



## **Chapter Thirty-one:** **Under Duress**

They sedated me so I could sleep. And though I understood why, I didn't like it. I had been awake for over a day and had gone through a series of traumatic events. My entire week had been too much, especially for a pregnant lady. My mind would not shut down on its own. It was on high alert and would be until I could convince myself I was safe.

When I woke up, Jasper was moving around my room, cleaning up and organizing it. I wasn't going to be allowed visitors until the doctors said I could, but that didn't stop everyone I

knew from sending me something. There were flowers and balloons everywhere. A lot of them were baby-themed. There was also food waiting for me. On the small table, there were bags, and they had a lovely smell wafting from them.

“What’s that?” I asked in a light voice as I moved the bed up with the controller.

He turned in surprise. My husband hadn’t expected me to be awake yet. Clean and showered, he was in fresh clothing. Jasper had changed into slacks and a button-down shirt I assumed Sam brought to him. I liked how the pants fit him. He was always so handsome, even when he was anxious.

“Hey. I didn’t mean to bother you. Um, I had something delivered for when you woke up. I wasn’t sure what you would be up for, so I ordered a bit of everything. I didn’t want you to have to wait for it,” he explained in a rush. He was trying to take care of me in the only ways he knew how. I smiled to myself. “It’s just Newk’s, but I know you like them. Let’s see, I got you potato soup, the mac and cheese, that club sandwich you like, too. And I didn’t forget the pickles. And there’s baked chips and fruit salad. And sparkling water. And there’s chocolate cake,” he listed off as he took it all out.

“And, and, and is there anything else?” I teased softly. “Stop. Come here. Take a breath.” I wiggled my fingers at him. He came to the bed right away. “Kiss me.”

He leaned over me and took my mouth, his hands on my cheeks. I grinned against his lips at his intensity. It made me dizzy with pleasure. I held him in place with my fingertips twisted in his clean white shirt. The baby fluttered with excitement in my belly.

“I don’t know how you’re smiling right now. You are so strong.”

“No, I’m not.” I shook my head. “I just can’t help it. I love it when you kiss me, and he can tell how much I enjoy it too.” I put my hand on the curve. “Again,” I ordered. He obliged, letting me hold on to his hair to keep him in place. His palms were flat on the mattress on either side of my head to hold himself up.

There was a knock on the door, interrupting our moment. Sam peeked his head inside and smiled. “Well, hey there, Sleeping Beauty! Can I come in? I’ve got some information to share.”

“Hey! Where’s Bree-” I began to ask, but Jasper interrupted me.

“She needs to eat first. She hasn’t since yesterday.”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “Then bring me some food,” I complained. “I can chew and listen at the same time. Where’s Bree?” I repeated. “Is she okay?”

Nodding quickly, he sat at my bedside. "Yeah. She's sleeping comfortably right now. She's in this hospital, too. A couple of floors above us. They've already run her through the wringer with tests." He shook his head with a pained expression. "Poor kid. I've never seen the abuse that bad in a living victim." He looked at Jasper. "Man, you should take a look at her X-rays. It reminds me of a POW. It's sick. And they've been doping her up to the fucking gills. I'm not sure how she's still going."

"I'll have to believe you. I turned in my gun and badge this afternoon. I'm officially retired," he replied with no emotions in his voice before turning to me. "Darlin, what do you want?" He swept his hand over the selection of food.

We both stopped to look at him in surprise. He had been putting it off for so long that some small part of me thought he would go back to it once we figured things out. I was wrong. But it wasn't the first time I had been that week.

"Half the sandwich, the pickles, and chips, too. And a little of the mac and cheese," I answered in a breath. My stomach growled loudly in demand. I smiled when he brought it to me, pulling him down for another kiss. "Eat the other half," I ordered. I knew he hadn't eaten, even if he had got cleaned up. "And the fruit."

"Yes, ma'am," he smirked. He wasn't the only one who could be bossy when they needed to be.

I looked back at our friend. "What do you know?"

He blew out a long breath through his lips. "A lot more than we did this morning. Okay, so James Hunter, aka Riley Kingston, aka Riley Biers, aka Matthew Biers, aka-" He stopped himself with a roll of his eyes. "I think you get the point. Anyway, our man in the closet has a dozen or so names, but amazingly, when he gets in trouble, things disappear in his cases. Papers or evidence. Poof!" He made a big hand gesture. "His problems go all away. Just in the past year."

"It's almost as if he had a girlfriend in the DA's office," I mumbled through a bite of a chip.

"Yup. But from what I can tell, the help didn't start until the very beginning of last year. Late January. After King was already captured. A few months before that, Hunter got dinged for a DUI and got into a fight with the officer. He ended up only serving a month. He also served six months for raping a young woman about five years ago. Get this. When he was a kid, he spent a year in a special troubled teen's house because he set fire to his neighbor's chicken coop with all the birds locked inside. Hundreds of them."

“Jesus,” Jasper sighed as he rubbed his forehead. “I bet he pissed his bed, too.” I looked at him in confusion at such a declaration. “It’s called The MacDonald’s Triade. Animal cruelty, arson, and bed-wetting after a certain age are all linked to sexual predators and violent offenders. It’s not conclusive, but they generally have some combination of the three, if not all of them. Royce ticked all the boxes, too.”

