

## Chapter 166 Regular Girl

### Moana

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of Edrick walking around the room. When I looked at the clock, I realized that it was a little later than I usually would have gotten up, and I quickly sat up and rubbed my eyes.

“Sorry,” I said, throwing the covers off and getting out of bed. “I overslept. Guess I missed my alarm.”

Edrick shook his head. “I turned it off for you,” he said as he fixed his hair in the en suite bathroom mirror. “I let you sleep in.”

I scrunched my eyebrows together. “Why?” Normally I woke up a full half hour earlier than this so that I could help prepare breakfast and get Ella ready, and sometimes I woke up even earlier than that.

“We’re going out,” he replied. “School supply shopping. Remember?”

My eyes widened for a moment. Edrick had mentioned that we would have to do some school supply shopping, but I didn’t think that he would want to do it so soon. Either way, I smiled and ran to my room to get ready for the day. I put on something comfortable to wear, knowing that we would likely be walking around a lot, and then got Ella ready as well at Edrick’s request. Ella was, of course, excited to go school shopping for the first time, and hardly sat down long enough to even eat her breakfast.

“I can’t wait to be a regular girl,” Ella suddenly said as we gathered our things and waited for the elevator to open. “I’ll be just like all of the other kids!”

At Ella’s words, Edrick and I both suddenly looked up at each other with incredulous looks on our faces.

“You are still a regular girl, love,” I replied with a chuckle as I tugged her sun hat onto her head.

“I know…” Ella said. “But I’m still excited.”

I smiled and took her hand, then stepped onto the elevator with her and Edrick. As the elevator carried us down, I chanced a look over at Edrick. I could have sworn that I saw a bit of a tear in his eye, but he quickly blinked it away and just smiled at me instead.

We headed to the mall, where our first stop was at a children’s store for Ella. Even though she would be wearing a uniform at school and there was no need for new clothes, she still picked out a backpack, accessories, and a little pair of Mary Jane shoes to wear with her uniform. I was excited to see how cute she would look in her uniform, and I couldn’t wait.

Afterwards, we went to the office supply store. I helped Ella pick out notebooks and folders off of the list of supplies that the headmistress gave us. Edrick disappeared for a bit, then returned with a cart full of stuff.

“Woah!” Ella said, jumping up on the side of the cart to peer in. “That’s a lot of stuff.”

Edrick simply shrugged. “There’s a sale,” he said, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the art supply aisle. I peered into the cart as well to see that he had fully stocked up on dozens of containers of crayons, coloring books, miniature canvases, acrylic and watercolor paint sets, and more.

“This might be too much, Edrick,” I said with a laugh. “She’s just one kid.”

“It’s not just for her.” He grinned. “You’ll need supplies for your classroom too, right? And, I wanted to get something for the kids at the orphanage.”

My eyes widened at the Alpha billionaire’s sudden charity. He certainly didn’t need to buy anything for the kids at the orphanage, but he decided to do it without even being asked. I couldn’t help but smile; he had changed so much since I had met him. The Edrick Morgan who I knew when I was almost hit by his car on the city street was gone now, and I didn’t know where he went. It was almost as though he was replaced by this newer, kinder Edrick Morgan.

“That’s... very kind of you,” I said with a smile. “But you don’t need to buy my supplies for me. Let me buy them with my own salary.”

Edrick was silent for a moment. I could tell that he was about to refuse, just as he always did; but this time, I wouldn’t let him. Ella had jumped off of the cart to go and look at a colorful notebook on the shelf, and now I grabbed the end of the cart and tugged it lightly toward myself.

“Seriously, Edrick,” I said with a bit of a laugh. “Let me pay.”

Edrick narrowed his eyes and tugged the cart back toward himself. “No. I’m paying.”

Now, I was the one who narrowed my eyes, and I pulled the cart even harder and with more determination than before. “Edrick Morgan, let me pay for these supplies.”

