

## Chapter 66 Sweet Relief

### Moana

“Did you decide?” the doctor asked.

I felt completely helpless, and began to cry harder. The doctor was silent and let me cry, and when I was finally able to speak around my sobs, I looked up at him and shook my head.

“I can’t do it,” I said, my chest heaving with each word as my lungs felt like they would explode. “I don’t want to go through with the abortion.”

The doctor nodded. “Okay then,” he said with a warm smile. “You don’t have to do it.”

He left to let me get dressed again. As I did, I felt Mina practically leaping with joy inside of me, and I couldn’t help but smile a bit. I finished dressing, then headed back out to the elevator with the intention of calling a cab home since Edrick thought that I would be spending the night here.

When the elevator doors slid open, however, I was utterly shocked to see Edrick standing there with a blue surgical mask on to hide his identity. He had a panicked look in his eyes, We stared at each other for a long few moments before he finally spoke.

“Well?” he asked. “Did you do it?”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t. I decided that I want to keep it.”

He seemed relieved and let out a deep sigh. “Come on. I’ll drive you home,” was all he said, but I could tell just from his body language that he was happy with the decision.

Without another word, he turned around and walked back to the door. I couldn’t help but notice the rude secretary’s eyes on me as I walked past with Edrick — no doubt she was shocked to see a human walking out with a werewolf.

Edrick held the door open for me, and once I was inside, he came around to the driver’s side and pulled away from the curb. I began to feel suddenly light and free, and was certain that I’d made the right decision. Whatever obstacles we faced, I was sure that we’d take them all in stride. In a way, we were going to be a team now, and that was a comfort.

“I’d like to tell Selina and the maids,” I said as we drove.

Edrick nodded, but didn’t say anything else out loud. I wondered what was going through his head, but decided not to pry.

The drive home was mostly quiet, aside from that brief agreement to tell Selina and the maids about the decision when we got home. Finally, I couldn’t contain my curiosity any further, and I broke that silence.

“What made you come back?” I asked. “I thought that you were going to pick me up tomorrow.”

Edrick paused for a moment, then shrugged nonchalantly. “My morning meeting got canceled, so I decided to come and check to see how everything went.”

I didn’t ask any other questions, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that he came back for a different reason.

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When we arrived back at the penthouse, Ella was playing in the living room with Selina. Ella was surprised to see me there; meanwhile, Selina looked rapidly between Edrick and I with a worried expression on her face.

“Moana!” Ella shouted, jumping up and running over to me. “I thought you were gonna be gone all day.”

I smiled, then shook my head and crouched down to her level to pinch her cheeks. “I decided I missed you too much,” I said, blinking away the tears that threatened to form in my eyes.”

“Ella, why don’t you go and play in your room for a little bit?” Edrick asked then. “Moana can come and play with you soon.”

“Okay!” Ella exclaimed as she scurried off. Once she was gone, Selina stood. I noticed that she was wringing her hands nervously.

“Well?” she asked.

Edrick didn’t answer. Instead, he gestured for both Selina and I to follow him to the study, and called for Amy and Lily to come as well, who were standing in the kitchen doorway looking concerned.

Once the door was closed, Edrick sighed. He opened his mouth to speak, then promptly closed it again and cleared his throat; I could tell that he was struggling to find the right words, so I decided to take it upon myself to reveal the news.

“I decided to keep it.”

Selina let out a sigh of relief. Amy and Lily sighed too, and in that moment I realized that they certainly already knew about the pregnancy, despite Selina having promised not to tell anyone. Still, I couldn’t be mad at her for secretly telling them.

“Oh, this is wonderful,” Selina said. Much to my surprise, the housekeeper walked briskly over to me and wrapped me in her arms. Once

again, I was taken aback by her sudden display of affection, but it was over more quickly than it began. She stepped back, then looked between Edrick and I once again.

“Are you going to tell Ella?” she asked.

I looked up at Edrick; we hadn’t talked about it even once, and I was still unsure as to whether he would even tell her that the baby was her sibling, or if we would hold up a facade that the baby had a different father.

For the second time in those few moments, I was shocked again.

“Of course,” he said without hesitation, nodding. “We’ll tell her.”

