

The Luna Choosing Game

#Chapter 471 – 480

Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 471

Chapter 0471 “Oh, no! Piper, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed. She placed her empty glass down on a nearby table then held her hands out to me like she intended to do something. Yet she never actually touched me or my clothes. “What can we do? That will stain right away!” She was right. Red wine stains didn’t come out at all once they were set.

I studied Bridget for a moment, trying to determine if this had truly been an accident. Everything had happened so quickly. Bridget could have lost balance. In the moment, that had been what it looked like.

Bridget was a professional actress. She could make anything look accidental.

But what would her end goal have been

for deception? To ruin my outfit? To get me out of the way? I wasn’t even talking to Nicholas, I had been talking to Julian! And Bridget hadn’t really shown any possessive interest in him. At least, not on the same level of Nicholas.

If this hadn’t been an accident, that meant that Bridget had it personally out for me, and that just seemed so... I don’t know. Too much.

It had to be an accident.

Veronica stood from her spot. She had a handkerchief and tried to help me wipe at the various spots. But it didn’t matter. The stain seemed set already and trying to wipe it away only stretched the stain out, making it worse.

The outfit was basically trash now.

Unless I could get it soaking in cold water. That might be the only way to salvage it.

Veronica traded me the handkerchief for the empty bottle. “We’ll keep an eye on Elva,” she said. “Go change.” That seemed like the best plan to me.

“Thank you,” I told her.

“Oh, Piper. Forgive me,” Bridget said.

@® I didn't reply as I walked around her and headed toward the sliding glass door that seemed to lead inside.

One of the wait staff was there. As I gestured to my shirt, I asked, "Do you have any idea where my luggage is?"

The waiter looked sympathetic. "We've moved all the luggage into the foyer while the room assignments are being made. You should find your bag there."

"Thank you. And the bathrooms?" "Third door on the left." "Thank you." They opened the door for me and I slipped inside. The inside of the building was as beautiful as the outside, with bamboo motifs and a tropical theme. Photos of palm leaves and exotic birds covered most of the walls. The furniture was mostly wicker with decorative cushions. I The foyer was much smaller than the one in the palace. It was mostly just a mudroom, where one could change I

their shoes and hang their clothes in the nearby closet. Our luggage was lined up there, just inside the door. I recognized mine right away. It was the most beat up of the bunch.

I grabbed my bag and dragged it back toward the bathroom. I found it exactly where the waiter described.

Some of the staff at the palace hadn't always liked me. Some still didn't. I was worried a little about what the situation would be here. It was a relief to know that the staff here would not be repeating the trend I experienced there. Maybe the tropical weather helped people feel happier.

One even joined me as I stood there.

"I'll take your clothes for you when you are ready, Miss. The sooner we get them washed, the more likely we can

remove that stain." I was incredibly grateful to her. So I ducked into the bathroom with my bag, changed out of my clothes, and then held them out for her after opening the door enough for my arm.

She collected them, and I heard her footsteps disappear down the hallway.

With relief, I turned to my suitcase. I set it down on the floor, zipped it open, and in a flash, all good feelings vanished. Instead, my heart sank.

"What the...?" The inside of my bag was covered in sticky red paint! It looked like someone had put a paint bomb in here. Cursing, I dug through my clothes, searching for something that had been left

untouched by the splatters and drips of the paint, but every single one of my clothes seemed damaged. @ For this to have happened, someone must have put in a few different paint bombs, to create the maximum damage.

Thank God I had brought packed Elva's clothing in a separate smaller bag tucked into the corner of this one. That seemed entirely untouched, except for the outside of the bag. Inside, Elva's clothes were safe and sound.

But that didn't help me right now.

What was I going to do? All of my clothes were damaged. And I had already given my stained clothes to the waiting house-person.

I would have to stay here until

someone came looking for me. God, I hoped it would be Veronica or Julian, and not Bridget. I guess I didn't have any other options.

Unless...

I closed the lid of the suitcase and then opened the top flap. There, I had stashed the two piece bikini that I had been too embarrassed to try on. It had seemed too revealing then. But. We were on a beach, right? Would it really be so bad for me to put on my swimsuit? € At least for as long as I could get Veronica's attention. Maybe she could lend me something else to wear for now. Even though our styles and sizes were different. Something would be better than nothing.

Plan set, I slide my underwear off and the bikini on. God, it really didn't leave much to the imagination. The triangles covered my nipples well enough, but much of the swell of my breasts were exposed. And the bottoms showed much more of my ass than I would have liked.

I closed my eyes and took a breath, steadying myself. This was fine. It was the beach. Everyone dressed like this.

No one will probably even bat an eye at me wearing this.

Still, as I went to leave the bathroom, I opened the door a crack to make sure no one was coming from either direction. Then I crept up the hallway, carefully plotting places to hide in case I someone came along.

No one would notice me behind that

potted plant, right? And those curtains seemed bulky enough to protect me.

Near the party, I slipped around into one of the more empty rooms. There were open windows along this side of the house that opened out onto the deck. If I could find one nearest Veronica and Julian, I could whisper at them through the window, all without giving myself away to anyone else.

