



Episode Forty-five

Once again, I was left alone early in the morning so that Bella could prepare for the show that evening. I felt a little tired and sore from all of our fun, so I was happy to have the time to sleep in. I took some aspirin when I got up. We had spent most of the night fucking in the most obscene ways, and my shoulders and back hated me for it.

It was worth it.

So, instead of going out to purchase clothing, I bought it online and had it delivered to the hotel. It was incredible how quickly they could get stuff to me. Money was such a helpful thing.

Jasper sent a few messages asking about the day. I texted that it was amazing and to call me when he had a chance. I smiled when it rang just a moment later.

“Amazing? That’s all I get, you wordy bastard?”

I laughed. “Honestly, it was better than that. I don’t know how many details you want.”

“All of them. What did you do?”

“Well, we waked and baked and had mimosas and breakfast in bed. Then we ran to a sex shop where I went bonkers. Just nuts,” I chuckled. “I spent so much. Bella was trying to get me to open up, and I don’t think she was prepared for it when I did.”

He snorted. “What did you get?”

“Clothes, shoes, lube, bondage gear, and a half a dozen vibrators. Tons of random shit. I think I embarrassed the hell out of her, but she humored me.”

Jasper hummed loudly, then laughed. “Bondage? I hate to inform you that blindfolds don’t qualify.”

“Hey!” I grunted. “Actually, we bought a kit. And clamps. And she picked out a riding crop and a collar.” I cleared my throat as I blushed. “Cuffs, too. She really liked those.”

“So did you just spend all day smoking weed, eating, and fucking?”

“Yup, pretty much.”

He sighed softly. “Oh, you lucky cunt,” he mumbled in annoyance. “I need to get laid.”

“I thought you got laid the other day!”

“But it wasn’t all day birthday sex.”

I scoffed. “That’s true.”

“What are you doing today?” Jasper questioned, changing the subject.

“Bella is performing at that charity show, and I’m going to support her. Then we’re going to a club afterward to the afterparty. This is one I’m looking forward to. It’ll probably be a lot of fun.”

“Aw!” He responded cheerfully. “Well, that’s nice, darling.”

“Oh!” I remembered something. “I have stuff to tell you.”

He was quiet for a long minute. “Oh?”

“Bella’s coming to Sydney with me! You’ll get to meet her! I’m so fucking excited. She agreed last night.” I chuckled happily. “I was talking to my Grandpa Alistar over Facetime, and that shifty old bastard flirted with her, brought it up, and then abandoned me when he realized I hadn’t asked her yet. But it worked out.”

“Oh! Cool!” He remarked. “In February?”

“Yup! So, what are you doing right now? I don’t suppose you want to help me plan this extra-special romantic trip for Bella before then? Since you’re so good at it.” He had helped me with pretty much everything at least a little. He always had such wonderful ideas. “I want to take her on a quick snow holiday around Christmas.”

He laughed quietly at my sucking up, then cleared his throat. “Um, I’m off right now.” There was a pause. “So, sure. Yeah. I’ll help, mate. What do you need?”

I hummed for a moment. “Where the fuck do I take her?”

We worked until I got too hungry. I let him go to get ready, going to a pizza shop not too far from the hotel in my new layers. Beside it was a florist. They delivered, so I sent two roses with a handwritten message to tell the ladies to break a leg. Bella was pretending she wasn’t nervous, but I could tell. They were just a little something to encourage her before. I also purchased a beautiful rainbow bouquet in a variety of colors to give her afterward.

When I arrived at the theater, Riley, Demetri’s partner, found me. He waved me over to his group of seats. “Oh! She will love those!” He said as he placed his hand on his heart.

“I hope so!”

He pointed to a seat. “This is yours.” Rosalie was already sitting down with her husband.

“Hi, man! Welcome! Join us!” Emmett greeted me loudly, shaking my hand.

“Thank you!” I took my spot beside the gorgeous blond, putting the flowers on my lap. “So good to see you again.”

“Did you have a fun birthday?” She questioned, lightly touching my arm. Her smile was pleasant and slightly knowing.

I chuckled softly. “It was splendid, thank you. I got to spend it with Bella.”

“Aw,” she grinned then pouted out her full lips. “That’s sweet. She was so happy on Thanksgiving! It was nice.”

“Yeah, it was nice to see,” Riley agreed as he sat in the seat beside me. He shook his head. “She was walking on air. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen her this happy, to be honest.”

