

THE LUNA CHOOSING GAME

Chapter 431



“Maybe we should try a different game,” Julian said. “Something easier.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Go fish,” he said, and we both laughed. A game for children might have been more fitting, honestly. At least then, I might have stood a chance. I had no proof but I had a feeling, just knowing Julian, that he had been counting cards at poker.

As he started to deal for our competitive game of go fish, I said to him, “See this is how it should be.”

He side-eyed me. “How do you mean?”

“Easy. Being with the person meant for you should be easy, just like this. Fun and silly. Full of more laughter than heartache.”

lian hummed as he set down the deck. I checked my cards. I had a truly lousy hand. Looked like I was going to lose at go fish too as badly as poker. Julian would never let me live it down.

“Does Bridget play cards?” I asked.

Julian’s smile twitched downward, just a hair. “I’m not sure.” He placed down two matching cards. He was already ahead of me. Of course.

Julian obviously enjoyed playing cards. It seemed unfair that he had no idea if the person he thought was his true love even liked it.

I was enjoying it myself, though admittedly, I wasn't any good. But this was another point I wanted to prove. The right person for him would try to learn his favorite games, just because he liked them. She would want to try just to spend time at his side.

I wished I could make him see, but the longer we spent together, the more I wasn't sure if any of my lessons were being learned. He seemed so entrenched with his feelings for Bridget, like he'd harbored them so long, he had no idea how else to be.

As we continued to play, and Julian continued to beat me at cards, I noticed Nicholas walk out into the garden. His gaze cast over the flowers and the fields before he spotted me and Julian at our small two person table. We were both leaning over the table, far into each other's personal space.

Part of my lesson in how a girlfriend should act included being more touchy feely. I had been making efforts to touch his arm or his hand, to lean into him. Even now, my leg pressed against his under the table from knee to ankle.

"Nicholas is watching us," Julian said. He plucked a card from the pile, then dropped three three's. "He looks rather annoyed at our closeness."

"Let him look," I said, huffier than I meant. "Today isn't about him."

"It's about us?" Julian asked.

"It's about you," I said. I didn't know why it was so important to me to Save Julian from his unrequited romance. Maybe it was because we had gotten to be such good friends. Maybe it was because, unlike me and my feelings for Nicholas, Julian had a chance to be free of his love and live his best life.

“He looks like he’s about to come over,” Julian said.

I glanced up in time to see Nicholas step forward. My breath caught in my throat. What would he even say? Would he try to split up Julian and I? Would he want to sneak me away to some closet for a secret tryst?

I didn’t know what I expected, or what I wanted.

But then Bridget appeared behind him and grabbed his arm, stopping him. She gave him her high– beam smile and thoroughly distracted him. As she pulled him away, Nicholas didn’t even glance back.

My heart sunk down as my disappointment surged.

Chapter 432



After my date with Julian, I was left confused, unsure if I had clearly made any of the points I had set out to make or not. Nicholas showing up had certainly thrown a wrench into my plans. I wasn’t sure how I could show Julian he deserved love that came easy, when my own heart was so entangled in pain.

In the end, we went our separate ways, but I wasn’t done yet. I would prove to Julian that he deserved better, no matter how long it took.

When I make it to my door, Nicholas is there, leaning against the wall beside my guard. When he sees me, he kicks off of it and comes closer to me.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

The guards were generally discreet, but I imagined for the conversation he wanted to have, we needed somewhere even more secluded.

“Where?” I asked.

“Follow me.”

I walked beside him back toward the royal family wing. He didn’t speak again until he opened his door, held it for me, and then closed it securely behind us.

“What is going on with you and Julian?” he asked me. A hint of anger weaved through his tone, making it gruffer than usual. It affected me in the usual way, making me shiver in delight and anticipation.

I tried not to let my body win this time. Yes, Nicholas was sexy beyond all reason, and I

secretly loved that he was so jealous and protective of me. But I couldn’t forget that we were fighting. Well, maybe fighting wasn’t the right word. I was still hurt and he was still oblivious.

Susie’s words ran through my mind. Just talk to him.

“Julian and I are supposed to be fake dating,” I said. “This isn’t anything new.”

“You were touchier than before. You were leaning into him.”

“Nick, this isn’t anything new,” I said again. “I don’t understand what the big deal is?”

Half of me wanted to remind him how touchy he’d been with Bridget since her arrival. It felt like she was nearly constantly hanging off of his arm. He always smelled like her, as if she

was purposefully scenting him at every occasion, which... I wouldn’t put it past her, honestly. 1

I didn’t want to have this conversation again, so with I sigh, I turned back toward the door.

Before I could take one step, Nicholas hand gripped my arm, not enough to hurt, but firm enough for me to be unable to escape.

“Where are you going?” he asked, and his voice had now lowered even deeper, with a growl around the edges. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“What does it matter?” I snapped.

His growl came out even deeper. “Is this about Bridget again?”

“No,” I said too quickly, too angrily. His fury was stoking my own, especially since I was also repressing my desire for him. If I couldn’t feel lust, I’d feel fury. The shift wasn’t that far apart.

Nicholas didn’t like that answer, or my tone.

He grabbed my shoulder and at once shoved me up against the wall. His body closed in, in front of me, pinning me there. I felt he was all around me. I was fully swallowed by him and his presence.

And I still smelled her.

A tiny growl of my own escaped the back of my throat.

“You smell like Julian,” he had the nerve to say.

“Well, you smell like Bridget,” I growled right back.

We looked at each other a minute. Fire burned in his gaze, mirroring what I felt in my own soul.

