

Chapter 156 In His Pocket

Moana

I felt utterly shocked after my conversation with Olivia. At first, I thought that there was no way that she really was Ella's biological mother, because Ella's biological mother was supposed to be dead. But the resemblance was uncanny, and she even knew things that no one else knew, such as Edrick's drinking problem. And the way that she cried when she talked about Ella... It was too real. She didn't seem to be faking it, and if she was, then she was a hell of a good actress.

But even then, I still didn't know if I could trust Olivia enough to fully believe her. There was always a possibility that she was lying and wasn't Ella's biological mother, but was instead somehow related to Michael or Kelly. That would explain why she knew so much about Edrick and Ella, and why she called Edrick so much late at night. Maybe Michael or someone else wanted her to bother Edrick and lie to me to get me to leave. I had no way of knowing at this point.

Either way, as I took Ella home that day after training, I decided to just pretend for a moment that Olivia was telling the truth. If I assumed that Olivia really was Ella's biological mother, then that meant that this entire situation was potentially more sinister than I originally thought.

I couldn't help but worry that my baby would be ripped away from me in the same way that Ella was ripped away from Olivia. Would Edrick really

do that to me, after everything that happened between us? I thought that there was a chance that we were mates, but now I wasn't so sure.

Not only that, but did I really want to be with someone who stole his first wife's child away from her?

As I looked over at Ella, who was swinging her legs in her car seat and happily sucking on a post-training ice pop, I really could see the resemblance between her and Olivia. I imagined how Ella's life would have been different if she hadn't been raised to think that her mother was dead, and honestly the fact that Edrick lied to Ella in the first place made me almost sick.

But, even then, I still couldn't be entirely sure if I could trust Olivia or not. Maybe some of what she told me was right, but not all of it. I wouldn't know until I had the perspective from Edrick's side of the story, and as I took Ella up the elevator and sent her to her room to get washed up for dinner, I wondered when or if I could ask Edrick about all of this. Maybe he could offer some better insight on it. Maybe he would have some proof, unlike Olivia.

When we got home, I decided that I immediately wanted to talk to Edrick. It simply couldn't wait; I needed to tell him what happened and hear his side of the story, because if Olivia was telling the full truth, then I wanted to make arrangements to leave and get my baby out of here... As sad as that made me. To think that Ella had only just asked me that morning if she could refer to me as her mother, and now I had supposedly met her mother and even found out that Edrick may have stolen her from her mother... All of it felt like too much.

However, when we got home, Edrick wasn't there. I looked in the kitchen, the living room, his study and his bedroom, and he wasn't there. In fact, when I asked Selina where he was, she said that she hadn't seen or heard from him all day.

First, I had woken up without him two days in a row. And now he was out all day on a Saturday when he was normally home, and no one even heard a peep from him?

All of this was strange, even for Edrick. Frankly, I was getting worried.

I felt the sudden urge to retrieve my wolf tooth. I always felt as though I was clearer headed when I held the tooth in my hand, and right now I needed to be able to think straight after everything that had happened.

I let out a sigh and made my way over to Edrick's bedroom, where I had been keeping the wolf tooth lately. He had cleared out a drawer in his dresser since I had been sleeping in there again, where I kept a few clothes and some toiletries so that I wouldn't always need to run back and forth between my room and his room for basic things. I always liked to have the tooth nearby, especially when I was sleeping, so I wound up keeping the tooth in that drawer as well. Now that Edrick knew about it, I wasn't worried about keeping the tooth a secret anymore so I didn't mind keeping it in his room.

I opened the top drawer of the dresser, where the ornate little wooden box sat where I kept the tooth. I pulled the box out and walked over to sit down on the bed with a sigh.

But when I opened the box, the tooth was gone.

My eyes instantly widened with shock and my mouth fell agape. I clapped my hand over my shock in dismay before furrowing my brow and jumping up, running over to the drawer and frantically rifling through it for the tooth. Maybe I misplaced it. Maybe it fell out somehow... But it wasn't in there.

