

Bell

I turned up the collar of my jacket. A light rain was falling, and I was feeling chilled.

Scanning the street of the podunk town that lay halfway between Houston and New Orleans, I let out a sigh and crossed the road. There wasn't much to it. There were a couple of cheap motels, some retail stores that had already closed for the day, and a gas station where the Greyhound bus stopped. The lights were on in the attached diner. It looked welcoming, and I needed a coffee.

Hitching up my backpack, I headed for the door. As a habit, I tightened my grip on the strap. The bag held all my possessions. Everything I had in the world.

When you were on the run, you couldn't take very much with you.

And so much got left behind.

I hunched my shoulders and walked inside. A bell above the door jingled. An older blonde woman wearing a white apron and holding a coffee pot nodded at me.

"Take a seat, hon. I'll be with you in a minute."

With a nod, I took a seat at a table near the window. I watched a car drive past and scanned the growing shadows on the sidewalks.

There were no lurking silhouettes. No one was watching me.

Swallowing, I looked at the menu. The plastic was scarred and faded, and I ran my finger over

a groove where someone had bent it once. I didn't have a lot of money left, so I couldn't splurge.

Loud voices echoed through the diner. Glancing sideways, I spotted three guys in their twenties at a booth, laughing and joking, as though they didn't have a care in the world.

They probably didn't. They probably worked, hung out, partied on the weekends. I wondered what that felt like.

An older, dark-haired guy sat a few tables away in the other direction, his head down as he read a newspaper.

The waitress appeared. "What can I get you?"

I shot her a small smile. "Coffee, please. Black. What's today's special?"

"Meatloaf. It's not fancy, but the cook has a special recipe. I promise it's hearty and filling."

And cheap. "Meatloaf, it is."

With a nod, the waitress—whose name tag said Karen—headed back toward the counter.

I drummed my fingers on the Formica table. I needed to decide where I was going. North? I could head to Memphis, or St. Louis. Or should I continue east? To New Orleans, or even Florida.

For a second, I wondered how my mom was doing back in Dallas. It'd been almost a year since I'd seen her.

It's safer this way, Bell.

But that didn't stop the pain. I missed her so much.

I'd always wanted to go to New Orleans. I tapped the table again. Then again, Florida had the beach. Who didn't like warm weather and golden sand?

The front door opened, and a young couple entered, accompanied by a gust of cold air. The man had his arm around a slim woman with red hair. She was smiling up at him.

All of a sudden, my vision blurred.

Allison.

The image of my best friend—with her wide smile, freckles, and long, red hair—was stamped in my head. I had so many images of her.

We'd been best friends since the second grade. Since the day she'd sat down beside me in class and announced that we were going to be best friends forever. And we had been. Through elementary school, middle school, and high school. Then, we'd decided to go to college together at Baylor. I'd studied business, and Allie had wanted to be a nurse.

Helping people when they need it, it's important, Bell.

She'd been the nicest person I'd ever known, with a good heart. She'd just been good and beautiful.

My hands curled around the edge of the table, and time clicked back in. I blinked and saw the redhead and her boyfriend take a seat at a table.

She wasn't Allison.

Allie was dead.

My belly revolted, tying itself in a knot. I tasted bile in my mouth, and breathed through the sensation. I dug my fingers into my thighs, pressing into the denim of my worn jeans.

“Here you go.”

Karen set a mug of coffee and a plate of food down. The smell hit me, making my nausea worse. I managed a smile. “Thank you.”

She eyed me. “You need anything else, hon, you let me know.”

I nodded. That small bit of kindness made tears prick my eyes.

There hadn't been much kindness in my life since I'd left home.

Shaking my head, I locked it down, and picked up my fork. *Survive*. That was what was important. And I, Bellamy Sanders, was a fucking survivor.

I wouldn't let *him* win.

I ate one bite of my meatloaf, chewing slowly. I was on my third mouthful, when someone stepped up to my table.

"Hi there, sweetheart." It was one of the men from the loud trio. He had light brown hair, and a face he probably thought was handsome, but just looked ordinary. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You look like you could use some company. Why don't you come join us?"

I shot him a bland look. "I'd like to be alone."

"Come on now." The smile he shot me told me he thought he was charming. "I'm a nice guy." He leaned closer. "We could have some fun together."

Ugh. I hated pushy guys like this. I'd unfortunately learned that when you were a woman alone, you attracted guys like this. A lot.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

A frown formed, creasing his forehead. "Hey, I'm being friendly here."

"I just really want to eat my dinner."

"You can eat it with me and my friends." He waved at his table. "We can get to know each other."

My heartbeat picked up. He wasn't going to let it go. He was going to make a scene.

I sighed. "Look—"

A shadow fell over the table, and I lifted my head.

My heart skipped a beat.

It was the lone man from the other table. Since he'd been sitting, I'd missed an important fact. He was huge. He was tall, broad, and all muscle. The sleeves of his blue shirt were rolled up, and his arms were covered in tattoos. The ink was a mix of different designs like flowers and swirls, and cool geometric patterns.

His face wasn't exactly handsome, but I couldn't look away. He was rugged, with a nose that had been broken before, shaggy, black hair, and a black beard covering his strong jaw.

His storm-cloud eyes trained on my unwanted visitor. "She said she wasn't interested."

"Stay out of this." The younger man kept his gaze on me. "This isn't your business."

"Yeah, it is, because you're being an ass. Go."

Mr. Persistent turned to face the older man, then he froze.

