

Chapter 55 Out of Place

Moana

The drive to the gala was quiet. Ella was too busy fiddling with the beads on her dress to talk much, and Edrick made no attempts at holding a conversation with me. I felt self-conscious after the way he looked at my belly when I got in the car — was I already beginning to show signs of being pregnant, or was it only a coincidence?

Eventually, the driver pulled up to the curb outside a large stone building with huge marble columns on the front. Edrick told us to wait until the driver came and opened the door, then Ella and I got out first. She held firmly onto my hand as we approached the building, clearly just as nervous as I was. Her nerves only seemed to heighten when we stepped inside and she realized that there were no other children around.

“Moana?” Ella whispered, tugging at my dress while giving me big doe eyes. “I don’t like it here.”

“I know, love,” I said, pulling her closer. “It’s okay, though. We’ll stick together all night.”

Ella nodded. Edrick was already being accosted by wealthy werewolf socialites and fellow CEOs, so Ella and I quietly slipped away.

We weaved our way through the small crowd. The gala appeared to be fairly private, with only a few journalists milling about and taking photos

of people. It was lovely, but I felt out of place as a human. The inside of the building was old and well-kept, with tall ceilings, marble floors, and enormous marble columns throughout. The sound of the orchestra playing music echoed through the air along with the sounds of people's voices. There were rows of tables covered in beautiful meals and hors d'oeuvres, although I couldn't help but wonder if I could even eat any of it without getting sick. Selina had given me that medicine earlier and it made me feel much better, but I was still traumatized from all of my vomiting spells over the past couple of weeks.

Just then, as Ella and I were looking for a quiet place to sit, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around to see Sophia standing behind me with a huge smile stretched across her aging face.

"Look, Ella!" I said, tugging on Ella's hand and breaking her from her trance as she stared at a plate of desserts. "It's Sophia." Ella immediately whipped around, her face lighting up as she saw Sophia. I watched as they hugged, then felt a smile spread across my face as Sophia straightened back up to hug me next. She appeared more vibrant and happy than I'd ever seen her; there was no doubt in my mind that Edrick's donations were making her life and the children's lives so much better. Even if he was only doing this to make himself look good in the public eye, I was at least happy to know that she and the children were benefiting from it.

"It's lovely to see you," I said, giving Sophia a tight hug.

When we pulled away, she was still smiling, but her smile faded as she looked at me. "Are you alright?" she said, still holding me by both arms. "You look a little peaked."

I nodded, scrambling to come up with an excuse; I knew that I looked a little haggard from all of my morning sickness.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said with a smile. "I had a bout of food poisoning not long ago."

Sophia seemed satisfied with this response. She then opened her mouth to say something else, but as she did, I noticed that she looked at my belly in the same way that Edrick had in the car. It was impossible for me to be showing already, wasn't it? But then again, I knew next to nothing about werewolf pregnancies. Maybe they showed sooner. After Sophia looked at me like that, I made sure to hold my purse in front of my belly.

"It's a lovely gala, isn't it?" I said nervously, just wanting to redirect the center of attention away from myself.

"It is," she said, tearing her eyes away from my belly and looking out over the crowd. "Edrick really outdid himself."

I felt a little bit relieved. "You know, I really am so grateful for all of this," she said to me. If I looked closely enough, I could see what looked like tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "With the official start of the foundation, so many children's lives are going to be changed for the better."

Sophia's words made me smile. "Is that why you chose this career?" I asked, realizing now that I had never had the chance to talk deeply with Sophia about her goals and passions in life.

She nodded vehemently. "Of course. You know, children don't choose to be born. They have no control over their heritage, and often they're at the mercy of their caregivers to see to it that they're taken care of. Not all children have the golden opportunity to grow up in a loving home where they can be well fed and have a promising future, and it's often even harder for human children to find that." She paused, dabbing at her eye with a handkerchief. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just get a little emotional. It breaks my heart to think about how this society can harm helpless children in so many ways. And people just allow it."

I reached out, squeezing Sophia's shoulder. "It's okay, Sophia," I said. "Your emotions are what will change the lives of so many children. We need more people like you."

Sophia smiled tearfully.

Just then, the speeches began. Edrick stood up on the stage first behind the podium, and for the first time, I had the chance to see his diplomacy in person.

“Thank you all for coming tonight,” he said, leaning into the microphone a bit. “This past month, I have had the pleasure of getting to know the director of the Oceanside Orphanage...”

Edrick’s speech went on for several minutes. I felt almost enthralled by his eloquence as he spoke, and was even moved by some of the kind things that he said about the orphanage. I knew that a lot of it was only fabricated to make his image as a CEO look better, but it still made me wonder if there was indeed a tiny shred of light inside his dark and cold soul.

After Edrick’s speech, Kelly also gave a speech. I was surprised to see her speaking at the gala, and even more surprised when Sophia leaned over and whispered in my ear that Kelly was one of the biggest donors to the foundation so far. Was Kelly secretly a much kinder person than I previously thought, or did she have some sort of ulterior motive?

The speeches ended, followed by a champagne toast. I felt a bit uncomfortable, trying to hide the fact that I wasn’t drinking. Thankfully, Sophia didn’t seem to notice. The orchestra began to play music and people began to flock to the dance floor in groups of two.

Sophia turned toward me with a smile on her face. “Are you going to da—” she began, but stopped as her eyes caught something behind me, and her smile widened.

“Kelly!” she exclaimed. “How nice to see you!”