I bit into my sandwich and sat with that information for a moment. “What about her? Do you know anything about the DA? When I asked her why she said ‘because you took her men away.’” I smirked at my husband. “You were wrong, by the way. Villains do monologue in real life.”

He shook his head, an odd expression on his face. “How are you making jokes about this?”

“It’s my defense mechanism?” I shrugged and took another bite. “I’m just happy it’s over.”

Sam smirked at our exchange. “Ms. Bryce Rachele is, of course, a fake name. Unlike his, it is a carefully crafted false identity that goes back six years. Right around the time King first got caught with Bree Tanner.” He sat up a little straighter as he fixed his tie. “Now, this woman was smart, but that idiot she recruited to help her isn’t, which is probably why he had so many bogus names, because he kept getting arrested. He’s been demanding to see his lawyer, Ms. Sunderland. He doesn’t know what’s happened yet.”

Leaning over, he pulled out a file from a briefcase. Removing a picture, he lifted it to show it to both of us. It was a young, flat-chested, mousy-haired woman with crooked teeth and glasses. She had blue eyes that were glazed over. She was smiling and holding a drink up. “This was the last photo I could find of Victoria Sunderland, a lawyer practicing out of Rochester, New York.” He plucked another from behind it. It was the photo, but further out. There were maybe a hundred people in it. “This was taken at the law offices of Mr. J. Jenks’s annual Christmas party, where she was a junior counselor.”

Sam pulled out another print. It was a newspaper clipping. It had a photograph of the defense’s table from behind. The headline was, “‘It was a date! Playboy King says the entire thing was consensual.’ There was a team of lawyers surrounding the monster. I recognized some from the trial. At the very end sitting behind them was the woman. She was shoved into a corner, looking at Royce.”

“Son of a bitch... She told me she worked on that case.” I shook my head. They both looked at me, surprised. “When she was asking me questions in Albany for the trial.” I gazed at the photo for a long minute. I couldn’t see it. “Are you sure it’s the same person? Could she have stolen someone’s identity?”

He pulled out another picture. It was a more recent one of the DA. He put the one from the Christmas party side by side. "So, her credit cards show that in the past five years she's gotten her teeth fixed, Lasik, her hair regularly dyed, Botox and fillers, too. And her tits enhanced. All things your rich serial killer boyfriend can pay for."

I rolled my eyes as I handed it back to him. "She said that he was her king, and she was his queen. Gag. Fucking nut job."

"Have you spoken to Ms. Tanner any?" Jasper inquired gently, like he was worried about upsetting me. I knew she would talk about this for a very long time. She might be answering questions for years. So would I.

Waffling his head from side to side, he sighed. "She's really confused, and honestly, I don't know how much she knows. Ms. Tanner didn't know either of their names, real or fake, other than King's. She called them mistress and master. She was in charge when King wasn't there."

"Are there any more of them running around?" He asked next. Our friend shook his head in answer. "So, a mentor and an apprentice situation, and they kept Bree like a human trophy? Christ."

It was horrifying to think about it.

"She did confirm she was the one that wrecked the cars and vandalized your house. Hunter or Sunderland was always in town to keep a close eye on her. She said they'd pump her up with something in a needle, tell her what to do, and point her towards the house. But he was the one that ran you off the road."

"Then did what's her name kill Mrs. Tanner?" I asked. He shrugged. He didn't know for sure yet, but he would find out soon enough. I suspected so. I closed my eyes. "I wonder if he's attempted to murder anyone else, or if it was just us."

Sam sighed. "We got more questions than we've got answers at this point. I'll try to connect all the dots, though." He grimaced a little. "I know you're tired, but when they let you out of here, we'll have to talk about what happened."

"I know," I remarked. I would think about that later. "Can I go see Bree now?"

The men looked at each other.

My husband was the first to speak. "Darlin, you need to get some more rest."

As soon as he started talking, I shook my head. "I told her I would find her. I need to. And I have to talk to her. I have to make sure she's okay-" I began to get riled up.

Jasper stood right away to calm me down, rubbing my back. "Okay, okay-"

"No, it's not. I need to keep my word. She saved my life!"

"Yeah, you can see her." Sam rose from his chair. "I'll go get the nurse. You'll probably need a wheelchair."

I pushed myself out of bed. "I don't need one." My legs tried to buckle. My man grabbed me in his arms, pulling me to his chest. "Alright, maybe it's a good idea," I said as I plopped back down hard enough on the mattress to make it complain. "Woo, those drugs linger." My brain was swimming.

"You should get some more rest," he repeated in a worried whisper. I shook my head again. "Yes, I know you're stubborn."

"I need to see her." I didn't know how to explain it. I made a promise I had to keep.

Luckily, Sam knew better than to argue with me and brought me a chair. After I put on a robe, I plopped down into my spot. Before we left, Jasper shoved fuzzy pink slippers onto my feet so they wouldn't get cold.

