

Chapter 25 Stayover

Moana

The night was finally over. By the time we all returned to the banquet hall, many of the guests had left. Ella, following her territorial outburst in the garden, seemed to have completely exhausted herself and now slept soundly on my shoulder as I carried her.

“Oh, tired little thing,” Verona said in a hushed tone as she came up to us.

“We should get going.” Edrick’s voice was cold and stern; I could tell that he wasn’t particularly happy with me, although I wasn’t sure if it was because I was spending time with Ethan earlier that night or because I got involved with the two wolf pups. I wasn’t particularly happy with him, either — not after what he supposedly said to Kelly about me.

Verona frowned. “Stay the night,” she said. “There’s no need to drag a tired little girl home when we have plenty of space here. You can leave tomorrow, after breakfast.”

Edrick glanced over at Ella, then back to his mother and nodded reluctantly.

Verona showed us to our rooms. Ella’s was situated next to mine in a lower level of the house, while Edrick’s room was directly upstairs. After I put Ella to bed, I returned to my room and wondered if Edrick still expected me to fulfill our sleeping arrangement even though we were in his parents’ home. As I was wondering this, as if on cue, I received a text message from Edrick asking when I would be coming upstairs.

I let out a deep sigh, wishing that it wouldn't have to be my responsibility for us not to get caught, before changing into the silk pajama set and slippers that Verona had laid out for me, which was incredibly kind of her. As I felt the cold, smooth silk on my skin, I wished that I could keep the pajama set.

Cracking open my door, I poked my head out of my room to make sure that the coast was clear before sneaking out. I took extra care to walk quietly as I made my way toward the stairs.

"Looking for something?" a familiar voice said from behind me.

I spun around to see none other than Ethan standing in the hallway. He had a thick book tucked under his arm and was in his own pajamas.

"Um— I was just going to check on Ella," I lied.

Ethan slowly nodded. I felt as though he could tell that I wasn't being truthful, but he didn't say anything about it. "Alright," he said. "Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Without another word, Ethan walked past me with his book. I slipped into Ella's room for a few moments in case he was still watching, and once I counted ten of her deep breaths as she slept, I snuck back out and bolted up the stairs to Edrick's room.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed when I arrived. His shoes were placed neatly on the floor and he was working to loosen his tie.

"Took you long enough," he said.

"It's a bit more difficult to not be seen when there are so many other people in the house," I replied as I walked over to the bed. I pulled the blankets back to get in, but just then, there was a knock on the door. My eyes widened; Edrick silently pointed toward the closet, indicating for me

to hide. I quickly ran over to the closet and quietly closed the door, staying in the shadows while I peered through the slatted door.

“Come in,” Edrick called out.

The bedroom door opened, and in came Verona. She was carrying a tray in her hand, and on it was a glass of milk and an orange bottle of pills.

“I thought I heard you talking to someone,” she said as she walked over to the bedside table to set the tray down.

Edrick shook his head. “Nope. Just me.”

Verona sighed and reached out to help Edrick take off his tie. “Well, darling, these pills should help you sleep. Has your insomnia improved at all?”

There was a long pause before Edrick nodded. “Yes, actually. I hardly need the pills anymore at all.”

Verona let out a small gasp. “Really?” she said. “Oh, that’s wonderful! What changed?”

I half expected Edrick to reveal our sleeping arrangement to his mother. The thought of it made my heart race, but thankfully, he didn’t. “I’m not sure,” he replied. “Less stressed, I guess.”

“Well, perhaps you have that au pair to thank,” Verona said. I watched, stunned, as the old woman’s gaze flickered over to where the blankets were pulled down on my side of the bed. Did she know I was here? I pictured her walking over to the closet and yanking the doors open, revealing my secret with Edrick.

Finally, she turned back toward the door and started to leave before that happened.

“I’m sure having someone to look after Ella is a relief for you, and that’s why you’re sleeping better,” she called over her shoulder. Her hand lingered on the doorknob for a moment; I swore that her eyes met mine

through the slats of the closet door as she glanced over, making me clap my hand over my mouth and step further back into the shadows.

“Goodnight, mom,” Edrick said, breaking his mother’s gaze away from the closet door.

“Goodnight, darling,” Verona replied before leaving the bedroom.

A few moments passed before I came out, once I was certain that she wouldn’t poke her head back in. As the adrenaline left my body, Edrick calmly stood and moved the tray of milk and pills over to the dresser, then began to unbutton his shirt in front of the full-length mirror.

“How did you get those pups to stop fighting?” he asked suddenly, taking me by surprise. “Those two boys are known for being a couple of little devils.”

I shrugged, walking over to the bed and taking my slippers off. “I don’t know. I just had a sincere talk with them. I think they just need someone to play with them more to release their pent-up frustration.”

“Hmm.”

Edrick continued to unbutton his shirt. I watched as he hung it carefully over the back of a chair, but I quickly looked away when our eyes met in the mirror. Thinking about the pups reminded me of what Kelly told me earlier... About what Edrick had supposedly said while I was in the bathroom. It hurt to know that he would say such awful things about me in front of others.

Edrick must have seen me picking my bottom lip thoughtfully. “What is it?” he asked suddenly, breaking my train of thought. I jumped, looking up from the spot on the blanket I had been staring at to see that Edrick was already dressed in his own pajamas; I must have been lost in thought for at least a few minutes without realizing it.

“You know, I’m not trying anything funny with Ethan,” I blurted out, feeling my face instantly get hot in response to Edrick’s cold gaze settling on me.

“Okay,” he replied slowly.

I watched as he got into bed, but still, I wasn’t satisfied. Ethan had been nothing but sweet and lovely since I met him; why was Edrick so cold toward him earlier?

“You know,” I said as I slid down into the blankets, “I don’t understand why you’re so harsh with hi—”

Edrick abruptly shut off the light, casting the room in darkness. “Enough, Moana.” His voice was cold and just as dark as the room. “It’s not your job to question my relationship with that man. I told you that he’s not who he seems, so just listen to me and stop being nosey.”

Edrick’s words stung, and it was then that I realized that I had forgotten to put a pillow between us. With a huff, I grabbed one of the throw pillows from beneath my head and shoved it into the space between our bodies before turning over and going to sleep.

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I awoke early the next morning to find that Edrick was still sleeping soundly behind me. So, taking this as an opportunity to quickly get out of bed and return to my room without any conflict, I threw my robe and my slippers back on before quietly slipping out of the room.

If only I had checked to make sure the coast was clear before I walked out!

“Good morning.”