

Carried Away

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Before you read

Content Warning and Tropes

I f you have concerns about content within the book, please read before proceeding:

This book is intended for readers **18**+ and contains sensitive content, profanity (a lot), and graphic depictions of sex (also a

lot). If you're under 18 years old, come back later. We'll be waiting.

This book contains some themes that may be distressing to readers, including childhood trauma and neglect, childhood abuse (historical), and concerns related to mental health. **In particular,** Bree has a history of an eating disorder and has been in recovery for seven years at the time of the book, but the topic is discussed and presented throughout the story.

Specific triggers related to an attempted assault as well as childhood abuse:

Chapter 4 has a scene of a character getting drugged at a party and an attempted assault, and some readers may find the scene distressing. It is possible to **skip** the last part of chapter 4 and still understand the story to follow.

Chapter 14 has a flashback to a traumatic childhood event when Ty was six years old. You can **skip** the first part of chapter 14, pick up at the page break, and still follow the story.

There is a soft Dom/sub dynamic between the main characters, which includes some light impact play. This is a work of fiction and is not meant to depict, represent, or teach this dynamic.

Tropes

Falling for brother's best friend, falling for best friend's little sister, eight-year age gap, friends to lovers, all grown up, first crush, emotional, off limits, surfing romance.

For all the brats out there.

Xx KC

The Boys from Olear Lake

T he broken. The lonely. The angry. The empty. Four childhood friends. Four wild stories. One unbreakable bond. When it comes to love, they stumble and fall, but always have each other's backs. Brothers by choice, friends for life.

"Mischievous and playful. Intense and consuming. Angsty and brooding. Handsome and good at shit. Kids tied together by missing pieces we'd filled for one another, shaping into men we could admire and be proud of." The Boys from Clear Lake series is best read in order of release, though each book can be read as a standalone.

Same As Yesterday The Wickedest Ones Broken Like Me Carried Away



 $C^{arried Away}$ is the fourth book in The Boys from Clear Lake Series. It is written as a standalone and can be read and understood without reading the rest of the series.

However, you'll get more out of each story when read in order. All the little details that carry over will make your heart happy. I especially recommend reading Ezra's book, <u>Broken</u> <u>Like Me</u>, to get the most out of Ty and Ezra's friendship in this book.

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Prologue

Ty

•• W hat does it taste like?" Noah asked, rolling a toothpick between his fingers. "Cause I've been reading some Charles Bukowski, and it's confusing me." He winced.

Ezra snorted. "Noah, if you take sex tips from a Charles Bukowski novel, you're fucked, and not in the way you want." He settled back on the couch, kicking his feet onto the coffee table and grinning like an idiot. "Sometimes you have to jump in and experience life's pleasures firsthand."

I pushed his Converse off my mom's coffee table. She'd recently picked it up from an estate sale and refinished it.

"My mom will kill me if you mess up her table, Ezra."

He smirked. "Which one? Kristy or Donna?"

"Kristy."

Ezra dropped his feet to the carpet. "She doesn't fuck around."

Nope. Kristy, my biological mom, held a lot of affection for my best friends but not a lot of patience.

"So? What does it taste like?" Noah prodded.

I crossed my arms, gesturing for Ezra to answer. "Care to tell him? Since you're so well versed in *experiencing life's pleasures firsthand*?"

Ezra flipped me off.

"All bark, no bite." Reed smoothed a hand along his cheek. A babyface if ever one existed.

Ezra, ever the angst, scowled. "I've been with girls before."

Maybe, but not many, and nothing beneath the panties. The only other one to touch a girl's pussy was Noah, and he admitted to me he didn't know what he was doing.

My best friends—Noah James, Ezra Collins, and Reed Watkins—gathered in my living room after soccer practice. We needed to discuss the crucial matter of Carrie Evans letting me go down on her after last night's game. At fifteen, this amounted to earth-shattering news.

There'd been many discussions about who would be the first to break the mouth-to-pussy barrier, and while it came as no surprise it was me, it deserved celebration.

"Come on." Noah pushed Ezra out of the way to lean forward and demand my attention. "Ignore these dipshits. What's it like?" "You know how you started drinking coffee at the beginning of the year and didn't like it at first, but figured you'd acquire the taste?"

All the boys nodded, inching closer.

"It's kind of like that," I admitted.

I glanced over my shoulder, checking that neither of my moms hovered in the kitchen or lingered in the background.

"She squirmed around a lot. I wanted to look at her for a bit, have my eyes on her pussy to see what it looks like. I've felt around them, but I've only seen pictures in porn or sex ed. Not exactly helpful."

Reed made a gagging sound, and Noah and Ezra laughed. We shared gym class this year, and three weeks ago, Mr. Bristol separated the girls and guys and gave a PowerPoint presentation on abstinence. Yeah, fucking right. Not happening, and slides of diseased genitalia wouldn't stop a teenage boy from an opportunity.

"Did she let you?" Ezra dropped his cool, ready to pull out a piece of paper and a pen to write it down. "What's it like up close?"

"I don't know. She didn't let me get a good look. She seemed self-conscious."

The TV blared in the background, but no one paid attention to the movie. I was the show tonight.

Not that I wasn't used to attention. Fair or not, I got a lot of it. It helped to be handsome and good at shit.

Noah hummed. "I can't wait to see one up close. I think I'm going to be a *big* fan." He grinned an easy-going smile.

"Did she come?" Ezra asked.

I bit the inside of my cheek, a hint of embarrassment tickling my gut. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure? Aren't you supposed to know?" Reed appeared offended, dropping back in his seat. I glared at him. "Tell me how *you* know when girls come, Reed."

I loved the boys. More like brothers than friends, they helped me build confidence in my life. But giving one another shit was part of the deal, and we'd spent ten years giving each other plenty.

"I will," Reed muttered, picking at a tufted button on the couch cushion. "Eventually."

Reed was quiet and reserved. Not boisterous like Noah, confident like me, or brooding like Ezra. His mouth hadn't touched any part of a girl before, and he kept it mostly closed anyway.

"You ever wish just *one* of us had a father we could go to for this kind of shit?" Noah said. "I hate that Bukowski is my barometer on this."

He sighed, planting his hands on his knees and rubbing his palms over the tattered denim of his pants.

"We promise, here and now, to always help each other figure it out. Help each other be the men we want to be someday. Hold each other accountable, even when we stumble, and figure it out together."

Reed gave a solemn nod. "In it together."

"Always," Ezra agreed.

All eyes stared at me.

"Together," I said. "We keep going until we're the men we want to be—the ones we never had in our lives. Then we push harder. We can always do better."

Noah chuckled. "Yeah, there's probably always something to learn—not only how to eat pussy."

Ezra nudged Noah's shoulder. "Hey, you've got Ty now." He jutted his chin toward me. "He'll teach us."

And just like that, the pressure settled over me like a thick fog.

It was stupid. Being handsome and good at shit was a gift, and any complaints deserved a punch in the face, so I kept them to myself.

Once you're known for being something, it's tough to let yourself present any other way.

People thought things came easily to me, so I stood tall and smiled like they did. They didn't need to know I struggled sometimes, too.

I grinned, though it didn't settle convincingly on my face. "Yep, I'll teach you everything you need to know."

Just needed to learn it first.

But I'd gotten damn good at refusing to stop until I accomplished what I wanted. Even after, honestly. Why limit oneself? A benefit of unchecked and high-functioning anxiety, I suppose. A residual leftover from my PTSD as a kid after spending the first six years of my life with an abusive father who, thank god, disappeared after my mom left him.

I could shake the nightmares and ground my reality after years of therapy, but the anxiety never disappeared. The bruises faded, but those emotional wounds left deep scars.

Instead of crumbling beneath anxiety, I turned it into a superpower. Keep going, keep moving. Don't stop. Stop, and it catches you. Keep moving, and you can outrun it.

I'd never stop and stand in place. Distract, run, move, don't settle. Push, drive, improve, and work harder.

Keep going.

You could excel at all kinds of stuff when you dedicated your energy to not standing still.

Can't stop.

Sixteen Years Later

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Bree

 $B_{go.}^{\,iting\,my\,lip\,in\,concentration,\,I\,took\,a$ deep breath and let

"Nailed it!" Marin erupted.

Cheers rang out around her, and she jumped up and down, pumping her fists in the air as if *she* won the cornhole championship match.

"Hell fucking yes, bitch!"

I liked Marin, I did, but she was a woman who said bitch entirely too often.

Tucking my hair behind my ears and ducking my head, I gave a shy bow and high-fived Joel, my adversary. He proved a formidable opponent, but I'd improved my game in the last month.

Cheers and shouts continued, party cups toasting and sloshing beer over the lips as it spilled into the sand.

I considered losing on purpose to avoid the attention, but this was a new city, a new me. No more existing in the background.

"Well done," Kevin said, tossing his arm around my shoulder and pulling me away from the crowd.

I only met him a few weeks ago at a new student orientation, but Kevin was friendly—and handsy. I wiggled away from his touch.

It was a warm night at the beach for May. Summer would be here soon, and that meant regular bonfires. Bonfires at Ocean Beach were the best. Sometimes windy, but the ocean was beautiful and calm tonight, with a light breeze.

"Hey, you can't steal my best girl." Marin shoved Kevin away from me and bumped me with her shoulder. "You want to surf tomorrow?" she asked me with a wink.

Kevin bristled. He spent weeks creating opportunities to be alone with me, and Marin had spent weeks interrupting them. She was an exceptional friend.

"No, thank you," I said, sniffling and surveying the dark sea.

It may be calm tonight, but I'd seen the waves when the tide picked up and smashed them into the shoreline. I had no business being out there.

She huffed, shaking her head. "I'm getting you out there if it's the last thing I do."

Marin grew up surfing in Orange County. Her father was a professional surfer, and her brother owned a surf shop in Pacifica. She was tall and lithe, a yoga enthusiast, and loved bathing suits. Her mother likely birthed her on a longboard, and not a single inch of her five-foot-ten frame didn't look it.

Beautiful with bleached blonde hair, sun-kissed skin, and eyes gray like a storming sea. Marin was a walking advertisement for the beach and even wore flip-flops in the rain.

I nodded toward the ocean. "There are sharks in that water."

She rolled her eyes and pointed at Kevin, who stalked down the beach with a pout. He joined a group of women at another bonfire, snaking his arm around the shoulders of a pretty brunette.

"There are sharks in the sand, too," Marin said.

"What's it matter?" I asked with a shrug. "Surfing, I mean." I knew why being aware of Kevin mattered.

Growing up with a protective older brother and a freespirited older sister provided plenty of information about dating, even if my real-life experiences were lackluster.

Marin gave me a pitied pinch of her brows. "Because you'll feel what it's like to be free. Truly free. It's *fun*. So fun, and you deserve fun."

I opened my mouth to answer, but she kept going before I could agree that I deserved fun.

"Plus, my car is in the shop, and I need a ride tomorrow. Please, Bree? Please?"

I met Marin a few months ago when I toured the campus, due to begin my master's degree in clinical psychology at San Francisco State University in the fall. A year ahead of me in her studies, Marin showed me the ropes on that visit. We became instant friends, and when she needed a new roommate, I packed up and left Seattle, ready for a fresh start.

I didn't want that fresh start to include the open ocean.

"I'll drive you," I agreed, "but I'm not getting on a board."

Marin smiled, mischief dancing in her eyes as the reflection of the fire flickered through them.

"You say that now, but wait until you meet my brother."

"Not interested." Best to shut Marin down right away. She was persistent, pushy, and downright stubborn sometimes.

She crossed her arms and sipped her beer. "You want fun. You won't get it sitting on the sidelines."

True, but as tonight proved, I was trying. My presence at a beach party reflected growth. Moving to a different state, making friends, and settling in proved a damn near miracle, and I was proud of myself. Even two years ago, this would have been a dream.

"What time do we leave?" I asked, ignoring her previous comment.

"Ass crack of dawn, bitch. Pack your bikini and a positive attitude." She slammed back her beer and wandered the beach, leaving me alone by the fire.

"I don't have a bikini," I mumbled, flopping down ungracefully and digging my toes into the cool sand.

I would go with Marin tomorrow and try to be positive. But that was new to me, too.

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"Shit, take a right!" Marin grabbed the steering wheel like a lunatic, turning it for me and nearly sending us careening into a dune along the highway.

"No touching the wheel, Marin!"

Some things shouldn't have to be said, but with Marin, I almost always had to say them.

She pushed her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose and pointed out the window.

"It's just off Coast Highway. Half a mile down. The neon blue sign that says, *The Surf Shop*." I snickered, and Marin shrugged. "We're surfers, Bree, not poets." A coastal town south of San Francisco, Pacifica was a popular surfing spot for city dwellers flocking for a solid range of waves from beginning to professional level. Marin's brother, Brody, ran a shop near Linda Mar Beach.

Like most of the central coast, tall bluffs with weaving trails overlooked a rocky cliff and the roaring ocean below. As we drove through the town, the long stretch of beach flattened, and the water calmed.

"Pacifica means peaceful in Spanish." Marin rubbed her hand along her temple like she could smooth out her hangover. "This is a great place for newbs."

"Mmhm."

I kept my eyes on the road until I spotted *The Surf Shop*'s glowing sign in the distance. With little traffic at this hour, I found a space in front of the storefront.

She scrambled out of the car as if one more second in it would be her demise. Only a twenty-minute drive from our apartment in Ingleside Heights, Marin white-knuckled the entire thing.

"Come on." She tugged on my arm and pulled me along the sidewalk. "We gotta get you fitted and out there, bitch. I'm not losing my spot because you're slow."

"Me? Wait, I'm not—Marin!" I shrieked, my feet flying from under me as she dragged me into the shop.

The bell over the door rang, the only sound inside a quiet store. A dim light illuminated the counter, the rest of the place dark.

Racks of beachwear sat in the store's front, and surfboards of varying sizes lined the walls in the back. Pictures of intimidating ocean swells covered the shop, broken up only by band posters and a few brand advertisements.

I recognized the woman in a poster above the register, standing next to a longboard with her head tossed back and her blonde curls shaking out behind her.

"Is that you?" I gaped.

Marin grinned and nodded. "Yep, when I was twenty. My dad's sponsor hired me for a gig. I spent a summer modeling beachwear for the brand and paid for my undergraduate degree."

I couldn't imagine being in a tiny bikini for the world to see. Marin was maybe the bravest person I knew.

"Bro!" she shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth for added effect. "Rise and grind!"

A loud *clunk* rang in the back, something falling, and a few muttered profanities followed.

"Shit, chill out, Marin. You don't have to be functioning on all cylinders all the time—"

The man I assumed to be her brother stopped short, standing in the doorway to a backroom blocked by a tapestry of Bob Marley's face.

He relaxed into a smile and ran a hand through hair as blonde as Marin's, long enough to hang to the base of his neck. Lithe, muscled, and casual in his beachwear, Brody could have been plucked from a Rip Curl ad.

"You brought a friend."

Marin gestured to me. "This is Bree. She's from Seattle and is terrified of the ocean. And a little bit of life, too."

Fucking Marin.

While I wanted to fight her on it, she was right. Still, I didn't want to give up every ounce of dignity that morning. I took a breath and willed my cheeks not to blush.

It didn't work.

Brody chuckled, walking around the counter and ducking down.

He crouched near the floor, muffling his voice, but his deep timbre reminded me of the rolling fog that blanketed the city in the mornings. You could get lost in it if you let yourself.

"Nothing to be scared of," he said. "The ocean is a place of peace. It holds your worries and reminds you that you're so much smaller than the world you're living in." He stood up, holding a jar of something and grinning. "Plus, it's fucking fun."

He tossed the jar to Marin, who easily caught it, though she half-paid attention to her brother.

"Try that wax," Brody suggested. "It's dope."

Marin unscrewed the top and dipped her nose in for a sniff before closing it again. "Is Perry here yet?"

Brody shook his head, flipping on the store lights and pulling up the window blinds. "Nah. Bro took off down to Baja. Left me in a jam, too. Summer season is kicking up, and I need Shawn and Whitney for lessons. I can't run the shop when I'm in the water. I swear, I'm not hiring him again."

Marin leaned closer to me. "Perry is our cousin. He's super unreliable." She perked up. "I'd help, but I'm starting my internship at the campus clinic in two weeks."

Like me, Marin was studying clinical psychology. She finished her first year of coursework and would now see clients.

I stayed quiet, letting the conversation take place without me as I wandered through the racks of clothes. My hands skimmed over the polyester and nylon bikinis and board shorts.

"You like something?" Brody stepped over and watched me examine the merchandise.

His eyes were a deep brown, possibly bottomless. Curse Marin for being right.

"Oh, no. I'm fine." I tugged on a thick strap beneath my tank top. "I have a suit."

Marin snorted. "No, you have a tankini. So does my mom." She pushed past me, riffling through the women's suits. "Here." She pulled out a white bikini and thrust it at me. "Try this."

I held it up, frowning. "Is there more of it?"

Brody laughed. "You're so tiny, Breezy Bree. You don't need much."

I swallowed, embarrassment and shame sweeping over me. I wanted to correct him. To point out every flaw and gross, fat, or unattractive part of my body.

Old feelings, I told myself, sinking into the mantra. *Those are old feelings*.

Nearly seven years in recovery, but the voice of my past haunted me sometimes. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath.

I will aim for progress, not perfection.

I am more powerful than my eating disorder.

I am valuable as I am.

I am not my body.

Exhale.

Marin thrust the suit into my hands. "On me." She nodded to her brother. "Ring her up with my discount."

Brody rolled his eyes. "You don't have a discount." Facing me, he said, "Take it. On the shop. If you're getting on our boards, you gotta represent *The Surf Shop* with style."

He headed to the back and pushed Bob Marley aside, disappearing. I stared at Marin, alarmed.

"I'm not getting on a board." I hadn't intended my voice to ooze panic.

Brody returned with a wetsuit and sized me up. "This should work," he said, satisfied. "We paddle out in fifteen. Meet by the barbecue pit."

My best friend clapped, giddy with excitement.

"I'm not—"

Marin held up her hand, cutting me off. "You told me you wanted a fresh start. You said you left Seattle because nobody saw you as anything other than this delicate girl who needed constant tending. You want to be on your own, feel like an adult, and take care of yourself. Now you're here, acting like that scared girl."

She ran her hand along my arm and tilted her head. A challenge. "Do you want life to be different? Try different things."

I stared at the wetsuit in my arms. For a moment, I imagined stepping into the ocean as its cold waves lapped against my feet. Moving deeper to paddle into the water without a worry in the world. No mantras to ground me and no shame in my belly.

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"Fine," I said. "I'll try."
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Marin gave a satisfied nod. "That's right, bitch."

Twa

Bree

"• H and me that." I nodded toward a Diet Coke just out of my reach.

Marin put down her reading, glanced at the drink, and rolled her eyes. She only drank water or kombucha, but she slid the can over with a grimace.

"Keep going," I said into the phone tucked between my ear and shoulder, settling onto the couch as I flopped beside my roommate.

A textbook rested in her lap, and a few more stacked on the coffee table. Summer classes meant Marin lived on the couch most nights. Lucky for her, sweatpants and a solid lounging session were my jam. I ignored the twitch in Marin's eye when I took a long drink of my soda.

My older brother's muttered grumble reverberated on the line.

"What else do you need me to do, Bree? We've booked the suite at the resort and your airfare and arranged airport transportation, but Sunny wants you to pick a dress. I trust you can sort that out yourself. Unless you'd rather Sunny do it. She's banned me from selecting attire."

Ezra and his fiancée, Sunny, were getting married in August in a small ceremony in Tulum, a beach town south of Cancun. Being dark in all conceivable ways, sweltering and sunlit Mexico seemed an odd choice for my brother. But when it came to Sunny, I didn't dare question it.

The things she pushed him to do benefited his grumpy disposition.

I sighed, making eye contact with Marin. "You don't have to treat me like a child, Ez. I can make my own arrangements, and I'll get the dress. Just tell me the color."

Sensing my annoyance, she patted my arm.

My brother spent a lifetime babying me because he wanted to protect me, but I left Seattle to move out of the shadows of my past and prove myself capable and independent.

Drumming up confidence seemed impossible when everyone watched and held their breath, waiting for me to fail.

I spent *years* overachieving or outperforming everyone around me.

And sure, I built a life of perfection to give myself the illusion of control when I felt invisible and powerless. And okay, that eventually broke me. But goddamnit, I could buy a fucking dress. "Biz is wearing purple," he said.

Of course. My sister stunned in purple with her raven hair. With my dark blonde hair, it made me appear sickly.

"Do I have to wear purple, too?"

Ezra covered the receiver, the muffled sounds of a conversation before he returned. "Sunny says to wear whatever color you want, but keep the dress short." He paused, muttering. "No, fuck that. Keep the dress modest."

"Not long!" Sunny shouted in the background. "It's a beach wedding!"

"Wear a fucking pantsuit," Ezra grumbled.

Wrestling ensued on his end, the static of something brushing against the phone and then a clattering sound and two voices arguing.

All posturing. I registered the humor in my brother's voice as he threatened to take his fiancée over his knee and spank her.

Super gross.

"I'm going now..."

Heavy breaths hit my ear, and Sunny's voice kicked on. "Hey, Bree. Wear what you want. Your brother is being gross and overbearing. How have you been? What's new in San Franny?"

"San Franny is good."

I bit my nail, watching Marin as she read her book about motivational interviewing, no longer interested in my conversation.

"I took a job, and I've been meeting new people. Things are settling into place."

Marin's eyes drifted up from her book, a *told-you-so* grin overtaking her face.

Damn near killed me to admit, but Marin was right. I liked her brother. Enough to offer to help at his shop for the summer.

Having a job would be good for me, and if short-staffed, it would benefit Brody, too.

"A new job? Friends?" Sunny squeaked. "Tell me about it! Hey—"

My brother took over. "You got a job? When? What are you doing? Is it stressful? Are you managing?"

"This is exactly why I said nothing, Ezra. I'm *fine*. I'm working at a surf shop in Pacifica for Marin's brother. It's casual and fun, and no, it's not stressful."

A heavy sigh blew through the receiver. "Tell me about these friends. Do any of them have a penis? *Friends*."

Despite my brother's stupidity, I smiled at my toes, wiggling excitedly on the coffee table.

I spent that first morning in Pacifica with a stomach thrashing rougher than the sea. Brody and Marin had an entire crew of pals. Connor and Remy, Brody's best friends with low-hanging swim shorts and waves on their abs rivaling the ocean they surfed.

Sharon, Cassandra, and Hailey, all shades of hair, skin, and eyes, but all a stunning combination that left me touching my hair far too much and adjusting my cover-up.

I am grateful for all my body can do.

The women were stunning. Intimidating not only in their appearance but in their warmth, friendliness, and inclusivity.

"I hope you're coming with us to Bertie's Cafe after the sesh, B."

B. Sharon called me B. I'd never had a nickname before.

"Yeah, come on, B, " Hailey said. "The acai bowl is to die for."

Cassandra tugged on my arm. "Come."

"*Come on, bitch!*" Marin had an entirely other B nickname for me.

Self-conscious, I struggled with bottom-of-the-barrel selfesteem my entire life. Hiding proved easier than existing in plain sight, and I never fought for attention.

My sister Bizzy told me to get over it and join the force of sisterhood instead of shying away from it, but I never fit in.

Other kids ignored me and left me out. My parents weren't around much. My father was gone unless he needed to parade his family for company publicity. *Family First Media*.

The irony was outstanding.

When Bizzy and Ezra moved out, it was just me in that house. I tried hard to give my father the perfect daughter well-behaved, excellent grades, and never so much as talked back. Perfection could earn his love, approval, and attention. I was sure of it.

But even that wasn't enough.

Not enough to earn friends. Not enough to make my parents notice or love me. Not enough for anything other than leaving me lonely.

Eventually, it was easier to be alone.

But the Pacifica crew loved a shared hobby, and for some inexplicable reason, they wanted to share it with me, too. I'd had nothing like it before, never been part of something, and was desperate for it. I starved myself of it for so long.

It was *fun*. I wanted more of that.

My austere older brother didn't understand the concept of fun. He wouldn't get it.

"Well, you see, friends are people you like and share a bond of mutual affection—"

Marin gave a thumbs up and mouthed, Yes, bitch.

"Jesus, Bree," he cut me off. "No wonder you and Sunny get along so well. You're both petulant."

I nearly choked.

"Brave man, Ezra, or incredibly foolish." No one would fault his fiancée for castrating him.

He chuckled. "Sunny left. But goddamnit, Bree. Just... be careful. With..."

"Penises?" I offered, toasting Marin's sinister nod of approval as she kicked me excitedly.

Pretty sure the grinding sound hitting my ear was my brother's clenched jaw. "No," he said slowly. "Just be careful with overwhelming yourself."

"With penises?"

Marin's cackle bounced through our cozy living room, mine just as loud as we clutched and slapped at one another, laughing. My brother's end of the line remained silent.

Calming down, I relaxed on the couch with my Diet Coke and a tickle of satisfaction. Felt good to be the bratty sister sometimes.

"You don't have to worry about me," I reminded him. "Things are fine."

"Fine," he scoffed. "I worry a lot, Bree. I know how it can get when you're stressed or overwhelmed, and I want to ensure you're okay."

Admittedly, I had a long history of struggling to cope when life became overwhelming, and Ezra helped me through much of it.

He was the one who got me treatment for my eating disorder, sending me to one of the best inpatient facilities in the country.

Seventeen at the time, I had lived with the disease since twelve years old. When things got scary, my dad ignored it. My mom pretended everything was fine. But my brother took care of me.

I didn't want to go. The thing about mental illness is that when you're deep in the pull of it, it can convince you it belongs. It's part of you. Leaving for treatment was the hardest thing I'd ever done, and I almost didn't do it. A chance encounter gave me the push I needed, and though the man responsible would never know, his ties to my brother left me thinking of him often.

I worked damn hard to overcome those monsters, and I'd been healthy and in remission for almost seven years. No relapses after that treatment program, even while pursuing my undergraduate degree, and I was consistent with therapy.

It wasn't always easy to push and keep going. Sometimes, I wanted to stop and give up. I was proud of myself.

"Ty is nearby if you need anything," Ezra said. "Call him if you're overwhelmed, okay? I mean, call *me*, right? But if you need someone closer, he's in the city."

"I know." I dropped my head back on the couch.

Not a day had passed since moving when I *didn't* remember we now lived in the same city. Ty's push started my recovery —the catalyst in a chain of events that led to all this.

"Your best friend doesn't want to babysit me, and like I said, I'm fine."

Eight years older and hardly aware of my existence, Ty was one of the few sets of eyes I wanted on me. But I had been invisible to him until that morning at the lake all those summers ago. I doubted he thought of it as often as I did.

I doubted he thought of it at all.

"Bree," my brother warned.

"Yeah, okay." Better to brush him off and be done with it than fight. It's not like he could force me to do it from two states over...

Right?

Yeah. No. Totally right. Best to temper his concern with an agreement—which wasn't a promise of follow through, anyway.

He muttered, "You're just trying to pacify me."

"Is it working?" I picked at my nails, smiling into the phone.

He sighed. "It's not *not* working."



Ty

••S o, are you excited?" Colt asked, resting on his forearms as he leaned across the conference table until he breathed in my face.

"You're going to get sued if you can't learn personal space," I warned, my focus unwavering.

"Nah, my father would settle." He sat back, fiddling with this tie and rolling it around his finger. I sighed, rubbing my temple. "You're not wrong."

Colt Tilly was the son of founding partner Roger Tilly of Tilly, Helfgott, & Associates, the firm I joined two years ago and committed my life to.

I continued reading through the file in front of me. Despite my blustering, Colt and I had been friends since law school. One of my favorite people, the idiot, so I took the bait.

"Am I excited...?"

He ran a hand over his black hair, clipped short on the sides with a clean fade and a high top. Sitting deeper in his chair, he kicked one ankle over his knee.

"Are you excited for a brand new week of hanging on by a thread?" He grinned, amused by my current state of strain. Then again, Colt galloped through life like an unbridled horse —aptly named.

"I'll stab you with your tie clip."

My friend grimaced, scooting back. "I believe it. You're white-knuckling that sanity, my friend. Maybe stop and take a break, huh?"

Working toward a partnership at the firm proved to be a marathon for me. Sweat equity would take me across the finish line and finally reward me for years of dedication and allegiance.

I was almost there.

"Damn," I muttered, kneading my eyes with the heels of my palms and ignoring his suggestion. He'd voiced it enough recently. "I've been staring at this contract for forty minutes, and there's no way Anderson will get everything he wants."

Colt bristled. "Hey, man. You can only do what you can do. Tilly will—"

"Bend me over his desk and fuck me if I don't deliver," I finished, ignoring the wince on Colt's face at the mention of his father doing anything of the sort. "I'm already on thin ice with taking time off, and Anderson—" "Is a megalomaniac who will test you nonstop and put you through the wringer for no reason other than he can." Colt examined his nails. "Men like him will push, not because they want to assess your skill or intelligence or because it's needed. He'll push because he likes the power of it."

I understood something about that, though I had the decency to relegate my needs to my private life, unlike Anderson.

The most challenging client to date, he was also my most essential and career-influencing.

Tilly nearly shit himself when I approached Anderson's real estate firm and convinced him to leave Burns & Farmer. A battle won in the war of San Francisco land development.

The partners swooned when I victoriously returned to the office with the flag of Anderson's client contract waving in my clenched fist.

"Keep it up, Jensen, and you'll make partner before my son."

Tilly beamed his terrifying smile, just a tad threatening, when I announced signing Anderson six months ago. The kind of smile fueling my pride and nightmares in equal measure.

Years of backbreaking work, long hours, a steady diet of stress and anxiety. Skipped holidays. Missed birthdays, dates, visits, vacations, and weekends... Shit, missed *everything*. Those sacrifices exemplified glory. Hitting my mark, building my career, and not stopping until I just got *there*.

There had changed over the years, but it was at my fingertips for the first time. If I landed Anderson, became a partner, and solidified my position in the firm, I could take a breath for one fucking second.

What better sprint to haul me over the line than the law firm's most prominent and lucrative deal in ten years? The one I *would* secure.

An abundance of pressure, but I thrived on stress. Expectations pushed me forward, kept me steady, and propped me up so I didn't stumble. As I continued to scrutinize the contract, my phone buzzed. Too distracted, I failed to notice. Colt picked it up and dumped it on the papers beneath my nose.

"I swear you'll drown in real estate contracts." He glanced toward the copy room with a dreamy look where Ben, the firm's newest junior associate, bent to replace paper in the printer. "Meanwhile, I'm going to drown in far more pleasurable seas."

"Neanderthal," I muttered, glancing at the screen.

The name *Eazy-E* flashed across it, and I chuckled. Ezra was anything but easy, but I sometimes had a sardonic sense of humor, particularly with that glowering mountain.

"Speaking of Neanderthals," I answered brightly. "How's my favorite brooding and angsty friend?"

"Fuck off," Ezra said, a heavy sigh to follow. "Are you busy?"

I gestured toward the door, indicating I was stepping out. Colt waved me off, his eyes still on Ben across the hall.

"I'm always busy. What's up? How's Genesis? Everything okay?"

I'd recently helped Ezra negotiate a new property deal for expanding his nightclub. While negotiations went heavily in our favor, I worried when my best friend called outside our weekly group chats with the boys.

Life always felt like the other shoe would drop, and even knowing my anxiety drove that dread, I couldn't shake it.

Didn't help that Ezra's father enjoyed cutting his son off at the knees at every opportunity for sport. My stomach always went tight at the thought of my best friend losing the things that mattered to him when he'd finally given himself permission to let anything matter at all.

Ezra grunted, "Ask Bizzy about Genesis. I just pay to keep the lights on. She handles the rest. Listen, I need a favor."

Passing a few associates with a nod and polite smile, I cut left down the hall and headed toward my office. With a window view of San Francisco Bay, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't my happy place sometimes.

The thirty-second-floor corner office had been a reward for my contribution to the firm's expansion and adding Anderson to our client roster.

Still not the thirty-third floor like Tilly himself, but I'd keep going, keep moving, and having a target to aim for reminded me I wasn't *there* yet.

I checked my watch, collapsed into my chair, and kicked my shoes onto my desk, loosening my tie a little. I needed to put myself back together before my clients arrived, but I would take a break for a moment.

Timed, planned, and with permission. The only way I could do it without unraveling.

"What do you need, brother?"

"Bree," he said.

I dropped my feet to the floor. He had my attention. Ezra's youngest sister hadn't had the easiest life, and if he called about her, something must be wrong.

"Is she okay? Did something happen? Is something wrong?"

He sighed again, but not with impatience. He was concerned.

"No, not specifically. I'm just worried about her, and I think she's pissed because I'm worried, and I can't stop worrying because she's on her own. There are no eyes on her."

Sounded right. Ezra was protective of the people he loved.

"She's an adult now. Maybe she doesn't need eyes on her."

He scoffed. "Anyone who grew up the fucked-up product of Richard Collins needs eyes on them."

A beat of silence passed as he gathered his thoughts, and I left him to it.

"I don't trust she'd tell me if something was wrong, and since she cut financial ties with my dad and refuses help, I worry she's going to get in over her head as she tries to prove to everyone she can take care of herself."

"Ezra..." I said carefully, knowing how sensitive he was about his sisters, especially Bree.

"Look, I know she *can*. I understand—she's an adult now, and I can't helicopter over her, but you saw how bad she got."

I did. Bree was seventeen and going into her senior year of high school. I remembered it well.

All her friends planned for homecoming and Friday night football games, but Bree was panicking about getting shipped to Connecticut for a treatment program to help with her eating disorder.

The morning she was supposed to leave, she slipped out of the family house in Clear Lake—a sprawling mansion along the southeast shore in a private nook where the region's wealthiest families lived.

The boys and I were in town for our yearly get-together at the cabin a couple of miles from the Collins' residence.

Bree ran away, searching for Ezra to plead with him to stop the trip. To withdraw her from the treatment facility, cancel the plane ticket, and let her stay home. She'd find a closer program and stick with it this time. This time, she meant it. She promised.

It was six a.m. when I left the cabin for a run. Bree sat in a chair in the sand, staring at the quiet lake, deep in thought. She hadn't heard me approach from behind and jumped when I touched her shoulder.

"Ty," she said with a breathy exhale. "You startled me."

It'd been nearly two years since I'd seen her at the time. With hollowed cheeks, thinning hair, and dark circles under her dull eyes, I almost didn't recognize her. She'd wilted away, disappearing into herself. I remembered Bree at ten years old, demanding our attention as she somersaulted and cartwheeled around the yard.

Ezra would roll his eyes and scold her for bothering us, but the boys and I didn't mind. Noah had a baby sister and knew how to talk to Bree and Bizzy like humans. Neither Reed nor I had siblings, so it was nice to feel like we did.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her that morning, pulling up another chair and sitting down.

She looked at me with tears, pleading for something I didn't understand. "Freedom," she said. "I want my freedom. Tell him not to make me go."

Ezra, she meant.

I avoided her gaze and stared down at my feet. Sand spilled into my running shoes from walking to the beach, and I'd be late for breakfast if I stuck to my planned route. But I didn't want to leave Bree like that. She seemed so sad.

We didn't speak for a while, but she broke the silence.

"One day, I want to exist without something having control over me, you know?" she whispered.

I swallowed, thinking about my struggles. My anxiety ruled every decision and determined how I lived. The first years of my life crucially shaped all to follow, even when life was safe.

I couldn't quiet my mind and had to keep moving or risk getting consumed by everything nipping at my heels. My nightmares, my worries, my fears, my insecurities.

Bree bunched up the long sleeves of her oversized sweater, a cream cable-knit that buried her body. I don't think I'd ever seen Bree in clothes that fit. She tried to hide herself from the world.

I clasped my hands between my knees and sat forward.

"I know what it is to feel like you're losing it. You have to control everything. Otherwise, you have nothing. But I also know you'll never be free if you don't let go of the monsters pulling you down, Bree." She took a deep breath, holding in a sob. "*Do you ever struggle*?" Her voice was so quiet, like she hid that, too.

Maybe our similarities made it easy to share anything with Bree. Or perhaps it was just that peaceful morning, but with her, I didn't have to hold back.

She didn't expect me to be carefree, perfect, or good at everything.

"I do," I admitted. "More than others see and more than I let them."

It pained me to see her like that. Empty of life, clinging to distress like the only thing she had. Seventeen years old—just seventeen. There was so much more life to live.

"You can choose to go and take the risk that, while it's scary, it's a chance. Life is full of opportunities. We can chase them, or we can waste them. We change through those possibilities. I think you can, Bree. You're strong enough."

Bree didn't answer. She silently cried. I watched, unable to turn away no matter how much I willed myself to give her privacy.

I slid my chair closer and put my arm around her, pulling her head onto my shoulder. We stayed like that until her tears dried, and she got up, squeezing my forearm without saying a word, and left.

Three hours later, Bree loaded into the town car and headed for the airport. Ezra saw her off with no idea she almost didn't get in that car.

I hadn't seen her since that day, but Ezra spoke of her recovery and his relief at how well she was doing. He was proud of her, proud of her strength and resiliency, but he still worried.

I always had a soft spot for her, too.

The memory of that talk faded back to the reality of my surroundings. My beige office walls retook focus, framed degrees and awards on display. The sinking cushions of my ergonomic chair, the sheen from my polished mahogany desk, and the stunning bay view reminded me that seven years was a long time.

"What do you need from me? How can I help?"

Ezra didn't hesitate. "Can you call her or send her a text or something? Remind her you're in the city; if she needs anything, you're available. Please? She won't. She'll think she's a bother, but I want her to know she's not alone."

The asshole had a real heart of gold sometimes.

"I can," I said. "Whatever she needs, I'll help if I can."

I got off the phone, rushing to my meeting, but I promised my best friend I'd reach out to his baby sister.

As much as I didn't want to be another set of eyes on a woman who once pleaded for freedom, I hated the idea of Bree struggling.

I guess I still had that soft spot.

Me: Hey Bree, it's Ty. Ezra said you're in the city now, and I thought I'd check in and see how you're settling. Let me know if you need anything.

I sent the message and tucked my phone into my pocket. Standing up, I fixed my tie and adjusted my suit to perfection.

One... two... three... four.

Deep breath. Keep going.



Bree

I stared at the text, biting my nails and reading the message for the dozenth time that afternoon.

Hey Bree, it's Ty. Ezra said you're in the city now, and I thought I'd check in and see how you're settling. Let me know if you need anything.

Goddamnit, Ezra.

Still treated me like a child, and now he recruited his friends to do the same. Worse, my biggest childhood crush that I wanted to impress growing up. Pity was not an aphrodisiac.

"So, like, a short board?" The sole customer in the shop asked. A man with dark hair buzzed close to the scalp. He walked down the row of boards, appraising his options. "Or long? So many choices."

I hardly paid attention, lost in thought. It had been a tedious day, with Brody needing me first thing in the morning and a harrowing drive to Pacifica in the thick fog before sunrise.

A tow truck almost clipped me on the highway, causing me to spill my coffee all over myself. Too frazzled, I forgot to eat breakfast. With surf classes coming in and out all day, I missed lunch. My blood sugar tanked, and so did my mood.

"You're going to want something at least a full arm's length overhead," I said, walking around the register to meet him by the boards. "You're looking for one that floats well to help keep you stable. What's your price range?"

The man leaned on one leg, scratching his head. He appeared no older than thirty. "What board does Kelly Slater use?"

"Nope." I headed to the longboards. "Don't think you'll be surfing like a pro just because you've snowboarded a winter in Tahoe."

Oof. I needed a granola bar or something.

"Hey!" the man protested, tugging on the hem of his shirt and shuffling his shoe against the floor. His blue eyes locked with mine, and his lips curled into a smile. "It was Whistler."

"Ha!" I laughed, my mood lifting a little. "Of course. My apologies." I pointed to a couple of eight-foot top foam boards. "You're looking at one of these bad boys. Check them out and let me know when you've decided."

I left him to browse, heading back to the register to adjust the lesson roster and assign the customer to either Shawn or Whitney. Brody's schedule was packed all summer, particularly with our female beginning surfers. "Not bad," Brody said, reviewing tomorrow's itinerary.

I glanced down at the bodice of my sundress and wondered how noticeable the coffee stain was on the light pink cotton and whether Brody would see it.

"No, not terrible," I agreed. "You're busy, but I scheduled some breaks."

He grinned, blonde tendrils hanging over his eyes, still wet from his last lesson. "I meant your sales, Breezy. You're doing great."

Looking at Brody made me blush, so I focused on the customer instead. He ran a hand over each board like he wouldn't pick the blue and silver Stewart.

Brody surveyed the list in front of him. "You're not on here yet. I'm still waiting to give that lesson."

My fear of the ocean interfered with my fantasies about riding the waves with my friends.

I still hadn't progressed beyond practicing getting up on my board... while on the sand.

Everyone was patient with me, and Marin only asked me ten thousand times in the last three weeks when I would get brave and dip my toe in the water. Literally—I wouldn't even swim out there.

"Hey, B!" Sharon called, stepping into the shop. It wasn't clear if she referred to Brody or me, but he hurried over to whisk her into a sweeping hug and swing her around.

The cream sundress fit her perfect figure and fluttered with the dancing movement. I tried not to stare like a creep, wondering why they weren't dating. She didn't have a single stain on her dress.

Once Brody set her down, Sharon approached me, running her hand over the braid I'd tucked my hair into.

"This is adorable, B." She reached into her oversized beach bag and pulled out a sandwich, thrusting it into my hands. "Here." I stared at the wax paper-wrapped present. "You brought me dinner?"

Sharon glanced at Brody. "He said you missed lunch, and I figured you'd be hungry. I stopped by the deli. Turkey. I hope it's okay."

Brody smiled at Sharon, and I gawked at the two of them.

They noticed me and thought about me. No obligation like my brother and sister. No pity, like my brother's friends. No exasperation with me, like Marin.

"Thank you."

Sharon smiled with amusement. "What are you doing tonight?" She backed up to the counter, hopping up and sitting beside my buffet.

Reading a smutty romance novel and drinking as many Diet Cokes as I want because Marin is working and can't judge me for it.

I cleared my throat and wiped my mouth with a napkin. "I'm not sure."

Sharon clapped her hands. "Stay for the beach party! Everyone gets drunk and naked and swims in the ocean."

I tugged on my hair, twisting the bottom of my braid between my fingers and pursing my lips. "Do you have to get naked?"

"Yes," Brody said, as Sharon said, "Of course not."

They laughed, and my head swam with the implications of that answer. Did Brody want to see me naked? Was he *saying* he wanted to see me naked? Would I let him?

Yes, bitch.

Two months of living with Marin...

Sharon placed her back to Brody and iced him out of the conversation. "Come see for yourself tonight. I promise we'll all behave."

She shot Brody a look, and he smiled.

"Absolutely not."

Having attended exactly zero parties in high school or college because of a lack of invitation or a scarcity of courage, my heart pounded at the thought of joining.

New you. Fun. Fun, goddamnit. Have it!

I might not run naked in the sand or get drunk and jump into the ocean, but I could be there, and maybe that was better than even the best smut book.

Probably not, but I should still go.

"I'm in. Let me text Marin to tell her I'll be home late tonight."

Sharon winked. "If at all."

I left Seattle to shed my past. Others saw what I showed them. It was time I showed them something different.

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There was nothing like a cloudless night at the beach.

Countless stars shining in the sky. The soothing lull of the ocean waves on a quiet shoreline.

No umbrellas or sand buckets to litter the empty beach. No seagulls fighting for crumbs or sand fleas destroying your ankles. Just the peace and serenity of an expansive sea and the white caps fading into a darkened abyss.

The roaring flames of a bonfire lit up the foreshore, but I spent most of the night on the outskirts, disappearing into the shadows and observing.

I spotted Cassandra in the distance, laughing and peeling off her clothes, running naked into the ocean with three men, also naked. Dozens of people splashed in the inky water, their laughs and shouts echoing over the beach, carried with the wind.

Surrounded by people, music, dancing, and cheers, I felt out of place and alone. I clutched the beer and squeezed my eyes shut. New you.

An opportunity I could chase or waste.

Pulling my shoulders back and standing tall, I strolled over to the fire and stood closer to people. Not precisely an act of courage, but it was a start. Sometimes, that's all it took.

"Need another?" Brody's smooth voice rolled from behind me, a beer appearing over my shoulder.

The can in my hand was full, but I tossed it into the garbage nearby and accepted Brody's. I bet it tasted better from him.

"Thanks."

He squeezed the aluminum can in his hand and smashed it, lobbing it into the recycling. "You chilly?"

Despite the hoodie over my dress, I shivered. The sand was cold at night, starved of the sun, and the wind from the ocean nipped a little even in June.

"I'm fine," I said, sipping my beer and running my hand along my arm.

Brody wrapped his arm around me, tugging me closer. "I'll help."

He smiled, and my stomach dropped into the sand with my bare feet.

His dark eyes focused on the fire in front of us. What was he thinking about, and did those thoughts involve me?

I'd slept with other guys, but each experience was awkward and rushed. Self-conscious and too in my head to relax and enjoy it with men too eager to catch their pleasure without regard for mine.

Could I have an orgasm during sex? I wanted to enjoy it. God. For once, I wanted to enjoy it with another person.

A gentle bump of Brody's hip shook me from my thoughts. "What are you thinking about, Breezy? You're smiling."

New you. New you.

A plea more than a chant. I closed my eyes—deep breath.

I opened my mouth to say it. Tell Brody my fantasy and ask him to make it a reality.

Nothing came out.

"Hey, give me a second." He stepped away, his emptiness replaced by the chill of the night air as he walked to a group of people across the fire pit.

I lost my moment. My opportunity. I wasted it.

Brody said something to a man I recognized as a shop regular before nodding solemnly and strolling toward the parking lot.

Just because I lost my moment didn't mean I couldn't take it back. Grabbing my sandals, I slipped them on and headed in the direction Brody had left. Foot traffic flattened the grass over the small dunes, and I followed a sandy trail to the parking lot.

Standing at the top of the last hill, I scanned the area. The shops and streetlights from the highway glittered in the distance, but only darkness blanketed the cars before me.

Like me, Brody parked near the shop and walked to the beach. Looking for his jeep would be pointless. No movement caught my eye as I spied around. Maybe he'd gone back to grab something. We left our belongings at the shop.

Their voices came first as I reached the south end of the parking lot, but my eyes adjusted to the darkness to spot them.

Sharon and Brody stood beside her sedan, arms crossed and glaring at one another.

It was a private moment, but I stepped closer, ducking behind the wheel of a van and peeking out past the bumper to get a better look.

Brody sighed. "You act like I don't matter to you."

Sharon's face shifted, hurt visible in the shadows cast by the moonlight. "You think I don't notice how you look at other women? Flirt with them? Touch them?"

If I questioned their relationship, the answer was becoming apparent.

Brody's voice softened. "It means nothing. Just friends."

It meant nothing. The flirting. The wondering. Of course, it wasn't about me.

Feeling sorry for myself, I kicked a rock across the parking lot, ricocheting off the bumper of a beat-up VW van with a loud clunk.

Brody and Sharon didn't hear me. Too busy sucking face now. Moans and slapping lips replaced any anger or hurt from moments ago.

I left when Brody flipped Sharon around and pressed her against the hood of her car.

"Can't wait to have you. Lift your dress."

No one had ever touched me like that, wanted me like that. What would it be like?

I scurried away as Brody fucked someone who wasn't me when I held the stupid and silly idea that tonight, I could be someone like Sharon.

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Fire swirled over my tongue and seared my throat. Almost hot enough to distract me from the burning in my chest.