Then, in a flash, our arms were around each other, and our mouths collided. His tongue licked past my lips and tangled with my own. He stole my breath away, just as he’d stolen my heart all those years ago. 1

I was helpless but to love him. I was addicted to him. To his touch. To the smell that was truly his, under that damn floral of Bridget’s.

My kiss added teeth, but he matched even that. We were both angry, but cared for one another too. I clawed at his shoulders. He ripped the belt loops off my pants from clinging too hard. 1

Being like this was all I ever wanted. Having him close. Owning him as he owned me, body and soul.

But then, I remembered his cruel words in our afterglow, when I'd wanted to let him claim me in a way no other man ever had, and he'd rejected me so thoroughly, it was a hurt I felt all the way down to my bones. 1

Instead of clawing to get him closer, I began to push him away. He was an Alpha, and much stronger than me. He could have kept on if he wished, I might have even gone along with it, but Nicholas was not that kind of man.

When he felt me pushing, he backed up a full inch, enough for me to breathe and to speak.

"You hurt me," I said. Tears rose in my eyes. "You don't want a family with me and that kills me instead."

Some of the heat and fury faded from Nicholas's eyes. Confusion replaced it. He was still hot for

me, his hands never left my hips, and his dick pressed into my thigh. But that confusion made him very still.

"Why would you think that?" he asked.

I shook my head a little. I didn't want to voice it, but... maybe Susie was right. He truly didn't understand. I would have to tell him. "The other night... When I offered you my virginity and you said you wouldn't risk making me pregnant..."

The confusion in his face ebbed at once, and a touch of sadness replaced it. "I'm only worried for you, Piper, and what might happen to you if you became pregnant."

"Why should I have to worry?" I asked. "Would you leave me out on the street?" 1

I'd wanted an apology. A denial. Anything. To hear him double down, only cut me up further. I felt like I was going insane. I had to get away. I pushed at him harder.

He stepped back a full foot this time, giving me more space.

"Don't pretend to care about me," I snapped, so full of hurt, it had nowhere to go except into my words. "You only care about yourself. You only care about the crown!"

If he wasn't a prince, we would be together. The crown had always stood in our way. Now, I knew, without question, that the only reason he didn't risk me becoming pregnant is because then he would have unnecessary challenges in his path to the throne.

"Piper" There was a change in his face, something like hurt, but I didn't care. I shoved away from him and stormed to the door. In the hallway, I ran until I couldn't run anymore. 1

But I couldn't go back to my room. I didn't want Elva to see me crying.

My wolf whispered in my mind, begging me to run, but I shoved those whispers away. We'd promised Elva we wouldn't lose ourselves.

I had to be strong. I had to... do something!

I stopped at a closet door, opened it, and buried myself inside.

Then I fell to my knees and cried.

Eventually, I would return to my room and be strong again, for Elva and for myself.

But for now, I just wanted to hold myself.

And mourn the possible future that never had a chance.



The next day was the dress rehearsal for the performance event. All of the candidates, Nicholas, Julian, Elva, and I were in our costumes in the ballroom at the base of the stage, chatting and getting ready. Everyone's spirits seemed to be high.

In our costumes, we made for a colorful bunch. Many of the choices were vibrant and bombastic. We'd surely catch a lot of strange looks if we had been anywhere other than on a theater stage. I wondered if every show was like this. I'd always been so busy and watchful of money, that I'd never been to a show.

I'd successfully managed to bottle most of my hurt, especially with Elva around.

Many times today, Nicholas tried to get me alone, but I'd always managed to deflect him, either by dragging Susie around with me, or sticking to Veronica and Tiffany like glue.

He must have noticed. I could practically feel his stare burning holes into the back of my head, but after the night before, I wasn't ready to face him. There was still too much hurt between us. It took everything inside of me not to run to another closet to hide and cry.

Elva needed me strong. The competition needed me strong. I wasn't going to lose points and face early expulsion just because of my inner scars.

Elva needed to be here for her health, and I had to make sure she stayed for as long as possible.

Oddly, Julian also seemed to notice me avoiding Nicholas. Once, when Nicholas nearly caught me alone, Julian himself stepped in, draping his arm around my shoulders. I hadn't made a joke, but he laughed like I had.

As Nicholas went away again without saying a word, Julian leaned into me and whispered in my ear, "Stay close to me. I'll keep him at bay."

"Thank you," I replied.

And Julian, true to his word, stayed near me.

I had thought it would be a temporary measure. I was sure that as soon as Bridget batted her eyelashes in his direction, that he would veer off and chase after her.

Because Bridget seemed so busy giving direction to Nathan, I hadn't thought too much about it. I was grateful to have Julian's help for however long or little he chose to give it.

Yet, then Bridget herself came over, and, casting her big blue eyes at Julian, asked, "Can you help me, Julian? I need someone to move around some of the props on stage while I stay back and watch from where the audience would sit. No one listens as well as you."

What a backhanded compliment that was. I nearly snapped a snarky reply of my own, but, being conscious of Julian and his feelings, instead I took his hand in mine and squeezed, offering him my support. He needed that more than my snarky remarks.

If he wanted to go, I'd let him. It wasn't my place to stand in his way. I would be disappointed, but I wouldn't be surprised.

"I can't," Julian said instead. His cool smile never faltered. 1

I blinked, startled. I didn't think I'd ever heard him tell Bridget no before. Her face mirrored my own surprise. She likely hadn't heard it either.

“I’m busy with Piper today,” he said. His arm fell around my waist and he tugged me closer into his side. “Sorry.”

