



Chapter Twenty-nine-

I put my hand over my heart, willing it to slow down as I caught my breath. “My god,” I muttered to myself, closing my eyes for a split second.

“My apologies, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” Mr. Cullen mumbled, frowning a little as he looked away. His cheeks were light pink, much like Edward’s would be in the same situation.

“I- What... what are you? I?” I stuttered, not sure what to ask. I had questions, like... Why the hell are you here? Didn’t Edward tell you to get out of his house? Don’t you know it’s not nice to sneak up on people? Are you trying to give me a heart attack? But none of them seemed right. Finally, I sputtered out. “Does your son know you’re here?”

“No, he doesn’t,” he answered in the same quiet tone as before, his voice even and calm. Far calmer than my own. There was no anger in it like there had been the night before. “He wouldn’t see me this morning, so I took the time to meet with some others I had business with, but since that’s all done with...” He drew out. “I wanted to come to speak to you. I figured you’d be here.”

“Why?” I asked in complete confusion. “I mean, why did you want to talk to me?”

“To apologize.”

“Pardon me?” I mumbled, not entirely sure I had heard him correctly. “Apologize? To me? Why?”

“For my behavior last night. The way I behaved was rude, obnoxious, and... simply inexcusable and unacceptable. Normally I wouldn’t treat anyone that way, and it wasn’t right.”

I stared at him for a long time, confused by this whole new person standing before me. He looked repentant, but I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t know him well enough to tell. Finally, I spoke. “You should tell this to Edward, not me.”

“Funny,” he scoffed, his eyes falling to his hands before looking back up at me with a sad smile. “That’s the same thing he said to me this morning, regarding you, before turning me away. He hadn’t even really let me say this much.”

Sighing, I glanced away from him as I leaned against the counter. I didn’t know what to say to the man. He had made me so angry before, and he had treated his son so badly. Honestly, he was just a bit rude to me, but I didn’t know him well enough to say if it was normal. The way Edward was acting, it was kind of obvious that it wasn’t, but I had no way to compare.

Eventually, I looked up, only wanting to know one thing. “Why? What did I do to you?”

“It’s nothing you did, really,” Carlisle began, but he added nothing else.

I groaned quietly, bending over to pick up the tin still on the floor. “Never mind. Forget I asked. I shouldn’t have expected an answer in the first place,” I told him as I placed it into the countertop for later. Or maybe to hit him with it if I needed to. The latter was far more tempting.

“You frightened me,” he blurted out when I had turned my back to him to switch on the oven to preheat it for the cornbread. I twisted around slowly, and he repeated himself, knowing I didn’t believe him. How could I? “You scared me, Ms. Swan, and when I am, I act badly.”

“How on earth did I? Edward has had girlfriends before, and besides, he’s not a child. I can’t be that much of a surprise. I know you weren’t expecting me last night, but that’s what you get for just showing up unannounced.”

“Yes, of course. He has had girls, though not many, and even fewer he’s been willing to introduce to his family since college. No, that’s not it. It’s something else.”

“Then what the hell is it?” I demanded, tiring of dancing around the issue. I suppose I knew where his son had gotten that from. It was an annoying habit. I wouldn’t take that from him anymore, and I certainly wouldn’t take it from his father either.

"It's your appearance."

I blinked. "I realize I'm younger than Edward, but I can clean up quite well, thank you very-" I began angrily, but he was shaking his head, holding up his hand to ask me to stop.

"No. It's not as simple as that. I know as well as any, the clothes don't make the man but, no. No... it's your appearance. Your body. Your face. I know Edward must see it at least some, but I doubt he knows the full extent of it. I mean, he probably doesn't remember when she was your age. He was only a baby. But I do. And photographs only give you glimpses of a person, a suggestion. Not the real thing."

"What?" I demanded again. He was rambling. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"You are the spitting image of his mother."

It took me a few seconds to absorb what he said completely. I just shook my head in confusion. "I don't understand."

"You are the same height, size, shape. Your face, your nose, your round cheeks. Your lips especially. All you need is Edward's eyes and hair, and you'd be Liz. It was like seeing a ghost standing beside my son. And that scared me because I knew instantly," he stopped, his voice lowered as he shook his head. "That he would do anything for you. You could take everything from him if you wanted, but he'd give it to you happily. He was such a momma's boy. Not that it's a bad thing. But he was hit hard, even harder than me, when she passed. As I said, I doubt he even realizes the extent of it."

One minute I was standing and the next I was sitting, though I wasn't entirely sure how I got here. "Huh," I mumbled as I took in what he said. "I don't want him for his money. I tried to quit once we started dating, he wouldn't have any part of it."

"He told me as much," Carlisle answered. "I know what I'm telling you isn't a reason for the way I acted. It's a poor excuse, but I hope you accept my apology so I can get to know you before I make any real judgments. I don't want to lose my son over this because I know no matter what, he will take your side."

