



Chapter Thirty-One

It was nearly a forty-five-minute drive over to Edward's house. There were no telltale signs that there was a mass of people inside, but I knew they were all waiting. Seth pulled up beside me, and together we walked inside. I could hear a television somewhere in the background and a lot of talking, also the clacking of billiards balls knocking together.

"Wait here," I said as I put a hand on his arm. "I'm going to double-check to make sure it's okay."

"Good idea," he answered with a smile. "If not, I'll go to the movies or something."

Nodding my head, I was glad he was fine either way. I made my way quietly towards the geek room, just peeking around the corner to see what I was dealing with.

Playing pool, a massive middle-aged man with dark curly hair and bright blue eyes leaned over the table with his stick. His smile was radiant as he talked to Carlisle, who had the same baby blues. He was tall, even taller than Edward. I had seen him before, come to think of it. At Edward's office, when I came up after deciding. He had to be Emmett.

Sitting on the couch, there was a dark-haired woman with lovely olive skin, her locks carefully twisted into a bun at the base of her neck. She was elegant and beautiful. She was talking to a pretty girl with the same tone, just slightly lighter. Her eyes were blue like Carlisle's, but her curls were nearly black with brown streaks like her mom's. They must have been Carmen and Edward's stepmother, Esme.

On the floor, there was a man, maybe my age or a little older. He was extremely pale with light, lime green eyes and cotton-white hair. He was entertaining three young girls. Edward had never mentioned their names, but I knew they had to be his nieces, and that was their father. They were beautiful creatures with delicate features and lightly tanned skin. The eldest was the easiest to spot. She had strawberry blond curls with big emerald eyes. She was playing carefully with the youngest, who had ebony locks and eyes. The middle girl was a mix of the two and was sitting in her daddy's lap.

My boyfriend sat at the bar, just watching the whole thing. He looked content, but on the outside of the action. It was kind of perfect for me, though.

"Edward," I breathed as I brought my head around the corner. "Honey," I said louder to get his attention. I caught it with no one noticing.

He instantly smiled and hopped off the barstool. "Hello, my beautiful girl. I've missed you so much," he cooed as he grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me hard. He bent me backward and took my breath away. My arms went around his neck as I gave back as good as he was giving.

"Woo-hoo! Go, little brother! Get you some!" A bear of a voice called from the other side of the room. I felt Edward's cheeks heat as he pulled away like he had forgotten there were other people there. I hid my face in his chest, just as embarrassed. All eyes were on us.

"Shut up, Em," he snapped, but he appeared amused. "Come meet my family. I promise they'll be more welcoming," he whispered in my ear as he tried to pull me into the room.

"Wait, wait," I objected, trying to get my bearings. "I need to ask you something."

Stopping, he seemed confused. "Anything."

"Um... You know how I went to my dad's girlfriend's house this morning for lunch, right?" I waited for him to nod. "Well, he proposed to her, and they're going to get married. And my future stepbrother and I thought it would be nice to give them some time. But I didn't want him to be alone, so I invited him over. Is that okay?" I asked, suddenly anxious that he would say no.

He immediately smiled. "Oh, darling! Yes, of course. He's going to be your family. He's more than welcome," he answered as he rubbed my shoulder before leaning in. "Is this a good thing?"

"I'm extremely happy for them," I assured him. "I'm going to have a family. A big one with a brother and a sister. You don't know how excited I am."

“Good.” He kissed my mouth lightly, and I heard a couple of female voices coo in the background. He laughed and looked over at the couch. “Stop it.”

“But it’s so sweet!” The girl gushed, smiling wildly. She had Edward’s crooked smile.

“Congratulations to you and your father,” the elegant woman declared. “Please, the more the merrier. There is more than enough food for everyone.”

“Okay, I’m going to go get him. He’s waiting in the foyer,” I told them. Only the kids didn’t seem to watch us. “I’ll be right back.”

I ran to him and grabbed Seth’s hand. He could tell by the smile on my face they were cool with it. “Dude, this place is impressive,” he mumbled to me as we walked back.

“You haven’t seen the best room yet,” I informed him as we entered. My boyfriend just looked at me in confusion. “Edward, I think you already know my stepbrother. It’s a small world, after all.”