The smile on Edrick’s face turned to a frown, and maybe he was a little more determined than I was. He tightened his grip on the cart, then yanked it back toward himself. “I won’t let you—” he began, but then his eyes widened and his voice faltered as I lost my balance from the cart being yanked away and suddenly fell backwards.

I started to fall, my arms windmilling at my sides as I tried to balance myself, but it was too late. I nearly landed on my butt on the floor.

But I didn't fall.

Edrick moved like a flash of lightning, faster than I had ever seen him move before. He raced around the cart and caught me. I let out a small gasp, more so at his speed than the fact that I was about to topple over two feet onto my bottom on the carpeted floor, and looked up at Edrick with wide eyes as he held me.

His eyes were glowing; he had used his werewolf abilities to catch me, even though I wouldn't have hurt myself at all.

"I... Um..." I stammered. Edrick was looking down at me with intensity, his arms wrapped tightly around me. I thought I even saw his eyes flicker down to my lips, but I couldn't be entirely sure. All I knew was that, even though I would have been fine if I had fallen and I had only lost my balance, he had gone out of his way to catch me. And now, for some strange reason, I felt Mina get excited inside of me and urge me to kiss him again. The taste of his lips from the night before still lingered on my tongue, and I felt my heart rate quicken as I imagined kissing him again...

"Woah! What happened?" Ella said, dropping the pile of colored pencils and shiny notebooks in her hands as she ran over to us. "Moana, did you faint?"

I shook my head, snapped back to reality by Ella's voice. Edrick stood me upright and let go of me. He quickly averted his gaze, but I thought I saw him blush a bit.

"I'm fine," I said, smoothing down my skirt. I spotted the pile of discarded things on the floor and pointed to them. "Ella, don't make a mess. Pick those up."

## Chapter 167 First Day of School

### Moana

A few weeks passed after that. With each passing day, Ella became more and more excited for school, and I was just as excited. After signing my paperwork and getting the keys to my classroom, I then spent the next few weeks leading up to the start of the school year preparing my lesson plans, stocking up on supplies, and cleaning out the abandoned art classroom.

On the morning of the first day of school, I woke up to Ella jumping on the bed and shouting.

“Moana! Daddy!” she shrieked excitedly, jumping up and down and jostling both of us out of our sleep. “Wake up! It’s the first day of school!”

I cracked my eyes open to see Ella standing above us with a wide grin on her face. Beside me, Edrick groaned slightly and finally sat up.

“Alright, alright,” he said, rubbing his eyes and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Come on. Let’s all have breakfast together before your first day of school.”

The night prior, I had already helped Ella pack her backpack and laid out her uniform. I had also packed my own bag filled with the things that I would need for the day, and set our bags out by the front door together. I had to admit that I felt a little nervous as I got dressed that morning, but I

was also excited, and seeing Ella in her adorable little plaid uniform and Mary Janes made me smile.

After breakfast, it was time to go. Selina packed a lunch for both of us, and even gave Ella a little squeeze and a smile before sending us on our way. Edrick walked to school with us; once again, Ella walked between us and held each of our hands, and I felt like we were a little family once more. I hoped that this would become a tradition of ours.

As we arrived at the school, the front yard was bustling with the activity of the hordes of other little girls who were excited for their first day. The display ranged from preschool children who were crying and being carried in by their exhausted parents, all the way to bored high school students who just seemed happy to see their friends and to know that they would be graduating this year. Ella was clearly nervous, and clung to Edrick's leg tightly as we walked up to the parent drop-off point.

"Daddy, I'm scared," Ella whined, looking up at Edrick with big saucer eyes. "There are so many kids. And it's loud."

Edrick smiled and crouched down to her level. He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and then held her firmly by both shoulders.

"You're going to have a lot of fun," he said. "I promise. And Moana will be here all day if you need her, and I'll be waiting right here for you when the day is over. It'll go by before you know it. Okay?"

Ella hesitantly nodded, sniffing a bit. Edrick planted a kiss on her cheek.

