



## **Chapter Thirty-five**

That evening was kind of magical. I had never been so happy before. I was never the type of person the term ‘glowing’ has ever referred to, but I was. My smile never left my face. It didn’t matter about our past. We were starting over, and those three little words marked the real beginning.

We weren’t able to be alone until the evening was over, but once we could finally cross the small patio to be together, our hands never unclasped from the other’s.

Lovemaking wasn’t in the cards for us, though I wish it had been. But I think the cuddling that occurred was just right. Edward held me throughout the entire night, his solid chest against my back with his arm draped protectively around my waist.

I was awake before sunrise, and I could feel him stir behind me. The smile that came to my face when he nuzzled his nose against my earlobe couldn’t be helped. He sighed heavily and pressed his hand against my stomach, “I love you,” he breathed into my ear. It was the first time I had heard the words come from his lips since I had seen them mouthed to me. I turned in his arms and placed my palm against his cheek as I looked into his lovely light green eyes. They were like crystal, glittering in the sun. No, they were more precious than that. They were diamonds, and his heart was made of gold.

“I love you,” I sighed before pressing my mouth reverently to his. “I love you so much, my beautiful shy man.”

The ensuing week sped by in a blur. Eleazar had to go back to Chicago to work on Saturday. As a doctor, he couldn't get as much time off as he liked. Carmen and the girls stayed until the following Friday, as did Carlisle and Esme. Emmett left in the middle of the week, his own duties to be done.

I only went to my home once in that time, and that was to get something, not even to sleep. Edward didn't want me to leave, and honestly, I didn't wish to either. I was enjoying playing with the girls and cooking for everyone.

Carmen was having fun hanging out with a female closer to her age, too. She seemed to be different from most twenty-two-year-old females. She was more responsible, more intelligent. I knew motherhood had a hand in that, but I think it was part of her personality. Alice came over one day and brought all the clothes in the right sizes for the girls, and together we spent it trying everything on them.

I thought my best friend was going to faint when she bought most of it and paid in cash. It was much bigger than the sale she had with Edward. I don't think she could have ever imagined that she would. It was an excellent thing that his half-sister was going to fly home on a private jet with her parents because to ship all of those boxes would be expensive and a pain in the ass otherwise.

As sad as I was to see Esme, Carmen, and the kids go, the moment his family left, I practically threw myself at my boyfriend. Or rather, I dragged him upstairs, shoved him down, and had my wicked way with him.

For hours. And hours.

We spent all day Saturday in bed completely nude, and the only reason we got out on Sunday was I needed to go grocery shopping if we were going to have something to eat.

It was so strange to come home Sunday night after being together for so long. My little trailer seemed foreign and uncomfortable somehow. I didn't know what to do with myself. Everything was clean, and I didn't even have a load of laundry to do.

Finally, I checked my personal email since it had been so long since I had done something like nine days, which must have been a record for me.

I had close to one hundred emails and more in the spam folder. A lot of them were just forwarded stuff from Alice or my father, or ads from websites I followed. But there was one from

my mother. I went through everything else before I finally read it. It was dated December first, which was the day before.

“Since you don’t seem to like it when I call anymore,” it began, “I’ll just email you from now on. I don’t want to be at the end of your wrath again. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about Christmas. You should totally come down! Florida is amazing in the wintertime. It’s so pleasant! I don’t think your boss is such a hardass that he won’t let you off for a week for the holidays. It’s been forever since you came. Phil misses you. So, let me know. I want to arrange for us to take surfing lessons when you come! Love you bunches, Mom.”

I frowned at the letter. It was something a teenager would write. It started out with sarcasm, and then instead of asking if I wanted to come, she told me I should. And not that she missed me, but Phil did, her husband. She had the emotional maturity of a child.

And surfing? Me? I don’t think so.

But she was my mother, and I had to be nice.

I opened up a new email and typed carefully.

“Hey, Mom. Sorry about my ‘wrath’, but that’s what you get for calling that early. You can call, just not before eight o’clock my time unless it’s an emergency. I don’t think I’ll be able to come down for Christmas. I have so much going on here. Perhaps you guys can come to visit sometime soon. You know, it has been a long time since you’ve come to me. I’ve gone the last three times. Louisiana isn’t that bad. Tell Phil I miss him too. And as great as surfing lessons sound, I don’t think I’d be able to do that in the middle of winter, even in Florida. Maybe in the summer. Anyway, love you, too. -Bella.”

