make sure a small child felt included?

I felt like a right asshole after that.

"She would love it," I said with honesty. "I'll speak to her about it."

Chapter 420



"Wonderful," Bridget said with an even bigger smile than before.

It was a beautiful smile, all pearly white teeth. She looked every bit the part of the a-list actress. Her makeup was on point. Even her hair was perfectly styled. I wondered how many stylists traveled with her. It wasn't unheard of to have a team around here. Many other

contestants did as well.

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"I'm so happy that oh." Bridget's gaze snags on where Nathan is speaking with Jessica. They both look terribly unhappy. "I better go deal with that. We'll talk more later."

She quickly walks away. As she approaches Nathan and Jessica, her presence immediately lightens the mood of both of them. Those frowns turn right into smiles.

Maybe it's not such a wonder that Nathan is following her lead, after all. She really does know what she's doing, in acting as well as deescalating situations. An impressive feat.

Nicholas approaches me next. I see him coming a long way off, but for Nicholas, I have no desire to run away, even with my heart still sore from the scene we shared together. That wasn't his fault, and I was not about to blame him for it.

He stepped right up beside me, as we both watched Bridget work her magic over Nathan and Jessica. I expected him to restart our last conversation. We hadn't finished talking when Bridget interrupted us.

Instead, he asked, "So what did you think of my idea?"

I pull my brow together, confused. "What was your idea?"

The corner of Nicholas's mouth twitched into a frown. "Didn't Bridget tell you? About finding a role for Elva?"

Wait – that had been Nicholas's idea? Bridget had made it sound like she had come it all on her own. She hadn't mentioned Nicholas at all.

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"Oh, right. Yeah, she did mention that," I said, unsure whether I should bring up Bridget's blunder at all.

It was possible that it was simply a misunderstanding on my part. Maybe she did mention Nicholas and I just forgot. I'd have a hell of a time proving

otherwise. And I doubted, deep in my heart, Nicholas would believe me if I went around accusing his best friend of trying to steal credit from him.

It could have been a misunderstanding. I had to hold onto that belief.

But try as hard as I could, I couldn't quite get myself to believe it.

There was something off about Bridget. I kept trying to ignore my gut feelings but they keep piling up time after time. 1

Maybe we were just two different people with differing, incompatible personalities.

Or maybe she really was up to something.

No. I couldn't go down that path. It had to be in my head.

"You don't like the idea, then?" Nicholas asked, dragging me out of my circular thinking. I was getting nowhere fast like this.

"I love it," I said, and smiled at him for good measure. "Elva will love it too. She always feels like she's missing out. She'll be so excited to take part."

"I thought so too," Nicholas said with a smile. "I'm glad you agree."

"Of course I do," I said. And then, because I couldn't resist digging the needle further into myself, I asked, "Did Bridget like the idea?"

"Not at first," Nicholas said. He dipped his head down a little. "But you know how she is. This play is her vision, she wants it to go a certain way. When I mentioned an unspeaking part though, something small, she turned around on the idea."

"I'm glad," I said. The sinking feeling returned at once.

Bridget had taken credit for an idea she didn't even initially agree on.

Something just wasn't right with her.

Was she two-faced? Was she genuine? Somehow, I had to find out.