I found a room with a window in the right position. The room was empty, thank God. Crouching, I crept toward the window. Unfortunately, a few long feet separated the window from where Julian sat. Veronica had moved even farther away and was talking with Elva.

Bridget, thankfully, had moved
somewhere else.

Julian was my only hope, then.

"Julian," I hissed, afraid to raise my voice too much. He didn't seem to notice at all. I dared to whisper a little louder. "Julian." He lifted his head. Did he hear me that time? Yet before I could feel any of the high of victory, a set of footsteps sounded behind me. They were close. Too close.

Someone was right there. I glanced, and oh no.

It was Nicholas.

Chapter 0472 I looked at Nicholas and totally froze.

Here I was, in such a revealing swimsuit, pressed up against the window, trying to get Julian's attention. I could imagine what Nicholas might think, and none of it would do well to quell the jealous wolf within him that was seemingly ready to jump anytime Julian and I were together.

"Why are you dressed like that?" he demanded. The wolf was in his voice, making it deeper and rougher than usual.

Panicked, I tried to explain what happened as quickly as I could.

"Bridget spilled red wine on my outfit, so I rushed to change. But when I opened my suitcase, someone had exploded some red paint balls in my luggage. Everything's ruined. The housekeeper already took my clothes so this was the only thing I had left and I thought if I could just get someone's attention they could -" "Prince Nicholas?" a waiter called.

"Are you in here, Sir? Your drink is ready." The waiter was coming around the door. I desperately searched for a place to hide, but this room was sparser than the others. It was a library or something, with bookcases built into two of the four walls.

There were two tall backed chairs, but they were on the other side of the

room. I'd have to rush and dive but there wasn't time! Fortunately, while I was in my panic, Nicholas maintained a much clearer head. He stormed straight toward the entrance and blocked the way and the view with his body.

"I'll have the drink outside," Nicholas told the waiter. "Please take it there for me and I will come get it in a moment." "Very well, sir," the waiter said, and turned away. Slowly, I heard the sound of his footsteps disappearing.

When he was safely gone, Nicholas I turned his attention back to me. His eyes were dark, feral almost as he dragged his gaze down the length of my mostly exposed body.

I

"Nick, I..." I didn't know what to say.

This was all unfortunate. I hadn't planned any of it. And I certainly hadn't expected to be standing here in this outfit, trying to hide from everyone.

Whatever words I might have fumbled out of my mouth were lost as Nicholas rushed toward me and scooped me up into his arms.

"Nick?" "Someone else will see you like this," he growled. Holding me in a bridal carry, he walked out of that library and down the hallway to the stairs. On the second floor, he moved with a practiced ease toward a bedroom and kicked open the door.

The head housekeeper had said that the rooms hadn't been finished being assigned yet, but the one Nicholas chose already had his things inside.

Perhaps this was his personal room whenever the royal family came to stay here. It would make sense for each of the royal family to maintain their own rooms, rather than be shuffled around like the guests would need to be.

With the door closed behind us, Nicholas slowly lowered me down onto my feet. I was standing in the middle of the bedroom, my feet cool on the tile floor. Nicholas, despite having lowered me, did not move away. Instead, he stared down at me from his six foot stature.

That angle let him look directly down at my breasts. Not that much was hidden from a forward angle view, but

from the top, he could likely see even more. And he looked. I watched him.

Those molten gold eyes stared openly at the curves of my breasts. His fingers twitched where his hands hung at his sides.

His face was drawn, his mouth a tight line. Was he holding himself back? Should that be my indication to leave? Why were we even here? "If you can get Veronica for me —" I began to say. I was sure she would lend me some clothes, but I just needed to ask her.

Chapter 0473 "No," he said.

I snapped my mouth closed and looked up at him. "Nick?" Nicholas's hands had curled even more, into fists now.

Maybe I should go. Of course, I wanted him, especially with him looking at me like he was, like he wanted to eat me whole.

But he was with Bridget now. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't.

"If you don't want me to touch you," Nicholas said, "Go into the bathroom there." He tilted his head toward an on suite bathroom with a door. "Go in there now, close the door. T will understand and go get Veronica for

you." I swallowed hard. A choice. Leave, preserve my dignity, but deny myself the feel of Nicholas's touch.

God, I knew the choice I should make.

Especially if Nicholas was trying to make things work with Bridget, as she had said so blatantly so many times.

Yet never once had I heard those words from Nicholas himself.

I should go. Staying will feel amazing in the moment, but it would only hurt me in the long run. Nicholas and I couldn't be together, regardless of whether or not he was with Bridget right at this moment.

I should go and not fantasize about those strong hands grabbing my

Sa 715 BONUS breasts. I shouldn't think about falling onto this bed behind me with Nicholas on top of me. Is I should just go.

Instead, I lifted my chin. "And if I stay?" That was my answer. I couldn't help myself. With Nicholas, I had no self- control. I would do anything to have him, to feel him, to love him.

His eyes impossibly darken farther, alighting a fire within me. With how slim this bikini is, I had no doubt that he could smell my desire in the air.

So he surged forward, wrapped his arms around me, and yanked me toward him. Our chests pressed hard together as his mouth descended over mine.

It had been too long since I had tasted his mouth, his lips, his tongue. I indulged now, taking my fill. This could be the last time. I was not about to miss this chance.

