

## Chapter 81 Glowing

### Moana

I was still utterly shocked that Edrick wanted to take me out shopping so soon after the tabloid incident, but the next morning, he was waiting for me in the living room when I came out of my room. He was dressed well, although much more casually than normal in a white Polo shirt and trousers. He had a mask and a pair of sunglasses in his hand, and I realized that he would be mostly unrecognizable dressed like this in public with his face covered.

As I walked up to him, however, I noticed that he had a second mask in his hand. He held it out to me. “You’ll have to wear this,” he said. “Now that people have seen your face, you’ll have to be more cautious in public.”

Admittedly, I felt a little bit hurt that we still had to be so secretive, but I finally understood where he was coming from and took the mask without fuss. As we walked over to the foyer, I also made sure to grab my sunhat along with my purse; the hat would cover my easily recognizable hair, at least a little bit. Edrick seemed pleased with this decision, and we put our disguises on before we even stepped out of the elevator in the lobby. With his mask and sunglasses on and dressed so casually, he really did look like a completely different person.

Edrick drove us to a shopping mall that I had never been to — a different one from before. This one wasn't an outdoors strip mall like the one that he took me to for baby supplies, but was rather a large indoor mall. As we stepped through the big glass doors, I felt awed by the massive fountains, lush greenery, and big glass ceilings. All of the other people walking around seemed to be wealthy; even the groups of teenagers strutting around were dressed impeccably well in designer clothing, and I felt rather out of place in my simple dress and sandals.

Edrick and I walked around for a bit before stopping at a children's clothing store first. The prices were expensive, so I only picked out a few things: a simple cotton dress, a light sweater since summer would be coming to an end soon, and a few little onesies for the baby. Edrick was mostly quiet the entire time, occasionally wandering off to look at some things on his own before returning to me. When I was finished, I approached the counter and dug into my purse for my wallet.

"I'll pay," Edrick said, pulling his wallet out of his pocket and extracting his black credit card from one of the slots.

I shook my head vehemently and put my hand up to stop him, ignoring the cashier's confused glances as she rang up my things and folded them neatly.

"It's alright," I insisted. "I want to pay myself."

Edrick frowned, but didn't say anything else until we walked out of the store.

"Why wouldn't you let me pay?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I want to purchase some things for our baby as well," I replied. "It doesn't feel right letting you pay for everything."

"It's all the same, isn't it?" he asked. "I do pay your salary, after all."

At Edrick's words, I felt my face get a little hot. Every so often, I was reminded that he did indeed pay my salary. It was a little embarrassing,

being paid by the father of my child, but I didn't say anything. Edrick didn't bring it up again, either.

Next, we went into a high-end women's clothing store. The prices here were even more exorbitant than the first store, and as I looked at the price tags, I immediately felt out of place. Even the sales associates gave me some odd looks; I didn't even want to touch the clothes for fear of getting them dirty or damaging them and having to pay for them.

"Good afternoon," one of the sales associates said with a warm smile. "Can I help you find anything today?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could, Edrick chimed in. "Yes," he said. "She needs a nice dress for an event. Something a bit loose and fit for a pregnant woman, but nice nonetheless."

The saleswoman's smile widened. "Oh, congratulations!" she said, glancing at my belly. "I think I know of a few styles that will look lovely on you. If you'd like to go and wait by the fitting rooms and take a seat, I'll bring them to you. Let me just take some measurements first..." She grabbed the measuring tape from around her neck and took measurements around my bust, my belly, and the length from my shoulder to my ankles before directing us over to the fitting rooms. I felt even more out of place now; I had never been to any store that took measurements for clothes.

Edrick and I waited quietly by the fitting rooms while the saleswoman ran around and gathered several dresses. As she approached, I could already tell that they were all of the highest quality, and I knew I wouldn't be able to afford any of them.

Before I could protest, however, the saleswoman showed me to a fitting room.

"Let me know if you need any assistance," she said with a smile.

I nodded, then glanced over at Edrick, who was standing nearby with his arms folded across his chest. "I'd like to see them all as you try them on,"

he said, momentarily moving to run a hand through his hair. Even through his mask, he seemed a little uncomfortable at the prospect of watching me try on clothes, but I agreed to his request nonetheless.