Rosalie cocked her head to the side then shrugged. “There were points with Aiden, but I think she’s more stable and healthy now, so it makes a difference. Her anxiety is better than it was. She’s slowing down and relaxing.”

“As much as she can,” Emmett chuckled. He leaned over to look at me. “I used to think she had ADHD. She still might, she’s just better at handling it.”

“No, it’s the anxiety,” Rosalie mumbled to him in a whisper. “And what her grandmother did to her.”

“What do you mean?” I questioned. Bella didn’t talk about the woman who raised her often, but it was always loving.

I think they forgot I was there, and I didn’t know all the stories they did. The blond licked her lips then glanced over at me, considering everything she wanted to tell me. Then she huffed. “That bitch straight-up abused her. She was what I guess you’d call a helicopter grandparent. They would wake up every day at four in the morning and from then to the moment they went to sleep at ten that night, she had her work. She studied, read the bible, practiced her music, cooked, and cleaned. That witch treated her like a slave and would beat the crap out of her if it wasn’t perfect. Did you know her mom started her in gymnastics when she was a toddler, and she was so good at it she got scholarships? Won tons of shit. After she died, that cow rode her so hard to keep it up that it was making Bella a wreck. When she quit, she hit her with a belt until she bled and grounded her for months.”

“No,” I breathed.

“Bella would call it tough love,” Emmett remarked as he shook his head.

She scrunched up her face in disgust. “She wouldn’t want to speak ill of the dead. But I will. I despised that woman. I hated her so much. So did Alice. She used to give our mom shit for being divorced, too.”

I felt sick to my stomach. “Did she really beat her?”

Looking down at her hands, she nodded. “Her back and thighs used to be covered in tiny scars. Mama took her to a lot of spa treatments to get rid of them. She hid the worst with tattoos.”

I realized then that Alice and Rosalie were both honest and blunt women who would tell anyone the truth if they felt they needed to hear it. No matter how brutal.

Slowly, I wiped my hand over my mouth. “No wonder everyone is so worried about me giving her new scars. She’s already had a lifetime of them,” I said to myself before I shook my

head. "She's really gone through a lot, hasn't she? I feel like I'm just now starting to understand how much. She is so damn strong."

"She's been to hell at least three times," she told me in a serious voice. "The next time she's there, it better be because her fine ass is there to take over, not because someone else dragged her through it."

I laughed at her words. "No worries. I'd protect her with my life if I had to. Bella is such a kind-hearted and strong-willed woman. I would never do anything to harm her. Every day I am just blown away by her goodness. Like this." I pointed my hand towards the stage. "I love this. This is exactly something I would do. I admire her dedication to her charity work."

"She's always wanted to make the world a better place."

"Me too."

Her husband leaned over again. "I think besides Alice, Bella has probably put in more hours than any person I know," Emmett added into the conversation. "She used to do twelve-hour days in the office when AI was starting up. She was the first one I met when I started at CFA, actually," he chuckled.

She looked disgusted again. "He hit on her. She was bent over cleaning, and he complimented her ass."

"Am I never going to live that down?" He questioned his wife, pouting at being called out. I snickered at him. I couldn't blame him for liking it. It was a fine one to be sure.

"You said, 'Hey mama, nice ass!'" Riley looked at him and snorted. "Who thinks that's a good idea? Ugh, straight people. You were doing charity work!"

"Uh, a horny twenty-something?" He answered, then shrugged. "Hey! She thought it was funny!"

Rosalie rolled her eyes, ignoring him. I chuckled. "I have to admit, there is something about her charity work that does things to me. So, I don't blame you. Also, her ass is legendary." He winked at me.

"She is dedicated," Riley mused.

"You know that AI considers CFA as much Bella's as it is hers? She put up so much of the money to start it and has worked more than any other leader. Alice told me she's over ten thousand hours logged, but you know it's more than that."

“Damn,” Emmett breathed. “It’s because she does all the long trips.”

“It’s incredible that she just gives her time away like that.” He quickly nodded in agreement.

“Well, as a volunteer, you get twelve fifty an hour. So, she gets a little something,” she countered.

Her husband leaned over to continue the conversation. “Not in the beginning, though. It was only after Aiden died that she started accepting it. Usually, she just gave it back.”

“She put everything on hold to help her, too.” Rosalie shook her head, frowning. “I think her career would be in a different place if she hadn’t. I know she doesn’t regret it, but I think it upsets Al. She feels guilty when she watches her struggle financially. She’s still paying off the bills Aiden left her with.”