Nicholas lowered his hands where he squeezed and cupped the mostly-bare globes of my ass. Slowly, gently, he lowered me down onto the bed and crawled on top of me, all without breaking the kiss.

When our kiss did end, he immediately lowered himself down, kissing along the column of my throat, then over my collarbones.

Those tiny triangles of my bikini were so easily pushed to the side, and Nicholas closed his mouth over my bare nipple. I arched my back at once, overwhelmed by the sudden

stimulation. His mouth was so hot, and his wicked tongue was trailing insistent circles over my sensitive bud.

I combed my fingers through his hair and held on for dear life.

A warmth blossomed and bloomed within my chest. I did my best to ignore it, knowing no good could come of it, despite how wonderful it felt. Any growing attachment to Nicholas was foolish and would only end in heartbreak for me.

Nicholas lapped at my nipple while cupping and squeezing my other breast with his strong hand. His thumb brushed that nipple through the fabric of the swimsuit.

[moaned. I cried his name. I writhed beneath him. »

And he continued tasting and touching me until I couldn't even do that.

Somehow, all of Nicholas's clothes and the rest of my skimpy swimsuit ended up on the floor, and Nicholas and I rutted against each other like we had when we had dated all those years ago. Nicholas's thigh was slotted between my legs. His dick was pressing into the edge of my hipbone.

We grinded and begged and panted our way to mutual pleasure.

And as I came with his name on my lips, I knew only he could make me feel this complete. &

Chapter 0474 When our lovemaking was done, Nicholas held me in his arms under the covers of the bed. Despite the bliss running through my veins, now that the deed was done, I also felt a wave of... guilt.

I didn't know if Nicholas and Bridget were together. Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. But probably should have clarified that before I jumped into bed with him like some kind of thirsty harlot.

My moral compass seemed to fly out the window when it came to Nicholas.

I'd pretty much do anything to keep him in my life.

"You're quiet," Nicholas said. He combed his fingers lazily through my hair as I laid, half-draped, over his chest.

"I was just thinking..." I began, but lost my nerve to say more.

"About what?" Nicholas prompted.

I should have known he wouldn't let this go so easily. "About you..." I said.

A pause. Then I added, "And Bridget." Nicholas sighed.

"She warned me that the two of you are together," I said. I wasn't able to stop the words, now that the dam had been broken. "She said it would be for the best if I stayed away from you." Nicholas's hand stilled. It had just passed through my hair and was now sitting on the edge of my shoulder.

"She said that to you?" @» "Yes." I lifted my head, to look him in the eye. "Was she telling the truth?" "I haven't made any decisions," Nicholas said.

He held my gaze so I knew that was the truth, but I also could tell there was much more to the story than simply that. I waited patiently for him to continue. I wasn't waiting long.

"My parents are convinced Bridget is the best choice for my Luna," Nicholas said. "They are being very insistent.

They even talking to Bridget about it, which is why she's so confident." He sighed again, and this time it came out harsher. I could sense his frustration.

"So many people think they have a right to decide everything for me. It was bad enough when it was just my parents. But now to have Bridget in the mix? She is my friend. She always has been, but she is suddenly demanding more of me. She wants promises I'm not ready to make." Not ready, he said. That didn't mean he was outright refusing her or outright refusing any of it. He just needed more time to think about it.

It wasn't the dismissal of Bridget that I wanted, but... I always knew that Nicholas would choose the crown before anyone or anything else, including me. That he would need to

think carefully was no shock. And that he wouldn't want to immediately dismiss Bridget when she was such a promising candidate wasn't shocking

either.

It still stung, though. Somedays I half- wished Nicholas would throw it all aside and choose me over everything else, but that was an entirely selfish notion. And Nicholas was too good of a man to do that.

So, for now, I clung onto what I could of him, and tried to enjoy him for as long as I could have him.

Which led my thoughts to this trip.

"Nicholas," I began.

«Hm?" That showed he was listening.

"What if, since we are on vacation, we... pretended to be different people?" He considered the words a moment.

"What do you mean?" 'Maybe what we both really need is a break. A break from worries and responsibilities. We're on vacation. We don't need to worry so much here. Why don't we try being other people? People who aren't a prince and a commoner." He laughed a little, and I knew I was winning him over.

"Who would we be?" he asked.

"Just two regular people on equal footing," I said. "Without any cares.

Two people who just want to drink boat drinks and watch the waves hit the sand."

Chapter 0475 He smiled down at me, then leaned down to press that smile against my lips.

We kisses lightly, and he said, "I'd like that." Of course, we still had to be careful around the others. If Nicholas and I were suddenly all lovey dovey around Bridget or Jessica, the two might spread rumors and have more questions than we had answers to give.

But in private, in moments like this, we could just be a couple, enjoying each other and the beach.

This wouldn't fix things between Nicholas and I. By now, our issues had

piled high between us. The minute we returned to the palace, it would all likely topple back onto us.

But for now, we could pretend we were okay. And that would have to be enough.

One problem remained, however. “Uh.

I still don't have any clothes.” There weren't exactly stores on this small private island. With a runway, someone could run out, I guessed, but it was already getting pretty late.