The first dress I tried on was already beautiful. I stepped out of the fitting room to show Edrick, who silently nodded and asked me to show him the next one. This went on for awhile as I continued to try the increasingly luxurious — and expensive — dresses on, until I eventually came to the last dress.

It was similar to the simple black dress I wore at the bar on the night we met. The material was a high quality silk, smooth and heavy, and cool to the touch. It hugged my curves in all of the right places, but the silhouette was just right around my waist so it didn't emphasize my pregnant belly too much. I felt a gasp catch in my throat as I looked in the mirror and noticed how the skirt flowed when I moved and how the sage green color of the dress enhanced the glow of my pregnancy, but then I saw the price tag and felt my stomach drop. It was over one thousand dollars!

“Everything alright in there?” Edrick called through the door.

“Um... Yeah,” I said, clearing my throat. I sheepishly opened the door and stepped out.

I couldn't see Edrick's facial expression beneath his mask, but I swore that his eyes widened for a split second when he saw me. Without a word, he raised his finger and gestured with it in a circle to indicate for me to spin. As I did, I felt my face getting hot and was glad that I had a mask on to hide it.

When I was finished, he nodded quietly.

“You like that one?” he asked.

I nodded, but knew I couldn't afford it. “Yes, but... It's very expensive,” I muttered. “I can't afford it. I think we should try another store.”

Edrick shook his head suddenly. “Absolutely not. Consider these dresses as workwear provided by your employer.”

My eyes widened. “No,” I insisted, “you don’t have to do that. Really.”

The Alpha billionaire merely shrugged. “Nonsense.” Before I could protest, he waved the saleswoman over, who scurried over with an even wider smile on her face. “We’ll take all of the dresses she just tried on,” Edrick said nonchalantly.

My face went pale with shock. He was going to buy me not just this dress, but all of them?

## Chapter 82 Protective Alpha

Moana

“We’ll take all of the dresses that she just tried on.”

My eyes went wide and my face went pale. I knew that Edrick would insist on purchasing something for me today, but... Everything? I tried to protest, but he wouldn’t hear it. As I sheepishly walked back into the fitting room and took the expensive dress off, my heart was pounding.

Once I was dressed again, I came out and handed the dresses to the grinning saleswoman, who was likely more excited to get a large commission for this purchase than anything else. I still felt utterly shocked as we made our way over to the counter and Edrick paid without batting an eye. I didn’t know how I would make this up to him, but I knew that I would have to figure something out.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said quietly as we walked out of the store. “How can I make it up to you?”

Edrick stopped and turned to face me. Even through his mask, I could tell that he was frowning.

“You’re carrying my baby,” he replied matter-of-factly. “I’m the one who’s making it up to you.”

I didn’t know what to say. Edrick’s sudden, kind words sent a shock through my body. What happened to the cold, unfeeling Alpha CEO I had

met just a couple of months ago? Suddenly, however, Edrick's eyes narrowed a bit as he studied my face intently.

"You look a little pale," he said. "Are you okay?"

I hadn't realized it before, but trying on so many dresses took a lot of energy out of me, and I hadn't eaten in a while. "Um... I'm a bit hungry," I admitted, realizing now just how faint I felt.

Without a word, Edrick nodded and hooked his arm through mine — another unexpected display of affection that I wasn't prepared for, but before I could think about it too much, he began to guide me toward the food court. "There's a place here with excellent sandwiches," he said. "We'll get something to eat there."

"Th-Thanks," I stuttered as I followed him. Time and time again today, I was shocked by Edrick's kind and generous attitude so soon after the tabloid incident that was, in my eyes, entirely my fault. Even as we walked, I could feel some other shoppers' eyes on us as they noticed the werewolf-human couple with masks on walking around, but it didn't seem to faze Edrick in the slightest. He seemed so nonchalant that I was frankly confused as to why he didn't appear to be very worried about someone looking too closely and recognizing us. Had he made some sort of deal with the tabloid CEO to not post photos of us anymore? It was a possibility, but there were other tabloids that could easily post our pictures, and I was shocked that he didn't seem to care. It was almost as though the entire experience changed something in him.

