

## Morning Embrace

### Chapter 1

Waking up first was both wonderful and terrible.

On the one hand, the warmth radiating off Lia's sleeping form was a sensation that sent happy tingles coursing through Robin's veins. On the other, she was in bed with a girl.

A girl.

In the back of her mind, Robin heard the echo of a cruel, shrill laugh. A bully's cackling.

A different heat tickled the back of Robin's neck. Not the comforting glow of Lia, but something far more uncomfortable. Shame pinched and prickled her skin, a flaring fire that was quickly followed by cold, dreadful sweat.

And, all the while, that mocking laughter.

She needed to get up. Needed to run-

But she couldn't.

Lia was sleeping peacefully, one arm under Robin's waist while the other draped over her waist. A sweet, beautiful face. Eyes closed, expression relaxed and oblivious. All Robin could do was stare at her roommate – her lover – as a war raged within. Two halves of her pulling in different directions; one side wanting to roll out of bed and lock herself in the bathroom, the other wanting nothing more than to press her lips to Lia's. Kiss those plump, pretty, oh-so enticing lips...

Robin couldn't move. Couldn't get up without waking Lia.

And waking Lia – bringing her out of that blissful, peaceful sleep – that felt wrong. So wrong.

She couldn't move. Couldn't get up. And she knew she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. All Robin could do was remain frozen, waiting for Lia to wake while simultaneously dreading that inevitable moment.

What would she say when Lia's eyes flickered open?

How should she act?

Robin's face heated as scenes played out in her mind.

Should she play it cool; smile and say 'good morning'? Or would Lia want something more intimate and romantic? Waking up to a gentle kiss or caress. But what if Robin did that and Lia *didn't* like it? What if-

Lia's eyelids began to flicker. Her brows twitching.

Robin did the only thing she could think of.

She shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep.

A few seconds later, the bedsprings creaked and the weight on the mattress shifted. A sleepy, soft moan sounded from Lia's lips as she stretched awake. The arms that were around Robin's midsection retreated as Lia stretched, then once the girl was fully awake, one of those hands brushed Robin's cheek. A gentle touch that sent hot tingles rushing through Robin.

She opened her eyes, saw Lia smiling sleepily at her.

And, simple as that, all her thoughts vanished.

"Hello," Lia whispered, cheeks pink.

"Hey..." Robin murmured back.

Lia's smile widened.

Robin's heart stuttered.

"It's bright," Lia said, eyes flicking to their dorm room's window. "What time is it?"

"It'll be fun!" Lia grinned wide, voice bright.

"I... I don't know..." Robin bit her lip, looked down. "I'm not really a 'party' person."

"It's not gonna be big, I promise." Lia beamed. "Just a few friends. Music and

snacks and hanging out. Nothing to stress about!"

"I..." Saying 'no' to Lia was like trying to deny the sunrise. That smile, as radiant as the dawn, made Robin want to agree just to keep it in place. "I need to use the bathroom."

Lia lifted an eyebrow as Robin shuffled past, fled into their shared bathroom. The moment the door was closed, Robin slumped against it. Her mind, as always, warring with itself.

It was exhausting.

Should she go to the party with Lia, or stay behind?

If she stayed behind, would Lia go without her or stay with her?

What if Lia realised how much of a loser Robin was? What if she decided she didn't like Robin after all?

Robin's eyes drifted to the bathroom mirror above the sink. Her own wide-eyed face stared back at her, filled with fear and pathetic dread. Skin pale from the *thought* of being dragged along to a party. A normal, unremarkable college party. And it was making her break out into a cold sweat.

*Dyke.* A cruel voice in the back of her mind. *Freak.*

Always scared. Always running and hiding.

It was just a stupid party with stupid people. She didn't have to go! She... She could just stay here. It'd be fine. It'd be-

A light tapping on the bathroom door cut off the thought.

"It's okay," Lia's voice sounded from the other side of the door. "You don't have to. We can hang out here instead. You can tell me more about that book you've been reading!"