It was literally two minutes later when my mother called, fumes practically coming from the speaker. “What do you mean you can’t come down?” She nearly shouted instead of saying hello like a normal person.

“I meant exactly what I said- honestly, Mom. I’ve got stuff going on here. I have a job, and I have plans. You know, a life.” I rolled my eyes at her tone of voice. Was she trying to guilt or bully me into coming down? That would not happen, that I could promise you.

“What do you mean, plans?” She demanded.

“Plans,” I restated. I didn’t have to tell her anything, especially when she wasn’t being nice.

“What possible plans could you have?”

Offended, I scoffed. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Renee, I’ll have you know that I’m going to a ball. A Cinderella dress, makeup, champagne, and dancing kind of Mardi Gras ball. And I’m helping Alice with a big pre-Christmas sale she’s doing. I’ve got several future dates set up with Dad and his girlfriend and her kids too. I’ve got plans.”

“Well, why didn’t you come to me first and see what I wanted to do?” She pushed, all high and mighty.

“Because I’m an adult, and if I don’t want to run to my mommy, I don’t have to,” I informed her. “I was serious about you coming to visit, but if you’re going to act like this, then never mind. I don’t have to cater to you.”

“You used to be such a docile child. What happened?” My mother growled in frustration.

I stared at the phone for a long moment. “Docile? No, I never was. I was too busy taking care of you to do anything else. When I went to Dad’s, I was allowed to be something other than a caretaker. Why don’t you grow the fuck up?” I snapped before I hung up. She tried calling back five times and emailed all within a few minutes, but I didn’t reply to any of them. I didn’t even look at the mail. I just deleted it. There was nothing she could say to stay my anger.

I just turned off my computer and silenced my phone before going to bed. I was not going to deal with crazy anymore that night.

The next day, I went to lunch with Seth, and we went video game shopping together. I ended up getting myself a hand-held system and several games for it, but I couldn’t decide on which of the bigger consoles I wanted. He was patient with me and helpful. It was a lot of fun.

I made meatloaf and mashed potatoes that night for Edward, along with some bread pudding. He adored it and ate it all despite wrinkling his nose when he heard what was for dinner.

“I should have more faith in you. That was lovely.” He sat back in his chair with his hand on his stomach. He looked so content. “I’ve never enjoyed it before.”

“Perhaps you should make a list of things you want me to do. I’m kind of running out of ideas,” I told him as I took a sip of my sweet tea. “Switch it around a bit. Food-wise.”

“I think I can do that,” he nodded, but I could tell by his expression that he was done dealing with work. He smiled a little in his wicked way and slid his hand over to me.

“What?” I asked, taking his palm.

He scooted his chair back. “Come sit on my lap.”

“But I should put this stuff away and clean up some. I made a gigantic mess,” I argued weakly, but his expression hushed me. I came over and wrapped my arms around his neck. “What?”

“I was thinking-” He began, but I felt like teasing him.

“Should I be worried?” I asked as earnestly as possible.

“I hope not.” He wiggled his eyebrows, making the seriousness disappear almost instantly. I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help but giggle. “Now, are you going to let me finish?”

I gave him a small kiss on the nose. “I suppose.”

“I was thinking... Well, after last week- I thought- maybe you could...” His confidence suddenly vanished.

“No. I don’t know. That’s why you have to tell me what you were thinking.” I ran my finger over his jaw, and I knew it was distracting him. I drew my fingertips over his bottom lip, so it pouted out a little. Who could blame me for kissing it?

“If you don’t stop that, I will fuck you on this table,” Edward declared gruffly.

“Mm, sounds good to me. Just try not to get my hair in the mashed potatoes. I want to save those for later.”

He laughed and rested his forehead on my chest, taking in a deep breath. “Bella, move in with me. I’m serious. Please, I want you with me all the time.”

I pulled back so I could look into his face. He was sincere this time, which explained the abrupt uneasiness. I knew he could fake confidence in his personal life when he put things out there as a joke, but when it came to the reality of it... Well, that was different. He could do anything in business, which was why we started out that way, but he was never sure of his footing in his intimate relationships.

Pushing my hair behind my ear, I thought about my response for a long time. Edward was patient, but I could see his eyes pleading for an answer. I knew I had to give him something, even if it wasn’t exactly the one he wanted.

“I think maybe it’s too soon for us to move in with each other. Can we be together through the end of the year and see how it goes? I want to break it to my family by Christmas, and I think moving in together before that is a bad idea. I think it’s a way to promise Charlie

won't like you. I just need to... introduce my fantasy to my real life slowly. You being my fantasy."

