



Episode thirty-seven:

Patty cat screamed at me as soon as I came into the apartment, circling my legs excitedly as I tried to carry the heavy bags inside.

“Please don’t trip me. I don’t want to die,” I mumbled, hurrying into Bella’s room. Once I put them down on her bed, I bent down to pick up the creature that followed. She purred loudly. “Look, you’re cute, but you have to leave, my friend.” I put her on the cat tree that was as tall as me. She mewed and flopped down, so I could rub her stomach. “Stay,” I commanded as I pointed at her nose.

She looked at me like ‘fuck you, I’m not a dog,’ and hopped down to follow me. I rushed back into the room, and she rattled the door almost menacingly, yowling in compliant.

“I’ll be back out in a minute. Crikey,” I laughed, going to set up the heater. The room was a good water leak away from forming icicles.

About thirty minutes later, Bella came prancing in. Her nose and cheeks were red from the cold. I popped out to greet her.

“Hello, gorgeous.”

“Well, hey there, handsome. Oh, my god. It feels so good in here,” she moaned, her head falling back a little. I took her banjo case for her. “Oh, thank you.”

We walked into her bedroom together. “So, I got three heaters. They’re different sizes. I’ve got one set up here and in the kitchen. And there is a little one still in the box,” I explained as I put the case on her bed.

“Edward,” she breathed my name, rubbing her hands up my back as she laid her cheek on my shoulder. “Thank you so much!”

I turned so that I could wrap my arms around her waist. “My pleasure.” I leaned down to kiss her several times. Her lips were slightly salty from sweating.

“I can’t tell you how nice it is to come home to a nice strong, sexy man who wants to take care of me,” she flirted, lifting on her toes to kiss my lips as her gloved hands slid underneath my shirt.

My heart fluttered in my chest. “I might know how you feel, though,” I whispered as I drew her in closer to me. We kissed for just a moment.

“I need to take a shower, so I can get cooking. I’ll be right back,” she promised before leaving me alone in her room. I used that time to browse the jewelry website and save my favorites. They were surprisingly cheap for cute stuff. It was the perfect Christmas gift.

I was sitting on the couch when she came back into her room, wrapped in a towel with wet hair. My phone slipped from my fingers into my lap. She didn’t notice.

“I have to admit, it’s nice to be able to walk from the bathroom to the bedroom and not freeze my tits off.”

I chuckled. “Ah, the wonders of a twenty dollars solution.”

“It was on the list,” she whined with a little laugh, pulling her towel off to dry her hair some more. Her body was perfect. I wasn’t the only one that I had been working out more. Her thighs were visibly thicker, her stomach tighter. Then she turned around and bent over to pick something out of the clothes hamper. I swallowed heavily.

She wiggled her underwear on before turning around to look at me. Bella caught my expression and smirked. “What?”

I quickly shook my head in embarrassment. “Oh, no. Nothing. You’re just... wet and naked.” She giggled. “What do you expect? I’m a man.”

Sauntering over, she came to straddle my lap while just in her panties. Her fingers went into my hair as she kissed me, her shower-fresh skin supple against my lips. My mouth traveled down her chest, wanting to taste all of her. My mouth went to her nipple, my fingers curling around her ass.

“Oh, fuck. I’m going to get nothing done today if you do that.” she moaned.

“Just a minute,” I promised, kissing over to the other. I licked the water droplets from her skin, making goosebumps raise up. She flushed, her mouth opening a little. Then she giggled as she pulled away. “Aw, come back.”

“I have to cook, I’m sorry,” she pouted before finally getting dressed. It was warm enough though that she could wear shorts and a thin little shirt with no bra, her perky nipples visible through the fabric.

“Tell me what to do,” I told her once we stepped into the kitchen. She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times before she went to go get a peeler. I sat down at the table and started to work a shit ton of yams.

