

# **The Luna Choosing Game #Chapter 0621 - Read The Luna Choosing Game Chapter 0621**

## **Chapter 0621**

That evening, after dinner, I met Nicholas and Mark near the front door of the palace. Then, we walked to the waiting car and a driver took us to Susie's family estate.

As pulled through the gate, I was amazed by the sheer size of the building. It wasn't the size of the palace, but the palace was the palace. A single family home had no need to be this giant. What could they possibly do with so many rooms? Did they always have people over?

The driver pulled around the front driveway, straight up to the double door entrance. We exited the car and go to the door. Nicholas stood up front, with Mark slightly behind him to his left. I was slightly behind to his right.

Nicholas leaned forward and pressed the doorbell.

A moment passed. Then two. Nicholas cleared his throat. Mark and I glanced at each other.

Then, in a rush, the door pulled open, revealing a very nervous-looking butler.

\*Prince Nicholas! Forgive my lateness. How may we assist you?" the butler asked, bowing low.

"I'm here to speak with the master and mistress of this household," Nicholas said formally.

"At once," the butler said. He ushered us inside and then led us to a sitting room with bookcases built into the walls. "I beg your pardon. As you have arrived unannounced, my master and mistress need to time get ready. I will ask them to make haste. If you will excuse me."

He bowed again, repeatedly, as he backed out of the room.

When he was gone, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "We've made it this far," I said.

\*This was the easy part," Nicholas said.

Mark began to pace.

I noticed, throughout the room, several antiques. In fact, most of the room seemed to be filled with antiques: furniture, vases, even the books on the shelves seemed old yet untouched.

The place seemed like a museum, full of beautiful things but totally spotless and sterile. It didn't look lived in. It didn't feel like a home at all.

"Did Susie grow up here?" I asked. I tried to imagine a child playing in a room like this, but I struggled to make the pieces fit.

\*Susie's family are very strict and private, Nicholas said. "They are some of the more traditional in the nobility. They will not like that we are here, sticking our noses into their affairs."

\*But you are the prince..." I said.

Nicholas shook his head lightly. "My being a prince got us through the door. But they will attempt to stonewall us from here. I can guarantee, when they arrive, the first sentence out of their mouth will be an attempt to get me to leave."

I was skeptical.

Until Susie's parents came through the door. They were dressed as expensive and stuffy as all the things in this room. Their expressions were tight and severe. I struggled to see Susie when I looked at them. She was so soft and kind. They were all harsh lines and sharp glances.

\*Your Highness," they said and bowed in unison. "We thank you for your visit, but you must grant us a favor by returning at a later time."

I lifted a brow in surprise. Nicholas was right. They really didn't waste time in showing him the door.

"I'm here now," Nicholas said with a firm, decisive voice that indicated that line of talking was now shut down."

And I'd like to see my friend Susie while I am here."

"Oh..." The couple looked at each other. The father spoke first, "I'm afraid that won't be possible. Maybe you haven't heard? Susie will be dropping from the competition. She needs to mind herself here at our estate for now."

"I've heard," Nicholas said, "Though I am confused as to why."

\*I'm afraid I cannot say, Sir," the mother said. "It's a very personal matter. I'm sure you understand."

"I'm not sure I do," Nicholas said.

"We've cleared it with the King, of course," the father said. "Did he not mention it to you?"

Nicholas stood up a little straighter. They really weren't going to give us any answers, were they? And they certainly seemed like they weren't going to let us see Susie.

No. I couldn't live with that.

I pushed forward. "Forgive our intrusion," I said. The couple blinked at me in surprise. "But it is vitally important we speak to Susie. We are her friends and just worried for her health. It's unlike her to disappear like she has. I won't be able to rest until I'm sure she's okay."

\*You... You are another candidate from the competition," the mother said. "Piper."

"That's right."

"She's talked about you in her letters," the mother said. She looked at the father again. "Her friend."

The father's face went tighter still. He sighed as he frowned. "She did speak of you."

"Piper," the mother said, coming closer to me. "Perhaps... it wouldn't be so terrible for you, and you alone, to speak with Susie. She might... do well to see a friendly face."

I nearly gasped, Really? But I bit it back at the last moment. I wouldn't complain about getting to see my friend, especially after we were sure it was impossible.

"I would be very happy to," I said.

She waved toward the doorway, where the butler was waiting. "Our servant will show you the way."

\*Thank you, ma'am," I said.

\*Piper," Mark called for me before I could leave. "May I speak to you privately a moment before you leave?"

I glanced at Susie's parents. They nodded slightly.

I walked to Mark. He pulled me more to the side, into the shadow of the bookcases.

He pressed a ring into my hand. It was a thin silver band with a small diamond.

"Mark?"

"Give this to Susie," he said. "Tell her it's long overdue. But if she would allow me, I would like to ask her properly."

The words were spoken lightly. The rest of the room could not hear.

I closed my fingers around the ring. "I will," I said to him. "I'll give it to her."

\*Thank you," he said. He hooked his fingers together in front of him, then fiddled with them nervously.

I could imagine! I had known he meant to steal Susie away, but I thought that meant bringing her back to the safety of the palace. I had no idea he intended to marry her!

I tucked the ring safely into my pocket. As I walked away from Mark, Nicholas caught my eye. He held my gaze and smiled a little. There was a light in his eyes that sparkled brightly the longer I looked.

Did he know what Mark had just asked me to convey?

He seemed to. He gave me the smallest of nods that set my heart racing.

Being this close to a proposal, an engagement, it made me feel things....

What it would be like if I was the one getting engaged?

Quickly, I shook the thoughts away.

I was here to help Susie. My own concerns could wait.

"I'm ready now," I said, and followed the butler into the hallway.

Chapter 0622

The butler showed me to Susie's room, and then quickly excused himself outside of her door. When he was gone, I knocked.

"Go away!" Susie called in a watery voice. She was crying.

I knocked more insistently as I pushed open the door.

\*I said -\* she started, cutting herself off she say me. "Piper?"

"Hi, Susie," I said.

"Oh, Piper!" She was sitting at her desk, the tears running down her cheeks. As I entered the room, closing the door behind me, she jumped from the chair and ran to me.

We shared a hug. Relief flooded through me.

I stepped back after a moment, to look her over. She didn't seem too worse for wear. Other than the crying, she didn't show any signs of abuse or neglect.

"What are you doing here?" Susie sniffed. "I'm sure word has gotten around by now."

\*Rumors don't matter. Come back to palace."

\*If you've heard the rumors, you know why I can't."