When we arrived at the food court, there were a plethora of restaurants to choose from. Edrick gave me a chance to take a look at the other food being offered, but I began to feel a little sick from the smell, so he guided me over to a bench a little ways away.

"You can wait here," he said, setting our shopping bags down beside me as I sat. "I'll get us some sandwiches. I'll be right back."

I nodded, and before I could say anything else, he quickly jogged off to the food court. I glanced over my shoulder to watch him as he went; in his white polo shirt, I could see his bicep muscles straining against the short sleeves. I also couldn't help but notice some other young women ogling him, and I quickly looked away before I let myself get too jealous.

As I waited, I took that time to close my eyes and take some deep breaths. Not even a few minutes passed, however, before I felt someone sit down next to me. I opened my eyes, expecting to see Edrick, but felt a knot form in my stomach as I saw that it was a different man.

He smelled like alcohol, and he was staring right at me.

I leaned away, forcing a weak smile behind my mask.

“Um... H-Hello,” I said, scooting a little further away on the bench.

The man only grinned and scooted closer to me. “What’s a pretty thing like you doing hiding your face?” he asked. As he spoke, the smell of alcohol only became stronger as his breath wafted over to me. It almost made me gag. Before I could even answer, he spoke again. “Take your mask off. I wanna see how you look.”

“N-No thank you,” I said. I stood then and grabbed my shopping bags. “Have a nice day.”

The man’s face darkened. I turned to walk over to the food court, but I suddenly felt his hand grip my wrist so tightly it burned, and it wouldn’t loosen even as I tried to wrench my arm away.

“Don’t be so coy,” he said with a sinister smirk as his eyes traveled down my body. “I don’t normally go for humans, but you’re too beautiful.”

“Th-Thank you, but I’m not interested,” I said. I tried again to wrench my arm away, but his grip only tightened. By now, I began to panic and let out a small cry of pain. I glanced over at the food court, but I could only see a sliver of Edrick’s form as he spoke to the food vendor. My heart



raced; I needed him to come back faster, but I couldn't call his name for fear of our identities being revealed.

"You know," the man said, pulling me so hard I fell back down to a seated position on the bench and causing tears to well up in my eyes, "a lowly human such as yourself should be grateful that a wealthy werewolf like me is even remotely interested in you. Come on, sweetheart... Spend the night with me and I'll buy you anything you want."

"I-I don't want to spend the night with you," I insisted, my voice shaking as tears began to stream down my cheeks and soak my mask.

The man only grinned even wider. "Let's see what you're hiding behind that mask, anyway..." He reached out then with his free hand to pull my mask down, still gripping my wrist tightly.

Before he could, however, Edrick's voice boomed from beside me.

"What are you doing to her?" Edrick snarled, storming up to the man. Instantly, I felt my fear turn into relief. As I looked up at Edrick, I saw that his icy gray eyes were now glowing a silvery color, which I had never seen them do before.

The man chuckled. "Leave us alone," he said, waving his hand at Edrick dismissively. "She's already been spoken for."

Suddenly, Edrick's hand shot out. He grabbed a fistful of the man's shirt and lifted him off the bench, causing the man to release his grip on my wrist as he scrambled nervously. Edrick's eyes narrowed as he brought his face just inches away from the man's face.

"Get the hell out of here before I call the cops," Edrick growled. He released the man's shirt, and the man quickly scurried away without another word. Edrick watched after him for several moments before sitting down beside me and grabbing my wrist.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked, inspecting my reddened wrist.

“I’m alright,” I said quietly, wiping my tears away with my free hand. Edrick sighed; he turned toward me, almost as though he was about to hug me as his gray eyes softened. But then, he only looked away quickly and handed me my sandwich. Without another word, he turned forward and draped his arm across my shoulders protectively as he glanced in the direction that the creepy man took off to. I felt my body relax beneath his touch, but my heart continued to race as I felt him rubbing my upper arm comfortingly.

“Go ahead and eat,” he said gently. “Everything is okay now.”