Bridget was so startled, it took her several long minutes to recover, even with her supreme acting ability. “I’ll find someone else,” she said, and turned.

Only when she’d gone did Julian’s smile dip, if just for a moment. Yet when he glanced at me and saw me watching him, his grin returned.

“Don’t take too much credit for that,” he said.

“Why would I?” I said, smiling back at him. Inside, I was reeling. Maybe my lessons had taken with him after all. Was he beginning to see he was worth more than being her errand boy?

He rolled his eyes dramatically, and I took the opportunity to lean in and kiss his cheek.

“What was that for?” he asked. He seemed pleased.

I shrugged. I didn’t have a good reason, really. “I guess I’m just proud of you.” He laughed.

On stage, Bridget had roped Tiffany into helping her move the props. Tiffany did everything that Bridget suggested, only for Bridget “Actually, it looked better before. Move them all back.”

A half hour later, the play began. Elva hopped up and down trying to see over everyone else standing, but to no avail. I was going to pick her up and set her on my hip, but Julian moved faster. He snatched her up himself and put her on his shoulders.

“I can only do this for the scenes I’m not on stage,” he said.

“Okay.”

“What do you say, Elva?” I prompted.

“Thank you, Julian.”

“You are

are most welcome, sweetheart,” Julian said. My heart melted for him a little.

The play progressed. I had to go on stage a few times, and Julian did too, but we always managed to find our spot back together on the floor.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly. But then it was time for the rejection scene between Nicholas and me.

I’d been dreading it. I truly did not want to hear him reject me again, even if he was only saying the words in the script.

Julian gave me a kind sort of smile and I took my leave. Heading up to the felt a bit like I was heading to the gurney. Or about to walk the plank off a pirate ship.

“Don’t wear the mask for this scene,” Bridget said to me as I passed her. “We want the room to see the emotion in your eyes.”

I knew it.

I removed the mask as I got to the stage. I could see Nicholas standing on the other side. As the scene before ours ended, it was now our turn to step forward and bring forth my heartbreak once again.

We both walked onto the stage and went to our places. I took a breath, opened my mouth, to start the scene, and was immediately cut off.

“I’m sorry,” Nicholas said.

I blinked. That... was not in the script. Had he forgotten his lines?

Yet, looking at him, I could see the sincerity there. He wasn’t a very good actor, he was too earnest, too bad at lying. Here, now, he was being 100% genuine.

"I'm so sorry," he said, and stepped closer to me. "I didn't mean what I said, not how it sounded."

"Nicholas!" Bridget called from the floor. "Are you trying to improvise? It's not staying true to the script!"

"I never wanted to hurt you," he said. "I never want to hurt you..."

He came closer and took my hands. This close, the green in his eyes sparkled. God, he was so handsome, so true. I could get lost in him so easily. I could forgive him anything in the world.

"Stop everything!" Bridget said. She hurried up the stairs. Nathan followed along on her heels. "Thank God this is only a rehearsal. Nicholas, we have to try again. Nicholas?"

But Nicholas wasn't looking at her. He was staring at me. He was still holding my hands. And this, more than even his words, was the true apology I needed.

Chapter 434



Bridget made Nicholas and I redo our breakup scene. With his apology fresh between us, I didn't feel so hurt anymore, and the words from the script bounced right off of me without taking root in my heart.

After the scene, Nicholas and I smiled at each other, then I made my way down the stage to rejoin Julian and Elva in the crowd. Julian winked at me as I came to stand beside him. I rolled my eyes, but smiled too.

My heart felt so much lighter than it had for days. Things weren't all the way better between Nicholas and I. There was much to talk about, and things to make clear. But the hurt wasn't so powerful anymore.

Of course, now that the breakup scene between Nicholas and I was done, it was time for his love scene with Bridget.

Susie had her one line, and then went to 'check' the door as Nicholas climbed in through the window. This time, unlike our previous rehearsals, the set designer and his staff had completed the display, and Nicholas climbed through an actual window built into the wall of the backdrop.

They shared a few words. I thought of covering my eyes, or Elva's, so we couldn't see. My too soft heart was not strong enough to watch Nicholas kiss someone else..

Yet when the moment arrived, when Bridget threw her arms around him and tried to press herself up onto her toes to reach his mouth, Nicholas turned his head. Bridget's lips found his cheek instead.

Bridget tried again. Nicholas turned his head farther. Then, Bridget huffed as she took a step backwards.

"Nicholas. We have to practice this scene," she snapped, her face twisted in unhappiness. So much for a love scene.

"No," Nicholas said.

"No? I'm the professional here," Bridget said, "And I'm telling you that we can't go into

this scene unprepared. You might think it's just kissing, but I swear, to be believable, it can't be the first time. We're liable to look like two fish eating each other."

Beside me, Julian snorted a laugh.

On his shoulders, Elva looked down at me. “What’s happening, Mommy?”

“Just a little spat between the actors, honey,” I told her. Inside, I was pleased.
at a one-

Bridget might have had a good point, if this were an actual set or theater and not just a off event made up of mostly high–class women and two princes. I knew for a fact that no one was going to accuse Nicholas of being a bad actor, no matter how badly he did.

They could look like two fish eating each other, and the crowd would still roar with applause.

But I suspected, and I wondered if Nicholas did too, that Bridget might be pushing so hard to practice the kiss just for the sake of kissing Nicholas.

Or maybe Nicholas was oblivious, as he seemed to be with everything else Bridget. Maybe his hesitation was more out of consideration for me. I liked to think that was true, anyway.

