



Chapter Twenty-four

I woke up alone in Edward's room, not a minute after seven in the morning. My clothes were neatly folded at the end of the bed where he had slept the night before. I ran to the bathroom and washed up before getting dressed. I went downstairs, careful to hold my skirt away from my bare feet while I took each step. Half asleep and clumsy, I thought it was better safe than sorry.

At first, I headed towards the geek room, but I heard the soft strains of classical music coming from the gym. I changed directions, heading back there instead.

He was sweating away as he ran on the treadmill. I had never seen him do it before. His legs pumped as his arms flexed, the muscles in his stomach twisting and turning with each step. It was hypnotic. I could sit and watch him do it all damn day.

"I'm sorry." Edward stopped when he noticed me, panting quietly. "Did I wake you? I'm an early riser."

"So am I. No, I woke up on my own. How long have you been down here?" I asked, walking over to the machine. He stepped down, pressing a careful kiss to my cheek. He smelled wonderful. Like sex, sweat, sunshine, cookies, and books. His scent was improving with every day, it seemed.

“About an hour.” He looked at the clock on the wall. “A little longer.”

“I thought you did your punching bag on the weekend?”

“I knew that would wake you.” He shrugged and smiled shyly. “You look so peaceful when you sleep, and I didn’t want to bother you.”

“It’s your home,” I smirked at his over-politeness. “I wouldn’t have minded. Are you hungry? Want me to make us some breakfast?”

He flushed a little. “Bella, you don’t have to cook for me anymore if you don’t want to.”

“But, I enjoy it.” I kissed his chest, tasting a bead of salty-sweet sweat on my lips. It was so good. I resisted the urge to lick him. I would save that for later. “What would you like?”

His smirk was so cute. “You know what I’d like,” he simpered, that teenage boy coming out in his eyes as he wrapped an arm around my waist. Yes, I knew exactly what he wanted, and I could feel it against my belly. But I felt like teasing him, so I pulled away while batting my eyelashes innocently.

“So, eggs and sausage, maybe? Hash browns, too? I can make some fresh-squeezed orange juice, too.” I tapped my finger on my chin. “Oh! Spinach and mushroom omelets with cheddar!”

Edward’s stomach growled loudly, making me laugh. His body was working against him. I backed away towards the door, smiling at my boyfriend’s frown. “That sounds great. Not what I wanted. But food-wise, awesome.”

“Go get a shower,” I called as I turned away.

“Bella?” He stopped me, a nervous quiver in his voice.

“Yeah?”

“Stay with me today?” He asked with those big eyes, his long strawberry blond eyelashes framing them beautifully.

“Of course,” I assured him. “There is nowhere else I want to be.”

When I came into the kitchen, I switched on the iPod he had in the dock, dancing to music as I chopped mushrooms and spinach for our breakfast. I had eggs sitting in tepid water to bring them to room temperature, my cheese already shredded and ready to go. In a cast-iron

skillet, I started up some sausage. The hiss of fat on metal filled the space. I sautéed the vegetables with a little butter and salt until they were perfect for our omelets. Everything looked so good, and my stomach started talking to me, too.

I had just plated the food and arranged it on the table when Edward returned from the shower. Each of us had a small glass of orange juice along with a cup of milk. He came to me and lightly kissed my forehead. "Smells amazing, darling."

"Thank you," I grinned, feeling my cheeks heat. His smile grew into that beautiful full-face, innocent boy, one that he had. It reached his sparkling eyes, and in them, I could tell he was truly happy for the first time in weeks. It was wonderful to see the clouds roll away to expose the shining sun after a season of rain.

"So, what would you like to do today?" He asked as he sat down on the stool.

"Don't know," I mumbled through a bite of meat. "Whatever we do, I need to go to my house and get a fresh outfit. This one had it kind of rough yesterday with the Maker's Fair and all. And I don't want to smell bad."

"Why don't you bring some stuff over to keep here?" He offered, not looking at me as he did so but instead focusing on his omelet. He was trying to be cool and collected, but I knew him well enough to know better. I could see the gears turning in his head.

