

## 15 - Beach

"I think if I hear Mr. Turner breathe one more fucking time, I will shoot myself."

I was ranting to Alex about the tutorial we were just in, frustrated with the class the entire time. When I originally signed up to take it, I expected exciting topics not for him to drown on about the sorrows of the American Dream. We were in fucking Canada, why does it even matter?

"It wasn't that bad..." Alex defended poorly, knowing she was only saying that in hopes of making me feel better...

"If you ever say that again, I'm considering leaving you behind."

"You wouldn't dare," She rolls her eyes. "I'm basically your only other friend besides Dean. Who, by the way, had apologized to me about his behaviour in your dorm. You trained him well."

"He's not a dog."

"It's a shame, isn't? Even dogs smile more than he does." She sighed and I nudged her with my shoulder, understanding that she was only teasing.

"He smiles..."

"Yeah, at you. Honestly, Sophia, you must be some kind of Goddamn miracle because I've had Dean in two previous classes and not once have I seen him look happy. What the fuck did you do?"

"Attract him with my personal charm?"

"Yeah, that must be it." She smiled, glancing at me while we walked in the direction of the cafeteria. We still had half an hour before our next class, one that we were unfortunately having to take it. "By the way, some of that... would you? I have a professor who needs to seduce in order to give me a good grade. Her class is basically impossible to pass."

"Who? Miss Sohib? I'm pretty sure Dean's had her before. Why don't you ask him for help?"

"No thanks..." She waved me off while we stood in line for some pizza.

"I'd rather not run out of his home crying."

"He wouldn't make you cry..." I started but trailed off once I saw the look on her face. "He really isn't that bad, Alex. He just really likes being alone. You remember when you took care of me, don't you? I was an asshole to you which, by the way, I'm still so fucking sorry for."

"The difference between you and him are that you were an asshole to me because you wanted to push me away. He was an asshole to me because he thought I hurt you."

When she said it out loud, I couldn't help but smile. He was so quick to come to my defence, it made me want to go home and kiss him all over again.

We were finally at the front of the line, ordering two slices each along with water before moving on to the side, waiting for our order.

"Still living with Dean?"

I nod, unconsciously playing with the necklace around my neck. I had looped in the ring he had given me so I could still wear both totems, the ring not fitting any of my fingers securely enough.

"We came up with a system." I told her, glancing around at our surroundings. Students loitered around, some talking with their friends while others were looking down, intensely focused on completing their work. "Aer asked the school for a refund since I was still living on campus anyway, I put that money into my savings and used it to pay for half of the apartment. We split up the bill evenly and while he now works at the diner across the street, I can easily pay for all of my expenses. Though, my student loans will take a while to pay back."

"That's good, I'm glad. Though, I have to ask...are you sure you aren't rushing into this? Moving in with him is a big step."

Her question was reasonable and as we picked up our orders and sat down at an empty bench, I twisted open my water bottle and took a sip before I replied.

"Honestly, I can see how it may seem that way to you. Though with everything going on with me and the restraining order, Dean is now taking our relationship excruciatingly slow." I had already filled in Alex briefly about Devon, Dean still being the only one who knew more about my past than anyone.

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow. "How?"

"Well, I started, picking up one slice and taking a bite. Alex followed, patiently waiting for me to swallow before I ventured on. "Whenever we're in the midst of making out, and I think we'll finally do something more, he stops it. He just brushes back my hair, kisses my forehead, and then sits me beside him as he watches another episode of the show we're currently on."

Alex puts a hand to her heart, her face genuine. "Aw, that's actually really fucking sweet, Sophia."

"I know but it can be a major cock blocker. Sometimes I wish he'd just pin me down and fuck me already, though I understand why he won't. I have a lot of shit I need to sort through first."

At that, Alex puts a hand to my arm, giving me a sad look. "You know if I had the power, I would kick your ex in a black hole. That way, he'd cease to exist."

I simply gave her an amused glance, finishing off my first slice. "How's astronomy class?"

"Oh, funny that you brought that up! It's wonderful, actually. I think the girl behind me is in love with me."

Here we go again.

"Alex, you think everyone is in love with you." I point out, starting on my second slice. Alex follows shortly after, almost drowning half of her water in one go.

"That's because they are, Sophia! She looked at me twice today and she even..." She pauses, trying to build up suspense. "Asked me for a pencil. God, it's like she's not even trying to hide it anymore." She sighs like she's on cloud nine, her eyes looking off to the side like she's daydreaming.

