

## Chapter 21 The Secret Brother

Moana

“Uncle Ethan!” Ella jumped up and ran over to Ethan. Smiling, he picked her up and twirled her around in a circle. The quiet air of the garden became briefly filled with the sweet sound of the little girl’s giggles before he sat her back down and patted her on the head.

“I think your grandma is looking for you,” he said, to which Ella immediately perked up and took off to find Verona.

I was still sitting on the bench, utterly shocked by Ethan’s presence. “Fancy seeing you here,” he said, walking up to me and standing in front of me so that his tall body blocked the light.

“Fancy seeing you here, too,” I said, standing. “I had no idea you were related to the Morgan family.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, running a hand through his hair. Even now, dressed in his formal attire, I could see a small smudge of paint on the artist’s left pinky. “The whole ‘Bradley’ last name is just a pseudonym. Well, sort of; it was my mother’s maiden name. I use it now to protect my true identity.”

I nodded, not sure of what to say. Ethan turned and walked over to the fountain, gesturing for me to follow, which I did.

“So... You’re Ella’s au pair, right?” Ethan asked as we slowly walked together around the garden. The summer air was still and humid, but the feeling of the cool spray coming off of the fountain was refreshing.

“Yes,” I replied, glancing over in the direction where Ella had just gone. “I have been for a few weeks now.”

We passed by a small grove of orange trees, their branches heavy and laden with ripe fruit. From where we stood, I could smell the citrus in the air. As we passed underneath the trees, Ethan casually reached up and plucked one. I watched as he expertly peeled the orange while keeping the peel in one long strip, then tossed the peel into a nearby shrub and handed me a slice. It was warm and sweet from being in the sun all day, and the juices that burst into my mouth made me smile.

“Well,” Ethan said, his mouth full of orange, “I can’t think of anyone better to be Ella’s nanny. I know how much the kids at the orphanage love you. Ella certainly seems to feel the same.”

My smile widened. “Thank you,” I replied. “I love Ella. She’s a good girl.”

We walked a bit more around the garden, then passed through one side of the large colonnade, where the feeling of the cold marble permeated through my sandals and cooled my feet. The arched ceilings made the sound of the crickets chirping even more prominent.

“You grew up here?” I asked, leaning on the railing of one side of the colonnade that looked out over even more gardens below.

“I did,” Ethan replied, sounding almost a little embarrassed by it. “I still live here now, part of the time, whenever I need to have some peace and quiet.”

I turned around, leaning backwards on the railing now, and looked up at the palace behind us. The party sounded as though it had gotten more lively inside; I could hear music now, and the sound of laughter. Through one of the large draped windows that led to the banquet hall, I could see the silhouettes of people ballroom dancing. I was a bit glad that I was outside just now, as I hadn’t the first clue how to ballroom dance.

Ethan quietly hummed along to the music, bobbing his head a bit for a few moments before turning toward me and holding his hand out.

“Care for a dance?”

I felt my face get hot.

“I don’t know how,” I admitted, staring down at my feet.

“Nonsense,” Ethan said, taking my hand and pulling me away from the railing. “It’s easy. Besides, no one is here to see if you mess up.”

My blush deepened as Ethan took my other hand and placed it on his shoulder, then placed his other hand on my waist. I felt him firmly pull me in a bit closer so that our waists were nearly touching.

“It’s like this...”

He waited a moment for a beat in the music, then stepped to the left, then the right, and backwards and forwards. Surprisingly, with him leading me, it was easy to move along with him. Soon enough, we were spinning around the colonnade to the faint music and the sound of the crickets, laughing along with each other.

The music came to an end, and with a final spin, Ethan dipped me. He hesitated at the bottom of the dip, our breathless faces hovering close enough to one another that I could smell the citrus on his breath. I felt my heart rate quicken and my face flush red again as his eyes flickered down to my lips.

Then, just as quickly as it happened, Ethan placed me back on my feet and stepped away with a bow and a flourish.

“You’re a good dancer,” he said. “Some might even call you a natural.”

I smirked and curtsied, feeling utterly ridiculous and enamored at the same time. My heart still pounded from our near-kiss, but I knew that it would never happen; not only was I just a human, but it would also be wildly

inappropriate for me to get romantically involved with the brother of my one-night stand and employer.

“Can I show you my studio?” Ethan asked suddenly, breaking my train of thought.

I nodded and followed him as he led me through the dimly-lit colonnade and through a large set of double wooden doors, then up a narrow winding staircase that led out onto a dark corridor on the second story, lit only by the moonlight shining through massive, arched windows. At the end of this corridor was another set of large double wooden doors. He opened the doors and reached around, his hand feeling along the wall for a moment before he flicked on the lights and gestured for me to enter.

The studio was just as I expected for a wealthy, famous artist: massive, with high ceilings, natural light, and concrete floors. The walls were lined with paintings, some finished and some in progress. There were several large, paint-splattered easels covered in canvases and supplies, and there was a huge wooden workbench in the middle of the room that was littered with half-empty tubes of oil paints and brushes soaking in jars of paint thinner.

“Wow,” I said, walking around in awe and looking at the paintings. “This is amazing.”

“You should see it during the daytime, when the sun is coming in,” Ethan said. He walked over to one of the large flat files that lined the wall and crouched to pull out the bottom drawer, rifling through it for a moment before producing a black portfolio.

“Come look at this,” he said, walking over to the workbench and placing the portfolio down. “You said you like art and child psychology, so I thought you might be interested in seeing some of my childhood drawings.”

Immediately intrigued, I walked over and gently opened the portfolio to reveal pages upon pages of charcoal drawings.

“May I?” I asked, to which Ethan nodded. I pulled out a few of the drawings and held them up to the light, furrowing my brow as I observed that each drawing had a similarly dark theme. Each piece depicted various scenes of a child, alone, in a dark room.

“Your childhood,” I said quietly, setting down the drawings, “what was it like, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Ethan opened his mouth to speak, but before anything came out, a familiar male voice came from the doorway.

“Ahem.”