



Chapter One: Where We Live

The sun was blinding bright when we left our townhouse. Groaning, I covered my eyes as I twisted my head away from the light. Jasper was holding my other hand as we walked to the car. When we got to the bottom of the three stairs, he stopped. I turned to look at him in confusion. My fiancé looked... horrified and angry. His cheeks were red hot, and his forehead was wrinkled. Slowly, I followed his gaze. It took a moment for my new automobile to come into focus.

“Hello, Bella,” was etched into the shiny red paint job repeatedly.

“King,” I whispered, fear instantly filling me.

“No, it couldn’t be,” Jasper mumbled as he pulled out his phone. “Get back inside the house. Now.”

“But it has to be him. He-”

My fiancé shook his head, his messy blond curls falling in his eyes. “I saw his body. Sam, too. It was him. He’s dead.”

Clutching his arm, I looked to see if anything on the outside of the townhouse was damaged. The windows seemed fine, and there was no spray paint on the garage door. “Then it has to be someone close to him. They had to be at the trial, too.”

“Yeah, I know!” He thundered to get my attention because I was panicking. “Now get your ass in the house. I’ll call the police. You call Tanya to make sure she’s okay, and that nothing has happened there.”

I gasped. The thought hadn’t occurred to me yet. “They know where we live,” I mumbled stupidly as I pulled my cell out of my purse, retrieving my keys too. Hurriedly, I unlocked the door and stepped inside the living room as I dialed her number. “Please pick up. Please. Oh, please,” I begged.

Every second hurt. It ticked on, my heart thudding in fear for my friend and former roommate. I thought I might be sick all over the beautiful bare cherry wood floors. My hands trembled.

Finally, after the third ring, her groggy boyfriend answered the phone. “Hello?”

My stomach, which had been in my throat, bounced dramatically down to my feet at the sound of his voice. “Edward! Is Tanya with you? Is she okay? Where are you?”

He instantly woke up, the sounds of blankets rustling in the background. My tone was frantic and scared. I had never felt like it before. “What’s wrong? We’re at my place. She’s fine, she’s just asleep.”

Leaning against the wall, I put my hand on my thumping chest. I was sweating despite it being a mild December day in Texas. “Oh, thank god. Someone vandalized my new car, and it looks like it might have something to do with the case.”

“Jesus,” he breathed. “Are you okay? Where’s Jasper? Have you contacted the police?” He questioned in a rush. I could hear him moving. Tanya spoke, but I couldn’t make out what she said. He pulled the speaker away from his ear. “Somebody did something to Bella’s car. She called your phone, and I picked up,” he answered her. “I don’t know. Honey, what did they do to it?” He directed towards me.

“I... I don’t know exactly. They keyed it for sure. The whole thing.” I moved to the bay window to look outside at the driveway. My man was speaking into the phone as he searched around the vehicle, his eyes scanning the neighborhood uneasily. Then I realized all the windows were smashed, and the tires slashed. “Holy shit, they took a bat to it and popped my-” I

stopped myself, putting my hand over my mouth. “Oh, god. I hope they didn’t do anything to the truck!”

He scoffed. “They couldn’t take a bat to it, it would break the damn thing. The frame is solid steel. Now, where’s Jasper?”

“He’s outside, looking at it and talking on the phone. He told me to make sure Tanya was okay,” I quickly rambled.

“I’ll go check the apartment.”

“Wait!” I blurted out. “What if they’re still there?”

“It’s daylight. They wouldn’t be stupid enough to do it when everyone can see, hopefully. It’ll be fine,” he swiftly promised. “Have the cops showed up yet?”

As he said that, a cruiser drove up to the driveway. “They just got here. I got to go. Please be careful.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. Be safe and call me when you can. I’ll let you know if I find anything,” he declared before he hung up.

I jogged back outside to Jasper as they were coming out of their car. Another pulled up behind it. He protectively tugged me to his side as he slid his phone in his pocket.

“Good morning,” one of them called to us as their partner walked around my vehicle. The other two were going around the building after a swift glance at it. “Jesus almighty,” he mumbled in a thick Texan accent.

Reaching out, he offered him his hand. “I’m Special Agent Dr. Jasper Hale. I’m with the Behavioral Unit down here. Thank you for coming so quickly. Just to let you know, there will also be the FBI arriving soon.”

“Why?” He muttered in shock. He was just a regular beat cop and was only told there was a vandalism issue, I had no doubt. They arrived too fast to know any real details about what could be happening.

