

Morning Embrace

Chapter 2

Lia checked her phone, saw the nearly two dozen unread messages.

She stared at the screen, the notifications, for a few seconds. She shook her head, pocketed her phone without checking any of them. Sat there on the toilet for a whole minute before the nagging in her brain finally won out.

She pulled the phone out of her pocket again, unlocked it, began reading through the new messages.

One or two of them were from family; her mother and her brother. Asking how she was doing, how her schooling was going. Other messages were from Lia's friends, asking about the party and where Lia had vanished off to. At the bottom of the list of unread messages was a notification from the local library, letting Lia know she'd need to return some books soon.

With a soft sigh, she began replying.

Everything's great! She sent to her mother.

I was sleepy, she sent to her friends. *Wanted to sleep early. Sorry!*

As for that last message; Lia opened up her note-taking app and made a reminder for herself to return the borrowed books. Her eyes roamed the long list of chores, a wave of apprehension sweeping over her as she did.

Relax, she told herself. *Take it one thing at a time.*

The list might be long, but most of the items on it were simple enough. Tidy the dorm room, vacuum the floor, organize her lecture notes, take inventory of their food and drinks and snacks; all things Lia could get done with before midday.

The list of chores was long and intimidating. But, broken down and examined, it was all plenty manageable.

Lia planted a smile onto her face, pocketed her phone, began mentally planning the day. Making sure there was plenty of time for her chores and tasks, and plenty of time to study on top of that.

I can do this. I've got this.

She repeated the words in her head. Again and again. Until they sounded as bright and confident to her as she was determined to feel.

Lia had never considered herself to be 'popular'. Not really.

Sure, all throughout middle school and highschool, she'd had plenty of friends. And she'd hung around with and been close to all the cliques and little friend groups. But that didn't mean she was 'popular'. She was just easy to get along with.

Meeting people, talking to them, and letting *them* talk while she listened intently and earnestly. Making friends was easy.

Maintaining those friendships, though...

It's worth the effort, Lia told herself.

And a lot of effort it took. Keeping track of dozens of people; new friends and old ones alike. Guys and girls that she'd gone to highschool with, who'd stayed in touch despite going to different colleges. And the many people Lia had introduced herself to, become acquainted with, right here at the college. A whole lot of names and numbers.

It was like a garden. Left untended, the plants will wither and die. But, properly cared for and fostered, those same plants – the bonds Lia had forged with so many people – would grow strong and beautiful. A larger garden took more time and effort to care for, but would be filled with so much more beauty as a result.

All these people wanting to be friends with Lia – it was a blessing. Something to be proud of.

Yet, every time she checked her phone, saw the new sets of unread messages, she

couldn't help but feel a little flustered by it all. So many invitations to hang out, or go to parties or gatherings. She felt *terrible* every time she declined. How much more disappointment could she dole out before she gained a reputation for it? Before her friends stopped asking; stopped trying?

If there was one thing Lia hated, it was letting other people down. Making them feel sad or dejected.

So she did what she knew she must.

She forced herself to read all those messages. Reply to them, eager and happy.

If only it weren't such an exhausting task.

"Are you okay?" Robin asked, sounding mildly concerned.

Lia didn't move. *Couldn't* move.

The bed she was sprawled on was too comfortable, too welcoming. Even if Lia was face-down on it, body motionless.

"Yeah," Lia said, her mouth pressed to the bedsheets. "I'm fine."

"You sure?" Robin said, uncertain.

Lia could all but hear her friend's raised eyebrow.

Friend? Or 'girlfriend'?

Roomie?

Lover?

Lia groaned into the bed. Her head throbbed, brain struggling against the weight of weariness that'd been building all day. Heavy as her eyelids were, she was surprised she hadn't already passed out. How nice that would be...

"Lia?" Robin spoke again, a hint of genuine concern entering her voice now.

She's worrying about me.

Lia's subconscious rebelled against that notion. She planted her hands on her bed, pushed herself up. Despite her petite frame, her body felt heavier than marble.

"I'm okay," Lia flashed a smile at Robin. "Just sleepy."

Robin pursed her lips, met Lia's gaze.

Lia poured all her soul into looking normal. Unaffected. Completely fine and normal; no need to worry over here!

"Uh-huh," Robin hummed, unconvinced. Her cheeks reddened.

"Come," Lia spread her arms out, squeezing the air and urging Robin closer. "Cuddle. Let's take a nice little nap together."

Robin bit her lip, hesitated for a moment, then obliged.

Something inside Lia softened as Robin climbed onto the bed with her, wrapped her arms around her, cuddled her softly. Both of them, Lia and Robin both, blushed as they got comfortable on the bed with their bodies draped over each other.

The tightness that'd been so oppressive moments ago unraveled and, before she knew it, Lia was drifting off to sleep with a soft, genuine smile on her lips.

Don't spend all your time buried in books! Go out and have fun. Meet boys and enjoy the full college experience!

A message that Lia's mother had sent her.

It was followed by the usual 'be safe' stuff. But the message was clear – Lia's mother wanted her to have 'fun' at college. Get a boyfriend. Experience all the things college had to offer.

Mostly, Lia assumed, her mother was just worried about Lia overworking and overstressing herself.

But even still... Meet boys?

Lia's cheeks flushed.