"Everyone will forget, the moment you appear. They'll all just think it's gossip and it won't matter," I say. "Since Jessica is the only other contender for Joyce, you wouldn't even have to face elimination."

\*Piper," she sounded so sad. "I can't come. It's just not rumors. My parents... They know the truth about me."

\*How could they?" I asked. She wasn't showing yet. Sure they might suspect, but to have real proof?

"I told them," Susie said.

I startled, speechless.

"I didn't want to lie anymore about any of it," Susie said. "I don't want to have to pretend to have feelings for Joyce, when the only one I really want is Mark."

The weight of the ring in my pocket near doubled, and I regretted holding it back even this long.

"He's here, you know. Mark. And Nicholas both. They are down in the sitting room with your parents," I said. Susie's eyes went wide as saucers. "Mark is here?"

"I don't think anything would have kept him away. If your parents wouldn't have let him inside, he would have scaled the walls and climbed through your window."

Susie laughed a little at that.

"Nicholas and I were able to stop him before he did anything drastic. Nicholas had a plan, as he always does, that his arrival at your door might open the way. My presence

was required for this. It is, after all, more likely they'd let me in to see you than some strange man."

"True."

\*Your parents knew who I was..." I began.

Susie blushed a little. "I talk about you often. You were my first friend."

My heart lurched and I pulled her into another hug. How grateful I was to be in her life! Though how much it hurt to hear she had such a hard time getting friends. She was so sweet and kind, she deserved so many more than just me.

I tug the ring from my pocket. "Mark told me to give you this." I held my palm out with the ring sitting in the middle.

Susie looked at it and gasped.

"He says it's overdue," I told her. "He wants to ask you properly."

Gently, Susie plucked the ring from my palm and held it up closer to her, to inspect it. She touched it with only her fingertips, treating it as a precious, rare, fragile thing.

For a moment, pure awe covered her face, softening all of her features. Then, in the next, she began to cry again. "What's the matter?" I asked her, stepping closer.

"My parents will never go for it," she said. "And even if they did. Or even if that didn't matter to me, Mark would be throwing his whole life away with this. He can't be Nicholas's Beta if -"

"Don't worry about that," I told her. "Nicholas will find a way to get it to work. If this is what you want, Susie, you can't let it get away. You have to follow your heart."

Susie blinked away the tears. She continued looking at the ring for another minute or two, before she rose.

"I want to see him," she said.

I nodded and we both headed for the doorway. With Susie leading, we didn't need the butler to guide us back downstairs to the sitting room.

Along the way, Susie slid the ring onto her finger. I couldn't help my smile. When she saw it, she smiled too, though hers was nervous.

\*It really is a personal matter, Prince Nicholas, as I've consistently said "Susie's father was saying. He cut himself off when Susie and I returned to the room.

\*Susie..." her mom said.

But Susie's eyes were on Mark, and his on her. Then his gaze dropped to her hand, where she'd already put on the ring.

"Susie," he said, the word overflowing with obvious love.

Mark stepped forward, moving closer to Susie's parents, closer than even Nicholas was standing.

\*Please," Mark said, dropping into a deep bow. "Please allow me to marry your daughter."

Susie's parents both went wide-eyed. "What?"

\*I am in love with your daughter," Mark said. "I cannot live without her."

"You don't know of her condition!" Susie's father said.

Susie's mother was quicker. She touched her husband's arm. "He does."

"I do," Mark confirmed. "The baby is mine. And I would raise it as my child, with Susie as my wife."

"I can vouch for this man," Nicholas said. "He is my Beta and a loyal man besides. He will treat your daughter

well."

"A Beta?" Susie's father said. "This is most unusual..."

\*I will personally see to their success," Nicholas said. "If you would allow this union."

This seemed to be agreeable terms with Susie's parents.

\*If the prince can attest to it, then it must be so," Susie's father said. "Especially as he is the child's father."

\*This would save our darling daughter from scandal," her mother agreed.

Joy overtook the room, and Susie's father called for the butler, "Bring us the champagne!"

\*Father!" Susie said, half-smiling, half-scolding.

"Not for you, my dear."

Susie and Mark moved closer to each other. They couldn't touch, it wouldn't be proper in front of Susie's traditional parents, but their body language spoke of their desire too. They leaned toward each other in every way two people could lean toward each other.

I was happy for them. Love seemed to radiate off them like sunbeams.

I glanced at Nicholas. He was smiling, clearly happy too.

I looked too long. Eventually he caught me. He held my gaze prisoner with his own.

In my chest, my heart raced.

I had no parents for Nicholas to ask for my hand. He would simply have to ask me. And, well, Elva too, though it was no secret who she wanted as a father.

With the soft way Nicholas was looking at me, I felt fresh hope build up in my heart.

Maybe it could be possible. If I turned down the King's deal, chose to for Nicholas and the kingdom. Maybe we could find a life together.

It wouldn't be how I imagined it exactly. We'd live in a palace. Things would be difficult. I'd surely fumble, trying to

do the right thing.

But we'd have each other.

And together, maybe that would be enough to save the kingdom.

Chapter 0623

Not long after, Nicholas and I excused ourselves. We left Mark there with Susie and her parents to celebrate and help solidify the engagement. Nicholas and my presence was no longer necessary.

The driver was outside, leaning against the parked car. When he spotted us, he flicked away his cigarette and came to open the door for us. Nicholas and I slid into the back.

The driver reentered the front behind the wheel.

"Just take us home," Nicholas said. "The long way, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Sir," the driver said and pressed a button on the dash. Immediately the partition separating the front of the car from the back began to raise, giving Nicholas and I our privacy.



As soon as we are hidden, Nicholas slid his arm around my shoulders. I sighed, relaxing into his side.

This was nice. We did a good thing, united a pair, and now we could relax and reflect on our good deed, before the need to be strong started again.

Nicholas took one of my hands and held it flat against his palm. With our fingers lining each other, his hand was so much bigger than mine. These strong hands of his, made for protecting his family, his kingdom.

\*Have you ever thought of being married someday?" he asked me, so out of the blue that I startled a little.

years

My heart hammered in my ears so loudly I couldn't really hear anything else for a long moment. When I spoke, it was likely too loud, just for this reason.

"Of course!"

He looked at me surprised, and I cleared my throat.

"Yes," I said. "Elva needs brothers and sisters."

"Oh?" Nicholas asked. A curious eyebrow rose but he smiled too, seemingly pleased.

"I like children," I said. "I wouldn't mind having more."

Nicholas hummed. I already knew he wanted a big family. In this, our desires aligned.

