



## Episode One-hundred-fifty-two

I had terrible rug burns on my knees and ass. The stinging was actually what woke me up, which was great because we forgot to set the alarm. We only got up an hour later than I wished to, though. I quickly slapped Jasper's chest, instantly wide awake.

"Shit! We're running behind."

"Oh. Whoops," he mumbled, sitting up a little. He looked at his phone. We wanted to be on the road in about ten minutes' time. "Meh, not too bad. We just need to grab a quick shower, and we'll get breakfast when we stop for petrol." He stretched his arms above his head. "How long does it take to get there?"

"About four hours."

"And what time are we supposed to meet them?"

"I wanted to be at their place by two. We were going to take pictures in the afternoon around the reservation and then sunset photos at the beach."

"Oh. We're not running that late. It's only eight."

"That's because I planned on us stopping for stuff. Like food. And traffic."

Smirking, he pulled me towards him. "Or sleeping in a little. It's fine." He kissed me for a long moment. "Go start the water, and I'll pick up real quick and make sure we've got everything ready to go when we leave."

"Okay," I grinned against his lips before kissing him again. "You're right. It's fine. I'm just anal."

"It's alright. We've got this."

Thirty minutes later, we were on the road with donuts and coffee. I had planned for nicer, sit-down meals, but this was perfect. I wasn't too tired or hungover, despite my aching knees. We were still able to have a pleasant lunch along the way.

We arrived at my brother's cabin at one forty-five. He was waiting for me on his porch, smoking. Jake stood, putting out his joint before running down the steps. I jumped into his arms just like the first time I saw him. He waggled me back and forth, his face in my hair.

"There's my sister. I've missed you," he breathed. It instantly made me want to cry. My heart always beat a little faster when I was around him.

"I've missed you, too. How are you?"

"I'm on top of the world. My wife is about to have a beautiful baby, and my amazing sis is here to be a part of it. God, I wish Dad was here for this."

I pushed my face into his neck. The tears came whether I wanted them to or not. "Me too. So much." His fingers bunched into my hoodie. It was surprisingly cold, despite it being May. At least it was sunny. It was more than what we could have hoped for in Washington.

"He's watching, though. He's our guide now."

"I hope so," I murmured as he placed me down to my feet.

Jake took my shoulders, looking at me seriously. "He is. He has to be. Dad put everything in motion so we could find each other."

"You know," I laughed as I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, "even if that's not true, I'm going to believe it because it sounds so nice. So, where's Mommy?"

We both turned to look at the porch. Vanessa was standing barefoot in her pretty dress. It was long-sleeved and flowing in a deep, velvet green. Her lovely red hair was curled, and there was a crown of flowers on her head. Her smile was strained, trying not to cry with us and

ruin her makeup. Hopefully, she was smart and invested in waterproof stuff like Lauren did when I shot hers.

“Hi,” she grinned.

I rushed to give her a hug. “You look like a wood spirit or something! You need some cute little wings, and you’d be a fairy!”

Laughing, she sniffed deeply. “I’m too fat to be one.”

“Shut up,” Jake snapped at her. “We’re not doing that today. You’re exquisite. Everyone agrees that you’re ethereal. Stop it.”

Pouting playfully, she smiled at her man. “Okay. Fine. Thank you. Go get changed,” she directed. Nodding, he patted me on the shoulder as he passed. “You must be Jasper! It’s so nice to meet you!” She went to hug him, too.

“What a beautiful home you have,” he complimented. “And you are just stunning. I agree with your husband. You look like some fairy tale creature. It’ll be perfect for the pictures, especially in this setting.” He looked around. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“We’re so happy to have you here. So, you’re staying for dinner, right? I’ve got stuff planned.” She took my hands to lead me inside the house to wait for him. At the very least, she needed her shoes.

“You don’t have to cook-”

“No, no. It’s already ready. I just have to pop it in the oven. I’ve been making freezer meals all week for when the baby comes. And I want to see how they turn out.”

“We’d love to,” my boyfriend replied for me graciously.