“Because we believe this could be a possible threat from a serial killer,” he said plainly.

The officer laughed and then saw our faces. He blinked once. “Wait, are you serious?”

“They did a real number on your car,” the other called. “I’m going to take a walk around the property,” they continued as another took pictures.

“We were involved in the Royce King case in New York,” Jasper explained. “Have you heard of it?” The man nodded, his eyes looking off to the distance for a moment as he blinked again. It didn’t sound like something real.

Finally, after he gathered his thoughts, he licked his lips and looked at me. “So, I take it you’re the Bella that’s being threatened here?” I nodded my head, resting it on Jasper’s shoulder. He wrapped his arm around me tightly again. “Is this your car?” I nodded once more.

“It was a gift from... work. I only got it a few days ago.”

We talked to them for about thirty minutes before Sam showed up. He was just in a t-shirt and jeans, his pants tucked into his worn-out cowboy boots. “Holy fucking shit,” he muttered as he presented his badge to an officer, hurrying up the pathway. “Who the hell did you piss off?”

“Someone close to Royce,” Jasper replied. He stopped, and they stared at each other. “I have no fucking clue who, though. It has to be someone up there, or at least in contact with him. That’s too-” He shook his head. “Accomplice or groupie. Shit! It’s something the fucker kept saying to Bella. He practically sang it to her when she saw him.”

My phone rang. It was from Edward. I turned away from the men so they could keep talking. “Hey! Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, your truck is fine, and the apartment seems alright. Nothing is out of place. How are things going there?”

“The cops are looking around. Please have Tanya stay at your place for a few days, okay?” I begged. “Or stay with her, just in case.”

“Don’t worry. I was planning on it. Anyway, I’ll let you go. Text us with updates,” he answered earnestly.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I closed my eyes. I rubbed my left hand across my face, on the edge of tears as I rested against my fiancé again. But I was too tired to be pushed over it. I felt dry.

Sam leaned in with his fists in his pockets. “Wow, nice rock, kiddo. Where did you get that from?” He questioned. “That looks like an engagement ring.”

“Real subtle,” Jasper declared with a shake of his head, but he smiled briefly. “Yeah, she said yes.”

He clapped his hands together as he grinned. "Hey! Congrats! I'm sorry this is happening and ruining your special day, though," he stated as he touched my arm. "Goddamn, this is stupid. What are you going to do?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to do anything. There was too much going on in my mind, and I was frankly scared. Cognitive function was shutting down. Even if King was dead, it still felt too dangerous, too frightening. "I want to run away. I just want to get as far away from this and our problems as possible," I admitted. It was childish and stupid, but it's what I wanted.

"I do, too," my future husband agreed, his eyes exhausted. "We'll need to get as much security stuff as possible put in this place. The best cameras, lights, alarms. Damn, my head hurts," he grumbled the last sentence, tilting it back towards the sky. "Yeah, let's just get out of town for a few days. I'll take a leave of absence. I can't deal with this shit right now."

Peering up at him, I saw him more resolute than ever before. We had joked about it so much, but this was for real. "Where should we go?"

His smile grew, pushing to one side of his face before peeking down at me. "Vegas?"

I laughed in surprise because I couldn't believe it. "Really?"

He shrugged, making Sam laugh. "So, what? You're going to elope? Uh, I've met your mother... She'll kill you."

"She'll get over it," I told him, only looking at my fiancé. It was exactly what I wanted to do. "Yeah. Let's go to Vegas. Let's get the hell out of here and get married."

Jasper laughed happily, leaning down to kiss my lips. It was the first time he had since before we stepped outside, and it felt like it had been months. "We'll go to your place and pick up your stuff. I moved most of mine here last night. The rest of it, I put in the pod. Shit, I got to cancel the movers."

"Okay, you do that. I'll buy our plane tickets. Let's try to leave tonight."

"Y'all are serious about this," Sam remarked in astonishment. I nodded at our friend once again. "Alright, I'll keep an eye on this place for you while you're away. I don't want anything else crazy to happen to it, especially if you think it's connected to King. If it is him, it means my job's not done yet."

"Actually, if you could, that would be great. I'll give you a key," Jasper accepted right away.

One of the FBI agents that showed up in a suit walked over to the two men. He was a young man in a different division from them, but you could tell how much they respected each other. "Sir, we're going to have the vehicle towed back to the lab. It looks like they destroyed the engine too, cut the brake lines and everything. We've done what we can here."

