



## Chapter Twenty-three: In the Middle of Manhattan

There, in the middle of Manhattan, was the biggest Barnes & Noble I had ever seen. It was at least three stories, and it was filled with people waiting to hear me read and sign for two hours. It was the largest public event I ever had, and the most I had interacted with a crowd. I was in the backroom, awaiting my cue. I was shaking, rocking back and forth on my heels. This was so different. I never talked to the audience on the shows. They just clapped for me. The hosts asked me questions to make me look intelligent and interesting. I was on my own.

Also, I hadn't read in public since college.

"Ms. Swan?" Nervously, the general manager came up to me. She was treating me as if I was an actual celebrity. A couple of years before, I would have been a few bad months away

from working for someone like her. I wasn't special. "We're ready for you if you'll follow us this way."

I repeated the word 'goddess' in my head as I trailed behind her. Jasper's hand rested on the small of my back. His fingers curled comfortingly against my spine.

She went to the podium. There wasn't even standing room. Adjusting the microphone, she smiled. "Thank you all for joining us today," she said in a librarian's voice. "Ms. Isabella Swan."

That was it. What an introduction.

There was a subtle round of applause. I cleared my throat as I came to where she was. I was going to read the first chapter in its entirety. Suddenly, I felt as if I should have practiced with my husband first. My eyes scanned the crowd to find him. He was in the third row. Then I realized a few rows directly behind him were one of the DAs from the trial, and she was there with her partner. I smiled to myself because I knew she was also there to support me.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for coming today. So, I'm going to jump into it, and afterward, I'll take some questions." Jasper encouragingly grinned at me. I opened the book to the first page and licked my lips. I gazed only at him. This was his gift, after all. This was his novel. "When one joins the force, they always have a vision of selflessly improving the world. Or at least the average citizen imagines they do. Heroes with gold and silver badges in navy blue who put their lives on the line every day. To protect and serve is an honor and a privilege. There is a reason little boys want to grow up to be them. Paragons, one and all."

"When I began at the paper, I was one of those naïve fools. A wide-eyed innocent middle-class white girl, more wholesome than Clark Kent fresh from Smallville on his first day at the Daily Planet. Reality wasted no time slapping me in the face. Injustice was everywhere, but no more so than amongst those meant to protect us. But I was no Lois Lane, just a junior writer in the crime department. Nobody cared about what I had to say until one cop was brave enough to tell me a wild story drunkenly one night in a dingy hotel. It was filled with corruption, sex, drugs, and murder, and it involved some of the biggest players in the city."

"He had told it before, but no one took him seriously. Not even his partner. Honestly, I really didn't believe him either until his body was pulled from the Devils River the next day, several hundred miles away." When I looked up, I met my husband's eyes. He seemed so proud, a slight smile on his handsome face. He was practically glowing. Squaring my shoulders, I took a deep breath. "His colleague needed no further convincing that something nefarious was afoot. What he wasn't sure of was whose side I was on. It was something we had in common."

When I spoke the last word of the chapter, I closed the book and lifted my eyes. The crowd erupted in unprompted applause. They jumped to their feet, filling the place with

overwhelming noise. Automatically, I laughed in surprise, then did a little bow. The questions were thankfully mainly about my books or the movie. These people were readers. Only one person asked me about the trial, and they inquired if I would write a story about it. I couldn't say either way. I never wanted to think about it again, but I felt like I was still in the middle of living it. Maybe in a decade, it would be different, but no one would care about it then.

The manager came back to the stage. "Ms. Swan is going to take a twenty-minute break while we set up the signing table. If you could form a line this way." She pointed to the right, and like a principal at school, they all listened to her. So many people were eager to have my autograph. It was crazy.

I hopped down from it and slid into Jasper's waiting arms. He was beaming as he held me tightly. "Have I ever told you how much I love that first chapter?" I giggled and pushed my nose into his neck. As I looked up, I caught a glimpse of the lawyer.

"Ms. Rachele!" I called before she could get too far. I waved at her to get her attention. Turning, she smiled when she noticed me. I wasn't going to miss her as I did at Christmas. She and her boyfriend came closer, having to push through the crowd. "It's so good to see you again! Thank you so much for coming!"

"Of course!" She grinned. "I wanted to come out to encourage you. I loved the first book, too," she continued to gush. "Plus, it's just a nice excuse to come into the city. It's so great that something positive has come from this case. It was a shit show from start to finish." Then she remembered something. "Oh, Jessica is here, too, actually!"

