



## And the Beat Goes On

It was a steamy spring in Run, Texas, when I started working at the diner. I was on the overnight shifts since I was just starting out. It was my first job, and I had no experience, so I couldn't complain. The only reason I got it was because my father was friends with the owner. He was why I needed to work so much, though. He was drowning in debt, and I didn't know where it came from. I gave almost every penny to him at the end of my shifts. I only had savings because I squirreled away five dollars every day, hiding it in my bra. He would go through my purse if he thought I was holding back on him. He even emptied my coins.

Nine at night until five in the morning, Monday through Friday, was hardly an exciting shift. It was never busy. It was mainly truck drivers, bikers, or drunks. Sometimes the cops or doctors came in during their shifts for coffee. My father was occasionally among them if he was working late. He tried not to, though. As the sheriff, he could work whenever he pleased, and he was lazy.

I had been there for a month when I first served... him. He wasn't alone, walking in with three other men. They were all very well dressed in fashionable suits. They stood out so much with their clean appearance. All four people in the place turned to watch them come in. It was only me, the owner, the cook, and another customer who just paid their bill. They were nursing the last of their soda as they straightened their jacket.

My boss stood up right away, grabbing his hat. "Give them whatever they wish, Bella. Exactly how they want it. Make it perfect. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mr. Clearwater," I said in confusion. Like I would do it any other way. I might have been new, but I was an excellent waitress.

He went to the table to greet them. He usually only did it for his friends, but I had never seen them before. "Good evening, gentleman. I was about to head home for the night unless you need anything personally from me?"

The biggest of them smiled at him brightly. His suit was crisp black, and his tie was a bright paisley pattern. "No, Harry. Just coming in to get a late meal after a hard day's work. Have a nice night."

Bowing his head like he was being dismissed, I waited behind quietly to be needed. The other customer made their way out the door, the bell ringing as it closed. "Isabella will be your waitress. She's very new, so please let me know if you have any issues."

And with that, he rushed out. He didn't even wait for them to say anything. I couldn't understand why he acted that way. I stepped up to the table and smiled at them widely, pretending I knew what was going on. "Hi! I'm Bella. May I get you something to drink to start?"

The big guy looked me over and grinned, plopping down in his spot. "She is new. I wonder what happened to the old broad who always gave us nasty looks."

"Mrs. Flo retired," I explained with my pad out, waiting.

"Fantastic. She was a cranky bitch." The blond fellow who was seated beside him lit a cigarette, taking a long drag. "I'll take a coffee, darlin." I reached over to the table beside them and passed him the ashtray. "Oh, thanks."

"Cream or milk with that?"

"Cream."

The man across from him was next. He was a baby-faced boy with big innocent eyes and a broad smile. He was the youngest among them by twenty years. His tanned skin was spotted with acne still, but he was also huge. It was an odd combination with his freshly pressed suit. "I'll take a chocolate milkshake."

I wrote that down. "Good choice. Whip cream and a cherry?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“I’ll have a coffee, too,” the large one added as he leaned back in the booth. He stretched out, so his arm rested across the top. He took up all the space he could.

I turned my attention to the last man. I hadn’t really looked at him yet, too distracted. When I did, it surprised me. They were all handsome and well-dressed, but he was out of this world. He was in a gray three-piece suit, a thick silver tie to match. His gorgeous auburn hair was slicked back neatly in place. He might have been in his thirties if I had to guess. His green eyes were so intense and focused on me. I couldn’t say anything because my breath caught in my throat.

“Hey, Eddie, what are you getting to drink?” The massive guy asked. I jumped because he was so loud.

“Don’t call me that,” he hissed in annoyance before clearing his throat. He shook his head, looking down at the menu on the mats on the table. His eyes were unseeing as he blinked. “Uh, just coffee, too.”

“Cream or milk?” I breathed. The tip of my pen was on the paper already. My hand was trembling ever so slightly, creating a messy flower on the pad.

“Cream,” they said at the same time. He didn’t look at me again.

“I’ll get you some water, too. I’ll fetch that then come get your order,” I promised, rushing away.

I took a whole coffeepot to the table with the mugs, cream, and sugar before I brought them water. The cook made the milkshake while I got their order. He rarely helped me, let alone talked to me beyond barking orders once Harry was gone.

The men were talking business quietly the entire time, but they were in a good mood. The handsome one seemed to be their boss. He was quiet, letting them chatter around him while he nursed his drink.

“Can I get you some dessert?” I asked pleasantly as I took away their empty plates. I wanted to make sure there wasn’t a single thing for them to complain about.

“Are you on the menu, gorgeous?” The boisterous one inquired in a teasing voice. He had taken off his coat and loosened his tie. A toothpick hung from his lips, and he played with it with his tongue.

“You’re married to my sister,” the blond grunted at him. “My loyalty to her is stronger than it is to you. So, cool it, will you?”

Taking the pick from his mouth, he laughed. "Aw! You know I mean nothing by it. Don't worry, sugar. I just like to flirt." Winking, he pointed the stick at me. "I'll take some cherry pie."

"We don't have time for that. We should get back," the beautiful boss said to him earnestly, his voice blunt. If I had been at the end of it, I would have cowed right away. It was so powerful without saying much.

"Would you calm down, you fucking fuddy-duddy," he mumbled, taking a slurp of his coffee. He didn't flinch or react at all. "Dad won't care. In fact, would you get me a slice of whatever your best cake is to-go? We'll take Pop some."

"Do you have chocolate cake?" The youngest asked. His employer looked at him with a frown. I nodded and pointed at him with a grin before writing it down. The higher the bill, the bigger my tip, I hoped.

"What the hell... What kind of pie do you have, darlin?" The blond questioned after finishing his cup of coffee. He lit another cigarette.