Almost as soon as he did that, it seemed that another group of little girls had already taken interest in Ella and were slowly inching their way toward us, fiddling nervously with their backpack straps.

"Um... What's your name?" one of the little girls, a scrawny little thing with wispy blonde hair, said sheepishly.

“Ella,” Ella replied, her face turning red.

One of the other girls, a slightly bigger girl with brown hair and freckles, stepped out from behind the rest of the group and grinned widely. “I’m Stacie. Wanna play with us before school starts?”

Ella hesitated and looked up at Edrick. He nodded, and as though she had known these girls for her entire life, Ella took off toward the playground with them. I couldn’t help but laugh at how simple it was for children to make friends; I missed those days. By the end of the day, I was certain that she would be calling them all her best friends forever.

Finally, Edrick turned back to look at me and smiled.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

“Just... Call me immediately if you start to feel sick or anything.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a bit. “Edrick, it’ll be okay,” I said, giving his arm a squeeze. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

Edrick nodded hesitantly. I gave him a little wave and turned to leave, but suddenly, I felt his hand on my arm. He pulled me back, turning me to face him so that I could see the worried look in his eyes.

And then... He kissed my forehead, making my face turn beet red.

“Be careful,” he whispered, taking a step back and releasing me. He shoved his hands in his pockets, and without another word, he walked away and left me standing there with a racing heart and butterflies in my stomach.

...

Once the bell rang, all of the students lined up to go inside. Ella was still with her group of little friends, which made me feel a bit relieved, and I

made my way up to my classroom as the teachers began to march their students through the hallways for homeroom. I noticed that quite a few kids, of all ages, were giving me strange looks; but I just waved and smiled, and unlocked my classroom door.

I still had some time before my first class would begin, so after I settled in a bit I made my way over to the faculty lounge for some coffee. There were a couple of other teachers in there; the music teacher, whose name was Jeff, and one of the science teachers, Deborah. I had already bumped into them a couple of times over the summer, and so we exchanged brief pleasantries before I scurried back to my classroom to get ready for my first lesson.

It didn't take long before the first class came in; and, much to Ella's surprise — although I already knew, and was looking forward to seeing her smile throughout my first class — it was her third grade class.

“Good morning, everyone,” I said as the students filed in with their teacher standing in the doorway. “I'm Miss Fowler, but you can call me Moana. Sit anywhere you like.”

As the kids hurried around to pick their seats, I stood up at the front and waited patiently. I had set up the desks in a semicircle around the room to make the atmosphere more welcoming, and there was a carpet on the floor in the middle with cushions that I would let the students sit on if they wanted. Almost immediately, Ella and several other girls beelined for the cushions. The other girls got their first, and almost shoved Ella out of the way in the process.

“Hey!” Ella said, frowning. “You pushed me!”

“You should sit in the back, half-blood,” one of the little girls snarled. She was a little girl who was taller than the rest, with ginger hair and blue eyes.



Her face was pointed, like a little fox, and she had a bit of a nasty look to her.

My eyes widened. I opened my mouth to say something with the intention of shutting that sort of nastiness down immediately, but before I could, Ella folded her arms and puffed her chest out.

“You know...”

## Chapter 168 Little Lawyer

Moana

“You know...” Ella frowned and folded her arms, puffing out her chest confidently before I could say anything. After those little girls nastily called her a half-blood and shoved her, I had expected Ella to come to me crying and that I would have to send them to the headmistress’s office, and all on my first day of teaching. But instead, Ella stood up straight and took on a confident air that I hadn’t expected from her.

“Buzz off,” one of the other little girls said, waving her hand dismissively. “We don’t bother with half-bloods. You smell.” She pinched her nose, causing the other girls in her group to giggle.

“You’re really mean!” Ella replied. “Why do you have to say things like that? Didn’t your parents ever teach you to treat everyone equally and with respect?”