«we'll have something flown in,” Nicholas said. “But that doesn't cover you for dinner tonight.” He hummed as he gazed across the room. “I have an idea.” We both slowly rose from the bed.

Nicholas crossed the room to his own

dresser and removed a pair of loose- fitting linen pants and a thin white t- shirt. He held them out for me.

I blinked at him, and at the clothes in his hands. No way he could mean for me to wear this? His clothes? He shook them as he held them out for me and I quickly realized that yeah, that was exactly what he wanted me to do with them.

“Uh, thanks,” I said. I snatched them from his hand and then hurried into the bathroom, realizing only after I closed the door how ridiculous that was. We'd both been naked as the day we were born. Why would I need privacy to put on clothes? I didn't know. It felt more intimate somehow, the fact that I was putting on his clothes for the first time. I kind

of wanted to see how it would look before I showed it to him.

I kicked my legs into the pants.

Fortunately it had a tie-waist so I could pull it tight until it fit me around the middle. But with Nicholas's height, the leg length was far too long for me.

Bending down I rolled the pant legs up and up and up. The roll was a bit bulky by the time my feet showed, but it was good in a pinch.

The shirt fit over my head well enough.

It left the rest of me a bit shapeless, but the only person I really cared about seeing my shape was Nicholas. And he already was well-aware of what I looked like under this shirt.

I checked myself in the mirror. My hair was a mess from our lovemaking so I straightened it out as best I could

without a comb. My toiletries, fortunately, weren't harmed with the paint bomb, but they were still far away, downstairs in my luggage.

Once I felt I looked mildly presentable, I took a breath to prepare myself, and opened the bathroom door again.

Nicholas had changed too, and now wore khaki shorts and a stripped t- shirt of a similar style to the white one [wore.

“How did it... work...?” His question faded as he turned toward me. The minute his eyes landed on my body, they added heat.

[swallowed hard as his wandering gaze left fire on my skin. It was like he didn’t know where to stop looking.

Was this because I was wearing his

clothes? “Nick?” “We might be late for dinner,” he said, and strode toward me.

I laughed until he kissed my breath away.

Chapter 0476 When we finally made it downstairs, it was as the others were beginning to make their way toward the dining room for dinner.

Julian spotted me first, standing at the bottom of the stair, and began laughing his head off. Veronica, beside him, noticed me a moment later, and gave me a hint of a smile, a big deal for her.

Elva looked up at me and laughed.

«What are you wearing, Mommy?» held open my arms and she ran into them. Then I lifted her up.

«I forgot all of my clothes,” I told her, not wanting her to know about the sabotage done to our bags. I would protect Elva as much as I could as long

as I could about the harsh cruelties of the world. } As the others walked by, Jessica followed them. She glanced at me but appeared indifferent to my appearance.

Bridget, however. Her gaze went ice cold as she inspected me from my shoulders down to my toes. She didn’t say anything, she kept on smiling. But I felt like the air in the room dropped a few degrees.

“Nicholas,” she said. She dragged her gaze from me to him. “The dinners are supposed to be couple specific. That means you should be with me.” That last sentence seemed to hold more weight than the rest, and honestly seemed vaguely threatening. I remembered what Nicholas said, that

— Bridget wanted promises from him that he wasn’t ready to give her.

[wondered if this was just one more of her demands that he wasn't too keen about.

"Very well," he said, acknowledging nothing else about what she said or how she said it. "I take it that means chairs will be placed at Julian's table for Piper and Elva." "I really couldn't say Bridget said which seemed like the polite way of saying that she just didn't care all that much.

"I'll find out," Nicholas said to me. He touched my shoulder, squeezed it, and then walked passed the others to enter the dining room first Bridget should have followed the rest,

but with Nicholas's absence, she stopped and stared at me. She stared so long that even Elva grew « uncomfortable and turned her head.

"What is it?" I asked her, when it seemed like she wasn't going to give up any answers on her own.

"Nothing," she said. She twisted her smile higher. "I'm just so glad you are making the most of the little time you have left." If what she had said to Nicholas before had been vaguely threatening, this was much more overt. Yet said with that bright smile of hers, I would look like the jerk for calling her out. So I just smiled harder too, so big my cheeks hurt.

"I am," I said. "Thank you for saying

so." Our angry smiles competed against one { another, until Elva stirred again.

"I'm hungry," she whispered in my ear. Oh. Right. Dinner.

"If you'll excuse us," I said to Bridget, and then headed for the dining room.

Once there, I saw that the room had been arranged with three separate round tables, set for two each. Nicholas was personally pulling a pair of chairs up against the one Julian and Veronica had claimed. Julian was asking the wait staff for more place settings.

Jessica claimed the farthest table as her own. There was an empty place setting across from her. That seemed almost like a cruel joke, as if they had expected

Joyce to arrive even up until the last minute. Maybe no one had told them he wasn't coming.

I wondered if anyone had told them that Elva and I were.

Bridget walked past me then and went to the middle table, where she plopped herself down contentedly and presumably waited for Nicholas to join her.

When the chairs were set at Julian's table, Nicholas waved to me to make sure I saw them, then he moved to his assigned seat with Bridget. Carrying Elva, I moved to Julian's table. I set Elva down between Veronica and me, which placed me between Elva and Julian.

