

Chapter 31 Photo Op

Moana

The very next morning, I called Sophia as soon as I awoke.

“Sophia, it’s Moana,” I said into the phone. “Do you have a minute to talk?”

Sophia was quiet for a moment. I could tell that she was hesitant; I had just informed her only a couple of weeks prior that I was working for the very man who frightened the orphans, and she no doubt had a suspicion that I was going to ask for something after how he acted.

“Yes,” she finally replied. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

I smiled, relieved that she was at least willing to talk to me. “You, too,” I said. “I know this might seem a bit contrived, but I wanted to ask if Mr. Morgan and I could come to the orphanage today. He wants to speak to you and the children after what happened yesterday.”

“Really?” Sophia responded, sounding a little surprised. “He doesn’t seem like the type to talk much.”

“Really. He wants to apologize.” Sophia was silent again. I grew desperate. “Please,” I said. “I’d really appreciate it if you gave him another chance.”

“Alright,” Sophia finally agreed. “When will you be coming?”

I glanced at the clock. “We’ll be there by noon.”

At noon, almost on the dot, Edrick and I pulled up to the orphanage. He was wearing a gray suit and tie that was almost as stiff as his demeanor, which was a sharp contrast from my light blue sundress. It was a scorching hot day; I was surprised that he was even breathing dressed like that.

The driver pulled up to the curb and let Edrick and I out. I glanced over at the Alpha billionaire over the top of the car, noticing how his image seemed to wiggle a bit behind the heat haze coming off of the black car. He took a deep breath and straightened his tie before brusquely turning on his heel and storming up to the entrance of the orphanage as if he was on a mission, where Sophia stood with the children as they waited for him. The children had made a banner that they were all holding, which read: "Thank you, Mr. Morgan!" I couldn't help but smile as I saw all of the little handprints on the long strip of paper that they held between them.

Sophia, smiling, came down the steps as Edrick approached.

"Welcome," she said, her eyes squinting in the sunlight. "We're happy to have you."

Edrick merely nodded and replied in a curt tone of voice, "Thank you. Where is the photographer?"

Sophia squinted even harder. "Photographer?" she asked.

"Well, I'm here for a photo op," Edrick said, looking around. "Didn't you hire a photographer?"

I stepped in, placing my hand on Edrick's arm before he could say anything else that was offensive. "I have my cell phone."

Edrick scoffed. "You can't possibly expect cell phone pictures to make it on the front cover of any magazines."

Sophia frowned, glancing over at me with a disappointed look on her face before looking back up at Edrick. "Perhaps you're not here for the right reasons, Mr. Morgan," she said. "While we appreciate your donation, all

of the funds have been allocated toward taking care of the children. We don't have the money to be hiring photographers."

Now, it was Edrick who looked over at me with a disappointed look on his face. He stepped away, waving me over to him, and I threw an apologetic glance at Sophia before following.

"You didn't hire a photographer?" he snarled.

I shook my head. "It's not about the quality of the photos," I responded, keeping my voice low. "It's about the message behind them. And I didn't want to make the children uncomfortable by having another stranger here to take their pictures."

Edrick glanced over at the children, who looked like they were broiling in the summer heat. One little girl's bangs were glued to her forehead with sweat. "Fine," he said, his tone of voice cold as he straightened his tie again. "Let's just get this over with."

Before I could stop him, he walked back over to Sophia. He said something to her that I couldn't make out from where I stood. She nodded and they walked over to the stairs; Edrick waved for me to follow again, and I did, this time jogging to catch up.

"Alright, children," Sophia said, walking up the stairs to stand behind them while Edrick stood off to the side. "Mr. Morgan is going to take a picture with us now."

"Hi, Mr. Morgan," the little girl with the sweat-soaked bangs said.

"Hello." Edrick didn't even look at her; he only stood off to the side with his arms folded, impatiently waiting for the picture to be taken.

"Wait, what's Miss Moana doing here?" another little girl said, looking around confused.

"I'm thirsty," one little boy said, his face red from the heat.

“We’ll have lemonade when we’re finished,” Sophia replied. She shot me a pleading look, practically begging me to just get the photo over with so she could bring the children back inside before they all had heat stroke.

“Okay,” I said with a smile, holding up my phone to take the picture. “On the count of three, say cheese! One, two, three!”

Maybe half of the children smiled at the very most. The other half of the children were either unprepared, too hot and miserable to smile, and the ones that were closest to Edrick appeared as if they were leaning away from him out of fear.

As soon as I snapped the picture, Sophia ushered the children inside. Edrick, without a word, stormed back off in the direction of the car. I mouthed an apology to Sophia, who glared at me angrily from the doorway, before I ran after Edrick and grabbed him by the arm as he put one foot in the car.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

I shoved my phone in his face to show him the picture. “The children look miserable,” I replied. “You have to try again.”

“If they don’t like me, then they don’t like me,” Edrick complained. “I did what I came here to do. Come on. Let’s go.”

Edrick’s indifference made me furious.

“Edrick Morgan, you get out of that car right now and go spend time with those children!” I shouted, curling my hands up into fists and stamping my foot.

Edrick’s eyes went wide. So did the driver’s, Sophia’s, and even my own. It seemed that all of us were equally surprised by my outburst — but it worked. Edrick somehow got out of the car, slammed the door, and got back up to the orphanage.

Sophia silently let him in. Her gaze followed me as I jogged after him, but she said nothing; once we were inside, Edrick stood in the foyer, looking around with distaste as the children stood off to the side. They, too, looked surprised at his return.

“Um... How about a tour?” Sophia asked.

“...And this here is the classroom. We haven’t quite got enough desks, but we make do. The children all get along and take turns so they can all have a chance to use the desks. It does get awfully cold in here in the winter, so we often have to move the class to another room to do their lessons — but, thanks to your generous donation, we will be able to heat the entire orphanage evenly this winter, and we can even afford more desks.”

Edrick stood in the middle of the classroom, turning slowly as he took in the room. The orphanage was clean and well kept, just as it had been even when I lived here as a child, but its age was beginning to show. The walls all needed a good paint job, half of the doors didn’t stay closed anymore, and the sinks all became clogged on a regular basis.

He was silent for some time.

“He seems moved,” Mina’s voice suddenly echoed in my head, almost making me jump. I was starting to get used to her occasional presence, but it still took me by surprise every time.

“Yes,” I replied. “It seems like maybe the Alpha billionaire has a bit of a heart after all.”

Suddenly, one of the children spoke up — they had all been following us curiously, intrigued by Edrick’s presence. “Um, Miss Moana,” the little

girl named Clara said, tugging on my dress and making me, Sophia, and even Edrick look at her. She was about Ella's age.

"Yes, Clara?" I asked.

"Can you make us some of your chocolate chip cookies before you go?"

I paused, glancing up at the clock behind Edrick to see that we had already been here for over an hour. "I'm sorry, Clara, but we've probably got to head ho—"

Before I could finish, Edrick suddenly stepped in and surprised us all.

"We'll stay a little while longer," he said.