



By Candlelight

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Category: Romance

Description: A little snow never hurt anyone...until it traps you with a stranger and only one bed.

Drew Olsen has had it. Calling the previous few years “rough” would be a massive understatement. He’s been in a sour mood ever since his family’s scandalous actions shook the entire town of Moon Harbor. Now he’s out of a job and a bed for the next five days. Oh, and it’s almost Christmas. So much for holiday spirit.

Mia Gallo needs a break. She found the perfect place for it in a cute cottage in Maine. But Mia never expected to get stuck in a blizzard...with a seriously hot grump.

Being snowed in together for Christmas was not in their plans. But it might be just what they both need.

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one

DREW

I was standing still when it happened. Just standing and staring at the Christmas decorations that had exploded all over town, turning Moon Harbor into a picture-perfect holiday postcard. And I just stood there looking at it.

I wish I could say I admired the evergreen garland and red ribbons covering Harbor Street's gas lights, or the oversized peppermint candy-looking pinwheels stuck in the frozen ground every few feet, but I didn't. In fact, I hated it because it was all a reminder of the fact that I hated Christmas, hated decorations, and hated my current life.

And that's when gravity—with a little help from its friend, black ice—played a fun game and sent me straight to the cobblestones on Moon Harbor's sidewalk.

"Dammit!" I said from the ground. A group of teens who'd just witnessed me falling onto my ass laughed and pointed. A look in their direction had them scurrying away, but didn't stifle their mirth. It was turning out to be a shit day and I just wanted to get home. But that was impossible, apparently.

I stood up and brushed myself off, then continued on my way to The Witch's Brew to grab a tea and figure this shit out. I'd just been informed that my condo was to be vacated—immediately—and for the next seventy-two hours, "at minimum." A gas leak. Which was dangerous, yeah, but where the hell was I supposed to go? Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, for fuck's sake.

I walked into the warmth of the cafe and tried to shake off the anger and annoyance that coursed through my body. I'd never been an asshole but the past few years had made me so. It was one shit storm after another, and I needed to do something to change the course of things. I could tell everyone was getting sick of me, and frankly, I was getting sick of myself. But hearing I was out of a home for Christmas, and not having anywhere to go, was making the big turnaround difficult.

My dad had recently moved down to Florida and had sold the family home after we both decided the bad memories were too much to live with. The only other family I had in town was my sister, and that was awkward because until recently, I didn't even know I had a sister.

Alex was great, and I knew she'd take me into her home in a heartbeat, but I felt weird about it. There was still a lot of trauma, according to my therapist, that we were both "unpacking." Whatever the hell that meant. But I guess what it really meant was that it was still hard for us to get close. And that was fine. We'd get there in time. Or maybe not.

But I sure as hell didn't want to join in on family activities or ruin her first Christmas as a married woman with my bad attitude. She had finally found some happiness. Staying away was honestly the least I could do.

Then I'd tried to get a hotel room, but every damn one was booked. The Moon Harbor Historical Society had chosen this year to boost the off-season with a Christmas Spectacular. Tours, wine tastings, an indoor festival, horse-drawn sleigh rides, the works. They'd been advertising it for months, apparently, not that I bothered to notice. I guess it worked though. Because I called around to every hotel in town and none of them had vacancies. Not even the run down motel on the outskirts.

And while I'm sure, if I pressed, I could stay with one of my friends, I didn't want to

go that route since I'd been alienating myself from them too, and I knew none of them would want to take me in. They would, because they were good people. But they'd do it reluctantly. And once again I realized, I'm the asshole and I'd be ruining someone's Christmas. So that was not an option.

"Hey Sara," I said as I approached the counter. Like most of the town, I'd always had a bit of a crush on the owner of the Witch's Brew. She was beautiful and smart and far too good for my grumpy ass, so I'd never tried to pursue it. But we were friendly enough. And she made the best coffee and tea in town, so I'd always be a patron.

"Hi Drew, how's it going?"

I grunted and shrugged my shoulders. She smiled slightly and waited for me to order, correctly guessing that I wasn't up for conversation.

"Can I get a large black tea please? And a side of lemon?" I looked around the bustling cafe. "To stay, I guess." I handed her a five dollar bill and she quickly returned my change. I slipped it all into the tip jar.

"Sure thing. Why don't you take a seat and I'll bring it out in a minute."

I nodded and then sat in one of the wooden chairs at a small table by the window. Scrubbing my hand over my face, I noticed the stubble was longer than usual. I needed to shave but couldn't bring myself to do it. These days, taking care of myself was not on the table. I did my basic daily shower and brushed my teeth, but anything else felt like too much effort. And wow, that was fucked up.

Sara appeared at the table and set down a steaming mug of black tea and a dish of lemons.

"Thank you."

She smiled, patted my shoulder, but said nothing, then turned back to the steady stream of customers. I could tell she knew something was off with me. Sara had a sixth sense about those things, but she also knew as well as anyone else, I guess. Apparently I never let anyone in, as my dad liked to remind me every other month or so. I wasn't sure if that was true, but I also didn't have any proof to the contrary, so I just assumed it was.

I squeezed two lemons into the tea and took a sip. The flavor was as sour as my mood. But it was what I craved, so I drank it greedily while I looked out the window. People swarmed the sidewalk, window shopping, sipping hot chocolate, admiring the decorative lights the town put up all over. Tourists rarely ever came back to town in the winter, but Christmas usually had a small uptick of visitors. But I'd never seen this many people in town in the winter. It was exhausting.

I watched a man squeeze through the throng and realized it was Sam Waters, my new brother-in-law. We'd been friends since school, but never close, and now he was a part of what little family I had left anymore.

It was weird to think I had a new brother. Especially because of what happened to my real brother. Aaron's face entered my mind, his crazed expression piercing through my memories. I felt a flashback coming, and screwed my eyes shut to block it out. It worked about half the time, this one included, and when I opened my eyes again, I saw Sam shake his head as a teen almost barrelled into him.

I shook off the memories and watched Sam make his way to the door of the cafe. The bell above the door jingled and he stepped inside, wiping his boots.

"Hey," he called, and approached the counter. He ordered something and turned to survey the room, his eyes landing on me. I nodded my head, not wanting to be rude—or more rude than I'd been for months—but also not wanting to engage in conversation. If I had a place to go, I wouldn't have been here in the middle of a loud

cafe. I'd be home, by myself, like everyone wanted.

"Hey Drew." Sam made his way over to me after all, so I had no such luck.

"Hey man, how's it going?"

"Ah, you know. Busy time of year, I just unloaded my last delivery at McClintock's but I have a few others to make to private buyers. Trying to get it all done before tomorrow."

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“Right.” Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, so he would be spending it with Alex and his little sister, Ellie, and their friends. Alex had mentioned it a few weeks back and invited me over for Christmas dinner, but I’d declined. I saw the disappointment in her expression, but also a sense of relief. Or maybe that was my own.

He sat down in the chair across from mine. “You coming over for Christmas?”

“Ah, gonna spend it at the hospital like usual.”

“Man, that sucks. But I guess it’s needed, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding.

The only thing I had going for me was my job as the head of security for the local hospital. I’d just started there last year and it was the only reason I got out of bed most days. My job as Director would normally give me the holiday off but since almost everyone else in my department had families and actual shit to do on Christmas, I signed up to work.

“You want to stop by after your shift? We’re having dinner on Christmas Eve but you can come over whenever. Well, if this blizzard doesn’t shut us all down.”

Shit. I’d forgotten about the blizzard warning. One more thing to piss me off.

“Snow isn’t supposed to hit till Monday, I thought?”

“That’s what they’re saying, but I don’t know, I’m feeling like it’ll be earlier. Either

way, you should come to dinner.”

“Thanks, but I’ll probably try to stay at the hospital all weekend. My apartment has a gas leak and we had to evacuate for at least 72 hours, or until they get their shit together. And I’ve tried all the hotels in town, but every single room is booked for the whole fucking week.”

“No way, that sucks, man. Just come stay with us. We have a guest room.”

“Oh, no, I mean, I appreciate that, but you know...I’m not good company right now.” I don’t know why I said that. I don’t know why I said any of it, to be honest. I never confided in people or asked for help and here I was, kind of doing both. Or at least hinting at it. “I’ll be fine though, they have some cots at the hospital so I’m hoping to grab one.”

That was somewhat true. Technically they were for doctors on call or working unusually long shifts. But I couldn’t see any other option and doubted anyone would mind, since most of the staff would be eager to get home.

“Come on. You know Alex has been wanting to spend more time with you. And you know it’d be better to spend the holiday with family than on a cot at work.”

There it was. Family. Why was I having such a hard time accepting it? Embracing it? Alex was a dream sister. She was kind, and caring. She never pushed too hard. She was quiet, but funny as hell when she let herself open up.

But our history was still too raw.

“I know, I’m just...I don’t know if I can handle all that.”

I didn’t know what “all that” even meant, or what else to say, but Sam seemed to

know that. He looked me over, eyeing me while he pondered something. I liked the guy, but I didn't like being beholden to anyone and I certainly didn't like how well he saw through me.

“You know what? I get it, man. Before I met Alex, I wanted to be alone all the time. It was hard just getting out of bed sometimes.”Damn.

Sam continued, “It's not the same. I mean, I know this is more complicated than that, but...it's no use pushing you if you're not ready.” He looked around, contemplating something else. “We'll be here when you are.”

The ghost of a smile hit my lips, and I felt my warmth bloom in my chest. It was true, I wasn't ready. But Sam's words helped. And I knew Alex would feel the same way.

And then he said, “But in the meantime, we still have Alex's cottage. No one is living there. She's been renting it out in the tourist season, but it's been vacant since Thanksgiving. She had a booking for Christmas but they canceled yesterday. It's all yours if you want it.”

“Wait, really?” My jaw hit the floor. I was complaining to Sam, venting really—who even knows why—and didn't mean for it to turn into an invitation. But this could turn my whole day around.

“Sure.”

“I'll pay for it. I just...man, thank you. I don't even know what to say. Everything is booked because of the festival, and...” I stood and shook his hand. “I really appreciate it, I do.”

“No worries. And don't worry about payment, Alex would never have that. It'll be our Christmas gift to you.” He clapped me on the shoulder and smiled. “Just, maybe

think about coming for dinner one of these days. No pressure.”

I nodded and my face formed the closest thing it could to a smile. It probably looked like I was in pain, but Sam didn’t seem to mind.

“Thanks, man. I promise I will.”

“There’s a lockbox but I don’t have the combo with me. We keep an extra key under the third rock to the right of the porch. You remember where the cottage is? Carol’s old one?”

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“Yeah, I remember.”

“Good. Fridge and pantry are stocked with non-perishables and drinks. Bring anything else you need. And just take the trash out when you leave.”

“Will do, man, thank you.”

Sam tilted his head in acknowledgment.

“It’s really no problem, man,” he said, and then strode back to the counter to grab his drink.