“And what will you say, exactly?” Selina pried. “Do you have a plan?”

Now, Edrick finally hesitated. He glanced over at me, looking surprisingly unsure of himself. “I... I admittedly haven’t thought that far ahead,” he said quietly. “I must confess that this is not a situation I thought I would ever see myself in.”

Selina frowned, folding her arms across her chest.

“What about you?” she asked, looking at me. “Surely you’ve thought about it.”

I bit my lip. Much like Edrick, I also hadn’t thought that far ahead. Less than an hour ago, I had been fully planning on aborting the child. Before that, I was too preoccupied with what decision would be best to make to even think about the impact it would have on Ella. I was a bit embarrassed that how she might react didn’t even cross my mind once.

Selina, seeing my hesitation, sighed deeply and even groaned a little with exasperation. “I suppose you have time,” she said, glancing down at my stomach. “But if you wait too long, you’ll start to show, and it will only hurt her even worse if she feels like you’ve been keeping a secret from her.”

“I just worry about her reaction,” Edrick chimed in, surprising me again with his own candidness. “You know how she’s been in the past with nannies... She might think poorly of Moana after this.”

I looked up at Edrick, taken aback that he had actually taken time to consider how Ella’s knowledge of the pregnancy might affect her relationship with me. All this time, I thought that he was too self-absorbed and superior to think such things, but now I couldn’t help but wonder if something had changed when he discovered my pregnancy.

“You have to make sure you handle it well,” Selina replied. “It’s important to be mindful of your child’s emotions when you introduce the prospect of a new sibling. And it’s equally important to work hard to ensure that she doesn’t think she’ll get replaced.”

Once again, Edrick and I looked at each other. At that moment, I felt myself soften as I looked up at his face; he had a worried expression on, but at the same time, he seemed excited and not so hard and cold as he usually was.

Now, we had to face our second obstacle as expecting parents — but at least we would be doing it together, as a team.

## Chapter 67 A Good Sister

### Moana

Edrick and I agreed with Selina that Ella had to be carefully introduced to the topic of having a new sibling. Not only could it be harmful to her self esteem to think that she might be ‘replaced’ or get less attention, but it could also be harmful to both her relationship with her father and her relationship with me. Considering the fact that we both decided that it would be best for me to continue to live with them as we raised the new child, it was important for us all to get along.

We didn’t say anything for a few days, as we both wanted to give ourselves time to come up with a strategy before we told Ella. But, as Selina warned, I would begin to show soon. Since the baby was a little werewolf and not a human, the pregnancy would be a bit different, and I would show sooner. My belly was already starting to look a little more bloated than usual, as I had learned at the charity gala.

During these days, Edrick and I met up each evening after Ella was asleep to watch videos on broaching subjects like this with children, and we even began to compile a small list of videos aimed toward children for Ella to watch when she was ready. Several late nights were spent like this, and it was a relief to feel as though Edrick was softening about spending time with me. Even though we never talked about anything other than the baby, it still felt nice to be near him and to not be treated like a total stranger.

Still, it was a little demoralizing to know that the only reason why he was treating me differently was because of the baby.

Finally, once we were ready, we decided that it was time to tell Ella.

It was a Sunday morning, and we'd just had a breakfast of waffles and bacon that Selina prepared for us. Once we were finished, Edrick leaned forward with his elbows on the table. He shot me a glance, and I gave him a subtle nod of approval, before he spoke.

"Ella, Moana and I have something we need to talk to you about," Edrick said.

Ella's eyes widened, and she suddenly spoke very quickly. "I'm sorry that I cut my doll's hair—"

I couldn't help but laugh at this sudden admission of new information, and neither could Edrick.

"It's not that, Princess," Edrick said, reaching out and taking her tiny hand. "You're not in trouble. Although, you shouldn't cut your dolls' hair; it doesn't grow back like yours does."

"Okay," Ella said pensively, swinging her legs on the chair. "What is it, then?"

Edrick looked at me again. We had decided that it was best for him to tell her since he was her father, but I could tell that he was having trouble. I pressed my lips together and smiled slightly, urging him to continue.

