



Chapter Eighteen: In a Pod

Not long after, I spent most of the morning writing after Jasper headed to work. I woke up with him to make breakfast, sleepily sitting on his lap in just my panties and his socks that went halfway up my calves. It wasn't a sexy look. Our meal wasn't much. Bagels, yogurt, fruit, and iced coffee. The air was sticky and humid already, making it hard to even want to put on a shirt, let alone eat something hot. It made it difficult to concentrate, so I took a nap after struggling to get three pages down for four hours.

When I felt the bed shift, it scared the hell out of me. My heart fluttered in my chest as I jumped, almost ramming my forehead into my boyfriend's. He was quicker than me, though. Thankfully, or someone would have had a broken nose.

"Shh, shh, shh," he murmured calmly as he brushed his fingers over my cheek. "It's me, darlin. It's okay."

"Oh, did you get off early again?" I asked, smiling up at him happily. His voice was all I needed to soothe me instantly. "Or did you just come home for a lunchtime quickie?"

Jasper laughed, shaking his head. "No. Um... My part is done. They said we could go. We fly out on Monday."

I sat up in surprise, adjusting carefully so that my back was against the headboard. For some reason, I wanted to cry. Tears filled my eyes, stinging my nose. "Really?"

"Yup."

"Oh, okay," I breathed. I nodded, trying to act calm. "I guess we have a lot to do to get ready. Um, we'll need to get-

He lifted his hand, stopping me from going further. "This morning, I took the liberty of ordering one of those small pod containers they just ship. So you don't have to get rid of any of the new treasures you've collected here. I figured you had become attached. And they'll come in handy when we find our place."

My mouth opened a little, but no noise came out. Swiftly, I leaned forward to kiss his lips. "Thank you. That's so thoughtful." I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly, so I could bury my face in his chest.

"It's easier than stressing out about it. It'll be here tomorrow, and they'll pick it up on Sunday. We have to turn our keys into the office in the afternoon. We'll stay that night at a hotel. It'll be delivered to my parent's house on Wednesday."

"That's perfect. Do you want to stay at the Desmond again?" I asked with a grin. "You can tie me to the bed."

"Huh, I already rented a room," he smirked, running his nose over mine. He was in a great mood. I still felt on the edge of emotional, though. His arms tightened around my body. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just so happy here," I breathed.

He pulled back to look at me, putting his hand on my chin. "And it'll get even better when we get to Dallas. We'll find a place that's perfect for us, and we'll be with our friends and family again. Don't worry," he emphasized with a smile, his thumb skimming over my quivering lip. "I promised to make this the best year of your life, and it's not over yet, okay? It's only halfway done. It also means we get to have a bit of vacation, finally."

"Oh! That'll be nice. I almost forgot about Mexico."

"I haven't," he stated in a serious voice. I laughed a little as I looked down at my lap. "We might not be able to do that, but I will take a few days off for my birthday next month, at least. I need it."

Thirty-five was coming up quickly for Jasper. We had met just before his last birthday, and he didn't tell me about it. He tried to act as if it was nothing, but I think it bothered him he was hitting 'middle-aged.' He was more sensitive about his age than I thought he would be. I would be thirty-one soon, but I didn't feel any different from when I was twenty-one. Perhaps I even felt better. I was eating healthier and not like a college student. Truthfully, I was the same weight, but I was actually a size bigger back then in jeans, and my boobs were smaller. I liked that the fat switched places in the right way.

"Do you get any time off before you have to start your new job?"

"I start next Monday. I'm on administrative duty mainly while I learn the lay of the land down there, so it won't be too stressful. I'll have weekends off for a little while. They probably don't want me to lead a case because I might be needed anytime in Albany."

That made me more excited than anything else he had said. "Really?! You'll have weekends off?"

"For the next month or two. I need to help them get caught up. They've had a temp, but it's not the same. I'll be working Monday through Friday, eight to six."

That's what I needed to hear to make me want to move. That sounded like a real vacation.