Laughing, he offered his hand to Seth. “No wonder she’s so happy. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Thanks. Thank you for letting me come over. An awesome house you got here,” he replied, smiling widely. “I always wondered what it looked like on the inside.”

“Of course! I suppose I should make introductions,” my boyfriend began as Esme and Carmen got off the couch and came around to the bar. “Isabella Swan, this is my lovely stepmother, Dr. Esmeralda Cullen.”

“Dr. Cullen,” I said politely as I tried to shake her hand.

“Esme, please. I’m practically retired now.” She ignored my handshake and brought me into a warm hug.

“Over there is my boneheaded older brother, Emmett,” he continued as he flicked his head in the direction of the pool table.

“Yo!” He replied with a raised hand in the air. You could tell he was one of those guys that never left college. The popular, good-looking type that got in a lot of trouble, which was probably only made worse by the amount of money he had.

“Mom, this is my friend and driver, Seth Clearwater,” Edward introduced him. He shook her hand with a never-ending grin.

The girl beside Esme looked antsy, and I could tell he was taking too long with the meet and greet for her taste. I went over to her and shook her hand. "You must be Carmen. Your brother has said so many wonderful things about you."

"You shouldn't lie, Tony," she teased.

"Tony?" I asked with a giggle.

He blushed brightly. "Yeah, they call me that sometimes. Ignore them. I prefer Edward." He stuck his tongue out at his sister like they were kids.

Speaking of children, they must have realized they didn't have a captive audience on the couch anymore and came over to the group of people. The eldest girl tugged on Edward's jeans, calling out for her 'Uncle Tony' repeatedly. He picked her up with one arm around her waist.

Giggling in pleasure, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "She's pretty," she babbled as she pointed at me. I flushed but smiled.

"I think so too," he whispered loudly in her ear. "Tanya, that's Bella. She's my girlfriend. Can you say hi?"

She reached for me, and he looked at me with a questioning gaze, wondering if I would take her. Quickly, I came over and grabbed her from his arms. She was heavy, almost too big to be carried anymore. She was nearly four, and she had bright, intelligent eyes.

"And this," Edward picked up the middle girl that came toddling over to him, "is Kate."

"And I'm Eleazar." The pale man went to stand beside his wife. His accent was thick. It was Russian, maybe? I wasn't sure. "This is Irina," he told me, referring to the baby in his arms. She grinned at her daddy.

Tanya snuggled up against me, her head on my chest. After a happy sigh, she spoke loudly. "You've got big boobies like Mama. You're comfy."

There was a moment of thick silence before almost everyone in the entire room, except for me, and perhaps Carlisle started talking or laughing. Seth was practically doubled over with tears streaming down his face. Edward moved his hand over his eyes as he chuckled quietly. Carmen told her daughter not to say stuff like that because it wasn't polite, and her father was apologizing to me though there was no reason to.

Kids say the darnedest things.

Emmett was the loudest out of the group. "That's my girl!"

Esme fussed at him, but she was just as amused as the rest of them. Tanya had NO idea what she had said that was so funny, but she was pleased with herself.

Finally, I responded. "Yup, I sure do. They're built-in pillows."

My boyfriend scoffed, lightly kissing my cheek before whispering in my ear. "Told you they'd love you."

"As a headrest, maybe." I looked down at the little girl. She was innocently smiling up at us. Sighing again, she snuggled into my chest like they would get softer if she did. She seemed comfortable enough.

Things were a lot quieter after that. Edward, Esme, Carmen, and I went to the kitchen after a while to heat the food I ordered for the day. Carlisle and Eleazar were having a conversation I didn't understand in the dining room. The girls napped while the meal was cooking. Seth seemed to find a friend in Emmett. They played the Wii in the geek room.

"Tony seems euphoric," Carmen commented with a slight smile. "I've never seen him look so happy. I don't think he's ever talked or smiled this much, even with me."

"He misses you," I told her quietly. We were arranging the enormous table in the dining room. The men had gone into the library to research something. I had no idea what since it was in another language, but Carmen seemed to understand.

"I miss him, too. We see each other every few months for a week or so, but it's not enough. He's been so busy down here too. I haven't talked to him this little since he went to college when I was a kid."