"So, what if it goes well? What happens on January first?" He asked, that needy little boy coming through in his eyes. God, how I wanted to kiss all his fears away.

"If it does, which I'm sure it will, then yeah. I don't care how my parents take it, really. That just needs to happen before I move in with you. But I will tell you yes on January first."

"You know that means I'll ask you again at straight-up midnight, right?" He smiled, feeling better, but I could still see the worry in his eyes. I knew the perfect way to ease his stress.

"You can. That's fine," I answered in a sugary sweet tone as I toyed with a button on his shirt. "Just kiss me first. I want to start off my new year with your lips on mine." I undid it, then another.

"Oh, Ms. Swan, yes. I believe that can be arranged," he assured me with a passionate kiss.

It surprised me we didn't break the table that night. Honestly, I didn't know you could do so many positions with a table and chair. It was impressive.

Something in Edward changed. He asked me to arrange a double date with Alice and Jasper and a meal with my new stepbrother. And he was downright social and happy to be so. He was charming and kind, which I realized he could be, but I could see what he was doing. He knew what he had to do to close the deal- make sure my friends and family liked him, and he would do his best to coordinate that. It was an excellent business move. The idea didn't bother me. He was good at his career, and he was trying to use his knowledge to lead to success in his love life. I could respect it. At least I knew he wanted it.

"You know what I think we should do?" He began one night when we were driving back from our second meal with my friends in a week. We had sushi from the same place we went on our first date and had yogurt afterward. It had been a pleasant evening, but that question made me concerned for some reason.

"What's that?"

"We should throw a party on Christmas eve at the house. We could invite everyone. I mean, my family will already be here, but we could ask Alice and Jasper. All of yours too. Seth and his mother, of course. I could invite some of my friends from work. Angela. It could be fun. Have a band and dance. You could invite your mom and her husband."

“You know I got into a fight with her,” I murmured, looking out of the window. It was one thing to go to an event with him, but it was another to throw it. It made it impossible to escape. And with all of my country-bumpkin family... The idea wasn't exactly pleasant. I could just imagine my father meeting the Cullens. Class meets Brass. Great. Just fantastic.

“I know, but I don't want you to be unhappy. You could call her and tell her that your boyfriend has invited her to come for the holidays and he's willing to pay for their flight and hotel.” He glanced over in my direction before looking at the road. He was driving like a normal person, so I knew he wanted this.

“I don't want you to do that,” I sighed.

“Why?”

“Because you can't throw money at every problem. Especially this one. We haven't gotten along very well lately, and I don't want her to ruin our first Christmas together.”

“Nothing could, that I can assure you, my love.” He reached over and squeezed my hand briefly before returning it to the wheel.

“Don't give her a challenge,” I teased, crossing my arms over my chest. I felt an icy shiver of terror run through my body as I thought about Renee succeeding. It was the last thing I needed.

“Isabella, I wish to make a good impression on your family. I need them to like me. And yes, I know you're having trouble with her, and I know it bothers you. And because it upsets you, it vexes me. If I can help you fix it, I want to. Let me do this for you.”

“I'll consider it,” I sighed, not knowing what else to say.

“The party or your mother?” He asked, just to make sure.

“My mom. The party sounds scary as hell,” I told him with another little shudder.

“Why?” He chuckled as he came to a red light, looking over at me with a curious expression. “Why does it frighten you?”

“You're kidding me, right?” I laughed without humor. “Your family is... cultured. Wealthy. Educated. Your dad already thinks poorly of me. I don't want to add fuel to that fire.”

“He behaved pretty well the rest of the week,” he pointed out.

“Doesn’t mean he likes me, just that he doesn’t want to upset you. But anyway, think about it. I live in a trailer-”

“You could be living with me,” he smirked as he pressed on the gas, racing us forward.

“I came from a trailer. Nothing will ever change that. The rest of my family... Well, let’s just say I’m probably the most normal. My dad is okay, but he’s so protective, and he’s horrible in groups. He doesn’t know how to talk to people and not be a cop. And if there is a crowd, Renee will make a scene. That’s her way. I don’t want to put Seth and Sue through that either. I like them.”

“They’re all adults. I’m sure they can act properly for one evening.”

“It would be the first time my mother has seen my father in probably close to a decade, and it would be with his future wife,” I said bluntly. “Hello, Jerry Springer- do I have a group of people for you...” I trailed off with a sigh.

