



Chapter Twenty-five: **In a Lawn Chair**

After we got cleaned up, my in-laws made me eat. I didn't want to. But when they brought up the baby, I gave in. The soup swished around in my stomach, making me a little nauseous. Thankfully, we didn't have to sleep in his old bunk beds. They had a guest room with a lovely queen-sized bed. Once I collapsed into it, I instantly fell asleep. It was how my body dealt best with stress. Whenever I became overwhelmed, everything just shut down. I think it's the human version of turning it off and back on again.

Jasper didn't sleep, or rather, couldn't. Insomnia was a problem when it came to PTSD. And the nightmares messed with his mind long after they faded away.

He studied every inch of the security footage from the past few days, frame by frame. He had nothing else to go on. Neither my hit-and-run nor Mrs. Tanner's brought any more new information other than there was more than one person coming after those who were

considered King's 'enemies.' Both cars were stolen and abandoned within moments. No images were caught of the drivers, either.

Every time I rolled over, no matter when it was, he was working on his laptop. All I could do was lay my hand comfortingly on his thigh before I fell back into a deep slumber.

It was after eight when he rubbed my shoulder, and birds were singing too cheerfully outside the window. "They're going to let me go look now. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Right away, I pushed myself up. "I'm going with you."

"That's not safe."

"Then it's not for you, either," I countered. Sighing, he ached to argue with me. "I want to make sure I get certain things. They said it was structurally sound. Please?"

Mulling it over for a minute, he looked away from me. "You'll need to wear gloves, goggles, a mask, and a hard hat." I shrugged. He knew I didn't care. "Fine, but you need to listen to everything I say and touch nothing without checking with me first. I don't know if they've hidden any other little surprises. This is a crime scene, and you will treat it as such."

"Yes, sir," I breathed.

He straightened up with a slight frown on his face. "Alright. I'll get you something to eat while you get ready."

I smiled to myself as he turned away to leave. "Thank you, Daddy," I said in a baby voice. He was halfway to the door when he stopped. He didn't turn to look at me. Tapping my fingers on my belly, I smirked. "Yeah, you better get used to it. I can call you that in public now, and it's not weird."

"No, it still is." He looked over his shoulder. "I'll call you Mommy."

"One, everyone is calling me that already." I pushed myself out of bed. "And two, you forget which one of us is shameless."

Shaking his head, he chuckled as he went off to the kitchen.

There was a series of random vehicles at our townhouse: cop cars, a small fire truck, black FBI sedans, and Sam's beat-up truck. There were also a bunch of people still walking around. Our friend was waiting for us in the driveway.

“Kiddo, you sure you want to be here for this?” He questioned as he gave me a hard hat. “You’re not used to stuff like this. It’s kind of traumatic the first time.”

“I need to see it for myself,” I firmly concluded. Just like with Royce, I had to get myself in the middle of it. I didn’t know how it would look, and I needed to find the words to describe it in my mind. That desire often got me in trouble, but I couldn’t stop myself either.

“I’m going to give him all the pictures,” he replied quickly. “I will keep you involved at every step. I’ve made sure to be the lead on this, don’t worry.”

I shook my head. “No, I need to go get some stuff, too. They should be okay, I hope. They’re important to me.” I looked at my husband and then at him. “Can we take things out now?”

“Go ahead. Start salvaging what you can. You can use my truck if you need to,” he offered right away. I smiled a little. “We’ll figure this out.”

“People keep saying that, but it hasn’t happened yet,” I complained as I followed them.

He sighed. “Yeah, I’m trying. It’s hard to keep up with crazy.” He paused at the door. “Alright, brace yourself.”

The smell of lighter fluid was overwhelming as he pushed it open. The first thing I noticed in the living room was they slashed every cushion, and every picture was broken. Nothing in there mattered, though. The kitchen and the dining room were all practically new. It wasn’t as if either of us had much when we moved in. Our wedding photos were saved in a thousand places, and I could print more copies.