Possibly, he was simply being considerate to all the girls, Olivia and Lilliana too. Kissing Bridget in the play would have given her even more of an unfair advantage.

Bridget, regardless of Nicholas’s reason, was absolutely furious.

“No,” Nicholas said again.

Bridget huffed. “Fine. If you refuse, maybe we should try a stand–in instead.” Her eyes fell down over the crowd. “Julian?”

Julian stilled.

Bridget called again. “Julian, come up here please. Let’s show Nicholas how this is supposed to go.”

"You don't have to," I whispered to him. He was so strong earlier, refusing to help her shift the props pointlessly around on stage.

Julian looked at me, and I could see in his eyes that he was breaking. "I'm a weak man, Piper."

He had been strong until now, but he was not strong enough to ignore a chance to kiss. Bridget. I was disappointed but I understood. His heart still yearned for her.

Slowly, he lifted Elva off of his shoulders and lowered her down to the ground. She wouldn't be able to see anymore, but maybe that was for the best.

Julian turned from me and headed for the stapp
walking toward Bridget..

Quick as lightning, he was up upon it,

Bridget didn't say a word past that point. She just opened up her arms and he slide between them. Then, his mouth was on hers.

They didn't look like two fish eating each other. They looked like two people in love. Bridget. was a very good actor, and Julian didn't have to be. His arms curled around her waist. One of her hands cupped his cheek.

It was tender and gentle and made me blush.

"I can't see!" Elva said.

"They haven't started again yet," I told her.

When the kiss ended, Julian moved forward like he wanted another, but Bridget, not so gently anymore, shoved him away. She turned to Nicholas instead.

"See? That's what we need to do," Bridget told Nicholas. "It will only look natural if we practice like this."

Julian, meanwhile, blinked a few times, like he was waking from a trance – or a dream.

I wasn't sure when the truth of what was happening hit him. He was a smart guy, cunning, but Bridget seemed to make all of his wires crossed.

If he wasn't love blind he would have known going up that Bridget's main intent with this display was to make Nicholas jealous. Deep down, maybe he did know that.

Maybe he had been hoping that an actual kiss would change things, make her realize that he was the one who had always been worthy of her love, not Nicholas.

Whatever lies he told himself to get up onto that stage were shattered now. He turned,

rushed down the stairs and headed for the ballroom exit.

'Stay with Veronica,' I quickly told Elva. Veronica nodded at me, then accepted Elva's hand. "I have to check on Julian."

"Okay," Elva said.

With Elva safe, I rushed through the crowd to find Julian. I caught him right before he could leave the room. We were far enough from the others for our whispered words to be private.

"Don't ask me anything," Julian said. He wasn't smiling, not even to pretend. His eyes had a haunted, faraway look to them.

"We don't have to talk," I said. "But it seemed like you needed someone near you."

"Someone I trust, you mean," he said.

I nodded. "Someone you trust."

He looked at me and his eyes focused somewhat. “Piper...”

“We don’t have to talk,” I said again.

He had Bridget’s smeared lipstick smudged at the corner of his mouth. Slowly, telegraphing my every move, I reached up and wiped it away with my thumb.

“Thanks,” he said. He laughed once then, bitterly. “Guess you think I’m the world’s biggest idiot.”

“No,” I said. “I think you are a man in love with a woman who doesn’t know what she has. And that kind of love is hard to ignore, even harder to let go of.

Julian nodded. “Like I said, the world’s biggest idiot.”

“No,” I assured him. I meant to say more, but as I glanced toward the stage, I paused as I noticed the piercing gaze of only one person watching us.

From this distance, I couldn’t read her face, but she was definitely staring straight at us, seeing our every gesture and movement.

Bridget.

Chapter 435



That night, Nicholas and Julian joined the rest of the candidates and me in the dining room for dinner together. Elva was tired from the day’s events, so I returned her to our room where the nanny was waiting to keep an eye on her. Julian joined me at the door, to walk down to the dining room together.

When we entered, Bridget had taken her usual spot, with Nicholas on her one side. The other side was open, presumably for Julian. She spotted us as we came in, and tried to wave us or, well, Julian – over.

“She wants you to sit next to her,” I whispered to him.

“I need space from her tonight,” he replied.

Nodding, I led him away from Bridget and over to where my usual spot was beside Susie, and across from Tiffany and Veronica. Since Elva was absent, her seat was empty. Julian sat down in that seat now.

Bridget watched us from her spot at the table. Her ever-present smile seemed slightly dimmer than before.

“You should have been the lead, Prince Julian,” Tiffany said. “No offense to Prince Nicholas, but you are a true actor. It’s like you were born to be on stage.

The compliment seemed to puff Julian back up and he returned to life. His grin slid right back on his face very easily.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said.

“I like Bridget,” Tiffany continued, “But I’m not so convinced about her giving the perfect roles to everyone. Piper, didn’t she try to make you a maid?”

I groaned, and everyone around me chuckled a little. Even Julian.

“God, I forgot about that,” he said.

Maybe he forgot. Or maybe he’d been so blindsided by love that he hadn’t noticed Bridget’s slights against me to start with.

Bottles of champagne came out then, and glasses were filled all around.

Nicholas, holding his glass, stood up. He held it up like he was going to make a toast.

Yet before he could speak, Bridget bounced to her feet and held up her own glass. “Nicholas

and I have been speaking tonight about how wonderful this event has been. Granted, I haven't been around for the other events, but this truly seems like the best one yet.

