



Chapter Twenty-nine: Dash Away

A security guard drove us to the hotel, another following behind us in a different car. Jasper wasn't exactly happy about it. They had just released the room as a crime scene so we could go get our things. He didn't understand why I felt like I needed to go back there. I couldn't explain it either.

"We can just go to my parents and get some rest. We can get it later," he argued calmly.

It was almost sunrise. We were both exhausted, but I knew he wouldn't be able to sleep for a very long time. Sadly, as soon as my head hit the pillow, I would probably be out for thirteen hours. I needed it, though. But I was too wound up.

“No. I want my stuff now. I need fresh clothes and all my toiletries. Maybe we can just get a different room. That would be quicker than going all the way to their place. We can take a bath together then go to bed,” I offered. If we went to his parents, we would have to recount the entire thing, and there would be much talk and worry. I wasn’t ready for that. “They have those big Jacuzzi tubs, and it would feel so nice.”

He smiled a little. “If that’s what you want, darlin.”

“Yes,” I grinned. “I very much want to sit on your lap in a big hot bath.”

“I can wash your hair for you,” he added. I nodded eagerly. Jasper leaned in and kissed my forehead lightly on a spot that wasn’t bruised. His lips lingered there. Gently, I ran my fingers over his tense jaw. “I feel so powerless. This makes me realize I had none to begin with. I wanted to lie to myself and say that I do, but everything is chaos, and if someone is determined, there isn’t much you can do to stop them. Especially if they’re fearless.”

“Or stupid,” I replied. “That man, whoever he is, isn’t a mastermind. It’s got to take a lot to organize a multi-state revenge plot.” I looked out the window. “Whoever our tiny terrorist is must be the brains of the operation.”

He shrugged. “There isn’t any way to know until we catch them. If we ever do.”

“We will.”

“I hope.”

“Soon,” I promised. He said nothing. Gently, I rubbed my fingers along his chin again. “Hey, I have a bit of a knack for these sorts of things.” He smirked, still not looking at me. “I can’t believe I figured out his name like that. It wasn’t that clever, but I think I helped!”

He chuckled at my tone. “I’ve told you before you’d do amazingly at the bureau. You could run circles around half of the boneheads there. You could be catching the bad guys, not writing fanciful stories about doing it.” Sighing, he stared out the window. “I can’t believe I didn’t recognize him.”

“When? Between punches?” He didn’t respond. “He changed his hair, and you weren’t really in a position to at the time. I didn’t either, and we both saw him not that long ago. But it’s not like we were close pals, either,” I countered. Softly, he grunted. “But it doesn’t matter. He’s in custody now, and he can’t hurt anyone else.”

“That woman is dead,” Jasper quietly stated. “I feel it in the pit of my stomach.”

“Probably,” I sighed as I played with my shirt. There were tiny specks of blood on it. It was a mix of mine and his. I couldn’t think about that, though. I would throw it in the trash as soon as I got into the room. “You know what I feel in my gut right now?”

“What?” He asked slowly.

Smirking, I glanced over at him. “Kicking. Now that I’ve realized what it feels like, I’m constantly noticing it. It’s so light.”

He brought his hand to my stomach. “I wish I could feel it.”

I moved it, so it was lower to where he was showing his displeasure at being still awake. My stress levels weren’t good for him, and I hadn’t eaten in hours. It was a battle to figure out which was best to do first. Leaning my head against my husband’s shoulder, I held it to my belly. “Charlie says, ‘Hey, can we chill for a bit?’ He already needs a vacation, and he hasn’t been born yet.”

He put both hands on either side of my stomach and leaned down to speak directly to it. “Me too, kid. I need to take your mother on a real honeymoon before you get here. The one she deserves after everything she’s gone through. She acts so strong, but I can tell how hard she’s trying.” He kissed it lightly.

“I can be tough because I know you’ll be there for me. I just knew I had to make it until you got there, and I was right. My hero,” I whispered.

“It shouldn’t have happened in the first place. But it’s not a mistake I’ll ever make again. I’m going to check every room we walk into for the rest of our lives.”