"Like what?" I asked slowly.

"Clothes, cosmetics, shower stuff. I don't know. Whatever you need in a day." He shrugged. I nodded my head thoughtfully, considering his idea. It had some merit. It could make things easier in the future. But Edward wasn't done talking. "Or, you could just bring everything over."

He continued to not look at me when he made the suggestion, but this time, he gazed into his cup of milk before taking a long sip.

"Are you asking me to move in with you?" I asked, amused by his shyness.

"Maybe."

Laughing, I rubbed my hand across my forehead. "Edward, we've been a couple for less than twenty-four hours. Don't you think it's a bit soon for that?"

"I suppose you're right," he sighed but smiled his most charming smile. "I'll ask again tomorrow."

I giggled at his suddenly bold playfulness. It was sweet, and it made me happy. He could be so cute when he wanted to be. "Hm, maybe not tomorrow. Try a week from now."

"Hm, I suppose if you want to be reasonable," he teased. "Well, since you want to go back to your place, do you want to go out today?"

"You know what? I don't care what we do as long as we're together," I explained as I reached across the island and touched the top of his hand. He twisted his palm up, winding his fingers with mine. We ate the rest of our meal while holding hands.

After we cleared away the dishes, I drove over to my place in a cute little sports car that he had. It was a convertible, and the day was beautiful, so we rode with the top down. Edward turned on the radio, random music blasting from the speakers.

"So, I'm going to grab a quick shower and get changed," I stated once we arrived.

"I'll wait in here, I suppose," he said, looking around the living room. He always seemed too big for the room, but I minded it less and less.

I took his hand and tugged him along with me. "Why don't you wait for me in here?" I offered once we got into my bedroom. I pulled out the Mac from the bag he had gotten me. "Why don't you try to figure out something we can do today?"

"Hm, good idea," he answered as he sat down on the bed with the computer.

So, I started my pre-shower ritual while my boyfriend typed away on my full-sized mattress. I picked out a new outfit, laying it down on the comforter. Then I got a pair of matching panties and bra, along with the scent I wanted to wear for the day.

Brushing my thick hair carefully so it would be easier to wash, I got all the tangles out. I stripped out of my clothes, and the typing and clicking stopped. I looked over my shoulder as I put them in the hamper. Edward was staring at me, blushing lightly.

"I'm going to have to get used to this. It's a little different in the daylight," he remarked.

"Still good?"

"Stunning." His nose turned pink, and he tried very hard to look back at the screen, but I could tell he was still looking at me. "You have the cutest freckle on your ass, by the way," he commented as I walked to the bathroom with a fresh towel. Laughing loudly, I felt my entire body flush with embarrassment. What a thing to tell someone.

My shower, though it had hot water, sucked freckled ass compared to the one at Edward's home. Now I was spoiled too. But it got me clean. I was quick about it and even blow-dried my hair so it wouldn't be too wild. Braiding it at the base of my neck, I let it run down my back. I wanted it out of the way when we drove in the car so it wouldn't fly everywhere.

When I came into my bedroom, Edward was still looking at something on the computer. His lips were pursed, twitching slightly as he thought about something. I didn't want to bother him, so I put on my bra and panties.

I caught my image in the long mirror I had hanging off my closet door and frowned at the reflection that peered back at me. Turning to the side, I patted my stomach. I was getting chunky around the middle. More so than I was before, anyway.

"Something wrong?"

"I think I need to run on that treadmill with you in the morning. I've been eating too well lately. I bet I've gained ten pounds since I started cooking for you," I explained, going over to get my blue jeans.

He folded up the computer and put it to the side before getting off the bed. He stopped me from getting dressed, tugging the pants out of my grip. "You look gorgeous, Bella. Don't worry about your size. You are beautiful the way you are," he said as he rubbed his hands over my shoulders.

"Doesn't mean I shouldn't try to lose a few pounds," I replied. "It's probably not good. I mean, I'm not all that healthy. Especially compared to you."