I wave my hand in front of her face, hoping to snap her back to reality. "Earth to Alex. You have got to stop doing this to yourself. It isn't healthy."

"Hey!" She exclaims, offended. "Says the one working a million jobs. How's the diner, by the way?"

"Awful," I groan. "I think I'll die doing this job before I die getting beat up by my ex."

Alex winces.

"Sorry, too soon?"

"I just don't like how casually you say that." She frowns.

"I'm sorry, I'm just tired of looking at myself and seeing a victim. And this medical examination shit is driving me mad."

"What are you so scared of?"

"Everything." I sighed, putting down my second slice. It was half eaten however I was starting to feel full, not wanting to overeat. "I'm scared of what they'll find. Scared of the results myself."

"They're there to help you, Sophia." Alex placed a tentative hand on my arm.

"Yeah, I know. Everything is just so nerve racking at the moment I feel like I'm constantly overstimulated. I really need a drink or maybe five."

She cracks a smile at that, lifting up her water bottle in a mock toast.

"Anyway, I never asked but what happened with Blake?"

Alex placed a hand over her mouth, trying to hide her grin making me even more curious at what she's done.

"Alex..."

"Alright, fine. I had him suspended."

That had me gaping, my hand frozen in shock. "What?"

She only shrugged, trying to act cool about this but she turned her head to the side, the smiling growing as she laughed. "I may have reported him to the office for selling illegal substances on campus. Aer giving out the names to a few of his friends, they all threw him under the bus and away he went."

"What?"

"Well, what did you expect? His asshole friend fed you molly cut with some other shit and then he beat you up. I wasn't about to let that shit go."

"Our ex's are so much alike maybe we should set them up on a double date." I murmured.

"Yeah, like that would go well."

With both of us finally done with our lunches, we had pulled out the review sheet for the test that was coming up for our next class, going over the material with each other.

Soon, we realize we have ten more minutes until our next class starts and start packing up, whipping our bags around our shoulders and walking down in the direction of the class. Tests had always made me anxious, no matter how long and hard I would prepare for it. And the idea that some people associate this same feeling, the one of butterflies, to seeing your love interest was bizarre to me. Why would you want to feel like puking every time you saw that? That made no sense.

"Hey, you nervous?" I asked Alex, seeing her expression neutral.

"I feel like I might shit myself!" She whispered, keeping up with the cool facade.

We stepped into the room, discarding our bags at the front before taking our respective seats. I had my pencil and eraser out, and as the class started to fill in and the time struck by in slow seconds, I reached up and cupped my hand around the ring that was attached to my necklace, the tsunami in my stomach almost feeling better.

When the prof finally arrived and handed out the double sided quiz, I immediately started, relaxing instantly after scanning the entire contents of the test. I knew my material better than anyone, and so as the nerves dissolved I was able to think more clearly and soon, was finishing the test ten minutes before class had ended.

After looking it over, I handed it in and walked outside, checking out some flyers on the bulletin board as I waited for Alex. Minutes passed as she walked out as well, and before I could open my mouth to ask her how it was she simply shook her head, a defeated expression.

"Still need that Sophia charm?" I joked weakly, feeling upset for her. I knew how terrible it felt to bomb a test, having done so myself various times before.

"I think I need a drink. Or five." She repeated my words from earlier, smiling slightly before frowning once again. "God, that sucked. But seriously, do you wanna get a drink with me?"

"At a bar?"

She shook her head, pulling out her phone and showing me a text that was sent to by someone named Macy. It was an invitation to a party happening at the beach, and my eyes slowly looked back up at her with question.

"You know I can't wear a bikini, right? I'm still kind of..."

"We don't have to go swimming. We can just lounge around, drink away our worries, and watch people do dumb shit."

At my hesitation, she continued quickly. "Or we don't have to go at all. I promise, it's completely up to you, Sophia. If you want, we can just go back out to my dorm and watch a movie. Some new horror just came out and I know how much you love that shit."

I didn't want to completely discard the idea, raising my hand to stop her rant. "Is it secluded? Intimate?"

She shook her phone, nodding. "Invite only."

"Let's go."

"Are you sure? You better not be doing this for me you people pleaser. I know you have a difficult time saying no."

I looped my arm through hers, dragging us in the direction of her dorm. "You aren't, don't worry. I wanna go and hang out with you. Drink away your worries... watch people do dumb shit."

