

Author: MissM
Title: Try to Say No
Word Count: 3556
Rating: PG-13
Genre: Fiction
Themes: Love, romance, wanting, forbidden desire, friendship w/benefits

The sound tore through the quiet, ripping her from a dreamless sleep. She jerked awake, eyes wide, heart pounding a heavy beat against her ribcage, her chest tight with breaths she wasn't taking. Frantic, her eyes scanned the room for the source of the sound.

After a few moments, objects became recognizable by the size and shape of their shadows. A dresser. A chair. A lamp.

A snore. Long, deep breaths sucked in through an open mouth, a moment of silence, and then an exhale. It was just a snore. As her breathing slowed and the cadence of her heartbeat returned to normal, she relaxed against the pillow, again. No matter how often this happened, she wasn't used to waking up next to him in the middle of the night.

In a few minutes, he would begin to make his escape, dropping his arm from across his forehead where he'd casually flung it in his sleep. He would sit up, swing his legs to the floor and quietly, gently, ease out of the bed. He wouldn't realize she was already awake and watching his usual routine under eyelids barely open.

Carpet crushing beneath bare feet and a fleeting figure moving past the dim moonlight shining through a window would be the only sound or sight of him. He would search through a trail of clothing ending at the foot of the bed; clothing almost torn from trembling bodies and littered about the room only hours before. She would lie as still as possible, breathing lightly, listening to time reversing. Thick denim being yanked back onto muscular, hairy legs; a loud zipper followed by the snap of a button; a shirt being pulled overhead; a dip in the bed as he sat to pull his socks on. And then his shoes.

Once dressed, he would tiptoe around to her side of the bed, lean over her and brush dry, chapped lips across her cheek. He'd give a tap or two to the rise of her hip and whisper, "thanks". With cat-like stealth and agility, he would navigate her house in the dark. The tinkle of his keys would ring out from the table in the foyer, where he dropped them when he came over. The front door would open. And then softly close. He would test the door a few times to make sure he left it locked. He always tested the door.

Alone in her space, lying in the dark and quiet, still, black night, she was safe to move. To open her eyes and breathe and sigh with disappointment. She would roll over to the side of the bed he slept on, gather the pillow he used that still smelled of him—cologne and shampoo and sweat and man—and suck in the scent of him. She'd close her eyes and imagine him still there next to her. Imagine he didn't get up and leave under cover of darkness like there was a reason to hide and sneak around. Imagine she didn't hear the engine of his car rumble down the street in the wee hours of the morning. She would remember being with him, how he felt, how he tasted, how he sounded. How he liked it. How he liked her to like it, too.

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Tears came, then. Hot, salty, forbidden tears that shouldn't still come, but did. Tears that told her to stop dreaming about what would never happen and stop romanticizing him. This. He didn't want more than this, from her. This was all she was getting. This had been happening at increasingly frequent intervals for years. In the last year, since the near lay-off and the salary cut and the stress of his mother's chronic illness, he was tense and frustrated more often. He reached out to her more often. She should have said no more often.

For years, she nursed a tiny, harmless crush on him. An annoying, nagging, longing for him. An immature recurring daydream of being with him. There were several times, over the years, when she had almost convinced herself to approach him, but never did. She decided not to tell him, not to ruin the friendship. It wasn't really like she had to hide it. It was obvious, even to him. It was obvious, too, that though he cared about her—they were friends, after all, part of a wide and varied circle of friends—he didn't feel for her what she felt for him.

The first time with him, that knowledge ate at her and chewed away at her soul, but she ignored it and eventually, with the sting of alcohol on their breath and inhibitions lowered and hormones raging, it happened.

They didn't talk about it after, but with the question of *would she, even though he didn't feel the same* now answered, and the window of opportunity wide open, it happened again. And kept happening. Was still happening.