In fact, it wasn't anywhere. I searched behind the dresser, in all of the drawers, in my bedside table and even under my pillow. I checked under the bed, under the mattress, in the bathroom cabinets... I checked everywhere. When I realized that it wasn't anywhere in Edrick's room, I

tried to keep myself calm as I hurried over to my own room, thinking that maybe I had brought it over there at some point and forgot about it.

But I tore my room apart, and it wasn't there.

By now, I was panicking. Did I put it in my pocket and drop it somewhere outside? I knew that there had been a few times in the beginning when I put it in my pocket without even realizing it. I had some sort of bond to it that made me instinctively want to keep it nearby, but when I eventually realized that it could easily get lost, I had become more careful about keeping it safely tucked away.

I decided that I needed to check in a few other places. Maybe it fell in the car, or maybe I even dropped it in the cafe with Ella earlier that morning. In fact, I even considered having the driver take me back to the orphanage to look for it if I needed to.

But when I re-emerged from my room with my shoes on, ready to go out in search of this tooth, I saw Edrick step out of the elevator. As soon as he did, his eyes instantly met mine, and his eyes were wide.

“He has it,” Mina suddenly said, sounding agitated. “Check his pockets.”

I didn't know how Mina knew that Edrick had the tooth, but I didn't care. I wanted to trust my wolf's instinct, and by this point I was frantic. Therefore, I didn't even hesitate for a moment before storming up to Edrick, causing his eyes to widen even more, and held my hand out.

“Show me what's in your pocket,” I growled.

Chapter 157

Moana

“He has it.” My wolf’s voice was steady and even-toned, but also agitated. “Check his pockets.”

I immediately trusted Mina’s instincts. She was too sure of it for me to even begin to question it, and she had never been wrong about these sorts of things before. And besides, by now I had spent so long frantically searching the apartment for my tooth that I was desperate. It was the only physical thing I had that was linking me to my past and my lineage. If I didn’t have that tooth, I felt lost, and I felt as though I might never find my parents or at least find out who they were.

“Show me what’s in your pocket,” I growled, holding my hand out flat as I glared up at Edrick with narrowed eyes.

Edrick looked taken aback.

“Why?” he asked, sounding a bit confused. He seemed innocent, but my wolf was insistent that he had my tooth. And I could sense it, too. The way that Edrick’s eyes widened for just a split second as I stormed up to him told me everything that I needed to know.

“You know why,” I replied. “I have a feeling that you took something of mine without permission.”

Edrick stared at me for a while, but I only stared back with my hand still outstretched. He had the tooth; I could sense it.

And I was right. Finally, with a sigh, Edrick reached into his pocket and retrieved the tooth. He placed it in my hand, and my fingers instantly curled around it as my eyes widened with a combination of anger and confusion.

“W-Why did you take it?” I asked, still gripping it tightly in my hand. “You should have asked first.”

Edrick looked a little embarrassed, and for a few moments he stared at the floor, chewing the inside of his cheek before he finally looked back up at me and let out another sigh. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I just kept getting a feeling about it. I wanted to see if it was a real Alpha tooth, so I took it to a friend of mine to run some tests on it.”

I was still shocked by this. Why would Edrick need to know whether the tooth belonged to an Alpha or not? It wasn’t his tooth, and therefore it wasn’t really any of his business whether it was an Alpha tooth or not. Not only that, but he should have asked me. If he really was that interested in my lineage, he could have included me in these tests. I would have been curious to know, too.

But then, as I stared up at Edrick with surprise, my eyes widened even further as I remembered something. During my conversation with Olivia earlier that day, she had said that Edrick’s only goal was to produce the ultimate Alpha heir to take over someday as the next CEO of WereCorp. He wasn’t interested in having a loving relationship with a woman or with his child; he was only interested in continuing his legacy. If he was really that concerned as to whether my wolf tooth belonged to an Alpha or not, then that only solidified what she told me.

If my baby wasn’t one hundred percent Alpha, did that mean that Edrick would potentially leave us both out on the street?

