



Episode Fifty-Nine:

The third video of the day was going to be at a no-kill animal shelter. This was the one I was most excited to see Bella in. She was biting her lip deeply as she beamed, just pulling into the parking lot. It was adorable. A sexy girl and cute puppies were a perfect recipe for a high viewer count.

We spoke to the director together this time. All the while, my girlfriend had a kitten crawling across her shoulders like a fuzzy black parrot. It pushed itself into her neck then fell asleep, so its head was covered with her curtain of hair. Absently, she petted it as she carried on the conversation. It purred louder than a car engine.

"I wanna sit on the floor, but I'm not sure I'll be able to get back up," she whispered to me in a pout once we were in the cat room.

I chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll help you."

Carefully, she got herself down on the ground with her legs spread out. This signaled every baby in the place to come darting towards her. There were at least a dozen of them, but it was hard to count because they never stopped moving. They crawled up her back and fumbled over her calves as others sniffed her boot and tried to nibble on it.

“Oh, my god! You’re all so cute!” She squealed in a tone I had never heard from her before. I sat across from her, crossing my legs. Bella was smiling so much. The light in her eyes was amazing. She purposefully wiggled her foot to encourage them to attack it, making her laugh when they did. Scooping one up, she bobbed it gently, so its ear flapped. “Such a sweet little bat.” She brought it up to her lips to kiss. It booped her nose with its forehead. “Aw, I love this so much.”

Bella adored animals. I could definitely work with that. A million more notes popped up in my brain that I would have to write out later. It would be worth it. This was going to be the best shoot of the day, no matter what happened at the chicken place after. Her happiness was infectious, and I could see my friends smiling behind the cameras.

I leaned forward and scratched the top of its head, nuzzling my nose against it while still in Bella’s hands. The creature roughly licked it, getting inside my nostril. It was like a wet sandpaper tissue.

“Oh, jeez,” I snorted and laughed, covering it with my palm.

She brought it up to her eyes to look at. “Mm, boogers.”

This made Seth laugh like a child. He sat on the edge of a chair. When he did, one of the adult cats made a home on his lap. He scratched under its chin for a second before putting his other hand back on the camera to steady it.

The director of the facility was waiting for us when we left the room after playing for forty-five minutes. She beamed. “So, we have a special group of friends we’d like to introduce you to. They just came in at the end of the last week, and they are now available for adoption. Why don’t you come with me to our puppy yard?”

It was a small fenced area, so people could interact with the pets outdoors to see if they were a good fit. It was half concrete and half grass with plastic play equipment and toys scattered about. Once again, Bella sat on the ground while she waited.

Two staff members opened the doors. Maybe a dozen bright yellow golden retriever puppies all came charging out at once. They were massive, but still very much babies. Their heads were too big for their bodies, and they kept tripping over their enormous feet. Their blond hair stood up like a puff around their chubby faces.

Four of them went straight for my girl. She giggled loudly, trying to pet them all at once. It was an impossible goal, but she gave it her best. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. I wanted to soak up her joy.

"I love you!" She gasped. "Holy shit! You're so fucking adorable!" She laughed as two of them licked her face excitedly. Undoubtedly, she still tasted like lunch. She smacked kisses at them and loved it when they returned it all over her cheeks.

One became very interested in Tyler, pawing at his leg until he looked down at him. When he turned the camera towards him, he sat and wagged his tail. He kneeled down to pet them, a smile growing on his face. Clearly, he enjoyed them. He chuckled when the puppy licked the lens.

I don't know why they say not to work with animals or children. I found both to be exciting. They were naturally making the video better.

When it was time for her to get up, my girl groaned when she put pressure on her foot but said nothing. She was moving a little slower, obviously in pain. There was a small pout on her lips when we had to leave.

On the ride to the chicken restaurant, Bella spoke about all the weird creatures she grew up around as a teenager on a ranch. A wolf, a bobcat, skunks, opossums, raccoons- and that wasn't even mentioning the regular farm animals that lived there. I looked up the place when we first started dating. It was a massive farm, taking up hundreds of acres outside of Houston. It was known for its organic meat and produce at local farmer's markets.

When I helped her from the car, she inhaled deeply when she tried to put pressure on her leg. It came out as a shaky breath through her trembling lips. She pushed them together and straightened her shoulders.

"Do we need to stop?" I offered softly so no one else would hear.

"Of course not. It's just starting to ache. I'll be fine," she promised.

This place dunked whole deep-fried chickens in different spicy sauces. We would try their mild, original, and extra hot. Seth was going to be in this video with us. They also served garlic rice and flatbread. The pungent sweet smell of spices and oil blasted us in the face as soon as we opened the door.

"Is it sad that I'm a little scared after last time?" I questioned as I caught a whiff of heat wafting out of the kitchen. It made my nose tingle.

"Well, we didn't have to sign a waiver... So, it can't be that bad," my girlfriend offered with a smirk. "Are we going to try the mild first?"

"Yes, ma'am. Which piece would you prefer?" Seth picked up the knife with a big grin. He purposefully smiled like a psycho, but we ignored him.

“Breast, please,” she grinned. “Thank you.” She thought of something, an idea lighting up her eyes. “Can we have extra sauce for dipping, please?” She asked the owner who was standing by to help us. “This rice smells so good. You can see the roasted garlic in it,” she spoke to the camera. Then she made a funny face as our friend put a sizable chunk on her plate. “Oh, yes. I’m so hungry now.” She turned her gaze to me. “I adore your taste in food. I seriously haven’t eaten anything I didn’t love when you pick a place.”

I placed my hand on my chest and fluttered my eyelashes stupidly. “Wow! That’s a big compliment.”

“Especially coming from such an excellent cook. Lauren is still talking about that hummus you made last time,” Tyler added from behind the camera in a soft voice. “Those Rice Krispies Treats were great too.”

