



Blurry Images

By Jeska Wood

Jasper's Point of View of the day he met Bella in Imperfect Pictures/Perfect Snapshots.

Episode One.

I was the first to arrive by fifteen minutes. I was too anxious not to. That was a lie. I missed him too much not to. I knew him, though. Tony hated being late for anything and arrived only five minutes after me. I saw his huge form coming from the parking lot, his camera equipment bag slung over his shoulder and bouncing at his side with his two American buddies following behind him. The moment he saw me, a broad smile spread over his face, and he doubled his speed. He actually jogged to me.

Within a minute, I was in his arms, and Tony was hugging me so tightly that he was lifting me off the ground a little. I was holding him back just as desperately, my face shoved into his shoulder. His smell was different from the last time that we had embraced several months before when his newest niece was born. It was sweeter, the aroma of coconuts wafting from his hair. Maybe he had changed shampoos. There was also the smell of her perfume on his clothes.

I dreaded meeting Bella, his new girlfriend. She seemed lovely from her video footage, which made me want to hate her more. Deep down, I knew that she wasn't taking him from me. Not really. And Tony was so happy with her. I was going to fake it and put on a brave face for him. It was near impossible with Vicky, the last bitch, especially the last year or so. I watched him desperately try to hold that crumbling relationship together while she treated him like a child. She mistreated him like his evil cunt of a mother actually, and I think perhaps he felt if he could fix his relationship with Victoria, it would magically mend the one with his mum.

In my honest opinion, both women desperately needed an appointment with an exorcist.

"God, I've missed you terribly," Tony breathed against my neck, the warmth tickling my skin. It smelled like fresh mint as if he had just brushed them. If I turned my face just a little, I could have been kissing him. His cheeks, his soft pink lips, his smooth forehead. Willing myself to stay still, I swallowed back my desire. I wouldn't let go, though.

"Me too, darling," I whispered in return. I could have held him forever. I let him decide when to pull back. The embrace lingered for a long minute before his fingers curled against my back as he slowly brought me down. His nails dragged along the fabric of my cotton t-shirt, creating tingling in their wake.

He put his giant hands on my shoulders, keeping me at arm's length to examine me. "You look good. Just fantastic."

"Thank you! So do you!" I said automatically. He looked better than good. I had never seen him so muscular. He was practically glowing, his eyes and his bright smile.

"Ah, thanks," he grinned, patting my shoulder before finally letting his arms drop to his side. I instantly missed his touch.

"So, uh... Where's that girl of yours?" I asked, looking around to see if maybe she was trailing behind somewhere. Knowing her face well enough that I thought that I would have been able to spot her, I glanced behind him. I probably knew more about her than I liked, though I would pretend otherwise, just in case Tony didn't want her knowing that I had watched literally all of his footage. He also told me all of her secrets, not that he really meant to. Things about her husband, her anxiety, and the details of their sex life.

To say that I was addicted was an understatement. I was dependent on the footage of Tony. I knew that it was a problem, but I couldn't stop myself. Since he had moved, I needed as much of him as I could get... even if it was mostly the fake version. The face that he created to deal with his low self-esteem and confidence. The videos he made with his new girlfriend were terrific, though. They were different. He might have been a little bigger and louder, but he really was that joyfully happy in them. When she was by his side, he was truly the most euphoric that I had ever seen him on film.

I wanted to make him feel that way. That was a stupid dream, though.

He frowned and sighed. "She's still feeling a little gross. She decided to run to the market and fetch the supplies for this afternoon. Bella still insists on cooking for us," Tony smiled a little when he said her name. "I hope that she's feeling better tomorrow. I want us to all film together. I've been looking forward to it for ages."

"Ah, don't worry about it. I'm sure that she will be soon. And we've got nearly a month. I'm sure that we'll film at least a few videos together," I assured him with a pat on the forearm. "Gentleman. Nice to see you again," I nodded to Seth and Tyler. They had allowed us our reunion quietly. I liked them well enough. I could see why Tony would be friends with them. "So, what are we filming first exactly?"

"So, I hope that you're fucking hungry because this place is supposed to have these crazy..." He continued on and on excitedly, rambling as we walked towards the entrance of the restaurant where we would order whatever he wanted. I didn't mind, though, because I trusted his tastes.

Of course, it was delicious, and I had a great time. Tony always knew how to pick them, though. He had a talent for finding these little hole-in-the-wall places doing different things with food.

We filmed three different videos very quickly. We all worked very well together. The rest of our little childhood gang would be joining us at the cabin that he had rented for their stay. I had taken an Uber to the restaurant because I knew that there was no way that I wasn't going to get sloshed to get through the evening. I was better at being confident drunk or stoned any day of the week. It wasn't healthy, but I wasn't going to deny myself this coping mechanism.

I was going to spend the night drinking my emotions away. My frustration, my sadness, my jealousy, and anger. And I would do it with a smile on my face. It made me hate myself just a little more.

