



Chapter Four:

“Hey there, Bellini!” Jasper called in his naturally joyful tone as I finally found my way to his office. There were about twenty small ones on the fourth floor alone, and I practically had to check all of them before I saw his nameplate at the end of the hallway. “Are we gainfully employed?”

Smirking at his stupid and fun nickname, I nodded. “We are. And we need a bellini,” I chuckled as I leaned against the doorway, crossing my arms over my chest.

As he pushed his hair out of eyes, he pursed his lips a little to one side. “Will a margarita do?”

“No. But tequila will,” I teased, massaging my forearms as I rested my head against the door jamb. “Where are we going for dinner?”

“The usual,” he told me with a big grin. “Ally will meet us there.”

“The one by the bridge?”

Jasper nodded excitedly. "You bet your sweet ass! It's enchilada night." He beamed as he stood from his chair before grabbing his leather jacket along with his helmet. He rode a death trap that he called a motorcycle. It scared the hell out of me. He tried more than once to give me a ride. I always politely declined. "And we've got some celebrating to do."

"I think you're more psyched than I am," I replied dryly as I walked behind him down the hall to the elevator once again. The building was quiet, and most of the paper pushers had gone for the day already.

Throwing one of his arms around me, he pressed the button twice. "Well, after a few shots, we can change that. Oh! I know what we should do! We should hit Fast Eddie's and play some pool. We haven't done that in forever."

"I don't have the cash for that," I answered with a frown. Dinner was one thing...

He scoffed. "Do you think you're paying for a thing today? It's your party, baby girl!" He leaned his head against mine after he pressed the lobby button. "We're coworkers now!"

"I work for Mr. Masen, not Eagle Gas. There is a difference," I pointed out, reaching up to touch his nose playfully.

Using his arm that dangled over my shoulder, he waved me off. "Whatever. Same thing, close enough. So, when do you start?"

"Friday. He told me that he'd like me to- uh, improve my wardrobe tomorrow. That I needed to maintain a certain appearance while I'm working for him. I have an expense account to cover all of that stuff, though."

"Ah, gotcha. Alice would love to help you with that."

I frowned deeply at the thought. I hadn't even considered it. How was I going to explain the fact that I was buying new lacy panties and bras for work to her if she came along? And she would wish to. Sighing, I tried to think of what I would do. I should have figured she would want to go shopping for an outfit for the occasion. I decided it was best to cross that bridge when we get to it. I hoped to get lucky, and it wouldn't come up. If all else failed, I would go later.

So, I changed the subject. He didn't notice that kind of stuff as Alice would have. That was the great thing about Jasper. He was brilliant, friendly, and generous, but he had the attention span that rivaled most five-year-olds. It was a little scary, honestly.

"What are you thinking about eating?" I asked smoothly. Gently, I patted his firm stomach through his crisp blue button-down shirt. "Enchiladas, obviously. But what kind?"

He knew right away. "I'm getting the cheesy ones with chili sauce. And I'll get me a beer."

"God. I am so glad that I don't have to sleep next to you tonight," I teased lightly. He laughed as the elevator doors opened, the sound echoing in the empty space. We walked out together, his arm still around me.

Jasper bumped his hip against mine. "Girl, you should be. I can clear rooms."

"So classy, Jazz. Oh, so classy," I answered with a disgusted face, patting his hand.

"I aim to please." He wiggled his eyebrows at me, squeezing my shoulder. Opening the glass door for me like a gentleman, Jasper led us into the parking lot. Right by the front entrance was a sleek black car with dark-tinted windows. "That's your boss's ride," he pointed out.

"Fancy," I commented, feeling a bit out of place and awkward as I looked at it. I had never even met someone that had a vehicle that nice, let alone be rich enough to have a driver. I briefly wondered what he was worth, but I didn't linger on the thought because the chauffeur came to the front of the car and opened the back passenger side door.

I automatically glanced behind me to see who was coming as if I didn't know. Mr. Masen- Edward was just getting out of the building with his tie hung around his neck and his jacket over his arm. He looked at Jasper and then met my eyes, a strange expression brewing on his face. I frowned slightly, pulling away from my friend's grip.

"Hm?" Jasper mumbled as he looked at me, wondering why I had tugged away from him so quickly. Then he peeked back and realized my reasons for himself. "Oh! Hello, Mr. Masen."