## Chapter 83 Forgotten

### Moana

We returned to the penthouse after the incident with the creepy man, which unfortunately put a bit of a damper on the trip. However, I tried not to let the man get to me, and was instead grateful for Edrick's quick thinking and protective demeanor. The entire ride home, I kept glancing at him by accident. I wasn't sure if he noticed, but if he did, he didn't say anything about it.

After parking the car, we took the elevator up to the penthouse and finally took our masks off once we were on the elevator. I was relieved to finally take the mask off after wearing it all day and let out a deep sigh as we set down our things.

Unfortunately, it seemed that our relief was short-lived. Selena quickly came into the foyer not long after we arrived with an expression on her face that was a combination of both concern and mild frustration.

"What's wrong?" I asked before she even said anything. Already, just from the look on her face, I could tell that something happened.

She sighed. "It's Ella," she said. "She's been moping in her room all day. I tried going in, but she even barricaded the door with toys. I'm not sure what to do."

Edrick and I exchanged quick glances. We both seemed to be thinking the same thing. “We’ll check on her,” he said with a sigh. “Go and take the rest of the night to yourself, Selena. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

Selena managed a weak, but surprised, smile. Without another word, Edrick walked off in the direction of Ella’s room. Selena shot me a brief glance that conveyed her shock at the Alpha billionaire’s suddenly generous demeanor, to which I merely shrugged, before I followed him to Ella’s bedroom door.

Edrick knocked gently on the door. “Princess?” he called out. “It’s daddy. Can you let me in, please?”

“No!” a tiny voice yelled from the other side of the door. “Go away! No monsters are allowed in my kingdom!”

Edrick turned to look at me with a confused expression on his face. I contained a smirk and brushed past him.

“Your Majesty,” I called out, playing into her game, “please let us in. We’ve been sent from another kingdom to make peace.”

There was a silence, followed by the sound of bare feet slapping on the floor. The door then cracked open, and one of Ella’s eyes peered out. She looked both of us up and down before opening the door a little more and stepping out of the way, revealing that her room was a complete mess. She was wearing a princess costume and a tiara from her costume chest, and had arranged all of her pillows and sheets into a makeshift castle on her bed. All of her toys were scattered around the room arranged in various scenes — a battlefield, a tea party, and a throne room — and her clothes had all been ripped out of her closet and were tossed carelessly on every surface.

“Ella,” Edrick said, sounding disappointed, “why did you do this?”

A small growl escaped Ella’s lips. I looked down to see her glaring at her father through her eyebrows. Her pointed wolf ears were showing and her

tiny fangs were protruding slightly. Her claws were extended as well, and I sighed, knowing that Edrick's accusatory demeanor was aggravating her further.

"What King Edrick meant to say was that he only wants to know what happened here in your kingdom," I said gently, crouching to the little girl's level. As I did, her face softened slightly, but she still looked rather angry.

"I have decided to move my kingdom elsewhere," Ella said. She pointed over to her closet, where a suitcase laid open on the floor. It was full of toys and other costumes. "This land is no longer fit for the Princess."

I looked up at Edrick then, who had a deep frown on his face. He seemed to be at a loss for words, and opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again. When he looked at me, I could see a sense of pleading behind his eyes. "Maybe the King and the Princess should have a royal meeting," I suggested, urging him to play along with Ella; I knew from years of experience with children that playing along was sometimes the best way to handle a situation like this.

Edrick sighed, then cleared his throat nervously.

"Um... Ahem... El— I mean, Princess Ella," he said, dropping to one knee and bowing, "would you... um... be so kind as to explain why you'd like to leave this land?"

Ella was silent for a moment. She tilted her chin up and stared angrily down her nose at Edrick, causing her tiara to flop backwards a bit on her head. I gently reached out and straightened it for her.

"I'm the only Princess in the land," she said finally. "I don't want to be replaced."

Edrick's head snapped up. He looked at me with wide eyes and opened his mouth to say something, but I merely shook my head and nodded my head toward her, indicating for him to address his daughter, and not me. He slowly looked back at Ella and cleared his throat again.

