



Chapter Thirty

Wednesday went by quietly enough. Edward and Carlisle didn't come back home from work until nearly seven that evening, and they only took a break to eat dinner before working together on a pile of paperwork and going back and forth with details that went far over my head.

His father moved back in that night from the hotel. His son agreed not to tell his stepmother or his siblings about Monday, if anything else, to keep things from getting uncomfortable. I wasn't around for that conversation, but my boyfriend told me about it. I also promised to keep my mouth shut if his dad behaved. Apparently, Esme, his stepmom, wouldn't react too kindly to his attitude either.

I wouldn't say I was completely comfortable with the man, or he with me, but at least I don't think he hated me anymore. He was polite enough and made vague conversation, or at least attempted to. Edward was almost always around when we were in the same room together, keeping a watchful eye on both of us. Like he was waiting for us to both explode into a major fight if he left. It wasn't entirely out of the question, but I had more self-control than that.

Not long after dinner that night, I went home and baked an apple pie to take over to my father's girlfriend's house for Thanksgiving. It wasn't much, but I wanted to bring something.

They told me not to, but who would turn down more dessert? There was never such a thing as too many sweets.

Mrs. Sue Clearwater lived on the far side of the neighboring parish, all the way in Haughton. She was a widow with two kids, a girl and a boy who were both grown. Her husband had died a few years back from a heart attack. I wasn't sure how they met, but they had been dating seriously for about a year. This would be the first time her children would meet Charlie and the first I would meet her.

This was the only information I had. I had no idea how the day would go. It could go either very well or... terribly.

I drove from the directions my dad gave me, getting turned around twice because the roads were not marked nearly as well as they should have been. Finally, I found a tiny yellow house surrounded by big pecan trees. My old red truck was parked underneath one of them. There was also an older but well taken care of Honda of some sort in the garage, probably Sue's. And on the street was a motorcycle that had seen better days. No doubt it was her son's. It screamed, 'boy.'

Grabbing the pie from the seat next to me, I took in a deep breath as I looked at the small house. I couldn't see any movement, but that didn't mean much. The shades were down.

"Here we go," I mumbled to myself as I walked to the front door. I raised my hand to knock, but it flew open before I could. On the other side of the threshold was a gorgeous dark-skinned woman. Her long salt and pepper black hair was braided down to her shoulders on either side of her head. Her face was just slightly wrinkled around the edges of her mouth and eyes, but both showed nothing but happy excitement. She was an inch or so shorter than me and curvy, dressed casually in a pair of blue jeans with a nice red blouse.

"Come in! You must be Bella. It's so nice to meet you!" She said warmly, squeezing me in a tight one-armed hug.

"I brought some apple pie," I declared as I held it out to her. I felt like a little kid when I did.

Her smile increased, and she placed her palm over her heart as she shook her head. "Oh! I told Charlie to tell you not to bring anything! Thank you, though! That's very sweet of you. It looks lovely!" She gushed as she took it from my hands.

"He did, but I enjoy cooking. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, gracious, no! Not at all! Why don't you come with me? I'll get you something to drink. Charlie's in the kitchen with my son," she explained as she looked back at me, walking

towards a door on the other side of the tiny yet neat living room. It seemed to be a cozy little cottage. I could see myself settling in a place like it someday.

“Yo, Moms, I got the turkey out for you!” I heard a familiar voice say. When I came around the corner, I burst into astonished laughter. “Hey!” He shouted when he saw me, sporting a similar expression.

“Seth! So you’re the son!” I giggled, coming over to give him a hug. Embracing me, he picked me up off the floor as he did with my feet lifting into the air.

I had been so shocked to see my friend and coworker that I hadn’t even noticed my father at the table who was sipping on a beer as he worked on shelling a massive pile of pecans. He was looking between me, Seth, then back to Sue. She just shrugged, smiling her gentle smile.

“So, you know each other?” He finally inquired, completely confused by our wild exchange.

Oh, well... crap. Seth probably hadn’t realized I hadn’t told my parents about my dating situation.

I peeked up at him with imploring eyes before glancing back at my dad, answering quickly for us. “Oh, yeah! He’s my driver. We work together.”

“You work with Mr. Masen as well?” Sue asked as she went over to the stove. There was something orange in a big pot. It appeared to be sweet potatoes. Charlie stood up and brought the bowl of cracked pecans over to her. Instead of sitting back down, he crossed his arms over his chest and just glared at me, like I had done something wrong.