The voice, muffled slightly by the door between them, was as bright and beautiful as always. Soft and kind. Open.

*We.*

*We can hang out here instead.*

Lia wanted to go to the party, but she'd pass it up just to put Robin at ease.

Something hardened in Robin's expression.

It was just a stupid party. Like Lia said; small and simple.

Robin lifted her chin.

She made her decision, rose to her feet and turned, opened the door before she could change her mind – overthink things.

Lia stood right there, on the other side, a hint of worry on her otherwise pretty face.

"What time is it?" Robin forced herself to say, to smile. "The party. How long do we have to get ready?"

The grin that spread across Lia's face made the knot in Robin's chest and the coiling in her stomach worth it. "Later! We've got plenty of time!"

Robin nodded her head, listened as Lia excitedly told her where and when the party would be, who'd be there. Robin tried to ignore the dread growing inside her, tried to get as swept up in Lia's eagerness.

A small house party. How bad could it be?

As they approached the house, Lia leading the way, Robin couldn't help but notice the number of cars parked along the suburban sidewalks. Too many to belong to the street's residents, surely.

A voice in the back of her mind urged her to flee.

Robin clenched her fists, ignored that cowardly temptation.

She could do this.

It was just a party! Just a few strangers, a little music. She could handle that.

More than that, this was an *opportunity*. A chance for her to crawl out from under *her* shadow. It was Robin's chance to embrace the promise of college, to reinvent herself,

find herself, become who she wanted to be.

When Lia turned off the sidewalk, walked down a paved path towards a large house, Robin blinked.

The images of a 'house party' her mind had conjured up included people milling about outside, drinking from red cups. Maybe a broken window, lots of shouting, loud music. But there was none of that here.

It looked like an ordinary house.

No sign of a party going on inside, that Robin could see.

See? She told herself. *Not a big deal.*

Robin followed Lia up to the house, waited as Lia knocked on the door and waited. This close, Robin could just about hear some music coming from inside the house. Mostly just a *thump thump* bass beat. But even that was faint.

The door opened, and the girl it revealed smiled wide when she saw Lia. The two of them hugged, said their greetings. And then Lia did the unthinkable.

She introduced Robin.

"This is my roommate," Lia said happily, stepping aside so that the smiling stranger could get a good look at her. "Robin. She's a little shy, but—"

The rest of the words dissolved into incoherent mush. Robin's mouth moved, her body moved. The girl in the doorway smiled and said something. All of it was lost behind Robin's internal screaming.

Her lips pulled into a weak smile. Lia grinned. The other girl smiled in a friendly way.

And then all three were inside the house.

Faces flitted before her; guys and girls alike. More than Robin could keep track of, dazed as her mind insisted on being.

They moved from room to room, though Robin's mind wasn't sure how or when. If asked which room connected to which, she'd be at a loss to answer. The only buoyant in these wild waters was Lia, a constant in every interaction, every room.

The music *thump thumped* in Robin's head, numbing her ability to think.

And then Lia was gone. Across a large living room, talking to a small group of girls. Her friends, most likely.

Everyone here seemed to be Lia's friend.

Robin glanced about, alone in a sea of unfamiliar faces. All talking and laughing and smiling, clustered in their little groups while Robin stood apart.

The air was dense. Thick and stuffy.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

Why was it so difficult to breathe?

*Thump, thump, thump.*

Robin tried to inhale, but her lungs refused to fill. Her body wanted to choke, but her brain refused to allow it. Refused to draw attention to her. So Robin stood there breathless, the veins in her head throbbing with the music's bass.

All around her, people were talking. And Robin couldn't hear a word of it.

She stared, chest constricting, at Lia.

Smiling, radiant Lia. Chatting with her friends, looking every bit like she belonged. Like she was in her element.

Robin wanted to walk over to her, but the very *thought* of actually doing it drove the heart into a spasming frenzy. To draw that many eyes to her, to be seen in her desperation...

Robin flinched, took a step back.