I automatically picked up the pot and poured him the last. "We have cherry, apple, chocolate custard, lemon meringue, and peach cobbler. You can get them with ice cream or whipped cream. We also have chocolate cake, carrot cake, coconut cake, and chocolate chip cookies."

The big gentleman chuckled. "Gotta love southern diners. They always have the best desserts. I'm glad we came down here."

"Where are you from?" I questioned with a smile. "You don't have an accent."

"We're from Chicago, but we have family down here." He pointed to the beautiful man across from him. "We're both lawyers, and we've been setting up an office in town," he explained. "He and my wife are from around here, though." He hitched his thumb at the blond.

"I just moved here myself two months ago. I was living in Florida with my mom, but she passed, so I moved in with my dad," I told him too much about myself. I shook my head in embarrassment as I over-shared. My cheeks heated. "I'm sorry. What about that pie?"

"Cobbler with vanilla ice cream. Getting anything, Edward?" The smoker asked. He was sitting beside him in the booth after rearranging to whisper to each other.

"No," he snapped. He didn't seem amused at being outvoted.

"I'll go get that and more coffee," I mumbled as I awkwardly rushed away from the table.

They were there for another hour. The entire time, the beautiful one kept silent. No one else came in. I checked on them and refilled their drinks. Otherwise, I was bored and just cleaned.

“Do you mind if I put on the jukebox?” I asked after a while. It was nearly midnight, and I was barely keeping awake. I still wasn’t used to staying up so late.

Fishing a dollar from his pocket, the brash one beckoned me over. “Go put your favorite tunes on for me. Whatever you want.”

His brother sighed heavily, crossing both of his arms over his chest. Smirking, his younger sibling poured them both another cup of coffee. He was provoking his wrath on purpose.

The first song I selected was ‘Chain of Fools’ by Aretha Franklin. She was probably one of my favorites on the machine and one of the newest. Harry didn’t update the box often, from the looks of it. He danced in his seat, making me giggle.

The beautiful man huffed, standing up quickly and leaving after tossing two twenty-dollar bills on the tabletop. “Come on, Seth,” he barked. The big kid got up, slurping down the last of his second shake.

The blond just shook his head and threw some cash onto the table too. It left the loud guy alone. He chuckled. “They won’t leave without me.” He stood up and slowly stretched, tossing more money. Sonny and Cher came on next. The beat goes on. “Groovy. I dig it. Thanks for the fabulous time, Isabella.” He winked at me. “Hey!” He began suddenly as if he thought of something. “That’s a good Italian name. Are you?” I nodded. “Catholic?” I nodded again. But I hadn’t been to mass since my mother’s funeral. I wasn’t exactly a perfect one. I didn’t even know where the church was in town yet, but since I was walking everywhere, I had explored only a little. “Far out, kitten. Us, too. Maybe if I ever wake my ass up early, I’ll see you at church.”

“Maybe,” I laughed. “It’s a problem for me too, but I don’t get off until dawn.”

Lighting a cigarette, he shook his head. “What a great excuse not to go.” He blew out the smoke in a long stream, putting on his hat. “Goodnight, kiddo.”

They left me forty dollars as a tip. The best night I had before, I earned twenty. I could have cried. I decided right away to hide it all. I could be greedy and give my father whatever I made the rest of the evening. They didn’t bother to look at the bill, and I wondered if they meant to. I would give it all back if they wanted it.

My dad was getting up to go to work when I got home. My feet hurt from standing all night. Right away, I pulled out the ten dollars in ones and change, plopping it down in front of him on the old table. The coins scattered and rolled. "Have a good day. I'm heading to bed."

Charlie grabbed my arm. "Hey! Make me some breakfast first," he ordered gruffly. I stopped and turned with a sigh, rolling my eyes. I hated it when I got home early enough for him to have time to eat. I didn't enjoy being his maid, but that's what he treated me like.

When I decided to come, this was not the fantasy I had in my head. A long-lost father ready to make up for the missing time. I was naïve beyond words.

I grew up with my mother after they divorced when I was a baby. My step-father was a nice man, but I knew once my mom died of cancer, it wasn't fair to linger. I thought it was a good opportunity to get to know my dad, but I was regretting the decision.

I didn't know how I could have been an eighteen-year-old girl on her own with no money and only a high school degree, but I didn't enjoy being the help to a stranger. At least if I did it for someone else, I would get paid to do it. This was becoming slavery.

"Eggs, toast, coffee," he barked. "Hurry up," he grumbled as he counted the cash. "Must have been a slow night."

"I only had five tables," I explained as I started the meal.

Charlie didn't even say thank you when I set the plate in front of him.

I waited until he left for the day before I pulled the money from my bra. Hidden under my mattress was my mother's locked jewelry box. Inside was less than one hundred dollars. I told myself when I got to five hundred, I would buy a used car and leave. I didn't know where I would go, but I wouldn't look back. All I had was the meager suitcase I brought with me.

Turning on the AM radio, I listened to music until I fell asleep. I felt like a vampire, rarely seeing the sun. The light streamed through the curtains as I lost consciousness. My dreams focused on the handsome lawyer. He was in my bed, hovering over me as we kissed.

The next evening, it was just as slow. Harry was getting up to leave when the beautiful one in the three-piece suit returned. This time he was alone. I leaned against the counter, pausing mid wipe to watch him enter.

"Mr. Cullen," he stuttered quickly. "Was there a problem last night?" He glanced back at me worriedly.

I didn't have a chance to panic. He smiled a little. "Ah, not at all. I only wanted a late dinner. You can go. Isabella can take care of me just fine." As he said the words, he looked directly at me.