When I looked up the stairs, I could see nothing but black.

“I want to go up there,” I mumbled through the respirator mask, pointing towards our room.

The men looked at each other, then Sam nodded his head. He went first, and Jasper walked directly behind me. Our security guards, two of them, waited for us outside by the entrance to give us some privacy. We took each step carefully, though they seemed fine other than soggy.

Everything was sickeningly damp.

The first guest bedroom door had been closed, so the flames touched it, but only warped the knob. Sam opened it for me. There was a tint of gray to everything, the smoke coming into

the room under the door, but it was intact and untouched. There was no butane smell, either. It was as if they didn't even peek inside.

I went straight to the closet, but Jasper stopped me with a gentle hand. Going ahead of me, he opened it slowly. Everything had been checked, but he was still scared. He looked it over and snapped pictures with his cell phone for himself. Moving his fingers along the edges, he made sure there were no wires or anything else nefarious waiting.

My wedding dress, cleaned and in a thick plastic garment bag, hung inside. I had forgotten I put it in there. When he said I could, I grabbed it and hugged it to my chest. If it hadn't survived, I would have been okay. It was just clothing. But if I was carrying a daughter, I wanted to give her the choice of wearing it when she got married. Sam took it from me.

When I tried to look inside my box of photos, once again, my husband stopped me. He lifted it to make sure nothing was inside and smiled. "They're all fine. They might smell a little smokey, but I can't tell right now."

I quickly shook my head. "That's okay. It doesn't matter. I just need them so I can copy them."

"I'll help you," he promised as he took it out.

"Thank you. Um, that's it in here..." I thought for a minute. "I put my jewelry box in the big gun safe before we left. That has all my mother's stuff in it. And it has my important papers. But that was fireproofed, right?"

He nodded in response. "It has my copy of Rabbit you wrote in for me, and the original Cop's Story from Christmas, too. Some of my art books. They're the only things I truly care about."

His friend cleared his throat. "They tried like hell to get it open. Looks as if they took a crowbar to it, but it didn't work. That area is the most damaged. And they left you a little message."

"Hello, Bella?" I questioned in annoyance. They were assholes of few words.

"No," he breathed, the sound eerie through the mask. "You'll see."

After laying my things on the balcony, so we could move onto the next room, both men flanked me again. Since there was no electricity in the house, it was quiet to an uncomfortable degree. Every step seemed so loud, making the wood groan in protest. Where there were rugs, water squished under our heavy boots. Jasper pushed open our bedroom door to let me go first.

Black everywhere. The flames had covered our entire ceiling. Though it mainly stayed off the floor, I could see where they swirled around the fluid, and it burned in a pattern. Our bed must have been lit on fire. They had piled something in the middle of it like a bonfire, and the fires raged through the roof. But it wasn't wood. The sun shined a spotlight on the area where we used to rest and make love. Slowly, I moved towards it as I tried to figure out what the weird, brightly colored shapes were. Some were puddled and shiny. Others were wires and metal sticking out of a darkened shell. Then, on the edge, I recognized a big purple dildo I liked, warped and curled onto itself, but still vaguely penis-shaped. It looked like an art piece.

"Our sex toys?!" I asked in confusion. "But why?!" I would have thought our clothes would have made better fuel, and they were in the same closet.

"Darlin," Jasper whispered. I turned to look at him. That's when I saw what he was staring at with a grim expression. 'Goodbye, Bella,' was written across the whole opposite wall. It was at least seven feet tall and dripped like blood. The flames seemed to have focused on the bed, but in spots, the paint was charred and peeling away.

"Oh, go fuck yourself, you little bitch," I shouted. If they were anywhere near the building, which, if they were smart, they weren't, they would hear me. Ten houses over probably could. "If you weren't a fucking coward, you'd just come at me, but I would END YOU!"