Veronica gave me a flat look that had me hide my laugh behind my napkin.

Bridget narrowed her eyes at me for a fraction of a second before continuing.

"The beauty of the theater is how every person is an imperative moving part. It is only through everyone's great effort that this event will be a success. Yes, Nicholas and I will draw most of the attention, but we will shine because of your hard work."

Susie looked at me now, back over her shoulder. "Is this supposed to be motivating?" she whispered.

I gave her a shrug.

Bridget didn't notice this time.

"So I offer a hardy thank you." She lifted her glass. "You should all pat yourselves on the back for your accomplishments here. To us!" She drank. The rest of us followed suit, thought with varying degrees of enthusiasm, none as bright as hers.

Susie pretended to sip at hers, then slipped some of it into my glass under the table when I motioned her to. No one was the wiser.

After drinking, Bridget turned and smiled at Nicholas. He gave a small smile in return, then

cleared his throat.

"Thank you, Bridget. Though I would also like to thank everyone for their hard work. Though some roles are smaller than others, there are no unimportant parts in this show. Your dedication to this event has been seen and appreciated. Thank you all very much. To you." He lifted his glass.

“To us!” Everyone said, the words absent when Bridget had toasted. Her smile tightened at little, but by the time she had finished drinking, it was back to full wattage.

After the toasts, we continued to drink and have a good time. Though, not too long later, Julian kissed me on the cheek.

“I’ve had a long day,” he said. “I want to turn in early.”

I smiled at him. “See you tomorrow.”

“Count on it.” He winked at me. Then he stood and left the room.

“It’s nice to see him having some fun,” Tiffany said. “He hasn’t really been himself lately.”

“I agree,” Veronica said. “He has been absent from the library these past few days.”

I tilted my head a little. “Does he usually visit you there?”

“Every day,” Veronica said. “At least for a little while.”

“We used to play cards in the afternoon most days,” Tiffany said. “I hope I didn’t offend him when I caught him counting. Though he seemed more humored at the time.”

I had no idea Julian worked so hard to make time for each of us so often. Though now, his fascination with Bridget felt even sadder. Whether he hung out with the three of us for romantic pursuits or for friendship, those relationships began to wilt the moment she returned to the picture.

“I’ve noticed he doesn’t smile as much,” Susie said, and we all agreed.

We stay until the champagne ran dry and people began to yawn. We truly had a long day and would likely have an even longer one the next day. The real party could happen when the event was finished.

Susie excused herself first, then Veronica. Tiffany stayed a bit longer, chatting up Jessica beside her.

Nicholas came to my side, then, and offered his arm. "If you are ready to leave," he said, "I would be honored to walk you back to your room.

"

I looked at him strangely, thinking to myself, Bridget would hate that. Yet when I glanced to where Bridget had been sitting, her seat was empty. Did she slip out? When? I couldn't remember. After the toasts, I'd had such a good time, I stopped paying her any mind.

"Where's Bridget?" I asked. I couldn't help myself.

He seemed puzzled by my question. "I lost track of her," he said. "But I think she left sometime after Julian." 1

Odd, but her loss was my gain. I slid my arm into Nicholas's waiting one and let him escort

me from the room.

A quiet sense of companionship settled over us again, bridges mended with his apology. We both at least understood now why I was upset. And I understood he hadn't meant it to hurt

1. me.

Silence lingered in the hallways, all except the sounds of our footsteps. On the staircase, he stopped me, turned to me, and said, "If it were up to me... If I could personally choose who to have a family with, I'd want it to be you, Piper."

My eyes went wide. My heart ached.

“My feelings for you are not what stand in our way,” he said.

The crown was important, not just to him or to me, but to the entire kingdom. And he would make a great king. Who was I, a lonely waitress, to ask him to turn his back on that so that we could live some little, beautiful but impossible dream.

Would we move to the country? Buy a little cottage? Stick our heads in the sand any news or politics came into discussion around us?

time

No.

Nicholas was born to be king.

What could I do but support him? Even if that meant my dream had to die.

“I understand,” I said.

Then he leaned down and gently kissed me.

My heart ached.

Chapter 436



Early the next morning, I awoke to the sound of loud and persistent knocking on my door. It was so early, Charlotte

hadn't even arrived yet and the curtains were still drawn over the windows.

The guards were talking with the morning visitor, who was nearly shrieking in her reply. It was Bridget. She sounded

upset.

I checked on Elva, she was still sound asleep. Then I rolled out of bed. I threw on a silk robe and rushed to the door.

The moment, Bridget saw me, the tears began to flow down her cheeks. “Oh, Piper! I have to talk to you at once.”

Fortunately, at that same moment, Charlotte was approaching us down the hallway. I asked her to keep an eye on Elva,

and went with Bridget to her own room where we could speak privately.

Bridget plucked a handkerchief from her nightstand and dabbed at her tear tracks. She was still wearing the same

clothes she had worn at the party. Had she been up all night?

Where? And... with whom?

“What happened?” I asked. “Are you alright?”

As much as I distrusted Bridget, I would never wish her harm. With the underground organization out there, and their

teleportation powers still unchecked, if Bridget had been out alone, she could have run into anyone.

My stomach tied up in knots. Maybe it wasn't right to keep so many secrets from the royal guard. Nicholas and Julian's personal guard couldn't possibly be enough to keep the entire palace safe.

But then, I smelled it. A touch of cologne. A cologne I recognized as Julian's.

Oh no.

My stomach totally dropped out.

He didn't. Couldn't. Wouldn't.

