



Episode Sixty-three:

Everything was right with the world.

I was in love with a beautiful woman who loved me, who was asleep in my arms, and it was Christmas morning.

I sent messages the night before to my family, telling them happy holidays. They sent me tons in return. I also got videos of gifts being opened and good times being had by my sisters. My parents weren't there to spoil the fun, and my grandparents were taking advantage of it. My eldest nieces posted pictures of their favorite presents from me, thanking me. Ruby had already pinned all of her posters to the wall. Her proud grin at her interior decorating was precious. The close-up of her face was detailed enough that I could count her nose hairs, her overcrowded walls behind her.

I didn't realize my girl was awake until she shifted a little and sighed. Her head was on my arm, facing away from me, and I was watching it silently so as not to bother her. "Aw. What cuties."

Chuckling, I flipped to another. "My sweethearts. Ugh, I adore them."

"You look so much alike."

"Yeah, these genes are strong."

Stretching, she popped her back and yawned. "It makes me wonder what our kids would look like. God, let's hope they're tall like you." She snuggled into my side. "I can imagine a boy that looks like you with my tan and eyes. He'd be stunning like his father."

My heart fluttered a little in my chest as I thought about it, too. I had always known I wanted kids, but it wasn't ever a rush. Truth be told, I couldn't see Vicky as a mother. She was selfish. I knew I would be the one raising them, and that was fine at the time. But seeing Bella as a doting mum was something that made me look forward to the future. But that was putting the cart before the horse. It had only been one day, but it felt like the beginning of a new lifetime.

She pushed herself up and kissed my lips lightly. "I'm so hungry. I'm going to run to the bathroom, then I'll get breakfast started."

"Do I need to do anything?"

Humming, she picked up her cane. "You can start the coffee if you want."

I turned on Christmas music for background noise. It was just instrumental stuff because I didn't like a lot of the songs. They got annoying and repetitive after a while. Putting the kettle on, I got everything prepared while it started bubbling away.

When she came hobbling out, I hurriedly scooped her up so she wouldn't have to walk the rest of the way. She giggled as she coiled her arms around my neck after she laid her crutch against the wall. Lightly, she kissed my ear, causing goosebumps to rise on my skin.

Humming in pleasure, I quickly captured her lips in a kiss before I sat her on the stool beside the island. I brushed my knuckles over one of her cheeks. "God, I love you."

Bella pulled me in for another kiss. "I love you, too."

The teakettle whistled loudly, so I ran to get it. She carefully slid down from her spot and hopped on one foot to the fridge. When I was done, I began taking things from her arms. There was no way I was going to have her fall because she had armfuls of jelly and cured meats.

"Tell me what to do, love."

I did whatever she asked, wrapping my arms around her waist from behind and swaying to the music. I couldn't take my lips off of her, kissing every spot her silky nightgown didn't cover. Pushing her fluffy curls away from her shoulders, I dotted her tattoos with kisses. I especially liked the watercolor camera.

When it was done, I had her hold the plate for me so I could snap a picture. I had taken quite a few and some videos, but it was a masterpiece- the meal and the chef. I posted it online with the caption, "My love made us a holiday breakfast nearly as beautiful as her."

The first comment was asking for the recipe. Soon. Very soon.

I carried her to the sofa when it was time to open gifts after we leisurely enjoyed a couple of cups of coffee and the best cheese bread I ever had. Brie was delicious, especially when wrapped in croissant dough with bacon and the fresh cranberry sauce she made a few days before. I was stupidly full, but it was hard to stop.

I shoved a pillow under her foot to keep the swelling down, then went to get the many packages around the tiny fake tree. Preparing her camera, she pulled it from the bag and got the right lens for the environment. She was so serious as she arranged it.

Straightening her back, she pushed her hair over her shoulder. "There is an order I want you to open these. One will be far less impressive if you open the others first."

"Doubtful." I plopped down on the floor beside her. "Well, you can open whatever you want in any order."

She shoved one of them at me gently before searching through the pile. "This one first." She found an envelope and put it beside the small sack. "This next. And then this one." She tapped her finger on the thin, wrapped square. It was hard, whatever it was. Her smirk was slightly naughty.

I reached for the bag. "So mysterious." Grinning, she snapped my photo.

She blushed for some reason, placing her camera back in her lap. "Well, I don't want you to get distracted by the last one yet. Honestly, don't get your hopes up too high. Two of your gifts were made by me."

