



## Episode One-hundred-forty

We spoke to Zafrina for four hours. Jasper cleared the table, did dishes, and then went into the office to edit while we chatted. I could tell he felt uncomfortable. Though there were a ton of offers to go through, Lay's was the one we kept going back to. The money was too much, the company too big. But there were so many huge companies and weird products.

When we were finished, he led her to the entrance and gave her a hug before she left. When he shut the door, his smile faded instantly. The mask just fell away. His hand was still on the knob. "What did I do?"

I laughed despite myself. "You don't want a bathroom break or something first?" I offered as I leaned against the island.

He licked his lips and glanced away as he flushed. Edward embarrassed himself with his outburst. "No. I can't stop thinking about it. So it's money. Yeah? Something to do with the accounts?" He shook his head in thought. "I haven't even started making the investments. I've got a few things in the works, but-" He sighed. "What is it? I looked at it earlier, and it seemed fine. I spoke to the accountant this morning as a matter of fact."

"Why did you give me the money from the old videos?"

“What?” He stared at me, confused. He honestly didn’t understand.

“You retroactively increased the amount and gave me a bunch of cash. That’s not what we agreed on. It was a ton in just one lump.”

“I told you I was going to increase it,” he replied, perplexed.

“Not on the old ones.”

He clicked his tongue. “Does it matter?”

I hated his attitude towards it. When we found a therapist, I would love to talk about his tone of voice. He sounded like his mother when he used it, though I would never say it to his face.

“Yes.”

Edward held up both hands as he walked into the living room. “Why?”

Staring at him in annoyance, I pushed my hair out of my eyes. Despite taking a shower after working out, I felt like I needed another. I was sweating a lot. “I don’t want your money. I want you for you. I will not exploit you.”

He didn’t like my answer. His mouth moved up and down with the words. I could see him chewing on them. “This is me at my most... me. What do you want? Huh? I don’t care about the cash. It’s not much at all. It’s only a small percentage. You’re going to get more once we switch them over to your channel.”

“I can’t keep it.” I tried to keep my bottom lip from quivering. I didn’t want to cry over it. It wouldn’t help anything and wasn’t rational.

His fist balled up at his side, and he tapped it on his thigh. He gazed at me and sighed. “I won’t take it back.”

“I know. I’m going to give it away.”

Edward laughed. “Great,” he encouraged, taking a few more steps forward. He ducked his head. “Give it all away. You’ll make triple that by the end of the year, anyway. More. So, why are you mad at me?”

“I’m not. I’m annoyed you don’t have any connection to reality when it comes to this subject and my feelings towards it.”

Scoffing, he raised his chin in the air. "I'm quite connected. How do you think I've made so much money, hm? Yeah, my parents aren't poor, but I've worked for every cent I've got. There was never a point where they supported my career. I just wish to make us all rich. What's so wrong with that?"

"I don't want people to think I'm a gold digger," I blurted out.

He sighed and rubbed his hand over his jaw. "You're not. When have you cared what people think about this?"

"Not people. Your sisters." I touched my chest with both my hands. "My siblings."

"No," he instantly replied. "No. I've spoken to them plenty about this topic."

"And what do they think about you buying me a house?"

His face scrunched up. "I bought us a home, and put it in your name because it's good for your credit and helps with your investments," he explained seriously. "I'm building a strong portfolio for you. It's a process. They know what kind of businessman I am. I have a plan."

"I want to call bullshit so hard. It's probably true, but it's not why you did it."

Staring off at the pool, he was only a couple of feet away from me. His mouth pushed to one side, then the other. "I did it because I love you, and I wanted to capture the feelings I had in that place. I wish to go back one day with both of you and feel that joy I did when I spent the afternoon with you in the ocean. My sisters know what kind of gift-giver I am. They know how overboard I am. Bells, they know I did that."

"Even so."

Edward sighed. "I really don't see a problem."

