



Chapter Seventeen: In a Thrift Store

The money went into my account on that Friday. I cried when it did. I wished I could ask Jasper to come home so we could celebrate, but I knew how busy he was. But he made a point of going with me to the meeting. He felt guilty he couldn't take me out sooner.

I didn't care. Everything was perfect already. The attention he gave me every night was all I wanted.

June brought lovely weather in the mid-seventies. I adored being outside. In Texas, I would be sweating my ass off. I walked to the shops almost every day, and I often went to the park to write.

One of my favorite stores was the thrift shop in the same center as the burger place and the grocery store. I regularly got clothing there and a number of kitchen supplies. It didn't take me long to realize I would ship a lot. But I didn't care about that either. For once, I could afford something without worrying about the cost.

The best section was, without a doubt, the 'new, still in the box with the tags' area. I skimmed it every time I got something from the grocery store. So far, I had gotten brand-new Kevin Klein slacks that were just a bit big, so I could get them tailored to me, funky patterned Vans shoes, and a cast iron dutch oven that was a fire engine red.

This visit, I first went through the clothing racks. They rarely had anything my size. Then I noticed the little grill in a box on the floor under the kitchen items. It was only five dollars, was a name brand with cast iron grates, and it even came with the tool to put it together.

Even if we only used it once, it would be worth it. It was heavy, but it wasn't a hard sell. I took it home and built it eagerly. It didn't take me long. It was a small kettle dome and shiny black. I was so pleased with my findings.

At the grocery store, I first selected a bag of charcoal and matches. It was so tough to pick out what to cook, though. Steaks sounded delicious. And I knew how much Jasper loved them. But they also had pork tenderloin on a great sale. After staring at the meat section, I finally decided just to make both. We could eat whatever was leftover as barbecue sandwiches. I grabbed buns, the sauce, and chips and a whole host of vegetables. Large baking potatoes, zucchini, squash, corn, mushrooms, onions, and pineapple, too.

Since I knew it would take a long time to get everything done, I got started way before Jasper usually arrived home around seven. I wanted to have a feast waiting for him. I even made a potato in the pressure cooker for Sam. He would enjoy it. We had plenty of beer and wine in the fridge for a good night with his friend.

It took a while for the coals to become hot enough since I put in so many. I left the door open to the balcony, listening to music as I chopped vegetables to make kabobs. It was just a little windy, and it carried the warm smell throughout the apartment. They went on the grill first while I sliced the pork into thick chops. The meat would have a quick marinade while the steaks went on next. They would have to go in rounds since it was so small.

Leaning against the doorway, I sipped a beer and relaxed with the sunshine on my face. The air felt so good on my bare legs. My blue jean shorts barely covered my ass, but I didn't care. It was so comfortable. Everything I could do in the house was done, and all I had to do was finish the meat and wait for my man.

The sun was still shining when Jasper's car unexpectedly pulled up. He hadn't texted, but it was early, and perhaps he was trying to surprise me. Sam stepped out of the backseat, which shocked me. Then another person I had never met before rose from the passenger side. He was a short, thin, pale fellow with shiny black straight hair that went past his shoulders. It was neatly pinned back. He appeared to be in his late forties, his skin smooth. Unlike the two men in suits, he was dressed more casually in slacks and a polo shirt. They were speaking until he stopped and sniffed the air suddenly.

"Oh, isn't that a lovely aroma? The things we smell are rarely pleasant."

I giggled to myself. Sam was the first to look up. He smiled when he saw me. "Well, hello beautiful."

Walking to the railing, I was barefoot on the concrete. As I pushed my sunglasses up, I rested against it to peer down at them. I wiggled my fingers playfully. "Good evening, gentleman."

"How are you doing?" He asked next. My boyfriend was watching me silently with astonishment in his eyes, his expression curious. His cheeks were slightly pink.

"I'm fantastic! I found something kind of awesome at the junk store today. Wanna guess what it is?"

He hummed loudly, slamming his door. "I'll say a grill."

I gasped then pointed my beer bottle at him. "World-class detective skills, Special Agent Uley."

Chuckling, he shrugged out of his blazer. "What can I say? I'm good at what I do."

Both of the other men laughed a little under their breath, shutting their doors, too. The new guy smiled up at me. "Well, I don't know what you're cooking, miss, but it smells incredible."

