



## Chapter Six

I bit my lip hard between my teeth to hide my nervous smile, but I quickly remembered my lipstick and looked back out the window to conceal my entire face instead. “Thank you,” I breathed.

“Thank you for joining me tonight,” he replied in a low tone and briefly brushed his hand against the top of mine. An electric current jumped between our fingers, but neither of us said a word as we met the other’s startled gaze. A blush grew on his cheeks, and I glanced away again, feeling flustered. I wasn’t sure if it was harder to look at him or to keep my eyes off of him.

“I hope that Japanese is okay. If not, we can go anywhere. I’m not picky,” I told him as I tried to fill the awkward empty air with some kind of normal conversation.

“Neither am I. Truly, I’ll eat anything. I love food, and I enjoy trying new things. But Japanese is one of my favorites, though. I lived in Japan for about six months while we were setting up a new office. I adored it.”

“Oh! Where?” I asked, instantly interested. I had never met a person who lived outside the country before. It seemed like something I needed to try. I wished to travel and see the entire world. Shreveport was such a small place.

“Osaka, on the main island. It’s awesome. I think it’s the second or third biggest city in Japan. It’s not the largest one I’ve ever lived in, but there isn’t any place like it,” he said thoughtfully. “And they had spectacular food.”

I leaned in a little. “What’s the largest you’ve ever lived in?” I inquired next, cocking my head to the side. As soon as we started talking, all the awkwardness and shyness seemed to have melted away.

He grinned. “Mumbai, but now you’ve distracted me! I have something for you,” Edward scolded playfully. He cleared his throat. “I thought this would come in handy...” he trailed off as he bent down to get something at his feet.

He put the leather backpack briefcase between us on the seat and smiled proudly. I touched it, a little confused by his offering. It really wasn’t my style, but it was nicer than my faux one. I wasn’t entirely sure how it would come in handy, besides being a purse. “Um, thanks.”

“Open it. It’s what’s inside.” He rolled his eyes but continued to smile.

“Oh.” I frowned at my stupidity. Open it. Duh... I picked it up and pulled out both a very nice laptop and iPhone. I was almost too stunned for words. “What? This is for me?”

“Yes. I thought they would be helpful, as I said. I told you all these things I wanted you to do but didn’t give you the proper tools to do them. Now we’ve got that covered unless these are unacceptable?” He looked bashful for a moment. “I should have figured someone with a degree in computers would wish to pick out their own equipment. I’m sorry. It was stupid of-”

Putting my hand on his, I quickly stopped his ramblings. I could only imagine how ungrateful I must have appeared by not thanking him right away. “No! No! These are perfectly acceptable,” I used his words. “Beyond that. It’s just unexpected. Thank you. Yes, you’re right. These will make certain things much easier.” It wasn’t the part of the job I thought about. I had been focused entirely on sex.

“Good.” He seemed relieved. His smile came back, but it wasn’t nearly as bright as it had been before. “You should be able to use the internet anywhere on the computer as long as you have the phone. I don’t get how it works, but something like it creates its own ‘hotspot.’ I have to admit I’m not up with all the advanced technology. It’s continually changing, and it’s hard to keep up.”

“Yeah. Things are obsolete the minute you buy them. You open the package, and it’s no longer the newest and greatest thing on the market,” I agreed, looking at the iPhone.

“Hopefully, this one will do the job for at least for a while,” Edward replied, leaning over and tapping his finger on it. “I already put all my numbers in for you. I realized the other day you

only had the one for the office. I also have my maid and gardener. Um... The groundskeeper. Other important contacts, too. You can look at it later. It's not important right now," he said, almost shyly. He seemed so nervous, and it made me feel more relaxed. Like somehow it made us on an even playing field.

I slipped the phone and laptop back into the bag and slid it to the floor by my feet gently. I got more comfortable in my seat as I looked at his handsome face. He was gazing at me with big innocent green eyes that were just so inviting.

"So, tell me about Mumbai. How many places have you lived over the years for your work?"

"Not just for my job, but when I was a kid, too." He matched my height in the seat, his temple against the headrest. "My great grandfather started the company. We've been setting up new offices around the world for almost eighty years. I've lived in some incredible locations for short amounts of time."

I nodded in understanding. "Where's home, though?"