Watching Bella operate in this tiny cramped space, cooking a mountain of food for an army of people while somehow still keeping it clean and organized, made me realize that she really was a professional chef. She chopped three different kinds of vegetables before I even got through my pile. When I was done, she gave me green beans to snap. She was assigning me tasks a child could do, I realized. It was about my skill level, though. She didn’t have time to teach me anything right then.

I danced around the kitchen with her, helping with dishes and talking to her as we listened to music on the phone. Whenever I kissed her, she tasted like something new and delicious.

Somewhere in the evening, I received a text message from Jasper. “I hope that you’re having a good day. Sorry for being abrupt earlier.”

“It’s okay,” I replied. “I understand. I hope you’re doing okay, and I miss you. Call me whenever you get a chance.”

The phone began to ring, and I smiled. I brought it up to my ear. “Oh, hello. What are you doing?”

“Just on a smoke break. What are you doing?”

I put my arms around my girlfriend's waist from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder as I watched her cook four things on the stove at once. There were three things in the oven, two slow cookers and a pressure cooker going as well. We had to turn down the heater because it was so warm. "I am currently in a tiny kitchen in Queens, watching a very talented woman cook the most delicious looking food that I've ever seen. It seriously smells so good. It's like Christmas."

"That's because that's what it is," she replied to me, smiling a little. "On steroids."

"Yes," I agreed with a laugh. "She already cooked probably twenty dishes all from scratch, and she's still going. And we're going to carry them all to her friend's place before the crack of dawn so that she can cook some more."

"She sounds like a busy girl," he replied, clearing his throat. "She's right there, huh?"

"Yup," I pulled her to me, kissing her temple. "My best mate, Jasper," I explained to her when she glanced back. I was sure that she could hear him on the side.

"Hi, Jasper!" She called softly as she stirred browning onions in a pan, making him chuckle.

"Tell her hello," he remarked. "You seem happy. I'm glad. I just wanted to check up on you and apologize for early. It's been a long week, you know?"

I shook my head. "No, I understand. I bought you some Christmas gifts today, so watch for that in the mail," I informed him proudly. I had gone to a swanky art supply store and went nuts. Not three doors down was a post office. It was meant to be.

"Aw!" He said cheerfully. "Thank you, darling. So early."

"Well, I was out."

"Did you get me jewelry, too?" He teased, making me chuckle. "You know what? Don't spoil the surprise. I'm sure it's just lovely whatever it is," he continued. I just sighed, making him laugh some. "Alright, have fun. Back to work. Kiss the misses for me."

I beamed at his request, quickly pressing my lips to the top of her head. "Consider it done. Bye, lovey."

By sunset, Bella had made several desserts, including chocolate chip cookies. They were created from the dough that she told Alice not to eat all of. I understood then why she would want to. It was fucking amazing. She offered me one warm, and then I asked for three more before I just started sneaking them like a child. She didn't seem to mind too much.

“I love them so much,” I mumbled when she caught me with a mouthful. She smirked, walking over to me so that she could lean over and kiss my lips.

“I’ll make you a bunch whenever I come next. You can keep them in the freezer and bake them whenever you want.”

“Thank you,” I muttered, smiling. She giggled a little.

That got me thinking about the next time she would come to Los Angeles. And Christmas. I had expected to be alone and accepted it. Now, I didn’t want to be. I wanted to spend it with her.

It was so late when she got finished with all the food, we decided to just stay at her place. I brought a little backpack with me so that I could change and shower in the morning. We snuggled on her tiny bed, my face pressed against her neck as I breathed her in. The sounds of New York echoed around us.

“What plans do you have for Christmas?”

“I was probably going to be alone. Alice and Rose are going to Texas. Demetri is going to see his in-laws as well.”

I took a deep breath. “I was going to be alone, as well. But I want to spend Christmas with you. And New Years.”

“I hope you don’t want to go to the ball drop in Times Square because I’m not doing that.”

It was so unexpected an answer that I laughed in surprise. “No. I was actually hoping you could come to spend it in California with me. We could go on that snowy weekend we were talking about. Colorado or Utah. Maybe you could spend three weeks all together?” I hadn’t thought about it much since then, but there had been so much else going on.