"There's no easy way to say this, but Julian confessed his feelings to me last night," Bridget said. "He told me he had been in love with me most of his life. I couldn't believe my ears.

He's so clearly in a relationship with you, and yet he still has these feelings for me."

I wasn't surprised. Just, disappointed. I had thought he was making progress in moving on from Bridget. Small steps, sure. Baby steps, even. But steps forward all the same. 2

Surely that loss during dress rehearsal should have been the final nail in the coffin, when she'd used him to try to make Nicholas jealous.

Yet maybe he felt he needed to confess to truly move forward. To tell Bridget his feelings, receive her firm rejection, and then move on.

I sighed but wasn't otherwise affected.

Holding her handkerchief to her cheek, Bridget watched me. "You are handling this news quite well... Admittedly, if the man I was dating told another woman he has loved her all his life, I would be furious."

"I'm going to talk to him about it later, sure," I said. What, did she expect me to cry?

Though maybe I should have made more of an effort, or she might have suspected that we weren't actually dating.

"I mean, I am pissed as hell," I said. "But..." I tried to think of some excuse for my lack of true upset. "It is unfortunately

the nature of the competition. I'm Julian's favorite, but he's

not here to find love. It's about who would make the best Luna."

That was a good enough reason, right?

"It's not just that," Bridget said. Fresh tears started. "It was the way he was talking about you..."

That gave me pause. "What? What was he saying?"

"Oh, he said such terribly things, Piper. Things I don't even want to repeat."

I frowned. What could he have said? We were friends.

"But I must repeat them!" Bridget said suddenly. She walked closer to me.

"Oh, Piper, you should know the kind of man

you are dating. He will give you roses to your face and then. spew the most hateful rhetoric behind your back."

Chapter 437



I frowned deeper. Julian was always playing the angles. Would he have put me down to impress Bridget? That didn't really sound like him.

"He called you... oh, forgive me. A manipulative tramp. A two-faced woman. Someone who only cared about him for his money and power."

Julian would not say that about me. He knew, after all this time, that those things weren't true. After everything we'd been through together, I struggled to believe he would say those words even in an attempt to win Bridget.

I tried to see through her tears now, but God, she was such a good actress. She truly seemed genuine.

But then, did Julian actually say those things...?

"The worst," Bridget sniffled. "Oh, Piper, if I could unhear these things I would."

"It's alright," I said.

She nodded. "He said he is only kind to you because he feels so bad for you. A single mother from a lower class. What hope do you have in the competition without his help?"

That one stung, striking straight through my chest like a spear covered in barbed wire.

I didn't want to believe Julian could say something like that. I wanted to think that our friendship was mutually beneficial to us both. But... I was so far beneath the princes socially, and all I'd seemed to do since my arrival was bring them trouble. 1

Maybe Julian had said that. Maybe he'd meant it.

I didn't know what to believe.

"I'm truly so, so sorry," she said. "After this happened, I couldn't think of what to do but to tell you."

"I understand," I said, while a hurricane raged inside my chest. Still, through my own pain and misery, I had one lingering question. "What did you tell him?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When he told you his feelings? Did you reciprocate?"

She vehemently shook her head. "Of course not! It was bad enough to hear those words.

How could I do that to you?" At once, she stepped forward and tugged me into a hug. "We girls have to stick together." 1

By the nature of this very competition, that was untrue, though I supposed I appreciated her sense of girl power and togetherness. 4

After our hug, I said my goodbyes, and hurried back to my room to get dressed. By now, Elva had roused and was eating the quick breakfast

Charlotte had prepared her. Charlotte cast me a suspicious sideways glance as I came into the room. I gave a subtle headshake. Whatever had just happened, I wasn't ready to talk about it yet.

I kissed Elva on the top of her head, wished her good morning, then went into the closet to change.

One thing, I knew for certain: I had to talk to Julian.

Yet when I went to his room and knocked on his door, neither Brian nor he answered.

Pressing my ear to the door, I could hear only silence within.

I couldn't help but question Bridget's story. Any or all of it could be a fabrication.

But.

So many parts of it would not surprise me if they were true, that I reasoned, by that logic, all of it could be true..

I hurried down to the dining room. A few early-rising candidates were there, but no Julian.

Then I checked the ballroom, and there he was.

"Julian!" I called, and rushed down the stairs.

Whatever he had been doing, he immediately stopped. He rushed toward me.

I opened my mouth to speak.

But then he kept walking straight past me.

"Julian?"

He didn't say a word as he left the ballroom, leaving me there alone.

Then I realized, I recognized his outfit. He'd worn that same suit the day before.

Like Bridget, he hadn't changed.

Maybe they had been together. Maybe her story was true after all.

Chapter 438



I didn't see Julian or Bridget again until later in the day when it was time for the final show. By then, the cameras had been set and the guests had arrived to fulfill their role as the audience. The King and Queen took their spots on their raised thrones. Joyce was notably absent.

He was likely still down in the dungeons. I briefly wondered if Veronica was having any success with him.

The other candidates, Nicholas, Julian, Elva, and I were all in a sitting room that served as backstage. A curtain had been arranged that blocked the pathway from the room to the sides of the stage so that we could come and go freely as needed without the crowd seeing. 1

Nathan fumbled around, trying to direct as best he could. Though it was Bridget mainly giving orders. Yet even she wouldn't be able to oversee us all the time today. She was in most of the scenes. 1

Four times before the show started, I tried to approach Julian backstage. Each time, he spotted me and made a wide arch around me.