She beamed. “Wonderful. Let me finish getting ready, and we’ll get this party started!”

I had fun when I took pictures for my friends, but it was even better when it was my family. They had special spots they wanted for the photos, and we hopped all over the reservation. The last location was thankfully right in front of their home. When the sun set, we just walked inside. It was the best tour I could have asked for. Our land was beautiful.

“So,” Jake began after the delicious dinner Vanessa made as Jasper and I sat outside with him with a joint. He grew his own weed in a little garden behind his house. Apparently, our father did it before it was legal, but we weren’t supposed to tell grandpa that. He used it for his pain. “I kind of have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” I questioned with a brief smile.

“Yup.” He took a hit before blowing it out slowly. “I was looking through Dad’s old videos for something to show you. He had a major love for his big ass awkward as fuck video camera from the eighties. It’s mostly us as kids. But I found a tape with ‘Renee’ on it.”

I gasped in shock. “What was on it?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I decided to wait until you were here to watch it. So, it could be nothing. That’s the ‘kind of’ part. But I’ve never seen this one before.”

Biting my lip for a moment, I took a hit of my own to calm my nerves. “Oh. Well, do you want to watch it now?” I asked, looking at Jasper, then back to him. Jake nodded in response before putting his smoke in the ashtray.

The VCR was set up in their bedroom. My boyfriend offered to help Vanessa clean up in the kitchen to give us a little privacy. My brother and I sat at the end of the bed, the remote in his hand. We both stared at the black screen nervously.

“What if this is porn, and we end up seeing our parents doing it?” I jokingly whispered.

“Why do you think I waited?” He laughed loudly, tilting his head to the side as his eyes got wide. I snorted too. “I guess... Here we go.”

The scene popped up, static going across the television for a minute before it stabilized. The camera was being set up on something, adjusting to make sure it was in at the right height. It was obviously being pointed towards a bed and a pale, sleeping woman.

“Oh, no,” I squeaked, then laughed. “I’m scared.” He chuckled awkwardly beside me.

Then I saw our father move onto the mattress. He was wearing sleep pants and no shirt. He looked exactly like Jacob. Muscular and handsome. Detailed tribal tattoos covered his arms and shoulders, and his long black hair went in waves down his back. He smiled at the camera, winking at it.

“Oh, no,” Jake repeated.

And then he sang happy birthday, smoothing the curls away from the sleeping woman’s face to reveal that of my mother’s. But I barely recognized her. All the pictures I had of her were from after I was born. She looked gaunt and sickly, miserable in her shell. Here her skin was lovely and clear, her cheeks plump. I could see my features in her too. I brought my hand to my

mouth to hold in my whimper. When he finished the song, he kissed her temple and whispered that he loved her. As she woke up, her grin grew.

I had never seen her smile before. Not like that. Genuine, warm, and pure.

“I love you too,” she cooed as she rolled over to look at him. Slowly, she ran her hand over his cheek, pulling him into a slow and tender kiss. The way they looked at each other reminded me of the way Edward peered at Jasper or me, with absolute adoration in their eyes.

“The first words I’ve heard my mother speak since I was five are ‘I love you,’” I blurted out as I cried softly. Jake put his arm around my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

“So, what do you want to do today?” My father asked as he hovered over her, playing with her hair. “We can do whatever you want. It’s your day.”

She hummed and then giggled, drawing the covers up to her nose. “Can we stay in bed?”

“Uh, we might still be watching a porno,” Jake whispered, making me giggle through my tears.

“If that’s what you want,” Dad agreed readily.

Mom brought her hand up to his hair, bringing it over his shoulder. She was smiling as she dragged her fingers down his arm. “Is there anything you wanted to do today?” She offered, then bit her lip. Obviously, she was fishing to see if he made any plans.

He instantly beamed. “Actually, I’m so glad you asked that,” he began in an almost overly cheerful voice. “There was just one thing I wanted to do.” Then he brought something out of his pant’s pocket. It was a tiny velvet black box.

“Is that my present?” She lit up with excitement.