"Have you seen the way I eat? I have to work out as much as I do to not be a fat slob! You are perfect, but if you want to be healthier, I understand that. Just... don't worry about losing too much, okay? You're so soft and warm and God, yum," he whispered the last word in a way that made my knees a little wobbly. He sounded almost hungry. Like I was a slice of cake, and he was going to devour me.

I leaned my flushed face against his cloth-covered chest to hide my slight embarrassment as I wrapped my arms around his waist. "Have you found anything to do today?"

"Nothing that sounds better than you and me in bed all day," he quietly responded.

"That does sound nice," I breathed, peering up at him. "We can go back to your place and-" I stopped talking when I saw Edward shake his head.

“We can stay here if you want. We spend so much time at mine. I don’t want you to think I don’t want to be here with you too. It doesn’t matter where we are, as long as I’m with you.”

“Honey, we should stay at your house because it’s frickin awesome. Seriously? This place is so boring. No cable. No millions of movies and video games. All I’ve got is a bed and a computer.”

“Well, all I really need for today is the mattress.” He nodded his head towards it. “Shall we?”

Smirking somewhat, I put the clothes I pulled out on top of my dresser. I took Edward’s hand, and he quickly removed his shoes before climbing on top of the blanket with me. Lying against his side, I rested my head on his chest as he wrapped his arms around me. Though I thought I would have been uncomfortable in nothing but my red bra and panties, I wasn’t. I slid my leg in between his, closing my eyes in a pleasure-filled sigh.

We were quiet for a long time, so long that I thought maybe he had fallen asleep. I was close. But finally, he spoke. “Bella, can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure, anything.” I played with the hem of his light blue Henley shirt.

“I don’t want you to quit.”

I wasn’t certain I had heard him correctly. Pushing up on my elbows, I gazed at him in confusion. “What?”

“I don’t want you to quit,” he repeated as his cheeks flushed once again. “I want things to change, but yeah, I don’t want you to.”

I sputtered for a long minute. “What are you talking about? You felt horrible about it last night. I thought-

“I don’t want you to stop cooking for me. I love your food and-” he interrupted, but it was my turn to stop him with a laugh.

“Oh, honey! I’ll still cook for you anytime you want. Don’t worry about that,” I assured him. “Lord knows I’ll have the time while I look for another job if it’s anything like the last time.”

“That’s the thing. In this economy, you have no idea when you’ll get another one. And I won’t have you go back on unemployment and live like that. I’m sorry. I know you have your pride, but no. And I want you to cook for me, and I want to pay you for the effort until you find another. I want you to look for a job, and of course, I’ll help you all I can, but I can’t live with how you were before,” Edward asserted.

His words were so heartfelt and emotional. I was taken slightly aback.

“It wasn’t that bad,” I tried to comfort him. “And it’ll be different this time.”

“But it wasn’t good either. And you’re right, it will be different. Please. Let me do this for you, okay?” He breathed, the rims of his eyes turning red as he touched my cheek.

Looking down, I frowned to myself in thought. “Then we’re going to have to define the work and the hours better. Write up a new contract, I suppose. And the pay will have to change.”

“Money is no object,” he eagerly stated.

“No more than four hundred a week,” I declared, thinking it over. It was more than what I was making before on benefits, though not much more. But, I would eat with Edward almost every day, and working had saved on bills. It would still be enough to save a little every week, just in case.

“Fuck no,” he replied instantly. “I think not.”

I laughed at his abrupt reaction. “Why?”

“Private chefs get paid a minimum of two hundred a day. Bella, as much as you cook for me? No. I say we stay with what we have now.” He shook his head.

But I had an argument for his logic. “I’m not a chef,” I pointed out with weird pride that I had something against him. “I have no formal training.”

“Some of the best in the world have no training. It doesn’t mean you don’t have a refined palate and a great talent. And if that’s an issue, I can pay for you to go to cooking school.”

I pursed my lips, and Edward raised an eyebrow in my direction. “No more than five hundred,” I countered.

“The idea of cooking school appeals to you, doesn’t it?” He cooed, seeing the little spark in my eye when he mentioned it. “Fifteen hundred.”

