



Episode Thirty:

Then they got down to business. I realized that this was real work. I was blown away by my girlfriend, who was just doing her job, like a boss, while holding the sleeping baby and eating at the same time. The only thing that really slowed her down was the fact that she needed help with cutting her meat. I had never seen 'career' Bella before, and I liked her a lot.

She agreed to help lead trips in the summer and fall, one to Ireland, not too far from my Grandparents, and to Disneyland, which wasn't far from me. I wondered if she did that on purpose.

Once the work for the day was done, I had so many things that I wanted to ask. Alice was excited to tell me whatever I wanted to know. I sat pressed against my girlfriend as she held the infant and fed him. He was a pretty little thing with lots of hair. I almost wanted to ask to hold him too, but big men requesting to hold babies are usually considered creepy. Especially if you don't know them. So, I instead played with his little fist as he ate. It wrapped tightly around my pointer finger.

I wanted to figure out the best way to give money to the non-profit so that it did the most good. This was something that Bella cared about, and I wanted to show her that I wanted to help too. I had already decided to make Culture for All my charity of the month for December. It was probably the first time that I had done anything charity related to impress a woman, and I couldn't bring myself to feel guilty about it. There were worse reasons to donate to a good cause.

And then Alice turned her attention to my girlfriend after answering a question that I had

about their classes and camps that they did. They were discussing doing a children's cooking camp when the UK trip came up again.

"I wish I could come with you to Ireland. I could go see my grandparents," I started wistfully as I pulled a curl away from Bella's temple and behind her ear so that it wouldn't go into her eyes while she was holding the baby. She looked so good with him. "You could meet them in person."

"Well, you are more than qualified to volunteer," her best friend said to me cheerfully. "All you have to do is fill out some paperwork and get endorsed by a qualified person-" Then Alice pointed a little finger at Bella.

"Yeah, of course," she replied as she brought the newborn up to her shoulder. It was apparent by the way she handled him that she was very experienced with babies, her time in the church daycare paying off. The boy looked up at me with a wobbly head as she patted his back firmly. He had a little milk around his mouth, so I carefully wiped it away. He smiled at me for a second, and I couldn't help but return it.

"And there you go. If you're really interested, I can put you on the list as one of the helpers. Bells can show you the website online to fill it out," Alice helpfully answered as she smiled at me.

"That's it?" I questioned in surprise.

The infant belched after a good pat, looking instantly relieved as he relaxed against her shoulder. Bella's hair fell around him like a curtain.

There were just a few of us left of the group, and now it felt more like a lunch with friends. I was enjoying it.

"This is an abled adults trip. Meaning it's adults who have issues that make it harder to travel, but they're still able to care for themselves. We're basically sheepdog trying to herd them and keep them from breaking things," my girlfriend giggled. "Mainly themselves. You don't need any special training for that. You're just a helper."

"Would we get time to see them? My grandparents?"

"They could come to anything we did. Museums. Gardens or whatever. And we can stay on our own dime after the trip is over. We just don't get our flights back paid for," she clarified next. She wasn't against this idea. It gave me so much hope to think that maybe the following year, the woman that I love could meet some of the people that I cared about most.

"Sven and I are going to go to Saint Petersburg after the trip we're doing together," Kebi stated, eating her dessert and waving her fork around a little as she spoke.

"Sven, her husband, is Russian, and he is actually paler than you somehow," Alice teased. I think she already liked me and I had to admit, I adored her as well.

Kebi shook her head, then sighed. "He's so white. We went to Trinidad for my mother's birthday, and I think he got paler, somehow. He went to the beach for three days, and it just bleached him. My children are going to look like Casper the ghost." I had to press my lips together to keep from laughing loudly. She reached over and took the baby from Bella, who frowned slightly. His mother was fully asleep, leaning against Alice.

She sort of giggled. "You'll have one dark kid like you and one light one, and they'll have the weirdest Jamaican Russian accent from New York, and I cannot wait. And I'll be their cool aunt."

"Who gives them weed when they're sixteen," Bella muttered under her breath.

