



Chapter Twenty-two: In the Afternoon

I was plowed.

We both were.

We couldn't keep our hands off of each other in the Uber ride back to the hotel. My fingers tugged on his hair hard, his tongue shoved deep in my mouth. We stumbled our way to his room. He pushed me against the door, ignoring someone who walked past us as we made out. I could hear their shuffling footsteps on the carpet and their awkward cough to let us know they were there. It didn't stop us in the least.

Jasper grabbed my knee and wrapped it around his hip. His other hand was gripping my ass tightly with his face buried in my neck. Biting and sucking, he was aggressively kissing every inch he could. I tilted my head at an angle to give him the most access. I don't know how long we were in that hallway, but it surprised me no one tried to stop us.

When we got inside, I shoved him against the door hard. It slammed shut, rattling the wall and the pictures that hung on it. It was enough to shock us both. We looked at each other, panting. As I stared at him, anger surged through me suddenly. I had pushed all of those emotions back for hours, hiding them under layers of liquor.

“I could still slap you right now,” I admitted in annoyance, my fingers curling in his shirt. It was untucked from his jeans, stained with sweat and booze. His eyes were tired and blurry, his lips swollen with our kisses.

“Do it,” he breathed as they focused on my mouth.

“What?”

They lifted to meet mine. “Punish me, Goddess.”

I swallowed, uncertain. “Are you positive that’s what you want?”

Nodding, he kissed me fiercely. His fingers twisted in my locks, holding me to him. “Yes, ma’am. Please,” he spoke against my lips, the words pained.

For a long moment, I just stared at him. My heart thundered in my chest, and blood rushed through my ears as the uncertainty pulled at me. The memory of the second before I opened the door, and how amazing and hopeful I felt, flashed in my mind.

As hard as I could, I struck him across the cheek.

The air whooshed out of his mouth, his eyes shut tightly in surprise.

“You embarrassed and hurt me! I was so excited. We’ve done nothing like it before, and we don’t go out very much. You’ve either been working, or we’ve been looking for a place together. Something is off, and I can feel it. You’re always so anxious. And bored! And I’m scared you’re tired of me now and I just-”

“No, no, no,” he stopped me, taking my face. I slapped him again. He closed his eyes. It didn’t stop him. “I don’t know how to adjust because it isn’t stable yet. It was so good in Albany. I’m ready for that again. I almost want to say fuck it and rent an apartment for now, but I’m worried I’ll just be called back up to New York, and it’ll be a waste of money better spent on our home.”

His words gave me pause. I shook my head. “It won’t be that soon, will it?”

“They’re trying to bring this in front of a judge as fast as possible.”

Looking away, I considered what I wanted to say. “That doesn’t give you the right to act like that. You were a childish, possessive, asshole. We could have had so much fun tonight. I did nothing wrong.”

He quickly nodded his head in agreement. "No, it doesn't, and no, you didn't. Please, punish me. I deserve it."

I raised my hand to slap him again. In his eyes, I could see him mentally bracing himself for my strike. I could hit hard. Instead, I flicked his nose. The shock on his face was palpable. I kept doing it until he muttered, 'ow,' but he was trying to hide a small smile.

"Go to the bathroom and start the water, so we can get cleaned up. I'm so disappointed in you right now." I pointed off in the shower's direction. He pushed himself off the door and walked towards the restroom. When he was past me, I swatted his ass. It made him stop. "You will take me out to make this up to me, and I'll dress like the biggest hoe I can. And let me tell you, you won't be getting any that night. You'll be able to look, but you won't be able to touch me. At all."

"Yes, Goddess," he breathed.

I wasn't sure what time it was when I woke up in the morning. It felt late in the day, though. My body ached from dancing, and my stomach rolled with the memory of the alcohol we consumed. The taste in my mouth was the worst I had ever had. I was flat on my belly, my face shoved into the pillow. Slowly, I shifted it to the side. Jasper was sitting up beside me, drawing. I turned over. His pencil stilled on the paper, but he said nothing.

"Good morning," I whispered, having to pull my lips open because they were so dry. It was like I ate cheap dollar store glue.

"Hi," he barely uttered the sound.

I pushed myself over onto my back. "What time is it?"

"Two."

"Damn," I mumbled as I stretched my arms over my head. I scrubbed my hands over my eyes on the way down. "When were we supposed to see the house?"

He sighed softly. "Four."

I finally looked at him. His face was so serious and upset. Slowly, I sat up, pulling the sheet up around my naked body. When I did, I noticed a bunch of things on the table. Flowers, a pink bakery box, wine, and a set of brown paper bags.

"What's that?" I automatically inquired.

“An apology.” He put the pad on his lap. The shame was written in the stress on his face, his cheeks pulled down in anguish. “I am truly sorry. It was unacceptable, and it won’t happen again. From the bottom of my heart, I regret my behavior.”

“It’s fine as long as it doesn’t happen again,” I answered as I touched his arm, scooting closer to him. He still didn’t look at me. “Jasper, what’s wrong?”

He gripped the pencil in his fist, his fingers trembling. Slowly he licked his bottom lip, gazing at nothing. “I’m just terrified I fucked up too much.”

Scoffing, I rolled my eyes. He was dramatic. I thought we had cleared at least some of it before. “After what happened last night? I wouldn’t have had sex with you if I-”

“You did before when I screwed up,” he answered barely in a hush. His cheeks were flushed.

Quickly, I shook my head. “It’s not the same.”

“How?”

It was in a million ways. Everything about our lives was different. “Because I was scared I would never see you again, and I was desperately trying to hold on to whatever I could. We aren’t those people anymore. This was just a stupid fight. It wasn’t a relationship ending one. We were bound to have one at some point. And as mad as I was, I never once thought about breaking up with you. I only wanted to fuck up your evening. I understand now why you reacted that way, even if you shouldn’t have.”

