



Chapter Nine: In a Shabby Apartment

Sunday, I woke up with my worst hangover since college. Alice was still asleep on the couch. I finished packing around her until I finally made enough noise to rouse her from her slumber. She wasn't ready to get moving yet, and I couldn't blame my friend. We ordered lunch and talked until it got late, and she needed to get home. She had school in the morning, and I had a flight. We promised to chat often. We embraced for a long time, squeezing tightly. Neither of us wanted to let go.

Tanya never came to the apartment. I was rather hoping I could say I was sorry in person. At ten, I sent her an apology by text. She asked what for because she didn't remember much about the night before. She had only woken up around six that evening. I answered for bailing out early, like a coward.

"Oh! It's okay! I know you needed to get ready for your trip. I'll miss you! See you soon, hopefully!"

Staring in surprise at the message, I decided it was best to let it be. Edward would never bring up the subject, that was for sure. He watched me walk out of the restroom at the club, dejected. The man didn't even try to say anything. Instead, he looked beaten down. He had done nothing wrong, but I shouldn't have agreed in the first place. Jasper wasn't angry at me, but I was at myself. He had just been so nice and said all the right things.

My flight to Albany was only about five hours. I took the earliest I could, leaving at six in the morning on Monday. I was too impatient. Sadly, he was working when I got in. I knew he would be. So I would store my stuff in our apartment then take myself out to lunch. I would get a few groceries for when we were there, too. I would take care of my man as much as possible.

It was only slightly shabbier than I expected it to be. It was an efficiency with a queen mattress, a loveseat, and a boxy television from the nineties on top of a dresser from the seventies that had a large mirror vanity to one side. It was so awkward. The carpet was brown shag, and the wallpaper had bamboo on it. The only window was high above the bed and had thick yellow curtains that blocked out all the light.

I giggled as I looked around. It wasn't that bad, really. Honestly, it could have been so much worse. It was clean, at least. I kind of loved it. But I could see why Jasper would hate it. But he wasn't paying for it, and we didn't know how long he was staying, so we couldn't find an apartment on our own. I didn't mind. I couldn't handle not having any access to a real kitchen for months on end. We both liked my cooking too much for that.

It was almost comically perfect for our first place together.

Sure, it wasn't ideal. But it wouldn't be hard to make it homier. I put the spare key he left me under the mat onto my ring with a smile. I was more enthusiastic about this part of it than I expected to be. It wasn't living together yet, just staying in the same place, but it would be an interesting test run for the future. His time healing was too hectic to count.

After inspecting the place, I walked to a shopping center about a block away to have some Five Guys. It was nice that it was so close to us. I knew how much he loved burgers and fries. I would have to get it for us someday. Or maybe we could go on a cute little date with milkshakes and everything. As soon as I found out his next days off, I would start planning for a short trip to New York City, though. That was the outing I was most excited about.

The pots and pans were battered in the kitchen, so I bought a cheap set and some knives. I would only get enough food for two days at a time since anything could change at a moment's notice. I made a few trips back to haul all of my loot. Going to one shop, then to the apartment. It was a wonderful almost spring day, and I loved it. I might have gone overboard at the inexpensive home store. I probably looked like a crazy person with all my massive sacks.

In a small slow cooker, I started a thick beef stew and baked some cornbread and cookies. The place smelled delicious. While they were baking, I put some candles around and washed a new blanket I got for the bed. I also purchased some fresh pillows, too. We could donate them to charity when we left. It wasn't much, but I knew it would make a difference.

As it got later in the evening, I became more psyched and nervous to see him. I changed into something I got just for Jasper, a baby blue crop top, innocent high-waisted panties, and

matching knee socks. I didn't bother with makeup, only putting on lip gloss and some edible dust like from New Year's. This time, it was chocolate cake flavored. Cookies wouldn't be the only thing for dessert, I hoped.

It was seven o'clock when the door finally opened. He hadn't texted to say he was on the way, but he knew I had arrived safely. But it still surprised me. As always, he was perfectly groomed in one of his tailored suits, his blond hair slicked back in place.

I smiled at him brightly, hopping up from the couch right away to greet him properly. "Hi there, handsome," I said playfully, putting my hands behind my back because I knew it would push my chest out and make me appear more innocent.

Silently, he looked around before peering at me. His jaw was tight, his eyes hollow and unseeing. I watched as his Adam's apple bobbed, and he sucked in a slow breath. His briefcase slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor loudly as he began to cry.

"Oh, no! Oh, god! What happened?!" I nearly shouted as I rushed to him. Both of his hands were covering his face, the tears streaming past them as he crumbled to the carpet on his knees. It was coming out so hard that there was no sound, but his body was shaking violently. I slid to the floor in front of him just in time for his head to fall on my shoulder. My arms wrapped around him as tightly as I could.