The little girls giggled nastily at Ella’s comment. Even though Ella was confident, I was well aware of how school bullies functioned, and I knew that she wouldn’t get through to them. I would have to speak to their teacher or even their parents, and that would be the only way to stop the bullying. Even then, many kids continued to be bullies regardless of the repercussions. It was sad that Ella had to realize this on her first day of school, but it was the truth.

“Ella,” I said finally, stepping in. “Take your seat. I’ll handle this.”

However, Ella just ignored me and kept reprimanding them with even more vigor.

“You should learn to treat everyone nicely,” Ella growled. “If you were half human too, or even a whole human, you wouldn’t like it if anyone else said mean things to you. My daddy always says to treat everyone else how you want to be treated!”

The gaggle of nasty little girls went silent. I was shocked by Ella’s impressive public speaking abilities; she seemed to have gotten it from her father, I thought to myself. The mean girls’ apparent leader, the redhead with the pointed face, scowled deeply and seemed as though she couldn’t come up with anything nasty to say as a retort.

It also seemed as though the other children noticed the argument, and had now gathered around and were beginning to cheer Ella on.

“Rebecca, you’re a meanie!” one little girl said — I recognized her as the timid blonde girl from that morning.

“Yeah!” another girl, the one who introduced herself as Stacie earlier, said loudly. “You’re always bullying everyone! You’re just a big meanie because your mom—”

“Alright, alright,” I said, deciding to intervene before things got any worse and more insults got thrown around. “Let’s all settle down.” I then looked down at the mean girls, who were still sitting on the floor but whose faces were all beet red by now, and I frowned. “I won’t send you to the headmistress this time, but I won’t tolerate bullying in my class. If I see you three bullying anyone again, whether it’s in class or outside of class, you’ll be marching down to the headmistress’s office right away. Understand?”

The three nasty little girls nodded, clearly regretting their actions. I ordered them to sit at desks and revoked their privilege to sit on the

cushions for that day, and instead let Ella and her friends sit there. Ella grinned widely as she sat down.

“Thanks, mom,” she said to me.

My eyes widened. There was a chorus of gasps across the room. One of the kids who was sitting with Ella jumped up and exclaimed, “Ella, the new art teacher is your mom?”

Ella nodded vigorously before I could say anything — not that I would have been able to correct her anyway, considering the fact that Edrick had told the news that I was her mother, but it was still strange to hear her refer to me as anything other than my first name. Not only that, but I quickly became worried that the other kids would like her less if they knew that I was her “mom”. Maybe they would see her as even more of an outsider, and would accuse me of favoritism.

“Yep,” Ella said, grinning. “She’s the best mom ever.”

Everyone was shocked. I felt a tear come to my eye as I saw Ella smiling up at me, but I quickly blinked it away. A hush fell over the room for a few moments, before one of the other girls spoke up.

“I wish my mom was a teacher,” the little girl said. “But she works at an office. My dad says that she’s a ‘pencil pusher’. I don’t know what that means, though.”

I stifled a laugh, and finally decided to cut the discussion short and begin my lesson after that.

We spent the remainder of class playing fun games so the children could get comfortable with me, and then ended the class with a coloring session. I actually got along well with all of the kids, and even the nasty girls seemed to have settled down their bad behavior. Soon enough, the half hour of the class flew by and the childrens’ teacher came to take them

back to their classroom. Ella and all of the other kids waved at me as they left, and I couldn't wipe the smile off of my face after that.

That day, after Ella's little speech and the way that she exposed our "relationship", I noticed that no one seemed to be bothering her. I ran into Ella a few more times that day during lunchtime and recess, and she didn't seem to be having any more trouble with anyone. In fact, it seemed as though Ella had even made quite a few more friends by the time we walked out of the school together that afternoon. Everyone must have wanted to be friends with the cool new girl who stood up to the bully and whose mom was the art teacher. As I took her little hand and led her out of the school, I couldn't stop smiling; although I couldn't tell if my smile was from Ella's success on her first day of school, or if it was from her calling me "mom". Maybe it was both.