"I don't want that to happen either," I whispered. "So what happens if you get to know me, and you still don't like me?"

"Then I shall have to deal with that quietly so as not to lose my little boy. I won't let you hurt him, and I will do anything in my power to stop that-"

"Even pay me to go away?" I inquired sarcastically.

“Yes, even that.”

“I don’t want to hurt Edward. That’s the last thing I want. And I’d never take your money.”

He nodded before clearing his throat. “As long as that’s true, even if I don’t like you personally, I will never stop my son from being happy. And you seem to make him that way. Ms. Swan, may I have your forgiveness?” He questioned in such a proper tone. Like he was taught in a whole other world than mine.

Chewing it over, I sighed. “You were such a jackass last night.”

“I was. That is a fault of mine. I am very protective of my family, and if I feel at all threatened, I become angry. We all handle our emotions in different ways. Edward hides and waits for the problems, in his personal life anyway, to go away. My eldest son sleeps with any female that will let him. My youngest just keeps moving forward and-” but he stopped, scoffing quietly to himself. But it wasn’t an unhappy sound.

“What?”

He grinned for a moment. “Your personality reminds me of my late wife, too. Your temper and tone. The way you reacted last night. Perhaps tamer, though. She was Irish and had a fiery disposition. She would have ripped me to shreds if she saw how I acted yesterday. If you are anything like her, the poor boy is in for a wild ride.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I pushed as my cheeks flushed with the raw nature of his words. I felt tiny as I listened to them. Like a little girl in church, listening to a pastor lecture about the qualities of heaven.

“Because it’s the truth, and you need to hear it. And I require your forgiveness if I’m ever to make things good with Edward. I’ve never treated him like that before, not even when he was a child and made some stupid mistakes. I don’t wish for this to ruin Thanksgiving at the very least. I know he was so looking forward to it, as was the rest of the family. I don’t want to make it uncomfortable for everyone. Oh, and please don’t judge my family for my behavior. They would never react that way towards you unless-”

“Unless I hurt him. I won’t judge them until I know them. If I say I accept but won’t forget, will that be enough for you?” I asked quietly as I toyed with the gray muffin tin.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less. It would be stupid of you, to be truthful. I’d be suspicious of me in the future if I were you,” he informed me lightly. “Do you think he’ll ever talk to me again?”

I considered it for a moment, still looking at the counter. "He loves his family too much not to, but you need to tell him this too. He needs to know your reasons. Poor Edward was so confused by how you were acting. I think that's what hurt his feelings most of all. He felt like he didn't know you."

"That doesn't surprise me," he muttered. "Yes, I will tell him. Oh, and I have another thing to apologize for."

I peeked at him. "What's that?"

"How rude I was about your food. It was quite good, but it would have been better if I hadn't been such a jackass as you put it. You've got some talent in the kitchen, something else you have in common with Edward's mother. He was such a chunky baby because of it," he chuckled before starting again. "I wish we could have dined together under different circumstances. Your meal now smells delicious. Soup?"

"Beef and vegetable stew. We're going to have cornbread with it," I clarified, looking at all the stuff laid out before me. "Very southern."

"What... in the..." Edward drew out as he came into the kitchen. It was just after four, and he was home earlier than usual. It didn't surprise me honestly, but I felt like I had gotten caught doing something bad. I knew that wasn't the case, but still. "Bella, are you alright?"

"Of course," I told him with a small smile, trying to reassure him.

His father took a step back, his head down in contrition.

"What's going on?" He asked as he came over to me, not looking at his dad as he did. He was doing the whole 'pretend that person doesn't exist in this universe thing.' And he was doing it pretty well at it.

"Mr. Cullen-" I began, but he interrupted me with a quiet cough. I looked up at him to see what he wanted.

"You may call me Carlisle."

"Carlisle," I started again with a little nod, "was just apologizing to me for how he was acting last night."

"Oh," he drew out, looking over at the man in question. "Are you sure you're okay?" He asked in a low tone so his father couldn't hear him. He pressed a worried hand to my cheek. Leaning into it, I placed my palm on top of his as I gave him a smile. He acted like I couldn't take care of myself. I think Edward forgot how tough I could be when I needed to be.

"I'm fine. I accepted, and I was just going to invite him to dinner... if you're willing after you two talk, of course. It is your house, so whatever you want to do," I swiftly explained. I wanted his family to like me at the very least, and I figured this was an easy way to move in that direction.

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow before glancing at his father. Then he turned back towards me again.

"Yes, but as I said, you two need to talk first. Besides, I have some work to do here. Dinner isn't done yet."