\*Married life isn't easy from what I've heard and seen," I said, "But if I was in love with my husband, and he in love with me, I don't think there would be any hardship too large that we couldn't overcome."

\*I like the sound of that," he said.

\*Marriage is a partnership," I told him. "It's having your teammate beside you for the rest of your life, always on the same side."

"I like that too," Nicholas said.

He traced a finger down the length of my jaw from my ear to my chin. He lifted my chin, bringing my gaze up into his eyes.

"Nicholas," I whispered.

\*Tell me about the nights," he whispered. His gaze dropped down to my lips. "You'd never sleep alone. And any time you reached out, I'd be there. To hold you." He pressed a soft, chaste kiss to my lips. "To kiss you." He lowered his hand, tracing his fingertips, feather light, down the column of my throat.

I pleasant shiver rushed up my spine. There was promise in his voice.

\*To give you whatever you want..." He said, voice a low growl.

"Nick...." I said. The word held a question.

He knew the answer, because he kissed me again, more insistently this time. He licked his way into my mouth. I eagerly opened my lips to welcome him.

One of his hands dropped to my breast. The other wrapped around me and guided me down, down, down, until my back was on the seat cushion and I was stretched out over the entire back seat. Nicholas settled himself over me, sliding one of his thighs between both of mine.

"Nick," came out in a breathy whine.

He pressed his thigh down, giving me the pleasant friction I needed between my legs.

Even with the driver going the long way around, we wouldn't have enough time to get properly naked, and to have Nicholas bury himself inside of me.

This was almost just as good, though. With Nicholas's hard thigh, and his muscled body pressing me down. His breath hot against my ear. His growing erection pressing against me.

We rutted together, gently at first, but with growing insistence. Our pace quickened.

I grabbed at the back of Nicholas's shirt with both hands, wrinkling the fabric. His hands curled to fists, one beside my head. The other gripping the headrest to give him more leverage as he moved against me.

I bucked up into him as he pressed down.

My pleasure spiked. It was so intense. God, I felt surrounded by Nicholas. His scent filled my nose. His body pressed into mine nearly everywhere. Only our legs were separate, dangling as they were in the cramped space. Nicholas pushed faster, harder, pressing his thigh against my clit.

I was quickly losing my mind. I clawed my fingers down his back.

"Nicholas!" I cried out.

I really hoped that partition was also soundproof.

Nicholas covered my mouth with his, swallowing down my cries.

"N-Nng!" I gasped as I came. I gripped Nicholas closer, as close as I could as I rode out my high.

He rutted against me a few more times, quick decisive thrusts, before he exhaled sharply and his hips shook.

For a long moment, we stayed as we were, breathing heavy and looking at each other.

Then, glancing at me, Nicholas started to laugh. It was contagious. I laughed too. As it faded, Nicholas lowered his head down and pressed his forehead against my collarbone. I wrapped my arms around him, keeping him there.

It was only now that I realized when Nicholas had been earlier seducing me into this moment, of which I had been

a very willing participant, he hadn't been using the kind of pronouns that would indicate some other hypothetical wife or husband.

He had said I. And you.

He meant us.

I carded my fingers through his hair and imagined what it might be like if we really were married.

Would it truly be so different than this?

Would anything change except for rings on our fingers?

Not between us, I didn't think. Though for the rest of the world, it would.

If we were married, we'd be able to stand untied against anyone that meant us or the kingdom harm. As it was, we were still forced to hide our affections for each other.

Affections that, at least on my side, were growing more and more all the time.

I'd been afraid to call it love before. But I knew, deep in my heart, there could be no other term for what I felt for Nicholas.

What I've always felt for him.

Time and distance may have separated us for a while, but my feelings for him had only grown. I loved him even more now than I had in the past. We'd been children then, playing at love. Now, we were adults who had experienced the hardships of life.

Now, we understood that love didn't come easy. That for it to flourish and grow, it had to be fought for.

I wanted to fight for it with Nicholas.

I didn't care what I had to do. When push came to shove, I wanted to be the one at his side, standing off against

his father, or the Bear Kingdom, or the underground organization or whoever or whatever else.

Nicholas was the love of my life, and I was finally ready to fight to keep him.

Chapter 0624

The next morning, I headed down to breakfast with Elva per usual. Today, all of the girls were even more animated than usual, their voices quick and cheerful with the latest gossip, their expressions bright.

"Susie and Mark are engaged!" Tiffany said, repeating what the others have said but louder and with bigger hand

movements.

"They must have met here during the competition," Olivia reasoned. "She broke the rules by paying attention to anyone other than the princes. She could go to jail for this."

"No one is going to send her to jail," Bridget said. "Nicholas wouldn't let that happen." For once, I agreed with Bridget.

"A Beta, though?" Lilliana scoffed. "She is a lady of good upbringing. She had the opportunity to marry a prince. Why on earth would she settle for someone of lesser stock?"

"She loves him," I said. I helped Elva into her chair and then sat in mine. Susie's was empty on the other side of me, and would now stay empty for the rest of the competition.

While I would certainly miss her - I did already - I was happy that she had found someone that she loved who loved her. She would find her happiness.

I wished now that I could find mine.

At least most of the other girls seemed happy for Susie too. Tiffany, Veronica, Jessica and even Bridget thought the match acceptable.

"What does it matter if she lowers herself slightly? A love match is a beautiful thing," Jessica said.

"You would think that," Lilliana said, "Since now you have no competition for Joyce's affections."

Jessica's face went a bit red. "I wasn't saying it just because of that. Susie is a nice person. Let her have what she wants."

"I bet she's pregnant," Lilliana said flatly.

Olivia gasped, even as a smile crossed her face. "How scandalous. That would explain why her parents would be so acceptable to the match."

\*They are marrying for love," I said flatly. I left no room for argument. If someone wanted to disagree with me on this, I would fight them. Susie's pregnancy did not negate from the fact that the two loved each other very much.

Maybe it did press the timeline of their romance forward somewhat, but that was all it did.

Mark and Susie were for life. The end.

No one really argued with me. Not even Lilliana or Olivia, who I suspected would argue with me the most. Instead, they turned their sights on Jessica.

\*I'm not sure if I should be congratulating you or pitying you," Lilliana said. "You may be the only contender now for Prince Joyce's affections, but he's not exactly a prize."

Olivia hummed thoughtfully. "Perhaps the others had the right idea, Jessica. Maybe you should back out as well." "Don't be jealous," Jessica snapped. She lifted her head up high. "You two will lose to Piper and Bridget, but I'm a shoe-in contender."

