

## Chapter 13 Birthday Outing

### Moana

Despite everything that happened that day, Edrick still requested that I spend the night with him. I made sure to put more distance between us this time, hoping that we wouldn't wake up in each other's arms again in the morning.

When I woke up, my cardigan was still on and Edrick's side of the bed was empty. I heard the shower running in the bathroom, so I let out a sigh of relief and took it as my chance to get up and leave the room before I would have to talk to him. Not only was it still awkward to look him in the eye with our new arrangement, but I was admittedly still a little upset with him for yelling at me publicly the day before.

I quickly got up and made the bed, opening the curtains out of habit to let some sunlight into the room before I put my slippers on and headed out.

"Moana?" Ella's little voice said, the second I walked out of the room. It made me jump a bit. I wasn't expecting her to be standing right outside the door.

"Good morning, Miss Ella," I said, managing a smile. "Are you feeling better today?"

Ella nodded, but her eyebrows were scrunched together and her eyes were narrowed suspiciously. "What were you doing in my daddy's room again?"

"I, um..." I stammered, realizing that I couldn't use the crepes for breakfast excuse two days in a row.

“Good morning, Princess!” Edrick said from behind me, brushing past me to scoop Ella up off the floor. Her look of concern and confusion quickly turned into a wide grin.

“Daddy!” Ella exclaimed, giggling as Edrick blew a raspberry on her cheek. “Where are you taking me for my birthday?”

I let out a sigh of relief to know that Ella seemed to have completely forgotten about seeing me coming out of her father’s room; I had also forgotten that today was her birthday. It had been mentioned in the packet of instructions given to me on my first day, but I had admittedly been too busy to look at it too closely since then.

“Well, Princess,” Edrick said, carrying Ella toward the dining room for breakfast, his muscles bulging through his white button-down shirt and his hair still a bit damp at the ends from his shower, “Daddy has to work today.”

Ella’s smile faded and she began to pout. “On my birthday?”

“I know, sweetheart,” Edrick replied. “But Moana will do something fun with you today. And I’ll be home later to have dinner and give you your presents.”

“And cake?” Ella asked.

“And cake,” Edrick replied.

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After Edrick left that morning, Ella was — unsurprisingly — quite sad that her father couldn’t spend her birthday with her, so I tried to come up with something fun to do that would lift her spirits.

“How about we play a game?” I asked, to which the little girl shook her head and folded her arm across her chest, sticking her lower lip out in a pout.

I sighed, trying to think of something else, but every option I offered her was met with indignant refusal. I knew she just wanted to spend the day with Edrick, and nothing would really make up for that.

Finally, I resorted to looking at some local attractions on my phone; although Selina and the maids were nervous about what happened before, they did finally concede to Ella's begging and told me that I could take her out so long as I stayed with her the entire time and didn't let go of her hand for one second, which was understandable. I knew that Selina still didn't trust me, but when I suggested going to a theme park for her birthday, Ella was too excited for even Selina to say no to the outing.

"The driver will take you there," Selina said to me as I put Ella's sun hat on to protect her face. "And the bodyguard will be watching at all times. Don't lose her again."

"I wasn't planning on it," I replied with a sigh, feeling a little annoyed at the housekeeper's blatant mistrust of me. I knew I messed up royally by leaving Ella's training to visit the orphanage when I should've been keeping an eye on her, but I wanted to prove to everyone — and myself — that I wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

Selina shot me a worried look as I got on the elevator with Ella, and I was relieved to see her face disappear as the metal doors closed. Now, I could just focus on giving Ella a nice birthday.

"Have you ever been to the theme park?" I asked Ella as we watched the floors on the elevator slowly tick down.

Ella shook her head, which made the big blue bow on the back of her sun hat wiggle adorably. "Nope," she replied, sticking her foot out to admire her brand new matching blue sandals — she clearly liked the color blue, as I was quickly learning. "I don't really get to go anywhere except for special occasions and to my training."

I frowned, imagining what it would be like to be a little girl who wasn't allowed to go anywhere. Even growing up in the orphanage, Sophia took us on the occasional field trip or ice cream outing. We even went to the local swimming pool twice a month in the summer.

“How come?” I asked.

“Daddy says it's too risky,” she replied, practically dragging me across the lobby as soon as the elevator doors opened. “He says that too many people will know who he is, so he has to stay hidden. Because of the... pa... pa-pa—”

“Papa ra zzi?” I asked, stifling a laugh at Ella's childish language.

Ella nodded her head affirmatively, appearing very serious. “Yes, that,” she said. We left the building and climbed into the back of the town car where our driver waited for us, and the bodyguard shut the door behind us before getting into the passenger seat.

The driver took us to the theme park and bought our tickets, and soon Ella was bursting with excitement as we looked around.

Getting off from the roller coaster the second time, I started to feel sick. And it was broiling hot outside in the summer sun, so hot that I had resorted to fanning myself with a pamphlet I picked up at the information booth. But Ella hardly seemed to notice the heat and my sickness as she was too excited about all of the rides.

“Hey,” I said finally, spotting an ice cream stand. “How about some ice cream first?”

Ella stopped in her tracks suddenly and squealed excitedly before running off toward the ice cream stand, pulling me along behind her with surprising strength for a little girl. We stopped at the ice cream stand and the man in a striped red and white uniform and a straw boater hat smiled down at her.

“What would you like, little girl?” he asked.

“Vanilla, please!” Ella said. The man looked at me next.

“I’ll have the same,” I replied.

Ella waited patiently while the man got her ice cream, sticking her grabby little hands out greedily as he handed it to her and immediately starting to lick it as it was already beginning to melt.

“That’ll be five dollars,” he said, looking at me expectantly.

I smiled and patted my pocket, my eyes widening as I realized that I had completely forgotten to bring any money with me. In fact, it had been so long since I had needed any money of my own that I didn’t even have any, and would have to ask the driver to spare me some cash until I got my first paycheck and could pay him back.

“Oh…” I murmured, “I’m so sorry… I left my wallet in the car. I’ll be right back — is that okay?”

The man narrowed his eyes and gave me an icy stare. “I’ve heard that trick a thousand times, lady,” he growled, his sunny demeanor quickly turning sour.

I stammered as I tried to explain that I really did have money, I just had to get my wallet, but was quickly interrupted by a familiar voice coming from behind me.

“I’ll pay,” the voice said.

Ella and I both turned around to see Edrick standing behind us with his face covered by sunglasses and a surgical mask, holding out his credit card.