It was true, I’d been plenty cynical lately. But even I could admit this kindness from a friend—no, family—had lifted my spirits. At least a little bit. I finished my tea, then headed out to grab some groceries for my new temporary digs.

two

MIA

It was early evening, but already dark by the time I arrived in Moon Harbor. Light snowflakes had begun to dot the windshield of my Jeep. I said a silent prayer of thanks to the heavens for the good sense to buy this vehicle in the first place. The four wheel drive would come in handy soon enough. According to the CozyHost listing and the owner herself, the cottage I’d rented for the week sat on a dirt road, and the paved ones were already slick.

I shook my head and turned down the music so I could concentrate. The host, Alex, had given me very specific instructions in case my navigation didn't work, and as it turned out, I needed them. But after following her steps, I soon pulled off onto a long driveway leading to a well-deserved getaway haven.

My headlights rounded a curve and the cottage appeared before me. A smile broke out on my face. It was quaint, beautiful, private. With the snow coming down and the various garden lights shining along the front, it looked like a winter postcard. It was everything I'd hoped for.

I parked and grabbed my bags, hurrying to the front to follow the directions and grab the key from the lockbox. Inside was welcoming, and surprisingly warm. Alex must have been by earlier to turn the heat on for me. Another little detail that would make this a five-star stay. A small light was on in the main hallway, but otherwise, the place was dark and quiet. I set my main bag down by the door and started back toward where I assumed the kitchen would be to unpack the groceries I'd brought.

Just like the listing promised, the fridge was well-stocked with sparkling waters, sodas, and condiments. I was surprised to see bacon, eggs, and a steak in the meat drawer. Another extra perk I mentally recorded to the list. I added my own groceries and then snooped in the cabinets, seeing they were already filled with pancake mix, oats, and various canned goods. How perfect.

With another satisfied smile and a shiver of giddiness, I went back to collect my bag. The cottage was cozy as promised, even at two stories tall. I lugged my suitcase up the stairs, flipping the hallway light switch as I passed by the extra guest room. Aside from a dresser along the back wall and some nautical decor, it was empty, unusual for a CozyHost property, but Alex had explained that the previous guest had ruined the mattress and she was awaiting a new one. Perhaps that's what led to the last-minute cancellation that got me the reservation. I assured her it was just me, so one bed was perfectly fine.

Passing the bathroom in the middle of the hall, I peeked in, excited to see a newly renovated shower. The glass walls were pristine and the sea glass green tiles added a fun flair to the nautical theme throughout the rest of the cottage. Ooh, this was turning out to be great for my article, but even greater for my mental health.

I'd been needing a getaway, especially after my ex-boyfriend Charles up and disappeared on me. What a waste of six months. I stopped and shook my head. Charles was not who he claimed to be, so it was no use mourning the relationship. And I refused to spend one more second overanalyzing what was not meant to be. That was a problem of mine. Overanalyzing. I did it with everything. But I was newly determined to break the habit.

Putting Charles out of my mind—for now—I walked into the main bedroom and sighed. One of those good, happy, life-is-amazing sighs, complete with puppy dog eyes. It was perfect. The canopy bed sat against the left wall, sheer curtains draping over the mahogany. White linens covered the mountain of pillows and a puffy cream duvet sat on top like a cloud. A wing-backed chair—the same sea glass green as the bathroom tiles—sat in the corner. Paintings of stormy seas and lighthouses lined the white walls. And my favorite part, the thing I knew I'd love as soon as I saw it in the pictures on the CozyHost app, was the massive window seat, complete with a fluffy velvet cushion and a pile of books on a nearby shelf.

Since it was still dark, all I saw in the sparkling-clean glass was my own reflection and the room around me, but I knew come morning, the view would be of the backyard and surrounding pine forest. I looked forward to losing myself in a book, only occasionally looking up from the story to see the trees around me and nothing else. No city lights, no bustling businessmen, no Charles. Ugh. No. Seriously, NO Charles. I needed to get him out of my head.

I rolled my suitcase to the dresser and unpacked. I always unpacked when I went away. My friends always made fun of me for it, but I hated living out of a suitcase,

even if it was only for a few days. I slipped my jeans and sweaters into the bottom drawer, then my T-shirts and leggings in the middle drawer. I giggled as I looked at what remained.

I had brought my sexiest underwear for a solo trip to Maine in the dead of winter. I didn't know what compelled me. But after six months of feeling...less than wanted by he-who-shall-not-be-named, I decided I needed to feel sexy again. Even if it was only for myself.

I went out to the fanciest lingerie store in Charlotte and bought myself a whole new underwear wardrobe. Frilly lace thongs, silk panties, matching bras, even sexy teddies and slips to use as pajamas—entirely inappropriate for the cold Maine winter nights, but some things were just worth it. And me discovering my sexy side and self-worth was one of those things.

Even if no one else saw them, at least I'd know how good I looked. And hopefully that would get me out of this stupid funk I was in since Char—no. Not going there. Maybe I needed one of those rubber bands people wear around their wrist to snap themselves every time they think of a detrimental thought. He definitely counted as detrimental. But alas! I was on vacation, so I needed to start acting like it.

I carefully placed all of my sexy new underthings in the top drawer and stowed my suitcase in the closet. It was time to go exploring.

* * *

The flurries of snow had stopped by the time I got back in my jeep and headed into Moon Harbor proper. It was only 6:30 but everything was so dark and quiet, it seemed like midnight in the outskirts of town. It was peaceful, but as someone coming from the city, it was a little unnerving. I shook off the feeling. I came here for a relaxed and peaceful getaway, but also to get away from Charles's criminal cronies.

This little town in the middle of nowhere was perfect for that. I suppose I simply needed to learn to appreciate the quiet.

As I got closer to downtown, though, I felt the thrum of life surround me. Pulling onto Harbor Street was like stepping into one of those Hallmark Christmas movies that I watched every year.

All of the tree trunks along the sidewalk were lit up with white twinkle lights. Garlands of Evergreen swirled around the lamp posts capped off by gigantic red ribbons at the top. The flurries of snow hadn't stuck to the ground but the moisture they brought left reflections of the lights on the streets, somehow making it all the more magical.

I parked my jeep in the first parking spot I found and got out to walk along the cobblestone sidewalk. Families in wool peacoats and puffed up parkas surrounded me, drinking hot chocolate, licking candy canes and admiring the shop windows, all decorated for the holiday.

I stopped in front of one particularly cute shop called Moonbeam Jewels and admired the window display. Sparkling white fake snow covered the interior of the window and display shelf. Crystal necklaces, bracelets, and rings sat scattered across the snow, spilling out of an overturned treasure chest. A wooden ship's bow stuck up from the snow, like it had run aground or gotten stuck in the ice. The whole window was a perfect nod to the New England town and its seafaring ways. I was charmed all the more.

A few shops down, I saw the Witch's Brew, a cafe I'd read about on a competing travel blog and knew I'd be checking out. It was a little late for coffee, but I figured a hot chocolate couldn't hurt. I stepped inside, the jingle bell above the door, a warm welcome to the space. It was every bit as adorable and Instagram-worthy as the photos online showed. But the Christmas decor pushed it over the top in the best way.

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A flocked Christmas tree stood against the back wall, gold and purple lights covering every inch. Silver ornaments and clear glass balls hung from the branches, and what seemed to be hundreds of carefully wrapped presents sat underneath, next to a hand-painted sign that read “Gift Donations Here.” Upon closer inspection, the instructions were simple. Donate a gift for an under-privileged child or teen, and receive a free coffee or tea. The shop would be hosting a party on Christmas for the Boys and Girls club. My chest warmed in appreciation and I made a mental note to grab something and drop it off first thing in the morning.

I got in line and glanced around at the rest of the cafe, still mostly filled with what looked to be tourists enjoying their warm drinks and treats. Little Christmas tree candle holders sat on each mismatched table and gold bows decorated the back of each chair. As I reached the counter, I noticed one large sugar cookie left in the display case. It was shaped like a Christmas stocking and decorated with red icing and white sugar sprinkles. I needed it.

The woman behind the counter smiled at me. “Hello, what can I get for you this evening?”

“I desperately need that stocking cookie.”

She laughed, and punched a button on the iPad register. “Good choice. Anything else?”

I perused the overhead menu, wondering whether peppermint or hazelnut hot chocolate would compliment the cookie better.

“And a peppermint hot chocolate, please.” I’d try hazelnut tomorrow. The woman nodded and rung me up. I paid and watched as she made the drink from scratch, steaming and frothing the milk, adding the flavors, placing a peppermint stick into the mug and a huge dollop of whipped cream on top.

“Oh my god, this is heaven in a cup,” I said as she smiled and plated my cookie.

“Thank you, I hope it tastes as good as it looks,” she replied with a wink.

“Oh, I’m sure it will. Is this your cafe?” I chanced a guess as she looked too practiced at making drinks and welcoming guests to simply be an employee.

“It is. I’m Sara. Are you in town for the festival?” I didn’t know if this was one of those small-town-everyone-knows-everyone-else-things or if I just looked wildly out of place. But I shook my head.

“Happy coincidence. I just wanted to get away for the holiday and found a cute place to stay on CozyHost.”

“Ah, that app has brought a lot of business to our town. We’re always happy to host tourists.”

“Well you’re the perfect demographic for it. The whole town looks like a postcard.”

She laughed. “It sure does, at least on the surface.”

“I’m Mia.” I stuck my hand out and she took it, shaking it firmly. “I’ve read about your cafe online.”

“Well, I’m happy you stopped by, Mia. I hope your stay here in Moon Harbor is everything you need it to be.” Her smile was warm, but her eyes held a knowing look

to them. I nodded in thanks and turned to find a table. I didn't know if Sara was good at reading people or if I was giving off desperation vibes, but the truth was, I did need Moon Harbor. Not just as a cute place to spend Christmas, but as something much more. I needed it to be my safe haven. I needed it to protect me.

three

DREW

I'd gone back to the hospital to check in with my team and finish up some paperwork, but by the time I left, I was ready for a shower and bed. It wasn't even late, just past nine o'clock, but the stress of the day had gotten to me. Maybe I'd have a shower beer and then cook that steak I'd picked up from the butcher's. Sounded like a perfect night to me, even perking up my perpetually bad mood a little bit.

Too bad that didn't last. After turning onto Millhouse, the dirt road the cottage's driveway sat on, I hit a deep divot and heard my tire pop.

"Fuck!" I pulled off to the only open area I could find on the tree-lined road. It was a small patch of grass about as big as my Charger, but it was good enough. There were only a few houses on this road, and I didn't know if they were even occupied this time of year, but the last thing I needed was to block the path and have someone tow my car.

I got out and walked around to the trunk only to remember my spare tire was gone. I'd given it to an elderly woman stuck on the highway a couple months ago. She didn't have a spare, and didn't know how to change a tire anyway. So when I'd come across her standing in the dark, tearful and afraid, I hadn't thought twice about it. I grabbed my spare and popped it on her sedan. I even admitted to myself at the time, the fact I could help her made me feel...good. A feeling I definitely hadn't been used to.