"Where do you live?" I inquired. I knew if he lived close enough, he would visit her frequently.

"Chicago," she stated, adjusting a couple of forks around a plate. "We saw each other for about two hours, maybe a month and a half ago, but he seemed so sad. A lot has changed since then."

I bit my lip. "We had gotten into a fight," I admitted. "This was before we started dating, though. It was just a big misunderstanding, but we didn't really get to speak until he came back the next day. I hate that he was unhappy."

She nodded. "That explains it. He wouldn't talk about it," she replied as she put down the last of the glasses. "He's been so quiet all morning like he didn't have the energy to even chat. I mean, more than usual, which is saying something. He wasn't tired. He was just missing his other half."

Smiling, she touched my arm as she went back towards the kitchen. "He was waiting to be whole again," she declared over her shoulder before disappearing.

Standing there as she floated away, I absorbed the information she had given me. Before I saw him sitting at that bar alone, I wouldn't have been able to believe her.

Maybe... just maybe... we were heading in a rather wonderful direction.

It seemed to take forever to get everything together, and everyone comfortably arranged. There were so many people. Carlisle took the head of the table, but at Edward's request. On the right of him was his lovely wife, then their daughter, her children, and then finally her husband. On the left, it was Emmett, my boyfriend, me, and then Seth. Our friend was having a delightful time talking to little Kate, who would giggle and squeal at his every word and expression.

"Shall we say grace?" His stepmother asked when we all sat down. "Edward, this is your home. Would you please?"

"Uhhh..." he drew out. I never knew him to be religious before, but it was always different when you're with your relatives. Holding his hand, I gave him a reassuring smile. He returned it before clearing his throat and looking down as he took his brother's. "Heavenly Father, we thank you for all your wonderful blessings you have bestowed upon our family. We thank you for allowing us to be blessed with the presence of new friends and loved ones. If it is your will, please keep them in our hearts and safe always. In his name, we pray. Amen."

"Amen," everyone said pretty much together.

"That was lovely, darling," she smiled.

"Thank you," he mumbled as he blushed slightly.

I squeezed his fingers again, ours still tangled together underneath the table. "That was very sweet," I whispered in his ear.

He turned his face into my hair, lightly kissing my temple. "I haven't done that in years."

"At our school," Tanya began as her father filled her plate with turkey and mashed potatoes, "when we eat lunch, they say. 'God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his hands, we are all fed, so we all must thank him for our daily bread!' But we don't always have bread, so I don't get it."

Carlisle snorted quietly. "Sweetheart, it's just because it rhymes. So it's easier to remember."

“So you go to school already, Tanya? You must be very smart.” I smiled encouragingly at her. She beamed, taking a big bite of a roll.

“Oh, she goes to this little Catholic preschool for half a day,” Carmen explained as she cut up tiny pieces of carrots for the baby. “It’s to get her ready for actual school and get her socialized. She loves it.”

“Hey, Bella,” Emmett called. “Pass me the gravy, baby.”

Giggling, I handed him the bowl. Edward just rolled his eyes. “Don’t encourage him.”

“He is a bit of a ham, beware,” Esme said teasingly as she took a sip of her wine.

“I’m not a ham! I’m the whole dam-” he was about to cuss, but about half the table gave him a dirty look. “Darn. I’m the whole darn pig.”

“Amen to that,” his brother laughed, hanging his head over his plate as he snickered.

He smacked the back of his skull before reaching for the basket of rolls. He just smirked as my boyfriend glared at him.

So, apparently, this was what it was like to have a big family dinner. I had experienced nothing like it before. Uninterested in my food, I was more into observing all the fascinating people around me. They were so unique. So interesting and full of life.

Poor Carmen had finally gotten around to making her own plate after getting the girls ready. She seemed tired but thrilled. But she barely had taken two bites before Irina whimpered for more to drink.

She stood, but I stopped her. “No, you relax. I’ll get her something,” I insisted, holding my hand out for the cup.

“Are you sure?” She asked with a relieved smile.

“Yeah. You eat. What would she like?” I inquired as I took it from her grip.

“Milk, please. Thank you so much,” she breathed. I don’t think she got as much help as she needed at times. There had been no mention of a nanny or anything. I wondered if she was doing it all on her own.