“Why do you think that you’ll be replaced, Princess?” he asked.

Ella shrugged. “You guys went out all day without me and had lots of fun. If you’re already forgetting about me now, you’re just gonna replace me with the new baby.”

Now, I felt my own eyes widen. Edrick’s face softened and he sat down on the floor, crossing his legs. “Sweetheart, no one’s gonna replace you,” he said gently. It was endearing to see him look at his daughter with such a genuine, pained expression. He slowly opened his arms, and after a moment of hesitation, Ella walked over to him and plopped down in his lap, burying her face in her chest. As she did, her tiara fell off of her head and clattered to the floor. “You’re always gonna be my first baby,” Edrick said softly. “You don’t have to worry.”

They held each other like that for a few minutes. Edrick rocked Ella back and forth while she sniffled, and for that time, I almost felt as though I wasn’t even there; I was just an observer watching a sweet moment between a father and a daughter, and I stood, deciding to give them some space. As I walked quietly over to the door, I heard Edrick speak again.

“How can I make it up to you, Princess?” Edrick asked gently.

“I miss my friends at the orphanage,” Ella replied with a sniff, her voice muffled by his chest. “Can we go as a family?” she glanced up then to look at me and I froze, taken aback by her use of the word ‘family’. Edrick looked up as well, and I could tell that he was just as taken aback as I was. He stared at me for several long moments, both of us frozen. His steely gray eyes were softer than usual, and in that moment, I felt Mina rousing inside of me.

Finally, he licked his lips and spoke, never releasing his gaze from mine.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “We can all go tomorrow.”

## Chapter 84 Someone from the Past

### Moana

That night, after Ella calmed down enough and agreed to clean up her room with our help, I laid in bed and found myself unable to sleep following the events of the day. Every time I closed my eyes, I pictured the creepy man from the mall; even more than that, however, I pictured Edrick's soft eyes staring up at me as he held Ella on the floor and I felt his protective arm around my shoulders.

I decided eventually that I couldn't sleep for a while, so I decided to get my sketchbook out and draw. Although I had been working on another sketch for the past couple of days, I decided to turn to a fresh page that night and draw a scene that I couldn't get out of my head: the image of Edrick holding Ella in her princess costume.

As I drew, starting with the rough forms of Edrick and Ella, a soft smile inadvertently began to spread across my lips. That smile spread as I began to feel Mina's presence. It had been a few days since I really felt her presence, but I could tell that the events of the day made her come out more. I was grateful; Mina had become a friend to me, in a strange way.

"I have a confession," she said finally after hanging around in my mind in silence for several minutes.

“Hm?” I said out loud. I still wasn’t entirely used to the whole concept of conversing with her in my head, and as I was distracted from my drawing, I didn’t think much of it now.

“Last night... I released a little more of my scent when he hugged you.”

I looked up from my sketchbook and frowned, setting my pencil down. “I thought we agreed on you not doing that without my permission,” I said quietly.

Mina was quiet for a few moments before answering. When she did finally answer, she sounded a little embarrassed. “I really didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

“Well, what happened then?” I asked.

“When he hugged you... I just couldn’t control myself. It’s getting harder to control it.”

I furrowed my brow. Could that mean... No. Edrick wasn’t my mate. If he was, we would have noticed a lot sooner. Right? I went to search for Mina’s presence again to ask her, but when I did, she was gone again. Sighing, I knew I especially wouldn’t be able to sleep now, so I decided to get up and head to the kitchen to make myself some tea. It was hot, so I stayed only in my nightgown.

The apartment was quiet when I slipped out of my room. As I made my way over to the kitchen, I figured that everyone else was already fast asleep — but I realized that I was wrong when I suddenly heard the sound of Edrick’s aggravated voice coming from his office. Unable to contain my curiosity, I meandered a little closer to the closed door and listened.

“What makes you think you have the right to care about my personal affairs?” he said, his voice muffled through the door. “You threw away that right when you decided to screw me over all those years ago.”

He paused, listening to whoever was on the other end of the phone. I furrowed my brow, but kept listening.