"Yes, sir," he muttered before scuttling off. It was as if he was frightened of him. My boss didn't take shit from anyone and was a big man around town. It was interesting to see him like this.

Sitting at a table, he didn't glance at the menu before putting it back in its holder. I was there right away. "Um, coffee with cream, and can I have a burger, medium, and fries?"

"Of course. Cheese?"

"Sure." He shrugged out of his jacket, rolling up his sleeves. He was thin but muscular.

"I'll get that right away."

I gave the order to the cook before starting a fresh pot. He wasn't happy. "Why is he here again?" He stomped over to the fridge.

"I guess he liked his club sandwich yesterday," I offered as I put ice in a cup.

"He's trouble," the old man grumbled cryptically. Ephraim was a nervous guy.

Doubtfully, I scoffed. "What do you mean?"

"He's a Cullen."

"And what does that mean?"

Leaning in, he whispered. "He's a mobster from up north. He is a cold-blooded killer."

I laughed. "I don't think so. He seems like a quiet person, actually. Maybe a little serious. They said they were lawyers." He shook his head. I rolled my eyes. "You're looney tunes. Why would a gangster come to this backwoods town?"

Ephraim lowered his voice. "Drugs. From Mexico. Loads of them, going all over the country. But they've got their fingers in everything here now. Their dad is the leader of the local branch." He nodded like he knew all.

"You've been reading too many of those pulp magazines."

"I'm serious," he growled as he threw the meat on the grill. It hissed against the black metal surface.

Again, I rolled my eyes and brought him his coffee with a smile. I was just happy to see him after the great tip. If I was lucky, history would repeat itself. I also took a glass of water.

"So," Mr. Cullen began after clearing his throat before I could leave the table. "I want to apologize for my behavior yesterday."

Blinking, I stopped in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I was rude."

"Not at all."

He sighed. "Yes, I was. My brothers made sure I knew it, too," he muttered as he stared at his hands. "I was in a bad mood, but it's no excuse."

"You were fine," I promised right away. "You weren't unpleasant to me. They seemed to get on your nerves on purpose, though."

Chuckling, he ducked his head. "Yeah. Well, it's still not a reason. But it was a long day."

"I understand," I said awkwardly. "Really. It's fine." Biting my lip, I pulled my hair over my shoulder because I didn't know what to say. "Actually, yesterday was my best shift here. You made my night."

Mr. Cullen nodded, smiling slightly as his cheeks flushed. It was cute. If he was a mobster, I didn't see it. He cleared his throat again and rubbed his fingers over his lips, almost to hide his grin. "Uh, it's kind of quiet in here." He pulled out a crisp dollar. "Why don't you put something on the jukebox?"

Slowly, I plucked it from his grasp. "Sure. Any requests?"

"Pick whatever you like."

A buck would buy ten songs, so I chose my favorites in the box. I played them whenever I could. They were probably getting sick of them, but I didn't care.

The Beatles started with 'Twist and Shout.'

By the time I was done, so was his burger. I brought it to him, refilling his coffee without asking.

“Thanks, Isabella.”

“Bella,” I corrected him. “I prefer Bella.”

“I’m Edward,” he introduced himself as he held out his hand to me to shake. It surprised me, but I automatically took it. It was warm and soft. The tune changed to ‘Brown-eyed Girl.’ “Mm, perfect song. Very fitting,” he breathed as he gazed into my eyes, still holding my palm.

I blushed as I looked down at my feet. I almost fell when I made my way back to the kitchen to work on my other duties.

When he finished, I brought him another coffee. I just wanted him to stay longer. “Can I get you some dessert tonight?”

He peeked at me from underneath his eyelashes. “What’s your favorite?”

“Apple pie with vanilla ice cream.”

“Get me that,” he replied right away.

He ate it slowly and had another cup. I hoped he was a night owl because he would never sleep. When I got another table, two deputies, he finally stood. His tab was less than ten dollars. He put thirty on the counter. “Keep the change, love.”

“Mr. Cullen,” one officer said to him, tipping his hat. They waited until he left to sit at a bar. “Hey, Bella. Coffee.” They turned up at least twice a week.

In the bathroom, I shoved the twenty into my bra again with a grin before leaving the diner.

Edward came in the next night, once again alone. His order was only slightly different. A steak, fries, and coffee with dessert. He gave me another buck to play music. I changed it up a little this time.

Once again, he left a twenty-dollar tip.

He quickly became my favorite customer. I ignored the cook’s warning. He was a crazy old man who liked to gossip. The cops wouldn’t have been so polite to him if he was a crook.

In the next four weeks, he came in at least three times a week. He changed up his order, asking my opinions and going with whatever I said. He was so sweet to me, always friendly. And he always left me twenty, if not more.

About a month later, he showed up again with his brother, and the man who I learned was his brother-in-law. He was married to their baby sister, and the loud one, Emmett, was to his twin sister. They were a tight family and worked closely. And I had discovered his father was a doctor. They were all very well educated.

“Hi!” I beamed at them excitedly. I started a fresh pot of coffee without asking what they wanted. They seemed a little tired, not the cheerful versions they were last time. Edward smiled at me, at least.

“Hello, beautiful,” he breathed in a sigh. There was blood on his collar.

“Oh, no! Are you okay?” I asked, reaching over to study it mindlessly. I touched the spot, the stiff white splattered with red. There weren’t any injuries on him from what I could tell.

His hand came up to touch mine. “Uh, yeah. Don’t worry. This isn’t mine. I had a bad day in court...”

“And it ended in blood?” I demanded in shock. I looked at his sibling, hoping for more of an explanation.

“Happens more than you’d think,” Emmett smirked slightly. “Don’t you fret, though. You should see the other guy.”

“I’d rather she didn’t,” Edward said seriously. “She’s too sweet to be exposed to that.”