She didn’t say anything for a second. “That’s so long. I want to, but I may have to work. I’ve been on a roll, and I don’t want it to stop.”

“That’s fair, but remember while you’re there, we can do those videos we were talking about. You can teach me how to cook. And we can do whatever videos you want. I love your ideas, and I think you’re amazing in front of the camera. You really could be a star,” I began to grasp for straws as charmingly as possible. I felt her skin heat under my lips as they moved over her ear and jaw.

"I don't want to use you for money."

"One, you're not. I am. I'm making way more money off this arrangement than you are. You must realize that. And I'm already planning on increasing what you get to match Seth and Tyler if you're going to be so involved. Even though I know you're about to freak out over it," I began right away.

"I haven't looked at my bank account in a while because I kind of had a little panic attack last time. The amount freaks me out," she said in a voice so tiny that I barely heard it. Her words confused me.

"Why? I know not all of it is from the videos you've been doing with me. A lot of it is your store. And the magazines."

"Which is only because you had me on your channel. And because I took your picture," she answered very quickly. I took a deep breath, leaning my face against the top of her head.

"That's how Hollywood works, though, baby. It's called a break."

"Everything good that has happened in the past two months is because of you!" She exclaimed in an anxious rush. As soon as the words stopped, she gasped a little as if they caused her pain.

That wasn't true in the least.

"Everything good that has happened in the past two months is because of your incredible talent, generous soul, and immense patience and fortitude."

"What if you go away?"

Oh, no. That was never going to happen. I could understand why she thought about that. I knew where that came from. But even if it was understandable, it was painful. I squeezed her closer, holding my hands on top of hers. Part of me wished that I had brought the ring with me, just to show her just how committed I was to her and our future together.

"I'm not."

"You can't say that because it's not true."

"It is true."

She began to shake with tears. "No. It's not. Everyone leaves. No one is immortal. Everyone dies. Everything is always changing. I relied on Aiden for money because I was a

stupid child, and because I was an idiot, I was almost homeless again. Because we were both terrible with money. I'm not going to make that same mistake again. I can't be relying on you."

Damn, I didn't know how to relieve that fear. I wanted her to rely on me. Maybe not for money. Of course, I would give her cash if she needed it, but I knew that she would never straight ask for it. When we worked together, I considered it just that. A job. Even if we were having fun while doing it. I tried to think of another way of going about it.

"You're obviously not. Do you really think you're not working when you did that stuff with me? Or that you don't deserve to be rewarded for your work? I'm not going to short change you because you lack the self-confidence to know your worth. And your pictures are separate from me and speak for themselves. I'm not going to not shout how awesome I think you are and that everyone needs to see your work. Clearly, I'm not the only one who thinks you're a skilled artist. I'm glad I can show people, but they're looking because your art is beautiful, Bella."

She turned over to look at me. Putting my fingers on my cheeks, she bit her lip for just a moment. "How can you be this good? You can have anyone. Anyone. You are a sexy twenty-four-year-old with literally all the money in the world at this point. Why are you bothering with me?"

"I don't know how you can be asking that. I really don't."

Bella's voice cracked. "I don't know what I have to give you."

The words didn't even make sense to me.

"You don't have to give me anything. That... that's not how any of this works. What you give me is intangible and undefinable and wonderful. You are full of love and kindness in a way that makes me want to be a better man just for you."

I love you, I wanted to cry. But I knew this wasn't the right time. I wanted the moment to be romantic. Not during a panic attack.

She pressed herself to me, pushing her forehead against my heart. "Stop it, you're going to make me cry."

My hands slid up her forearms. "Please don't be down on yourself anymore. I'm going to argue with you every time until you just accept that I'm right and you're great."

Pulling back, she gazed into my eyes. Her fingers dragged over my cheeks before moving across my lips. "I think you're more than great." Then Bella began to kiss me tenderly. "I want you," she said against my mouth. "Please."

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