She cheered in glee, picking up speed and practically dragging me the rest of the way there.

"Oh, this is going to be so much fun! I can't wait, Sophia. I'm so excited. Do you think girl from astronomy class will be there? Do you think she'll give my pencil back as an excuse to talk to me? Do you think..."

She was so excited that it made me excited, my smile growing as I watched her makeup a hundred different scenarios between her and the girl behind her.

Unlike my room which was still bare and undecorated, Alex's room screamed her. Posters strewn all over the walls, vinyls shoved in a bookcase as well as CDs and cassettes. Upon further examination I noticed they were all albums from different artists. She had an entire wall dedicated to music and the adjacent one to books, us having almost completely similar tastes.

Shutting her door behind us, I sat on the bed and watched Alex do her stu.

She walked over to her closet, pushing it open revealing a variety of clothing. Neon, pastel, basically the whole spectrum was in her closet.

Her hand moved and she tossed a summer dress on her bed followed by a small purse. With that, she took out some black heels, wanting to wear something light and cute.

Looking over at me, her eyes followed down my body before nodding. "I have the perfect thing for you to wear."

She threw a few clothing items my way before pushing me to the bathroom to change. I pulled on the outfit she gave me and walked out.

Alex had put on some jewelry as well, and I admired how put together and pretty she looked in a matter of minutes.

"You look amazing! Here, try these on." She pushed shoes in my direction as well as jewelry.

Once we were both done, I came to step in front of the mirror to admire her work.

"You should be a stylist or something." I nodded to her, pulling my hair back in a high ponytail.

"Dude, you have no idea." She groaned, moving to lay against her bed. "It took me so long to find clothing items that would flatter my body type and my skin tone. It's so hard shopping as a black person."

"I agree." I frowned, fully turning my body towards her. "I had to spend a whole day researching what colours would look good on me and which ones don't."

"It's so hard to talk about this with other people, they just don't get it." She shook her head before smiling as she looked me up and down.

"We look so hot, Sophia holy fuck. You know I'm pan right? Let's date."

I let out a laugh as Alex gathered her items into her shoulder bag, following me out the door.

"Sexuality has always been confusing for me."

"What do you mean?" She wondered as we walked out and to her car.

"I thought I was straight for the majority of my life and then I thought I was bi. But now it's so scattered I think I'm going to stick with unlabelled! I feel like it's so wide that I can't just stick it in a box."

"I'm completely understand." She nodded her head. "Honestly? Don't even worry about labels. Like you like, fuck who you wanna fuck, in the end it doesn't even matter."

"Are you saying you wanna fuck me, Alex?" I teased as I climbed into the passenger seat.

She shot me a knowing look. "You're hot. Of course I wanna fuck you. Who doesn't?"

I sighed, clipping on my seatbelt before leaning back as she started the car.

"Apparently not Dean."

Alex shot me that same look Dean would when I made a joke at an inappropriate time, backing out of the parking lot before rerouting herself on the main road.

"Sophia, are you really this upset about it?"

"No...Yes. I don't know." I shrugged, looking out of the car window. "From as long as I can remember, sex has really been the only way I've received a action. And I feel like..." I trailed off, not knowing how to properly articulate my words.

"You feel like because he's the first guy who wants you for more than just your body, you're scared that he'll lose interest and leave?"

"Yes," I said, surprised, turning to look at her. "You know how that feels?"

"Honestly? I feel like every girl does. Guys are assholes, Sophia. And as much as it sucks to say, the majority of them are like that. They treat you based on your looks and attractiveness, and most of the time aren't even ready to commit. They just want someone they can use and dump. It's all about their needs for them."

My mouth was slightly open as I looked in her words, rubbing a Dean's the third guy I've ever dated and the first guy who has looked at me as a person rather than something he can fuck."

"That's a really fucking rare thing to have." She said with a small smile. "I know that's the bare minimum, but nowadays even the bare minimum isn't met by many. Sophia, can I give you some advice?"

I nodded, sitting in my seat so I could face her better.

"I think if you're still upset over this, you should talk to Dean about it. Communication is really important in establishing healthy relationships, and even if you two decide to stay friends, it's still crucial in that aspect too. You guys are still learning about each other, your wants and needs, boundaries and fears. Communication can easily make or break a relationship."

"What about if I need reassurance. Is that bad?"