Lilliana and Olivia snapped taller in their chairs. Lilliana's face went pale.

\*You talk a big game for someone whose prince hasn't been seen for weeks," Lilliana snapped. "What happened to Prince Joyce anyway? After he was determined to be a liar and a traitor?"

Now it was time for Jessica to turn pale. Her cheeks stayed white for only an instant before her face went red

instead. Her expression scrunched up in rage.

\*That is a prince of the kingdom you are talking about," Jessica huffed. "You could be charged for treason for talking like that."

Lilliana lifted her chin, so that she had to look down her nose at Jessica. "Try it. My family would never stand for that."

\*She only asked an innocent question," Olivia said. "Where is Prince Joyce? That's no cause for treason."

As Jessica continued to sputter, Veronica sunk down slightly in her chair. I tried to catch her eye and smile at her, but she seemed determined to avoid everyone's gaze.

I didn't want her to beat herself up, but I couldn't talk to her about it in front of all these people. For now, I bit my tongue. At least in terms of building Veronica's spirits.

When it came to the girls berating Jessica, however, I wasn't going to sit by and stay silent anymore.

\*Prince Joyce may have had some trouble," I said, "But he is still a prince. And Jessica will make the best princess consort out of anyone here."

Lilliana and Olivia frowned at me, but they didn't press the subject.

"I can't believe Susie is marrying a Beta," Lilliana said, and they returned the subject to something more familiar, and far less treasonous.

That afternoon, I joined Nicholas, Elva, and the wolves for a walk out in the yard beyond the gardens. Elva was laughing, chasing Silver through the tall grasses.

Nicholas and I followed along behind.

"Have you heard that voice again?" Nicholas asked. "The one you heard the last time you shifted?"

"No. But I haven't tried shifting again either."

"Maybe you should try. See if it comes back."

I wasn't sure that I wanted to hear the voice again. It had been alarming and unnerving the last time I had heard it. It was much easier to pretend now that I hadn't heard it at all.

Though I knew that wasn't the best way to handle the situation. Just because I ignored it didn't mean it would simply go away. It would be like ignoring a medical symptom just because I didn't want to face it.

I had to face it. Something could be wrong with me. It was better to know now rather than ignore the problem until it was too late.

"Okay," I said. "But..." I side-eyed where Elva played with the wolves. "Stay near me. Just in case something happens."

"Piper," Nicholas said in seriousness. "I'm not going anywhere. You know that. I'll always be at your side, for as long as you need me."

I'd always need him, but I didn't want to get into that right now.

I sucked in a deep breath, closed my eyes, and reached for my wolf.

Odd. I couldn't quite reach far enough to find it.

"Miracle?" I tried calling for her.

She didn't answer.

It was so strange. I could feel her. She was definitely still a part of me, somewhere. But she was evasive. The harder I tried to pull her forward, the more she avoided me.

"Are you... going to shift?" Nicholas asked, his voice full of hesitant pauses.

"I'm trying," I replied.

I tried harder, but I felt as if I was chasing Miracle around in my head. She was always a step ahead.

\*Miracle, please answer me. What's wrong? What's happening?"

She remained silent. My insides twisted up into knots.

Was something wrong with me?

"Nicholas..." Worry crept into my voice. When I opened my eyes, I saw that same worry reflected back at me through Nicholas's eyes.

"What is it?" he asked me.

"I was trying to shift," I said. "I... can't..."

Nicholas's eyes went wide. He stepped closer to me. I appreciated his closeness, taking comfort in his presence

and his warmth. I leaned into him. I couldn't touch him in public like this, where anyone could see. But his nearness still helped.

It didn't stop the tears from rising in my eyes, however.

"Nicholas," I said. "I can't reach Miracle."

Chapter 0625

"Have you ever heard anything like this?" I asked. "I can feel Miracle. I know she's there. But she's not speaking to me and she's not coming forward to help me shift."

Nicholas's brow crumpled as he considered my question.

"I've never heard of anything like this specifically," Nicholas said. "But it does sound like how it feels when a wolf first begins to manifest. It can be unpredictable. But I've never heard anything like that happening to someone with an established wolf."

"\*Could it be because I was separated from my wolf for so long?" I asked.

"I don't know. It seems strange that it would only happen now, after you've been reunited with your wolf for weeks without this kind of issue. If this was part of the process of Miracle returning to you, then it should have happened before now."

These weren't the answers that I wanted. I had hoped that Nicholas had solutions that I lacked. But it seemed he was equally as confused.

"Perhaps we should speak to Veronica," he said. "Maybe she knows."

"Could it have to do with the ritual? From the island?" I asked. Was that what he was alluding to?

"We can't rule anything out," Nicholas said.

The Oracle could have been clearer about the side-effects of the ritual. I would have still gone through with it of course, but it would have been nice to know what giving up some of my life force would entail on my body and my future.

"But I've shifted since then," I said. "And that's when I heard the voice.."

Nicholas frowned. He inched closer to me, and our arms brushed together. The heat of his skin seared pleasantly against mine.

"Try not to worry," he said. "We'll figure it out. Miracle is still there. We'll find a way to reach her."



I wanted to believe him but he didn't know any more than I did. Yet even so, his quiet confidence gave me

strength. Yes, maybe, so long as he was by my side, I would find a way to survive this - just as we had survived everything else.

Suddenly, the wolves perked up, turning their ears and faces toward the woods. Their stances went still and alert. A bit a fear slithered down my spine. "Elva," I called. "Come stand near me."

Elva, for a moment, glanced between the two wolves, Silver and Night, before nodding and then rushing to my side. The wolves must have told her the same that I did. That she needed to get to safety.

"What do they sense?" I whispered to Nicholas.

He scented the air. As an Alpha wolf, he could sense and smell things from a farther distance than I could. He could also be more in tune with the dangers lurking nearby, as this was his territory.

"Something's there that shouldn't be," Nicholas said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I can't tell."

Night grumbled and chuffed.

"I'll go with you," Nicholas said.

Miracle, at that moment, came close enough to the front of my mind for me to understand Night's reply. "You need to protect our pack," Night said through grumbles and barks. "Protect your mate and the pup." My heart leapt into my throat. They had called me Nicholas's mate. For wolves to recognize me as such... I couldn't think of that right now. Not when we might be in clanger.

Nicholas curled his hand into a fist. It looked like he wanted to argue. He wanted to go forward and join the wolves in defending his territory. But in the end he stayed right where he was.

"Very well," Nicholas said.

