

SWEET MONSTERS TREATS



COOKIES *for my* ORC NEIGHBOR



MICHELE MILLS

COOKIES FOR MY ORC
NEIGHBOR

SWEET MONSTERS
TREATS #1

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COOKIES FOR MY ORC NEIGHBOR

The big green Orc living next door to me is so *very* mysterious.

He works from home and rarely goes outside. And when he does go out, he *never* wears a shirt buttoned over his massive chest, no matter the weather. Small children and senior citizens run screaming when he stomps to his truck, so I guess I understand his reticence?

But today is Valentine's Day and I'm worried the big guy is sad and lonely. My neighbor is more angry-looking and growly than usual, despite that darling puppy he recently adopted.

And since I happen to be alone this Valentine's Day too, I decide to bring him a plate of my famous sugar cookies.

Everyone warns me not to disturb him because Orcs always claim their Brides in the dark of winter.

But for some reason, this doesn't worry me at all.

Sweet Monster Treats

Cookies For My Orc Neighbor is a sweet and steamy monster romance that is part of the Sweet Monster Treats collection. Each book is a standalone, containing its own Happily Ever After, and they can be read in any order. Be sure to explore the other titles in the collection:

[Candy For My Orc Boss by Ava Ross](#)

[Cupcakes For My Orc Enemy by Honey Phillips](#)

GRACE

Another winter storm recently slammed into our part of the state, leaving behind six inches of snow and many disgruntled townsfolk. Luckily the sun shines bright this morning, and the skies are fair. Water drips everywhere. Walkways, cars and streets are clearing at a rapid pace. Snowplows recently scoured our street and people are out and busy today, trying to dig out and get stuff done.

After all, next week is Valentine's Day.

I stare out my window as my mysterious, hulking neighbor, Alden Overlook, stomps over to his big red truck. He looks angry again. I'm not sure why. But then my Orc neighbor always looks disgruntled. This is part of his charm.

My kitchen window is positioned at the corner of my house, with the sink right below, directly facing Alden's front yard and driveway. I'm busy washing dishes, not checking him out, or at least that's what I'm telling myself. Six months ago, I moved in next door to this grumpy Orc with muscles for days and abs that won't quit. Soon afterwards my preoccupation for all things Alden began.

A deep sigh escapes my lips.

I start soaking some pots and pans. Alden is probably just going out today, trying to get some groceries, like the rest of us. I daydream for a moment... What it would be like, going grocery shopping with him?

A fluffy black puppy squirms underneath his massive green arms. A wide smile spreads across my face. That dog is

so darn cute. It's a mini schnauzer and I know what breeder he got her from and what he paid for that darling puppy. Yes, this is my level of obsession.

Is he going to take his puppy into the store with him? I'd think he'd have to, considering how cold it is today. I smile, imagining that energetic dog in the cart. I guess the staff at the grocery store would make an exception due to the weather, especially if he went to the smaller local store on Main Street—they're always nice about stuff like that.

My neighbor's perennially unbuttoned flannel shirt flutters in the breeze as he makes his way down his front walk. It's amazing how he never seems cold in this type of weather. The man has no need of gloves, scarves or coats. He just stomps through the snow with heavy work boots and jeans and he's perfectly warm. In the summer he doesn't even bother with shirts unless he's running errands.

He's already shoveled the snow off his driveway and the roof of his truck and scraped all the ice off the windshields. The truck is warming up. Oh, how I loved watching that display of manly snow-shoveling earlier this morning. The moment I heard that scraping sound I was pressed against the window. Alden Overlook can swing a snow shovel better than anyone I've ever met. I might've taken a few secret pictures of his epic bulging muscles and that perfect chest. Shh, don't tell anyone. He even shoveled the snow off the sidewalk in front of my house too, as well as the neighbor's on the other side, because he's helpful like that. Never expecting a thank you. He's done this many times since I moved in, always leaving behind white calcium chloride pellets. Never expecting a thank you.

Meanwhile, Alden's a notorious recluse. Whenever he steps out of his house, I'm on high alert for a rare sighting. No one seems to know much about him. I assume he's either self-employed or able to work from home. He only exits his front door to work on his front yard or his car, or maybe to run errands. I can't blame him for staying inside most of the time since simply stomping to his truck in his own damn driveway

often causes small children and senior citizens to cry out in fear.

It's ridiculous.

If anyone is walking down the sidewalk at the same time he steps out of his house, someone will scream. I've seen it myself many times. I suspect it's the deadly horns that burst out on either side of his forehead, and the fangs that recently started jutting up from his lower lip, along with that harsh expression. It's true he looks angry most of the time. He's not the charming and smiling type.

And yet he purchased that puppy.

The acres of dark green skin startles some people, especially if they've never met an Orc. Lots of people are scared of Orcs, thinking they're barely restrained beasts from olden times. But for some reason I'm not afraid like the others. Never have been. There are quite a few Orcs who live amicably in our small community, so this isn't new. But I've never seen a male with horns quite so large and curved. His dark hair is long with a bit of wave and he's got a thick beard that looks so good. It's always neatly trimmed. How does he eat, or kiss for that matter, with those thick fangs in the way?

He doesn't seem to have any friends or family, which is sad. I've never once seen anyone visit.

Alden opens his truck and lets the puppy inside. He straps her into a raised car seat he's bought for the dog. Darling. I wish I knew the name of his puppy. Well, it's not really a puppy anymore, is it? The dog arrived in the early fall and now it's a big puppy? I remember what she looked like when she first arrived so I can't help but always think of her as a puppy.

He pulls out of his driveway and then drives off down the street.

I have a soft spot for this Orc everyone else fears. I'd love to get to know him better, but he doesn't seem to want anything to do with me, or anyone else for that matter. Once I tried to wave at him when we both walked out to our cars. He

studiously ignored me. A few weeks ago we were both pumping gas at the same time and yet again, he acted like I was part of the scenery.

This harsh Orc that others run screaming from—I want to run toward him and ask him out to coffee. But I would never get up the nerve to do that.

Friends try to set me up on dates, which I always decline. They want me to ask guys out, but I'm way too shy for any of that. In high school I once got up the nerve to ask out the guy I was crushing hard for, who happened to be the quarterback of the football team and class president. He told me, right in the hallway for everyone to hear, that he couldn't go to prom "with someone like me," whatever that meant. I wasn't pretty enough, or my boobs weren't big enough? Maybe my clothes weren't trendy? Probably I wasn't popular enough.

His instant rejection wasn't the end of the world, but it does make me think twice before initiating anything. Maybe this is the real reason why I don't talk to Alden and only lurk in the periphery. He's fascinating. I feel like I know him even though we've never spoken. I should be bold and say something to him, but I can't, which is silly considering I talk to people all day at my banking job. I'm good at talking to people.

Today is Sunday and I'm at home lounging around, but I work as a teller at the local bank. I started right out of high school and I've worked my way up. I greet people all day long and help them with their transactions. At first I was shy, wanting any position that didn't require being face to face with people. But now I feel different, bolder and more grown up. I don't even rent this place next door either; I have a mortgage. Grandma helped me with a substantial down payment and cosigned, so I could have a mortgage with a monthly payment I could afford. The point is I'm twenty-five years old, with a good job and my own home. Why am I still single? It would be different if I enjoyed being single and wanted to live without having to think of anyone else's wants and needs and no desire for children. But I really do want a husband and children—a family of my own. I wish this house wasn't so

empty. I've lived here for the last six months and it's the first time in my life without either my grandma or at least a roommate nearby and I must admit I'm often sad and lonely.

I bake cookies and there's no one to give them to. I take plates of cookies to work and leave them in the employee break room. Everyone loves my sugar cookies and asks me to make more for basically any occasion, some even offer to pay, which is a nice validation. But it's not the same as having a boyfriend or husband right there to enjoy them with me, warm right out of the oven. I can't make dinner and plate anyone's food and watch another person's enjoyment at the first bite. I binge-watch shows by myself, wishing I had a partner to experience them with. I invite friends over and Grandma comes by regularly on Sundays and we have lunch together, sometimes with her group of church friends.

My life is good, it is. I should be more grateful. It's just...

My cell phone rings. I glance at the screen and see it's my best friend, Margie, who always wants to talk instead of text. I shake my head and put her on speakerphone while I keep busy with the laundry. "Good morning," I chirp.

"Morning," she replies and then proceeds to give me a litany of updates on her spring wedding plans. I listen patiently to all the details of the dress fittings, the price, and how she wishes the wedding was over already. There's an update on our bridesmaid dresses and the flavor of cake she and her fiancé, Alex, chose. Finally, she takes a deep breath. "And what about you? How are you this morning?"

"Me? There's nothing new." I start loading clothes into the washer. "You know I'm basically boring. Well, I did see that puppy that Alden bought this morning. I think he took it with him to the grocery store, isn't that darling? And he shoveled snow off my sidewalk early this morning without my even asking."

"That was nice of him. Have you gone over to thank him?"

"Oh no. I don't think he wants any thanks. That wasn't the point for him."

“Why haven’t you ever spoken to that Orc that lives next door?” Margie prods. Both of us work at the bank, although now she’s moved to a different department. She was my roommate, but now she lives with her fiancé and I have to admit I’m jealous she’s already found someone she loves and who loves her back, so quickly. Also, Alex is a great guy. But now that she’s settled down, she’s even more determined for me to have someone too. “Now that I think about it, he’s the only man you ever speak of. You need to get to know him.”

I bite a nail. “I can’t talk to him.”

“Why? Are you afraid of Orcs?”

“No,” I answer as I add fabric softener to my wash. “I’m not afraid of Orcs. Modern, urban Orcs don’t hurt anyone. The problem is he doesn’t talk to anyone, so I’ve been trying to respect that boundary and keep my distance.”

“I suspect he’d make an exception when it comes to you.”

I snort. “Guys never ask me out.”

“It’s just because you don’t put out ‘available’ signals. You act as if you don’t want a boyfriend. As if you’re already taken. You seem incapable of flirting. This would be fine if you wanted to remain single and happy, except we all know you want a husband and children. It’s all you talk about when we go out to happy hour and get a few shots in you. If you’re going to get what you want, Grace, you have to start smiling seductively at guys. Or, I don’t know, maybe even get on one of those online dating sites.”

I gasp with horror. “Never. You know I hate that stuff. I don’t even have social media accounts.”

She chuckles. “I know. It’s weird and yet charming. Why don’t you let me set you up with Alex’s best man, Jonah? You remember him? He’s been asking about you ever since you two met at that barbeque last month.”

It takes a minute for me to remember who she’s even talking about. “Oh yeah, he’s nice but I think he’s too handsome.”

“Too handsome? Girl, how can a man be too handsome?”

I wave a hand. “I’m not after that type of guy. The ones who leave behind a trail of broken hearts. I don’t want to fight for a man’s attention or warn other girls away. He’ll get incessantly hit on by other women and one day he’ll crack from all the interest and cheat on me. Handsome guys are risky.”

“Um, Grace that sounds like stereotyping to me and unfair to all honorable yet beautiful people in the world, male or female. Also, I’m not sure if you’re ever going to meet a guy who you can be one hundred percent certain won’t ever cheat on you. Are you sure you want this to be your criteria for a relationship?”

I pretend to listen but suddenly I’m thinking about Alden Overlook, the Orc next door, because Orcs mate for life and are physically incapable of cheating.

“As far as I know, Jonah isn’t a player” she continues. “He recently broke up with his high school girlfriend and he’s got a really good job. At the very least you should go on one date with him. Maybe there will be something there.”

“No...no. That’s not a good idea.” And then I glance out the kitchen window because I see that red truck in the distance. “Oh,” I gasp. “Alden is coming back home.”

“He is? Good. Are you dressed?”

“Dressed? Well, I’m in sweats. Why? Do you want to meet somewhere today? Please say it isn’t so. Don’t make me scrape snow off my car on a Sunday.”

“No, I want you to pull on your coat and snow boots and get your ass outside and go meet this Alden you speak of so much.”

I place a palm against my chest, like I’m having a heart attack and sputter. “But...he...”