“Yeah, I do. I’m his personal assistant,” I told her. “I see Seth almost every day. I wish I had known!” I said to him.

Smiling, he still had his big arm draped over me. “Me too! Doesn’t this make things more interesting?!”

“So, who is this, Mr. Masen-” Charlie started, but I decided it was best to interrupt him before he asked questions that would get me in trouble. Well, as much as any adult can get into with their parents.

“I thought you said you had a sister?” I questioned my friend a little loudly, interrupting my father.

He nodded. "Yeah, Leah. She's too busy at school to come up. Ah, we're better off. She's a harpy," he replied, pure annoyance in his tone. There was bad blood there, but I knew better than to get into it at a holiday meal.

"Seth," Sue chided him, frowning for the first time. The expression looked unnatural on her dark russet skin. "Be nice."

"Fine," he answered, but I could see the effort it took to keep from rolling his eyes.

"Do you need any help, Mrs. Clearwater?" I asked politely.

"Heaven's no! You're my guest. Please make yourself at home. May I get you something to drink? Do you like sweet tea, like your father?" She inquired, her loving glance going in his direction. He flushed, a pleasant, simple smile spreading over his usually serious mug.

Wow, my dad was in love. Like, in stupid, giddy love. It was weird to see, but nice. It seemed to make Seth uncomfortable, though. He shifted beside me.

"No, thank you."

"Hey, Bella, we were talking about video games the other day. Want to see my collection? I've got Mario Kart on the N64 set up in my old room," he offered, tugging on my hand at my side.

"Sure," I responded, allowing myself to be pulled along. The space was small, only one other room and a bathroom separating us from the kitchen slash dining area.

He let out a huffing breath when we were alone. "Ugh, they've been doing that all morning. Your dad is a nice guy and all, but that's my mom, and it's a little weird."

I laughed quietly. "I get it. It's okay. Hey, can I ask you a favor?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Can you not tell them I'm dating Edward? I haven't told my parents yet, and I want to keep it that way for at least a while," I pleaded softly. "I don't think it'll come up or anything, but yeah, I'm not ready for the Sheriff to meet him."

He seemed shocked. "Oh..." Seth drew out before he shrugged. "Yeah, I can do that. It's none of my business, anyway. I'm kind of surprised you're not with him right now."

"My dad asked me to come a few weeks ago, but I am going after lunch and having dinner with his family. They flew in early this morning," I explained.

My friend nodded in understanding. "So, it's kind of a big day for you, huh? Meeting all kinds of new people." He plopped down on an old twin-sized bed that looked too short for him. His room was tiny, barely two feet between his mattress and a dresser with a television on it.

Sitting down beside him, I crossed my ankles before leaning back on my hands. "Yeah, it is. Your mom seems nice. I hope Edward's stepmother is too."

"I've only met his dad, who was fine. Kind of a cold fish, but alright."

"I've already met him. He doesn't like me much, but he's acting nicer now." I shrugged, not really wanting to go into it. That was the past, and it was going to stay that way. "So, you got Mario Kart 64?"

"Sure do." He grinned wildly. "Wanna play?"

"I'd love to," I smiled in return.

And we did for a couple of hours before lunch was ready. I helped Mrs. Sue set up the table, along with Seth and my dad. They kept touching each other innocently, Charlie and Sue. A brush of the hand here or a peck on the cheek there. It was all very cute. I had literally never seen my father happier, and for that, I was very grateful.

The meal was good, especially the sweet potatoes with maple syrup and homemade candied pecans. The conversation flowed pretty well, but my father seemed a little on edge for some reason. When the food was done, we cleared the dishes together and placed the three desserts in the middle with fresh plates and forks. She had made a pecan pie and a coconut cake.

Seth ate about a quarter of my apple pie all by himself, along with a slice of each of his mother's confections. My father enjoyed a big piece as well. Sue and I were the only ones that seemed reasonable about the whole thing, having a tiny sliver of each and a cup of coffee to go with it.

"Thank you, Mrs. Clearwater. It was so lovely. Thank you for inviting me into your home to share it with you and your family," I told her politely, making her beam with pure pride.

My father grinned, too, a small one just to himself. "You know what I think would be nice?" He began after clearing his throat quietly to get everyone's attention. "If we went around the table and said what we were thankful for. Why don't you get us started, Seth?" He added, glancing to his left.

