



## Chapter Seventeen:

I felt weird and uncomfortable when I woke up, my jeans making my legs sweaty. It was about ten in the morning, and the sun was beating through my window. I was alone, a note waiting for me on the nightstand.

Bella,

I am so sorry I left you without saying goodbye, but you were resting so peacefully. Please call me when you wake up, so I know you're alright. If not, I'll be right over, and I'll take you to the doctor.

With all my affection,

Edward

Reading it several times, I grinned at his words. He was worried about me. I mean, really alarmed. And though I didn't want him to feel that way, it was still nice that he did.

I got up from my bed, shedding my uncomfortable jeans. I kicked them to the corner of the room before going to the bathroom.

“Oh,” I uttered in shock when I sat down to use the restroom. Blood had soaked through my panties. “Oh...” I drew out.

Well, that explained at least part of the whole crazy episode, the cramping and the tiredness. Though I had never been THAT tired because of my period or that nutty. It was also a week early, which was surprising. I was regular. I suppose with so much going on it was sure to affect me in some way.

Cleaning myself up first before I called Edward, I took a long shower to ease my aches and got dressed. After downing a couple of aspirin, I found a bag of doughnuts in my cabinet and a glass of milk.

I wasn't confident which line to call him on, so I went with his personal cell. I had never spoken to him on the phone before. I took a bite of my chocolate badness while I waited for him to answer.

“Oh, thank goodness. I was becoming quite concerned about you,” he said as greetings.

“I'm sorry,” I mumbled. “I just woke up a little while ago.”

“No, no. That's fine. I'm glad you got some rest. How are you feeling?” He asked, the anxiety clear in his voice, and it made me feel awful. I didn't want to distress him, especially over something so stupid. It should have been something I was used to.

“Better.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm positive,” I assured him.

“I want you to take today off, okay? I want you to relax. Maybe go to the spa, on me, so you're one hundred percent for tomorrow.” I heard Edward's leather chair groan in the background. I could just imagine him sitting down, the look of concern playing out on his lovely face.

“Oh, the ball,” I breathed. I looked down at the bag of doughnuts and frowned. I wanted to fit into my dress still, and those wouldn't help. “I'll be fine. I don't want to leave you without dinner.”

“You haven't. There are about a dozen plates of food in my freezer. I think I can handle reheating one of them,” he chuckled before he got more serious. “Bella, is there anything I can get you?”

"I promise I'm okay. Don't worry so much. Are you sure about tonight?"

"I'm positive," he used my words, making me smile. "I'll pick you up at five-thirty tomorrow?"

"I thought you said you always like to eat before one of these things," I reminded him. "How am I supposed to manage cooking and getting ready at your place?"

"I do," he chuckled quietly, "but I want to take you out. I don't want you too tired to dance. I'll pick you up from yours."

"Oh, my," I muttered, making him laugh outright. I giggled at the joyful sound, my cheeks flushing slightly. "I'll see you then."

"Get some rest, darling," Edward replied sweetly. "Goodbye."

"Bye," I whispered, turning off the phone and putting it on my lap with a quiet sigh. I looked at the doughnuts again and pouted. "I want you more than ever now, but I can't have you."

My best friend joined me while getting my hair and nails done. I had them painted for the party, a dark shiny black, though I didn't get the fake ones Alice loved.

"It's awful," I complained as we sat next to each other, getting pedicures.

She smirked with her head leaned back against the rest. "It's your period. It's supposed to be."

"I've never done that before," I explained with a frown.

"Are you bleeding heavier than normal?"

"Not really. A little lighter, actually."

"Constantly horrible cramps?"

"Just a few." I shrugged. "Terrible fatigue, though. And really, really emotional."

"Bella, it happens. You'll have your months. And you have to admit, you've been working harder this month than you have in years. You're going to be tired. Also, you're in a new relationship-

"I wouldn't call it," I stopped her, grimacing to myself.

“What would you then?” She glanced in my direction with a knowing smirk still spread across her pink lips.

“It’s not like that. It’s a relationship, but not in the way you mean it.”

“Whatever,” she commented, ignoring me. “But anyway, I wouldn’t be too worried if I were you. Rosalie turns into a beast at that time of the month.”

