

## Chapter 96 A Proposition

### Moana

As I watched Edrick and Kelly walk away together, I couldn't help but feel a little jealous. Not only that, but she was wearing the exact same dress as I was! Even Verona did a double take when she saw Kelly walk up to us.

When they were gone, Verona quickly came over to me and took my hand.

"Don't worry about it, dear," she said gently, giving my hand a squeeze. "Kelly... Well, she's not a bad girl, really, but she's always had a bit of an infatuation with Edrick. She'll get bored eventually and stop pestering you."

"It's alright," I replied with a smile, even though I couldn't help but feel bad. "It's just a dress."

Verona gave me a sad look. I felt as though I would cry and ruin my makeup if I kept standing here, so I quickly excused myself under the guise of performing my job duties as a nanny and went to look for Ella. After several minutes of walking around and weaving my way through the growing crowd, I finally spotted Ella over by the snack bar with her friends. As children often do, they were stuffing their cheeks with sweets.

"Ahem." I cleared my throat as I came up to Ella, folding my arms across my chest and looking down at her. The other kids saw me and quickly ran

away, but she slowly turned to face me and gave me a sheepish smile, her cheeks round with cream puff pastries. “You’ll spoil your appetite, young lady,” I said, stifling a laugh at the little girl’s chipmunk-like appearance. She chewed for a minute, then finally swallowed with a big gulp. “Sorry,” she muttered, staring down at the floor. “I was hungry.”

“Well, at least get a plate and sit down when you eat,” I said gently, taking her hand as I began to lead her away from the snacks. “It’s not very polite to eat like that.”

I led Ella back to Verona, who was still waiting by her table as she talked to a servant, seemingly giving orders judging from the way that she pointed and gestured at various tables. The servant nodded understandingly before scurrying off. Verona let out a sigh, then finally noticed Ella coming and a wide smile spread across her face. Ella ran up to her, grinning from ear to ear as her grandmother showered her with kisses.

I hadn’t even fully caught up yet when I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder. At first, I thought it was Edrick needing something from me — but when I turned around, I felt myself go pale as a sheet when I saw that it wasn’t in fact Edrick, but was instead his father, Michael. He was staring down at me with a terse smile spread across his face, but his eyes were cold and stern.

“Care for a dance?” he said, holding out his hand.

“I— Um—” I stuttered, my heart practically pounding out of my chest as a million thoughts raced through my mind. Why was Michael Morgan asking me to dance if not to confront me about the pregnancy? Even if it wasn’t about the pregnancy, it certainly had something to do with my relationship with his son. I was sure of it.

“Well, is that a yes or a no?” he asked. “Come along. I like this song. I’d like to dance before it ends.”

Before I could resist, Michael's hand dug into my shoulder and he guided me somewhat roughly over to the dance floor. He then turned to face me and took one of my hands in his, then put his other hand on my waist. I could feel my own hands trembling as I placed my free hand on his shoulder.

“U-Um, thank you,” I managed to squeak out, forcing a tense smile as we began to dance to the music. Michael was a stern leader, and I almost felt as though I was being thrown around a bit as we danced. “This is a lovely song.”

“Mhm.”

For a few moments, we danced in silence. He smelled like an almost sickly combination of whiskey, cigar smoke, and cologne. It made me want to gag, and started to trigger my morning sickness, but I somehow managed to keep my cool in front of him.

“I suppose I'll cut right to the chase,” he finally said after a couple of minutes, a tense smile still spread across his face while his eyes scanned the crowd around us, doing anything but looking at me. “How much will it cost to make you go away?”

I stopped in my tracks, but Michael hardly seemed to notice and kept pulling me along as we danced, nearly causing me to stumble. I didn't know what to say; what did he mean? Why was he doing this? Why now, especially, right in the middle of a huge party?

“Uh... Pardon me?” I asked, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Michael scoffed. “I know you're pregnant with my son's child,” he said, lowering his voice. The way that the smile stayed plastered on his face, as though we were just having a casual conversation, made me sick. If I reacted, not only would it make a scene in front of so many people — many of whom were looking at us, wondering why Michael Morgan was dancing with a human — but it would also appear as though I was acting

erratically if he appeared so calm and cordial. No one could see the way that his fingers dug into my skin.