“I believe you,” I sighed. His face was pulled down in his anguish, his eyes foggy, and his mouth twisted into a quivering pout. He was trying to keep it together for me. “Shh...” I hushed him gently as I pecked his lips. “It’s okay.” He shook his head, and I nodded in answer. “No. We’re staying positive. Remember? Being happy will piss them off more. They want to scare me, but they won’t. Fuck them. As long as I have you, I have everything I need.”

He smiled slowly. “Yeah, you’re right.”

We pulled into a parking space in the garage. We were on the first floor, so we walked towards the main entrance with a guard in front and one behind. They were keeping an eye on our surroundings, making sure everything was normal, and no one was doing anything suspicious. There were only a few people milling about, most of them were tourists coming or going to the airport. They were in pajama pants with their rolling luggage, talking loudly to each other as they laughed and joked around with their Starbucks coffees in hand. It was still so early. The morning sun was just starting to blaze across the sky.

My eyes constantly scanned around for threats too. Jasper clasped my hand as we moved at a decent clip. It was like they were escorting the president or something. We were almost to the front entrance when I glanced over my shoulder.

There was a tall woman with a bright red curly bob that was cut close to her chin. It was obviously a fresh style, the angles sharp. She had big shades over her eyes, but it wasn't enough to change her appearance to make her unrecognizable to someone who had stared at her for months. I had seen her more, and I had even spent several days alone in the same room. We watched her work for ages.

Automatically, I twisted around to glare at her. "It's her," I quietly declared. Everyone else did too to see what I was talking about. The lady was maybe twenty-five yards away. Startled, she stopped moving when we did. I knew if I was mistaken, she wouldn't be bothered and kept going wherever she was headed. But she was following us. "We were wrong."

Clearing his throat, Jasper straightened his shoulders. "Hi, FBI. May I speak to you for a moment, ma'am?" He began in a polite, professional voice as he strode towards her slowly. It was purposefully non-threatening. She said nothing, her chin held high. Quickly looking around the parking lot, she stumbled a couple of steps back before turning to dash away. "FBI! STOP!" He shouted as he ran after her. One of the guards went after him. "Freeze!"

The other was beside me, maybe three feet away, as we stood on the curb under the awning. We were both staring in surprise. "Call the police," I ordered before looking over my shoulder nervously. As soon as I did, a van pulled up right behind us. It must have been going fifty miles an hour, speeding forward before slamming to a stop.

The door slid open, and before I could realize what was going on, I was being yanked backward, and something was put over my head. It slammed shut instantly. There was a bunch of banging against it as the man who had just been standing at my side tried to get it open. When I attempted to struggle, something bashed me against the temple hard enough to knock me to the ground. Then the vehicle shot away, smacking me around, so I wasn't able to get up. Then it stopped again, ramming me forward into the seat.

Once more, it was opened, and we started moving before it closed. I could hear Jasper in the background, screaming frantically, but it quickly faded away. Someone pulled my arms behind my body, binding them tightly. The person was panting.

"Good work," Ms. Rachelle praised in an amused voice. "If you want a job done right, you send a woman." She grabbed the drawstring bag around my neck and tied the strings, so it was tight. It squeezed my throat uncomfortably until I almost choked. I tried not to panic. "You have no idea how long I've waited to have you like this," she cooed dangerously in my ear.

“Why?” I whimpered.

“He took away my men. Both of them now. I’m taking you and your baby away. An eye for an eye. Pretty simple, really.” Then she punched me in the head.

We didn’t drive for long. It was hard to keep track of time, though. When we came to a stop, I was forced to my feet. The sounds were echoing around us, so we were probably inside somewhere like a garage. An enormous metal door was pushed open, and I was marched up several flights of stairs. We went through another, and I walked a few yards before I was shoved down again into a chair. One of them duct-taped my ankles to the legs. I tried to struggle, but the other pulled the strings until I could do nothing but try to breathe.

Then the bag was torn away. The room was dark except for a single blinding bright light centered on me. It was aimed at my eyes and stunned me for a moment. When I could focus, two women came into view. Ms. Rachele was standing a couple of feet away from me, smirking proudly with her hand resting on her hip. “Hello, Bella,” she sang just like Royce did when I visited him in jail.