I had no idea what was going on.

Jasper tangled his strong arms around me, pulling me to his chest with a rough thud. He buried his face in my neck as his fingers curled into my shirt. "I can't do this anymore," he gasped.

"Can't do what, honey?" I asked, confused. I gently nuzzled his hair, trying to soothe him. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. I promise."

He shook his head. "I- I can't keep looking at these- I can't keep doing this," he stuttered out brokenly. "I can't sleep. I haven't slept in days. I keep trying, but when I do, I have nightmares. And I watch you die in a million ways. Every fucking time. And I can't anymore."

"Oh," I breathed, leaning my head against his. I didn't know what to say. "Um, I'm here. I'm okay. I'm here now. I'll keep the nightmares away," I whispered into his hair, trying to hold back my tears. I wanted to be strong for him. It wouldn't help if I freaked out, too.

His fingers curled tighter into the fabric of my crop top. "It's too raw. It's too fresh. I can't, I can't," he repeated as he gasped for air. "I knew I couldn't. I knew I needed more time. But... But what if I can't do this anymore?" He blurted out the words brokenly. "This is my job! This is

my career. I have trained for this my whole life, and I've thrown up like a goddamn rookie at just photographs. Fucking pictures!"

"Then we'll figure out the next step together," I swore. It was as simple as that.

Sitting back, he wiped his face with his palm roughly. Digging his nails into his scalp, he looked up towards the ceiling. His cheeks were splotchy and red, sticky with snot and tears. "What is that, huh? I can't even think of-" he started again, shaking his head.

I shrugged, touching his knee gently. "You could research. Or teach. I don't know, but you don't have to start over. You don't have to throw the whole baby out with the bathwater, you know?" I took his hands, bringing them up to my lips to kiss. "You just need a break. And until you figure out what you want to do, maybe we can live off of my advance if that guy was for real," I joked. "I can take care of us for a little while."

Jasper swallowed, licking his lips. He had to concentrate on getting the words out. "He is. He has a good reputation, and no record other than an utter disrespect of Manhattan parking laws."

His words gave me pause, distracting me for a moment. "Do you think I should take it?" I asked my distressed boyfriend. I blurted it out.

He smiled at me slowly, touching my cheek. "He's helped a lot of first-time authors in his field. I think it's up to you what you want to do, though." That meant yes, but he would never make a decision this big for me.

I sat back on my bottom, adjusting my legs so that they were more comfortable. They were falling asleep because of the position we were in. "Well, there you go. That's almost what I make in a year."

"As sweet as you are, don't worry about that part. I could take care of myself for a good long time if I flake on this. I wouldn't let you," he mumbled, gazing at me from underneath his clumped up eyelashes.

"I'd want to." He had been paying for everything for months. I didn't mind doing it for a while, especially after what he went through. He needed more than a vacation. He deserved to heal completely, mentally, and physically.

"I know," he whispered as he took my face and tugged me towards him. For the first time in a week, he kissed me. This was not fun making out, but desperate and scared. Wet, his lips were salty. When he pulled away, he laid his forehead against mine. Both of Jasper's hands were on my cheeks. "God, look at you. You're so fucking cute, and here I am, having a mental breakdown. This is not what you wanted tonight. I'm sorry that I'm nuts."

Gently, I pushed him back so he would look at me. My fingers tightened around the shoulders of his blazer. “No. You will not do that. You will not feel guilty for expressing your emotions to me. I want you to, no matter what they are. I am here for you. And you are not crazy. You went through something terrible. You’ve handled it so much better than I could. You are so strong, but even heroes need a minute to breathe.”

“Yes, you are here for me,” he agreed in a tiny voice before forcing a smile. Once again, he pulled me closer, and we hugged for a long time. When he finally calmed down completely, he whispered, “It smells good in here.”

“I made you dinner and some dessert. I figured you’ve been eating like garbage without me,” I teased gently.

Chuckling, Jasper shook his head. “I’ve barely been able to keep anything down. But that’s making my mouth water.”

I stood up from the floor and offered him my hands. He looked at them for a moment, almost as if he was confused. “Come on. Let me go make you some while you get comfortable.”

“You’re too good for me.”

Taking them slowly, he rose to his full height. I bent my head back to look into his red-rimmed eyes, my arms going around his waist. “No, I’m not. Jasper, when this is over, you can do whatever you need to do, and I will support you. If you want to become a professor or focus on your art full-time for a while, I will be by your side. I know you really can’t just drop it right now, but-”

“I know you will be, darlin. And I promise I’ll be by yours when you become a best-selling author.” I giggled softly at his words, his hands resting on the small of my back as he pulled me closer. “Oh, maybe I can become your full-time bodyguard,” he joked with a tiny smile.

