



## Chapter Thirty-six

I was sitting silently at a vanity in one of Edward's extra bedrooms as a woman worked on my locks the night of the Krewe of Centaur's Christmas celebration. My sweet boyfriend had surprised me with a pair of lovely women to do my hair, makeup, and nails. He knew that though I enjoyed going out with him, this wasn't exactly my cup of tea. I wasn't very good at it, at the very least.

It didn't help that we would also attend a formal New Year's party and a Twelfth Night ball, which was the official start of the Mardi Gras season the following month. Not attending would be frowned upon in the group, unless there was some major reason like illness. We had no such excuse. It was starting to feel like a lot.

Already in an elegant deep forest green dress, I was wrapped in a cape to keep the hair spray and makeup from messing it up. I had already purchased my dresses for the other events since I had so many so close together. I was getting quite a collection of formal attire.

Alice and I made a special day trip to Dallas to go shopping since I had visited almost every single shop in Shreveport with little luck. It just made sense to make the three-hour drive for a much bigger selection. Edward thought it was an outstanding idea, as long as we took the car service he hired. It wasn't Seth, sadly, who had responsibilities at home, but the man was nice enough. We had a marvelous time. Especially when it came to eating. We stayed overnight and ate at this lovely brunch place called Benedict's. It was amazing and probably the most I

had ever spent on breakfast, which wasn't saying much since I was cheap. I had a Belgium waffle with Nutella and marshmallow fluff drizzled over the top, a mound of strawberries rounding the entire thing off.

I could have eaten it at every single meal.

The excursion was also a good chance to do some much-needed Christmas shopping. I was glad the limo had an enormous trunk because we used every inch of space. When we arrived back at Edward's, we split up our booty like kids with Halloween candy.

I was pulled back into reality by a sharp tug from a brush as the tall woman with bright red hair tried to smooth the tangles. She had done it up one way but didn't like it, so she took it down so she could do it differently. Honestly, I didn't care how she did it, as long as I didn't look too silly. I just didn't want anything too big.

The other lady, shorter and stockier with wild blond dreads, worked on my nails. She was painting them a rich jade green to match my apparel and applying little crystals to the tips. It wasn't my usual style, but they were the artists, and who was I to argue? I didn't have much of a sense of fashion. Though, I believed I was getting better at it.

My dress was gorgeous, that much I had to say. It was made with dark, thick, shiny green material that could practically stand up on its own. And it was floor-length, fanning from my hips with the bosom tight. The same white crystals as my nails were spread over it in a heart-shape. Plus, the sleeves were long, which was a wonderful thing since it would be a chilly night. The coldest so far of the year.

"Mr. Masen said he wanted your hair up," the redhead explained in a voice strained in concentration. "Away from your neck. You just have so much of it, and I don't want it to look heavy."

"I'm sure whatever you do will be beautiful," I replied with a reassuring smile, but I wasn't there. Not really, anyway. I was tired and achy, a slight cramp in my stomach. I was worried I was getting the flu, but I would not let that ruin the evening. It was our first formal event since we became a serious couple, and I would enjoy it as much as possible. I was going to give him a night to remember.

I would just have to think about being ill the next day and pray I could get over it before Christmas in a couple of weeks. The last thing I wanted was to get everyone else sick too. It always seemed like someone had to be ill during the holidays, and I guess it was my turn.

I sat in the same spot for hours, and my rear was sore from no movement, but I wasn't about to ask to go to the bathroom while they were working so hard. Finally, the redhead figured out what she wanted to do with it. She French braided it in two parts on either side of my head

before artfully twisting it into an interesting bun at the base of my neck. She secured it with enough hairspray to ensure it wasn't going anywhere... for days, possibly. James, the blond woman, did my makeup to match my dress, painting my eyes dark with hints of green, but my mouth was a fierce red. The thick lipstick wouldn't come off without the aid of a powerful cleaner. Turpentine, perhaps?

"There you go," she finally said as she tore the cape away from my body and smiled to herself. She was obviously proud of their work, and I could see why. I looked lovely, and I couldn't have done any of the tricks they had pulled off. Edward's money was well spent, and I knew he would love it.

Slipping into my silky green ballet flats, I was determined to be comfortable for the night since I had gotten the scariest pair of heels I had ever seen for New Year's.

I was positive Edward had been playing video games in the geek room almost the entire time I was getting ready, only throwing his suit on after a quick shower. Maybe, just maybe, he had put gel in his hair. The whole thing probably didn't even take twenty minutes. I had to admit I was a little jealous, but I guess when you're that good-looking, there isn't much you can do to add to perfection.

"Thank you, it's amazing," I assured them quietly, but my heart really wasn't into it.

Suddenly the blond snapped her fingers and pulled something out of her pocket. "I bet you have a headache from all that hair-pulling. You've got a long night ahead of you. I've found that taking these always helps," she said as she placed two little blue pills in the palm of my hand.