Almost. I needed more tequila, I think.

It wasn't Brody that bothered me, not entirely. Sure, having a crush on a man comically out of my league proved foolish. Worsened by entertaining the idea that he liked me back.

Mostly, it'd been foolish to believe things could change.

I set my plastic cup on the picnic table lined with various liquors and mixers, skimming over the options to add to my Diet Coke. A shot proved a decent start, but a couple more, and I'd stop feeling bothered at all.

Thumbing over the bottles and avoiding the mill of people doing the same, I reached for the rum.

"Excuse me," a deep voice said as a man bumped into me from behind, almost knocking over my cup of soda as he reached for the same bottle. His hand steadied my drink before it tipped. "Sorry."

Ignoring the clumsiness, I mumbled, "No worries," poured my rum, and hurried away.

I headed toward the water. No idea why. I'd never get in there. Never join my friends. Never actually fit in anywhere, even when invited. Throwing back my drink, I took a healthy sip.

"Ouch, shit." I stumbled, knocked by a woman as she brushed by... and spilled my drink down my front.

"Sorry," I apologized, though her unsteadiness and enthusiasm to reach the drink table caused the accident. She didn't even look back.

"Just my night." I sighed, eyes darting between the wet trail down my dress and the crowded picnic table. No way I was waiting in that line again.

Slipping off my sandals, I carried them in one hand and kicked through the sand. As I ambled down the shoreline, the bonfire became just a sparkle in the distance. Moving closer to the water, my head dropped in surrender.

One day, I would do things because I wanted to rather than trying to prove a point. Today had not been that day.

Tomorrow would be a new one.

The ocean washed over my toes. Closing my eyes, I listened to the gentle crash of the waves for what seemed like hours. Peaceful. Quiet. Lulling me to sleep as the day's exhaustion caught up with me.

"Beautiful night, right?"

I peeked open an eye.

"It's you," I mumbled, catching his face in the moon's glow. I hadn't recognized his voice through the chattering conversations at the drink table. I closed my eyes again. The sand rolled beneath me, stealing me from my feet. No. Not the sand. My legs gave up. I let go of my sandals, struggling to catch myself as my head went dizzy, and I collapsed onto my butt in the wet sand.

"Tahoe Guy."

A bristle. "Whistler."

I hummed, forcing my eyes open. "I lost my shoes."

Bobbing on the surface of a wave, they floated closer before the tide dragged them back and swept them out.

I should have stood up, but fatigue depleted any motivation to move. So I didn't.

The rising tide broke around me. Saltwater dripped from my lashes and burned my eyes despite remaining closed.

Panic swirled in the back of my mind. I would drown here. The tide would drag me into the surf and steal me away, and my body declined to cooperate.

"How about we go somewhere warmer? Dry?" he asked.

Hands hooked under my armpits and pulled me from the water. Strong enough to lift me by the waist, he hauled me along.

"I don't feel good," I said, my chin dropping against my chest. "I think the drink was bad."

With a grunt, he shifted me and then continued. My feet carried me despite my inability to feel them.

"Can you find Sharon?" My eyelids drooped, and all efforts to keep them open were wasted. So exhausting. "She's there." I clumsily pointed down the beach.

He headed the wrong way.

"She's meeting us at my hotel. She'll pick you up."

Static filled my head, a low buzz inflating my brain like a helium balloon. It might detach from my body and float away.

Something wasn't right.

He dragged me along the dunes and toward the inn, the beach quiet and empty. Well and truly away from the party, fear flooded my veins.

"Take me back," I said, kicking to life with the adrenaline and dawning realization of what was happening.

I struggled against him, and he pinned my arms to my side.

"You're fine," he soothed. "Remember? You told me you wanted to come back with me. You kissed me at the party and dragged me away. You told your friend you wanted to spend the night with me. Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

"No, that's not true. Let me go!"

His body hardly moved when I tried to push him away. Grabbing my wrists, he bent lower until his face pressed close. He bared his teeth in a snarl and squeezed me tighter.

"I said don't worry."

Lips slammed to mine as he ground against me, his erection jutting into my hip. He forced my mouth open with his tongue, his groan deepening as he thrust harder.

No, no, no!

My head spun, but instinct took over. My teeth clamped tight until I tasted metal.

The man screamed, muffled by my mouth, and I refused to let go as he tried to pull away. I lifted my knee, shooting it between his legs. Releasing him, I stumbled backward.

"You fucking bitch!" he bellowed, rolling on the ground, one hand on his dick and the other feeling around his face.

Blood covered his lips, and his brows furrowed in anger. I didn't wait for him to recover. For maybe the first time in my life, I ran.

Fueled by adrenaline, I ran as fast as possible with a sinking body. Stumbling, I tripped over coastal sagebrush roots and buried sticks. I face-planted, my shoulder landing hard in the sand, scrambling onto my hands and knees, and starting again. His groans rumbled behind me, curses to follow. The brush rustled around him as he got up. Glancing back, I glimpsed his sway as he gripped his crotch and adjusted himself, then bounced on the balls of his feet. He was coming for me. My head start wouldn't last long.

Cutting inland, I pushed over the dune and toward the road.

I didn't know how far he'd walked me, but the bonfire light disappeared, and there was no way I'd make it back to the party before he caught up.

"Help," I rasped. "Help!" My head spun, and my vision flickered and twisted with the contrast of lights in the distance and dark shadows.

The echo of his feet pounding through the sand brought every nightmare to the surface of my skin.

"Shit!" he yelled.

I didn't turn around or wait to see what had happened, but he must have tripped because he howled in pain.

"I hope you broke your ankle!" I shouted over my shoulder, picking up speed.

Trembling and running on fumes, I made it to the road. Barefoot and with nothing on me, I headed to the shop. Backtracking to the bonfire risked crossing paths with my attacker again.

Run. Don't stop.

Adrenaline poured out of me, sapping what little energy I had. Hard. It was so fucking hard to keep going.

You can do hard things.

Half-jogging, half-dragging myself, I got to *The Surf Shop*. When I punched the entrance code, my finger slipped and hit a five instead of an eight. A red rejection flashed across the box.

"Shit, shit."

Clearing the screen, I tried again. This time, the box went green, the click of the lock turning. I hurried inside, slammed

the door closed, and listened to the lock click into place. Blinds shut and lights off, I hid behind the counter.

I ran. I fucking ran.

I'd done so well.

My head spun, and my breathing grew shallow. With trembling legs, I collapsed. Reaching for my purse under the register, my shaky hands grabbed it and fished out my phone.

My vision blurred again, the room shifting on its side. Nope. It was me. I slumped over.

Brody. Sharon. Cassandra. Marin. Hailey. They could help me—one of them. I only needed one.

Unsteady fingers unlocked the screen. I was losing it. I was going to pass out.

Brody didn't answer. Sharon didn't answer. Cassandra didn't answer. Hailey didn't answer. Of course, they didn't. They were at the party. Marin didn't answer.

Nobody answered.

"I need help," I croaked, but no one answered.

My finger hovered over his number, hesitant and scared.

"Let me know if you need anything."

I connected the call, praying this time someone picked up.



Тy

•• I s this vintage?" she asked, holding the glass to the light and inspecting the wine, a red so deep it looked purple beneath my dining room chandelier.

Shit. Was it a vintage? I had no idea. Tilly gifted me a membership to his fancy wine club as a thanks for my hard work, but I preferred beer.

"Yes." I slid the bottle to her and smiled. "A fine year, too."

She dipped her nose in the glass, inhaling and watching me from above the rim with her big blue eyes.

Colt kicked me beneath the table, his eyebrows shooting up.

"You got Anderson to agree to an exclusivity clause?" Ben asked, ignoring us and focusing on the work at hand.

Tilly assigned two junior associates, Mia and Ben, to assist with the Anderson deal.

"I did," I said, shifting through the contract to find the contingency waiver.

"When you work your ass off, you make partner." Colt closed the file.

Even that wasn't enough, but I kept my mouth shut. Soon. It was on the horizon.

Mia slid closer, emptying her wine glass and keeping her eyes locked on me. Working weekends was never ideal, but working this late on a Friday invited trouble.

Not long ago, I'd have asked Mia to stay. I *had* asked Mia to stay a few months back.

I learned my lesson. Distractions weren't worth the potential consequence of dropping the ball when I neared the end zone. Relationships proved easy enough to sacrifice when casual asked for nothing in return.

Gossip spread around the law firm after one messy night. Tilly got pissed at my unprofessionalism, but it at least sorted things into a clear pile of *Do Not Touch*.

No company policy restricted employees from dating, but Tilly had a strict policy of not fucking shit up. Fine. It aligned with my policy of *keep moving*.

Colt grinned, not taking his eyes off me. "Ben, can I walk you to your car?"

Asshole, I mouthed at Colt as Ben collected his things. Mia leisurely shuffled the files into a briefcase, in no rush to leave. My friend enjoyed encouraging mischief.

Colt lived two floors above me. The Herrington, a popular building for working professionals, was only a few blocks from the office and home to many senior-level associates. Ben didn't live in the building, but Mia did.

Not helping matters.

Ben tossed his satchel over his shoulder and headed out the door behind Colt.

Colt's personal and professional affairs didn't need to be sorted into tidy piles.

"I can stay and help wrap up," Mia said, watching the door close behind them. "Anything to close this deal."

I rubbed my face. What the fuck was wrong with me? She was attractive, brilliant, and driven. By all measures, the kind of woman you'd want in your apartment.

But this project was slowly killing me. I wanted a break from work and a solid night's sleep instead of a warm body with me or potential trouble.

I cleared my throat and gestured toward the door. "It can wait until the morning." A line I'd never said before. "Do you need me to walk you out?"

Taking the hint, Mia hid any disappointment well.

"I'm fine, thank you, and thank you for the wine. I'll see you on Monday, Ty."

As soon as she was gone, I wondered if I made a mistake. My shoulders were tense, and my gut twisted with stress. Maybe it would have been good to get a release. Bury my worries in a distraction for the night and leave the consequences to play out on Monday morning.

Except I'd decided not to sleep with coworkers again. Keep things clean, clear, and casual—which proved difficult the more I worked.

A problem for another day.

Clearing the glasses from the table and tossing out takeaway containers, I cleaned up after everyone left. We worked seven hours in my apartment besides the ten at the office earlier, and we were nowhere near done.

When my phone rang, I was sure it was something workrelated. I once took pride in making myself available at all hours, but in recent months, I realized that was a mistake, too.

I frowned as her name flashed on the screen. *Bree Collins*. Checking my watch, the frown deepened. It was after one a.m.

"Bree?" I answered.

I heard her breath before her voice.

"Ty? I need help."

"Where do you live?"

I buckled Bree into the front seat of my car, careful when she was too limp to help much.

"My apartment," she said, closing her eyes and leaning against the window.

Right.

"What's your address?"

Bree swatted me with her hand. "Same as Marin."

What happened tonight wasn't apparent, but she shouldn't be alone. Even after confirming the blood on Bree's face wasn't hers and she had no visible injuries.

I found Bree crumpled on the floor of *The Surf Shop* with her wet dress splayed around her and the hood of her sweatshirt pulled tight over her head. Blood smeared her chin, and I swear my heart dropped to my fucking feet.

I scooped her up, doing my best to check her over, grateful she was aware enough to provide the door code.

"Jesus. Where are you hurt?"

"You came." Her eyes fluttered before she focused on me. *"I ran,"* she said proudly.

Bree refused to go to the hospital or police, assuring me she wasn't hurt, but that didn't mean she was okay either.

She at least allowed me to get her water and help her clean up in the shop bathroom.

"No one hurt me," she mumbled as I washed her face with a paper towel. "But I hurt him." She gave a slow, serene smile.

Unclear if that was any more comforting, but this was Bree. I'd get the goddamn shovel if I had to. Reed must know how to bury a body properly. I could always call him for instructions.

I finished cleaning her up, gentle with my touch as I focused on her smooth skin rather than those wide eyes staring back.

But drained of adrenaline, utter exhaustion now had her eyes closed. Plump lips parted with soft exhales as Bree relaxed in my front seat. I started the car, pulling away from the curb and flipping around to leave town.

I had no idea where Bree lived, but she could sleep in my guest room tonight. Ezra would kill me if I found his sister like this and dumped her somewhere unsupervised.

"I'm taking you back to my place."

"So forward," she whispered.

"Here." I thrust a bottle of water from the center console. "Have more."

Bree squirmed to sit up, twisting off the top and taking a swig. Half of what went into her mouth spilled down her chin and chest, but she didn't notice. Wiping her mouth with her hand, she glanced around the car.

"My tummy doesn't feel good."

"Want me to stop?"

Shadows from streetlights passed over her face, giving enough light to catch her grimace. Swaying in the seat, she murmured, "No."

We didn't speak again, and Bree didn't open her eyes for the remainder of the drive, nodding off as my thumbs tapped the steering wheel. I'd hauled it to Pacifica to get to her, but I took the long route home. Bree was safe, and the car rocking lulled her to sleep. I didn't want to wake her.

Finally pulling into the garage beneath my building, I parked in my spot. She looked at peace for the first time in the two hours since I found her. I shouldn't disturb her, but sleeping slumped against the door couldn't be good for her neck. Then again, staring for a moment wasn't exactly terrible. The softness of her face, long lashes, the—

"We can go," she said after a moment, eyes still closed. "A couch would be more comfortable than this seat."

"God, yeah. Of course." Shit. Guess not asleep.

I wrapped one arm around her waist to hoist her up as I slung her arm over my shoulders to get her out of the car. She tried to wave me off, claiming she could walk herself, but it seemed safer to assist and hold her as if my life depended on it.

Given this was Ezra's baby sister, it probably did.

Bree smiled and muttered, "Such a jerk."

"Truly the worst," I agreed.

I helped her to the elevator, hitting the eighth-floor button, grateful we wouldn't likely run into anyone at this hour.

We rode in silence to my apartment.

Once inside, she leaned against the wall, pointing at her bare feet. "I lost my shoes, and my feet are sandy."

Bright pink polish painted the tips of her toes, and a tan line spanned over the top of her feet from her flip-flops.

"I have a vacuum. Come sit down."

She tugged on her bottom lip, scanning the tidy room. I didn't give her more time to overthink it, helping her to the couch and getting her situated. Even then, she curled in on herself like she feared touching my things.

"It's a Dyson, Bree. Top of the line. Relax." I headed into the kitchen for more water. "What happened tonight?" Returning, I handed Bree the glass and sat beside her. She scooted away, spilling some water on herself, and this time she noticed. Peering down, she blushed and flicked the droplets off with her hand.

"A man spiked my drink when I wasn't paying attention," she said, setting down her glass. "Several hours ago. I think I'm finally feeling okay. Just really tired."

My eyes widened. "What the fuck?"

Her hands shook, and I tucked them in mine. This time, she didn't move away.

"Never been so grateful for inconsiderate people. Someone bumped me, and I spilled all over myself." She gestured to the stain down her dress. "I hate to think of what could have happened if I drank it all.

"I was in and out for some time, but when I realized what was happening and he kissed me, I bit his tongue as hard as possible and kneed him in the balls. Then I ran. Or tried to run, anyway."

She stared at our hands clasped together.

"I was slow and unsteady, but he must have tripped and hurt himself. I couldn't risk running back to the party and crossing paths with him, so I ran to the shop and locked myself inside. I called my friends, but you were the only person who answered."

Thank fuck.

Pulling her into a hug, I squeezed her like she might disappear if I let go.

"I'm so sorry." I hesitated. "Did he... touch you beyond that?" Shit. I should have taken her to the hospital regardless of what she wanted.

She shook her head. "No. He didn't get the chance."

"Tell me what you remember," I said softly.

She did as best she could. When she finished, I excused myself, covering her with a throw blanket and disappearing

into my room to call the police. Bree didn't have enough details to give them much, but the cops would at least break up the party and help get people home safely.

Her eyes were closed when I returned to the living room. Sitting next to her, I pulled the blanket higher.

Bree opened her eyes and smiled. It had been a long time since I'd seen that smile.

"Thank you," she mumbled. "For helping."

I wrapped my arm around her. "Tomorrow, we'll file a police report, okay?"

"Okay." Chewing her bottom lip, she said, "Don't tell Ezra, please. Promise me."

This was Ezra's sister. I'd do just about anything for her, but I didn't think I could do that.

"Bree."

"He already thinks I can't take care of myself."

A strange knot pulled inside my gut, wanting to do what she asked. But I knew damn well how my best friend would feel about that.

"He knows you can take care of yourself," I said, ignoring the breathy sigh she released as she dropped her head against my shoulder. That knot pulled a little more. "He would want to support you."

"My therapist will support me," she argued. "My brother will scold me and use this as leverage to justify his overbearing tendencies. Can we talk about it in the morning? Will you wait until I can think clearly and figure out how to manage all this?"

That seemed a reasonable request without toeing the line of obligation to my best friend.

"Sure," I said, helping her up and walking her down the hall to the guest room. "You should sleep." I pointed across the hallway. "I'm just there. I live alone. If you need anything, come get me, okay?" She surveyed the room as I flipped on the light. Nothing glamorous. A double bed, a vanity set, and a bookshelf with a few of my favorites.

I left briefly to grab her a clean shirt and boxers to sleep in, more water, and a couple of aspirin.

Bree had passed out by the time I returned, arms tucked against her chest and knees curled up as she snored softly.

I sat beside her, setting the water and aspirin on the nightstand. For the first time tonight, I unabashedly took her in her.

Bree was a Collins, and as such, she was beautiful. All those fuckers were. She didn't have the same sharp features as Ezra and Bizzy, the angular beauty that made them appear intense and sometimes harsh.

But she had a soft face, round with pink cheeks and a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. I couldn't see her eyes now that they were closed, but they were brown. Not a dark brown like Ezra's. Bree's were lighter, closer to hazel, with a hint of gray.

Tears brought out the gray in her eyes that morning on the lake when she was seventeen.

Smoothing my hand over her hair, a dark blonde with gold highlights, I let it filter through my fingers—a pretty color, like the sand on a sunny day.

An intimate gesture, though unintended. The soft puffs of breath indicated she was deep asleep, but I continued.

"You did so well." It needed to be said, even if she never heard it.



Bree

E verything hurt.

The sunshine breaking through the curtains stung my eyes. A thundering ache pounded through my head. Even my teeth throbbed like I'd clenched my jaw all night.

Sitting up and rubbing my eyes, I took a moment to place where I was. The sheets were far too high of thread to be the Target cotton ones at my house, and the room didn't smell like Marin's strange incense. No heavy feet lumbered down the hallway as a roommate stormed around the apartment, getting ready.

Peaceful and bright, the room smelled like fresh laundry. I expected no different from Ty Jensen.

I ran a hand over my face, groaning and flopping back onto the pillows, then winced as my head throbbed harder. A glass sat on the nightstand, two aspirin beside it. I took them and polished off the water, burping daintily.

I kicked my feet over the bed and slid them along the soft carpet, taking in the surrounding room. Simple, yet sophisticated.

Standing to stretch, I spied the t-shirt and boxer shorts on the end of the bed. Had Ty brought those for me? I cringed, glancing down at my dirty dress and hoodie. Not only did I look a mess, but I'd dragged sand into his apartment.

"Jesus." I closed my eyes, inhaling sharply and trying not to be sick.

My stomach twisted in knots, and my tongue thickened with the threat of vomiting. I pressed it to the roof of my mouth and clenched my jaw, willing the rolling wave of nausea to calm. When it did, I opened the door and peeked outside.

Vague memories of walking down the long hallway with Ty flooded me. His strong arm held my waist and helped me to bed, the heady combination of amber and musk embedded in his soft sweater.

The apartment was quiet, an empty living room when I emerged from the room. No signs of Ty being awake yet. The last remnants of sand stuck between my toes, dirtying the solid wood floors in my wake as I explored his apartment.

My fingers skimmed along the built-in shelves as I admired the sculpture art and books filling them. A navy blue shag rug provided the only splash of color in a room of white, gray, and cream hues. Tasteful and clean. Adult.

I thought of my tiny bedroom lined with posters and strings of Christmas lights. Ty had lamps, several of them, none a lava lamp. Tufted decorative pillows without mystery stains.

His kitchen appeared no worse. Stainless steel appliances, pale marble countertops, and a crystal bowl filled with fresh fruit. Stacks of mail didn't litter the counter, and his eightseater oak dining room table had chairs with fabric on the seats.

It's not that it surprised me to be around taste and cleanliness. I'd grown up with wealth and affluence. I knew the difference between Calacatta and white marble flooring. Decor and style could be purchased and put together with little personality, so I loved my modest but quirky apartment.

I adored my mismatched furniture, a cluttered desk, and crooked posters—a stranger to that girl who expected perfection and had lived a sterile life of sacrifice for it.

But Ty's apartment was both elegant *and* a reflection of him. Tasteful, yet comfortable. Refined, yet welcoming.

I poured a glass of water and stood next to the island, sipping slowly and letting my eyes continue to wander.

The jingling of keys startled me, and I turned at the sound. Ty came through the door a moment later, closing and locking it, unaware I hovered ten feet away with my mouth agape.

He faced the wall, shirtless. His back's tight and flexing muscles gave plenty to take in before he noticed me. His palms splayed against the wall to balance as he kicked off his running shoes.

Beads of sweat lined his tan skin, dripping in a tantalizing trail along his spine that my tongue needed to follow. A pair of low-slung gym shorts framed a firm ass. My eyes brazenly admired the flawless curve of those cheeks.

I dropped my glass onto the counter with a loud *clunk*, Ty turning around to catch my unabashed ogling.

Drooling like a rabid dog.

"Hey. You're up."

The front of him turned out to be immeasurably better than the back. Muscled and toned, tight and compact. Abs flexed with the slow movement of his walk to the kitchen, sweat sliding down the ridges of a powerful core.

Corded and masculine forearms. Sinful v-cuts framing his hips.

I blinked rapidly, willing myself not to pass out.

Ty brushed past me, reaching into the cupboard for a glass and filling it at the sink.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as he stared out the window and drank water.

Gathering courage despite my blush, I faced him, admiring the mess of his blonde hair. He must have been at the gym or running. He smelled like deodorant and sweat, and an entirely new sensation replaced the aches and pains in my body.

When I didn't answer, Ty asked, "Are you feeling okay, Bree?"

Shaking my head, I snapped back to the room, wiping my mouth with my hand. "Yes, thank you. Thank you for the aspirin, bed, and the rescue."

Dropping his hands to the counter, he hung his head and stared at the sink. "You rescued yourself."

Sighing, he turned around. His bright blue eyes shone with something unfamiliar. Pride.

"You got yourself out of a horrible situation. You did the right thing to call me, but you took care of yourself."

I sucked in a sharp breath. It wasn't the glory of Ty's body or the comeliness of that chiseled face that stole the oxygen in the room. It was his recognition.

I didn't hate the pride that bloomed quietly in my chest.

My heart thumped wildly, my cheeks warming even hotter. In the bright light of the morning, there'd be no way to hide it.

Ty crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the counter and observing me.

"I know it can take some time for emotions to catch up, but how are you physically? Sick? Hurt?"

His eyes ran over me, and my gaze followed. A dirty dress that reeked of seaweed, tangled hair, and caked-on, crusty makeup.

How was my body? A mess.

"I'm a little sore," I mumbled, massaging the shoulder I'd fallen on when running from my attacker. "Otherwise, fine."

Ty continued observing me like he wasn't sure he believed that, but after a moment, he nodded.

"I'm going to shower, and then I can take you to the police station, and we can pick up your car, too." He pointed down the hall. "You're welcome to shower as well."

Separately, he meant, but my body still lit up.

"There are supplies in the guest bath. Spare things, a toothbrush. Help yourself to what you need."

How often did he have guests? Did they sleep in the bed I had, or did they share his? I'd never ask.

"Thank you." I ran my fingers through the tangled mess on my head. "I should clean up."

He nodded, said nothing else, and headed toward his bedroom. I wanted to follow him there, see his room, and how he'd react to me in it. But I was a coward, and Ty was a man. Neither paired well.

Once in the bathroom, I confirmed I looked worse than I thought. A thorough scrub in the shower might wash away the regret from last night.

Let it go. One mistake doesn't define all your choices. You got yourself to safety. You are safe. You are wanted. Your friends care.

My friends cared, as evidenced by dozens of worried messages that bombarded my phone in the last several hours. Cleaner and in slightly better condition post-shower, I took a few minutes to respond to my friends and explain the night's events.

Ty's bedroom door remained closed, still in the shower. Naked. Wet. Naked and wet.

Get a fucking grip.

I ignored my brother's text asking if I bought my pantsuit yet and tossed the phone back into my purse. Ezra was *really* going to lose his shit when Ty told him about this. I had to find a way to keep this between us and figure it out fast because Ty was making breakfast and driving me to my car.

Flopping down with a huff, I remembered the neat pile of clothes at the end of the bed.

Weird, bizarre, and doubtlessly creepy, I picked them up and tucked them into my purse. Like some fucked up souvenir from Ty's apartment.

Ty was Ezra's friend, and a childhood crush didn't tie him to me in any way other than my fantasies.

And his underwear in my purse.



Ty

•• I hope this is okay," I said, keeping my eyes on the road ahead to avoid staring at her.

"I don't know what kind of music you like. Or if you like music. I can put on another band or turn it off." I lowered the volume on the radio.

Nerves led me to ramble. It didn't happen often.

Bree shifted in the seat next to me. She tucked her dress tight between her thighs, and the tan skin of her legs peeked out.

I allowed myself one glance to get it out of my system. Aside from a few scars along her left calf and knee, her skin was smooth.

"I like the Clash, too," she said, bunching fabric in her fist, releasing it, and gathering it again. "You often listened to them when you hung out in Ezra's room."

"You remember that, huh?"

Ezra and I spent plenty of time holed up in his room as teenagers. Smoking pot, listening to music, and giving each other shit about girls and all our insecurities. As best friends do.

Her fists twisted tighter in the cotton. "I remember."

I caught her smile before she resumed staring out the window.

With weekend traffic, it took longer to drive to Pacifica than last night. Then again, I wasn't speeding and running lights to get there this time. We talked about music and commiserated about the pressures of school. Shared some anecdotes about current life circumstances—mostly work for me and Bree's first few months in San Francisco.

Conversation flowed comfortably, and halfway to Pacifica, I had to remind myself to stop glancing at her. I forgot how easy it was to talk to Bree.

Bree let me take her to the police station to file a report of her attack. Doubtful they'd find the man, but she needed to take control in a situation that left her without it. I understood well enough.

Parking was tight on a Saturday, but I found a spot a few blocks from the shop. Bree exited the car, stretching and tugging off her hoodie as she stepped into the sunshine.

She wore the pink sundress from last night, a favorable color for her complexion, and I let my eyes wander briefly

before turning away.

One... two... three... four.

I blinked, moving on. The guilt in the pit of my stomach was uneasy, and disappointment with an inevitable goodbye was confusing.

This was Bree. Bree. My best friend's baby sister.

The woman with her loose ponytail and cotton sundress. Her heart-shaped pouty mouth and light freckles. She didn't look like that seventeen-year-old girl from years ago, but I closed my eyes and reminded myself it was her.

The soft spot may still be there, but it was shifting into something... hard.

Well and truly fucked up. An animal. No wonder my best friend didn't trust me.

I cleared my throat and gestured ahead. "Lead the way."

She did, shuffling barefoot along the sidewalk and telling me about the shop. Her roommate's brother owned it and hired her. Though deathly afraid of the ocean, she longed to fit in with them and learn to surf.

A sweet admission. I wasn't sure if Bree rambled because she was nervous like me or wanted to share something.

"You've done plenty of scary things, Bree. You can do this, too."

She laughed, relaxing into herself as the morning progressed. As if the distance from last night and returning to this place settled her.

Bree waved to a woman across the street and nodded in her direction. "That's Payton. She runs the coffee stand and burns every espresso shot, but she is the kindest person you'll ever meet. I won't go anywhere else. Do you want a coffee? My treat."

Before I could answer, she checked the traffic and crossed.

I considered declining, dropping her off to tackle the endless task list I was already behind on. But I pressed my lips tight and decided I could stay up late into the night to compensate no big deal. I'd have a coffee with her, say goodbye, and pivot my schedule for a few hours.

Adjusting was fine as long as there was a plan—a schedule for change. Timed, planned, and with permission. It was fine.

She'd ordered two Americanos before I caught up. Chatting briefly, Bree was off again, heading toward her car.

"Let me grab my sunglasses," she said, doing just that.

It was curious, like watching a stranger. No longer the nervous and sad girl I remembered, she was a woman with a life.

"You're comfortable here," I observed, sipping my coffee as she locked her car and leaned against the door, resting her sunglasses on the top of her head.

"I am. I feel like myself. Like I fit in, you know? People here include me in things. They're my friends and want me around."

I paid little attention to Bree or Bizzy when we were growing up. They were younger, and boys were oblivious and dumb from twelve to twenty-five, anyway. And then some, truthfully.

But I also remember Bree stayed home a lot by herself.

Ezra spent most of his time out of the house because he hated his father. What had it been like for Bree to live in that house, too? Had she felt as out of place as her brother? Did she have somewhere to escape, like him?

Then it made sense. "That's why you're so eager to learn to surf. You fit in here but somehow also don't. You want to bridge that gap."

She bit her bottom lip, staring past me and toward the ocean. "Yeah."

"Let me help," I offered. Her eyes snapped to me, and I shrugged casually, like her answer wouldn't bother me either way. "I surf. I understand what it's like to have anxiety. I told your brother I'd help if you needed it. Let me." She flinched at that, and I recognized my mistake.

"I'm not offering for Ezra. I'm offering for you."

I think. Unclear if I wanted to take care of Bree because she was Ezra's little sister or if it was that soft spot for her. Either way, I didn't want to leave her.

Which meant I probably should.

No, Bree needed something. I was able to help her with it. My best friend asked me to help his sister, right?

Or maybe Ezra provided an excuse to linger.

Bree's face relaxed, but she brought her hand to her mouth and bit her thumbnail. Catching herself, she dropped it.

"I'm going to freak out a bunch. I can't even swim out there." She sighed, crossing her arms. "I'm so scared."

"The beauty of fear? You don't have to let it go to do what you want. You can be afraid and do things anyway. You just do them *while* being afraid."

She considered that, eyeing me. "What about you, Ty? Does anything scare you?"

Stopping.

Stopping scared me. I tugged on Bree's elbow, pulling her to keep walking.

"Plenty," I said, "but I've learned it doesn't have to hold me back if I don't let it, and people don't see your fear unless you show it." I opened the shop door and followed her inside.

A few degrees too cool, the air conditioning caused Bree to pebble with goosebumps. Without thinking, I ran my hand down her arm, smoothing her skin. Jesus, she was soft.

Her eyes widened, and I dropped my hand as we stared at each other, equally shocked.

"Breezy!"

A man hopped off the stool behind the counter and rushed over. Wrapping Bree in a tight hug, he twirled her in a circle and set her down far more gently than he'd picked her up. "Fuck, Breezy. I'm so sorry. When you disappeared, we were worried sick. Marin blew up my phone at two a.m. looking for you. Sharon thought you'd left, and we hoped you'd just gone home. When Marin called, I looked for you and found your car still here and no sign of you." He swallowed, shaking his head and whispering, "Fuck, B."

She gave him a sweet smile, and he didn't take his hands off of her. I cleared my throat, and she broke eye contact with him.

"Brody, this is my brother's friend, Ty. Ty, this is my friend Brody." She elbowed him. "He's kind of my boss, too."

My brother's friend.

I bit it down and offered my hand. "Hey, man."

Brody shook it. "Dude. So glad you were there for her." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Let me call Sharon and tell her you're here. She was a mess after your texts this morning."

Brody wandered off, leaving me and Bree alone.

"You don't have to stay," she said. "You probably have plans today, and I've already ruined your weekend."

She was right. I had a shit ton of work and no time for distractions or detours. Safe and reunited with her friends, Bree was okay now. She didn't need me to hover, and this guy appeared happy to take over.

Was he her boyfriend? I should ask. Seemed like something her *brother's friend* would do.

The flair of jealousy made it even more evident that it was time to leave. Except my stupid mouth took over.

"I have no plans," I lied, "and it's no trouble. You didn't ruin anything, and I'm not sure you could even if you tried."

Where the fuck did that come from? I clenched my jaw and closed my eyes. *Get it together.*

Bree ran her finger over her lip as she smiled, her eyes sparkling with something dangerous to match mine.

I enjoyed her company. Felt good to be the person who came for her last night. To understand her, and through that understanding, she understood me.

"Okay," Brody said, clapping his hands as he returned. "Sharon is on set today but insists on seeing you tomorrow. Come for a morning sesh?"

"Yep, I'll be there."

Brody shot her a crooked grin as they locked eyes.

"You have a great shop," I told him, intercepting their moment like an asshole.

No, like a protective friend. Like her *brother's friend*. Like Ezra would want me to do.

He would no doubt prefer I didn't let my eyes linger when her attention was elsewhere or that I didn't wonder what shade of pink her nipples were. But he would want me to check the situation out and ensure her friends were fine, upstanding citizens.

Brody beamed proudly. "Thanks, man. Been here for the last six years and loving life. Still can't believe it's real sometimes. You surf?"

"Yeah. I started about ten years ago. I surf at Linda Mar from time to time with some local buddies."

"Oh, yeah?" Brody leaned against the counter, his fingers tapping the edge of it. "Who are your buddies?"

I was an asshole. No posturing or challenge; Brody was friendly and curious. I liked the jerk immediately.

"Sharky Robins? Him and his crew."

Brody clapped his hands together. "Yes, bro. Everyone at the beach knows Sharky! Solid dude."

Bree glanced at me and then Brody, then back at me. "Sharky?"

I grinned. "Ever see a one-armed surfer out there? That's Sharky."

Her head dropped, and she rubbed her temple and muttered, "Jesus fucking Christ."

Brody fiddled with the drawstring on his board shorts and jutted his chin toward Bree.

"She's afraid of the water. Can't imagine that's going to help."

I laughed, liking the energy of this place. It made sense why this was important to Bree.

"Yeah. Just don't let her talk to Randy Dufflin. Now *that's* a shark story."

Bree's eyes went wider. "What?" she shrieked.

"Oh, it's nothing," I answered, biting hard on my bottom lip to stifle my laugh.

Brody stepped behind the counter and grabbed a power bar, tearing into it and taking a bite. He pointed the snack at me.

"You want to surf tomorrow? We ride at six." He sat on a stool. "She's been saying she wants to get in on it. Maybe you can help convince her. Get her into the water."

He shot Bree a wink, and her cheeks turned crimson.

Don't do it. Say goodbye, go home, and be on your way. Don't stop. Keep going.

But that fucking mouth.

"I'd love to." I smiled at Bree as I said it, her blush deepening, and I wasn't sure if I just made the best or worst mistake.

"Sweet," Brody said. "See you tomorrow."

He finished his bar, flipping his phone and watching a couple of customers in the back of the shop.

We said goodbye to Brody as Bree dragged me outside. The sun caught the highlights in her hair. The end of her ponytail brushed against the base of her neck. The long curve of her nape was delicate and feminine. Bree was beautiful. Beautiful and grown up and"You don't have to," she interrupted my unabashed admiration. "It's commendable that you're being nice, but you don't have to."

"I'm a surfer. I do it on the weekend, regardless."

I willed my eyes not to drop to her chest or the hard nipples under the bodice of her dress from the change in temperature outside of the shop. I didn't tell Bree I'd been skipping more weekend surfs to make up time at work in recent months.

"We can start tomorrow."

She bit the inside of her cheek.

"Don't overthink it. We'll start tomorrow. You don't even have to get on a board." I gave her my best smile, knowing it was a damn good one. "We'll begin with your toes. Work our way up to get you wet."

Her face went full-on red.

"I mean in the water," I stammered. *Fuuuuuucking idiot*. I smiled politely, pretending none of that just happened. Fuck, she made me kind of nervous.

Bree sucked in a long breath, releasing it until she had nothing left, and sputtered a laugh.

"Okay, tomorrow. But you don't have to. You might have plans for the weekend already."

The way she said it made my heart stutter. Like she didn't expect I'd follow through.

Shit. It wasn't just today. I had a morning walkthrough with Anderson's team on a property he was attempting to acquire. Mia could attend in my place. It was a Sunday, and Sunday was grunt work. Associates expected it. Anderson would be sending his grunt workers, anyway. He wouldn't even be there.

If we started early, I could be home well before lunch. No big deal. Surf at six, done by eight, back by nine. Easy. Enough time to catch the tail end of the walkthrough.

Perfect. I'd do that.

"Tomorrow," I agreed, my stomach tightening with the relieved smile on her face. "I don't have to. I want to. I'll see you in the morning."

As I said it, I knew I was so totally fucked. But, like with everything, I couldn't stop.

Eight

Bree

I dropped Ty's clothes on the bed. "I told you so."

Collapsing onto the mattress, she stared at me like I was a stranger.

"Bitch. Who are you, and what have you done with my friend?"

"Hell, if I know," I muttered, staring at the cotton pile for another minute before shoving everything into my drawer. Closing it, I didn't turn back to face her.

"As terrible as it was to get attacked like that, I'm proud I took care of myself. That I fought and won."

For a long time, my battles resulted in losses. Only in recent years had that shifted. Though I preferred never to have another fight like last night, I didn't wake up feeling helpless.

"Of course, you should be proud," Marin said, tucking her legs and changing positions on the bed.

Growing up, I fell into the trap of perfectionism, attempting to earn my parent's attention and approval. Despite all my attempts, it never came and only led to my collapse. Fragility lived in the shadows that haunted me. Those whose opinions mattered the most treated me like I could never escape the broken pieces I worked hard to heal.

But now I realized I *had* healed. Maybe I didn't have to try so hard to show anyone else when the truth lived deep in my bones.

"So, tell me about Mr. Knight in Shining Armor," Marin said, examining her nails and chipping the paint off them. "Did he scoop you up and carry you away, a la *The Body Guard*?"

I shoved her over and flopped down next to her, staring at the ceiling.

"Not really. Maybe for, like, a *minute*." More when he carried me to clean up in the bathroom, but timekeeping seemed a touch pathetic. "He brought me back to his place and took care of me."

Marin waved her hand dismissively. "That's the boring shit. Tell me again about what he looks like shirtless and sweaty." She dropped back, propping on her elbow. I told her three times already about my time with Ty in the kitchen.

"No."

She pouted, flicking my arm. "Fine. Tell me about how much you l-o-v-e him."

I groaned and rolled over. "Shut up."

She pushed my shoulder, rocking me back and forth. "Tell me about your colossal childhood crush on your brother's best friend."

"Which one?" I laughed and stuck out my tongue.

She returned the gesture, raising two fingers in a V beneath her tongue. "All of them."

"My brother has three best friends. They're all insanely gorgeous in their own right. Even when they were teenagers and awkward and wrestling with puberty and pimples, I was in love with them." I sighed, shaking my head. "But I was the little sister. Almost eight years younger. Ezra moved out of the house before my eleventh birthday, and I didn't see them much after that."

Marin gave a nefarious smile. "I've seen your brother. He's no slouch. Are his friends as hot?"

"Gross." I pulled the pillow out from under me and hit her with it.

She grabbed it, tucked it underneath her head, and dropped her leg to pin me.

"Show me pictures!" she squealed, clapping her hands.

Ridiculous. I mean, sure, the boys were attractive. And sure, I could ask my sister if she had a photo—too risky to reach out to my dumb brother. And sure, having a picture of them wouldn't be the worst...

"You want to see the boys?"

"The boys," Marin said dreamily. *"That just sounds like a fantasy."*

I smiled at her, shaking my head as I texted Bizzy and asked her to get me a photo. If anyone had it, it would be her. She cataloged everything, never sure when she'd need it for some promotion for the club or as blackmail.

The picture came through right after Marin and I collapsed on the couch to watch *Army of Darkness*.

Bizzy: For your spank bank, you closet freak. Want me to crop out Ezra? Less weird that way, in my experience.

I vowed to make my sister feel just an ounce of modesty someday.

"Holy. Shit." Marin sucked in a breath and nodded enthusiastically. She glanced up with a feral smile. "For *sure*, for my spank bank."

The photo Bizzy sent left my head a little light. Ezra scowled in the background like a grumpy tower, but Ty slung his arm around Ezra's shoulder, smiling handsomely. Reed had a hell of a beard, which meant it was taken in his pre-Vivian days, and Noah rested his head on Reed's shoulder, grinning like a golden retriever.

"Lordy," Marin said, fanning her face with her hand. "They're now *my* childhood crushes, too. I'm coming with you tomorrow to surf. I have to meet this man in the flesh. Is he single? Can I flirt with him? Are you calling dibs?" Her rapidfire questions made my head hurt.

"Um." I tried to think through them. I had no idea of Ty's relationship status, only that he lived alone. As for Marin pursuing him, flirting with him, or any sense of dibs?

"He's my brother's best friend."

Marin's grin shifted my insides uncomfortably.

"Oh, Bree. That just makes it much more fun."

Ty

T he ocean was beautiful, but she was stunning.

A vast expanse of rolling waves and shades of blue could carry away all of my worries, and in it stood the woman holding my attention hostage.

The water brought peace, regardless of tides, and quieted the world, but Bree brought my imagination to life.

She was knee-deep in the sea, her head tipped back, and her hair around her shoulders. The sun shined on her, and it did something to my heart. Stopped it, maybe.

Even from a distance, Bree was exquisite, her white bikini hugging her tan skin and making me ache. That wasn't Ezra's little sister I stared at.

I shook my head to clear it.

"It's a trust exercise," I said, focusing on the surfers floating beyond the break instead of the soft lines of Bree's body. "Anything with the ocean." I took off my shirt and joined her in the water.

With the beach otherwise empty, I assumed her friends to be in the lineup, waiting for a solid wave.

Bree hugged her arms around her waist. "I didn't think you were coming."

It was unlike me to be late. I spent a long night working before attempting a restless sleep, tossing and turning as my stomach clenched thinking about spending the morning with her... Wondering when I started playing with fire and forgetting to set my alarm.

Well, that was something I didn't want to share.

"I'm sorry. I hate being late," I admitted. "I'm almost never."

She smiled, hugging herself tighter. "Almost."

I deserve that.

I moved closer, standing next to her. "You're in the water. That's a good start."

"Sharks attack in shallow depths, too, right?"

Yes, but I wouldn't confirm that. I nudged her with my shoulder, encouraging her deeper.

"You've probably walked under palm trees without consideration for the far more dangerous coconuts just waiting to fall on your head." She rolled her eyes. "We don't have coconut palms around here."

"No," I conceded, "but you spent years vacationing in Hawaii, and I doubt you gave those trees any thought or the fact that falling coconuts kill more people each year than sharks."

Bree took another step. Then another, until she stood midthigh.

"You're only giving me more to fear." She combed her fingers through her hair. "As you said yesterday, though, you can be afraid and do things anyway."

Hearing her say that lit me up. I wanted my words to matter to her.

"Come on." Taking her hand, I encouraged her deeper. "Let's go be afraid together."

"Nothing about the ocean scares you," she said, hissing as we got deep enough for the waves to hit her bare stomach.

The ocean and its creatures didn't scare me; standing so close to her did.

I ignored her comment and guided her out. Her grip tightened with every step.

Bree trembled next to me. Neither of us wore wetsuits, and the water wasn't warm. The temperature would become more comfortable by September, but the ocean could be unforgiving even in July.

"How are you?"

She shook her head and gave a nervous smile. "Scared."

I took her other hand. "Deep breath. The first step in learning to surf is learning how to be *in* the surf."

Bree nodded, struggling to regulate her breathing. I didn't take my eyes off her, wading deeper until the water touched my shoulders.

On the tips of her toes, she reached for my arms and clung to my biceps with each incoming wave. Without the leverage, they would roll over her head.

"Are you a strong swimmer?"

Disbelief and fear mixed in her laugh. "In a pool!"

"Where's the fun in that?" I chuckled. "You're doing so well. So good."

Her eyes flashed something, a small ignition light as her pupils expanded, and her fingers grasped me tighter.

She likes that. An observation I had no right to record in the depths of my memory.

But I would.

"This isn't easy, and look at you. You're over your head."

Her eyes widened, and she sunk under the surface for a moment. "Don't let me go!"

She scrambled up my body, but I shushed her and curved my hands around her hips, bracing her.

"I've got you. Do you want me to bring you back to shore?"

Her hands moved up my shoulders and clung to my neck. She was too scared to think about it, climbing me like a tree because I was the tallest object around, but fuck if it didn't make my knees a little weak.

"No. Don't stop."

Those breathy words might sink me to the bottom of the sea floor in different circumstances.

I bit the inside of my cheek to avoid squeezing her hips and rubbing myself against her.

Do not get hard.

Proving difficult with her chest pressed to mine. The stiff peaks of her tight nipples grazed my skin with only a thin layer of fabric separating us. I wanted to wrap my lips around those nipples and tug them between my teeth until she gasped and writhed, begging for more.

My heart raced with a mix of desire and guilt. I shouldn't be objectifying her like this; wrong on so many levels. But try as I might to suppress those thoughts, they clawed at me relentlessly.

"Let's try something," I said, needing the reprieve. "Lie back."

Her grasp tightened, and I encouraged her to float. "I won't let go," I promised.

"An exercise in trust," she muttered, letting me guide her.

Deep enough that I was treading water, I didn't let go. After a moment, her body loosened a little, and her eyes opened to stare at the sky.

"Good, Bree. You're doing so well. Relax, just like that."

Fuck. I brought my hand up from below the surface to scrub my face. I needed to calm down my imagination.

"How does it feel?" I asked, doing myself no favors as my brain lit up with all kinds of ideas when I could say the same things to her in even sexier circumstances.

She relaxed little by little. "A little overwhelming this deep, but good."

Christ almighty.

She hesitated.

"What?" I asked, towing her through the water as we swam deeper.

She focused on the sky overhead. "I'm swimming in the ocean."

Bree said nothing but let go of my hand. Her breathing picked up again, but she wasn't on the verge of hyperventilating.

Her face split into a radiant smile, reflecting on the water's surface with the strength of the sun.

"I'm swimming in the ocean!"

"Next time we get on the board," I said, glancing toward the pack of surfers down the shoreline.

"Will you ride with me?" She moved her face to my path of vision and treaded water in front of me. "I'm nervous about getting on a board. I need your help."

She relaxed to float on her back again, drifting farther away.

I was unsure how true that was, but I still wanted to stick by her side.

· • • • • • • • • • • •

"You're some sort of wizard," Marin said, grabbing my forearm as we walked to Bertie's Cafe.

After getting out of the water, Bree's friends met her with bewilderment, amazement, and excitement that she swam in the ocean today.

Had any of them offered to escort her out there, holding her hand until she got comfortable? Or was it me that made the nerves bearable?

Idiot. No lingering on the thought, let alone stopping on it.

"Nah," I said, glancing over my shoulder at Bree walking behind us.

She carried her flip-flops in her hands, her towel wrapped around the lower half of her body, chatting with Brody.

A smile lived on her face since she exited the water. Even though the ocean terrified her, Bree allowed her determination to lead her choices. She'd be surfing in no time.

"Bree is brave, that's all. She just needed a minute to ease into it. Give it a few more weeks, and you won't be able to get her out of the surf." Easy to say when truth lived in that sentiment. I admired Bree. Under the right conditions, she was unstoppable.

Brody's ears perked up, and he jogged to walk with me. Marin used the opportunity to drop back and hang with Bree.

"Bro, for sure. I said the same thing to her."

Yeah, I bet you did.

"You had some impressive rides," I said, changing the subject.

Brody grinned, slapping my back. "Looking forward to being out there with you next time." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "If she'll let you go," he added.