“Put on those big girl panties, Grace, and go get what you want. You want a man who doesn’t cheat. Well, Orcs don’t cheat, do they? In fact, they are notorious for being overly obsessed with their mates. Most women would consider this problematic, but I think for you it’s a gold star. And there’s the

fact that you've been watching him for months and have never seen him with another woman. You know he's as single as you are. And most importantly he's obviously the only man you're interested in. Go talk to him. Just thank him for cleaning up your sidewalk. That's easy to do."

"Well, maybe..."

"Good stuff doesn't fall into your lap, Grace, you have to work for it."

I take a deep breath. "Damn it. You're right. I need to be bold."

"Yes, I am right. And I just want the best for you. You're a wonderful person and some guy would be lucky to have you as his life partner, even an Orc."

"Aww, Margie that's sweet of you to say, you're the best. But I'm not going to ask him out. I'm just going to be friends with this guy who has a darling puppy."

"Uh huh, whatever, now get out there and at least say hi."

We end the call and I rush into the mudroom to shove on boots and my coat. Despite living my whole life in freezing winter conditions, I continue to have an irrational fear of slipping and falling in the snow and ice. Maybe because it's happened at least three different times in my life, resulting in various injuries. My newest snow boots are highly rated. I throw open the front door and crunch my way over, trying my best to stay on the edge of grass for more traction.

The sunshine glinting off the snow feels great and suddenly I'm happy to be out. My aunt and cousin, who live in California, sent pictures this morning of daffodils blooming in their front yard. Meanwhile I sent back pictures of more sparkling snow drifts. California sounds nice but there's something to be said for a glittering winter wonderland.

Alden is only barely opening his driver side door. Perfect, I'm not too late. He starts to step out of the truck, and there's a sudden rush of dog and man. He's trying to hold a bag of groceries, but the dog jumps over him. In a moment there's a

litany of curse words and a tumble of cans and boxes of frozen dinners into the nearby snow.

The puppy starts barking in the driveway.

I get there just in time to grab the dog's red leash. But she proves stronger than I realize, and I'm caught off guard by the push and pull and next thing I know she's running right at me and hitting my knees and I'm teetering.

I gasp with dismay. No, not again.

I fall on my ass in the snow. A fluffy black dog squirming in my lap.

Alden fully steps out of the truck, holding a now empty brown bag and frowns down at me.

I pick up a can of soup and hand it up to him, along with the leash. "Good morning. I was just out to get...well, I came over to say...but then I saw that you needed some help, so I ran over here and then the puppy caught me off balance," I finish in a rush.

He looks around as if he's wondering where the hell I came from. From my vantage point on the ground, he appears tall as a skyscraper. His horns are curved and proud. The dark beard is amazing and his lips, between those fangs are so lush and kissable. And I'm a mess because all I can do is stare far too long at his muscled green chest, exposed under that unbuttoned red flannel shirt. It really is amazing how Orcs don't seem to mind the cold as much as the rest of us humans. Their bodies run much hotter.

He reaches a huge hand down to help me up.

I gingerly accept and then I'm swiftly pulled to standing. He's so much taller, wider and more manly up close. My cheeks heat and my stomach flutters as I imagine snuggling into bed with him, naked. Well, shoot, who am I kidding? Guess I want way more than friendship with Alden Overlook. "Hi, my name is Grace Anderson..."

He studies me like he's never seen me in his entire life.

“I live next door,” I try to explain as I covertly wipe snow off my damp ass. “We’re neighbors.”

ALDEN

“We’re neighbors?” I frown at the clumsy, random female who suddenly appeared in my driveway.

She hands me a can of soup along with the leash to grab onto my wayward dog.

My eyes narrow. “How is this possible that you live nearby?” I grouse because I’m always on high alert, ready for trouble. It’s been my experience that strangers have questionable motives. Especially human strangers. I’ve never seen her before, but she claims to live next door? I’ve truly never seen this female in my entire life. Although humans often look similar. It’s hard for me to tell them apart.

“Yes, it’s true. I live over there.” She points at the house with the small blue car parked in the driveway. “Thank you for shoveling the snow off my sidewalk this morning. I appreciate how you did that for me and how you always lay down the pellets, it’s very nice of you. I came over to say thank you and introduce myself, then thought I’d at least grab for the leash when I saw the dog jumping out of the car. And then, well, I fell on my ass.”

Her cheeks pinken and she bites her lip.

“Aaah.” I’ve still never seen her before, but a human female did indeed move in next door last season. And it’s true I did shovel snow off the sidewalk in front of the two adjoining houses along with mine this morning and treat the walkways, like I always do in the winter because it makes sense.

The dog yaps and leaps against her legs and knees. I sigh and pull back on the leash. “Pepper,” I growl at the energetic dog. “Calm down. Stop jumping on this female. You’ve already caused enough damage for one day.”

“Oh, her name is Pepper? That’s a cute name.” The female bends down and rubs the dog’s face and ears and starts an entire conversation just for my dog. “You are such a pretty girl. I’ve seen you through my window this whole time and always wondered what your name was. *Pepper*. It’s perfect for you. And don’t worry, I don’t mind that I fell in the snow when you were running around. You were just excited to see me, weren’t you?”

I blink, confused that my neighbor continues to stand so close, helping with my dog and giving the animal such care and attention. A wide smile continues on her face and there’s zero fear in her scent. And...do I detect a hint of arousal from her, directed towards *me*?

My nostrils flare as I continue to examine this curious female.

I’ve lived in this town for at least a decade and townspeople still react in fear. The sheriff department long ago realized I’m a quiet, law-abiding citizen who works and pays taxes, like anyone else. They leave me alone and in fact treat me with friendship. But the fear of many individuals in this community is always there, bubbling under the surface and occasionally erupts at the most inopportune moments.

And it wouldn’t help in the least if I just moved somewhere else.

My Orc ancestry precedes me.

And suddenly the quiet is pierced with a high-pitched scream. Dread fills the pit of my stomach. An older female I recognize, with short white hair, uses a cane to walk down my cleared sidewalk. I meet her startled gaze and she cries out again. “Don’t hurt me. Help. Someone help me from this murderous Orc.”

I sigh with resignation. This same elderly female often walks past my house and pretends to fear me. Each time it happens I turn and walk away, but today I find myself more irritated than usual. When will this harassment end? She's not the only one in this town who behaves this way. It's like being spied upon by paparazzi, except it's humans who are one step removed from pitchforks and torches. Don't they realize this is modern times? Orcs do not terrorize villagers anymore; it hasn't happened in at least two hundred years.

"Gladys, what are you even talking about?" my neighbor barks out. "Of course he won't hurt you. Cut it out. Leave this man alone."

I glance over, startled at her outburst.

She looks visibly angry at the older female. The younger female crunches across the snow on my lawn and steps closer to the senior citizen. "Gladys Mason, I can't believe you said that to him. What were you thinking? You've lived in this town, amongst Orcs, your entire life. Having an Orc in town isn't new. And Alden moved into this home at least three years ago. You go for walks in front of his house almost every day, weather permitting, on purpose, I might add, considering you could easily take another route. And each time you run into him as you pass his house you do that fake scream and pretend he's trying to harm you. I've seen and heard it too many times through my window and I'm done with it. Stop with the fake cries. I can understand little kids and even people new to the neighborhood being scared of him at first, but with you it's ridiculous and it needs to stop because you're just being mean. Leave this man poor man alone. Stop terrorizing him. He's never done anything to you."

The older woman purses her lips. "He's a wild Orc. They're unpredictable and can hurt people. I was scared."

"Alden? Wild? Because he has tall horns? Stop with the fake excuses for your rude behavior. He doesn't scare you and you know it. He's simply standing in his front yard with his dog. How is this affecting you?"

"Orc-lover," Gladys Mason sneers.

Grace shrugs. “I’ll take it. If that means I treat Orcs as well as humans as equals with dignity and respect, then yeah, I’m an Orc-lover and proud of it too.”

“Heh, well you better be careful, Grace Anderson. You don’t want to spend time alone with this Orc. Everyone knows wild Orcs take their brides in the dark of winter. Watch out he doesn’t drag you off by your hair and fill you with his sons.”

Grace lets out a gasp of outrage. “Stop it with your utter nonsense. Gladys, get off this man’s property. And if I hear of you screaming again when you see him, I’m going to be speaking to your daughter and letting her know of your actions.”

The older woman’s eyes widen with fear, and she scurries away quicker than I thought possible. In moments she’s a dot in the distance.

All I can do is stare at this young female in wonder. Never, ever has a human stood up for me against another’s bad behavior. Law enforcement gives grudging apologies for the shouted insults but say there’s nothing to be done. Shopkeepers and wait staff shake their heads at the mocking comments and give me discounts to try to entice me to return. But no one, no one has ever outright said to the instigators, “Stop it with the harassment. It’s wrong. No more.” Not even me.

She turns and gives me a rueful smile. “I’ve tangled with that woman many times in the past. Believe me, she might look innocent, but she’s anything but. She deserved everything I said to her, and more.”

For the first time I actually *see* this female and notice her exquisite beauty, which radiates inside and out. I look at her closer than before, taking in all her features. Wide blue eyes with thick lashes. Long, wavy, golden-brown hair. Her skin is soft and creamy and her pink lips plush. Exactly the type of mouth I want around my thick cock.

I reach out a hand. “Let’s start over, shall we? It’s nice to meet you, Grace Anderson. My name is Alden Overlook.”

“Nice to meet you too,” she chuckles as we shake hands. “Sorry for that. It must bug you when people behave that way. You deserve credit for being so patient. It doesn’t go unnoticed that you never respond and escalate the situation. It’s appreciated. But also, that harassment needs to stop.”

“I agree.” Her hand is engulfed in my much larger green hand again. This time my touch lingers and there’s a rush of electricity the moment skin meets skin. I let go and fist my fingers. “I agree... Would you like to come inside?” I blurt out, because apparently my dick is speaking for me this afternoon. “We can talk more inside. I’d like a chance to get to know you better.”

“Um, sure. It would be nice to chat for a bit.”

She’s probably surprised I’m being so forward, considering I normally never speak to her, or any other humans for that matter, nor do I ever have visitors. But after that fearless display I want her nearby. I step close, to pick up more cans from the snow, and that’s when her scent fully enters my lungs. It’s also the moment I realize I’m in trouble because I want her underneath me.

Grace wears baggy cream-colored sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt, a puffy white coat and heavy snow boots. It’s hard to see her figure underneath all the layers but I look forward to removing that fabric to expose her lush body for my hands and tongue.

My cock thickens in my trousers and a growl rumbles in my chest.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I rasp. “Let’s go.”

What am I thinking?

That old woman was a harridan but one thing she did get right—it’s true that wild Orcs take their brides in the dark of winter. But all these years I’ve lived amongst humans, not once has this been a problem. My lower fangs annually grow into larger tusks during this time of year and jut out past my lip. And yes, I get horny as hell each winter, masturbating until

my dick turns raw. But I ride it out and it goes away. I don't bother to hibernate during these months because it's meaningless—I've never found a human who I'd want as a bride anyway and never expect to find one who'd want me in return. I've concluded that I will live my life alone. A male without a bride or sons.

This might explain my recent adoption of a puppy.

And now, for the first time in my life, there's a young, vibrant, fertile human female nearby who I'd love underneath me. And I swear the scent of her arousal for me increases the longer we are together. I might have possibly discovered a human female who isn't afraid of a wild Orc and wants me in return? Need overrides simple logic. I require more of her voice and scent. Is that so bad? Yes, she should be running away from me because my end game would be her swollen with my child. But for now, all I want is conversation. I might want much more—dragging her to my bed and filling her with my seed—but I will do neither of those things. I'm a modern Orc and will refrain from kidnapping. Even in the dark of winter.

She helps me gather up the rest of the groceries. Pepper yaps and I pick her up with my other arm because I don't want her paws in the snow. I open the front door and we walk in together.

“Wow this place is spotless. It's so clean.”

I shrug as I set down the squirming pup. The dog's nails click on the hardwood floors as she darts back and forth across the front room, excited that we have company. I walk over and turn up the thermostat for this human. I run hot, but she doesn't.

