



Episode Fifty-five

Once I checked out, we went to a small lunch. It was nothing fancy. It was a little deli where we sat in a corner. My heart was in my throat the entire time we waited, looking for someone else to pop up and be an asshole. Thankfully, there were no incidents. I couldn't really taste anything I was eating, though. We both needed to eat, but it was mechanical, nothing more than fuel.

Being quiet was wasting my time with her, but I was too deep in my thoughts. Bella picked at her food, not excited about it either. She ate half of her sandwich, nibbling on her chips as she gazed towards the window out onto the street. She seemed on the edge of tears again. So was I.

The pavement was crowded with Christmas shoppers. It was a pretty day with a few clouds in the blue sky, but it was windy. It whipped their scarves and jackets around, pulling at their hats. The red-leaf trees that decorated the lane where we waited for our car swayed and threw leaves everywhere. The crimson ominously dotted the streets.

We had plenty of extra time when we got to her apartment. We wanted to make sure traffic wasn't a problem, so we left early. Also, I needed to make certain she was comfortable

and settled before I left. It was actually hard to fit her chair in the elevator. She held one of my bags in her lap.

Carefully, I moved Bella onto her couch with her foot propped up. Once she was snug, she pulled me down next to her to stop my nervous fidgeting. The entire time, she laid against me with one of her hands in mine. She was eerily silent, her frown etched deep on her normally cheerful face. I wanted to take it away, but I knew I looked just the same. My heart was heavy in my chest, sitting almost in the pit of my stomach. Acid swirled inside of it, leaving a foul taste in my mouth.

The engagement ring burned a hole in my jacket pocket. The box was inside my coat, pressed against my breast. My thumb moved over the ring finger of her left hand repeatedly, trying to imagine it there. It seemed so big in my mind, and her fingers were so small and delicate. Then I tried to see her in a white dress, but I couldn't. It didn't seem right for her, and I remembered how uncomfortable she looked in the one with Aiden. Instead, I imagined the suit she had worn so well. It was the only thing that made me smile.

I attempted to ignore the time as much as possible, but I knew I couldn't.

"I have to go. They won't leave without me, but..." I lamely joked as I stood. I strode over to my luggage to get the rest of the weed oil for her. She didn't have easy access, and I could always get more back home. "For you and Alice, yeah?" I carefully chucked them onto her day bed for later. "I don't like it as much as my joints."

She smirked a little. "She'll love you forever," she stated lightly before her face changed, and she picked at the blanket draped over her lap. "I think I'll open one of those, take two pain pills, and go to bed until my doctor's appointment on Tuesday."

"It's not a terrible idea. I wish I could join you. I don't know how I'm going to sleep without you again," I admitted, feeling exhausted. All I wanted to do was curl up with her on her little mattress like we did the night before Thanksgiving, quietly making love until we both passed out. It just made me sadder. "Do you need anything before I go?"

Her pouty, full lips quivered as her eyes turned red. "A kiss."

Without hesitation, I took her mouth while holding her tiny face in my hands. She held onto mine, giving back as good as I gave. The moments melted together, time losing all meaning as we desperately clung to each other. It was so hard to pull away. "Now I really have to go," I breathed. "Feel better, my darling," I whispered before I pecked her forehead.

Bella tried to force a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. I could see the obvious struggle in them. It was the one I was feeling, too. "I'll be fine in a few days," she promised weakly. "Be careful. Text me when you're on the plane."

“I will.” I couldn’t resist, and I kissed the top of her head one last time. “Goodbye, love.”

When I shut the door of her apartment behind me, I had to stop and take a breath. My hands were trembling at my side. I couldn’t and would not cry in public. I was a grown man, and I could handle my emotions.

Of course, I was lying to myself.

In the elevator, I swiped at my cheek and sniffled. My nose was a little stuffed up, and my brain was hollow. When I got out to the street, I pulled out my phone to order a car. Something in my pocket rattled. The keys to Bella’s apartment were still in my possession. I had forgotten all about them in my distress. Smiling at them, I was grateful for my accidental excuse to give her one more kiss.

“Oh, darn,” I muttered sarcastically to myself as I turned to go back inside with my luggage rolling behind me. I would, of course, have to return them to her. The entire ride up, I grinned to myself. It just felt like a bonus, like finding one more fry at the bottom of the bag. I was greedy and always wanted more.

Going back inside without knocking, I left my suitcase by the door. Patty greeted me with a loud meow. I patted her head when she jumped up to her tree before moving back into her room. “I’m sorry. I realized I forgot to give you your keys back...” I began loudly to announce myself but paused when I saw that Bella was in Alice’s lap, weeping heavily. Her red face was covered in tears, her lips trembling as her fingers curled into her friend’s trousers. Alice looked at me with pain in her eyes as she stroked her best friend’s black hair. “Oh, no, no, no. Don’t do that.”

I moved so quickly that I tripped on my own feet and slid in front of her on my knees. The ache was shocking, but it didn’t matter. I took her face in my hands and tried to wipe away her anguish.

“What did you expect?” She said in a thick, emotional whimper. Her chest heaved with the overwhelming distress she was letting out. Her body was shaking with the effort. She brought her palm to my cheek, and it was moist with her tears.

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but I don’t want this. It hurts my heart so much.”

Turning to kiss her hand several times, I pushed it into my skin. I could feel my own emotions beginning to overflow. Everything I had been trying to hold in on the elevator came flooding out.