Tony sat in the backseat with me in the big rental SUV that the two men had gotten for their time in Australia. They did so that they could have space for all of their camera equipment.

“So, are you joining us tonight?” I asked the two men in the front seat. We had been pretty focused on our work because Tony wanted to get back to the cabin as quickly as possible.

Glancing back at me for a moment, Tyler smiled understandingly. “Nah, we’re going to let him have time with his friends.”

“We’re going to a comedy show,” Seth chimed in. “Thanks to the boss.”

“Ah, you’re welcome. They were gifted to me, actually. You’d be amazed how much free shit people give me now that I don’t need it.” He shook his head a little to himself. “I re-gift so much of it. It’s great for Christmas presents for my sisters, though.”

“You can keep giving it to us, too,” Seth joked with a laugh in his voice.

“I planned on it,” Tony chuckled warmly.

Tyler looked at me again, pouting a little. “I’m kind of sad that we’re missing Bella’s cooking, though,” he sighed. “You’re in for a real treat. What is she making?”

My best friend grinned excitedly. “Nachos.”

“Aw,” Seth whined. “I like her Mexican so much.”

“She makes all the stuff from scratch,” Tony explained proudly to me. “She acts as if it’s nothing when honestly, all of our idiot friends would be impressed if she popped open a jar of salsa. She has been half dead for nearly a week, and this morning she’s going on about how she’s ‘just’ going to make two kinds of salsa, guacamole, sour cream, beans, and three types of nachos.”

“She doesn’t do anything halfway,” Tyler asserted with a grin. “My wife, Lauren, is a vegan, and Bella always makes sure that she gets a ton of good food, so she doesn’t feel left out. She’s still talking about that meal she made when we filmed the spit videos.”

Seth snickered a little. “Spit videos.”

Blowing out a heavy breath, Tony widened his eyes for a moment. “Oh, fuck those DNA tests. I’m so ready for those stupid results to be back,” my best friend complained as he laid his head back against his seat. Anxiety pulled at his cheeks, dragging them down. It made him look like his father.

“Why?” Seth asked him curiously. “You’re just going to be white.”

He rolled his eyes hard. “Not for me, asshole. For Bella. She acts so strong, but I know that this will be hard on her, no matter the results. I know that she wants to know, but she’s terrified to find out. She could have done this sooner if she really wanted to.”

“What is she scared that she’s going to learn exactly?”

Pausing for a moment, he chewed his words for a second. “I... I don’t know precisely. There is just so much there to unpack. First, her childhood wasn’t good. At all. I’m pretty certain that she suffered some sort of abuse connected to that, perhaps even from her own family. It’s probably painful to dive into that. I also think that it might be easier for her to ignore the insults. They’re all wrong because she doesn’t know what the slurs should be either.”

“I still can’t believe that motherfucker in New York,” I interjected with a sigh. It was hard to imagine the scene playing out, even if I had seen it on the security footage. I could give him that his girl was a tough one. And she was protective of him.

He pushed his fingers into his hair. “God, you have no idea how much time I’ve spent talking to my therapist about that fucking trip,” Tony mumbled to me before shaking his head. “I still feel like a rubbish boyfriend, and she’s like ‘let me at em,’” he said the last bit in a high-pitched voice, making me laugh. He snorted, looking over at me. “She is so feisty.” He shook his head again, smirking a bit. “Seriously, you’re going to love her.”

“Yeah, you fucking lucked out,” Seth called to Tony loudly, playfully. “Hot, funny, smart, cute, and a little creepy. Mm, just how I like them.”

He looked so unimpressed. “You couldn’t handle her,” he replied dryly.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. It’s not like you can,” his friend teased right back.

“No, I can’t,” Tony’s laugh turned a little dirty, his smile growing wicked. “It’s probably a good thing that I’m nearly a decade younger. I need all the energy that I can get to keep up with her as it is.”

“Don’t women peak sexually around forty?” I joked with him, pushing his arm with my elbow.

He flushed bright pink, ever being the prude, but he was also grinning wildly. “Goddamn, I hope so! I’m going to take that whole year off and just take her to whatever new and exciting places that she wants to fuck whatever brains that I have left by then out if that’s the case. Frankly, it’s amazing that I still have the ability to speak at this point as it is.” He blushed purple when he realized what he had rambled out. He was in a good mood and around his friends, so his mouth was just taking over. Smirking to myself, I pushed my lips together as I looked out the window. I liked it when he was like this. He was hilarious.

“You can frame it like a gift for her,” Seth teased. “Yeah, baby. We’re going to spend the year traveling, just celebrating your birthday!”

“That would definitely be a gift for both of us,” he sighed. “And the thing is... I think she’d totally indulge me if I wanted to do that.”

“Uh, yeah?” I snorted. “What downside is there for her?”