He looked up towards the ceiling, shaking his head as he did. His messy blond hair was everywhere, frazzled from sleep. “I’m such a prick and a bad boyfriend.”

“No, you’re not,” I argued right away. “Come on. Stop with the pity party. Don’t worry. I’ll punish you properly soon. You’ll suffer,” I said lightly as I brushed my fingers over his cheek. “Look at me.” Jasper did, his eyes a little red. He was trying so hard not to cry. So much of his life was acting tough, and it was taking a toll on him. “We’re okay. I promise. Coming back to Dallas has been weirdly stressful, hasn’t it?” He nodded in answer, swallowing as he did. He brought me to his chest, hugging me for all he was worth. “Oh, baby. It’s okay. We’re okay. It was only a dumb fight. We’re fine. I swear. It’ll be just fine,” I chanted as I held him.

He buried his face in my neck, his heavy panting coming out in waves against my skin. “As soon as I saw you, it reminded me of my nightmares. I just imagined you in a ditch. It was so clear in my mind. Your lifeless eyes, the blood, and I panicked.” He sucked in deeply. “It’s stupid. I should be better at controlling my emotions than that.”

I let him get it out. Gently, I rubbed his back, repeatedly smoothing circles over his t-shirt. "Okay, well, you know that's a trigger now. We'll try to avoid it in the future."

"No. It was only because I was surprised. I imagine you in stuff a lot like that when I fantasize. You were breath-taking and so sexy."

Smiling to myself, I lightly kissed his ear. "I'll wear it when I punish you," I whispered into it before nipping it gently. He chuckled softly. "I'll rub all over you all night and really make the torture last." I tugged on the lobe with my teeth.

"Mm, I hope so." He pulled back and brushed his fingers through my hair. His thumb skimmed over my bottom lip. "I got some breakfast. Pain Au Chocolat and apple strudel bear claws."

"Yay," I responded, smiling at him as sweetly as I could. "We'll eat, take a shower, and go meet the realtor. We'll have to pick your car up first."

Jasper's expression was shocked. "Do you still want to go?"

I nodded my head. "Of course I do. Do you?"

He genuinely smiled. "Okay. Good. Me too." Leaning in for a kiss, he let his lips linger for a long time. "Let me go make some coffee."

"Can you bring me some water and aspirin, too?"

"Of course."

We had found three different townhouses we wanted to look at during the week. Jasper and I usually agreed on what we didn't like, which was a lot of things. We weren't picky, but we wouldn't settle, either. We kept saying we weren't in a rush, but we were so ready for it.

Though we understood there might be some remodeling, we weren't looking for a fixer-up. Neither of us had time for that. We didn't want carpets, and he preferred a garage. Most of all, I needed a place with light. That's what I disliked about the apartment in Albany the most.

The first house we visited was a quick no. From both of us. He could feel it in my body as soon as we walked inside. It was dark, cramped, and too narrow. Also, there was a nasty shag carpet. We didn't even bother to go up the stairs. The agent realized pretty swiftly and shifted her focus.

“You know, I have one a few houses down that went on the market yesterday. We haven’t put it online yet. If you’d like, we could walk to it. If you want to look,” she offered hopefully. I glanced at my boyfriend, and he just shrugged in answer. We were both hungover and not thrilled about anything. Energy would be hard to muster.

“Sure,” I finally smiled politely.

Three homes down, there was a freshly white painted townhouse with pretty hibiscus. It was two stories with a new stone pathway. The plants were filled with fragrant flowers in a multitude of colors.

The realtor looked over her shoulder to see my reaction to it. “The owners fixed the place up a year ago,” she explained, opening the door with her key. Jasper squeezed my hand as we waited patiently behind her.

We were greeted by the sun shining on the dark cherry hardwood floors. They dressed the living room up for showing off, the curtains pulled open to allow it in. The stairs were right off the foyer. It was snug and comfortable.

“So, it’s four bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths. The half is down here, under the stairs,” she continued. She walked to it and opened it. “There is also a kitchen with an attached dining room. The two-car garage connects to that. And, the best part is there is an enclosed sunroom,” the middle-aged blond woman declared as she pointed over her shoulder.

“Oh, wow,” I replied in a little laugh, looking around. I already liked it. I smiled at Jasper, and he grinned in return. “Bigger than we were thinking.”

“But it’s still in your price spectrum. This one is only twenty thousand more than the other one,” she promptly answered.

“Why so cheap?” He questioned, putting his hands in his pockets. He leaned in to hear her answer. The other home had been at the very bottom of our price range, and it showed. I would have never expected something like this for the cost.

“They need to get out. They’re moving to... California? Washington? Someplace like that. One of them got a new job, and they just want to unload, but they’d prefer not to give it to the bank.”

I went towards the kitchen. It had a huge island and brand-new appliances that came with the home. The stove had six burners and a griddle in the middle and two side-by-side ovens. There was a large walk-in pantry, too. Next, I wanted to check out the sunroom. I continued through the dining room that was set up for a fancy dinner with friends. Red roses like

the ones Jasper had bought me in the morning were in the center. I could imagine serving his family a meal at it.

When I got to the sun porch, it made my heart skip a beat. I could see myself spending my days there, writing in the sunshine. It led to a covered patio perfect for grilling out. I could almost smell the smoke. I felt my man move in behind me, his hands sliding across my hips.

“This one,” I whispered.

“Wait until you see the upstairs,” he answered in my ear. Smiling, I reached behind me to scratch his jaw. Jasper lightly kissed my temple. I glanced up, his beautiful blue eyes looking happily into mine. “If you want it, it’s ours.”