Either way, as Ella skipped happily next to me and Edrick's tall frame came into view in the golden light of the late afternoon sun, I felt happier than ever.

Edrick was waiting for us at the parent drop-off point as we approached, and when Ella saw him, she let go of my hand and raced up to him. He scooped her up and kissed her cheek, but as I got closer I saw that he looked a little worried.

"Well?" he asked. "How was your first day?"

"It was amazing!" Ella exclaimed. "I made lots of friends, and I learned all about sy.... Syl..."

"Syllables?" Edrick asked.

Ella nodded excitedly. "Yeah, those! And there were these mean girls, but I stood up to them..."

As we began to walk home, Ella continued to chatter nonstop about her exciting first day of school. She told Edrick all about how she stood up to

the nasty girls in art class, and how she made more friends at recess, and how she couldn't wait for her second day of school. Slowly, as she talked, Edrick's look of worry turned into a warm smile.

And as he carried her on his shoulders, I felt his hand reach out and slip into mine.

## Chapter 169 A Visitor

### Moana

A few more days passed by after that. By the end of our first week of school, it seemed as though Ella and I both had settled in quite well. Ella was making loads of friends and loved her teachers, and I also enjoyed teaching. It finally felt as though I was living my childhood dream of being an art teacher, although I did find it difficult to connect with the other teachers. They weren't unkind and did exchange pleasantries with me each day, but I could tell that they didn't want to associate with me too much since they still thought that I was human. Maybe over time they would get to know me a bit more and would get over some of their biases. However, right now I couldn't help but wish that my wolf would just emerge already so that I would stop having to deal with this sort of attitude from people. Unfortunately, however, it didn't seem like Mina was getting a whole lot stronger. She seemed to be stagnating a bit at her current level of strength.

"It's probably the baby," she said when I asked her about it one morning. "I think when you have the baby, I'll be able to get stronger. For now, your body is focusing on keeping you both healthy for the pregnancy."

It made sense, but it didn't necessarily make me feel any better about the situation.

For now, because no one really wanted to talk to me too much, I spent the majority of my lunch breaks eating and drawing in my classroom. Normally it was fine and I quite enjoyed the down time, but on this

particular Friday I quickly came to the realization that I should have gone to the faculty lounge when I heard a knock on my door.

I looked up, my cheeks stuffed with my sandwich, and quickly covered my mouth with my hand when I saw the headmistress standing there.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt,” she said. “But you have a visitor.”

I finished chewing and swallowed, then waved her in. “Thank you, Headmistress Hawkins,” I said with a smile. I half expected it to be Edrick stopping by, or maybe Selina.

But my smile faded when I saw who it really was: Ethan.

“Hi, Moana,” he said with a bit of a sheepish smile. He was holding a vase of flowers in his hand as he walked into my room.

Part of me wanted to yell at him to get out after the way that he kissed me. I had thought about it a lot, and I was almost entirely certain that he and Kelly had worked together that night to make Edrick kick me out. I remembered the evil look in his eye when I saw Edrick confronting him, and how his demeanor suddenly shifted theatrically when he noticed me standing there. It wasn't just that, but seeing him so suddenly instantly reminded me of my conversation at the orphanage with “Olivia”, who I was still unsure about. If it was possible that she really was an actress after all, then Ethan would have been on my list of suspects as to who hired her to begin with.

But I didn't yell at him or kick him out. Maybe I was too nice; or maybe I was afraid. If he worked with Kelly before, then did he work with her when she hired those Rogues to attack me?

“Hey, Ethan,” I said, standing from my desk so abruptly I almost knocked my chair over. “Um...” My voice faded away. What was I supposed to say to him? To what do I owe the pleasure? Nice to see you? What the hell are you doing in my classroom? “Long time no see.”



I almost instantly cringed at my choice of words, but Ethan didn't seem to notice. Instead, he simply held up the flowers a bit.