It was now, for the first time in the past couple of days, that Mina suddenly began to appear. I quickly pushed her down, knowing that she would try to encourage me to do something rash, and I was afraid that Michael would do something to my baby.

“I— I’m not looking for money,” I said, my voice shaking. “I don’t want anything.”

Michael let out a wry chuckle. He dipped me with a bit of force, then pulled me back up, making my head spin. To everyone else, it just looked like an elaborate dance, but to me it was a deliberate act of violence. “I won’t have my family name sullied by yet another illegitimate child,” he said. “Ella is bad enough as it is; to add not only another child, but a human child at that...” He tsked. “I won’t have it. Name your price, and leave my family alone.”

“I’m not trying to sully your family’s name,” I replied. Mina wouldn’t be quelled, and I felt her anger bubbling up inside of me.

“Tell him,” she growled. “Tell him you’re a werewolf. That’ll shut him up.”

I shook my head slightly, ignoring her. “I only met your son because he offered me a job.” That was a lie, to an extent, but I didn’t care; I would say anything to get away from Michael now before he hurt my baby.

“A job?” he laughed. “What about the expensive clothes, hm? The penthouse? The fancy dinners and professional stylists? Were those part of the job description?”

The lump in my throat grew bigger. I didn’t have an answer for that; of course those things weren’t part of the job description, but I also insisted every step of the way that Edrick didn’t need to spoil me like that. It was his decision to do those things, not mine. I only got pregnant by accident.

Before I could answer, however, the song finally came to an end. Much to my surprise, Michael stepped back and bowed.

“Curtsy,” he snarled.

My eyes widened. “What?”

Michael glanced up, glaring at me. “Curtsy, you whore.”

I wanted to scream, but I did as he said and curtsied to end our dance. The people around us, entirely oblivious to the situation, clapped enthusiastically.

Michael stood, straightening his jacket. As the crowd filled in once more, the smile on his face faded and was replaced with a distinct look of disgust.

“I’ll give you until the end of the night to decide,” he said. “Take the money, or don’t. Either way... I won’t allow you to continue seeing my son.”

## Chapter 97 Treat You Better

### Moana

I was so utterly, unbelievably stunned by Michael's cruel 'proposition' and his rough mannerisms during our dance that I was frozen to my spot. Even as he walked away and disappeared into the crowd, I still felt as though my heart would beat straight out of my chest. I could already feel the vomit bubbling up in my throat from the fear, which was the only thing that got me moving.

I quickly ran to the bathroom, which was thankfully empty. Tears welled up in my eyes as I burst into one of the stalls and doubled over.

Nothing came up, thankfully. I gagged a bit, but that was it, so I took a deep breath and walked over to the sink to splash some cold water on my neck and try to calm down.

Surely, Michael's threat meant nothing. Edrick would certainly handle this; I didn't need to worry. I would tell him after the banquet so as not to ruin his fun, and for now I would just try to have some fun of my own and not think about what Michael said. I just needed some fresh air, and then everything would be better.

Taking another deep breath, I stepped out of the bathroom and followed the hallway until I came to a door that led out to the courtyard; the same one that I had danced in with Ethan at the first banquet. The air was hot,

but there was a bit of a breeze. I made my way over to the fountain and sat down, letting the cool spray hit my back as I sat and tried not to cry.

“Everything okay?” a familiar voice said.

I lifted my head to see Ethan standing in front of me. He had his hands in his pockets and was looking down at me with a concerned look on his face.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, managing a weak smile — but as soon as I met Ethan’s soft gaze, I couldn’t hide it. My eyes started to fill with tears, and my face twisted into a grimace. I covered my face with my hands, not wanting to let Ethan see me cry. “I’m sorry,” I muttered into my hands. “It’s really nothing.”

Just then, I felt a pair of warm arms slide around me. I slowly looked up to see Ethan gazing at me with worry drawn across his face. “You can tell me,” he said gently, reaching up to tuck a strand of loose hair behind my ear. “It’s okay.”

I sighed, staring down at my lap and shook my head. “It’s just... Michael,” I whispered, biting my lip for a moment. “He— He tried to give me money to make me ‘go away’. And he called me a whore.”