I hid a smile. *Yes, that's right, you aren't the biggest guy in the room.*

"Now," the tattooed giant growled.

The pest clearly weighed his options, then sniffed. "She's not worth it anyway." He sauntered back to his friends.

I kept staring at the stranger. I couldn't look away.

His head turned back to me, and storm-gray eyes met mine.

Beau

The young woman looked up at me with the biggest blue eyes I'd ever seen.

"Thanks," she said.

She had a surprisingly smoky voice.

"I hate assholes like that," I told her.

She nodded. She had dyed, mousey-brown hair that was pulled back in a braid. I could tell the color wasn't natural, because it was all one color, with no variation. She had a cute face with a button nose.

"Can I buy you a coffee, as a thank you?" she asked hesitantly. She waved at the seat across from her.

"Thought you didn't want any company?"

"Not *his* company." She shook her head. "Sorry, you probably just want to finish your dinner alone. Thanks, again."

I eyed her. There was something so alone about her. I'd seen the look plenty of times before, when I'd been growing up as a kid in foster care, and now with the foster kids I trained at my gym.

"Let me get my stuff."

I'd finished my burger, so I grabbed my newspaper and coffee mug. I waved to the waitress and slipped into the seat across from the waif.

I'd clocked her when she'd first entered the diner, and initially, I'd thought she was a teenager. But now, up close, I guessed she was probably in her early twenties. Young, but she had a gritty look in her eyes.

She was no delicate flower.

My boxing career had taught me to gauge a person's grit and determination quickly. It was why I'd been so good at fighting.

My instincts told me that this woman had plenty of resilience, and she didn't give up easily.

"I'm Beau."

She hesitated. "Bell."

It probably wasn't her real name. She was clearly in trouble, or trying to outrun trouble.

"Where you headed, Bell?"

"Florida."

I nodded. "I'm on my way home to New Orleans. Had a business trip in Houston."

Some of the guys I trained in my gym had fought in a competition in Houston. I'd decided to drive instead of fly, and take my newly restored car for a spin. I'd left the boxing competition this evening, but after I'd crossed the Louisiana border, I'd decided to find a hotel for the night, and drive the rest of the way home in the morning. Maybe get off the Interstate, and take a scenic route through the wetlands.

I could have found a nice hotel—I had the money—but I'd decided to go old school and find a motel where I could keep my car out front.

"I've always wanted to visit New Orleans." Bell toyed with her coffee mug. "It sounds great."

I laughed briefly. “Most people usually focus on the crime rate and the hurricanes.”

Her lips quirked. “I think of Bourbon Street, Mardi Gras, Cajun food, the bayou.”

“It has all those things. I think it’s a great city.”

My brothers and I did our best to help make it better. We were all successful, and tried to give back. We donated a lot of money to local charities and causes. We kept our little corner of New Orleans—a city block of the Arts/Warehouse District—crime free.

We weren’t afraid to tangle with assholes who stepped onto our turf. I flexed my hand under the table. We all had our businesses and homes there, and we did what we had to do to protect it. Yes, we’d done well for five abandoned boys who’d met in foster care.

Who’d shed blood, and had each other’s backs.

Older, uglier memories stirred. I let them. I never forgot where I came from.

Or who I came from.

“So, what’s in Florida?”

“The beach.” Bell smiled.

It lit up her face and my breath caught. Damn, she was beautiful when she smiled. I cleared my throat.

“I like the beach,” she continued.

“Plenty to like—sand, warm sun, cold beers. Although there are sharks and sunburn. Once, I was on vacation with my brothers. A fin popped up in the water, and I’ve never seen my brother Reath swim so fast. Turned out it was a dolphin.”

Bell laughed, then looked startled, like she hadn’t laughed very much lately. “How many brothers do you have?”

“Four.”

“*Four*. Wow. I bet your place was rowdy growing up.”

I lifted my chin, but didn’t mention foster care. Our last foster home hadn’t been pretty. Harvey Tucker had liked to beat boys in the name of discipline. Really, he’d just been a sadistic asshole.

“You have siblings?” I asked.

Her gaze dropped. “No. It was just me and my mom.”

Our coffee got refilled, and I kept the conversation light. Whenever things got too personal, Bell got skittish. We talked more about New Orleans, music, movies. I wasn’t much of a talker usually, but it was easy with her.

She was young and fresh, and clearly educated, despite the well-worn clothes. She should be starting her career and dating and going out with girlfriends, not doing whatever it was she was doing.

“We’re closing up soon,” Karen called out.

I lifted my chin. “Thanks.”

Bell was biting her lip, and looking outside. The drizzle of rain had increased to a steady shower. I knew the forecast said it was going to get worse.

“You staying at the motel next door?” I glanced out the window and could just see my car.

“The place isn’t fancy, but it’s clean.”

“Um, the bus is coming through in a couple of hours.”

I stiffened. The diner was closing, and it was raining. Where the hell was she going to wait?

She carefully counted out some cash and left it on the table, then gathered up her backpack. She pulled it over her shoulder.

I dropped some cash beside hers on the table and followed her outside.

Just then, there was a violent crack of thunder, and lightning filled the sky. The heavens opened and rain poured down in a torrent.

“Oh no.” Bell’s hair was drenched in seconds.

“Come on.” I took her arm, and jogged toward the motel.

We huddled under the walkway outside my room. Our clothes were saturated, and the rain hammered down around us.

Shit. It didn’t look like it was going to let up any time soon.