She didn't belong here.

Casting one last, lingering look at Lia – who was smiling and laughing happily, fitting into the party's atmosphere with natural ease – Robin turned, walked.

She kept her eyes forward, didn't dare look at anyone else.

Head throbbing, chest aching, she made for the nearest exit she could find. Which happened to be the door to the house's back yard. If anyone shot curious or amused looks at her as she fumbled opening the door, Robin couldn't see. She could feel eyes on her, but couldn't tell if those eyes were real or imagined. The instant the door was open, Robin all but sprinted through it.

Chilly, fresh air flooded into her lungs.

She hunched over, sucking it in. Pushing all other thoughts from her head, focused on nothing but breathing.

*Idiot.*

The thought struck her like a whip.

Not an echo of Mindy's voice. It'd been Robin's own.

*Stupid.*

She gulped. Slowly nodded her head.

Yes. She was...

She glanced over her shoulder at the house. A house that was much further away than Robin remembered walking. She blinked, realised she'd sprinted all the way to the end of the back yard.

And, though she couldn't hear anything from the house, her mind summoned up the sound of laughter.

Laughter directed at the silly, stupid girl who'd ran outside.

Numbly, Robin turned away. Sat down on the cold grass. Looked up at the darkening sky.

*Why are you like this?* She asked herself. Demanded.

No answer came.

So, she sat there in silence. Staring up at the sky. Building up the courage to stand and leave, walk back to the dorms.

Lia wouldn't mind. She probably hadn't noticed Robin's absence.

*She's having fun.*

Robin didn't want to ruin that.

Better for everyone if she just left.

And she would. As soon as she felt ready to stand up again, she'd walk away. Around the house, so she wouldn't have to enter the party again. Then into the night. Alone.

Up in the navy sky, a smattering of stars had begun to appear. Tiny dots of shining white on a deep, darkening blue. The crescent moon drew Robin's gaze, silvery and bright. It was beautiful, in a lonely, quiet kind of way.

Robin didn't hear the footsteps approaching until they were just a few feet away.

She spun her head, flinched when she saw it was Lia.

"Hey," her roommate said. "Are you okay?"

Robin blushed, glanced down, nodded her head.

"Is the music too loud? I can ask them to turn it down for you if-"

"No! No, it's fine," Robin trembled. "I just... wanted some fresh air. I'm okay."

A few seconds of silence passed. Robin kept her gaze locked on a tuft of grass, ears straining to hear anything but the sound of her own racing heart. She waited for Lia to leave, go back to the party to have fun with all her friends.

But Lia didn't leave. The girl let out a soft breath, a sigh of contentment, before stepping to Robin's side and lowering herself to sit beside her.

"It's pretty," Lia said, looking up at the sky.

"Yeah..."

A few seconds of awkward silence followed.

"I'm sorry."

Robin turned her head to look at Lia.

"I... I shouldn't have pushed you into coming," Lia continued. "I know you don't like crowds and-"

"It's not you," Robin interrupted.

Lia pursed her lips, gazed at Robin, waited.

"I'm not..." *Normal*. "Good with people."

Unable to meet Lia's sympathetic eyes, Robin look away. Stared down at the grass.

"I don't fit in. I..." She gulped, fought down the tide of emotion that threatened to drown her. "I don't *belong*. I'm just..." *A loner. A loser*. "Me."

She flinched when a gentle hand touched hers, held it lightly. "It's okay," Lia said softly. "You don't have to explain anything."

Robin shook her head. "I'm not like everyone else. I'm... defective. I..."

Her vision blurred, a warm teardrop escaping down her cheek.

"I don't have friends," Robin whispered, shutting her eyes tight. Lia squeezed her hand, and it took everything Robin had in her to not crumble. She shuddered, trembled, kept her eyes closed and the flood at bay. "I don't know how to do *any* of this. I don't even know what 'this' *is*."

"It's okay," Lia soothed, voice soft and sweet in the stillness. "Let it all out."