Shaking my head, I peered down at my present. "You make that sound like a bad thing." When I reached in, I felt something delightfully fluffy. It was a lovely multicolored scarf and hat. "Yo, you made these? I didn't know you could knit."

Once again, she looked down to play with the knob on the top of the black electronic, but she smiled. "Yeah, I used to a lot. My grandmother taught me. I've had a lot of free time on my ass, obviously. Demetri brought me a bunch of very nice bamboo yarn to keep me entertained."

Bella finally gazed at me. "It's made locally in New York. It's super soft, and I like their color combinations. He got them at some Christmas bazaar."

"Bamboo? Really? It is soft. This is perfect for our trip. Thank you." I didn't even know you could make it out of that. I quickly gave her a kiss before putting them both on. They felt so pleasant against my skin. I hadn't put a shirt on, just in my pajama bottoms.

She snapped another photo, grinning wildly as she did. Stupidly, I flashed a peace sign. She was trying so hard not to giggle. "Ham."

"Yup," I agreed without hesitation. "Now open one of yours." She picked up the very expensive lens her best friend told me she wanted. "Don't shake it. If I got it wrong, blame Alice. She helped me pick it out."

"Okay," she snickered as she pulled off the gift wrap. Then everything about her expression changed as she gasped loudly. It was all I needed to know that I had gotten it right.

She looked up at me with massive, surprised eyes. "Are you fucking serious?!" Bella didn't even wait for me to answer before she threw herself at me. She was barely on the sofa as she ravished my mouth with kisses, hanging off the edge.

"I bought the right one?" I joked, feeling breathless from her affection.

She brought it to her chest like a child and hugged it. "Yassss..." Then her eyes grew with desire. "Oh, my god. I hope I get to use it this weekend."

It was exactly why I got it. I couldn't help but beam. "I hope so, too. Okay, my turn."

She giggled awkwardly. "This makes mine way less impressive."

"It's not a contest," I replied quickly. "And to be fair, I simply asked Alice what she'd buy you if she had all the money in the world." It was a good list I saved for later. I opened the envelope that was in the middle. I expected a card, but it was three pieces of paper with loads of tiny print. "What's this?"

She took one from me. "That is one year of monthly boxes filled with unique chocolates from around the world." Then the next. "This one is savory snacks from around the world. So like chips, beef jerky, nuts. That sort of thing. And that last one is a beer and wine of the month. You get a couple of bottles of wine and a new six-pack every month. So, at least three times a month for a year, you will get something to eat or drink from me even if I can't make it for you myself. Even if it's just junk food."

Her presents were all so thoughtful. Everything about it was so loving. It made tears prickle at my nose and eyes, but I swallowed them back as I smiled. “Aw, that’s so sweet. And it’s like Christmas every month. That’s perfect. I love it so much.”

“I considered a geeky subscription box, but I figured you might already have one, and there is no sneaky way to ask about it.”

“Oh, I used to, but I didn’t renew it when I moved here. Maybe for Valentine’s Day.” I playfully winked at her.

She grinned bashfully, playing with her camera’s strap for a moment. “Well, that makes shopping easier.”

Next, she selected the smallest of the packages. “Once again, if it’s wrong, blame Alice.”

Her smile pushed to one side. “Poor Mary Alice, just getting thrown underneath the bus here today.” She unwrapped this one slower, pushing the creaking top of the box open. Her eyes got huge as her face lit up. “It’s James Avery!” She slipped it on the ring finger of her right hand. It fit perfectly. Bella looked back up at me. “It’s so pretty!”

“Well, Alice is two for two, so it’s okay. She avoids the bus for today. You really like it?” I asked, just to make sure. I didn’t think she was that good of an actress, but...

She nodded so hard, her hair bounced. “Yeah, I have one kind of like this one, but not as big, that my grandmother gave me when I was thirteen. I wear it all the time. I mean, I would guess you’ve probably seen it. They’re my favorite jewelry store.” Sighing, she held her hand out in front of her to look at it once more. “I was a little worried for a minute.”

“Why?”

Her gaze was back in her lap again as her cheeks flushed. “I thought it might have been an engagement ring.”

I chuckled awkwardly. “Well, I’d marry you tomorrow if you let me.”

Quickly, she shook her head. “Edward-”

“I said if. If you’re not willing to live with me yet, you’re certainly not ready to be married to me. And that’s fine. I understand,” I paused, then smirked, trying to lighten the mood. I had maybe been a little too open with my feelings. “Unless that’s the problem, and we can make a pit stop in Vegas tomorrow.” I took her hand and pressed my lips to the silver, swirling band. “I’m patient.”