I turned back, catching Bree's blush as the pink spread over the bridge of her nose. Or maybe it was just the start of a sunburn.

It was all so ridiculous. Bree had a life I knew nothing about. Some combination of nostalgia and endearment mixing with my dick's strong-willed attraction explained my fascination with her. Possibly fueled by the admiration of her resiliency.

The man who attacked Bree used a fake name at the shop and paid in cash, and there was no record of him at the inn or any other motel nearby.

The incident shook her up, but Bree said an emergency therapy session was already helping her to cope with the residual emotions from that night, and she would continue with her therapy. I believed her. Despite her brother's worry, Bree was no longer that evasive and sick teenager prone to overwhelm. A drastic metamorphosis, she was now a woman who cared for herself.

God, I admired that.

But I was a man on the move in life. Even if I wanted to stop for a moment, I'd eventually blow right through her, and I couldn't risk it when she was Ezra's sister.

Bree didn't deserve that, and Ezra would murder me. Slowly. Painfully. Gleefully.

And yet... I accepted the invitation to stay for breakfast and left Mia alone for today's walkthrough. Shoved off from work, taking the day for myself. I never took the day, having trained clients to expect unimpeded access. Rarely was I away from my phone or unreachable.

But even Tilly didn't work seven days a week. So why did I feel like I was doing something wrong?

I wasn't stopping. I was *pausing*. It was okay to pause. It had to be.

Right?

· • • • • • • • • • •

I couldn't avoid his call forever, despite my best attempts.

"Hello to my favorite grump," I answered, grimacing and picking up my phone.

I didn't want to start my Friday morning with this conversation, but I missed the weekly group chat with the boys on Sunday because of my swim with Bree. I missed Ezra's call on Monday afternoon because of a meeting. Then I missed his call on Tuesday mid-day because I didn't want to talk to him. Again on Wednesday and Thursday.

"Well, shit," he hissed. "He's alive."

I noisily shuffled some papers along my desk. "Been swamped at work. What's up? Everything okay?"

He didn't hesitate. "Anything you want to tell me about?"

You mean like the fact I picked up your sister after she escaped someone drugging her and dragging her away and brought her to my apartment, and she stayed the night, and then I accepted the invitation to meet her friends and offered to help her overcome her fear of the ocean so she can surf?

Or that she looks fucking phenomenal in her itty-bitty white bikini, and her skin is soft and feels delicious beneath my hands, or that I watched her float on the surface of the water and used all strength and fortitude not to stare at her tits?

Or maybe about my failure to avoid looking at them as she ate breakfast across the table in that little bikini top, the thin fabric hardly covering her full breasts?

Or the fact I didn't move my foot away from hers when she accidentally shuffled into my space under the table?

Or that I've been texting her daily to ask how she is?

"Uh, nope," I muttered, dropping my head to my desk and shaking it. "Nothing I can think of. What's going on?" I prayed my voice didn't sound as panicked as I felt.

I didn't keep things from my best friends. Omit, maybe. Lie? Never. This was a fine line between the two. I recklessly danced along it, unsure which side I'd land or how I'd be judged for it if Ezra found out.

Not if Ezra found out. *When* he found out. No way I could hide everything from him.

And he really might kill me. Certainly, maim me. A nasty scar decorated my elbow from when we were kids. Ezra put a stick through the spokes of my bike—just because it pissed him off that I rode so well from the start.

Imagine what he'd do if I were riding his sister.

"You are an asshole," Ezra grumbled, chuckling briefly. "You think I wouldn't figure out you planned a bachelor party?"

I let out a slow breath, lifting my head.

"Yeah," I said, matching his chuckle with a pathetic puff. "I wanted it to be a surprise, but you got me."

"You can't hide from me, Ty."

Sitting at my desk, the tightness in my stomach shifted into my chest and settled at the choking of my tie around my neck. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep my shit together when I considered how much work I had to do and the lack of time.

"Break things into smaller pieces," my mom's voice sang through my head. "When you're overwhelmed, do a little, then take a pause. Then do a little more, honey. You don't have to take it all head-on."

I was eight when she first told me that, learning it in her therapy. And when I was eight, it worked.

At thirty-two, I lived in one of two modes: Full Speed or Destroyed. One would inevitably lead to the other, but I was okay until I started having nightmares, losing track of time, or not sleeping. I knew my red flags. "Well, thanks, Ty. It means a lot you went out of your way to make the arrangements."

That sat heavy in my gut.

"I saw Bree," I blurted, tattling on myself.

Ezra said nothing for a second, possibly upset or maybe only waiting for me to explain. I picked up a pen from the desk, twirling it absentmindedly.

"I was at the surf shop where she works, and her boss and I chatted. He invited me to surf with them, and it turns out Bree wants to learn and is nervous, so I offered to teach her."

I scratched the back of my head with the pen, awaiting Ezra's response. His challenge. Picking apart my story—which wasn't a lie! I *had* been in the shop, and I *had* chatted with her boss, and he *had* invited me to surf. Everything was true!

To a degree.

The shadows of those truths mattered, but I wouldn't bring them to light. Bree wanted to be independent, for people to treat her like an adult. So long as her safety was the truth of things, it was for her to decide whether Ezra should know the rest.

I scratched my head harder. It wasn't right, and if the roles were reversed...

One... Two... Three... Four.

I kept on.

"Anyway, I went to the beach on Sunday to get her into the water. She did great," I added.

Keep going in the story. Don't stop on the details.

"Shit, man. You got her in the open ocean, huh?" He sighed into the receiver. "How is she doing? She doesn't tell me anything. I'm aware it's because she's pissed that I want to know and equal parts determined to prove she doesn't need help. But... is she okay? I mean, did she look okay?"

She looked fucking fantastic.

"Yeah," I said, my voice breaking. I cleared my throat. "Uh, she seems okay. Healthy, Ezra. Happy, even. She has friends, and they seem like good people."

My best friend grumbled, as he was one to do. "Female friends?"

At twenty-four, Bree was old enough for whatever Ezra worried she was doing.

"She has them, yes."

"Guys swarming her?" he asked, chewing on his displeasure.

"Some of those, too."

He sighed again. "Sunny is always telling me to leave her alone about it, but goddamnit. Bizzy can handle herself, but Bree doesn't have much experience with men and is too trusting of others. I'm not sure she's even had a boyfriend. She's probably a virgin. The last thing she needs is someone taking advantage of her."

"She's twenty-four. I doubt she's a virgin."

He muttered something about me fucking off.

"Don't let anyone touch her," he said. "None of those greasy-handed fuckwads. Nobody puts their hands on her."

I held my breath, waiting for it.

"Especially you, asshole."

There it is. So predictable.

I could play it in two ways. Agree without an argument, but that would likely draw suspicion because I rarely agreed with Ezra without a fight. Or push back the way he expected, regardless of my feelings about his sister.

"Come on now. I can't help her learn to surf if I don't touch. I'll go easy on her." Joking about Bree made me uncomfortable. "I can be a real gentleman."

He snickered. "You can be a real handsy motherfucker."

Not wrong.

"Come on. I got her in the water." *Got her wet*. I bit down on the retort. If it were *anyone* else, literally anyone else, the words would fly from my mouth. Not Bree. Not when there was truth to my desire for her.

The pause in his breathing told me he expected me to say it, bracing for it. We knew each other too well.

"And?"

I sighed, not giving in. "I deserve some slack. I'm helping her—at her request."

Ezra muttered under his breath. "Fine, an exemption is granted due to extenuating circumstances. But Ty, be careful," he warned. "She'll fall in love with you if you're careless. I know my sister, and I'm not saying I agree with them, but women like you."

"Oh?"

While not my usual smug bravado or a dirty joke or innuendo to get under his skin, it proved convincing enough because he said, "Whatever, you know what I mean. She's got a big heart. She wants someone to fill it, and you're only interested in filling other spaces."

I wanted to be offended, but I couldn't argue. I ran through women and casual relationships like a sprint.

"I worry. When Bree falls, she falls hard. In *all* things. You'd destroy her, even if unintentional, and I can't witness that—adult sister or not." His tone softened. It didn't happen often. "It breaks my heart to see, you know? It kills me to watch her struggle. I can't handle it.

"Our dad is a piece of shit. I get it; she's not a kid, but I'll always feel like my sisters need someone to be in that role. Bree especially. They didn't get his protection. The least I can do is try to give them mine." A heavy exhale echoed between us, a sign of Ezra's resignation when he said, "And you can give her yours, okay?"

I mumbled, "Yeah," at a loss for words.

My best friend exercised reasonable logic, even when the result concluded *my* grubby hands should stay off his sister. Keeping those grubby hands to myself was the sane and safe choice. Ezra asked nothing he shouldn't. Nothing unreasonable.

He cleared his throat, returning to his grumpy disposition. "Be a good friend and be my eyes. At least while Sunny and I are dealing with the wedding shit, I can't keep my attention on everything."

My stomach shifted uncomfortably. "I'm happy to help Bree, but I don't think she needs it."

"Please," he mumbled. "For me. For my peace of mind and mental health. Maybe hers, too. Keep an eye on her. *Just* an eye."

No doubt I could keep my eyes on her—much more doubt about keeping my hands off.

But Ezra asked, and I would follow through. Not because Bree needed monitoring, but because he deserved help when he regularly gave it and rarely asked for it in return.

I swallowed it all down. "Yeah, brother. No worries. Happy to."

He paused and quietly said, "Thanks for watching out for her."



Bree

$B^{\,e\,\,cool.}$

Be fucking cool.

"You're here!"

Running to greet Ty's car in the parking lot, I was anything but cool.

He leaned across the front seat and pushed open the passenger side door for me as I opened the back, tossing my bag in before dropping into the seat beside him.

It was early, just five-thirty, and Ty shoved a travel mug of coffee at me.

"You thought I'd forget?"

Not necessarily that.

Or maybe it was.

"I'm just really nervous."

An empty highway greeted us as we headed for Pacifica.

"What are you nervous about?" His voice was a little rusty, like he wasn't quite awake yet.

My stomach fluttered, imagining that timbre waking me in the morning. Sheets tangled and bodies naked after a night together.

He reached for his coffee and struggled to free it from the center console. The fumbling snapped me out of my daydreaming.

I set my mug between my thighs and helped him with his, our hands brushing as he took it. I blushed immediately, staring out the window to hide my face.

Taking a slow sip of my drink, I focused on the billboards disappearing as we shifted our route to the coast.

"You know why I'm nervous," I answered after too long. Awkward after an extended silence, but Ty rolled with it.

"The ocean makes you nervous. I get it. It's vast and intimidating. Unpredictable."

I wouldn't confess that spending time with him made me more nervous than the idea of surfing or the ocean.

Ty ran a hand through his hair, his shaggy locks messy this morning. I'd only seen him dressed casually on the weekends. Easy-going. What did he look like on a Monday morning? A Wednesday evening? A Friday lunch? Although he didn't appear in court—thank you, Ezra, for the brief details throughout the years—Ty practiced at a high-powered law firm. He was exceptional with his work, impressing my brother enough to hire him.

Ty studied to pass the bar in California *and* Washington to practice where he lived and help my brother—his only client in Washington because Ty was that kind of guy. A machine. A powerhouse. Grander than the ocean. More daunting. The fact he offered to help me at all? Just as unpredictable.

So pathetic.

Ty was my friend now. He regularly checked in and ensured I was okay and settled after the incident. But recently, our texts shifted from obligatory check-ins to personal questions, like whether pineapple belonged on pizza.

Like... Ty reached out because he wanted to.

So silly.

He did it because I was Ezra's sister.

But he said nothing to my brother about the party. Ezra sounded like the same grumbling jerkwad when I spoke with him last, which meant he had no idea about my getting drugged.

So I kept my mouth shut. Despite the guilt of recruiting Ty in my secret-keeping, I said nothing to Ezra.

"When I'm nervous, I like to remember I can do anything for a set amount of time," Ty said, glancing at me and back to the road. "You can make it an hour on a board. It's only an hour."

"An hour?" That was so much worse than I thought.

He reached over, squeezing my arm. "Forty-five minutes?"

I stared down at his hand. Ty pulled it back as if he realized he had touched me right about when I did.

He shifted in his seat, leaning closer to the door.

"I told Ezra I'm teaching you to surf."

My scalp tingled with the admission. He'd spoken with Ezra sometime since the party. Did he tell him what happened?

"Yeah?"

He ran a hand along the thigh of his board shorts. A gradient blue, navy at the top and fading to a pale powder at the bottom hem. With his white hoodie, we matched.

My denim cutoffs were a dark wash, and my white cotton tshirt complemented his, though my shirt had *The Surf Shop* logo across the left breast. We almost looked like a couple.

"I didn't tell him," Ty said. "It's your life, and you're not in danger now." He kept his eyes on the road as it twisted along the coast. "It's up to you what you want to share about yourself with others."

A warmth spread through my chest, so overwhelming I might burst into flames.

"Thanks."

The choice to keep something from Ezra that Ezra would *absolutely* want to know was an uncomfortable position for Ty. I was grateful he treated me like an adult capable of making her own choices.

"I'm not trying to hide anything," I clarified.

Ty raised his eyebrows, and I smiled, returning my attention to the window.

"I mean, I'm trying to hide it, but not for the sake of hiding it. I've spent my entire life with people thinking I'm too fragile to manage my life. My brother means well, but he oversteps, convinced he knows better, which implies that I can't take care of myself. Maybe as a teenager, but I'm twenty-four now. I've got it."

Ty nodded as I spoke. When I finished, he said, "Your brother loves you. I understand his hovering can overwhelm you, but you're not fragile. Ezra never thought so. His worry is because of his fears, not because something is wrong with you. He's always told people you're the strongest person he knows." "He said that?" The idea made my head spin. "Then why does he treat me otherwise?"

"I don't have any siblings, but the boys may as well be my brothers. The thought of them hurting or in pain is worse than experiencing my own. I'd step in at every opportunity to prevent it. I can imagine that's how Ezra feels about you and Biz."

I puffed my cheeks, letting out a slow breath. "That's kind of the best thing ever." Affection settled for my glowering brother and his overreach.

I still wouldn't tell him more than I wanted, but maybe I'd appreciate him more.

The sun rose to the east of us, painting the sky with orange and pink hues as we crested the highway and split off toward Pacifica. Warmth settled in my chest, and not only for my sibling.

"You don't think I'm fragile?"

"No, I don't think you are. You can't do the things you've done if you're fragile and at risk of breaking."

He said it casually, like he hadn't told me something that rocked me senseless.

Finding a spot in front of the shop, Ty parked and let himself out, leaving me and my jaw hanging in the car.

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"Do you think our legs resemble spaghetti noodles dangling off a plate?"

My voice was too steady for the chaos inside my belly as I sat at the front of Ty's longboard. I tucked my knees under my chin as he paddled out.

We weren't heading to the lineup with Brody and the others. Ty insisted we practice getting a feel for the water and learning to be calm on the board before taking me out for a proper surf.

Good luck.

Ty paddled far enough from shore that we undoubtedly presented a tasty buffet for all the great white sharks circling beneath us.

"Nah," he said, sitting up and ceasing his paddling. "Even if you did, sharks don't like Italian food. Too much garlic."

"Outstanding," I whispered, holding my knees tighter.

He dropped his legs into the ocean like monsters didn't exist there.

"I've surfed almost every weekend for the last ten years. I still have all of my appendages."

"Sharky had all of his appendages once, too."

Ty laughed, full-bellied. "I can't argue, but I'm confident you and your appendages are safe. I wouldn't have brought you out here otherwise."

I hated him for having a point that wasn't terrible.

Slowly unfurling from my fetal ball, I lowered one leg into the water. Despite my wetsuit, I let out a small gasp at the temperature.

Ty scooted forward, sitting close enough to my back that I sensed his presence, but not close enough to touch. The tiny currents from his kicking feet swirled near mine as we bobbed on the waves.

"I expected it to be warmer," I said.

When I moved to pull my legs up again, Ty's hands shot out to hold me in place. The movement rocked the board, and I clung to him with one arm.

"I've got you," he said, sliding closer until my back pressed against his stomach.

His hands stayed on me, just above my knees. I stared at them, distracted by the ridges of his veins and the golden tan.

His nails were rounded and smooth. He took care of them, but the calluses inside his palms told a different story. He didn't shy away from lifting, pulling, or pushing. The juxtaposition of those pieces of him brought a shiver up my spine.

Ty slid forward a little more, running his palms along my arms. Patting roughly, he said, "Sitting in the water and waiting can make you go cold. Move around a bit. Keep that blood going so you don't go numb."

"Sure. Be right back. I'll jog around the block real quick to keep the blood moving."

His chuckle in my ear did little to settle the goosebumps on my body. Thank god the wetsuit hid them.

"Clever." He paused. "A little bratty, though."

I craned my neck to gape at him, and his megawatt smile crashed into me like a freight train. Jesus, he was handsome.

Shutting my mouth, I faced the beach again. The sea wasn't the only dangerous thing surrounding me.

I cleared my throat. "So, um. What do you do out here? Read a book? Grab a coffee? What do we do while we wait?"

"Never took you as a brat, Bree." Something unrecognizable laced the low rumble in his voice. After a moment, he said, "We enjoy the peace."

"My heart is hammering too fast to feel peace," I admitted.

"That means you're missing the best part of being out here."

His hands abandoned my legs and now rested on the top of his knees; his body still crowding mine. I'd argue *that* was the best part.

"What's the best part?" I asked, all of my senses aware of his proximity. It awakened a need buzzing beneath my skin since the moment he picked me up—increasing with every glance or smile he shared.

It *screamed* as he sat so close. Each exhale pressed his chest against my back, causing my breath to shallow. Could I drown above water? It sure seemed like it.

I dropped my head to his shoulder as he lowered his mouth to my ear. The electric current careening through my veins was not fully contained in my body.

I felt it running through him, too.

"Freedom," he whispered, his breath warm on my skin. "It's the freedom of being carried away. Not because you're giving up, but because you've surrendered to something bigger than yourself. Nothing exists out here except you and the ocean. Nothing but the waves beneath you, rolling through you until everything fades. No worries. No problems. No what-ifs. It's just you and an expansive peace."

My stomach rolled with the waves, cresting over a peak before dropping in a lurch. I closed my eyes, allowing the sensation of the water's gentle movements to command my focus.

"You once said you wanted your freedom, Bree."

My eyes shot open. Did he remember that morning on the lakeshore when I was seventeen and terrified of leaving home for needed treatment?

Those early and quiet hours when I cried because I was scared to choose myself, to step into the open instead of hiding behind a façade of perfectionism.

"You remember?"

His breath fanned along my neck. "I do."

"I remember it, too," I whispered. "It's why I got on the plane—your words. I didn't feel alone for the first time."

Ty saw me that day and didn't blink, flinch, or look away. He sat with me and made me understand help would bring peace and free me from the burden of my illness. No demands, threats, or guilt to get me there. It was a choice. One I had to decide for myself.

Still a work in progress, but that morning set me on a path I may not have taken otherwise.

"When you told me that life is full of opportunities, and we can chase them or waste them? It finally clicked for me. You said I could change-that I could change my life."

I believed him enough to try.

I peeked over my shoulder. Ty wore a neutral expression, giving away nothing. What did he see on my face? The longing in my eyes or the ache in my chest? The pining for it to mean to him what it meant to me?

Our eyes stayed locked.

"You did. You changed your life. Now you're a woman who can do whatever she desires."

If I held his gaze any longer, I might combust. I turned away, staring straight ahead at the shoreline and the scattering of umbrellas as families set up their camps for the day.

"You desire freedom, and you can have it out here," he murmured, his palms curving over my hips. "Feel the waves beneath you. Focus on how they carry you if you let them."

I closed my eyes, my chest rising and falling to the rhythm of his movements. Forget the waves. Ty's firm grip and the ardent need for his touch to slide lower were all that existed.

His hands didn't move, but they didn't relent, either. He guided my hips to undulate with each lapping pass of a wave, and the wake of an impatient longing followed.

Ty's fingers dug into my flesh, his body pressing closer. I gasped at the sensation of his erection through his wetsuit. He was hard. Ty Jensen was hard because of me.

"Ty," I whispered, dropping my head against his chest and bringing my hands to cover his touch to move with him.

The waves no longer rolled our hips. It was a willful choice. His just as much as mine.

Hot against the shell of my ear, Ty's voice was husky with each fast exhale. "Bree."

He swallowed, his hand squeezing me harder as a soft moan escaped my throat.

"Are you free out here? Free to do what you want?"

His touch proved a delicious reminder that I was a woman who could demand what she wanted and needed. I didn't have to hide.

"I am." I hardly recognized the breathy whimper of it.

His lips fluttered against my ear, lowering down my neck but not making contact. "What do you want to do now that you're free?"

My nails pressed into the soft skin of his hands, no doubt leaving marks. Good. I wanted him to see his hands and remember it'd been me to touch him. I ached to feel more of him.

"Tell me," he breathed.

The coldness of the water ceased to exist, and the fear in my stomach shifted to an entirely different sensation altogether.

Being on a board with Ty was exhilarating, sexy, and free. God. It was free.

My arousal didn't embarrass me. My grinding hips sought friction against the thick wetsuit as I imagined Ty's hands drifting lower and tracing the inside of my thighs. I'd spread for him eagerly.

Free to do what I wanted out there on the water, to feel *everything* and nothing equally. My thoughts stilled, my worries disappeared, and I longed to get carried away with him.

"Ty," I moaned, liking the sound of his name on my tongue.

My hand rose, draping behind me as I cupped the back of his head and pulled his face to bury in the curve of my neck.

This time, his lips didn't keep their distance, brushing over the sensitive skin of my nape.

He mumbled, almost pained, "We shouldn't."

We shouldn't, but rules and norms shifted and disappeared in the waves. The entire world disappeared.

"Free, Ty. Be free with me."

He groaned, one hand dipping between my thighs to trace the seam of my suit, the other reaching for the zipper on the back. His hand hesitated, my heart stuttering with the pause.

My free hand slid to his thigh, flexing my fingers. "Don't stop, please."

My body *ached*, a deep throbbing that needed the attention of his touch. He wanted me. The truth of that jutted against my lower back.

"Bree," he rasped. "I want—" A groan cut him off, his hips sliding forward as his hand rubbed me.

"Then do," I gasped when his teeth nipped along my neck.

"Breezy!" Brody shouted in the distance, slamming into my moment as he paddled over, flanked by Remy and Connor.

Although it would take a minute for them to make it to us, Ty pushed away from me. My heart sank in that space—as if it embarrassed him to be caught with his hands on me.

We were two consenting adults doing nothing wrong. Why did he pull away so fast?

"Breezy," Brody said excitedly, pointing at the beach. "You see the girls?"

Lost in the moment with Ty, I failed to register Marin, Cassandra, Sharon, and Hailey down the shore. Each held a sign. I squinted to get a better look, but Ty helped by pushing off to paddle closer.

Way To Go, Bitch! Broken into four pieces, one for each. Marin grinned as she clutched *Bitch!*

Because, of course.

I threw my hands over my mouth while Ty paddled back, chuckling as we went. Hopping off when it got shallow, I trudged through the water and shook my head.

"You went out!" Marin danced wildly.

Still asleep when it was time to leave, she rallied through her hangover for me—the best of friends. "You fought your fear, bitch! You did it, and next week, you'll go out solo and catch your first wave, and it will blow your mind!"

Sharon clapped. "You're a surfer, Bree!"

I blushed, playing with the messy pile of hair tied at the top of my head. "I'm not a surfer." I smiled. "Yet."

"You'll be one in no time," Sharon said. "Riding those waves solo and feeling the joy of surfing."

"The thrill of it," Marin added.

Ty dragged his board up behind me, a twitch of a smile on his face, though he didn't look at me. "The freedom."

Eleven

Bree

$L^{\mathit{ook}\,\mathit{at}\,\mathit{me.}}$

Such an unfamiliar demand that I questioned if my brain short-circuited as I stared across the table at Ty.

Breakfast at Bertie's was chaotic and loud, or business as usual for a Saturday morning, but he remained quiet and lost in thought. Because of me.

It was all my fault, and now my mind pleaded for him to look at me so I could at least apologize with my eyes.

Except I held no regrets for getting carried away in a moment with Ty. I only worried I upset him. Maybe I ruined everything, including the roots of a blossoming friendship.

"Bro, the party wave was epic," Brody's boisterous voice said, his hand slapping Connor's shoulder as he pointed at him. "Didn't think you'd make it without getting worked."

Connor flipped him off, and the crew laughed. Ty's eyes stayed on the cup of coffee before him as he remained silent.

I kicked his foot, grabbing his attention. He lifted his eyes, catching his zoning. Blinking a few times, he smiled. I relaxed into a smile as well. Maybe he didn't hate me.

"My girl gets the honor of MVP this morning," Marin said, tossing her arm over my shoulders. "Facing her fears like a *boss*."

A round of applause circled our table, and I uncharacteristically allowed the focus to linger on me.

"It's because of Ty," I said, not moving my foot from his. "He helped me."

"To Bree and Ty," Brody cheered, lifting his water in a toast.

Everyone echoed the sentiment, and I squirmed a little in my seat. I liked the sound of our names together.

"You did it yourself. You didn't need me." Ty picked up his menu and kept his eyes trained on it.

Marin glanced between us, her brows furrowing like she was trying to figure out a puzzle.

"Okay, explain what that energy is," she whispered, leaning closer.

I jutted my elbow to back her off. "No energy," I mumbled.

She pulled her arm from my shoulder and reached for the creamer, dumping a heap into her mug. "Uh-huh."

Her eyes lit up.

"Marin," I warned. Straight-up mischief shone on her face.

She swatted her hand to silence me, unbothered by any objections.

The echo of conversations against the concrete floors contended with the roar of the ocean and an open patio door, but Marin's voice stayed quiet.

"Hey, Ty?" She continued stirring her coffee well after it paled with creamer.

He glanced up, his hair falling into his eyes before he brushed it into a messy wave out of his face. "Hm?"

She bit her lip, stirring faster. "Do you like movies?"

"Movies?"

Marin nodded. "Yes, these moving pictures that tell a visual story. Have you heard of them?"

She managed a straight face through it, but Ty didn't. He laughed.

"Yeah, I've heard of these movies. I'm old, but I'm not that old."

Her head tilted to the side, appraising him. "True. You're the same age as Bree's older brother. His *best friend*, right?"

I glared at Marin, but she ignored me.

"Anyway," she continued, "Bree and I are going to the movies tonight. Want to join us?"

"Marin!" I hissed.

A lie. We had no plans other than waxing our eyebrows. I ran a hand over mine.

Ty's eyes shot to me, and I unclenched my jaw, trying to relax my face and hide my feral rage... from Ty. Totally happy to unleash on my best friend in private.

Clearing my throat, I said in a much more even tone, "Ty is probably busy. It's a Saturday night, and he likely has plans or a date or something." I cringed as I said it. Pathetic.

Marin's eyes widened as she glared at me. "Maybe let him answer for himself," she said through gritted teeth.

Down the table, Sharon leaned over. She gave a thumbs up, and I died a little.

Ty half-glanced at Sharon before returning his attention to Marin. "That's a thoughtful offer, thank you."

"And?"

He shifted in his seat. "And?"

"And? What's the answer?" She pulled the spoon from her coffee. "You in, big brother's best friend?"

Sharon waded up a napkin and threw it at Marin, which only caused her to drop her head and laugh.

The glint in my best friend's eyes was sinister at best. "Come on, Ty. What's it going to be?"

He hesitated, his thumbs tapping against the table. What I wouldn't give to know his thoughts.

"What time?" he finally said.

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"You are an asshole."

Marin leaned against the vanity, ignoring the insult or perhaps taking it as a compliment. She pulled down the lid of her eye to draw a smooth black line with liquid liner.

"You love it, bitch."

I did not.

But I also kind of did.

Because of Marin, I huddled in the bathroom, fighting for elbow room as I diligently worked hard to make it appear like I hadn't worked at all to look good. "You're still an asshole," I muttered, running a finger over the shiny pink gloss on my lips. "Hair up or down?"

Marin stepped back to take me in. "Up. It exposes your long neck, and his mouth will ache to be all over it."

If only.

"I think I freaked him out this morning on the board," I admitted. "He got lost in a moment, and now I think he is trying to backpedal. What if I misread everything? I know he's been with a lot of women. I know he only has casual hookups. I've heard Ezra talk about it. What if he just wants to hook up and then... nothing?"

Marin shrugged. "Then you have the best night of your goddamn life, and you enjoy the hell out of it."

I'd never enjoyed the hell out of a one-night stand. Or with anyone, no matter how many nights.

Painfully shy with my body, self-conscious, and stuffed with anxiety, I struggled to enjoy casual sex. Plagued with awkward and unsatisfying experiences—whether because of me, the partner, or a combination. My only long-term boyfriend in college grew impatient with my insecurities.

"What if we hook up and he hates it? Or he's disappointed? I can't avoid him forever. He'll be at my brother's wedding."

Holding the curling iron in my hand, I opened and closed the clamp, lost in the meditative lull of the *clip clap*.

"It's not like it's just one event either," I continued, wandering a path of worries and what-ifs—my favorite kind of adventure.

"It's an entire week at a resort stuck together. I will be *mortified* if I have to spend that time avoiding Ty because I've embarrassed myself."

Marin grabbed me by the shoulders like I was hysterical. For a moment, I feared she would slap me for effect.

"You will *not* embarrass yourself. You will be brave. You will go, have fun, flirt, and see what happens. You pushed this morning, and it was *amazing*. Go be amazing again."

An opportunity. I could chase it or waste it. Either way, I trusted Ty not to hurt me. He was a good man. We were friends. But a hook up... a hook-up with Ty could be an entirely different experience for me.

This was a New Me. New Me knew Ty wasn't a forever guy, but he could help me. Not just stepping into the surf, but stepping into these unknowns. I wanted something different. And Ty?

He was different.

One night or beyond, we wouldn't get lost in more than a good time.

After years of deprivation? I deserved a good time.

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"I can't believe you're overthinking this opportunity," Marin said, pushing me out the door to walk to the theater.

"You can't believe I'm overthinking this? Marin, do you even know me?"

Standing in the coolness of a San Francisco summer evening, I pulled my hands into the pockets of my jumpsuit and clenched my fists. If I hid the evidence of my nervousness, she wouldn't give me shit for being a baby about it all.

"He's just coming to be polite."

Easier to front-load the pain of a rejection I was sure would come, giving myself an excuse not to be brave.

"Am I overdressed?" I ran a hand over my black linen jumpsuit, airy and light, but I worried I dressed too formally for a casual evening with friends.

She glanced at my flip-flops. "No."

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the theater. Connor waited on the sidewalk outside, hands tucked into the pockets of his long shorts. He waved, and I eyeballed Marin.

"What?" she asked innocently. "I wanted a date, too." Her mouth shifted into a playful smile, and I recognized that look. I was walking home alone tonight. After greetings, Connor pointed toward the building. "Ty is getting tickets."

I exhaled. He hadn't stood me up. Stood us up. Stood the group up.

A few minutes later, Ty came out, holding a winning grin in fitted black jeans and a thin blue sweater. Casual, yet handsome. Relaxed, yet mature. Another reminder that Ty Jensen was a man.

I'd never been with a man before. Only boys. Was there much of a difference? Maybe tonight I'd learn.

Tickets were handed out with greetings. Marin and Connor went ahead, Marin squeezing Connor's arm as she giggled at something he said to her.

"You look lovely, Bree."

Ty placed his hand on my lower back and guided me inside as I sank into the heady revely of his compliment.

He smelled amazing. Whatever cologne he wore had me fighting the urge to bury my nose against his chest and inhale.

We found theater five and scanned for Marin and Connor. They sat tucked in a corner, her head resting on his shoulder.

Ty let me lead, sitting beside me as I plopped down by my bestie and ignored the death glare she shot me.

"There are a hundred other seats," she muttered.

Feigning hearing loss, I stayed put. She stood with a huff, pulling Connor over a couple of seats to give them space.

I dissected Ty's compliment for the next two hours and seven minutes of the movie while simultaneously kicking myself for it.

New You. New You. New You.

New Me didn't want to sink into the weight of uncertainty and drown in interpretations. God. Did normal people walk through life and *not* overthink three seconds of their lives? What was that like? After fifty-three minutes, I settled on Ty being friendly because he saw I'd tried so hard tonight. My hair was on point, and my makeup flawless.

I was convinced he felt sorry for me by minute one hundred and twenty.

I checked my phone when I had the intrusive thought that Ezra bribed Ty into complimenting me.

Ty's breath against my ear surprised me. "You're supposed to put those away during the movie," he whispered.

An explosion on the screen lit the theater in orange and yellow bursts of light, allowing me to catch the humor sparkling in his eyes. He was teasing me, but still right.

I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and tried to shove my phone away. The pockets of my jumpsuit were shallow, but I got it in and committed to not looking at it again.

Ty draped his arm along the armrest between us. Forget the movie, whatever we were watching. Were there superheroes? Too many explosions for a romantic comedy.

Impossible to bring my eyes to the screen to check. Not with Ty's forearm so proximate, exposed with the sleeve of his sweater pushed up like man cleavage. He probably did a thousand wrist curls daily to keep those forearms looking fly.

There was something immensely sexy about a man's forearms, and Ty's were peak perfection. Thick, tight, and corded with muscle when flexed. The band of muscle traveled down to his long fingers. No doubt deft and skilled with those masculine fingers. Thick, masculine fingers. Thick, deft and skilled, masculine...

Jesus.

Ty wasn't a bulky man. Muscular and strong but lean. Yet somehow, he seemed so much bigger. Like he could wrap around me, and I could disappear in him.

Good lord. I wanted him to disappear *in me*. My head dropped against the back of my seat as I raked my teeth over

my bottom lip and held a pained groan while studying his *forearms*.

"The movie," Ty whispered, nodding toward the screen.

My eyes jolted up. He caught me staring like a creep. I cleared my throat. "You're hogging the armrest."

Even I cringed, and I said it.

With a chuckle, he slid over. "There's room for you, too."

Our arms brushed, pinkies dangerously close. It was heady and heavenly, like this forbidden secret longing. Ty had no idea that just his *pinky* made me feral.

Pressing my thighs together, I tried not to stare at where our bodies touched. Visual confirmation of his proximity made it so much worse. Unbearable. His touch was tormenting. More might kill me. Beyond my endurance. I doubted I'd survive. We needed another armrest.

Ty's company was completely innocent, and I was being silly to let the butterflies in my belly carry me to a world of make-believe and fantasy. A world where Ty and I were alone in the theater, free and unworried like when in the ocean. If his hand were to run down the seat until it found my thighs, spreading them...

I closed my eyes, biting my lip harder. What did those hands feel like?

When they curled over my hips and dug into my flesh on that board, I imagined them all over my body. They were big enough to touch me everywhere all at once.

Or maybe that was Ty. His energy. His interest. His attention. It consumed me when directed my way, and for some reason, he let me have it in the last few weeks.

Maybe it was time for me to stop overthinking things.

Stretching my pinky, I brushed it against his. Such a light movement that I could dismiss it as an accident.

Staring straight ahead, he didn't glance down or acknowledge me.

But his finger brushed back, wrapping over the top of mine.

A simple act, but my heart thundered in my chest, and my nipples tightened. Arousal danced over my skin, my entire body alight with an unfamiliar ache.

I wanted to study it, to understand the shameless yearning and unabashed lust. Ty made me feel everything in my body after a lifetime of ignoring it, mistreating it, and wishing it wasn't there.

I came to life in his presence, energy and electricity running through every vein, cell, and breath. Vibrating and buzzing as I focused on the sensation of his finger over mine.

A lazily draped finger. If that act lit me on fire, how searing would all of him be? He could burn me if I weren't careful.

My lips parted, my thighs pressing tighter as I struggled not to squirm into the throbbing of my body. This time, I caught the slight movement of Ty's glance from the corner of my eye. He stared at my legs, like he knew what I was doing, the pressure I was building, and recognized my desperation for the friction of his touch.

His pinky released mine, his palm sliding over the back of my knuckles. Slowly, down he went. Nothing else existed, only the languid path of his touch.

My head dropped against the seat, my knees opening in anticipation.

Light. His palm grazed so lightly that I had to check and ensure I wasn't imagining it. My eyes flashed to him, but he stared straight ahead.

A slow and heavy swallow rolled down his throat as his hand curved over my upper leg with a firmer touch. Like the first pass had asked permission, and my silence was an agreement.

My head lolled to the side as I watched him caress my inner thigh.

Ty shifted, leaning his weight against our shared space, his eyes still on the movie. His nostrils flared, his jaw tight, before dipping his hand lower. Then lower still until it traced the seam of my suit.

Pressure. I *needed* more. He rubbed where I wanted, but not hard enough to do more than make me ache.

Scooting my ass forward, I rolled my hips to encourage him. He licked his lips, his eyes fluttering shut as he exhaled heavily through his nose.

"Ty," I whispered, unsure if he heard me. "Please. More."

His legs spread as he relaxed into his seat. At the same time, he settled into me. No longer hesitant, he stroked me harder, his hand palming my pussy over the thin fabric.

I shuddered a groan, gliding my hand over the armrest to find him. He let me, not moving away when I rubbed him over his jeans.

Thick and hard, and holy shit, he could have me here. Right here, in this theater, with my best friend a few seats over. I didn't care if she saw—if anyone saw.

"Are you wet, Bree?" he murmured, his breath heavy as I stroked him.

I whimpered, nodding and squirming. "Yes."

A low groan rumbled deep in his chest. "Good fucking girl. Will you come for me in this theater?"

"God. Yes." I would, and not just because his touch was electric. His focus, his desire, the strain in his voice—a fantasy come to life.

My hand stroked faster, encouraged by the short thrust of his hips rising as he jutted against my hand. He groaned, his head falling back as he caressed me. Everything disappeared. There was no movie, audience, sound, or air—god, there was no air. I couldn't *breathe*.

"Yes!" Marin hooted and whistled, standing and applauding like this was a live show.

My hand stilled, Ty's stopping at the same time. The credits rolled across the screen, and people shuffled out.

Ty pulled his hand away immediately. Mine stayed on the zipper of his jeans, and he lifted it off, setting it on the armrest with a hesitant glance as I tried to adjust to the surrounding room.

Marin and Connor stood in a hurry to leave the theater before the crowds.

"Well? Up!" Marin gestured hastily for me to free the aisle. "Why are you so flushed, Bree? Are you feeling okay?" With a loud whisper intended for Ty's ears, she hissed, "You naughty necking with brother's best friend?"

Ty tensed next to me, a grimace as he hung his head.

She gave an insane laugh that told me she snuck a flask in her purse tonight. I should have seen that coming.

I rose, embarrassment catching up with me.

"Shut up, Marin."

She cackled, singing about kissing in a tree and adding a fun little chorus about brothers cutting it down as Connor pushed her along.

Ty hung back, letting my friends follow me first, like he needed a physical buffer between us. His eyes didn't meet mine as we regrouped in the lobby.

There was no doubting what had just happened. If I thought that certainty would bring me comfort, I was wrong. It made me a thousand times more nervous.

"Wow," Marin said, her hand on her chest. "That was *phenomenal*. Jean-Claude Van Dam will never die."

Was he in the movie?

Connor threw his arm over her shoulder, pulling Marin closer and whispering. She bit her lip and nodded.

"Hey, we're heading back to Connor's. Are you good to get home? He'd take you, but..." She pulled the flask from her purse, grinning like a loon.

Marin spoke to me but stared at Ty. She wanted him to take me home. I wanted him to take me home, too. "I can drop her," Ty said, scratching the back of his neck and ruffling his hair. "I have my car. Do you need me to drop you, too?"

"No!" Marin blurted, stumbling over the word as she stumbled over her feet to escape. "Cabs are a thing. These too." She pointed at her shoes.

The delight on Marin's face was blinding, but the stutter of my heart distracted me too much to shoot her punishing scowls. She and Connor said goodnight, leaving Ty and me on the sidewalk outside the theater.

"You don't have to—" I started, but he cut me off.

"I'd feel better if you didn't walk home alone."

I followed him to his car as I tugged on my bottom lip. Ty opened my door before going around to the driver's side. Sitting in his seat, his hands gripped the steering wheel as he stared at the dashboard.

I swallowed the dread in my throat. I sensed it before Ty even spoke.

"We can't." He didn't need to explain what he meant.

The silence between us was loud, the air thick with tension —and possibly heartbreak.

Ty couldn't do this, or maybe he just *wouldn't*. Those three words hit hard, but they also freed me. Because the thing about someone breaking your heart is that once it happens, it releases the worry about what it will feel like. Suddenly, you know, and it doesn't seem so scary anymore.

It only hurts.

"Why not?" I whispered, staring down at my feet.

He sighed.

"Because I'm Ezra's sister?"

I wanted to push back. Tell him my brother didn't get to decide my life for me or choose who I did or didn't see. I was an adult, and my choices were my own. But Ty surprised me. "While my best friend deserves consideration, we're adults. We don't run one another's lives."

"Then why not?"

The soft yellow glow from the parking lot floodlights illuminated his face, making him entirely too handsome at the moment when he was going to break my heart.

His grip on the wheel didn't lessen; knuckles clenched until they turned white. He let out a long breath, his eyes focused on his hands.

"It's not just Ezra's reaction. You're still his little sister and I'm still me. I won't stop, Bree. I go. I keep going. I move through everything and everyone because I can't stop. I push and move and run. I can't stay still." A rough hand scrubbed over his face. "Work is my life for a reason. It's one of the few places where that is a benefit. The other areas of my life?"

He finally met my imploring gaze, the softness of his blue eyes making me hate him a little.

"It destroys them. Your brother trusts me to be your friend. *You* trust me to be your friend."

Ty's rejection felt just as destructive as his need to move through life without stopping. Clamping my jaw tight, I pressed my tongue to the top of my mouth and focused on the pressure to avoid the pinching in my chest.

"I don't want to do that to you. I can't." The way he shook his head, like the idea disgusted him, made my heart crack even more. "You're not just some girl. You're his baby sister."

"Then you have the best night of your goddamn life, and you enjoy the hell out of it."

Marin's words rang in my ears, a chorus of bravery and encouragement. Ty couldn't give me more, but I was *twentyfour*, a student, and setting up my independence. He wasn't looking for forever, but neither was I.

I was looking for *myself*.

And Ty? He didn't see me the way everyone else did. That made me see myself differently, too.

"Then don't. We can have a night of fun, right? It's no big deal."

I think I believed that—or at least wanted to.

He started the car. "Not with you, Bree."

Ty said nothing, but he didn't need to. He said it all a moment before, and his reason stung much more than if he blamed my brother for not touching me.

Because it wasn't Ezra's fault.

Not with you, Bree.

It was mine.



Ty

S he opened the door and got out before I even parked the car.

"Bree—"

The door closed on my apology.

I deserved that. It took guts for Bree to proposition me, and despite my attempts to protect her feelings, I feared my

honesty hurt worse than if I'd taken her home and fucked her.

But I didn't want to do that to her.

I mean, I *did*. This morning on the board, the feel of her, even coated in the thick Neoprene of a wetsuit—Jesus. I got so hard, immediately coming to life. My dick forgot we promised to help my best friend's sister, not dry hump her.

A heady combination of the isolated peace on the water and Bree's body so close to mine.

If uninterrupted, I would have slid down the zipper of her suit and run my hands beneath it. Touched as much of her as possible before she thought it through.

I betrayed my best friend's trust.

Ezra wasn't unreasonable. He wanted me to keep my hands off his sister because he knew how it would go. How it always went with women in my life. He never gave me shit about it in the past, and he wouldn't in the future—so long as it didn't involve Bree.

I never should have accepted Marin's invitation tonight, but I wanted a bridge back to the friendship we started. One separate from that of her brother and me.

Then I fucked up in the theater. Proximity to Bree messed with my head.

Bree hurried into her apartment building, throwing open the door to the lobby with enough force to hit the wall and bounce back.

I could avoid her—until I saw her in Mexico for Ezra's wedding. She might stare daggers at me the entire time. I deserved that, but how would I explain the inevitable frosty reception to my best friend?

Further confirmation of why I should cut things off before they turned into something I couldn't take back.

Taking a deep breath and running my hands over my face a few times to get my bearings, I put the car in reverse, checking behind me to back up. As my head swung around, the reflection of something on the floor grabbed my attention. A phone.

Not mine, and I doubted the pink rhinestone case belonged to Colt, the only other person to ride with me recently.

Bree dropped her phone.

I picked it up, examining it. It buzzed and lit up, startling me. I fumbled and caught it in my lap. *Shit*.

I had to return it.

Right?

Yes, I did. I shut off the car and sat for another five minutes, staring at the rhinestones as they glimmered in the reflection of the outside lights and tried to find the courage for decency.

I'd need it.

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Reminding myself I was an adult, I headed for Bree's apartment, lamenting the building's lack of mail drop or concierge desk. The phone was too thick to slide under her door. I'd have to knock.

No slots on the doors either. Not even a peephole. Where the hell did her mail go?

I glanced down at the torn and faded carpet beneath my feet and inhaled the scent of mildew.

San Francisco was obscenely expensive, and like her siblings, Bree cut ties with her father and his wealth. But undoubtedly, Ezra would insist on helping her cover the rent in a nicer place.

Yes, Ezra *would*. I smiled, shaking my head. I doubted Bree would accept it. She wanted to do things on her own.

Lifting my fist, I let it linger for a moment before knocking.

There was a shuffling inside, someone moving around, and then a, "*Shit*."

"Just a minute!" she hollered, not bothering to ask who stood at her door. I hoped it wasn't a habit. Bree answered, exasperated and hunched over, rubbing her shin. "Yes?"

It took her a second to register it was me, and she stiffened as she tried to hide behind the door.

"Um, hi." Whatever the commotion in her apartment left her breathless. "I, uh. I didn't expect you."

I held out her phone.

"Shit," she mumbled, reaching for it. "Thank you. I searched all over and worried it fell out of my pocket in the theater. My jumpsuit had shallow pockets, and things don't stay in them long..." she trailed off as my eyes rolled over her.

The jumpsuit *had* shallow pockets. Had, because she no longer wore it.

Bree's face turned four shades of red over two seconds, and she angled the door to block herself.

"Um. I, uh, was getting ready for bed."

Leaning against the frame, I crossed my feet at the ankles and gestured at her. "What are you wearing?"

Bree squeezed her eyes closed, trying to hide behind her eyelids. She did that a lot. Kind of adorable.

"I'm naked," she lied. "Don't look at me!"

"I already saw you. You're definitely not naked."

She released a long exhale, the messy bun on top of her head bobbing as her shoulders dropped. Defeated, she mouthed, *Shit*.

Catching her in the t-shirt and boxers that disappeared from my guest room the night she stayed at my house shifted something inside me.

Maybe it was pure instinct, animalistic or hedonistic or stupid male pride, but Bree's body touching my clothes...

"Let me see."

She pressed her lips into a tight line and shook her head.

"Let me see you, Bree."

She exhaled slowly, squinting one eye open to assess the situation. After a moment, the other opened, and Bree collapsed her head in shame and presented herself to me.

One foot scratched the back calf of the opposite leg.

"Um. This is weird, I know. I—" She stopped. "This is weird."

Maybe, but even weirder was me losing any good sense, pushing Bree into her apartment with more force than intended as I backed her against the wall and kicked the door shut.

"Don't hide from me." My voice was raspy, unrecognizable, as I struggled to steady my breath.

The pounding of my heart led the charge as I pressed forward until hardly any space existed between us.

Bree's eyes widened, her chest heaving. The white cotton of the shirt did little to contain the peaks of her nipples, hardened beneath the thin material, and made it apparent she wore no bra.