"I brought you a peace offering," he said, his cheeks turning a little red with embarrassment. "I know I hurt your feelings that night at the party. I've spent a lot of time thinking about it and I've realized that I overstepped a lot of boundaries, and that wasn't right. But I'd like to make it up to you, if you'll let me."

I still didn't entirely trust him, but I was willing to hear him out. Maybe he would confess to working with Kelly. He did seem as though he was trying to make amends.

With a stiff smile, I walked around my desk and took the flowers from him. They came in an expensive-looking crystal vase, and the flowers were a lovely array of sunflowers, baby's breath, and chamomile. I set the vase down on my desk, feeling Ethan's eyes on me the entire time, and turned back to offer him another stiff smile.

"Thank you," I said.

Ethan smiled back at me. There was a bit of an awkward silence as we stared at each other like two cautious felines, before he broke the silence by looking around at the classroom.

"So, you're an art teacher now, huh?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. Ella is coming to school here now, and the position was open, so I just went for it."

Ethan looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "You convinced Edrick to send Ella to school? How on earth did you do that?"

I shrugged. "He pretty much came to the conclusion himself," I said. "I just recommended it."

"Hm." Ethan nodded slowly, then shoved his hands in his pockets and stared down at the floor. "Well, I'm happy for both of you," he finally

said, lifting his gaze a bit to meet mine. I had forgotten how charmingly shy he always was. It didn't make up for what he did and what I saw in him on the night of the party, but he wasn't acting suspicious now. Was this all an act too, or was he genuinely sorry for everything that happened and wanted to be friends again? Honestly, I was a bit lonely since the other teachers didn't really want to associate with me, but at the same time I knew that being friends with Ethan — regardless of how sincere he was being — wouldn't bode well for my relationship with Edrick. Things were going so smoothly between Edrick and I now that I didn't want to throw a wrench into it by secretly becoming friends with his half-brother again behind his back.

“Anyway...” Ethan paused, chewing the inside of his cheek, and leaned back on one of the desks behind him. “I saw on the news that you two are officially engaged?”

I nodded. I didn't know if I should have told him whether it was fake or not, although if Michael, Verona, and Kelly all knew, then he surely knew as well. Either way, I wanted to be vague, so I didn't say anything.

Ethan looked at me for a moment, then quickly looked away. His cheeks turned a little red again as he spoke.

“If you don't mind me asking,” he said, clearing his throat and meeting my gaze once more, “what made Edrick suddenly decide to have a public relationship and announce you as Ella's biological mother?”

## Chapter 170 Fishing for Information

Moana

“If you don’t mind me asking, what made Edrick suddenly decide to have a public relationship and announce you as Ella’s biological mother?”

My eyes widened at Ethan’s sudden question. It was rather unexpected and, despite the gentle and curious tone of voice he used and the innocent redness in his soft cheeks, I found his question downright creepy. After everything that had happened with Ethan both leading up to and during the last party when he kissed me without my consent, I didn’t think for a moment that any sort of question like that wasn’t loaded in some way or another. The fact alone that he suddenly showed up at my place of work — and I didn’t even fully know how he knew that I worked here yet — was enough of a cause for concern.

“Um... I mean, I am pregnant with his child,” I responded with a bit of a nervous laugh, and gestured at my belly — which had grown a bit since I last saw Ethan and now couldn’t be hidden terribly well under my dress. “It was the most logical thing to do, I guess.”

Ethan nodded slowly, but didn’t answer right away. He then pushed himself up off of the desk he was leaning on and walked over to a corkboard that I had on the wall, which displayed some of my students’ artwork. He studied it carefully, and seemed to be thinking. I noticed that his eyes landed on something that Ella drew, and I knew that he knew that

it was her drawing because her name was on it in big, crooked letters. He continued staring at it for a few moments, which made me oddly uncomfortable, before he turned back to face me and smiled.

