



Chapter Twenty-seven: In a Courtroom

“Turn around,” Jasper said so firmly and loudly that everyone around us shifted to see what was going on. It was a tone I had never heard before, deep and harsh. It was his cop voice.

King chuckled and slowly spun around in his seat. All three of the prosecutors stared at him in surprise. Ms. Rachele looked between my man and Royce nervously, swallowing. You could tell he made her nervous. The killer smirked to himself, lounging comfortably in his chair.

“He called me Bella,” I whispered.

“I know,” he responded softly.

“Why? Why does he know my name?”

“Did you expect him not to, especially with that many lawyers?” He questioned. Leaning over, he pressed his lips to my temple. “I don’t want it in his mouth either, darlin.”

Shaking my head, I looked down at the pen in my hand. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just-”

“I know,” he repeated. He retrieved his from my bag and took the paper from my lap. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you,” he wrote. “Always.”

“I know.” I smiled. Then someone came into the courtroom that caught my eye. It was an older woman, weathered but strong. She sat right behind Royce. “That’s Bree Tanner’s mother,” I breathed.

“That lady has a spine of steel,” he remarked as he gazed at her. She remained stone straight, glaring at his head. Her mouth was a frightening frown.

After a few seconds, she scanned the courtroom, and her eyes landed on us. She smiled brightly. I realized then she knew who I was, too. Stupidly, I hadn’t even considered it a possibility. I still thought about her daughter, stealing minutes to read more information about her when I could.

The jurors then came out of a particular room, already looking bored. They stood in their special box.

“All rise,” the bailiff called loudly. The judge, an older olive-skinned man with long black hair pulled neatly back into a ponytail, rushed in. He wore the traditional robe over slacks.

He cleared his throat as he stood behind the bench. “You may be seated.” Giving it a minute, he peered over the room. “My name is Judge Harry Clearwater, and I want you to know that this is my courtroom, despite what either side thinks. You have both made the past few months unpleasant for me, and if you continue to do so, I will make your life hell. Do we understand each other?” He pointed the gavel at both sides. They quietly agreed before he glared at the journalist. “You will behave because you don’t need to be here at all, in my opinion. I am already unimpressed with the media coverage, and I will kick you out if you make this any more of a circus.”

“I love him already,” I wrote to Jasper with a smirk. He rolled his eyes and returned it.

“Are we ready for opening statements?”

“Yes, your Honor.” The lead rose and walked around the table. “Good morning. My name is Jessica Stanley, and today I wish to stand in front of you, not as an attorney, but as a mother of not one but three teenage girls. And I want to share with you dozens of tales of woe.” She pressed something in her hand, and a slide popped up with three young women. It was on a big flat-screen television in the center of the floor between the judge and the jury box. They were mixed, their skin a lovely light brown, but I could see her face in all of them. The next was them together with their father, hugging. They were wearing matching sweaters for Christmas. “These are my children. They are sixteen, fifteen, and thirteen, and they don’t look much different from the victims in this case. And it kills me. Which is why I asked to be on this one.”

She pressed a button. Another slide popped up. This time, it was of the dead body of a young woman. Blood splattered her pallid skin as she laid on a metal table covered in a sheet. She really looked like one of her kids. "Tiana was sixteen." Again. "Taylor, too." Once more. "Octavia would have been sixteen if she lived just two more days. Her grandmother had already bought her a gift. It was a new dress. They buried her in it." She flipped to a new photo. This was a closeup of a slice wound. Then of bruises. Gunshot and stab wounds. Broken bones. Then it went to another victim. "Miley was only twelve years old. Your Honor and members of the jury, I am here as a mother who is seeking justice for these children. As a parent, sister, aunt, cousin, and friend. I will prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that not only did Royce King kidnap, rape, and torture these babies before he brutally murdered them, but two dozen more just like them." She pointed at him.

A list of all the girls came up next. "I will introduce you to every single one of them. You'll know their names. Their stories. Each a victim of their circumstances that brought them within reach of a brutal monster. A beast that, with the help of his family's wealth and status, obscured the evidence."