“Daddy!” Ella suddenly called from behind. I quickly pocketed the tooth and turned to see Ella running toward Edrick with a grin on her face and her arms outstretched. “I shifted all on my own at training today! I didn’t need any help at all!”

“Hey there, Princess,” Edrick said, crouching down to her level with a warm and loving smile on his face, causing his gray eyes to shine in the sunlight that was streaming in through the living room window. “Did you really, now? All by yourself?”

“Mhm! The teacher told me to try it, and I did it! I did what the teacher taught me before, about taking a deep breath and letting my wolf borrow my energy... Like this!” Ella suddenly took a big, deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut, and as she did, her ears began to grow more pointed and her fingernails began to extend; the first signs of her shifting. Edrick and I both gasped as she started to shift, and I took a few steps backwards and clamped my hand over my heart. Even a little werewolf that was only Ella’s size could wreak havoc indoors, and children were notorious for not controlling their wolves very well when they shifted. If she shifted indoors, it could be a bit of a disaster.

“No shifting in the house, Ella!” Edrick suddenly said, scooping her up off of the ground and tossing her in the air playfully, causing her to open her eyes and giggle before she shifted. Her ears returned to their normal state and her claws retracted, and I watched as Edrick kept tossing her in the air with a grin on his face, causing her little laughs to float through the room like the sound of angels.

As I watched this, I found myself almost forgetting all about the incident with the tooth. Seeing Edrick like this only made me think that there was no way that Olivia was right; Edrick clearly loved Ella more than anything, and the way that he laughed and played with her only proved it. He was now zooming around the room with her on his back, both of their arms outstretched as he made airplane noises, and I couldn’t help but laugh along with Ella.

Seeing Edrick's kind hearted nature toward Ella made me realize that maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to trust Olivia. I still didn't know for sure if she was Ella's biological mother. For all I knew, she was just an actress sent by Michael or Kelly to throw me off and make me paranoid around Edrick. Both of them clearly wanted me to stay away from Edrick so badly that I wouldn't have put it past them at this point to work together to do something like that, and it would have been too easy for them to get inside my head and make me hate Edrick.

After that, I realized that maybe I overreacted a bit with Edrick. When he finally set Ella down and sent her off to help Selina and the maids set the table for dinner, he slowly turned back to face me with an apologetic and almost sheepish look in his eyes that told me that maybe his intentions were more curious than sinister.

"I really am sorry," he said quietly, sticking his hands in his pockets. The sunlight shined in through the open window as the sun slowly sank below the horizon, causing a halo of light to beam around him. He looked so handsome in this light that, even after how upset I had been earlier, I wished that I could kiss him.

I quickly averted my gaze as I felt my face flush from looking at him, and shrugged.

"Just... Ask me before you do things like that," I replied softly. "You've said so yourself that you deserve to know the truth as the father of my baby, and I think that I deserve the same respect as the mother of your baby, too."

Edrick nodded, and when I met his gaze, his eyes were soft and full of regret.

"I won't do something like that again," he said. "I promise."

Chapter 158 Plein Air Painting

Edrick

As soon as I saw the hurt expression on Moana's face, I knew that I messed up by taking her tooth. Obviously, I still couldn't tell her about the Golden Wolf, but I realized that maybe I should have asked if I could take her tooth ahead of time; I could have simply told her that I wanted to take it to have some tests done, or anything to not make her panic. She clearly had been frantically searching for the tooth when I came home, and I instantly felt like a jerk for making her feel that way.

Even though Moana said that it was okay, and simply told me not to do that again, she was distant for the next couple of days. I noticed that she was being much more quiet than usual, and whenever she came to bed at night she would simply lay down and turn away from me. Maybe a combination of taking the tooth, getting upset with her over what happened with her ex-boyfriend, and not being there when she woke up for two days in a row made her feel upset.

So, I decided to make it up to her.

One morning, Moana was busy giving Ella a bath when I found Selina in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

"Selina," I said, walking into the kitchen and pouring myself a cup of coffee, "can you help me with something?"

The housekeeper looked up from the fruit salad she was mixing and furrowed her brow. “What is it?”

