



Chapter Thirty-eight

I twirled the end of my scarf nervously as I waited for the limo to arrive at my trashy trailer. It wasn't that I was nervous about the car. I was about the fact that my entire family surrounded me. And I do mean 'entire.'

After Edward's minor breakdown about the fear of his own death, he convinced me we don't live forever, and he would prefer to meet my relatives sooner rather than later. I had a sneaking suspicion he was using my weakened resolve against me, in a true business-like manner, but that only occurred to me as every single person in my tiny trailer sat silently. Not even the television was on to give us a bit of comforting noise.

It was Christmas Eve, and I could think of better ways to spend it. I had, at least, gotten Edward to agree not to have a full out party but just a family gathering at a local restaurant. He rented out the entire room as soon as I agreed with a happy smile on his face, like a kid in a candy store. He had no idea what he was getting into.

My father looked the most displeased and uncomfortable about the whole thing. He was the hardest to tell. My mother had a notion, and she was pleased to hear she was right.

Apparently, in her mind, it was an acceptable reason not to come, having a boyfriend. After hearing it, she was more than happy to fly up to see us, especially at Edward's expense.

That, of course, rubbed me the wrong way. But I wasn't a part of that conversation. Edward talked to her after she very politely asked if she could. He made a very good first impression on her. She was pleased as punch.

The discussion with Charlie wasn't nearly as pleasant.

I tried to smile at my father, but he just grimaced from across the room. Sue nudged his shoulder, and they eyed each other for a long time silently. Their exchange was obvious. She wanted her future husband to play nice, and he would have no part of it.

My mother would have said something to him too, but I told her if she couldn't say anything nice then she shouldn't say anything at all. And that went for the entire visit. She hadn't even opened her mouth in a fake yawn since Sue and Charlie arrived.

Phil, my mother's young husband, was squirming nervously in his seat. I was not the only one to see the future drama unfolding in their mind's eye. I liked him and felt sorry for the poor bastard.

Jasper nudged me from one side and Alice from the other. Hiding my grin, we all sort of rolled our eyes. I was more than grateful that they were there with me. Seth was too, but Leah, his sister, was still at school. From what he said, she wasn't that happy about the engagement. She was mainly not pleased that her mother was marrying a man she had never met before.

After a few moments of extreme silence, Mom couldn't take it anymore. I could see the wheels turning in her head as she tried to find a subject to talk about that could keep everyone civil. That would be easier said than done. For some reason, she decided to ask, "So, tell us about this Edward of yours."

"Yeah, since none of us have heard anything about him until a week ago," Charlie grumbled. Sue nudged him with her elbow as she tried to maintain her even smile. "What?"

"Be fair," she whispered.

"She at least knew about you," he hissed back harshly.

"Dad, we've only been dating a couple of months. It's not as if we've been together for years." I rolled my eyes. I felt like a teenager again. "It's not as if I betrayed you or anything."

He just huffed as he crossed his thick forearms over his massive chest. Poor Edward was not in for a pleasant evening.

“So, tell us what he’s like,” Renee ignored the conversation, not even looking in her ex-husband’s direction. It was obvious she felt wronged by him, but for the life of me, I couldn’t explain why. She didn’t want him, but she felt as if she still owned him like a child with an old toy who didn’t wish to play with it but didn’t want to give it away either.

“I can tell you,” Seth grinned, letting me know that he would take some pressure off of me. At least for a little while. “He’s really nice. He’s a great guy and a fantastic person to work for.”

“That’s for sure,” Jasper agreed, helping me out.

“He’s generous,” Alice chimed in, and I knew exactly what she was thinking about. “So is his family. You’ll like them. They’re lovely. I expected them to be stuffy, but they’re not at all. Especially his siblings.”

“His nieces are a blast!” Seth laughed. “Think they remember me?”

“Edward told me that Tanya and Kate inquired about you yesterday when they arrived,” I informed him with a slight smile. “They asked where I was too.”

Actually, what they demanded was ‘Where their Auntie Bella was,’ but I felt like that was too much information. I grinned to myself as I thought about those little girls and how Edward was around them. He was a doting uncle, and I could only imagine how much so he would be as a father.

I had to shake the notion from my head. Though I had just told my dad it had only been two months, I couldn’t stop thinking about him being the father of our children. Kids that I hoped had his beautiful green eyes and my thick brown hair. Maybe a few freckles like him, too. Perhaps the boys would be big and strong like him, and the girls would have my slight frame. I shook it again, trying to fight the flush of warmth that was threatening to spread across my full pale cheeks.

“Edward is a good man,” I added quietly.