Tonight, though, it had bitten me in the ass. I cursed as I kicked the flat tire. Grabbing my phone, I called Rick, the owner of the only tire shop we had in town, but it went straight to voicemail. It was dark as shit out here, but I was less than a mile from the cottage, so I grabbed my stuff, locked my car, and trekked the rest of the way. I'd deal with that mess tomorrow.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, I was back at the cottage. My phone rang from in my pocket and I grabbed it, swiping on the answer button.

"Rick, hey. Thanks for calling me back."

"Don't thank me yet. What's going on?" I heard his kids yelling in the background. It sounded like a battleground but I figured that's just what a house full of kids under ten sounded like.

"I'm staying out at my sister's cottage, you know the one on Millhouse?" My tongue almost tripped over the word sister, but I was surprised it didn't. Rick paused though, probably processing it.

"Yeah, yeah I know the one."

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“Well I got a flat turning onto the road.”

“Ah shit, man. That dirt road is god-awful for your tires. And suspension, come to think about it. You still out there?”

“Nah, I didn’t have a spare on me, so I left my car on the shoulder and walked back here. You think you can make it out tomorrow morning and help me?”

“Yeah, I’ll try to make it out there first thing. I’ll text when I’m on my way. You drive a Charger, right?”

The sigh of relief hit me hard. “Yeah, man. Thanks, I owe you one.”

“I’ll take you up on that some day.”

We hung up and I mentally crossed that one item off my to-do list and walked to the fridge, reading some emails from work along the way. I texted my on duty team to let them know I’d be a little late tomorrow and grabbed a bottle of the new IPA I’d been meaning to try.

Beer in hand, I headed upstairs to take my shower. I wasn’t super familiar with Alex’s cottage—it was her aunt’s before she inherited it. But I could tell the bathroom was newly renovated. The steam shower was sparkling new, and the tile work was gorgeous. I didn’t really care much about home design but I appreciated good craftsmanship, and this had Sam’s work all over it.

He was a carpenter by trade, but mostly designed and built high-end furniture. I knew

he could do way more than that, as he customized his own house, well now, my sister's house too. Fixing up the cottage was probably a passion project for both of them. Alex was so close to her aunt Carol, I didn't ever see her selling this place, but wanting to update it and make it better was right up their alley.

I slipped my feet out of my boots, pulled off my hoodie, and stripped my jeans off. The water took a couple minutes to heat up, but once it did, the steam started gathering in the enclosed shower. I closed the glass door behind me and stepped under the rainfall showerhead.

The scalding hot water and heavy pressure was a balm on my sore muscles. I took a sip of my beer and set it on the convenient built-in shelf. For once, I wasn't in a hurry, and lathered up my hair and body with some of the shampoo and body wash Alex had provided.

As I rinsed off, I took another sip of my beer and just let the water wash over me. This was probably the best shower I'd had in years. I even let myself smile a little as I closed my eyes and let my body completely relax.

But I really should have known better. Because the moment my muscles relaxed, I was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream.

four

MIA

“What the fuck?” The man—the naked man—was yelling obscenities as I screamed at him from the doorway of the bathroom.

An intruder! A scary man in my shower! If anyone should be yelling obscenities, it should be me, surely. Some raving lunatic breaks into my vacation rental and just

helps himself to my very fancy shower? Before I even get to enjoy it? I don't think so.

I'd come back from a beautiful evening enjoying all the Christmas sights and sounds downtown, with great expectations of a hot shower and another cup of—admittedly inferior—hot chocolate. Hearing the shower running from the stairs set my heart to pounding. I'd never been so scared in my life.

And yet somehow, I thought it had been a good idea to ambush the trespasser. With what, exactly? My banshee-like cry? That was all I had going for me. I hadn't even thought to grab a weapon of any sort.

If this was a horror movie, I'd most certainly be dead and the audience would be cheering for the bad guy.

I might be dead soon, anyway.

I shook off the thought and studied the interloper in front of me. Standing in my steam shower. Enjoying my vacation.

What kind of terrifying creep did such a thing? Only now, the steam was clearing and I could see that he was a very tall, very muscled, very handsome creep. Drat.

He shut off the water and reached for a towel, only there wasn't one within arm's length. He must have forgotten to grab one from the fluffy stack on the shelf in the corner.

"A little help here?" He called, sticking a hand out.

"And why should I help you?"

“Why should—lady, you’re interruptingmygoddamn shower, and you’re not even gonna grab me a towel?”

“It’s not your shower. I mean, you were taking a shower, so I suppose that’s yours, but the shower itself is not. It’s mine, and you’re trespassing!”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, but since you won’t help me out here, I guess I don’t have any other choice.”

He barked out a laugh, but it was decidedly humorless, and opened the glass door, stepping out onto the bathmat in all his naked, wet, trespassing glory.

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I knew he'd been naked. I'd seen him through the glass. But now that he was right in front of me with no partition between us, the steam dissipating, I had a front row show to...well, all of him. And dear reader, it was a headlining act.

My eyes scanned his body. I tried to stop them. I felt my eyeball muscles straining under the influence of good manners. But it was for naught. I looked. I saw everything. All six-foot-two of him, all sinew and muscled skin...all thick, long,manlinessof him. And the worst part was, I couldn't look away.

The man smirked and walked over to the towel shelf to grab one, taking his time to dry off, not even having the decency to cover up as he did so. And my traitorous eyes followed every move he made.

"You're gonna catch flies," he said, wiping the towel over his face and hair, leaving the rest of him mercilessly (or mercifully?) naked.

I clamped my mouth closed so fast, my teeth rattled in my jaw. Who was this man?

"This is obscene," I managed, but didn't move a muscle. He just smirked again.

"Then why are you still staring?"

My mouth dropped open again, god bless it, I had no control anymore. Get yourself together, Mia. It's a naked man, you've seen them before. Not one like this. Not one even close to this. Something had to give, though, because I was close to combusting.

"I'll just...I'm going...BEDROOM!" I blurted out, screamed more like, and ran from

the room and down the short hall to lock myself in the bedroom and never come out. This was where I lived now. This is where I would die.

A few minutes later, a knock sounded. I'd managed to lock the door and hide under the covers. Partially because a stranger had trespassed and was in my rental, but mostly because that stranger was hot as heck and he was doing things to my insides I had never experienced before. Sheesh.

"Come on, I won't call the cops if you just leave nicely," he said. Wait, what?

That got me out of my hiding spot. I walked to the door, but didn't open it.

"What do you mean if I leave nicely? This is my rental!" I yelled at the wood.

"Yeah, well I have it on good authority that it was vacant this week."

"Oh, so you just figured you'd help yourself?"

"Like you did?"

"What?! I'm calling the owner and CozyHost immediately. After I call the police."

"Wait, you know the owner?"

"Yes. Well, I've corresponded with her. And I'm sure she would be enraged to know some squatter is here, flashing her unsuspecting guests."

"Look, I'm not a fucking squatter, okay?" The little humor I noticed in the bathroom was gone and he sounded annoyed.

"I don't see why you're angry about this. I am a single woman, alone here, and you

could be a murderer!” It was stone cold silent after that. I almost wondered if he’d walked away and I didn’t notice. But then he spoke again, his voice softer.

“Look, the owner is Alex, right?” I didn’t answer him, but he continued. “That’s my sister.”

“Wha—your sister?”

“Yeah. Her husband told me today this place was vacant and said I could stay here this week while my apartment gets fixed.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“Well, how do I know you’re telling the truth? You could be anyone.”

“I guess that’s true. And so could you. I was innocently taking a shower and you walked in on me. You could be a murderer too.”

I felt myself deflate.

“Why don’t you come out and we can call Alex together?”

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Against my better judgment, I opened the door. He was dressed now, in a clean black henley and gray sweatpants. Of course. One look at them and I almost closed the door again. My face was hot and I knew my cheeks were a deep shade of scarlet. But he seemed to be ignoring me now. He walked down the hall to the stairs and disappeared down them.

“Wait.” I followed and nearly tripped in my quest to not let him out of my sight. Until I confirmed he was who he said he was, my hackles were up.

Downstairs, I found him in the kitchen, phone already to his ear. He opened the fridge and pulled out a beer, offering it to me. I scrunched my nose and shook my head. He rolled his eyes at me and twisted the cap off, taking a good long drink. I absolutely did not stare at his throat while he swallowed it. Nope, not at all.

“There was no answer,” he said, pressing end on the call.

“I’m not falling for that.”

“Call her from your phone, then.”

“I will.”

“Good.”

“I’m doing it now.”

“Okay.”

Except my feet weren't moving from their spot on the tiled kitchen floor. Something about this strange man had taken me over and obscured my good judgment. It's his penis. It's the fact I saw his penis. He could be a dangerous criminal and all I can think about is his penis.

"You need your phone if you're going to call."

"I know that!" I finally turned away and shut my eyes in embarrassment as I walked back to the front of the house where I had dropped my bag. Rifling through it, I found my phone and opened the CozyHost app. The man just strolled into the room behind me and sat on the couch, calm as could be. His gray sweatpants shifted as he spread his legs wide and I gulped and turned away.

Finally finding the host contact button, I placed a call. It rang. And rang.

"Hi, you've reached Alex. I can't get to the phone, but leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Shoot.Beep.

"Hi, Alex. This is Mia. The guest from CozyHost. I'm at the cottage now, it's absolutely lovely, by the way. A dream, really. But, um, there seems to be an issue. A man is here claiming to be your brother and insisting he is staying here, and I would very much like to speak to you and address this as soon as possible. Please call me back. Thank you."

"Are you always so polite?"

I turned my head to find him staring at me.

"Well, yes. What's the point of being mean?"

He seemed to think that over. “I don’t know that there is a point to it, it’s more of a basal reaction.”

Huh.

“Look, I’m sure you paid good money to be here, I don’t blame you for being pissed off.”

“I’m not pissed off, I’m just confused. And surprised. And scared.”

“I might be scary, but you don’t have to worry. I have no plans to hurt you.”

“As...reassuring as that is, I suppose, I just want to know when you’re leaving so I can get on with my night.”

He stood then, and approached me. He got so close I could smell the hops from the beer mixed with mint toothpaste. Why did I think that was so attractive?

“Well, baby, I’ll tell you this. I’m not going anywhere. And,” he looked at the time on his phone, “it’s past ten now. I know for a fact there are no other vacancies in town. So whether you like it or not...” He looked me up and down like I was a tall glass of water. “We’re stuck together for the night.”

five

DREW

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Well god dammit. This was a complication I really didn't need. I finally caught a break and of course, there'd been some sort of mix up. If I were a gentleman, I'd leave, no questions asked.

Once upon a time, I was a gentleman. But now, I was a tired and grumpy asshole who just wanted to get some fucking sleep. And Pollyanna was here complicating everything. But the worst part was that she was most definitely in the right. She paid to be here, and made arrangements with Alex, and here I was fucking up her vacation.

But I didn't have anywhere else to go. That was embarrassing as hell to admit. My car was busted, and Alex wasn't answering, probably already in bed for the night.

The pretty little thing kept sneaking glances at me. I knew I made her off-kilter, but I found myself kind of liking it. Did that make me a sadist?