“No— Olivia—”

The name Olivia sounded familiar. I blinked as I tried to recall where I had heard that name before, but it finally hit me; I had heard him use that name once before in a situation very similar to this. I had overheard him talking about money and using that name very late one night. Who was this ‘Olivia’ person? Was she a friend? A family member? Edrick certainly didn’t sound terribly fond of her, though, and it almost seemed as though they had some sort of disdain for each other, although the reason behind that was a mystery to me.

Unfortunately, as I continued to stand there and puzzle over whoever this ‘Olivia’ woman was, I was too deeply lost in thought to notice that Edrick hung up the phone and walked over to the door. In fact, I was completely taken by surprise when he suddenly flung the door open. I jumped back in surprise, my eyes wide, while Edrick just stood in the doorway and stared at me.

“What are you doing up?” he asked.

“I... Um... I couldn’t sleep,” I said, my heart racing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Edrick stared at me for several more long, silent moments. The air in the room was thick and hot, and I half expected him to snap at me for eavesdropping... But he didn’t. Instead, he merely shrugged and shuffled over to the bar in the living room and muttered something incoherent to himself as he rummaged around in the dim light for a drink. I watched him for a moment, taking in his slightly haggard appearance, but felt the overwhelming urge to stop him as he pulled out a whiskey bottle and unscrewed the cap.

“I was just about to make tea,” I interrupted, causing him to pause just before he began to pour the whiskey into a glass. “Let me make you a cup instead of alcohol.”

Edrick paused, his hand still poised with the bottle to pour. But, after a few moments of somber contemplation, he surprisingly lowered the bottle and nodded as he screwed the cap back on. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll take some tea.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I’d noticed that Edrick seemed to be drinking a little less recently, or at the very least, he seemed more receptive to other options. If I hadn’t stopped him tonight, I wondered to myself if he would have gotten too drunk; his argument with this mysterious ‘Olivia’ seemed to have taken a lot out of him.

“Come on,” I said, gesturing to the kitchen. Edrick silently followed me to the kitchen, then sat on a stool at the kitchen island while I filled up the kettle with water and put it on the stove. It was dark, and neither of us bothered to turn the overhead lights on, but I had become so used to the layout of the kitchen already that I knew where everything was. The city lights illuminated the room just enough through the window for me to be able to make out Edrick’s somber, brooding expression as he stared down at his hands on the counter.

“I know you heard me,” he finally said after some time. “Just like before.”

I cleared my throat as I looked at him, still unable to hide my curiosity. “If you don’t mind me asking... Was it the same person as before, too?” After I spoke, I felt a knot form in my throat, and I hoped that I didn’t agitate Edrick any further.

Much to my surprise, he nodded. “Yes,” he admitted. “Someone from my past. They’ve been bothering me; they usually start up again around this time every year, because...”

He stopped then, seemingly not wanting to say anymore. As I looked at him, I could tell just from the look in his eyes that he already felt as though he said too much.

## Chapter 85 Moonlit Melancholy

### Moana

Much to my surprise, the aloof Alpha billionaire almost began to open up for a brief moment... Almost. “Yes,” he admitted when I asked if the person he was arguing with tonight was the same person who I overheard him arguing with before all those weeks ago. His voice was low and strained, like there wasn’t enough room in his throat to get everything out in one breath. “Someone from my past. They’ve been bothering me; they usually start up again around this time every year, because...”

The dark kitchen fell quiet after Edrick suddenly stopped himself from saying more. He kept his eyes fixed on his hands as they sat clasped together on the kitchen counter, but I could tell just from the look on his face and the way his body suddenly tensed that he already felt as though he said too much.

I didn’t know who this mysterious ‘Olivia’ woman was or why she apparently popped back into Edrick’s life to supposedly harass him around this time every year, but I decided not to pry any further. Clearly, whoever she was was a sore subject for the Alpha billionaire — and if I learned one thing about him over the past few months since I’d met him, it was that it was just better most of the time to let him decide to open up to me in his own time. Prying wouldn’t get me anywhere, and it would likely only make him distance himself further from me.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence as the water slowly came to a boil in the kettle behind me, I finally spoke.