By the time it was a semi-regular occurrence, she had the routine down pat. Handling it was easy. Compartmentalize. During the other twenty-five or so days of the month, they were friends. Good friends. They hung out with their other friends. They attended dinner parties and group movie dates. They showed up at the usual places and did the usual things and laughed at the usual jokes. They spent time together like they always did, watching the shows they both liked, bantering about plot lines and scene twists and character traits. They talked into the night, like the old friends they were. He ranted about his job, the extra workload and the unfairness of having to take it on, in contrast with being grateful to still have a job. She complained about her coworkers and her boss and the new girl who didn't do anything all day but chew gum and paint her nails and flirt with Kevin from shipping.

Then there were those three or four days a month, when he would call and asked if she was free and could he come over? She would know what he wanted, because his tone would be different. He was different when he wanted that. That was base, physical, and primarily for satisfaction of needs and wants and longings and urges. She wanted more than base, physical satisfaction of urges and longings. He didn't. But as long as she gave him what he wanted, as long as she said yes when he called, he kept calling. When the demands for more arose from her, he pulled away. Long, torturous spans of time would pass before he would call or come around again. She made it her business, then, to separate the sex from the friendship. The buddy from the fuck.

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It worked, for awhile. While he was in the room. After he was spent and had slipped away while she slept, the tears came to remind her that she wanted more than these explosive, powerful, amazing and yet sporadic and empty episodes, but would never have it. And that maybe, for the good of her heart and mind and sheer sanity, she should break it off.

She should.

She wanted to.

She couldn't.

When he called, she knew what he wanted, but couldn't make the word 'no' come out of her mouth. She felt weak even admitting it, but the word never really came to mind until he was gone. He would call, and her body—and mouth—would say yes. Her doorbell would ring and he would be there and they'd head straight for the bedroom, tossing away clothes as they went. A few hours of exertion relieved stress and pressure and frustration. Peeled away the layers of the day, the week, the month. Soothed away irritations. Made problems disappear, if only for a fleeting moment of pleasure. There was a span of time, right then, right there, when it was just the two of them. It was what she needed and sometimes craved, and was as much a release for her as it was for him.

She laughed when she overheard her girlfriends musing about his prowess and bedside manner. If they only knew that he was not smooth or charming or gentle, winking eyes and romantic gestures and manly confidence. He had strong hands but used them awkwardly, grabbing, gripping, holding her where he wanted her until he was finished. He talked a lot, asked a lot of questions, needed assurance. Needed to know that she liked it, that she was having a good time, that he made her feel those sensations and make those sounds. She remembered that from the first time, more vividly than she should because she was drunk out of her mind and so was he.

There was a party. Some friends, some drinks, some food. Parties were always at his house because he lived on the beach. Their group of friends, all from college, would gather in a circle in the sand around the fire pit, telling stories and drinking cheap alcohol, gazing out at the calm of ocean waves and the smooth moon as it hung in the sky, wishing on stars and sniffing the salty air. Parties at the beach house were low-key by nature—come when you can, leave when you must.

She could hardly walk, so she was trying to sober up before driving the half hour to her house. She didn't need another ticket, let alone a DUI. Sprawled out on the short, well-cushioned love seat that matched the massive grey overstuffed sofa in the manly, masculine living room, friends thought she had passed out and left her there. It wasn't unusual for him to find people curled up on the floor and the couches the morning after a party.

By 3am, most of the guests were gone, except for her. On the fringes of her alcoholic fugue, she heard empty cans being tossed into a plastic bag, the aluminum in tinny concert as they gathered among the glass bottles. He crept around the couch so as not to wake her, but was surprised to find

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her eyes open. Glassy and bloodshot but open. He abandoned his task and crouched next to her, between the coffee table and the loveseat.

“Hey. How you doin’? You want some water?” He spoke softly as he stroked her face. That was unfair, and he knew it. He liked to fan the flames of her crush on him. He couldn’t help it.

“And some aspirin,” she managed to choke out, her voice strained and grainy from a night of yelling over music and too much alcohol.