"Wait a minute, how did you even get here? There's no other cars outside and no garage."

"My tire busted out on the road. I walked the rest of the way. So like I said, I'm not going anywhere. At least not till tomorrow morning when Rick comes to bring me a spare." Recognition flashed on her face and I figured she remembered seeing my car on the side of the road.

"Well what do you propose we do? I'm just supposed to trust that I'm safe here with you? I don't even know your name."

She had a point, so I tried to keep my annoyance hidden. I didn't think I was doing a

good job at it, but I tried at least. I opened the lock screen on my phone and went to the hospital's website. I found the staff page and showed her my dumbass photo. She took the phone and paced the room while looking at it.

“You work for the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“You're the director of security?”

“Yes.”

“You seem a little young for such a big job.”

“Okay.”

“Andrew?”

“Drew.”

She handed the phone back to me, seemingly satisfied for now, and then held her hand out.

“I'm Mia.”

I looked at her hand and fought the smile that wanted to form on my lips. This chick was adorable. And I didn't find anything adorable. But I shook her hand because I didn't want to leave her hanging.

Interesting that I cared.

“Well, there’s only one bed here. Alex told me the other one was ruined and the new mattress hasn’t come in yet.”

“Whatever, I’ll just sleep on the couch.”

“This couch?”

We both looked at it and I shrugged.

“This couch is about two feet too small for you.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll deal with it. You paid for the bed, I’m not gonna take it from you.”

She kept looking at me, and why did I like it so much? But it also felt too real. Half of me basked in the attention this beautiful woman was showing me and the other half wanted to run and hide. Don’t let anyone in. It had become a motto for a reason. I needed to keep it that way.

Mia turned and walked up the stairs without another word. I guess that settled that. She wasn’t giving me a second thought. That was for the best. But then a moment later I heard her footsteps return to the top of the stairs. And when she walked down, Her hands were full of pillows and a big, fluffy blanket.

She walked right past me and began to make up the couch for me, turning it into as comfortable a bed as she could make it. She even smoothed her delicate hand over the blanket, ridding it of wrinkles. And shit, that made my chest ache a little, and I didn’t know why.

She looked at me one more time, before nodding and heading back to the stairs, but paused on her way up.

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“Good night, Drew.”

My tongue stuck in my cheek, but I forced myself to answer her.

“Good night, Mia.”

“Sweet dreams.” And with that, her little body bolted upstairs, leaving me alone in the living room. I knew for sure, my dreams would not be sweet.

six

MIA

“Drew wake up!”

He bolted upright, grabbing a handgun underneath the couch. “What’s the matter?”

I screamed. “Why do you have a gun?”

“My job is security. Now what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” I pointed to the big picture window, covered by sheer curtains.

“It’s Christmas Eve and it snowed!”

“Jesus.” He flopped his head on the pillow and stowed his gun back under the couch.

“I’ve just never really been around this much snow before! In Charlotte, we’re lucky

if we see two inches all winter!”

“Welcome to Maine,” he drawled with his eyes closed. But then they snapped open and he was upright once more. “Wait, how much did it snow?”

I sighed dreamily and looked out the window. “A lot.”

He scrambled over, looking past me and out into the front yard.

“Shit.”

But while he was worried about the snow outside, I was worried about something else. Those gray sweatpants were barely containing his morning erection and once again I was left slack-jawed at the sight of him.

He looked over to me and noticed. Of course he noticed. I’m sure I cemented myself as the real creep now. I would forever be the perverted woman who couldn’t stop staring at his dick.

But then something wild happened. Wild, only because this kind of thing never, ever happens to me. He stepped up closer, so close his erection practically touched my stomach.

It didn’t, but I felt a phantom caress of it as he stared into my soul. And then he licked his lips. Not in a weird way. Just a quick movement of his tongue over the bottom lip, as if he were preparing to...what? Kiss me? Ravish me? This wasn’t a romance novel. We were strangers, stuck together for a short time.

But I couldn’t help the way my body reacted to him. The urge to stare. The urge to touch him. The desire for him to touch me. Where did this come from? I’d never experienced it before. And certainly not with someone I didn’t even know.

My breath hitched and he cleared his throat. His eyes never once softened. They stayed fierce and angry and dangerous, and god help me, I liked that.

He stepped back and made no attempt to hide the fact that he was adjusting himself. And yes, I kept looking. He was still hard, but it wasn't sticking out so much anymore. A tragedy.

“Don't you like snow?” I asked, a ridiculous way to distract from my heathen behavior.

“No. Especially not when it strands us here.”

“Strands us...wait, how much do you think there is out there?”

“Looks like at least ten inches and it's still coming down pretty hard.”

I clamped my lips together to avoid making a bad joke, or worse, an embarrassing sound. Because eight inches and coming down hard was exactly what I wanted from him right now. Who the heck was I all of a sudden?

“I have a Jeep. It's four-wheel drive.”

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He looked at me like I was dreaming, but didn't say anything. My Jeep had never been through anything this deep. And it was still a long way into town.

Just then his phone rang from its spot on top of the coffee table. He turned around to get it. As Drew took the call, I admired the view. I'd never been around much snow. We got dustings in my part of North Carolina, but before that, I'd grown up in Florida. Maine was like a whole different country. And snowy Maine was even more foreign.

But as I looked out the window, my breath fogging up the glass in front of me, I adored what I saw. Snow blanketed the ground, not a single imperfection showing. The trees were flocked with fluffy white clouds of it. And it was still coming down in a heavy whirl. I couldn't imagine a more beautiful sight.

I heard Drew say goodbye to whomever he was talking to, and then felt him walk up behind me. If I were smart, I would have never let a stranger approach me from behind. But Drew did things to me. He made me crave him. Wait, what? Did I reallycravehim?

I thought about the way my body reacted to his, the way it was reacting right now to him standing so close. My pulse was thudding, my skin was hot. My panties were definitely wet. Crave? Maybe so.

And despite his grumpiness, and a complete lack of knowing him, I trusted him for some reason. At least enough to know my life wasn't in danger.

“Well we're definitely stuck here for a while. None of the outer roads in town are

plowed and they gave up plowing downtown for now, too, since the storm is supposed to get even worse.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah, that was Rick. He was supposed to come bring me a tire, but that’s canceled now. They’re shutting everything down.”

“I thought you New Englanders were built for snow storms.”

“Yeah but not two feet of it in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Two feet?!”

“By this afternoon, apparently.”

“Well I don’t think my Jeep can get through all that.”

“Sure can’t,” he said, easy as pie while I gaped at the situation we now found ourselves in.

He walked back, staring at his phone.

“I gotta contact work. See if there’s anyone able to get in there.”

Drew sat back down on the couch and started doing his work stuff, and I didn’t want to be a bother. So I went back upstairs to get dressed and try to take my mind off this new development.

I stood at the dresser surveying all of my options. I didn’t have any proper snow clothes, but I had a parka and Uggs. I could layer leggings under jeans and a long

sleeve T-shirt under a sweater. Good enough, I supposed. There was no way I would miss playing in the snow for the first time in my life. Ten minutes later, and properly bundled, I waddled down the stairs and grabbed my coat from the rack by the door.

“Uh, what are you doing?”

“I’m getting ready to go play in the snow.”

“Play in the snow? Like you’re seven?”

“Well, some of us didn’t get to do it when we were seven.” Drew just shrugged but as I struggled to put my parka on top of my layers, he took pity on me and came to hold it so I could slip my arms in.

“Thank you.”

He just grunted in response and went back to the couch. It was my turn to shrug, but it wasn’t visible due to the fluffiness of my wardrobe. So I slipped my gloves and hat on and walked out the front door.

The snow was up to the middle of my shins. I had never experienced anything quite like it. Hiking my feet up to trudge through it, I walked over to the front yard. There wasn’t much since most of the property was surrounded by forest, but I remembered there was a patch of grass across from the front porch.

The snow was still coming down and I tipped my head back and stuck out my tongue to catch snowflakes. They tasted like the cold air. It was magical. I giggled and dropped to my butt in the snow. I wanted to make a snow angel, but it was too deep. No matter, I just rolled around. I realized I must look absurd, but this was amazing. I couldn’t remember the last time I smiled so much.

Maybe this trip to Maine was made for the wrong reasons, but it seemed to be the absolute right thing for me.

seven

DREW

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She was frolicking in the snow. I'd never imagined using the word "frolic" before, but now, looking out the window at Mia, there was no other word for it.

She was frolicking and it was fucking adorable. And there I went again. Using the word "adorable." This woman was bonkers for my vocabulary.

I made a pot of coffee and stood at the front window, drinking a cup and watching her play in the snow. And damn it if I wasn't fighting the urge to go out there and join her. She looked so angelic, but so full of life.

Mia was a beautiful woman. Long dark hair, olive skin. Her big brown eyes were so filled with expression, I don't think she could hide what she was thinking if her life depended on it. And those curves.

She was petite, barely coming up to my chin, but she had curves I'd kill to get my hands on. Not that I could see them at the moment. Covered in layers upon layers of clothing and snow, she was the Abominable Snow-Mia. And I was standing here pining over her instead of doing my own thing, or, god forbid, making a move.

But that was not in the cards. I hadn't dated anyone in over a year, and it was for the best. I was too set in my ways to compromise on anything, and too much of an asshole to try. Plus, Mia was a tourist, just here for a vacation. It would be a mistake in a million ways. But that didn't stop me from thinking about it.

Last night, the way she looked at me when I stepped out of the shower...it did things to me. The shock on her face, the fact that she couldn't tear her eyes away. She liked it but she didn't want to. And just thinking about that had me hard half the night.

The way she was so polite. The way her cheeks rounded when she smiled. And the way she smelled, like sugar and flowers at the same time. Fuck, this woman was a complication.

So why, after one last look at her jumping in a snowdrift, did I find myself heading back to the kitchen to make her breakfast? So that she could come inside to something warm and hearty after playing in the snow? Surely that was just what any stranger would do in this weird situation. It was friendly. It was kind. But I'm not kind.

Best not to think about it too much.

I grabbed a bowl and the mix from the cupboard and began making some pancakes. Then I threw some scrambled eggs together and fried up some bacon. She must have brought the bag of oranges on the counter, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to slice those up too.

Before I knew it, I'd made a damn feast for this woman I didn't even know. And that fact almost pissed me off, but then I heard the door open and her carefree laughter floated through the cottage and sucker-punched me in the gut.

I turned the burners off and left the pancakes warming in the oven, then went to go help her out of her layers. When I turned the corner, that damn smile hit me again. I actually had to look away or I risked smiling back, and if I let myself do that, I was positive I would have looked like the Joker.

"That was incredible!" she squealed with delight, hopping on one foot while trying to get her boot off. As soon as I got close enough, I pointed to the stairs and she sat her butt down on them while I removed the boot. Her sock underneath was covered in matted snow too.

“You gotta learn the ropes up here or you’ll catch your death.”

“Oh don’t be such a spoilsport. It was so much fun! I can’t believe how hard it is to walk through, though.”