“You don’t have to tell me any details if you don’t want to,” I said quietly. “But just know that I’m always here to listen if you need advice or even if you just need to vent.”

Slowly, Edrick raised his eyes to meet mine. His face had softened, and there was a sense of melancholy behind his gaze that I couldn’t quite understand. He simply nodded in response, then quickly looked away.

The tea began to boil, causing the kettle to start whistling behind me. I took it as my opportunity to look away and maybe change the subject, so I quickly turned around, ignoring the butterflies in my stomach, and turned the burner off. I then filled the tea infuser with two scoops of chamomile tea leaves, then set it in the teapot and slowly poured the hot water over it. As I did, I felt the aromatic steam rise up and dampen my face... But I also felt something else.

Warm, soft hands around my waist.

I suddenly stopped pouring the tea, feeling Edrick’s hands slowly slide around my waist. He pressed his body up behind me, his hands resting on my belly, feeling how it was beginning to protrude slightly. At first, I thought that he was just feeling emotional about the baby and wanted to touch my belly, but as his body pressed more firmly into me and I felt his breathing deepen and thicken, I knew that it was something else.

I set the kettle down on the counter, then slowly turned my head to look up at him. When I did, I saw that he was gazing down at me. His eyes were no longer gray, but were glowing silver again, just as they did in the mall — only this time they weren’t glowing from anger, but rather from arousal. They flickered down to my mouth then, and I saw him lick his lips.

“Edrick—” my voice was low and thick. I felt the butterflies in my stomach travel down further, into my groin, as his hands gently tugged my hips closer to him.

Without a word, Edrick slowly bent down and pressed his lips against mine. His lips were warm and soft, and as he kissed me deeply and his tongue began to work its way into my mouth, his right hand slid up my belly, over my breasts and up to my neck while his left hand lingered over my stomach. At that moment, I swore I heard a low, aching moan rumble in his throat, as though something stirred inside of him to take our kiss further. I wanted to take it further, too, and I could feel Mina’s presence strengthening for the third time that day.

But then, just as suddenly as it happened, Edrick suddenly pulled away. He almost stumbled backwards, taking me by surprise, and passed a hand over his face as he shook his head vigorously.

“I’m... Sorry,” he muttered, backing up against the kitchen island behind him and then sidestepping to get around it, all while keeping his gaze averted to the floor. I kept my back turned, staring down at the half-filled teapot in front of me as I felt my heart palpitate and my face get hot and red. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but nothing would come out — and by that point, he was already by the door.

“I’m tired,” he said, his voice ragged. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

I spun around then to face him and went to say something as Mina pleaded inside of me to make him stay, but I knew that whatever I said would fall on deaf ears. Edrick seemed to have made up his mind, and besides; I knew that he would never make the mistake of sleeping with me again. I was, after all, still the nanny.

“I’m going to bed. I don’t want tea anymore, but thank you for the offer.”

Without another word, Edrick abruptly turned on his heel and stormed off, leaving me alone in the dark kitchen. I listened to the fading sound of his

footsteps, followed by the sound of his bedroom door clicking shut. Finally, I let out a ragged breath and blinked rapidly to diffuse the tears that had already welled up in my eyes.

Deep down, I knew that he could never really be with me because of the vast differences in our social classes. I knew that. But it didn't mean that it hurt any less when we so clearly wanted each other, and our social classes were keeping us from even being intimate in private. I wanted so badly to storm over to his door and burst into his bedroom, demanding that he make love to me tonight, but I knew that it would get us nowhere.

As I stood there, frozen in the dark kitchen, the only movement I could feel was the pained fluttering in my heart. Mina's strength quickly faded as she came to the realization that I wouldn't be intimate with Edrick tonight.

Finally, I felt as though my own energy had been sapped. When Edrick walked away, it felt as though the rug had been pulled out from underneath me, and I was now teetering in my spot. I didn't even want tea anymore; I only wanted to crawl into my bed and cry myself to sleep.

And so, I left the half-filled pot of tea on the counter and returned to my bedroom. That night, I curled up beneath my blanket, feeling oddly cold for such a hot night.