He pursed his lips and shrugged. “She has to have him on top of her for fifty percent of the trip?” Seth sarcastically added from the front seat. I barked out a loud laugh and looked back out the window.

“Ah, well, I’m going to defend my mate. I’ve lived with him for close to half a decade as an adult, and I don’t think that the ladies have too many complaints. Sometimes annoyingly. Goddamn, Vicky was a loud bitch,” I muttered.

“And that’s why we tried to fuck at her place,” he replied with a laugh. “I’m not going to lie, I like them loud. Bella has her moments, but she can control it when we need to, at least. But she obviously likes it when she can be.”

“Like when your mother heard her screaming out your name yesterday?” Seth laughed evilly.

Tony threw his hands up in frustration, making a little growling noise as he clenched his fists and his nostrils flared. He made a motion like he was strangling someone. His mum.

“Do you know how good of sex that she ruined?!” He seethed before pouting a bit like he was a teenager again. “Who the fuck doesn’t knock when you hear your adult son fucking? Then Dad made a joke about my good performance and how it must run in the family, too.” He fake gagged. “That couldn’t have gone any worse. And she has the audacity to be mad at Bella because she walked out in the middle of our fight.”

“She was always going to hate her because she didn’t pick her,” I mumbled then sighed, crossing my arms over my chest. Shaking my head, I frowned at him. “Poor girl. I don’t envy her that.”

“The girls and the grands love her already. Fuck Esme,” he said her real name like he did when he was furious with her when we were kids. He felt ‘mother’ was a title earned. His sisters and his nannies were more a mum to him. They were the only reason that he turned out as kind a man as he was. I shuddered to think of what he would have been like if he turned out like her instead.

We pulled up to the vacation house where he was staying with his brand-new girlfriend that he was very much in love with. My stomach twisted with nerves. I wasn't ready to meet her.

The men dropped us off, and together, we walked to the seaside cabin silently. It was quiet when we came inside.

"Hm," he hummed, taking the camera equipment that I had from my shoulder and storing it to the closet for later. Tony went into the kitchen, just peeking inside before glancing out onto the back deck. "I'm guessing that she's laid down. I'm going to check on her. If you want to play..." He pointed to a large television screen that took up one wall along with his multiple systems.

"Yeah, cool," I replied, going to pick up a controller and a set of headphones to mess with. It would give me an excuse to not talk to her as much if anything else and something to do with my nervous hands. When I turned it on, my profile from before was still there. I smiled to myself.

Tony was gone for a good while. He came back out with a small frown on his handsome face. He was clearly worried about something.

"Everything okay?"

"She's so damn stubborn. She keeps saying that she's getting better, but-" he shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I don't know. She's better than she was. I'm just impatient."

"Is it a bad time? Should I go?" I didn't want to leave him, but I also wasn't ready, so I started looking for any excuse. I wanted to meet her like ripping off a bandage, quickly so that I could deal with the sting all at once. This was like yanking it off one hair at a time.

"No. No. Everyone else will be here soon, and she says that she's going to power through. Um, anyway, you want a beer?"

"Yeah, sure. What have you got, darling?"

"Fucking everything," he chuckled cheerfully. "I went overboard."

"Surprise me. You know my tastes."

"Oh, yeah. I've got something that I want you to try that I think you will really love," he said excitedly before heading towards the kitchen. He went in, the door swinging shut behind him. Tony was in there a while before I heard him mumble. "Now, where the fuck is the bottle opener..."

Chuckling to myself before putting my headset back on, I resumed the game. I hadn't been playing another two minutes when I saw her out of the corner of my eye.

I had seen this woman in a hundred different videos, but that didn't prepare me for how tiny she was. She crept along the wall with her sock covered feet quietly padding on the hardwood. Despite obviously not feeling very well, she was still breathtakingly lovely. The film didn't prepare me for her eyes, big, bright, and beautiful. One of her overly full lips was between her teeth.

The moment that I saw her, I realized that I could never hate her. I knew what kind of person she was from the videos, and from the evident happiness that she brought to my friend. Tony spoke about his mask often, but I had my own. I knew that I had to try my best to treat her like I would any of my other friends because I knew that's what would make the man that I was in love with happy.

So, I did what I was best at. I flirted with her.

Smiling stupidly, I greeted her with, "well, hellooo there, gorgeous."

A little color came to her round cheeks, a smile forming on her lips. Her mouth wasn't perfect, one side messed up and slightly uneven from the car accident that took her junkie mother. It only enhanced her beauty somehow. I could see the faint silver line of the scar just curving under her cheek to nearly her ear. Wild shiny inky black curls framed her sweet face, making her olive skin seem very light.

Tony had once described her as unexpected. He was right.

"Um, hi," Bella giggled, looking down and then back up at me charmingly through her thick black eyelashes.

Oh, no, my brain screamed in annoyance at my heart, and it's swift and startling emotions. I already like her.