"I'm sure this seemed like a good idea

to someone at the time they came up with it," Veronica said, glancing across the room at the awkward seating arrangements.

"I think this was supposed to be a romantic trip," I remind her. "A reward for doing well in the theater event." An event that had been rigged from the start to give Bridget an obvious advantage.

"I prefer the non-romantic kind," Julian said. He smiled for us, but that smile dimmed as he glanced at Bridget and Nicholas alone at their table.

Now that I more understood where Nicholas and Bridget stood with each other, I didn't feel as jealous as before.

Yes, it still festered in the back of my heart, and I knew someday it would

hurt even worse. But for now, I could push that aside.

I overlooked them to watch Jessica. She had seemed alright at first, but the longer I watched her, the more lonesome she seemed.

"We could fit one more at our table, couldn't we?" I asked the others. Both followed the length of my gaze. €& "I don't see why not," Veronica said.

"I'll speak with the staff," Julian said, rising.

"I'll go ask her if she wants to move," I said, standing also. To Elva, I said, "Stay here, sweetheart. I'll be right back." "Okay, Mommy."

I crossed the room, walking around behind Nicholas, who glanced to watch me. At Jessica's table I stopped..She looked up at me.

"Would you like to sit with us?" I asked her.

She smiled, relief spreading across her face. "Yes." So Jessica joined the table with Veronica, Julian, Elva, and I. As it was only originally intended for two people, five people made it cramped.

But it was worth it, when Jessica started coming out of her shell a little.

I didn't know all that much about Jessica before. I knew she was bookish, and smart, and liked Joyce a whole lot, but that was it. What I learned, speaking with her over dinner, was

that she was headstrong and opinionated. She obviously didn't care much for Julian, glaring at him whenever he spoke. But her smile was bright and honest for the rest of us, especially Elva.

"You have such an intelligent child," she said to me, after Elva had told Jessica how much she enjoyed reading all kinds of books. Especially the ones about animals. Elva loved animals.

When the topic of Joyce arose, however, her mood shifted from one of contentment to one of quiet contemplation.

"I'm still committed to Prince Joyce," Jessica said. "Everyone has a past and deserves a chance to make amends." I nodded in agreement.

Veronica voiced hers aloud, "You're right." Julian seemed altogether distracted. I could understand why.

At Nicholas's table, he and Bridget were laughing and talking about times gone by. It tugged at my heart too. My wolf paced inside of me, angered with jealousy.

But I wouldn't let the jealousy take root within me. Whatever Bridget wanted them to be, Nicholas saw her as a dear friend. And I didn't want to take that away from him [I guessed I was feeling more confident since learning about his true feelings on the matter.

Julian, however, seemed utterly miserable.

With a deep sigh, he pushed his chair back from the table.

"Please excuse me," he said, "I'm not feeling well." Then he stood and left the room, with the rest of us watching behind him.

Chapter 0477 Watching the slump in Julian's shoulders and slight barely-there drag of his feet as he left, had me immediately and overwhelmingly worried. I quickly asked Veronica and Jessica to keep an eye on Elva, and hurried to follow him.

I came out into the hallway just to watch him slip back out onto the deck.

I hurried that way, opened the door, and rushed through. I caught up to him at the base of the stairs from the deck to the beach.

"You can never leave well enough alone, can you, Piper?" he asked, but there was no real heat behind it. If anything, he seemed relieved to not be alone anymore.

"You know me," I said with a playful shrug. "Always sticking my nose where it doesn't belong." I paused enough to let the playfulness pass. I wanted him to know I was serious when I added, "At least with the people I care about." He gave me a small, grateful smile, then tipped his head toward the beach.

"How about a walk." "Okay." Side by side we moved along the edge of the water as the waves lapped at the sand. Sometimes, unexpectedly, those same waves would push a bit farther and tickle the bottoms of our feet as well.

Over the ocean, the sun was starting to set, painting the sky in a rainbow of color: blues and purples, and golden

reds. A beautiful day was becoming a beautiful evening.

I smelled the salty sea and was grateful to be here, to be witnessing this. This was an once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. I'd return home and likely never see the beach again. But with these memories, I could be satisfied.

Unfortunately, the man-shaped raincloud beside me did not seem to be enjoying this as much as I did.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked.

He had to know I was here for him.

With everything we had faced together, I had hoped this would be a given. Yet sometimes, people needed to hear the words said many times before they started to believe them. Hopefully this would be that time for Julian.

"I don't know why I keep going back to her," he said, and kicked at the sand.

"It's like a bad habit I can't break. An addiction, maybe." @ I kept quiet beside him, sensing that he needed me to listen more than he needed me to speak. That he had recognized his addiction was a good step forward. My advice to him now would be the same it had always been before. It seemed like he already knew it. He didn't need it repeated.

"But she's all I ever wanted for so long.

No other woman has ever been able to compare. And being with her is like a measurement of success for me," he said. "I feel like I'll always be a failure without her by my side." He really had given this a lot of thought. Good for him. To see these

things about ourselves was oftentimes the hardest part. At least in hindsight. In the moment, the healing, the part— I that came next, was always the hardest.

I thought of what I could say that might help him. Of course, I had to agree with his words and continue to encourage him.