Ethan’s face twisted into a scowl. I could feel his arms tense around me.

“That bastard,” he said, shaking his head. “Do you need me to talk to him?”

I shook my head vehemently. The last thing I wanted was for Ethan to confront Michael; it would only make things worse. Even Edrick would be upset that I confided something like this in Ethan. Edrick didn’t even know that I told Ethan about the pregnancy.

There was a long silence. My chest quaked a bit with stifled sobs, but Ethan held me firmly and rubbed my back. It was comforting to have a friend here at a time like this; if I told Edrick now, I knew that he would

instantly go to his father and cause a scene, but I just needed some comfort and someone to confide in. I was glad to have Ethan as a friend.

“Moana...” Ethan’s voice was soft. I looked up to see him gazing at me in a way that reminded me of the night that we danced out here, when we almost kissed.

Except this time he did kiss me.

He kissed me gently on the lips. His lips were warm and soft, but... I didn’t have an interest in him like that. I thought that we had an understanding about that when he first mentioned his feelings for me when we went out for dinner. I froze for a moment, shocked and confused, before pulling away with wide eyes.

“What are you doing?” I asked, recoiling and wriggling free of his embrace. I stood, smoothing down my dress. “You know that’s not what I want.”

Ethan frowned and stood, taking my hands in his as his eyes searched my face earnestly. “Moana, I can’t deny how I feel about you,” he said. “And I think there’s a part of you that feels the same way. I can sense it. You know I can treat you and the baby so much better than Edrick does. If we were together, there would be no question about it; I would proudly take you as my wife. I would never hide you from the public—”

I quickly pulled my hands away and shook my head. “No, Ethan,” I said, taking a step back. “I don’t want that. You know I don’t.”

“Moana... Please. I care about you.”

I didn’t know what to say. All I could do was stare back at Ethan and blink incredulously, my eyes wide. I thought that we agreed that we would just be friends, but... Clearly he didn’t seem to think that I was serious when I told him the first time.

Ethan stared at me for a few moments before suddenly turning and walking away without so much as a goodbye. I watched after him, watching as he disappeared in the direction of his studio.

I was alone again. More tears came, and I sat back down on the edge of the fountain. Now, more than ever, I felt alone in the world because I didn't even have a friend I could trust. It seemed that men only ever wanted to use me, throughout my entire life. First, my boyfriend Sam only used me for emotional support before leaving me for a model and a fancy job at WereCorp; then, Edrick only had a one night stand with me and only saw me as the lowly human nanny, no matter how hard I tried; and now this... Not to mention Michael, trying to throw money at me to make me disappear. Was I really not worth anyone's true love and affection?

I sat there for a while, not wanting to go back inside as I dabbed at my tears with a handkerchief. Part of me really began to wonder if I should have just taken Michael's money and left; at least then, I could be free of all of this extra pain. With that money, maybe I could just raise my baby in peace. I could even start over fresh, in a new city, if I really wanted to.

But at the same time, I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to leave Ella behind, and I couldn't deny the fact that I didn't want to leave Edrick behind, either.

Suddenly, as I sat there staring into the fountain in deep contemplation, I heard the sound of heels approaching on stone. I looked up and my heart dropped.

Kelly was headed my way.

## Chapter 98 What's Best

Edrick

I was too taken aback by Kelly's proposition to even speak. Was she the one who paid off the tabloid to keep the photo up, just so she could manipulate me into having a fake relationship with her? Or did someone else put her up to it... Like my father?

"Well?" she said, batting her eyelashes in front of me. "What do you say?"

"I..." I paused, blinking incredulously as my head reeled. "I need a drink." Without another word, I turned on my heel and headed back toward the door to the banquet hall.

"At least think about it!" Kelly called after me in a sing-song tone of voice. "I'll be waiting to hear your decision!"

I sighed as I stepped back into the banquet hall, letting the music and the noise of the guests wash over me. Why couldn't I just enjoy the banquet? Why did it seem as though these sorts of things always had some sort of political connotations behind them?

As I headed over to the bar, I tried to push my conversation with Kelly into the back of my mind. She was already a little drunk, and was clearly

just being vindictive because she still couldn't seem to get over the fact that I was never going to be interested in her romantically.