"Chicago. Our main office is there, and that's where I'm from originally. Our family house is there, and we tend to go back for at least a little while before we move onto a new place. I feel like a nomad, though," he chuckled. "I'm planning to stay here longer than I have anywhere else before. There is so much that needs to be done. The Shale has been an incredible boom for us."

"I can imagine Shreveport must be backward compared to some places you've lived..." I trailed off in longing. I could only fantasize about living in all these unbelievable locations. It was one of my favorite daydreams when I was sad at night, and I needed to cheer myself up. I would just envision myself in Rome or maybe London, living a normal productive life. I would usually fall asleep thinking about it.

He scoffed. "Cows walk in the middle of the road in Mumbai. Millions are very poor, and you can try to help as many as you can, but it's never enough. It's distressing. The disadvantaged in the states are nothing like in other countries. It's still terrible." Edward sighed before shaking his head sadly as if it pained him. Then his expression became impish. "Besides, rednecks and Cajuns aren't that bad. I like the south, but I would prefer to be in Dallas or Atlanta. More to do culturally. There can be some backward ideas here, but the people are generally pleasant."

"Well, sir," I slurred out in a thick accent. "We were taught to use our manners."

"That you were," he chuckled.

We locked eyes for a long while, saying nothing. But it wasn't awkward at all. Edward brushed the back of his hand against my jaw, almost to my ear. It was so tender.

"You'll have to tell me about the world someday and describe the culture and art. The beauty of it all," I nervously whispered.

"Well, I can tell you one thing right now. Throughout my travels, I've never in my life come across a creation as enchanting as you."

I let out a shuddering breath as the pounding in my chest increased twenty-fold. The hair on my arms raised as a cold bead of sweat formed behind my left ear. "Oh..."

"Are you feeling alright?" He asked, touching my jaw once again.

"You don't have to flatter me so," I finally declared as I bit my lip again.

He shook his head, still holding my chin. "I'm merely stating facts. I think you'll find I'm an honest person, Ms. Swan."

The car pulled to a stop. Seth popped out quickly and opened the door for me first. I slipped out with Edward following behind. He hummed to himself as he placed his hand on the small of my back, his other grabbing something from his pocket. "Why don't you get yourself dinner? We should be an hour, at least."

"Thanks!" Seth beamed as he took the twenty from Edward's fingertips. "I'll park in the back, so I'm out of the way. If you need me here sooner, just call me."

"Thank you," I smiled. I liked Seth. He seemed like a nice kid.

We got a small table in the tiny restaurant by the waterfall. It was almost entirely full, and the noise was exceedingly loud. Edward sat beside me to the right, his overcoat removed along with his blazer. He was wearing a flattering silk green tie that made his eyes shine an even brighter shade. I placed my cape and purse on the same chair as his jackets.

Edward's cheeks flushed as he watched me sit down beside him, and I couldn't imagine why. "What?" I asked automatically.

He looked down at his lap. "Bella, oh my." He smiled to himself. "Perhaps I should ask you to keep the coat on. I don't want every man in here staring at my captivating date."

"Please," I laughed at his charms. "If they are, it's probably because they're wondering why the chubby girl is with the hot guy in a suit. We're a mismatched pair."

"I don't think so at all." He frowned a bit, leaning in close so that he could lower his voice. "You are a lovely woman, and I am honored to be with you tonight. So, please, don't be down on yourself again. I find it distressing."

"Sorry," I mumbled, almost feeling like I was being scolded for being bad.

We were quiet for a moment before the waitress came to take our drink order. I had a glass of plum wine to go with my meal, and he ordered green tea. When she left, he sighed as he glanced over the menu.

"I'm sorry. I've made you uncomfortable."

I shook my head. "No. It's just that this is all so new."

"I think we need to get to know each other," he suggested, putting down the thick blue booklet. "The only way we will do that is if we ask each other questions. You asked me a few in the car. So, I suppose it's my turn now."

"What? Your background check didn't get everything?" I teased, glancing over the words on the menu even though I already knew what I wanted. I was easy to please. Japanese clear soup, baked salmon, which was a delicious ball of crab salad wrapped in the pink fish and covered in this sweet dark brown goo. And a bowl of rice. It was what I got almost every time.

"No," he laughed. "It only gets the basics. There is so much I want to learn about you."

"What exactly would you like to know?"

"Everything," Edward answered without hesitation.

"Well, that's not a tall order at all," I commented sarcastically. "Where do I even begin?"