She shakes her head, giving me a warm look. "Not at all. In fact, wanting reassurance is normal. Healthy. You should want to ease your partner's fears and have them know that you're there to support them. Can I tell you something?"

"Please."

"People have this weird ideology that love conquers all. That with love, all your problems will instantly be fixed when that shit isn't true in the slightest. When you get into a relationship, you shouldn't think that it will automatically solve everything that's broken with you. Rather, you should use your different challenges and learn to love each other, struggles and all. Because this is real life, not some romance novel, and it's human to go through things. I feel like that's why a majority of relationships don't work. They think that because they've hit a speed bump, they're done. When in fact you should use that speed bump and grow a closer bond. It's the struggles that bring us together, not the walk in the park."

"You're really fucking good at this," I told her with a grateful expression. "Thank you, Alex. I really need to hear this."

"Of course, Sophia. If you ever want to talk to me about this stu, I'm always here for you. And look, we're here!" Her excitement was and to be honest, so was mine. As she parked the car and turned the engine off, I noted the time being eight pm.

We clicked our seatbelts and I paused, patting my pockets for my phone and breathing out a sigh of relief once I found it.

"Hey, Alex. Can you wait here a second? I forgot to let Dean know I'll be a bit late."

She nodded, pulling out her own phone to busy herself with as I clicked his contact for my favourites list, putting the phone against my ear as I waited for him to pick up.

"Hello?" He asked, his voice slightly rasy. I winced, forgetting he was probably in the middle of some work.

"Hey, Dean? It's your favourite person!"

"Jeremy Renner? Is that you?"

I rolled my eyes, unimpressed. "Ha ha, very funny, pretty boy." He knew I had a great dislike for Mr. Renner, so he bringing him into conversations in order to irritate me.

His laugh turned my frown upside down (hilarious) and I turned my back to Alex, not wanting her to see my obnoxiously happy expression.

"What's going on, Soph? Is everything alright? How's your test go?"

"Everything's fine, don't worry. And the quiz was surprisingly easy. I almost felt like you for a second. It was just calling to let you know that I might be a bit late. Alex and I decided to go to this beach party."

"Ah," he said, and I could picture him nodding. "She drives there?"

"If I say yes, will you be mean?"

"No..." He scooed and I sighed, making him continue. "It's not that she's a bad driver, sweetheart. It's just that...she can be a bit...she's just..."

"Wow, Dean. You are full of compliments today."

"Don't tell her I said anything. Just maybe for next time, tell her to not turn onto the steering wheel so malevolently. It's not going anywhere, promise."

"Is this how you apologized to her?"

"No," He denies. "I was completely civil, taking full responsibility."

"Mhm," I hummed, not believing it one bit. "I bet you were. It was all fun and teasing, I know Dean didn't mean any harm when he said to watch out for Alex's driving skills. From the other times they interacted, they sort of had a love-hate relationship. Dean was every bit antisocial, still not even liking to interact with others constantly, the exception of course being his close friends since she's known them for longer and is now more comfortable with them. While Alex was loud and chatty like me."

"Hey, Dean? I gotta go now. Don't stay up too late, you have a bedtime to maintain."

"Look who's full of jokes now," He replied, deadpanned. "Bye, Sophia. Stay safe."

"Bye, Dean." I hung up the phone, slipping it back into my pocket and walking back to where Alex was texting away. At the sight of me she put her own device back in her purse, this time looping her arm through mine and walking into the crowd.

There were a lot of people here but not as many as in the parties I went to before and because it was on the beach, people were more spread out and there wasn't a pungent smell of alcohol in the air. Aer walking around for a bit, Alex finally recognized someone, waving while pulling me along.

"Hi guys!"

"Alex!" Two girls yelled back, while the three guys continued to converse. Looking over at the shout of Alex's name, they sent her a nod.

"Hi guys, this is Sophia. Sophia, this is Macy and Alisha."

"Hello," I smiled awkwardly. While I liked to meet new people, I still wasn't the very best at it.

"So look, how was the test today?" Alex asked, and that made me go all the way to the beach party, finally figuring out why they looked so familiar. They were in the same class as us.

"Fucking brutal." Macy groans, shaking her head like she wants to get rid of the memory all together.

"I found it pretty easy..." Alisha said shyly from beside her, fucking back a lock of hair.

"That's because you've been studying all week, babe." Macy leans down to kiss Alisha on the lips in a quick peck before pulling away, turning their attention back to us.