"Gin and tonic, please," I told the bartender. I turned around and looked across the room at the party guests as I waited for my drink, and as I did, I saw a familiar head making its way toward me through the crowd.

My father. Great.

"Hello, dad," I said as he approached. I stuck my hand out, but he didn't shake it and instead brushed past me to order his drink. So it was going to be one of those nights; my mother really wasn't lying when she said he was in a mood. With a stifled sigh, I turned back around and took my drink from the bartender. I was sipping it and minding my own business when my father suddenly slapped a folded piece of paper down in front of me.

"What's this?" I asked, furrowing my brow as I picked it up and opened it. My eyes widened as I saw that it was a chart depicting our stock prices. They seemed to have gone down a little over the past week; it was correlated perfectly with the day that the tabloid incident occurred.

"Your little mistake is already taking an effect on our business," my father said. He tilted his head back and drank his small glass of whiskey in one go, then slammed the cup back down on the bar with an amount of force that even made the poor bartender jump. "You need to do what's best for our company. This has gone on for long enough."

"What's best?" I asked, folding the paper back up and sliding it over to him. "What are you talking about? What has gone on for long enough?"

My father let out an exasperated sound that was mere centimeters away from a growl. The bartender refilled his glass, and he snatched it away and drank that in one go as well. "I may be old, but I'm not a fool, boy," my father said. "I was patient enough with your first child. She may be illegitimate, but at least she's a purebred werewolf. But this..." He turned, gesturing toward Moana as she walked across the ballroom holding Ella's

hand. I watched as Ella excitedly took off toward my mother, who was grinning from ear to ear and showering her with kisses. My father never even once smiled at Ella. My eyes wandered over to Moana then, who looked absolutely stunning in her dress; far better than Kelly looked, and Moana hardly even had to try to look that beautiful. She was a natural beauty, whereas Kelly was too thin and the effects of too much alcohol, too many cigarettes, and not eating enough were already starting to show on her face. I always suspected that she dabbled in other drugs, too, but I could never be sure.

“Dad, do we need to have this conversation right now?” I asked, taking my glass and taking a step away from the bar. “It’s the family banquet. Why can’t you just have a nice time?”

My father scoffed. “How can I seriously have a nice time when you’re running around impregnating human nannies?”

A lump rose in my throat at my father’s words. For the second time that night, I was reminded that Moana was just that: a human nanny. A servant from a lower class. I often forgot that she wasn’t a werewolf socialite because of her beauty and her grace, which made it hurt even more when I was reminded of her true social standing. Of course I couldn’t admit it to anyone, and not even really to myself, but I secretly wished that she was a werewolf socialite. If she was, I might have reconsidered our relationship by now if it weren’t for my overwhelming disdain for love and marriage.

I didn’t know what to say. My father turned then to gesture toward Kelly, who had just walked in through the side door and was now sauntering across the banquet hall. “Why don’t you just marry Kelly already?” he said. “She’s a werewolf from a well-to-do family, and she’s an Alpha. You could say that Ella is the daughter that you had with her and no one will bat an eye.”

I could think of one person who would certainly bat an eye, though: Ella's mother, Olivia. It was already difficult enough as it was to keep Ella in the dark on the true nature of her mother and to keep her believing that her mother was dead. If I told the public that Ella was Kelly's daughter, Olivia would find out and would do everything in her power to meddle in one way or another. Not only that, but Ella would resent me forever if she found out. I had always planned on maybe speaking to Ella about it one day when she was grown up and could emotionally understand my reasons behind doing it, but if she found out now at such a young age, I wasn't sure if she would ever get over it.

Suddenly, I came to the realization that my father must have been the one to put Kelly up to talking to me. They were certainly in cahoots together, and it made my blood boil.

"You put her up to it, didn't you?" I asked, spinning around to face him as I gripped my glass with so much force that I was certain it would break. "You told Kelly to try to convince me to have a fake relationship with her."

My father only shrugged and took his third drink off of the bar, this time holding it nonchalantly as he began to make his way toward the dance floor.

"It's time for you to grow up, Edrick," he said. "It's time to do what's best for the company."