"Thank you. I've got veggie skewers, ribeyes, and pork chops. I couldn't decide what I wanted to make and went a bit nuts."

Sam looked at Jasper and sighed. "That's exactly the crazy you want in a girlfriend."

Laughing, he nodded his head in agreement, but his eyes never left me.

"Oh! So you must be the infamous Isabella Swan!" The man said cheerfully, looking over at my boyfriend with a grin. "This is your partner?"

"Oh, no! I'm infamous?" I responded with a giggle, taking a sip of a beer. "That's never a good sign."

He laughed too, putting his hand on his heart. "Excuse me, I misspoke. I mean, the fabled Ms. Swan. You are the stuff of legends around the bureau."

Finally, Jasper cleared his throat. "Um, Bella, this is my boss's boss's boss, Dr. Micheal Aro," he introduced me. "He is the director of all the behavioral units for the entire country."

I stood up straighter, putting my beer bottle behind my back. "Oh, wow. Uh, nice to meet you, sir."

“Trust me. The pleasure is all mine.”

All the men started up the stairs. Sam’s room was about three doors down from us. It surprised me that the head would stay in a place like this, but I said nothing. Maybe he wanted to show that anything that was good enough for his underlings was good enough for him. Or perhaps the FBI really was that cheap.

I had to pull the steaks off to rest and start the pork chops. His former partner was practically drooling, his chin tipped back as he took each step purposefully. “I am so jealous of you right now.”

Snickering at his attitude, I shook my head. “Sam, you know you’re always welcome to join us. And if you’d like to, you can too, sir,” I added politely like the good hostess I was.

Dr. Aro looked surprised, his face lighting up. He quickly glanced at Jasper then back at me. “I would be delighted! Thank you so much!”

Jasper’s eyes were huge. I couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t ideal to have your big boss in your sad apartment, but since he was staying there, I was sure he didn’t mind. It would have been impolite not to offer when we had so much.

“Come on in! Can I get you a drink?” I asked as I took the plate into the kitchen and placed it onto the table already filled with food. I covered everything in foil so it wouldn’t get cold.

He followed behind. “Yes, please. I’ll take one of those beers if you have another.”

“Yes, sir, I do!” Hurrying to the fridge, Jasper was right behind me. I could feel him on my back. “Would you like one as well?” I asked him in a sweet voice, looking over my shoulder.

“Please,” he mumbled. I didn’t even bother to ask Sam. I just got him one. Lining them up, I started popping the tops with the opener. The caps clinked onto the countertop. “Are you sure this is okay?” He spoke in a low tone directly in my ear.

Smiling, I rose up on my toes to give him a quick kiss. “Of course, I am. It’ll be done in about fifteen minutes. Y’all got off early tonight! I wasn’t expecting you yet. I thought I had more time.”

“Take your time, Ms. Swan,” Dr. Aro politely replied as he took his beer and sat on our sofa beside Sam. He smirked at me when I gave him his drink.

“Please call me Bella.”

“And you can call me Mike, please,” he grinned in return. “How exciting! I haven’t been to an old-fashioned barbecue in years.”

Sam finished half his booze in one go before putting it down on the coffee table. He stood up with his briefcase. “Honey, I’m going to go get changed real quick. I’ll be right back.”

Poor Jasper looked overwhelmed as I went back to him in the kitchen. He said nothing, his eyes wide. I wrapped my arms around his waist and lightly kissed his lips. “Why don’t you get changed so you can help me?”

This got him out of his head. “Oh, yeah. Sure. I’m sorry. Let me do that,” he uttered in a rush, going to the closet to pick out his jeans and shirt. I smiled as I watched him, finishing getting the rest of the meat ready for the grill.

Since there were more than three of us, I peeled the pressure-cooked potatoes and swiftly mashed them with lots of butter and cheese. They were more than big enough for that. I also added the salad to the table with all the dressings we had. We had a good selection since it was my typical lazy lunch.

Sam returned in jeans and a polo, carrying a six-pack of beer. “Here, I don’t want to come to this party empty-handed.”

“Thanks,” I giggled. “Put it in the refrigerator for me.”

“I can’t wait to get back home, and I’ll have you over to my place. You can meet my wife. You’d love her. She’s a cook like you,” he told me as he did. His expression was wistful.

“I can’t wait. I’ll tell her how terrible you’ve been behaving up here.”

He laughed, going back to the couch. “Oh, god. She knows. She’s glad I’m out of her hair.”

