



## Chapter Twenty-four: Out the Window

I came back to Dallas more relaxed. Our night together was rejuvenating. We both needed it. We had to discover the way to get back to being us again. Between the hit-and-run and the pregnancy, we were struggling to find those people. We couldn't live in fear forever, nor should we allow the tiny terrorist the satisfaction of disrupting our daily lives. We were still newlyweds after all, and we needed to have as much sex as possible before the baby came to teach us what real servitude was. It was like we were creating our own mini Master or Mistress, who did not respect safe words. We would find out which at the end of the week.

A black car with a security guard picked us up from the airport. Silently, he put our things into the trunk before whisking us inside. There was another already at our home, waiting for us. It gave me some sense of safety. It wasn't much, but we had to hold on to it.

"Maybe we should go out tomorrow," I began thoughtfully as I rested my head against Jasper's shoulder. We were both dressed comfortably for the flight in jeans and hoodies. He rarely wore them out, but he was getting more relaxed with his appearance since going on leave. Even his hair was longer, random curls flopping on his forehead. I pushed one away from his eyes. "We can make up that date we skipped last night."

"What? That didn't count?" Jasper teased in a low voice as his fingers wove with mine. He was feeling a little better too. A sweet smile tugged at his plush pink mouth.

"Oh, it did, but it's my turn," I replied, rubbing my foot against his ankle. I glanced at him from under my eyelashes, making them flutter against my cheek innocently.

Humming, he nodded his head as his tongue darted out to moisten his lips. He liked that idea but was still worried. "We'd need security to follow us around if we did that. Are you sure?"

"We would still have some privacy. At least to have a nice dinner and maybe a late-night walk. I don't think it would dampen the mood too much. We have to get used to it. Besides, I haven't driven my new car."

He ducked his head and lowered his voice. "Perhaps I should drive, Mrs. Hale?" He countered quickly.

I didn't want to think about why he was asking that, but he was right. He was the better driver, and we would be safer with him at the wheel. "I suppose," I mumbled a bit sourly. "I'll have to think about what I want to do. Maybe we should go out during the day and go to a museum. That would be safe, and we could spend the evening at home. A breakfast date?"

"I'd like that," he said encouragingly. "We should go back to the art museum soon. They have a new exhibition I'd love to see. Also, the Perot is doing something interesting right now, but I don't remember what," he continued, getting excited about the idea. It made me happy to see him as eager to serve me. I hadn't been in control since learning about being pregnant, and I would have to figure out how to use it to my advantage.

He could probably argue I was currently always in control because of it- rightfully so.

"You just want to go see the dinosaur fossils," I teased lightly. My fingers slid across his thigh. "Nerd."

"Shut up," he chuckled. "Brat."

I playfully gasped. We were almost home, turning on to our street. "Oh, you're brave to piss off a pregnant woman who-" I stopped when I realized something. Leaning forward, I blinked as I tried to make sense of it. "There's smoke."

My sudden tone change confused Jasper. "What?" He looked out the window with me.

Part of me prayed it was the house behind or beside us, as cruel as it was. I didn't wish a fire on anyone, but at least then it was an accident. A sad twist of fate. It was only a thin pillar. Maybe it was a large bonfire... in the middle of the day. Or they were burning leaves... on a particularly gusty April afternoon.

"Shit. No," he whispered.

That hope was lost as soon as we pulled into the driveway and saw an orange glow in my bedroom window. The security guard was still in the car, unbothered. He was looking down at something in his lap. When I looked around for a cop, I realized they were on the opposite side of the street to be able to see it.

Jasper flew from the backseat, banging on the window to get the attention of the other guard. The one who had picked us up was already calling the emergency number, speaking quickly into his cell phone.

"What the fuck are we paying you for?" He shouted at him as he ran to the opposite side of the house. "Watch her!" He pointed at me as I scrambled out to follow. "I'm going to check the perimeter. The fire is small. They might still be here."

"You don't have a weapon!" I screamed, but he couldn't hear me over the sound of the police car coming down the street with its siren on. Even if it was only six or so houses down, it came at full speed. The officers were out in a second and rushing towards us. "My husband went around the back!" I warned them.

"Mrs. Hale, stay in the vehicle," one of the guards ordered. The one from the driveway went to turn on the hose we had attached at the front. I had been using it when I watered my flowers. He started spraying the outside of the building as well as the one beside it to keep the flames from spreading. The homes were so close together. He tried to hustle me backward, away from the chaos.

Before I could move, there was a deafening bang inside the house, and a powerful whoosh of air pushed my bedroom window out. It shattered everywhere, raining onto the grass below. I screamed in surprise, one hand flying to my mouth and the other to my stomach.

When Jasper ran beside the building, his feet crunched over it. "They disabled the electricity to mess with the security and went in the back. The door was still open! The sunroom appears to be trashed, but that's all I could see. I think they jumped the fence."

The sound of firetrucks barreling down the road could be heard as they turned down the street. There were at least two of them. It was like shrieking, the noise painful. My husband tugged me towards the car and close to him, so we were out of the way when they pulled up.

