



Episode Fifty-three:

The next day, Bella was awake before I was. She had hopped herself to the bathroom with her crutches and brushed her teeth. Her sweet minty kisses stirred me from my slumber pleasantly. They were so cool, causing my lips to tingle just a little. She was still in the sexy nightgown from before, and I knew she wasn't wearing panties. It was an unbelievable way to wake up.

"Yum," I mumbled against her mouth, making her giggle. I brought my fingers to her hair, holding her in place as long as possible.

She carefully brushed her fingertips over my temple, her smile almost dreamy. "How are you feeling?" My girlfriend pushed a curl out of my eyes, biting her lip as she did.

Swallowing and sniffing to check, my throat seemed fine, and my nose was only slightly clogged. I rolled my head, and my neck popped loudly, but it wasn't painful. I had just been in the same position for too long. Yawning, I cracked my back. "I'm good. I feel okay. How are you?" I questioned as I ran my hand over her jaw.

"I'm fine." She bit her bottom lip again, closing her eyes as she leaned into my touch. She slid her palm over mine and pressed it against her skin. "I want to go out with you today."

“What would you like to do?” I asked encouragingly. She seemed to be in a good mood, and I wanted that to continue- anything to see that smile. My thumb ran over the scar on her cheek. Bella turned her head to peck my hand.

“Well,” she began as she traced my stomach with her nails. My abs were already starting to fade from my lack of working out, but I didn’t care. At least I wasn’t sore from that anymore. I had been overdoing it in my boredom and loneliness. “I was thinking about the Natural History Museum and the MOMA.”

“Oh... Museum of Modern Art?” I inquired. She nodded with a grin. It went all the way to her glowing eyes. She obviously loved the idea. How could I say no to that? “Sure. Either would be great.”

Pushing herself up on her palms, she sat up a little as her smile grew. “We could do one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. They’re not too far apart. We can go to Central Park, too,” she spoke like a giddy child.

Pulling her down for another kiss, I grinned against her minty lips. Bella was beaming. “Sounds perfect. Do you want to go out to dinner tonight? I promised to take you out somewhere nicer once I felt better,” I reminded her, pecking her mouth in between the sentences. Part of me wished we could just stay in bed and fool around, but she wasn’t up to that. I wasn’t sure she was really up to anything other than relaxing.

“If you’re up to it.”

Scoffing, I pulled back to look at her. “Me? You’re the one-”

Bella rolled his mismatched eyes. “With a wheelchair and pain meds. And you’ll have to roll me around. If you want to stay in bed all day again, I’m cool with that, too.”

It was as if she could read my mind. As tempting as it was, I remembered her face from before. I didn’t need to be tempted, anyway. I shook my head, kissing her once more. “No. I like your idea.”

She was even more alluring in the shower than she was the day before. But that was on purpose. The way she rubbed all over me was shameless. I was trying to be a gentleman, but she was doing everything in her power to make me hard. But I was too afraid of hurting her. I would never forgive myself if I did more damage to her poor foot. Bella pouted when I turned off the water again. I felt it, too.

The history museum wasn’t wildly busy, but it was fairly early in the day. She took her camera out as soon as we arrived and started snapping away at a stunning speed. She twisted

and bent in her chair or raised her arms above her head. It was obvious that she was enjoying herself, and I loved watching her more than seeing the exhibits. She looked at everything with such wonder and joy. People moved out of the way for her, giving her the best views possible. Every chance I could, I brushed her hair away from her neck and lightly kissed it as I crouched to see what she was taking pictures of. And she would show me with a glowing grin.

“So, what do you want to do for lunch?” I questioned as we rolled around the edge of Central Park. Orange and brown leaves littered the concrete, crunching under the wheels. She was even snapping photos of that. She was tilting her head to the side as she looked at the results.

“Mm...” She hummed, taking another. “Have you had a hot dog yet? It’s a tradition.” Bella glanced over her shoulder at me.

Shaking my head, I shrugged. “Nope. Sounds good to me.”

We moved a little into the park, into the shade. There was a children’s play area close to us. I sat on a bench with her facing me in her wheelchair once we got our hot dogs from the bright yellow Nathan’s truck near the entrance.