Dad shook his head, grinning at her. “No. It’s mine. Renee Swan.” He opened it, and inside was a silver ring. I couldn’t make out anything else about it since it was so far away, and the picture was a little blurry. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Wailing, both of my hands flew to my mouth. Jasper came bolting into the room, knocking the door so hard it rattled the walls, and Ness waddled behind. Both of them looked at me, then at the screen.

“Yes! Oh, my god! Yes, of course, I’ll marry you,” my mother practically screamed in his face, her arms flying around his neck. He fell back on the mattress with her on top of him. “Are you serious?!” She was obviously in his t-shirt and just panties.

“Um, nope. I’m practicing for April’s fools,” he said dryly, rolling his eyes. “Yes, I’m serious, silly woman.” She giggled before kissing him furiously. Finally, he put the ring on her finger. “I know it doesn’t have a stone, but I didn’t want it to look like a traditional engagement ring just in case-”

She quickly sat up. Mom looked terrified as the color drained from her face. “Oh, shit. What am I going to do about my parents? What if they find out?”

“Don’t worry,” he swore as he sat up too. “When I graduate, you and I will go to Washington. It’s that simple. I’ll help you escape and get you away from them. It’s only a couple of months away. There’s a little house waiting that is all mine. We’ll get married on the beach, start a family, and we’ll forget those bigots exist. Everything will be perfect. I promise.”

Mom nodded vigorously before finally looking down at her finger and smiled. “It’s already perfect. I love it. Oh, my god! We’re getting married. I love you so much!”

I couldn’t tear my eyes away. I felt Jasper put his hands on my shoulders to comfort me. Jake held my hand while Ness took the other. My heart had never been so hurt and so filled with joy at the same time. This was the best gift my brother could have given me. They looked so perfect and young- happy and full of life. And then to see my mother’s justifiable fear and know that she wouldn’t be that person by the time I was born.

“She was pregnant with me already,” I whimpered. “Probably not even that far along.”

Dad went to get the camcorder and brought it onto the bed. When he returned, they snuggled close. She lifted her hand to show the camera her ring. I instantly recognized it because it was on my own. My grandmother had given it to me when I was a teenager.

Both of my hands flew to my mouth again before I doubled over in pain, pressing my forehead to my knees. Jasper came to kneel in front of me, stroking my back. I sort of melted off the bed into his waiting arms.

I watched from Jasper’s grasp as my parents repeatedly kissed, longer and deeper each time. Finally, Mom looked at the camera, flushing and over the moon. “Okay. Time to put this away, or we won’t be able to show it to our kids.” Dad laughed loudly, mischievously biting her shoulder after he tugged down the neck of her shirt to expose it, then turned the video off.

“Shh, shh, shh,” my boyfriend hummed quietly in my hair, rocking me back and forth as he smoothed his hand through my curls. “It’s okay, dove. It’s okay.” I just shook my head, the tears coming in endless streams. “I know, I know. It’s okay. It’ll be okay. I’ve got you.”

“They were so happy! It’s so unfair! They should have left then!” I sobbed. “Why couldn’t he find me? Why couldn’t they be my parents? Why?” I demanded. “Why?”

He shook his head, kissing my temple. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve been wearing my mother’s engagement ring since I was a child,” I whispered. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know,” I chanted into his chest, my fingers gripping tightly at the back of his shirt.

“Are you really?” Vanessa asked in surprise. I slowly nodded and brought my fist up to show her from my spot on the floor in Jasper’s comforting grip. It was on the ring finger of my right hand. The one Edward purchased for me, that was similar in design but bigger, was on my pointer.

“Eddie bought the other for Christmas so he could sneakily find out what size I was. So he could buy me an engagement ring,” I informed her, looking at my shaking fist. “It makes it even more special somehow. He got it because he knew how much I loved my little one. Oh, god.” I clutched my fist to my heart.

Jasper squeezed me to his chest, and I buried my face in his neck. He kept patting my back lightly. “Mate, would it be possible for me to get that tape from you so I could make a digital copy for you both? I promise I will return it in perfect condition.”