“Mmmhmm.” I was trying like hell to not come off like a fucking creep as I slowly peeled the sock down her shin and off her foot, to reveal...another sock. “Man, you were really serious about these layers, huh?”

“See, I wouldn’t have caught my death.” She leaned back against the stairs and closed her eyes, her face relaxed in a contented smile. I removed the other sock, and then repeated the process with the other foot. But then I reached up and unbuttoned her jeans and her eyes popped open.

I didn’t even think about why I was doing it. It just felt natural as anything. But other than her eyes, she didn’t move. So I unzipped the jeans. She lifted her ass up off the stair and I pulled them over her hips and down her legs. I knew she was wearing leggings underneath, but it didn’t seem to matter. As natural as it felt, it was also erotic as fuck.

And now I was hard again, kneeling before her and undressing her, but knowing it would go nowhere. I needed to get a grip.

I cleared my throat and stood, pulling her up by the hand. She had taken her parka off, but her sweater was wet on the bottom of her sleeves, so I motioned for her to lift her arms up. She did, and I lifted the wool up and over her head, leaving her in a skin-tight T-shirt and those leggings that were like a second skin.

I looked her body up and down. I couldn’t hide it and didn’t try to. This woman was affecting me in ways I couldn’t explain. But I wasn’t a weak man. So I took a deep breath and walked away.

“I made you breakfast,” I called over my shoulder.

eight

MIA

What was that? Drew basically just undressed me, ate me up with his eyes, and then walked away like it was nothing? And he made me breakfast? Oh and if he thought I didn't notice the big problem in his pants, he was wrong. But I don't think he would even care. He certainly hadn't tried hiding it before.

This man didn't seem to care if I knew he was hard because of me. But he also hadn't tried to make a move? Men were confusing. Admittedly, I had little experience with them, but they were confusing nonetheless. Before Charles, I'd only had two real boyfriends.

Not for lack of interest, or trying. But I'd just accidentally fallen into relationships that became long-term things. And I knew they weren't right. I never felt that zing people talk about. But they were comfortable, and the men weren't doing me wrong, so I felt bad breaking things off.

At least I'd learned my lesson with Charles. That man did me wrong and I had no problem saying as much. But shoot, I wasn't supposed to be thinking about him. Okay, do-over.

I steadied myself and walked into the kitchen, which had miraculously turned into some sort of restaurant while I was out, because every breakfast food I could have ever wanted waited for me.

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Drew stood at the counter, scooping scrambled eggs onto each of our plates. A tray of crispy bacon sat on the stove and next to it, a pile of pancakes so tall, it could have fed a football team. A bowl of orange smiles sat on the small table on the side of the room. And steaming hot coffee was already poured into a mug.

“I don’t know how you take it,” Drew said, looking over his shoulder. “Your coffee, I mean.”

I couldn’t respond, I just stared at him. Finally he turned, handing me a plate and waving at the stove.

“Help yourself.”

“I can’t believe you made all of this. I mean...you didn’t have to.”

“I know. But if you don’t want it, don’t feel obligated to eat it. You’re probably too nice to turn it down.”

“No, I want it.” I was practically salivating, but that caught me off-guard. I took the plate and began helping myself to the pancakes and bacon. “You think I’m too nice, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

I laughed. “Wow you didn’t even pause to consider,” I said, loading a third, no fourth, piece of bacon onto my plate and sitting down at the table.

Drew took his share and then joined me, shrugging before he spoke.

“I think everyone is too nice. But yeah, you especially.”

I laughed at that.

“It’s not my business and I don’t even know you. So take it with a grain of salt.”

“No, you’re right. I am too nice. And I usually like it that way.” I took a bite of bacon and swirled my spoon in my coffee, considering whether to even bring this up. What the heck. We were stuck here for the time being. Might as well get to know each other a bit.

“I guess I’ve always thought, why be mean, when you can be nice and make someone’s day better? Or at least not make it worse. But I recently discovered I am way too nice to people who don’t deserve it. And way too trusting, apparently.”

Drew looked up from his plate with a snarl. “Someone treat you badly?” His voice was steady but it seemed dangerously so. Like he was keeping himself carefully under control. It made me shiver. I covered it up with a shrug.

“My ex. Well, I thought we were together, but I guess it was all fake. He was just using me. I was much too nice to him.”

Did Drew just growl or did I imagine it? At this point, I’d believe either option. But he didn’t say anything, so I kept my mouth shut too. An enormously difficult task for someone as talkative as I was. Luckily the food was amazing and I distracted my mouth by shoveling in bite after bite. But Drew finished his plate all too quickly and got up from the table.

“I’m gonna go get some wood for the fire.”

“We don’t have a fire.”

“The fireplace in the living room. I’ll build a fire. If this storm gets as bad as they’re saying, we might need it.” With that, he stomped off to the other room to put on his boots. But my mind was racing. I had enjoyed the snow, but I really didn’t stop to think about the storm getting any worse. Should I be worried? Probably. Instead, my thoughts were consumed by Drew going out to chop some wood so he could build us a fire.

What planet had I landed on? The only thing my exes ever did for me was make a dinner reservation. And most of the time, I paid for it.

I heard Drew open the front door and then slam it closed behind him. This was a good time to remind myself that he was not my boyfriend, or even a date. He was a stranger I was temporarily staying with. But my body didn’t seem to care. As I got up from the table to go spy on him outside, I felt a jolt of electricity pulse through my veins. Gosh, he was hot.

And I was in big trouble.

nine

DREW

“We need a Christmas tree.” Mia’s voice called from the kitchen as she made dinner later that night. We’d spent the day sticking mostly to ourselves, but one thing that didn’t escape me was Mia’s love of Christmas.

“We’re snowed in.”

“So? There has to be some way we can make one.

“Seems like a lot of work for little payoff.”

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“It’s Christmas! The payoff would be huge.”

I rolled my eyes, and she just pouted. But not for long.

“Well dinner is in the oven. I’m going to go raid the closets. Maybe there’s an old fake tree around.”

“You do that.”

I went back to reading football stats on my phone, but even that was boring me. The truth was, I couldn’t get my mind off Mia. And being in such close quarters was starting to drive me up the wall. So I’d let her snoop around for a Christmas tree all she wanted if it kept her busy and out of my line of sight. My cock could only handle so much.

I got up, needing to shake off this energy I’d built up and walked over to the window. It was dark out, but I could see the snow was still coming down. The wind shook the little cottage. I hadn’t been through a blizzard like this since I was a kid. A memory of playing in the snow with my brother and the neighborhood kids hit me without warning. The image of it nearly brought me to my knees.

But then a crash from upstairs and Mia’s voice screaming out brought me back to the present in quick form. I ran upstairs, my heart beating out of my chest. I found her on the floor in the guest room, a pile of sheets and boxes on the floor next to her.

“Are you okay?” I dropped to my knees, desperate to make sure she wasn’t hurt. But then she burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you. I just knocked the all down from the top shelf and it took me out with it.” She gestured the the items surrounding her on the floor. I rolled my eyes and took a deep breath. She was okay. At least she was okay.

“See, this is why it was stupid to go looking for a damn Christmas tree.”

“Oh you’re such a spoil-sport. It was an accident!”

I grabbed her hand and lifted her to her feet, but shook my head at her as I did so.

“Whatever.”

As I was walking out of the room, everything went dark and Mia gasped behind me.

“Shit.”

“Oh my gosh. Did we just lose power?”

“Obviously.”

I groaned and felt my way to the door.

“I can’t see anything,” Mia said.

“I can’t either. Here, follow the sound of my voice.”

A moment later she bumped into me, and I tried to ignore the fact that her tits touched my arm.

“Here, hold on to me and I’ll get us downstairs. There are some flashlights in the kitchen.”

I felt her grab my hand and ignored the happy flip my stomach did at the idea of holding hands with a pretty girl. Fucking pathetic.

We made it downstairs without injury and found the flashlights and a whole package of candles. I checked my phone while Mia placed the candles around the kitchen, downstairs bathroom. The living room was still lit enough from the fireplace, but I'd need to throw some more wood on.

"Fuck, the whole county grid is out."

"That sounds bad."

"Yeah, it is bad."

"Well, what do we do?"

"We hunker down. The oven is an old model, it should still be on, right?" She backed down the hall and confirmed. "Alright, we have food. And fire." I took my flashlight and headed for the stairs.

"Wait, where are you going?"

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“The heat won’t work because the switch is electric, so you’ll freeze your ass off upstairs. I’m going to bring the mattress down here so you can sleep by the fireplace.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

I grunted in response because I didn’t know what else to say. It’s not like it was a big deal making sure she didn’t freeze to death.

But inside I secretly relished the fact that I got the opportunity to take care of her.

ten

MIA

Drew came backdown a few minutes later, while I was busy in the kitchen finishing up dinner. I had to admit, the ambiance of the little cottage in candlelight was more beautiful than I could have imagined. I was sure that it made my future memories of this weekend even stronger.

I opened the oven, delighted by the strong heat that warmed me from it, and pulled the chicken pot pie I’d made out of it. It wasn’t a traditional Christmas Eve dinner, but I did my best.

I don’t know why I wanted to impress Drew so much. It really didn’t matter. At least, that’s what I kept telling myself. But I knew it was a lie.

“Should we eat by the fireplace, then?” I called out.

“Fine.”

“Don’t sound too enthusiastic now,” I said to myself as I put our plates on a tray. I added a beer for him and a Coke for me, and then headed back down the hall to the living room. As I approached, I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Oh my god.”

“Is it okay?” Drew asked, his face actually betraying emotion for once. He looked nervous. He looked so nervous I wanted to wrap him in my arms.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said, looking all around at the candles he’d added after all. Every shelf, table, mantle, horizontal surface, had a candle on it. They flickered merrily and cast a warm glow around the room. The fire was roaring bright orange, and he’d covered the mattress in the middle of the room with what seemed like every pillow and blanket in the whole house. It was the most beautiful thing anyone had ever done for me.

Did he do it for me? He must have. Drew was a simple man. I couldn’t imagine him laying around with this many candles or blankets or pillows.

No, he was utilitarian. He’d use what he needed and say ‘fuck the rest.’ So this was for me, right? My heart, which was already in a constant state of puddledom, melted even more.

“Drew...thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He took the tray from me and sat it on the coffee table. Then he took my hand and helped me down to the floor, where we ate our Christmas Eve dinner by candlelight. And despite not knowing each other, a sense of comfort and familiarity found its home in my heart. This was one of the best Christmases I'd had in years. And it was because of Drew.

eleven

DREW

After dinner, we were left with not much else to do. So of course, Mia had managed to find board games. I rolled my eyes and grunted and did all the other grumpy asshole things I usually did, but the truth was, I had a fun time.

Mia insisted on playing Monopoly, but soon lost interest after I almost bankrupted her.

"I told you you're too polite. I'm ruthless, so I always do well at Monopoly."

"Well there's no harm in letting me skip out on rent one time."

"That's how porn always starts."