I chewed my lip for a moment. It was a bit embarrassing to admit that I needed to find a nice way to make things up to Moana, but it had to be done.

“I think I really hurt Moana’s feelings lately,” I said. “I want to make it up to her, but I don’t know how. Has she mentioned anything to you?”

Selina stared at me for a moment, then shrugged and returned to stirring the bowl of fruit salad. “She doesn’t complain much,” she replied. “But she has been a little cooped up since the media attention started. On Saturday, Ella begged her to go out for breakfast. I think they’re both feeling a little stir crazy.”

I nodded slowly, considering what Selina had said. Maybe I needed to find something that Moana, Ella, and I could do as a family. Summer would be ending soon, and it wouldn’t be long after that before winter came and we would be spending a lot more time inside. Maybe it would be nice to do something outside in the fresh air.

As I sat down and began to drink my morning coffee, I opened the newspaper and started to read it front to back, just as I always did every morning. I rarely paid any attention to the advertisements, however. At least, that was until something suddenly caught my eye as I was reading.

It was an advertisement for an outdoor art class. It was called “plein air painting”, which meant that students would be painting landscape scenes out in the fresh air. And, it was family friendly. I remembered that Moana had brought her plein air easel to paint at the mountain estate, but that she had never been able to get any painting done due to the fact that we had to leave so suddenly. Moana loved drawing and painting, and I knew that going to a class to paint outside with Ella would make her happy.

I also thought back to the day that we painted at the orphanage. Even though Moana's lesson that day was geared toward children, I had still had a lot of fun that day. It made me want to try painting some more, and so I decided to cut the newspaper advertisement out and slip it into my pocket just before Moana and Ella came out for breakfast.

"Daddy," Ella said as she sat down at the table, "do you have to work today?"

I nodded. "I do, Princess. Why?"

Ella let out an exasperated, almost theatrical sigh. Meanwhile, Moana poured syrup onto Ella's pancake and tucked a napkin into the front of Ella's shirt without a word before sitting down next to her. The entire time, Moana didn't so much as look in my direction.

"I just wish we could have some playtime," Ella finally said. "Playtime outside of the house. It's stuffy in here."

I couldn't help but smile. This only solidified the fact that the plein air class would be good for everyone, but I decided not to say anything right away. I wanted it to be a bit of a surprise.

The plein air class was set for the day after the next, so I decided to give a little hint to get Ella excited as well as to see how Moana would react.

"Well, I'll take the day off of work the day after tomorrow," I said with a smile. "Then, maybe all three of us can go out and have some fun."

Ella gasped. "Really?" she squealed excitedly.

Moana didn't say anything, but I caught her quickly glancing up at me with wide, sparkling eyes; that was all the confirmation I needed. I knew that this art class would make both of them happy.

"Really," I replied, reaching out and pinching Ella's cheek.

Later that evening, I decided to sneak into my bedroom just before dinner and place the art class advertisement in an envelope on Moana's bedside table. I even added a little note on the front of the envelope that said to get her painting supplies ready, and couldn't help but smile when I set the envelope carefully down for her to find later.

As we ate dinner that night, I felt as though I could hardly contain my excitement. Even though I had never been particularly interested in painting, I had to admit that I enjoyed it now after my little art class with Moana at the orphanage. Not only that, but I was even more excited to make Moana and Ella happy.

Hopefully, I thought to myself as we ate dinner together, this art class would show Moana that I truly was sorry for hurting her feelings. I didn't want her to be stressed, and I also had to admit that I felt lonely without her affection. Already I had become too used to feeling her snuggling up to me in the middle of the night, and it hurt a bit to only ever see her all the way over on the edge of my large bed every night.

But that wasn't the only reason behind why I wanted to make Moana happy.

Since the Mother Witch gave me the special potion to keep Moana's wolf from emerging, I had been too nervous to try using it yet. I was worried that it would not only be potentially dangerous for Moana and the baby, but also that she would be too suspicious of me after the way that I had disappeared so much for two days as well as the fact that I stole her tooth that day.

