

## Chapter 32 Sweet as Sugar

### Moana

The children all began to cheer once Edrick agreed to stay longer so that we could make cookies. I lifted my gaze from Clara to see the Alpha billionaire standing in front of me, but he wasn't looking at me; he was looking at the children.

We all made our way down to the kitchen. I lingered at the back of the group, still in utter shock as I tried to wrap my head around Edrick's sudden change in demeanor. Had the tour of the orphanage and seeing how disadvantaged children lived given him a bit of compassion?

Once we were in the kitchen, I put on an apron and started to get out the ingredients to make the cookies while the children watched hungrily, licking their lips in anticipation for the sweet taste of sugar in their mouths.

"Do you like to bake, Mr. Morgan?" Clara asked, standing on her tiptoes as she gripped the edge of the counter to see.

"No," Edrick replied, avoiding eye contact with the little girl. "I don't."

"Not even cookies?"

"No, not even cookies," Edrick said. Then, in a slightly lower voice: "I've never baked anything."

The children erupted into gasps, causing me to stifle a laugh. “Here,” I said, grabbing an extra apron and tossing it to Edrick. “I’ll teach you.” Edrick caught the apron and gave me a puzzled look while the children exploded with a chorus of giggles.

“I think I’d just mess it up,” he replied. “You can do it.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “There will be no cookies if Mr. Morgan doesn’t help,” I said, to which all of the children began to protest loudly, some even going so far as to push Edrick toward me with their tiny hands, begging him to bake.

“Alright, alright!” he said; it almost seemed as though he was holding back a smile. He shrugged off his suit jacket and put the apron on, coming over to me. Without thinking, I reached out and rolled his sleeves up for him. Our eyes caught for a second and lingered on each other.

“Ew!” one of the older kids shouted. “They’re gonna kiss!” Now, the group’s cries of protest became even louder as some of the boys even went so far as to gag theatrically.

I stepped away from Edrick, shaking my head as I felt my face get hot. Next, I showed Edrick which ingredients to pour into the bowl, and how much of each.

“Put two cups of flour into this bowl,” I said, “and the baking soda...”

Soon enough, we had enough cookie dough for an entire army. Sophia took half of the children as a group, helping them to roll the dough into little balls and place them on the trays, while Edrick and I helped the other half.

“Mr. Morgan?” Clara said — she seemed to have taken a liking to him, which reminded me of Ella.

“Yes?” Edrick asked as he rolled a ball of dough between his palms.

“Do you have a mom?”

“I do,” Edrick replied.

Clara was silent for a moment, sticking her tongue out to the side a bit as she focused on rolling a wa d of cookie dough into a misshapen ball between her tiny hands, then slapped it down on the tray with an unprecedented amount of force for such a small girl. Then, she turned toward Edrick and looked up at him inquisitively. “How come you never bake with your mom? If I had a mom, I’d probably bake with her all the time.”

Edrick opened his mouth to speak, but the words didn’t seem to come.

“Clara,” Sophia interjected from across the room, “That’s an awfully personal question.”

“Oh. Sorry, Mr. Morgan.” Clara drooped her shoulders and dug into the bowl of cookie dough to grab another handful.

“No,” Edrick said, taking me by surprise once more, “it’s alright.” He bent down to Clara’s level and looked at her with unexpected honesty in his eyes. “My dad doesn’t always think that boys should do the same things that girls do,” he said. “So, I grew up thinking that if I tried to ask to do things like bake with my mom, I would get scolded.”

Edrick’s words sent a pang through my heart. Growing up in the orphanage, Sophia had always allowed the boys and the girls to play however they wanted and to try new things. I grew up not only baking and doing traditionally feminine things, but I also had all of the opportunities in the world to try traditionally masculine hobbies. I couldn’t imagine not being allowed to try those things just because of my gender, but it explained so much about Edrick’s personality... And it made me dislike his father a little more.

One of the little boys, who was sneakily stuffing raw cookie dough in his mouth, suddenly spoke up. “That’s dumb,” he said, his voice garbled through the cookie dough. “Baking is fun.”

“Hey, Elliot!” I shouted, running after the little boy. “Don’t eat raw cookie dough!”

Elliot ran around the kitchen, evading me, and the children erupted into laughter again. When I looked up, I saw that Edrick was laughing, too.

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Soon enough, the cookies were out of the oven and the children were happily stuffing their chocolate-covered faces. Sophia led Edrick and I to the door; we hadn’t realized it, but we had been there so long that the sun was already beginning to set.

“I really can’t thank you enough, Mr. Morgan,” Sophia said as we stood in the doorway. “Your donation means the world to us. We’ve really been struggling lately — the government isn’t so generous with their money when it comes to human orphanages like this one. I really thought—” I watched as Sophia blinked back a few tears. “—I thought that we would have to shut down soon.”

I reached out and squeezed Sophia’s arm. Edrick fell silent and appeared to be thinking, his brow furrowed almost angrily.

“I’ll see what I can do in the future,” he said suddenly. “I could set up a foundation.”

Sophia’s and my eyes both widened in shock. “You’re joking,” she said.

Edrick shook his head. “Children deserve to be taken care of,” he said. “These kids are lucky to have someone like you. I’ll do what I can to help keep this place afloat.”

A sob suddenly escaped Sophia's throat, and she threw her arms around Edrick in a tight hug. I watched, suppressing a smile, as he stood there stiffly with his arms at his sides as though he didn't know what to do. Finally, Sophia pulled away and wiped a tear away from her eye with her finger. "I'm sorry," she said. "That was inappropriate."

Edrick said nothing, but walked out the door with a nod. I said my goodbyes to Sophia and the children before following him. The air was much cooler now, and there was a breeze coming off of the nearby ocean. As we walked to the car, I watched Edrick walking ahead of me. He still had his sleeves rolled up and carried his suit jacket over his arm. The breeze ruffled his dark hair, which had been combed back neatly when we first arrived and was now loose and free, which made him look all the more handsome. I could feel Mina's presence inside of me as I looked at him.

"Wait! Mr. Morgan!" a tiny voice suddenly shouted from behind. Edrick and I turned around to see Clara running toward us with wild abandon as she swung a small paper bag in her hands. Sophia was standing in the doorway, watching.

Clara stopped in front of us, panting from her mad dash, and her little face turned bright red as she forcefully held the paper bag out to Edrick. He looked down at her for a moment, puzzled, before tentatively taking the bag.

"It's two cookies," she said between breaths. "One for you and one for Miss Moana."

"That's very sweet, Clara," I said with a smile, watching as Edrick seemed to be suppressing a smile himself.

Clara, satisfied with her gift, turned on her heel and began to march back toward the orphanage with confidence. She stopped halfway, however, and turned around to say one more thing.

“When are you gonna come back to bake some more, Mr. Morgan?” she asked.

Edrick was silent for a moment. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

And then, he said: “I’ll be back soon.”