"What are they?" I asked, looking at them curiously.

She shook an aspirin bottle at me. "Extra strength. You'll probably be doing a lot of dancing tonight too. This will help your feet from getting as sore as fast."

"Oh, thank you," I declared gratefully as I popped the tablets into my mouth. Vicky, the redhead, passed me a glass of water with a straw in it as I did. Slurping them down, I smiled at the duo. It was a fine idea, and I should have thought about it earlier, but I wasn't in my best state.

Edward was waiting for me in the geek room. When I walked in, his back was to me, and he was pawing at a bulky velvet box. He turned it repeatedly in his hands, almost nervously.

Grinning to myself, I leaned against the doorway. "What do you have there, Mr. Masen?" I asked teasingly. He gave a small start before getting up with a smile. "Jumpy?"

“A little,” he admitted. “You are ravishing, my love,” he complimented as he stepped forward and offered me his hand. I crossed the few steps between us, letting my palm rest against his. “Something is missing, though.”

“What’s that?” I inquired curiously, tilting my eyes towards the box. I knew what he had planned, I just wondered how over the top he had gone.

“I love that you humor me sometimes,” he mused. Slowly, he cracked it open and revealed a solitaire necklace with matching earrings, maybe a carat each. My heart dropped into my stomach.

“Oh, my...” I breathed. “Are these diamonds?” I asked, just to make sure. No one had ever given me any before. I hadn’t even bought them for myself.

“Yes, flawless and in platinum,” he smirked slightly as he walked behind me to clip the necklace into place. The earrings were next. In a smooth motion, he placed them in my ears, gentle so as not to hurt me. “They’re almost as beautiful as you.”

“Hardly,” I gasped as I laid my hand on the tiny jewel around my neck. It felt extremely heavy.

“Yes. You’re correct. They simply can’t stand up to your beauty,” he murmured. He wrapped both of his hands around my left, cupping it in between them. “Perhaps this will close the distance.”

One second it was bare, and the next, it was encircled in a stunning tennis bracelet. It was all diamonds that were each about the size of the ones in my ears. It was platinum, too.

“No, no, no... this is too much. Edward, this is way too much. I can’t accept this. Oh, my God,” I gasped as I felt the weight of the jewelry on my body. I had priced nothing like it before, but I knew it wasn’t cheap. And it was from him. Of course, it wasn’t.

“Consider it an early Christmas gift,” he smiled charmingly. But I shook my head, my eyes wide with more than just slight distress. “Oh, yes.”

“No.”

“Yes,” he laughed.

“Then never buy me anything... ever again,” I frowned, looking at my very heavy wrist. “I can’t wear this out.”

“Is it that ugly?” My boyfriend grimaced as his cheeks flushed.

“Uh, don’t be stupid,” I said a bit too quickly. “It’s gorgeous. One of the most beautiful pieces of jewelry I’ve ever seen! But what if I lose it? Or break it?”

“It’s insured,” he chuckled when he realized I loved it.

“Oh, god! It cost enough to be INSURED?!” I nearly squealed, but he just rolled his eyes and put his hands on either of my shoulders. “Edward,” I whined.

“I had them all insured when I bought them. Love, I know you. You won’t lose these. And if they’re broken, then they can be easily fixed. Or replaced. You’ll have to get used to getting jewelry and gifts. You are mine, and I’m going to spoil you rotten. Now, say you love it, then thank you.”

I flushed in embarrassment when I realized I hadn’t thanked him. Not wanting to smear him with my red lipstick, I hugged him tightly. “Thank you,” I whispered. “They’re beautiful, and I’ll cherish all of them always.”

“That’s better,” he mused as he wrapped his arms around my waist and spun me in a circle. I laughed and leaned my head back as he kissed my throat lightly. “As I said, get used to it.”

“But I can’t give you anything in return,” I complained quietly with a laugh as he put me down to my feet. “I can’t fry enough poultry to make this up to you.”

“Isabella, it’s not about keeping things even. I’m not keeping score. Just stay here with me and keep frying your amazing chicken,” Edward replied with an enchanting smile. “And I’ll continue showing you how much I love you in my own ways. That’s all I want.”

“Okay,” I smiled as I felt the heated sting of tears dance across my nose before it rose to my eyes. Blinking rapidly, I willed them away. I wasn’t about to ruin my makeup.

There was a beep from Edward’s pocket. He didn’t even have to look at it to know what it was. “Your step-brother is here. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, I just need to grab my jacket and purse.”

When we came outside, Seth was waiting with the back door open for us. He whistled playfully as I did a little spin. “Nice.”

“Check it out,” I responded as I showed him my neck, ears, and wrist. “A Christmas present from Edward.”

“Wow! Well... As long as he keeps treating my big sister this well,” he spoke teasingly, helping me into the car. “Mr. Masen,” he smiled.