"You guys know each other from school?" I ask. "Or just from the class we're all in this semester."

"From before, actually! We were in Mr. Stephens class together last year and Alex was so hung over, we had to lug her ass out the door while the teacher wasn't looking."

"Okay, I wasn't that hungover." Alex denies, crossing her arms.

"You couldn't stay awake long enough to take out your laptop and pretend to do some work." Alisha points out, and they all burst out laughing.

"So, Sophia. Are you new here? I haven't seen you around."

"Yeah, I am! I moved here to complete my last semester."

"Any particular reason why?" Macy asks.

"I just...needed a change of scenery." I awkwardly laugh and Alex swoops in to change the subject.

"You guys up for swimming?"

"Yeah we're down. Give us a second and we'll meet you by the shore." They both lift their hand and I turned to Alex, confused.

"I can't swim." I reminded her.

"Neither can I, Sophia. We'll just dip our feet in the water and have our chance to watch some people do some dumb shit." That had us grinning at each other, walking together over towards the rocks.

I sat down, adjusting my skirt so I wouldn't accidentally mess someone and slipped off the sandals Alex had let me borrow, setting them aside while Alex did the same. There was a slight breeze in the air, my eyes closing momentarily to breath in the pretty scent of water and sand.

Alisha and Macy were already undressed, stripping to their bikinis as they got in. Alisha screamed when Macy pushed her into the water, coming up in a bubbling mess.

"Macy will fucking ruin you for that!" She screamed, yanking Macy down as well.

"My mother is Asian, I've experienced it all!" She screamed back.

I laughed with Alex at the exchange, dipping my hand down to touch the water. We sat in peaceful silence, continuing to gaze at the couple when I spoke up.

"This is nice." I sighed, leaning my head on Alex's shoulder.

"Yeah, it is." She smiled. "You got to the beach much?"

"Not really. I feel like a er everything that has happened, I forgot to appreciate the little things along the way."

"We should come here more often, you know. Me and you. Have a little picnic moment."

"Are you asking me out on a date, Alex?" I teased, nudging my shoulder with hers.

"Of course. You think I would let someone like you slip through my fingers?"

I shook my head, putting a hand to my heart. "Of course not, I'm far too valuable to pass up."

"Ah yes, the infamous Sophia charm. You should make merch, I'd definitely buy it."

We fell back into comfortable silence, leaning on each other again as we watched a couple of more people enter the water with a beachball, Macy and Alisha playing a game with them.

"Sophia," Alex called out, clasping her hand in mine.

"Mhm?"

"I'm really fucking glad you're here and you're alive."

"Alex?" I whispered, hiding her close.

"I'm really fucking glad too."

We stayed in silence for the remainder of the night, basking in each other's presence before Macy and Alisha had gotten out of the water and were now dragging us both to the makeshift campfire a couple of BJ's had set up.

I sat down on a log hesitantly, looking around at all of the unfamiliar faces. Alex sat next to me as she talked with Macy about a club they were both apart of.

"You new?" A voice called to my le. When I turned I saw that a boy had taken up the empty seat next to me.

"Yeah, kinda." I smiled kindly back, not wanting to be rude.

"I figured, I haven't seen you around."

"So I've heard." I rolled my eyes, understanding where he was taking this.

"So..."

"So?" I questioned back. "You're the one who decided to talk to me. You continue the conversation."

"Can I take you out on a date?"

"You just met me..." I sighed. "And sorry, I'm not interested."

"Isn't that the point of a date? So we can get to know each other?" He retorted.

"I don't remember wanting to get to know you." I frowned.

"Christ," He laughed. "You are not making this simple."

"Maybe it's a sign for you to back off?" I offered.

"Damn, and I thought you'd be easy." He muttered under his breath, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck.

"Easy," I deadpanned. "Yeah, okay bye." I turned my body away from him and towards Alex, reaching to tug her arm.

"Can we leave? I'm starting to get tired."

"No please. Let me say goodbye really quick, alright? Guys we're gonna head out, okay? Be safe, love ya both and stay friends." She screamed back their I love you's as well as we waved, walking back over to her car and getting in.

"So," Alex started, her hands on the steering wheel as she tilted her head at me. "How was your first beach party?"

"Honestly? It was really fun. But also..." I didn't continue, not wanting to dim her happiness.

"No, Sophia