His brother laughed, then pursed his lips as he nodded. “Oh, I see why you wanted to come here now. Alright.”

“Shut up,” he grunted at him with a shake of his head. “Can I have a steak tonight?”

“Medium with fries?” I asked. He responded with a nod.

The big man continued to smirk. “Get me the same thing, beautiful,” Emmett cooed, winking at me. He pulled out two dollars. “Why don’t you entertain us for a couple of hours? I don’t think Eddie will be in a rush.”

His older brother’s cheeks heated. Even his ears turned pink.

They stayed until three in the morning. They left as much as before, each of them throwing down money without looking at the bill. Edward knew how much it would be since he had been coming so often. Emmett kept flirting with me as he teased his sibling.

I walked home with a big smile on my face. I didn't even mind making my father his breakfast.

When he was out of the house, I turned on the old radio from the fifties onto the AM station and counted my cash. It was just under four hundred. It was more than I ever expected to make, and so much quicker. Only a few more weeks, and I would have my goal.

But for the first time, I considered waiting. I told myself it was for several reasons. I could save up more money and get a better car, but really, it was because of Edward. His brother joked as if he had a crush on me, but I knew it couldn't be true. He was so much older, more mature, and too beautiful. But my feelings were growing every day.

I decided to wait to figure out what to do until I had it. Maybe when I had it in my hands, I would know what to do.

The following night, midnight came and went, and it disappointed me he didn't show up. But it shocked me to see him when I did. He had never shown up as late as four. It was the very end of my shift. My replacement would arrive by four-thirty to get ready for the breakfast crowd.

I brought his coffee right away. "So, should I apologize for last night?"

"What for?" I laughed. It was like history was repeating itself.

He glanced away as he rolled his eyes. "My brother."

"Oh, he's fine," I replied. "He enjoys giving you a hard time, though. I don't know why. I'm just a lowly waitress with good coffee," I awkwardly joked.

"Actually..." He peeked down at his mug. "He's not wrong about my feelings." My mouth opened in shock. He was blushing. "Would you... Would you like to do something when you get off?"

I laughed in self-conscious surprise, my face turning tomato red. "Um... Wow. Uh, I would, but my dad expects me to get home before he goes to work."

"Oh!" He said, nodding in understanding. "Right. Your father. It's late... or I guess early. He probably wouldn't like a stranger taking his teenage daughter out."

Leaning in, I whispered. "I don't care what he thinks. I just don't want to make him mad. He screams and throws things. It's not worth it," I said with a sigh. "But I have two days off coming up. Saturday and Sunday."

His beautiful crooked smile pushed up to one side. "Sunday? Lunch?"

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

He seemed inflated with my answer, sitting up some. “So, can I drive you home when you get off? I know you walk. It’s already hot out there.”

I beamed. “Thank you. I’d love that.”

Rushing through my end of shift chores, I turned over my tables as soon as the breakfast waitress came in. She would only be alone for an hour before someone else showed up to help her. Grabbing my purse, I went to the restroom to wash my face and shoved the money down my bra. My heart was beating so violently, I worried about being sick.

Edward opened the door to his 1969 Camero. It was a beautiful brand new car. I didn’t feel like I belonged in it in my dirty waitress uniform. As soon as he got in, he turned on the radio. We drove in silence. He didn’t have to ask where I lived, but it was a small town. I knew where he did, too, though I had never asked. The cook and other waitresses hadn’t shut up about him. All of their stories were wild.

I had arrived home a lot faster than I normally did and had left work early, so it was still dark outside, and my father hadn’t woken up yet.

I didn’t know what to do or say, but I didn’t want to get out. I had gotten into a vehicle with a practical stranger like an idiot, but I wasn’t scared of him. I knew he would never hurt me.

Slowly, he reached over and took my hand when I didn’t move. I laced my fingers with his. My nerves instantly calmed. “I like you, but people keep telling me I should be afraid of you. I don’t know why.”

“You should,” he said, surprising me. “If you were smart, you’d stay away from me.”

Shaking my head, I glanced at him. “I don’t want to do that.”

“I don’t want you to do that either,” he replied with a sigh. “Because I’m a selfish monster.”

“You’re the most generous man I’ve ever met,” I retorted right away, shaking my head again as I looked down at my lap. “You don’t know how much better you’ve made this last month. It’s been-” I stopped myself from saying something about my father. He had been drinking more, yelling whenever he was the slightest bit angry. He smashed a plate the other day when he didn’t like what I made for dinner. It was exactly what he asked for.

“Bella,” Edward whispered my name. With his other hand, he brushed his fingers under my chin so he could draw my lips into a kiss. I never had been before, and I wasn’t expecting it. I gasped against his mouth, the sweetness that was him flooding my senses. Etta James was on the radio. My eyes sank closed as I dissolved into him.

I knew right then I was in love with him, and I would walk to the end of the earth for him if he asked. There was no way I could leave.

He moved his knuckles over my cheek, smiling as he did. He looked at me from underneath his eyelashes in the way he did. Everything in that moment was perfect.

I didn’t even mind making Charlie his food. I had his plate finished before he left his room.

“Your breakfast and money are on the table. I’m going to bed,” I informed him, shutting my door before he could ruin my mood.

Saturday morning, I waited until Charlie went fishing to go into town to buy things for my date. A dress, nylons, shoes, and even makeup. I hadn’t worn any before, but I wanted to be pretty for Edward. I hid all my new treasures in my suitcase, so my father wouldn’t see them.

The following day, I anxiously waited for him to leave again to go with Harry and their best friend, Billy. They did it every weekend, usually staying out well after dark. He always stank of beer and smoke when he returned.