The shirt would swallow her whole if she didn't tie the excess fabric into a knot on her hip. The small peek-a-boo gap of skin between the waistband and her navel was a torturously tempting expanse of possibility.

An indecent amount of time could be spent licking, sucking, biting, and tasting that inch of exposed flesh. The thought of my teeth marks on her skin made me fucking feral.

"You stole my underwear." My palms slapped against the wall on each side of her head, caging her in, and my hard-on pressed against her abdomen, hips holding her in place.

One quick flick of the button on my jeans and a slight shifting of denim, and I could have my cock in hand, stroking until it wasn't only my teeth marks covering that beautiful soft skin.

Exactly why I shouldn't be in her living room, lost of decency and good sense.

She licked her lips and nodded, staring at my mouth before bringing her eyes up to mine. "I stole them."

I tilted my head. "Why?"

The same reason I would take hers if given the chance.

"I wanted something of yours," she whispered, swallowing. "To feel you on my body."

"Bree," I hissed, one hand dropping between us as my fingers hooked into the waistband. "They're mine."

Her hands fisted the fabric, pulling them tight against her thighs.

"Then take them."

My fingers ached to rip the clothes from her and take what belonged to me. Whether the clothing or her.

A million thoughts collided in my head. The longing and need to touch her. The afflictive promise not to. The ardent desire to give in, just this once. She said it was okay. Even after telling her why I wouldn't do it, Bree gave permission.

She told me it was okay. One night was okay.

I dropped my forehead to hers, her breath fluttering so close it would only take a slight forward movement to catch those exhales and suck them into my mouth with her lips and tongue to taste her.

She said it was okay, but I understood Bree well. One night wouldn't curb her feelings any more than it would mine.

"I promised I wouldn't put my hands on you."

"Ezra won't—"

"No," I cut her off. "I mean, yes, I promised him, but fuck him. I promised myself." My shallow breaths matched pace with hers, a collision of air lingering in a space I regretted. "You... you're..."

So many things. Bree was so many things, and the intersection of them confused me.

I wanted to sink into one another until nothing was between us, no miserable atom of space, and we drowned in pleasure. Why was I torturing myself?

Because in two weeks, two months, whatever time, you'd leave her behind. Stopping with her would kill you. You don't stop. Keep going.

My finger tugged dangerously along the waistband of the boxers.

Keep going.

Bree's lips parted, her chest heaving with courage. "Fine," she said, snapping my attention to her face. "You promised you wouldn't put your hands on me? What if I put my hands on myself?"

Slack-jawed, I watched as she released the grip of fabric in her balled fists, snaking one hand over the bare patch of exposed skin along her abdomen.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. It was a terrible idea. I should leave.

My brows pinched in anguish as her hand slid beneath the hem of the shirt, an agonizingly slow path to her breast.

"Bree."

I closed my eyes, but only briefly. I wanted to watch her as she softly panted, palming her breast and pinching her nipple.

Fuck. I was jealous of her hands and their ability to do what I swore I wouldn't, what I *couldn't*.

"I should leave," I whispered, sliding forward until my forehead pressed to the wall.

My chest touched hers with every inhale. The movements of her hand bumped against me, a reminder she touched what I longed for.

With her mouth so close, her gasps echoed in my ear. Her breath was hot, burning my skin with agonizing need.

"Then leave," she breathed.

I growled, fucking *growled*, like an animal. Pushing off from the wall, I shook my head. "In the mood to be a brat? Hm?"

She was challenging me, teasing me, and forcing my hand. I stepped back, moving away from her to give my thoughts and body some space.

Or maybe to call her bluff.

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Sitting back on the couch, I crossed one ankle over my opposite knee and gestured for Bree to continue her bratty game. She wanted to be treated as a big girl? I'd indulge her—and possibly myself.

Her persistence thinned my patience. That fucking *attitude* thinned my willpower.

"You want to touch yourself when I can't? Go ahead. Don't let me stop you. Show me what a brat does when she doesn't get what she wants."

She'd back down. Admit she was in over her head. Get shy. I smirked, relaxing in my seat.

I didn't expect her to slip her other hand beneath the waistband.

"I will," she said, dropping her head and closing her eyes as her hand moved in tight, fast circles.

One leg kicked up, her heel against the wall.

My cock was uncomfortably hard. Tired of weeks of thinking about doing what she now did to herself.

I adjusted my dick in my jeans, and the movement caught her attention.

She tilted her head, her eyes half-hooded and her hand working furiously.

"You can touch yourself, too."

I dropped my leg and relaxed deeper into the couch, spreading to get more comfortable.

"Is that what a brat wants?" Keeping my eyes locked with hers, I rubbed myself.

The pink blush on her cheeks was fucking adorable. Christ, it made me even harder. Changing the rules to whatever game we were playing—Bree surprised me.

"Yes," she panted, her hand working beneath the fabric. "It's what I want."

"Have you ever done this?" My dick pressed so hard against the zipper of my jeans that I worried it'd forever have teeth marks. "Why should I give in to a brat's demands when she's done nothing to earn it?"

"No. I haven't done this." Biting her bottom lip, she closed her eyes and shook her head. "But if you let me, I'll behave. I'll do what you want, even if you can't do it yourself." Her eyes fluttered open as her chest rose faster. "I'll be good for you, Ty. I swear it."

Fuck. I wasn't sure which left me more out of control—her obstinance or her compliance.

"Yeah? Pull up your shirt." I stretched my arms along the back of the couch. "Show me you can be a good girl who listens."

She removed her hand from the boxers, and I clucked my tongue.

"No. The other hand. Don't stop playing with your pussy. I'm already a very jealous man of your hand. Don't make me an angry one, too."

Bree whimpered, tugging on the hem. The tied knot tightened the fabric and held it close to her skin. With a nervous breath, she closed her eyes and wiggled the shirt over her ribs to expose two gorgeous tear-drop breasts with dusty rose nipples.

Fuck. I wanted to put my mouth on those. Suck her and bite and nibble those delicious fucking pink peaks. They were hard little points, her body aroused and ready. God. How wet was she right now?

"Come here." I crooked a finger to beckon her, expecting a refusal, but she pulled her hand from the boxers and released her breast.

Using her ass to bounce her from the wall, she kept her tits out like a goddamn queen and sauntered to me.

I should have demanded she crawl.

I spread my legs wider for Bree to stand between them, and she didn't hesitate to take her place. Without touching her, I ghosted along her body, a whisper over her skin.

"You're so beautiful."

Her arms relaxed at her sides, her head falling back as she exhaled.

It was excruciating not to touch. To play this game and not fold beneath her.

"I could stare at you all night," I murmured. "Just watch."

Her eyes stayed on the ceiling. "I'm nervous."

"I know."

It made her even more beautiful.

I leaned forward, desperate to bury my face in the most private places of her body, inhaling and tasting her. Lick along the soft skin inside her thighs, tongue her clit until she went wild and lost her fucking mind.

"Even brats get nervous." My nose brushed the cotton between paradise and my stupid promises. "Even brats can tell me no when uncomfortable, and it stops. You know that?"

Licking her lips, she nodded. "Yes."

"Will you let me see you? Watch you? I want to, Bree. So fucking badly. Will you let me?"

She gasped as my breath hit the thin fabric of the boxers with each heated exhale and declaration.

Cupping her breast, she lifted it and tweaked her nipple. "Just touch me."

Tempting. So exceptionally tempting, but once I touched her, I wouldn't slow things down. I'd slam her onto the couch, wrap her legs around me, and drive into her. Thrusting over and over until she unraveled, and I was spent.

Then I'd do it all over again. And again. And again. I'd fuck her until nothing was left and leave. I'd be done with her, and I didn't want to be done with Bree.

I pleaded instead, "Touch yourself the way you want me to touch you."

I'd regret this tomorrow. I'd wake up and kick myself for confusing her and allowing things to get out of hand.

But that was tomorrow.

Our eyes locked as Bree lowered to her knees. I could easily thread my fingers in her hair and tug her closer. Tell her to open her mouth and slide my dick down her throat. Grip her head and hold her there as I pumped into her, fucking her face while she swallowed every drop I gave her. The look in her eyes told me she wouldn't object.

The thought made me want to explode. God, I was an asshole. I'd known this girl forever. Sweet and shy and lovely. So goddamn lovely.

But she'd look lovelier choking on me, I think.

"Take off my shirt."

She hesitated. "The one I'm wearing? Or that you're wearing?"

"My little thief," I murmured, my eyes raking over her. "They're both mine, aren't they? Get rid of yours."

Her fingers tugged the fabric over her head, leaving her chest bare. Bree was stunning on display for me. I pulled my sweater and t-shirt off, letting her eyes wander over me. She reached out, her hand sliding in a destructive path down my stomach.

"Did you promise I couldn't touch you?" she whispered, staring at the bulge in my jeans. I dropped my head back, groaning. I hadn't made my promise with this scenario in mind, but I wouldn't let her pleasure me if I didn't return it.

"Hands to yourself. Don't be a brat."

She pulled her hand back. "Sorry," she whispered, the word so soft yet making me so *hard*.

God. Compliance. Definitely compliance. Fuck me for it, but I wanted Bree to do what I told her. I craved her attention and interest—her trust.

Glorious, divine, and brave, but uncertain. She awaited my direction. Exquisite. Already toeing a thin line, this woman would drive me insane if I dropped my guard.

Unbuttoning my jeans and sliding down the zipper, I palmed myself, keeping my dick in my boxer briefs.

"Off," I said, nodding to the boxers covering her.

Her hands slid between the waistband and hips, hesitating as she kneeled before me.

"Have you ever let anyone see you like this?" I tilted my head, taking in the beauty of her fear mixing with the eagerness of her courage as I gripped my dick harder.

"No. Not like this. In the light."

"Show me."

She listened, taking off the boxers.

Naked and exposed on her knees, her heavy breasts rose with each sharp inhale. My brazen eyes studied the soft lines of her body, the sensual curve of her hips.

Fuck, I wanted to ravage her. Ruin her. Every perverse thought of pounding my best friend's sister until we collapsed, and she let me whisper praise and adoration for how well she took me before I had her again. My greedy mouth sucking pleasure from her until she cried pretty tears and begged me to stop.

"You're stunning." I fixed my eyes on her pussy, a tidy patch of hair leading the way to a treasure I wanted to bury myself in. "You were right. You can be such a good girl for me. I like that, Bree. Very much."

She whimpered, her hands gripping the couch cushions next to me. I enjoyed Bree being a good girl for me, but I think she enjoyed it even more.

"On the floor. On your back," I instructed, sliding down my briefs to free my cock. Bree's eyes widened, and I assured her, "I'm not going to fuck you. You'll fuck yourself, and I'll watch you come."

She glanced behind her, lowering to the living room floor.

"Hitch your knees," I instructed.

She listened, the raised position of her legs giving me a perfect view of her cunt, wet and swollen with arousal, as I lowered from the couch and kneeled next to her.

I gripped my cock, squeezing and groaning as she got comfortable.

Stroking along my length, I said, "I'm going to get closer. Okay?"

She half-exhaled, half-sobbed, maybe overwhelmed.

"Do you want to stop?"

"No!" She grabbed my leg, anchoring herself. "I don't want to stop. I want you to see me."

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes. She opened them before I told her not to hide.

"Very good. So beautiful," I said, shadowing her.

Wedging between her knees, I boxed her in. My body covered hers, positioned as if I were going to fuck her.

God, I could just fuck her. So much effort to hover over her and hold my weight on one arm while pumping my length with the other hand. So much effort not to do this thing we both wanted to do.

I took a deep breath, clearing my head. "Tell me if you want to stop or tap three times." She nodded, shifting and wiggling against the carpet to get more comfortable. Without a word, she slid her hand between her thighs and let out a low moan.

I swore softly, staring at her pussy as she played with herself.

"Spread yourself wider."

She dropped her knees to the side.

"No, use your fingers to spread your lips. Show me how much you like this. How much you enjoy me watching you fuck yourself as I jerk off. Show me how wet your cunt gets, knowing you're making me this fucking hard."

Her breath staggered as I spoke, but she nodded and did what I said.

"So good. You listen so well when you're not being a brat."

She whimpered again as her hips circled wildly, her cunt exposed and on display. Bree was gorgeous.

"You look so pretty touching yourself like this. So stunning, wide open for me. Look how soaked you are." I hissed a long breath between my teeth. "Shit, Bree."

She panted, "You... You make me feel so good."

The obscene sounds of her fingers rubbing through her arousal drove me insane, her pussy wet and slick and ready. I could really make her feel good if I let myself.

My body shuddered in one overwhelming ache as I imagined my mouth on her, tasting her, and my dick sliding through her wetness, glistening with it.

Maybe I could just run my cock along her pussy. I didn't have to enter her to get us both off. Technically, my hands wouldn't be touching.

"I want to taste you," I groaned. Bree's hand stilled, and her brows etched together. "Your fingers. Let me taste you."

Another fine line, but fuck if I cared when she took those wet fingers and slid them into my mouth.

"Your cunt," I murmured. "Your cunt tastes so good. Fuck. Dip your fingers in your pussy again and go deep. Don't stop until your knuckles are buried. Two fingers."

She went as deep as she could at that angle, moaning, writhing, and arching off the floor.

"Use your other hand to stroke your clit. Fuck your hand and stroke yourself."

"Ty," she gasped. A silhouette of pleasure, the curves of her body taunted, teased, and tortured. I'd done it to myself, like the fucking idiot I was.

I fisted my dick harder, running my hand along the length. So close to her pussy. I closed my eyes and groaned.

"I want to fuck you so badly," I whispered. "I want to feel you come apart on my dick and thrust into you until you can't take anymore. Then keep going."

Her head dropped to the side as she watched me pump myself. "I want you, Ty. I want you to fuck me."

She was right there. Right fucking there for the taking. It'd be so easy to drive forward. Slide inside her and worry about the consequences tomorrow. I pumped faster, squeezing a tighter pressure, imagining her wrapped around me.

"What do you feel like? What does it feel like to be inside you?"

She whimpered, her fingers dancing and her lower back lifting off the ground as she bucked against her hand and moaned.

My knees burned into the carpet, but I'd rub my fucking skin raw before I'd stop this.

"Tell me, Bree. What do you feel like?"

"Empty," she panted. "I feel empty. I'm thinking about you on top of me, not holding back. You inside me. The way you'd fill me, the way you'd touch me. How good you'd be."

My forehead against hers, I sucked in her heated breath as her thighs trembled beneath me. She shook all over, the announcement of her climax barreling between us.

The pace of her fingers increased as she pressed harder and fucked deeper, riding the pleasure moving through her.

"I'm going to come," she gasped.

My mouth hung slack as the beautiful wave of her climax slammed through her. The furrowing of her eyebrows as she concentrated on its long ascent pulled her face into a striking look of surrender.

Bree took my breath, emptying my lungs of all oxygen as my body emptied itself of the coursing energy we shared, my orgasm ripping through me on the tail end of hers.

Panting and a sticky mess, neither of us made a move. The room stayed quiet around us, our heaving breaths the only sound. She blinked a few times, her eyes squinting and adjusting to the light. I hung my head, squeezing my eyes shut to hide the evidence of what I'd just done.

Finally, Bree reached up and ran her hand over the head of my cock, wiping some of the cum from my dick and my fist, smearing it on her stomach.

Her eyes met mine in a challenge, saying nothing, and *game fucking over*.

My seed all over her belly had a new kind of pleasure radiating up my spine.

One I hadn't felt before.

One I wasn't sure I wanted to feel at all.

"Let's clean you up," I said softly, reaching for the boxers.

I wiped her stomach and between her thighs. She sat up, propped on her elbows as I cleaned her.

"I'm keeping those," she said after I finished, nodding toward the dirty fabric. Her face remained firm, her mouth pressed in a line, daring me to fight her.

I kissed her temple and got up to tuck my dick away and dress.

"I see you're back to being a brat."



Bree

•••• H e's not coming," I said, struggling to hold a smile that belied the tightness in my chest.

Marin shot me a sympathetic look, her hand squeezing my arm as she nodded for Brody, Sharon, and Connor to go ahead.

The group left the shop, heading for the beach and their regular surf. I wouldn't get on a board alone and didn't want to

ride with anyone else today.

Well, almost anyone else.

"Maybe he's running late this morning. Just because you stained our living room carpet after coming the hardest you've ever come in your entire life—"

"Marin!" I hissed, slamming my hand over her mouth and praying everyone was out of earshot as they strolled down the sidewalk.

She laughed against my palm, licking it until I let go.

Shaking out my hand, I grumbled, "You're so gross." I hesitated. "It's not stained."

I cleaned the spots when Ty left my apartment the other night. She was otherwise correct. I had come the hardest and was too proud to be embarrassed.

But Ty remained noticeably absent for our usual Sunday surfing meet-up at the shop this morning. Maybe *he* was embarrassed. I hadn't spoken with him since he helped me clean cum off my stomach because we mutually masturbated in the hottest experience of my entire life.

I played the night on repeat every free moment, only confessing to Marin when she knocked on my bedroom door and told me the constant buzzing of my vibrator distracted her from studying.

Marin sighed, staring out the window toward the beach. "You can wait here if you want, but you know what I think?"

I did. After I admitted my disappointment, she made her opinion annoyingly clear.

She held up her hands and shrugged. "Communication is overrated. Why talk to him about your feelings or ask what headspace he's in? Such a waste of time!"

Gripping her shoulders, I spun her toward the door. "Goodbye, Marin. Have a great surf. I'll see you when you're back."

She cackled as I shoved her along.

"Being an adult and taken seriously, this thing you've craved for so long, does not happen with healthy and open dialogue. It only happens when you stuff your feelings like you want to stuff your—"

"Bye!" I slammed the shop door, Marin's laughter fading as she hurried to catch up with everyone.

Be an adult. Please. I'd done very adult things with Ty, and I wouldn't let Marin's wet blanket suggestion of communication skills ruin my mood.

Further.

I'd been in a sour mood the last few days.

Twenty minutes of tapping my fingernails against the counter while sitting behind the register and staring at the wall passed the time just fine. It was still too early for customers.

Ty didn't show up to surf. No surprise. As we said goodbye, the tension in my apartment hung thicker than the erection he fisted.

And that said something.

He didn't want to touch me because he didn't want to hurt me by blowing past me.

I was no fool. Ezra spoke enough about Ty and his romantic history, or lack thereof, in general conversation. The man wasn't likely to settle down. This was not new information; he'd been transparent and clear about it.

Calling him or asking him for more, for *anything*? It proved I was a young girl desperate for the attention of her older brother's best friend, who had no interest in giving it.

I wanted to be casual. Breezy. Because Ty did casual, and I wanted Ty to do me.

I had to get him to see I didn't need protecting. Yes, I was Ezra's little sister—I couldn't change that, no matter how many deals with the devil I offered over the years to make it so. But I could make my own life choices, which included letting him blow through me. Blow past me. Blow in me?

My head slammed onto the counter as I groaned and laughed simultaneously.

"You okay?" The shop bell chimed as the door opened. I didn't need to lift my head to know who walked in.

"Yes," I mumbled, not moving. "Good morning."

Ty's flip-flop-clad feet appeared in the small crack between the counter's edge and my stool.

"Marin said you weren't coming out today. You okay?" I sensed the frown on his face from his tone alone. "Are you sick?"

Lifting my head and blinking a few times to adjust to the bright shop light, I plastered a fake smile.

"Right as rain and well rested. Just doing some countertop transcendental meditation. All the rage."

Ty set a coffee on the counter for me.

"Avoiding the waves still?" He raised his eyebrows, sipping his drink before setting it down to lean against the counter. He propped his chin on his hand.

"Come on, Bree. You're braver than that." The slightest gleam in his eye told me he wasn't referring to the water. "I've seen it."

"I didn't think you would come today," I said, ignoring the blush on my cheeks.

"I almost didn't," he admitted, grimacing and running a hand through his hair.

Tucking my hands in my lap, I stared at them instead of Ty's unfairly handsome face.

"Because of me?"

"Yes. No. Sort of." He shifted, the rustling of his board shorts the only sound besides the soft buzzing of the lights above. "Some things came up that required my full attention. I wasn't intentionally avoiding you. We need to talk."

The way he said it... wasn't promising.

Thunderous in my chest, the unsteady rhythm of my heart echoed in my ears. Talk. We needed to talk, but I didn't think I would like what Ty had to say.

"I never should have taken advantage of you the other night. It was shitty to shoot you down, only to confuse you by showing up and setting rules to an unfair game, having my fill, and then leaving like it was okay because I told you ahead of time I'd end up hurting you. It was a mistake."

Did he see it like that? That he'd made a mistake? That *I* was a mistake? He coerced me into something I didn't want to do? Incapable of deciding for myself?

Sliding off the stool, my eyes stayed on the ground between us as I tucked my hair behind my ears, nodding.

"A mistake, huh?"

Ty said nothing, his eyes tight and locked on me while I kept mine anywhere but him as my temper rose.

"A mistake because it's unfair to me?"

He clenched his jaw, the word fast on the exhale. "Yes."

I hummed, rolling my shoulders back and lifting my face to glare at him. "Having *your* fill. Taking advantage of *me*."

"Yes." Another terse response.

Taking advantage of me as if I didn't know any better. A smile crept along my lips as I raised my palms and placed them against his chest, shoving him away.

"Fuck off, Ty."

He stumbled back, catching himself on the counter and giving me a confused look just before I turned my back and headed to the storeroom.

The snacks beside the register needed to be restocked after a group of stoned teenagers came into the shop yesterday and bought all our candy bars.

Pushing the Bob Marley tapestry aside, I went to the small room next to Brody's office and scanned the shelves, knocking over toilet paper rolls to access the hidden candy stash. Brody liked to get stoned and tap into the snacks, too.

Ty followed, hot on my heels.

"What the hell?" he fumed. "What was that?"

With feigned indifference, I grabbed a handful of Snickers and faced him. "Oh, was I not clear? I said to fuck off."

The familiar tickle of pleasure licked along my spine as Ty's face shifted from his usual easy-going energy to something else entirely. Not anger exactly, but it was heated all the same. The squinting of his eyes and the flaring of his nostrils when I said or did something that upset him.

Or aroused him.

Ty liked it when I pushed back. He *liked* the idea of being responsible for his best friend's little sister getting naughty. Any claim otherwise was a lie, and the fact he sat on my couch days ago and encouraged me to fuck myself proved that.

The candy dropped on the shelf as I thrust my finger into his chest.

"You think you had your fill, and I didn't have mine? You think you took advantage of me, and I didn't take advantage of you?" I shook my head, my eyes slightly wild. "You only think that because you see me as this kid who needs to be protected. Who can't take care of herself. Who can't have desires that are *hers*."

For several weeks, Ty treated me like I wasn't fragile. Strong, I could do anything if I took the chance—even if it scared me.

Turning me down due to disinterest was one thing, but turning me down because he didn't think I could handle it?

"Maybe I want fun for the sake of fun. Do you think I need you to handle things for me?" I thrust my finger into his chest again, and he winced.

"Bree, that's not—"

"That *is*," I hissed. "Stop treating me like a kid. I can make my own choices. If I choose to let you use me, that's *my* choice. If I want to be used, that's *my* choice. What if *I* want to use *you*?"

Ty's tongue poked the inside of his cheek. "It would make me feel like shit for doing it. It *made* me feel like shit for doing it, okay?"

I dropped my finger, stepping until the tips of my toes touched his, and my breasts brushed against his hoodie.

"Made you feel like shit? Why? Because you liked it so much?"

He shook his head, not looking at me. "Just drop it."

"Maybe it made you feel like shit because you didn't get to finish inside me. Is that it? How disappointing to have to fuck your fist instead of my pussy."

I feigned a pout, a tickle of delight igniting low in my belly as Ty's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared.

Ty was right. I *could* be a brat.

I didn't just enjoy watching his blood boil. I *loved* it—the pleasure of holding power with someone who didn't relinquish control easily.

"Bree," he warned, his hands balled at his side. "I said drop it."

"Drop it? Drop what?" I batted my lashes, giving a pretty smile. "Drop to my knees for you, Ty? Is that why it made you feel like shit? Because you didn't ask for what you really wanted? Like me taking you in my mouth and—"

"Goddamnit, yes!"

Ty's voice shook as his hands splayed against the rack behind me, rattling the metal. His body surrounded mine, trapping me in place. The heat of his breath fanned over the shell of my ear. "I'm pissed because I should have done it, even knowing the outcome. I said I wouldn't touch you, and now you're being a fucking brat again, and all I want to do is touch you. But I won't—"

"Then don't," I whispered, my eyes flickering over his. "Don't touch me at all, but that's your choice. I can make my own."

A second later, I was sinking to my knees in front of him. I hesitated as I reached for the band of his shorts, chewing on my bottom lip. Would this be too much?

I untied his drawstring, feeling him already hard beneath the fabric.

Probably, but too much was never my problem. Starving myself of what I wanted was.

"Let me show you I've grown up."

Ty's jaw went slack as I slid my hand into his shorts, gripping him and stroking the smooth skin of his shaft.

"Tell me to stop, and I'll stop, but this is my choice to touch you, Ty."

Breathing fast and with his fingertips flexing against the shelf, he opened his mouth to say something, but closed it when I pulled his cock free.

"You wanted this?"

Hard and hot in my hand, I traced my lips along the crown.

"Yes," he whispered so quietly I almost didn't hear him.

"Do you want me to stop?"

He grunted as I licked him slowly, keeping my eyes on his.

"Fuck. I don't want to stop," he gritted, his head falling as he gave in. "Take it all."

Satisfaction purred in my chest, my stomach fluttering with my victory.

Wrapping my lips around him, I hollowed my cheeks and lowered to take him deep. Choking, I eased up and tried again.

Ty's hands clutched the shelf, his fingers twining between the metal slats as he gripped tightly.

Taking him to the back of my throat, I swallowed around him until I gagged. My throat would be sore tomorrow, but it only encouraged me. I wanted proof that I'd pleased him.

Slamming his hands and rattling the metal, Ty dropped his head back in pleasure and groaned.

"Bree," he rasped. "You shouldn't."

I popped off him long enough to mumble, "Still my choice unless you want me to stop."

"No," he breathed, sucking in a sharp inhale when I deepthroated him again. "Oh fuck. Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't," he chanted.

Ty's hips jutted forward to fuck harder into my mouth as he watched with wild eyes. My hand fisted the base of what I couldn't take, twisting around him. The discomfort of burning skin on my knees against the rough concrete floor and an aching jaw contrasted with the arousal soaking my panties.

His mouth hung open, and his chin tipped in pleasure and awe as I worked him. My free hand gripped his thigh, my nails digging into his flesh as I tried not to combust. I was wet and eager, but I didn't want to stop touching him to touch myself. I wanted Ty everywhere. On me, in me, near me.

Tears trailed down my cheeks as he thrust, my lips swollen and tight, makeup running. I was a mess, but the way those lustful eyes brazenly watched made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

"You suck my cock so fucking good," he groaned, his hips driving faster. "I'm going to come. Fuck. I'm going to come. You're going to take me, aren't you? All of me?"

I hummed, the vibrations causing him to jerk forward.

"Fuck. Yes, that's it, baby. So good. Fuck. I'm going to—" His head tipped back, and he sucked a sharp breath before coming with a shuddering groan.

Baby. My heart fluttered as I swallowed him.

Ty's movements stilled, his eyes softening as he traced my lips, still wrapped around him.

"Show me," he panted.

Opening for him, I stuck out my tongue. Ty gripped my chin and pulled me to stand. His mouth was on mine a moment later, his tongue sweeping as he kissed me.

My knees weakened, and my hands cupped behind his neck to hold steady. Still half-hard, his cock pressed against my lower belly. Moaning, my hands feathered through his hair. Sinful. This kiss was sinful and *electric*. I'd had none like it before.

Time both stood still and raced forward. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes in the storeroom, but that was impossible because he'd been kissing me forever.

I groaned low in my throat, kissing him deeper. The tang of his cum coated my tongue, making the kiss impossibly delicious.

"Ty," I murmured against his lips, allowing my hand to dip underneath his hoodie. My fingers traced the lines of his stomach, the downy hair along it soft beneath my touch.

"Bree," he murmured, gently pulling back. With the pads of his thumbs, he wiped the smudged mascara from my cheeks. "Look at you."

I smiled proudly, but that faded when I recognized it wasn't adoration in his voice.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He dropped his head and stepped away to tuck himself into his shorts. "That was—I'm sorry. I got carried away."

I tried to keep my voice steady. "Don't do that. Don't make me feel like I didn't decide for myself what I wanted." I whispered, "Please don't make me feel like a regret."

Ty's eyes shot up to meet mine, his head shaking. "Never, Bree. Never. It's not you. This—it's not about you."

He cupped my cheek, pressing a hard kiss on my forehead. And though the words were right, a heaviness beneath them didn't match the longing that filled my heart.

The list of options was short. If it wasn't me...

He cleared his throat, avoiding my eyes again. "I'm—that ____"

"It's fine. I promise."

My hand dropped, sliding from his hoodie to give him space. It *was* fine, but the panic on his face indicated he didn't believe it. As if I would chase him down and demand a marriage proposal because I knew the taste of his cum.

"I wanted to." I held his cheek, needing him to look at me. Reluctantly, he did. "I wanted to. I'm asking for nothing, okay?"

He nodded, licking his lips. "That makes it worse, Bree. You deserve someone—"

"Who respects that I know my limits," I finished for him. "Did you have fun?"

With a single nod and a soft smile, he said, "Yeah."

"You don't have to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

He opened his mouth to answer, but I cut him off. My arms wrapped around his waist, my fingers tangling in the fabric of his hoodie. I enjoyed giving Ty pleasure, and I'd do anything to avoid causing him panic.

Nuzzling against him, I whispered, "I won't tell my brother. Promise."



TyS weat coated my skin, my body thrumming with adrenaline and fear.

"Don't touch him! Don't you dare touch him!"

It didn't matter how fast I ran. How quickly I made it to the cupboard to squeeze inside of it. He caught my foot before I could close the door, pulling me out as I kicked and screamed. Or maybe it was my mom screaming.

He was everywhere, surrounding me, swallowing me, crushing me with his anger and fists and breath that stank of alcohol.

If only I'd been faster. I could have shut myself in the cupboard. The one under the stairs. The one he didn't know locked from the inside. The one my mom put in after last time when he broke my wrist with an easy twist of his heavy hands.

If only I'd been faster.

Getting to the cupboard took me four seconds, but he only needed three.

Those hands wrapped around my ankle, dragging me as I clawed at the floor. The carpet burned my knees as I slid along.

With one eye swollen shut and the other already bruised to oblivion, my mom tried to crawl to me. Her arm hung in a weird position. It didn't look right.

She wouldn't make it in time. What a waste. She'd thrown herself before him to buy me time to run, and I'd been too slow.

His breath stunk with a heat that seared my skin as he fisted my shirt collar to hoist me face-to-face with the beast that consumed him.

"Not so fast, are you, Tyler?"

Tyler. That was him. Not me. Tyler was mean and angry and nasty and cruel. Not me. That would never be me.

I tried so hard. I kicked and squirmed and scratched and pulled. It only made him laugh louder.

"Not so strong, either."

Then it went dark.

Sucking in a gasp of air, I bolted upright, surrounded by the thick darkness of the nightmare.

He got me.

After a moment, my eyes adjusted to the surrounding space. My dad wasn't here. It wasn't his darkness.

Sometime in the early morning, a pastel purple and orange sky broke through my kitchen window despite the muddled remnants of my nightmare.

A hand on my chest confirmed my breathing and that my heart was beating. Too fast, probably.

It passes. You won't have this feeling forever. Deep breaths.

My head slowly calmed my body. You're not having a heart attack. You had a nightmare. You fell asleep working at the table. You are an adult. You are safe.

After some deep breaths, I pushed aside the papers in front of me and sat up, rubbing my face.

One... Two... Three... Four.

Keep going. Don't stop. They catch you when you stop.

The alarm on my phone vibrated a moment later. How long had I slept? A few hours?

Rolling my neck, I groaned as it cracked. It'd been a while since I had a nightmare like that. Stress-induced. That had to be it.

Work was its own nightmare. It made sense—work stress fucking up my dreams.

Everything else was business as usual. Early morning runs, full days at the office. Texts with my best friend's sister, whom I promised to watch out for instead of defile.

It was no big deal. Bree and I found a groove to the game between us. An agreement. An understanding. I'd been honest, and she asked for nothing more than I would give her.

So why did my stomach knot when she said those golden words? "I won't tell my brother."

They hadn't delivered the relief intended.

And why couldn't I shake memories of her taste, her touch, her fucking *mouth*? Goddamn. Bree could suck dick—a

thought I'd never, ever have imagined saying two months ago.

Worse, it wasn't the heat of her wrapped around me that caused my heart to stutter. It was the sweet laugh from that dangerous mouth. The sharp sting of her sense of humor. Her curious questions and thoughtful observations.

Worse still—I couldn't stop thinking about her. Couldn't stop looking at her. Couldn't stop *wanting* her. This wasn't me.

This. Wasn't. Me.

Was it a coincidence I had a nightmare about my dad? Or a red flag?

Those nightmares haunted my childhood, but by the time I was a teenager and after years of therapy, they'd calmed. I didn't have another until my first year of law school.

It had been a challenging year with stress and unraveling when I needed to do better, work harder, and improve faster. I fell behind because of the pressure and adjustment to school.

Ty Jensen didn't fall behind. He moved ahead, sprinting, running, moving—always moving.

A horrible panic attack convinced me I was dying while on the phone with Ezra. I was in my dorm room at Berkeley, and he was in Seattle.

My best friend talked me through it, then got on a plane, flying to verify with his own eyes that I was okay. He stayed for a week, helping me settle.

And I went to his little sister's apartment and watched her masturbate while I jerked myself off, thinking I was a noble man because I didn't touch her.

I couldn't stop there either. No. Ty Jensen didn't stop. He let that same little sister get on her knees to please him days later.

I tried to stay away. I swear. Let everything linger between us, like the crackle of energy in the air would sink to the ground and disappear if we just pretended it had never existed. Fuck, fuck, Christ, fuck.

Nothing like destroying your best friend's little sister's throat and her dignity to tug the thread that begins your unraveling.

"I won't tell my brother."

Unfortunately for me, Tilly picked up where my shit morals left off.

"This is a colossal disappointment. Completely unacceptable," Tilly said on Monday morning, loosening his tie and sighing as he leaned back in his chair.

After ten minutes of agitated pacing, he finally sat while we had a conference call with Anderson and his team. Anderson was at least to the point, not dragging the call longer than necessary.

Ten minutes was plenty of time to convey his disapproval of my performance.

"It was a Sunday walkthrough—" I started, but Tilly lifted his hand to shut me up.

"Anderson is a top-tier client. You can't send a junior associate in your place and not expect an uproar."

"That was weeks ago. I've been to every one since—"

"And still not delivered what he asked," Tilly reminded me. "He feels neglected and let down. Burns and Farmer held his dick to piss when requested. You leave him hanging in the wind."

He waved his hand dismissively in my direction.

"I'm Breezy. I promise, Ty. I'm choosing casual. I'm good with it."

"If one of us isn't good with it anymore?"

"Then you get Ezra in the divorce. Promise."

Morning fog blanketed the city at this early hour. It would burn off by lunch, but Tilly's bad mood would linger. Regardless of how reasonable it was to send a junior associate in my place for a standard walkthrough on the weekend, Anderson expected better and demanded it. I'd fucked up. Plain and simple.

Lacing my fingers together, I set my hands in my lap and did my best to remain calm despite the swirling chaos in my gut.

"He's my best friend. He trusted me, and I promised—"

"He'll never know. You want casual, and I want fun."

"Mia proved more than capable of fielding questions and taking over. She's been hustling just as hard as me on this. I'd never have sent her if Anderson were there—"

"Not the point," Tilly said with a sigh. The chair groaned beneath his weight as he sank back in his seat and stared out the expansive windows. "That's not how we conduct business here, and it's not something a partner would do."

I'd yet to see a partner attend a menial weekend task, but pointing that out wouldn't do me any favors.

I hadn't been delivering on my performance or Anderson's successes.

"This is probably a terrible idea, Bree."

"Could be."

"That wicked grin does little to make me think otherwise."

I cleared my throat. "Of course. You're right. It was my mistake, and I'll fix it."

"Damn right you will," he grumbled, shaking his head. "This is it, Ty. There is no partnership without Anderson. He'll be in London for two weeks, but he's due back on the twentieth. You'll meet him that morning, apologize, make amends, and bring him the Presidio contract with all his concessions met."

"That's—"

"What you'll do," Tilly finished, standing and adjusting his suit without glancing at me. The frown lines on his weathered face deepened. "Pick your best color of lipstick, and expect some ass-kissing."

My stomach twisted and knotted. Not with sucking up to a petulant rich asshole—that was a regular workday, but Tilly's timeline was untenable. Landing the Presidio concessions aside, I was leaving the Thursday before for Ezra's bachelor party at the cabin and then flying to Mexico.

"Sir, to be clear, I'm out of office-"

"Plans change." Tilly leaned down, buzzing his assistant. "Thomas, reschedule my ten o'clock Pilates and call a meeting with everyone on Anderson's deal. We're in emergency mode."

Because of me. We were in emergency mode because of me, and I needed to fix it. I only had to contend with my best friend's wedding festivities, avoid telling him I defiled his sister by shoving my dick down her throat—and planned to do it again—and grovel at the feet of a man who wanted to kick me in the face when I was down because it made him feel good...

While ensuring these outrageous and near-impossible concessions were met on an unattainable timeline.

Right.

Tilly dismissed me, his hand gesturing to the door. "No more fuck ups. You present yourself to Anderson. No proxies. He doesn't pay for fill-ins."

The unease already worked its way to my gut. "Of course."

I could do it. I wouldn't stop until it was done.

Stress cleaved my chest, digging and pulling. The stitching of my restlessness tore through me and threatened to spill all over Tilly's office. Just a little longer. I had to hold the seams tight for a little longer.

But letting off a little pressure might help.

Settling back in my office, I took a deep breath and texted Bree.

Me: Free to come over tonight?

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Making a conscious attempt to leave work before seven, I came close.

Walking out of the building at eight fifty-three, I fumbled through my messages, rolling my eyes at the most recent text.

Ezra: Call me, yeah? Or proof of life or whatever.

I smiled and groaned simultaneously. Ezra sent it because he was worried, but he only worried because I'd been avoiding him.

A few work texts waited, and then the one I hoped for.

Bree: 8:30 works for me. Looking forward to seeing you then. This time, I'll be wearing my own underwear. Still not returning yours, though.

Then, fifteen minutes ago.

Bree: Just letting you know I'm here.

Shit. I'd have to huff it home.

Me: On my way. I'm sorry. Got caught up. I'll see you soon. But why wear any underwear at all? You have ten minutes to consider righting that wrong.

I smiled, focused on not tripping while texting and jogging, lost in thoughts of Bree's panties.

Me: But... what color panties did you choose? And will they be drenched for me when I get there?

Autocorrect helped me as I maneuvered past pedestrians, multitasking at its finest. Dodging people and naughty texting my best friend's off-limits sister, asking if she's wet for me. No big deal!

Entering the lobby and waiting for the elevator, I considered taking the stairs. But I was sweating after my hustle and needed a moment.

The elevator dinged, the doors opening and letting out a couple. Nodding politely, I stepped aside to let them by before

getting in and hitting the button to the eighth floor. My phone vibrated in my hand, and I grinned as I brought it up to read.

Ezra: Braved white ones today, and if they were drenched, I'd be reaching out to my doctor instead of you. Considerate of you to inquire, though. I did ask for proof of life. Shame on me for not specifying boundaries.

I glanced at those fingers, shaking my head. Fumbling assholes. They better improve their precision tonight.

Ezra: Who is this one? A fountain, from the sounds of it.

I laughed despite myself, getting ready to tuck my phone into my pocket to evict my friend from my conscious thought when I was heading to rail his sister, but my hand halted. If I didn't answer now, I'd ruminate on the message.

Respond. Keep going.

Me: You know me. Just a good time.

Ezra: Anyone I know?

Fuck, brother.

The doors opened to my floor, and I scratched along my jaw, considering what to say. No skirting him on this—the moment of truth.

Or not.

Me: That coworker from a few months ago. Just needed a night. Now quit cock blocking me. Your jealousy knows no bounds.

Lying to my best friend didn't settle well—given it was the first time I'd done it.

Ezra: I am somewhat unreasonable. Unblocking cocks now. Have fun, and don't drown.

Bree waited at the end of the hall, sitting on her butt with her knees tucked and her chin resting on top as she leaned against my door.

She grinned when she saw me, standing to adjust her dress. Every thought from moments before tumbled out of my head. I left it all behind and led Bree into my apartment, closing the door.

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"I can't believe your willingness to sit through an entire episode of Shark Week," I said, chuckling as I handed Bree a cup of tea and sat beside her on the couch.

It was a strange experience to have her in my apartment... hanging out. With clothes on. The start of having a woman at my place for non-work obligations usually involved immediately getting naked. A practical man with little spare time, I prided myself on my efficiency.

She thanked me, blowing on her tea and taking a sip. A benign act, but my heart palpitated.

"I figured if I'm going to be comfortable in the water, I need to understand it better." She shrugged, pulling her braid over her shoulder and fiddling with the end of it. "Though I won't say I enjoyed watching great white sharks chase seal decoys and launch themselves into the air at frightening speeds."

"Yeah, we probably should have started with a different episode."

Bree was a trooper. She laughed, setting down her mug. "It's fine. I've spent the last six months trying to learn how to handle being scared without depriving myself of the experiences I want to have. This is a good exercise."

"What other experiences do you want to have?" I blurted with an uncharacteristically bumpy execution. "I mean, what does that look like in your world?"

She pinched her braid tighter with a shy smile and diverted her gaze to the couch cushion between us.

"All of them. I spent a lot of years not doing things. Either because they scared me, I wasn't healthy enough for it, or others didn't think I could. I moved to San Francisco for a new start. A new me."

"The old you was pretty great," I said softly. Her eyes shot to mine, scanning my face. For what, I couldn't tell. "The old me wouldn't have blown you in a storeroom at six a.m."

I nearly choked, sitting up and clearing my throat. "I'm not sure what to say to that."

It was the proverbial elephant in the room, but I preferred it residing comfortably away from us. I had no idea what to do with Bree, even though nothing had changed except permissibility.

"You don't want me now that you've had me?" She brought her leg up, tucking it beneath her and twisting to face me as her elbow rested on the back of the couch. "Or you don't want me because you *can* have me?" She glanced at the TV. "Or are you just really into the Discovery Channel?"

I was, but that wasn't why we were watching it.

My hands sat in my lap, my stomach flipping with nerves. "I'm still me," I said, opting for honesty. "I'll likely be even more me in the next couple of weeks as I shore up a messy work situation. I'll likely piss you off, and there's a reason I don't have a girlfriend."

"Right." She nodded, propping her chin on her fist. "Probably has something to do with the fact you're so grotesquely cruel and hideous."

I smiled, my hand snaking into the space between us and resting an inch away from her knee. "Probably has something to do with that."

Bree laughed, a light cadence that shined in her smile. When comfortable and relaxed, she was radiant.

"I'm a big girl, Ty. I'm about to start my graduate program, have volunteer work ahead of me, and will still be working weekends at the shop. I'm not exactly rolling around in free time. You've considered why you keep things casual in your life, but you've not asked about mine."

Well. Shit.

I puffed a long breath, staring at my hand near her leg. "I'm an asshole."

She shoved me playfully. "Just a little self-absorbed, I'd say."

"Goes with the territory of being grotesquely cruel and hideous." I shook my head. "I don't want to fuck things up. That's all. I don't want to blow up my friendship with—"

"Ezra," Bree groaned, rolling her pretty eyes. "I know."

"No," I said softly. "I mean, *yes*, but I was going to say I don't want to blow up my friendship with you."

My hand slid to rest on her knee. Her skin was soft but cold when exposed beneath her sundress. I should have turned down the AC, but having her in my apartment raised my body temperature approximately four thousand degrees.

"Then you don't. *We* don't. We make an active choice in how we want this to go." Her smile faltered, but only for a moment. "How we want it to end."

My lawyer hackles raised high, negotiations on the tip of my tongue. Ruthless and straightforward, uncomfortable conversations and confrontations didn't faze me. Bree? She looked slightly sick.

"What have your experiences with casual relationships been like?" I asked, careful how I worded my question.

A smile remained frozen on her face. "Plentiful."

She didn't blink, and I didn't quite believe her.

"Mexico!" she exclaimed, slapping my arm before flinching at her volume. "Ha." She lowered her voice and tried to relax her face. "Ahem. Mexico. We hang out, have casual fun, and return to our lives as friends after Mexico. A summer fling."

"Through Mexico?"

"Yeah. Through Mexico. Then I'm back at school, and you're back at blowing through life."

Timed, planned, and with permission. The only way I took breaks without unraveling. There was no reason doing this with Bree couldn't be the same.

"And if feelings shift?"

I wasn't sure if I meant for her or me, but Bree interpreted it differently than my worry of feelings growing stronger.

"If feelings shift and you need to bow out early, so be it. I'd rather you were honest with me than feel sorry for me or handle me with kid gloves because you don't think I can handle myself."

It was the correct answer, but it stoked a percolating discomfort in my mind that I was in over my head. Not because I would overwhelm or blow past Bree, but perhaps because she would do it to me.

I tucked the thought back where it belonged—the dungeons of denial.

"I know you can handle yourself," I said, idly tracing circles on her knee.

"And my brother can handle himself." Bree's voice was soft but steady. "If you prefer to keep things casual *and* quiet, that's fine, too. However, you already claimed custody of him in the dissolution of this arrangement. No take-backs, Ty. I refuse."

"Brat," I murmured, staring at her tan skin beneath my finger.

She hummed softly. "What are you going to do about it?"

Fifteen

Bree

I wouldn't survive this.

I hadn't lied when I said I wanted casual with Ty, but when I challenged him with my disobedient attitude, I questioned if I should have held him to his promise not to touch me.

With fast hands roughly grasping my hips, he pulled me onto his lap. Urgent and demanding, I wasn't sure what would be left of me when he was done.

He wasted no time seating me with my back to his stomach and my legs spread over his thighs. My heart pounded wildly, my chest rising and falling faster than my breath could keep up.

"Bree," Ty breathed, one hand gripping my hip while the other fisted my braid and tugged my head back, forcing me to look at him. "Tell me again you want this."

His fingertips dug into my soft flesh, a delicious reminder he would touch me back tonight.

"I want this."

The intensity glowing in his eyes signaled there was no slowing this down. Once Ty started, he wouldn't stop. He warned me, and I hadn't listened.

I was listening now.

"Say 'red' if you want to stop at any point, for any reason. Do you understand? If your mouth is otherwise occupied, tap my arm or leg three times. I won't restrain your hands." He paused. "Tonight."

His forehead fell to my shoulder, and he wrapped my braid tighter around his fist. Hard and thick beneath me, he thrust his hips upward.

I whimpered, willing to submit to anything my body urged me to do. Never had I been wanted with such fierce desire, but never had I craved someone with extremity in return.

The typical self-conscious ramblings spilled from my awareness, ceasing to exist for a blissful moment in which I felt revered as I was. Present in my body, not my brain, I wasn't trying to escape or hide.

Mexico. Mexico, and then it would be gone, but I'd cling to this for all the seconds I could. Why had I wasted my time on anyone who didn't make me feel like this?

Ty kissed my shoulder, his teeth nipping lightly. "Bree. Do you understand? Answer me with words."