“Oo, I like that,” I teased, lifting on my toes so I could push my lips against his. He smiled just a little against them. “Now, go get changed. You don’t want crumbs all over your jacket.”

By the time I finished making him a bowl of hot stew with some buttered cornbread, he had switched into a t-shirt and flannel sleep pants. Jasper looked so drained, plopping down into the old wooden chair with a squeak. I hurried to get him a beer from the fridge. When I tried to go get something else, he pulled me down into his lap.

“Thank you for coming up here. It makes me feel so much better to have you in my arms again,” he told me as he pushed my hair behind my ear. “I can’t do this without you.”

“It’s the only place I wanted to be.” I kissed him firmly, showing how much I meant it. “Now, let’s get you fed, and we’ll go get some sleep.”

“Okay,” he chuckled before kissing the side of my neck. Quietly, he groaned. “Chocolate?” Jasper leaned in to get another taste, humming as he did.

“Yup. And you can have more of it after you eat some real food,” I promised.

We went to bed right after. He fell asleep instantly.

“Hey... It’s Dr. Hale,” I heard him say in a soft tone. It was dark, the room slightly cold. I pulled the blanket tighter around me, trying to stay quiet. “Yeah. I won’t make it in today.” He paused. “I’m having some stomach issues,” he sighed, his voice weak. “Yeah, I did throw up in the trash a couple of days ago. I apologize for you having to witness it, and I appreciate you ignoring it. Obviously, I’ve been trying to do the same. I’ll attempt to sleep it off, and tomorrow, I’ll go to the doctor if I need to. Thank you for your concern. I’ll manage. I’ll text you later if I’m not able to make it tomorrow. Yes. Yes, sir. Thank you. I will. Goodbye.”

The words hung in the air for a long time. He didn’t move from his spot on the sofa, though. I sat up slowly. “Jasper? Are you okay?”

He hadn’t realized I was awake, and it surprised him. “What? Oh. Yeah. Yeah,” he blurted out, shaking his head as he looked down at the phone in his hand. “I just... need a minute, you know?” He glanced up at me, grimacing as if he was in pain. “I need a day off with you to get my head right.”

I got up and walked over to the couch to him. “Okay. I don’t mind it. I missed you,” I remarked as I slid my hands from his shoulder down his arm. “Are you going back?” I questioned seriously.

Jasper nodded, putting my arms around his neck as I leaned down behind him. “Yes. I have to.”

“No, you don’t. You could refuse to be a part of this, just quit. You can’t ignore the trial, but that’s a long way off, and you’ll have more time to deal.”

Scoffing, he tilted his head back against my shoulder and sighed. “No. I’ll go back tomorrow.”

“Okay. But only if you want to.” I kissed his temple after I spoke. “Promise me you’ll go speak to a counselor. I know the FBI or the Albany police have to have one.” I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, crossing them over his chest as I pressed my nose into his cheek.

“It’s normal to have anxiety after what you’ve gone through, and there is nothing wrong with asking for help to deal with it.”

“I have been,” he promised, putting his hand on top of my crossed wrists. Jasper turned his face towards mine. “Twice this week. And I’ll go again.”

“And they think you’re ready to go back to duty?”

He swallowed and sighed, blinking off into the distance. “They consider this soft. It’s just a lot of talking and looking. Remembering. I get to look at every little girl he destroyed, and I get to listen to his gleeful description of the entire event. He is a monster. Charming and pretty and fucking insane. He talks so much, but I’m sure half of it is lies. But then the details he gives on what he does to them is... dead-on. No pun intended.” Jasper looked towards the mirror at our shared reflection. “I should have killed him.”

“No,” I breathed. “Even if he deserved to die, you’ll bring justice to so many families. I know this is painful because you’re one of his victims now, but you’re still a hero. You’re still strong. You’re still brave.”

“I have clung to you like a nervous child for the past few months. I’m not sure how you can think that about me,” he said in embarrassment. “I’ve needed you for everything. You’ve been my maid, nurse, and caretaker in every way.”

My arms tightened around him. “Don’t you think that’s what I wanted to do? I loved every minute we were together.” He scoffed. I gently pinched his arm in answer. “I’m not a liar.”

“No.” He smiled. “You’re not.”

“Now, let me take care of you. We can do whatever you want today. Whatever you need. I just want to make you feel better.” I kissed his hair repeatedly. Closing my eyes, I savored our closeness as his fingers slid over mine. They twisted together, locking my arm tight over his chest.

“Can we play, Goddess?”