Grace walks further inside, turning around and looking in wonder. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply anything by that. This house is the exact same floorplan as mine and I'm embarrassed to admit that my own house isn't nearly as tidy as yours. It only looks this neat and clean if I know about two days in advance that I'm going to have company. But you didn't know I was coming over so that means you're always

this tidy, which is pretty awesome.” She inhales. “And what is that amazing scent?”

I grin. “Scented candles. I doused them before I left but the scent lingers. Today I chose a coconut avocado candle with orange blossom.”

“I love it.”

I stomp over to the kitchen and place the groceries on the counter and start putting them away.

“It’s a good thing the ceilings are high, isn’t it?” she chuckles.

I glance over and see that she’s pointing at my tall horns. “Yes, that’s the exact reason I purchased this home, because of the vaulted ceilings.” I’ve never in my life had such a “normal” conversation with a human. I want more. “Are you hungry? Do you want to eat lunch together?” I question because apparently, I’m losing my mind. Since when do I invite people over to my house and ask them to stay? Once a week I meet a group of Orc friends at a local pub that’s Orc-friendly, but other than that I don’t see anyone else. And I don’t cook. I can reheat. That’s the extent of my hosting skills.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea.” She’s obviously surprised at my invitation. “I’m not busy and don’t have other plans. Normally my grandmother comes over for lunch with me on Sundays, but she called this morning to cancel because she’s not feeling well. It would be nice to eat with you, since I was going to eat alone anyway. I’d appreciate the company.”

I fold the paper bag and place it in the recycle container. Then I stand upright, realizing my error. “Wait, there’s a problem. I’m not sure if there’s much here for us to eat. I went to the store, but I only purchased wet dog food, four cans of soup and none of it is the same and frozen meals.” I open my fridge again and pull open drawers, looking to see if there’s more to be offered, but there’s nothing. I don’t have anything new in there besides the frozen meals I’ve put away. Dammit.

Grace stands behind me and examines the contents over my bent shoulder. “Hmm. A few bottles of ale and a half-eaten

box of donuts?”

I turn around and shut the fridge behind me. Suddenly we're standing almost chest to chest. Her head only reaches my shoulders. This female is delicate and not ready for my darker urges—I need to remember that and keep my claws to myself. “I invited you to eat with me, but forgot I've only got canned or frozen food in this house for one, or for a dog. I don't have anything to...make that's fresh.”

“No worries. If you'd like...I happen to have lunch heating in my slow cooker in my kitchen. I was making extra today because I thought my grandma was coming over and possibly some of her friends, but now that's cancelled.”

“You cook?” I rumble, leaning closer to catch her scent again. This time it's not just the scent of arousal, but her own natural scent I find enticing. Better than any candle I've ever purchased.

Her face brightens. “Oh yeah, I love to cook. The beef stew I made is ready by now because I started it last night. Would you like to eat lunch with me?”

My stomach rumbles with hunger. Could this female be any more perfect? I've dreamt of finding a bride who could make up for my failings. Fond memories of other human mothers in our commune lovingly preparing home-cooked meals for me and my father still echo in my mind.

“I take that as a yes?”

I smile down at her, allowing the heat to show in my eyes. “I would be honored to eat your stew, Grace Anderson.”

She stares at my rough features for a moment, the scent of arousal thickening in the air.

I want to reach out to touch her glorious hair, but I refrain.

She clears her throat and backs up. “You...you can either come over to my house and eat with me there or I can bring it over here.”

“Do you mind if we eat here?” I question. “We should return to my house because of the dog. Pepper would be more

comfortable staying where all her things are. Her crate is here, as are her toys and food.”

“Yes, you’re right. That makes sense. I need to go back and get the slow cooker and a few other things. I’ll be right back.”

“Do you want me to help you bring it over?”

“No, I’ll be fine...”

“I’m helping,” I declare. Because for some reason the thought of her leaving makes me uneasy. What if she goes next door and decides to never return?

ALDEN

I crate the dog in my house and close the door behind us.

We step outside and I reach behind for the female's hand. I glance down to assess her reaction to this intimacy. Grace Anderson smiles up at me with warmth as well as a hint of lust in her eyes and squeezes my hand in return. Heh. I should be concerned someone will be alarmed at the sight of a dangerous wild Orc in the dark of winter, holding the hand of an innocent female he wants to fuck. How does she not understand that the more she's with me, sending signals of acceptance and desire, that she is putting herself in harm's way? But I keep my breathing even and my instincts at bay. This is not me kidnapping and breeding her. She has nothing to fear in my presence. This is only me getting to know a potential girlfriend.

Normal. Normal. Normal.

I've lived for a decade amongst humans, learning to leave primitive instincts behind, readying myself for the possibility of a future human female in my life. I knew this could happen, that I could meet a female I'd want during the dark of winter. I've trained hard to learn to be an appropriate mate that a human female would want long-term. An Orc whose child she would want to bear and stay around to raise. I have no idea if I've succeeded in this endeavor.

Why couldn't she have fallen on her ass in my yard in the middle of summer? My fangs are much shorter at that time of year and my instincts level. Any other season besides winter would have been safe. Behaving like a modern Orc, knowing

there was no way I could turn wild and scare or hurt her would have been easy. And by the time the next winter returned I would be tame because she was already my bride, with her scent in my lungs and my own scent covering her body.

But there's still an entire month before spring arrives.

I ignore the dark heat throbbing in my body. A need that wants her thighs spread and my tongue in her slit. We walk together hand in hand, down my driveway and onto her sidewalk. I try to act normal. Having this human at my side feels entirely natural. And Grace seems unconcerned that we might run into other humans who will see her holding an Orc's hand.

My chest puffs with pride.

Maybe I really can keep my baser, primitive instincts at bay and court this human in the winter and still treat her with respect. Maybe I won't need to push her away and lock myself in my house for the next four weeks in order to stop myself from ravishing her like an ancient Orc.

Maybe...

We reach the porch of her home and she pauses while unlocking the front door. "Um, I wasn't expecting company. Sorry for the mess."

I step inside and see that her home is indeed untidy compared to mine, but it smells clean and would only require a bit of dusting and organization to bring it up to my standards. I inhale and lick my lips. "What is that scent?"

"Oh, that's the stew." She walks over to a steaming pot on the kitchen counter and lifts a lid. She picks up a big spoon to check on the ingredients. "Good, it's ready. It's nice and warm and the meat and potatoes are soft. I'll take it to your house and plug it back in on your counter to keep it warm. Easy. I'll get a towel."

I insist on holding the wrapped slow cooker because it's heavy.

"Wait a second." She looks bashful. "The only reason I'm asking is because I know you live alone like I do, except you

don't seem to have company. I was wondering if you have bowls and silverware for an extra person? I didn't look like you had much of that when I was glancing around your kitchen."

"No, I don't," I admit. "I have one actual bowl and plate and then a stack of paper plates. Only a few spoons and then disposable utensils. The dog has more bowls than me."

"Okay," she chuckles. "I like to cook and have a lot of dishes here for company. I'll bring a few things. Let me get it right now." She opens cabinets and drawers and starts pulling out items. She opens a fabric bag and fills it with everything she thinks she needs. "I love eating home-cooked food on real dishes with real silverware. It makes me happy to hear that clink of a spoon or fork against a dish and to have something heavy and substantial in my hands while I eat. I don't mind the extra time it takes to wash up behind myself. I'm not much of a takeout-with-disposables kind of gal. So, the idea of us going to your house and eating this stew together using my bowls and silverware sounds wonderful. Don't laugh, but this is exciting for me."

"It's exciting for me too," I answer truthfully. "I was only going to have my typical canned soup. And I was going to eat alone. You've saved me from that travesty."

"Yes." She looks at me with a very serious expression. "Now neither of us needs to be alone."

I nod, swallowing against the lump in my throat.

Then she grabs the handles of the bag. "Ready."

"Do you need me to carry that too?"

"No. I've got it. Oh, wait, should I bring drinks?"

"No, I've got ale."

"Ooh, can I try some of your ale?"

"Of course, but it's dark," I warn. And then we leave her house and I chat along the way about the microbrewery I prefer, run by two Orc brothers, that caters to Orc tastes.

We enter my warm home again and she follows me into my kitchen. I set down the slow cooker and remove the towel. I take the towel to my nearby laundry room and place it in the basket to wash later. “Let me have your coat and your boots. I will put them away.”

“Oh, okay. But there’s a problem...”

I help her remove the coat and then I guide her to a chair where I bend down and pull off each wet and dirty boot.

She wiggles her bare toes that are painted a charming shade of pink. “See, this is the problem. I wasn’t wearing socks. I was in such a rush to catch you before you went inside, I just shoved my boots on like this and now I’ve forgotten that I don’t have socks or slippers for your house.”

“One moment.” I return from the laundry room with a fresh pair of gray socks. “Use mine. I do not want your feet cold. These socks are big but they will do for now.”

I watch as she puts them on and pulls them up almost to her knees, having to roll them down. “Thank you, they’re comfortable.”

Warmth radiates in my chest at the vision of Grace wearing my clothing.

I remove my own boots, leaving on my gray socks. And now both of our boots are lined up together in the mudroom and her coat hangs from a peg. The house is much warmer than I’m used to, but it won’t be uncomfortable. Later, I could always discard the socks or my flannel shirt.

She reaches out to open a kitchen drawer and pauses to look at me. “Is it okay that I open drawers? Am I being kind of forward here just making myself comfortable in your kitchen?”

“Make yourself at home.”

Please.

She plugs in the slow cooker and removes everything from her bag. “Are you hungry, would you like to eat right now?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay, let me get everything ready and then we’ll eat.”

I let the dog out of the crate and make sure Pepper’s got water and a new toy. Grace takes a moment to greet the dog and give her a bit of attention, then she washes her hands and gets back to work. I toss a toy around for Pepper and keep her company while Grace is busy in the kitchen and dining area.

She puts down two different place settings onto the table, along with fabric mats, then silverware with cloth napkins.

This gives me an idea. “Wait, we’re missing something.” I go and grab another candle and lighter from the cabinet, then I return to put a flickering light in the middle of the table.

She glances at the red glass surround of the candle. “Red petal romance?”

I shrug. “Valentine candles are popular right now. It’s rose and gardenia.”

“I love it. Thank you.”

A breadbasket arrives next on the table. “I sliced some fresh baguette. And here’s a small crock of butter if you want to use that too.” I watch in wonder as she uses the ladle to fill us each a steaming bowl of stew, with visible chunks of tender beef, potatoes and carrots, and places them on the table. “Oh wait, salt and pepper.” Then she stands back and smiles. “Okay, all ready.”

“I feel spoiled.”

She lets out a sultry laugh.

My nostrils flare but I remain composed. I might want to toss everything off the table, letting it shatter and splash on the floor while I tear off her sweats and position my head between her thighs. But I will not ruin this home-cooked meal she prepared for us with my raging lust. This winter I will slowly court her, get to know her, and leave my destructive winter desire behind until the spring, when I can behave with decorum.

I can do this.

I pull out a chair for Grace. She smiles with gratitude and sits down. I take the seat next to her. Then I pick up a spoon, scoop up my first bite of stew and position it between my two large fangs and take a sip. “It’s amazing,” I growl. “Better than a restaurant.”

A wide smile causes her eyes to brighten. “Oh, I’m so happy you like it.”

And then I proceed to devour the entire contents of the bowl with lightning speed, only pausing to eat half the bread in the basket along with most of the butter. I’m scrapping the last bite when I finally break out of my intense feeding trance and look over to see Grace watching me with a look of pure joy on her beautiful features.

I use a napkin to wipe my face and beard. “Sorry I ate so fast. It was just so good. I’m used to only eating canned soup and frozen meals I heat up. Or I order out burgers or donuts. This is a rare treat.”

“No, no I’m thrilled that you like it so much. I love watching you eat what I cook with gusto. Do you want seconds, or thirds? There’s lots more.”

“Yes. And how about some ale?” I stand up and pull out two cold bottles from the fridge. I pop one for her and one for me. By the time I return to the table she’s refilled my bowl of stew as well as the bread and butter.

Grace takes a sip of the dark brew and declares her newfound love for “Orc ale.”