“Though,” Seth laughed softly, “I have to wonder about the man part. I’ve seen his video game collection.”

“Hey,” I snickered, slapping his shoulder playfully. “Just because you’re grown-up doesn’t mean you have to be mature all the time. You of all people should know that.”

“I suppose you got me there,” he grinned wolfishly. Sue smiled at her son, too.

But after that, the conversation fell silent again. When my phone beeped, I nearly jumped for joy. It wasn't unusual for a car ride to be quiet. After that, if Edward's family didn't keep the discussion going, then at least everyone would have the excuse of putting food in their mouth to keep from talking.

He picked out an upper-scale seafood and steakhouse for us. The place was surprisingly slow until I realized there was more than one event room, and each of them had something going on inside of it.

"We're looking for Mr. Masen," I said to the hostess, and she instantly nodded her head.

"Yes, ma'am. We've already got your menus waiting for you. The other half of your party arrived a few moments ago," she explained as she led us off to a room on the right. At least it was close to the bar. I was certainly going to need a stiff drink to get through the evening.

Edward knew that. At the empty spot next to him, there was a lemon drop waiting for me, just the way I liked it. The drink, not the shot, with lots of sugar on the rim and ice. He was nursing a double of bourbon, neat. He looked so serious until he saw me, his face lighting up almost instantaneously. But he wasn't the first to get to me.

"AUNT BELLA!" Tanya screeched as she threw herself out of her chair and ran towards me. Kate was quieter about the whole thing, but she wasn't far behind. "ARE YOU GOING TO WATCH US AGAIN!?" She asked loudly.

Laughing, I picked up both of the girls as best I could, which was easier said than done because of how heavy they were. "I don't know. That's up to your mama."

"You can tomorrow!" Tanya announced cheerfully.

"Tomorrow is Christmas," I smiled. "You get to open presents. You'll see me then, though," I assured her with a quick kiss on the cheek. Kate was busy nuzzling my neck, making little humming sounds as she got comfortable.

"Oh, my gracious! They're so adorable!" Sue crooned before looking over at her son. "I want some of these."

"Don't look at me like that!" He replied, stepping away from her. Kate grinned wildly when she realized that Seth was there and wiggled her fingers at him. He took her happily, and my arms were grateful for the relief. "Hey, kid! Did you miss me?" She just nodded, smiling as she buried her face in his chest.

"Hey!" Carmen came over and gave me a big hug, which I returned with one arm. She also hugged Alice. They had become chummy since Thanksgiving, exchanging emails so she

could buy more. My best friend was pleased to see her, and not because she was her greatest customer ever.

Edward finally pushed his way through the crowd and placed a gentle hand on my cheek as he pressed a quick kiss on my lips. Tanya giggled, and he kissed hers loudly, smacking as he did. "Bella thief," he teased, and I felt myself melt a little.

And for a precious moment, I forgot that we were surrounded by people, and it was just us as our eyes locked.

"Oh, Bella! You didn't tell me he was so handsome!" Renee gushed as she pushed her way from somewhere near the back. She couldn't stand not being in on the action.

"Back off, woman," I said in a joking tone. Some good cheer had appeared in my cranky brain when I saw him. "He's mine."

"Oh, well," she smiled as she offered her hand to him. "At least we know he has excellent taste. Hi, I'm Renee Dwyer."

"Mrs. Dwyer." Edward shook it, the other on the small of my back.

"Oh, please! Renee, of course," she spoke in a flirty voice, batting her eyelashes. It was all I could do to keep from rolling my eyes again.

Next, he shook Phil's, giving him a charming hello. That's when Dad made himself known with a thick cough. He didn't enjoy being ignored.

"Edward Masen," I began, directing my attention towards him. "I would like to introduce you to my father, Charlie Swan, and his lovely future wife, Sue Clearwater."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," he offered his hand to him first. It was obvious from the expression on his face that he was trying to squeeze it as tightly as he could. My boyfriend was strong, and it hardly bothered him. He just shook back firmly with a calm smile. "Mr. Swan."

"Chief. Chief Swan," Dad corrected. I did roll my eyes then.

"Ms. Clearwater, it's lovely to meet you," Edward smiled pleasantly at her once my father had released him. "Both Bella and Seth have said so many wonderful things about you."

"Hey, Bella!" Emmett shouted from across the room, lifting his beer up. He was too lazy to make his way through the crowd. I couldn't blame him.

"Hey!" I laughed.

Next, we introduced my parents to Edward's, who were polite. Charlie and Carlisle were the same type of cold, though. At least they had something in common.