I bathed then put my hair in curlers while my radio was playing. Lightly, I powdered my nose and cheeks before adding the bright red lipstick. When he finally left at eleven, I let out a sigh of relief. I stayed in my robe to hide my dress, just in case.

Edward showed up at eleven-thirty. He was more relaxed than I had ever seen him before in slacks and a blue turtleneck. He beamed when I opened the door. Saying nothing, he took both of my hands and brought me into a sweet kiss. I giggled as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“You’re so lovely,” he breathed against my ear.

“Thank you.” I flushed. “So, where would you like to eat?” I hadn’t gone anywhere else in town but the diner.

“Actually,” he paused, licking his bottom lip. “I thought we could go on a picnic. I got everything in the car, and I know a good spot.”

My heart fluttered with joy. “Oh, that would be so nice. And it’s such a pretty day.”

Once again, he turned on the radio, and we rolled down the windows to enjoy the fresh air. It was a perfect spring day. We drove for a long time, going into a national park by a man-made lake.

“My family has a cabin out here,” he explained, holding my hand as we wound ourselves further into nature.

“It’s so beautiful!” I gushed when he took us to the flower-covered meadow. It was filled with bluebonnets, buttercups, and primrose. Monarch butterflies floated through the air.

He pulled a basket and blanket from his trunk. “Could you take this?” He asked as he held up a radio.

I rushed to grab it. When I did, he stole a quick kiss. I leaned in for another. He smiled against my mouth.

We laid in the middle of the field on the blanket after we enjoyed our feast. It was so much more than I expected. Sandwiches, chips, deviled eggs, cookies, and grapes with bottles of Dr. Pepper. “I have to admit I don’t see you making a picnic.”

Laughing, he played with the flowers at his side. He plucked one from the ground. “My mother did, actually. I asked her for advice, and she suggested this. She was more than happy to, as long as I invite you to the next family dinner.”

I grinned. “I’d love to.”

Dragging the bluebonnet over my cheek, he leaned in for a kiss. “So, I brought something special.” He put it behind my ear.

He reached into the basket and pulled out a bottle of French champagne. “Oh,” I breathed. “I’ve never drank before.”

Pausing, he smirked and sighed. “Well, at least we’re starting you out the right way. Only the best for my girl.”

I played with the hem of my dress. My slip was trying to peek out. It came to my knees. “Am I your girl?”

Edward stopped unwrapping the foil around the cork. He looked up at me soberly. “Until the end of time. If you want me.”

My breath left my body as I smiled. “I do.”

He inclined in and kissed my lips until I fell back into the flowers as he hovered over me. I ran my fingers through his hair, holding him as tightly to me as I could. It was better than my dream.

We shared the entire bottle. It made me dizzy, giggling as I laid with my head on his lap. The music made it so easy to float away. When the sunset came, I realized we had lost complete track of time. I was hoping the meadow held some magic to make it still, but I never got my wishes.

I groaned when we drove up to my house. My father's cruiser was in the driveway.

"What's the matter?"

"I just didn't want to explain where I was all day. I kind of snuck out," I admitted. "Hopefully, I won't get in trouble."

Edward chuckled. "Honey, you're an adult. You're too old to get in trouble, and if he has a problem with where you were, he can take it up with me," he teased.

Laughing quietly, I shook my head. "It'll be fine," I promised. "Um, I had a great time today."

"Me too," he spoke softly. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I work tomorrow."

He chuckled again. "I know." He put his hand on my chin and kissed me tenderly. "Sweet dreams."

When I headed into the house, I still felt like I was walking on air. Almost instantly, I was greeted by my father's angry face. I could smell the whiskey from several feet away. It was jarring.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I went to lunch with a friend," I replied, blinking as I stared at him.

"Did I say you could do that?" Shouting, he took a step towards me. I stumbled back.

Edward's words rang in my ears as I regained my footing. "I am an adult, and I don't have to ask to come and go. And it's only eight in the evening. It's not even late."

His hard palm struck across my cheek, making me gasp in shock. I didn't see it coming. Both of my hands went to the same one, holding my face. The flower in my hair slowly drifted to the floor.

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" He growled.

"What is wrong with you?" I shrieked in anger. He slapped me again.

"Friend? You don't have friends. Where did you go?"

"A picnic at a park. Jesus." I held my aching jaw, bending with the pain. "And I have friends! From the diner."

"Who did you go with?"

I took a cautious step back. "It's none of your business." The door dug into my spine. I knew what was coming.

His eyes darkened with rage as he stalked towards me. "What's on your face? Lipstick?" His hands balled into a fist. I braced myself. "Where did you get that dress from?"

"What?" I questioned, confused by his words. He grabbed my throat. My eyes got huge. "I bought it yesterday!"

"With what?" I said nothing. He squeezed. "You've been keeping money from me?" He was shaking with his strong emotions, spittle spraying from his cracked lips onto my face. "Go get it. All of it."

"No," I responded firmly.

Charlie's other fist connected with my eye. I didn't make a sound as my head bounced against the wood. This just made him angrier. He hit me again. "Go. Get. It." When I was silent, he squeezed my neck until I squeaked. "Or I'll rip that room apart until I find it. I'll destroy it all."

Finally, I pulled away from him. I went to the jewelry box and unlocked it with the tiny key, throwing it onto the mattress after. All the meager contents fell onto the blanket. The bills were in a neat stack. I stomped back into the room and flung it on the floor at his feet. The fives and tens scattered everywhere, gently flying and floating onto the carpet.

He punched me so hard that it took me to the ground. "Pick it up." I didn't move or look at him while on my hands and knees. He kicked me twice but realized it would make no difference. I was just a dead weight there on the shag.