Edward sighed heavily and nodded his head. He knew well enough they needed to, but as his dad had so plainly stated, he liked to hide from his problems until they went away. He brought both hands to my face and kissed me soundly, letting his lips linger on mine. I lifted on my tiptoes, returning the slow sweetness. I touched his fingers and smiled as we pulled away from each other. With that, I knew no matter what, we would be okay.

He sighed again before glancing over at his father. "Yes, I suppose we have some things to discuss."

"Take your time," I told them. "It'll be awhile before this is ready." I waved my hand over the messy, ingredient-covered counter. Both men simply nodded their heads solemnly before walking out. It was like they were both marching towards their doom.

Men. They could be so dramatic.

After about thirty minutes, some kind of agreement must have been met between them because they came back into the kitchen discussing something with more animation. Carlisle's arms went wide as he explained information to his son. Edward bobbed his head the entire time. Neither of them looked mad or remotely upset. It was amazing how easily boys could forget and not hold grudges when they wanted to.

The whole thing just made me roll my eyes.

"Yeah, I can see that, but are those companies worth the risk? Greece is in serious trouble right now. Not only that company but the entire damn country. Japan, I can see. Another office in Tokyo would do us some good, and I can see your reasoning for doing it. It just... troubles me. That's a huge investment. It'll take years before it reestablishes itself. Greece, I mean."

“Yes, but it’ll take years to set up. By the time things are going well again, we will be in there as the economy is growing. That’s good for us. Also, it could be helpful to them. It could create several hundred jobs around the country,” he argued his point of view.

“That’s hardly anything in a region in so much trouble. They need at least tens of thousands just to get started.”

He pursed his lips for a moment. “We could set up charities there too, other businesses perhaps. Also, think of the jobs that would be created to support the workers. That several hundred is only a base number. And anything helps.”

Edward nodded his head again as he sat down at the counter. His jacket and tie were gone with his top button undone. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I don’t think the price will get lower,” he added. “I think it’s a risk worth taking. We’ll be able to recover at least some if it’s a failure, so it won’t be a total loss.”

I didn’t really catch on to what they were talking about, but I had a feeling I didn’t hear the important details. And all I truly knew about Greece was the ancient Gods, statues, and salad, which didn’t sound half bad. We would have to have Greek food soon.

“It’s something to think about. Have you discussed it with Emmett?” He replied, looking over at him with a very serious business-like expression. I had only caught glimpses of him like that in the past, and I thought it was cute.

“You know your brother. He goes headfirst into everything.”

He nodded before turning his attention to me. “Is there anything I can do to assist?”

I giggled. “Certainly not. I haven’t let you help yet, and I’m not going to now. I want to impress your father, not kill him with your cooking.” I teased as I pulled my corn muffins out of the oven. They were perfectly golden brown and delicious, steam rolling off of them in waves.

“Hey! I’m not that bad!” He laughed.

Tapping my chin, I stared at him for a moment. “Do I need to remind you of last week and the explosive pasta?” I said as I pointed my finger at him.

His father snorted. “How do you make pasta explode?” He asked in confusion.

“I’m not sure, but there’s a reason he has a new microwave,” I remarked, glancing over at the silver and black contraption on the other side of the room.

My boyfriend threw his hands up. I had made so much fun of him about it already. "It was a simple mistake! I didn't realize I left the fork on the plate." Covering his face in embarrassment, he shook his head the entire time.

"Mmhhh." I continued before walking to the fridge. "Edward, would you like a hard cider? It'll go really well with dinner. I bought some the other day."

"Are you having one?" He asked instead of answering.

"Yes." I shrugged.

"Sure." He did too, tilting his chin to the side just slightly to look at me. He smiled crookedly, the right corner of his mouth lifted high into his soft round cheek. His eyes sparkled, and I could tell he was happy once again.

We gazed at each other for a long minute, and I felt as if I were in a trance. I shook my head, feeling exposed and embarrassed for some reason. Clearing my throat, I turned my attention to the other man sitting at the island. "Mr... I mean, Carlisle, would you like one, too? We have apple and pear," I offered politely.

"Yes, please. Pear. Thank you," he said courteously, maybe even overly so. I wasn't certain what was normal for him, but he seemed to be trying to be extra nice. I guess that was better than the alternative. I wouldn't complain about it, that was for sure.

"Dinner will be on the table in about ten minutes. You two have time to wash up and get ready. I'll finish setting up," I stated, suddenly feeling like a mother.

Without a word, both of them got up and headed out. I shook my head at the strange interaction. Perhaps it was knowing I looked like Elizabeth Masen. That was something Edward and I would have to talk about later, and I couldn't help but wonder if that would be an odd conversation. But it wasn't something I would linger on for a long time.

After the day before, I hadn't expected my dinner to be going like it was. But I was glad. I had to remember things could always be stranger, if not worse. And I would much prefer him happy and getting along with his family any day.