“Well, I’m glad that you two figured something out that works for you,” he said. He paused, licking his lips. “It’s just... I don’t know. Edrick was always part of the whole anti-human crowd. So much has changed about him recently. I mean, I was already surprised enough when he wanted you to live with him and keep the baby, but to announce a public relationship with a human and to claim that you’re Ella’s biological mother—”

“What’s your point, Ethan?” I asked, feeling myself getting more agitated. Part of me wanted to snap at him and tell him that I wasn’t even a human, but I didn’t feel comfortable disclosing that information to him.

Ethan shrugged. “Nothing, really. Well... That’s a lie, actually.” He let out a wry chuckle. I folded my arms across my chest, trying to make him aware that I was losing patience without outright telling him off, but he didn’t seem to notice. “I’m only curious because I thought that there was something special about you, Moana. I could sense it on you. Maybe Edrick already knows, or maybe he doesn’t realize it — maybe you yourself don’t even realize it — but I just want to say that if you happen to need any help figuring out your lineage, or anything like that, I’d be happy to help you out with it.”

I tried to hide my shock. Was Ethan being truthful, or was he just pulling my leg? Either way, it felt as though he was fishing for information, and it filled me with discomfort.

“Thanks, but I’m fine,” I replied. “And I’m not sure if you know this, but Kelly did hire Rogues to attack me. Edrick had to save me. So if you’re wondering why we suddenly decided to have a public relationship, then maybe it was because that whole terrible ordeal traumatized both of us so much that it actually brought us closer and made us realize our feelings for each other. And you can tell Kelly that, too.”

Ethan's eyes went wide for a moment. I couldn't tell if he already knew about the ordeal in the Rogue district or if that whole experience had been kept a secret, but either way, I didn't care. At this point, I just wanted him out of my classroom; my lunch break was almost over and I would have a high school class coming in soon that I needed to prepare for. Therefore, when Ethan opened his mouth to speak, I cut him off.

"Thank you for the flowers, but I do need to get back to work," I said, trying to sound at least somewhat polite without giving the impression that I was even remotely interested in speaking again.

Ethan seemed to get the picture. He nodded slowly and, without a word, turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Once he was gone, I sank back down into my chair with a sigh and passed my hand over my face. Even just that ordeal was enough to exhaust me, and now that it was over I felt deflated. I placed my hand over my belly and rubbed it gently, soothing both myself and the little werewolf that was inside of me.

"Mina," I thought, leaning my head back on my chair and staring up at the ceiling, "I know it's hard, but I need you to try to get stronger. I'm tired of having to hide my true nature, and I'm tired of feeling helpless when Edrick isn't around."

My wolf didn't respond, but I knew that she heard me. Whether or not she would be able to heed my words was still up for debate; I knew that there was no way to rush her getting stronger and emerging, and I really only said it to make myself feel better.

For the remainder of that day, I couldn't stop thinking about Ethan's strange visit. His flowers sat on my desk, taunting me in their stupid crystal vase as I wondered if I should tell Edrick that Ethan came and asked me all of those questions or if I should just keep it a secret and pretend it never happened. If he found out eventually, would he be mad at me or would he understand?

It wasn't just that, either. The way that Ethan pried for answers... The way that he stared at Ella's drawing with such a strange intensity... The way that he somehow knew where I worked when it shouldn't have been common knowledge yet. All of it felt strange.

A visit that, to Ethan, was apparently supposed to be a chance to reconcile, wound up unsettling me more than anything. Was he watching me? Was he working with Kelly and Michael? Did I need to be worried about myself, the baby, or even Ella?

There was no way of knowing just what Ethan was up to, if anything. And I had been through enough stress already.

That was why, by the end of the day, I decided that it was best to just move on and pretend that it never happened. It was better for everyone if it was swept under the rug, and when I saw Edrick's smile as I walked to meet him with Ella, I knew that I had made the right decision.

After all, I didn't want the news of his half-brother's strange and uncalled for visit to make that smile fade from his face.