“I love these so much,” she confessed through a big bite. She brought her tiny hand up to cover her mouth, mumbling the words. “When I first came, I was broke as hell. All the money I had went to my education and moving. And our place, even though Roe and Al mostly paid for that. There was a cart close to school that I went to almost daily. It was a dollar, and sometimes it was the only thing I would eat all day. If I was working, they’d always feed us, but-” She shook her head. “I survived on cheap slices and these.”

Gazing at her, I realized just how different the worlds we came from were. I was never that broke. Ever. And if I didn’t have the cash, I always had credit cards I could use if I needed it for emergencies. It reminded me of Jasper’s harsh childhood. My best friend had more in common with my girlfriend than I did. I chewed my bite for a second quietly, giving myself time to reflect. I was so privileged, and it wasn’t a good thing.

So, I went in a different direction. “Which slice was your favorite?”

“Oo,” she drew out, her eyelashes fluttering as she thought about it. Bella tapped her chin lightly. “I don’t think they’re there anymore. Something like Gino’s. They did the traditional Italian style. You’d like them. Next time we need to do that.”

It did my heart so good to hear her talk about future visits.

“I have had pizza. It was pretty decent.” I leaned forward and absently wiped some ketchup from her cheek with a napkin. She flushed and grinned at the action, looking away as

she brushed her hair out of her face. Taking her chin, I kissed her lips lightly. “Ready for some art?”

“Always,” she spoke with a smile. Her cheeks were still pleasantly pink.

The MOMA was a big white open space. It had a pride flag hanging in front of a glass wall that went out onto a patio with a fountain. There was a colossal statue of a rose in it. Bella took a bunch of pictures of it, then showed them to me. She was such a talented artist. All the colors were stunning and I never could have achieved the angle she did, nor would I have thought to try it at all.

Most of the people were unsurprisingly around Vincent van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. But I could see why. Photographs and copies did not do it justice. The depth of the paint was astounding. It was a living, breathing world. A hot, lazy summer evening. The wind was blowing across the rooftops, twirling the wisps of clouds.

My girlfriend took my hand and squeezed it. “The first time I saw it, I cried,” Bella admitted in a quiet voice. “I was so ready to be disappointed. But it was more than I hoped it would be, which is so rare. It’s only happened to me a few times before.” I leaned down and kissed her temple at her words. My girl was sharing a part of herself with me. Twisting to peck my cheek, she scratched her fingers over my chin before turning to whisper in my ear. “You’re one of those times. So much more than I expected.”

My heart jumped in my chest.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I replied before kissing her lips. She returned it slowly, her eyelashes fluttering closed. We were in our own bubble, everything else around us just noise. But then I felt something on my arm. It was a surprisingly sharp tug. I turned in surprise. Several young women were standing behind me with their phones. All of them were grinning wildly.

“Hi! Pardon me. Are you Eddie Cullen?” The one that touched me asked in a thick accent. She was the ringleader, or maybe the one that spoke English the best.

I cleared my throat and straightened up. My soul deflated a little when I realized I had to go to work and interrupt this special moment. But I couldn’t let it show. I forced a smile. “Yes, I am. Hi.”

“Oh, my god!” She giggled, bringing her phone up to her face to hide behind it. “That’s so awesome. We’re big fans. We love your videos, and we’ve watched all of them.” She waved her finger between her friends as she spoke. The girl was so loud, drawing attention to us. “We’re on vacation from Tokyo. Can we take a picture with you, please?” She asked politely.

I glanced at my girlfriend to make sure it was okay, and she smiled encouragingly. I held in my sigh as I turned back to them. "Yeah, of course," I said cheerfully, even if I wasn't in the mood. Thankfully, Bella didn't seem to mind at all. She even helped take a group picture for them. It was so embarrassing, getting all the stares. I was literally no one and didn't deserve their happy squeals as I posed with each of them. It should have felt good, but the last thing I wanted was my time with her taken away. I didn't want to be a celebrity right then, and I hated thinking of myself as one.

After we finished the museum, we went back to the hotel to get freshened up. She retired to the bathroom to do her makeup and hair, wobbling out on one crutch in a sexy little sweater dress. She had one long thigh high stocking on. It made me pause. Her injury did nothing to take away from her charm. Perhaps it added to it.