The wolves turned and rushed into the woods. They disappeared in a flurry of fur and rustled leaves.

"We have to get back inside," Nicholas said. "Now. I need to alert the guards."

Nicholas used his Alpha voice. Even Elva could understand his urgency. Together, we hurry toward the palace. When we reach the doors, Nicholas urges us forward.

"Go inside," he said. "I need to speak to the guard."

"Sir?" the guard asked.

I ushered Elva into the house. Then I continued to push her forward until we were well away from the door and nearer the stairwell.

"Mommy?" Elva asked.

"It's okay, honey. Just keep walking."

\*Mommy, I'm scared."

The shake in her voice gave me pause. As we reached one landing of the stairs, I stopped her. I dropped to my knees and pulled her into my arms.

"We're safe," I promised. "Nicholas and the wolves are going to protect us, okay?"

\*Something was out there," Elva said. "The wolves seemed... scared.\*

Elva spoke to the wolves better than I ever could. If she said she could sense their fear, then she surely could.

This confused me, though. What on earth would be enough to frighten two very capable and strong wolves?

"They said something.." Elva sniffed. "About... a bear?"

"A bear?" I gasped. Elva's eyes widened, and I cursed my mistake. I tried to lower my voice back into calm. "I'm sure it's nothing. The wolves would be enough for handle any wayward bear. Besides..." I cleared my throat. "The bear is probably just lost. They can help it find its way home."

It was a gentle lie for the sake of a child, incorrect in two different ways.

For one, wolves and bears spoke differently. They wouldn't be able to understand each other in their wolf and bear forms. For two, bears were physically stronger than wolves. If the wolves stuck to their pack, they could overtake a bear. But if it was one on one... or even two wolves against one bear...

I couldn't let my fear and uneasiness show on my face.

"It will be fine, okay? We'll go see Silver and Night again soon."

"When?" Elva asked.

"As soon as we can."

Elva frowned at me for that comment. She wanted something definitive. I wished I could give her a definitive answer. But even if I would tell her white lies, I wouldn't outright deceive her.

Truthfully, I didn't know when we would be able to go outside again. So, for now, I needed to be vague.

Nicholas caught up with us then. He knelt beside us and smiled. "Nothing to worry about. It's most likely just someone lost in the woods who happened upon our property. It happens sometimes. It's not always with ill intent."

"Not a bear?"

Nicholas blinked and his eyes went wide. "Who said anything about a bear?"

I looked at Nicholas, trying to determine if he was being purposefully obtuse to protect Elva, but he seemed genuinely confused.

Elva glanced between me and Nicholas.

"Maybe... I didn't..." Her face scrunched somewhat in puzzlement.

"It's okay," I said, rubbing Elva's back slightly.

She was slowly calming down, thank goodness. Yet when I looked at Nicholas, I could see the stress sinking in

his features. His closed mouth tightly.

He might have had some stress before, but Elva's mention of bears seemed to intensify it up to a thousand.

He wouldn't say a word about it in front of Elva. He might not even say anything about it in front of me alone.

But he didn't need to.

If it was a bear, there was every reason to be afraid.

Chapter 0626

Later, I left Elva to play with her Nanny and her dolls, and joined Tiffany, Veronica, and Julian for a meeting in our sitting room/investigatory office. No one seemed terribly excited today, as we didn't have any good news to share. "There's not much progress today, I'm afraid," Julian said. "In fact, we might even have backwards progress."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I tried to track down the older couple that crossed the border with the two babies," Julian continued. He pushed his hand through his hair and sighed. "They are long dead, and from what I can tell, they took all their secrets with them."

"They didn't have children," Veronica chimed in. "No other relatives from what I can tell."

"They might have confided with a neighbor or a friend," Tiffany suggested.

Julian pointed at her. "I was thinking that too. Well, hoping it more like. We tracked down their last known location." Julian motioned toward the map of the kingdom that he had hanging behind him on the board. "They spent their twilight years here." He pointed at a spot on the map.

Tiffany came closer to see. "I know where that is. It's pretty close. Just like... thirty minutes from here? Maybe? With no traffic."

Something sparked in Julian's eye. It looked like mischief. I braced myself for whatever wild plan he was about to reveal.

"We should go there tomorrow."

The elimination ceremony was set for the day after tomorrow, so theoretically, we could make this work if it was only a day trip.

"If they are both dead," Veronica said, "I doubt we would find much info."

"Maybe," Julian said. "But if they did make friends... we have to be certain. Buckle in, Veronica. We're in this for the long haul. We have to exhaust every avenue, purpose every lead just to be certain they are in fact dead ends."

"I suppose," Veronica said with a tiny shrug. She seemed resolved to join Julian on whatever scheme he plotted.

Tiffany seemed more excited. "I want to be able to help while I can," Tiffany said. "If we wait any longer than going tomorrow, it will be too late for me, and I'll be eliminated."

Silence fell over us. Julian hummed as he awkwardly turned toward the map.

He pulled up his phone. "I'll make arrangements," he said and stepped to the side away from us to make his calls.

When it was clear he was otherwise engaged, Tiffany looked at Veronica and me.

"Don't give me those sad eyes, girls," Tiffany said. "We've always known I'm the next to go out of the three of us." "I have every much a chance to be eliminated as you," Veronica said.

Tiffany shook her head. "You don't see the way he looks at the two of you. Veronica, he admires you so much. And Piper..."

I waved off her comment. I already knew Julian's feelings for me, as did Veronica. It wasn't too surprising that Tiffany had been able to pick up on it as well.

"Don't lie to me," Tiffany said. "Don't pretend otherwise. When the time comes, and Julian has to pick two, I'm not going to be in that number."

\*Julian likes you," I said.

Tiffany gave me a small smile. "I know that. We are friends. And when the count was three, I could make it easy.

But it's not three anymore. A friend won't make it further than third, when the competition is to find a lover and wife."

"He could do so much worse than you," Veronica said.

Tears began to well in her eyes. "Don't soften the blow, now." She sniffed. "The worst part is, I'm going to miss you guys so much."

Veronica's lip twitched. "You aren't dying, Tiffany."

Chapter 0627

"Veronica's right," I chimed in. "We'll still be able to see each other."

I hoped with all of my heart that would be true. Veronica could visit Tiffany and vice versa. Julian, as prince, would be able to visit whoever he wanted whenever he wanted.

But me? If I returned to my life as a commoner, I doubted I would be let back into the world of nobility. And it seemed unlikely that they would want to visit me. Even someone as kind as Tiffany likely would draw the line at sleeping on the couch in my apartment.