“It is the best,” I agree.

“At least we don’t have to drive home,” she chuckles and takes another swig. “Let’s make a toast.”

“To what?”

“To us, as friends. I’m happy we finally met today.”

“And I’m happy I met you too.”

“Friends and neighbors. Yes.”

And we clink bottles and I stare at her because I'm still stunned by her beauty and our instant connection and I obviously I want more than simple friendship. Due to the scent of her arousal that lingers in the air, I know she wants more than that too, but it's nice knowing we're starting as friends.

"You know what's funny?" she comments. "I originally thought you were grumpy. I'd heard you never talked to anyone. I never came over to introduce myself because I thought you didn't enjoy talking to people. But then I come over here and find out the opposite is true."

I take a sip of ale. "No, it's true. I hate to talk to people. I suppose I could be labeled as a grumpy isolationist."

"But you're talking to me."

A smile spreads across my harsh features. "You're different."

She bites her lip and twirls her gorgeous hair in her fingers. I shift in my seat because the erection tenting my trousers is starting to prove uncomfortable. Her heavy white coat is gone, and she's still dressed in baggy clothing, but I can see the outline of this female's generous curves and the hint of a large ass that I want to handle with care. She's thin, but not delicate. Grace is also taller than the average human female. I suspect she would be able to handle my Orc lust. But can she handle a wild Orc wanting to breed?

We continue with our impromptu luncheon. I ladle a third bowl for myself and retrieve two more bottles of ale from the fridge because it turns out Grace loves it too. Hiding my erection is difficult but she seems to not notice. Pepper plays under the table while we eat and drink.

Grace sips often at her ale and tells me her life story. I learn that she has lived in this town her entire life and works at the credit union on Main Street. The name of her soon-to-be-married best friend is Margie Davis. Grace was raised by her grandmother after her parents died in a tragic plane crash. And her grandmother also helped her purchase the house next to me.

I suspect she's tipsy from the two bottles of ale she's chugged. I'm going to have to cut her off because my female cannot handle dark ale like I can.

Pepper runs into the room with one of my slippers in her mouth. I sigh and take it from her and exchange it for another toy. "I've never had a pet in my entire life, until now," I comment as I return to my seat.

"Really? Never," Grace giggles. "Why did you get Pepper?"

"One day, due to road construction, I took a detour down a dirt road and caught a glimpse of fluffy black puppies playing in a front yard and I was intrigued. I stopped the truck and got out to investigate. There were a few other townspeople there, readying to choose their puppies, as well as another Orc so it seemed reasonable. The next thing I knew I was paying an outlandish sum of money for a pure-bred miniature schnauzer puppy. Months later the little troublemaker is here in my home, and I've named her Pepper because she's pure black. And she's a handful."

Does she realize she's scooted her chair so close to mine that our hips are now touching? Her arm rests right next to mine.

"I love that name. It makes sense."

"You are a very good cook," I blurt out.

"Oh, thanks. I do enjoy cooking and it really makes me happy to have someone to eat with. Someone who enjoys what I make."

"I would eat anything you made and enjoy all of it," I respond, gazing right into her wide blue eyes so she can see the veracity of my statement.

A whimper of delight escapes her lips, then she takes another sip of ale. "So tell me what you do. You work from home?"

I take hold of her hand and thread my fingers through hers. "Yes, I do. I work from home. I translate projects for clients from English to Old Orc language."

“You speak ancient Orc?”

“Yes. I speak it and helped with the development of turning it into a modern, written language. I grew up in the wilderness of Maine, in an Orc commune. The land was granted to us by the government. But I left the settlement as an adult. Sometimes I regret the isolation from the others of my kind—the wild Orcs—but it was for the best.”

“Why did you leave?”

I shrug. “Eventually all sons grow and leave in order to find a human mate. Well, some of us stay on communes our whole lives, but those are males who for whatever reason have no need of ever finding a mate. Sometimes males who left will return to the commune if a human mate wants to live there too and raise a family in the old ways. Mated pairs or single Orc males who live there are committed to life apart from modern society, leaving them the ability to continue their traditions, undisturbed, in the ways of old.”

“Oh. Is that what you want, to return to the commune one day with a wife?”

“No,” I answer truthfully. “I like to visit occasionally but I like modern conveniences. Nowadays lots of Orc sons are born within cities or human communities and live their whole lives there, without ever having seen any of the communes. There is nothing wrong with that, but by translating books and other reading material to ancient Orc, I’m helping to keep the language and traditions alive, which is important to me. But I want to stay in this town. That’s why I purchased a home here.”

“Despite how you get treated by scared townsfolk who still think it’s ancient times?”

“Yes,” I chuckle. “I enjoy the cold winters and mild summers since my blood runs hot. There are modern amenities, but not an overwhelming amount of humans and I don’t have to contend with five lane freeways and rush hour traffic. Also, you’re here.”

“Oh.” Her gaze drops to our joined fingers then lingers on my mouth. She licks her lips and shifts in her seat, as if she’s restless for my touch.

The chair scrapes as I drop her hand and move from the table. The dog is startled and lets out a questioning yelp. I start pacing the kitchen, taking deep breaths, trying to keep my dark urges under control. But they’re bubbling to the surface.

“Alden, what’s wrong?”

I shake my head and fist my claws. “It’s too much,” I growl. “I can’t do this any longer and remain calm.”

“Do what any longer?” She stands up. “Alden, did I do something wrong? I didn’t mean to—”

“No, Grace, you’ve done nothing wrong. It’s all me. I’ve been trying hard to keep my lust for you at bay but it’s becoming more difficult the longer I spend with you.”

“Your lust for *me*?”

“I thought I could control myself and simply get to know you, but now I worry that was a mistake. I’m a rare wild Orc. The older female was right about one thing, wild Orcs do take their brides in the dark of winter. This is a time-honored ritual on the commune. And it’s still a rhythm my body tries to emulate, even though I’m trying to live the life of a moderate urban Orc. Female Orcs do not exist. There are only males, who mate with human females who accept having our sons.”

I cannot let her return to this house. I need to cut her off and have no contact with her.

She takes a step towards me. “Tell me more about what’s happening to you. I’m embarrassed to admit that I don’t really know much about wild Orcs. I mean, I know that there are no female Orcs and that you have children with human women which are always sons.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you not knowing that much about wild Orcs. There’s not that many of us and we try to remain quiet.”

“Are your parents still alive? Do you see them?”

I remain quiet.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“No, it’s all right. My father is still alive, but I rarely see him because he’s very strongly committed to living separate from humans. You need to know that I am from the primitive tribes and not like other Orcs. You can see my horns. My two fangs grow larger in the winter than any other male I’ve met. My desires in the dark of winter are acute. I still have attributes that do not normally appeal to human females. I’ve never before been asked by a female to mate, and…”

“You’re a virgin?”

My neck heats up. “Yes.”

“Oh, I’m a virgin too.”

I let out a roar of dismay. “Why did you tell me this?”

All sense of control is lost. I grab her and wrap an arm around her waist. I bend down and brush my lips against hers, showing her how our lips can meet perfectly between my winter fangs. A soft, tender kiss, holding back the raging lust and the need to breed. She moans and reaches up to wrap her arms around my neck.

The moment her taste enters my bloodstream, I turn into something more. I can literally feel my fangs elongate. My cock leaks seed from the tip into my trousers. Heat rushes through my veins. And my mind is full of nothing but getting her to my bed, any way possible.

I crowd her backwards, until she’s pressed against the nearest wall. My hand is underneath her shirt and I’m pinching her nipple. I want nothing more than to tear off her clothing.

I break off and stare at her, my chest rising and falling, wondering how I can possibly walk away now. But I have to. I step back and keep her at arm’s distance. “We have to stop. Orcs don’t date,” I try to explain. “We don’t do serial monogamy. I’ve never had past girlfriends. I wait until I meet the female who is mine and I mate with her and fill her with my seed.”

“Oh.”

“I want you underneath me.”

“Oh,” she breathes.

Wild, wild thoughts enter my brain. Flashes of me grabbing her right now, tossing her over my shoulder and throwing her onto my bed, tearing off her clothes.

I grab her hand and place it over my tented crotch. “Do you understand what I’m trying to tell you? I won’t be gentle. I won’t be myself. What if I harm you during my breeding frenzy?”

“Is that real?”

“Yes, all of that is me. I am much larger than the typical human male and I would take you again and again and immediately get you pregnant with my son. And I wouldn’t be able to let you leave my home. I’ve spent too much time with you as it is.” I stride over to the mudroom and grab her coat and boots. “Stay away from me, Grace. My body wants a bride and I’d get you any way I could, even if that’s not what you wanted.”

I take her hand and pull her along with me. I open the front door, hand her the coat and boots and nudge her over the threshold. “Leave, now. And never come back.”

And I shut the door in her face.

GRACE

Did he just kick me out of his house?

I stand on Alden's porch and look back. The lock turns with an audible click. Curtains swish closed. Even Pepper doesn't bother to bark for my return.

Yep. Kicked out.

He kissed me within an inch of my life, his rough hands under my shirt and pinching my nipple through the lace of my bra. And then growled that I had to leave, and he never wants to see me again.

Oh-kay. That makes sense. Not.

I sigh, sit down on the step, and shove my arms into my coat, then pull off both of his oversized socks and...fuck it, I'm not returning them, they're mine now. I stuff the warm material into my pockets. Then I slip on both of my snow boots. My head is a bit woozy from those two bottles of ale. My lips still tender from his kiss. And my body throbs from his touch.

I do the slow walk of shame back to my own home. My lips still tender from his kiss and the brush of that beard. And my body throbbing from his touch. I've been kissed before—a furtive session under bleachers or a corner at a party that never led to actual dating and easily forgotten. But this was next-level kissing with a huge Orc and his massive, fully erect penis, crowding me against the wall. How dare he teach me what kissing really was and how it could melt my body as well as my brain, and then take it all away so quickly. It was like

catching a glimpse of a golden rainbow, only to have it snatched away.

I should be angry that he pushed me out so quickly, but I'm not. Mainly I'm disappointed. He explained the situation clearly. Alden thinks he's basically a danger to himself and others and therefore needs to keep me away. He thought he could keep control of himself and that it would be safe to have me in his home, simply talking and eating lunch together. But apparently his lust for me proved too great and he thinks he'll turn primitive and treat me like Orcs did towards human women in ancient times.

But I disagree.

I spent lunch with a sexy Orc gentleman. And his darling dog. Inside his sparkling clean home. He loved my home cooking and ate everything I made. He also held my hand and opened up about himself.

Luckily, my keys are still in my coat pocket. I unlock my own front door and step inside my quiet, lonely house.

He acts like he doesn't want me around, but that's obviously not true. Alden wants me there just as bad as I want him, and he loved my company and my food. We got along well. Once I got him alone, I learned the quiet, grouchy Orc who lives next door to me, is kind, smart and funny. I loved having lunch with him. The state of his cupboards and fridge was sad though. He didn't even have condiments. Not even mayonnaise, mustard and ketchup. There were boxes of food, canned items and frozen meals. Old empty takeout containers in his trash, and not the good type of healthy takeout, but the greasy and quick kind. He seemed to be a connoisseur of donuts, burgers and chicken nuggets. Well, he did have good ale.

It's sad. He needs me.

But he thinks he's not worthy and he can't keep me safe.

Is that true? Would he really harm me?

I putter around the house the rest of the afternoon and evening, stopping often at the kitchen window for glimpses of

that red truck. He stays home with Pepper. It's weird knowing that he's so close and yet so far away. I can't even call him because we didn't exchange cell numbers.

Does Alden use a cell phone?

I have so many unanswered questions about this man.

That night I have the hardest time falling asleep. I stay up much too late, binging another show on TV and then I finally force myself to go to bed. I toss and turn, remembering how it felt to be in his arms, his body so close and that massive erection pressed against my stomach. I wish he was in bed with me right now. I can't believe how much I'm thinking of him sinking into me with something so...big. Dammit. What has he done to me? And how rude can he be, kissing me like that and then pushing me away?

And for some weird reason I don't even want to touch myself to get some relief...I only want Alden.