I went to the kitchen and refilled the tiny sippy cup before I came to the table to give it to the small child. She snatched it from me and took a big slurping gulp like she hadn’t had a drink for

days. I giggled quietly as I walked to my spot when suddenly there was a sharp pain in my side. Hissing, I placed my hand on the back of Carmen's chair.

"Are you alright?" She questioned as she turned around to look at me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I've just started a new medication in the past month or so, and I don't think it likes me too much," I explained as I rubbed my ribs. The ache went away, and I lifted myself back up to my full height.

"What medication?" Esme asked with concern. I had forgotten that she was a doctor. I really didn't want to announce to the entire table I was taking birth control. It was like saying, 'I'm having sex with your son.' I couldn't do that.

Instead, I decided to only say the medicine's actual name. Perhaps only she would know it, and it wouldn't be as embarrassing. "Um, Loestrin," I answered, my cheeks flushing. It wasn't like I was making it less obvious at all.

"Oh, that's a low dosage, isn't it?" Esme pressed, realizing right away what I was talking about.

"I believe so," I replied. "I've just been taking it for a little while. I'm still getting used to it."

"Ah, yes. It does take time. Some women never get used to it."

And that, thankfully, was the end of that conversation. I couldn't have been more grateful. Everyone seemed more interested in their food.

After dinner, Esme insisted everyone work together to get the leftovers put away with the dishes cleaned. Edward volunteered us to keep the kids' company, along with Seth. Esme wouldn't allow him to help even though he said he would. He was, apparently, a guest.

We went to the geek room, and my man plopped down on the pile of pillows. Tanya and Kate squealed with pleasure and followed him. Seth sat on the couch, his eyes going directly to a football game on the big television. I sat on the floor with the chunky one-year-old on my lap.

"Who wants to do the airplane?" My boyfriend offered the girls excitedly.

Tanya clicked her tongue and shook her head, patting his arm like an adult. "Uncle Tony, we just ate. We might throw up."

He looked aghast by the whole idea, shaking his head in horror at the girl's unashamed and blunt truth. "Yeah, good point," he uttered.

“Didn’t think that one through, did ya, Uncle Tony?” I inquired sarcastically with a smirk. He stuck his tongue out at me, but it only made me laugh.

“So, what are we going to do then?” He questioned, ignoring my teasing. Instead of answering, Kate, who seemed to be the quietest of the bunch, climbed up on top of him and rested her cheek on his chest. He wrapped one of his big arms around her securely and petted her hair with the other. “Are you tired, my little lovely?” She just nodded.

Tanya appeared to enjoy cuddling and laid down beside him so that her temple was on his stomach by her sister’s feet.

“Comfy?” I quietly questioned.

Smiling happily to himself, his eyes were closed as his head rested on one of the big black pillows. “Yeah. But I think we may need to get these girls bathed and ready for bed soon.”

At the word ‘bathed’ Kate popped up off of Edward’s chest. “Bath time?”

“Yup. Tanya, go ask your mommy if it’s okay if we get you ladies a bath.” Before he could get the sentence completely out, the happy and hyper child was off like a shot towards the kitchen.

Just a few minutes later, she returned. “She said yes and to give her a minute to get our shampoo stuff.”

“Tell her I got you some. All I need is the clothes,” he replied as he stood up and stretched his arms way above his head. His back and elbows popped.

Kate was already trying to take her shirt off.

“Well, I think when they start stripping, it’s time for me to go,” Seth chuckled as he turned off the television.

“Okay,” he snickered as he brought his hand out to my new stepbrother. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Thanks for letting me. I’ve had a great time,” he assured him. “Bye cutie,” he laughed at the girl who had somehow gotten one of her arms caught in the sleeve.

“Byeeeeee, Seth.” She grinned her cute little gap-tooth smile that curved like her uncle’s.

“We’ll have lunch and go video game shopping soon,” I promised as I came over to him. Edward had taken the baby from my arms and moved towards the gigantic bathroom in his room.

“For sure,” he beamed, “sis.”

“Wow, that’s so strange.” I hugged him gently before pulling away. “But insanely cool.”

“You may not say that when you meet our sister,” he warned ominously. “We’ll arrange something on Monday?”

“For sure,” I used my brother’s words.