It took me a moment to realize that she was talking about the curly-haired chief prosecutor. I only thought about her as Mrs. Stanley.

She turned around, getting on her tiptoes. Even though she was a couple of inches taller than me without her heels, it was hard to see over the crowd. There were just so many people crammed into the already tightly packed building. Finally, she shoved her way through to come greet us, too.

"Ms. Swan!" She quickly drew me into a hug. She was dressed comfortably in blue jeans and a sweater, her curly brown hair pulled up into a ponytail. "Congratulations on the new book!"

"Thank you. Um... Actually, it's Mrs. Hale now," I corrected her politely and brought my hand up to show the two women. "Just Ms. Swan for work."

They both seemed surprised. She clapped her hands together. "That's incredible!" Mrs. Stanley declared. "When? I didn't even realize you were engaged."

"It all happened really quickly in December. Right after the trial," my husband explained with a proud smile. "We couldn't wait."

She took my hand to look at my ring, bringing it up to her face. Lifting it so that Ms. Rachelle could see it, her eyes got wide. "Oh, Bryce, look at that. It's stunning. Good work, Dr. Hale."

"And it's made from his grandmother's old wedding rings, so it makes it even better," I added, looking at it myself. I wiggled my fingers. "I love it so much."

"Ms. Swan, we're almost ready for you," the manager came to me, lightly touching my shoulder to get my attention. I could barely hear her over the crowd.

"Right. I'm sorry. I'll be right there," I mumbled before I glanced back at the ladies. "Sorry. I have to get back to it."

"Well, as much as I'd love an autograph, I am not waiting in that line," Mrs. Stanley said with a brief laugh. It looped around like a snake, filling the aisles. We all looked at it for a second. I swallowed back some of my nervousness that returned.

"Same," the younger lawyer added. She brought her hand up, her face apologetic. "No offense."

"Um, none taken," I softly laughed. "I wouldn't wait for a signature, either. You know, if you're really interested in one, I can just send a couple of signed copies to you. I'll mail you my new one and everything."

"Really?" Ms. Rachelle replied, looking at her boss.

Someone called to Jessica. It was a huge black man in slacks and a sweater. I remembered him from the pictures with her kids. They seemed like such a happy family in it. He smiled when he got her attention, lighting up his entire face.

She looked back at him, then at me again. "That would be awesome. Thank you. Um, that's my husband." She hitched her thumb over her shoulder. "We need to run because we have a reservation." She plucked a card from her purse. "Just send it to my office if you don't mind."

"Not at all," I promised. "Thanks for coming."

We watched her go to him. She looked so tiny beside her man. He kissed her cheek lovingly before they melted back into the crowd. Ms. Rachelle pulled out one, too. "We should let you work too, but if you don't have any plans tonight, would you like to go out for a drink with

us?" She squeezed the arm of her boyfriend. I couldn't remember his name for the life of me. He had been silent the entire time, letting us gossip. His eyes moved over me slowly before flicking over to Jasper.

"Oh, we can't." My hand automatically went to my stomach. "Um, I can't drink, but we actually have plans, anyway." She seemed confused as she stared at my belly. It was like she was doing some calculations, her eyes narrowing in thought. That happened a lot when you rushed to get married, and people found out you were with child. "I'll be four months pregnant next week. We're not telling everyone yet, though," I explained bashfully. "It's my little honeymoon baby, I think. You never know these things for sure."

She gazed at her boyfriend. He had a slight smirk on his face. Swallowing, she glanced back at us. "That's awesome. Wow, it's been a really great year for you." The way she said it was as if she was overwhelmed for me. She had no idea.

"It's been a dramatic one at the very least," Jasper mumbled to himself. "But awe-inspiring all the same." He leaned in to speak in my ear. "Ms. Swan, as your bodyguard, I need to let you know it's time for you to go." The other two gentlemen that were standing behind us would let me chat forever.

"Right, right," I laughed. It had been so long since I had interacted with people, it made me eager to chat. Our friends and family had come to the townhouse, but this was different. "I'll send those as soon as we get back. Thank you again for coming. You don't know what it means to me."

I didn't know it was possible for my hand to hurt that much from writing. I did it constantly at home when I made notes. It made me hot and sweaty too, but that might just have been the anxiety and baby. Pregnancy glow was actually perspiration.