She glanced over her shoulder at the other person. She was the smallest female I had ever seen. Not only in terms of height but weight. She was so thin I could see every bone in her arms. Her cheekbones were sharp to an almost point. This was our tiny terrorist.

I recognized her face instantly. I had searched for every picture of her I could, every article. Dreaming about her, she often haunted my thoughts. Her once beautiful dark black skin was now marked, and her hair had been clipped to the scalp.

“Bree,” I whimpered her name. She looked at me in surprise, her eyes getting a little wider. Clearly, she didn’t expect me to know it. “No, no, no,” I panicked, thrashing in my spot. The DA struck me across the face harder than her boyfriend did the day before. The girl flinched back automatically, even though it wasn’t directed towards her. “Why?!” I wailed.

The lawyer bent down to look into my eyes, maybe a few inches away. “Because it’s what he wanted. And I always gave him what he wanted,” she smiled as if it was a fond memory. She seized my throat and squeezed. “You took my King away from me. I was his Queen. How can someone this stupid and unimpressive like you spoil our fun?” She tightened her grip. “As long as he was alive, I had a chance to get him out. I could save him. We had plans in place.” She paused, shaking her head. “And you ruined it all. I should be married right now! I should be the pregnant one,” she shouted in my face. Her spit sprayed my skin. “We were going to have a family. Everything was perfect, and you had to mess it up.” She was actually squeezing hard enough to cut off my air. She leaned in, so our noses were almost touching. “I’ve never hated someone more, and I am so sick of hearing your fucking name.”

With all my might, I head-butted her. I could thank the fake Riley for that idea. It worked well against me the day before. She screamed and slapped me so hard it made the chair lift before settling back to the ground. When I peeked up, Bree met my eyes but instantly looked away and ducked her face. She was visibly shaking.

It hurt like a motherfucker, but I was able to catch my breath.

She picked up a gun from a table beside us. It was the first time I noticed it. There was a horrifying array of knives. Then I remembered how his victims were always covered in slice and stab wounds.

She ran the barrel over the cheek she had just slapped before putting it under my chin, so I would look at her. "Don't worry, it's going to last so much longer. We'll take this slow, just like he would have wanted." She briefly grinned. "He would have loved this so much. Royce dreamed of having you alone." She caressed her fingers over one of the blades while still holding my head up. "He's the one who taught me how to use these properly. Where to cut to make it take as long as possible." She gave me a cruel smile. This woman was a complete psychopath and was having a splendid time. "I will even give you a gift before I make you swallow your idiot husband's cheesy ass cowboy gun." She wiggled it at me before pressing it to my lips. I hadn't realized it was Jasper's stolen weapon, but it made perfect sense. "I'll let you see your baby first."

"No-" I automatically shrieked in her face, but she shoved it into my mouth. It went all the way down my throat. The metal taste was unpleasant and made me gag. It took everything I could not to throw up.

"This isn't a chat, bitch. You get to listen to me now. I've had enough of listening to you morons talk. Ugh, I hate the sound of Dr. Hale's stupid southern accent. How can people this simple be so successful? And your book was garbage!" She shook her head in disgust. "That's not what happens to a human body when they're stabbed. Do your fucking research." She pulled it out finally. "But you'll see for yourself in just a few minutes," she almost giggled.

Then I heard something outside. Vehicles rolling, crunching over the gravel and asphalt. The DA was still for a moment, hoping it would pass. I didn't know where we were, but we were probably in the middle of the city. There were cars everywhere. But then there was more of it before several car doors slammed. When I glanced towards the windows, I realized they were covered in fresh newspapers.

She took in a deep breath through her nose, simply annoyed at possibly being interrupted. She peered over her shoulder again at the frail girl. "Were we followed?" She asked in a quiet but firm voice.

“No, mistress,” she breathed, her head ducked so hard it made her shoulders curl in. Her eyes were trained on the floor.

“You better hope you’re right,” she said calmly. She tapped the tip of my nose with the gun. “Don’t you move a muscle,” she sang the words. The lawyer straightened up to her full height, weapon gripped at her side. “I’m going to look outside. I’ll be right back.”