Hurriedly, Charlie scooped it all up, then shoved it in his pocket. "Get up and go wash that shit off your face. You look like a whore. Don't keep anything from me again, or I'll give you worse next time. And don't leave this house unless I know exactly where you're going."

I dragged myself off the floor. After washing my face, I fell into bed and cried myself to sleep. My eyes were both blackened when I woke in the morning, my lip split. My neck was wrapped in bruises. Blood had dripped from my nose at some point, but I didn't know it. It stained my pillow and dress. My father also ripped it with his kicks, destroying it.

I threw it into the garbage.

Neither my boss nor the cook looked at me when I came into work that night. The other waitress who was just waiting for me gasped, covering her mouth. I had tried to cover it with my new makeup, but I did a terrible job.

Saying nothing, I went into the back to do my side duties.

I was still in there when I heard the bell two hours later. No one had come in, but it was a Monday night. Edward wasn't alone, his brother's big voice echoing throughout the restaurant as he laughed.

I started a fresh pot and pulled out the cream. Rushing to the table, I put the small pitcher in the center. It was the four of them again. "Hey, guys. What can I get you to drink?" I tried to speak cheerfully. "Coffee will be a second."

Seth was the first to sit down, sliding in the booth. He looked at me with wide eyes, gasping. "Holy shit. What happened?"

Emmett turned to look at me. He was still standing, just shrugging off his coat. He put his hand on my arm. "Wow, honey. Were you hit by a van or something?"

Edward's eyes connected with mine, and I saw as they filled with rage. "Who did this to you?"

"My dad," I whispered.

"The Chief?" Jasper remarked in shock. He pulled his cigarette from his lips. "What? Why?"

Closing the distance between us, Edward pushed my hair away from my cheek to look at the damage. His thumb moved over my aching lip. "What happened last night?"

“He was drunk and mad as soon as I got home. He met me at the door. I told him what you said. That I’m an adult. He kept...” Stopping, I shook my head. “But then he realized I had money, and he lost it. Demanded that I hand it over. I’ve been saving for a car. I said no. But... He made me,” I finished lamely as I stared down at my feet.

“He’s been taking your tips?” He seethed.

I looked away again. “I’ve been trying to hide what you give me, but-” I paused once more. I felt as if I would cry, but it hurt. Everything did.

“Um, hey Ed,” his brother murmured quietly. “I saw him today. Guess what he gave me.”

His mouth moved in anger, his jaw popping. “How much?”

“Four hundred.”

I didn’t have to say anything for him to know that was the exact amount he had taken from me. He drew in a sharp breath through his nose. “No. No man gets to hit my girl or take her money. No,” he repeated. “You’re getting it back, and I’ll deal with Charlie. He’ll never touch you again, I swear.” He held my chin and stared into my eyes. “Do you believe me?”

Nodding, I lifted to peck his lips. It was tender since they hurt. Edward immediately hugged me to his body. Burying my face in his chest, I wrapped my arms around his waist. Sniffing loudly, the tears came again. We were still for a minute. No one made a sound.

“What are we doing, boss?” Jasper asked, putting his blazer on.

He looked around at the other men. “Harry, Bella is taking the rest of the night off,” he roared. He didn’t wait for an answer. He didn’t care about it, and neither did I. “Emmett, use the phone in the office to call Dad.” His younger brother nodded, going into the back with my boss following behind. “Let’s go wash your face and check the damage. I’ll take you to my father to get patched up, but first, we’ll deal with yours. Do you know where he is?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Home, I think.”

“Perfect,” he mumbled, putting his hand on the small of my back to lead me to the restroom.

After he washed my cheeks, he sighed in disgust. Edward pushed my hair behind my ear, leaning in to kiss my forehead. “Never again.”

Seth drove with Jasper in the front seat. We were in a different car, long and black. I was in the back, wrapped in my man’s protective arms.

“You know you can’t have her go back to stay there after we deal with him,” the blond commented as he turned around to glance at us.

“I realize,” he remarked dryly.

I pulled away to peer at him. “I don’t want to live there anymore. I wanted to get a car to leave,” I confessed, the words tumbling out. “It was a mistake to come here. I wanted to get to know my dad, but now I know why my mom left. Edward is the only good thing about this place.”

Sighing, he pecked my forehead. “I’m sorry he did this to you.” He looked at his brother-in-law, thinking. “We’ll get her things and take her to the house. I’ll figure out the rest tomorrow. I’ll be damned if I let that drunkard hurt the woman I love.”

My heart skipped a beat in joy.

“I love you too,” I breathed. He turned his gaze to me and grinned. Blushing, I buried my face in his chest for the rest of the ride. His heartbeat thumped against my cheek.

I could hear Dean Martin playing on the stereo as we approached the opened front door. It was Charlie’s favorite record. Emmett pulled up behind us in his car. Edward made a circle with his finger, and Jasper broke off from the group to go around the house. He opened the screen door for me, the loud squeak breaking up the chorus of crickets. The front steps of the porch creaked with the weight of the four of us.

Charlie came out of the living room, a beer in his hand. Sweat dripped down his forehead, and he was only in his stained undershirt and boxers. “What the hell?”

The two men couldn’t be any more different. Edward looked sharp in his three-piece suit, his hair perfectly combed back. His arm was curled around my waist. “Good evening, Chief Swan. I’d like to have a word with you,” he said calmly in return.

His eyes focused on me, filling with fury. “Why are you with my daughter?”

He laughed coldly. “Oh. Now she’s your daughter? Was she when you stole her hard-earned wages to fund your gambling habit? Then beat the shit out of her when she tried to save her own money? Oh, Charlie.” He clicked his tongue in disappointment, then shook his head. “I’ve been letting some things slide because of my affection for her. But that ends now.” He looked down at me, patting my hip. “Love, pack your clothes. Seth, help her.”