It wasn't until everyone was sitting down that a couple of waitresses came in to get our drink orders. They had already ordered a bunch of appetizers for everyone to split, two of each thing on the menu. Edward got a platter of those marinated crab claws I liked so much from the first ball just for us to share. I had to ignore my father's grimace when I kissed him soundly on the lips in thanks. I could practically feel my mother vibrating next to me.

He didn't seem to like the fact that my man ordered a drink for me either, but I couldn't explain that one for the life of me. He knew what I liked, and that I would need it. Why wouldn't it be nice to have it waiting for me? In my opinion, it was very thoughtful.

"I've got to say, little brother," Emmett began as he beamed over in our direction, his small plate full of the remains of the starter course. He had tried everything at least twice. "It's no Chicago, and this city doesn't have too much variety, but a lot of what it has is good."

"I think so too. I've," Edward started with a slightly embarrassed laugh, "considered talking to the owner of a local fast-food restaurant to see if he'd ever considered branching out back home. I have to admit I'll miss it."

"Canes?" I smiled. He nodded his head, grinning at me ruefully. "Hm, they are expanding pretty quickly. I wouldn't be too surprised if they've already got it in the works."

"So, you're not planning to stay down here?" My father asked suddenly. "What about my daughter?"

My boyfriend blinked. "Oh! Um, no. Not forever. I can't. It's simply part of our business and what I do, but it'll be a long time before I leave, and I hope," he squeezed my hand tightly underneath the table, "by then, Bella will come with me."

"Hm, travel the world with a handsome man? I can't imagine her saying yes to that!" Renee laughed playfully as she nudged my shoulder, but I just rolled my eyes as I tried not to blush. This only made my father huff loudly.

"Dad, I knew all of this going in. It's not a secret or anything," I assured him. "I'm not bothered by it."

"You should be," he muttered under his breath. I think Sue pinched him soundly under the table because he grimaced, and his head turned towards her with a snap. Her eyes went wide and then narrowed almost in a scary way as they carried on a silent conversation. "Fine," he finally breathed, taking a large swig of his Coke.

Alice, Carmen, and I all made silent eye contact, and you could tell we were all thinking the same thing. 'Oh, sigh... fathers.'

"I have to admit," Esme grabbed our attention, and I instantly knew it was the start of a new discussion. Hopefully, a more congenial one. "The weather, during the winter anyway, is far more pleasant than in Chicago. Still chilly, but not a ton of snow, ice, and wind."

"Oh, I wish it would snow, though!" Sue sighed almost dreamily. "I've never had a white Christmas."

"Remember about ten years back when it snowed on New Year?" I questioned.

"Yes, I do!" My dad's girlfriend laughed. "It was right before Y2K, and we were all joking that it was a sign that hell was freezing over."

"I don't remember," Seth frowned slightly.

"That's because you were a baby," I smirked, and he stuck his tongue out at me. I just giggled.

The two women went back and forth for a while about memorable weather events. This was certainly a better line of conversation than before. I could have hugged them for that.

Tanya crawled onto Edward's lap after we ordered our meals, and I picked up the baby who was fussing. She was sitting on mine happily. Kate decided she didn't want to be left out of the cuddling and made her way to Seth.

Irina played with my necklace and hair, twirling it around her little fingers and watching the different items glint in the light. All the girls were in matching dresses with old-fashioned pinafores. Alice made practically everything they were wearing, including their bloomers and bows.

"So," Carmen began, and I could tell by her tone that she was thinking something bad. I had joked around enough with her when she visited last time to know she was about to be wicked. Her expression matched her half-brother's. "You're fantastic with babies. Will we be seeing some in the near future?"

Edward scoffed loudly, turning his face to the side to hide his blush. She giggled, knowing exactly what she was doing. "Behave!"

"Oh, come on! I'm sure Mom and Dad want more grandbabies. I bet they'd like some boys too," she continued. "And it's not as if Em is going to have any. He's too old."

“Hey!” Emmett fussed, throwing a half-eaten hush puppy in her direction. “Men can have kids well into their seventies.”

“Anyway.” She rolled her eyes as she leaned in towards us. “So, what do you think? Are babies in the cards?”

It was Edward’s and my turn to have a silent conversation. He smiled and shrugged, not at the question of children but on whether we should answer at all. I shrugged too, cocking my head to the side slightly.

This had almost every parent at the table bent forward to look at us. Esme and Renee were hopeful while Carlisle and Charlie were in dread. Sue and Phil were simply curious, though I think both of them would be happy to have babies to play with.

“I want them someday. Both of us do. Especially Edward,” I smiled at him, and he gave me a brilliant smile in return. “So yeah, they are... someday, but not today. That’s a fact I’m sure of,” I laughed quietly. Yes, my monthly issues were making themselves known, that was for sure.