"Oh my gosh," she said, blushing at the thought. But I got her to laugh. And that was a win.

"I guess I should get some sleep."

"Yeah, probably a good idea."

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Okay, this was awkward. Bunking together by the fire made sense but now that it was time to do it, I was nervous like a little schoolboy. Fuck me.

I grabbed a pillow and laid down on the couch, which was indeed two feet too small for me. My legs hung over the side, but it was fine. I was fine. I was absolutely fine sleeping in the same room as the hot woman I wanted to touch all over. Totally fine.

“Goodnight,” Mia said, as she burrowed under the covers.

“Night.” I mumbled.

The mattress was only a couple feet away from me, but it felt way too close and entirely too far at the same time. There was not a chance in hell I would be getting sleep tonight. But I wanted her to sleep well, so I shut the hell up and tried to lay still. Was I breathing loud? It felt loud. The fire crackled, but everything else was too quiet.

“Um, Drew?”

“Yeah?” I asked, way too quickly. God I sounded eager.

“That couch is way too small. And this bed is big. I just feel silly.”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh, yeah. I know.”

Silence. Why did I cut her off? What was she going to say? God, I was such an idiot.

“It’s just, I was thinking—”

“Yeah?” That was even more eager. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Well, maybe you could sleep in the bed with me.”

I wooshed out a breath, but tried to cover it by clearing my throat. I didn’t know her intentions, but fuck yeah, I wanted to join her in bed. If nothing else, it would be a hell of a lot more comfortable than the couch. But I wanted it to mean more.

“Are you sure?” I asked. She was far too polite for her own good, and if this was one of those times, I would die.

“Yes.” Huh, now she sounded eager. “I mean, yeah...there’s plenty of room. And it’ll be warmer this way.”

“Okay, yeah.”

I slipped down onto the mattress and pulled the covers over top of me. I could smell Mia’s sweet floral scent. I could practically taste it. But I needed to get closer. Fuck it. The power was out and we were stuck in a blizzard. Even if that’s all this will ever be, I might as well give in to the moment. If she tells me to fuck off, I can go back to the couch.

I slid my arm around her middle, pulling her back against me. And fuck, she felt good. Cuddling was normal. Friends cuddled. I’m sure strangers in similar situations cuddled. This was no big deal.

Maybe I want it to be a big deal. Shit. Did I? I didn’t know. I just knew it felt amazing

to have this beautiful woman in my arms, for one night at least.

But then she did it. That thing that girls do. That thing I secretly wished for the second she suggested this.

She pressed her ass back against me. Not enough to start anything. But enough to tell me, she wanted it too. My cock strained against my sweatpants, and I knew she'd feel it soon. But then I heard the sweet sounds of her breathing getting deeper and evening out. I knew I'd be lucky to get even five minutes of sleep tonight. But I got to hold Mia while she slept. And that was even better.

twelve

DREW

I'd stocked us with enough firewood to keep us warm for a month. I knew it was unnecessary, I knew it was a distraction. But I'd needed it.

I was about to go crazy in there, sleeping with Mia like we belonged together, waking up to her whispering "Merry Christmas" in her sleep-laden voice. God, it was intimate and perfect and not at all for me.

I spent the night creating elaborate scenarios of a life with Mia. Taking her on vacation, showing her around town, fucking her to sleep every night...I'd almost needed to go jerk off in the bathroom, but I didn't want to wake her.

I thought about her past, wondering why the hell she was single in the first place. She deserved the world. And then I remembered what she'd said about her ex. It was none of my fucking business, but it suddenly sure as hell felt like it was.

After my body reacted so strongly to her, after I found myself actually wanting to

make a move—something that had become foreign to me over the years—I'd been forced to dump metaphorical cold water over my head. Remind myself that no matter how horny I was for this woman, or how much I wanted to actually, what, talk to her? Open up? No. I couldn't let myself go there. I needed to keep my distance until this snow melted and I could get away. I'd go crazy otherwise.

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I stacked most of the wood on the covered porch, but brought in enough for the rest of the day and started to build the fire.

I felt Mia behind me before she said anything. Before she even made a peep.

“You could make yourself useful and hand me that kindling bucket,” I said, pointing to the bucket not three feet from me. I rolled my eyes at myself, and then watched as she picked it up and wordlessly handed it to me.

She must have showered. I smelled the floral shampoo as she approached. She had changed into another pair of leggings and a tank top. A fucking tank top when it was twenty degrees out. She had one of those oversized cardigans on, but it was open and the top of her chest was bare, the neckline of the pink top hugging the curves of her tits so perfectly I wanted to scream.

“You trying to kill me?”

Her brows knit together in confusion, and I didn’t blame her for it.

“What do you mean?”

I stood, crowding her personal space and not caring one bit. She tilted her head back and looked up in my eyes. I saw the confusion there, the shock at my sudden movement.

But I saw something else. Something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. And it was so damn close to desire, I almost said fuck it all and took her right there on the

hardwood floor. But the tiniest thread of self-control stopped me. I put my hands on her arms and gently—so fucking gently—nudged her back a step so I could walk past.

“Just forget it.”

I walked up the stairs, not knowing where I was going since there really was nowhere to go. But I need a minute. A few minutes.

I needed a few minutes away from the complication and temptation that was Mia.

I ended up in the bedroom and slammed the door behind me. If I didn't do something to calm myself down, we'd both be in big trouble.

thirteen

MIA

Well,shoot. I didn't know what that was all about. But Drew clearly had something on his mind and it seemed that I maybe annoyed him somehow.

Sharing a bed was a ridiculous thing to suggest, but I couldn't help myself. I'd wanted to sleep next to him. I'd wanted to feel his body close to mine.

I thought that he might be interested in me. I knew on the surface he liked the way I looked, and I knew that I aroused him, at least in a small way.

But I felt stupid for thinking that lent itself to actually liking someone. How did I develop a school girl crush on Drew after knowing him for less than two days?

This was the eternal optimist in me coming out to play. I didn't think about real life

or consequences, I lived in my own world, apparently.

How embarrassing.

Regardless of my intentions, I upset him somehow, and the only way to fix that was with some good old-fashioned apology cookies. And since it was Christmas, I could make apology Christmas cookies. Even better.

I laughed at how silly I sounded and how he probably would hate this. But I was stuck in this cottage with nothing else to do, so I figured I might as well make some sweets. If nothing else, I could stuff my face later while he ignored me.

I scavenged the cupboards for all the necessary ingredients. They wouldn't be fancy, but any port in a storm. Or, cookie, in this case. I got to work making two batches, one chocolate chip, and the other, my mom's famous soft gingerbread cookies. Those always worked on my dad when he was in a mood.

The best part was they were quick and uncomplicated. In less than a half hour, I was taking two batches out of the oven.

Drew still hadn't come downstairs. Probably for good reason. He didn't want to be bothered. I knew this. But I still piled a bunch of cookies onto a plate and walked them up the stairs to say my piece.

As I got to the top of the stairs, I heard a grunt coming from the closed bedroom door. A grunt? No, a moan. Or a grunt that turned into a moan. He must not feel well. Oh dear. What if he hurt himself somehow?

I put the cookies down on the little table in the hall and walked to the door to knock on it. But as soon as my knuckles were in position, I heard it again. But this time, there was more.

“Mia...”

It was so soft I almost didn't catch it. But my supersonic hearing did. He said my name. And then grunted again.

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Oh dear lord.

Was he...?

No.

Moan.

Yep, yes he was.

This man was touching himself. In the bed that I slept in last night. And from the sound of things, he just had a miraculous finish. Why was I so turned on by that?

Oh god, I was standing at the door while he did it like some kind of voyeur. I needed to move. If I could only get my feet to work.

The door swung open, causing a yelp to rise up out of my throat. Too late.

Drew stood there, his pants up but unzipped, his face flushed, and a look of pure rage on his face.

I backed myself up as far as I could go, which wasn't far because my butt quickly hit the wall on the other side of the hallway. Drew followed me step for step and now stood so close, I was sure our bodies would touch if I breathed too hard.

“Can I help you with something?”

“I...” I lost all ability to talk, apparently. But for some curious reason, my hand did something completely on its own. Not a single brain cell controlled it as it lifted up, fisted the front of Drew’s shirt, and pulled him closer to me.

His eyes, still full of rage, ignited with something even stronger. I didn’t exactly know what that was, but I could tell it was dangerous. And I wanted it.

“You’re playing with fire, baby.”

My voice still didn’t work, but I lifted my chin up, defiant. I’d never been defiant in my life.

The right side of his lip turned up into the sexiest smirk I’d ever seen in my life.

He crowded me. His big, tall body taking up all the space in front of, and around mine. He boxed me in with his hands, placing them on the wall on either side of my head. His pelvis was almost flush against me.

But that was still too far away.

I thrust my hips up and against him as I pulled on his shirt, effectively leaving no doubt as to the fact that my body wanted him.

He growled. Deep in his throat. And I was a goner.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mia?”

Instead of speaking (yet again) I let my body do the talking. I slid my hand from its grasp on Drew’s shirt, slowly, painstakingly slowly down his hard abs, over the open waist of his jeans, and down to his crotch, where I cupped a very much still hard as steel erection.

This man was either made of stronger stuff than most, or he hadn't finished his alone time. Either way, I thought I was lucky to perhaps reap the benefits of it. I gave the tiniest squeeze and Drew's eyes screwed shut.

He thrust against me.

"I'm no good, Mia." He looked down to where I still cupped his dick. I looked down too, and reveled in the power I felt. My hand looked so tiny in comparison to the bulge he was sporting. And the vibration from his uneven breath and jerky muscles had me feeling all sorts of needy.

But he was trying to get me to be the one to either decide to do this or back off. I'd already showed my hand. I wasn't about to back down now. I took a breath and found my voice.

"I think you're plenty good. But we don't have to be good, right?"

I squeezed my hand again and he moaned, before thrusting into my touch again. He looked down at me, dragging his eyes slowly up my body before landing on my face again.

"You're a pretty little thing and I'm the big bad wolf." He brought his hand off the wall and onto my chest, sliding it up until he wrapped it around my neck. "But this is no fairytale, baby."

He squeezed, and my mouth popped open in surprise.

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Did he really just say that? Did he really just put his hand around my neck? And did I like it—no love it?

I stared up at his eyes they were hooded with some kind of ferocity behind them. Mine were wide open, and a chill ran through my body. I had never been more turned on in my life.

Until he crashed his lips down onto mine and the kiss took me away.

fourteen

DREW

None of this was supposed to happen, but now that it did, there was no going back. Mia's soft lips yielded to mine, giving me all I wanted. No, I wanted more. I wanted everything. But this kiss was a damn good start.

A little mewl sounded from her throat as I squeezed my hand around her throat again. Not hard. Not enough to take her breath away...yet. But I needed to show her who I was so she could decide to tell me to fuck off or not. And for not, I guess the answer was not. Thank Christ.

She thrust her hips up to me again as my tongue invaded her mouth and tangled with hers. God, she was just as needy for me as I'd dreamed of.