I hadn’t thought of Jasper’s odd twin sister in a while. She didn’t like me, but she honestly didn’t like anyone. She enjoyed cars. She was even a saleswoman on a lot, but that was about it. Rose put up with Alice, but she didn’t exactly try. Apparently, Jasper got the friendliness gene out of the two.

“You sure ‘beast’ is the right word?”

“Yes. I’ve heard her growl at people before. She reminds me of a honey badger.”

Snorting and laughing, I slapped her hand gently. She smacked back, giggling. “Okay, I’m not that bad. It just took me by surprise.”

“I watched this thing on food from the BBC a while ago where they did an experiment, well a bunch of different ones, but one of them was about PMS. Their study showed that every single woman who increased their dairy intake improved their moods by a lot.”

I pursed my lips. “So, if I eat more cheese and ice cream, I’ll be less of a psycho?” I asked with a raised eyebrow. “Shoot, I think I’m down with that.”

“Seriously! Ain’t it a nice excuse? ‘Pass me that block of cheddar, I feel a cramp coming on.’”

“I think I’ll have a cheeseburger for lunch. With some cheese fries. And a milkshake,” I smirked.

“That’s the spirit!”

Placing my hand on my heart, I tried to make my face look sad and serious, but I wasn’t doing an outstanding job of it. “It’ll be hard, but I’ll just have to suffer through it.”

We burst into laughter at the same second.

My evening was long and boring. I didn’t feel like going out, even though I had the money to do it for once. Instead, I went to bed around eight and woke up before sunrise.

I checked my email and my phone, but there were no messages for me. So, I took the time to write to my mother, hoping maybe she would get off my back and Charlie's too. I didn't say a word about Edward, though. I did tell her I was working as mainly a chef for a lovely man, and that I enjoyed it.

Frankly, I didn't really know how to talk to my mom. I got along better with my father, but he was fairly easy going. He didn't force personal issues like my mother did. She claimed it was her job. Thinking about my parents reminded me of something else I needed to do.

I waited until it was a decent hour, and called my dad.

"Hello," he answered in his gruff voice. I could hear sports in the background.

"Hello, Chief Swan. I'm calling to confirm our date for Monday night," I spoke in a teasingly serious tone. He chuckled as the sounds of football were turned down. "Are we still on, old man?"

"Yes, we are."

"Got any ideas about what you want to eat?" I pressed. "Seriously, the sky's the limit. You can pick the fanciest place you want."

"You know I don't do 'fancy.' And this is your first paycheck. I won't let you waste it all on me."

"I don't think there are any restaurants in Shreveport with menus that expensive. How about one of those nice casino steakhouses? Neither of us has ever been."

"I don't know, Bells..." he murmured. "You've been tight for so long. Don't you have bills to pay?"

"Everything is paid, and I've put some in my savings. And I get paid again on Wednesday. Dad, I want to do something nice for you. You've been so good to me the past couple of years. I need to do this for you."

My father sighed heavily. "Alright. You know I like steak."

"Excellent. Pick me up at six?"

"Alright," he grumbled. "What have you got going on today?"

"You'll laugh," I said as a way of warning.

"I doubt that."

"I'm attending a masquerade ball as my boss's 'date.'"

"Date?"

I frowned at his tone of voice. "Yeah. It's part of the reason he hired me. So I could attend functions with him and help him if he needs it."

"So, what? Are you part of his entourage?" He asked in confusion. I could almost see him doing the whole finger air quotes thing. Laughing and sighing, I covered my eyes.

"He doesn't have one. Edward isn't a celebrity. He just doesn't want to go alone, and I guess it looks better if you have someone by your side at these things. I'm only his assistant."

He huffed. "I don't like it."

"You don't like anything," I teased. "You act like it's sinister."

"Can you trust him, though?" Charlie inquired, and I could hear the doubt in his voice.

"Yes, I can," I answered truthfully. "Don't worry about him. What you need to be concerned about is me. In heels. And a fluffy-ass ball gown."

"You in a gown?" He snickered a little too hard for my taste, but I said nothing. I knew exactly where he was coming from. I couldn't believe I was doing it either. "Okay, good luck with that."

"Yeah, yeah. Yuck it up, old man."

"Take pictures for me."