“You are seeing her as a trophy, not a person,” I said. “And I suspect that after wanting her this long, you are imagining her as more than she is, as well. No one person is perfect. We all have flaws. Bridget has several. You can’t continue to be blind to that.” He grew quiet for a moment, and I wondered if I said too much or was too harsh. As Julian’s friend, I wanted him to confront these ideas he had of her,

but I didn’t want to push him so hard that he broke. It was a delicate line to cross. I felt I was playing a dangerous game here.

Still, I couldn’t stop. For the sake of our friendship, I needed to tell him the full truth.

“She’s treated you poorly, Julian. She’s led you on just to reject you multiple times. She’s gaslit you, she’s made you feel like you aren’t good enough. When she is around, you change into someone that I don’t recognize. It’s like you are a shadow of yourself.” I shook my head. “You deserve better, Julian. You deserve to be with someone who likes you the way you are.

Someone who brings out your best qualities. Not someone who pushes you into hiding your true self.”

He laughed a little, bitterly, though I didn’t feel like his anger and frustration was directed at me. “You act like women like that are so easy to come by.” Once more, unbidden, I thought of Veronica’s words to me not all that long ago, that perhaps I should just date Julian for real. And while I could appreciate Julian as a man who was handsome and funny and smart, I couldn’t do that to either of us.

My heart was too entangled in Nicholas.

But what if the person Julian needed to date wasn’t me, but wasn’t someone so far away either.

“What about Veronica?” I asked.

He glanced at me sideways.

“Veronica?” “You should spend more time with her, { Julian. I know you two get along. She obviously cares for you a great deal.” “She does?” I nodded.

Julian considered it for a long moment.

Then several more, longer moments.

"She is beautiful," he said at last.

"Intelligent, too. And her dry wit never ceases to make me laugh." He laughed now, perhaps thinking back on something that she said.

For a moment, my heart took flight in hope for the two of them. But then his laugh faded.

"It wouldn't be fair to her," he said. "I don't want to lead her on when I still

I care so much about Bridget." I nodded, even as I sighed. Julian and I really were too similar. i Eventually, we made our way back to the mansion, where there seemed to be some disagreement spilling out into the hallway.

"What's going on?" I asked Veronica as Julian and I approached.

Nicholas was speaking with Selma, while Bridget stood beside him, her arms crossed.

"There's been a mix-up with the rooms," Veronica told us. "With your arrival Piper, they are one bedroom short." Oh. God, so no one really did think to call ahead? I glanced at Julian. I didn't I want to accuse him, but... he was the

one who asked me to come. He should have been the one to make certain the arrangements had been made. — I He looked at me with genuine innocence. "I told Nathan myself what was going on. He assured me he would pass word on, so that the arrangements could be made." Nathan. Someone in league with Bridget. Someone who never seemed very fond of me. Someone who worked directly under a King who wouldn't want me to be on this trip.

[wasn't mad at Julian, and I told him so. At least I tried to. The minute I opened my mouth to speak, someone else's voice spoke up louder.

«The solution is simpler than you are making it," Bridget said. "11 just stay in Prince Nicholas's room."

Chapter 0478 "That's a bit presumptuous, isn't it?" Jessica said to Bridget, and I instantly liked her even more. "Why should you get to room with a prince?" "Prince Nicholas, as the oldest of his siblings, has the largest room of any of those here," Bridget said. She smiled brightly but narrowed her eyes at Jessica, which made her look a little threatening. "It makes sense that he would be the one to share." Jessica, however, was not so easily intimidated. "Makes sense to whom?" Julian started forward. "Nicholas and I can room together then." Selma paled. "We could not ask our

princes to inconvenience themselves." I wondered, even if Nicholas and Julian decided to room together, if the staff would be allowed to assign a guest to Julian's vacant room.

I had a feeling there were empty rooms left in this house, but they were assigned to the King and Queen and Joyce, respectfully.

“See?” Bridget said, glancing at everyone in turn. “It makes the most sense, as I preciously suggested, for me to stay in Nicholas’s room.” “No,” Nicholas said, flat and firm.

Bridget startled as she turned to look at him. A wave of relief washed through me. Nicholas was tired of having his choices made for him. This choice seemed small, but maybe it was a step

in the right direction for him. A step he needed to be able to more firmly stand up for his own wants later. = I could only dream. Even I knew I was likely kidding myself.

But still, in this case, I could feel relief.

“No?” Bridget asked, though she kept her tone light. She was looking for an explanation, not making an accusation.

“It wouldn’t be proper for us to stay in the same room like that,” Nicholas said.

Bridget’s smile went a little thin. “But we’re friends before we are anything else, Nicholas. Very old friends. It wouldn’t be the first time we platonically shared a bed.”

“We were children then,” Nicholas said. “We are adults now, and my decision is final.” Julian turned away from the scene to walk back to me and Veronica. He was smiling again, looking as relieved as I felt inside. I wondered if my own face mirrored that expression as well.

Veronica looked at us both, then spoke up. “Bridget can stay in my room.” Bridget’s eyes went wide. I’m sure my own did too.

“What? ...a generous offer...” Bridget exclaimed, then recovered.