"Drew, please." She'd ripped her mouth away from mine, and begged as she rubbed up on my cock some more.

Fuck.

I was telling the truth, though. I wasn't any good for anyone. I was an asshole, and that extended to the bedroom. Oh, I'd make her come. I'd rock her fucking world. But it wasn't going to be sweet and gentle. I was so close to exploding and I needed to know if she could handle it.

"I meant it, baby. I'm no good. I don't know how guys fucked you in the past, but this isn't gonna be like that."

"I know." She panted, her breath heavy, her body a live wire.

"You know, don't you?" I slid my hands down to her waist, over her hips, and around to grab two handfuls of that plump ass. Kissing my way up her neck, I continued. "You know I'm a rough one, huh? And you still want it."

It wasn't a question anymore. She'd already given her answer, and kept giving it with the way she moaned as I hit all the right spots on her neck with my tongue. But I still needed to hear the words.

"Yes," she whispered, her mouth slack.

"Yes what?"

She opened her eyes, seemingly aware of the importance of the moment. "Yes, I want it. I want you to...I want you to fuck me, Drew."

That did it. She hadn't once used a swear word since I met her, but now she was asking me to fuck her, and if I hadn't already been hard as a rock, that would have done it.

I picked her up, spinning her around and into the bedroom, but I didn't put her on the bed. I backed her against the wall and kept her right at my eye level, her legs wrapped around my waist like a vice.

"You know what you do to me, baby?"

"Wha...what?"

I nuzzled my nose against her neck, breathing in that seductive scent of hers.

"You make me crave you," I said. "You make me want to throw you down and have my way with you."

She gulped, but I didn't miss the way she ground her heat against me at the words.

"I had to lock myself away and stroke my cock. Had to work it while I thought of you in those tight leggings. You in this tank top, your tits practically falling out of it." I kissed her neck, sucking the tender flesh and marveling at the taste of her.

"No one makes me like that."

"I do," she blurted out, defiantly. Well shit, this little thing could keep up, couldn't she? I huffed out a laugh.

"You sure do." I switched sides, sucking my way up the left side of her neck. "But then I heard you in the hall. You interrupted me, right as I was about to come."

"I'm sorry."

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“I don’t think you are, Mia.”

I straightened and carried her over to the bed now, dropping her onto it.

“You’re gonna make it up to me, aren’t you?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

“Good girl.” I slipped my hands under her top and pulled it up. The cardigan fell off her shoulders at the same time and I lifted up to reveal the sexiest little see-through bra I could have imagined. The cups barely covered her nipples, and little straps criss-crossed up to her shoulders. Did she wear this kind of thing to lounge around the house all the time? Fuck.

“Did you wear this for me?” I asked, leaning down to kiss her nipple through the fabric.

“No. I wore it for me.” Holy shit, why was that even sexier?

My cock grew impossibly hard and I rubbed up against her as I took her other nipple into my mouth. She shivered and I relished in it.

“Take your pants off,” I said as I straightened up and whipped my own shirt over my head. She scrambled to push them down and I pulled them off the rest of the way.

“Ah fuck baby. You have these little matching panties too?”

I lowered my head and licked a path along the edge of the lace, right where her thigh

met her hip. Goosebumps erupted along her skin and she whimpered. I slipped my finger under the fabric and moved my mouth close but she stopped me.

“Drew, wait.”

I lifted my head up.

She continued, “You don’t have to...I mean, I’ve never...”

I shook my head, not understanding. But then her cheeks grew red and she closed her knees. Wait a minute.

“Mia, what do you mean you’ve ‘never?’” She looked away, embarrassment flooding her features and I’d do anything to make that go away. But I needed to understand.

“I just...I’ve never had anyone go down on me.”

Oh. Wait, what?

“Mia, you’re joking.”

“I am not. I just, never had anyone offer to do it. And I felt weird asking.”

Rage flooded my veins. This fucking glorious woman had never been with a man who used his mouth to pleasure her? She deserved so much better. But I was here now, so she was going to get it. I didn’t care if I wasn’t good enough for her. I knew I how to treat her, and that was more than those other fuckers could say.

But I didn’t want to scare her off.

“Is it something you want, though?”

She still looked embarrassed and maybe even a little nervous. I didn't want that. So I caressed her thighs with my hands in soft, soothing movements, not getting too close to her pussy. Just letting her know the touch of a man who wanted her.

"I mean, I don't want to ask for it if you don't want to do it."

"That's not what I asked."

"I guess I've always been curious."

"I'd never force you into anything, Mia. But if you want it, there is nothing you could do to stop me from licking your pussy."

Her eyebrows shot up into her hairline, clearly not used to real men who loved eating pussy.

"I promise you, I want it. I'd do it all fucking day." I leaned down to kiss her thighs, a tender touch of my lips to show her I wasn't in a rush. She was in control. But god, I wanted her.

Her hips started moving, and I could hear her breaths coming out faster now.

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“I want it. I want it from you.” Her words were the sweetest music to my ears.

I sat up again to pull her panties down her legs. They were so sexy, I’d wanted to keep them on and just slip them to the side, but now that I knew it was her first time, I wanted her to be comfortable, and I wanted her to know I needed to worship her. All of her.

I grabbed her by the hips and slid her so that her ass rested on the edge of the bed. Then I sank to my knees in front of her and spread her wide.

Her pussy was perfect. Wet, hot, and waiting for me. I wanted to go slow, work her up as much as possible, but she was already writhing and whimpering for me. And after being interrupted earlier before I shot my load, I was about ready to die from my own arousal.

So I licked a long, slow path from the bottom to the top, easing in, and relishing the strangled sound her throat made.

And then I repeated it. Smiling against her clit, I started in on her, circling my tongue around, adding suction with my lips, then increasing the pressure and pace until she was dripping for me and begging for release.

“Oh god Drew. Oh my god. I’ve never...never felt like this...” Her words were breathy, her chest rising and falling in rapid movement as she struggled to keep up.

“You like it, baby?”

“Yes, I love it. Ohmygod!” I slipped a finger into her tight center, and fuck. My cock was gonna wreck her. But I couldn’t think about that right now or I’d go mad. I added a second finger and increased the pace of it and my tongue, feeling her twitch against me.

She was close. She was so close.

I flicked her clit with my tongue and then sucked down on it and she cried out. Her hips bucked against my face and she rode out the wave. She was coming because of me and it was fucking beautiful.

fifteen

MIA

I was off in Heaven somewhere while Drew was still licking slow laps down between my legs. I can’t believe I finally did that. I can’t believe he wanted to so badly. I can’t believe it felt so freaking good.

I’d been missing out, that was blatantly clear now. But Drew’s enthusiasm was what really pushed it over the edge. I’d never felt comfortable trying it before because none of my exes seemed to want to do it. And asking for it was just not something I thought I could do. Maybe that wasn’t right. Maybe sex with the right person includes all the things you want to do? Interesting.

“Mmmm.”

I felt the vibrations of him and shivered. He laughed and then sat up.

“So?” he asked, expectantly. He looked confident when he was in control and doing those magical things to me, but now that it was over, he appeared...almost shy?

Unsure? It was so unlike what I knew of him, my heart swelled and I just wanted to hold him. But that was weird, right? We still barely knew each other. And oral sex didn't mean that changed anything. But he needed to know it changed me.

“That was incredible. I’ve never come so hard before. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do, though.” I wanted to explain, to share more, but he just kissed me. The taste of myself on his lips threw me for a loop, just for a moment. But then the arousal of it all swelled in my belly. He moaned into my mouth and I felt his erection bump into my stomach. The urge to make him come just as hard as I had hit me and heated me from within.

A fleeting thought ran through my head. What if I’m not good enough? What if I’m just not enough? But I had no time to worry about it, because he deepened the kiss, then broke it and lifted me up to the middle of the bed. He pushed his pants down and stepped out of them, fisting his impossibly thick cock and giving it a few strokes. Lordy, his hand barely fit around it. I was mesmerized.

“I want you, Mia. Will you let me take you?”

And why was that so hot? He wanted to take me, but he asked first.

I knew sex with Drew wouldn’t be like any of the boring, gentle, vanilla sex I’d had in the past. I wasn’t sure exactly what I was signing up for, but I knew I wanted it. I wanted Drew and I wanted everything he was giving me.

“Yes. I want you to take me.”

“You sure you can handle me, baby?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I want to try.”

He laughed and brought his mouth down to leave wet kisses along my breasts. He settled his hips in between my legs and I almost fainted at the feeling of his hard cock against me.

“Mia,” he said, “Look at me.”

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I hadn't realized my eyes were closed. I opened them to find him staring at me.

"You want to stop? You say stop. I promise you, you're safe with me. You got it?"

I nodded. "Yes," I gulped.

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise." My voice was stronger that time, and I knew that no matter how nervous I was, I still wanted—needed—everything Drew was about to give me.

"Good."

He leaned down to kiss me, his lips and tongue claiming me with a fierceness I'd never experienced before. But it was over all too soon, and he was rising up onto his knees, stroking his cock and lining it up at my entrance.

"You trust me, Mia?"

"Yes." I don't know why, but it wasn't even a question. I did.

He nodded once, and then pushed into me.

"Fuuuuccck." The word was drawn out on his lips with every inch he slowly slid inside.

He stretched me. There was no other word for it. My pussy clenched around him,

feeling the burn of being stretched in a way I never had before.

“My god, you feel so good, baby.”

I couldn't speak, but if I could, I would have said the same thing to him. The sensation of pleasure and pain was intoxicating. But then he started to move in me, sliding in and out with an ever-quickenning rhythm, and I thought I might die from how good it was.

I couldn't control the sounds I was making. Whimpers and cries and pleas of more. I didn't even recognize my own voice. But with every pump, every solid thrust into me, he was taking me higher and higher than I ever thought I could go.

And just when I was about to fly off the edge, he pulled out of me, flipping me over onto all fours and shoving into me from behind.

And oh! This was different. How had I had sex with three people and never experienced so many things?

The angle he was hitting did things to me. I imagined what we looked like, how hot and wanton and...raw it all was. This was the most sensual experience of my entire life. I never wanted it to end.

“Arch your back for me. That's it, Mia. That's fucking perfect. God, you feel how deep I am in you, baby?”

All I could do was moan in response.

“You feel how much I'm stretching you?” Each word was punctuated by his hips slamming into me. More. I needed more. I whined, and he took note. He put his arm around me, grabbing onto my neck and pulling me up onto my knees, so that my back

was flush with his front.

His hand tightened around my throat as he slammed up into me. Why did I love that so much?

“You like taking it rough, don’t you baby?”

I nodded and he squeezed my neck harder. And before I realized what was happening, his other hand came down around me and found my clit.

Oh lord. Oh fucking fuck. How did this feel so good? I cried out as he rubbed my clit, as he pumped deep into my pussy, as he dominated my throat.

“You take my cock so perfectly. Fucking made for me.”

It was all too much. It was all too perfect. And suddenly, with his dirty words in my ear, I flew off the deep end, coming so violently, my entire body shook with waves of convulsions and he had to push me back down onto the bed. He kept fucking me, kept at that harsh rhythm and I heard him calling out “yes” over and over with every thrust.

