



Chapter Thirty-five: Run Away

I flew back to Albany after an early morning interview that took place before dawn. I had Eric cancel the rest of them. This was more important. I needed to be there for this, at least for my sake. For reasons I couldn't explain, I had to see it with my own eyes.

I took an Uber straight to the courthouse. I was still dressed and styled by Lauren. Jasper met me by the entrance to carry my luggage. It was starting in under fifteen minutes, so we had to hurry.

Reporters and groupies swarmed us. He kept shouting 'no comment' at them, wrapping one of his arms around me protectively. They were all screaming questions, some of them not so nice. The people I had spoken to in the past twenty-four hours had a list of acceptable ones. Some of these made my skin crawl.

We barely got in there before the judge did. The gallery was packed, but Sam had saved us a spot. We slid into our places beside him as his door opened. Mrs. Tanner looked back at me and smiled. I grinned back hopefully.

Mrs. Stanley's closing statements took three full days. I cried more than once. The pictures and some memories were like a knife to the heart. Mr. Jenks only spoke for a day. He kept saying the word 'innocent' until it lost all meaning. Then Judge Clearwater gave a grand speech to the jury about doing their duty to the best of their abilities. Everyone looked so tired.

They had been away from their families for so long. They have been sequestered for almost four months.

And then all we could do was wait. I should have been excited about the days off, but they were filled with anxiety. We were ready at any moment to leave. There was no way to relax. Since I knew it would be over soon, I packed and cleaned to distract myself. There wasn't a lot to do.

The second day, I baked cookies and made the kitchen spotless from top to bottom when I finished. Dinner was in the crockpot, waiting for us when we were ready. It was good if we just had to go. Jasper was sitting on the couch with coffee, reading a file. There were several pictures spread out on the table beside him. He was a lot more relaxed than I was, in sleep pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt.

I sighed heavily and leaned against the counter when I couldn't think of anything else to do. My brain was too fuzzy to even consider writing or editing. It was pointless.

"Don't worry. He's guilty, darlin. It's just going to take a little while to vote on all those charges. It'll probably be another day. Maybe more. There isn't anything we can do now," he stated after putting it down onto his lap.

"I know."

"So, what do you want to do when we get back to Dallas to celebrate? Once we do, I'll arrange for a month-long vacation," he said as he sat up, changing the subject suddenly.

I smirked. "I'm definitely putting money towards Mexico now."

He chuckled, nodding his head. "You know what? I'm okay with that. If you want to spoil me a bit, I'm fine with it. I think you can afford it now. Only a little, though."

I giggled softly at his teasing. "Why don't you just quit after this and we'll run away to Europe for a while. I'll pay for everything. We'll go to Italy and France. Germany and Sweden, too. I'll really spoil you. We can spend every day playing. Can you imagine doing a scene out in Paris? Or Tokyo?"

Jasper looked me over from head to toe as if I was the sexiest creature he had ever seen. I was just in shorts and a tank top. "God. Don't tempt me."

"You can be my bodyguard. The pay is good. Seriously. Quit if you want to," I urged as I walked to him, gently touching his barefoot. "I can take care of everything now. You don't even have to work if you don't want to."

He put his paperwork down, pushing his glasses onto the top of his head. "Darlin, are you trying to be my sugar daddy?"

I cackled in surprise at his unexpected joke. Quickly, I sucked in a deep breath to stop it. I nodded. "Yeah. That's how good the dick is."

Jasper snorted loudly, reaching for me. He yanked me on top of him, squeezing me to his chest. "Be still for a moment, little girl. It's okay. I've got you." Shifting, so I was more comfortable, I laid my head on his shoulder. "You've been moving for two days." He pulled the blanket over the top of the sofa onto us. It was chilly since it was almost the beginning of December. "Let's take a nap. We haven't done that in ages."

"I should probably-"

"Shh," he hummed. With his hand on the small of my back, he softly kissed my forehead repeatedly until I finally relented. He was so sweet and gentle with me. It was hard not to give him exactly what he wanted.

It was dark when I woke up. I was still on the couch, but I was alone. I rubbed my face roughly, trying to get some sleep out of my crusty eyes. Something had startled me awake, but I wasn't sure what.

"No!" Jasper suddenly cried. I didn't understand why, and it scared the hell out of me. His voice was furious. I popped up instantly, holding the blanket up to my chest. It was like I was ready for someone to attack. "No! You can't be serious!"