Bella laughed. “No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. I’m not. But you’re worth the wait. I do want to marry you, though.” I laid my head down on the edge of the sofa.

Lightly, her fingers grazed my cheek to my temple. Her expression was slightly sad. “What if I don’t want to get married?”

“Doesn’t matter whether we get a piece of paper or not, I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you. Or try my hardest to. If you’re willing to have me. The end results are the same. But you hate calling me your boyfriend, and that would fix that,” I replied with a smirk.

She rolled her eyes before she laid down on the couch with me. Our noses were almost touching. “That’s because my gentleman sounds so much better, though. How can you be so sure? What if something changes?”

“Bells, we can’t predict the future, but that doesn’t change that I know what I want now. What I want in my life. I’ve always been a goal-driven person. And my goal now is to make sure you fall as deeply and crazily in love with me as possible so we can spend the rest of our lives conquering the world together. Because I know when I’m with you, I can do anything. So, you know what? Things are going to change, but it’s going to be far more for the better than the worse.”

Her cheeks went neon. “You’re such a romantic. I never would have expected it when I first knew you existed.” She grinned for only a moment, then her gorgeous eyes met mine. “I didn’t know how much I needed you.”

I leaned forward and kissed her slowly, my hand on her cheek. It was as gentle and sweet as she was. I understood exactly what she meant. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything else, the emotions thick in my throat.

“Alright, open your next gift.”

She pushed herself up, so she was sitting against the back. “I just opened one.”

Rolling my eyes, I shoved the computer I got to guarantee we would have a way to connect, even if we’re thousands of miles apart. “This one is kind of selfish. It’s a high-speed gaming laptop. It should be good for your photography as well, I was told, but this way we can maybe play games together when we’re not together. I know you’ve been wanting one. But check out the best part.” I turned over the box to show her the picture after she unwrapped it. She still had said nothing, and it was making me nervous. “It’s rainbow back-lit. And you’ll never run out of storage.”

She leaned forward to read the numbers I just pointed out. Her eyes squinted. “Holy shit! It has thirty-two terabytes of hard drive space!? That’s so much! How is that even possible?” Her mouth dropped as she read, her eyeballs flying back and forth.

“That is five hundred hours of video, by the way. I got myself one custom-built for me that has sixty. That bad boy is going to make my life so much easier.”

Looking back at me, her jaw was still hanging open. “I can’t imagine how much it costs.”

“Since you are technically an employee for my production company, it’s a business expense. I need someone to help make dumb videos with me, and I want to play more games with you because it’s always so much fun,” I informed her with a big grin.

“I feel sorry for your accountant. And you enjoyed getting your ass kicked at Guitar Magic at Thanksgiving, did you?” She brushed her fingers against my jaw with a smirk.

“To be fair, I haven’t played it before! And how was I supposed to know Alice was one of the top-ranked online players in the world? How is that even possible?” I wasn’t proud of how high-pitched my voice got. They both destroyed me, but her best friend killed everyone handily.

“Adderall and weed,” she replied dryly.

“But like how is she just quietly always on the top of the rankings? I checked. She’s been at the top for like three years now! I’ve never been that good at anything,” I complained like a child. I had been in actual pro gaming competitions, and she, a tiny middle-aged woman in an apartment in Queens, was holding real-world records. She needed her own channel to show off her skills.

“I don’t know how many people are actually playing it. And yeah, she’s been playing it for longer than three years. It’s pretty much the only reason she’s ever owned a game console. She’s been playing those stupid Guitar Magic games for fifteen years solid now.” She wrinkled her nose. “It makes my eyes twitch.”

“It’s just filthy, though. Filthy!”

“She’s a classically trained musician who’s played at both Carnegie Hall and the Sydney Opera house,” she giggled. “Oh, and Madison Square Gardens multiple times. She has dozens of symphonies worth of music memorized in her head. I love how impressed you are by the toy guitar, though. You, a man with a damn Grammy.”

It was not the same thing, and we both knew it.

“Really? She’s played there? Solo?”

She quickly shook my head. “No. As part of an orchestra, of course. I played with her at Carnegie Hall and the opera house when we were still in high school and college. But she’s done it again since. She was part of an orchestra group in Queens for the longest, but she’s been focused on just her work for ages now, it feels.” Her eyes stared off into the distance, a bit of longing in her voice.

“Wow. That’s so impressive. And what did you two play again?” I encouraged her to talk about it. She rarely did. I think something about not using her musical degree embarrassed her, though I wasn’t sure why. It was still brilliant.