I wasn’t in the least bit surprised at anything they said. The lights chose that moment to dim. Just a second later, Demetri came out onto the stage wearing a bright bubblegum pink princess style ball gown.

“Wow!” I declared in surprise. Riley looked over at me in a smirk. “That is pink.”

“It’s his color,” he replied.

“It looks good on him.” He smiled and nodded happily in agreement. I chuckled quietly.

I didn’t know what Bella was doing in the show besides the ending. She would dance, but other than that, she hadn’t given me many details. So with every act, I became a little more excited, hoping to see her beautiful face from just a few rows back. I hadn’t ever seen a girlfriend in a thing like this before. I was usually the dramatic one.

Something like a tune from a music box played after Demetri came out in his third outfit. This one was a tux. The area was dark behind him. “Dance is where I fell in love with the stage,” he announced to the audience. “Just like so many other kids out there. But I knew that I was different. Just a bit of a rebel.”

He passed off the mic before the lights turned up. Bella was dressed as a ballerina with her leg bent back behind her. Demetri held his hand out to her, and she seized it so he could pull her off the platform. The song changed to one I recognized but didn’t know the name of. It fit his speech perfectly.

My girlfriend had told me she took ballet as a teenager and that once she came to New York City, she continued to take classes to help her try to get roles. She downplayed it, though. She acted as if she was terrible, and that was part of the reason she quit.

I had never seen anyone move like that so close up. It was like she was telling a story with her body. Every motion was clean and perfect, sharp, and to the point. She worked amazingly with her partner as he spun her around the stage until he ripped off her dress to reveal a black one underneath.

Demetri threw her around like she was a feather. I could see her gymnastic training in the way she landed in a proper split after one of his flips. When the song ended, she twirled her way back to the platform.

The whole packed audience cheered wildly for her. I clapped and stood to my feet, as did everyone else. There were wolf-whistles and catcalls all around us.

“That was incredible!” I breathed in wonder.

Rosalie leaned in. “Bella wanted to take ballet when we were kids, but her grandmother wouldn’t pay for it. So, Alice convinced our mom we all wanted to, and that we needed her to do it with us. Isn’t she great? I always loved watching her.”

I did something I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help myself. I pulled my phone out and sent a message to Bella. “You have been seriously holding out on me,” I informed her, adding a bunch of stupid emojis to go with it. I felt giddy from just watching her, my heart beating a million miles an hour.

“I told you I was a dancer. Thanks, but I’m not that good.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “But, like... You’re a legit dancer. Like you have real moves. Ballet moves.” I didn’t know how to word my feelings. They were overwhelming me.

“You are so so so sweet and biased. I stopped dancing seriously a decade ago, and I’m rusty as fuck. I’m so sore. I might be dying right now, actually. Like legit. My chest.” She sent a funny gif of a man grabbing his breast like he was having a heart attack.

“lol You did great though,” I promised, grinning to myself. I sent a whole rainbow of hearts.

An hour later, the show was wrapping up. Demetri came to the stage again in his tux. Bella was standing behind him in her own suit, but it was very feminine. It was fitted to her body and so sexy. Something in my brain just misfired and kind of shut down when I watched her. I

didn't even hear what her friend was monologuing about. Watching her expertly play while looking like that made me melt in my seat.

And then she sang.

"Wow," I whispered to myself. I saw Rose nod in agreement. "Why isn't she on Broadway?"

"She's not as confident as she pretends to be," she replied. "That's why you have to encourage her every step of the way."

I just nodded in understanding.

It took forever to get to my girl. There were so many people trying to get her attention. When she finally saw me through the sea of bodies, she threw herself at me. I caught her easily, lifting her feet off the ground. She giggled cheerfully as she kissed my cheek.

I put her down, appreciating the view close up. "You look incredible."

"Yeah, this queer groomsman's look ticks so many boxes for me," her blond friend agreed, giving Bella a tight hug too.

She looked pleased with herself, slipping both of her hands in her pant's pockets as she averted her eyes to the floor. "Oh, I should skip the dress next wedding then? Demetri has such good taste."

"Those shoes are everything," his husband added, looking at her feet. I hadn't even really noticed how high her heels were. They made her almost four inches taller. "I bet you can't dance in those."

Glancing down, she shrugged. "I used to be able to. But it's been a while. So, I guess we'll find out, won't we?"