Actually, Scratch that. I would be the one sleeping on the couch if I went back, as Anna had to find another roommate to make rent.

I tried to picture Tiffany on an air mattress on the floor.

Yeah. That didn't seem likely.

"I hope so,\* Tiffany said, and smiled at us both. I wouldn't ruin the mood by bringing up my worries, so I just smiled back.

"You know," I said. "I could be the one going home." I had slighted Julian's advances. He might not select me after all. As for Nicholas? He might not even be allowed to pick me, depending on what the King decided.

Speaking of the King's decision, I still needed to approach him. I was fairly certain now, that I was not going to give Bridget my blessing.

I was going to try my best to win this competition after all.

But wanting and actually succeeding were two different things.

Tiffany started laughing. "Sure, Piper."

Even Veronica shook her head at me. Yet before I could hear Veronica's cutting remarks on the subject, Julian ended his phone conversation and returned to us.

"Piper," he said. "Why don't you invite Nicholas to go on this trip with us? He'd no doubt be jealous to be left out."

That was very... nice of Julian. Too nice, maybe. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, but he gave me his best innocent look. I knew better than to believe it.

But... I didn't exactly want to question him too hard. Whatever the reason he had for wanting to invite Nicholas still ended with Nicholas being invited. I was always happy to spend more time with him, and would have loved to have his company beside me.

"Elva should stay here, however," Julian added.

I had only stopped narrowing my eyes at him but now I began again.

Julian cleared his throat. "The subject matter might not be overly appropriate for a child. A dead couple. A missing pair of children. A town full of people who probably won't want to talk to us. She'd be much better at home."

That was true... But again, that should have been a call that I had made myself. For him to suggest it...

Something was definitely up.

When Julian didn't offer any more explanation himself, I said okay and the meeting broke.

From the meeting, I went straight to search out Nicholas. I found him near the entrance, speaking with the guards. I stood politely to the side, waiting for their conversation to end.

When Nicholas noticed me, he finished up and came over to me.

"What is it?" he asked, unusually curt.

I blinked twice in surprise.

He caught himself and sighed. "Sorry, Piper. Things have been tense. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"I understand." That attack from earlier was likely still on his mind. Maybe now wasn't the best time to bring this up, after all. Though... maybe there wouldn't be a better time.

"Was there something I could help you with?" he asked.

When I told him about tomorrow's trip, his tension maxed out and he looked like he might set fire with his eyes. \*Julian wants to what?"

## Chapter 0628

\*Julian wants me, Tiffany, and Veronica to escort him to the nearby small town to search for information about the missing princesses. He asked me to invite you too," I said, although I thought I had been clear the first time.

Yet as I said the words once more, Nicholas's frown grew deeper and his brow lowered.

"I need to speak with my brother," he grumbled and walked away from me to storm down the hallway I had just walked up to speak with him.

"Nicholas?" I called, as I turned to follow him. His behavior had been tense from the beginning today, but I hadn't expected this simple request to make everything that much worse for Nicholas.

Nicholas didn't look back, not acknowledging me at all, so I eventually stopped and looked after him unsure what to do.

I didn't know what his problem was? I guessed I should leave him be, let him and Julian duke this out in their usual way.

But I was worried about Nicholas and how quick to fury this new stress could make him.

I hesitated only for a moment before I hurried to follow him, albeit more secretly this time. I didn't call out again. And I waited around the corner for Nicholas to disappear in a hallway, before hurrying down that hallway after him.

Eventually, I reached the outside of the sitting room that we had turned into our investigation headquarters. I stood out of side, hiding in the hallway beside the open door.

From within, I heard Nicholas's raised voice, and Julian's cooler one.

"You are planning a trip?" Nicholas said loudly, angrily. "After everything we learned?"

\*So there was a bear in the woods," Julian said. "That doesn't mean we are under attack."

"It's enough reason to be cautious!"

I sucked in a sharp breath. Elva had been right, listening to the wolves. She'd heard them talk about a bear. Had Nicholas known this entire time? Had been downplaying it to keep us safe?

"How could risk the lives and well-being of Piper and the others for this?" Nicholas demanded.

"This isn't some dalliance," Julian said. He was calmer than Nicholas, but his own frustration was starting to seep into his own voice. "I am working on trying to avoid this war."

"So work on it yourself. You don't need Piper or the others."

"They are observant," Julian said. "They've helped me this far. I'm not just bringing them for the hell of it, brother. I genuinely believe they could assist in this investigation."

"You don't need them," Nicholas said.

"I'm flattered by your high opinion of me, believing that I can handle this all on my own. However, it remains that this is too important to fuck up. I need more eyes on this, just in case. I can't afford to be wrong. Any one of the girls might be the one who uncovers the truth."

"It's too dangerous."

"That's why I thought to invite you, Nicholas. You'll keep Piper safe. You know how prone she is to trouble. I can keep an eye on Tiffany and Veronica." Julian sighed. "Listen, I will admit it's dangerous. But if it could potentially save our soldiers from battle and the border towns from invasion, isn't it worth a little risk?"



Nicholas didn't say anything.

I wanted to stand tall and speak my own mind. It is worth the risk, especially since we don't know for sure that

anything will happen. I would walk into danger if it had a chance of keeping two kingdoms for war.

But if I stepped into that room, they would know of my presence, and -

"You might as well join us, Piper," Julian called.

The blood drained from my face. I froze. Maybe this was a trick to see if -

"I can see your shadow on the floor," Julian added.

Oh, shit. Okay. I had been so worried about Nicholas that I hadn't taken the time to properly conceal myself. It didn't help, of course, that Julian was so damned observant.

With a steadying breath, I stepped out of my hiding spot and into the room.

Julian immediately grinned at me. Nicholas had his back to me, yet even as I came to stand beside him, he avoided looking at me.

Likely, he had known I was there as well.

I lowered my head in shame. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been eavesdropping."

Julian waved his hand at me. "Who cares about any of that? I'd rather have your opinion than worry about any of that."

Nicholas finally turned to look at me. He gave me a withering glance. "You already know, Julian, that she will agree with you."

I wasn't going to be intimidated by Nicholas's words. I don't think I was capable of being intimidated by him, even though I could admit he was intimidating. I loved him, and though he hadn't admitted love for me, he had spoken of great affection.

Nicholas would never hurt me, physically or with words.

He could be somewhat careless though, hurting me slightly with his desire to protect me. I didn't much care for being lied to.

"Why didn't you tell me about the bear?" I asked him. "Even when Elva suggested it..."