“Viola and violin,” she stated quietly with a small smile.

“What is a viola exactly?”

“A big violin. It’s part of the violin family that was crafted around the sixteenth century in Italy. Violin, viola, cello, and the upright bass. But there are a bunch of different kinds of each. Different sizes. More strings. Double strings. Stuff like that.”

“Wow. Okay. Makes sense. You’ll both have to play for me one day. I’ve not heard you play the violin.”

Her bashful grin grew slowly. “Maybe I can make some videos about music and instruments,” she replied as she pulled the rest of the paper off the laptop box. She didn’t meet my gaze, but she continued to smile. “I should earn my keep for the man if he’s supplying me such nice hardware.”

“You can do whatever you want, baby. As long as you’re happy.”

Finally, she looked up. Her eyes were slightly glossy, and her cheeks were pink. “Thank you. It’s all amazing. Everything is so thoughtful.”

“You’re welcome,” I eagerly replied. “Open the last one now.”

Smirking, Bella rapped her nail on the hard square. “Don’t you want to open your last one?”

“In a sec. I’m having more fun with your reactions right now. I picked this one out all on my own,” I explained as I put the sack on her lap beside the camera.

“Alright,” she spoke quietly before pulling out the fuzzy sleepwear, then let out a loud laugh. “Is it koala footie pajamas?”

“It indeed is. And look, it’s got a pouch in the front for your phone.”

Giggling, she rubbed the fabric between her fingers. It was incredibly soft. “Can I wear this to the Christmas party?”

“I mean, that would be terrific. So yeah. Please do,” I laughed at her reply. I couldn’t wait to see it.

“With one house shoe and a boot, half tanked on eggnog and Lortabs. Yeah, that sounds like Christmas,” Bella continued, then shoved the last one to me with a slight, amused grin. “Now open yours.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I smirked as I finally picked it up. It was a book, which wasn’t surprising, but there was no title on it. The image on the cover was familiar, but I wasn’t sure how until I opened it to the first page. It was of Bella in the corset she wore on my birthday. It was in front of the door, the lights glowing behind her. The next was a closer version at a lower angle, and the one after was from behind. The tattoos on her thighs and the curves of her ass were in view. “It’s the pictures from that night,” I muttered out stupidly.

“Well, most of them are from that night. Some you haven’t seen yet. I took them just for you.” Her voice was purposefully alluring. Quickly my head popped up, and I met her intense, sexy gaze, then glanced back to the gift.

“We hadn’t really spoken about them since I took them. So much has happened since then. And when you didn’t say anything, I kind of assumed I did a terrible job,” I rambled.

“Oh, not at all. You did very well,” she cooed. “But it does help to have someone who is a master at photo editing. It’s not photoshopped, by the way. I only blurred blemishes and such.”

She didn’t have to tell me. I knew everything about her was real. I never expected her to give me something so- my brain short-circuited.

“Oh, boy.” I looked at each page. There were dozens. When I got to an image of her in a lingerie set on her tiny bed, I paused. “Oh, boy...”

“You really should thank Alice for all her help with our gifts this year. She said I was too classy to send those over the phone to you. She helped me take some of the pictures, too. The ones with clothes on, mainly,” she teased.

“She’s the best. No buses for her ever.” The final photo was of her touching her naked body, her legs spread as she sucked on one of her fingers. Her lipstick was slightly smudged, her intense eyes staring into my soul. She was glistening wet, just for me, forever. “Fuck.”

“Do you like it?” She inquired in the sweetest voice. When I peered at her, she was nibbling her bottom lip seductively.

"It- I... you. I-" My mind was ruined for the entire day. Maybe for the rest of the year. I hurriedly glanced back, taking in her beauty. "Oh, boy."

Like the seductress she was, she twirled a curl around her finger. Her expression was slightly cocky. "I don't know if I should tell you what Alice called it."

"Oh? What's that? What did she call it?"

Her lips pursed for a moment. "The classiest thing you'll ever masturbate to."

They were both funnier than me. I hated how correct she was. Heat crawled up my body. Staring out at the mountains, I tried to get my shit together and not laugh like a nervous twit. Before it could rip through my throat, I cleared it a little too loudly. "I am feeling personally attacked right now."

Laughing, she leaned forward again and kissed me firmly on the lips. Her fingers curled around the back of my neck. Her nose skimmed against mine as our foreheads pressed together. "I love you," she giggled.