"And I knew you wouldn't," I admitted.

"Yeah! Because I have millions now. Really bloody millions. Why can't I make my partners more secure financially if I can?"

"I know it doesn't feel like it, but this is still a new relationship. Money can mess it up. The more, the more complicated."

"When we're married, it'll be all yours, anyway. Why does this matter?"

I wanted to stomp my foot, but I didn't. "Because we're not yet, and we're getting a pre-nup. I won't marry you otherwise."

"But will you stop complaining once we are?" I said nothing. "Mm, I didn't think so. You are as much my business partner as you are my romantic one. I'm giving you money reflective of your role in our organization. I can't pay you for all the little things you do behind the scenes. It's not possible to list them all. The inspiration and ideas. Do you think you're the only one that feels like they're stealing?"

"I've done everything completely willing-" I argued right away, but he put his hand up to interrupt me.

"Exactly. Look, I know you'd do it for free. I get it. I do, but I also don't give a shit." Shocked, I stared at him. His tone was so calm and even. "Yeah, you heard me. I don't. Nothing changes. You deserve every cent. I'll pay my," he used dramatic finger quotes to show he was sarcastic, "'employees,' whatever I see fit. This is my company, and I get to decide your salary if you think I'm the boss."

"You are," I agreed.

"Damn right," he muttered, then sniffed. He hadn't expected me to say that and was just going with his rant. "So, who are you going to give it all away to, hm?" He was all puffed up and acting bigger than he was actually feeling because he didn't enjoy making me upset for any reason, even if he thought he was right.

"Jasper gave me the idea to give it to the reservation to redo the office."

He brightened up. "Oh, that's a wonderful idea. I'll match whatever you give if you think he'll accept it." He didn't skip a beat.

I gasped. "Edward-"

"What?" He interrupted again and closed the distance finally. "Why can't I? They're my family now, too. If they're yours, they're mine. Married or not." I put my hands on his face and brought him down for a kiss, just for the sweetness of his words. He smiled against my mouth. "It's okay," he cooed as he put his palms on my waist. "Don't be anxious. Everything is fine. The money won't mess with our relationship if you don't let it."

"I'm still annoyed," I whispered as I shut my eyes.

"I know, and I love you for it." He kissed my forehead. His fingers curled into my hair as he held me to him.

"It's not fair, and I don't like it."

"I know," he repeated. Edward was smiling.

"Why would you want to do that with Lay's?" I questioned, saying it in a petulant rush. "You're the voice and face they want. Those will be national advertisements. I'm just doing YouTube."

"You're doing some of those, too. But people will eat your recipes. They'll become kids' favorite dishes. You'll do more mental work than I will, that's for sure. You've already probably started it in your head. If we do this, we do this as equal partners. But I think the salary should totally switch."

Gripping his shirt tighter, I pulled away slightly to look at him. "I don't need the extra money."

"Fine," he sighed dramatically and playfully. "Give it away then. Give it all to your family. Or Alice. I don't care. If you don't, I will." I leaned my face against his chest, taking a deep breath. "I've already gotten my career where I want it. Let me help you."

"Just giving it to me isn't helping. I enjoy working."

"I know. You do it all the time," he teased. "You're not my employee, nor would you ever be, but I can decide how I want to spread my funds around. If I want to give less than one percent of my assets to you, I can. And I will. And I'll keep giving it to you until you feel stable."

"That's what she said," I mumbled into his sternum. He laughed softly. "I'm pretty sure it won't make me feel that way."

"Yeah, I know," he admitted with a sigh. Edward patted my ass gently. "But I don't know what else to do. I can only show you I adore you in so many ways." His embrace tightened to make a point. "I love doing them all, so I'll never stop."

For a long minute, I listened to his heartbeat. I finally looked up at him again. "It's not a 'you' problem. It's me."

He kissed the top of my head. "I understand where it comes from, though."