"We didn't have all the facts yet. As wolves and bears speak differently, the wolves couldn't be sure if it was a bear shifter or simply a lost bear," Nicholas said. He glanced away, embarrassment coloring his own cheeks. "But mostly I didn't want you or her to worry."

"I would always prefer the truth," I told him.

"Then you should understand now why I am truly worried," Nicholas said. "We cannot rule out that the bear was a shifter scouting the borders of our palace. We cannot assume that it meant us no harm."

"Nicholas," I said, turning fully to him. He did the same, facing me. "I know you want to keep me safe. But I also know that you have an obligation to keep your people safe as well. If going with Julian could help stop the war, then it is something I have to do. Something that we have to do."

Nicholas sighed. "If those are your thoughts on the matter... I do not like it but I will defer to your opinion. Though, if you go on this venture, I will not leave your side."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I said and gave him a small smile.

Julian cleared his throat. "Yes, well. This is lovely. Does this mean you both are up for the adventure?"

Nicholas gave me a look. He disapproved, but he would allow me this if my mind was made up.

Which it was.

I rose up to my full height, pushing my confidence forward, and said to Julian, "We're in."

The next morning, all of the candidates, as well as Elva with me, were called into the sitting room for an announcement.

Elva had brought one of her toy stuffed animals, a teddy bear with a polka-dot bowtie. She held him to her chest with her arm wrapped around his.

She squeezed it tighter as Nathan began the announcements.

"Bears have been spotted in the area," Nathan said. "More than are typical for this time of year."

Some of the girls whispered and looked at each other.

"If anyone sees a bear, you are to immediately report it," Nathan said. "This is no joke, and no game. This, I'm afraid to say, is war."

## Chapter 0629

Elva held tightly onto her teddy bear. She looked down at it with sad eyes.

"I don't understand, Mommy," Elva said. "Why do we hate bears now...?"

I lowered myself down to her level. Holding her shoulders, I explained, "We don't hate bears, honey. But... they could be dangerous right now. They're all pretty grumpy about some things that happened a few years ago. Until that gets sorted out, we need to be extra careful."

Elva nodded, soaking in my words. Then she held out her bear toward me. "Do we report Mr. Fuzz Bear?"

My heart cracked down the middle. How could I possibly, properly explain this situation to Elva, a child? She couldn't see the difference between wolves and bears. To her, they were all her tea-party guests.

"No, Elva," I said, gently pushing Mr. Fuzz Bear back toward Elva. "Mr. Fuzz Bear is a bear we can trust. It's every other bear that we see that we must stay away from and report, okay?"

She didn't seem to understand, her face still scrunched up in confusion. But, she eventually nodded and pulled Mr. Fuzz Bear back into her arms. "Okay..." she said in a tiny voice.

Slowly, we walked back to our room. I hadn't told Elva yet that I would be leaving without her today. I knew she was going to be upset about it.

As I dressed in less flashy clothes for the adventure, Elva stood in the closet doorway and asked me, "Where you going, Mommy?"

"I just have to go out for a little while."

"What about the bears?"

"I'll be okay," I told her. "Nicholas will be there to protect me."

"Can I come?" Elva asked.

Absolutely not. I would endanger my own life, but I'd never put Elva at risk. "No, honey," I said. "Not today." "But Mommy-"

"I'll be fine," I said, "But it's too dangerous for little girls."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. She scrunched up her nose in frustrated anger.

"If you can go, I can go too!" she said.

"No, Elva."

"Why?" she asked.

"I told you why," I said, though even I could admit that my reasoning wasn't very sound, at least from her perspective. If I could choose to endanger myself, shouldn't she be able to, too?

"Why, Mommy?" she demanded.

A knock sounded at the door, abruptly ending the argument. Nicholas opened the door.

He was dressed casually too, a suggestion made by Julian. They didn't want to stand out as princes and candidates while we were beyond the palace walls.

Nicholas wore blue jeans and a polo shirt. It was odd to see him dressed so informally, although the jeans hugged his backside delightfully.

"Did I come at a bad time?" he asked.

"Nick-lass!" Elva said, stomping out into the main room. "Tell Mommy I can come!"

Nicholas's almost smile immediately fell. "I can't, princess, I'm sorry."

"But I want to go!"

\*The answer is no, Elva."

Her bottom lip quivered, and watching Nicholas, I could see the moment his heart broke, having to deny her. He even placed a hand to his chest, as if that would help ease some of the pain that was burning there.

"We'll be back before you know it," Nicholas added, softening.

Elva shook her head. She was still mad.

"Can I have a hug goodbye?" Nicholas asked, holding open his arms.

Elva frowned, but ultimately gave in. She came forward and he wrapped her in the safety of his embrace. Slowly, he released her. Then she looked at me.

"Do I get a hug too?" I asked, stretching open my arms. She quickly raced to me, and I earned a hug as well. "Thank you," I told her. "I love you," I said and kissed her cheek. In case the worst should happen, I didn't want to leave any room for doubt about how I felt about her.

She was my darling daughter now and forever, no matter how long or short my life. She would always be mine. Nicholas and I left Elva in the care of her nanny and stepped out into the hall. After bidding good day to the guards at the door, the two of us walked away from the room.

\*Elva really wanted to come," I told him.

"I saw," Nicholas said. "It hurt, to turn her down. Even though I knew that was best for her."

I nodded. "I didn't want to frighten her. I don't want her to know fear at her age, but I also want Elva to be cautious. It's a difficult balancing act."

"I can see that."

"Especially when she doesn't understand why I am willing to risk my life, but she is not permitted to do the same," I said.

"I would prefer it if neither of you risked your lives," Nicholas said. "But Elva's safety is paramount." He shook his head a little. "I will do my best to bring you safely back to her. I hate that anyone has to be at risk."

\*I fear that we might always be in some level of danger," I said, slipping without meaning to, because I was speaking of a future where Nicholas was King and I was his Luna.

He didn't seem put off by it, however. Instead, he seemed thoughtful. "That may be so," he said, "But it will always be my duty to keep my family safe. As a man, as a mate, and as a King."

His words left me speechless.

"Nicholas," I said after a moment to recover. I touched his arm, stopping him. He turned to look at me. I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say. There were so many levels of feeling within my heart, so many conversations we needed to have, if we were both thinking about a future together.

But such an idea, such a feeling, was so overwhelming, it seemed too large a subject to tackle right here on the way to meeting Julian and others.

But we needed to talk about this. Sooner rather than later.

"I know," he replied, as if he could read my thoughts. Perhaps it was truly my heart that he could read. He laced our fingers together and squeezed my hand.