I stared after him as he disappeared into the crowd without another word. I still hadn't even finished my drink, and by now I didn't even want it; I just needed to get out and get some fresh air. Leaving my drink on the bar, I turned and stormed off toward the garden.

I needed to take a walk and get away from all of this.

## Chapter 99 For Good

### Moana

I was still staring into the fountain, utterly taken aback by Ethan's sudden decision to kiss me when I just needed a friend to confide in, when I suddenly heard the sound of heels clicking across stone.

My heart dropped when I looked up and saw who was headed straight for me: Kelly.

She had a devious smirk on her face that told me everything I needed to know. She was up to something. I would have tried to get up and walk away, but she clearly saw me already and it was too late.

"Hey, Kelly," I said, forcing a faint smile. "How are you?" I tried to be polite and ignore the fact that she was clearly wearing the exact same dress as I was, even though it made me uncomfortable to see her like that. I kept telling myself that maybe it was just a coincidence, as the store that Edrick took me to did seem expensive and popular, but I knew Kelly just enough to sense that it was completely intentional on her part. She clearly even had the dress altered to sit more tightly on her abdomen, as though she was trying to flaunt the fact that her belly was flat and slim while mine was growing.

Kelly stopped in front of me with that same smirk on her face. She had her phone in her hand and was gripping it so tightly that her knuckles were white. Now that she was up close, I could tell that there was something

else behind her smirk: pure evil and hatred. Her eyes were cold and calculating.

“You know,” she said, putting her hands on her hips, “I tried to give you the benefit of the doubt. I mean, it’s obvious that you’re only trying to scam poor Edrick into giving you money and social status, and he’s falling for it for some stupid reason, but I thought ‘Hey... Maybe she is just a nanny looking for work’. Turns out I was wrong, and everyone can see it. Edrick will see it, too, after tonight.”

“Um... What?” I asked, blinking incredulously. “I’m not sure if I know what you’re talking about.”

Kelly scoffed. She still stood in front of me, effectively blocking anyone from seeing me. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was intentional, as though she didn’t want anyone to see what she was about to do to me. “You’re such a slut, seducing two brothers like that in one night.”

My eyes widened. Did she see my kiss with Ethan? Anyone on the outside could have been able to tell that that kiss was spontaneous and not consensual. “Kelly, that’s not what—”

“Oh, save your excuses,” she said, tapping on her phone now to unlock it. “I saw you. And I have proof.”

“Proof?”

“Here.” She tapped some more on her screen and then turned it around so I could see. My eyes widened as she did; on the screen, there was a clear picture of Ethan kissing me on the fountain. It was right before I came to my senses and pushed him away, which made it appear as though I liked it. As though I wanted him to kiss me, even though I didn’t really want him to at all.

“Ethan kissed me without my permission, and I rejected him,” I snarled, standing. “You’re twisting the narrative.”

“I’m twisting the narrative?” Kelly responded with a wry chuckle. “You’re the one who’s been waltzing around with Edrick, weaseling your way into his life and his family’s life. Everyone knows what you’ve been up to and it’s pathetic. Why can’t you just take Michael’s money and leave all of us alone?”

A pit formed in my stomach. Kelly knew about Michael’s ultimatum? Were they in on it together, or something? All along, Kelly had been following Edrick around like a lost puppy, and his father had apparently been pushing it for years. I couldn’t help but wonder if they planned on working together tonight to push Edrick and I apart and make me go away. Was that why Kelly wanted to speak to Edrick privately at the beginning of the banquet?

“I think you’re just jealous,” I blurted out.

Kelly’s eyes widened. “Jealous?” she asked, laughing abrasively. “Me? Jealous of you? That’s ridiculous! I would never be jealous of a worthless human nanny who had to go and get herself knocked up by a wealthy werewolf CEO in a pathetic attempt to climb the social ranks.”

Now, I was the one who laughed. I felt Mina bubbling up again inside of me, urging me to stand up for myself, and I did just that. Mina’s presence instilled me with newfound confidence, and suddenly I didn’t care what anyone would think if they overheard me. To me, Kelly was nothing but a sullen teenager.

“You are jealous,” I said. “You’re jealous that Edrick will never want you. You think that he’ll choose a human nanny over you, and you can’t stand that. You’re like a child.”