"But with the effort of a curious and intelligent woman, Ms. Isabella Swan, the facts were revealed. With only a laptop, dedication, and research skills she uses in her work as an author, she noticed what no amount of cash could cover-up. And that is the truth." A list of names I had discovered in my time looking came onto the screen. Then a picture of the two victims that lived. "And because of her diligence, these girls get to grow up. Scarred, but alive."

"This is a dramatic saga, with lots of blood and gore. It's not for the faint of heart. There will be no fairy tale endings for most of these sweet children. But there are heroes in it, like Ms. Swan. Like Special Agent Dr. Jasper Hale, who put his life on the line to stop Royce King from slaughtering a toddler he held captive after shooting their mother." She walked over to the table in front of him. The man didn't even look at her. "The defendant gunned down Dr. Hale at point-blank range and barely missed his heart. He still captured Mr. King and helped save both parent and child. Like John Samson, the SWAT team leader that this monster shot in the head, killing instantly. Mr. Samson was a husband and father." A family photo of them came up. Then one of his wife who was holding a newborn. "This is a daughter that will never know her dad. A baby that will never have her daddy to protect her from people like this individual right here." She tapped her fingers on the desk.

She turned back to the jury. "In my opening statements, I want to set a scene for you, and I will introduce all the characters so you can fully appreciate their roles in this tragedy. Both heroes and villains. This is not a tale I will tell my children before bed, but as a mother, I hope you, members of the jury, can help me give closure to countless family members who are suffering and put Royce Matthew King behind bars. Let's give them an ending so many others have been denied."

I couldn't move. I thought I would be sick. It was a good thing she had warned me. I hadn't expected it in the least. My breathing picked up. Jasper took my hand and squeezed tightly. I glanced at him, the panic clear in my expression. He tried to reassure me with his eyes.

He wrote again. "Take notes for your stories, Isabella. Describe everything. Fill as many pages as you can."

Staring at him for a long time, I eventually took the pad and nodded my head. Jasper gave the pen back to me.

The weight of everything and how much I was involved finally hit me. So, to distract myself, I did exactly as he told me. From how the windows looked to how people were dressed, I scribbled until my heart slowed.

Mrs. Stanley spoke for three hours, uninterrupted. The judge cut her off after a while. "We will take an hour for lunch," he clipped, slamming his gavel down with a loud pop. The room erupted in noise as he disappeared off into his chamber. Jasper leaned over and pecked my forehead gently.

"Hey, Doc!" Sam called from the aisle as he stood up. There were several other FBI agents with him. "Come here a second. I have a question." He smiled at me. "Hi, Bella. It'll just be a minute. Want to grab chicken?"

"Sure," I said weakly, giving him a small smile. He returned it with a sigh.

Jasper rose, kissing the top of my head. "I'll be right back."

There were so many people in the aisle he had to push through them. Someone else made their way towards me. Mrs. Tanner stood speechless in front of me. I came to my feet, but I didn't know what to say. My breath caught in my throat, and I wanted to cry, though I wasn't certain why.

Finally, she hugged me. "Thank you," she whispered in my ear. I had done nothing to deserve it.

I embraced her back as tightly as possible. "I am so sorry. It's so awful what he did to her. I think about her every day. I'm sorry," I repeated.

"It's okay, honey."

"If I could do anything in this world, it would be to find out what happened to her," I told her honestly. "I hate that-"

She pulled back and smiled at me kindly. "Me, too. But we're here now."

"I wish I could give you answers."

Mrs. Tanner faintly sighed. "I wish you could, too. But we don't always get those." Jasper came back to me as the crowd thinned to go eat or use the restroom. She turned to look at him. "Thank you for your service, sir, and I'm sorry you've suffered because of that bastard."

"I've worked on your daughter's case every day I can since I found out about it," he breathed, and it was almost childlike and nervous. He was a young person standing in front of a parent that was hurting. And he felt guilty for it. Just like me. "I'm so sorry that-"

"No. You don't apologize for a thing that man did, either. You're only doing your job. I know better than anyone how hard it is to deal with..." She trailed off, looking towards the now empty table. "Anyway, I'll let you go to eat."