The door closed behind her roommate as she left us alone. I didn't even notice she got up. I was so focused on Bella. Patty meowed at her in annoyance. "Come on, girl," she whispered to her quietly as she shuffled back to her room. Her own sorrow was clear in her tone.

I needed to calm down, at least for her sake. I knew she was unhappy, but I didn't realize that it was going to hit her so hard. Sad, yes, but this was so much worse. My heart kept breaking and made me want to stay even more.

"It's not that long. It's just until the twentieth. We will both be so busy it will fly by. I promise," I lied for both of us.

"I know. Don't cry," she begged, curling her fingers against my skin. I hated the tremor of anxiety in her voice.

Resting my forehead against hers, I shook my head a little. "That's not fair. If you can cry, then so can I." There was no way I could stop myself.

Our magnetic force kept me in place for so long. Silent, my thoughts were screaming a thousand things at me at once. Stay. Don't go. She's hurting. Take care of her. She needs you. She doesn't want to be apart, either. We were meant to be together. Leaving felt wrong in every way.

Bella finally sat up once she had fully calmed down, resting against the back of the couch. Her face was still splotchy, her eyes glassy. "Go before they do decide to leave without you," she tried to say lightly, but her voice was too thick to make it believable.

But if she could do it, so could I. "Okay." I took a deep breath through my nose and forced a smile. "Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry."

She smiled slightly. "Please, don't apologize," she whispered, reaching for my hand. "Thank you for taking such good care of me."

I laughed. Honestly, I didn't know how she could feel that way. I shook my head again as I swallowed some of the emotions in my throat. "Thank you for all that you've done for me. This week and... everything."

Her lips were salty with tears, but at least there were none coming from her eyes when I left.

With no more excuses to go back, I ordered a car and went to the airport. I was empty and emotionless, exhausted by the surprise wave of blubbering. I was about twenty minutes late, which wasn't too bad considering there was traffic. If it bothered them, the crew said

nothing, and they greeted me with a pleasant smile. I was sure they were used to dealing with far worse celebrities.

When I got on the plane, I sent a message to my girlfriend like she requested and my best friend. Silently, I sulked in the comfortable lounge.

“Can I get you anything to eat or drink?” The host asked when we got in the air. My disposition made her nervous, not that I could blame her. I wanted to force a smile, but I couldn’t.

“Whiskey. Double- on the rocks, please. I’m going to want a couple, actually.”

“Yes, sir,” she said instantly before hurrying away. There was no judgment on her part. I doubted that it was a wild request.

I drank four doubles in fifteen minutes and fell asleep for the rest of the flight in the chair. Then I had three more after I was woken up and informed about our landing in twenty minutes. When I got home, I sent messages to everyone that cared. Bella first, Jasper second, and a group message to my family. Zafrina, too.

My best friend shot me a message back right away. He must have been waiting for it. “How are you? Are you doing any better?”

“No,” I responded as I flopped onto my bed with my arms over my head. My phone rang in my hand. I figured it was him, so I just started talking. “I’m a fucking idiot for leaving. She’s hurt and upset. I left her in tears. I’m a monster-”

“Oh, do shut up,” he stated firmly, interrupting me before I got too far. “You are not. You’re an adult. You asked her to come, she said no. She knew you had to work. It’s not your responsibility-”

“It’s not about that. It’s not about feeling responsible. I need to take care of her. I want to. This feels wrong in every sense of the word. This is worse than when she left LA. I honestly don’t know how I flew away from her,” I rambled.

“Um... has someone been drinking?” He questioned with a soft laugh. I just grunted. “Wait. Are you drunk?”

“Not really. Just buzzed now. I was a couple of hours ago,” I replied with a wave of my hand. “They had this nice whiskey on the plane, and I finished the bottle.”

“Well, that’s one fucking way to cope,” he declared sarcastically. “Do be careful, darling.”

I felt my bottom lip quiver like a child as my nose stung. “How am I supposed to... I don’t know? Do anything next week?” I pushed in a strangled voice. “I... I don’t know,” I sighed and closed my eyes. “When I left, I forgot to give her the keys back. And when I came to return them... She was sobbing. Fucking bawling, man,” I sniffled as tears appeared. I attempted to swallow them. “She didn’t want me to go either.”

He scoffed. “Well, of course, she doesn’t, you idiot. Because she’s in love with you, too. She might not have told you, awake and out loud to your face, but I promise you she does. Why wouldn’t she? Hm? Everything she’s done so far has shown you how much she cares. But you are still at the beginning of this relationship. Slow down, give it time. Rushing will scare her. She doesn’t know what kind of anxious anal asshole you are yet. Surprise her with that after you get married,” he finished mockingly.

I sighed. “You’re right.” I took a deep breath and held it for a moment before I let it out.

“Yeah, don’t want to drop that bomb on her until you got a ring on it,” he mumbled. “Not everyone has had years to get used to it,” his tone was almost bitter, like an ex-wife.

“You are so mean to me, I swear,” I complained with a snort. “You’re not wrong about it either, but I think she already knows how fussy I am. Bella might be just as bad. You’ve seen our docs. Have you seen how detailed her notes are?”

“Your poor type-A personality children.” He clicked his tongue playfully.

My head fell back as I laughed. “They’ll be so damn beautiful and need so much therapy.”

“Good thing you’re rich now,” Jasper deadpanned. “At least you’ll be able to afford it.”

“Damn right,” I snorted. I sighed as I gazed at the ceiling. “That was, by far, the worst vacation I’ve ever had, and I wish never ended.”