Kelly’s eyes widened so far that I could see the whites all around her pupils. Her face went beet red, and even the veins on her neck began to pop out.

“You little b\*\*\*h,” she snarled. Then, in one swift movement, she raised her hand, pulled it back, and slapped me across the face as hard as she could. There was a flash of light just from the force of being struck by a werewolf; it made my head reel, and I fell back onto the edge of the fountain, clutching my face.

“I’m showing Edrick this photo tonight,” Kelly said nonchalantly as she stuck her phone back in her purse while I was still sitting on the edge of the fountain and clutching my face, staring dazedly down at the ground. “Either take Michael’s money and leave us all alone once and for all, or I’ll make sure Edrick kicks you out himself.”

I couldn’t speak. The pain from the slap was still throbbing through my face and my head, making my ears ring so much that I could hardly even hear Kelly’s voice. Finally, seemingly satisfied with her destruction, she flicked her long, blonde hair over her shoulder with a hmpf and stormed off. The last thing I heard after the fading sound of her heels clicking away on the cobblestone ground was the sound of the door opening and closing, temporarily letting the music and voices carry across the small garden air before disappearing again.

Once I was alone, a sob escaped my throat. I lowered my shaking hand from my stinging face, my entire body shaking with pain and rage. No matter whether I took Michael’s bribe and left or didn’t take it, I was still stuck between a rock and a hard place. Would Edrick really kick me out over a kiss that I didn’t even want? Would my child always wonder why his or her father didn’t want to be in our lives? Would Ella always wonder why I left her?

The tears started to flow now, and I knew that I would be seen easily here and people would begin to start asking questions. So, gathering what little dignity I had left, I stood and began to make my way further away from the banquet hall where I could be truly alone with my pain.

## Chapter 100 Two's Company

### Moana

With my face still burning from Kelly's slap, I needed to get away from the banquet before anyone saw me and started gossiping even more. If anyone saw me crying, I knew that Kelly would be satisfied as well, and I didn't want that.

As I gathered what little dignity I had left and started making my way through the gardens, the sound of the music and the partygoers talking and laughing slowly began to fade, replaced by the sound of the crickets chirping and the sound of the fountains. I eventually found a quiet garden not too far away with a fountain in the center and rows of peach trees circling the perimeter, their sweet fragrance filling the air.

I leaned against one of these trees and bowed my head, finally letting the tears flow now that I knew I was completely alone.

All my life, I only ever wanted to create a beautiful family of my own. After spending my childhood in an orphanage, I always wanted to bring a child into the world with two loving parents who would never leave. The thought of having a big, happy family always made me smile, but now it only made me cry more as I realized that even my own child might never have that now.

Even if Edrick did accept this child, he would never accept me and his family would never accept either of us. How could I bring a child into a

mess like this? How could I bring a child into a world in which his or her own grandfather hated them with a burning passion?

As I thought about the possibility of packing up and leaving, even with Michael's money, it made me sob even more. It wasn't even just about Edrick or the baby, either; Ella had become almost like my own child in my eyes, and I couldn't bear the thought of her confused, sad little face wondering why I was leaving. But no matter what, one way or another, someone would sow the seeds of hatred in her mind at some point. Whether it was disdain for the new baby, thinking that it would replace her, or whether it was disdain for me and ruining her family structure, I couldn't imagine a scenario in which someone wouldn't eventually give her the wrong ideas and create bitterness in her heart.

"Are you alright?"

I didn't hear him coming as I cried. I jerked my head up and whirled around to see Edrick standing behind me with his hands in his pockets and a concerned look spread across his face.

"Um... Yes," I said, straightening myself and wiping the tears from my eyes with my handkerchief. "Just hormones. I got a little overwhelmed with all of the noise and the people."

Edrick didn't seem to believe me, but he didn't pry. Neither of us spoke for a few moments; as he glanced over his shoulder at the mansion, the sounds of the party carrying over to us across the summer breeze, a small sigh escaped his lips. I couldn't help but wonder if something had happened to him, too. Maybe Kelly and his father pestered him in a similar way.

"It's a nice party," I said, just wanting to change the subject.

Edrick shrugged. "Normally, yes. This year..." His voice faltered, and he swallowed hard. "Want to walk?"