“I made more hummus for your party! I fixed a bunch and put it in the freezer. And I made salsa too, because the longer it sits, the better it is.”

“So good, too. Spicy as fuck, but yum,” I remarked. They set the ominously dark sauce in front of us. “Well, that is a powerful smell. Wow.”

Bella picked up a piece of the skin covered in it and devoured it. “Can we eat now?”

“Yeah,” I replied, accepting the other slice of the breast with skin. Seth had a leg. We brought forks to our mouths at the same time after clinking them together like champagne flutes. The mild sauce was sweet, and I liked it.

My girl took a slice of the bread, added some of the chicken and rice, then drizzled the sauce on top. She held her hand under it as she brought it to my mouth after she took her own bite. “Try this.”

“Oo,” I cooed, promptly taking a big chomp. It created a mess, but it also made her giggle. “Oh, yeah. This would make a good burrito, too. Especially with the crispy skin.”

She nodded her head quickly. “Agreed. I am so excited for the spicy one now.”

My fear was for nothing. It wasn’t hot at all, it only pleasantly stung and warmed me up a little. It was exactly the heat level I liked. I wasn’t sure if my tolerance had gone up or if it was just the right amount. She said it wasn’t hot either, but she could eat straight lava and add some red pepper flakes and a dash of Tabasco for a kick.

We ate a ton, but there were a lot of leftovers after Tyler had his fill. Seth took them home with him happily.

When we stepped out of the car at the house, Bella whimpered quietly to herself when she stood. Without a single thought, I picked her up before she could get her cane.

“Edward!” She squeaked and laughed. “I can walk.”

“I can tell you hurt, though. Let’s get you inside.” I looked over my shoulder at the guys. “I’ll be right back for the stuff.”

Carrying her into the living room, I sat her carefully on the sofa. I went to the island where her nearly empty bottle of pain pills rested. I took one of them to her with a glass of water.

“I don’t need that,” she complained.

I leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Take it, and it’ll be extra fun for you in twenty minutes.” She made a little face, pursing her lips. Finally, she grabbed it from my palm and popped it into her mouth. “Good girl.” I pecked her forehead.

My friends had most of it inside before I could come out. The only thing I needed to grab was her walking crutch.

“Today was great!” Tyler said brightly, patting my shoulder. “Having Bella there made it even better. The animal shelter shoot was muah.” He kissed his fingers. “And I really want a puppy now.”

“Me too,” I chuckled. “Someday,” I sighed in fake longing, then beamed at them. “Thanks for working so hard today. I’ll see you at the party?”

“Hell yeah!” Seth smiled. “Merry Christmas, bro.” He leaned into the house to wave at my girl. “Happy Holidays, sweetie! I had fun!”

“Me too!” She smirked back. “Merry Christmas!”

Locking the door behind them, I was so glad to be alone with her. She was lying on her side, her head on her arm as she grinned at me dreamily. “Hi there.” She wiggled her fingers at me. “What do you want to do?”

I hummed, crawling onto the couch with her, and laid on my stomach beside her. It was so huge that we could have stretched out at any angle. “What would you like to do?”

She laughed. “That’s not fair. I asked you first.”

“Yes, but your foot hurts, and I don’t know what you’re up to.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Well, my drugs haven’t fully kicked in yet. Want a smoke?”

“Absolutely.” I hopped up right away to go fetch it.

I carried her outside after getting us drinks. She only had soda water, not wanting to overdo it. Laying with her head on my lap, she propped her leg up on the arm of the sofa. We were about halfway through our joint when her phone rang. It was just after eight o'clock. She looked at the screen and smiled.

She put it on speaker and laid it on her stomach, taking a drag. “Hi, Momma,” she sang. “How are you?”

“I’m fantastic, baby girl. How are you? Mary said that you went to LA early. How is it?”

She held the smoke up for me, grinning as she did. “Amazing. The weather is even better than Texas.”

“It’s actually a little chilly here! I can use the fireplace. We’ve got some nice mesquite in there. It smells so good, but it makes me hungry.” Bella giggled. “What are you doing?”

“Sitting outside with my man by his pool, looking at the mountains. We spent all day filming videos for his channel, and it was so much fun. You’ll like these. We had this whole fried chicken for dinner. They did the entire bird in this almost Nashville-style hot sauce. It was so delicious.”

“Oh, girl,” she drew out in a thick southern accent. “That sounds good. And you know I’ve got that turkey fryer, too.”

“They marinated it in buttermilk for forty-eight hours, which is more patience than I have when it comes to waiting for fried chicken,” she joked as she took another hit. “Then they dunked the entire thing in the sauces- like a five-gallon bucket. And I got to play with a whole litter of golden retriever puppies today. You would have adopted all of them.”

The older woman laughed at the words. “That depends on how many there were. What’s your boyfriend doing right now?” There was a slight pause, and she lowered her voice. “He is such a handsome young man.”

“He is,” she cooed, her drugs fully kicking in as her head lolled back. She closed her eyes. “He’s my pillow right now. And he’s treating me like a princess because my foot hurts.”

It was the first time she admitted it all week, and it took the painkillers to make her finally confess it.

“Good,” the woman replied. “Well, I just wanted to check on you.”

“I’ll call you on Christmas,” Bella promised. “I love you. Kiss everyone for me.” She turned it off with a smile after it ended, putting the phone on the table. I held the joint to her lips, letting her take a hit. She blew it out slowly. “I am so glad I am not there right now. Alice is already losing her mind,” she laughed.

“That’s how I feel about my parents,” I admitted with a chuckle, tapping the ash out. “I’m overjoyed you chose to spend it with me instead.”

Her fingers moved over my jaw as she held my gaze. “Me too.”