



## **Chapter Twenty-nine: On the Stand**

Jasper picked me up from the airport the following evening. It was almost nine. He was wearing his comfortable blue jeans and t-shirt, his hair messy as if he had been playing with it a lot. He had some free time after court. Mrs. Stanley had finally wrapped up her statement at the end of the afternoon before. The defense only took the day. They would call witnesses in the morning.

He was surprisingly relaxed despite this.

Bending me backward with a kiss, I giggled happily. “So, how many is it now?” He asked me against them instead of saying hello. He raised his eyebrow. I didn’t have to ask what he meant.

I flushed. “Um, twenty-five.”

Taking my hand, we walked to the parking lot. He was carrying all my stuff with the other. Quietly, Jasper hummed for a moment. “So, if my mental math is correct, I believe you made a shit ton of money this week.”

I laughed loudly. “I haven’t thought about the numbers to be honest. I’ve been too busy.”

"It's just over thirty-seven thousand," he casually replied.

"Wait. For real?" I stopped so abruptly it almost tripped him. My sneakers squeaked against the linoleum.

"You really haven't done the math, have you?" He chuckled. "I wonder when you'll get your first royalties."

"I don't know," I admitted before I let out a ragged breath. "So, this is happening. This is nuts."

"What part of it?" He smirked, tugging me along again.

"All of it. I never thought this would be how my writing got out there. Not in a million years."

He nodded, his mouth pushing to one side. "Uh, it isn't how I imagined it either. But it doesn't matter as long as it gets out there. The world needs to see your talent. It's just opening a door."

First, he put my stuff into the trunk before opening the car door for me. In my seat were a few wrapped presents. "What's this?"

"Well, I wanted to get you something to commemorate the occasion. And admittedly, I couldn't think of anything on my own. So, I asked Alice, and she gave me a sweet idea, but it didn't feel like enough. And surprisingly, Sam was helpful today. The one he offered me is most useful with one of your birthday presents, so I decided to go ahead and give it to you."

"That's a lot of stuff," I replied as I glanced up at him. He just shrugged. "You didn't have to do that."

"Isabella, shut up and open your gifts," he ordered firmly but playfully.

I laughed then sighed. "Fine."

Hefting the boxes onto my lap, I stared at them for a minute. They were a variety of shapes and sizes. He got in on the other side. Jasper gave me the second smallest to open first and looked at me expectantly.

Inside the box was an old leather-bound book of love poems. "Aw!" I gushed, holding it to my chest. I pouted out my bottom lip a little. "This is so sweet. Thank you."

“That was obviously not Sam’s idea.” He smiled at my reaction.

“Why didn’t this feel like enough? It’s lovely.”

“Um, darlin, you just-” he trailed off, then shook his head. Jasper laughed. “You know, I consider you about as close to perfect as a woman can get, but I think one of your few flaws is your inability to grasp the scope of some things you’re involved in.”

I snorted quietly, tracing my fingers over the book. “You know, before a couple of days ago, I might have argued with you, but I figure you’re right.”

“I know I am,” he continued to tease. He pulled out a long thin box. “Now, this one.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, rolling my eyes at his attitude. When I opened it, I expected there to be jewelry inside. Instead, it was... A pen, or maybe a computer stylus. I picked it up and looked at it curiously. I brought it up to my face since it was dark in the garage. “What is it?”

“An Apple pencil. It takes notes and everything. Actually, it’s super cool. I know you like the act of writing, but the environment might suffer for it if you keep doing like you did the other day.”

Smiling at his words, I ran my hand over the biggest unopened box. “You got me an iPad for my birthday?”

“Yeah. It’s a pro. Is that alright? I thought you’d like it for traveling.”

“That’s amazing. Thank you so much.” I leaned over and kissed him deeply, my fingers curling into his messy hair. “It’s perfect. You’re right. It is better for the environment.”

There was one more gift on the pile that I didn’t know what it was. “I want you to know, you definitely went overboard,” I informed him as I opened it up. This package was extremely light.

Jasper chuckled affectionately. “This is the one thing I picked out on my own. I’m very proud of it. It took me hours to come up with.”

I scoffed softly at his tone. The small box was holding clothespins. “Ooh!” I said automatically as my eyes got wide. He was trying so hard not to laugh at my reaction. I giggled gleefully. “I love these so much.”

“Really?” he asked in genuine surprise. “We’ve never played with them before.”

“We’ve always used the clamps,” I offered. It was difficult to take my gaze off of them. “Oh, I definitely want you to put every single one on me.”