And, just like that, the walls came down.

Voice cracking, Robin spewed it all out. Talked about everything and nothing. Blabbered about her past, the loneliness and the mockery and the big, hollow chasm inside her. She talked and cried and talked some more, cringing at her own voice but unable to stop.

"I-" Robin gasped, cheeks wet and throat raw, "I can't-"

Lia, who'd been silently listening up 'til then, shimmied closer to Robin. The moment her roommate's arm wrapped around Robin's shoulder, Robin collapsed into the embrace. And, from there, her blabbering stopped. She let Lia hold her close and simply cried. Sobbed. Let her treacherous tears fall until, at last, the shaking lessened and her ability to think and control herself returned.

Almost as if coming out of a haze, Robin blinked and realised her head was nestled against Lia's chest. And, as soon as that realisation came, so too did the fact that Lia's pretty top was drenched in Robin's tears.

Then came the awareness that Lia was gently stroking her head, cooing and whispering comforting words.

Shame welled up in Robin's chest. And she quickly walled all other feelings away. Pushed everything, all that pain and misery, back down where it belonged. Steeled herself, letting the voice in the back of her head scold her for making a fool of herself.

She wiped her embarrassingly wet cheeks with the back of her hand, pulled away from Lia who released her without comment.

*Of course*, Robin berated herself. *She'll want nothing to do with you after this. Some first date.*

The thought was bitter. And deserved.

How could she have let herself break down like this?

Wanting nothing more than to curl into a ball and disappear, or else run away and never talk to Lia again, Robin instead forced herself to look up at the other girl – witness the disgust and judgment in her eyes.

Only, when she did, there was none to be found.

All Robin saw in Lia's expression was a soft, gentle compassion. Worry paired with sympathy.

Robin wasn't sure if that was better or worse than what she'd been expecting – dreading – to see.

"I'm-" Her voice caught, raw and rough to her own ears. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-" Lia disarmed Robin with a smile. "Nothing to apologise for. How're you feeling?"

*Like death.* "I'm... okay."

Lia nodded her head, gazing into Robin's eyes.

"We should, uh," Robin glanced at the sky, saw how dark it was now. Fully night, with stars twinkling in the darkness. "I think I'm gonna head back to the dorms..."

She couldn't go back inside the house. Not like this.

Her eyes stung, were probably bloodshot. Hair a mess, face covered in tears and snot. Just the thought of entering the party, having all those people seeing her, was enough to chill Robin to the bone.

"Alright," Lia smiled. "Let's head back."

"Y-you don't have to," Robin said quickly, glancing from Lia to the house. The party. "I'll be fine. You can stay here, if you want."

Lia, smile never wavering, shook her head. "I'm tired. Besides, this party is boring."

It was a lie. Robin knew it, and was thankful to Lia for it.

Lia held out her hand.

Hesitantly, Robin reached her own hand out to meet it.

Their fingers intertwined, and butterflies fluttered around in Robin's stomach – which she vehemently told herself were just hunger pangs, and not *anything* more.

Still, as they walked around the side of the house, onto the street beyond, Robin couldn't help herself from smiling.

Her cheeks felt heavy, her chest still ached painfully. And, if anyone saw her holding hands with Lia, Robin was certain she'd die a little on the inside. But, despite all that, the timid warmth of that simple contact – Lia's hand against hers – was enough to banish some of the ever-present shadows from Robin's thoughts.

Mindy's voice still bounced around inside Robin's skull, an echo of an echo. And Robin wasn't sure she'd ever be free of it.

But, right then, she was too exhausted to listen to it.

"I think," Lia began, and instantly Robin's whole attention was focused on her – her roommate, her girlfriend, *whatever* they were, "I still have some coco powder left over from Christmas. Hot coco and a nice bubble bath sounds *amazing* right now! And, after that..."

Robin smiled, listened to Lia's voice as they headed home.

What the other girl was saying, Robin would only remember fragments and snippets of. But that voice? Robin could listen to it for hours.