I inched closer to Veronica to whisper, “Why in the world would you want to do this?” Veronica gave me a pointed look. “I don’t trust her. This way I can keep a

better eye on her.” I didn’t like the idea of Veronica sacrificing her vacation to keep watch on Bridget, but Veronica was very steadfast. If she said it allowed, she’d already given it thought. She’d already come to her decision. She likely knew what she was going to do before Julian and I even showed up for this argument.

All eyes turned to Bridget. For once, she seemed uncomfortable in the sudden limelight.

“Very well,” she said, though the words sounded forced. She sounded like she would rather do absolutely anything else. “Thank you, Veronica.” Veronica dipped her head in acknowledgement, playing the role of

humble benefactor quite well. No wonder she had been awarded so many points in the theater event. She really was very talented. Bridget should have given her a bigger role.

I supposed that didn't matter now.

With the matter settled, the staff began moving everyone's luggage at once. A sudden wave of servants appeared and disappeared in a blink-and-you-miss- it kind of rush. It was amazing watching them work, truly talented people with a craft.

Not five minutes later, our rooms were ready and all of the staff I had seen had vanished like they'd never been there at all.

If I was a superstitious sort, I might have thought the entire staff were a bunch of ghosts. As it wasn't, I instead

guessed there were a whole set of back hallways and rooms specifically designed to hide the staff from sight: However, even with our rooms being ready, no one was ready to go to sleep yet. It was just past sunset, after all, so most of the group wandered back out onto the back deck, where some of the staff were lighting tiki torches.

Some of the group were talking about a bonfire. From what I overheard, the staff were rushing to procure the appropriate kind of wood.

Nicholas lingered behind the rest, waiting for me at the door. But I stayed behind a moment longer yet. Elva was holding my hand with one hand while she rubbed her eyes with the other. She was clearly exhausted.

“Do you want to go to sleep, Elva?” I ask.

“I wanna see a bonfire...” she said with a yawn.

I smiled as I lifted her up into my arms.

“There will be others,” I told her.

“We're going to be here a full week, after all. You've had a long day and need some rest.” She yawned again. I knew she was genuinely tired when she didn't argue.

“Okay.” Nicholas left his vigil at the door and approached us. “Someone tucked out.”
“up H 3) H »n I'm going to tuck her in.”

Nicholas nodded. "I've made special arrangements for you and Elva. You'll recognize the guard at the door, and a

nanny is on call whenever you need her." "Elva's usual?" I asked.

"The very same." Oh, thank goodness. People I knew I could trust.

Nicholas leaned down and kissed Elva on the temple. "Good night, princess." When he straightened he smiled at me.

I smiled in answer.

Then I turned and headed upstairs carrying Elva.

It was a relief seeing two familiar faces waiting for us at the door: a guard and a nanny.

In the room, our luggage were placed

near the dressers. The bed had been made with the covers drawn back.

I lowered Elva down to sit on the bed, then rushed to get her pajamas. By the time we had finished changing her, she was mostly asleep sitting up.

Such a big day for such a little girl.

I lowered her down into the bed and brought the covers up to her chin, making certain she was properly tucked in.

"I'm... cited, Mommy," Elva said, voice mumble-like with sleep.

"I know. Me too. We're going to have a great vacation." "you and me... and Nick-lass." She giggled. "We're gonna be a family...

soon."

I blinked. What? Where had she heard that? "Elva, I'm not sure if..." My voice trailed off when I heard her soft snoring. She wouldn't hear anything I had to say like this.

I would have to talk to her in the morning, though, if she still remembered this. I didn't want her to have any false illusions about what might happen here.

Though... it was not that I couldn't appreciate that little dream. It wasn't that I hadn't had that dream all on my own, before.

But what could have happened that had so convinced her the three of us would be a family now? tried to think back, but couldn't

remember any specific instance of anything being different.

Yet Elva had seemed confident, as if fully convinced that she, Nicholas, and I would be leaving here as a family.

Chapter 0479 [waited until Elva's snores became more consistent, and then, after checking the nanny and the guard would keep watch over her while she slept, I made my way back downstairs.

By now the bonfire had started, and I saw the flicker of flames through the sliding glass door before I ever opened it to go out to the deck and down to the beach.

One of the staff stopped me halfway down the stairs. "What would you like to drink, Miss?" I ordered another delicious boat drink.

I could see the others with their wine glasses and mixed drinks. Even Nicholas had a sifter of whiskey.

I Tonight, it seemed, was going to be a night of possibly drunken mischief.

This was something none of us could afford to have happen in front of cameras. Truly, a vacation was just what we all needed.

As I headed down to the beach, I found Julian strumming lightly on a dusty old guitar as he tried to bring it in tune.

"I didn't know you could play guitar," I said to him.

He grinned at me. "There's a lot about me you don't know, Piper." I rolled my eyes and kept walking.

Veronica was waiting patiently with a long stick while Jessica struggled to open a bag of marshmallows. Good

thing Elva didn't see the bag before heading upstairs or sleep would have been the last thing on her mind, Not far from them, Bridget was holding her wine glass and laughing away. Nicholas, beside her, nodded at whatever she was saying. He seemed amused, but not as much as she was, to be laughing so bombastically.

When Nicholas spotted me heading closer, he excused himself from Bridget and made his way over to me.