God, if I could stay in that hallway with him and live in this moment forever, I would.

But, we were to meet the others soon. This conversation would have to wait until later, at the very least.

"I will bring you back here safely," Nicholas said. "Not just for Elva, but also for me. Then... perhaps a conversation is overdue."

I nodded. Though, before I could speak to Nicholas about this, I needed to have a conversation with his father, the King. That man would understand that I was not going away quietly.

That Nicholas was mine and I was going to fight until my dying breath to keep him, no matter what I had to do, what uncertain future I had to face.

But, unfortunately, now was neither the time for that.

"Let's go," I said to Nicholas, and tugged him by his hand toward the stair.

Before we could solve our love life, we had a war to stop.

## Chapter 630

Julian, Nicholas, Tiffany, Veronica, and I piled into a pair of inconspicuous looking cars and drove to small town. It took around 45 minutes, during which, Tiffany sat amazed at the many dials and knobs that made up the center console of this older-model sedan.

"No touchscreen," she said for the fourth time. She couldn't seem to believe it.

Nicholas followed Julian into the village and parked on main street, where a few shops and restaurants took up residence in a stretch of older brick buildings. There was a park at the end of the road, with a graveyard off to the side of it behind a tall gate.

After we had parked and reconvened on the sidewalk, Julian said, "We should split up so we don't seem so conspicuous, Nicholas, you and Piper head south. Veronica -"

"I will investigate the cemetery," Veronica said.

Julian considered this, then nodded. "Tiffany and I will go north."

We each were equipped with the most recent photo of the older couple that we could find. Then we parted ways.

Nicholas and I went into the grocery store first. After all, the couple would need their groceries. However, most of the employees there were too young to remember the couple. Disappointed but not deterred, we left that store and tried another.

We went to a barber shop, a pharmacy, a gas station, and finally a local shop with cards and knick-knacks. The woman at the counter at the knick-knack shop was older than most of the other people we had encountered.

Still, even in a small town, there was no certainty everyone would know everyone else.

Yet when I showed her the photo of the couple, her whole body went rigid. "They're long dead now. Whatever they did, you won't get the truth from them."

Hope soared in my heart. "You knew them? All we are looking for is information."

"I don't know what to tell you, sweetie," she said. Her nametag read Mary. "They moved into town suddenly, appearing in a house that had sat empty for years seemingly overnight. But they kept to themselves."

"You didn't speak with them?" I asked.

"Not any more than 'hey, how are you.' Well... except for this one time..." Mary tapped her finger to her chin. "What happened?" Nicholas prompted.

She looked us both over, as if trying to deem if we were trustworthy. She must have decided, because she leaned forward at once and eagerly began telling the story.

\*They would come in from time to time, pick up a card or two, or buy a newspaper. The husband, I saw him more than the wife. He was always going on walks. Seemed to me like he was pacing. Guilt, I think."

"What makes you think that?" Nicholas asked.

\*He came into the store once, real late at night. He needed help with an internet search. He didn't know much about how things worked. I was happy to help. He was trying to track down a pair of twins. They were in foster care, he said, but he didn't know where. He didn't even know their names. It was all very suspect.

"But he was relentlessly searching. He had that look, you know? That grief-guilt look. I figured the twins were grandchildren, but when I asked he wouldn't say.

\*He believed the twins were in foster care?" I asked. Not dead, then. This was very important news! If the lost princesses weren't dead, then we had a chance of ending this war once and for all.

That the couple nor Mary knew the name of the foster home wasn't great news, but if we followed their trek from the border, we should be able to narrow down the places they would have had a chance to stop at and drop off

some babies.

This wasn't a great lead. It meant we still had a ton of work to do. But it was better than nothing, and certainly gave some hope to what the future might bring.

"He did have a photo though..." Mary said. "What happened to it..." She scratched her head. "He gave it to me and asked me to keep searching. I did, for a while. Eventually I figured it was a wild goose chase."

"Do you still have the photo?" Nicholas asked.

\*Somewhere, I'm sure... I really never get rid of anything." Mary said.

"Do you mind looking for it?" Nicholas asked. "It could be incredibly beneficial to our search."

Mary narrowed her eyes at him. "Your... search? Just what are you kids up to anyway?"

\*Same as him," I said. "We're trying to find those twins."

\*After all these years? They are surely out of foster care by now," Mary said.

\*This is the best lead we have," Nicholas explained.

Mary nodded. "Just a minute then. Let me look in the back." She turned and disappeared into a back room. We could hear her shuffling around in there, searching through stacks of papers and other things.

\*They are likely alive then," Nicholas said, while Mary was gone.

I nodded, having come to the same conclusion. "A picture would help. I hoped. Truthfully, all babies tended to look very similar. But again, any lead was better than none.

"Ah-hah!" Mary called from the backroom. She came back out to the front of the store waving a photo in her hands. She handed it to me.



The image was grainy and slightly fuzzy, but in it were a pair of babies with identical features. Each were clad in an expensive-looking purple and gold garment.

I passed the photo to Nicholas. He looked at it for a long time but didn't say a word. Strange.

After thanking and saying goodbye to Mary, we walked toward the cemetery, which had been our agreed upon meeting place. Veronica was standing near a plain headstone with our couple's name on it.

Julian and Tiffany arrived at the same time we did.

\*All we heard," Tiffany said, "was how quiet they were."

"We heard that, too," I added, but then showed them the photo. "But Mary at the card shop thankfully never gets rid of anything." I conveyed Mary's story and all that she said.

Tiffany looked at the picture and then passed it to Julian.

Julian looked longer. A few times, he lifted his gaze to glance at me. Then his eyes met with Nicholas. They seemed to have a wordless conversation that I couldn't discern.

"What is it?" I asked, when the silence got to be too much.

"Nothing yet," Julian said and passed the photo to Veronica. "Just an idea."

"You aren't going to share?" I asked.

Julian lightly shook his head. "Not until I'm sure."

I glanced at Nicholas, but he didn't say a word. I got the distinct feeling they were keeping a secret from me, but

they were both stubborn. If they weren't ready to share it, they wouldn't.

Since I trusted them, I knew they would share if it was necessary.

Then, at once, Nicholas and Julian both lifted their heads. They turned toward the wind and sniffed.

"Time to go," Nicholas said. "Now."

Julian agreed and began ushering us out of the cemetery.

"What's happening?" Tiffany asked. "I don't understand. We haven't finished our investigation!"

Nicholas needed only say one sentence to cause us to move.

"I smell a bear."