Since it was almost a half-million-dollar car, without all the bells and whistles Justin added to it for me, they were taking this seriously. This wasn't the kind of vandalism you just paid a fine for.

"Any other damage to the place or the neighbors?" The other agent shook his head at Jasper's question. "Okay. Darlin, give him the key."

I took it off the ring. It had been there for less than a week. It instantly felt so much lighter. "Thank you."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"I'll make sure everything is done properly. You two get your shit together for a trip." Sam pulled me to him for a hug, lightly kissing the top of my head. "It'll be okay. You've got insurance. They'll get you a new one."

"I don't even care about that. At least it wasn't Jasper's."

Snorting, he shook his head. "No. This is worse in a hundred ways. I hate that it happened right outside my window, and I never heard it. I feel like a terrible cop."

"Um, we wouldn't have heard anything last night with what we were doing," I immediately countered. His friend laughed loudly. "Well, it was our anniversary, and we got engaged. We were rightfully distracted."

Sam pointed at me. "Listen to her. She's right. I'll look into this personally and make sure they handle this thing by the book. We'll view this as a terrorist-type threat." He waved his hand behind him. "It's a scare tactic to get your attention."

"They certainly got it," I informed him.

After getting done with the cops and packing Jasper's things, we took an Uber to my apartment. He inspected the truck even though he knew an officer came to glance at it earlier. I bought one-way first-class tickets to Vegas for seven that evening. It was around a three-hour flight. I booked the presidential suite at the Four Seasons with a view of the Strip, not caring about the cost. I got it for at least three days. If we wanted to stay longer, I could extend it, or we could go somewhere else. Maybe we could really run away to Europe.

In the cab, he was looking at something else. Wedding stuff. Jasper was biting his lip as he did, his thumbs moving furiously. He waited until we got into the building to speak about it. He began by clearing his throat. "So, the Clark County marriage license office is open until midnight, but I don't think we want to get married today."

"No. We'll both be exhausted by the time we get there. And tomorrow, I want to sleep all day."

"That sounds perfect. So, we could get married on the tenth?" I nodded, giving him a slight smile. "We can get the license tomorrow then. Um, I was looking at places we could do it, and I think I have somewhere you might like."

"Oh, we're not just going to go through a drive-thru with an Elvis impersonator?" I teased.

He chuckled softly as he shook his head. "Uh, there is actually this company that does weddings in the desert canyons. They provide pretty much everything, including pictures. They have an opening for a sunset service on that day if we want to do that. It looks beautiful."

I leaned in to study the photos on his phone. He wasn't kidding. I was a little afraid anything we did would be cheesy, but it didn't seem that way at all. This instead sounded magical. "Oh, I love it. That's perfect."

He beamed. "Okay, I'll book it, and now all we have to do is figure out what we want to wear."

"I'll just buy everything I need when we get there. I don't want to worry about packing," I grumbled. "I want to hurry and leave."

"So, we'll sleep in tomorrow then go shopping after we get the license?"

I walked towards my room. "Yeah, sounds good. Let me get a few things, so I don't shop naked."

"I'm going to run to the restroom. When you're done with that, we'll take a shower and get something to eat before heading to the airport."

Most of my stuff was in boxes because I had been getting ready for the past couple of days. I had packed items into my suitcases to make it easier to move. I just dumped the smallest one out with all my notebooks and pens onto my bare mattress. Most of my clothing was in my laundry basket and hamper. I quickly sorted through them to find a few things I wanted.

Next, I looked at the shoes in my closet. I grabbed slip-ons and some flip-flops, tossing them on top of my luggage. One of the few objects I still had hanging up was the beautiful red dress I had for the pictures all those months ago for the book's marketing. It was in a garment bag, dry-cleaned and everything. It felt too extra to go out in, even for fancy dates, so I hadn't put it on again. It was so low-cut and revealing, the mermaid skirt making me look like a princess.

I remembered the feelings it gave me as I stared into the mirror in that hotel room. How strong, confident, and powerful I was. On that rooftop with my hair flowing around me, I felt ethereal. I was a Goddess. I wanted to feel like that again. Biting my lip, I only considered it for a moment. I took the dress down and placed it beside my suitcase.

Just as I came out of the bedroom, Jasper walked out of the bathroom. "I'm done. Ready for a shower?"

"Wow, that was quick."

"Yeah, I've already got everything I need," I replied as I held my hand out to him.