"Moana is going to have a baby," he finally said quietly. "A little sibling for you."

Ella's eyes widened again. "A... sibling?" she asked. She looked back and forth between Edrick and I, processing this new information. I bit my lip and felt my heart begin to race as I started to worry that she was going to throw a tantrum. We'd made sure to prepare for that sort of scenario, but that didn't mean that I was looking forward to it.

“Yes,” I chimed in. “You’re going to have a little brother or sister. How does that make you feel?”

Ella was silent for several more seconds. I felt a lump rise in my throat, and glanced over to see that Edrick was staring intently at his daughter with a look of worry on his own face.

But then, much to our surprise, she suddenly jumped up on her chair and threw her arms up in the air. “Yippee!” she exclaimed. She then jumped down and began to skip around the room and chatter excitedly. “I’m gonna have a little sibling! I hope it’s a girl. I want a sister so I can braid her hair and do her makeup!” She stopped then, tapping her chin with her index finger. “Although, I guess a brother would also be okay. Then we can play tag and I don’t have to feel bad if he falls down because he’s a boy.”

Suddenly, Edrick threw his head back and laughed, fully and deeply, for the first time since I’d met him. “Ella, you should still worry if your little brother falls down and gets hurt,” he managed through the laughter. His eyes were squeezed shut as he continued to laugh, and when they finally opened, there was a sparkle in them that I’d never seen before. Seeing him like this made me smile.

Finally, Ella walked back over to her seat and sat down.

“So, you’re happy?” I asked, squeezing her little hand.

“Mhm.” She nodded. “I’m very happy.”

I let out another sigh of relief — but that feeling quickly returned when she asked her next question.

“Are you two gonna get married?” she asked.

Edrick and I both fell silent. I heard him clear his throat, but I quickly averted my gaze, as did he. We had both known that she would probably ask this question, but we never could have actually prepared ourselves for it.

“Well...” Edrick began, clearing his throat again.

I looked up, feeling my heart skip as I saw that his gray eyes were looking at me once more. The sparkle in them had faded, as though he flipped a switch. They weren't cruel, but they weren't warm, either.

“Your daddy and I decided to just be friends,” I said suddenly, turning my entire body in my chair to face Ella.

Ella frowned. “But mommies and daddies always get married, don't they?” she asked, turning her head to look at Edrick.

“Not always, Princess,” Edrick said in a low, serious voice. “Sometimes they don't. But that's okay. The baby will still be your little sibling.”

“Oh,” Ella said. “Okay.”

Even though it hurt to admit that we would never be a true married couple and would only ever be co-parents living under the same roof, I was at least relieved to know that Edrick was able to handle that question so well. It made me wonder, though: would the new child be so accepting of it? Certainly he or she would eventually ask that question and become confused about our strange dynamic, and it would be a lot different. I wasn't Ella's mother, but this new child would be mine and Edrick's offspring. It would, without a doubt, affect the child in many different ways.

“Well then,” Edrick said, standing now as though the mention of a marriage with me was enough to turn him back into his usual CEO self, “Moana and I have some videos that we'd like to show you so you can learn more about what it will be like to have a new baby in the house.”

Ella nodded matter-of-factly. What she said next warmed my heart and made me temporarily forget about the pain of my relationship with Edrick.

“I promise I'll try my hardest to be the best big sister I can.”

## Chapter 68 A New Page

Edrick

Now that the issue of Moana's pregnancy was settled, in our household at least, I felt much more at peace than before. Ella seemed to get happier by the day, and would chatter away about her future sibling almost every night at dinner. The issue of figuring out how to best bring it up to my parents was still something I would have to deal with, but at least I had a little time; it wasn't as though my father was walking around my penthouse and would see Moana's growing belly, unlike Ella, who would've seen it happening before her very eyes. Part of me wanted to keep up the lie and tell my parents that I wasn't the father, but I knew that it would be useless with Ella running around. Eight year olds don't exactly make the best keepers of secrets.

Things seemed to settle down into a new normal over the next several days. The servants were kind to Moana and helped her whenever she needed it, but she was still mostly independent with her work. However, I couldn't help but wonder if she would really still be considered a 'nanny' once she got further on in the pregnancy, and especially once she had the baby. I had the money to continue paying her for caring for Ella, of course, but I did wonder occasionally if it would be appropriate — especially once my family found out.