"You know, I've had enough of hospitals. Maybe we should do an at-home birth," I mumbled as we rolled into the elevator.

My husband grunted softly. "We'll need a house for that first. Let's not think about that right now." He was correct, so I just nodded.

There were two agents standing by the door. Sam briefly knocked before poking his head in. "Hi, Ms. Tanner. I got a visitor for you if you're up to it." I didn't hear the answer, but he stood to the side.

Jasper moved me inside. The bed was completely flat, and she was lying on her side in the dark. When she saw me, she pushed herself up. She had an IV in her arm, and there were several bags, big and small, attached to the pole. They had probes on her chest, monitoring her heart. It beeped faster.

"Hey," I smiled. "There's my hero. How are you?"

She looked down in shame. Her lips were trembling. "I am so sorry for everything I've ever done to you. I didn't want to, but they made me. Please-"

I pushed myself out of the wheelchair and was over to the bed before either man could react. Wrapping my arms around her thin body, I held her to me. She was crying, holding onto the back of my robe. "It's okay. It's all over. It's not your fault. You did what you had to do to survive, and I am glad you did." I put my hands on her shoulders. "They were just things, and I didn't need them. Everything I require in this world is with me in this room right now." I touched my stomach and looked at my husband for a brief moment.

Bree pushed her face against my sore neck. I leaned into it. "I want my mommy," she whimpered.

"Me too," I admitted softly. My own, hers, Caroline and April. "Your mother was an amazing woman, and I have never respected a human more. She loved you more than anything. I know she is so happy right now."

"They told me that nobody cared about me. They said no one was even looking."

"She never stopped." I glanced over my shoulder again. "They never stopped. But it was like a puzzle where someone purposefully stole half the pieces and repainted the others. We all thought for sure you were dead."

Jasper cleared his throat. "Were you the only one he kept? Are there others?" He was so scared that this wasn't over.

Gazing at him for a moment, Bree swallowed down her emotions. She knew she had to be strong. "He tried to keep most of them. At least for a little while. But they would do something to make him angry, or he would make an example of them to the others. Sometimes it would be a day. Other times it would take months. I don't know why I was different."

"Because you were the one that got away and tarnished his perfect image. If you hadn't come along and spoken out, he could have kept on doing it forever," he explained, then shook his head. "If Bella hadn't made the connection, he'd still be doing it right now." Our eyes met for a moment.

I sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

"Am I going to prison? I've done so many horrible things. They made me help them."

"Made you," Sam spoke up. "Those are the crucial words there. You did everything under duress. Besides, we need a witness to make certain Mr. Hunter ends up in lockup for a very long time. Don't worry, we'll keep you safe."

“I’ll make sure you get everything you need to live comfortably for the rest of your life,” I promised, taking her hand. “I owe you everything.”

“We do,” Jasper agreed and went to her. He was so much bigger than her, towering over the bed. He kneeled down in front of her. “I will never be able to thank you enough for what you’ve done for my family. I’ll be able to have one because of you.”

My stomach fluttered. I giggled faintly and looked down at it. “He’s pretty grateful, too,” I mumbled and put my hands on my sides.

“It’s a boy?” She asked with a slight smile. I nodded. “I had one, too. But he died,” she breathed. “It was... too early, and I never saw a doctor.” She paused and took in a ragged breath. “It made Mistress so mad. She wanted our Master to marry her and start a family. They were going to say they adopted him. He’s in heaven with Mama now, though. It’s better this way.”

“Ugh, it’s like if the Joker and Harley Quinn stole a kid,” Sam complained.

“When?” I asked softly, ignoring him.

“A few months before he got caught.” She looked down at the bed. “I don’t know the exact dates, I’m sorry.”

I looked between the two of them. “That might be why he escalated.”

“They,” our friend corrected. “Ms. Tanner has already informed us that Ms. Sunderland was involved in all the murders, too. She helped select and hunt victims.”

She nodded, still not looking up. “It was like a game.”

The words hung in the air.

I squeezed her hand as I looked at her. “Well, not anymore. They’re gone, and it’s over now.”

We only stayed a few more minutes. The doctors came in for more tests, and I needed to rest. They were going to keep me overnight just because of everything I had been through in the past few days. They wanted to make sure my stress levels were under control and that the baby hadn’t been affected by it all.

The room was pleasantly quiet since we were all alone again.

“Come and lay down with us,” I said as I rubbed my belly. “The mattress is uncomfortable, and there isn’t enough space,” I added in a cheerful voice, patting the spot beside me. “But it’s perfect for two and a half.”

Tiredly, he chuckled before crawling into bed with me. We laid on our sides, spooning as we had done in the morning. I put his hand on my stomach, where I could feel our son. I knew he wouldn’t be able to for maybe months, but it was still comforting.

“So Goddess, what do we do now?” He asked as he placed his chin on my shoulder. His lips touched my lock and key necklace, his kisses light and soothing. There were so many things we needed to do, but there was only one thing I wanted.

Enjoying the sensation, I bit my lip for a moment before peeking at him from the corner of my eye. “I think I might be ready for that extended honeymoon, sir.”

“Mexico or Europe?”

I smiled. “Both.”