"Damn, you're so beautiful," I muttered absently almost to myself.

Blushing, she tried to make it to the bed, but I quickly scooped her up and put her on the edge. It made her giggle, holding onto my neck as I did. I didn't want her to tire herself out. Once again, I kneeled down at her feet to help put on her shoe. "You're my Prince Charming," she cooed as she played with my hair. Her fingers moved over my jaw. "You make me feel like a princess when you dote over me like this."

"Do you enjoy it?" I inquired as I took her hand in both of mine. I brought her knuckles up to my mouth to kiss, letting my lips rest on each one for a long second as I held her gaze. She nodded, biting into the corner of her bottom lip as a slight blush tinted her nose. "Good to know. I promise to keep it up."

The restaurant I picked was uncomfortably narrow. It was too small for her chair, so she took out the shorter crutches she brought with her that were stored in the back. They were the kind that supported her forearms. She moved in front of me slowly and as carefully as she could. It was nerve-wracking.

She was doing fine until a pole caught on a chair. I was prepared, worriedly walking close behind. Instantly, my arms went around her waist. I wouldn't allow her to hurt herself if I could help it. She gasped, her eyes going wide as her face twisted around to look at me.

"Are you okay?" I breathlessly asked.

"Yes," she grumbled, leaning back against my chest for a moment as she got her balance again. She let out an unsteady breath before glancing up once more. "Thank you."

I held her arm the rest of the way to the table. When we got to it, I put her foot up into a chair to keep the swelling down. We sat close together since it was loud. It made it feel so much more intimate. I enjoyed how she whispered in my ear with a seductive smile. Her lips were so

full, and I liked to just watch her talk. We shared a bottle of wine, taking the night slowly. Bella kept stealing kisses, much to my pleasure.

We couldn't get close enough. It felt like we were magnets again. The pull was so strong. She had to feel it too. The intensity was shocking, and it was as if, at any moment, we would collide together.

It was fairly early when we went back to the hotel, but that was fine with me. I was ready to be alone with her. No tourists or waiters to interrupt in our bedroom.

Bella was quiet while riding up in the elevator. We were about halfway up when I heard her squeak. It was a strange sound. Her mouth was twisted, squeezed shut tightly. She was trying to hold her chin up as she stared ahead, but tears were streaming down her face in rivers. It was so sudden.

Moving down to her level, I was worried that her foot was bothering her. The fall had concerned me, but she seemed fine after. "Love? What's the matter? Are you in pain? Are you okay?"

Her lips quivered as she looked away from me. "I don't want you to leave tomorrow."

"I don't either. But I have to." If I could have gotten out of my contracts, I would have so I could take care of her. She was more important. But it was far too late for that now.

"I know," she breathed as she shook her head. She couldn't look at me. It almost seemed as if she was embarrassed. I couldn't understand why.

"You can come with me."

Pain went across her entire face as she tried to hold back her emotions. "I can't," she sobbed. "This is not how I wanted things to go. I wanted to give you as good a time as you gave me. This isn't what I wanted."

I laughed at the absurdity of it all. "Well, of course not." I took her hand. "It's not your fault. And I'm the one that got sick for most of it."

"I wanted it to be as perfect as the time we had together in LA."

It warmed my heart that she thought of our time together like that. I did too. "You can't control that, Bells." I enjoyed using her friend's nickname for her. It was so cute. "And, even if it wasn't perfect, I got to spend it with you. That's all I wanted in the first place. And it's all I want for Christmas, too." I pecked at each of her knuckles as I had done earlier in the night. I could taste the salt on them.

“The twentieth seems so far away now.”

“I know. At least it’s not as long as before.”

“I guess,” she said as her other hand scrubbed her skin. She seemed almost angry, but not at me. Maybe at the situation. I rolled us to our room.

Moving my hands over her shoulders from behind, I leaned down and kissed her briny cheeks several times. She turned her face towards mine and captured my mouth. It lasted for a few needy moments with her fingers in my hair. I had to steady myself on the arms of the chair to keep myself upright.

When we pulled apart, we stared into each other’s eyes. In that moment, I wanted so badly to tell her I was in love with her, with the flickering lights of Manhattan as the backdrop. If I were braver, it would have been a sublime ending to a perfectly imperfect day.