He laughed, much to my annoyance. “Okay, it sounds bad when you put it like that. But, at some point, our families and friends are all going to be in the same room together.”

“Does it have to be this month, though?” I whined like a child. I knew I was, but I couldn’t help it. “Can’t we wait until our wedding day? At least we can escape then. Just go on our honeymoon and leave them there in the dust, fighting amongst themselves.”

“Oh, have we set a date? I didn’t realize we were getting married now.” Smirking to himself, he didn’t glance in my direction. I could see the amusement dancing in his eyes. He was enjoying making me so flustered.

“You know what I mean,” I huffed.

“I’m sorry,” he chuckled. “It was just a thought. Would you at least consider it? It would be nice, I think. Fun, even.”

“It would be a massacre,” I muttered under my breath, but I nodded my head. “Yeah, I suppose it is something I could think about.”

We pulled into the driveway of his house. Edward killed the engine, and we sat there for a long while in the dim light of the garage. He finally looked over with concern. “Is it really that bad with her?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed, unbuckling my seat and drawing my knees up to wrap my arms around them as I let my head loll back against the rest. “Things have been weird lately. It’s like all of a sudden I can’t stand her anymore. Everything she does frustrates me, and she’s done

nothing to improve herself. She's such a child. Whenever she tries to act like a mother, I can't take her seriously. It's so upsetting, especially when I look at Sue and Seth. She seemed so loving, so caring. She's the exact opposite of her. Renee is so selfish and always has been."

"I'm sure she loves you." Edward stroked my shoulder.

"I'm not certain she has the ability to love another human being. I mean, I know she cares in the way she can. It's different with Phil, an unconventional kind of relationship. But I just look at her and feel like going, 'I realize you never wanted to be a mom. Sorry about that.'"

"You shouldn't apologize for existing. One reason I want to meet your parents is to thank them for creating my reason for living."

"You're too much," I sniffled, wiping a rogue tear away from my cheek.

"It's true, though," he said as he placed his hand on my chin and forced me to look at him. "Bella, you were meant to be in the world. I know that. You were made just for me. And I will do everything in my power to make the woman I love feel as special as she makes me feel."

"Wow," I laughed despite the tears flowing down my face.

"What?"

"How did our conversation turn into this?" I inquired, wiping my cheek again with the back of my hand. I swallowed the bile that had risen in my throat because of the tears. "One minute we're talking about a party and the next I'm crying about my mother."

"And don't forget, somewhere in that time we decided to get married," he teased slyly, making me giggle a little.

"Let's elope," I replied, laying my head against the back again.

"We can run away together. Go to some unnamed tropical Island and hide from the world."

"Oh, can we?" I asked, making him chuckle.

Edward leaned over and kissed my mouth softly, straightening my hair around my face. "If I thought that would fix anything, I would say yes," he replied. "But I know better than that. It won't. Running away never does, and I should know. I'm a pro at it. But maybe we can do that sometime soon. Perhaps this summer? Just you and me alone for three months."

"Do we have to wait that long?" I pouted.

Edward didn't respond but got out of the car and came to my side to open the door. With a gentle hand, he helped me to my feet before enclosing his arms around my waist then pulled me in closer. "My love, if you tell me you truly want to leave right this instant, we can. With a single phone call, I can arrange a plane. You wouldn't have to pack a thing. We can get right back into this vehicle and go to the airport. And we can hide as long as you want."

The man could certainly call a woman's bluff when he wanted to. His powerful eyes locked onto mine, holding me in their gaze for a long time.

"No," I finally remarked. "You're right. It won't fix anything. I'll think about my mother coming for a visit. I suppose it has been a while since I've seen her."

"If that's what you want," he smiled, but we both knew he had used his business sense to get me where he wanted me. I wrinkled my nose, which only made him chuckle. He knew that I knew too. Sneaky bastard.

I pulled away from him and put my chin in the air as I headed towards the house. "Yeah, I suppose the summer would be just right. I want to lose some weight, so maybe I can wear a swimsuit without wanting to break all the mirrors in the place."

"Ah, come on! You're perfect the way you are!" He called from behind. "Besides, we'd be alone, remember? You wouldn't have to wear one at all."

"Oh, I don't know about that." I wiggled my ass playfully. "I wouldn't want to give the sharks a show."

Laughing, he ran to catch up to me. When he did, he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close to his side, where I felt the safest.