I smirked to myself. "When hell freezes over."

Charlie laughed harder. "Alright, kiddo. I'm going to meet Pam for an early movie. I'll see you on Monday at six."

I smiled at the thought of my father dating. I hadn't met her yet, but I wouldn't push. I knew I wouldn't want to be rushed into meeting the family if I were seeing anyone. "Alright, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you, too. Bye, pumpkin."

After that, I piddled around the house for a while before taking a nap. I figured I would be up late, and with my current condition, I would need the extra energy. I ate a light lunch, just a small salad. I wasn't really that hungry.

I started getting ready around three, taking a shower and blow-drying my hair. I figured it would take a long time to do it and my makeup, and I was right. It took nearly an hour and a half. I had never taken that long before. I curled each piece carefully before pinning it into place. When I was finally done, it was twisted into an elegant bun with the feathered clip secured to the side of my head.

My jewelry was just a pair of fake diamond earrings, but I suspected no one would know the difference. No one would look that closely, hopefully.

I shoved myself into the waist-crushing corset, my breasts lifted and squeezed into an unnatural position. Careful with my silk stockings, I pinned them into place with the aid of the little dangling clips that hung off the bodice. I had worn nothing like it before, and I had to admit that I liked how it made me look.

Slipping on the dress, I had to work for nearly ten minutes to get myself zipped up. Not because it was tight, but because my arms weren't long enough to reach the back. I felt like a bit of an idiot dancing and squirming around, trying to get it up. I halfway considered calling Alice to help. She had at the store, and I didn't realize it would be such a problem.

Then I got my purse ready for the night. Edward said not to bring one, but I would need it for specific female reasons.

Sometimes it sucked to be a girl.

Finally, I pulled on my gloves after putting on my shoes. I went to my bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror. The image was me, and not, all at the same time. I gazed at the mask I had in my hands and brought it up to my eyes. Carefully, I tied the silk ribbons at the back of my head, trying not to ruin my hair. Though with the amount of hairspray I had in it, I doubted it would ever move again.

"Huh," I said to my reflection. "Would you look at that?"

A loud knock echoed from the living room. I glanced at the clock. It was a little early, but I knew it was Edward. It couldn't be anyone else. I snatched my bag off of my bed and flicked off the lights before hurrying to the front door.

What greeted me was something completely unexpected.

He stood on my deck in the most delicious looking tuxedo I had ever seen on a man, but few could have pulled it off. The black pinstriped jacket was long, going roughly to the back of his knees, the collar at the top popped up slightly. His shirt was white and collarless, with no tie. But I could see a vest, a silver chain hanging from the pocket to his pants, like that to an old-fashioned watch. His shoes were black and white and wing-tipped, going perfectly with his attire. The mask was resting on the top of his head. His gelled and somewhat wildly spiked hair made me smile. It appeared as if he was going for a faux-hawk but didn't quite make it.

The cocky grin on his face was too much as he held out his hand to me. "My, oh my, my Bella. You look delicious tonight," he spoke in a very charming, almost sing-song voice.

"Someone's in a good mood," I teased, taking it. He brought it up to his mouth and kissed my knuckles lightly. I felt my knees wobble at his touch. He made me feel warm in places I didn't know I had.

"Of course I am. It's a fantastic cause, it's a party, and you'll be by my side. Why wouldn't I be?"

He tugged me into his arms, playfully starting to dance to whatever song was going on in his head. His hand was flat against my spine, the pressure perfect. Smirking, I brought the mask down over his eyes. He chuckled and leaned in for a kiss, but I put a silk gloved-covered finger over his lips.

"Oh, no, sir. I worked on my makeup for far too long for you to mess it up. Besides, if this red gets on you, it will never come off. So, unless you want me to mark you as my own..." I trailed off.

"And what if I do?"

"Hm, there are better ways of doing that." I patted his chest with my free hand. I pulled back and walked down the stairs, careful to hold my dress up so as not to get it dirty. Glancing over my shoulder, I fluttered my eyelashes at him. "Maybe we can try that later?"

"Mm," he hummed, following behind me. He caught up, grabbing my fingers with his own. "That would be lovely."

Seth beamed at me when I got to the car. "Bella, you look incredible this evening."