I still hadn't decided whether to fully believe Bridget's story about what happened last night, but every strange behavior today only lent credence to it.

Even Nicholas noticed, as he came to stand at my side. "Did you and Julian have a fight?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I don't think so."

Given the history between the two brothers and Bridget, I didn't want to share Bridget's accusation. If any part of it was true, Julian was likely embarrassed and wouldn't want Nicholas to know.

"He's pissed about something," Nicholas said. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. "Good luck today." 1

"Thank you," I said. "But isn't it bad luck to talk about luck at all before a show. Aren't you supposed to say, break a leg?" 1

"Maybe. I genuinely don't know," Nicholas admitted. "But I wouldn't wish that on you even if that is what I'm supposed to say."

I smiled at him. "Don't forget I have a wolf now. A broken leg wouldn't keep me down for long."

"I'm grateful," he said. "But I still wouldn't wish you any pain, no matter how briefly." 2

I placed my hand over his on my shoulder and squeezed. What I was most grateful for was him, though I couldn't say that here, with so many people around.

"Nicholas!" Bridget called. "We have to get to the stage." She stopped a few feet off. Glancing between the two of us, her gaze zeroed in immediately to his hand on my shoulder.

Nicholas didn't move it. Not until he smiled at me, and I nodded in understanding. Then and only then did he pull away and follow Bridget down the makeshift hallway to the stage.

Outside, the roar of the crowd was dying down. The cameras were likely on. The show was about to begin.

I walked over to where Susie was helping to retie Elva's ribbons in her hair. She'd already pulled one free.

Nearby, Tiffany was practicing her lines too loudly, and several others hushed her.

Veronica was meditating. Jessica was pacing. Olivia and Lilliana looked bored.

Julian had vanished.

I sighed.

Susie, watching me, misread what was bothering me. "Do you think they will actually kiss today?"

At once, my stomach twisted up all over again. God, I had been so preoccupied worried about Julian that I had forgotten all about that incoming nightmare.

That made the waiting twenty times worse.

Eventually, Nicholas came back. Bridget remained on stage. She was in almost every scene.

Nicholas walked straight back to me and said, "I need to speak with you privately for a moment."

"Of course," I said.

The only place to speak privately back here was an adjoining bathroom. Fortunately, like most all of the bathrooms in this place, it had its own little powder room before you entered any room with a toilet. We went to that powder room now. Nicholas checked the entire bathroom was empty then locked the door.

Chapter 439



“Nick? What is it?” I asked.

He turned to me, walked right up to me, and said, “Something better than good luck.”

Then he kissed me. I wrapped my arms around him. His hands gripped my waist. He guided me back against the lip of the counter then hoisted me up so that I was sitting on top of it. My legs went around his waist. His tongue slipped into my mouth.

Every time I kissed him was as good and as breathtaking as the very first time. He had a way of snatching my heart from me with his closeness. I never had a chance of moving on from him, when my body and soul yearned for him so completely.

When we were like this, together, even in stolen moments, I felt so at home. Whole, in a way

I never feel when I’m alone,

His hands were firm on my hips. From this new height atop the counter, I had much better access to his chest, so I took full advantage of that, running my hands up and down his torso.

God, how I wanted to undress him and have my way with his right here. But we didn't have much time before one or the other of us would be called back to the stage. So I was careful not to disturb his costume. His must have been doing the same. His hands never strayed from my hips.

Too soon we broke our kiss to breathe. Nicholas dropped his head so that his forehead rested against mine. I closed my eyes, soaking in the feel of him so close to me, of us sharing the same air.

"That's what I needed," he said, "Now I can make it through."

"It's not so bad," I said lightly.

"I hate the breakup scene with you," he said, "And every scene that follows."

Oh. His kiss with Bridget.

"You are the only want I want to do this with," he whispered, voice quiet in the already quiet room.

My heart leapt forward in my chest. I felt the same.

"It's just for show," I reminded him. "It doesn't have to mean anything."

"Despite this event, I'm not an actor," Nicholas said. "I have no intention of kissing anyone without meaning it."

"Nick..." I didn't know how to convey that I understood. That no matter what happened, I would forgive him for it.

But he seemed so hard set. Bridget must have been pushing him pretty hard.

And Nicholas was nothing if not stubborn. I was surprised she didn't remember that from their youth. The more Nicholas was pushed, the less likely he was to move.

Nicholas kissed me again, with more passion this time, greedily claiming my mouth with his own. His hands lifted up along my back and he tugged me closer to him.

I didn't care anymore if the costumes were damaged. I didn't care about anything but him and this. Us.

Eventually a gentle knock sounded on the door. Veronica's steady voice came through." Bridget is looking for you two. It's almost time for your scenes."

We had to part.

I looked at Nicholas and laughed. He had my lipstick smeared all over his lips. I had half a mind to let him leave like that. Show Bridget who Nicholas wanted to kiss.

But... that would only inevitably come back to bite the two of us.

After all, we were not open with our relationship.

I was now, and likely always would be, Nicholas's secret.

Chapter 440



I sneaked out of the bathroom while Nicholas stayed to clean the lipstick off and adjust his clothes. As the leading man, he had to be certain that he looked perfect. I insisted. Someone would be sure to notice if even a hair of his was out of place, and then our relationship could be threatened.

As I entered the room where most of the others waited, I looked around for Julian, but he

wasn't waiting with the others. Perhaps he was watching the show?

I checked in with Elva. She was with Veronica now. Most of Veronica's scenes were over so she could watch her during Susie and my remaining scenes. Knowing Elva was in good hands, I sneaked out of the sitting room to peak in on the play itself from the actual backstage.