"What will you be doing exactly?" I asked curiously. I understood more about his job now and why he was required at crime scenes. He could tell you a hundred things by merely stepping into a room, like a party trick. One that took a decade's worth of education to do. Jasper reminded me of Sherlock Holmes.

"Paperwork. Looking at pictures. Making calls to other agents. Juridical coordination. There is also a training class I need to take, which will be boring. I won't be going to any sites for a while. So no traveling, yet."

"Do you miss it?" He had been sitting still for the longest time I had known him. Jasper said he struggled with it as a child.

He shook his head right away. "Not a single bit, but I am ready to make a permanent home with you. With a bigger, softer bed. And a better air conditioner. A dishwasher." I giggled as he listed the things he hated the most about the place. "So, what do we need to do?"

"Um," I nibbled on my lip as I considered it, "I have some boxes, but maybe we should get some plastic tubs and some trash bags. Uh, packing tape, perhaps some bubble wrap for any glass stuff. I'll wash everything to make sure it's clean, so we don't have to worry about that when we get back. It won't be much. Just a couple of loads. I guess we pack tonight."

Jasper nodded his head, smiling as he sat straighter. "Sounds easy enough. Think we can get everything we need down the block?"

I reached for his hands. "Yeah, for sure. Have you gotten lunch? Do you want to eat first?" I realized we never got that cute date at the Five Guys I wanted when we just arrived. It made me a little sad we didn't explore the city more. We hardly went out. We enjoyed being together alone too much.

"Mm, yes, ma'am," he smiled as he loosened his tie. He had already taken off his jacket and guns. "Let's drive, though. It's too muggy to be lugging things around."

On Sunday afternoon, we stood in the shabby apartment's doorway. It was perfectly clean, probably better than when we first moved in. It seemed so different, almost hollow. Only the smell of bacon lingered in the air from when Jasper made sandwiches for breakfast, reminding us it was our home. Sam would be there longer, so we gave all our food to him. I didn't mean to, but I had gotten a collection of things. It felt like our visit would never end. Maybe I just didn't want it to.

Funnily enough, we stayed in the same room at the Desmond. After we played that evening, we went to bed early. Jasper had nightmares about the shooting, the first in a while. Shaking, his breath was ragged as he cried in his sleep. I held him until he stopped. His trembling fingers curled around my back and into my hair.

The flight was boring, if anything else. Nothing happened. The weather was perfect. The plane took off on time, and we arrived when we were supposed to. Jasper's parents were waiting at the airport to pick us up, so we wouldn't need a rental car or taxi. I think Caroline was just eager to see her son again.

His mother held onto him for two minutes, squeezing his neck as she whispered about how much she missed him and how proud she was of him. Putting her fingers on his cheek, she cooed that Jasper was her big strong hero. I couldn't help but giggle because I felt the same way, but I would never do that to him.

With flushed pink cheeks, his eyes were on the ground. "Mama, please."

Justin came to me and put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. "I think Albany agreed with you! You look lovelier than ever."

My boyfriend grinned. "Bella's getting toned from all that walking she's been doing. Getting a tan, too."

“Yeah, as it turns out when it’s not a hundred degrees outside, it’s so much fun to go places that way!” I joked as Caroline came to hug me. “It’s so hot here!”

“Well, baby, it’s the first of July in Texas. I don’t know what you expected,” she teased in return. Playing with my hair, she smoothed it over my shoulder. “I’m so glad to have you back! And just in time for the fourth! It’s perfect! We’re going to have a big old party!”

“Joy,” Jasper murmured dryly. We walked towards the exit with our luggage. “Who’s catering this year?”

“Fogo De Chao!” she gleefully explained. “We’re getting the full-service setup!”

My boyfriend looked at me. “They throw one for all their employees and friends every fourth,” he informed me. “It’s bigger than their Christmas party.”

“Everyone can do a fun holiday bash, but I can blow things up on the fourth!” Justin chuckled, opening the car door for me.

“They do a full fireworks display. It is so overboard,” he told me bluntly as he slipped inside.

“I can’t wait!” I giggled. “It sounds like fun.”

“So, what plans do y’all got next?” His father asked as we started down the interstate.