He disappeared and reappeared with a glass of water and a small white bottle with the familiar twist cap. She sat up halfway and took the water from him, pressing the cold glass against her throbbing temple. He fished two capsules from the mouth of the bottle of pills and handed them to her.

“Three,” she said. “I need three. Two won’t do anything.”

“Okay, here you go,” he said handing her the third capsule. She tossed them back and swallowed, then took a swig of water.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, set the still full glass onto the coffee table and then lay back down. The pain throbbed and pulsed. She moaned and whimpered, clutching her head.

“Are you gonna puke? On my couch?” He poked her when she didn’t answer, and she swatted his hand away.

“I’m not gonna puke on your couch,” she whined. “My head hurts.” Talking made it hurt. Breathing made it hurt. She just needed to lie still and not talk, or breathe, or move until the pain reliever could do its job.

“Here,” he said, lifting her head, and sliding up under her. He grabbed a throw pillow and placed it on his lap, then gestured for her to lie down. She settled gently so the jackhammer pounding at her skull could subside.

She closed her eyes against the brightness of the room. A heavy hand rested on her shoulder as he laid an arm over her and settled himself into the seat. Remnants of music from the party thumped from the speakers in each corner of the room. He stretched to pick up the remote and changed the station. Easy listening, light rock tunes now provided the soundtrack to an otherwise silent early morning. For a long while it was the only sound.

The pain ebbed like the ocean tide, washing in and rushing out, weaker with each wave. Eventually, she could think and breathe and possibly move without feeling like her skull was about to split into two pieces. She realized, lying there on his loveseat, her head in his lap, that they were alone. And it was late. And maybe...

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Long, deep breaths sounded above her, then a strangled snorting sound. She flipped to her back so she could see him, her eyes climbing his chest. He was asleep, head tipped back against the couch cushion. Eyes closed, mouth open, chest rising and falling with his breaths.

She sat up, and he stirred, eyes opening, mouth smacking, stretching. "You okay?"

She checked her hair, smoothing it down. Adjusted her thin blouse, as it had ridden up her waist. "Yeah, I feel better. Thanks for the drugs, man."

His sleepy gaze wandered over her body, settling on her chest. "Uhm...yeah, no problem."

She raised an eyebrow and shot him half a grin. "See something you like?"

He blinked and slowly raised his eyes to her face. He didn't even seem embarrassed to have been caught staring. "Sorry. They're just... there."

"So they are," she said, nodding. Waiting. He yawned. Stretched his legs. Scratched his belly. Said nothing. She took her cue to leave. "Well, thanks again for the drugs and the uh, lap. I'm gonna get going."

She tried to stand but weaved to the side as the room turned on end and spun wildly to the left. "Whoa."

"Sit your ass down," he said in a thick mumble. "Not going anywhere." He tugged at her arm and she fell back onto the couch, giggling.

"I'm still drunk."

"I know. Me too. So. Stay. I want you to stay."

He dropped a hand on her thigh and then ever so slowly slid that hand down her bare leg and back up, just under the hem of her shorts, goose bumps popping up in its wake. It lingered rather high up on her leg, his thumb rubbing just inside her thigh. Tempting. Now he was making his move?

His hand was warm though, and heavy, and *on her thigh*. Her crush had lain dormant and grey for so long but a touch, a suggestion, a long, lingering stare had brought it to life in a flourish of reds and pinks, rushing back full force and with deep intensity. Her heart leapt and her skin flushed and she looked away.

And then looked back at him. His hand was still on her, where he'd never, in all the years he'd known her, ever touched her before. His eyes were still on her, his expression giving away desire that, in all the years she'd known him, she'd never seen.

But he's drunk, her mind argued.

So am I, she argued back.

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He won't remember it, her mind argued.

I will, she argued back.

"Well, you have to be tired. It's been a long night. You should go on up, go to bed. I'll be okay down here." She patted a cushion on the couch and smiled. And hoped he would suggest an alternative to actually sleeping on the couch. "I'll just leave whenever I feel like I can drive."