"Honey, what is it?" I looked around for him in the darkness. I almost hoped it was just a nightmare. My blurry eyes finally found him standing beside the open bathroom door. The light was spilling out onto the bed. He leaned against the doorway with his phone up to his ear.

"No, no, no... That- How?!" He demanded. Jasper was gripping his hair tightly, half bent over as if he were in pain.

I moved onto my knees to watch him, my heart pounding. His voice was so ominous, his eyes narrowed sharply. "Who the fuck thought that was a good idea?!" He shouted. "No! I won't calm down! Fuck this! We've just wasted a year of our lives! No! No, I'm not alright." He hung up on whoever he was talking to.

He roared with fury. I hurried to him, leaping off the couch. I was unsure of what was wrong, but in a second, I was in his arms again. "What? What happened?" I asked desperately, my face pushed into his chest.

Swallowing, he pressed his cheek into my hair. "Royce King was stabbed to death this morning."

I pulled back in shock. "What?" I slowly blinked. "Are you... Are you serious?" He nodded, leaning against the door frame. He was shaking with his strong emotions, his hands balled up into tight fists. "Someone got a knife into the prison?"

"It was a makeshift shiv made of a sharpened spoon," he said with almost no emotion.

Blinking, I stared at him for a second. "They stabbed him to death with a spoon?" I opened and closed my mouth several times. "What the hell? Who?"

Jasper sniffed. "Another prisoner."

"He was in the general population?" I gasped. That couldn't have been a good idea. No one in their right mind should have allowed that. Surely, his lawyers knew it was bad. They couldn't have wanted that.

He rubbed his hand over his forehead, shaking his head. "Yeah. They were in line for food. The inmate said he had a bounty on his head. He was already serving life, so in his eyes, it was worth it. What's another sentence? Nothing for him changes, but now he'll be famous. He'll be treated like a prince because he offed a famous kid killer."

I fell back against the door frame opposite of him. "What will happen now?"

"Both sides met with the judge, and they've decided since the jury doesn't know what's going on that they will let them reach their verdict. It'll help the families of the victims seek compensation if it's guilty, for the civil trials."

Pushing myself off the door jamb and against him, I held onto his shirt. "Then it wasn't for nothing. It's okay."

His arms wrapped around me tightly. "I should have just-"

"No!" I shouted at him, shoving his chest. "No. He should have been punished. Never say that again!"

"We could have avoided this whole fucking year if I had."

"You're not a killer!" I almost yelled in his face.

"Yes, I am!"

The words hung in between us.

I shook my head. “This has been the best year of my life. It’s exactly what you promised me. I wouldn’t change anything. I loved every minute of being up here with you. It wasn’t perfect, but I don’t care. It was an adventure. I’ve learned so much, and I feel more motivated than ever before. And we’ve grown as people. Fuck Royce. I’m glad he’s dead. They’ll find him guilty, and the families will get reparations. It’s not about him anymore.”

He put both of his arms around my neck, holding me tightly to him. “Yeah, you’re right, darlin. I’m sorry. And I won’t say it again. It’s just-”

“I understand. It’s okay.”

It only took two more days for the jury to reach their verdict. Jasper said it wasn’t very long, but it felt like decades to me. The entire time, my sales were going through the roof, and I was being hounded for requests for interviews. I told Eric I couldn’t handle it right then and wouldn’t talk about it until I was ready. The brightest spot of that period was reaching one million books sold. But I couldn’t celebrate it.

Caroline called, crying and telling me how proud she was of me. She was beyond excited that we would return soon. I was, too. Jasper didn’t fuss at me when my packing and cleaning went into high gear after King’s murder. Instead, he helped.

Then they finally came back with their decision.

As I was preparing to go to court for the last time, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. My hair was straight, and my makeup nude. I was only in my towel and necklace. Jasper always got ready quicker. He was wearing one of his three-piece suits with the blue tie from Christmas. The holiday was fast approaching, and I needed to think of gifts to get him. I didn’t have another full novel to surprise him with, though I had a few dirty short stories.

“What are you thinking about?” He questioned as he came in to spray on his cologne. I could have drowned in the smell, I loved it so much.

“What to get you for Christmas.”

“I’m still trying to decide what to buy you for our anniversary. That’s first.” My eyes got wider. He tilted his head to the side and smirked. “Did you forget it was coming up?”