“Yes, sir,” he commented right away after pushing off the wall he was leaning on. He allowed me to go first, moving between my father and me. I went straight to my room. Emmett

was stepping closer to the fearful looking man, going around his big brother. He was almost a half-foot taller, towering over everyone in the space.

My suitcase was already waiting for me in the closet. It took three seconds to get the rest of my clothes. Next, I grabbed the jewelry box from under the mattress. The only thing left was my brush. I threw it in and closed it. It didn't even fill it halfway. Seth took it from me.

Charlie was on the floor on his knees when I returned. Someone had turned the music up louder, so I couldn't hear anything from my room. "That was quick. We'll get the rest of your things later," Edward promised as he held out his hand to me.

"This is everything," I explained as I grabbed it. He brought me just behind him as if to protect me.

He took a step forward and slapped my father across the cheek. "Your daughter lives in poverty while you steal her money. You are pathetic." He said nothing. "Apologize and give it back to her."

In Charlie's clenched fist was a roll of cash in a rubber band. I had a feeling Emmett 'gave' it back to him to return. He threw it to my feet, and it just bounced, rolling away. The big man punched the back of his head. "Christ, you're stupid. Pick it up and try again. We got all night."

Dino crooning 'Blue Moon' in the background made it so much more unnerving. It was quiet for a long second except for the music and crickets.

Swallowing, he picked up the roll. He reached forward and shoved it in my hand, not looking at anything but my fist. "Sorry," he grumbled.

"No. Do it better," Edward growled.

I crammed it in my apron pocket, not glancing at him. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," he insisted. He peered at his brother, and I realized it was a threat. A real one. Charlie saw it, too.

He looked between Edward and me, swallowing. His eyes flicked down to the brown carpet. "I'm sorry about taking your money and hitting you," he said with no feeling. It was the best he was capable of because he felt nothing for me. The only emotion I had for him was revulsion.

Taking a step around my new boyfriend, I stared at my father for a second silently before punching him directly in the nose. It put him on the floor. His face landed about an inch from my

ruined flower still on the ground. It had been flattened. I had splattered his blood across the carpet.

Seth laughed. "Yeah! Get him, baby!"

"Rot in hell," I spat before stepping back into my man. "I never want to see you again."

"Let's get those bumps checked out, love," he cooed before kissing my temple from behind. He was still looking at the asshole. "Emmett, you and Jasper explain some things to Chief Swan. Circumstances are about to change."

"With pleasure, brother." The blond strolled in from outside and took off his jacket. There was a cigarette hanging from his thin lips. "You see, Charlie, we take family seriously, and Bella is a part of ours now." He rolled up his white sleeves. Scars marked his skin. "And we don't allow people to mess with that, no matter how new the members are."

"I didn't-" He stuttered fearfully. "I'm sorry! I didn't know-"

Emmett cracked his knuckles. "Oh, so you think it's alright to beat your kid otherwise?"

"No! Of course not. I- I apologize-"

I didn't look back as we walked out the door. We were in the car before I spoke again. "Will they kill him?" I inquired seriously, unsure if I cared either way. I was happy he was in pain and scared.

He shook his head. "No. They'll just teach him a lesson. You can't get cash from a corpse, and he has more money to pay you back. Don't worry, I'll have Seth collect it for you so you won't have to see him."

The young man got in and started the vehicle after putting the suitcase in the trunk. It was so dark outside I could barely make out Edward's face.

I still had my work apron on. Fiddling with it nervously, I glanced in his direction. "Why did he give Emmett my money today?" I wasn't sure how much he would tell me. I realized I knew nothing about the world around me.

"We have a small casino on the other side of town. Its front is a bar. You might have heard of it. He owes us about five thousand. He's terrible at poker. But he won't be able to play another card in this state after tonight."

I sat with that information for a bit. "Can I ask you a question?"

“Anything.”

I believed him after his last answer. It had been brutally honest.

We stopped at a red light in the middle of town. It made an eerie crimson glow in the car. I knew where we were going, even though he didn't say where.

“Edward, are you a gangster?”

He chuckled softly at my words, nodding his head as he relaxed back in the seat. “Yes. I'm a member of the mafia. As is the rest of my family. We're a part of the Volturi out of Chicago. We've been here for about two years, expanding.”

Making a face, I relaxed too. “Why here? It's so small.”

He waved his hand. “It's complicated. Most of our business is coming from Corpus Christi and San Antonio. Laredo. Houston. But it's easier to operate in smaller towns, though.” I was silent. “Does it bother you?”

Snorting, I shook my head as I looked out the window. The trees just blurred together. “My dad is a cop, and he beat the hell out of me. You're a 'criminal,' and you treat me like a princess. You're not the bad guy, so no. It doesn't.”

“I am,” he hastily stated, taking my chin and forcing me to look at him. “I took pleasure in hitting him. Good people don't.”

“So did I.” Even if my hand hurt, it was one of the most satisfying things I had ever done.

He scoffed. “It's not the same thing.”

“I don't care. I love you. Just never treat me like that, and you'll always be my knight in shining armor.”

“Aw, that's nice,” Seth said from the front seat. His boss flashed him a look in the rearview mirror. “Sorry. It is, though.”

I knew where his parents lived, but I didn't know what the house looked like. The large ranch home was stunning, even at night. They must have been doing very well. All the lights were on when we got there. A woman opened the door for us. She might have been in her late fifties, but she was gorgeous, her hair and makeup perfect.

“Oh, dear,” she sighed, holding onto the doorframe. She went straight to me and touched my cheek. “No. I hope whoever did this has gotten what’s coming to them.” She looked at Edward in question.

He gave her a sharp nod. “Happening now.”