"That is an excellent question." He cocked his head to the side, looking down at the menu for just a moment and opening it to a random page. "Hm, let's start with your name."

I rolled my eyes. "You know that, though."

"I do, but I don't know why you don't like Isabella. That's a beautiful name."

I scoffed and shook my head. "Isabella sounds like the slutty housewife on a Mexican Telenovela." I frowned to myself. "And Marie is half the females of the world. I don't know. It doesn't fit me. What about you? What's yours?"

“Edward Anthony Masen Cullen,” he swiftly answered. I wanted to ask one about his, but he asked another before I could. “And what kind of music do you like, Isabella?”

“I like a little of everything. Anything that has a fun beat. It only has to be good, you know?” I replied. “You?”

“Classical is my favorite, but I listen to a little of everything, too. I tend to get into whatever is popular in the region I’m in.” He shrugged. He opened his mouth to ask another, but the waiter came to the table.

“Hi. Can I take your order now?” He asked, his pen poised to write.

I peeked at Edward to make sure he was ready. He nodded, so I began. “Um, I’d like the clear soup, baked salmon, and a bowl of rice, please.”

“You want it fried or steamed?” He questioned. He didn’t bother to look at me as he scribbled down his notes.

“Steamed.”

“And you, sir?”

Edward read over the page, his finger running over it. “Hm... I’d like the shrimp box, a teriyaki steak bento with fried rice, and miso soup. Don’t bother with the salad. Oh, and an order of vegetable tempura to begin with, please.” He grinned as he passed the waiter our menus. I just gaped at him. This time it was his turn to ask. “What?”

“That’s a lot of food,” I answered in awe. I wasn’t sure if he knew how much he ordered. “Do you normally eat that much?”

“I like to eat.”

“And where do you keep it all?” I tipped over to the side to take in his size. As I had told Alice before, he wasn’t the most built man I had ever seen, but he wasn’t fat in the least. In fact, he had long thin arms.

“Hey! I work out, and I work hard. I deserve to eat what I want,” Edward exclaimed, acting as if I had hurt his feelings. He bent forward, so he could speak directly to me. “Bella, there is a reason I like a woman thicker. I want to eat a meal with her and enjoy it. I want to have a piece of cake and not feel guilty about it because my date ate nothing but a salad with no dressing,” he finished, speaking as if it was a problem he had more than once. “By the way, you’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

“No,” I laughed at the near disgusted expression as he said the word. I clicked my tongue. “Why?”

“Because I like a big steak, and I don’t want to feel judged! I don’t get it! Meat is just so good. How can people not eat it?” He shook his head before running his fingers through his thick hair. It seemed a lot darker in the dim room, but I could see the bits of red catching in the light.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You can ask me anything, Ms. Swan,” Edward answered as he took a sip of his tea. It was nice to know that we had something in common. Perhaps we could share a pot.

“What nationality are you?”

He raised a curious eyebrow in my direction. “What do you think? What would you guess?”

“Hm...” I drew out. “Irish and English? Or maybe French. You’re very regal.”

He chuckled at my words. “Ah, so close. Irish, yes. But nein, ich bin part German.”

“Oh, wow. German! And you speak it, too?”

“Nein,” he repeated with a laugh. “Just a little. My great-grandfather was German. He came to this country with his family when he was young after the first World War. He started in the oil fields, then worked his way to the top. The rest is history. But my mother was full-blooded Irish. My father met her in London while he was working there.” He smiled to himself wistfully.

“That seems to make you happy,” I commented.

He nodded his head, peeking up at me from underneath his eyelashes. “It’s just a lovely story. My mom was working in a ‘disco’ after she dropped out of school. And I can imagine my father hitting on her and getting turned down nightly. She was a very feisty and stubborn woman. He came back every single evening until she finally agreed to go out with him. I miss her immeasurably. She died when I was eleven of a massive heart attack.” His smile instantly disappeared, and I hated it.

“I am so sorry.” I frowned as I touched his hand.

“It’s alright. It’s nobody’s fault. But I have to admit you remind me of her. Your big eyes and full cheeks, your attitude...” he trailed off before covering his hands with his face. “Ah, that was probably a creepy over-share. I’m sorry.”

“No!” I soothed him quickly. “No.” I would have said something else to comfort him, but I had no idea what. I felt guilty that I didn’t know the right words. “Why don’t you ask me another question, hm?” I finally offered.