“Please, call me Edward. We’re practically family.”

“Not yet, Romeo,” he retorted. “That’s up to Ms. Swan.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully before nodding his head in slightly amused agreement. “I suppose you’re right on that front.”

The playful banter continued the entire ride, which was much longer than the one to the casino event. The Christmas party was being held in a nice country club out in the literal wilderness. They really seemed to get along and had a lot in common, despite the twelve-year age difference. They were talking about the best science fiction movies of all time when we finally arrived.

“I’ll be out in the parking lot waiting for you, so give me a text when you’re ready to go. I’ll just swing around,” Seth informed us.

“Wow, we’re going to be in there for a long time. Are you sure?” I asked in concern.

“Ah, look at you. Playing the role of an overprotective big sister already,” he joked. I just swatted him, which he easily dodged. Laughingly, he replied. “I’ve got my dinner in here, snacks, music, my laptop. My DS even. I’ll be fine,” he assured me. “Have fun,” he added as he stepped out of the car to open the door for us.

A band was playing music so loudly that we could hear it outside. It sounded very similar to the last event. We checked our jackets, something I had never done before. Mine was fairly plain compared to the rows of fur coats.

We were stopped several times as we went inside to get our picture taken. I wasn’t sure why, but the idea made me blush. Edward, surprisingly, lapped it up. Especially when we had our photo snapped while we were underneath the mistletoe. He kissed me so I was bent nearly completely backward with his hands securely around my waist. Mine clung to the back of his neck. There were quiet cheers and whistles coming from all around us from people I didn’t know. I wanted to hide my face in his tux jacket, but he wouldn’t allow it.

We socialized with strangers- something we hadn’t done before. Folks came up to Edward that he either knew through a charity or work. He was more than happy to introduce me to them. The same very pleased smile spread across his face as he did. And he always did it the same way. He would say hello and shake the person’s hand politely before going, ‘and this is my lovely,’ ‘beautiful,’ or ‘amazing girlfriend, Isabella Swan.’ The adjective was different, but it

meant the same. It was astonishing how each time it seemed to catch me off guard and make me blush. I expected him to stop, but he didn't.

Dinner wasn't as good as it had been last time, but that might have been because the country club catered it instead of whatever restaurant that had done it before. It wasn't awful, but it wasn't nearly as delicious. The liquor was fine, though.

Edward knew the couples that sat at our table with us. Apparently, he worked with one of them at Eagle, and the other operated a parts company they bought from. The men talked and laughed about their jobs, and the wives just kind of rolled their eyes, letting them go without a word.

After dinner there was dancing and drinking, the crowd getting drunker as the night went on. They weren't as reserved about it as they had been during the last ball, which honestly made me a little nervous. It was probably a good thing that most of these people arrived by limo and weren't driving.

I was certainly glad that we weren't. Neither of us was in a competent state, though we weren't as drunk as the last one. It wasn't something we did on purpose, but we were too busy paying attention to each other to refill our glasses.

We were there for several hours, dancing, drinking, talking, and generally having a pleasant time, but towards the end of the evening, my medicine wore off, and my feet were aching in a desperate sort of way. My back and side too. Edward had more energy than me, which wasn't hard to believe. He was having such a good time, and I felt guilty about my declining mood. I didn't want to leave, but I couldn't stand it anymore.

Gingerly, I tugged on his sleeve as he talked to an older woman about the importance of something in something-something. I didn't know because I wasn't paying that much attention. He excused himself quietly when he realized my pained expression.

"Are you alright?" He asked, gently touching the side of my neck with the palm of his soft, warm hand.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired. But would it be okay if we went? I mean, if you're ready?"

"Of course!" He remarked soothingly as he leaned in for a kiss. He wasn't worried about my makeup and did so fully. I tried to return it as best as I could, but I just didn't feel like I had enough strength. He, of course, noticed. "My poor, tired, love. You sit here. I'll message Seth and go get our things. I'll be right back," he insisted as he pulled out a chair for me. I took it gratefully.

As soon as we got into the car, he removed his jacket and covered me with it. I kicked off my shoes and tucked my feet underneath me carefully as I leaned my head against his shoulder.

“How was the party?” Seth asked nervously when he saw my condition. He remembered what happened last time, and he wasn’t about to forget. But I don’t think he would have been so pleasant if he thought Edward hurt me again.

“Oh, it was great,” I assured him with a slight smile. “I’m just so drained. I think I drank too much. And maybe ate too much cake,” I informed both of them as I snuggled into Edward’s side. His arm draped over me soothingly, his other hand adjusting the coat.

It wasn’t true, but I didn’t want to bother either of them. They were both worriers.

“When we get home, I’ll draw you a bath and rub your feet,” my sweet boyfriend whispered in my ear. Smiling, I nodded. Both things sounded lovely, and neither had been something he had done for me before. He was full of surprises, and I was grateful for that. He was such a generous man.