"Whitlock," he spoke his name briskly, looking between us. "Have big plans for the night?"

He didn't seem to notice the tension in the air. Nodding, he grinned at his boss proudly. "Yes, sir. We're, my wife and I, are taking your newest employee out to dinner and to shoot some pool." Jasper smiled at me, winking happily. He was thrilled for me, which was nice. I fleetingly wondered if he would still be proud to be my friend if he knew what I was doing.

His expression changed, and he nodded in approval. He looked up at me for a long second before he spoke. "Sounds like a good night." Edward grinned genuinely as he had outside his door when I was leaving earlier, making my brain go a little blank. We were just staring at one another. "I'm glad that you consider your employment with me as something worth celebrating," he said directly to me, leaning in a bit.

“Of course, it is!” Jasper answered for me as he put his arm around me once again with his fingers on my shoulder. “I promise that you’ve made a good decision in hiring Bella. I’ve known her since high school. Not only is she whip-smart, but she’s a hard worker and an amazing person. There isn’t a better woman for the job,” he continued to sing my praises.

“Ha.” Edward murmured. He licked his lips in amusement as his cheeks heated just a little. Mine were on fire from my friend’s words and the weird situation I was in. “You don’t have to sell me on her,” he quipped as he put his hand on his heart. “I’ve already hired her. But you’re right, though. I think I made an excellent decision. Thank you for sending her my way.” When he said the last sentence, he was looking directly at me. My breath caught in my throat. My friend didn’t notice.

“Absolutely.” Jasper grinned like a proud papa. “I’m so glad everything worked out.”

My new boss bowed his head. “I am, too.” His warm green eyes raked over my body before glancing back at him. “Anyway, have a good time, you two.”

Sliding into the car, the driver shut the door and quickly looped to the other side. With that, they sped away, leaving nothing behind in their wake. Not even dust. The whole thing happened so fast that I wasn’t sure what to say. They chatted about me like I wasn’t there, but honestly, that was probably my fault as much as it was theirs. It wasn’t as if I spoke up or anything.

It was perhaps for the best that I just kept my mouth shut.

Abruptly, a thought popped into my head while we watched the shiny black car drive away. Jasper, though he didn’t understand what my employment entailed, was my pimp.

I laughed out loud a bit hysterically, suddenly and loudly. He looked at me in confusion, like I had lost my mind. I probably had.

He leaned his head to the side, his nose wrinkled. “Girl, what has gotten into you?”

There honestly wasn’t a damn thing I could tell him. Finally, I shook my head.

“I have no idea,” I simpered, wiping a hand across my eyes to clear away the few stray tears that spilled out. “I haven’t eaten all day, and I’m starving. I’ll meet you over there?”

“Sure thing.” He grinned reassuringly, placing a kiss on the top of my head before he patted my shoulder. “See you in a few.”

My best friend was already there, waiting with a round of tequila.

“Holy crap on a cracker! I can’t believe it!” She beamed when we sat down at the table, just like her husband had when he spoke about me to our new shared boss. “I told you this day would come!” She raised her shot glass in the air. I tapped mine against it and grinned slightly, feeling embarrassed that they were paying so much attention to me. “Welcome back to the world of the working, baby!”

“To Bells!” Jasper threw his back before grinning wickedly. Then he picked up his beer. “Let’s get some food! Where’s our waitress?”

“Right here,” the little girl said in a rush as she came to us. She was busy, and you could tell she was flustered. She probably had a ten table section, which was full because of the special they had every Wednesday night. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“That’s alright, darlin. I know you’re swamped. If you need to finish with your other tables first, we understand. We will wait until you’re ready,” Jasper answered with all his southern charm practically oozing out of him. Then he winked at her.

She ate it up, giggling a little nervously as she smiled back. “Ah, you’re so sweet! No, it’s okay. I’m ready for you now,” she squeaked, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

Alice and I rolled our eyes, smirking at each other. Jasper would have flirted with a brick wall given half a chance. He had always been that way. And because he was charming, as well as good-looking, he got whatever he wanted with women. But he was as harmless as he was a gentleman, which made him even more appealing.

He lifted his menu for her to take. “I’ll make this easy for you, sugar. We want two enchilada meals with cheese and chili sauce,” he informed her as he waved his finger between him and his wife. “She’s the hard one, though,” he teased as he pointed at me.