I just kept telling myself that we could cross that bridge when we came to it, though, and that bridge was still quite a ways away. I could take some time to think about the best plan of action as to how to address it when that time came.

I noticed that Moana seemed to be spending more time doodling in her sketchbook — well, not really doodling, as she was admittedly far better than that. Whenever she had some time to herself while Ella played or was busy with her violin and piano lessons, I would catch her sitting in some sunny corner with her sketchbook in her lap.

If I was being honest, it made me a bit curious. She seemed so focused on her drawings; what, exactly, was she drawing?

She caught me looking a few times, too. But I wasn't only looking at her sketchbook.

When I would see her in the sunlight, her hair would turn an even more fiery shade of red. And, as the pregnancy progressed, she seemed to have a maternal glow about her that made her even more beautiful. I caught her sometimes looking at me, too, and we'd both quickly look away at the same time with an unspoken rule between us to not say anything about it.

But, when I couldn't sleep at night, I kept those images of her in my mind; particularly the one image that was still burned into my memories of the morning that I found her sleeping with Ella. Sometimes, just thinking about it made me fall asleep, but most nights it kept me awake more than anything.

I tried not to think about her. It wasn't the right thing for me to think about her. Even though she was carrying my child, she was still the same as before: my very human nanny. I couldn't have any sort of romantic relationship with her, and that was final. Even the thought of it had to be cast out of my mind before things went too far.

That was why, one night, I decided to climb out of bed and get myself a drink; maybe the alcohol would make the picture of her in the sunlight leave my mind.

I quietly walked to the living room, barefoot in nothing but my pajama pants, and poured myself a glass of wine at the minibar. I sunk down into the large, plush armchair with a sigh, and swirled the red liquid around in my glass before taking a sip.

“Bleh.” I made a face to myself as I realized that the wine had gotten too warm and now tasted foul. I got up and grabbed the bottle, shuffling over to the kitchen to dump it out into the sink. When I was finished, I walked back to the minibar and decided to go for the old tried and true: whiskey.

As I was pouring the whiskey, however, I noticed something: Moana’s bedroom door, which I could see from where I stood, was cracked open. The light was on. Something in me wanted to check to see why she was up this late and if she was okay, so I quietly walked over and knocked softly.

There was no answer. Maybe she fell asleep while reading?

I slowly cracked the door open a little more and poked my head in, but she wasn’t in her bed.

“Moana?” I quietly called out, stepping into her room. Her bathroom door was open, and she wasn’t in there. I decided that she must have fallen asleep in Ella’s room, so I walked over to the bedside table to shut off the lamp with a sigh.

That was when I saw her sketchbook lying on the bed.

My curiosity got the best of me. I couldn’t help myself; I set my glass of whiskey down on the side table and picked up the sketchbook, opening it. As I flipped through, I saw countless drawings of the city view from her balcony, each one getting better than the last, as though she was practicing.

Then, I came across the sketch I'd found her working on during one of the nights we slept together. I sank down onto the edge of the bed as I looked at it, taking in how beautifully she'd finished it. It was the finished drawing of Ella and I on the ferris wheel. Ella was sitting on my lap, pointing with her finger out over the crowd with a smile on her face. Moana had stylized it, of course, and had removed my surgical mask and sunglasses. My eyes looked so lifelike as they followed Ella's finger.

I turned the page then, and suddenly felt a skip in my chest as I saw what she'd drawn next.

That must have been what she'd been working on so much lately: little doodles of baby shoes, baby clothes, and, when I turned the page...

A list of names.

Adam. Genevieve. Liam. Celeste. Noah... She hadn't only been drawing these past several days, but she'd also been thinking of names. Something about it warmed my heart, to think that she was sitting in those patches of sunlight thinking about our baby's name.

Suddenly, I heard the floorboards creak next door in Ella's room. I cursed under my breath and quickly threw the sketchbook down on the bed, tiptoeing out and just managing to get out to the living room before I saw Moana sleepily come out of Ella's room, then shuffle over to her room and shut the door behind her.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. How could I explain that I was in her room, snooping through her sketchbook at night?