“Yes, but there aren’t any around here, and I’m not going to let you pay for it. The closest is in Dallas or New Orleans. Six hundred.”

“Do you think I won’t just pick up and go with you anywhere?” He asked and then countered me with, “and don’t you think we should define your work hours before we even discuss pay?”

“I suppose.” I sat back on my knees opposite him as he laid against my headboard. “And I know it’s not that easy for you. You have work to do here.”

“Work that can be done by many others. If I wanted to, I could work at any of the sixty different offices we have around the planet. Want to train in Paris? Rome? Tokyo? Bella, tell me where, and we can go tomorrow,” he offered, practically laying the world down at my feet on a golden platter, and I knew he meant every word.

“It doesn’t work like that in real life,” I softly responded. “One day, maybe. But not yet. And how about this? Work from oh, one in the afternoon until six on weekdays. Ten to six on the weekends?”

“No, I want to spend the weekends with my girlfriend. Not my personal chef. One to six, Monday through Friday.”

“So, what is that? Twenty-five hours a week? Hardly worth that much. That’s part-time. Honestly, five hundred would be too much for that.”

“Just because you’re arguing with me in your unmentionables doesn’t mean you’re going to get your way,” he muttered.

“Just because you’re a business badass doesn’t mean you’ll get yours,” I replied with a smirk. “If you want this, then we’re going to have to do it my way. Six hundred, Edward. That’s more than enough for me.”

“One thousand a week, along with continued health benefits. That’s my final offer, Ms. Swan. I can hire someone else if you so wish, though their food won’t be as good as yours...” He trailed off, looking at me with the gravest expression he had ever aimed at me before. “You pay for quality in this world, darling.”

He stuck his hand out for me to shake. He was dead serious. I couldn’t believe it. He would have hired someone else if I had said no.

“Damn you,” I muttered, taking his palm. We shook once, and he tugged me on top of him afterward. “No funny business at work,” I mumbled.

“That’s why you’ll be working weekdays. I can’t make promises like that on the weekend,” he informed me, nuzzling my hair. “Don’t act so sour. I’d give you the entire universe if you asked for it.”

“Yes, I know. But it makes me feel guilty that I can’t give you something more in return.” I whispered, peering up at him.

“I have you. That’s incredible. And,” he laughed quietly, “your food. Oh, my. I’ve dreamed about your chicken. I think it could have been considered a wet dream. Like I said earlier, you’ve seen how I eat. You know how into food I am.”

“Want me to make you some on Tuesday?” I offered. Beaming, Edward nodded his head happily. I giggled and laid my cheek on his stomach, which gurgled and popped. He played with my hair until I fell asleep.

It was mid-afternoon when I woke up, close to dinner. He had worked off his blue jeans at some point, and we had gotten under the covers. I wasn’t sure how. I think both of us needed the extra rest, though. Yawning, I rubbed the back of my neck as I sat up. He was still asleep, his mouth slightly open and snoring quietly. I giggled, unable to hold it in.

“What? What?” He sat up rather dramatically, his eyes going wide. Laughing loudly at his extreme expression, I covered my mouth. His eyes narrowed at me as he fell back against my pillows, covering his eyes. “I haven’t napped in years.”

“It’s nice,” I commented, sitting back and stretching. “Especially with such a sexy partner. By the way, you snore.”

“So do you,” he teased, and I just shrugged. It didn’t surprise me. We were in the south, the land of pollen. Everyone did. He yawned, his jaw opening wide as his eyes squeezed shut. “Wow, this isn’t how I expected to spend today.”

“The day isn’t over yet.”

“True,” he smiled, touching my cheek. “It was nice, though.”

Finally getting dressed, I took my hair down since my sleep ruined my braid. The result was a kinky mess haloed around my head. There wasn’t anything I could really do about it without a bath, so I decided to just leave it. I pulled it into a fluffy ponytail.

We grabbed some dinner and walked along the river again, like our first night together. This time was different, though. There was no nervousness. There were only comfortable conversations and sensual kisses. We sat on a bench and watched the sun go down while holding hands.