“All thirty of them? Could you handle that?” He questioned as his voice got deeper with arousal. I don’t think he was expecting my reaction.

“I imagine you could put them all on my tits,” I replied as I flushed, biting my lip. “Seriously, the poems and these are enough to melt my panties off. You could have waited until my birthday to give me the others.”

His mouth pushed together with amusement as he closed his eyes and rubbed his temple for a minute. “Ugh. Come here,” he grumbled before he pulled me to him in a vicious kiss. I grinned contentedly against his lips. He laid his forehead against mine. “I wish, with all of my heart, we could do exactly that tonight. If it weren’t so damn late, and I didn’t have to take the stand tomorrow.” He kissed me again, just as roughly. “I did not think this through.”

“You knew I would love it!” I teased.

“All of them, though,” he sort of whimpered the words.

“You could totally get more, too. I’ve always wanted to see if I could handle an absurd number. Tie me up with my arms above my head like at the cabin that one morning. You could put them all over my breasts, thighs, and ass. Just everywhere. It would be so much fun,” I gushed.

I watched the man that was my Dom and my boyfriend switch places in his eyes. Jasper growled. “Isabella. I cannot be this horny. We need to go to bed when we get home.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I only wanted to let you know how much your very thoughtful gifts pleased me and how I’d love for you to use them on me,” I spoke as innocently as possible. “You’ve been so wonderful to me tonight. The last thing I want to do is make you upset.” I kissed his neck lightly, my breath blowing over his skin. “I adore them all.” My fingertips danced over his thigh.

“You devious little girl,” he mused as his fingers smoothed into my hair. “Tomorrow, you will regret that.”

I shook my head, smirking. “No, I won’t.”

Sighing, his eyes flicked back to the man who had serious work to do in the morning. “I did not think that through at all. I thought I was being funny,” he mumbled to himself as he started the car. I snickered cruelly. “I got them at the dollar store when I got wrapping paper. Why am I surprised?”

“Why are you?” I asked sarcastically. He shook his head, glancing over at me at a stop sign. “Feel free to take your frustration out on me tomorrow. All of it.”

“I am,” he answered back just as sardonically in a bright voice before chuckling warmly. “Oh, I am.”

The next morning, we woke up with the alarm. It provided us no opportunity to play before. I packed my new electronic toys into my bag to take with me. Jasper had already charged it for me and put it into a case and protective cover. He was quiet the entire time. I gave him a chance to gather his thoughts.

Once again, we sat in the same row. Mrs. Tanner was right behind King.

“Just to warn you, they’ll call me right away. It will last more than a day. I’m sorry you’ll be alone. If you want, you can go after lunch. I know-” I looked at him sharply. “You don’t have to, but it’ll get rough real quick, darlin.”

“I don’t care. I’ll be here for you the whole time.”

Sighing, he nodded his head. We sat silently while we waited. I couldn’t help but stare at the back of Royce’s skull. The entire time, I wished it would implode and save us all the trouble. I hated him so much.

“What are you thinking?” He whispered in my ear.

I took my tablet out and wrote him a note. “I’ve never wanted someone to drop dead randomly more.”

“Your expression is terrifying,” he replied in a breath. He playfully shuddered.

Then I noticed King slowly turn around. He smiled pleasantly at Bree’s mother. “Hello, Mrs. Tanner. It’s so lovely to see you again.”

My fingers wrapped around the pencil in anger. He had no right to talk to her. But she wasn’t a part of the trial, and there was nothing we could do to discourage him. He had been warned by the judge not to speak to the witnesses, though. The day before, he tried to communicate with someone else in the audience who was a family member.

“This weather is lovely, isn’t it?” He continued.

Smartly, she didn’t respond to him. She just stared blankly ahead. I looked at my boyfriend and made a decision. Quickly grabbing my bag, I walked over to her. “Excuse me,

Mrs. Tanner?" I said as brightly as possible. "Would it be alright if I sat with you? They're calling Jasper to the stand today, and it would be easier if I wasn't alone."

She smiled and picked up the purse beside her. "I would be honored, young lady. Please, join me."

I did, glaring at the murderer. He knew exactly what I was doing and why. And he did not like it. For the first time, his politely uninterested facade slipped, and he scowled, whipping around in his chair.

Mrs. Tanner winked at me. I smiled in answer, reaching over to squeeze her hand. When I glanced over my shoulder, my man was looking at me proudly.

I wrote again. "Good luck. You've got this." I lifted it to show him. He nodded.

