



## **Chapter Thirty-two**

When I came up to the bedroom, I could hear the water flowing in the enormous copper bathtub that Edward had. Giggles and squeals echoed through the space, including his. The girls were already in the tub, the liquid just over their chubby thighs. He had gotten them some toys, and they were busy playing and splashing.

“You know, not too many uncles would do this,” I told him. He was sitting by the edge on his knees, his arm resting against the lip.

“I used to give Carmen baths all the time when we were growing up.” He grinned, his hand dipping in the water to check the temperature. “Mom and Dad worked a lot, and I didn’t like a nanny giving her one. Then it just became a thing until she was too old for it.”

I closed the lid on the toilet and sat beside him. He turned off the tap when it was at the baby’s stomach. Suddenly, she squealed and repeatedly slapped at the surface, getting everyone wet.

“Hey, hey, hey,” my sweet boyfriend laughed. “None of that.” He handed her a small pail with two rubber ducks floating in it. “There, play with those.”

She dumped the bucket of water on top of her head. It shocked her to no end, her eyes going wide as her entire body quaked with surprise. It only made Edward laugh harder. He seemed so happy.

“Do you want children?” I asked, grabbing a clean towel from the rack and setting in my lap. We had spoken about it before, but this was different.

“I do. Someday, I hope I can be a dad.”

“It’s only a matter of finding the right woman and getting married,” I teased. “Honestly, you don’t even have to get hitched anymore.”

“I’ve already found her. I’m working on the other part.” He did his little half-smile, a flush crawling across his cheeks. Blushing too, I looked down at my hands. I was glad when Eleazar came in with clothes for the girls. He asked if we needed any help, but Edward declined.

He did all the work, but I was sure he didn’t see it that way. Washing their hair, he played with the bubbles and made the others giggle by styling it in funny ways. They were in the bathtub until the water was cold and they were prunes. I took the baby out for him, who was fighting the end of bath time the least. I patted her down and rubbed her back and tummy with lotion after I placed her in a diaper.

“When did you get all this stuff?” I asked when he came out with a pouting two-year-old. Tanya was still in the water, lounging like she didn’t have a care in the entire world.

“I couldn’t sleep last night, so I went to Walmart and bought a bunch of things.” He shrugged. “I thought it would be good for them to have some here. They’re coming again for Christmas, anyway.”

With some trouble, I got Irina into a sleeper while he was carefully brushing Kate’s hair. She could barely keep her eyes open, her head bobbing and weaving.

“All done in the kitchen,” Carmen said from the bedroom doorway with a smile. “Look at that. You’ve almost got them all ready for bed.”

“Except for that one,” Edward nodded towards the bathroom. “She doesn’t want to get out.”

Sighing, she placed a hand on her hip. “We always have this problem. Tanya! It’s time to get out!” She stated as she started stomping towards the room. “I know you’re having fun, but it’s bedtime. You’ve had a long day.”

A loud 'awe' echoed through the entire room, all the way to the bedroom. Edward had a funny smile on his face.

"What?"

"It's weird to see her as a mother. She's still a kid in my eyes," he explained after a moment. He shook his head like he was clearing away the fog before pulling the silky princess nightgown over Kate's wet hair. "I can remember when your momma was your size."

She placed her hands on either side of Edward's cheeks and squeezed until it puckered his lips. She then shook her head seriously. "No."

"Oh," he uttered through fish lips. "Okay. If you say so."

Giggling, I patted his knee. "Alright, well, if you have these two, I will let you have some private time with your nieces and sister."

"We're just going to lay them down to bed," Carmen said as she came out with a soggy Tanya in tow. She didn't look pleased.

"Yeah, but that was always a special time for me when I was a kid. I don't want to intrude on that," I told them as I stood up. "Goodnight, girls. I'll be down in the geek room."

His sister snorted, placing her hand over her mouth. He flashed a curious face in her direction. "That's the perfect name for it!"

"I know, right?" I snickered. Edward just rolled his eyes.

I made my way downstairs to find Carlisle, Emmett, and Eleazar setting up a table off to one side of the room. They even had poker chips and cards already out, placing chairs from the dining room around it. Esme was sitting on the couch, quietly reading a book. Glancing up as I sat down, she could tell I was slightly confused.