But then again, as I walked back to my room, I realized that I'd have to explain it anyway — because I'd accidentally left my glass of whiskey on her bedside table.

## Chapter 69 Shopping for the Baby

### Moana

One night, I was reading a bedtime story to Ella when I found myself nodding off in the chair by her bed. I didn't wake up until a couple of hours later. She was fast asleep and I didn't want to wake her, so I quietly got up and slipped back into my room to go back to sleep.

When I walked back into my room, I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, seeing as how tired I was. I moved my sketchbook aside and climbed into the covers, and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up with a headache. I groaned and sat up, rubbing my eyes, and as I did so I noticed something sitting on my bedside table that I hadn't noticed the night before: a glass of brown liquid.

Furrowing my brow, I picked up the glass and inspected it. It was certainly one of Edrick's whiskey glasses from his minibar, and when I sniffed its contents, I quickly realized that it was, in fact, whiskey.

I frowned. Why was there a glass of whiskey on my bedside table? I hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary the night before; had Edrick come into my room looking for me?

I decided that I would ask him about it later, and got up to start getting ready for the day.

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When I came out of my room and walked over to the dining room, Edrick was already awake and was sitting at the dining room table with a plate of toast, a coffee, and a stack of financial reports in front of him. He looked up when I entered, and immediately I could tell that he was guilty when his eyes flickered to the now-empty whiskey glass that I'd dumped out into my bathroom sink.

“Were you in my room last night?” I asked, setting the glass down on the table in front of him.

He paused, then finally nodded his head. “Yes. I saw that your light was on, so I went to shut it off. I guess I set my drink down.”

I frowned and opened my mouth to tell him that he shouldn't have been drinking so much in the middle of the night that he would forget a whiskey glass on my bedside table, but before I could, he suddenly spoke.

“Get dressed,” he said, taking a nonchalant sip of his coffee. “I'm going to the baby supply store while Ella is in training. You should come with me. Afterwards, we'll pick Ella up and I'll take you both out for dinner.”

I felt a little surprised by this sudden proposal. Already he was looking into buying baby supplies? And, even more surprising than that, he was going out in public with me and was even planning on taking me for dinner? I didn't protest, however, and simply turned around to go back to my room and put on a nicer outfit. I opted for the same blue dress I bought at the farmers' market. As I put it on, I looked in the mirror and noticed that it seemed to hug my slightly growing belly well, and I even found myself running my hands along my belly with a smile on my face as I looked in the mirror. I couldn't wait to watch my belly grow over the coming months.

Once I was dressed, Edrick and I took Ella to training and dropped her off. Then, he drove just the two of us to a local strip of expensive outlet stores. As we pulled into the parking lot, I was a bit taken aback by all of the luxury sports cars that were parked outside. Happy families dressed in designer clothes roamed around outside as they walked from store to store, and there was a large marble fountain with a statue in the center surrounded by a small park with benches. I'd never been to outlet stores that were this nice, and even though I felt good in my dress, I still felt a little out of place.

Before we got out of the car, Edrick put on his face mask again to hide his identity.

“Wait,” he said sternly before I opened my car door. I watched as he climbed out and then jogged around to my side of the car. He opened the car door for me and even held out his hand to help me out. As I felt my hand in his large palm, my heart started to pound and I felt my face getting hot.

“Thank you,” I murmured, staring at the ground. There was a moment of silence, during which time I felt his eyes wander down to my dress, then linger on my belly.

But, just as quickly as it came, his gentlemanly nature faded. “Come on,” he said, turning on his heel and starting to walk toward the stores, “we’ve got a lot to do before Ella gets out of training.”

I followed as he walked briskly toward the baby supply store, and by the time we arrived, I was already a little out of breath from trying to keep up with his long strides.

The store was full of other expecting parents, as well as parents with infants and toddlers. We began to walk around the store and look at all of the supplies, but as we did, I also looked around a bit at the other customers. I couldn't help but notice that many of the parents with young children also seemed to have human nannies with them that were doing

all of the work to take care of the children. Admittedly, it bothered me a little bit that some couples were ignoring their children while their nannies did all of the work. I was a bit grateful that Edrick never acted like that, despite his cold and indifferent demeanor.