Admittedly, I cared more about finding and confronting Julian than I did about the actual play, but I ended up hitting two birds with one stone.

Julian was onstage, in a scene with Bridget, and they were arguing.

"You act like I'm the villain, but where is my restitution?" Julian demanded. "All these years, I've followed you. I've loved you. And now you are casting me off for someone you've

known for mere weeks?"

"Love is not a competition," Bridget said, which I always thought was a strange line, given our current circumstance. The entire Luna selection process was a big competition. "I met him, and I loved him.

The love between us had time, but never blossomed."

"For you," Julian spat. His acting was exceptionally good today. He was always a talented

actor, but the sheer amount of raw emotion in his voice made me shiver. He was even putting Bridget to shame. "I have loved you from the moment I saw you."

"It's not enough," Bridget said. "I'm sorry."

"You've never appreciated me. All I've done. All I've sacrificed —"

“You’ve sacrificed?!” Bridget’s voice rose now. “What of my sacrifices? I had turned my

heart off for so long! How can you not be happy that it’s now come back to life? If you truly loved me –“}

“I should be pleased you love another man?!” Julian’s voice rose to match.

“If you truly cared!”

#+15 BONUS

“You are delusional!”

“Am I?” Bridget demanded.

My thoughts paused a moment. I didn’t remember some of those lines from the script. Did they decide to improvise? Was that what they were truly doing last night?

If they were even together.

Yet even if they talked about this, which I honestly doubted, the fire and passion under their words seemed too real. It could have been that they were both just very good actors, which they were. But I had a suspicious feeling not all these feelings were for show.

“You are the one holding me here,” Bridget said, bringing it back to the familiar words of the script. “You threaten terrible things. You were never in love with me. You’ve only ever been obsessed with me.”

Julian growled. “You will regret those words when I make you my bride.”

“I will never be your bride,” Bridget said firmly.

They stared each other down.

The curtains closed. The crowd erupted in applause.

Julian stormed off the stage.

He was coming my way, so I tried to step into his path. “Julian —”

“Not now, Piper,” Julian said and sidestepped around me.

“But I...”

He didn’t wait to hear me out. He just kept walking toward the sitting room where the

others were.

At that same moment, Nicholas was coming out from the room. Julian smashed his shoulder into Nicholas’s as they walked by each other.

“Julian?” Nicholas called, but Julian didn’t turn. He continued to storm forward.

Slowly, Nicholas made his way over to me. “What was that about?”

“Tough scene, I think,” I said, and motioned toward the stage. Bridget was still there. She

had a solo scene next.

“I don’t think it’s just that,” Nicholas said. “He’s been off all day. I’m a bit worried about him.”

I didn’t want to break Julian’s confidence, or blab some rumor that Bridget said before I could verify the truth with Julian himself. So I couldn’t tell Nicholas everything that was going on. I wasn’t even sure I could tell him anything. 1

We faced the stage side by side as the curtain opened for Bridget’s solo scene. In it, she lamented Julian’s terrible treatment of her. How he was so terrible for making him choose between the two of them, and then forcing her hand when she refused him. 1

I knew it was theater, not real. But for all the similarities between the play and their actual situation, it made me so mad at the possible implication that Julian would attempt to force her.

“You know more than me,” Nicholas said, side-eyeing me. “Julian confides in you more than he does anyone else. Except perhaps Brian, though I’m not sure there’s counts as a friendship.” 1

“He hasn’t confided in me about this,” I said. “Not fully.”

Nicholas hummed. We continued watching Bridget’s performance for a moment. Soon Nicholas would have to go onstage to rescue her from the tower where Julian’s character had trapped her.

I had so many questions for the three of them: Bridget, Nicholas, and Julian. Sometimes it seemed like Nicholas was the only one who would give me a straight answer. Though his memory seemed skewed. I wasn’t sure he knew all the truths of what was going on around him.

Maybe he knew this, though.

“Nick. Do you know how Julian feels about Julian?” I asked.

“His puppy love crush?” Nicholas said. He smiled at first, but it quickly flitted away. “It never meant anything. Julian never means anything with his feelings. He finds excitement, grows bored, and moves on. He’s always been that way, even with Bridget.”

“But what if...” I struggled to find the correct words. “What if it’s real with Bridget?”

“Can’t be,” Nicholas said, as dismissive as if I had suggested Julian grew another arm, or flew to the moon. Impossible. Ridiculous. 1

Nicholas wasn't even considering the possibility of the words. In Nicholas's opinion, Julian would never have true feelings.

That seemed short-sighted.

"He might find love eventually," I said. "He's not immune to it. No one is." I wanted to suggest it without pressing too hard. I could risk revealing Julian's secret. Facts were, I knew that he definitely felt he was in love with Bridget, and had been for years.

Maybe Nicholas was right. Maybe it wasn't real love. But to Julian, it felt like it was. Wasn't that enough to take it seriously? Julian deserved support. How would he even know what was love or not if no one ever heard him out?

"Nick, I really think —"

"Trust me, Piper," Nicholas said. "Whatever is going on with him, it doesn't have anything to do with love." He looked at me then, again. His eyes were worried. He wasn't a terrible brother, just one who thought he knew Julian better than he did. "Will you find time to talk to him? Make sure he's okay?"

"I will," I said, and it was a promise, not just to him, but to myself.

I couldn't believe what Bridget had said to be true, that Julian had said all those terrible things.

We were friends. That was real.

I had to speak to him, and find out the truth.