Hopefully, this painting class would help Moana relax enough for me to start putting the drops in her morning coffee, just as the Mother Witch said.

After all, I did need to make sure that her wolf wouldn't emerge for her own safety.

Chapter 159 The Sound of Music

Moana

After my conversation with Olivia as well as finding out that Edrick took the wolf tooth without my permission, I was a little distant for a couple of days. I just didn't know how to feel about everything, and I needed some time to think.

I still found it hard to believe that Edrick was really the type to use women as reproductive tools. I also found it strange that he would have told Ella that her mother was dead for no reason, which was why I couldn't stop wondering if Olivia really was just lying to me. At this point, I didn't know who to trust. All I knew was that I needed to make sure that my baby would be safe.

Edrick must have noticed that I was acting distant. When he mentioned doing something outside with Ella and I at one point at breakfast on Monday morning, I glanced up to see that he was looking at me. His gaze was still apologetic, just as it had been on the day that he took the wolf tooth. Maybe he really did feel bad for what he did.

However, I didn't think that he would actually want to do anything with me and Ella. I thought that he was just saying things to make Ella happy in the moment, and that he still planned on working all week in the hopes that she would forget anyway. Ella had been complaining a lot about

feeling cooped up, but I still wasn't sure if it was safe for us to go out together; the bakery on Saturday was just a little treat because it was right next to the penthouse, but I didn't feel safe going any further than that without Edrick around.

That was why I was shocked when I went to bed that night and found an envelope on my bedside table. Edrick was in the shower when I found it.

I scrunched together my eyebrows confusedly as I picked it up. He had written something on the front of the envelope:

“Make sure to get your painting supplies ready for a fun day outside. - Edrick”

When I opened the envelope, a small gasp escaped my mouth. Edrick had clipped an advertisement for a family friendly plein air painting class for the day after the next. Although I couldn't be entirely sure if this was what he was referring to earlier that morning when he mentioned going outside to do something together, I had a pretty good idea that this was what he meant.

Edrick came out of the bathroom a few moments later. I jerked my head up as he entered, my eyes wide with excitement. He instantly smiled.

“You want to go?” he asked.

I nodded vigorously, feeling excited like a little kid again. I loved plein air painting; I had planned on doing it at the mountain estate, and was devastated when we had to leave suddenly after the wolf attack and I couldn't do it. And now, I could not only enjoy an entire plein air class, but Ella could come as well.

“Are you coming, too?” I asked. I hoped that he would; after all, we had fun that day at the orphanage when he joined in on my painting lesson. He had mentioned that he wanted to learn more about painting, too.

Much to my pleasure, Edrick nodded and flashed me a smile. “Of course,” he said casually as he dried his damp hair with his towel. He was wearing only his pajama pants and no shirt. By now, I had become a bit more used to seeing his chiseled upper body without anything covering it. “I wanted all three of us to go. Like a...”

His voice faltered. I knew what he was going to say: like a family. But, in typical Alpha billionaire fashion, of course he couldn’t bring himself to say those words. I didn’t care at the moment, though. I was just excited to be going to the class, and it made me almost forget about how upset I had been over the past couple of days.

Honestly, I was just happy that Edrick seemed to be okay with taking part in my interests. It was something that Sam never did; in fact, I had never had a boyfriend who would even look at my art, let alone make art with me. Not that Edrick was my boyfriend, technically...

But it made me wonder something: Edrick had to have some other interests. I never saw him doing much other than occasionally reading. Other than that, he was always busy or at work.

As we got into bed that night, I couldn’t contain my curiosity any longer. If Edrick was willing to take part in my interests, then I felt as though it was only fair for me to do the same.

“Do you have any hobbies?” I asked as he flicked the light off.

Edrick was silent for a moment. I glanced over at him in the dim light of his bedroom and I thought I could see him chewing his lip almost nervously.

“Um... Not really,” he replied.

“Come on,” I said, turning on my side to face him. “You have to have something that you enjoy doing.”

He paused again before finally answering. “I guess I like the piano. I used to play a lot when I was younger.”