And that's when I finally realize I left behind my slow cooker, bowls and spoons. I smile wide because now I've got a reason to go back over there.

My feet are cold and the socks I'm wearing are bothering me. So I switch them out for those big gray socks from earlier. I snuggle into the pillows with Alden's socks on my feet.

And finally, I fall asleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, I awake to a cell phone blaring at the butt crack of dawn. I know it's Margie because not only does she call instead of text, she's also a notorious morning person. I reach over and tap the screen. "Hello?" I rasp. "Why are you waking me before my alarm on a weekday morning? Are you secretly working with Satan and I've been unaware?"

"Stop it, I need to tell you something really important," she responds, sounding freakishly bright and awake on a Monday morning.

I rub my eyes. "What? What's wrong? And why couldn't you tell me this at work?"

“Because I’m not going to be at the branch today, remember? I’ve got that out-of-town meeting. I’ll be gone the next few days. And I’m worried I gave you the wrong advice yesterday concerning that Orc you live next to. I was talking with my parents and cousins last night and I mentioned you. I said how I told you to go and introduce yourself to Alden.”

“Yeah, and what’s wrong with that?”

“Well, they told me that normally that would be good advice, but Orcs find their brides in the dark of winter so in reality it was terrible advice.”

My brow furrows.

“Grace, wake up. It is literally the dark of winter. Right now. The first day of spring is more than a month away. I’m worried I sent you into the lion’s den. Are you alright? How did it go yesterday?”

“Don’t worry, it went fine. I went over and introduced myself like you told me. And I already know Orcs take their brides in the dark of winter.”

“You do? Good. What happened?”

I summarize the story, including the kiss at the end before he threw me out, but making the details of that passionate encounter vague, because...because it was a private, special moment between me and that guy I care about next door.

“He told me he doesn’t want to see me again.”

“Really?” She lets out a sigh of relief. “Oh good. At least I can respect the fact that he’s trying to keep you safe. He knows he’s not right for you.”

I frown because I think he’s in fact very right for me. But I decide to keep this part to myself.

“Well, if Alden Overlook doesn’t want to see you again and it’s established that he’s wrong for you, then I think you should take that date with Jonah.”

I stand up and start making the bed. “Since when is there a date with Jonah?”

“Well, last night, after I learned that Alden Overlook was a no-go, I happened to run into Jonah and I pulled him into a corner and, um, I gave him your cell number.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. And I know that he’s going to ask you out on a date for Valentine’s Day.”

And then there’s a ping and I see a text. “He’s texting me. Jonah Murtagh is texting me,” I growl. “Margie.”

“Perfect. I’m going to get off so you can respond.”

“Margie. I don’t—”

“Bye, girl. Love you. Hope you have a great day.”

And she’s gone and I’m staring at the perfectly nice introductory text from a perfectly nice man, that I really should go out with. My cell starts ringing because now he’s not only sending the text but trying to call me.

But I let it go to voice mail and I don’t respond to the text either. What’s up with all these morning people? I toss the phone aside and shuffle into the bathroom to ready for the day. Margie can deal with Jonah questioning my non-response. He’s a nice man and he’s done nothing wrong, but this is on her. She’s the one who needs to apologize and make it up to him.

A long, warm shower makes me feel more awake. Next, I need coffee. I make my way to the kitchen, in my robe with my wet hair wrapped into a towel on my head, trying to start my Keurig. And that’s when I see Alden working in my driveway. The sun is barely up and he’s out there getting snow off the roof of my car. I watch in amazement as he also scrapes ice off my windshield. He even pours water on the glass, just to make sure I have plenty of visibility. He doesn’t turn to look at me. And I don’t step outside to greet him.

He said for me to stay away, and I have to respect that.

Finally, I leave the kitchen to get dressed. I return later to glance out the window again and see he’s even tended to my

delicate Lilac tree and propped up a snowy limb with a piece of wood.

How sweet is this man?

He's nowhere to be found when I walk out with my travel mug of hot coffee, dressed for work. The coat, gloves and snow boots keep me warm. My nice work shoes are in my tote bag. I feel so spoiled this morning. One day last week my car was so iced up I couldn't even open the frozen doors and had to climb in through the hatch back and warm my car up that way. This time I walk right over, open the door easily and start the car. The windshield wipers work perfectly, getting rid of that last bit of water. I'm so delighted I'm about to cry.

I pull out and drive to work, thinking I'll have to send a thank you note to that handsome Orc next door.

THREE HOURS LATER, Lindsey, my coworker, twitters with delight as she leans behind our partition. "Look who's in line this morning."

"Who?" I glance around, thinking from her tone I'm going to see a celebrity in the bank teller line.

"Jonah Murtagh. He's in our line."

"Oh. You know him?"

"Well, I know of him. I heard he's basically the most eligible bachelor in the county. He's supposed to be a nice guy, too. Not a player at all. Wow, he's much more handsome in person. Look, he's now in *your* line. Is he here to see you? You're so lucky."

I roll my eyes. I want none of this.

"Good morning, Grace."

I nod and smile at the extremely handsome young man standing in front of me, with blond hair and blue eyes. It's true he's so good-looking he could basically be a model or on TV. But again, I'm unmoved. I prefer my big, rough Orc. And for some reason my mind drifts to the idea of having darling, horned babies who look like Alden.

And at that moment I see over Jonah's shoulder a flash of green skin, curved horn and red flannel shirt through the windows out the front of the building.

No way. Is that a mini schnauzer?

Jonah hands me his bank ID card, his deposit slip and check and I get to work, all business. "Good morning, Jonah," I greet, in the same friendly tone I use for all our customers.

"It's nice to see you again," he starts. "Margie gave me your number last night. I hope that was alright. I tried to call you this morning but..."

I freeze up because I cannot even do this. All I can think of is my grumpy Orc with the hot lips and I can't be fake for his man. It's not fair to him or to me. And I feel I can't tell him the truth—that I don't want to go out with him—right here in a public place while I'm trying to work. And is Alden out front or is my mind playing tricks on me? It's all too much and I'm suddenly worried I won't be able to concentrate correctly on my job. I need a quick break.

I see out of the corner of my eye that Lindsey's customer has left, and I immediately turn and ask her to take over this transaction for me, faking "a feminine problem." She beams at me, thrilled for the opportunity to meet "the most eligible bachelor in the county."

"I'm so sorry, Jonah, but I've got to step away for a moment. Lindsey will take care of your deposit. I hope you have a nice rest of the day."

And then I sign out of the system and I'm gone. I run off to the bathroom, thinking all the while of that flash of curved horn through the window.

What's going on with Alden? Why did he take the time to clean my car before I left, but then made sure he was gone before I came outside? Is he really following me today

Why?

ALDEN

I vowed last night to keep Grace away from me.
That I was not going to touch her.

But Pepper wakes me up this morning at the foot of the bed, tossing and turning and the first thing I think of is Grace, wishing she was beside me.

I roll out of bed while it's still dark outside, wearing only my pajama pants and a pair of thick slippers and take the dog to the backyard to go potty, which takes forever. Then I bring her back inside and put down her bowl of dry dog food. A quick shower and actual daytime clothes begins to wake me up. Dark roast coffee wakes me further. "Bring me your toy," I tell Pepper. She barks with excitement because she loves stuffed animals. A teddy bear is her new favorite. Then I play with the dog in the living room. I throw it inside and she brings it back to me.

The whole time I think of Grace.

What I said and how I behaved. Her soft smile. The way she spoke to me and listened eagerly to what I had to say in return. How she defended me. How good she treated my dog. Her laugh. The taste of her lips and the heft of her breast in my hand. The silken slide of her warm skin.

The scent of her arousal.

At the end I finally saw reason and told her to stay away from me. I kicked her out of my house and locked the doors and closed the curtains. I shouldn't have had her in my house in the first place. This was mistake number one. I should have

greeted her on the front lawn, thanked her and then waited to court her until spring. We could've gone back to the old routine wherein I didn't notice her existence. But her scent entered my lungs, and I smelled her arousal. I lost my mind and invited her inside and had time to bond with her.

I've told her I want nothing to do with her, but I kissed her long and hard before she left. It was stupid. I shouldn't have done it. But when she told me she was also a virgin something in the deep recesses of my primitive Orc brain came alive and I was snarling and grabbing and had my tongue in her mouth in seconds. Was my hand on her ass? Her scent entered my lungs, and I smelled her arousal. I invited her inside and had time to bond with her.

My mind drifts to an image of me holding her hand while we walked outside. Anyone could have come down the walkway and seen us, but she wasn't trying to hide our public display of affection. Neighbors most certainly watched from across the street through their blinds and curtains. Grace wasn't embarrassed to be seen with me.

She fed me lunch as if she were tenderly feeding me, having no idea how meaningful that is to an Orc. Cooking and feeding are signs of affection amongst our family units. She was pleased that I enjoyed the food she'd made with her own hand. I sat at my table envisioning her cooking in our home and me doing the dishes and cleanup afterwards. I could see what it would be like having her living there. The joy that life would bring.

And a family with our future sons.

That was why I needed to get her away from me.

How can a soft human like Grace survive mating a wild Orc? I very rarely see this workout. It takes a special human to remain with an Orc like me. The other Orcs in town with human mates are modern. They're not as wild and don't have the horns that I have.

I'm different.

I'm the exactly the type of Orc who could lose control and hurt her. What if I'm really the beast Gladys Mason accused me of being? What if this winter I drag Grace by her hair, pulling her into my bed and filling her with my sons, without fully acknowledging her consent? The dragging her by the hair part obviously is wrong, but the idea of picking her up, preferably in a public place, throwing her over my shoulder and taking her away to my bed and locking the door behind us sounds terrific.

This is why I'm worried I will hurt her. And then she'll grow to hate me with the intensity of ten thousand suns and I'll hate myself too. Therefore, I have to stay away but I'm finding it impossible.

So, I watch and care for her from a distance.

First, I leave Pepper in her crate and go outside as the sun rises to make sure everything is nice and neat for my future bride before she leaves for work. She is prone to falling and I don't want her to get hurt again so I clear her walkway and the driveway and scatter more pellets. I remove snow from the roof of her car and the ice from her vehicle. A delicate new tree covered in snow also needs to be propped up.

My heart stutters the moment I notice her studying me from her front window. A growl rumbles in my chest but I manage to turn away and not rush her front door. I can't have Grace this winter, but that doesn't mean I can't tend to her needs.

Right?

She is after all my neighbor. I'm just being neighborly, that's all.

This female has been living next to me for the last six months and only yesterday, when she walked right up to introduce herself, did I notice her. How could I be so stupid to not notice her before? Maybe this is all my fault? If I weren't so isolated, so unnoticing of humans and resentful of strangers, and so *grumpy* I would've met her last summer or fall.

Grace leaves for work, and I load Pepper into my truck and follow behind.

I can barely handle having her next door and not in my house and in my bed, let alone the idea that she's miles away. I must visually confirm her safety.

Normally I work full-time in my home office on translation projects, then take Pepper for a walk around the nearby lake park in the afternoons. But today I put off my work projects and go into town because this is an emergency.

I'm stalking Grace.

I park in front of the credit union on Main Street. Pepper is dressed warmly in dark snowshoes and a red sweater, protecting her from the elements. She comes out with me, and we both watch Grace Anderson at work through the front windows of the bank. I think of going inside to make a transaction, but this isn't my bank. Although now I'm thinking I need to transfer my accounts and use the same bank that she works at. Grace looks beautiful and professional and I'm certain she's excellent at what she does. Her hair is pulled back off her face and she's wearing a long-sleeved, bright, silky-looking blouse.

I don't want to go in and cause trouble at her job, which is important to her. But then a young man steps up to her counter and leans forward in a personal manner and speaks too closely to her.

I step back and take a deep, calming breath. Nearby humans on the street whimper with dismay at my appearance and back away.

When I finally regain control of my rage and look back inside again, Grace is gone and the human male is now at a different counter.

I have no idea where my female went. The city park across the street is reasonably cleared of snow so I take Pepper to this new location and we wait on a bench. I think maybe she'll come out at her lunch.