“I didn’t even really remember the date, to be honest. We’ve never talked about it. I know we started dating in early December.”

He ran his finger over the chain of my necklace. “It’s on December seventh.”

I frowned at myself. "I'm terrible for not knowing that. It's so close. It's only-" Jasper pressed his lips to mine to make me shut up with his hand under my chin.

"Well, now, you know. I plan to spoil you all day long, Goddess. I've already arranged for it off."

Smiling, I leaned back into him. "You're so good to me, sir. Damn. I have to think of something else to get you."

"You're gift enough," he mumbled cheesily into my neck as he pecked around my ear. "You're all I want."

"Okay, but don't you want me gift-wrapped, at least? Cute and innocent or maybe something super slutty like latex?" His eyes snapped up to the mirror. "Oo, latex. Gotcha." I jiggled my breasts at him.

He chuckled softly. "I wouldn't hate it, but we're probably going out, and it'll be a little cold for that."

"That's true." His arms wrapped around me from behind, and we looked at our shared reflection. "Jasper, I promise to make the next year of your life the best one. I know you hated how this one went-"

"No, I despised how a single part of it went," he interrupted. "I know it'll be great, though. How could it not? We're going home to a beautiful place that is all ours. We'll get to spend the holidays with our friends and family. Plus, we'll finally get that damn vacation I've needed for the last decade."

I nodded. We could both use one.

The media surrounded the entire building. It was hard to get into the garage. Sam was waiting in his rental car for us in his regular spot. He got out as soon as he saw us, straightening his tie as he did. "Let's go find this bastard guilty and then go get some drinks."

"It'll be ten in the morning," Jasper retorted.

"So?" I questioned.

"Do the bars open that early?" He shrugged. He wasn't saying no to the idea.

There was a howl of noise when we walked past the opening of the garage. There must have been a hundred people shoved around it. I felt sorry for the line of guards holding them back. The Albany police department would be happy when it was over.

Mrs. Tanner was waiting for us when we arrived. She came to hug me wordlessly. She smiled as she took in my distressed face, gently touching it. "It's okay. God can judge him now."

"If hell exists, he's suffering all the horrors he inflicted on his victims for the rest of eternity."

"Amen," my man muttered under his breath. She grinned at him kindly before finding her seat.

Ms. Rachelle walked over to us with tears in her eyes. It looked as if she had been crying for days. Her cheeks were puffy and swollen. She forced a smile. I imagined she felt the same way Jasper did. She had put in a year of work into the case, to have it all washed away because other people weren't very smart and didn't do their jobs. Mrs. Stanley and Mr. Crowley only seemed annoyed.

"Hi. Um, I just want to... to thank you for coming in and-" she sighed, looking up tiredly. "You've been fantastic, and I'm sure that-" She sniffled, shaking her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be this emotional."

"It's okay. It's understandable to feel frustrated. I imagine you must feel as if someone has stolen something from you," Jasper sympathetically replied.

She stared at him in surprise. "Exactly. Yes. You're right, Dr. Hale. That is how I'm feeling."

"This was your first case in Albany?" He asked. She nodded, her red hair bobbing around her shoulders. "You should be proud of what you accomplished. This was a beast to handle."

She forced another smile. "It's time," someone whispered. The bailiff came out first. Nodding her head at us, Ms. Rachelle went back to the table.

We took our seats and waited for the jury to come out. It only took a few minutes. Everything was so somber. Nobody made a noise as they read the verdict.

Guilty on all counts, as if there was ever any doubt of that. There were no surprises. As soon as they finished, they took the people back out once more. I didn't understand everything that was going on, but I knew I didn't have to worry about it again.

I wished I could never think Royce King's name again, but I knew if we would continue looking for Bree Tanner, it would always be on my mind.

Once dismissed, her mother stood and smiled at us before straightening her shoulders. She walked proudly out of the room with at least a bit of justice. Even if it wasn't perfect, and she didn't know what happened to her daughter.

I didn't know if Jasper and I would ever find out what happened to her, but I knew we would always try. And even if we couldn't, I would put part of my money towards causes that protect women from men like him.

That night, I stood in the middle of a room I knew I would never visit again. I wouldn't miss it like I had the first time we left. I was ready to move on. We had evolved too much for the space and needed our own. It was an important step in our future, and it was key to starting this next stage together, no matter what revelations it held.

Jasper put his arms around me from behind. In them, I knew I would be perfectly safe. Always.