Once again, I rolled my eyes but at him. Another thing he liked to do, besides flirt with people, was give them a hard time. His charms weren’t as effective on me anymore, but he could always make me flustered if he really tried. “I’d like enchiladas with flour tortillas. Beef, with cheese sauce on one and sour cream sauce on the other, please. And can I have a side of the house dressing? Thanks.”

“See, I told you,” Jasper said to the girl as he took my plastic menu and gave it to her. He playfully shook his head. “She has always got to be the complicated one.”

She bit her lip for a moment, giggling softly. “That’s okay. I think I got it.” She winked back at him and smiled. Then she practically skipped off.

“Must you do that with every living creature you meet?” Alice asked in fake annoyance. She didn’t care. She thought it was funny, and it was one thing that she liked about him. It always worked on her.

“Yeah, shy much?” I added in since he was such an ass to me.

He didn’t look the least bit ashamed. “Oh, Bella, baby, you know that I’m about as shy as a whore on Bourbon Street.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me as he took a drink of his beer.

Leaning in real close, I lowered my voice as I ducked my head. “And Jasper, my dear sweet innocent friend... Exactly how do you know how shy they are?”

Choking on his drink, it dribbled out the corners of his mouth as he coughed. I wasn’t sure if it was my words or the timing, but his look of agony had Alice rolling. She smacked him on the back several times as he sputtered, laughing the entire time.

“Harpies,” he mumbled at our chortling. It just made us laugh harder. Poor Jasper. He had it so rough sometimes. “You’re both banshees. You like my suffering.”

“You bring it on yourself.” Alice shook her head.

“Bella needs to go shopping tomorrow!” He blurted out, looking directly at me as he did so. He would do anything to make us stop.

Even throw his friends under the bus.

I narrowed my eyes on him. I couldn’t believe that bastard sold me out like that. He knew I hated to shop and even more so when it was with Alice. But he also knew I would never tell her ‘no.’ “You bitch!” I snapped at him automatically.

“Takes one to know one!” He playfully sneered over his beer.

“Shopping? What kind of shopping?” Alice ignored our exchange.

“Everything.” I shrugged slowly, trying to make it seem more tedious than it really was. “Uh... Clothes. Shoes. Makeup. I need to get my hair styled, too. Just that sort of thing. I’ve got an expense account,” I told her, thinking about the black card burning a hole in my pocket. “It’s not like we’re bargain hunting. I know how you like to do that.”

Her eyes got wider with excitement. “Oh, sweet! Shopping spree! Yay!” She looked off into the distance, pondering about something for a second. “I’ve got to drop some dresses off at that one kid’s store. You know the consignment one I was telling you about? They sold

everything I had and asked if I could bring more! I'll do that around ten or eleven. But I can do whatever after. Do you want to meet for lunch, and we can go to the salon afterward?"

I was a horrible actor. She totally disregarded my weak attempt to make it sound less appealing. But I couldn't have planned it out better. I could just go get the slutty things in the morning. I guess I needed to get that out of the way first, anyway. Like ripping off a band-aid. I wouldn't get out of it, so I might as well take the best deal I could.

"Yeah, sure. That works," I agreed, resigned in my torture. "Do you know where a good place to go to is? For the haircut. I haven't had my hair done in, like, forever."

She swiftly nodded. "I can set up an appointment with my people. Just your hair or anything else?"

I thought for a moment. "Nails, but none of those fake ones, and I need my eyebrows waxed. That's it."

Jasper groaned quietly. "Why do you do that to yourself? You might as well use Gorilla Glue and a kitchen towel and do it for free. Why pay someone to hurt you?"

We both turned to look at him slowly. "Gorilla glue?" I gaped at his weirdness. I reached over and took his beer away so that it was no longer in his reach. "Alright, I'm cutting you off, sir. You are a cheap date."

"Ain't that the best kind?" Jasper's grin was sinful. I shook my head at him and his badness. Thankfully, that's when our food came.

After dinner, we played a few rounds of pool at a local billiards' hall. It was a lot of fun. It was something I hadn't done in literal ages. When you were without money, it was as if there was nothing fun left in your life. And if you did something that was supposed to be, you felt guilty for spending your cash or someone else's. It was a vicious cycle of boredom and depression. But for the first time in a long while, I didn't.