An hour later I see Grace walking to the busy sandwich shop. She's bundled up in her snow boots and that fluffy white coat. She's also wearing a pink scarf and gloves. She grows more beautiful each time I see her.

Pepper and I follow at a respectful distance, but Grace clocks me. It's difficult for me to blend in. The horns and green skin amongst a sea of humans always causes me to stand out. Her blue eyes widen and a look of determination settles on her gorgeous features.

She marches straight for me.

"What are you doing here, Alden Overlook?" my female boldly questions. All the other humans on the sidewalk treat me as either a ghost or an object of fear. Not Grace. My female has no problem speaking her mind where I'm concerned. "I don't think it's coincidence," she continues, "that you're here on this street with Pepper at the exact moment I happen to step out for lunch."

I rub against the heat at the back of my neck. "It's true that this is no coincidence. I was waiting for you at the park."

Her brow furrows but then she's distracted by Pepper's excitement and bends down, petting my dog and whispering words of affection. Then she stands and looks at me again. "I saw what you did this morning to my car and the front yard and I really appreciate how you helped me so much. It really was lovely getting into my car and just going this morning, so easily. Thank you. It's just that I'm confused considering you kicked me out last night and said you never wanted to see me again."

I look around because Grace isn't trying to remain quiet and many of the townsfolk are paying attention to us, listening in to our conversation. She has to know this is happening. Grace isn't trying to hide the fact that she was at my house?

"I still want you to stay away from me and never see me," I grouse. "That hasn't changed."

"It's a little difficult for me to do when you're coming over to my front yard and then showing up at my workplace."

“Does this anger you?”

She throws her hands up. “No, no of course it doesn’t. I wasn’t the one who wanted to leave yesterday—that was you deciding it was over between us. I’m just confused. You tell me to stay away and then you come over to my house and now you’re here on the sidewalk talking to me. What do you really want, Alden?”

I want all of her.

I want to unleash my wildest Orc tendencies upon her. Grabbing her right off the street. I want her covered with my jizz, filled with my seed and swollen with my son. Her virginity is mine and I give up mine to her at the same time. Her hands on my horns as she screams out her release. My fangs scoring her skin. Those lips on my cock, trying to take all of me. I want her cooking for me, feeding me with her hand and I’ll clean all her messes afterwards.

But I also don’t want to hurt her and I will if I take her as I want. I must protect her, from me so she always stares at me with trust in her eyes, as she does now. And I’m doing a terrible job at keeping her protected.

I hang my head in shame. “I can’t stay away from you.”

“Alden, you don’t have to stay away from me.”

I take a deep breath. “No, I have to. It’s my job to keep you safe.”

“Oh, Alden, I don’t—”

Her arousal again fills my lungs. It is too much. “You don’t understand the amount of rage I’m trying to keep in check,” I snarl. “And who was that human male I saw you talking to earlier at the bank?”

She blinks up at me. “No one. Although why should that matter to you? Remember, I’m supposed to stay away from you. Shouldn’t I be trying to move on with someone else since you don’t want me?”

I grab her and pull her in close, my arm around her waist, right there on the sidewalk in front of a bakery and a jewelry

store. The scent of her arousal is driving me crazy. My lips are against her ear, and I know she can feel the ridge of my thickening shaft. “I can’t have you right now, Grace, in the dark of winter. But you are to save yourself for me until this spring.”

“Until spring?” She places her palms against my hot stomach. “Is that an order?”

“Yes, it is.”

She gives a curt nod.

I take a deep breath, feeling calmer that she understands my direction. “Yes, it is.” And then I step back. My female stares up at me with desire in her eyes, looking so damn fuckable.

A twittering crowd of humans stares at us with wide eyes. I think one of them was recording us with a cell phone. I shake my head, turn around and march away with my dog in tow.

“I left my slow cooker at your house,” Grace shouts after me. “When I get off work, I’m coming over and I’m going to knock on your door. And we’ll talk.”

A growl rumbles in my chest. How many times do I have to tell this female to stay away from me and wait another six weeks? When will she learn not to poke at an Orc that’s wants nothing more than to kidnap her ass and fuck her raw. She’s so very lucky I’m not kidnapping her off the street right now, in the middle of her workday.

I jerk on the dog’s leash, and walk faster back to my truck.

GRACE

I come home and find the slow cooker on my doorstep, perfectly washed and shiny. Along with the bag I'd brought yesterday and the bowls, utensils and placemats inside. Alden thinks this is going to work to keep me away, but it's not.

After that display on the sidewalk at lunchtime today, I'm even hornier than before. I'm seriously beginning to wonder if the taste of his tongue and his scent do something to me. Am I addicted to Alden Overlook? He says to stay away. He says wait six weeks until spring. And for some reason six weeks sounds like a lifetime. It was difficult enough to simply wait for the end of the workday to come home and be able to go next door and see him, let alone another six weeks.

This is impossible.

Also, now I know he really does want me. He's not saying no forever, he's saying wait. This is an opening I can exploit.

I change out of my work clothes and then open the front door, ready to march over to that sexy Orc's house...and find Jonah Murtagh standing on my doorstep with his hand raised like he was about to knock.

"Good evening, Grace," he says brightly. "It's nice to see you again."

"Jonah?"

"I'm here to meet you at..." He looks at his watch. "You asked me to come over so we could talk."

“No, I didn’t.”

“What?”

Margie, that troublemaker. She’s going to get an earful later. “Are you sure that message was from me? I have a feeling that my friend, Margie, is trying to set us up. She means well, but...”

“Sorry I just thought...” He rubs the back of his neck “Well, anyways, since I’m here this is now the second time we’ve seen each other. Actually, the third. I don’t know if you remember we met at the barbecue.”

“Yes,” I say, distracted by the sound of a door slamming.

“Well, tomorrow is Valentine’s Day and I was wondering if you might want to go out on a date with me tomorrow night.”

I meet his gaze, trying my best to be nice. This is sweet of him to ask and I’m certain he must be nervous. I would be. I know exactly what it’s like to be rudely brushed off. “Oh, Jonah, I really appreciate you thinking of me that way. And that’s so nice of you to ask me on a date for tomorrow, but I can’t go.”

“You can’t? Why? Do you have plans with your family? Maybe I can come too and meet them?”

He’s so sweet. I seriously hope he finds someone who loves him fiercely, that just won’t be me. “I’m interested in someone else,” I answer truthfully. “I can’t go out with you because I’m falling in love with my neighbor.”

“What? Margie said you were single. Her exact words were ‘very single’.”

“Jonah, I’m sorry. Like I said before, Margie means well but she doesn’t know that I’m falling for someone else. This whole thing was a mistake and I never meant to hurt you and neither did Margie. I’m sorry you came all the way over here for no reason. You know who you need to ask out instead for Valentine’s Day? Lindsey Smith.”

“Who?”

“Lindsey Smith. She’s my coworker at the bank. She helped you with your deposit today. She’s single and wonderful and I know she’s interested in you. You’d be lucky to have her.”

And then there’s a distant roar, “Stay away from her!” a deep voice bellows.

“Oh hell. This isn’t good. Jonah, I think you should go home right now. Get in your car.”

“Who is that? Is someone threatening you? Do you need help?”

Alden marches over in all his raging glory.

The tall horns and another flannel shirt wide open, exposing the six pack of green muscled chest. The thick, muscular thighs. He’s pissed at the thought of me with another man. Steam literally escapes from his flared nostrils. He arrives in moments and looms over Jonah. The wild Orc raises an enormous, clawed fist like he’s going to smite this human all the way back to the dark ages. Jonah is strong, but he’d have to be Captain America to withstand a blow from a wild Orc in his prime.

“No, no, no,” I shout. I cannot let Alden get in trouble over nothing. I race down the steps and get between them and place a palm against Alden’s bare chest. He keeps snarling, trying to move forward and grab Jonah so I reach up and pinch his ear, forcing him to look down and meet my gaze. “Cut it out. What would I do if you hurt him and ended up in jail?” I rage. “Don’t leave me alone.”

He blinks down at me, my words finally penetrating his brain. Then he chokes and drops his fists immediately.

“I’m leaving,” Jonah shouts. “This is ridiculous. I didn’t sign up for this drama. I had no idea you already had a boyfriend, especially an Orc. I’m gone.” He slams into his SUV and skids off, racing down the street.

Alden swings around and marches back to his own home.

“Alden, wait.” I chase after him, my boots crunching in the snow. I catch him on his front porch.

“Stay away, Grace,” he thunders.

“Talk to me,” I beg. “Tell me what’s happening. Why did you do that? You’re the one who tells me to go away and then you’re worried I’m going out with someone else?”

He turns and confronts me. His dark eyes wild and his chest rising and falling. “You want to know everything?”

I lift my chin. “Yes, I do.”

“Fine. The real reason you need to stay away, besides the fact that you are in very real danger, is that I know you’ll hate me in the end. And you’ll...hate our son too. My mother left soon after she gave birth to me. That’s the truth. My father took her roughly in the dark of winter. And from what he said, it didn’t evolve into a love match. She didn’t want to stay with us and was horrified to be giving birth to an Orc. She stayed in the commune only long enough to hide her pregnancy, not letting anyone know she’d been knocked up by an Orc. She gave birth to me, recovered and left us when I was just two months old. I’ve never seen her since.”

“Oh Alden. I’m so sorry. That’s terrible.”

“This happens. Women often leave, especially when it comes to wild orcs. Our mating process can be rough and a woman can be caught unaware and then later, she’s disgusted to be giving birth to what she calls a monster. This is why you need to leave.”

“How could you think that I would think that way about our children after all that we’ve shared?”

“No, you don’t understand. I am exactly the type of Orc your mother warned you about. What Gladys Mason warned you about is actually me. I am losing more and more control each day that I’m around you. I almost tore apart a human male simply because he was standing too close to you.”

“But you didn’t hurt him. You stopped and walked away. I want to stay with you. It’s hard for me to be apart from you too. You aren’t the only one who is suffering.”

“No, my mother left because my father kidnapped her against her will right off the street in the dark of winter. He

was instantly smitten like I am for you and he lost control. He didn't drag her by her hair but he brought her to the commune and filled her with his seed. At first he did think that it was a love match because she screamed with pleasure, but that did not mean she was also filled with love. For my mother it was lust, for my father it was Orc mating and love. Old primitive ways did not result in my father receiving a mate for life. Instead, he became yet another wild Orc who was a single father. My mother didn't want to be swollen with his sons. She didn't want *me*. I assume she saw the infant she'd birthed and was horrified. I refuse to recreate this same scenario in my life. The old ways are ridiculous. I won't kidnap and force an unknown female into my bed. Yes, I'm very, very horny each and every winter and nothing seems to make it better. Masturbation is only a temporary respite. I want you with a fiery passion, but I won't touch you right now. Especially when I'm not certain of your true feelings for me. You're human. You might think this is temporary but that won't work for me."

"But..." I stammer, not knowing exactly how to answer because while he's telling me such a horrific story about his mother, this admission about masturbation is also probably the sexiest thing I've ever heard in my life, including great lines from movies and books. The image of this huge male, stroking himself, is causing all my girly parts to throb with need. I want to take care of that for him.

"We wait for six weeks," he thunders. "If you still want me at that time, then we will court. But know this...I will not risk taking a female who will give up on me, or my sons."

Then he slams his door in my face, again.

I'm on his doorstep for the second time this week, listening to the lock click behind me and the swish of those curtains. At least this time Pepper barks for me.

"Don't worry, Pepper. I'll be back."

I SPEND the next few hours that evening furiously baking heart-shaped Valentine's Day sugar cookies because that's

what I do when I'm upset. Some people drink wine to relax, others watch Netflix and some smoke weed.

I bake.

My favorite country music playlist blares from a Bluetooth speaker and I dance around, having fun, not minding the flour on my face and hair. It's crazy how many cookies I manage to get done. Some dusted with sugar, others with sprinkles, but most mainly with colored frosting. I even make some with chocolate kisses in the middle.

Margie calls me, twice but I let it go to voicemail. I don't respond to her threatening texts either. I love her but I need space.