He moved his hands through his hair once again before dropping them back to the table. “Alright. What nationality are you? That seems like a fair one.”

“I’m a mutt, but I have some English in me.” I changed the direction of the conversation. “May I ask you another?” I started as they sat the tempura down on the tabletop along with the dipping sauce. Steam was rising from them, so I gave it a moment to cool so I wouldn’t burn my tongue.

“Yes, anything.” He picked up a fried onion and lightly dipped it in the sauce before popping the whole thing into his mouth so that his cheeks puffed out. He huffed because it was searing hot.

“You eat like a teenager,” I blurted out.

Edward laughed. “That’s a statement, not a question.”

“No, no.” I shook my head. “Sorry. How old are you?”

“You didn’t google me?” He inquired, shocked. “Hm, glad you didn’t. It’s all very boring and business-like. I’m thirty-four.”

“Your eyes are older,” I replied thoughtfully. He offered me the piece of squash, not looking at me as he did. I took it from his fingertips. “Like you’ve been through too much already.”

Edward mulled over my comment as he chewed. The only thing left on the plate was the sweet potato, and he pushed it my way. He swallowed hard and frowned slightly. “You’re not wrong, but that’s a story for another day. Most people assume I’m closer to forty, and I can’t say I blame them. Especially while I’m in these suits. I feel like an old man.”

“You don’t like them,” I commented lightly, tearing the large chunk in half and giving the other part to him. He took my offering with a smile.

“I wouldn’t say I dislike them. They have their place. And when I’m in them, I know I’m conducting business, but I feel like I have to wear them too often. I rarely get to enjoy my jeans and t-shirts.”

“I can’t imagine you in a pair.”

“You’ll see me in some tomorrow.” He smiled. “It’s Saturday, and I don’t have to think about natural gas or oil or stocks or anything like that for at least forty-eight hours. Oh! That reminds me. I’ve arranged for the car to pick you up at ten in the morning. Please dress casually. I’d like you to be comfortable.”

Our waiter put our soups in front of us, whisking our tempura plate away without a word. I stirred mine gently with the Japanese style wooden spoon. I smoothed my tongue over the top row of my teeth as I nervously thought. “What plans do you have tomorrow?”

“Ah, well, I was going to show you around my home, and I’ll help you finish filling out the insurance paperwork, too. I’ve got some notes and things I want to give you.” He shrugged slightly. “Nothing amazing. Lunch. Dinner. More getting to know each other. I have no major projects for the weekend. Video games. Movies. Something relaxing. It’ll be my first days off in about a month.”

I ate about half of my soup when I pushed it towards Edward. He finished his own in a few gulps. The smile that crossed his face made me giggle, and he chuckled in return. “You’re right, though. I eat like a teenager.”

And as if to prove my point, they delivered our food. His sushi course called a ‘shrimp box’ was about eight pieces of huge shrimp filled and covered rolls, and his bento was even bigger. It was stuffed with steak, rice, wantons, and a few slices of orange. My little ball of fish and white rice looked tiny compared to his meal.

Our dinner conversation was easy, mostly about our dining habits. We talked about the things we liked and disliked, which was almost nothing in Edward’s case. He shared one of his rolls with me, and when I was full, he finished my salmon. I had another glass of wine, and we spoke more about our favorite drinks as we let our food settle.

“Okay, so favorite dessert, then?” I asked as I curled a loose piece of hair around my finger mindlessly, leaning in so we could have a more private conversation. Edward was too, his jaw in his palm.

“Ice cream. Any kind. Or well, I should say anything frozen. There are so many kinds around the world. I enjoy cold stuff. What about you?”

I hummed in pleasure. “I adore ice cream,” I sighed at the thought of it. “You know, there is a Baskin Robbins within walking distance of here.”

“Is there? I didn’t even notice.” He perked up. “Would you like to join me for some?”

“Would you like to get it to-go and have it while we walk along the river?” I asked, standing as he did. Edward threw a hundred dollars on the table without bothering to look at the bill.

He was quick to wrap my cape around my shoulders before putting his jackets on. He offered me his arm. “Shall we?” I shook the fog from my head and slipped mine around his. “I think that idea sounds lovely.”

We got ourselves a couple of scoops, butter pecan for me and rocky road for Edward with extra marshmallow cream drizzled over the top. The car had a small fridge and freezer with ice and drinks. We placed our desserts in it, so they wouldn’t melt before we made the short drive.