It caught him off guard, and it took a minute of humming before he answered. "I'm grateful for my family, my friends, my job, and all that good stuff." He smiled, looking to his left to me.

I was more prepared than him. "I'm thankful for my new friends and the old ones I'm lucky enough to still have. And I'm grateful that good times are ahead of me."

Our attention turned toward Sue. "I'm grateful for the continued good health of my children and for the happiness that God has brought into my life," she answered, taking my father's hand and giving it a bit of a squeeze. Smiling, he drew it up to his mouth and gave it a little kiss. Her son turned a bright shade of red but said nothing.

"I'm grateful," Charlie started while looking first at me. "That my daughter is here, in good health, and happy. And I'm grateful I have been blessed with a new love, even if I'm old. So thankful, in fact, that I hope to spend the rest of my life with her. However long that is," he declared as he got out of his chair then kneeled beside his girlfriend's and pulled a little white gold diamond ring from his breast pocket of his flannel shirt.

Fainting, Sue fell forward into my father. She was out cold.

"Whoa!" Seth hopped out of his seat to go to his mother's side. I hurried over to her as well, helping my dad get her back up. She came around quickly. I fetched her a glass of water, and her son got a wet towel to wipe her face with. "Moms, are you okay?"

"What just happened?" She inquired, confused.

"I asked you to marry me," Charlie laughed quietly, only a small chuckle. He didn't seem disheartened by her reaction.

She looked around in shock. "I... uh... huh... well, oh my," Sue stuttered out, her eyes blinking rapidly as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I guess you weren't expecting that," I remarked, looking over at my father. I didn't realize he could be so full of surprises.

"Not at all! Oh, Charlie! Of course I'll marry you! You're amazing! I love you." She threw her arms around his neck. When she did, he stood up and picked her up out of her spot. They kissed for a long minute, and he pulled away to place the little ring on her tiny fingers.

Then they started kissing again. Seth looked like he would be sick.

"Are you okay?" I mumbled.

"We're going to be step-siblings," he muttered, looking over at me. We both shrugged at the same time and kind of smiled.

"I think we need to give them some privacy."

"Oh! No! I'm sorry, excuse us," Sue said as she tugged quickly away from my father. He was blushing but smiling like an idiot.

"Well, actually, I should get going." I looked down at my watch. "How about this? Seth, would you like to join me, so we can give these two some much-needed time alone?"

"You don't think he'd mind?" He asked, referring to Edward.

"No, not at all. Besides, it would be nice to have another person in my corner," I assured him. "And it would be cool to introduce my stepbrother to the family."

"Sure." He grinned at me wickedly. "And how many people can say they brought a real-life Indian to their Thanksgiving meal?"

Snorting, I covered my eyes before pushing his shoulder. "Oh, no. That's terrible!"

"Don't be crass," Sue snapped at her son as she walked over to him before softening her tone. "You wouldn't mind, sweetheart?"

"Not at all. It's cool! Congrats, by the way. I'm thrilled for you," he promised as he gently hugged his tiny mother. He towered over her.

"Come over tomorrow for lunch, okay?"

"Sure thing, Moms," he soothed her.

I sauntered over to my dad and gave him a hug. "Way to warn a girl," I whispered in his ear.

"I wasn't even certain if I was going to do it today," he informed me. "But it seemed like the right time. Thanks for coming."

"Of course. Congratulations."

"Thank you, pumpkin," he responded with a little catch in his throat. Of course, it was a manly one. My father wasn't one to cry often.

“Are you sure he’d be okay with me coming over with you?” Seth asked again once we got outside after saying our goodbyes.

“I believe so, yes. And honestly, I’d really like to have someone else I know there that I’m comfortable with. I know it’s kind of weak, but I’m scared to meet his family.”

“Meeting his dad went that bad?” He questioned. I just nodded. “Okay, well, I’ll hang out a while before heading out. If it gets to be too much, you can use me as an excuse to get out of there.”

“How does that work out?” I asked as I walked to my car.

Seth was halfway to his broken-down white motorcycle before he turned with a smile, shrugging his big shoulders. “You’re smart. You’ll figure out something. See you there... sis.”

Smiling, I realized I would have a brother. I knew we were adults, and honestly, it wasn’t the same thing. But it was the closest I would ever get, and it made me tremendously happy. I didn’t know how Leah, Seth’s sister, would like me, but I had a sibling I already felt connected to.