

Playing Catch Up

By Ruby Lang

Fay Liu loved her boyfriend Oliver Huang a lot, which made it especially sad that she was going to have to kill him.

“I can’t take the days off,” he said.

“You’ve been working for a solid 18 months.”

“I take breaks. I sleep. And *other things*.”

Oliver sent her what was supposed to be a smoldering look and struck a seductive pose on the bed with plenty of hip and lots of pout.

It was only the teensiest bit effective.

“Barely. You don’t have to take every gig that comes along, Oliver. You’re doing fine. I thought / was supposed to be the workaholic.”

Oliver flopped back. They’d moved in together just before the pandemic, and it had gone surprisingly well. They hadn’t gotten on each others’ nerves. In fact, it was a good thing they’d decided to live together because if they hadn’t both been working from home, it was possible that Fay would never see him at all.

He was taking on too much.

She was able to coax him out of his office occasionally with snacks and sex. The third S, sleep, wasn’t quite as effective, but that was what she’d used tonight.

“Oliver,” Fay said, lowering herself onto the bed, “It’s past midnight. We talked about this weeks ago. I booked the rental car and the cabin. There will be cross country skiing and fresh air, and hot cocoa with tiny marshmallows. It’s the new year. No one will expect you to work while ringing in 2022. You can start working again on January 2nd.”

“Right at the stroke of midnight.”

“Eastern time.”

A pause.

Oliver asked casually, “And there will be snow at this cabin?”

“And skiing.”

“The marshmallows in the cocoa, they’re tiny?”

Fay held up a thumb and a forefinger to indicate how miniscule they’d be.

She almost had him. Almost. Then he let his head fall back. “It’s just…”

That was it. Fay climbed on top to straddle him and put her nose to his. “Listen. If we don’t get out of this apartment and this city—which I love! A lot!—I am going to *lose it*.”

His eyes closed briefly. He settled his hands on her hips. “You know,” he murmured, “maybe I’m losing it, too, because I find this very hot.”

His hand inched under the waistband of her track pants, one finger slipping between the curves of her ass.

All right then. Sex, not strangulation, would win again today.

“I’m glad we agree on something,” she said. “Now how about clearing those days for me?”

“I—”

She slid herself back and forth across the very interesting bulge in his pants.

“Yes. Okay. Fine. You drive a hard bargain.”

She whipped off her shirt. “Don’t worry,” she said sliding down his body. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

By the time they’d gotten out of the Bronx, Oliver was asleep which suited Fay fine. She stepped on the accelerator and sang along with her music without worrying about waking him. Oliver was a creature of the city, having grown up in Queens. But she’d grown up in northern California, and she loved driving.

Besides, if Oliver slept now he’d have more energy for other things later.

Snow was falling softly by the time she pulled into the little cabin in the Catskills. Oliver yawned and pulled his hand through his hair and went around to haul the bags out of the trunk while Fay got the door open.

It was adorable. An overstuffed green couch, a shelf full of board games and books, a gas fireplace that lit with the flick of a switch. Oliver brushed past her to put the boxes of groceries in the kitchen, and she followed him to find a welcome basket with jams and crackers on the counter. She started putting things in the fridge while Oliver got the rest of the bags, and she made *plans*.

Maybe she could bake a cake!

Maybe she could become the kind of person who baked cake!

Humming, Fay decided to inspect the bathroom and its clawfoot tub. Maybe Oliver would find it as interesting as she did.

Where was Oliver anyway? It was a small cabin. It wasn't like he could've gotten lost.

She pushed on the final unexplored door, but it didn't want to budge.

Was something in front of it?

She peeked her head around and saw. Their bags were squashed between the door and Oliver's legs, which hung over the edge of a huge bed that took up most of the small bedroom.

And Oliver, poor, sweet, annoying Oliver, who'd worked all day and night in the days leading up to this vacation, was asleep.

Fay edged inside, pulled Oliver's socked feet properly up onto the bed and pulled the covers over him.

Then she stuffed the bags inside the closet, closed the door again, and went out to the living room to sit in front of the fire.

Alone.

Oliver still hadn't woken when Fay got up the next morning, and ate her toast. He barely stirred when she rooted through their bags for warm layers.

"Oliver! Let's go for a hike!"