Jasper came up behind me in the middle of the hotel room and rubbed my shoulders. "Do you still want to go to dinner tonight?" He asked softly. I scrunched up my face and shook my head a little with a pout. I was too tired. "Stay in and order, or do you want to go down to the restaurant?"

"Let's just order. I think I'm all done with being in a crowd now," I explained. He nodded in understanding, pushing his nose in my hair. We were silent for a moment. "I want to do a scene," I complained. "I don't want to think anymore, sir."

We hadn't played since Valentine's. It was a couple of weeks before we could even have sex comfortably again. The real pain from the accident came in the days after. Though our lovemaking was fun and passionate, it wasn't the same. He chuckled softly, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“Are you sure you’re up to that?” He inquired worriedly. I nodded. His lips rested against my temple as he thought. “We can do that. But before we get started, I have something I want to give you.” Jasper went to his luggage to retrieve a small white box and handed it to me. “It’s more practical than romantic, I’m afraid.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything.” I rolled my eyes. Inside was a new phone. I smiled to myself as I ran my finger over the shiny edge. “Thank you.”

“You’ve been trying to ignore your cracked screen, but I know it bothers you. It’s the latest model with the largest amount of storage you can have. Plus, it has fancy tracking software, so if it ever gets stolen or you lose it, you can pop onto the computer to find out where it is,” he continued to explain. “Also, it shouldn’t be easy to hack. You know, since you’re a celebrity now. We wouldn’t want any naughty photos of you to get leaked when I have you take them for me.”

I giggled. “That’s probably for the best. You always think of everything, sir,” I cooed as I kissed his cheek. “When would you like to get started?”

His hand slid down to my ass and gave it a squeeze. “Right now, Isabella. Go take a shower and get ready for me.”

With those words, I got a second wind. I rushed through my bath. When I came out, one of the chairs had my wand tied to it with red rope. I hadn’t even known he had brought toys with us. We were only coming for a couple of days, and I didn’t think we would have time. On the table were more in different colors, as well as his drawing pad.

He was already in blue jeans and a t-shirt, his feet bare. Slowly, he smiled as he took in my damp appearance. I was just in my towel. “I want to draw my favorite model all wrapped up in rope. If you’re a good girl, that will be your reward, but I can also use it as your punishment.” He held my chin so I would look into his eyes. “You will be silent, and you will listen to my every command. The decision on whether you enjoy that or not is up to you. Either way, you’re making a mess tonight.”

We both knew I would, either way. Grinning, I nodded my head in understanding. He brought my Tiffany’s collar from his pocket. It made my cheeks heat. He really thought of everything. Something about knowing he wanted this to happen so badly he prepared, just in case, filled me with joy.

Jasper slipped a ball gag into my mouth. “We don’t want those poor bodyguards to hear you screaming like a little whore.” It was hard not to smile around it. He picked up the pink rope first, twisting it in his long fingers. “Get on the bed on your knees and sit back.”

By the end, I was wrapped in a combination of pink and baby blue. It was artfully tangled around my breasts, legs, and thighs. It enhanced the bump rather than hid it, but that was by his design. My ankles were tied to my wrists, pushing my tummy and tits out. Finally, he walked to the table and plucked a flower from the vase, snipped it with the safety scissors, then placed it behind my ear. Jasper smiled at his handiwork.

He picked up my new phone. "It's supposed to take incredible pictures," he teased as he snapped one. "I think I'll film you when I allow you to cum. So I can watch it over and over again. It'll be so pretty. Trying not to scream while you shake as it drips down your delicious thighs." He was trying to make me blush, and it was working. His fingers went between my legs to check how much I was enjoying myself. "Fuck so wet just from getting tied up. Do you like being at my mercy?" I nodded eagerly.

Sucking on his fingertips, he looked me over. He plucked one of my nipples. They were taut from being wrapped in the silky soft rope. "Your tits really are bigger. Fucking gorgeous." He trailed his nail lightly over the top of one. Sliding it down to my stomach, his palm pressed against my curved belly. "I have to admit, I love this." He placed his hand on the other side. "This is mine. There is a piece of me inside you right now. Something beautiful I made with you. Even when we're not together, it's there. Growing." I whimpered quietly. "Shh..." he cooed as he ran his knuckle over my jaw. "We've both missed this. Haven't we, Isabella?" I nodded again. He forced me to look into his eyes. "Are you comfortable?" I did it once more. There was no other way for me to communicate. "Good." He went to pick up his tablet, a confident smirk on his face. "I hope so. We're only just getting started."