I get to work on fixing things with Jonah Murtagh. The town is small and I'm certain I'll run into Jonah again, considering he's the best friend of Margie's fiancé. I can't ruin Margie's wedding with animosity between the Maid of Honor and Best Man. And maybe Jonah really will end up together with Lindsey, and she's my coworker at the bank. I can't let things end badly between us. Plus, that really must've been scary for him, having Alden race up like that, ready to tear him apart. My man *is* scary.

I send an apology text to Jonah and include Lindsey's name and phone number, which she can thank me for later. Jonah doesn't respond, but that's fine and in fact to be expected. I also package a cute box of my famous sugar cookies to drop off at his workplace early tomorrow and I place a handwritten note on nice card stock inside. I apologize for the drama and explain it was simply "Orc mating fever" and let him know that both Alden and I are very sorry for creating any stress for him.

We both hope in the future we will see each other around town and be able to laugh about what happened.

Sincerely,

Alden & Grace Overlook

Okay, maybe it's a bit much signing both our names like that, because it's not like Alden and I are married yet. But I

know that's his end game and he doesn't know it yet, but that's my end game too. And I like to start things as I will continue. Everyone is going to have to get used to me being married to an Orc. Might as well get them used to it now.

Finally, I box up or plate all my cookies and clean up the kitchen. Grandma is going to get a big box, as is Margie that sneak. And my coworkers. And...Alden gets the biggest platter of them all. It's midnight by the time I fall into bed, exhausted.

The next morning is the same routine as before. Alden tends to my car before I leave for work, making sure it's clear of ice and snow, ready for me to leave. But he's nowhere to be found as I pull out of the driveway. I look for him on the street at lunchtime and don't see him anywhere, nor do I hear Pepper's bark. I miss that Orc, and his darling dog too. I'm lonely without them. Especially on Valentine's Day.

"Oh my gosh," Lindsey exclaims at the end of our lunch break. "I just got a text from Jonah Murtagh. Can you believe this? Wait, how did he even get my number?" And then she squeals with delight and drifts away, furiously texting him back with a look of pure joy on her features.

I walk the other way, with a secret smile on my face.

The credit union seems busier today, filled with customers shouting out greetings and chatting about what their plans for the evening. Some even tell me how they will surprise their significant others to show their love. Others simply want to let someone in their friends or family network know how much they love them. It's basically a day of people showing love for one another.

And the big guy I want to love is hiding away from me in his house.

Yes, he was scary when he almost attacked Jonah. I could see that flash of deadly wild Orc he'd trying to save me from. Ancient Orcs from olden times used to lose their minds and capture women and take them off to their mountain caves and keep them against their will.

But this is modern times and it's different.

Alden isn't giving himself enough credit. The moment I stepped between him and Jonah and put my palm on his bare chest and made sure he locked eyes with me, he calmed down.

Hmm.

Maybe I can unlock that calm Alden again. The Orcs in previous generation in Alden's family line chased their brides and kidnapped them. I think this is because they don't converse with or date the women they want; the wild Orcs just took. And if a woman ran away, it lit their chase receptors even further. But Alden already has me and I'm willing. He's been pushing me away, keeping me separate from him and I bet this is having the opposite effect from what he wants. He wants to be able to be with me right now, not six weeks from now. But each time I'm separated from him, that ignites his chase instincts. He's creating a no-win situation for himself.

What if I give in, but this time in such a way as when I was between him and Jonah? I'm there, with my palm on his chest, touching him and letting him know I'm his. No need for the kidnapping or a chase because I'm there. If he's got me and he's assured that I won't leave, I really think I can keep him calm.

By the end of the workday, I'm formulating a plan.

I need to be there for Alden today so that he can see that I want and accept all of him. The dark-of-winter Alden, as well as the middle-of-summer version. He doesn't need to change to be with me, we don't need to wait six weeks for him to be different.

He's everything I need exactly the way he is.

I'm going to go home, change and then take a platter of my famous sugar cookies over to that grumpy Orc next door and force him to let me in. I'm alone tonight and I can't let him be sad and lonely on Valentine's Day. He's mine and I'm not frightened of an Orc who takes his bride in the middle of winter.

Instead, maybe that's exactly what I want.

ALDEN

I told my future bride to stay away until the spring thaw but she's back.

Grace Anderson is certainly the most stubborn female I've ever met.

It's now early evening and I'm lounging around the house in jeans and slippers. My female recently returned home from work and is knocking on my front door. I know this because I followed her again today but did a much better job of hiding myself.

"Time for you to go back to your crate," I tell Pepper. "I don't want you too eager, barking for Grace again and trying to get her to return when it's not time yet. I know you want her to move in, but you have to wait for spring."

Then I open the front door only a crack and see my female underneath the warm porch light. A bright smile on her gorgeous face and a large platter of sugar cookies in her hands. "Today is Valentine's Day," she announces, as if I don't know. I almost sent her a bouquet of roses this morning, but decided against it, not wanting to give her another reason to knock on my door.

And yet she's here anyways.

Grace is bundled up in her coat and boots and that pink scarf again. But underneath she wears the same sweats she wore that first day we ate lunch at my house. Which now seems like an eternity ago.

“Why are you here, female?” I growl. “I’ve repeatedly explained to you that Orcs take their brides in the dark of winter. You know that your nearness revives all my most basic, feral instincts.” My voice deepens. “Even now my cock is hard for you and I’m having trouble keeping my hands to myself, here on the doorstep. All I want is to strip you bare and ravish you. Leave. Now.”

She bites her lip. “Let’s go inside and talk about this. I’ve made you some cookies.”

“Female, did you hear me? If you come inside, that will be the end of my control. I’ve done everything to save you from yourself, but my control only goes so far. Today is literally the darkest day of winter.”

“I know. Let me in,” she repeats. “I’m not stupid, Alden. I know what I want and I want you.”

“Me? For how long?”

“I want you forever.”

“That’s not true. Our children will be male Orcs. No human woman would want that.”

“Now you’re the one saying untruths. There are lots of human women with Orc children they love and adore. And I want that, with you.”

I open the door a bit wider and sniff at the platter in her hands. “You made those cookies by hand? You didn’t purchase them at a bakery?”

“No, I worked many hours last night baking these for friends and family. I made this batch special for you, with my own hands in my kitchen just so I could bring them to you today and feed you with my own hands.”

Oh hell, my sneaky female has been studying Orc mating traditions. “If you step into my house, I will fuck you hard and fill you with my seed. You’ll be stuck here for at least a week because I won’t let you leave. I will be ultra-possessive and driven to breed. This is what happens when you decide to voluntarily mate with a wild Orc in the dark of winter. Or you could wait until the spring when I can act modern.”

“I’m here to show you that I accept all of you, no matter what time of year it is. You don’t need to hide yourself from me. I like you just the way you are.”

“I am dangerous right now.”

“Maybe I like a hint of danger.”

“Grace, this isn’t a joke. You’ll be instantly pregnant with my son. That also means you’ll be my wife and a mother to my children.”

“I’m not joking. Maybe I want to live with you and sleep next to you every night and raise our babies together. And maybe I like the idea of you keeping me inside your home with you for the next few days, as a sort of early honeymoon. I know what I’m getting, Alden, and I say yes, to all of it.”

I open the door wider and step out onto the porch with her. I lean close and let her get another eyeful of the fangs and horns. “You say yes to being essentially kidnapped from your life for the next week and letting me take you in possibly a very rough manner? I can hurt you Grace, this isn’t right, I can’t agree to this.”

“You won’t hurt me.”

“How do you know that?” I growl, my voice deepening with need. Now I’m too close. I can’t seem to keep my eyes off her ass. The scent of her arousal is killing me. “Don’t you see how my fangs are getting longer and...and...” My breathing turns ragged, and I try to back away and reach for the door because I’m about to let out a roar of possession. The hunt is about to consume me.

She places a warm palm against my bare chest and meets my gaze with love in her eyes. “I’m not running from you, Alden. There’s no need to chase me. I’m here with you.”

She’s like a freaking Jedi master. I instantly start to calm down at her measured voice and touch. I reach out and touch her hair, which calms me even further. “I can’t make love to a woman who only wants a boyfriend,” I warn. “I can’t be with someone who will later want a divorce.”

“I know what you need, and I can make that commitment to you.”

I take measured breaths. Meanwhile my cock is thick in my jeans, ready to breed. “You’ve only known me for two days. How can you say any of that?”

“Well, you’ve also known me for the same amount of time. How can you know that I’m really what *you* want?”

I shove my nose into her long hair and inhale. “This is how I know,” I groan. “Your scent lets me know you’re the female for me.”

She puts a hand on my shoulder and gives me a serious look. “Now it’s my turn. Let me tell you what I’ll need from *you* if you’re to be my husband, so you can decide if this is what you can put up with for the rest of your life if you decide to commit to me.”

A smile twitches on the side of my lips. She’s incorrigible. “Tell me.”

“I need a man who will get along well with my grandmother. My grandma will arrive at our house most Sundays for lunch and she might even unexpectedly bring along her group of church friends and you need to be okay with them randomly coming over. And I need for you to sit at the table with us and chat, or at the very least eat with us before you slink away.”

“I can do that...starting in the spring.”

“My best friend is named Margie and she will be married this spring. I’m her Maid of Honor. You will need to go to that wedding with me as my plus one and smile nicely at all the humans and engage in a short amount of small talk. And I expect at least one slow dance from you before we leave.”

“That’s acceptable.”

“I expect to be invited to that pub you talked about so I can meet your Orc friends and their wives because I want to get to know them.”

“Yes. I’ll bring you there in April.”

“And I want you to go to the occasional barbeque, birthday party or other function with me. Basically, you’re going to have to be a bit more social, with humans, if you are going to be married to me. And also...”

“Also?”

“I’m going to want at least three sons. Not just one.”

I lick her neck. “How about four?”

“That sounds perfect. I’ve always wanted a big family.”

We’re both standing on the porch. And she’s still somehow holding that platter of cookies with one hand and the other continues to touch my bare chest. Offering herself to me with food she made herself to feed me. All to keep me calm so we could be together on Valentine’s Day. It’s the most erotic sight of my life.

“I accept your offer,” I declare, loud enough for anyone to hear. “You are mine. Hold on, I’m bringing you inside.” And I sweep her into my arms—platter and all—and carry her across the threshold of my home and kick the door closed behind me.

“Oh,” she gasps.

I stomp over and sit her down on at the kitchen table. I move the chair next to her closer and sit down, facing her. “Feed me,” I order.

She puts the platter of cookies on the table and lifts the clear cover. Then she carefully picks up a heart-shaped cookie with pink frosting and lifts it to my lips. I bare my fangs and carefully bite, chew and swallow all the while keeping my eyes connected with hers. I allow all the love and desire I feel for her to show on my face.

She whimpers with need.

“More,” I order.

I eat three more cookies and lick the frosting from my lips and then I cannot take anymore waiting.

I pull her chair closer and grab onto first one snow boot, then the other, tossing them over my shoulder. Next, I reach

for that heavy coat she wears, and I have it off in moments, tossed aside. For once, not caring if I'm making a mess. I'll clean it up later.

Then I pick her up in one smooth motion and throw her over my shoulder. She lets out a squeak of surprise.

"You're mine," I declare as I march across the living room, down the hallway and up the stairs. It is indeed a good thing that this house has vaulted ceilings. I often scratch the doorways with my tall horns, but never the ceilings. Grace once said this home had the same floorplan as her own, but that's only the downstairs. This house is much larger than hers, with additional bedrooms, which will make it a convenient location to raise our sons. I purchased a large home, always hoping that one day I'd have an opportunity to fill it with family.

We enter the primary bedroom and I manage to set her on her feet, instead of tossing her onto the bed to start my ravishment. Only her voice, food and touch are keeping me sane.

"I want to watch you undress," she tells me. "I need to see all of you."

"Keep your hands on me. It's the only way I will refrain from taking you too soon."

She nods in agreement and stands close and keeps her hands on my side while I undress. "You're so warm. I'm going to love snuggling you at night."

My buckle comes off first. Then I loosen the belt. The jeans drop past my black underwear. I kick off the last of my clothes and my erection bobs in front of her. I grasp it and give it a few rough strokes, allowing her to see all of me.