Her friend was not embarrassed at all. "I am the cool aunt."

"It won't be cool by the time they're old enough. It'll be legal everywhere, and it'll be stuffier than wine because all the old people smoke it for medicine. I use it for my insomnia, and I honestly thought my first time would be a lot cooler when I was in school. But I was extremely uncool as a teen, so nothing has changed," I blurted out, warm from my wine.

Bella actually scoffed at me, glancing in my direction. "Oh, please. You're the coolest person in this room. You have literally millions of fans who scream your name. I've seen them. I've heard them. They love you because of how cool you are. False modesty is a filthy habit."

It shouldn't have been a turn-on for her to call me out on my bullshit, but her playful eyes and lips that were curved into a smirk was too much. I wanted her.

"Be careful not to cut those pretty lips with that sharp tongue of yours," I quipped back as I squeezed her leg under the table to show that I was teasing. She melted against me, her nose skimming over my cheek lightly before she pressed a kiss to it. Her smile was so warm and inviting.

God, I was so in love with her. It made me think about the ring again.

"You like it," she flirted. My girl wasn't wrong.

"Maybe a little."

"Maybe a lot," Alice smirked, giving us a funny look over her glass. "So, are you going back to the apartment after this? I have to go back to the office. Fucking paperwork."

Ah, what a mature way of letting us know that she wasn't going to be home so that we could fuck if we wanted to. Yeah, I did like Alice.

"I don't know. We haven't talked about it. Eddie has a hotel room, so at the very least, I'll have to get some clothes if I stay with him," she answered, glancing back at me. Yes, please stay with me.

I brought her hand up in mine. "We can do whatever you please. I'm just happy to be

here. I know you have things you have to do," I informed her, trying to be a gentleman as I kissed her hand before pressing it to my face so that I could feel the softness there. Her fingers cupped my skin.

"It doesn't matter where I sleep, though," she told me with a smile. "I want to stay with you if that's okay."

"Of course." Her smile grew.

"Okay. I hate to do this, but how do I wake Nicole?" Alice questioned.

"Gently and not like an asshole," Kebi joked, rocking back and forth in her seat with the baby.

"So, I just don't move then?" She inquired sarcastically. Bella snorted as she stood and walked to the other side of the table. She leaned over, gently rubbing the mother's shoulder before kissing her temple.

"Thanks for letting me play with your baby. He's super cute. You better get him back before Kebi leaves with him," she whispered. Nicole sat up quickly.

"She can take him." She rubbed a drowsy hand over her face. "She'll bring him back. I'm so sleepy."

"Oh, okay!" Their friend thundered, standing up with the bundle of joy.

"Let me know when you need me to start watching him!" Bella exclaimed, waving her hand.

"Please, no babies at the apartment," Alice mumbled to herself as she stood from her chair and stretched her arms over her head. "Patty is enough."

We walked out together. Bella made sure that Nicole and her newborn were in the back of a cab and on their way home before we caught our own. The sun was setting, and the streets were glowing a luminous amber. I watched Bella's face in the changing light. It was so serious.

"There is something we need to talk about. I wasn't going to bring it up, but since you're here, it kind of changes things," she finally began.

"I hope it wasn't a bad thing that I came." I thought about what Jasper had said. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to just pop up. She was quick to bring her hand up, though, shaking her head.

"No. It's great. I just... I haven't wanted to talk about it or think about it. But tomorrow is Aiden's birthday. I wasn't going to bring it up at all, but I go to the cemetery, and I usually spend the day with his family."

She seemed so small and nervous to tell me. I wish she had before. My birthday was so

close to his as well. I wondered if that upset her in any way.

“Oh... I'm sorry. It must be hard on those special days.”

She looked away as she flushed in embarrassment. “I haven't called his mom yet. I've been feeling guilty.”

“We can go to the cemetery tomorrow. Or you can go alone if you need to. I would understand either way,” I let her know. I would do whatever she needed. She smiled at me slowly, sadly.

“I would like it if you came. If you're not uncomfortable with that.”