The outside lights had been turned off and only the fire now illuminated all.

Nicholas was even more devilishly handsome in the dancing orange light, and my heart toppled over itself all over again.

"You're back," he said.

"I'm back." "Elva down for the night?" "Like a light," I said. T wouldn't tell him anything she said, about him and me and her being a family soon. I had no idea how I would explain it, and hearing Nicholas laugh it off as childish musings might actually break my heart.

"Good," Nicholas said. He moved to stand beside me while facing the fire.

"It's a beautiful night." "It is," I said.

He glanced sideways at me. Then he said, "If we were anyone but the people we are, would we be strangers?" I looked back at him, wondering about what kind of game he wanted to play.

"Would you want to be?"

"Maybe," he said. "Then I could see if I could win your heart all over again." "For the third time?" I asked.

He blinked. "Third?" What, had he assumed that he had no hold over my heart now since we'd become reacquainted? Had he forgotten everything that had happened since I moved here? Or was it simply because we didn't overly talk about that stuff anymore, knowing everything was so futile? Before I could think of a satisfying answer, the waiter reappeared, holding my drink. He handed it to me and excused himself. He was here only four or five seconds, but it had been long enough for the mood to shift.

"didn't mean to bring up old wounds," Nicholas said, "You didn't." Julian finally tuned the guitar and began to play. It was a soft kind of ballad that fit in perfectly with a night light this. The bonfire crackled. Jessica laughed as she finally opened that bag of marshmallows. Bridget had wandered closer to them and plucked one from the bag, straight into her mouth.

This night felt special, even with Bridget's presence. A night like this, out here in the night air with the lights off and the big dark ocean stretched out before us... It felt like freedom.

With no cameras and no responsibilities, maybe this was freedom. It might only be for a week,

but even now, after only a handful of hours, it was the breath of fresh air we all so desperately needed.

Chapter 0480 Everyone was starting to unwind.

I glanced at Nicholas. He was staring hard now into the fire. It made the shadows flicker and dance over the hard plains of his face.

"I wouldn't want you to be a stranger," I told him.

He glanced back at me.

"To become strangers means I would have to forget everything that came before this moment." I smiled at him, genuinely, from the heart. "Every memory with you is a precious one. I'd never want to forget." Something shifted on his face. He suddenly seemed much more open. He turned to me, opened his mouth and

his arms.

"piper," he began.

"Let's play a game!" Bridget called, bringing us all to attention.

Nicholas's mouth closed. He looked down.

The moment was gone.

Fifteen minutes later, we were all seated in a small circle beside the bonfire. Bridget, somehow, likely through her superb acting abilities, had managed to convince everyone to take part in this game.

The game she chose? «Two truths and a lie," Bridget said.

"Does everyone know how to play?" Everyone nodded, except for Jessica,

who just looked confused. She glanced at Veronica for answers. The two were becoming fast friends. a3 "We go around the circle and everyone says three things about themselves," Veronica explained. "They say two truths and one lie but don't reveal which is which. It's left to the others to guess." "Oh. Okay." «p11 start," Bridget said. Her smile was bright, though her eyes were a bit glassy. I wasn't sure how many red wines she was in, but I was hopeful that her tipsiness might give the rest of us an advantage in this game. As a trained professional liar, she had a clear leg up over everyone else.

"Go easy on us," Julian said. He grinned at her. She pretended she didn't hear him. He wilted slightly.

"Okay..." she looked around at each of us, and suddenly I began to feel somewhat nervous.

The first person to go usually set the tone for everyone else. When Bridget had suggested the game, she had seemed to be in a good mood, full of marshmallows and wine. Now, she was taking on a more serious expression.

The whole thing began to make me feel very nervous. Maybe this was a really bad idea after all.

“Okay. I'm an actress,” she began.

«That's a truth!” Jessica announced quickly.

Veronica leaned to her. “Wait until she is done, and then guess the lie.”

“Qh, right. Sorry.” Jessica sipped her own boat drink through the curly straw.

Bridget smiled wider and continued.

Her gaze shifted to Nicholas at my right side. “Iam in love with Prince Nicholas.” My heart twisted uncomfortably in my chest. Was that a truth? Was it a lie? What would be the third thing she said? Then her gaze slid to me. Her smile sharpened.

« am in love with Prince Julian.” The air felt sucked from the entire universe. I immediately turned to look at Julian, whose gaze had dropped to the ground.

“Julian,” I whispered, but he shook his

head at me.

Wordlessly, he stood and turned to head inside. i Veronica's face twisted with disgust.

“That was a cruel, callous thing to do.” Bridget looked at her with wide-eyed innocence. “What did I do? It's just a game.” “It's not just a game to some of us,” I snapped.

That was the wrong thing to do apparently, because Bridget's smile twitched even wider as soon as I opened my mouth.

«Oh, Piper. I know it's not a game to you. You all want to be mad at me for playing with two men's hearts, but isn't that exactly what you are doing,

piper?” I straighten, suddenly feeling sick to 4 my stomach.

“you are openly dating Julian, but strutting around in Nicholas's clothes,” Bridget's eyes were as blazing as the bonfire. “Why don't you tell everyone which of the two you actually love?”