I pushed away from him. The words stung for some reason. "I wish you didn't," I sighed. "This is why I kept putting this off. I knew it wouldn't get us anywhere."

"Needing to express yourself isn't-" he paused. He licked his lips as he gathered his thoughts. "I'll admit I don't understand why it bothers you so much, but I do respect that it does."

Trust me when I say I've been restraining myself. We both know I could do more. I could easily put more money in there, but I'm not. I'm keeping it to places where you did work because I value your feelings on that. But it doesn't feel right to have all this and for you not to have a security blanket."

"I'm going to keep fifty thousand."

Edward's face wrinkled again in disgust at the number. "Which is a year--"

"It's a couple which would give me enough time to get on my feet from anything. Maybe more, depending on where I lived."

He shook his head. "I want to make sure you're secure for the rest of your life. That's my goal."

I scratched my cheek, my lips twitching. He was too sweet. "It's not your job."

"No. It's not. It's my greatest dream and wish. I want to make sure that my loves, both of them, are taken care of even if something happens to me because I can't live in a world where I can do that but don't. I'm not that kind of man. Bella, I have to take care of you." He reached out for me.

"You are so good at it," I promised right away. He held my waist in his hands. They almost touched. His fingers were so long, and I was thin. Edward made me feel tiny when he did this, in more ways than one.

He kissed me for a long moment. "You should see what I can do if you let me. I can make you a star in your own right, and you won't have to think about bills ever again. Just don't look at your account anymore and trust me," he whispered the words seductively.

"That sounds dangerous."

"Trusting me?" He smirked. I shook my head. "I'll always make sure the cash is there if you want it or need it, but you know that."

Huffing, I relaxed against him. I felt defeated. My cheek squished against his chest as I closed my eyes. "What a weird problem to have."

Edward waffled his head from side to side. "Ah, well, not really. I think a lot of people struggle with feeling deserving. Self-esteem is scarce all around." I peered up at him slowly. "That's what it really is."

"Maybe," I mumbled. "Dr. Cullen. When's our next session?"

“Ah, we can have another whenever you want.”

Jasper came quietly out of the office, padding towards the kitchen. We both looked at him from our embrace. “So... um, how’s it going?”

“Have fun listening?” Edward asked him sarcastically and a bit too loudly. “You could have warned me.” I poked his ribs. “Not everything! Just a polite heads up, ‘Yo, asshole, you fucked up. Start sucking up now’. That’s all,” he defended himself swiftly.

“You already suck up constantly,” he sassed in return. “And you knew, but you shrugged it off. That’s your own damn fault.”

He groaned softly. “Yeah, you kind of have a point.”

“Also, I’m not fucking up my brand-new relationships by choosing sides.”

Edward sulked but knew he was right. “Yes, but I know you agree with her.” Our boyfriend shrugged, putting both hands up, then blew a small raspberry. “Just let me take care of you,” he comically whined.

“We need to get him a puppy,” Jasper declared as he gazed at me. He finally moved into the kitchen to throw away his empty bottle into the recycling.

“Or a baby.”

“But my figure,” he said as he put his hand on his hard stomach. He went to the fridge and got a beer. “I’m not ready to be pregnant, and I know you’re not having it. Yet.” I laughed, going to hug him. He kissed my forehead. “You know it’s because his sisters have been training him up for years with his nieces, and now he has no one to take it out on twenty-four seven. He’s got enough affection to give a gaggle of demanding little girls, and now we’re his only focus.”

He was incredible at hitting the nail on the head. I liked how blunt and to the point he was. It was probably one reason our man was attracted to him, too.

“I-” Edward opened his mouth, then looked off. He blinked several times. “Oh.”

I pushed my lips together to keep from snickering. “I know what you’re going to talk about to your therapist next,” I mumbled as I peeked at him from Jasper’s arms. I held my hand out to him, and he came immediately.

He was blushing but smiling. “Maybe a little.”

