



## **Chapter Nineteen: In a Crowd**

The next day, we slept in and relaxed. Wednesday, I went to dinner with Tanya and Alice. Rosalie was hanging out with her, so we invited her to join us. They got along instantly. It was sweet. It was nice to catch up with my oldest and now newest friends. Hopefully, my former roommate would warm up to my boyfriend since she liked his sister so much.

Thursday, we had dinner with his family at their home. They were all so happy to have Jasper back again. And he was obviously delighted to be there. We stayed late into the evening, talking, eating, and playing card games. Mamaw kicked everyone's ass at poker. I wasn't surprised. She was a hustler. It was a nice way to spend Independence Day.

Justin was the most excited I had ever seen him as he talked about his party that was coming up on the weekend. He rented out a whole lakeside event hall where they would shoot fireworks off a barge. Jasper was silent throughout the entire discussion. He really thought what they were doing was too much, but he wouldn't rain on their parade.

On Saturday, when we arrived at the lake, the parking lot was filled with cars already. There would be well over three hundred people there from what his father said. Jasper seemed uncomfortable in his polo shirt and jeans, sunglasses over his eyes. He still looked like a cop. His face was tight, his body tense. I couldn't understand why. He had been anxious all day long.

“What’s wrong?” I questioned softly as we walked towards the building. The gravel crunched under my sandals. Music was already playing loud enough that we could hear it outside. There were red, white, and blue decorations everywhere.

“Big noisy places like this make me uncomfortable,” he stated.

“They’ve never bothered you before.”

He cleared his throat, the sound rough and unpleasant. “Okay, loud situations like this with lots of people who know me, but I don’t know them, makes me uneasy,” Jasper corrected himself.

“Ah,” I nodded in understanding. “Okay, that makes more sense.”

Sighing, he shook his head as if it disappointed him. “These individuals have known me, or at least learned all about me, since I was a child, and I don’t know a damn one of their names. And frankly, I don’t want to!” His pout was a little cute. He opened the door for me to go inside the building.

I laughed. “You’ve turned into a cranky homebody.”

Opening his mouth, Jasper snapped it shut quickly. His frown just made me giggle more. “Ugh, maybe. It’s so hot, too. I’d rather go soak in the pool at the hotel.”

“Tomorrow?” I offered. He nodded, sighing again as my boyfriend pursed his lips. I bumped my elbow into his side, glancing up at him. “Aw, you’ll be okay. There’ll be good food and a bar! I promise it won’t be that bad.”

Scoffing, he looked at me from the corner of his eye. “Yeah, that’s not terrible, I suppose.”

People surrounded Caroline and Justin, but she still saw us from across the room as soon as we entered. She waved frantically. “Y’all come here! I want you to meet someone!” She shouted, wiggling her fingers. In her other fist was a drink. The woman was exceptionally loud.

Moving through the party, they separated like the Red Sea. Jasper’s hand curled against the small of my back. I could hear the whispers that I was the future novelist daughter-in-law to the hero-son as we walked closer. “How’s the pool sounding? Are you hungry?” He asked under his breath.

“I could use a drink,” I replied in a low murmur with a smirk. “Hi!” I called brightly to his mother when we got close enough. My smile was huge and fake, straining my cheeks a little. “It already smells good in here.” I didn’t know what else to start with.

“They’re setting up now!” She informed me as she put her arm around me and turned me towards the crowd. Caroline pulled me totally from her son’s grip and ignored him. “Everyone, this is Bella, Jasper’s girlfriend. Isn’t she gorgeous?!”

I quickly looked back at him in surprised horror. His eyes were sparkling with apparent amusement, the corners of his mouth twitching. My boyfriend nodded along with her in agreement when his mother finally glanced at him. When she turned, I gave him an annoyed glare. He just shrugged and mouthed, ‘Sorry.’

Someone cleared their throat to get my attention. “Caroline has been talking about you for months! It was so sweet of you to go with him up there while he worked,” an older woman I had never met before began. I smiled at her politely because I didn’t know what to say. Frankly, I didn’t think it was. I couldn’t have been without him any more than he could have been without me. “So, when are y’all planning on getting married?”

My jaw hit my chest.

“Well, I have no earthly idea,” I spoke as lightly as possible, trying not to laugh anxiously in her face like a crazy person. “Honey, can you get me that drink we were talking about?” I asked Jasper, tilting my head to the side.

“Malibu and rum, rum punch, or a beer?” He inquired with a chuckle. It was a little petty, but he didn’t mean it like that. He just knew exactly how I felt.

“Rum punch,” I mumbled. It was the strongest. I wouldn’t ask for shots in front of his parents, even if I wanted them.

Jasper’s father perked up. He was almost done with whatever was in his transparent plastic cup. “I’ll get that for you. What about you, boy? You want something?”

“Martini?”

He visibly shuddered. “I just don’t know how you can drink that rubbing alcohol with pickle juice.”

“Make it extra dirty, please.” He grinned at his disgust. “Thank you.”

The room instantly got noisier when Emmett and Rosalie arrived. There were a lot of younger men there that were mechanics with their dates, and they all knew both of them. It took them five minutes to get through the crowd to us. The entire time they were greeting folks.

Rose hugged me as soon as she saw me, pushing through several people to get to me. It seemed to surprise the group of women around Caroline. They were the office workers from some of their lots. Most of them had worked together for twenty or thirty years. Emmett lifted me off the ground with his embrace next.

He wiggled my dangling legs, his grin bright. "Are you going to get smashed with me again, lady?" He asked me like an eager child. I giggled in response, putting my arms around his neck so I wouldn't drop to the floor.

"Uh, no," I remarked right away, tossing my hair over my shoulder. "Last time was a mistake. You did it on purpose, too."