My husband rushed to me. I was doubtlessly as fearsome as a pregnant corgi. "Okay. No, no. Deep breath. Let's not raise our blood pressure too much. You're safe, and if they come, you won't face them alone. I promise. I'm here."

"I'm so sick of this bullshit!" I complained, balling up my latex-gloved fist. "At least tell me why the fuck you want to kill me!"

"Villains don't tend to monologue like they do in novels," Jasper countered in a gentle tone. "It's never that easy. And if they have manifestos, we generally find those after they're already dead."

I grunted, then stomped from the room. The office was next. Of course, books burned. I had filled my walls with them. My eyes scanned the bookcases, seeing how it destroyed our knick-knacks that had been housed in between. They were charred and warped. I had spent two days arranging the shelves just so out of boredom while stuck at home. It now annoyed me that I had wasted the time.

Then I realized the cases that held Jasper's childhood BB gun and his gifted six-shooter were shattered, each with big holes in the middle. This wasn't damage from the fire. Both weapons were missing. "Jasper-" I turned to see his grandfather's shotgun was gone, too.

"I see it," he answered right away. "Fuck. Well, that's the only thing I've seen that they've stolen for sure so far. That speaks volumes," he growled to himself as he walked towards them. The glass crunched under his feet. He looked on the ground just to make certain we weren't wrong.

"What did they do in the other room?" I questioned Sam. The future nursery.

"Campfire with your baby items in the center."

"Any more messages?" He shook his head. I turned to my husband. "I've seen enough. Those were the primary things I wanted."

He was eager to have me out of the building. "Okay. Let's get you with the guards, and I'll bring it all out for you. Then I'm going to take pictures of the rest of the house for myself and look around if that's alright." I nodded, already heading towards the stairs. I didn't want to be there any longer than I had to.

Since there was nothing else to do, I waited in front of my townhouse in a lawn chair. I played on my tablet and phone, texting Alice, who was freaking out for me. But I was mostly numb with seconds of seething rage. Rosalie kept her and Tanya in the loop about what was going on since I didn't have the energy to go over it repeatedly.

"What are you going to do?" She questioned.

"I don't know," I admitted. "We're going to stay at Caroline and Justin's another night and then probably move into a hotel. I love them, but they're kind of suffocating. My man is pushy enough on his own."

"Do you think they'd mind if I came over to check on you?"

Smiling, I was glad she was my friend. "Of course not! Please do. I need you," I pouted to myself as I typed the words. "I miss you."

"I'll come over after school today. I have a staff meeting at four, but it should be over before five for sure," she replied quickly. "I need to get back to work. I love you."

"Love you too. I'll see you then. I'll buy you dinner," I offered. It gave me something to look forward to.

My husband touched my shoulder to get my attention. The smell rolling off of him was so intense it made me gag. He took a step forward because he thought I was going to vomit, and he was going to help me in some way, but then I pushed him back and turned my face away.

“I’ve got that stuff in Sam’s truck. Should I ride with him?” He questioned with a grimace. I nodded my head vigorously. “Sorry.”

A security guard drove with me in the backseat, the other in another car behind us. We were a convoy. It was hard not to look at everyone like they were about to attack us. Every bad driver made me nervous for another reason. Were they about to ram into me, or were they swerving to miss a pothole?

We went directly to take a shower, our clothes going right into the washing machine with extra soap and scent-boosters to kill the aroma that burned my eyes. Then I took a nap until our friend was supposed to come. Jasper spooned me, sleeping finally.

It was a nice spring day outside, only slightly windy. I was always running hot, so it felt pleasant. We sat outside away from his family for a little privacy while we waited for our dinner to show up. I lounged in a heavy wooden chair with a can of sparkling cherry flavored water. Jasper had a huge martini in a mason jar, and I had never been more jealous in my life. I would have gulped down six of them, even if they were rubbing alcohol with vinegar.

Everyone was silent for a long minute after we got settled. She didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t know where to start.