At the fast-food restaurant we went to with Sam, I didn't want to even try. When Jasper asked me what I would like, I said just a soda. My stomach felt uncomfortable, twisting in nervous knots. He ordered first for himself. "And, Isabella will take the grilled chicken strawberry pecan salad, no onions. Can you put extra feta and fruit on that?"

"Yes, sir," the cashier answered, typing it in. "Would you like to add a side of bread to that?"

"Sure. Dressing on the side. And a small drink, too."

I pursed my lips together, not saying anything. Sam had ordered ahead of us but was waiting beside us. "My wife would have smacked me if I did that."

Jasper got his receipt and absently passed me my cup so I could go fill it. "Yes, well, she might too," he responded dryly. "But you forget I enjoy that."

Laughing at his words and Sam's expression, I swatted my boyfriend's shoulder playfully. "I won't hit you. I know you're just trying to take care of me. And it sounds nice. I like that you ordered extra cheese and everything."

"I know what my darlin likes," he teased as he took my drink back for a second, filling it with Sprite before passing it to me once more. "Go get us a table, and I'll get the food."

The break was short, and we hurried back to the courthouse. But, like all big shows, it didn't start on time. The judge hadn't returned. Mr. Crowley called Jasper over to ask him a question. I sat in our spot again as they disappeared off into a room.

King turned to look at me once more, his leg crossed over his knee. His smile was charming, like a snake's. I wouldn't insult rats by calling him that. They were at least cute. If there was a creature lower and more dangerous, I wasn't sure what it was.

"Hello, Bella," he repeated. It was almost musical how he uttered it. He smiled when I said nothing. "I bought your book last night. I can't wait to read it. Will you sign my copy for me?" I remained silent, my spine straight. I wouldn't react and reward him. "Will it be exactly the same as the self-published version? I've already read that," he added conversationally. Royce leaned in. "I loved it. Five stars." He was talking like there wasn't an ocean of people around us. I didn't know they allowed him to speak to anyone in the courtroom. He straightened his tie. "I've enjoyed everything of yours I've read so far. I think I've read... everything, now." He kept saying the word 'everything' on purpose. "It's really made my lonely nights easier."

"Turn around," I ordered in a firm voice.

Just as I did, Jasper walked past the desk. He stopped, towered over the serpent. "Excuse me, but I think you need to explain to your client what witness tampering is and what the ramifications of that are."

Royce chuckled, turning around in his seat. "Tampering? No, Dr. Hale. I was only expressing my admiration for your multi-talented girlfriend's writing. You should be proud. I'm almost jealous."

Jasper looked over his head at his team of lawyers. "Last warning before I take it to the judge. Do not speak to the witness again. Eyes forward."

The counselors said nothing to him. Instead, they huddled up close to Royce. He ignored them, his face straight ahead.

He sat back down beside me and squeezed my hand. "Are you okay?" My boyfriend softly questioned. The judge chose that moment to return.

"Yeah," I promised, shrugging when we stood. "I'm fine."

Pulling my pad out again, he tapped on his message from before. "Always." Then he gave it to me.

I filled every page front and back before the end of the day. Straight at five, the court called it a day. Mrs. Stanley hadn't finished with her opening statements. I wouldn't hear the rest of them because I was going to New York City the following day to do stuff for the book. It would be on television, though, so I could record it for future notes.

It sucked so much Jasper couldn't go with me. I wished with every fiber of my being he could. We both needed a real vacation that lasted more than three days.

I felt like a zombie as I walked to our rental car. The affair had been far more emotionally draining than I anticipated. He opened the door for me after kissing me soundly.

"When we get home, do you want to change into our pajamas, order pizza, and drink beer? Maybe watch a movie, then go to bed?" he asked once he started the drive.

"Yes, sir," I breathed.

"Why don't you look up the food?"

Absently, I nodded. "Okay." For the first time since the morning, I pulled my silent phone out of my purse. I had been too distracted to even think about it. I had two hundred missed calls, a hundred text messages, and all of my Isabella Swan media sites were bombarded with literally thousands of comments. They were popping up so fast they blurred together.

My boyfriend worriedly looked over at me. "Bella? Everything alright, darlin?"

"Holy shit," I gasped.