Not long after we began shopping, an attendant came to us with a smile on her face.

“Looking for newborn supplies?” she asked, nodding her head toward my belly. I hadn’t realized it, but I was rubbing my belly as I walked around. I almost went to take my hand away, but then I remembered that I could be open with my pregnancy now, which filled me with an immense amount of joy.

“Yes,” Edrick replied with a nod.

The attendant’s smile widened. She then pulled out a handheld scanner and handed it to me. “If you’d like, you can walk around the store and use this to scan anything you want. Then, once you pay at the register, one of our employees will gather everything and we can either have it delivered to your home or help you bring it out to your car.”

“Thank you,” I replied. Edrick and I walked away and continued to look. My jaw dropped when I spotted a lovely display with a cream-colored wicker bassinet. As I walked up to it and ran my hand along the fabric that was lined on the inside, it felt softer than anything I’d ever touched...

But it cost almost a thousand dollars.

“Do you want that?” Edrick asked, walking up to me.

I hesitated, biting my lip, before shaking my head. “No. It’s too expensive.”

“Nonsense,” Edrick said. He grabbed the scanner out of my hand and immediately scanned the barcode on the bassinet before I could stop him.

“Edrick!” I said, grabbing the scanner back. “That bassinet is almost a thousand dollars! It’s too expensive for something that will only be used for the first few months of the baby’s life.”

Edrick merely shrugged in response. “So?” he asked, folding his arms across his chest. “I have the money. I want this baby to have the best of everything.”

“Even so,” I replied, “it’s wasteful to spend so much. It’s pretty, sure, but there’s no real need for such an expensive bassinet.”

Just then, another couple passed as we argued over the bassinet. The wife chuckled, and the husband leaned over toward Edrick with a playful smirk on his face. “The first rule of being an expecting father is to never argue with the baby’s mother,” the husband said with a wink before walking away.

Edrick, who had his mouth open already to speak, suddenly shut it.

I couldn’t help it; the fact that the other man’s words somehow managed to shut up the Alpha CEO made me laugh.

## Chapter 70 An Unbridgeable Gap

### Moana

By the time Ella's training was about to end, Edrick and I had purchased a whole host of baby supplies. He insisted on buying the bassinet anyway, as well as anything else the baby might need. Although I thought it was a bit irresponsible for him to spend so much on certain items, I figured that he knew what he was doing, and I didn't argue any further. Besides: I couldn't help but feel happy to spoil our future child as well.

We picked Ella up at training, then Edrick pulled out of the parking lot and began driving in the opposite direction of the penthouse.

"Um, daddy?" Ella called from the back seat, twisting in her car seat to look intensely out the window. "I think you're going the wrong way."

Edrick smirked, then shook his head. "No, Princess. We're going out for dinner."

Ella gasped and squealed excitedly. "Really?" she asked.

"Really."

"Really, really?"

"Really, really."

Ella squealed excitedly again, which made both Edrick and I smile. I was sitting in the back with her to keep her company, and at one point I looked

up to see Edrick's gray eyes on me in the rear view mirror. I blushed and quickly looked away. When I glanced back up, he was looking at the road again.

"What did you learn at training today?" I asked Ella as Edrick drove.

"Oh, lots of things," she said. "We did an obstacle course."

"An obstacle course?" Edrick asked as he guided the car around a corner.

"How did you do?"

"The teacher said I was the best in the class," she boasted, placing her hands on her hips with a gloating smile. "I didn't miss any of the jumps, and I kept my balance the whole way on the beam. Oh, and then after that, we practiced shifting..."

As Ella continued to prattle on about her exciting day of training, I felt a tear come to my eye. That day, I really felt like we were a little family; we were a strange little family, but we were a family nonetheless. I quickly looked out the window before either of them could see my tear, but I couldn't contain my smile.

When we arrived at the restaurant, I was amazed by how beautiful it was.