I set up the table again for three, but this time I put a glass of water and Carlisle's hard pear cider to Edward's left side. The stew was waiting for us in a bowl, and the cornbread was wrapped in foil, still fragrant and warm. My stomach growled, extremely hungry suddenly. I had skipped lunch, so it was no wonder. Sometimes I was ravenous that time of the month, and at other times I couldn't eat a bite, especially lately.

His father was the first to come down, his tie removed along with his jacket. The only thing changed about him was his sleeves were rolled up from washing his hands. I suppose he had taken all his stuff to a hotel. Edward came down a few minutes later in a comic book shirt and jeans, his feet bare. Carlisle rolled his eyes as he sat down at the head of the table after placing a kiss on my cheeks.

“What?” He asked, smirking at his father.

“You are still a child at times.”

“At times?” He laughed. “I think the only time I’m not is when I’m at work. I’d rather be into comic books, movies, and games than be an adult. You have your golf to keep you young, I have this. It could be worse.”

“I suppose,” his dad chuckled as he pulled out a muffin from the foil paper. He passed it to me before handing another to Edward. He served himself last, passing the log of honey butter over to me first. “And what do you think of all this, Ms. Swan?”

“We enjoy the same things. Maybe not so much with comic books, but with video games and movies. We haven’t really gotten to play together yet,” I explained. “So, we’ll see how that goes.”

“I’ve been in a movie phase.” Edward glanced over at his father. “Next week, why don’t we have a weekend of games? Just laze around the house in pajamas all day?” He asked when he turned back to me.

“Sounds great,” I grinned, his hand brushing mine. I quickly pulled away and blushed when I remembered that his dad was in the room with us. It didn’t matter that we were adults. Any time there is a parent in a room with a new couple, it was awkward.

I cleared my throat, ladling soup into the guy’s bowls first before getting myself two scoops. Edward opened his drink, the twist top easier said than done, before doing mine without asking. He knew what was going to happen. I would try on my own for about five minutes, making my hand sore in the process, before asking him to. It just saved us both time.

The beginning of dinner was quiet and only slightly weird. It would have been worse if I hadn’t been so hungry and into my food. But as my munching slowed, it was obvious there needed to be some conversation.

“So, did Maria have the day off?” I asked, stirring my spoon around the bowl to look for another piece of potato.

“Who’s that?” Carlisle inquired.

“My maid. Yes, she had to take her children to the doctor for shots this morning. One of them had a bad reaction last time, so I told her to take the full day so she could watch over them. I didn’t want her to worry about him. Sorry, I forgot to tell you.”

“Oh, no! It’s fine! I was just concerned about her,” I explained.

Once again, we fell into an awkward silence. This time it was Carlisle’s turn to start up the conversation. “So, Bella,” he began after taking a sip of his cider. “How did you get into cooking? Is it something you’ve always been interested in?”

“Ah, well,” I drew out, not exactly sure how to answer. “I enjoy doing it for myself, but I never considered it for a career until Edward. He found out I had a talent for it, and I just accidentally fell into it. Actually, I have a bachelor’s in Computer Integrated Science from Louisiana Tech.”

“It’s a good school, about an hour east of here,” he explained to his father. “Mostly computer and engineering degrees. Science and the like. They’re known for their football team too. Bella graduated in the top five percent of her class, with several honors I might add.”

“I see. Why didn’t you go into technology then?” He didn’t mean it in a prying, rude sort of way. He was just asking a curious question.

Stirring my stew around for a moment, I sighed. “I tried. For a long time. Sadly, this area has little need for people who work with computers. I tried all over the state. You have to have the experience to get a job, and you can’t get any until you have one. It’s a crappy catch twenty-two. If I had the money, I would have moved elsewhere. Dallas or Houston. Austin, perhaps.”

“I’m glad you didn’t move,” Edward said as he slid his hand over mine. I turned it palm up, and our fingers wove together.

“Me too,” I told him with a slight smile. Glancing up at his dad, I began talking again. “I’m hoping to find something soon. I’ve been looking, but I guess I just picked the wrong time to be a young person searching for a career. I’ve considered going to cooking school, but I’m not sure. It depends on a lot of things.”

“Well, I’m not sure how much you’d learn there. This was a fantastic meal. Thank you for sharing it with me,” he said politely. My boyfriend practically beamed with pride, squeezing my hand tightly.

Blushing, I muttered a soft thank you.

I was grateful when their conversation turned away from me and back towards Greece. They talked about it for a couple of hours before Carlisle went back to his hotel. Edward asked if I would stay the night with him since he wouldn't be able to see much of me alone in the next week. I agreed because I knew I couldn't the following day on Thanksgiving eve. If that was such a thing.

The holiday was looking a lot less threatening than it had been before and a lot more enjoyable. At least on the Masen/Cullen side of things. Who knew how it would go with my father and his new girlfriend.