She hadn't told her mother – or *anyone* for that matter – about her relationship with

Robin. If it could even be *called* a 'relationship'. Whatever was happening between her and Robin, Lia had no titles or labels for.

Girlfriends? Sort of accurate, but not really?

Lovers? Also somewhat accurate, but it failed to encompass everything that Lia and Robin were.

Sex friends? Definitely not. Friends, sure. Friends that'd explored each other sexually, yes. But 'sex friends'? No.

None of the labels Lia could think of fit.

They were... complicated.

As were Lia's feelings about it all.

For a brief moment, she tried sorting through the swirl of feelings and thoughts. Tried to find something solid to grasp onto. But no answers came.

Until Robin, Lia hadn't known she even *liked* girls.

Not like *that*.

Sure, there'd been instances of curiosity in her past. Watching other girls in the dressing room, appreciating curves and the like. But that hadn't been *lust*.

Had it?

It was so confusing to think about. Such a mess of uncertainty.

So Lia shoved it all aside, locked it away.

A problem for her to figure out another day.

All she knew for sure was that the moments she spent alone with Robin were some of the most comfortable, carefree times Lia could remember. The warmth of Robin's arms and legs, the closeness of her lips as they drifted off to sleep holding each other. It was something Lia hadn't anticipated, to put it gently.

So much for her dreams of a handsome husband, two and a half kids, and an energetic puppy.

Was she even *into* boys anymore?

It didn't take much imagining for Lia to find her answer.

Yes. Yes, she still had the hots for guys.

It just so happened she was also attracted to girls.

Apparently.

More messages. Too many messages.

Some from her mother and father. Many from friends; old and new. Another one from the library. Several more from other official places or businesses. Books this, packages that, membership fees and spam to be avoided and ignored. Plans being made that Lia couldn't keep track of. Invites to this or that or the other thing. Parents checking up on her, making sure she was taking care of herself.

It was all *too much*.

Lia's finger hovered above her phone screen, frozen an inch away from opening her messages.

If she opened them, read them, she'd have to reply.

If she replied, she'd have to come up with good reasons why she couldn't hang out with friends, or explain how college was going to her parents. She'd have to take notes, make adjustments to her calendar.

Wouldn't it be so much easier if she just... didn't?

Just this once. Just for a few minutes. A few hours.

Would it be so bad to ignore the outside world for the rest of the day, snuggle up close to Robin and stop worrying?

The longer she stared at her phone screen, the more strained she felt. It wouldn't be the end of the world if she simply turned her phone off, would it? She could just pretend it died on her. No harm done.

But why did that feel so much like admitting defeat?

"How do you do it?" Robin asked, face nuzzled in Lia's hair.

"Do what?" Lia asked, eyes closed. Basking in the feel of Robin's warmth. Wrapped tight and snug in a thick blanket, their combined warmth was like an oven. So comfortably warm that Lia never wanted to move from this spot.

"Keep track of so many things," Robin said, her voice soft and sweet. Music to Lia's ears. "All the classes you have. All your friends. Everything."

Lia gave the tiniest of shrugs. "It's nothing."

"Nu-uh," Robin mumbled sleepily. "Not nothing."

"I just..." Lia lightly squeezed Robin. "I don't know."

"I'd die," Robin yawned.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," nodded her head slightly. "If I had to keep track over everything like you do, I'd die."

"It's not so bad..."

For some reason, that felt difficult to say. Lia frowned, squeezed Robin reassuringly. It *wasn't* bad. She had her schedules and her organization. So what if it took a bit of time every day to reply to all those messages, keep track of all her friends and their lives? So what if she was taking so many lessons, studying so hard every day? She could handle it.

"It's not..." She said, tried to sound convincing.

"Okay..." Robin whispered.

"I'm fine, really," Lia whispered. "I promise."

"Are you?"

Lia bit her lip, didn't reply.

"I'm here," Robin yawned softly.

"I know," Lia mumbled. And, after a few seconds, added; "Thank you."

She wasn't sure if Robin heard that last part. A moment later, her roomie – roomie? friend? girlfriend? person? – her *person* started to breathe lightly, evenly. She'd fallen asleep.

Lia liked it that way. Robin falling asleep first.

Something about Robin's sleepy breathing always set Lia at ease. Made her forget all about her lists and chores and studies. When the two of them were in bed like this, it was like the rest of the world stopped existing. No army of friends vying for Lia's attention. No mountains of schoolwork to memorize and master. No expectations to meet beyond being there, in that moment. Being herself.

She didn't need to be perfect. She could just be Lia.

"Thank you," she said again, knowing Robin couldn't hear her through the veil of sleep. "For caring."

Everyone else cared too. Lia's parents. Her brother. Her many, many friends. They all cared about Lia. All wanted what was best for her. And yet... Something about Robin set her apart. Made her special.

Lia had no idea what that thing was. Wasn't sure it was a thing that *could* be known.

"Goodnight," Lia said softly, relaxing fully into Robin's embrace. "Sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite."

In the moments before she drifted off into sweet oblivion, Lia remembered her phone. Sitting on a side table, set to 'do not disturb'. Running low on battery, but not plugged in. Left as it was, it'd be dead long before morning.

Lia smiled, let sleep take her.

The phone wasn't worth getting up for. Not when she had Robin's arms around her.