“It’s Bella’s,” Jake said in a whisper. “I’d love a copy, though. There aren’t a lot of tapes of Dad walking. Are you okay, sis?” I only shook my head, not moving my face. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize!” I laughed. “This is-” I stopped myself, unable to find the words.

“I think you’ve had enough tonight,” my boyfriend muttered into my hair. I slowly nodded in agreement. “I’m going to get her back to the hotel, and all tucked in with a bottle of something.”

“Jack,” I breathed.

“I was thinking wine and aspirin, but that works,” Jasper countered as he stood, bringing me to my feet too.

“Don’t let me get too drunk. I need to be able to see straight tomorrow,” I implored. He kind of smirked as he rolled his eyes. “I can’t vomit in front of my grandpa.”

He kissed my temple as he put his arm around my waist. “Yeah, dove. I know. I won’t,” he spoke a bit sarcastically as he took the tape from Jake’s hands. “I wouldn’t expect us too early in the day.”

“That’s okay,” Vanessa promised, coming to give me a hug.

“Thank you again for dinner. It was delicious,” I whispered to my sister-in-law as she squeezed me. I felt the baby kick against my stomach, making me look down. I touched the bump gently, and she kicked at it several times. “I’m sorry I’ve got her so riled up.”

“She’s just worried about her aunt,” Jake answered for his wife as he came around to her. He pulled me from Jasper’s grip and hugged me. “I should have watched it first to prepare you.”

I shook my head. “No. It’s okay. Thank you for sharing it with me. I’m so glad you found it.”

“Me too.”

As soon as we got into the rental car, I began to sob loudly. Jasper buckled me up, kissing my temple again. Immediately, he looked up something on his phone. About forty minutes later, we were in front of a liquor store. He didn’t even ask if I wanted to go inside. He just leaned over, kissed my lips, and murmured he would be right back. I was still quietly crying.

He returned with a large brown paper bag, swiftly putting it in the back seat before typing in the address for the hotel into the direction’s app. It only took ten more minutes to get there.

We didn’t get out, just staring at the entrance. Darkness surrounded the car, and everything was silent except for the rain on the windshield. It had stayed away only long enough for us to have a perfect shoot.

“I never saw my mother’s smile,” I finally began. “I never got to hear my father’s laugh. If they had run away together, he would still be alive. He’d never been shot, and he would have been healthier in the first place. My mother would be alive and happy. I’d grown up in that cabin, and I would have had brothers and sisters. Maybe not Jake, Rachel, or Rebecca, but- I can’t even imagine what kind of person I would be. But I wouldn’t be this nervous wreck,” I bemoaned through my tears. “Perhaps I could have been that actress I wanted to be growing up and not have loathed myself so much I can’t even stand to hear my voice or look at my face. I still would have found you and Edward, just been confident because I knew no matter what happened, I would have this wonderful and loving support system back home waiting for me if I need them. Who believed in me and loved me,” I howled the last two words as I covered my eyes. “I’m sorry. This is embarrassing. I’m just so angry.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he said as he unbuckled my seatbelt so he could turn me in his direction. “I want to be here for you. It’s okay to let it out.”

“I’m so glad you are,” I whimpered. “I wish Edward was too, so you could squish me between you until I fall asleep.” He chuckled quietly, kissing the top of my head repeatedly. “Thank you for this.”

Both of his muscular arms wrapped around my shoulders, squeezing me tightly. I pulled back just a little to look into his blue eyes. They were glassy and red, and I could tell he was trying not to get too emotional for me, hoping to calm me down. With my fingers on his cheeks, I drew his mouth to mine. We kissed slowly and tenderly for a long, pleasurable minute.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” he swore against my lips.

“I know,” I smiled, swallowing. I gazed into his eyes once more. “Jasper, I love you,” I blurted out. I hadn’t even thought the words before, but I knew that’s what I had been feeling all along.

He drew in a quick, surprised breath before capturing my mouth again in a more searing kiss. His fingers moved to my hair, holding me to him. I felt tears roll down his cheek. “Oh, dove. I love you, too.”