"Yes. My safe word is 'red' if I want to stop for any reason or tap three times." I hesitated. "Are you going to hurt me?"

He buried his face in my neck, biting the sensitive skin behind my ear before his breath turned to a whisper against the shell.

"No, but I'm going to touch you. Everywhere. There's nothing you'll hide from me and nothing I won't take."

Fuck. Everything tightened, an aching surrender.

"You have four seconds to change your mind. After that? I keep going, and I don't stop."

My hips rocked forward, undulating and eager for more. I didn't want Ty to stop, and I didn't care where he touched, what he wanted, or what he'd take. I would give it.

"One," he mumbled, his mouth on my jaw, kissing the soft line of my face as I ground harder.

"Ty," I moaned, my hand gripping his thigh to steady myself, shamelessly rolling my hips.

His erection was hard and evident against my back, and my other hand reached to stroke him. The position was slightly awkward, but I wanted to touch him, to please him. To earn his praise and adoration.

"You like that?" he murmured, his breath lighting a path of flames over my nape as I burned for him. "Such a greedy girl, already trying to ride my cock. Bree, what am I going to do with you?"

"Everything," I breathed. "You're going to do everything with me."

"Mmm," he hummed, his hand sliding along my abdomen in a lazy stroke that only fed a hunger for more. "Two."

He could take—whatever he wanted, however he wanted, wherever he wanted—so long as he just took it.

"Come here." He released my hair, both hands on my waist, and encouraged me to flip around. "I want to watch you when I touch that gorgeous pussy. I want to see your face when it's my hand to make you come."

I wasn't prepared for the intimacy of facing him like this. His nose brushed mine, his eyes intently watching. His dick had been in my mouth, but even that didn't feel as vulnerable as when our eyes locked.

"Ty," I whispered, my hands connecting behind his neck as I rolled with him. He held me tighter, a half-smile tugging up.

Our lips were so close his breath could have been my own.

"Three."

One hand slid lower, his finger dancing along the hem of my dress. He skirted the thin fabric, bunching it higher to expose more of me.

Ty ghosted over my collarbone with labored breaths. I cupped the back of his head, my mouth going slack as I rubbed myself all over him. Nearly trembling, I rode him lewdly. Fully clothed, no skin exposed, and I could come just like this.

Threading my fingers through his hair and pulling his lips to mine, I groaned, "Four."

· • • • • • • • • • •

Ty's kiss was ruinous. Soft yet forceful, tender yet demanding. His tongue slipped into my mouth, tangling and caressing. Close, but not close enough. I wanted more.

"You're a tease," I whined.

My arms wrapped tighter around his neck, and my thighs spread over his lap. Undoubtedly, I was making a mess of his slacks, and Ty did not look like a man who bought cheap suits.

"Kettle, meet pot," he murmured against my lips, chuckling. "You've been teasing me for weeks in your tiny *fucking* bikini with your gorgeous *fucking* smile and sweet *fucking* laugh."

A thrust of his hips punctuated his words, stealing gasps from me with every upward drive.

Lifting me off him, Ty pressed me flat on my back. His mouth was on mine again, our hands grabbing at clothing and pulling each other closer as we struggled to undress hurriedly.

Desperate and messy, I fumbled with the buttons on his dress shirt as he unbuckled his belt and worked on his pants. He sat back on his heels, sliding his shirt off his shoulders with a teasing smile.

Bare-chested and with his pants open, he let his eyes wander over me.

"I can't decide if I want you in this dress the first time I fuck you."

With one finger, he encouraged the strap of my sundress down. Then, the other side, until he exposed my breasts. Given the frenzy we'd been in moments before, Ty's delicate movement surprised me.

I fought the instinct to cover myself. Even in the dim light of the living room, Ty could see my body for what it was.

The devilish gleam in his eyes gave every indication it pleased him.

"No bra?" He tsked, kissing along my chest as his finger widely circled my nipple. Close, but not close enough. More. I needed more.

"Please," I rasped, my hips rising as my lower back arched off the couch.

It still wasn't enough.

Locking my legs at the ankles and bringing our bodies together, I whimpered and writhed beneath him. His erection pressed against my belly, and my hand slid between us to stroke him.

"You have to touch me," I begged. "Please."

Ty gave a dark laugh, one I didn't recognize.

"I don't have to do anything." He took my nipple in his mouth, and my bare skin scratched against the couch as my back bowed in pleasure. "You don't have to," I panted, my dress pooled at my waist as I brazenly stroked him. "But you will."

I bit his plump bottom lip and enjoyed the sound of his hiss with the sting of it.

Ty's eyes flashed something wicked, his smile equally salacious. "Keep going," he said softly. "See what happens, Bree. I love to punish a brat."

I shuddered at his words, the steady calm despite my taunts. What was Ty like when he lost control? *Really* lost control. How hard would I have to push until he did?

But the only hard thing pushing was his cock heavy against me as he slowly thrust into my hand.

"Do you like punishment?" His mouth pressed to my ear, his voice deceptively gentle. I had little doubt Ty would put me over his knee if I said yes.

"I... I don't know," I admitted.

"Should we call that yellow?" He licked a slow path along my neck, tugging my earlobe between his teeth.

"Okay."

Ty stilled, pulling back to take my face in his hands. "No 'okay.' You can tell me you don't know, take your time to consider it, or say no outright. You don't do something simply because I suggest it. Do you understand, Bree?"

"Yes." I blew out a breath, nodding and giving a brief smile. "I'm open to it. I've never had anyone do... stuff. Stuff that wasn't..."

"Vanilla?" His knuckles caressed my cheek. "You're quite a brat for someone who's never had to answer for her attitude. Such a natural."

His gaze followed his touch, gliding over my collarbone and down the side of my breast, tickling along my ribs. Lower his touch went, his finger dragging over my navel and lower still.

Sinking into my panties, he groaned the same time I did when those fingers found where I wanted him the most. My entire back lifted off the couch when his hand cupped my pussy, his pointer and ring finger spreading me as the middle one circled my clit. "Shit," I gasped.

Ty shadowed me, watching my face. "You know, punishment doesn't have to be painful."

Licking my lips, I nodded. "Okay."

His brows furrowed, and he stopped his touch.

"No!" I grabbed his hand. "I didn't mean 'okay' like whatever you want. I just meant 'okay' like I'm okay with punishment not being painful. I don't think I like things that hurt."

I'd spent plenty of my life hurting.

Ty nudged his nose along my jaw. "I'd love to tie you to a spreader bar. Ankles over and bent at the knees. Immobilized. Fastened and spreadeagle so I have unimpeded access to your pussy."

I blushed, my cheeks just as hot as my desire at the thought.

"That would embarrass you?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I don't think it would look good. That I would look good."

He sighed. "Oh, Bree." He resumed fingering me, his eyes just as unrelenting as his hand when he slid two fingers inside.

"I like how your pretty little cunt looks just as much as I enjoy how it feels. You're beautiful, and when you're ready for it, I'm going to stare at your pussy until I think I might die if I don't bury myself inside you. Then I'll stare even longer. Eventually, I'll fuck you, and when I'm done, I'll watch as you leak my cum. I'll do that all night, fucking and admiring you. I think I'd like that."

"Oh, god," I whimpered, clenching against Ty's fingers.

"I think you'd like that, too," he murmured, his mouth lowering to suck my nipple as his hand worked me harder. "I think we can find other ways to help you behave that don't hurt. What do you think?" "I'm—I'm going to come." My nails sank into the muscled skin of his back as I ignited. "Ty, shit, I'm—" My chin tipped to the ceiling, my head falling back as my body jerked beneath him.

"Take what you deserve," he encouraged, gently rubbing my pussy and not stopping despite my sensitivity.

I whimpered, scooting away from his touch, but his other hand pressed down on my belly to hold me still.

"You're not done," he said softly. "I told you I wasn't going to stop."

He kissed along my neck, his lips and tongue and teeth nipping, licking, and sucking.

"Punishment can be an interesting thing. Not always straightforward, as one would think."

The mischief in his eyes should have alarmed me, but it didn't. His soft chuckle against my skin caused it to pebble with the threat.

"Have you ever come so many times that you lose your mind? The pleasure clouds with pain, and you're not quite sure where one starts and the other ends?"

My eyes widened. I swallowed, shaking my head, and whispered, "No."

"I just keep going."

Ty's hand bracketed my neck with solicitous pressure, making it impossible to move from his grasp. His lips kissed along my nape, long and exposed from his grip on me as he held me in place. Using his free hand to hook his thumb into the waistband of my panties, he inched them down with a rough tug.

My chest heaved with excitement, rising with quick, shallow breaths. He was taking entirely too long, yet not long enough.

"Please, fuck me already," I whined, hardly recognizing my voice.

Ty said nothing, his mouth trailing down my throat and kissing over my chest. The grasp on my throat didn't relent. All control belonged to him as he lavished my breasts. His teeth tugged gently before giving a sharp bite.

"Spread your legs for me. I want to look at you before I have you."

My confidence froze, the realization of his ask sinking in, and the familiar need to hide.

"You're beautiful." Ty slid down my body, settling at my thighs.

He kissed my belly, curving his arms around each leg to rest in the cradle of my hips. A gentle tug brought me closer to his face.

"Seeing all of you drives me wild. You never have to hide from me because I want every part of you."

Ty kept his eyes on mine, his chin resting at the top of my pubic bone as he gave a lustful smile.

"Can I? Will you let me look at you?"

New You. New You.

New. Fucking. You.

A grown woman, my body had served me in this life, and now it was strong and healthy. His adoring look told me I had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Every part of you is gorgeous. Desirable." Ty's head dipped to press fluttering kisses on the inside of my knee. His lips brushed the skin of my thighs on his ascent to my pussy, his breath a burning whisper of promise. "Let me see you."

"Yes," I whispered. "You can look at me."

His head tilted in consideration as he pushed my knees wide and gazed at me. "Exquisite. You're exquisite."

Tenderly, Ty ran his palms over my legs, easing along my thighs and running in circles. His fingers gave a light squeeze with the next pass, and then he lowered his mouth. He licked my pussy in one broad stroke of his tongue, moaning.

"You taste so good," he mumbled, nuzzling into me and burying his face.

Ty took his time, licking and sucking with a precision that curled my toes. I held the back of his head, grinding against his mouth and encouraging him to keep going.

"Oh, wow." My hips rocked in a fevered and uncontrollable dance that matched the pace of his tongue as he devoured me. "You're so good at that."

He was. He really, *really* was. I'd never been consumed like this.

I could *feel* the smile on his lips.

"I can be better." A finger entered me, then a second, curling as he surveyed my reaction.

Shifting to watch the movement of his fingers pumping in and out of my pussy, he leaned back.

"Watching you like this pleases me, Bree."

I whimpered, my eyes fluttering closed.

"No, no. Stay with me. You're doing so well. Look."

He cupped the back of my neck, pulling me in for a deep kiss. I'd never tasted myself before, and the uninhibited flush of Ty's enjoyment on his face made me like it maybe as much as him.

Ty broke the kiss, guiding my head to stare between us as his hand worked my body.

"So pretty when my fingers are fucking you."

His thumb pressed against my clit, rubbing tight and fast circles, and his words washed over me with the same gratification as his physical touch.

My stomach tightened, my toes dipping down and flexing as my eyes slammed shut. I was going to burst. It wasn't just the thousands of nerve endings to bring pleasure. It was the revelry of the man working so hard to praise, revere, and venerate me.

To see me.

I shattered beneath him, his words, and his affection.

My fingers dug into his arms, leaving half-moon indentations in the skin as I gasped his name. Ty slowed his pace, gripping my hip with the other hand, and watched my face as he furrowed his brows and groaned with me.

Breathless and panting, I pressed my hand to my temple.

"Ty—"

His mouth stole my words, the vigorous roll of his tongue knocking all thoughts from my head. Kissing Ty was pure rapture. I let go of the need to speak again, bringing the kiss deeper.

"One more, beautiful girl. You can do one more before I have you, can't you?" he murmured, removing his fingers and kissing a dangerous path toward what I was sure would be my death.

"Ty—"

"Get on the floor. On your hands and knees, low on your forearms with your ass in the air." He stood, kicking off his pants. "Leave the dress like that. I like you a little messy."

I propped on my elbows and stretched out on the couch as my eyes followed him. He strolled naked to the kitchen, grabbing his wallet from the counter.

Pulling out a foiled package, he said, "We'll discuss limits when we're not naked, but have you been tested since your last partner?"

"Yes. Everything is good."

Ty nodded, returning to the living room.

"I said on your hands and knees, Bree." He dropped the condom on the floor, gesturing for me to follow. "I've also been tested and am clear, but I prefer using condoms." He gave me an impatient stare. "And here I thought you were done being a brat. Where'd my good girl go? It seems you've chosen not to listen."

Slinking to the floor, I shook my head. "I'm listening, Ty. I just..." *Don't like that position*, I wanted to say. Don't like how exposed *everything* is when I'm on all fours like that.

He raised his eyebrows. "Just?"

"Just..."

"It's important that I understand what you need to feel good."

A sentence I'd never once heard in my life. My chest tightened, swelling with emotions I couldn't figure out.

Closing my eyes and licking my lips, I said, "I just get embarrassed that you can see *everything*." I lowered my voice to a whisper, as if we weren't alone. "Like, you can see my butthole, even. It's another level of visibility."

Ty stared impassively.

"I should make you get on all fours in front of the mirror and watch as I rim your ass until you stop thinking something is embarrassing about your body or what I want to do to it."

My jaw dropped.

He sighed. "One step at a time. On your hands and knees, ass up high, my brave girl. You pick. I can fuck you with my mouth from behind or my cock. You've been so good for me tonight. Let me be good for you, Bree."

The way he said my name made my skin dance with a prickle of pleasure. I wanted to drive him wild. I wanted him as desperate for me as I was for him. He made me feel like I *could*. It wasn't about approval. It was about trust. I trusted Ty enough to give without fear.

"Please fuck me with your cock," I said softly.

He gave a wolfish smile, eclipsing me. "Using your manners like *such* a good girl."

His lips were on mine, consuming and charged. Taking. Taking everything and leaving me with the euphoria of his affection.

A welcomed trade.

Sixteen

Ty

W ith tangled hair and annihilated makeup, Bree was beyond compare as she slept soundly.

Standing next to the bed, I ran featherlight touches over her bare arm and bit my smile, admiring the hickeys lining her breasts.

The night hadn't gone as expected, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise that I invited her to stay instead of seeing her off when we finished.

A summer fling, a few weeks of casual fun to scratch an itch for us both. Permission to *pause*, then resume life as usual when all was said and done.

Bree rolled over, her hushed breath hitching as she mumbled something in her sleep. I was tempted to crawl back under the blanket with her. Tuck her in my arms, curl around her, and allow myself a little more rest.

The sun hadn't yet risen, but the lightening sky cast a hazy blue glow in my bedroom. I'd been up long enough to have gotten ready for work, as much as I wanted to stay and rub Bree's scent on me again so I'd have something to smile about on a torturous day of obligation.

"Ту."

My eyes shuttered closed as I *heard* her breathy moan like I was still inside her. Felt my lips kissing up her spine until I whispered against her neck.

"Give me another. Just one more. You're doing so good, baby. You can. I know you can."

I bit back a groan, exhaling through my nose as I pictured my thrusts picking up while my hands cradled Bree's fleshy hips, eyes taking in the way her ass shook with each hard drive. Pulling out to the tip and thrusting in with a punishing stroke. How eagerly she took me.

I drew out two more orgasms from her before giving in to my own.

"Oh, god."

The heavenly whimper as her stomach went taut and her fingertips flexed against the carpet. The way she dropped to her forearms in collapse, her ass raised to the heavens like a woman who no longer cared what I saw of her.

Fucking Bree was a dream, and it had little to do with her tight cunt or her sublime smile or that sweet puff of breath when she fell into her pleasure. And oh my, had I wanted to give her pleasure. To praise and satisfy her until she let go. *Really* let go. Not of her body, but of her fears, insecurities, and hurts.

"Stay with me," I murmured, pulling her into the shower.

She allowed me to wash her hair, almost too tired to stand after what we'd done. Like hell I'd send her home. I wanted to take care of her. Clean her up, make her drink some water, and have a snack.

"That seems..." Bree was hesitant, like we were breaking some rules. We weren't. I was a lawyer, well familiar with the law. All permissible.

The way I'd grinned, shamelessly admiring her ruined state, sprawled on my bed with her wet hair splayed over my pillow and remnants of her mascara smudged beneath her eyes.

"That seems like a perfectly reasonable idea."

"It's creepy to stare," Bree mumbled, tugging the blanket over her shoulders. Her voice was heavy with sleep, but she yawned and blinked open one eye. "Should I charge a fee for this?"

I smiled, petting her long locks. "You'd make a killing. I have to go. I'm sorry."

She nodded, kicking off the blanket and yawning again. "Sure. I'll grab my stuff."

Pressing my hand on her shoulder to keep her there, I quickly said, "No. Stay. Please. I'll leave a key, and you can lock up on your way out."

She chuckled. "Brave to assume I won't go through your stuff."

"You'll stay and sleep," I said softly, caressing her hair. I hoped she would let me wash it again. "Wake up when your body feels like it. Make yourself breakfast, drink plenty of water, and shower again if you want. You'll call or text me if you need something or feel weird or uncomfortable about last night." A surprising dynamic, but with Bree, extended aftercare felt right.

She wouldn't go through my things, regardless of her posturing. She didn't want to do anything to disappoint or upset me. It's why I didn't spank her ass when she dared me to do something about her bratty attitude. It's why I didn't need to punish her with pain. It was likely she had a high tolerance for it after hurting herself the harshest.

Punishment for Bree was making her take care of herself. See herself. Love herself.

Face herself.

She trusted me to give that, just as I trusted her to respect my boundaries. I shook aside the urge to examine what that meant.

Snuggled beneath the covers, she sighed. Drawing her knees into her stomach, she curled on her side.

"There's that grotesquely cruel and hideous man I've come to know."

· • • • • • • • • • •

"You. Did. Not."

Bree's broad smile nearly bowled me over as I stepped into *The Surf Shop*, ignoring the confused glances from the few customers near the clothing racks.

To be fair, she'd shouted after slamming her palm on the counter.

"I *did*," I said with a matching smile, strolling over with a swagger that belied the thumping in my chest with Bree's excitement to see me.

It'd been a long week with little sleep and desperate attempts to rearrange the universe to meet Anderson's demands. Save his souring deal before he returned to San Francisco.

I hadn't realized how much I needed the reprieve of her sweet energy until I basked in it. Bree stood to greet me, and I didn't hesitate to wrap her in my arms for the kind of hug I *swore* I'd give any of my friends.

She poked a finger into my gut, still grinning. "Jeez, Ty. Seeing you four times in one week? I'm flattered, but showing up *early*? Careful. I might think you like me."

"It was slow at work for a Friday." *It wasn't.* "And I was just thinking of you." *A lot.* "Besides, I do happen to like you." *Also, a lot.*

I'd been thinking of her an embarrassing amount since our first night together, and I don't mean when we fucked for the first time. Since picking her up from the bonfire last month, Bree had commanded my thoughts.

Even when I didn't want her to.

But so what? Casual didn't mean I couldn't like her or want to enjoy her company. That I couldn't text her throughout the day or order lunch to the shop on days when she'd be swamped.

Spend hours sitting on the couch with my hands tangling in her hair as I talked to her about work after my busy days, and we daydreamed about all the things we'd do if we had no obligations in life or stress and worry.

Totally casual.

Bree playfully punched my arm. "Thinking about how boring it was to help me pick out a bridesmaid dress and wondering why we're friends?"

Yeah. I did that. Met her at the mall near her place two nights ago after *calling her* to catch up. Because I hadn't spoken to her since breakfast that day. Jesus.

I followed her through the shops, choosing the worst, most hideous options and laughing as she gave me a fashion show. It didn't matter how unflattering or obnoxious the selection was. Bree happily trudged into the fitting room each time, emerging with a serious expression.

"Is this the one?"

Eventually, we gave up, tired and hungry, and the mall announced its closing. I dragged her to a restaurant near my place. I had an insatiable appetite, but not for food.

Bree returned to the register, bending to rummage through something beneath the counter.

I leaned over and whispered, "I was thinking about you. Thinking about dinner at the restaurant."

Her wide eyes met mine as her cheeks flushed pink.

I'd been thinking about that restaurant and having her in the bathroom. Thinking of her soaked panties as she pushed them to the side to let me rub the tip of my cock along her pussy in the single stall, uncaring if anyone waited outside.

Sliding over her clit repeatedly until she whimpered and mewled and climaxed on me. She sank to her knees after to take me in her mouth. Sucking me until I slammed my fist against the wall, dropped my head back, and exploded down her throat.

Bree gave a nervous laugh, standing and facing me. "Yes. The ambiance was fantastic. Really nice place."

I winked. "I know all the good spots."

She puffed a long breath and headed for the clothing racks to rehang some items from the group that had left.

"So that's why you're here a few hours early? Wanting a repeat?"

Yes, but no. I'd also been thinking about my body sliding over hers in slow passes later that night, her eyes holding mine and hiding nothing. Our mouths an inch apart, sharing breath and pleasure.

But mostly? I'd been thinking about last night. After work, I met her at her apartment and shared Twizzlers while watching *Evil Dead*. As it turned out, Bree loved comedy horror films just as much as I loved them.

She went to bed after the movie, and I stayed up reading briefs and sending emails from her kitchen table instead of alone at my apartment. Aside from brushing shoulders on the couch as we shook with laughter, we hadn't gotten physical until I climbed into her bed, well past two a.m.—where I wrapped her in my arms and slept a few peaceful hours.

I cleared my throat, running a hand through my hair and shuffling in place.

"No. I'm not early because of that. I popped in to see if you wanted to hit the waves."

Bree's eyes lit up with excitement and fear in equal measure.

"No, but yes. Let me check with Brody if closing a little early is okay." She headed toward the back room, calling over her shoulder, "With the bonfire at the beach tonight, I doubt we'll get much business anyway."

The bonfire Bree invited me to.

"You still comfortable with that?" I asked carefully, watching her face for an indication her attendance was a bad idea. She'd been working with her longtime therapist again, picking up regular sessions since her assault. When Bree mentioned she wanted to start going to bonfires, I offered to tag along in case it proved more difficult than she anticipated.

With a deep breath, she smiled and nodded. "I'm good. Therapy has been helpful, and I don't want one night to ruin all the rest." She glanced away, focusing her attention on organizing swim trunks. "I appreciate you'll be there with me."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," I blurted like a fucking idiot.

Bree's hand stilled, the hanger dropping to the floor as it missed the rack.

Christ almighty.

"As your friend," I hurriedly added. "Friends help each other. We're friends." I winced, sliding my hand into my hair nervously. "Right," she murmured, bending to pick up the hanger. "Let me go check with Brody about leaving early."

Fucking idiot.

She disappeared behind the tapestry but returned with a recovered smile.

"We're good. But please be patient with me because I can't stand up on my board yet and—" Bree stopped, holding up her finger and pulling her phone from her back pocket. The pink rhinestones sparkled in the light.

"Shit," she murmured, tugging her lip. "Hold on."

She turned her back to me like that would block the sound. I chuckled.

"Did you call about my pantsuit?" She hummed a few times, the back of her head nodding to whoever had called.

"Holy shit, Ezra! You're kidding me!" Bree spun around with eyes so big I swore they would roll out of her skull.

"No way. Have you told the boys yet?" She winced and shook her head at me. "Oh, shut up. Who would I tell? It's Bizzy you have to worry about. Besides, it's not like I see your friends."

I raised my eyebrows and waved. Bree held her hand over her nose, stifling a laugh.

"Um, yeah. He helped for a bit. You know, it's hard for me to get into the ocean. Ty was a champ at helping me feel comfortable getting wet."

Bree's eyes lit up as she sank her teeth into her bottom lip and choked on a giggle.

I could *hear* Ezra on the other end.

"Goddamnit, Bree! Not funny!"

Kind of was, but whatever.

Bree strolled to the window, shutting off the store sign as she moved her brother along in conversation. She said goodbye, tucking her phone into the back pocket of her denim shorts.

"Holy shit, Ty." She zipped her lips. "Can't say anything, not going to, but *wow*."

I folded my arms over my chest and leaned against the wall while waiting for her to collect her things.

"I have persuasive ways of attaining information."

Bree pointed to the pocket holding my ringing phone. "You have a call."

I continued to ignore it. "It's your dipshit brother."

"Maybe he's calling to tell you his secrets?"

"Nope. He's calling to find out mine. I know Ezra better than anyone. You made a joke about me getting you wet, and he's calling to cross-reference your comment with any I might make and compare notes." I tapped my temple like the armchair psychologist I was. "Anything he wants to tell me, he'll save for the cabin on Thursday. Your brother prefers faceto-face conversations about important matters."

Bree slung her tote over her arm, the string of her tiny little suit spilling over the side.

"Not a joke, Ty. You did help me get wet."

I continued to ignore the ringing from my pocket as I guided her out of the shop and toward the beach. Guilt swam in my chest from blowing off my friend, soon replaced by the freedom of the ocean and the girl on my board.

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The jostling of my keys echoed through the empty apartment as I tossed them onto the table next to the front door.

Rubbing my face, I puffed a long exhale before peeling off my suit jacket and tossing it aside. It landed on the entryway floor, and for once, I didn't give a shit if my Armani wrinkled.

Dry, tired eyes burned with each weary blink as I collapsed against the door and tried to remember the day.

Wednesday. It was Wednesday. It had to be. The dumpster was pushed to the sidewalk outside the parking garage, making the turn tight when I pulled in. The trash collection was on Thursday morning. I checked my watch—1:07 a.m. No longer Wednesday, I guess.

Aside from expensive dress wear on the floor, my apartment looked the same as when I left on Monday morning. A water glass rested next to the kitchen sink, the extent of my living clutter.

No one had come in to clean. I'd just not been home to do anything other than sleep since Tilly's *third* emergency meeting to deal with my fuck up. That was two days ago. Since then, I'd lived at work and in my head during this crisis.

I tossed my satchel onto the dining room table and spread out my documents.

Swamped with work, I'd not spoken with Bree in days. I should message her. Explain how tired, weary, and fragile my entire life presently was and apologize for ignoring her since the night I held her hand and swayed in the sand with her tucked against me as she laughed and visited with her friends. She took back control, found her power and confidence, and pushed herself.

Unlike me, collapsing beneath the heavy weight of obligation, my sanity a willing submissive to the demands of my career.

I wouldn't see Bree until Mexico. I expected a text or a check-in after my radio silence, but I hadn't heard from her either. Which was what I wanted, right? Casual? Easy? Without messy feelings or expectations and explanations?

I needed this time to focus. Weeks of losing focus and obsessing over my dick instead of my work. I single-handedly risked blowing the biggest deal of my career.

But fuck. I wished Bree was here tonight. It felt good to have her proximity, even just sleeping in my bed while I worked.

"Fucking idiot," I puffed.

I scrambled to get back on track. Tilly hadn't just been pissed—he raked me over the coals in front of our entire team all week, making it a point to demonstrate what happens when people lose focus.

And I had.

I was on the verge of losing the firm a lot of money in what should have been a sure deal, and now I was about to take time off in the middle of it all.

But I wouldn't cancel on Ezra. Ever. As painful as it was to acknowledge how much I loved the angsty motherfucker.

I wouldn't cancel on him... but I lied to him.

My head dropped, my fingers tugging my hair. Blinking a few times, I took another deep breath.

I just needed to work harder. Push more. Focus. Then I'd be good and get back on track. I wouldn't stop again. Bree wasn't asking me to. This was an ideal situation.

We weren't coworkers, our chemistry was phenomenal, and she agreed to casual because I'd blow through anything else.

Ideal.

Casual.

This was casual. My feelings were casual. I was focused.

My skull pounded as I clenched my teeth to shut out the ache. I didn't expect perfection, but I expected to get things right. The last couple of months? I'd been getting it all wrong. I couldn't shake the sensation this was one more iteration of fucking up.

Seventeen

Bree

 $\textbf{``G}^{et up!"}$

I blinked, too nervous to react.

"Now, Bree. Now!"

Deep breath. Flex your core. Soft knees. Pop up.

My arms pushed through the water, catching the rhythm of the cresting swell beneath me. A slow start picked up as my speed increased, and my board drifted on the front of the wave.

Tightening my core and pushing up, I stayed low as I popped up, arms stretched for balance.

I rode my first wave.

A baby swell, long and slow, breaking close to the shoreline, but I did it.

"Yes!" Brody cheered. "Breezy! Yes!"

He followed effortlessly in my wake and hopped off his board to give a high-five before pulling me in for a hug. A squeeze so tight, I feared I would pop, but I didn't complain. I was proud, too.

"Again?" he asked, his eyes searching mine with excitement.

Brody held so much enthusiasm and pride, but instead of lifting my spirits, he inadvertently made me feel worse. I wanted another set of eyes staring at me after I caught my first wave.

I forced a smile, scolding myself for letting anything steal this moment of joy. Ty left for the cabin with the boys for Ezra's bachelor party, and I wouldn't put off an opportunity just because he wasn't around.

Most of my disappointment was because I hadn't heard from him in days. Nothing personal, and he wasn't upset. We had a lovely night at the bonfire as he held me close and murmured sweet rumblings about being proud of me and reminding me that I was stronger than I gave myself credit for.

I went home with him that night, enjoying the ways he worshiped my body.

Ty was many things, but a liar wasn't one. The silence this week proved him a man of his word. Work preoccupied his time and energy. He warned me. I told him I could listen.

Brody stared expectantly, his gigantic grin a reminder I had other things to focus on, too.

"Yeah. Let's go again."

I managed three more baby waves, falling off one in an embarrassing tumble but feeling victorious. I'd worked up to this moment all summer—this accomplishment.

Toweling off on the beach and shaking out my hair, I took in the salty scent of the ocean and the roaring of the waves. I'd done it, and now I smelled like the briny sea, and the roar of my pride was louder than any tide.

I rummaged through my bag and pulled out my phone.

"Don't even think about it," Marin huffed, flipping onto her stomach to tan her back.

"There's nothing wrong with saying *hi*," I pointed out.

"Bree," she warned.

We spoke extensively about *Breezy's Breezy Plan to Nail* Brother's Best Friend and Not Get Hurt.

Mainly, it consisted of treating a casual hookup as... casual, even if there was nothing casual about my heart rate when I thought of Ty.

"Fine." I dropped my phone into my bag, sitting in the sand with my towel wrapped around my waist.

Marin flopped her cheek onto the top of her forearms to look at me. I couldn't see her eyes behind her sunglasses, but I didn't need to. They disapproved of my clinginess. I did, too. I just didn't know how to overcome it.

"You told him you're a big girl who doesn't need him to take care of her feelings, right?"

I shielded my eyes, watching seagulls in the distance as they crowded a family's picnic.

"Right."

"Well? That means you have to walk the walk, my friend. He told you casual. You told him fun. Now you're both crossing into obsessive territory, and it's going to fuck up your plans to be breezy, Breezy." My hand dropped, filtering sand between my fingers. Marin was right.

She pushed herself up like a cobra. "I don't want to be discouraging, but I don't want to see you fall harder for him than you intend. Be realistic. That's all."

I wiggled my toes in the sand, my feet disappearing beneath it.

"It's not obsessive territory," I mumbled.

A big fat lie. It was for me, and I hated myself for it. I'd gotten carried away as if Mexico weren't days away. The start of our end, an end proven necessary by this streak of no contact.

Marin sat up and gave me a pointed look. "Tell me again about how he worships your pussy, and tell me that's not obsessive."

She pulled her sunglasses down and resumed her tanning session.

I blushed. "I've never experienced anything like it. He just... stares. Looks."

I was still getting used to allowing myself to be seen like that. Anytime I tried to hide, Ty would coax my confidence. Suddenly, I'd be on his bed, facing a mirror on the wall with my legs draped over the edge. Knees open, Ty behind me, making me watch every filthy thing he did to my pussy.

Marin smirked. "He doesn't just look. Amazing he hasn't pounded you into oblivion. How are you still walking?"

"You're the worst."

She adored pushing my comfort. Reaching for my phone, I stood and excused myself.

"But also, thank you for letting me tell you the details. My brother is calling," I said, heading farther down the beach for privacy.

"Ask him if all the boys have dicks of dreams!" she crowed.

Ignoring her, I reluctantly accepted my brother's call. I couldn't continue avoiding him this close to his wedding. He might actually need something.

"Baby sister, you finally answered. Have you been avoiding me for a specific reason?"

Ugh, never mind.

"Yes, because you're obnoxious."

He chuckled, covering the receiver with his hand. A shuffling static and some mumbling followed, and then he returned.

"Sunny wanted me to call before you flew out."

"To ask about my pantsuit?" I deadpanned.

Despite the levity in his voice earlier, Ezra grumbled. I don't think there was a conversation ever, not a single one, in which Ezra was grumble-free.

"Not about your pantsuit, but it better cover your ankles."

"I'm packing my ittiest, bittiest bikini."

Surprisingly, my brother laughed. "Yeah, okay," he conceded.

Wow. His disposition had been pleasant since he and Sunny found out they were pregnant.

My brother, gloomy and brooding and a walking bad mood, was the *last* Collins I expected to have children. Aware of how fucked up our parents were, absolutely aware of how fucked up *we* were, and adamant we wouldn't continue the multigenerational trauma with offspring.

Whereas Bizzy simply didn't want children, Ezra didn't want to do to a child what our parents had done to him, and he never saw himself as separate enough from our dad to do better.

Not until Sunny.

Too young to think about it either way, my eating disorder had been a barrier in the past even to consider it. "Sunny asked that I confirm you will be arriving on Monday."

"Yes," I answered.

I spoke with her two days ago. Unlike my overbearing brother, I adored his fiancée and enjoyed talking to her.

"And you'll be alone? No..." He sighed. "Date?"

"Also, yes."

Ezra hummed, and I didn't like it. I changed the subject instead. Sort of.

"Have you told the boys about the baby yet?"

Like Ty?

I wiggled my toe into the sand, digging a hole beneath me, then covered it up, repeating the process.

Ezra groaned. "Noah gave one big, 'I told you so,' but yeah, I told them. I wanted an ultrasound picture, and yesterday was Sunny's first appointment. We wanted to make sure things looked okay. They were pissed I was late to the party, but fuck them."

If that wasn't Ezra.

"Ty's being weird about it," he continued. The tips of my ears went warm. "He's been acting strange, and I'm unsure what to make of it. When was the last time you saw him?" The air in that pause was thick. "You know, when he was helping you to surf?"

No way Ezra knew. No way Ty would tell him. Nobody wanted to piss off the thundering storm cloud before his wedding. Besides, there was nothing to tell, and what I *could* report would cause my brother's head to implode.

"Um." I lifted onto the tops of my toes, flexing my calves. "I think the last time I saw him was when he came out to surf. I wasn't getting on a board solo yet. He helped. Seemed fine. Totally normal. Nothing amiss. Marin was there. Sharon, too," I rushed. "Brody. A roster of friends. I have friends!"

God, I sounded like a lunatic.

"Brody," Ezra teased. "Your boyfriend?"

I sighed, unsure if I was relieved he hadn't pushed back about Ty or disappointed by it. If he knew, maybe we could keep going. There'd be no reason to hide anything.

Except my brother wasn't *actually* the reason Ty and I agreed to a limited summer fling. Ezra was collateral damage in a potentially messy situation, which we avoided by setting clear boundaries. Mexico. Through Mexico.

"Would it matter?" I asked, more defeated than intended.

"Maybe," Ezra answered. "Has Ty checked him out? Seen if his intentions are honorable?"

"Whose intentions? Ty or Brody?" I muttered, pushing back the bratty pout aching to escape.

"Brody. Come on. Ty's intentions are rarely honorable, but I wouldn't expect it directed at you. It's bad enough he resorts to sleeping with coworkers to deal with his shit. And he's such a mess right now, I've little doubt he's on the prowl. Can't imagine him resorting to my little sister to blow off some steam."

My chest tightened, and I kneaded it with my fist, biting back everything I wanted to say to prove him wrong. Ty didn't see me as Ezra's little sister any longer.

I pushed down the questions about his coworkers or prowling. We hadn't discussed history. We hadn't discussed exclusivity. I assumed.

Foolishly.

Instead, I said, "Fuck you, Ezra."

He paused, his amusement fading. "You're right. That was rude."

"It was. I don't want to be mocked, and I don't deserve to be made a joke," I snapped.

I should have ignored his call. Kicking at the sand, I headed back toward my towel.

Ezra swallowed audibly. I rarely stood up to him. "You don't. Of course. I'm sorry, Bree."

Not the reaction I expected. "Thank you," I mumbled.

"Ty would be lucky to get a girl like you. I hope you know it."

My brother seldom complimented me directly, and I fought the urge to argue with him. Personal growth and all that.

"A woman," I corrected.

Ezra conceded. "Yes. A woman. Weird and gross. Let's not speak of it."

He hesitated like he wanted to say something, but he kept it to himself.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Hey, I can't wait to see you. Sunny, too. We all miss you. You know that, right?"

"I do." I did. "I'll see you on Monday," I said, hanging up with my brother and gripping the phone tight in my fist.

Feelings—so many of them—swirled in my gut. Too messy and cluttered to catch any specific one.

Ty had been clear about his intentions and expectations. I claimed I could handle it because I was an adult who chose to accept the consequences.

I had to act it, not follow him around like a puppy.

My phone stayed tucked in my hands as I hurriedly typed the text and sent it to Ty before my pride stopped me.

I was a goddamn puppy.

You're probably thinking of me because you can *feel* the glory radiating from Pacifica. I did it today. Rode my first solo waves. Small swells. No tubes or anything gnarly. Thought you should know since you got me there. –B

Eighteen

•• W here have you been?" I got up from my towel, lumbering to Ezra and smacking his arm. "You're late."

Noah, Reed, and I had been at the cabin for an entire day, waiting on the man of the hour. I spent most of that time by the lake, obsessing over the next steps for my deal.

Ty

I already checked in four times with the office and reviewed a few revised documents that needed approval from Anderson. But I'd done it. Fuck miracles. Pure determination, talent, and perseverance—maybe a bit of insanity—saw me close on all concessions *three hours* before getting on a plane to Clear Lake.

To appease Tilly, I would fly out Sunday to San Francisco, clean up my Anderson mess on Monday morning, and fly out that afternoon to meet everyone in Mexico. A slight detour, but I expected an official acceptance from Anderson at our meeting and a final document signing scheduled soon after.

Keep going. I just had to keep going. A little longer.

"You're not going to believe it..." Ezra trailed off, stopping himself and shaking his head. Instead of a moody grumble about some complaint or another, he had a smile on his face. Ezra Collins was *grinning*.

It didn't take long for him to spill his secrets.

Sunny was pregnant.

His chest puffed with emotion, and I never thought something so dark could shine so bright. Ezra was *proud*.

Noah was the first to jump to excitement, probably thrilled he wouldn't be the only one wiping other people's asses these days. I loved my nieces, but Noah was determined to keep Jaime pregnant in perpetuity, and they had more children than good sense.

Reed pulled Ezra in for a bear hug.

I blinked. Then blinked again. "Never in my life did I think you'd become one of them." I pointed at Noah and Reed.

With a hand up in protest, Reed said, "Don't look at me. I got snipped years ago."

Noah couldn't stop smiling. His mood was like that. Almost always elevated. Often, mine was the same. Like life was easy.

Not today.

I swallowed it down, hugging Ezra. "Congratulations, brother," I mumbled in his ear. "I'm flying alone in the wind, but for your happiness? Worth the abandonment."

"Come on," he said, pushing me away after a moment. "Come over to the dark side. Noah wasn't wrong. It's not so bad."

I plastered a smile on my face to hide my roiling stomach.

"Doing fine on my own."

"No date to the wedding, Ty?" Reed laughed—the asshole.

Rather than engage him, I stared at the dark water and wondered how long it would take for someone to find his body if I drowned him.

Reed began humming *Dancing On My Own* by Robyn.

How many days before evidence decomposed and disappeared in a lake?

Noah sang the lyrics to the song, and I decided to tie them together and throw them in one go.

"Shut up." I shoved Reed's shoulder more forcefully than intended, and he stopped humming. "I don't dance anymore."

Ninth-grade dance rotation in gym class was more than enough for me. And perhaps a few embarrassing occurrences as an adult.

Ezra thrust his finger at me in threat. "Oh, you will. Sunny's brother Noble will be there and no doubt slobbering all over Biz. That leaves Bree on her own. You'll dance with her. She's had shit luck with guys and needs a boost in self-esteem."

"Thought you didn't want my hands on her," I sniffed.

I scratched the back of my neck, squinting into the sun. I'd for sure dance with Bree. Naked. In my villa. Or hers. The details were unimportant—I had plans to take care of my best friend's sister, and I'd boost *something*.

Ezra slapped my arm. "You're too smart to do more than give my sister a friendly dance, right, Ty?" He smiled brightly.

"Yeah," I mumbled, heading for the cabin. "I'm grabbing a beer. Anyone want something?"

No one did, and I didn't wait for further comment before I left, picking up the pace to a jog. I didn't want anyone following me.

Just one more thing to feel guilty about. My best friends came together to share this time, and I was running away.

Opening the fridge, I pulled out a beer and cracked it, staring absently at the clock. The quiet *tick* of each second hand reminded me to use my time wisely. Don't waste it standing in the kitchen.

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One... Two... Three... Four.
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Taking my drink, I headed to my room, setting the bottle on the nightstand and collapsing onto the bed.

Still no texts from Bree. No calls. Not that I should expect it. I couldn't have my cake and eat it too. Spout off about being casual and then feel uneasy when she left me alone.

Except who didn't want to eat the cake they had? Fucking stupid to have it and not eat it.

I reached for my phone, unlocked it, and stared at the screen.

What color panties are you wearing?

Have you touched yourself today?

What's your favorite way to come?

I groaned, shaking my head. I was such an asshole.

I've been thinking of you all day. Is that allowed? Can I tell you I miss you? That's something friends do, right?

The screen door banged open, alerting me the boys returned to the house. The doorbell rang a short while later. Probably pizza. Better not be any fucking pineapple on it.

A soft knock at my door followed a few minutes later, and Ezra's voice announced, "Pizza if you want some. You alive in there, Ty?" Yes. Just fantasizing about your sister's pussy and all I plan to do with it.

I opened the door and tried to smile instead of confessing my sins. I didn't want Ezra to think things were out of sorts when my entire life these days was anything but sorted.

"I swear to god. I smell pineapple." I leaned against the door frame, forcing a grin.

Ezra rolled his eyes. "Fuck off. It's delicious, and you're insane. You coming?" He eyed me carefully. "Or maybe you want to get some sleep? Looking a bit rough, Ty."

My best friend, my brother. Despite his casual stance, I could see the concern pinched between his brows. He sensed it —something off.

One... Two... Three... Four.

Keep going.

"And miss this dead man walking moment of watching you shuffle toward domesticity? Please."

I brushed past him, heading to the kitchen to join my friends and grab another beer.

Ezra followed. "Better to be shuffling toward something than running toward nothing."

· • • • • • • • • • • •

Six coffees before nine a.m. were not unreasonable, and I would fight anyone who argued otherwise.

I rubbed my weary eyes, the words on the papers in front of me blurring together from exhaustion.

Staying up late the night before and drinking at the cabin left me with a nervous energy that didn't fade after the last of us stumbled to bed.

I hadn't slept, staring at my phone and waiting for a notification from Mia as soon as she confirmed the final document signing with Anderson. Usually waking by five to get a run or surf in, my internal clock ticked along steadily. Coffee it was. Then, more coffee. And, of course, even more. Already up, I figured I'd do some work until everyone woke.

"You look like death," Ezra said, silently approaching from behind as he crept into the kitchen.

It may have been the bare feet hiding his steps, or maybe he was being cautious with my state of disarray.

"Your eyes are bloodshot, and you look rabid with whatever upset you're stewing on. When did you last sleep, Ty? Really sleep?"

In your sister's bed last week.

My hand scrubbed my face before I wiped my palm over my mouth. "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

Ezra slapped a hand on my back. "You don't look far from it. What the fuck do you think you're going to do, huh? Work out this mess when you're a zombie?" He gestured to the papers scattered over the table.

I sighed. Or I possibly groaned. I was too tired to tell what sounds my body made.

"I'm just..." I couldn't even finish the thought.

He sat beside me, his hands resting on my shoulders before he shoved my seat back.

"Let's go, Ty. You have to rest."

"I'm fine," I said, adding to my lies.

My best friend smacked the back of my head as he pushed me toward my room. "Idiot," he grumbled. "We'll talk later. For now, *sleep*."

I sighed, dropping my head in surrender.

Maybe it was exhaustion. Perhaps it was because my best friend was uncharacteristically right. I think it was because my brain shut down approximately ten hours ago, but I didn't fight him. He nodded on his way past me. "Get some sleep."

The way my body swayed when unsupported, I doubted I had much choice. Collapsing face down on the bed, I had a distinct thought that one day, I would close my eyes and never wake up again.

Like letting myself sleep would allow the darkness to catch up with me.

· • • • • • • • • • •

You did it! And you snore like a congested hippopotamus. See someone about that, would you?

XoXE

Ezra taped the scribbled note to my forehead during my nap.

I snickered, shaking my head and simultaneously loving and hating my friend.

A growling stomach reminded me I spent the day catching up on sleep instead of eating.

The door creaked as I stepped out to investigate last night's pizza situation and whether anything remained.

Three heads swiveled in my direction, grins erupting on the faces of my best friends as I appeared in the living room.

Ezra assessed my approach, and Noah held up his hand for a high-five as I passed. Reed yawned, probably peopled out for the day.

"You look better," Ezra observed, his eyes shifting to whatever movie played.

"Yeah. Turns out I needed a nap."

"A true baby," Ezra mumbled, tapping a finger against his beer. "I've always been an exceptional babysitter, having younger sisters and all." He let the comment linger for a moment before sipping his drink.

"How are Biz and Bree?" Noah asked, reaching across the table to grab a handful of chips and shove them into his mouth.

Wiping crumbs off his chest, he grinned. "I always liked your sisters."

Ezra snorted. "Admirable effort to piss me off. No points for creativity, rockstar. Going the sister route is not only cliche but poor form. You can do better."

Reed chuckled, running a hand over his face and staying out of it—the smartest of us all.

"Ty can do better," Noah mumbled through a full mouth. "Get him, Ty! Get him with your dirty words and innuendos from all that sex."

Ezra raised his eyebrows, setting his beer on the table before leaning back and crossing his arms. With an acute glare, he said, "By all means."

"You guys are idiots." I brushed past them on my way to the kitchen.

The boys always assumed I had more sex than I actually did. Well, the last few glorious weeks aside.

Even with my back to the living room, I sensed Ezra's eyes on me. So fucking intense, that guy.

"You know a guy named Brody?" Ezra asked, causing me to stiffen. "I think Bree's got a thing going with him."

Clearing my throat, I took shelter, rummaging through the fridge.

"That's her boss and roommate's brother."

"Doesn't mean shit," Noah said, kicking up his feet. "Other than she's working *full time*."

Reed grimaced.

Ezra stared at Noah. "I'm not above murdering you." He gestured toward me. "I know a lawyer."

"Not that kind of lawyer," I pointed out. "And Brody's not that kind of friend."

"No, I suppose not," Ezra replied, sipping his beer as he studied me.

My friend was too relaxed for the topic of conversation, and it tightened my skin. He held no concerns about Brody.

Why not?

No way Ezra knew anything. I'd said shit, given nothing away, and not so much as asked about Bree while here. Or at all since hanging out with her.