His hand didn't move except to gently squeeze the thigh in his grasp. "And leave you down here to sober up by yourself? How rude," he said with a short laugh, flirting, smiling, eyes twinkling.

It's gonna happen. It's gonna happen. It's gonna happen.

She tried to relax, sinking into the couch, laughing back, smiling back, flirting back, hoping her eyes still had some sparkle to them.

After a few minutes, he stood and started walking out of the room. He turned back to see if she was following and smiled because she was. They stumbled up the stairs, weaving and giggling, leaning against one another.

As soon as her feet hit the carpet of his bedroom, he was all lips and hands, his body pressed tightly against her, moving her backward until her legs hit the mattress and she couldn't help but fall onto it. The room was cool and dark. He didn't turn any lights on.

It was awkward and clunky. He was loose and drunk and much too verbal and self centered about it. His breath, hot and haggard, smelled like three day old Budweiser. He just barely waited until she came before he did. When it was over, he rolled to the left and collapsed onto the bed next to her and before she could whisper something about how... good... it was, he was snoring.

She'd liked him for so long that she told herself it was enjoyable, that first time. All first times were a little uncomfortable and unpleasant, or so she'd convinced herself. She hoped for a next time. And that when the next time came, it would be better.

It took three weeks for next time to come, a long, laborious, torturous three weeks in which her emotions tossed back and forth. Embarrassment. Elation. Shame. Hope.

She almost thought he wouldn't come around again, but he called. His nervousness was cute. His direct, pointed request was not, but she forgave it. He asked her to come over, but not for dinner or drinks or movies. He asked her to come late. Very late. He was so very obvious.

She should have said no. She said yes.

She came late. They went straight to his bedroom. She braced herself for a repeat of the first time, but was pleasantly surprised that the experience improved when he hadn't been drinking all night and wasn't half asleep.

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Except that when he was sober, he was self conscious. He didn't like it when she didn't seem to be having a good time. He felt inadequate if she didn't sound like a porn star, so she obliged with some loud moaning and a few fuck yeah's. After, he would stay inside her. He would lay on her and drip sweat onto her and her good sheets and catch his breath. And ask her over and over if it was good.

It wasn't the sex that drew her to him. It was never about the sex. It was the moments after, when he was lightheaded and spent and vulnerable, basking in the afterglow and so tired that he might say anything, and sometimes did. Sometimes he confessed things that he wouldn't tell anyone else. Like how he resented having to take care of his mother, especially when his father, though estranged, was mere miles from her. How he hated his job but it paid so well he didn't want to quit, so he felt trapped. He would tell her that he knew it was wrong to keep coming to her, taking from her but not offering more. He would say he felt safe with her, and that feeling brought him back to her, time and again. He would suggest that maybe they shouldn't keep doing this.

But then he would call again, and though she should say no, she never did.

Because, what if he started sleeping with another girl and suddenly decided he was ready to offer more? She didn't want him going anywhere else for what he was getting from her, so some other woman could benefit from what she'd sacrificed to have. It would devastate her to see him with someone new. For him to show up to their friendly gatherings with a new girl on his arm. To go to parties and watch him flirt with someone else and coax her into his bed so he could ask her, over and over, how good it was.

So she hung on, an iron grip on thin shreds of hope that didn't make sense, but she couldn't let go. She would stroke his back and scratch his scalp and lightly touch her lips to his temple and quiet his apologies with whispers of, "It's okay. It's okay."

After he thought she was asleep, he would get up, redress, and slink out into the inky darkness at the edge of night. She would listen to his car start and rumble through the neighborhood. Then she would roll over and suck in the residual scent that was, by now, embedded in the fibers of the pillow he slept on.

The tears came to remind her that what she hoped for would never come. He would call, again. And ask, again. And come over, again. And he would admit things, and apologize and she would be weak and tell him, "It's okay" and make him feel better. She would lay there, her tears falling into the pillow, his scent filling her nose, and decide, again.

The next time he called, she would try to say no.