“So, do you think your nieces will like the clothes?” I asked, leaning my head against his shoulder.

“Of course. They’re little girls. They love any kind of clothing you give them,” he chuckled. “I miss them. I haven’t seen them in a couple of months.”

“You said something about them coming for Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah. Me and my brother and father have some business to work on down here, so they’re going to come here for the holiday this year and stay the week after. It kind of kills two birds with one stone. Carmen will come down with the girls, but her husband can only stay a couple of days,” he explained. “Carmen is my sister. I’m not sure if I ever mentioned her name before.”

“No. You really haven’t talked too much about your family,” I said, playing with the hem of his shirt again.

He shrugged. “I’ve always kind of felt like an outsider. They all seem so loud and bigger than life, well except for Dad. He can be when he wants to, but not like my older brother, Emmett.”

“What about your sister?”

“Her too. Actually, she’s my half-sister and quite a bit younger. She’s my father’s and Esme’s daughter together.” He chuckled to himself quietly at a thought. “But she wouldn’t be around if it weren’t for me, though.”

I glanced at him. “How’s that?”

“After Mum died... mine and Em’s mother, her name was Elizabeth, I got sick. I suppose the stress of it got to me. I went in and out of the hospital a lot. Esme was my doctor. I guess my Dad needed the comfort... It was less than a year after Mum died that they got married. Carmen came about three months after that. It all worked out. I wasn’t thrilled with the whole thing until she came, though. But I just fell in love with her instantly. I was maybe twelve. Emmett really didn’t get it, but he was older. Almost in college. I mean, he loves her, don’t get me wrong. But she’s everything I’m not. And now,” he laughed, “she’s spawned these beautiful, feisty little creatures that are just like her.”

“You really adore your family, don’t you?” I asked, enjoying listening to his musings.

Edward grinned. “I do. I really do. Honestly, I’d rather be on the outside than not have them at all,” he breathed as he touched my hair gently. “I have to admit I’m more open with you than I ever have been with them.”

“You’re sweet.” I kissed his chin lightly, and he sighed as he leaned his forehead against my temple. Then I suddenly thought of something. “What’s going to happen on Thanksgiving?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you need me to cook?”

His eyes got wide. “Of course not! It’s a holiday. I’m not going to have you work all day. We’ll have it catered. I guess I haven’t even really thought about that. What are you doing?” He inquired, his eyes hopeful.

“My Dad wants me to meet his girlfriend. They’re having lunch,” I explained, biting my bottom lip when he looked disappointed. “But, I told him I was going to spend at least part of the day with you, most likely. I wanted to cover my bases. I wasn’t sure, and,” I laughed, “I wanted an excuse to leave if I needed it.”

“My family will arrive in the morning so we’ll have dinner, I’m sure. Everyone likes to take the time to freshen up and rest a little,” he clarified, a soft blush covering his cheeks. “Do you think you’d like to join us that night? I would really like you to meet them.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Are you certain it’s not too early?”

“Well,” he smirked slightly. “That’s about two weeks away. I don’t think that’s too soon. Unless,” his expression changed, and he frowned, “you don’t want to.”

“Did I say that?” I pressed. He shrugged, that shy little boy coming out. “I’d love to meet your family, but... is it okay if we save meeting mine for Christmas or something? I don’t want to have to meet the girlfriend and try to explain who you are in the same afternoon. It’s too many new people in one day.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. That seems fair to me.”

“I have to prepare you for Charlie, anyway. You do realize he’s a former cop that still likes to play with guns, right? And you do know that I am his only little girl?” I inquired in a teasingly serious tone. Edward’s eyes went wide, making me giggle.

“I’m fucked, aren’t I?” He asked in a strained voice.

“Nah,” I snickered as I wrapped my arms comfortingly around his middle. “Don’t worry too much. I’ll protect you.”

“Promise?” He smiled crookedly, one side rising higher than the other in the most pleasant expression of contented happiness.

"I swear."