“What will happen to the house?” She began in a quiet voice. It was barely above a whisper.

He took a gulp, then answered. “The insurance company has already come by to start the claim.”

“I don’t know if I have the energy to rebuild it,” I admitted.

“It might be better to start fresh, anyway. There is so much water damage on the second floor. And they soaked everything with that flammable shit. We’ll have to hire someone to clean it up carefully. But it may be better to move to a gated community or an apartment with a doorman. At least make it a little harder.”

“Not that the cops or security are really doing shit,” I added sarcastically. “They didn’t notice them setting the place on fire!”

He rolled his eyes. “Right. She ran right up to it before the power went out too. Zero fucks were given,” he mumbled. Alice looked at him in surprise. “She hopped a fence in the back and went in the backdoor,” he explained. “Broke a side window and opened it.”

“How did she get past the alarm?”

“Took the electricity out for the entire block at the source a couple of houses over. All she needed was a pocket knife. It looked like an outage. The guard had only been notified of it when we got there. It had been down less than twenty minutes by then. They worked quickly. Bella was the first to notice the fire. We probably just missed her again. I’m betting she was going to do the sunroom last as she was leaving.”

She sat back in her chair in surprise. “I guess all it takes is a little gasoline and a lighter, huh?”

“Barbecue starter fluid and matchbooks, actually. Matches are an arsonist’s best friend. They burn slower, so you have more time to get away,” he explained, taking another sip. “Light one near a puddle, walk away and let it burn down to the pack for a big boom.”

The words hung in the air. Anxiety tickled the back of my skull, and something twitched in my belly.

“Can we talk about something else for a little while?” I begged in a pitiful voice. Jasper rubbed my ankle gently, my feet in his lap as he rested in a chair across from me. She forced a smile and nodded. “Tell me what’s up with you. How’s school?”

She shrugged. “Boring. We’re getting new computers, so that’s nice.” Swirling her beer around in her cup, she watched it swish around the edge before taking a sip. “So, I went out with Dr. Bitey.”

“Mary Alice,” I remarked in surprise. “No! What? Why?”

Quickly, she threw her hands up. “Tanya said that I could!”

“That doesn’t mean you should do it,” Jasper laughed, shaking his head.

“So, what?” I questioned. “You seriously decided to milk him for a fancy dinner?” She took a long sip of her drink, her eyes focused somewhere in the yard. “What else?”

Alice waffled her head to the side then scrunched up her nose. “You had sex with him!” He accused her. She didn’t deny it. “What is it about that man that has women willing to drop their panties, huh? I don’t get it. He’s bizarre and extreme, he just keeps it behind a pretty face and tons of money. And what the fuck am I saying? I just answered my own question,” he sighed. “Stupid girl, why?”

Her funny smirk grew crooked. “Maybe I only wanted a good scolding after. I knew someone would give it to me.”

He clicked his tongue and finished his drink. “You deserve better than him.”

“Please tell me it was a one-time thing,” I begged. She said nothing again. I brought my chin in, looking at her in surprise. “No.”

Sulking, she pushed her mouth out in a pout. “But he’s so big,” she drew out the last word, whining it as her face lifted towards the sky. “And he went for hours. Plus, he’s a doctor.”

My husband and I looked at each other. He raised an eyebrow. “Look, I got nothing. It’s what attracted me to you,” I said dryly. He was unimpressed with my joke, pursing his lips a little as he rolled his eyes.

“Me too,” Alice uttered under her breath. Instantly, his cheeks went neon red. I slapped her thigh, and we both cackled.

“I’m going to check on that food,” he uttered as he shoved himself out of his chair. We both watched over our shoulders.

“You both have a nice ass too,” she added, making him clench as he walked even faster through the glass door. We both dissolved into giggles as he slammed it shut behind him.

It felt like the first time I had really laughed in months.

“My man’s is better, though,” I declared before I took a sip. Smirking, she fist-bumped me with a nod.