"It's a tradition amongst the boys to play after Thanksgiving. They used to with cookies as the chips, but I had to put a stop to that," she explained with a slight smile.

"I bet they didn't like that. Especially since they all seem to eat like Edward."

"After they figured out that they didn't have food hangovers the next day, they were okay with it, but yes, they didn't."

I liked how quiet and soft-spoken she was. It made me more comfortable, and it was easier to make conversation with her. "He's talked about going to the casino a couple of times, but we never have."

"Oh, he's very good at poker. It's like he can read their minds. He's exceptional at deciphering facial expressions. I suppose that's why he's so great at dealing with employees and such."

"Hm," I hummed, not knowing what to say. A moment later, Carmen and Edward returned from where they laid the girls down to rest.

"All done." She plopped down on the couch between her mother and me.

My boyfriend kissed the top of my head lightly before going to see what his brother and father were doing. They directed him to go to the fridge and get some drinks.

"What about real hangovers?" I inquired with a giggle. She just grinned, winking at me teasingly. We all looked over at the men with the same expression on our faces. Affection. We sighed nearly in unison before sitting in a more comfortable way. After being silent for a few moments, I asked a question. "Not to be rude, but what kind of accent does Eleazar have?"

"Oh, it's not. He's Russian," Carmen declared with a nod of her head. "He's from Moscow."

"How on earth did you two meet?"

"It's actually because of Edward," she started.

"Don't make me a part of this," he yelled from the table. Carlisle was dealing the cards, the other two arranging their chips.

"Well, it's true!" She snapped back. "Okay, so when I was around sixteen, I volunteered to do some stuff for a charity he had set up in several countries in Africa for children. It was just for a month or so. We were building homes and other important buildings. Anyway, Eleazar was there too. He was one of the doctors. He had just finished his schooling."

I heard my boyfriend talk about charities before, but I didn't know he had personally set up some. It was nice to think about it. I couldn't imagine how many he had helped.

"I bet your parents loved the age difference," I joked, thinking about Carlisle's reaction to mine.

“You have no idea,” Esme muttered but smiled charmingly. “He is a wonderful man, and I’m glad he is in my daughter’s life.”

“Anyway.” Carmen rolled her eyes. “We didn’t start dating then, we were only friends. We emailed back and forth for about nine months before we got to meet up again when he came to New York for a vacation, and we fell in love there. It wasn’t on purpose. It just happened. He moved to Chicago on a work visa, and we got married when I turned eighteen. The rest is history.” She shrugged. “What about you and Edward?”

Flushing, I figured I could tell them most of the truth. “Well, before I met him, I had been unemployed for two years. I’ve got a computer degree, but Louisiana isn’t known for its technology. Anyway, I went to put an application up at Eagle. My friend works up there, and he said there was an opening for a lobby position.”

“It was raining cats and dogs,” he added over his shoulder from the table. “Poor thing was dripping wet because she didn’t have an umbrella.”

I laughed at the memory. “Which made me annoyed, to begin with. And then this rude little bimbo Barbie gave me trouble because it was actually her job they were scouting for.”

“I was just coming out of the copy room when I watched Bella light into her. It was hilarious. Oh, by the way, she got herself fired,” Edward chimed in again.

“How?”

“Stealing office supplies. She was an idiot, anyway.”

“Hey, Tony, are you going to cluck with the hens, or are you going to play?” Emmett asked as he took a swig of his beer. He placed his cards on the table and came over to the couch with us. The two other men gave him a dirty look. “What?” They just shook their heads.

He sat beside me, his arm draped over my shoulder. I leaned into him, placing my head on his. “I was horrified when he came up to me. He was so handsome, and I was a soggy mess. And then he asked to see my resume and told me to come the next day for an interview.”

“And all I could think about was how beautiful she was and how I wanted to ask her out. But you know me. I can never do things the easy way. I needed so badly to help her, but I knew if I hired her at Eagle, I couldn’t date her. So, I searched and searched for jobs in her field, but all of them paid poorly, or they were out of town. So, I offered her a position as my personal chef.”