“Why don’t you play, then?” I asked. “You have a piano here. Ella is the only one who plays it during her lessons.”

“I don’t know...” Edrick shrugged. “I just don’t really have a reason to play it.”

Edrick’s words made me frown. “You don’t need a reason to play music,” I replied gently. “You can just play if it makes you happy. That’s a better reason than anything else.”

After I finished speaking, Edrick only responded with a short, low hum. I couldn’t tell if my words inspired him to play the piano more, or if it annoyed him. Maybe he was one of those people whose parents pushed him to play so much that now he got agitated whenever anyone tried to convince him to play. I went to bed after that and decided not to bother him about it anymore than I already had, and assumed that he would probably not play in front of me or anyone else.

But the next morning, when I awoke to a sound other than the cars and the people in the city below, I knew that my words had struck a chord with Edrick.

I sat up abruptly in bed, my eyes wide, and immediately jumped up and threw my slippers and my robe on to go and see the source of the beautiful music. When I came out of Edrick’s room, however, Selina was standing in the hallway. She quickly grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out of sight before I walked into the living room.

Even the housekeeper’s eyes were wide, but she was smiling. She placed her finger over her lips. We listened for a few moments, and as we did, my heart felt lighter than ever.

“I haven’t heard him play the piano in years,” Selina whispered, a few tears pooling up in her eyes.

It seemed that Edrick had decided to play the piano after all. For the first time since I moved in, the penthouse was filled with the sound of music.

I hoped that I could stay here forever and always listen to him play.

Chapter 160 A Scene Worth Painting

Moana

On the day of the painting class, Ella and I were both elated. Edrick kept his promise and took the day off of work, and after breakfast we were on our way.

The class was held in a beautiful park in the uptown area of the city by a lake. Edrick parked the car on the street and we each held one of Ella's hands as we walked over. I couldn't help but smile as we approached, with my plain air easel folded up and tucked under my arm. The air that day was beautiful with a nice breeze, and as we approached the little lake, I could see that it was teeming with all sorts of wildlife: ducks swimming around in search of breadcrumbs, little frogs jumping off of lily pads, and turtles sunning themselves on floating logs. The lake was surrounded by large weeping willow trees whose long fronds swayed in the breeze. It really was like a picture straight out of a storybook.

As we approached, there was already a group of other families gathered by the picnic area. A woman was standing at the front of the group and setting up a demonstration easel facing the lake, and while she did, I noticed that the other children were running around like wild little animals.

I didn't blame the children for acting so rambunctiously. There was a spread laid out on one of the tables filled with all kinds of fruit and sweets,

and it seemed as though the children already had their fair share of sugar. Even Ella, who normally would have been excited to play with other kids, halted in her tracks and looked up at Edrick and me with an apprehensive look on her little face. Even she was a bit taken aback by the sheer amount of energy surrounding the place; it seemed like some of the parents were genuinely trying to wrangle their children, but some other parents also seemed to be ignoring their kids as though this was more of a romantic date for them to go on while their kids could run amok around the lake.

“Hello!” the teacher called, waving at us excitedly as we walked up to join the group. She looked down at my easel, and her smile widened. “It looks like you brought your own supplies! Are you a painter?”

I felt myself blush as the other attendees turned to look at me. A couple of werewolf women gave me snide looks. I could only imagine what they were thinking about a family of a wealthy and famous CEO with his supposedly human fiancée, their half-breed daughter and the half-breed baby growing in her belly. With our security guard standing a little way away and the fact that our faces had been plastered all over the news recently, I knew that the other couples recognized us. The teacher, however, thankfully treated us just like everyone else with kindness and warmth.

I shrugged in response to the teacher’s question. “I wouldn’t consider myself much of an artist, but I do draw and paint sometimes,” I said, wanting to be humble.

“That’s a lie!” Ella suddenly chimed in. “She’s really good at art! She even teaches me how to make art sometimes!”