"Right this way," the host said as we entered the restaurant. I walked behind the host and Edrick, who was wearing his mask, and looked around as I held Ella's hand. The restaurant was located at the top of a tall building, and we had to take an elevator to get up to it. It was spacious and peaceful at the top, with little trickling fountains and a greenhouse feel to it. There was a big glass ceiling with an observation deck for people to walk around and look at the city view. Meanwhile, green plants hung down from the ceiling, lined the walls in pots, and little gardens were dotted around the restaurant.

The host led us to a small, private room with one wall that was entirely glass so we could see out over the cityscape. He left us with the menus, and when he did, Edrick finally took off his mask. Much to my pleasure,

the Alpha billionaire was smiling. He pulled Ella's chair out, then mine, which made me blush.

"Get anything you want," he said, flipping through the menu. "Both of you."

"Hm..." Ella tapped her chin thoughtfully, then leaned over from where she was sitting next to me and pushed the menu toward me. "Do they have chicken tenders?"

I laughed. "Chicken tenders?!" I asked in a playful tone of voice. "Don't you want something fancy?"

"Chicken tenders are fancy," Ella insisted, folding her arms across her chest.

I heard Edrick chortle across from me. "You're right, Princess," he said. "Chicken tenders are indeed the fanciest of all dinners." He didn't look up from his menu as he spoke, aside from a quick glance up — and as he did, I caught his eyes sliding over my dress, my belly, then up to my hair and eventually they met my own eyes. Once he noticed that I was looking, he quickly looked away again.

"What about you, Moana?" he asked. "What are you having?"

I swallowed, taken aback that he cared to know what I was going to order. Lately, I'd been craving a lot of meat; no doubt it was due to the pregnancy. I was carrying a little werewolf, after all.

"Um... Steak sounds good," I said.

Edrick furrowed his brow. "Are you sure that it's safe for a pregnant woman to eat something like that?" he asked. "I just don't want you to feel sick later."

"I think it's okay," I said, feeling my face blush from the Alpha's concern for my health and the baby's health. "But I can get something else, if you're that worried. I've just had a craving for red meat lately."

“Hmm... Let’s see,” Edrick said, pulling out his phone. He quickly typed something, then was silent for a moment and nodded his head. “It says that protein is actually recommended, as well as the vitamins in red meat. You should eat it if you want it. Maybe a craving like that is a good thing.”

Under any other circumstances, I would have been a bit discouraged by a man questioning my choice of food like that, but this was different; I began to feel as though I really did make the right choice. Edrick clearly cared about me and the baby, and it warmed my heart.

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After dinner, and even a little dessert, Edrick paid the bill and we left. I felt indescribably happy after such a lovely day.

Edrick also must have had a wonderful day, because on the way back down in the elevator, he instinctively placed his hand on my lower back as we stood next to each other. I felt my heart skip and chanced to look up at him to see that he seemed to be doing it naturally, and he didn’t even seem to realize it himself. I blushed, looking back down at my feet, and rubbed my hand over my belly. Somehow, this all felt so natural.

The elevator doors opened at the bottom and we stepped out, only to be surprised by a bright camera flash in front of us.

My eyes widened. I glanced up at Edrick to see that he had forgotten to wear his mask down to the lobby, and he was frowning deeply — such a stark contrast from the smiling man who I just had dinner with. He quickly dropped his hand from my back and stormed out of the elevator, putting on his mask as he did so to avoid more photos, and then pulled out his wallet as he walked up to the photographer.

“How much?” he snarled, digging into his wallet. “Let me buy that picture. I can guarantee I’ll pay more than any tabloid you could possibly sell it to.”

“Erhm... How much you got there?” the photographer asked, peering into Edrick’s wallet.

My heart sank. “Come on, love,” I whispered to Ella as Edrick continued to barter with the photographer. I didn’t want her to see what was happening and get a bad impression, so I took her hand and ushered her over to the car, where I busied myself with putting her in the car seat and getting her situated for the ride home in order to keep myself from crying.

For some reason that day, I’d forgotten that Edrick wanted to hide me, his daughter, and his future baby. Things had felt so natural for a short while that we almost felt like an ordinary little family.

That picture that Edrick was paying the photographer so handsomely for was immediately a cold reminder of the gap between us that could never be bridged, no matter the circumstances.