“Good,” she cooed. “I’m Esme, Edward’s mother. You must be Bella.”

I nodded. “Thank you for the picnic. I loved it. Your deviled eggs were fantastic,” I breathed. Suddenly, I was nervous, and the words came babbling out. “I’m looking forward to that family dinner.”

Beaming, she hugged me. “Oh, you sweet thing. Come on. Carlisle will look at you.”

“You can take off,” Edward told Seth dismissively.

“Yes, sir. Goodnight, Mrs. Cullen.”

“You too.” She waved at him. “Charming boy. He’s only a baby,” she mumbled to herself. Leading me into an office, a tall gentleman with white hair was talking on the phone while he set things up on his desk. The cord stretched around it.

“If he becomes much more of a problem, we’ll have to get him out of the way and put our own man in. He’s too sloppy. Yeah, I agree.” He stopped when he saw us. “I have to go, Aro. Edward’s here, and he’s brought me a patient.”

“Tell Uncle hello,” Edward said with a smirk. With his hand on my back, he led me to a sofa.

When he returned it, I could see his features in his father. “He sends his regards. I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” he remarked before hanging up. “My, what a pretty punching bag you are, my dear.” He clicked his tongue and looked at Esme. “Go start some coffee. She needs at least a few stitches.”

He went to his desk and took two pills from a bottle. He brought them to me with a glass of water from his fully stocked bar. “Pain killers. I’ll need to numb the spots once that kicks in.” I swallowed them without question. Laying against Edward, I felt unbearably tired. It was just after three in the morning.

“I’ll be right back,” the older man mumbled, leaving to get something out of the room. We sat silently while he held my hand.

Edward's mother returned with a tray of coffee. She automatically made her husband and son each a mug. Almost drastically quick, my brain was swimming with the drugs. Slumping down, I laid my head in his lap. Gently, he stroked my hair.

On the wall across from us was a calendar. I realized it was the last day of spring. My life was wildly different from what it was in the winter. My mother died not long after Christmas. It was hard to focus on anything, though. Thousands of thoughts danced in my mind. Especially with him petting me sweetly.

I pulled his hand around me, curling my fingers around his as I closed my eyes.

"Edward, she's so young," she whispered after a few minutes to her son. I think they assumed I had fallen asleep.

"I know," he sighed.

"How old is she?"

"Eighteen."

"You're old enough to be her father! You're twice her age."

"I realize!" He hissed. "I've thought about it a lot. I've been trying to fight this attraction all month, but she feels it too. I love her, and I'm going to marry her. I can't stop now. I'm in too deep."

"You want to get married?" I asked drunkenly with a grin, opening my eyes again.

Edward smiled down at me. "I do."

"When?" I inquired with a giggle. If he told me to stand up and find a dress, I would have.

Chuckling, he pushed my hair out of my face. "Whenever you say yes."

"Yes!" I said right away. I couldn't focus, his smile blurring in my line of vision. Music played, but I was almost sure it was in my head. It was Sonny and Cher, 'And The Beat Goes On.'

"Perhaps you should discuss this when she's not just been drugged and used as a punching bag," his mother stated swiftly.

He nodded solemnly. "Of course."

Closing my eyes again, I hummed. "It'll be yes tomorrow, too. I want you to be the only man I ever kiss."

Edward leaned over me to peck my lips. "Me too."

I fell asleep before his father could give me stitches. It was probably for the best. I wasn't very good with needles.

When I woke up, I was alone in a sunny bedroom. Somehow, I had changed into my nightgown. I looked down at it, touching my skirt. I couldn't remember doing it.

"My mother helped you," Edward informed me. Glancing up, I realized he was in a rocking chair in the corner. "How are you feeling?" Instead of answering, I lifted my hand to my sore mouth. There was a small bandage on it. "Three stitches in your lip and in your eyebrow. Those are just to keep you from scratching in your sleep. Do you need anything?"

"You're so far away," I breathed. He smiled as he stood, coming to sit on the edge of the bed. "Where am I?"

"A guest bedroom in my parent's home." I nodded in understanding. "You'll stay here until I set you up in an apartment."

"But I want to live with you," I admitted, scooting closer.

"It wouldn't be appropriate. We're not married, and I have to do whatever I can to keep your reputation and virtue intact as much as possible."

I laughed at his seriousness. "I don't care about any of those things. I just want to be with you, Edward."

"Well... I'll care for both of us then. Your soul and keeping it pure is all that matters right now."

Moving my hands over his back, I leaned in to kiss his neck from behind. "I want to be a mobster's girlfriend. I don't care about that," I teased quietly.

"And I want you to be my wife one day. There's a difference."

"Well." I paused against his throat. "The answer is still yes."

He seemed surprised, but he probably didn't think I would remember talking about it. "We've gone on one date, Bella. Are you sure?" Nodding, I reached for his hand. He took it in his, bringing it up to his mouth to kiss. "I love you. I loved you from the very second I saw you,

and I will until the day I die. I didn't want to bring you into this life, though. But I think it might be safer. I never imagined your father would do that to you," he mumbled to himself. He shook his head. "Bastard."

I kissed his neck again. "It doesn't matter anymore." I ignored the small bandages, pressing softly. "Can I stay with you if we're getting married?" I pressed my palm to his heart.

He hummed in pleasure. "I'll ask if you can remain here until we do."

"When?" He understood my question. When did he want to? I would whenever he did.

He put his big hands on mine. "We shouldn't rush. We want you to finish healing first. It wouldn't look good if the bride has two shiners."

"Not too long, though," I breathed. "I don't want to wait to be yours."

Turning his head to the side, his strong fingers curled against my cheek. "By the end of the summer." Lightly, Edward kissed the corner of my mouth. "Now... are you ready to meet the rest of your new family?"