I nodded. "Yes. Walking would be nice."

We started to walk together, neither of us speaking. I held my purse in my hands while Edrick kept his own hands in his pockets, but there was no denying the closeness behind us as we walked. Neither of us spoke, but I enjoyed the silence. It was nice, after my interactions with both Ethan and Kelly, to just walk quietly with someone who seemed to have a similar understanding of what I was going through.

I forgot sometimes that this pregnancy was affecting Edrick in a similar way. Sometimes, I supposed that I got so caught up in my own feelings about it that I forgot what it meant for him — to have a child with a woman he only just met, and to have feelings for that woman when it was socially unacceptable for him to act on them. It must have taken a great toll on him.

We passed through a stone colonnade that led to another, bigger garden. Up ahead, there was a large fountain surrounded by white stone and red rose bushes. There was a small, ornate stone bench at the front of the fountain, and it called to me; after everything that happened, especially with the heat of the summer evening, my feet were beginning to ache and swell in my heels. I tried to pick shoes with low heels, but the pregnancy was making even those feel uncomfortable.

“Is it okay if we sit?” I asked, gesturing to the bench and looking over at Edrick. My face quickly went red as I did, seeing how handsome he looked in the dim light with the breeze ruffling his hair. I quickly looked away, swallowing. “My feet hurt a bit.”

Edrick nodded. We approached the bench and he gestured for me to sit, but he continued to stand, thoughtfully inspecting the roses on one of the bushes. I watched in silence as he touched the petals with his fingers, as though he was counting each one.

“It must have been nice, growing up here with all of these gardens,” I said, looking around. “It’s so lush.”

“It was one of the better parts of living here,” he said quietly. “Plenty of places to escape to when my father was in a mood. He rarely bothered coming out this far, so sometimes when his moods were especially sour, I would even sleep out here under the stars.”

I couldn't help but feel bad, imagining little Edrick sleeping outside when his father was being cruel or moody. But when I looked up at him, I saw that there was a bit of a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. He didn't seem too upset by it; if anything, he seemed to be remembering those days fondly. I realized now that maybe those days were preferable to these ones, before he grew up and became a CEO.

It also reminded me of what Tyrus had told me earlier that day, and I couldn't contain my curiosity.

“Tyrus told me that you went to college together,” I said.

“Mhm.”

“What was college like for you? What did you go for?”

Edrick shrugged, walking now over to the next rose bush. “Business. Nothing exciting.”

I paused, biting my lip. College was supposed to be an exciting time — a time for exploring the things that make you happy and choosing a career path that brings you joy. Edrick, however, didn't seem too fond of that time at all. “What else would you have studied?” I asked. “When you were little, I'm sure you didn't say you wanted to grow up to be a businessman.”

The Alpha billionaire, much to my surprise, let out a chuckle. “No, I suppose not,” he said, his eyes lifting finally from the roses to look up at the moon. “It's embarrassing, though.”

“Everyone has embarrassing dreams when they're kids,” I insisted. “You can tell me.”

Edrick was silent for a few moments. Then, with a sigh, he finally answered. His voice sounded almost choked. "I wanted to be a teacher," he finally admitted. "A... music teacher."

My heart skipped at this thought, but at the same time, I felt confused; I had never seen Edrick play any sort of instrument or even mention an interest in music.

"Do you play any instruments?" I asked.

He nodded. "Piano, mostly."

That was strange; there was a piano in the penthouse, which Ella only used for her lessons. Other than Ella, I may have heard Amy or Lily plunk on it once in a while, but Edrick never even looked at it. I opened my mouth to ask why, but suddenly, before I could say anything, the Alpha billionaire did something even more unexpected.

He kicked off his shoes, peeled off his socks, and rolled up his pants.

"What are you doing?" I asked, stifling a chuckle as he climbed up on the bench.

"You said your feet hurt," he said, stepping over the back of the bench and straight into the fountain. "Come on."

I stood, shooting Edrick a confused look. He seemed entirely sober; I hadn't seen a drink in his hand all night. And yet, here he was, standing barefoot in the fountain out behind his parents' mansion. And he was holding his hand out for me with an earnest look on his face.

"The water feels nice," he said. "I promise."