“Of course I'll come.” I tugged her to me so that I could hold her to my chest, and she pressed herself against me. “Would you like to see his family as well?”

She didn't look at me. “I think I might just call this year. I don't know,” she sighed. “I should, but I don't know if it would make it harder for them. Or for me. They're great, it's just... so much. They're always...” she trailed off, flustered.

“We can do whatever you need to do,” I assured her quietly, refusing to let go.

“Is it going to be hard for you?”

The question surprised me. I sat back a little so that I could see her face. Why was she worried about me? “How so?”

Her lip quivered before she shook her head. “I love Aiden. I still love him. I will love him until the day I die. That won't ever change. No matter what I feel for you now or in the future.”

“I would never ask you to deny that either. It was very unfair what happened to you. Look into my eyes. Trust me. You're not going to scare me off.” I knew what I was getting into before we started dating. I wasn't frightened of her past. It made her into the beautiful woman that I was holding.

She shook her head, clearly upset. “That's not fair to you.”

“How?” I questioned as I lifted her eyes to look into mine. Then I realized that she was worried that her sadness would make me envious of him in some way. No, I wasn't. I had her now. That's what mattered. “No. Just... no. Don't even think about that. I'm not going to be jealous of someone who loved you so well.”

“I'm going to cry in front of you tomorrow. Like, actually cry. Not overly emotional in Target crying. It's not going to be pretty. Or nice. Or sexy. Or quick.”

“We'll stop to get tissues. And chocolate. And wine. And whatever else you may want or need,” I replied.

"I took tomorrow off because I've been a mess in the past. I don't feel as emotional as I have been, but..." She kept shaking her head. Bella looked so embarrassed and ashamed, and I couldn't understand why. "I have survivor's guilt. I've always struggled with it. With my mom, then my grandmother, some. I recognize it, and I understand why I feel it, but it doesn't change the fact that it's there in the background. It's one of those fun things about PTSD. You... this... right now helps, though. You're what I need. You're what I want, Edward," she said in a rush, looking up at me with such fear. I brought my hands to her face so that I could pull her lips to mine. Her kiss was needy, her fingers clutching at the lapel of my wool peacoat.

"Whatever you need tomorrow," I whispered into her hair. "I will do my best to give it to you."

As soon as we walked into Bella's apartment, the cat began to meow very loudly from the top of her high tower, not far from the front door. Bella reached to pet her, but Patty rolled onto her stomach so that she couldn't. My girlfriend smirked as she forcefully gave the kitty the bird. I chuckled, scratching her belly. She obviously liked it because she began to purr.

"You slut," she insulted the cat.

"She's so fat and fluffy," I mumbled as my fingers danced over her tummy until her tail curled around it. So I played with that instead.

"That's because Alice feeds her chubby ass waffles. She begs worse than a dog." Patty noticed the door opening, so she jumped down to follow for more pettings. "No. You don't get to go into my room. Go to your mama's."

Bella waved her hand in front of the open door. I went inside, and she closed it swiftly. The kitty shoved her paws under the door right away in protest. It rattled violently in place as she locked it.

Her room was big, probably the size of my master bedroom. There was a large comfortable looking leather sofa on one wall, and on the other, there was a small white daybed. Everything was perfectly neat, and it smelled like coffee, vanilla, and coconuts. Just like her. I breathed it in deeply.

I walked to her window so that I could see the view that she loved so much. As soon as I saw the Empire State building, I smiled to myself.

Bella's arms wrapped around me from behind as she pushed her face into my shoulder. As she held me, I realized that she missed me just as much as I had her. Coming early wasn't a mistake, but maybe the best thing that I could have done. I needed to be here for her.

I felt so overwhelmed as I turned to look at her. I didn't know what to say, so I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I like your room."

"Thank you. It's not as impressive as, say, a five-bedroom three-bathroom McMansion with a pool and a waterfall in Burbank. But I like it," she teased dryly. She was playing with me.

“You want different things from a home in New York,” I joked in return. “The real estate market is very different. But I'd trade my pool for that view. And to be closer to you.”

This goes with episode 26 of Imperfect Pictures!