“How about we get married first before that happens?” He commented to his sister. “One step at a time.”

“Are you two engaged?” Renee asked hopefully, her voice a full octave higher. I swear the entire table leaned in another inch as they waited for my answer.

I lifted my bare left hand. “Nope. So be patient!”

When I did, Irina became interested in my fingers, moving them in every direction she could in silent fascination. I giggled when she tried to bring one of my fingertips to her mouth, but I wouldn’t let her. That didn’t stop her from trying to lean forward to get it.

“I think someone is hungry,” Eleazar uttered as he got up from his seat to fetch the baby. Our food would arrive shortly, and she would want to get at hers right away. Her father gave her another hush puppy, which she quickly munched.

Esme politely commented on the dress Renee was wearing, and their conversation was off and running. Alice got into it, expressing her thoughts on what would be in style the next season. Everyone seemed to be happy to let them have their fun. The rest of us quietly sipped our drinks and munched on appetizers.

Edward draped his arm over the back of my chair and whispered in my ear. “I’m not sure if a party would have been a good thing or not.”

“More people would have just made it even more awkward,” I assured him in a hushed tone.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” I smirked, and he chuckled quietly, pressing his lips to my cheek. “It could go a lot worse.”

My father coughed in that awkwardly fake way, grabbing my attention. He only frowned at me, and it was all I could do not to roll my eyes, which had been in overdrive the past few hours. He realized I was an adult, didn’t he?

“I think I’m going to run to the restroom,” I murmured, wiping my mouth with a napkin before standing up from my seat. I needed a few calm moments to myself.

“I’ll go freshen up too,” Renee said, rising quickly with her tiny clutch purse.

So much for quiet.

We headed into the bathroom, my mother chatting away happily about how generous Edward was and how cultured his family was. And oh, how good-looking. Especially how attractive he was. I couldn’t argue with her, but it was too much. I hummed my answers, retreating into a stall.

“It was a miracle you two met. Just so lucky. I’ve never had that kind of luck, you know. I mean, there is Phil, but honestly...”

Groaning quietly to myself, my stomach cramped. It was half because of that and half the horrible conversation.

“Are you okay in there?” Mom asked nervously.

“Fine. Just about to start my period,” I informed her as I came out. Washing my hands, I splashed some cool water on my neck. I always seemed to get hotter around that time of the month.

“Well, I guess babies aren’t in the cards yet, huh?” She giggled. I gave her an exasperated look as I exited the bathroom, not making sure she was coming. She hurriedly followed, filling the air with nothing but noise.

Lots of it.

Thankfully, our food was waiting for us.

I swear Emmett was halfway done with his. Edward waited to start until I arrived, standing up to pull out my chair. He did it often, but I had a feeling he was doing it just to look good in front of my father. It made me smirk.

The conversation rolled on through our feast. He and I stole bites from the other's meal, purposely getting different things so we could share. I liked mine better, especially when I covered it with some crab mixture from his plate. I think he preferred mine, too.

Sue got into a discussion with the girls. Seth threw silly jokes into the mix, both of them patiently answering questions that Tanya asked no matter how random they were.

Neither Carlisle nor Charlie said much through any of it. If they wanted to pout about their children having a serious relationship, they could. Neither of them had any right to dislike their child's partner. On the contrary, both of us were doing as much as we could to get them to like us. Hopefully, one day they would both come around.

If not, fuck them.

After dessert, I had to say goodbye to my boyfriend, at least for a few hours. I promised to spend Christmas morning with my relatives and then the afternoon with his.

My morning seemed to drag on with sarcastic comments and snide remarks coming from both sides of the Mother/Father aisle. Phil and Sue had to suffer through it, but they took it all in stride. It was our first holiday together as a 'family' in probably fifteen years, and I could see why we had done it apart.

Seth was my only port in the storm, keeping me from blowing up at the sheer childishness of it all. I knew there was hurt on both sides, but they were acting like asses. It didn't help that Renee liked Edward so much. I think Charlie hated him even more just because of it.

When I arrived at my boyfriend's home, I felt as if I had walked into my safe place. Carlisle might not have loved me, but he kept his opinions to himself. Everyone else welcomed me with open arms, making me feel like I was part of a family- a somewhat normal and loving one.

We spent a very pleasant afternoon watching the girls play with their new toys. Then we ate a delicious dinner and watched their Christmas home movies, including ones with Emmett's and Edward's mother. He didn't run this time when he saw her. Instead, he sat beside me with a slight smile and a hand securely holding mine.

He didn't have to hold on so tightly because I wasn't going anywhere. It was where I was meant to be.