Rubbing the back of my neck and willing myself not to flinch under Ezra's intense focus, I announced, "I need to check on something."

I didn't wait for a reply before heading back to my room.

Closing the door and locking it, I allowed four seconds to freak the fuck out that maybe Ezra knew more than he let on. It'd be in his wheelhouse to mess with me instead of confront me. Let me wiggle in discomfort for sport.

Maybe Bree had insider information. Grabbing my phone and ignoring my work alerts for once, relief hit when I saw her text.

You're probably thinking of me because you can *feel* the glory radiating from Pacifica. I did it today. Rode my first solo waves. Small swells. No tubes or anything gnarly. Thought you should know since you got me there. –B

Mineteen

Bree

••P hone's ringing!" Marin called, bending to adjust the strap on her heel as she hobbled down the hall, half-folded over. "On the table, bitch!"

Turning off the burner and removing the pan with my grilled cheese sandwich from the heat, I caught it just before the call went to voicemail.

"Hello?"

"Yet."

His voice was so quiet and scratchy that I almost didn't recognize it. I held my phone away from my ear to check the caller ID.

Ty Jensen.

I rolled my lips together, tasting the slick gloss from my chapstick. "I'm sorry?"

"Yet," Ty repeated. "It was a small swell. No tubes or anything gnarly... yet. You'll get there. Well done, Bree. I'm proud of you."

My eyes fluttered shut with his validation.

"Thanks," I mumbled, leaning against the counter and crossing one arm around my waist.

Put together for another night out with Connor, Marin entered the kitchen. Her brows pinched as she gestured to the phone.

Ty, I mouthed.

She frowned and pointed up and down at me. I flipped her off.

Ty didn't need to know I stood in my kitchen with an avocado scrub on my face while grilling a cheese sandwich for a late-night snack in the muumuu my mom brought me back from Hawaii a few years ago.

Marin pulled her phone from her back pocket, snapping a picture and grinning.

I covered the receiver and hissed, "Go away!"

She threw her head back, laughing out the door. Cackles echoed down the hallway.

"Bree." Ty let out a shaky breath, catching my attention.

"Are you okay?"

He cleared his throat. This time, when he spoke, he almost sounded normal. "How are you? Tell me about your first wave. What was it like?" Almost sounded normal, but not quite.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked quietly.

"No. I just want to hear about your day."

He needed the distraction from whatever haunted his thoughts, and though he haunted mine, I wanted to be the person who brought him relief.

I gripped my muumuu and pulled it tight against my legs. I understood wanting to be anywhere other than inside your head.

"Well," I drawled. "The water was calm today. It was overcast, and the fog was so thick coming out of the city that I worried the coast wouldn't be clear enough to get out there. I know you guys are all experts and unbothered by the weather, but it makes me nervous."

He said nothing to that, which I accepted as an invitation to continue. "It cleared when we got out on the water. Yesterday, I paddled out on my own. Brody and Marin flanked me. It's irrational, but I've convinced myself sharks don't attack the people in the middle. Only the easy pickings on the sides."

Ty forced a laugh, uncharacteristic of his usual easy-going mood. Something bothered him.

"Do you still have all your limbs?" he asked.

"I do," I confirmed. "Though I took a rough tumble and fell ass-first into the water. It hurt!"

Thinking about the sting on my cheeks and the embarrassment made me laugh. Brody was concerned I injured myself.

"Yeah. The water can smart when you hit it hard enough." He sighed, the strain in it evident.

"Ty... It doesn't sound like you're okay."

Another sigh. "Work is exhausting, and I'm fucking up. It's my fault." After a beat of silence, he asked, "Are you ready for Mexico?"

Mexico. Through Mexico.

Cold food abandoned on the counter, I headed to the bathroom. The face mask cracked and itched my skin, and my muscles ached from surfing.

I would wash my face and drop into bed. Snuggle under the blankets and cozy up in conversation with Ty.

"Yes, I'm ready," I said, the lie radiating through my body. Even my scalp tingled. I may have packed my suitcase, but I wasn't ready for Mexico.

Turning on the faucet and waiting for the water to warm, I ran my finger back and forth beneath the stream.

"Are you ready?" I asked softly, switching to speaker and setting the phone next to the sink. Splashing my face, I rinsed the scrub before toweling off.

Ty said nothing for a moment, and I shifted uncomfortably, aware of the heaviness in his silence.

"I'm not sure," he finally answered, and while his voice recovered from any instability or shakiness earlier, things still didn't feel right.

"I'm returning to San Francisco tomorrow, just a quick stop. Work I can't get out of." He adjusted, causing some static on the line. "I can't shake the feeling that the other shoe will drop. That no matter what happens, I'm going to fuck it up and lose it all."

"All of what?"

He let out a long breath. "Honestly, Bree? I'm not sure I know anymore. At first, I thought I'd lose my rising position at the firm. Now? I worry it's more. A friendship I'd give my life for." He hesitated. "Trust I was proud to have gained."

My belly fluttered, but I ignored it. Casual. Casual wasn't butterflies and daydreams. I wouldn't get carried away.

"Anxiety makes us feel like we have to stay on the balls of our feet to anticipate whatever is coming next, but it doesn't mean something disastrous is on the horizon," I said gently.

"Has Ezra said anything to you about knowing something's been going on with us?"

Well, shit. I might eat my words. The other shoe threatened to fall from the sky!

I pulled my hair into a quick bun, smoothing any stray hairs. Dark circles lived under my eyes, and my skin was splotchy from the scrub.

"No, but he did ask when I'd seen you last. He was worried you were acting strange. Is everything okay?"

I flipped off the bathroom light and headed for my bedroom.

"Bree, can you switch me to video?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely not."

I plugged in the Christmas lights strung along my walls and walked to my bed, pulling a few pillows off and tossing them onto the floor to make room.

Relaxing on the bed, I raised my knees and draped my muumuu—no, *nightgown*—over my legs.

"Bree."

Something was wrong, and despite my head telling me to let it go, let *him* go, my heart refused. I was fooling myself if I thought I was stronger.

My chest tightened at the thought of Ty seeing me. Not the flawed skin or perpetual state of exhaustion. My heart felt raw, agonizingly visible.

"Please?"

"Ty," I whispered. "I'll see you on-"

"It can't wait."

No. All the nos.

"Yeah, okay."

The video appeared on the screen when I hit the icon. A dark space stared back at me, and I angled the camera away from my face.

"Ty? Are you sitting in the dark?"

"Hold on."

After some rustling and a *click*, a lamp flicked on, bathing Ty in a soft yellow light. Ethereal with the glow behind him, his hair shined a beautiful gold. My fingers twitched instinctively, craving to filter through the silk of it.

"There. Better," he said softly. "Where did you go?"

He placed his phone beside him on the nightstand. I kept my camera focused on the Clash poster over my shoulder.

"Still here," I confirmed.

A slight tug pulled up the corners of his mouth as his eyes sparkled. He already sounded lighter.

"I like your room, Bree. It's cozy and warm."

"And a dump," I added with a proud smile.

He laughed. "It's not a dump. It's comfortable, and the energy of it feels good."

Adjusting the angle, he relaxed against his pillows. Stretched on his side and with his hands tucked beneath his head, he looked adorable. But I couldn't miss the strain in the pinched lines of his face.

"No," I conceded, balancing the phone on my knees. "Not squalor, but not Collins' regal. By design. Since cutting off from my dad, I've financially supported myself." I smiled, running a finger over my lips. "Or living off student loans and piling up debt, rather."

"I know a bit about that. Law school wasn't cheap." He paused. "Has Ezra not offered—"

"I want to do it myself."

He shifted on the bed, a shadow crossing the screen with the low backlight. "Let me see you. I want to see you for a reason."

"This is fine," I whispered, rolling the hem of my gown between my fingers. "Bree. You're going to be a brat tonight when I'm not there to deal with it in person?"

I lowered the phone until it rested at eye level. "Hi."

"Hey," Ty said back.

I bit my lip. "Let the record show I cooperated not because I want to behave, but because I think you're having a day where you need a win. Are you okay?"

The soft smile hardly raised the corners of his mouth, but somehow held warmth in his eyes.

"Better now. I wanted to see your face, see if you look different."

"Why would I look different?"

"Because you did it. You overcame your fear to do the thing you set your mind to. How does it feel?"

I nestled into the pillows against my headboard. "Accomplished."

"You look confident." His smile faded, but his eyes stayed locked on mine. "Thanks for letting me see."

With Ty, I *wanted* him to see me. Craved his focus. Reveled in the adoration that came with it, enlivening every part of me that needed safe attention.

I'd spent years hiding and shrinking, but Ty encouraged visibility. This man, who'd known me my entire life, made me see myself differently.

"I think you've seen me for a long time, Ty."

He swallowed heavily and murmured, "Was I noticeably creepy? I tried hard not to be creepy."

Warmth radiated in my chest. "That morning on the lake? It was the first time I felt validated. You saw me as more than a broken girl. The one who controlled everything by being perfect. As if perfection would make my dad see me or my mom tell me I was enough. When they didn't, I shrank until I disappeared, punishing myself for it. I had no idea that being recognized nourished my heart. For the first time, I believed things could change."

"You were never broken, Bree, never fragile or weak. You only needed to find the confidence to choose yourself. Be proud of that. You're unstoppable." A slanted smile tugged up. "And now you're a surfer. I wish I could have seen it today, but it's special to see some of these other moments, too."

A soft blush crested the tops of his cheeks, and my heart swelled.

Seventeen and waffling between my health and my fear. Scared to wade into the water and needing a guiding hand, swallowing terror to get on that board.

Ty's frequent nudges helped me to do the hard stuff by reminding me it was possible. He didn't do it for me or push me into anything. I made choices despite apprehension, hesitation, and fear. Not because I felt confident, but because I felt *capable*.

I could do the things that scared me—like letting him see me. All of me, not just my body.

But it was my body I boldly offered. Hearts remained offlimits.

"You can see more if you want."

• • • • • • • • • •

I had his attention.

"I like it when you look at me," I whispered, angling my phone on the nightstand. Ty's sweet touchstone call was about to become a provocative test of patience.

"Do you like looking at me?"

I slid down the straps of my gown, the bodice held only by the clenching of my arms and the urge to drive this man to insanity through teasing.

Ty's eyes widened, and he licked his lips. His breathing picked up, his chest rising and falling.

"Brat." His thumb swiped along his bottom lip in a slow sweep that stilled my heart. "You know full fucking well I like looking at you."

I lowered my nightgown until it bunched at my waist, my breasts exposed.

His face shifted with a tortured pressing of his eyebrows. "Shit," he murmured.

Standing, I slowly pushed the fabric over my hips and the rest of the way down. The gown fell to the floor, leaving me naked. I kicked the material away and stood beside the bed.

The wonderment in his gaze fueled my confidence. Emboldened and brash sexual energy had been reserved for others, never me.

One hand traced along my hip, sliding down my thigh and circling, while the other skirted my stomach.

"What's your favorite part of looking at me?"

Eyes closed, he clenched his jaw and complained. "That's not fair. I'm not in the same state."

Judging by the thin line of his lips, that frustrated him.

Good.

My head fell back as I tugged the tie from my hair, letting it cascade down my shoulders.

Ty scrubbed a rough hand over his face. "You're teasing me."

Bringing my finger to my lips, I traced along my mouth. "Is this your favorite?"

He groaned, dropping his head. "Bree."

Sitting on the bed, my hands snaked up the inside of my thighs before spreading my legs to give him a clear view of my pussy.

"Or this?"

Courage kept my gaze steady on his face as he watched from his phone. This pleased him.

Tortured him a bit, too, but I never had that kind of control over anything. It was *powerful*.

"Fuck," he hissed, reaching behind his collar to pull his shirt off. "You love to be a brat, don't you?"

I hummed, my fingers walking along the soft skin of my stomach.

"I think you like it when I'm a brat. I think you want to make me behave."

My finger circled my nipple, the hard point aching with the light brush.

"You're killing me," he groaned.

I caressed my breast, rolling my nipple. "What a way to go, though."

"Such a naughty girl. You surprise me. Constantly. You have my attention. What are you going to do with it?"

"Depends. Are you going to watch or participate?"

The jangling of his belt filled the line between us, Ty's hands working quickly to push his pants off.

He smiled, so easy on the eyes. Not just desirable. Ty was *divine*. The waved ridges of muscles flexed along his stomach with his heavy breaths, his hand lazily stroking his cock.

"I'm a real team player."

Despite the electricity in the call, I dropped my head and laughed. Desirable, divine, and *delightful*. A trifecta of perfection in male form, and for tonight at least, he was with me.

"Do you like what you see?"

He focused on my wandering fingers. "Yes. Show me more."

My hand dipped between my thighs just before he slid a hand along his length. Squeezing, he groaned.

"More?"

"Yes," he breathed. "Stand up. Bend over, ass and pussy up, chest flat on the bed. Finger yourself for me."

Despite the tension in my body, my hand skimmed leisurely over my abdomen, trailing from one hip to the other in an unhurried path. Desperate for relief and to ease the throbbing, but unwilling to rush the experience of Ty's full attention.

He pumped himself hard and rough. Pre-cum coated his shaft, the wet sounds of his hand working his dick driving me wild.

Never had I physically ached to touch a man before. To feel his skin beneath my fingertips. To run my hands along every part of him, my tongue following. No possibility of touching him tonight punished us both.

Or maybe that just made it all the more electrifying.

"And if I don't do it?" I challenged.

"Then I'll make you finger your ass instead of your pussy."

That snapped my attention from the heady gaze of watching his hand.

"You wouldn't," I whispered, knowing he would. Of course he would.

Pushing against my discomfort and demanding I honor and appreciate my body brought Ty enjoyment.

He groaned, squeezing himself before roaming with a heavy stroke over his entire length.

"We can test that if you'd like. I'll enjoy it either way."

I huffed, making a production to get into position. With my chest flattened on the bed, I glanced over my shoulder at the screen.

Ty's hooded eyes met mine. "Look at that. Even your thighs are wet. So good for me, Bree. You're so good for me."

My heart stuttered with his praise, holding my breath for the reward.

"When I see you again, I'm going to spread you and slide deep inside the way you like it. Now, finger yourself for me. Let me pretend it's me there with you."

I was already touching myself, wet and desperate. Mine would have to do, but I craved Ty's hands on my body, brushing every part of me. His hands, his mouth, his dick. Our bodies skating over one another.

Ty groaned, his hand stroking faster. "Look at you behaving," he practically purred.

The words sent electricity along my spine, lighting me up with his affirmation. I longed to be his good girl. Obedient. I fingered myself as he watched, no longer embarrassed about the position. He didn't leave me there long.

"Sit back," he said, his head dropping in pleasure. "Get on your back and hitch your legs, pussy facing me. Show me how you fuck yourself when you're alone, my greedy, filthy girl. How beautiful you are when you're enjoying your body."

I shimmied against the pillows behind me and brought my knees up.

Ty rasped, "Oh shit," as his throat went tight. "I can see you dripping on your sheets. You like this, don't you?"

I closed my eyes, biting my lip. Knowing he watched made my legs tremble.

"Gorgeous. So pretty when you bite your lip like that. When your hands are on your sweet skin. Does it feel good?"

I exhaled through my nose, my hips swaying. I wanted to work for it. I wanted him to watch me work for it.

"It does," I panted as my other hand pinched my nipple.

His breathing stayed heavy as his hand worked faster. He fucked his fist with hard, pumping thrusts as he watched me. My chest swelled with desire and craving, eyes on him with longing.

"Dip two fingers into that pretty cunt and get them wet." I did as he asked, my body on fire. "Show me," he grunted. Holding up my fingers, I gave Ty what he wanted. I sucked them into my mouth, a wicked smile on my lips.

"I should spank you for taking what's mine before I give permission." The *fap fap fap* of his hand on his dick made me want to explode.

I gasped a laugh, my hand clawing at the sheet as I ground harder. "I don't need your permission."

"Goddamn. Brat," he gritted, his jaw clenching.

"Ty," I moaned, my head dropping onto the bed as my muscles tightened.

It was intoxicating—his eyes on me, his hands on himself. The unsteady breaths as he took pleasure from me chasing mine.

"Fuck, Bree," he grunted. "You're killing me." The sound of his agony shot an arrow through my heart. "Don't stop."

Our eyes stayed locked as my climax radiated, riding the waves of absolute adoration and appreciation for his revelry, elevating all pieces of me. "I'm going to come."

"Please," he rasped. "Come for me, and I'll come for you."

Muscles contracted, and my body went tight. Arching my back, I rode the wave of my pleasure like a seasoned pro, cresting back to the shore of reality just as Ty groaned, his orgasm taking him as he made a mess of his hand, breathless and collapsing back on the bed.

Neither of us spoke, and while I expected embarrassment to hit in the wake of the moment, it never came. I felt something else instead.

Radiant. Glowing. Confident.

"You surprise me. Every goddamn time," he panted, pushing his messy hair out of his face.

I grinned. "Is that a good thing?"

He shook his head, licking his lips and staring at the ceiling. "No, beautiful. That's a great thing." My finger hovered over the *end call* icon as I sat tall like a queen. "I'll see you in Mexico, Ty."

I hit the button and fell back on the bed before I said something that might diminish the victory of my courage tonight.

Mexico. Through Mexico.

But Mexico wasn't until Monday, and he planned a brief trip home tomorrow. We might not have much time left, but I could squeeze every available moment, even if maneuvering around his work schedule. Anything proved better than nothing with Ty.

Glancing at my dresser and the spare key on my jewelry box, I traced a finger over my smile.

"You surprise me. Every goddamn time."

Ty said it himself. That's a great thing.

Twenty

Тy

"• \mathbf{F} ucking hell."

I rubbed a hand aggressively over my face, puffing a long breath and staring at the departure board. *Delayed*, *delayed*, *delayed*.

Hours stuck waiting for my flight out. Hours of wasting time in the purgatory of delay. Due to leave at ten this morning, my departure had been pushed back. Repeatedly. Hours missed with my friends, fucking around and forgetting for just a moment that I headed back to a heap of shit to deal with.

At 6:52 p.m., the airline announced a gate assignment when whatever technical issue had been remedied. By eight, we were taxiing. Thank fucking god, because shit had hit the fan.

I read Mia's text as we pushed back from the gate.

Mia: He canceled the meeting, Ty. I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say.

No. No. No. Fucking no.

Me: We get him back. I land at ten-fifteen. Can you meet? Arrange for Colt and Ben as well?

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mumbled, scrubbing my face again and ignoring the disapproving glare of my seatmate as he earmuffed his kid. I shot him an equally unhappy look.

"He's, like, twelve. Guaranteed, he's heard worse." I eyed the grinning tween, a hint of mischief in those gleaming baby blues. "Guaranteed, he's said worse." The kid beamed.

"Come on, man," the guy complained.

A reasonable ask. I sighed, shifting to lean against the window.

"Sorry. I'm an asshole. I've just got a lot of shit going on right now."

My phone pinged, and I furrowed my brows apologetically as I read and murmured, "I'll keep it PG."

Mia: Colt and Ben are working on the Sanderson case. I'm on a date. Ty, it's Sunday night. There's no meeting. I hate to say it, but nothing else can be done at this point. It's over.

"Fuck!" I hissed before cringing. "Shit. Sorry, sorry."

The guy gave up, dropping his hands as his son cackled beside him.

Me: Something else can always be done. Please, I'm begging you. Help me. I left my friends early. Been stuck in an airport all fucking day. I've auditorily assaulted my seatmate's child. Please, Mia. I can't stop here.

I can't stop until there.

The powerful roar of the jet engines firing shifted my stomach as I anxiously watched the ellipses next to her name and prayed Mia answered me.

I was an utter asshole for ruining her night, but fuck— Anderson canceled our meeting for tomorrow. No reason. No explanation. No rescheduling.

He cut me off. I worked my ass off to get him what he wanted, and there he was, happy to take it as I clung to the edge of my sanity before he stepped on my fingers and kicked me into the swirling madness.

I'd lose my chance at making partner without Anderson. The firm's biggest fuck up and fumble.

Gaining speed, the wheels rumbled and hummed over the tarmac.

I'd paused, maybe stumbled, but I'd recovered. I'd fixed it.

Relief, sweet relief at the ping.

Mia: Send me your flight info. I'll pick you up on my way home. You owe me, Ty.

Anything. I'd give her anything to avoid losing everything.

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"I'm still not sure what you think is going to happen," Mia said, her arms wrapped around her waist as she leaned against the door frame. "Maybe you should take the night to rest, and we'll regroup in the morning. You seem a little stressed and ____"

"No," I grunted, rifling through my bag to find my keys. "God. Fucking. Damnit. Where the..."

My knuckles brushed the key fob. Thank fuck. I hadn't left them at the cabin or lost them in transit. Mia scratched her shoulder, the lacy fabric of her dress shifting. A reminder I interrupted her night by insisting she help with mine.

"I'm sorry." I dropped my head, my palm flat against the door. "You're doing me a huge favor, and I appreciate it. You work hard, and you're dedicated."

She reached for my keys, gently taking them from my hand and unlocking the door.

"I also know how important balance is. You're a mess, Ty. Go inside. Take a shower. I'll review the briefs, and we can make a plan to storm the castle at first light, okay?"

With a sympathetic smile, she let us into my apartment.

I squeezed her arm. "Thanks. I really am sorry I ruined your night."

Mia shook out her hair, laughing as she flipped on the foyer light. "I'm used to you calling and making demands of me. You do it enough."

I groaned, dropping my bags. "Yeah, sorry about that. I should probably stop. I'm such an asshole."

Mia's heels clopped against the entryway floor as she kicked them off.

"You can be an asshole, yes. But you don't stop until you get what you want." She pointed to the kitchen. "Can I help myself to some wine while you shower? This time an *actual* vintage?"

I toed off my shoes. "Make yourself at home. If you'll be here all night, it's the least I can do."

Pulling off my hoodie, I dropped it next to my stuff and headed toward my room.

"You should have called me out," I hollered over my shoulder.

"Please. It was bad enough that you thought I was seducing you. Talk about ego. Besides, I enjoy watching you think you know what you're talking about when—*holy shit*!" Mia cried. "What?"

I rushed to the source of the sound. Mia stood frozen between the kitchen and living room as she clutched her chest and stared at the couch.

"What's wrong?"

My eyes followed her stare.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Bree said quietly, her arms wrapped around her shoulders as she hugged herself with her knees tucked up. "I..." She hesitated. "I'm sorry. I'll go."

"Bree?" I squinted, trying to understand why she sat in my dark living room. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

She reached into her pocket as she unfurled to stand. Holding up a key, she mumbled, "You gave this to me, and I forgot to return it. I thought I'd surprise you."

"You succeeded," I muttered. Fuck. Fuck. I didn't have room to add more to my plate tonight.

Mia cleared her throat and jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "I should leave you two—"

"No." I held up my hand, cutting her off. "I need you to stay. Bree is my best friend's little sister. She came over to hang out, but I don't have time."

Shit. That sounded terrible. I took a deep breath, running my hand along my temple.

"What I mean," I said slowly, "is that I don't have time to hang out. I need Mia to stay and help on a project."

Bree crossed her arms, her eyebrows pulling together. "I'm sure you do." A crisp response, the words tight. "I'll leave you to it."

"Bree," I bit out.

I didn't like her frosty attitude when *she* ambushed *me*. Now I'd have to take more time that I didn't have to explain this wasn't what she thought—which wouldn't be an issue had she not surprised me in the first place.

Blood rushed in my ears, my head throbbing. Fuck. I couldn't stop for this. I didn't have time. The palpitations in my chest made it hard to breathe. Too much. There was too much to do, too much wasted time, too much delay.

I was going to lose it. Control. It slipped with each passing second I stood still, dealing with this unanticipated disturbance.

Mia's presence surprised Bree, but Bree's shocked the hell out of me. I hadn't expected her. I hadn't expected *this*. I didn't have the time. I didn't plan for it. And goddamnit, I hadn't given her permission.

Timed, planned, and with permission. This break had none. *None*.

Now, I was about to unravel.

Sinking my teeth into my tongue, I bit until my eyes watered. I spoke as calmly as possible. "We have important work to do. It couldn't wait. Mia picked me up as soon as I landed."

Bree's eyes roamed the sleek lace dress that hugged Mia's defined curves. "Yes. I wear cocktail attire when I work, too."

"Bree." My tone sharpened with impatience. I faced Mia, embarrassed my coworker had to witness Bree's petulance. "I'm sorry. This is unexpected."

She glanced at Bree, whose cheeks flamed pink as her eyes shifted to the floor.

"Oh," Mia said, putting it together. "I'll give you some time with this before diving into anything else."

Bree snickered. "Ty's reputation precedes his ability to multitask, according to my brother. If you'll excuse me."

"Low fucking blow," I rumbled, puffing a long breath. *Keep it together. Keep going. Keep it together. Keep going.*

Mia shook her head, stepping toward Bree. "It's not like that, honey," she said softly. "It's just work."

Honey.

She meant it as an endearment and a reassurance, but the pink on Bree's cheeks showed precisely how she felt about it.

"It's not my business either way." She tossed the key onto the coffee table, brushing by. "I hope you're able to *close the deal*. Enjoy your night."

I rolled my eyes. Bratty Bree was sexy in the appropriate circumstances, but tonight was not it, and her flippant comments only pissed me off and wasted time.

"Stay." I shoved down my impatience, reminding myself ten minutes wouldn't change things in groveling for Anderson.

But it might change everything with Bree.

"Please stay. We can talk in my room."

Bree said nothing, nearly to the door, as Mia glared at me.

"Go talk to her. You can't let the poor girl leave like that, Ty."

Bree's shoulders went rigid, and her hand stilled on the doorknob.

"I'm not a girl."

Mia's face scrunched in confusion as she glanced from Bree to me.

"I'm a woman, and I'll leave if I want to."

Taken aback, Mia stammered. "Of course. I just meant-"

"Lovely to meet you, Mia. Goodnight."

Bree let herself out, disappearing into the hallway. Mia grimaced, and I shook my head.

"It's not you. This is my fault. Give me a moment."

I followed Bree to the elevator, my bare feet plodding against the carpet as I hurried to catch her.

The rude and presumptuous attitude wasn't typical of Bree. Which meant either she had changed or things between us had changed. It was supposed to be casual. She said she could handle casual.

Always on the move and a natural runner, my sprinting toward a woman also wasn't typical.

Fuck, this isn't casual.

Recognition hit like a goddamn shovel to the head. It wasn't her. It was *me*. I'd given her control of my feelings. I fucked up.

Bree punched the down button, hugging herself and watching the floors tick on the counter above the doors.

"Please, let me go. I'm already embarrassed," Bree whispered, tucking her sleeve over her hand to wipe her nose.

"She's a coworker. Mia is helping with a project I've been fucking up on. The reason I'm back. One day. One fucking day to meet with this asshole, and he cancels as I'm about to get on a plane. After I've disrupted my plans and probably shaved years off my life and missed—"

"Do you sleep with coworkers?"

"I'm sorry?" I blinked several times, trying to wrap my head around the focus on *that* possibility out of everything I shared.

"Ezra said you sleep with coworkers. Do you sleep with coworkers?"

Bree kept her back to me, her long blonde hair sweeping past her shoulders as she tapped her foot impatiently.

I sighed, ignoring the sting of her disinterest in the rest.

Time. I had little of it to claw back what I deserved—my partnership depended on it. In seven hours, I would demand Anderson face me. Then go to Tilly to suffer the consequences, knowing I fought my hardest and prayed it was enough.

All the sacrifices. It had to be for something.

"I prefer to keep work strictly professional these days."

Bree scoffed. "Like showing up at midnight for a sleepover with a gorgeous and classy woman. Do lawyers typically drink vintage wine and flirt?"

"You're jealous." I cocked my head, stepping closer. "Just tell me so I can reassure you, and we can go on with the night like two adults instead of talking around your actual feelings."

I estimated it would hit hard when I said it, and I was correct. Bree's upset sent a prickle of awareness through me. She siphoned my control. If I lost mine, I'd take hers.

Immediately dropping my chin to my chest, I sheltered from the fallout.

Eyes flamed, roaring with indignation as her restraint crumbled. "Pardon me if your arriving home in the middle of the night with a beautiful woman makes me jealous!"

My chest tightened, my blood going hot. "Pardon me if I didn't have the time to give you a heads up about my plans when I had no idea you'd be letting yourself into my house."

Calm down. Deep breath. You are here. You are safe.

It wasn't working. Tonight, it wasn't working. Everything tensed and coiled, ready to spring with anger. I didn't have time. This was not the plan. Bree hadn't asked permission.

I crossed my arms, my fingertips digging into my biceps as I squeezed it all inside me. Almost there. I was almost *there*.

The elevator dinged, the doors opening to Bree's back. She ignored it, stalking forward with her finger pointed at me.

"You're right. I never should have let myself in without prior consent. You said you liked it when I surprised you, and I misinterpreted that. You meant flashing my pussy during phone sex." She dropped her hand. "But hey, you've got a live show tonight, so."

She turned around to closed doors, hitting the button again furiously.

"God, Bree. Grow up. You've embarrassed me in front of my colleague, embarrassed yourself. For no reason other than you're jealous and can't just fucking *say it* or accept my word that this is strictly professional. I'm not an asshole, contrary to your shitty swipe about my promiscuity. I'm not fucking Mia tonight, nor did I have plans to."

"Tonight?" she snickered. "These days? You said you don't mix business and pleasure 'these days.""

"I don't," I answered flatly.

"But in days before?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, sighing. "We've mixed personal and professional in the past. Months ago. Nothing since."

She sucked in a sharp breath as if the confirmation hit harder than she thought it would. "Oh."

"Bree." I reached for her as the elevator arrived again.

This time, she stepped inside. Without thinking, I stretched my arm to block the door from closing. She refused to look at me or answer me—holding the conversation hostage with her silence. Held control with it.

My face softened with my plea. "I'm not going to sleep with her."

Bree's eyes stayed on the floor, the tip of her nose pink from her upset. "But you did. Did you... Did you do to her what you do to me? Did you tell her how good she was? How beautiful?"

With hands splayed along the elevator frame, I held the doors open. "Bree." My voice cracked.

"She probably didn't whine or get embarrassed, huh? Probably wasn't shy? Was she confident? Didn't need reassurance? Do you prefer that?"

She was pushing. Pushing to get something from me. A reaction. My attention. Control. She thrived on pushing me. It's what made her such a good brat, but sex was one thing. Emotions were another.

"I'm not the first man you've been with. I'm not interested in comparing myself to them or considering what you did or how you did it unless it impacts what we're doing. I ask for reciprocal respect."

The door alarm beeped, angry and incessant, but I didn't release my hold. Bree held my stare, shadows of something haunting behind those tears.

"You're right. You're not the first man I've been with. Or the second, third, or beyond. You won't be the last. Do whatever you want."

I wanted to tear my hair out.

Jealous and hurt, Bree presently allowed insecurity to take over. She shut down rather than admit things had gotten out of hand—*feelings* had gotten out of hand.

My fingertips flexed against the metal. Time. I didn't have it. My jaw clenched, and my head pounded harder.

"Can you not act like an oppositional teenager, please?"

The alarm blared in the bright hallway. Scratchy carpet itched under my bare feet. The tight skin of my tired body sent my nervous system into overdrive.

I tried to take a breath, but my lungs refused, my throat burning with each shallow inhale.

"I'm not acting like an oppositional teenager," Bree snapped.

Blood rushed through my ears. The alarm hammered. Louder. Even louder. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes.

Too much with no time.

"You're right. You're acting like *a child*. If you want to be treated like an adult, behave like one. I should have listened to your brother. Just go."

I dropped my arm, the elevator doors shutting on the image of Bree's startled face. The alarm calmed, and the surrounding air became accessible again.

But my heart couldn't settle, sinking to the floor with the realization that I fucked up.

Staring at the closed elevator door, I considered hitting the button. But I didn't have time. I had to get *there*. I warned her. I fucking *warned* her.

I returned to my apartment.

Keep going.

Twenty-one

Bree

S tupid.

I was so stupid.

Staring at my boarding pass in a crowded security line while running on no sleep after humiliating myself the night before in an attempt to be a New Me by violating someone's boundaries and then being childish about it... Well, I'd had better days. I'd also had worse.

I took a deep breath, glancing around the chaos. Arriving early for my flight was the best defense to avoid the man who would be on the same one. It was the only afternoon flight out to Cancun, and if Ty had a meeting this morning, he wouldn't have made the six a.m. departure.

Not that I checked flight schedules or anything.

"Next."

The TSA agent accepted my passport on my turn. Holding it up, he compared the decent photo to my dejected face and grimaced.

"Hope your day gets better." He returned the passport and waved me forward.

Well. Fantastic.

I grabbed a tub and dumped my things to send through for screening. Too busy muttering under my breath to catch the heated eyes boring into my head, I didn't spot him until it was nearly my turn at the metal detector.

Ty stood in the security line next to mine, parallel to my position. *What are the stupid odds?*

I opened my mouth to say something, maybe an apology, a little groveling, or even a hello. I quickly shut it when he glanced away, crossed his arms, and *ignored* me.

I crossed my arms, too, and focused on the family passing through the metal detector instead of the sting of his rejection.

Ty was annoyed, or possibly angry with me. Fine. I understood. I acted like a child when I felt jealous and insecure, rather than apologize. I invaded his boundaries and should have taken his assurance at face value—which stretched the purpose of this arrangement. Casual. I told him casual. I meant it—at the time.

He didn't owe me an explanation, even if I wanted it, and he shouldn't have to detail what he did outside of our time together.

Shouldn't have to, but I wanted him to. Instead of asking for it, I was snippy and bratty—and not in the way that lit us up with desire.

But now *he* was childish because ignoring me was just shit. I chewed my lip, watching the mother in the family ahead get her hands wiped with a test strip by the TSA agent.

"We also have pre-made formula in the diaper bag," she said.

Biting my lip harder, I gave a sidelong glance at Ty. He didn't look at me again. Asshole probably arrived early for the flight to avoid me, too. Efficient planning proved a shared trait.

I relaxed my arms slightly as I took in his disarray. He leisurely dressed in joggers and a hoodie, but his waves of blonde hair were tousled like they'd been repeatedly combed through. The dark circles under his eyes indicated he had a rough night.

"Mia is helping with a project I've been fucking up on. The reason I'm back. One day. One fucking day to meet with this asshole, and he cancels as I'm about to get on a plane. After I've disrupted my plans and probably shaved years off my life and missed—"

My eyes closed as I remembered his words. The way I blew past the heart of what he said and focused on *myself*. God. Ty was right about all of it.

Regret pooled in my stomach, and I faced him as he waited to be called through the metal detector.

"Ty?" I hollered. "Can we talk?"

He glanced at me so briefly it was more insulting than if he hadn't responded.

"Next," the agent signaled him through.

My head filled with static, my heart pounding. He. Did. *Not.*

No, he did. He really fucking did.

Ty ignored me; a giant cold front sent my way. Motherfucker. This wasn't about freezing me out to punish me. This was a goddamn power play. Ty's silence was his attempt to claw back control. He might know my insecurities, but I was aware of his. He lost control last night. He needed it back.

But *ignoring me*? And he called *me* a child. I chewed on my lip, but only for a moment.

Ty wanted to play? Game. Fucking. On.

Impulsivity took over, fueled by absolutely no fucks.

"Hey, Ty? I don't think agreeing to take that random guy's suitcase through security was smart. I know he said his wife would meet you at Cinnabon to grab it, but it seems suspect."

Ty's mouth dropped, and I had to hand it to myself. He didn't ignore me now.

He pointed at the security belt, shaking his head. "No, that's not—she's fucking with me, I don't even know her—"

"Sir," the agent said, gesturing to the small room beside us. "I'm going to need you to come with me."

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People hovered like gate lice, crawling and spreading everywhere, blocking the terminal.

Sipping my coffee and bouncing my knee, I scanned the gate. First class started boarding five minutes ago. Zone three meant it would be a while for me, but I promised myself I wouldn't get on the plane if Ty didn't.

Why did I say something that could potentially get him arrested or put on a terrorist watch list? In retrospect, not my finest moment.

Still less embarrassing than last night.

"Shit," I mumbled, taking another sip and shaking my head with a slight smile.

People generally tried to minimize their list of offenses to apologize for, not grow it. Even so, Ty's wide eyes scratched an itch for retribution when I hollered across the line. The brat in me purred a little with satisfaction.

That purr extinguished when the agent announced zone four boarding, and the last passengers disappeared through the gate.

"Shit." Too anxious to drink my coffee, I tossed the cup. I paced next to the gate agent, tugging my lip.

The agent cleared his throat. "Ma'am? We're making a final boarding call. If you're on this flight, you need to board now. It's a full one, and we're trying to depart on time."

My eyes darted between the agent, my bag, and the terminal. Spotting anyone specific in a crowd buzzing with people seemed a feat. The speaker announced the final boarding and no one broke through the chaos to sprint to the gate.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh my god. I got him arrested," I squeaked, cupping my cheeks. "He's going to miss my brother's wedding—his best friend's wedding. Ezra may as well be his brother! Ty deserves to be there more than I do! Oh my god. He's going to kill me. They both will."

The agent eyed me. "Ma'am? Are you okay? Are you safe?" He lowered his voice. "Are you on anything? Did you take any medication or drugs before this flight?"

Tears pooled in my eyes, washing away the worry of my potential arrest. "No, I'm not okay. It's my fault he won't—"

The agent glanced over my shoulder, reaching to accept the boarding pass from the straggler behind me.

"You almost didn't make it, sir," he grumbled.

"My apologies," Ty said, balancing a *cinnamon roll* as he took a bite and used his free hand to retrieve his travel documents.

He turned to me, grinning as he polished off the snack and wiped his hand on his pants.

"For some reason, I just had a hankering for Cinnabon."

"Have a safe flight," the agent said, waving him through.

"Better hurry," Ty hollered over his shoulder. "Nobody likes the asshole who holds up an entire flight."

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Stuck on a five-hour flight with the stain of embarrassment on my face was not ideal. Stuck on a five-hour flight with the stain of coffee all over my shirt was even worse.

"Jerk," I mumbled, trying to get comfortable in the middle seat when both men next to me occupied the armrests, unconcerned with seat etiquette.

The man in front of me had no problem dropping his seat back during drink service without warning, causing the coffee on my tray table to shift precariously and almost tip over, which caused me to grab it from falling as we hit a patch of turbulence that shook the entire cup all over me.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I kicked my knees into the seat ahead, giving an extra firm punch of momentum. The man in front was old. Surely, he had lower back problems.

"Can you please not?"

I leaned forward until I came nose-to-nose with that geezer. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was I disturbing you?"

"Actually, no. I'm in a real cheery mood today. After a round of interrogation and a private search by TSA, I enjoyed a delicious cinnamon roll. So no, Bree, a knee to my back isn't a disturbance by comparison. Carry on."

I snorted, tapping hard against the entertainment screen on the seat back. "Wow. An interesting conversation and a meal? Sounds like a date."

"You're a brat," he grumbled, facing forward again.

I bit back my smile. I was a brat, and I shouldn't be as thrilled about it. This wasn't the kind of behavior to soak my panties, but it satisfied me all the same. Knowing I had influence and control over Ty's feelings? It was powerful. Like that queen who held his attention on the screen when she spread her pussy and put on a show. But my body commanded nothing right now. It was *me*.

"Unfortunately, you *chose* to switch seats and take the middle one *in front of me*."

Ty's shoulders shook as he laughed. The asshole knew precisely what he was doing and did it purposefully.

Ty reveled in pushing my discomfort the way I thrived on pushing his control.

For five hours, I stared at the back of his elbow through the gap between seats, ruminating on my regrets, mistakes, and missteps.

"Oh, come now, Bree. Travel companions shouldn't be separated. That couple wanted to sit together. Some would say it's rather generous to give up an aisle seat in exchange for the middle to make it happen."

"Some would say it's stupid." I shoved my finger hard into the seat screen. "Sheesh. So many choices. I think I'll have to select every movie to decide on something. Might take me the entirety of this flight, just poking along through my options. Poke, poke, poke."

I stabbed my finger harder.

"I love that for you," Ty said lazily, raising his seat upright.

My hand slipped as I fell forward, but I stayed quiet, refusing to acknowledge he got the better of me.

"Hope you find something that entertains you."

He dropped his seat back, knocking into my forehead before I could lean away. I huffed, rubbing the sore spot.

"Oh, plenty to entertain," I replied. "Just one big day of amusement."

Despite my bark, no bite lived in the response. Sure, I'd have a prominent forehead bruise in the wedding photos, but

I'd also have an enormous smile. Ty no longer ignored me and admonished my immaturity.

He joined in.

"I love to play a good game, Bree. You may not know this about me, but I'm competitive. Not blustering, either. I'm exceptional at winning, and I win a lot. Change the rules if you like, and I'll adapt. It's a skill to be this—"

"Bloviated?" I offered.

Unable to hold it, he laughed. It triggered my own, but I bit on my knuckle to keep quiet.

"I'm a patient man. To a point. I expect better behavior."

I kicked my knees into his seat. I'd give him no such thing.

Twenty-two

Ty

•• \mathbf{W} hat the fuck happened to you two?"

Ezra stood before Bree and me, his hand sliding along his jaw as he took us in.

"You look like you rode on the wing of the plane instead of inside it." He wrapped his arm around Sunny and pulled her to his side. "Jesus." Bree slid her foot in a slow circle. The rhinestones on her sandals caught the reflection of the overhead lights in the resort's open-air restaurant. It'd been a long trip to get there, and Ezra was correct—we looked a fucking mess.

It was dark when we arrived at the boutique eco-resort where Sunny and Ezra would be married. A dusty, unpaved stretch of road framed by green leafy palms led us to the imposing sandstone structure of the reception.

It was difficult to see beyond the hotel lights, but Sunny did her best to orient us to the facility as the staff retrieved our bags.

The resort was private, surrounded by a thick jungle with thatched roof villas scattered along the white sand beach.

Tucked between the villas and reception was a swimming area with two pools connected by a lazy river and a boardwalk crossing over each. Two swim-up bars lived on either side. The pool was visible from the restaurant, with string lights and tiki torches giving an ambiance that called for a night swim. Clear my head.

Seeing Bree at the airport reminded me that I'd lost control, gotten angry, and weaponized her insecurities to punish her. To take her control when she'd stolen mine. It shamed me how much I enjoyed it.

Bree was sensitive to how others perceived her resiliency and strength. She trusted me to hold power over her pleasure and push her comfort in a safe space to find her boundaries. To prove to herself that she could if she wanted.

She acted like a brat because it gave her a sense of power, and I gave her that power because her vulnerability made *me* feel powerful. Because she trusted me with it. Her trust was everything.

And I used it to hurt her.

"You're right. You're acting like a child. If you want to be treated like an adult, behave like one. I should have listened to your brother. Just go." Ignoring her at the airport was my best attempt to remain in control when shame flooded my gut. A power exchange only worked when it was safe. I'd made it unsafe.

While I didn't appreciate a thorough security pat down, pride bloomed in my chest when Bree decided to fight me for that control again. To kick—quite literally with my seat on the airplane—and not hide, as she was prone to do.

Fuck, she was a brat. A glorious, superb brat.

Sunny clapped her hands. "This place has everything you'll need. The rehearsal dinner is tomorrow night, the ceremony the night after, and then a few days to do what you want. We're so glad you guys are here."

She glanced at Ezra, who stood with his hand cupping his chin as he stared at me. I stared back. I'd had enough pushiness from a Collins lately.

"Okay..." Sunny trailed off, returning her attention to me. "Ty, you'll get your own villa, a studio. Reed and Viv are in the one next to you—"

"Christ," I muttered, rubbing my temple.

Bree burst into laughter, shaking her head. Reed and Vivian were animals.

I glared at her. Real fucking funny.

Swatting at a mosquito on my neck, I grumbled, "You couldn't put Noah next to them?"

"He has children," Sunny hissed. Unclear if that meant the James clan got a bigger villa due to numbers or if she gifted them the distance to avoid any trauma.

Ezra's sinister grin told me he'd been in charge of room logistics. "Might want to sleep with your windows closed."

"And me?" Bree pipped up.

Sunny wiggled away from Ezra, looping elbows with Bree and leading her away. "You, Biz, and Nicole get the other multi-room villa, but Nicole doesn't arrive until tomorrow."

Bree groaned, her shoulders slumping. "Is Noble here yet?"

Sunny patted her arm. "He is, and he asked to camp on the beach."

"Which means he'll be in Biz's room," Bree bemoaned.

Ezra pointed a warning finger at me as he called to Bree's back, "*No one* buys his crystals, got it?"

Bree glanced over her shoulder. "What?"

"It's not important," Sunny muttered, hurrying Bree away.

An entrepreneurial spirit, Sunny's brother offered soul cleanses and sold crystals to hippies in the California desert.

He'd once swindled Ezra when Ezra made the grand romantic gesture of chasing after Sunny when she fled to the desert to escape his brooding fucking energy.

Given my best friend didn't do grand romantic anything, it was kind of sweet, but I'd never admit it.

Bizzy accompanied Ezra on that trip for moral support. Sunny's brother helped Bizzy cleanse a few things, too.

I couldn't be bothered to hide a smug grin. Bree's sleeping situation proved just as precarious.

Good. I enjoyed an even playing field.

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With legs kicking freely down the barstool and ass cheeks hanging over the seat, Bree tossed her head back and laughed.

Her tiny denim shorts hid little, but the bikini top hid even less. She held up her drink, clinking glasses with her new friend.

It was after one a.m., and despite the long day to get here, Bree appeared in no rush to go to bed. Nor was the dumb shit next to her, bumping her with his shoulder and making eyes like an asshole.

She smiled shyly, setting her drink on the bar to gather her hair into a messy bun. The messy that killed my fucking heart because it looked so good when she relaxed. My scowl deepened, my mood sinking into the abyss of wrath. I sat at a table in the sand and kept my eyes on her. I could be doing other things, too. But look at me being a concerned fucking gentleman.

I had planned to swim tonight, not spy. With everyone in their villas for the night, I grabbed my towel, ready to swim laps until I was too exhausted to overthink my life.

Hard to believe it was only this morning I'd been dealt a fatal blow to months of effort, gotten frisked by Jerry—a sympathetic but professional man who kindly listened to my explanation of *why* a gorgeous vixen scorned would joke about airport safety—and spent hours in transit, engaged in psychological warfare with a brat.

I hadn't expected to see that vixen leave her villa with a towel and suit and head for the same pool. It was supposed to be *my* night swim.

I followed quietly in her shadows—*not* stalking. I had a towel, for Christ's sake! *I* was going to swim.

Was, but I didn't because seeing her slide those shorts off and toss her belongings on a lounge chair before jumping into the water was unsettling. But watching her join a group of douche bros playing chicken in the pool pretty much ruined me.

Hiding—no, enjoying privacy—at the bar near the pool, I ordered a beer and slowly sipped it until my tight grip on the bottle warmed the liquid inside. That was nothing compared to the heat in my veins at the sight of Bree flirting with a roving pack of fuckwads.

Inevitably, the alpha dragged her away.

Fine. He'd offered to escort her to the bar for a drink and kept his hands visible thus far, but that meant little. Bree's giggles told me more about the situation than her companion's body language.

Because those giggles? They were fake as fuck. Just as fake as her finger tracing the rim of her glass as she joked and teased. Just as fake as her enthusiasm to jump in that pool and join a group of guys.

Bree knew I was hovering, and she sought to prove a point.

It wasn't about the dick next to her. Or dick at all.

Another breathy laugh, and she rested her hand against the guy's chest while leaning to whisper something in his ear. He nodded, and she slid off the stool, strolling toward the changing rooms.