Laughing softly, Jasper leaned in some. "You just realized that was what they were doing?"

His brother-in-law turned to look at him while still holding me. "Shh... Don't give away my secrets." He carefully put me down to my feet. "What you got there, girl? I'll get you a refill," he questioned as he pointed at my nearly empty cup. Only a little pink liquid was left at the bottom.

"Rum punch, please." He winked at me and did two stupid finger guns, clicking his tongue as he did. "Beer, baby?" He asked his wife. She rolled her eyes but saluted him in return.

"He pre-gamed hard, didn't he?" I whispered to Rosalie.

"Oh, god. So hard. We're taking an Uber." I nodded my head. We were, too.

"So, Bella," another woman started. "Why don't you tell us about your books?" They all leaned in eagerly. I had experienced nothing like it before. Fifteen old ladies all stared at me at once as if I was about to perform a trick. Nervously, I fidgeted with my lock and key. "You're getting published, right?"

"Well," I cleared my throat and smiled. "Um, I'm already self-published, but I just signed a deal with a publishing house out of New York. And I have an agent now. My novels are available online, but they're going to distribute them on a national scale."

"Like at Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million?" someone else asked.

It felt as if I was being passed around like a party favor. I was glad when it was time to sit down to eat. It was like dining at the actual restaurant, waiters hurriedly bringing the meat to each table with cheese bread, baked bananas, and yucca fries. There was also a full salad bar. Jasper's brother-in-law gave them a workout, as did his father. It was good, though, and I couldn't blame them. I enjoyed more than my fair share.

After dessert, I was once again swallowed by a crowd of women led by Caroline. Jasper slipped away to use the restroom after a time. When twenty minutes passed, I realized he wasn't coming back. Excusing myself, I looked for him until I finally found him outside around the corner behind the building. The hall had large glass windows that overlooked the lake, and he was just out of sight of them. The music and the laughter were so loud.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I gently inquired, walking towards him slowly.

"Just getting some air," he breathed. Jasper quickly moistened his lips, looking up at me. His face was stressed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to leave you like that. I needed a few minutes."

I leaned against the wall beside him. "Were they becoming too much?"

He nodded his head. "Yeah. Just a little."

The light was fading, and the cicadas were getting louder. It added to the near frantic tempo of the activity inside. "They're only curious, that's all. I don't mind it."

"Yeah," Jasper smiled. He paused, clearing his throat. "Honestly, this is why I don't enjoy going to church with them, but at least there is a point when they're forced to shut up."

Laughing, I squeezed his hand. We were silent for a long moment. I wanted to give him whatever he needed. In the darkness, I looked over his delicate features and pale skin that glowed in the moonlight. I turned my head towards the lake just in time to watch the first firework rocketing into the air. The boom was deafening, echoing over the water as the sparks of light reflected off the calm surface. I felt Jasper's entire body jerk and tense. Automatically, I pivoted to see what was happening. Grimacing, he twisted his face away from the sky.

"What's wrong?" I spun entirely to look at him.

He closed his eyes tightly. There was another bang, two in a row this time. I could see the pain in his face. "Nothing-" Jasper lied. There was shame in his voice, and I couldn't understand it.

Another went off, making him jump again.

"You don't like fireworks?" I said in a whisper. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed heavily. He wouldn't answer. I put my hands on his cheeks to make him look at me. "No, don't. It's okay."

I leaned up on my toes and kissed his lips lightly. When more popped, I could feel his chest heave as his heart sped up. His fingers curled into the fabric of my dress.

“I haven’t really liked them in a while, but it’s worse this year,” he admitted, his eyes still shut as tightly as they could be. “They don’t scare me. But my body just reacts.”

“Oh, baby…” I breathed. Instantly, I felt like an inconsiderate asshole. “It’s okay. A lot of veterans don’t enjoy fireworks. I’m sorry. I should have thought about that. We can go-”

“No, it’s fine. They’ll be over soon, and the party is only really getting started. They’ve got games and door prizes and shit.”

Swiftly shaking my head, I made him look at me. “I don’t care about that.” I pushed my thumb over his cheek. He didn’t move, making me sigh. I wanted to take his discomfort away, but I wasn’t sure how. Finally, I removed my wireless earbuds from my purse with my phone and quickly switched on a playlist. Putting them in his ears, I turned the music up as loudly as I could. “Can you hear anything?”

Once more, he shook his head slowly. I twisted him away from the lake and tugged him down for a deep and powerful kiss. “Look at me,” I whispered softly against his cheek. “It’s okay. You’re safe, I promise.”

“I know.”

I didn’t even notice when the fireworks display ended. Jasper had me pressed as hard as he could against the wall, his hand under my sundress on my thigh. He had lost himself in touching me, aggressive and needy. There would be hickies on the places where he had pushed the straps of my dress down, the tops of my breasts exposed.

“Yo!” Emmett yelled at us, snorting as he did. “Get it, girl.”

“I’m trying to! Go away,” I complained as I peered over my boyfriend’s shoulder. I had wrapped my legs around his waist, and my feet were completely off the ground. Desperately, I clung to him.

Laughing, he shook his head. “Caroline is looking for you.”

Jasper removed the earbuds finally and put them back into my purse. “We’ll be there in a minute.”

“Need a second to get that boner to calm down?” He joked.

“I wish I had my gun,” he whispered to me. “I’ve not had enough alcohol to deal with your immature bullshit, Em.”

He quickly threw his hands up. “Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. Jesus, I didn’t realize your panties would become so bunched. I’ll buy you both a drink to make up for it.”

When he walked away, I pulled Jasper’s face toward mine. “We can leave at any time. Tell me when.”

“No, I’m better now,” he promised after letting me back down to my feet. I pouted, not believing him. “I am, I swear. Thank you for distracting me. It helped. You always know exactly what I need.”