"Thank you." I flushed and smiled. Edward gave a funny, sweet little grin as he slid in beside me. "So, where are you taking me to dinner, Mr. Masen?"

“Well.” He skimmed his hand over my knee and up to my thigh, his nail circling a cluster of crystal on the dress. “The party is at one of the casino hotels. So, I made a reservation at the steakhouse.”

“That’s where I was going to take my dad on Monday,” I chuckled at the coincidence. “We were just saying that we’ve never been to one before.”

“Which?” He inquired, looking slightly concerned.

“I figured Horseshoe.”

“Ah, we’re going to Sam’s Town. The event is actually in their banquet hall. I was going to ask if you’d like to join me for a few hands of blackjack after,” Edward said in a quiet voice, our faces close. Our noses were maybe two inches apart. We were so intent on one another that it was like the rest of the world didn’t exist.

“Well, perhaps we should just go to the party, and if the food isn’t good, go play and eat afterward,” I suggested, propping my head against the rest. Edward angled himself slightly, so he mirrored my position. He was so close I could feel his breath against my lips. “I’m not really hungry.”

“Sure. It starts at six-thirty, if that’s what you want to do. We’ll be a little early.”

“We can waste some time at the slots, if you want,” I offered, biting my bottom lip. His breath was so sweet, his amazing cookie-book-sunshine scent wafting through my nose. I was practically drunk off of it, as if I was under his spell. I touched his smooth chin and brought it in closer so I could kiss his mouth gently.

“What about your makeup?” He asked with a cannery-eating grin, bringing his hand to my waist. “What about marking me?”

“I changed my mind, and I want to now. You look too good. I don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea and think you’re alone tonight. You’re mine.” I tilted my head slightly to the right, pecking the corner of his mouth before kissing the left. His fingers tightened around my ribs, sending a shock through my system that went straight between my legs. And even though I was still uncomfortable because of my period, I was very much turned on.

“Like I’ll look at anyone else but you.” He brought his thumb and forefinger to my chin. I wasn’t sure why, but when he did, it made me feel like a princess. Like I was something special.

Seth cleared his throat as we slowed. I had forgotten we were actually around another person. “Mr. Masen, we’re almost to the casino.”

“What time is it?” He asked, not looking away. His eyes were so bright, the green shining in the light of the dim car. I felt my pulse quicken as my lips parted slightly.

“Five forty-five.”

“Park at the top of the garage, and I’ll give you a few bucks to go eat. Maybe play a little,” Edward suggested, playing with a tiny curl at the back of my neck. I shivered visibly, and he grinned like a child who had just found a new toy he wasn’t supposed to.

“Really?” Seth asked in surprise.

“Yeah. I’d like to have a few minutes alone with Ms. Swan if you don’t mind.” Edward’s hand slipped down to my throat. His thumb stroked my jaw, making me melt even more. I would soon be a puddle in the seat.

“The car is yours,” he said rather formally, but I could hear amusement tinting it.

He pulled his wallet out of his inside jacket pocket and retrieved a hundred-dollar bill when we came to a stop. The sun was setting in the background over the river, glowing orange and pink. It was beautiful, especially from our point of view.

“Thank you, Mr. Masen,” Seth said before slipping out. The door shut gently, carefully so as not to rock the car.

Edward continued to gaze at me with a contented look on his face.

“Hi there,” I remarked finally with a smile.

“Hi,” he repeated before leaning in and lightly kissing my bottom lip. “God, I am so lucky to have met you, Isabella. I have never felt happier than I do right now. I’ve never felt more alive than I am with you.”

I removed my gloves so I could feel his skin against mine. When I brought my palm up to his cheek, he pressed his against it and nuzzled it as firmly as he could. “You’re not the person I expected that day in your office.”

“Is that a good thing?” His eyes looked up into mine longingly, his hand still pressing mine against him.

“It’s the most amazing thing,” I whispered as I came closer. My side was resting against his. His hand dropped from his cheek and went back to my ribs, holding me like before. Turning his face, he kissed my palm lightly. “So, you wanted some time alone with me, huh?”

“I just know a better way to spend forty-five minutes than at a slot machine, that’s all. Plus, I’m not ready to share you. You are glorious, and every set of eyes will be on you.”