"Mmmph," Oliver said, pulling a pillow over his face.

Fine. It was a shiny, beautiful day. The snow had fallen all through the night. From her place on the couch in the firelight Fay had watched it for hours.

She wasn't going to miss the opportunity to go out now.

Fay bundled herself up, clapped a hat on her head and went to the door. It wouldn't budge.

Not again.

She tried once more. This time it gave way. She managed to take a peek outside and saw the tall drifts of snow blocking the door.

But she was determined to get outside.

After shoving at the door with her shoulder and grumbling, she was able to crack it open enough to slip outside.

Where it was beautiful. Snow tufted the fir trees and birds twittered. The sun was especially bright on the sparkling white. It was hard to wade through it, but she could enjoy standing still and enjoying all that stillness. Alone.

Again.

Fay tramped around exasperated for a while, but it was hard to stay mad when it was cold and clear and silent. By the time she made it back to the yard, her mood had mostly dissipated. She took a moment ball up the last of her peevishness and throw a snowball at a tree.

“What’d that tree ever do to you?”

It was Oliver, leaning casually on the open stuck door, wearing his enormous, ridiculous boots with the laces untied. No jacket, no hat, no gloves. Just his snug gray Henley, track pants, and a cup of coffee.

“The tree isn’t you. That’s what it did to me.”

Oliver paused for a minute, probably trying to unravel her muddled logic.

Then he looked around and set his coffee on the shelf of snow behind the door.

“Okay,” he said. “Hit me.”

“What?”

“You want to hit me with a snowball. At least that’s what it sounds like.”

“No I don’t.”

“But you just said—”

It burst out of her. “I don’t want to nail you with snow! I just want you to be around.”

Funny how a cry of frustration could sound very loud in the woods.

“Fay, we’ve both been working at home. We’re around each other all the time. You hear my voice Zooming in the next room, I hear yours. I thought you wanted to come out here because you needed some space.”

Fay threw up her hands. “I don’t need space from *you*! You’re shut up in your office all the time! Working! Why are you taking on so much? We’re lucky. We’re fine. You know that right?”

Another long pause and Oliver looked down again. Fay felt her stomach sink.

Oliver said, "Sometimes I don't know it. I feel like I can't turn work away. Because what if I don't get any more contracts?"

"That hasn't happened. And if it did, we'd figure things out."

"I don't want you to have to bail me out."

His hand was tight around the doorknob. He wasn't meeting her eyes. "I don't want to be like my father. Always drifting, always trying to get my mom to give him money, always taking things for granted."

"Oliver."

"In the middle of the night, I wake up and think about him, about where he might be right now. And then I turn my head, and I see you and I never want to disappoint you that way."

"Oliver." She started toward him, but the snow was so deep that halfway there, she stumbled, trying to get her foot, but her next step was worse and she was about to pitch face first into a cold, cold drift, when she felt Oliver's strong arms grasp under her arms and haul her up against him.

"I've got you," he said.

And she looked up into his face, felt his arms firm and tight ready to haul her up with gentle strength and said, "And I've got you. Always. Whenever you need me. Because I trust you, and you can trust me."

He blinked. "Oh."

His face creased into a smile as he hauled her up to standing. "Is that how it works?"

Her knees were wet, and snow had gotten into his open boots. But neither of them cared.

"I wouldn't let you slip," Fay said. "I'd haul you out of the cold. And not because you pestered me. And not because you're lazy. But because we all need it sometimes. You know I would. Just like you would for me. Just like you're doing now."

Fay could tell he was thinking about this as he helped her. She held her breath while she felt him adjust his hold.

After a minute he nodded. "Lesson learned."

It was a start.

"Well, happy new year to all of us," she murmured.

"New year? I didn't sleep that long, did I?"

“It felt like you did. But I’m ready for a fresh beginning.”

Fay was still clinging to him. She still wasn’t quite steady on her feet, but it was more because of the way he held her, carefully, tenderly, lovingly. The way she would hold him. But the soles of her boots were on the ground again. She could support herself if she wanted to, but she wanted his arms securely around her.

“You’re awake. We’re snowed in, and there’s only one bed,” she said. “So let’s go in and remind ourselves of how good it is to be alone. *Together.*”

And carefully leaning on each other, they made their way through the new snow and back inside.

The End

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