“I tried to quit when we started dating,” I frowned. “I told him I would find another job.”

"I can imagine Edward took no part in that," Esme said with a knowing look. "He's always been possessive. Well, I'm glad he hired you, and I'm so pleased for you both. You two seem very happy."

"I know I am," he replied as he took my chin between his fingers and brought my mouth up for a slow and innocent kiss. Sighing in pleasure, I leaned my forehead against his jaw when he pulled away.

Biting her lip, she looked as if she was deliberating something. So much so that the three of us on the couch watched her and waited for her to decide. Finally, his stepmother nodded her head and stood up. "Edward, I have something for you," she began.

"Darling, are you sure it's the right time?" Carlisle asked, almost as if he was in a panic.

"I think it's as good a time as any. And I think he'll like it."

"I'm sure he'll love it. But don't you think this is something he should have in private?" He pressed. We watched the conversation go back and forth like ping-pong balls.

"We're all family here. Besides, I think Emmett will like it too. He can't have his just yet, but I'm working on it," Esme assured him.

"What on earth are you two talking about?" Edward finally inquired, a peculiar smile on his lips. "You'll have to give it to me now because I'm too curious to wait."

She smiled innocently, but I could see the wicked twinkle in her eye. She knew exactly what she was doing. Esme went to the bar where her beautiful and very expensive red leather purse sat and pulled out a disc in a clear case.

"Well, I was going through some tapes I found, and I had them all converted into DVDs. I'm making you a whole compilation of them with your birthdays and special events. I finished the first one just the other day. May I?" She asked as she waved her hand toward the DVD player.

"Yes, please. That's very sweet of you, Mom."

It took her a couple of minutes to set it up, and when she was done, she handed him the remote to start it. He pressed play, and instantly images danced onto the screen. Then the words 'Edward Anthony Cullen-Masen's First Ten Birthdays,' with cheerful music played in the background.

And then a red-haired woman came into view. Obviously in garb from the '70s, her round cheeks were full and freckled. She was giving the camera a skeptical look as she sat at an

island in the middle of a very retro kitchen. She was working on what appeared to be a birthday cake.

“Do you even know how to work that thing?” She finally asked. Her accent was lovely and thick. Irish.

“Of course I do, Lizzy,” Carlisle’s voice, smoother than he was now but clearly him, laughed. “I’ve been playing with it all morning, and I think I’ve got it all figured out.”

“You and your toys.” She shook her head.

“What are you working on? Talk to the camera, not me. This is for prosperity.”

She rolled her eyes, and her full lips cracked a smile. “I’m decorating a cake for our son’s very first birthday.”

As I looked at her, I could see it. I wouldn’t say I was the spitting image, though we did have a lot of things in common. She was short like I was, perhaps shorter. And she was full-figured, her features soft and curved. Her hair was wildly red, even redder than her son’s, but I suspected that was because of dye. Her eyes were all Edward’s. I could see some of what Carlisle meant, in the shape, the height, and especially the mouth. But I could see the differences too, besides the hair and eyes. Her nose was long and slender, where mine was short. Her cheeks were higher than mine and more attractive, in my opinion. Also, she had a perfect smile with straight teeth. Mine were far from it, with a small gap between my front two.

“Which one? We have two, after all. Devil is in the details, my dear.”

The woman stuck her tongue out at the camera. “Tony, of course. It’s my baby boy’s first birthday. We’re going to have a little party and eat cake.”

“I’ve seen that pile of presents in the living room. That’s not little,” Carlisle teased.

“Some of them are for Emmett. I didn’t want him to feel left out.”

A hand came around the shot and smoothed a random red curl behind the woman’s ear. “That’s my Elizabeth, always so worried about everyone’s feelings.”

I heard Edward snuffle quietly beside me, and his arm dropped from my shoulder. Everyone seemed glued to the screen, not noticing the tears streaming down my sweet boyfriend’s cheeks. Carmen was smiling, and Esme was too while holding her daughter’s hand. Emmett stood behind the couch and had a massive grin on his dimpled face. I realized he had the same perfect teeth as his mother and high cheekbones.

“Aw, this is cool,” he muttered to himself.