"Alden, you're so handsome," she says with awe in her voice.

"I think there's something wrong with your vision, female. Reminder that I'm an Orc."

"All I see is a strong, powerful male that I want to kiss all over." Her hands roam over my chest and down my hips. My

long green cock leaks precum from the slit at the tip. She touches it with the tip of her finger. “I’m the first woman to see this gorgeous erection?”

“The first.”

I moan as she grabs my shaft and moves her hand up and down, her fingers unable to meet around my girth. “This is mine,” she growls.

My lips twitch. “Yours,” I agree. “Later you will take me in her mouth. But if we do that right now, I will come too quickly. I want my first release to be inside of you, growing our son.”

And then her arms tighten around my neck and she’s literally climbing me, kissing me with all her might. My female is truly passionate and wants me desperately. Her arousal is thick in the air. I kiss her back, with equal fervor, showing her again how I can manage this in between my large, jutting winter fangs. I will never hurt her.

I break off the kiss and set her down on her feet, only because I must tend to her needs. And to do that, I need her clothes off. “And now I must see all of you.”

The soft sweatshirt comes off first and for the first time I get a visual of her torso. Her breasts are spectacular. The bra she wears is white and lacy. She reaches back and unclasps the bra and slumps her shoulders forward and the fabric falls off and drops to the floor. I almost swallow my tongue. “Grace,” I choke. “I knew you were beautiful, but this...how did you manage to hide these under all that clothing?”

She giggles at my words and then sighs with pleasure when I reach out to touch and squeeze her breasts that fit perfectly in my hands. I bend to get one large nipple into my mouth, past my fangs, and then I switch to the other. I pinch, suck and scrape until she’s swaying on her feet. I finally stop only because there’s so much more to explore.

I toss her onto the bed and pull her down and I’m immediately on my knees. “I must taste you.”

Her thighs splay open, and I'm allowed my first glimpse of her pussy in all its glory. She's trimmed the hair on her mound to a single strip, just enough for me to still notice. I reach down and use my large green hands to delicately push open her nether lips so I can see all of her. She's gorgeous here too, so small and tight. I need to make sure that she will be able to take all of me.

My shoulders and my head are between her thighs. I lick her slit with my forked tongue. She lets out a deep groan. Ah, this is how I will know what she wants. I spend time, testing my female's likes and dislikes by listening to her moans of pleasure. I learn that she highly enjoys when I lick and suck at her nub. I spend most of my time there. She starts thrashing on the bed, crying out for me to never stop.

Then she grabs onto my horns and screams out her release.

I stand up and wipe her juices off my face, inordinately pleased with myself that I was able to do so well on my first try.

"Are you sure you've never done this before, because you were pretty good down there for a self-avowed amateur."

"I've studied, making sure I knew exactly how to pleasure a woman when the time came."

"Ah."

And then I cover her, and my hips are between hers. I notch my cock at her entrance and meet her gaze. "Ready? I'm very large. Larger than a human man. Are you sure?"

"Please. I'm sure."

I go slow because it's the first time for both of us. And she needs me to go slowly so she can become used to my girth. I suck on her nipples, helping her along. At one point I manage to reach between us and strum her clit again. And then I push harder and suddenly I'm all the way inside of her and she cries out in pain.

I pause to kiss her eyelids and cheeks. "I love you Grace Overlook, with all my heart. Thank you for sharing this with me."

She takes a deep breath and opens her eyes. “I love you too, Alden Overlook. Now keep moving, I want more.”

I move in a jerky motion, running on instinct alone.

“Faster.”

And then all my baser instincts take over. I do my best to give her what she wants but I’m nothing more than a wild Orc impregnating his bride.

My bride starts crying out and I can tell she’s about to come again. And my own release rushes through me at the same time. My hand is braced against the headboard as I pound into her and then I still above her and throw back my head and unleash a tremendous roar.

It’s amazing, like nothing I’ve experienced before. The pleasure sweeps through my body. I release all my seed inside of her, feeling so much of it jetting out, again and again. It’s so much I’m certain it’s got to be spilling onto her thighs.

I crash down next to her, making sure to keep her in my arms. The both of us quiet for a time, unable to speak.

“What are we doing next?” she finally pants against my sweaty chest.

My cock is already rising, readying for another round. “Let’s go downstairs and eat the rest of those sugar cookies and then fuck on the kitchen table.”

She lets out a throaty laugh. “That sounds like a plan.”

EPILOGUE

ALDEN

O *ne year later...*

My twin sons are now over three months old and a handful.

It was indeed shocking at first to learn my bride was carrying not one, but two sons. She had to place her palm against my chest again, to calm me down. I was highly agitated and concerned for her safety as well as my offspring.

But my mate made it through a healthy pregnancy, only requiring bed rest the last month.

Grace recently returned to work after her maternity leave. The bank gave her a promotion upon her return, and I'd worked extra hard at translation projects while she was pregnant, so between the two of us we are doing well. My bride moved into my home with me, and we sold her house next door and returned her grandmother's initial down payment.

An acquaintance of ours from the pub—Eyric Overtree and his human wife and their three Orc sons—bought the house next door. And suddenly I'm not the only Orc in the neighborhood, which is nice.

“Grandma”—as she insists I also call her—comes over often to help with Jason and Jyric, her twin grandsons now that Grace has gone back to work. I'm now the main caregiver to our sons and spend much time with this older human

female, and I've learned I enjoy her company very much, as do my sons.

"You should hire a nanny," many of Grace's friends have commented because they think I will eventually want to return to work full time too, but I disagree. I can do this. My female loves her job, and it pays well and she's good at it. It's her career. My job can be put on hold for now. Along with the fact that my house is paid for, and I have a sizeable saving account, this allows me to become the stay-at-home dad to my twin Orc sons, and I couldn't be happier. I want nothing more than to be nearby for every moment of their growth. Even the messy, screaming, smelly and exhausting moments I consider a blessing.

The ultimate reason for this happiness is my female who is indeed fully invested in our relationship and loves our sons as much as I do, if not more. The best moments of my life were sitting beside her with our newborns, holding one tiny baby on my own chest while she breast fed our other son and helping her switch out our infants.

Today, I'm alone with our sons, who are named after her father and mine. Both have nubs of soft starter horns and are large for their age. Their skin is also warmer than the average human infant. It's nearing lunchtime and a sunny spring day, so I decide to surprise Grace with a visit. She loves it when I bring the boys to her work so we can lunch together at the park.

It seems to take forever but eventually I get both of my sons cleaned, fed, in fresh diapers and dressed in clothing that seems fastened correctly. They're both gurgling and kicking happily when I strap them into their car seats.

Pepper barks, wanting to be clicked into her car seat too. "Don't worry," I laugh heartily. "I haven't forgotten about you." The SUV has three rows of seats and Pepper's seat is now often in the far back, but today I move it to the front passenger seat, so she feels special.

As soon as I park the SUV in front of the credit union, I text my bride to let her know we're here.

I'll be there soon!!! she responds.

I push the double-stroller to the park and tie Pepper's leash to the handle. Many humans greet me along the way, with huge smiles. They enjoy stopping to see the babies and exclaim over "how cute they are." It never ceases to amaze me how differently the townspeople treat me since I married Grace. I had no idea, but it turns out my bride was a highly known and beloved female in their midst and because she chose me, they now think I must be "nice."

Also, I've been told I smile much more often and I'm "less mysterious" whatever that means.

"Oh, my babies," my wife croons the moment she arrives. She loves it when I bring our sons by her work. It's now spring and the daffodils are blooming. She needs some sun on her face.

First, I sweep her into my arms for a passionate kiss, full of tongue and promises of hot encounters this evening, when our infants are finally asleep. Then I sit her down on a bench. Soon we've both got a baby bouncing on our knees. I hand her a wrapped sandwich, her favorite from the nearby sandwich shop, along with her favorite chips.

"I'm so happy," she proclaims. "Thank you for this. For all of it."

I kiss her lips. "Thank *you*, my female."

EPILOGUE

GRACE

Five years later...

F Alden is a morning person, and this never seems to change.

It's a Saturday morning and I wake up in bed with the space next to me empty.

He isn't quite as perky as Margie in the mornings, but close. He gets bonus points for letting me sleep in a bit while he takes the dog out for a potty break and feeds her. That's nice of him. He also takes care of our sons, allowing me some extra sleep. He's wonderful that way. I do the same for him in the evening, letting him go to bed early and staying up late with a fussy baby or sick son, especially on weekends.

That Valentine's Day when I got bold and decided to go over to his house with those cookies and demand entrance was the smartest move I ever made.

I hear the distant sounds of laughter coming from downstairs. I smile and get up and put on my robe. First, I pause to run to the bathroom to throw up. Ugh. Then I brush my teeth and place a hand on my slightly swollen stomach. Alden doesn't know yet, but I'll surprise him today with the good news. After all, he did say he wanted four sons, didn't he?

I shuffle downstairs for some coffee.

"Hey look, mom is awake. She's awake."

“Mom, mom what are we having for dinner tonight?” Jason, my six-year-old questions. I can always easily tell him apart from his twin brother because Jason has black horns and Jyric has golden-brown horns. Their horns aren’t as tall as their father’s, but they are tall for the average Orc.

We have three boys now. Our twins and another son, who is three years old. By the time the new one is born, that one will be starting preschool.

I smile and try to remember the schedule. “Oh, we’re having lasagna.”

There’s a chorus of happiness from all three of my boys. They dance around for a moment in their matching pajamas, then return to their show on TV and their toys.

I shake my head and move to the coffeemaker. At the beginning of our marriage, I learned right away that Alden likes to drink dark roast coffee, black without any creamer or sweetener. Meanwhile I doctor up mine with flavored creamer and many scoops of real sugar because I’m a nut that way. And I have two of these super sweet cups each morning, which is always my breakfast. Alden doesn’t eat breakfast either, so we’re the same that way. But we do both love a nice home cooked lunch and dinner. And dark ale.

That reminds me that we’re having people over for dinner tonight. I need to make at least two pans of lasagna. Luckily our guests will be bringing lots of side dishes. Our neighbors are coming over, as well as Margie and Alex, and Jonah and Lindsey. And all their kids. It’ll be fun.

It really makes me happy at how easily my husband has been accepted by my community. Well,

I think this is because I started as I wanted to go forward. “I’m proud that you’re my husband and I want to show you off. Let’s go out to dinner at the Refectory,” I said on that first night of spring.

Alden was skeptical at first, but I kept showing up with him in public places and I spent time teaching everyone in town how I expected them to treat my new husband. I didn’t

say outright “you will treat Alden with respect and act like the fact that he’s an Orc is no big deal” but I showed them with my actions. Nowadays they practically treat Alden like they wish he’d run for city council.

Hmm...that’s not a bad idea. Maybe I should mention that to him.

I reach down and pet the two dogs that crowd around my ankles. “Good morning, babies.” We have a new puppy named Salty, and he’s Pepper’s best friend. He’s another mini schnauzer, but grey and white. I’ve been taking Salty to dog obedience training. We practice commands and walking, so he’s not dragging me. How to wait at the door. How to sit and stay. He acts like a perfect angel then comes home and chews up my slippers. I like to give him bits of turkey while I make sandwiches.

And finally, I feel the warmth of my large husband standing behind me.

I smile with delight when he starts by simply pushing aside my hair and kissing my neck.

“Mmm,” I moan.

Then he turns me around and he’s kissing me. I love kissing him. That beard is the best. It’s much softer than I first assumed. Women told stories of human husbands with sharp mustaches or scratchy beards, but Orc facial hair is thick but soft.

He breaks off the kiss, buries his nose in my hair and inhales. Then his whole body tenses. Uh oh.

He places a huge green hand against my lower stomach. “Another son?” he growls.

“Yes.”

I look up at him wondering what will happen next. Knowing I’m pregnant always makes Alden horny. He grabs my hips. The ridge of his enormous erection is against my stomach and I’m instantly wet. He always does this to me, even six years later I’m always hot for him.

“If we’re quick, they won’t even notice we’re gone.”

I love this man so much.

I giggle and take his hand and we sneak upstairs. And it’s true, we’re so quick they don’t even notice.

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