When we arrived at the well-lit trail beside the river, the sun was about to set, the horizon a brilliant orange and bright purple. The weather was turning colder, a light wind blowing the fall leaves around so they fell from the trees like snow. We walked in silence for a long time while we ate our desserts, both of us deep in our own thoughts.

“I know you may not believe me when I say this, but this has been the best time I’ve ever had with a woman I consider a peer,” Edward commented awkwardly like he didn’t know how to word his feelings. “I’m not very good with people. I’m great at business, but I’m terrible at the intimate parts of life. I feel like I have trouble talking to the average person. But I don’t with you. And I don’t know why.”

“That’s strange,” I answered, not knowing what else to say. “You make me feel like an idiot.”

He looked immediately dismayed. “God! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to, and I am so sorry for ever making-” he stopped babbling when I raised my hand, shaking my head quickly.

“No! It’s me. I feel tongue-tied, and I don’t know how to respond. But when we get started, it’s so easy. But sometimes, when I look into your eyes, I just forget what I was going to say.”

Or, I said too much... I thought to myself as I gazed into the deep beautiful green.

“This wasn’t what I expected,” Edward finally declared as he tossed our empty ice cream cups in the trash.

“I didn’t know what to expect.”

“Neither did I.”

“Thank you,” I told him, the sky starting to fill with diamond stars. “I have to admit, I feel a lot better about this arrangement now than I did before.”

He tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. “In what way?”

“I- I think it worried me I wouldn’t like you as a person. I thought you’d be a jackass, and I guess you still could be, but tonight you’ve been nothing but pleasant and gracious. What we’re doing... good people don’t do this.”

“I know,” he breathed. “I’ve thought about that myself. But I don’t think you’re a bad person, Bella.”

“I don’t think you are, either,” I replied, not because of obligation, but because I felt it was true.

“There is so much more I wish to learn about you, Isabella. I want to know you better. And I hope you still feel as if I’m a good person as you continue to get to know me. This is so out of the ordinary for me. Out of my comfort zone. I know it’s worse for you, and I appreciate that. I want you to know if you ever need to quit, I understand.”

“Thank you,” I repeated softly as we walked back towards the car. The wind was getting stronger, clouds beginning to roll in. Maybe it would rain again, the river needed it. It was so low.

We were silent much of the way to my trailer. As soon as I realized he would see it, it embarrassed me. I could only imagine what kind of house he lived in. Mine was falling apart, with ugly off-white siding that looked as if it would drop off if you blew on it hard enough. I sunk down in my seat, gnawing on the tip of my thumbnail like a madman.

If Edward noticed, he said nothing.

I popped out of the car before Seth could open the door for me, surprising both him and Mr. Masen.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning, Ms. Swan!” Seth called after me.

I was halfway up my steps when I realized that Edward was behind me, the leather backpack in his hands. “Here,” he remarked, passing it to me. “I didn’t want you to forget this.”

“Thank you,” I said for the third time. “For this, for dinner, for... everything.” I shrugged, biting my bottom lip.

A soft blush spread across his nose and cheeks, barely noticeable by the porch light. “Thank you for joining me. I’m already looking forward to this weekend.”

I pulled out my keys, pushing the right one into the lock. It popped open, and I placed the backpack on the table by the door so I wouldn't have to hold the massive thing anymore.

It was rude to not give a proper goodbye, but I was so flustered that I didn't know what to do or say. My cape slid off of my shoulders, and I struggled to grab it before it hit my leaf-covered deck. Edward took a step forward and caught it, placing it back on. As he did, his fingers brushed my bare arms, and I shuddered as the electricity flowed freely again. I knew he felt it too because he took in a deep, sudden breath. He didn't step back, though.

Instead, he leaned in and pressed a light kiss on my forehead. It lingered for a long moment, his skin soft and smooth against mine. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, his cookie-book-sunshine scent practically wafting from his warm neck.

I suddenly felt the urge to brush my cheek against his slight five o'clock shadow to see if it would feel as good as I imagined.

That's when I knew it was time to go inside. I took a step back and smiled politely at Edward as I tried to hide my blush. "Goodnight, Mr. Masen."

"Goodnight, Ms. Swan," he answered, his flush as bright as mine and a pleased grin spread across his lips.