A bright orange flame licked up the side, out the window. It sent black soot everywhere, charring the siding like a greasy burger on a grill. It didn't smell like a barbecue, though. The odor was plastic and harsh.

I was numb. Stupidly, I had let my guard down. I let myself feel happy for a second. We both knew they were going to punish us for this brief reprieve. They needed to remind us we weren't going to be safe until they were stopped. I wasn't sure how much more I could take.

Burly men in full-body gear ran in to fight the fires. It wasn't just one but in three different rooms. All upstairs. I didn't even have to guess which they were. My bedroom, the office, and the room that would be for the baby. If they hadn't noticed I was pregnant before, they certainly figured it out when they went rampaging through my safe haven.

Sam arrived within twenty minutes with several FBI agents in tow. The cops were crawling everywhere, and the firemen were still working to put flare-ups out. There was no doubt that it was intentional because they found a failed incendiary device in the sunroom. It only involved matches and a cup of lighter fluid. They were making a point with their placements. I didn't need years of school like them to know that.

"Motherfuckin' son of a bitch," he muttered under his breath. He looked at one of the security guys that was standing near me with a displeased smirk. His hands were on his hips. He was fully suited up, his guns hiding under his blazer. Both the guards were dirty and disheveled from running around in the chaos.

We were beside my new car that was parked in the street. It was unharmed, thankfully. The garage and kitchen door were locked, and it was on the opposite side from the worst of the fire. The guest bedroom was untouched, too. All it held was my old bed and my belongings I hadn't known what to do with yet, like my picture collection with all the photos of my parents and the assortment of watercolors I had in my apartment. They were in plastic tubs shoved into a closet. It was a small miracle.

All I wanted to do was run in and save a couple of things. There were very few items that meant much to me. The rest of it was just stuff. I could replace it all. I had precious few memories left of my late parents, though. As soon as I got my hands on the photographs, I would preserve them digitally and back them up. It was stupid of me to not do it sooner. It made me angry at myself. Most of my life was backed up in half a dozen ways, mainly my work and current pictures. My baby needed to see the grandparents they would never meet. My mind then focused on them, never meeting their grandbaby, and how much joy that had given my in-laws.

Nervously, I played with my lock and key as I thought.

“When will we be able to get in there?” Sam questioned the fire captain as he walked by.

“I’d say tomorrow morning, late tonight at the earliest. It’s still reading hot, and this wind isn’t helping. But the structure seems stable, and the second floor is intact, but there is a lot of smoke damage. There are holes in several spots on the roof now.” He sniffed and lowered his voice as he spoke directly to him. “You guys will want to go in there carefully and take pictures of everything. Someone tossed the house like they were searching for something, and I’m going to guess they stole at least a few things. But that’s me.”

We observed the smoke slowly disappear over a couple of hours. Sometimes tiny puffs would float up from the roof, but the firemen were all watching and waiting to jump in. It floated and curled into the bright, baby blue sky. All of our neighbors watched from their yards. None of them came to speak to us, though. I was sure they must have hated us for all the issues we were causing. We had to be dropping the property value at the very least. Not that it was our fault. We were trying to stop it.

Neither Jasper nor I enjoyed being useless. I was silent unless spoken directly to. My husband, on the other hand, had plenty to convey to the manager of the security company and was itching to get inside the house. Crime scenes spoke to him. He wanted to see what it had to say. They wouldn’t allow him to be the first to go in, though. Sam would after they made sure everything was safe. Since he was on leave, he couldn’t work whenever he felt like it. So, instead, he seethed with angry pent-up energy and yelled on his phone.

Justin and Caroline showed up in the afternoon. His mother texted him to see if we had arrived home safely and to invite us over for dinner the following day. He told her what happened in only a brief message. Since becoming pregnant, she had become extra protective of me. Unsurprisingly, she called him screeching. It was so loud that every person around us could hear her without being put on the speaker. Sam looked over slowly with wide eyes. It was almost funny if anything could be again.

Panicked, she ran directly to us as soon as the car came to a stop. The cops couldn’t have stopped her if they tried, but no one was worried about the tiny blond church lady. My father-in-law was still in his work polo as he rushed a few feet behind. He hugged his son wordlessly and held him. His hand rested on the back of his head, silently reassuring.

He pulled back just a little. “Are you alright?” He finally asked after a minute.

“No,” he answered simply. Neither of us was. It felt like all my joy had been sucked from my body. The one place that had been my sanctuary was now destroyed, but it hadn’t felt safe

in a while. We kept adding security features as if they would stop someone who was truly determined, but they were only lies that we were telling ourselves.

“I know,” he sighed and touched his son’s cheek. His frown stretched his normally handsome face into an angry, pale mask. Jasper was just a shell of himself at that moment. Justin smoothed his thumb over his temple. “You’re sleeping at our house tonight,” he stated firmly, leaving no room for argument.

“There will be extra security with us,” he breathed, conceding instantly. The relief he felt at having his father there and taking over was palpable. He was scared and needed that comfort, even if we were all only pretending to be protected behind their high walls and gated community. It wasn’t as if anything we had done before mattered. But we had to hold on to something, or we would never be able to sleep again. “And I’m going to have someone stay at Mamaw and Rose’s, just in case.”