The guy rapped his knuckle on the bar, shaking his head before joining his friends again. They welcomed him with high-fives.

All sets of eyes in that group of boneheads followed her round hips, swaying seductively with those shorts cut so high I could see the flesh of her ass hanging from the denim.

Once Bree disappeared around the corner, I pushed out of my seat and headed for the bar, skirting past them and cutting to the opposite side to trail Bree without being obvious.

She wasn't in the bathroom as I expected. Catching the sight of that messy bun bouncing toward the beach, I hurried to follow.

The brush lining the path thickened closer to the sand. It was an access trail, not adequately lit or maintained, and each step closer to a dark and empty shoreline caused my temper to rise exponentially. She shouldn't be out here alone like this. Shouldn't be—

My breath caught as I broke through to the shore. Standing at the water's edge with her hands cupping the back of her neck, Bree stared at the ocean. A slight breeze pushed wisps of loose hair around her face. In the moonlight, she looked ethereal.

"You shouldn't be at the beach alone at night like this," she said, closing her eyes and lifting her chin toward the stars. "There are weirdos everywhere, and you never know who will follow you." "Bree." I stepped closer, moving slowly despite the speed of my heartbeat. "You were aware I was—"

"Babysitting me?" She opened her eyes, keeping her face to the obsidian sky. "Yes, I was aware. Contrary to what you may think, Ty, I can take care of myself. One bad night with one bad choice doesn't mean I'm incapable of making good ones."

She dropped her arms, tucking her hands into the back pockets of her shorts.

"You were flirting to prove a point? To make me jealous?" Close enough to touch her now, I refrained.

A slight smile tugged on her lips. "I was proving a point, but not to you." She eyed me for a moment. "I don't need you to know I can take care of myself. Just like I don't need you to know other men will want me, and I don't need your approval."

This wasn't the girl who clung to me in the ocean the first time she entered it to swim. This wasn't even the girl who propositioned me in my car.

"You don't need it, but you want it," I said, erasing the space between us as I shadowed her back. My chest pressed against her, and Bree's body bowed to lean into me.

This was the woman who told me to fuck off when I treated her with kid gloves instead of listening to her. This was the woman who didn't hide when everything swirling inside her head told her to.

This was the woman who pushed. Pushed me, yes—but pushed herself the most. I admired her.

The heat of my breath fanned along her skin as I whispered in her ear.

"You want it, which is more meaningful. Needing doesn't give you a choice. It's an urge, something inside forcing it. But wanting? We can choose to ignore wants and manage just fine." My teeth nipped at her earlobe, causing her to whimper. "But you won't ignore me. You like to play just as much as I do." Her hands flexed at her side, and her head rested on my shoulder.

My arms wrapped around her waist to steady her as I used the other to pop open the button on her shorts and slide down the zipper. Bree's body trembled—a pretty sight that had me aching. But I told her on the plane that I was a patient man.

I tugged her shorts down, just past her ass, taking her bikini bottoms with them.

"Ty," she whispered, her fingers wrapping over the arm cradling her waist.

I pressed a soft kiss to her shoulder.

I told Bree I was a patient man. To a point.

Tenderly cupping the back of her neck, I encouraged her forward until I bent her over my arm. Bree peeked over her shoulder as she rested at a ninety-degree angle, confused. Giving her a gentle smile, I palmed along her bare ass with a slow stroke.

"You say red if it's too much or tap my leg three times."

I told Bree I was a patient man. To a point. I also told her I expected better behavior.

She hadn't given it to me.

"Ty?"

Whap. My palm cracked against her ass, causing Bree to squeal and squirm in my arms.

"What *the fuck*?" she screeched, her voice echoing over the water. I raised my hand again, giving her the chance to call red.

Bree's lips pinched into a thin line as she glared at me. "Did you fucking *spank* me? Like a *child*?"

She knew the answer to that just as well as I did. I didn't need to say it.

"What color are we, Bree?"

Her eyes heated, anger and tears lighting that fire. "You're such an asshole. Such an asshole!"

"What color are we, Bree?"

With eyes slammed shut, she cried, "Green, you son of a bitch. We're green, and I hate you!"

Kicking and wiggling, Bree put enough effort into her tantrum that I had to adjust my grip—and my hard-on.

Whap. I spanked her other cheek, soothing the skin before shifting to strike the opposite side. The first spanking had been a warning to show I was serious, but the second landed hard enough to sting.

Whap.

"You're a brat, and a brat needs to learn a lesson."

Whap. Whap. Whap.

I spanked in rapid succession as Bree howled beneath me.

"At least fuck me while you're—"

Whap.

"I hate you!" Bree squeezed her thighs tight, sliding her hand between them as she tried to grind against herself.

"No, Bree. You'll take your punishment, and you won't come. Not by your hand." I smoothed over her cheeks, the blossoming red on them making me groan.

Whap.

"Or mine. You'll not come until I say you've earned it."

Angry tears spilled from her eyes as she gave a death stare, but she said nothing else.

I righted her to stand, one arm supporting her to ensure she didn't collapse, and gently pulled up her bottoms and shorts. Bree sniffled.

"You don't need to prove anything to me, but you want to." I kissed her temple, my nose grazing through her hair. "Stop. There's nothing to prove. I'm sorry I made you believe otherwise, and I'm sorry I made you feel childish last night." Bree panted, her exhales coming fast and hard as she tried to catch her breath. Her gaze focused on the sand at our feet.

"I'm sorry that I invaded your boundaries instead of asking first... and for not trusting you when you're one of the few people who have proven trustworthy."

I rubbed her lower back, holding her closer.

Bree leaned into my touch. "I acted like a child, but you can't talk to me like that. No matter how I'm behaving outside of sex."

Pressing a tender kiss to her shoulder, I murmured, "I agree. I'm sorry, Bree. I lost my patience, and that is on me, not you. I should have asked for space instead of white-knuckling a high-charged moment. Discussed things when settled enough to be reasonable instead of hurting your feelings because I had no control over mine. How can I make it up to you?"

With a testing wiggle, Bree hummed. "You can make me come now."

I sighed, my finger hooking into the band of her shorts. "I could, but you don't want me to. You want to earn it, don't you?"

"I hate you," she whispered, biting a smile. "Get out of my head."

We stood silently, my arms around her as her head pressed against my chest, and we stared at the dark ocean.

"You've been punished, Bree. You can be free from the regret of whatever happened last night, this morning, the trip here."

"And you?"

I sighed, not answering, unsure I'd be free from anything, let alone my regrets.

"You still can't come," I said instead, taking her back to her room.



Giggles erupted behind me as little feet kicked sand onto the picnic blanket.

"Girls," Jaime's patient voice warned. "Settle down."

Noah's wife sat next to me with her breast out as a baby popped off and wailed. Sunny sat on the other side of Jaime, unwrapping a granola bar and handing it to her.

With her breast free in the wind, Jaime held the infant in an offering to Noah, who crouched beside our blanket and shoveled sand into a bucket.

Noah accepted baby Olivia without a word, cradling her and singing softly as he wandered the beach so Jaime could eat peacefully.

Weird and wild to wake up to a beautiful morning in Mexico with my favorite people—like it shouldn't be allowed. I hadn't had this much time off in... shit. Probably ever. Instead of relaxed, I felt unsettled.

Or maybe anticipation ate away at my nerves. After yesterday, I didn't know what to expect with this trip.

Jaime turned her attention to Chuck and Didi, the two rambunctious karate-kicking girls. They tossed more sand above their heads and sprinted to trail behind Noah. Jaime smiled, her eyes on her family.

"They're going to be trouble someday," I said, nodding to the girls.

Pulling up her knees and resting her chin on top, Jaime said, "I sure hope so." She shot me a grin. "Noah would deserve it."

Sometimes, my friends blew my mind. We weren't the same dipshit kids anymore.

Reed lounged beneath an umbrella nearby, reading a book as Vivian's head rested in his lap and his fingers tangled in her hair. Her eyes remained closed, a soft smile on her face.

Bizzy lay on a towel behind us, dusting off the sand the James girls tossed everywhere before she resumed tanning

with her shirt covering her face. Noble was nowhere to be seen, but Sunny said that wasn't unusual.

"Bree up yet?" Ezra asked, stalking over to join. "I need to speak with her."

He dropped onto the blanket beside Sunny, draping his hand over her knee.

"She left last night, was gone several hours, then came back late," Bizzy mumbled beneath the fabric. "Maybe around three or four this morning? She's still sleeping. She said the villa was *too loud*."

"Goddamnit," Ezra groaned, dropping his head in his hands. "Disgusting."

Bizzy sat up, clutching her shirt in her lap as she flipped him off. "I'm a sexually active woman, Ezra. Eat a dick and deal with it."

"Nobody wants to deal with it. Even Bree had to flee to escape your revolting hookups," he grumbled.

Vivian shot up. "Don't make your sister feel bad for enjoying your brother-in-law's company. I hope Bree was out enjoying someone's company, too." Her eyes flickered to mine.

I tensed.

Reed smiled into his knuckle. Saying nothing, he wrapped his arm around Vivian's shoulders, pulling her closer to kiss her temple. "Get him."

Sunny patted Ezra's hand on her knee. "Your fault for having such cool sisters. I wouldn't have to invite them if I didn't like them so much."

Ezra muttered something under his breath, grumbling like a cantankerous thundercloud. He'd mellowed in his time with Sunny, who, despite her name, could be a little dark like him. But boy, did she give that asshole a run for his money.

"At least Bree isn't here to join Bizzy's ranks," Ezra said, squeezing Sunny's hand and glaring at Bizzy. "I'd rather she sleep this trip away than get into shit with you."

Bizzy laughed, flipping him off from over her shoulder with two middle fingers now. "Consider yourself lucky that Bree is asexual."

Ezra grumbled under his breath.

I shifted uncomfortably on the blanket, staying out of the conversation entirely. The movement caught Reed's attention, and he sat forward, giving me a look.

Fuck. No way he knew me that well. I resorted to staring at the water as Bizzy and Ezra went back and forth with one another.

When I glanced over, Reed's intense eyes continued focusing on me. A smile twitched in the corners of his mouth.

Shit. How close to the villas were we last night? No, Bree and I were far enough away that we wouldn't have been seen, especially in the dark.

I rose before guilt forced me to do something I'd later regret. Like confess.

"I'm going for a walk."

Not waiting for a response, I hurried in the opposite direction from Noah and his daughters.

Reed nudged Vivian. "I enjoy my walks late at night, personally."

Fucking hell.

"Hey, Ty!" Ezra called behind me.

I should have known the fucker would follow me.

The breeze off the sea was mild, leaving the waves calm. I couldn't pretend not to hear him when the surrounding beach was so goddamn peaceful.

"Walk with me, will you?" he asked, catching up.

I reluctantly stayed at his side instead of sprinting ahead. Ezra had muscle but no endurance. I could have lost him.

My best friend patted my shoulder, shoving me forward as we started down the shoreline. He gave a quick smile, hardly a pull of his lips. The energy between us was off. It had been off for a while. If I felt it, he did, too.

We each removed our flip-flops and carried them as we strolled along the water. Quite a romantic walk, with the lush green foliage contrasting the bright white sand and clear blue sea. Unfortunately, I shared it with Ezra.

We walked in silence for several minutes, the air tense. I wasn't sure who was responsible for it.

The look Reed gave me when Bree came up in conversation... If he knew, Ezra might, too. He knew me better than anyone else. Not to mention Reed was a big fucking gossip for being an otherwise quiet guy.

"How are you doing, brother?" Ezra asked softly, the tone betraying the hardness of his entire appearance. He was probably the only man in the Yucatan dressed head to toe in black.

I stared at the water. Gorgeous for swimming, maybe a boogie board, but without strong winds or waves, it wasn't ideal for surfing. Still, being near the ocean was sometimes as calming as riding a board.

"Doing fine," I said, kicking my foot in the sand. "Why?"

Something bothered Ezra. He didn't bring shit up just to make conversation. That had never been his style.

"Can we just get to it? Whatever it is?"

Ezra dropped his chin and tucked his hands into his pockets. "Yeah, we can." He straightened up and looked at me. "I'm worried about you."

"No need to be," I said.

He shrugged, squinting from the glare of the sun. "Maybe not," he conceded, "but if something was wrong, you know I'm here to listen, right?"

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my shorts to match his stance. "Yeah, I know." His chin jutted toward the ocean. "You lose yourself out there, but I know what it looks like when you lose yourself here, too." He thrust his finger into my chest. "To see the fear in your eyes like you're drowning on dry land. I saw it at the cabin. You can tell me you're fine, and there's no reason to worry, but I see you, Ty. You can't outrun me."

"I'm fucking up at work," I admitted. "I took a massive loss that hits harder than just ego, and it's my fault. I got distracted and let myself get carried away in... things that took my focus when they shouldn't have. I slighted that asshole client, and he made me suffer to get him back, only to refuse to work with me. He's agreed to stay with the firm, but only if he's represented by someone else. I won't be offered a partnership."

Anderson's loss meant there was no chance Tilly would promote me. *There* was suddenly nowhere.

"When would it have been enough?" Ezra asked, running his foot through the sand as he surveyed the ground. "You think landing this asshole would have made you feel accomplished? Being a partner? When it didn't, what would be the next marker you kill yourself to get to?"

"It's my career, Ezra. Partner means security. It means accomplishment. It means—"

"What if you're using the wrong metrics for success?"

"What other metrics are there?" My voice broke, the strain of forcing things to be okay because they *had to be* tugging at my resolve. "What else is there when I've sacrificed my entire adult life working for something I may never get?"

He nodded, listening along. Finally, he said, "I spent many years telling myself I couldn't have more than I did. Our reasons are different, I know, but the outcome is the same. You keep a lot out of your life when running too fast for it to catch up with you."

He patted my shoulder, heading toward the villas, leaving me alone on the beach.

Twenty-three

Bree

•• Y ou're with Ty," Sunny chirped, positioning us at the end of the aisle.

A trail of seashells lined the sand in a path to a white wood gazebo with ornate carvings along the trim. Flowers cascaded down the posts, bright pink hibiscus that contrasted with the turquoise water beyond.

The wedding processional would be brief. Ty and I would walk first. Then, Bizzy and Noah. Finally, Nicole and Reed.

As Sunny's maid of honor, Nicole was initially paired with Ty, Ezra's best, best, best man—officially, he had three. There'd been a shake-up in the order of things.

When I pointed this out, Sunny waved me off. "There are like ten people at the wedding. No need for formalities!"

Right.

"Okay. Ty there." Sunny grabbed Ty by the shoulders and adjusted his placement. "Nicole there." She turned to Nicole, posing her as if Sunny were playing with her dolls.

She stepped back, clapping. "Okay, Ty. Bree. Go!"

Standing between Nicole and Bizzy inside the gazebo, I inspected the bouquet in my hand rather than stare daggers at the man responsible for my need to spend the day on my feet.

"One more run-through. Please," Sunny coaxed, ignoring Ezra's eye roll. "It's bad enough we lost the James clan. I don't want everyone clueless in the middle of the ceremony."

"Bad luck Noah was wearing Olivia in that carrier when she had the blowout," Vivan said, shading her eyes from the sun. "Anyone want to swim after this?"

A rumbling of agreement spread through the group, but I remained quiet. With a red ass, I had to sit this one out. Or stand it out, rather.

"Bree?" Ty said, his eyebrows raised high. "You don't want to swim, too?"

I flipped him off and ignored his stupid smirk.

That asshole thought the remedy to my bratty attitude was to spank me? Wrong. It only made me want to lash out more.

Because maybe he'd do it again.

Oh god. My face flamed with embarrassment. I shouldn't have liked last night as much as I did, but as soon as Ty said I'd been punished and was free from my regret? Those words

sank into the marrow of my bones, sliding through my body with permission to let go of the heaviness dragging me down.

I'd never had that relief before. His words carried away the guilt and shame, leaving me with the sweet sting of his touch to remind me I'd atoned for my misdeeds.

The sweet sting... and a dull ache between my legs because I'd been wet and bothered ever since.

While there was no way Ty would know if I got myself off —right?—I would know. I didn't want to disappoint him. That felt worse than a heavy hand on my ass.

"You okay, Bree?" Ezra asked, eyeing me. "You're awfully red. You might be burning. Did you put on sunscreen? Drink enough water? It's hot as fuck. I don't want you passing out."

"I'm fine." I waved him off, grateful when Sunny gave up and declared us sufficiently rehearsed for tomorrow's ceremony.

"You might need some cream," Ty murmured, trotting next to me as everyone separated to prepare for a free afternoon before dinner. "Something organic."

My lips pulled into a smile that did not match the anger in my eyes. "You might need to fuck right off."

His eyes lit up with delight. "Are you sure you're okay? You seem a little…" He slid his finger along my arm. "Tense."

I snatched my arm back, giving him a dirty look. "I can listen, Ty."

"You can," he agreed in a low voice. "You listen so well when you want to be good for me."

My fury faded slightly. Licking my lips, I whispered, "So, can I come? Since I've been... good?"

I didn't want to love that as much as I did.

He tutted. "Of course not."

"I hate you!" I hissed, scowling as he skipped ahead to catch up with everyone.

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"You okay?" Bizzy whispered next to me—a shocking volume for a woman who typically lived life out loud. I must look terrible if she gave me the courtesy of privacy.

"You look..." She paused, taking me in. "Uncomfortable."

My thighs pressed together as tightly as my grimace. "I'm fine."

A lie. My ass was sore, but the ache between my legs was infinitely worse. Being told not to do something by Ty only made me want it all the more. I glared at him down the table, my fingers drumming angrily on the top of the wood surface.

Sitting through a rehearsal dinner would have been manageable if not about to combust.

Watching everyone enter the pool while I opted out did not improve matters. The thick lines of finger imprints ran not just on my ass but along the tops of my thighs. My suit couldn't hide it, and jumping in with shorts meant answering to Biz when she made it her business to investigate.

Ty had dunked himself into a wet, muscly picture of every girl's fantasy, doing little to ease the discomfort in my body.

"You ready for no take-backs?" Ezra asked Sunny, squeezing her hand.

Sunny patted her belly like a drum. "As long as I don't barf on my dress." She smiled cheerfully even though her morning sickness had recently shifted to all-day sickness.

Jaime nodded sympathetically as she passed Chuck a roll. "It's completely acceptable to puke when and where needed."

Proudly, Noah said, "Jaime's puked her way across America."

"And part of Europe," she added. "Touring while pregnant is an experience."

"Delightful," Ezra murmured, pulling Sunny in for a kiss so deep I was sure *I* would be the one puking. "You're doing the heavy lifting, and I love you. Aim for me if you're worried about your dress."

Ugh. Gross.

Ty's eyes penetrated me, a stupid smirk lingering while he watched me suffer all through dinner. The display of PDA wasn't adding to my night.

"I'm tired," I announced, setting my napkin on my plate and excusing myself. "I'm going to get to bed early to be fresh for tomorrow."

More lies. I planned to wiggle and squirm against my pillow, hoping it was enough pressure to climax. I wouldn't technically be using my hands.

I was about fifteen feet out before Ezra trotted at my heels, jogging to catch up.

"Bree!" he called. "Let me walk you."

I spun around, ready to tell him to give it a rest. I could make it to my room just fine. But he tossed a meaty arm over my shoulder and leaned into me.

"It's not you," he said. "You know that, right?"

"It's not me?" I crossed my arms defiantly. "If it's not me, why are you walking me back like a child who needs supervision?"

Ezra blinked, then blinked again. "What?"

"What?"

He sighed, dropping his arm, and glanced toward the table where his friends laughed and joked.

"I'm not talking about escorting you back, Bree. I'm saying it's not you. The reason he's been stressed and losing his shit. It has nothing to do with you. Don't hold it against him." He hesitated. "Or yourself."

I swallowed, staring at the sandy ground between us, lightheaded. Ty, he meant. How did Ezra know?

As if sensing my thoughts, Ezra said, "You think I don't know my best friend? My brother? I knew he would set his sights on you as soon as I told him you were off limits."

Ezra laughed as my mouth fell open. I punched his arm. Hard.

"Ezra, what the hell?"

He rubbed his arm, shaking his head. "He's always had a thing for you, and you've always had a thing for all of my friends."

My mouth dropped even wider, and he used his hand to close it.

"Dear sister, you followed the boys around like a lovesick puppy. Stuffing your bra and waltzing through the house like no one knew those lopsided, lumpy things were Kleenex in one of Mom's old bras."

"EZRA!"

He laughed harder. "You'd put on her makeup, but you had no idea how to apply lipstick, and it would end up all over. Grinning at us with your lumpy fake boobs and lipstickstained teeth. A fucking riot."

Despite my embarrassment, I laughed with him. "Was it really that noticeable?"

His brows pinched together, and he nodded. "Oh, incredibly." He sighed. "You don't think as soon as that asshole told me he was teaching you to surf, I knew something was going on? Or the fact he never spoke of you again unless I specifically asked didn't give him away? God, he's always telling on himself, either outright or with his obvious behavior."

My toe traced the sand, kicking lightly. "There wasn't anything going on when he was teaching me. Not really, anyway."

Ezra rolled his eyes, darker in the shade of the trees, yet bright. My brother shifted from glowering to glowing in the last year. "Ty has had a thing for you since you were seventeen. It was creepy as fuck for him to admit it, so he didn't. Instead, he always asked about you and thought I wouldn't know the difference."

"What?" I whispered, sure I misheard him.

"You and Ty have always had an understanding about one another. I don't hate that for either of you. You've changed this summer. You're... I don't know. Maybe you're yourself and just letting us all see, finally."

Was it possible to choke on this much affection? My stupid, grumbling, annoying, overprotective, and overly involved brother... was everything a sister could want.

"Anyway." He ran his hand through his hair and glanced at the table again. "He's going through some shit, and when Ty goes through shit, he collapses. He pushes himself until he can't anymore and then pushes twice as hard. I'm watching it, but you should know. It's not you."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I considered that.

"He said he couldn't..."

Ezra raised his eyebrows. "Couldn't what?"

Ugh.

"Couldn't.... touch me."

Ezra's face contorted in severe consternation. "Fucking gross."

I waved my hands, silencing him. "Shut up. I know. Just listen for a second."

He grimaced, but nodded.

"All that aside, Ty said he wouldn't do that to me. He said he just keeps going. He can't stop, and he channels that energy into work because it's the only area of his life where that's a benefit, but it destroys everything else. He didn't want to do that to me, so he made a promise not to touch me."

Ezra cupped his chin and bobbed his head, listening and not making eye contact. He may never look me in the eye again, and I think we were both perfectly okay with that.

"Yeah. That's his anxiety. He's always been like that. It was awful until we were six or seven. It improved once things settled after his mom got rid of his dad. But he never shook that anxiety."

I tugged on my hair, wrapping it around my fingers. I understood a bit about that.

"He's always been the motherfucker who had to control everything. Be good at everything, and anticipate everything. When Ty can't or doesn't, he's unable to tolerate it. Those stupid rules keep him from spiraling."

"Well, he broke them," I mumbled.

"God. Fuck, Bree. Just. No. Fucking no." He grimaced. "Don't say shit like that."

My brother scrubbed his hands over his face, staring at the sky and shaking his head. "This stuff with him and his work... Yes, he's a runner and always needs to be sprinting toward something. I just... You can keep up. That's all."

Ezra shifted his weight to his heels, rocking back like he ached to leave this conversation.

"So, I said my peace. I don't want to hear another fucking word about touching."

I bit back my smile. "You don't want an update?"

"Goddamnit, Bree." He slammed his hands over his ears, stepping back.

I leaned in his direction like I would follow when he tucked tail to run.

"Want to know whether he changes his mind about his stupid rules? Gives in to temptation again?"

"Fuck you." He looked a little green around the gills, waving me off as he escaped.

"You want me to tell you if it gets to that?" I called to his back as he sprinted to the safety of the restaurant. "You're an asshole!" he shouted, flipping me off from over his shoulder.

Twenty-four

Ty

 $T^{\text{hose fingers.}}$

Thrumming one by one over the tabletop with a steady rhythm of wrath. Bree definitely hadn't used them to make herself come yet.

Which meant she was behaving.

Dinner was agony, but not as excruciating as not following her when she got up to leave.

The group sprawled on the beach to admire the sunset after dinner, absent my obsession. Ezra pulled me aside before I settled in the sand to get lost in my thoughts. Another romantic moment spent with the wrong Collins, but Bree had disappeared.

She better not be masturbating.

Or maybe she should. Then I could spank her again. Shit, I liked that so much more than I wanted to.

"You seem lighter, brother," Ezra said, leading me away from the party and taking a seat higher on the beach, just shy of the palm tree line. "I'm choosing to believe it's because you're having a fun fucking time with me."

I hummed.

His toes dug into the sand. "It's revolting to think it's actually because of my sister."

He took a sip of his beer and held the cold bottle against his temple. He looked mildly ill.

I stared with my mouth open. "You know?"

"I guess it had to be someone. May as well be you," he continued, ignoring me.

I pulled my knees to my chest, watching the party break into smaller groups as the golden hue of the last light blanketed the beach with bright oranges and reds.

My favorite time in Tulum. The sun set to the west of us, but the radiant glow spread over the entire ocean, darkening the turquoise water as the sun dipped lower. The sea would fade to black when it was gone, the stars dotting the sky.

As much as I loved the beauty of the day's last light, I longed for the obscurity of the night sky at this moment. It would give me something to hide behind.

"You're... okay with it?"

Ezra sighed. "It was never about you not being good enough for her. It was always about not wanting her to get hurt." He twisted the bottle in his hands, staring at the sand.

"Bree has been clear that it's for her to deal with, and she can." His fingers tapped over the glass. "But it's not her I owe an apology. It's you. I underestimated you by assuming you'd treat her less than she deserves. Regardless of what happens between you two, I should have remembered you're a good man."

I bit the inside of my cheek, unsure that was true.

Ezra took a sip of his beer before handing it to me. I accepted, taking a swig. We both stared at the water.

"I don't want to hear a goddamn detail about your physical relationship. I swear to god, Ty. I'll rip your dick off and choke you with it. That's my hard line."

I snickered, handing him the bottle back. "Yeah. I can agree to those terms."

No wind rolled off the ocean this evening, only a soft breeze lulling the waves to shore with a gentle crashing. The laughter of our friends accompanied the rhythm of the sea—the absolute best sound in my world. My two favorite things.

Ezra should have gotten up and joined his celebration, but he would stay until we settled whatever needed to be said.

We sat in companionable silence. My best friend wasn't a man who spoke to fill space.

"We said through Mexico," I said in a hushed voice. "It's temporary."

Ezra took a long pull from the beer, finishing it and setting the bottle in the sand, pressing it down and digging a hole.

"You're both solid people. Neither of you hurt for the sake of hurting. You'll treat each other well, even if it's casual." He shook his head, muttering, "Gross."

"Not gross actually, it's rather—"

"Shut the fuck up, Ty." He gave a heavy sigh. "I can't believe I'm going to say this." Puffing a breath, his hands smoothed over his thighs. "You underestimate your ability to do well with this shit."

I opened my mouth to argue, ready to point out a history of women who might say otherwise, but Ezra held up his hand.

"I'm talking about the vulnerable shit, Ty, and don't pull that pompous attitude with me. I see you, and Bree does, too. Don't forget that."

He stood, picked up the bottle, and started back for the party.

"Quit creating barriers where they're not needed, brother. And quit running from the good stuff. The bad catches up no matter what. You need the good there to help you fight it."

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Sleep wouldn't likely come again, not without exhausting my body first. If I were at home, I'd lace up my shoes and go for a run, but running through the Yucatan jungle in the middle of the night seemed foolish.

I slipped on my swimming trunks. A few thousand laps in the pool ought to do it.

A lighted path of lanterns lined the walk, the soft glow of the yellow lights giving a peaceful ambiance to the humid night. A warm breeze carried the scent of the ocean, and I inhaled the salty air. There was nothing like the beach, no matter where I was.

If I had a board, I'd be tempted to paddle out to feel the comfortable rock of the waves beneath me.

I'd settle for the still water of a pool. The gate was locked, but I hopped over the fence, tossing my towel on an empty chair and tugging off my shirt. The fresh air felt good. Grounding.

"It's closed. You're an hour too late."

Bree sat at the water's edge, her feet swirling in small circles. She raised one leg high, wiggling her toes before

flexing her ankle and dropping her foot back into the water.

"Another rule breaker at this hour," I said.

Her hands splayed next to her, fingers wrapping over the concrete pool lip.

"Bizzy and Noble are disgusting weirdos, and Nicole stole my earplugs. I can't sleep. I figured I'd come out here and sit quietly."

Quietly. Not necessarily alone. She didn't protest when I joined her.

We sat silently, the breaking water the only sound between us as we kicked our feet in the pool.

Bree dropped her head back, staring at the sky. A nearly full moon shone brightly, giving plenty of light to see her profile. It was easy to sit next to her and admire her.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Aside from a sore ass, yeah, I'm fine."

Her eyes remained on the sky above. I followed her gaze, amazed at how many stars I saw absent of city lights.

"I'm sorry, Bree." My voice broke, and I dropped my head.

Her hand rested gently on my arm. "I enjoyed last night. I liked being told I could let everything go and believing it." With a playful glint in her eyes, she added, "And the spanking was pretty damn fun."

I sniffed, nodding as I stared at my hands. "It's more than spanking you without discussing it beforehand. I'm sorry I lost control the night you tried to surprise me. I was purposefully hurtful because you caught me off guard. For all my blustering about being an adult, I still can't handle feeling out of control. I just broke. I always break when things don't go my way."

"You're allowed to make mistakes, too." Bree slid closer, her thigh brushing against mine. "You deserve someone to say it to you, Ty. You can let it go."

My chest tightened.

"Besides, as someone who has always been seen as fragile and on the cusp of breaking, I can assure you that your loss of control is still very controlled." She laughed softly, nudging me with her shoulder.

"You're not fragile."

Casual with Bree didn't feel casual; try as I might to talk myself into believing otherwise. If I were being honest, I knew that from the start, fucking idiot that I was. But dragging her into my shit would be unfair.

A transition to friendship was in her best interest, but inevitably, that would slide. She'd get busy. I'd get busier trying to fix my position with Tilly and start from scratch to prove myself. We'd surf an occasional weekend or text and check in, but life would bring a drift. She'd meet someone who chased *her*, sprinting to get to her instead of running like a misguided coward.

I had now.

"That's why you're so special." I puffed a breath, scrubbing a hand over my face and avoiding her curious glance.

"You've always pushed, even when it's hard or uncomfortable. You don't give up. I run. I run to avoid fighting, but you're a fighter, Bree. You've always fought your monsters. That makes you brave. You're anything but fragile. Me? I'm the coward who runs, rather than faces those monsters."

"You once told me I'd never be free if I didn't let go of the monsters pulling me down." Bree's hand splayed over my thigh, her fingertips caressing. "They're still there, Ty. I don't know if we can ever get rid of the monsters. But we don't have to be scared of them. We're stronger."

I dropped my head onto her shoulder.

"Ezra knows," I said, half-smiling.

That asshole.

Bree rested her head against mine. "I know."

The gentle crash of the waves in the distance rolled quietly between us, a sound I loved because it calmed my head.

"You came to swim?" she asked after a minute.

I nodded, and she lowered herself, easing into the water.

"Then let's swim."

With one foot, she kicked off from the wall, drifting to the center of the pool. Treading water, she waited for me.

Her pretty blonde hair spread around her as she turned in circles.

"I was going to swim laps," I said. "To tire myself out. Are you up for it?"

"Oh, I think I can keep up," she shot back, heading toward the end of the pool to start her laps.

I spent years convinced that wasn't possible. Tonight, maybe that was true.



"You can't ignore that ten years of private swim training would give me shoulders of steel, Ty Jensen. I can swim for another hour, at least."

Bree floated on her back, her eyes skyward and not looking at me. I couldn't take mine off her.

She clobbered me in the pool, not only swimming faster but longer, too.

"An unfair advantage," I protested. "My moms couldn't afford membership at the country club. I had to swim in the lake and risk disease and brain-eating amoeba. I wasn't pampered with private pool boys."

Her sweet laugh filled the air as she glided through the water until she was in the shallow end. Standing up, she shook out her hair, refreshed and wide awake. It had to be almost two in the morning.

"Yes, true, but look at you now. You spend every weekend in the ocean. A far more formidable opponent than Cade, the pool boy."

"Cade?"

"His parents forced him to give lessons at the pool after he stole his father's Mercedes and wrecked it with friends." She took a mouthful of water, leaned back, and spit it into the sky. "When we were fourteen."

Bree made her way to the pool wall, resting the heels of her palms on the lip and propping her elbows as she watched me tread water.

"I spent a solid summer swimming laps nearly non-stop to improve. I wanted to beat *Cade* so badly. I got good at swimming that summer."

"Did you beat him?" I leisurely swam closer, my eyes locked with hers.

She grinned. "I destroyed him."

I laughed, making it to a shallow depth for standing. Dunking my head one last time, I popped up and tossed my hair back, running my hand to brush it from my face.

Bree's expression when I opened my eyes was delicious. Catching herself, she closed her mouth and cleared her throat.

I stood close to her now, the water above my waist. Close enough to see the shift in her breathing, her breasts buoyed by the water just below them.

"We're still in Mexico," she whispered.

My hands rested next to hers, and my body caged her.

The rise and fall of her chest pressed her breasts against me. With another inch closer, her exhale fanned over my cheek.

"We are." My fingers flexed, aching to touch her.

She swallowed heavily, and it took all self-restraint not to bracket her throat. Hold her still while I devoured her nape until she was panting and desperate, pleading for more.

I wasn't sure who I was edging anymore.

"I've behaved," she said softly, her hands releasing the pool's edge and skimming across the water. They drifted in a path over my arms, dancing along my skin with a blistering touch that could burn me alive. She lit me on fire.

My knuckle traced her jaw, her breath catching.

"You've been so good for me."

Bree smiled, standing before me as the woman few had allowed her to be, refusing to see what she now demanded.

She tilted her chin in defiance, challenging me to a battle I wouldn't win. I would throw down my sword at her feet every fucking time. My body pressed hers against the wall, our eyes locked.

Her lips brushed mine with the sweetest whisper of the most sinful words.

"Then reward me."



Bree wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist before I could answer.

My hands gripped her ass, fingers digging into the fleshy skin and enjoying the hiss from her lips with the rough touch. She was still sensitive from last night, and the thought of my handprints on those luscious fucking cheeks sank me. That pretty skin turning a delectable shade of pink.

I wouldn't spank her tonight. Bree needed recovery before we explored her limits, but I wanted our bodies so close that even the tiniest drops of water ceased to exist between us.

"How's that beautiful ass?" I murmured.

She moaned, her hands sliding to tangle in my hair. "I hate you."

"Good. Get mouthy. I'd love to do it again."

Bree's teeth sank into my bottom lip, pulling roughly until it was my hiss to swirl between us.

"That's not a threat."

Fuuuuuuck. I think I love this woman.

I cupped her breast, my fingers brushing the fabric of her bikini. My other hand snaked behind her, tugging the flimsy string at the base of her neck to loosen the top. The cups fell away, exposing her gorgeous nipples, hard and tight in the exposed air.

My mouth was immediately on her, nipping and biting. The water splashed around us as I thrust my hips to meet hers.

Bree rubbed herself along my cock, shamelessly rolling over me. Fuck, I was hard, both in my readiness to have her and movements as I ground my erection against her pussy.

It wouldn't take much—slide those bikini bottoms to the side to take her. She lowered one hand, skimming the thin fabric, but I grabbed her wrist.

"Not yet." Exploring her neck, my lips, tongue, and teeth nipped, licked, and sucked her wet skin.

"Please," she begged. "Please touch me."

Dropping both hands to her hips, I hoisted Bree out of the water in one easy movement. Dripping—in all ways that mattered—I placed her on the edge of the pool.

"Show me. I want to look at you before I have you."

It was always my favorite part.

I hooked my fingers into the sides of her bikini bottoms, tugging slowly. With eyes locked, I encouraged her hips forward, tapping on the cheeks of her ass to lift and slide the bottoms off.

Bree slid them down, dropping them next to us. She took a deep breath and rested her heels on the pool's edge, knees tented and open for me.

Dear. Fucking. God.

She gave a wicked little smile, knees falling wider as her palms anchored her to the concrete.

I wasted no time kissing up those sinful thighs.

Bree dropped her head back, her wet hair slapping against the concrete as I licked her in a languid pass, flattening my tongue for more pressure when I did it again. She whimpered, her fingers threading my hair.

Two eager hands pulled me up as she leaned forward to take my mouth in a messy kiss, moaning.

"You like the taste of yourself? I can't get enough, either."

Without breaking the seal of our lips, I hoisted myself from the water, hovering as Bree moved back to make room. Her legs spread to fit me between. I settled, cradling against her hips.

Our breath picked up—so fast. From one inhale to the other's exhale, we cycled and shared the release of any air in our lungs. Gasping and tearing at one another as hands clutched in messy passes over every inch of wet skin.

Her hand slid into my shorts, pushing them down to free my cock. I cupped the back of her neck to keep our mouths united as I lowered her to the concrete until she was flat on her back.

Her other hand gripped my ass, her foot sliding around to bring me closer. My fingers brushed her nipple, pinching until her back lifted from the ground.

I eased inside her, Bree taking me so fucking well. Hissing a breath between my teeth, I groaned when fully seated.

"God, Bree. You feel so fucking good."

Nails dug into my back. "Harder, Ty. Give me more."

Skin slapped against skin, wet and slick and desperate and fevered. Bree lifted her hips, meeting me thrust for thrust, moaning as the sounds of our bodies filled the surrounding air. Messy, hurried, and eager.

"So goddamn good. *Fuck*," I rasped, driving forward with torrid strokes.

"Ty." It was a sob. The overwhelm of her emotions eclipsed me. Fuck, she was incredible. I hooked an arm underneath her knee, pulling her leg up as I watched each driving movement.

"I know," I groaned, staring at where our bodies connected. *Thrust.* "The way you feel." *Thrust.* "Your taste." *Thrust.* "God, the way you take me." *Thrust.*

My hand moved between us, my fingers stroking with frantic pacing as I drove harder. Wild and desperate, the base of my shaft collided with my fingers as they slipped in her arousal. I struggled to keep a steady pace, unraveling. This time, I wanted to.

"I'm coming," she breathed, inhaling sharply. "Don't stop."

"Fuck. You should know I don't stop."

My fingers dug into her knee as I gripped her leg tighter. There'd be bruises in the morning, but I craved my mark on her.

"Oh, god," she moaned, her body tensing as her back arched off the ground.

I picked up my pace, my hand on her hip, holding her down to thrust harder until my breath caught and I tumbled over the edge of release. I pulled out, coming on her stomach with a quiet grunt.

Swearing softly, I took in the mess. Fuck. It was pretty.

"Come back to my room. Stay with me," I murmured into her hair. "Please."

Bree pushed up, forcing me back as she crawled into my lap. Naked from the waist down, cum sticky on her stomach and hips, and breasts spilling out of her untied top, she was a filthy fantasy come to life. Stunning.

She watched me for a long moment, making me nervous.

"Please," I repeated. The request felt more vulnerable than anything we'd just done, for reasons I couldn't process fast enough.

Bree combed a hand through her tangled hair. "I suppose I could be persuaded," she said with a shrug of one shoulder.

"Brat," I muttered, grinning as she scooted from my lap.

We stood, and I handed her back her bottoms. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Eyeing my artwork spread over her belly, I realized my previous statement was a lie. She wouldn't get clean tonight.

Bree laced her fingers with mine. "I don't know, I kind of like it," she admitted, rather shyly.

"My very good girl, spoiling me." I pressed a kiss to her temple. "Dirty it is, then."

Twenty-five

Ty

•P lease don't divorce me already!" Sunny shrieked, her hands covering her face as she peeked through the cracks of her fingers to assess the damage.

Ezra wiped a glob of frosting off his cheek, his eyes locked on her like a predator stalking its prey.

"So dramatic all the time," Bree mumbled, resting her head on my shoulder and watching her brother chase his new bride around the table.

Ezra caught Sunny, his arms wrapping around her waist before she escaped. He pressed his cheek against hers and laughed as they tripped over one another, wrestling to use the other as a napkin.

"It's gross, too," she continued. "I mean, feeding each other cake is plenty to watch—did you see how Sunny licked his fingers clean? But pawing at each other on top of it?" She scrunched her nose. "She's already pregnant. Enough."

I kissed Bree's temple, lacing our fingers and resting our hands on my knee.

"I'm sure there are ways to enact your revenge, and we can consider your options." I squeezed her hand. "I'm happy to help you execute a plan."

It'd been a short and sweet ceremony for Sunny and Ezra, exchanging vows on the beach and smiling so widely at one another that I hardly recognized my best friend.

Bree stood to the side, her eyes drifting to mine. Then we were smiling with wide, alarming grins.

The reception occurred in the open-air restaurant, closed to hotel guests for our small party. Lanterns lined the awning, and string lights wrapped along the exposed beams of the thatched roof. The soft glow created a romantic ambiance. Perfect with the setting sun, and finally, the right Collins.

Music played on the speakers, a selection chosen and arranged by Noah. As soon as they cut the cake and we shared dessert, Bree and I moved to the dancefloor.

Her pink dress flared at the skirt with a fluffy tulle just above mid-thigh. I wanted to run my palms over the smooth skin of those legs, but her glowering protector hovered.

"Hands in appropriate places and bodies at a respectable distance," Ezra said, passing behind us as I held Bree close and swayed to the rhythm of a song calling for inappropriate touches. "You've always been a handsy motherfucker. Keep them decent in public." Ezra pulled Sunny into his arms and rested his chin on her head, tucking her against his chest.

I refrained from asking what my hands could do privately, but I had to say *something*. This was my best friend, for Christ's sake. He deserved it.

I leaned over. "I promise I'll keep my hands decent in public only because I respect your sister, not you. But you told me to dance with Bree at your wedding," I reminded him.

"Yeah, well. The party ends at midnight."

Sunny smacked his arm and mouthed something to Bree that I couldn't make out.

I grinned. "I will happily dance with Bree until midnight, but nothing says dancing has to stop with the party. I'm happy to dance with her all night, Ez. All night. *Dancing*. All. Night."

Bree rumbled a laugh against me, her shoulders shaking as she rested her head on my shoulder and left us to it.

"I've got the stamina for all night. Isn't that right, Bree?"

She lost it, bursting into laughter just as Ezra looked like he might choke on the bile in his throat.

He flipped me off, guiding Sunny to the other side of the dancefloor, and muttered under his breath about what insufferable company he kept.

Bree planted her chin on my chest as she stared at me. "You guys will do this all night, won't you?"

I hummed, my hands sliding down the curve of her spine and resting against the lowest part of her back.

"Absolutely. You have no idea how satisfying this is."

Suddenly, I appreciated the appeal of being a brat.

She pinched my arm, and I squealed. Then I rubbed my arm and tried to sound tough, although I'd squealed.

"What was that for?"

Bree rolled her eyes. "You can take it up an octave, Ty. You're not that rough in the voice box."

I relaxed my throat. "Fine. What was that for?"

"For making me wonder if you're enjoying torturing my brother more than you're enjoying my company."

Her glare was playfully heated, but some truth tucked in there.

I held her tighter, kissing her neck.

"The universe is rather generous to give me *both*, but there's no competition. Being with you satisfies more than a need to torment your brother."

I nipped gently, tugging her skin between my teeth and reveling in her goosebumps.

She collapsed against me, her hands sliding to cup the back of my head as I continued kissing her nape.

Her breathy exhale nearly killed me. "How long do you suppose we have to stay?"

I chuckled as if I wasn't thinking the same goddamn thing.

The song changed to something fast and poppy, Noah releasing a loud *whoop*. He grabbed Chuck, pulling her onto the dancefloor as he held her hands and settled her feet on his to move them along.

He wore Olivia in a carrier strapped to his chest, kissing her sleeping head.

Jaime held Didi in her arms, twisting them around and mouthing the lyrics as the little girl giggled and clung to her mom.

Impossible to ignore the emotion warming as I watched them. My best friend deserved the life he worked so hard for —the people he loved even harder. Noah's life hadn't been easy, but he'd never stopped trying for what he wanted—a family.

Ezra and Sunny lifted their hands above their heads, dancing —I think—just slightly off beat. They didn't care, laughing and touching and smiling, like there was nothing better than finding the person who lit up your entire world. Even when it felt most dark. Even when *Ezra* felt most dark. There he was, my best friend. Shining. Illuminated. Glowing.

Vivian hollered something at the bride and groom as she tugged Reed onto the dancefloor to join, as reluctant as that recluse could be.

Reed shot Vivian a look before she said something that made him crack, and he erupted into laughter so loud that it echoed around us.

My best friend, who once believed quiet was safe and peace was solitary, came to life when he found a woman who was anything but silent. Despite the loudness, it brought him the tranquility he'd longed for.

And me, dancing with the girl whose touch stopped my heart. It wasn't anxiety or panic that resuscitated it. Letting myself touch her back made my heart beat wildly. Stopping didn't kill me. It brought me to life instead.

My breath fanned against her hair. She smelled divine. A faint scent of perfume. Something soft and floral, light and clean.

"I can't believe we only have a few days here," Bree whispered, swaying to the song.

I stiffened, removing my nose from her hair. "I know."

Her eyes flickered to mine, assessing. She gave a brief smile before quickly moving on. "I'm so excited to get started with my program."

My hand cupped her cheek, my thumb caressing her skin.

"Lots to look forward to. I'm excited for you, Bree."

Her lips brushed against my ear. "I can feel how excited you are."

I hauled her closer, hips pressed tight and not helping matters. "Can you blame me?"

Bree turned her face, her mouth on mine, taking me by surprise. She kissed me—no shyness, no uncertainty, and no hiding.

"Goddamnit," Ezra growled from across the dancefloor.

This time, I paid no attention to my cantankerous best friend, holding onto Bree instead. Because I didn't want to let her go.

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"You don't have to," Bree said, smacking Ezra's shoulder as she stared at her ticket.

Ezra's eyes met mine, and he handed me my new boarding pass.

"I want to," he answered with no shame, upgrading us to first class for the flight home. "I wish we were all traveling together, and I hate saying goodbye. At least let me treat you."

"And us?" Noah asked, gesturing to the circus he traveled with these days.

Ezra ignored him, focusing again on Bree. "Consider it a last bit of vacation before you go back to the life of a working student, hm?" His eyes flickered to me. "When things go back to normal."

Bree stared at the ticket. "It's not a hardship to accept a first class ticket, big bro. Thank you."

She lifted onto the tips of her toes to give him a quick kiss on the cheek, practically skipping down the terminal to check out the shops with Bizzy and Sunny.

Ezra continued staring at me well after Bree left.

I shook my head. "I appreciate your generosity, but I'm not kissing you."

Noah snorted, nearly spilling his water bottle as he tried to take a drink over Olivia's head. A few drops must have hit her because Noah gently swept his hand to wipe her hair. "Amazing she didn't wake up," Ezra murmured, peeking over the carrier. Hard to believe he'd have one of his own soon enough.

Noah's hand circled idly along her back. "This baby is the most chill of the girls yet." He smiled down at her. "Nice to have at least one that won't be a troublemaker, you know?"

Reed emerged from the newsstand with a book tucked under his arm, joining. "We doing goodbyes now?"

Ezra hummed. "Goodbyes. Such an interesting topic of conversation."

I didn't like the way his eyes gleamed. Groaning, I turned my back to him and pretended to scan the terminal because it was interesting.