“I doubt that.” My boyfriend finally came out of the bathroom, changed, and in socks. He seemed so awkward. “Sweetheart, can you flip the pork chops, please?” My hands were busy. “The tongs are over here.”

He took them from beside me on the counter, smirking a little as he looked at them. Jasper clicked them twice. Almost without thinking, he playfully snapped them at my stomach. They pinched my shirt, making me giggle. He smiled as well but said nothing. Before he went outside to do as I asked, he kissed my forehead.

We sat around the table together, enjoying way too much food. All the men had at least three beers each. They were chatting and laughing about work. I knew enough about what was

going on to follow along and contribute to the conversation. Dr. Aro was very cheerful and interested in hearing the things I had to say. He even asked me questions.

“And you’re a novelist, from what I understand?” he inquired as we got dessert. Freshly baked brownies. I wasn’t sure how they could eat anymore. We still had plenty of leftovers for barbecue sandwiches the next day, though.

“Yes, sir,” I smiled.

“And she just signed a four-book deal!” Jasper praised as he took my hand. “I’m so proud.”

Mike beamed. “My beloved Sulpicia, my wife, is a librarian and loves to read. Our house is floor-to-ceiling books or places for her to read. Yet, she still has a Kindle and an iPad... and a million audiobooks.”

I laughed. “Oh, a woman after my heart.”

“It’s too much,” he smirked, taking a sip of his beer.

“Certain novels are better experienced in different ways. Honestly, she just sounds like the kind of person who is ready to read in any situation.”

He chuckled, touching my hand lightly for only a moment. “That’s exactly what she says.” He shook his head. “I still say it’s a fire hazard.”

Playfully grimacing, I ducked my head. “Okay, yeah, maybe a little. May I suggest no candles?”

Laughing louder, he smirked as he raised his eyebrows. “The problem with that obvious recommendation is she also loves candles.”

“So, good fire insurance?” I deadpanned.

“The best!” He laughed again as he stood. “Thank you so much for this marvelous meal and wonderful company. It’s getting late, and I have to fly out first thing in the morning. If you will excuse me?”

Everyone rose from the table, too. “Yes, sir! Thank you so much for joining us,” Jasper quickly answered.

“I’m heading out, too. I’m so full I can barely keep my eyes open,” Sam added as he patted his stuffed belly.

Dr. Aro rubbed his shoulder as he followed him to the door. "Same. I don't think it'll be hard to sleep tonight." He turned around and took both of my hands. "It was a pleasure to meet you once again, Bella. I hope one day I can return the favor and have you over to my home for a meal. Maybe someday soon you'll find yourself in Washington, D.C."

"I would like that. I'm sure your wife and I would have plenty to talk about."

Impishly, he shook his head. "She'd never let you leave. Anyway, goodnight."

We watched the two men move towards their rooms. The grill was still smoking. I leaned against the arm of the sofa, playing with my necklace. Jasper clicked the lock into place after shutting the door, letting out a slow breath before he turned to look at me.

His smile was huge, and his cheeks once again pink. "Holy shit."

"That went well!" I said proudly. "He seems nice."

He let out a nervous laugh. "I don't think you understand exactly how big this was for my career." He ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it at the ends.

"Having dinner with your boss?" I questioned, tilting my head to the side.

He rested against the door. "No, not just a dinner with my boss. With one of the top people in all the FBI. He claims a position I aspire to hold, and he invited us over for a cutesy date with his wife." Jasper covered his mouth with his hand and laughed. "You just charmed the hell out of him. He is a powerful friend to have, darlin. And I thought I was doing well with giving him good scotch every Christmas."

Playfully, I wiggled my shoulders at him. "Aw, I didn't do anything special, but I'm glad you're so happy about the results. I'll keep it up, I promise."

Rushing towards me, Jasper tackled me to the couch and kissed my lips deeply. I giggled against his mouth, wrapping my legs around his waist. "You're unbelievable. I feel like I need to reward you somehow," he joked as he pecked down my chest.

"Oo, I like the sound of that. What kind of reward?"

He considered it for only a second. "We can do anything you desire tonight," he offered seductively, pushing my shirt up my stomach to kiss my bare skin lightly. "I'm off tomorrow. We can play all night."

Biting my lip, I thought about it with a smile. "Do you want to switch?"

Jasper grinned wickedly. "Hell yeah... Goddess."