Jasper looked over at me with a grin. “Lunch?” I over-enthusiastically nodded my head in agreement, making him smirk.

He laughed gently. “Okay, sounds good. But I meant for the future.”

I glanced at my boyfriend, who was relaxed in his seat beside me as he held my hand. “Well, we’ll take this week to unwind, and we will stay in one of those places with the little kitchens in them. Hopefully, for not more than a month, but I’m not in a rush. We’ve got to find the right place for us, so it might take a minute.” Grinning, I squeezed his fingers.

“You’re going to buy a home together?” Caroline squeaked as she turned around to look at us from the front seat.

Of course, Jasper hadn’t told them I had agreed to move in with him. He chuckled and sighed. “Well, something like that. I don’t think we’d want a house. We were actually discussing a townhouse or a condo. Three bedrooms, two baths, probably.”

“What would you use the third bedroom for?” she grinned at him eagerly.

“Bella’s office. She deserves her own cozy workplace. Big desk, overstuffed couch with lots of pillows, a mini-fridge for snacks. That kind of thing. I’ll make it extra nice for my favorite author.”

“Aw,” I beamed up at him. He winked at me.

“Are you using the second bedroom for a nursery?” she asked next.

“Caroline!” Justin fussed at her. “They’re not even married yet.”

“In the future! Not right now,” she pouted as she turned back around with a huff. She crossed her arms over her chest. “If they’re buying, it’s something to think about.”

He shook his head at his wife. “There is a reason Rosalie yelled at you the other day. Stop pressuring these kids. Times are different. They ain’t in no rush. Now... what are we having for lunch?”

I wanted to tell Justin that I loved him. He reminded me so much of his son. They were both good men. Jasper was grateful for the distraction, too.

“You pick, my treat,” my man replied to his father with a small smile. They looked at each other in the rearview mirror for a moment.

After lunch, we went to his hotel. It was nicer than our place in Albany, admittedly, but the kitchen was smaller. It didn’t matter much. I had the one at my apartment if we needed it. I was still paying the rent there, so I might as well use it for more than a storage area for my things.

My truck was in my spot when we pulled up to my place. Tanya had been cranking it for me, driving it twice a week. Jasper would return after he dropped off his dry cleaning and ran errands. He didn’t like me using the rusted thing any more than he did before.

My roommate was sitting on the couch in her fluffy pink robe when I came in, a bright gold face mask smeared all over her skin.

“There you are!” She cheered as she hopped up from the sofa. She rushed to me to give me a big hug. “I’ve missed you so much!”

“Me too,” I replied as I gently embraced her.

“It will be so good to have you back here again. It’s lonely without you.”

I laughed awkwardly. I knew I couldn't give Jasper shit for not telling his parents when I hadn't spoken to Tanya yet either. But I wanted to do it in person. "Yeah, about that..."

"You're moving in with him, aren't you?" she asked with a small frown.

"I'll pay my part of the rent until we renew our lease in October. That way, you have more than enough time to find a new roommate or a place to stay. Perhaps you and Edward could move in together?"

She pouted her bottom lip. "Yeah, maybe. I kind of figured this was coming," she confessed. Tanya stomped her foot. "I hate it. When will we see each other?"

"We'll be in Dallas. And we'll still be friends. It just makes sense. We will be together all the time, anyway."

"Are you sure?" she asked in an almost childish voice.

"We've been together for over seven months now, and we've known each other for about a year. I know this is what I want. Being with him in New York was... magical."

She let out a puffy breath. "Ugh, fine. I'm happy for you," she commented dryly, making me laugh. "I can afford this place on my own. You don't have to do that with the money. It's nice, though."

"No. I want to. I promised to do my part, and I signed the lease. Don't worry. I have the cash. I'll even give it to you all at once if you'd like."

Clicking her tongue, she shook her head. She hugged me again before pulling back. "So, just stopping by to get some things?"

"Pretty much. Jasper will pick me up in a little while. He had some errands to run. Want to go to dinner sometime this week when I'm not exhausted? I'll invite Alice too."

She smiled in answer. "Yeah, I'd like that."