Once the circus began, Mrs. Stanley stood from the table as she picked up a legal pad. "The prosecution would like to call its first witness. Dr. Jasper Hale."

Rising, he walked confidently upfront. He had worn a dark gray tie and a three-piece suit meant to impress. He was so elegant in his stride. The bailiff brought a bible for him to be sworn in on. He put his right hand on it. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, God?"

"Yes," he declared firmly before taking his seat.

The curly-haired woman walked towards the witness box with the pad in her grip. "Good morning. Could you, for the record, state your full name?"

"Special Agent Doctor Jasper Whitlock Hale."

"And what is your occupation?"

"I am an analyst for the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, or NCAVC. I am a specialist who deals with non-typical homicides. Not a one-off, jealous husband kills wife, type, for example. I study crime scenes, evidence, suspects, and victims to aid in investigations dealing with serial killers or especially brutal murders."

"How did you become an analyst for the FBI?" She continued, glancing down at her notes. "What qualifications do you have?"

Jasper straightened his shoulders. "I have a bachelor's and a master's in psychology. A master's and a doctorate in criminal justice, too. All of which I received from Texas A&M. I also have numerous certifications."

Mrs. Stanley turned to the jury. "And you're a veteran, as well?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I served my country proudly for eight years, and I was honorably discharged with the rank of Major."

"You graduated at the top of your class at West Point, too," she added. "The valedictorian."

"Yes, ma'am. I was."

"That's very impressive, doctor. And you completed your education while you were in the Army, despite having three deployments to the Middle East?"

He shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat. Jasper understood what she was doing, but he was uneasy with this kind of attention. "Yes, ma'am."

"What was your role in this investigation?"

"I was the primary analyst and lead investigator under the supervision of Dr. Jerry Marcus."

Once again, she turned to the box of people who were all very interested in what the handsome and well-educated hero had to say. I couldn't blame them. It was fascinating. "Doctor, there are admittedly a bunch of questions I need to ask you." She lifted her papers and showed the crowd. "And they're important ones. But I'd like to start with the questions we're most curious about. It'll be better to get it out of the way. I'd like to ask you about the day you were shot." He nodded his head in answer, his gaze downcast with the pain of the memory. I knew right then why Jasper was her key witness. They were eating all of it up already, and they just started. It was more interesting than a television drama. "First, let's begin with the infamous tip. Who delivered it to you?"

He lifted his eyes until they met mine and smiled. "Ms. Isabella Swan."

"And how do you know Ms. Swan?"

"She is my partner. Um, romantic partner."

"So, your girlfriend." He nodded and grinned. She looked over at me and did too. "Can you tell me the circumstances in which she presented you with this information and exactly what she told you."

“It was New Year’s Day, and I had the day off. She came to visit me from our home in Texas to spend it together. We just had lunch, and we were relaxing. She was reading news articles about events she felt were similar to the MO of the one in this case. Ms. Swan was looking at Bree Tanner’s in particular. She mentioned Mr. King and his involvement in it. They suspected him of kidnapping, raping, and torturing Ms. Tanner, but they dismissed it. I made the connection that I had interviewed a suspect named Royce Matthews earlier in the investigation. After some checking, we ID’d him as King and realized he was living under a false name.”

She allowed him to talk, explaining everything. “So, you were chatting with your girlfriend on your day off about her true crime hobby?” She paraphrased with a smile.

“Yes, ma’am,” he chuckled. “Exactly.”

“Where is Ms. Swan today?”

Jasper lifted his hand and pointed to me. “She’s in the courtroom. She came to be supportive.”

“I see.” She studied me. “And do you know who Ms. Swan is sitting next to?”

My breathing picked up, my cheeks heating as they spoke about me. I tried to keep my face blank.

“Mrs. Candace Tanner. She’s Bree Tanner’s mother.”

Mrs. Stanley cocked her head to the side and smirked slyly for just a moment before it became more earnest. She patted the railing of the witness stand. “Dr. Hale, do you know where Bree Tanner is?”

“No, ma’am. She went missing almost six years ago.”

“Objection!” The defense shouted for the first time. A warm, smooth hand slipped into mine. We both looked ahead at him proudly. I squeezed her fingers. Mrs. Tanner was so much stronger than I was. I admired the hell out of her.

For just a moment, Royce glanced at us angrily. All I could do was smirk at him. If his head wouldn’t pop suddenly like a can of biscuits in a hot car in August in Texas, I wanted him to be served as much justice as possible for all of his crimes.