Catching on, Noah pipped up. "Oh yeah. I mean, I understand saying goodbye to you dipshits since we're all going to separate locations, but I guess Reed and Ez are heading for Seattle and don't need to say goodbye."

Reed didn't sit back on an opportunity to fuck with me.

"Right. Just like Noah and Jaime aren't going to say goodbye because they're going to Portland together."

I sighed heavily, rubbing my temple, still not facing them. My asshole friends moved to stand in front of me.

"You're not as funny as you think," I mumbled, rubbing harder. I already had a headache.

"We're dead serious," Noah said. "Wouldn't expect to be funny. You're doing that shit, Ty. The shit where you run from everything."

An overhead announcement reminded passengers to monitor their bags and report suspicious activities. I tucked my bag closer to my side, ignoring the sudden urge for Cinnabon.

"It's not Bree specifically," Reed said. "It's been years of you working yourself raw, on the move, telling yourself you're headed for something instead of acknowledging that you're running from everything." "You've missed so much," Noah agreed.

Sunlight poured through the terminal windows, making my head pound harder.

"I've made it to everything," I protested. "Been at the cabin every summer. For the births of those babies. For the weddings and the shows and the book launches and club openings. Held this baby's hand in the waiting room at the doctor's office to ensure he made his appointment."

I nodded to Reed, who murmured, "It was my first prostate exam. I was nervous."

"I've been there for the important moments."

"Absolutely," Ezra agreed, his hand landing on my shoulder. "We love you for it, and we see it. You have made it to everything *for us*."

"It's the other shit," Reed said. "You call it sacrifice, but you're giving up everything for yourself, and what are you getting in return?"

Olivia squirmed against Noah. He bounced and rhythmically shushed, settling her.

"Remember when we were fifteen, and we promised to hold each other accountable?" Noah glanced down to check the baby. Satisfied, he continued. "Ezra joked that we had you to teach us everything we didn't know, but for once in our lives, I think you need to learn from us."

Ezra gestured toward Sunny at the sunglasses stand. Bree stood beside her, thrusting a pair of oversized lenses with beach balls for frames into her hands. Sunny put them on as Bree took a matching pair, the women cackling.

"We're not perfect, but we're happy," Ezra said. "When you find the person who makes you happy, even in the shit of life?"

"You hold on for dear life," Reed said softly.

Noah sighed. "It will no doubt be a wild ride, but worth it, man. So fucking worth it." I continued staring at Bree, my eyes unable to look anywhere else.

"I don't know how I feel." It was the truth of it. "I feel everything all at once. I don't understand it. The only explanation is that I stopped. I stopped, unraveled, and now I don't know how to put it all back together."

Ezra laughed. "You don't understand how you feel? Do you know why? It's not because you stopped, idiot. It's because you fell."

"Hard," Noah added.

"You've never done it. It's weird and scary," Reed said.

Ezra kicked his foot against the tile floor, his hands tucked into his pockets. "It's uncomfortable and obsessive."

Noah grinned, shaking his head. "And stomach-sinking and breathtaking and glorious."

Our heads lifted simultaneously as the airline announced the next departing flight.

To San Francisco.

Bree clasped hands with Sunny, the two of them in their ridiculous sunglasses, murmuring something and pulling one another into a tight hug.

Blinking, I finally willed my eyes elsewhere. The open arms of my best friends, my brothers, stopped me before I could run away.

I said goodbye to Reed first, then to Noah. Ezra hung to the side, waiting his turn. He embraced me the longest.

He always did.

"I love you, brother. You don't have to stop, but you can slow down." Ezra pulled away, slapping my shoulder and pushing me toward the gate. "Enjoy first class and thank me later."

Twenty-six

Bree

''T hink you're nimble enough to get me off under this?" I bit my lip and batted my lashes playfully, lifting the thin fabric the airlines called a blanket.

His eyes darkened, and he leaned closer. "Don't tempt me."

He nodded to the woman across the aisle. Her nose was half-buried in her book while her eyes roamed above the tops of its pages towards us. "What's the point of first class if not the extra legroom?" I spread my legs wider, a smile on my face.

Teasing Ty was one of my favorite things to do. He was mischievous enough to join in most invitations for fun.

"I don't think this is what your brother meant when he told me to enjoy first class."

Shifted on his side, Ty's broad shoulders blocked our nosy neighbor.

"You're making this hard." His eyes dropped to his crotch before flickering back to mine.

"I have no doubt how *hard* it is." I lowered my voice despite the droning of the plane. "I'm thinking about how hard it is right now. How much I want to put my mouth on you and swallow your cock as you pull my hair and tell me all about how good my mouth is making you feel."

Ty groaned. "You're a ruthless woman." He shot me an unhappy look. "When we land, I'm going to spank your ass."

I bristled. "As if that's a punishment."

Lifting my hand to examine my nails, I feigned disinterest when I was *very* interested in what he planned to do with me once off this plane.

His eyes danced with amusement. "You didn't let me finish. I'll spank your ass. Then I'll fuck it, and I won't let you come when I do. No getting yourself off after, so don't bother asking."

I puffed my cheeks, blowing a slow breath that brushed the hair away from my face.

Ty relaxed in his seat with a smirk, lacing his hands over his stomach—a proud man.

A flight attendant handed blankets to a few more passengers before retreating to the galley. It was a full flight, and with a nosy neighbor, we were torturing ourselves.

Which was kind of our thing.

Aside from a bit of turbulence after takeoff, the flight had been smooth. The bumping of my heart was most unsteady. The last few days had been perfect.

My big brother married the woman carved by the universe for him. We all celebrated, danced, and had a blast. Ty and I had a solid two days of hanging out and doing touristy things like swimming in cenotes and seeing the nearby ruins.

It was so much fun, and that didn't even touch on the nights in his villa. We slept little, fucked a lot, and whispered secrets, stories, jokes, and affections until sunrise.

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"It was a good trip, wasn't it?" Ty asked softly.
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He unclasped his hands and placed one on my arm, his thumb running over the sleeve of my hoodie, lost in his thoughts.

"It was."

He gave a soft smile, not quite hesitant. "Can't believe tomorrow is Monday. When do classes start?"

"First thing in the morning," I said, keeping my voice elevated despite my unease with the topic. "A meeting with my academic advisor, a new student mixer, and lunch with Marin to catch up."

The entirety of our stay in Mexico had been as free and uninhibited as being carried away on the board together the first time Ty brought me on the water. I dreaded the wave of reality about to crash over us.

"Sounds like a full day," he said, his eyes clearing.

I swallowed. "Yeah."

His lips slid into an easy smile. "But that's tomorrow."

Skirting my arm, Ty's hand disappeared under the blanket and ran along the top of my leggings. He made no moves to push beyond the cotton barrier, caressing over the fabric.

"I don't like thinking of tomorrow," he murmured.

Tomorrow wasn't just a full day for me. It was a full day for Ty. One filled with uncertainty as he worked to rebuild what he lost so quickly when one deal went south. I hated that he had so much pressure on him.

"Then tell me about today. Tell me everything you'd be doing to me now if I were this ruthless woman you claim me to be. Though I may have to reconsider if you won't let me come when you take my ass."

The woman across the aisle stilled mid-turn of her page.

Ty gave a solemn nod. "Fair enough. Guess I'll just have to fuck your ass and make you come so many times you're sobbing."

He said it *much* louder, and despite my blush at the woman's gawking, I laughed.

The wide passes of his palm shifted to the idle tracing of his finger in a figure eight over my thigh.

I spent days getting lost in the blue of Ty's eyes. How the cerulean reflected the light of the sun and made them brighter. In the darker cabin of the plane, though, they looked like sapphires.

My hand skated over the armrest, settling in his lap.

"Bree," Ty warned, his hand squeezing. "Behave." He released my hip and resumed a gentle stroke along my abdomen.

I laughed, threading my hand through his hair and earning a pointed glare from our aisle neighbor. My body still buzzed with his words.

"We have an audience," I whispered conspiratorially.

Ty glanced at the woman, her eyes darting back to her book.

"The most judgmental are often the most afraid to do what they actually want." His fingers brushed lower.

"Ty Jensen. Are you implying you want to mess around on a full flight with a disagreeing busybody feet away? What on earth could you accomplish under those circumstances?" *"We* could accomplish a lot. I could slip my hand into those leggings and work you until you beg me to let you come. The problem is that you're incapable of climaxing quietly."

"Ty!"

He laughed, catching my hand before I swatted him with it.

"It's true, though," he said.

It was.

"You'd give us away in a heartbeat, and the last thing I need is to get put on a no-fly list. You almost got me the first time. I'm supposed to visit my moms for Thanksgiving, and I'm not driving up to Clear Lake."

"There's always the train." I covered his hand on my stomach, shifting it lower.

Nearly nose to nose, he whispered, "What would you let me do if it was just the two of us right now?"

An instant ache drifted through my body, the entirety of my craving enveloping me. Ty had that power. It wasn't just my pussy that longed for him, but I didn't know how to be closer to him than when our bodies were locked together. The delightful push and pull, thrusting and receiving, and the exchange of our desire. If possible to breathe him in, I would.

I raised my eyebrows. "Whatever you wanted."

His groan was louder this time, a deep rumbling. "That's unfair. There's a lot I want to do."

"Tell me."

Ty glanced around before wiggling closer and bringing his mouth next to my ear.

"I'd start with letting my lips wander all over your body. I love your mouth. It's sexy, warm, and tastes so good, but I like it when your lips are wrapped around me. You look so pretty when your mouth is full and your wide eyes stare up. I think I'd like to fuck you like that for a while."

I swallowed, my eyes fluttering closed as my stomach dropped.

Being on my knees with Ty in my mouth was intoxicating. It was his surrender, not mine. Not that I would have minded *that*, but the way he'd fist my hair and groan with pleasure, looking down at me with adoration—I had to touch myself and work my body simultaneously, or else risk imploding from my need.

I took a deep breath, trying to regulate my heartbeat. "I like when you fuck my mouth. What would you do next?"

Ty's soft laugh in my ear was utterly, excruciatingly pantymelting. The timbre of his voice, the sweet dulcet of his tone, and the sounds from him consumed me.

"Well, if I'm fucking your mouth, your hand is on your pussy, and that's just torturous for me. Unfair. I'd like to see you on your back, settle between your legs, and give you a turn. Would you like that?"

I blew out a breath, regretful I started this game. I would lose, empty of him and filled with need and urgency.

"Ty." I was sure I mouthed it, unable to speak.

"Your mouth tastes good, but your pussy tastes divine. It drives me wild when you lose it. When your hips lift, and you grab the back of my head to grind against my face."

He sighed, the heat of it filling the space between my neck and shoulder.

"Even better when you crawl up on me and ride my face. Fuck," he murmured. "Heaven to have you slide over me as you're gripping the headboard, taking what you deserve. I'd grab your thighs, holding you so tight I'd suffocate. Nothing better."

His hand reached for mine, lacing our fingers together as he gently kissed my palm. "I'd let you come then. You'd have earned it."

"You're benevolent." I squirmed in my seat, desperate for relief.

Ty kept my hand pressed to his lips. "How wet are you right now?"

"Soaked. I'm dying."

He chuckled. "You're not dying. But my cock is about to rocket off in protest. I'm so hard right now."

"Maybe..." I trailed off, jutting my chin toward the bathroom in the front of the plane. Chances weren't great it'd go unnoticed, but...

Ty's frown proved answer enough. "Airplane bathrooms are disgusting."

He was right. The fantasy was precisely that—a fantasy. The reality of airplane bathroom sex was anything but sexy, even in first class.

"I like you filthy," he said, shaking his head. "But not like that."

I dropped my head against the seat, laughing. That only drew the attention of a few people around us.

Ty leaned in. "Way to go. I was going to suggest a discrete hand job and finger fucking. No way everyone doesn't know what we're up to with the flush on those pretty cheeks."

He grumbled, shifting in his seat.

"Ty?"

"Hm?" His eyes were closed, and his head rested against the back of his seat as he took deep, slow breaths.

"You didn't get to come."

He lifted his head, and I nudged him.

"You didn't get to come. You'd let me come, but then what?"

Ty groaned and glanced at his hard-on. "I'm living with this beast, huh?"

He leaned close to me again, but this time, he pressed his lips to mine, giving me a long kiss. Even though there was no tongue, it still made my heart pound against my ribs.

Ty pulled away and smiled. "After you come, I'd take what I wanted, Bree. All of you. There wouldn't be anywhere left I

hadn't touched, licked, explored, fingered, or fucked. And when I was done taking everything, you'd come apart on my dick before I finally gave in and unraveled right behind you."

He kissed my nose and relaxed back in his seat.

"Now let me meditate and bring blood to other parts of my body, please. I'm afraid I'm going to pass out."

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With no medical emergency, we landed without incident.

Ty spent the last three hours of the flight with his eyes squeezed shut and his hands gripping the armrest. I watched a documentary on deforestation, hoping it would shift my *mood*.

Customs was surprisingly fast for an afternoon landing. Standing outside baggage claim, I pulled my backpack over my shoulder and wheeled my suitcase toward the taxi depot for a goodbye I didn't want to say.

It's not that I wouldn't see Ty again—I would. He promised to join for occasional weekend surfs, and we'd be on friendly terms.

But that almost made it all the more difficult. I didn't want to see him as only a friend.

Casual. Fun. Unsurprisingly, I sucked at both. Ty was right in his reason for wanting to avoid this in the first place. But I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge it. I said I could be casual and we could have fun. I said it, and I could do it.

"So, um. I guess have a good rest of your day," I said with a wave.

"Bree, what the hell kind of goodbye is that?"

Ty grabbed my arm, pulling me to him as his other hand slipped around my waist.

"You think I'm going to let you walk off with a wave and 'have a nice day?" He laughed and shook his head. "Come on, my company sent a town car for me. I'll have them drop you, too." "A—wait, what?" I followed as he walked through the airport, heading for a group of people with signs. Ty spotted his name on a placard, took the handle of my suitcase, and encouraged me along.

"A town car. Company perk for senior associates." He sighed. "Partners get even better perks."

"Oh." I glanced down at my hoodie, running a hand over the vinyl print of *The Surf Shop* logo. "I got this sweatshirt."

"Looks good on you," he said, his hand on my lower back to push me forward.

"I feel like we should be going to an *event*," I said once in the car.

Bottles of water and mints awaited us, and I grabbed one of each. Popping a mint, I played with the crinkling wrapper in my hand.

"It reminds me of being a kid when my dad would take us to fancy company events."

Ty shrugged. "It's all about impressions for men with money and power."

The way he said it made it sound like he didn't see himself as having either. Except Ty worked at a global real estate and acquisition firm and lived in a beautiful *two-bedroom* apartment in the heart of San Francisco—by himself! His company hired a car to pick him up from a *vacation*, not even a work-related event.

"Not you?"

He shook his head, leaning against the window and staring as we pulled away from the curb.

"You're the most hardworking person I know," I said softly, my free hand tangling and combing my fingers through his hair. I studied his face, the dark shadows gone from under his eyes.

"Not hard enough recently." He said it as a throwaway comment. Maybe more for himself than for me.

"Hey. You've been on US soil for approximately ninety minutes. Give some time without beating yourself up."

Ty cupped his jaw with his hand.

I softened my tone. "I wish you weren't so hard on yourself."

He made a protesting snort, and I cut him off.

"You are, and you're not hard on anyone else. You're kind and thoughtful and so generous with your affection. You deserve the same."

I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him to me. Ty sighed, resting his head on my shoulder.

We rode silently for the remainder of the drive, leaning against one another. When the car arrived at my apartment complex, Ty stared at our clasped hands on the seat.

I took a moment to memorize the rolling waves of his hair and the hard lines of his jaw—the slope of his nose and the shape of his full lips. I allowed my eyes to linger before we returned to a promised friendship.

I trusted Ty to hold a friendship, regardless of what happened. It enabled me to be free with him, to pursue his attention. We agreed on how it would end, when it would end, and why it would end.

When he brushed those lips over mine, murmuring, "See you later," I didn't let myself cry. Because I'd promised him just as much as he'd promised me.

"See you, Ty."

I got out, not looking back, even as I reluctantly dragged my heart with me. I said I could be an adult. I said he could trust me to take care of my feelings.

Keeping my back to the lot, I couldn't watch him leave. Tears stung my eyes as I heard the car pull out, the bumper grinding against the uneven dip at the exit.

"Goodbye," I whispered to myself. The word hung heavy on the drive, even if unspoken. I let go of my grip on the suitcase and padded my fingers under my eyes.

"You won't cry. You're an adult. Be a grown-up." I puffed a long breath. I promised. I promised him, I promised *myself*.

The scuffing of feet along the sidewalk startled me. Ty dropped his bag next to mine.

"Seemed more efficient if he let us both out. Given I have no plans to say goodbye," Ty said, gesturing toward the town car, leaving without passengers because *Ty got out*.

"Ty." I couldn't catch my breath. My chest filled with... everything. My chest filled with everything, and I couldn't *breathe*.

He gave a shy smile, his hand ruffling his hair. "I know you have a busy day tomorrow, but I was wondering if you're free for dinner."

"We're not in Mexico anymore. Summer is almost over," I stammered like a fool. *Just say yes, idiot!*

Ty held his arms open and surveyed the apartment complex. "You're correct. But why limit ourselves to a season?"

He smiled sweetly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Summer is great and all, but you're the girl I want to carve pumpkins with. The girl I want to take ice skating. The girl I want to pick flowers for. The girl who gets all the seasons."

"Woman," I whispered, biting my lip and shaking my head.

He nodded his agreement, moving closer until the tips of our toes touched.

"I told you the first time on my board that the best part of being on the water was the freedom. Being carried away, surrendering to something bigger than yourself.

"I was wrong, though. You're my freedom. I get carried away when I'm with you, and I'm here, Bree. I'm here to surrender to something bigger than myself."

"You better say me," I whispered, wrapping my arms around him, sure I'd never let him go. "You're surrendering to me." Ty chuckled. "I mean, yes, my queen. I'm surrendering to you." His hands cupped my face as his eyes locked on mine. "But Bree? I'm surrendering to my feelings for you. Because if I'm going to fight anything, it won't be us. It will be those fucking monsters that make me think I can't stop."

I kissed him softly, cupping his face to mirror the touch on mine.

"I'll fight with you, Ty."

He snickered, dropping one hand to smack my ass. "I bet you'll fight with me, my very good brat."

Twenty-seven

Bree

 $``F \ \ \ \ uck \ mental \ health." Brody \ crossed \ his \ arms \ and \ stared \ at \ me \ as \ I \ stood \ behind \ the \ register.$

"You don't want to be a therapist, do you? The best therapy is out there." He gestured toward the beach as I held my hand over my mouth to stifle a yawn. It had been a long first few weeks of classes, and I was beat. "You get me on Saturdays," I said, focusing on the inventory order form I was supposed to work on. "I'll come surf on Sundays. Besides, lessons slow after summer, and you'll be covered. You won't miss me as much as you think you will."

Brody glared at me. "We'll miss you *more* than you think we will, Breezy."

Sharon riffled through the bikinis on the clothes rack near the door, humming her agreement.

"You can't leave us, and Marin has no qualms about dragging you out here—whether you want to come."

I'd learned that months ago when she insisted on bringing me to Pacifica. It was the start of more than I ever could have imagined.

"There will be no kicking and screaming," I said solemnly.

I had no plans of leaving Pacifica behind, even with obligations picking up at a fast speed. I might have to rearrange some things and shift my time, but this shop, these friends, this place—had a piece of my heart.

Sharon gave up whatever she was looking for and came to join us at the counter. "You can bring your hot boyfriend, too."

Brody shot her a look, and she laughed, leaning with her head propped in her hand.

Ignoring Brody's pout, I leaned closer to Sharon.

"Ty is rather steamy, isn't he?"

She winked, closing the space between us. "He's got that *vibe*. I have no doubt he's steamy."

Brody made a gagging sound, rolling his eyes. "You guys know I can hear you, right?" He stepped around the counter and pinched Sharon's ass. "Don't think I won't remember this later."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm counting on it."

We giggled as Brody stalked off, disappearing behind Bob Marley and giving us privacy. "Things going well with you two?" I asked, nodding in the direction Brody had left.

Sharon's smile was radiant. "Better than good. We're..." She thought for a moment, settling on "Solid. We're solid. And you and Ty? Please tell me it wasn't just Mexico."

My eyes flickered to hers before dropping to my work. "Already been unleashed in San Francisco." I shrugged playfully, batting my lashes.

Sharon smacked my arm, glancing toward the back of the shop, and lowered her voice.

"Woman to woman. As good as expected?"

"Oh, Sharon," I said. "No chance I could have expected it to be as amazing as it is."

"Dear lord," she said with a sigh. "I love Brody, but... just, dear lord." She patted my hand. "I'm happy for you, B."

I was happy for *myself*.

Sharon sat up as Brody emerged from the back. "You guys done talking about all that chick shit?"

She strolled over to Brody and locked her elbow with his. "As if you, Connor, and Remy don't swap stories."

He scrunched his nose. "Connor is hooking up with my sister. You better believe he doesn't say shit to me these days."

While Brody acted nothing like my grumpy brother, I could kind of sympathize with his discomfort.

"Come on, babe." He tugged Sharon along. "Bye, Breezy. Don't stay late to finish that. You've been on your feet all day. At least sit down and take a break."

"Of course," I said, smiling and waving as they left.

As soon as they passed the window, I tenderly rubbed my ass cheeks. No chance I'd be sitting today. Possibly tomorrow, too. Ty had been just as busy as me during weekdays, but we managed late dinners and even later nights. Though admittedly, some of those nights were late because we were in bed reading. Schoolwork for me, briefs for Ty. But we were busy together, and that made it significantly better.

Smiling, I got back to work. I wanted to finish this for Brody even though we'd closed. He'd done so much for me without realizing it.

Just a few months ago, I came to the beach, threw myself into a job desperately trying to fit in somewhere I never thought I'd belong, and befriended people I'd expected to reject me. But I had a place in life for the first time, and it was exactly where I wanted to be.

This wasn't about a New Me. It was about finding the *Real Me*. The one I'd tucked away and hidden. The one who needed permission to be seen. Not by the people around me, but by myself. After too many years of turning away, I wanted to see her.

I closed my eyes, shaking my head—this life.

You are more than what you told yourself you could be.

For once, my grounding mantras weren't to settle my anxiety or discomfort. They fed and nourished my soul instead.

The shop bell interrupted my quiet reflection.

"Sorry, we're closed," I said, exhaling a long breath and blinking open my eyes.

"Fantastic." Ty stood in the door, a broad grin on his handsome face. "Cause I want to take my girl out."

"An unexpected patron! What are you doing here?"

Ty had spent long days at work debriefing the associate taking his place on the Anderson deal and transitioning his role to new client cases. It was an adjustment for him, and though he seemed lighter since returning, it hadn't been easy.

Last night, he had an evening call with my brother, closing his bedroom door for privacy. He emerged after a while, shaking his head but smiling.

"He's a dipshit, but sometimes he has okay advice," Ty said. *"I think I have it all sorted."*

Ty cleared his throat, making a production of his announcement.

"I missed a significant event." He leaned against the door frame and nodded toward the back. "Grab your board, Bree. Let me see what you can do."

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"Okay, so that felt a little anticlimactic," I apologized.

Ty sat on the hood of his car, watching me pull off my wetsuit—always a fight to the death. I hung it on the concrete wall dividing the dunes and the parking lot, laying it next to his. He handed me a towel, and I shook out my hair.

"Nothing with you is anticlimactic," he said, his eyes fixed on my movements.

Ty had pulled the boards up the beach, waiting for me to wash off at the showers as he sat with his towel wrapped around his waist, hoodie over his head, and looking pretty damn cute.

I slipped into my sundress, shivering as the breeze rolled off the water. With the sun nearly set, the temperature cooled quite a bit.

My nipples were hard under my wet bikini top, and the cotton of my dress was too thin to hide it, but Ty kept his eyes on my face. I wondered how much effort that took.

"I didn't even get up," I said, trying not to pout.

He slid off the car, wrapping me in his arms and smoothing his hands along my body to warm me.

"You almost got up, and the waves were big this afternoon. You'll get it next time."

Ty rode those waves like a boss. Easy for him to say.

He kissed the top of my head. "Could you have imagined three months ago that you'd be out on the water like that?"

I smiled against his chest. "No, never."

He held me, swaying our bodies together with the rhythm of the crashing sea. It was a sweet dance, and he kissed me with a soft brushing of his lips. It was so light, a whisper, but I thought my heart would beat straight out of my chest.

"Come on," he murmured. "Let's get warm in the car."

Yes, please.

We sat in Ty's car holding hands, watching the last of the sun disappear beyond the edge of the sea.

"I rarely see California sunsets," he said, his voice quiet and his eyes not leaving the golden horizon. "Too busy working to catch them. I sometimes forget how beautiful it is here."

Running a hand through his wet hair, I slid a little closer. "How are you doing?"

Ty shrugged. "It's strange not being the lead on this project I brought to Tilly's feet. I practically killed myself to get Anderson what he wanted, and he looks at me like I'm dog shit on the bottom of his shoe." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "I nominated Mia to lead. She's worked hard and been focused. She'll make partner easily. She deserves it."

I studied his profile. "But how are you doing, Ty?"

He shifted his weight to lean his arm against the center console. "Still getting used to this feeling. The one where I let others move ahead of me."

My fingers continued combing his hair.

"Tilly asked how I planned to get back on a partner track." My touch stilled, the tension in Ty's body spreading over my own. "I was honest with him. I don't plan to get back on that track, not at the pace I was going before. I can't, Bree. It will kill me eventually."

His head pressed against my hand as his eyes closed. I resumed combing his hair.

"That feels good, Bree. This feels good."

This feels good. Us.

"It does."

He said nothing for a moment, rolling his head into my touch like a dog getting a good scratch. It was endearing.

When Ty opened his eyes again, they were subdued, like he'd fallen into peace with whatever was on his mind. I'd give anything to hear those thoughts, but I didn't want to push.

So, for once, I didn't. I reached for his hand instead and traced the back of his knuckle with my thumb.

Ty watched with an amused smile. He looked up, focusing on the horizon, the sun now gone.

"I told Tilly I need more balance," he said softly. "I'm done by seven. That's it—seven to seven. I'll read briefs at home. No more calls, meetings, or late nights. Weekends are mine unless there is an emergency."

Seven to seven was still a long day, but I didn't comment.

"Tilly has a wife he never sees, and his only son works for him. Helfgott has three ex-wives. The notion of boundaries confused them, but I'd rather stay a senior associate for my entire career than be like them." He gave a brief smile. "Empty."

"You're too full of life to be empty, Ty. That heart of yours deserves more."

Puffing a long breath, he nodded. "I can't keep things as they are. It's up to Tilly to decide if that's enough. I've had a life of deals going my way. I can't beat myself up for the one time it doesn't. Not anymore. You helped me to see that."

"Me?"

He squeezed my hand. "You let go of your past. Of what no longer served you—because you wanted something different." Ty swallowed, clearing his throat. "I want something different, too." We sat quietly for a minute, Ty's soft breaths the only sound between us.

"I could let go partly because you gave me permission, Ty," I whispered. "When you see me and don't look away, it reminds me that I'm someone worth seeing. That makes me see myself differently, too."

Despite all the dirty shit we'd said and done to one another, I blushed. "When you take control and allow me to relinquish my own? It frees me. I want you to be free like that."

His hand tapped the steering wheel, a steady and rhythmic *thump* against the patent leather. "I have a hard time relinquishing control, Bree."

I rested my hand on his. "I'm well aware, dear."

"It was the not touching you thing, huh? Gave me away?"

"Well, it was either neuroses or a disinterest in me. While I didn't like the rules you set for yourself when I locked my sights on nailing you..."

Ty laughed, shaking his head and gripping his hands on the seatback. I slid to straddle him, and his eyes followed me as he sank his teeth into his bottom lip. He thickened beneath me as I idly rolled my hips.

"It was never about you. It was always about me," he rasped, his hands dropping to grab my hips and guide me.

I hummed, my body lighting up with all the ways I'd give Ty the freedom he needed.

"Well, it's about me tonight."

"Fuck," he swore. "Please."

"Ty?" I pressed my mouth to his and let my lips slide with the whisper of my words. "Lower your seat. You're not allowed to touch. Put your hands on that seatback. If they come off, I stop. One finger, Ty. I dare you."

He simultaneously groaned and laughed.

"You're not allowed to top from the bottom, either. If you do, I'll spank your ass raw. If you think I won't enjoy

switching, you're wrong."

He rumbled a low growl, grasping the leather as he jutted his hips upward. "You're a brat, Bree."

Pulling off my dress, I hummed my agreement. "Tonight, there's not a goddamn thing you'll do about it."

Ty dropped his head, softly cursing.

"No one will punish you more than you'll punish yourself." I smiled, leaning to whisper in his ear. "But I'm going to try."

"Bree," he rasped, his fingertips already clawing into the seat.

I patted his cheek. "Fuck, that's pretty."

He laughed, gripping tighter. "You surprise me. Constantly."

My knuckle slid along his jaw, my other hand stroking him over his shorts. "We haven't even started yet."

"Yes, please," he groaned, lifting his hips.

Planting soft kisses against his neck, I nibbled and bit, tugging his earlobe between my teeth.

"You've been punished, Ty. You can be free from the regret of whatever happened in the past, with work, and the guilt of wanting to stop. It's done. Do you understand?"

He didn't answer, his eyes shuttering closed.

Ty once said something similar, albeit when I was in tears after he spanked the hell out of me. But with his permission to let go, I had. Because I trusted and cared about him enough to believe him.

I hoped he felt the same about me.

"Do you understand?" I gripped his chin, forcing him to look at me.

Swallowing heavily, Ty gave a quick nod.

Tracing his mouth with my finger, I smiled. "Good boy. You say red if it's too much or tap three times."

"Fuck, I'm going to die," Ty whispered, his eyes squeezing tight.

It probably seemed like it to a man who needed to control everything.

I untied the strings of my bikini top, shaking my head.

"No, Ty. You're going to be *free*, and that's how you feel most alive."

We didn't come up for breath until the windows steamed and the surrounding air turned humid. Until I straddled his lap and teased him as he begged for relief, his hands never lifting from the seat despite how hard he gripped it.

Until I pulled my panties to the side to take him and ride him slowly, demanding he keep his hips still so I could take my pleasure while edging him from his own.

Until my back ached with the bite of the steering wheel against it. Until every moan and gasp had eased from our lungs, and the car went utterly silent around us.

And even though the sky was now dark, the beach quiet, and both of us exhausted from general life and emotions and making love, we stayed for hours. Ty kissed me and told me he loved me, and I said it back.

But it wasn't his words that held the promise of his affection. Everything in his kiss told me we'd have a lifetime more of them.

It still wouldn't be enough.

Five years later

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Olear Lake

Ty

•• \mathbf{Y} ou ready, brother?"

I adjusted my cufflinks and took one last look at myself in the mirror. "Yep."

Ezra punched my arm and pushed me out the door. "Wonderful, because she told me if you run off, she will hunt you down and drag you back before murdering me." The decision to marry Bree was the easiest I'd made yet. No chance I would run. Gave that up a long time ago.

She forced me to wait until she finished graduate school to get married. Until she spent a couple of years working at a local low-income community mental health clinic. Until she passed her licensure exam.

Pretty sure she made me wait just to be a brat, but four years after she moved in with me, she was going to be my wife. I'd have married her the moment I officially proposed last year, but she wanted a wedding, and I'd never stop giving Bree what she wanted.

That brat had me trained well, and I'd make no complaints.

Ezra gestured toward the inn's banquet room at the end of the long hallway. "I'll see you down there."

He shoved me to Reed and Noah, who waited to ensure I reached my mark.

Ludicrous. The doubt I'd ever settle down shifted when I gave in to my feelings for Bree. But I guess the boys held some caution—something about being a runner.

Which, sure, maybe in the past. But now I stood there, in front of our family and friends, entirely still except for my thudding heart. They could take their caution and shove it.

"You ready?" Noah glanced out at the rows of guests and waved to Jaime and their girls.

Jaime blew him a kiss, tugging her dress down to nurse their fifth and newest daughter, June. Chuck, Didi, Olivia, and their fourth daughter, Josie, now two, were in various states of behavior.

Chuck sat with a book in her lap, reading quietly. Didi corralled Olivia, the little hellraiser she was. Turned out, Noah was wrong about her chill.

Josie tugged on Jaime's arm to get her attention. It was fucking insane, and Noah couldn't be happier. The exhausted grin Jaime tossed his way indicated the feeling was mutual. I took yet another deep breath. "I'd have married her years ago. She made me wait."

"Smart woman," Reed said, rolling his neck and tugging at the collar of his suit.

Vivian shot him a look of disapproval and shook her head. Reed was the least comfortable in formal wear, and definitely the least comfortable in front of an audience. He couldn't stop jostling around.

He shot Vivian a look in return, one I was grateful not to see straight on. Whatever it was, her displeasure shifted to a sly smile, and she winked at him.

She eyed him for a beat longer before reaching over and gesturing for Josie to sit on her lap and give Jaime a break.

I tapped my foot, checking my watch. The ceremony was supposed to start five minutes ago. I closed my eyes. *One... Two... Three...*

Before I hit four, the doors to the banquet hall opened. A nod from the wedding planner signaled for the music to begin, a guitarist strumming a melodic and acoustic version of the Clash's *Stay Free*.

Noah bragged he was better equipped to play, but I needed him by my side. Noah liked attention, but he was stuck up there with me.

With my best friends. My brothers.

A little girl poked her head through the open doors, her dark brown eyes wide and on the verge of tears. She clutched the basket of flower petals in her tiny hands, her mouth opening for gasps of breath.

Sunny stepped out behind her, clutching her hand and squeezing it.

"Aw," Noah drawled. "Look at Rory." He sighed, shaking his head. "Four is such a rough age for attention. She's brave."

"We told her she didn't have to be a flower girl, but you know how much she loves Bree." Bree and Aurora, or Rory as we called her, were kindred spirits. Rory might look just like Ezra, dark and with a sharpness even at four years old, but she was a quiet warrior, like her auntie.

Sunny held Rory's hand, plucking some petals from the basket to toss them down the aisle because Rory couldn't do more than stare at the ground.

Once she was a few feet from the groomsmen, Rory dumped the basket, leaving a pile of yellow rose petals, and the audience laughed.

The little girl glanced up, startled, and buried her face in the skirt of Sunny's dress.

Vivian set down Josie and scuttled over, taking Rory's hand and pulling her to join the girls, where she curled up beside Vivian and continued hiding her face.

It was kind of adorable.

Marin came out, making a far less dramatic entrance, which was surprising. Bizzy was next, floating down the aisle and waving at a few faces in the crowd.

Finally, Bree appeared. She clutched Ezra's arm as he walked her toward me, and my entire head went fuzzy.

Noah gripped my shoulder and held me steady. "She looks good, brother."

Fuck good. She looked incredible.

Bree wore a soft white gown fitted and covered in lace, and her hair swept up beneath a short veil that fell to her chin. Tasteful, classy, and so goddamn sexy that I couldn't help but hold my breath.

When they got to me, Ezra punched my arm.

"You better not fuck this up," he said with a feigned grimace before scooting next to Noah to take his place as my best man.

Bree requested Ezra give her away, choosing not to invite her father to our wedding since all the Collins children had cut him off. Her mother decided not to attend in protest, but my moms stepped in, taking over duties as mothers of the bride.

It broke my heart for Bree but solidified that, without a doubt, she was my family.

We were happy. Each year, each month, each week, each day, each *second* built upon the one before it, elevating my heart to a stratosphere of contentment I never thought possible.

I always thought stopping would destroy me. That when I did, the worst parts of myself would catch up. But what ended up happening was the best woman caught up with me instead, and she wanted to stand by my side forever.

"You're stunning," I whispered in her ear, pulling back to take her hand and stare into her eyes.

She stared back, tears threatening to spill. She didn't want to cry. She told me that last night as I held her in my arms and spoke affirmations of my love. Although tradition dictated we spend the evening apart; there was no fucking way that would happen.

I spent the first two years of our relationship with too much time away from her. Between her master's program and my career, we relied on color-coded calendars and mutual study and work sessions to share time and space.

After a year, Bree moved in with me. A year after that? I knew I never wanted her to leave. But that brat—she made me wait, probably for the sake of torture.

Taking a position with a smaller firm three years ago, I shifted to more reasonable hours and became a partner after two years. While it wasn't Tilly, Helfgott, & Associates luxury or esteem, it was a manageable workload. I vowed to be available to Bree and the life we built, which included vacations. Mexico was always a favorite.

"I'm so excited to marry you," Bree whispered back, pulling her veil out of her face and leaning closer as the officiant began her speech about love, relationships, and commitment. As it turned out, my grumpy best friend was right. I didn't have to stop, but I could slow down. Slowing down was being there for dinner with Bree, with her on the weekends, and turning my phone off when I was out of the office because the things I once believed were priorities absolutely weren't.

I slept nearly eight hours a night, too, and it had been a long time since I had a nightmare.

"I'm even more excited to marry you," I whispered.

Bree brushed her nose against my ear. "I can't wait to fuck you as your wife. You're gorgeous in that suit."

Fuuuuuuuck. The woman still lit me on fire, and I doubted that flame would ever die.

I nuzzled into her neck, my voice a low mumble. "Mmm. My very, *very* good girl. I'm going to fuck you so hard. Make you come apart on my dick."

The officiant cleared her throat and glared at us. I was pretty sure we were being quiet, but given Ezra's sickly appearance and Noah biting his knuckle, trying not to laugh, maybe I'd been wrong.

Reed gave me a thumbs up.

We straightened, and Bree took one step to the left, giving me space but continuing to hold my hand. We chose a brief ceremony, both of us opting to share private vows last night just for us.

The vows now were more ceremonial, a traditional promise, and when we finished, Bree clutched my hand as we glided down the aisle, officially husband and wife.

I picked her up, carrying her around the corner to the dressing room. Setting her down, I kicked the door closed.

"We have maybe ten minutes before they drag us to the reception," she said, raising her eyebrows.

I locked the door behind me.

"We should be with our family and friends. They came to celebrate, and we'll be in Hawaii for two weeks. I don't know about you, but I have no intention of answering calls, emails, or texts while on my honeymoon."

My eyes tracked her as she slid against the wall, her mouth running nervously. Adorable.

"Really. Ten minutes, max," she said.

A smile curled on my lips. "I can get you off in five."

She blushed. "Ty."

"I can get myself off in less," I promised.

Bree covered her nose with her hand, laughing. It was one stride to her, and when my hands grasped her hips, she stopped laughing immediately.

Her eyes went wide as I flipped her around so her back was to my stomach, my hard-on pressed between us and aching for relief. I don't think there'd be a day I didn't want to bury myself in her.

My palms traced over her ribs, roughly running along the side of her breasts and cupping them over the bodice. She moaned, pushing her ass against me as she hiked up her skirt.

I pressed her to the wall, kicking her feet wider, and quickly dropped one hand to free myself while using the other to hook a finger into her lacy thong. I pulled so hard that it snapped off.

"Dammit," she whined. "I don't have any extras."

I regretted nothing.

I slid my fingers back and forth and groaned at her slickness. Bree whimpered when they dragged to her clit.

I worked my pants open, my dick springing free.

She spread her legs, pushing me back with her ass as she flattened her palms on the wall and bent to a ninety-degree angle, *glistening* and panting with ragged breath as I fingered her.

Bree was a queen, commanding her pleasure, taking what was hers, and making no apologies for it. It might have been my fingers dancing over her body, but she was in charge. She always had been.

Biting her lip, she rocked against me, chasing her release and seeking the climax her body screamed for.

Just as she began to clench against my fingers, I withdrew them and thrust my cock inside her, shuddering as she cried out, "Oh, fuck me! I'm coming!"

I grabbed her hips, driving harder as she shook. Her palms slapped to the wall to hold herself up.

My thrusts became sloppy with the sting of pleasure pooling at the base of my spine, coiling as everything in me went hot.

"Fuck," I grunted, two hard thrusts before coming inside her.

"Bree," I said softly, bringing one hand to support myself against the wall while I used the other to support her.

I kissed the bare skin of her neck, enjoying the shiver it gave her.

"I love you. My wife."

She inhaled through her nose, nodding and then letting the breath out through her mouth. "I love you, my *husband*."

That was wild to hear.

Pulling out, I spied around for something to clean up with, afraid I'd leak cum all over my suit. That would ruin the wedding photos.

I grabbed a t-shirt from a bag on the floor—no idea who it belonged to. Wiping my dick and tucking myself back in my pants, I smiled at Bree. She stood with her dress pulled up, her legs spread, and my cum dripping down her thighs.

"Oh, that's pretty," I mumbled, crouching in front of her and admiring my work. Using two fingers, I wiped along her leg and pushed my cum back inside her. "I'm going to get you pregnant, Bree."

She rolled her eyes, used to me by now. "I'm on birth control."

I might be thirty-seven, but Bree was twenty-nine and made it clear she didn't want kids until she was in her thirties. I made it clear that I would respect that, but it wouldn't stop me from talking about it. The thought of stuffing her with a baby made me hard again.

"If the boys could hear you..." she trailed off, taking the shirt from me before I shoved it back in the bag on the floor. She shook her head and chucked it in the garbage can—a far more decent human than me.

I adjusted my suit and helped her to get her dress straight.

"They'd die of shock, and fuck them for underestimating me and my domesticity. I can't wait for us to build something different from what we had."

The serene smile she shot back melted me on the spot. I immediately wanted to marry her again.

Coming out of the room, not even eight minutes later, might I add, we were met with annoyed glares from our best friends. The only one mildly amused was Bizzy, which had more to do with her increasing suspicion that Bree was freakier than she ever gave her credit for.

She was.

"For real? You're going to make us wait?" Reed shifted from one leg to another, most likely impatient to change out of his suit.

I brushed him off. "It's fine. The photographer's not even here."

Noah grinned. "Yeah, because she had to chase down Ezra and find him a paper bag to breathe into when he started hyperventilating."

Bree gasped. "Is he okay?"

Sunny stepped forward, patting Bree's arm. "He will be. He just, uh, heard you guys." Bree's face paled, and Sunny gave her another pat. "It's my fault. I sent him to remind you that we were supposed to do pictures first."

Bree buried her face against my chest. "Oh my god," she groaned.

"Yep," Noah said, still grinning like a fool. "He heard that, too."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "For fuck's sake, Noah."

After what felt like hours of uncomfortable silence and smirks, Ezra emerged, a crumpled paper bag in his hand. Danielle, the photographer, pushed him along until he stood with us. "Not a fucking word," he grumbled, not looking at me or Bree. Which, fair.

"I'll not say a word about it." I held up my hands defensively. "But I just want to point out that senior year, you let Ashley Peppercock give you a blowjob on my bed at that Halloween party when my moms were out of town."

"And?" he demanded. "Not at all the same thing."

Sunny poked her head between us, craning her neck to get in on the conversation. "Did you say 'Peppercock?""

I laughed, but Ezra only scowled deeper.

"You came on my sheets, Ezra, and instead of telling me, you made the bed and acted like nothing happened."

Sunny's mouth dropped, and Ezra tucked his hand under her chin and closed it.

"I was seventeen, and Ashely wasn't your sister. Besides, it was probably covered with cum, anyway."

"Yeah, *my* cum," I protested. "Not yours, you filthy motherfucker."

The photographer stood, her mouth agape as she clutched her camera, half-hunched to take a photo and too stunned to do so.

Reed and Noah watched on, stupid grins on their faces as the others blinked repeatedly, unsure what the fuck to make of this.

Danielle opened and closed her mouth a few times before recovering. "I'm just... going to need you to stand over there."

She pointed outside.

Near the cliffside was a bright white gazebo decorated with yellow roses. The setting sun over the lake was the perfect backdrop, and Ezra's tantrum was causing us to lose the good light.

We all shuffled out, and Ezra, predictably, trailed behind like a fucking baby. Sunny tugged on his hand, moving him forward and reminding him that his sister was a woman.

We all lined up, taking various cues from Danielle until she had all the shots she wanted and released us into the wild.

Vivian and Jaime strolled ahead, arms looped and laughing about something. Probably how stupid the boys were.

Sunny and Bree followed, heads close together and whispering between themselves. Marin and Bizzy were already halfway back to the inn, well and indeed done with all of us.

Despite his sour stomach, Ezra walked next to me on one side, Reed on the other, and Noah beside him. Ezra's heavy arm draped over my shoulders slowly and without a word.

I wrapped one of mine around his and the other around Reed. Reed joined in, wrapping an arm and pulling in Noah, a chain link of friendship that had lived between us for thirty years now.

We'd once been little shits—mischievous and playful, intense and consuming, angsty and brooding, and handsome and good at shit. Kids tied together by missing pieces we'd filled for one another, shaping into men we could admire and be proud of.

We'd held each other accountable, called each other out when needed, and showed up for the moments that mattered. The boys were my family, and they always would be.

Bree turned around, beaming at us. "You boys are the cutest. Three decades of friendship. Longer than I've been alive."

She loved to make me feel old and out of touch.

"Married, some kids, houses, careers." Noah sighed, resting his head on Reed's shoulder. "Who'd have thought?"

"Me," Ezra said softly. "We were always supposed to do better and be better."

"Still gotta keep to it," Reed said. "Can't slouch. Still have to hold each other accountable to be the men we want to be."

"And the men we deserve!" Jaime called back.

Noah mumbled, "Fucking love that woman."

Everyone made it inside, heading toward the reception in the banquet hall. The music reverberated along the walls, and Sunny threw her hands above her head and swayed her hips as she glided to join the party. Bizzy and Marin followed.

Reed, the self-selecting odd man out, headed in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" Vivian asked.

Reed didn't turn around. "Changing out of this monkey suit," he growled.

We were nearly at the reception when Reed's booming voice shouted down the hall. "Where the fuck is my shirt?"

Bonus and What Comes Mext

H i friends! Want to read some deleted bonus scenes from Carried Away? You can find them <u>here.</u>

In case you missed the bonus novella epilogue that picks up immediately after Same as Yesterday (and launches the James clan), you can find that <u>here:</u> (No email signup required).

Curious about what's coming next? You may have been able to spot a couple of hints dropped in the book about the next generation of characters in The Boys' universe. Those James girls might just be popping up again, all grown up and giving Noah a run for his money. I can't wait to share The James girls with you :) To keep in the loop, sign up for my<u>newsletter</u>. Bonus chapters, sneak peeks, and more information to come.

Sign up here Happy reading Xx KC

Thank You

A Very Special Thank You...

To YOU

Y es, you.

Thanks for sticking with the Boys.

To every reader, new or established with the Boys' universe, I appreciate your reading. I hope you've enjoyed the stories, and I can hardly wait to share the next generation of stories. Don't think we're done yet ;)

Afterward

H ello Dear Reader,

As an indie author who self-publishes their work, I appreciate *every single* one of you and *every single* page you've read! Sincerely, thank you, thank you, thank you. I write to tell stories that people enjoy reading, and if you've enjoyed reading this book, I hope you'll be willing to leave a review. Every review counts, and I appreciate it from the bottom of my heart. I also love hearing from readers and talking about stories (whether it's what I'm writing or what other people are reading and writing—seriously, romance is *the best* community of readers **ever**). Drop me a line via my website <u>www.kceverly.com</u> or shoot me an email kceverly@gmail.com. Honestly, friends, I appreciate you so much!

And while I'm sure your email, like mine, is stuffed with more unnecessary than necessary correspondence, I'm always tickled when people sign up for my<u>newsletter</u>. Don't worry, I promise I rarely send out emails, and while I've been told that's very poor indie author behavior, I'm sticking with it ;)

Xx KC

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