But nobody replied to him. Instead, the screen continued to talk. Elizabeth blushed a soft shade of pink and turned her attention back to the elaborate chocolate cake. “I just want my baby to be happy.”

“I’m sure he will be. Speak of the devil!” His father said as the camera zoomed around to the kitchen door. In the arms of an older woman was a chubby little boy in overalls. He had vivid wiry blond hair that was red in spots.

“Excuse me,” Edward spoke with a snuffle. Like a shot, he was out of the room. Carmen looked instantly concerned, and Esme glanced back at her husband.

“I told you,” he whispered, the rims of his eyes red, but there were no tears.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled and ran after him. I caught a glimpse of him going into the library. Following behind, I placed my hand on the door right before he closed it. “Edward, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he muttered as he wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand.

“You don’t seem so,” I said, shutting the door behind us and locking it.

Instead of replying, he walked over to the chase and practically threw himself down on it. “Well, I can see it now,” he finally declared after a few minutes of silence. “Before I just kind of blew it off, figuring it was a lame excuse, but I can see it. Especially if Esme was working on this for a while before he came. Dad had enough of Mum at home. And then he comes here to get away from it, and he sees you. It’s not a good fucking reason, but still. God.”

“Do you think I look like her?” I asked, touching his knee.

“Your mouth. It’s so much like hers. Your expressions too. Your shape. Yeah, I do. Not as much as he does, but I think it’s just fresh in his mind.” He brought his arm over his eyes and took several deep breaths.

“Does it freak you out?”

“A little,” he admitted. “You?”

I reflected on it for a while. It was the first time I had put any real hard thought into it before. I was decent at not thinking about things that worried me. After a few minutes, I gave my best reply. “No. It doesn’t. I think most men try to find women like their mothers, at least to some

extent. And the other way around, with women and their fathers. For good and bad reasons. It doesn't surprise me. And honestly, I'm honored. Elizabeth seems like a wonderful woman."

"She was," he assured me. "One of the best I've ever met."

"Are we okay?" I touched his knee again. He reached down and took my hand, giving me a timid nod. I knew we were finished talking about that for the night. His entire family was in the geek room, waiting for us to return.

And though Edward said we were, I wasn't certain. Not completely, anyway. I knew we would have our issues, but I wasn't sure how to deal with this one. All I could do was take it one step at a time and hope for the best. And, honestly, I was just happy I got to be in his life at all.

We sat together in silence for several minutes until his tears had dried, my hand in his grip the entire time. He sighed heavily and grabbed a bottle of water from his desk for a long dredge. When he finished, he rubbed his eyes before running his fingers through his hair.

"I suppose we should get back in there."

"Only if you're ready."

"I am." He forced a smile. "Come on."

When we returned, the television was thankfully blank. Emmett had gone back to the card table with the other men, and they were quietly playing. Esme was sitting there with anxiety written all over her face, her daughter's hand still in hers.

"Edward?" She breathed, her lips pulled down into a worried frown.

"Thank you so much for this, Mom. It's wonderful. I'll watch all of it when I'm alone soon," he formally stated.

She stood up and quickly gave him a hug. She whispered something in his ear, and he just nodded his head. He smiled slightly, a genuine one, and she kissed his forehead.

"Hey Tony, come over here and play. I have to redeem myself after last year," Edward's brother called. Glancing in my direction, I gave him a reassuring nod.

"I don't think it's possible to do that," he responded as he returned.

The men played for a couple of hours before giving up. It was practically tied between him and Eleazar, both commanding a massive pile of chips. Everyone was tired and ready for

bed, though. After giving a kiss to his sister and stepmother, he shook the hands of his fellow card players. Together we watched them walk out of the room to their prospective bedrooms.

I expected to tell him goodnight and head home, but Edward had other plans. "Stay with me tonight," he begged as he took both of my hands in his.

"But your family-"

"I just want to sleep with you in my arms. It's been a long day, and I haven't had any alone time with you."

"Are you sure?"

He placed his palms on either side of my face and kissed me. Gingerly, Edward swept some hair away from my eyes and rested his forehead against mine. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

With that little sentence, all of my worries about our future washed away.