The teacher grinned. “Is that so?” she said. “Well, maybe if I get tired today, I’ll let your mommy step in to teach the class.” She said it in a joking manner, but it made me blush even harder; not to mention the fact that she referred to me as Ella’s mother. I still hadn’t talked to Edrick about it just yet.

I set up my easel, and the teacher gave Edrick an easel with supplies to use. Ella even got her own miniature easel, which was placed next to Edrick's. I was slightly behind the two of them, which gave me the perfect view of them. The way that they looked was more stunning than just the view of the lake, in my opinion.

However, the other children were still too rambunctious. The teacher patiently tried to get their attention, but it didn't seem to be working since most of the parents weren't paying much attention. I felt a little bit bad about it as I watched her get somewhat frustrated as she tried to get them to settle down so she could begin the class.

Finally, when Edrick and Ella, both shot me a concerned look almost in unison, I decided to step in.

"Hey, kids," I said, approaching the group of children who were now on the verge of wrestling in the dirt next to the lake, "it's time to start painting. Don't you want to have a souvenir to bring home later?"

The children suddenly stopped their play-fighting and looked up at me, cocking their heads as I spoke. I could already see that they were listening more to me than even the teacher, which was no surprise; I had always been good with kids. I didn't know why, although now that I knew I was a werewolf I had begun to wonder if it was an ability of mine. But pacifying children wasn't a werewolf ability that I had ever heard of, so I simply figured that it was just because of my experience with children. I had, after all, been the one child to help Sophia around the orphanage a lot while I was growing up and I had always enjoyed taking care of the younger kids.

"Come along," I said with a smile. "Let's go paint."

The kids seemed to be listening. They calmed down and made their way over to join their parents, and as they did, the teacher, Edrick, and many of the other parents looked at me with shock. I felt a bit embarrassed by

the attention as I made my way back over to my easel, but I was just glad that we could start painting now.

The teacher began the lesson, which was to paint a scene of the lake in front of us. She began by teaching everyone how to paint the perspective of the lake, using simple terminology to explain things such as foreground and background.

As she taught, however, I just couldn't get my eyes off of Edrick and Ella. They were both focusing so hard on their paintings, and I noticed now for the first time that they were both left-handed. Between the little bow on Ella's sun hat and the way that Edrick's white shirt rippled in the breeze, it was too beautiful of a scene for me to ignore.

And so, I added a little something extra to my painting.

The art class was a lot of fun. The other children turned out to be little angels now that they were calm, and Ella even seemed to make friends. When we were finished, the teacher came around and looked at everyone's paintings. She stopped in front of everyone's easels and pointed out to the class how beautifully they did — she even did the same in front of a toddler's easel, which was just a giant splotch of color. It made me smile, and it made me want to come back to another one of her classes.

At the end, she came to look at my painting. Her eyes widened a bit as she looked at what I had painted; I had painted the lake, of course, but I also added Ella and Edrick in the foreground, standing together as they painted on their easels.

The teacher looked over at me.

“This is gorgeous,” she said. “You were being too humble earlier. I love how you added something special to you.”

Edrick seemed to get curious. He c****d his head and came over, and when he saw my canvas, he said nothing; instead, he only blushed a deep, scarlet red.

I couldn't help but laugh a little.

On the ride home, I gingerly held my painting in my lap while Ella chattered nonstop about how much fun she had.

“Can we hang up our paintings together?” she asked, her voice practically a squeak from her level of excitement.

Edrick nodded, and I noticed that he glanced over at my painting again. “We can even get them framed,” he said with a warm smile. I felt my face turn red, and was reminded of what Olivia had said about him. I was believing her less and less; why would he go to the trouble to frame and hang our artwork together if he just planned on kicking me out once the baby was born?

Ella seemed pleased with this, and let out a satisfied sigh.

“I hope I can go to lots of classes someday,” she said, staring winsomely out the window. “I had so much fun with the other kids.”

Ella's words admittedly made me feel a little sad. She really had so few chances to experience what it was like to be a regular student. Even her weekly training sessions were one-on-one.

When I looked over at Edrick, he seemed to be looking at Ella thoughtfully. I hoped that he was coming to the same realization that I had come to.