All too soon, I heard him groan and pull out, coating my butt with his wet, hot release.

“Fuck Mia,” he groaned.

The bed shifted and I heard him leave the room, but I was too weak to move. This bed was where I lived now, every ounce of strength had dissipated from my body.

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“You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

I felt Drew wipe me with a hot washcloth, then follow the path with kisses.

I moaned, unable to say anything else. I was too far gone in a post-orgasmic haze. It was all his fault. I heard him snicker, then the bed shifted again. He pulled me up and over to him so that my head rested on his chest.

“You okay, there?” he asked.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him.

“Is that what sex is always like for you? Because holy heck, I’ve never done anything close to that.”

He kissed the top of my head and ran his hand up and down my back as he spoke.

“Did you like it?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “I loved it.”

I felt him release his breath, as if in relief?

“I mean...I don’t fuck gentle. But no. It’s not always like that. That was...something else.”

My heart jolted but I didn’t want to assume ‘something else’ meant special. Because that’s how I felt. And it seemed silly, when I thought about it. I just had the most

rough and raw sex of my life and all I could think was how it felt so special to me.

I was sure he didn't feel the same. But I could pretend. As he held me in his arms, and the snow flurries still fell outside the cottage, I could pretend he thought it was.

sixteen

DREW

After we spent hours talking about our childhoods and ate our body weight in the cookies she'd made, Mia went to take a bath and I came downstairs to actually build the fire now that I wasn't on the verge of combustion. Goddamn that woman slayed me.

I wasn't lying when I told her sex wasn't always like that. I just didn't elaborate on the fact that I'd never had sex like that, either. I mean, yeah, I was rough. I liked to fuck hard, I liked to dominate. I'd had my fair share of girlfriends and dates who were happy to oblige that. But there was something primal that flooded through me when I was inside Mia, something I'd never felt before.

She was mine.

That thought slayed me. I never got possessive over women. Never cared much either way about anyone. I'd known Mia for two days and all of a sudden I needed to claim her. Needed to keep her and show her she's mine.

On the surface, it seemed both crazy and natural at the same time. Crazy because of the circumstances, but natural because she was one hell of a catch. Anyone would be stupid to not fight to lay claim to her the second they had the chance.

Mia was everything I wanted in a woman, and I'd never put much thought into that

before. But she showed up and I knew it in my bones. She was everything. I thought about what did it for me, but the fact was, everything did. The way she was so cheerful and polite. The way her face lit up as she played in the snow like a little kid. The way she opened up to me as we laid together, her hand resting over my heart, like it was home. The way her body yielded for me, took everything I gave it like it was made for me.

And she made me fucking cookies. How was I supposed to walk away from her after all this?

“Hey,” she said, gliding down the stairs. “That looks so cozy.”

The fire was roaring and the neanderthal in me cheered that she noticed.

I patted the couch next to me and she came to sit, sliding up against me. My arm circled her shoulders, bringing her in closer to me. Again, natural.

“Any word on the storm?” she asked.

“Nah, just more of the same.” It was probably true since the snow hadn’t stopped but I wasn’t about to admit she had me so twisted up, I hadn’t even thought to check. We were in our own little bubble and I had no intention of bursting it before we absolutely needed to.

She didn’t seem to mind, though, as she snuggled in and rested her head on my shoulder.

“So, you didn’t tell me about your family. Aren’t they missing you on Christmas Eve?”

Ah. I’d avoided the question. Mia had told me all about her parents and brother, how

they still lived down in Florida, and she saw them whenever she could. They all seemed close, and I thought how nice that was for her. But it made me hesitant to tell her about my situation.

“Nah, we just do our own thing.”

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“Your sister seems so nice. I’d think you would hang out with her on the holidays.”

Okay, this was a test. Not one from Mia. She didn’t know she was testing me, or what can of worms that assumption would bring up. But it was a test I recognized in myself. I could bullshit some standard answer and change the subject. Or I could be honest. I could actually open up about myself for once, and pray that she wasn’t afraid of me afterward.

I almost chickened out. Almost. But then she nuzzled her cheek against my shoulder in the sweetest fucking way, and my chest seized up. I realized then and there—and I didn’t care how crazy it sounded—I’d do anything for her.

“Well, that’s kind of a wild story, if you’re up for it.”

My heart beat a tattoo against my ribs. But she just looked at me with so much compassion, and nodded.

“So...I didn’t know I had a sister until last year. Alex didn’t know anything about me, either. My dad apparently had an affair with her mom back in the day, her mom moved away, and he never told anyone. But I guess, my mom knew at some point. And when Alex first came to town last year, everything came out.”

I chanced a look at Mia’s face, but other than a bit of surprise, she didn’t show any emotion. So I pressed on.

“It turned out, my mom was responsible for a lot of bad things. She and my brother. I’d always had a hard time getting along with her, she was always so sanctimonious,

hypocritical, you know the type. But finding out my brother was...not who I thought he was. That wrecked me.”

She rubbed slow circles on my forearm and listened to me with rapt attention. And it was just, the simplicity of her there for me, listening to me, not forcing it out of me, that made the words tumble out of my mouth.

“My mom had poisoned Aaron’s mind. Turned him against our dad, made him into a dangerous person. It came out that she had been responsible for Alex’s mom’s death. She’d murdered her.” I heard Mia’s sharp intake of breath, but she just squeezed my arm, a silent permission to go on.

“Aaron kidnapped Alex and planned to kill her, just like her mother. My dad and I had to go out searching for them. I just remember the fear, the anger, the confusion. This wasn’t the brother I grew up with. This wasn’t the man I knew.” A tear escaped my eye, and Mia wiped it away with her thumb, leaning up to kiss my cheek. That kiss gave me the strength to continue.

“We found them, but Alex had escaped. Aaron was chasing after her. He was gonna kill her. I just remember thinking ‘why?’ over and over again. Why? Why was he doing this? But there was no time. I had to make a split second decision. I shot him. Saved Alex. Killed Aaron.”

“Drew...” I waited for her repulsion. For a shaky platitude or horror masked as concern. I waited for her to get up and leave. But she didn’t.

She turned to me, climbed on top of my lap and held my face in her hands.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you. I’m so sorry.” She repeated it, and kissed my forehead, over and over. I didn’t even realize I cried more tears until I felt her wiping them away. And then she held me. She held onto me

so tightly, it was like a lifeline. And I felt myself able to breathe again.

I didn't know how long we sat there like that, but at some point we drifted off to sleep. And when I woke up, she was still right there with me. But I felt lighter than I had in years.

seventeen

MIA

When Drew opened up to me, my feelings for him overwhelmed me. I knew how hard it was to open up to anyone. It was easy to take one look at Drew and see a 'closed for business' sign. But he talked to me. He shared what had to have been the most traumatic event, the most difficult thing to relive.

It felt like a gift.

So now, despite me knowing better, my heart was in it. I had a feeling he was going to break it. But I couldn't bring myself to care.

He'd disappeared outside to get more firewood, which was odd because we had plenty. But I thought maybe he just needed some time to himself after all that talking, so I didn't push it.

It was too cold to read upstairs in the window seat like I'd wanted to do, but reading by the fire was just as cozy and perfect. I'd gotten lost in a book for so long, I jumped when I heard the door open. Drew stomped his snowy feet on the porch and then came inside. But what he carried took my breath away.

"Are you kidding?"

“Ha. I just spent an hour cutting down a tree in a fucking blizzard, yeah it’s all one big joke.”

I squealed.

A Christmas tree?! He’d chopped down a Christmas tree for me. In the freezing cold snow. Just because he knew I’d wanted one.

The tears fell fast and hard. I didn’t even care how stupid I looked.

“No, no...baby don’t cry. Why are you crying? Please don’t cry.”

He pulled his gloves off and threw them onto the floor, and came to me, taking my face in his hands. They were freezing cold, but I didn’t care.

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“They’re good tears, I promise.”

“Thank fuck.”

I kissed him. I flung myself against him and kissed him with all I had in me. If this was going to be some stuck-together-in-a-blizzard-fling, I was going to make sure he darn well remembered me.

His moan got me going, though. The way his throat rumbled with that deep bass. Now that I’d experienced all that he could do to me, I constantly craved more.

So why not take it?

I ended the kiss by sinking down to my knees and looking up at him through my eyelashes. His face slackened and he unzipped his pants without a word.

His cock sprung out, hard, heavy, and dripping from the tip. This was another thing I wasn’t so experienced with. But every part of me craved it, so I figured I’d go with the flow and let my arousal guide me.

I licked the tip, tasting the sweet and salty combination that would forever just be Drew. My lips sucked on him while I swirled my tongue.

“Fuck, Mia. You know I want you to suck my cock, but I’m going to blow my load way too soon if you keep that pretty mouth on me much longer.”

“But I want to make you come.”

“Yeah but I want to fuck the orgasm out of you, baby.” He led me to the couch and sat down. “Come sit on my cock.”

I felt the rush of heat flood my pussy and whipped my clothes off in record time. I straddled his lap, and then slowly took him inside me. We both groaned at the sensation.

“You’re stretching me so much,” I said.

“Fucking right I am. You’re so tight for me. Sink down low, all the way.” I followed his directions and let him take the lead. “That’s it. Mmm. You feel how deep I am? I’m bottomed out inside you.”

“Yesss,” I hissed. I felt so full.

“Now I want you to grind your hips on me. Just a little at first. Yeah, just like that. God, that feels good. You like that, baby?”

“Mmmhmm....” My eyes were closed, my jaw slack. All I could focus on was how good it felt.

“Now go a little more. A little faster. Up and down now”

I swirled my hips in a circle, then rose up and down and oh! This felt better than anything ever had.

“Drew!” I called out.

“That’s it baby. You’re riding my cock. How’s it feel?”

“Amazing. Oh my god.”

“Take it, Mia. Ride me and take what you need.” He dropped his hand down between us and used his thumb to rub a decadent rhythm on my clit.

And that was all it took to push me over the edge. He swallowed my cry with his kiss.

Before I knew it, he’d picked me up and held me against the wall, pounding into me with a force I’d never imagined was possible. His brute strength sent shivers throughout my body.

“God I love this pussy. I love the way you make me feel, baby.”

“Drew I...I...” I had to stop myself from confessing more than either of us were ready for. But every moment with him was proving to me that he was the only one I could ever want.

He sensed something, though. Because his whole demeanor changed in an instant.

“Look at me, baby.”

He stared into my eyes, slowing each thrust so that they were deeper, more intense than anything else.

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“You feel that?”

I nodded.

“This is us. You’re mine. You know that?”

Did I? Yes. I did. There was no question. I nodded. “Yes.”

He thrust again and again.

“You’re mine now. And I’m yours.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it.”

He kissed me again, a fierce claiming kiss that rocked me to my core. There was so much more to come.

But this right now...this was enough. He gave me everything he had. And when he came, he whispered it over and over.

“You’re mine.”

THE END...FOR NOW