

Morning Embrace

Chapter 3

The moment Robin stepped out of the lecture hall, she all but collapsed. Staggering forward, she let relief and exhaustion wash over her. A smile spreading her lips even has her shoulders sagged. She stepped across the corridor, out of the way of the stream of people, and put her back to a wall.

Then she let out a sigh. Part happy.

Finally. *Finally*, a break.

Spring break, to be exact.

Some time off!

Her body wanted to give up the ghost right there and then, crumple into a heap on the floor and sleep the next two weeks away.

She was so tired, so happy, she almost didn't care what that would look like to everyone else. A small, petite girl rolling up in the busy corridor for a nap. She was almost tempted to do it. *Almost*.

But laugh from someplace distant stopped her.

Robin could imagine it all too well. The looks she'd get. The whispers about her. The judgement.

A little of her joy fizzled away.

She shook her head, inhaled a breath, pushed away from the wall.

College, much like high school had been, was like a living creature. The classrooms its organs, the corridors its veins, the students its blood. Certainly, there was a pattern to the flow of bodies. Some coming, others going. All flowing along, going where they needed.

That's what she imagined when she joined the flow. Walking with her head down along with the other students. Heading to the nearest exit. To the dorms. To her room.

To Lia.

Robin's chest throbbed. And, as if to mirror that sensation, the flow of bodies around her slowed. Ahead, some people were blocking the way. A clot. A group of guys all laughing and bumping into each other, play-fighting and saying goodbyes and cracking jokes.

It took a few seconds before the clot fixed itself, the guys all going their separate ways.

And the flow resumed. Guiding Robin home.

"Home." She mouthed the word without making a sound.

Was that what her dorm room had become? Home?

That thought, and the massive shadow looming over it, was too much for Robin to think about right then.

She kept her head down, let herself move along with the rest of the flow. Allowing herself to be just another body in the crowd, an unremarkable blip that no-one would look twice at.

That, she'd found, was one of the major benefits of college.

It was so much *bigger* than high school. So much easier to remain unnoticed. Here, she truly was invisible.

Back in high school, avoiding being seen had been a job in itself. Carefully planned routes to avoid bumping into the bullies that'd tormented her, always looking around and checking where those bullies might appear from while also keeping her head down to remain as unseen as possible.

Even though she hadn't fully gotten over many of those habits, she could at least breathe easier here.

No ambushes. No mockery. No public humiliation.

Robin pursed her lips, slipping out of the stream of bodies as she reached her exit. A door that led outside this building and into the open campus beyond.

Funny. She'd spent the last weeks – the last few days especially – looking forward to this. A break from the constant business of study and schoolwork. And yet, now that the moment had finally come, she almost regretted it.

What was she going to do now?

How was she going to spend the next two weeks?

Robin had no clue. Had been avoiding those questions as much as she'd avoided Mindy and her cronies back in high school.

She'd have to figure it out soon.

But not right now.

All she needed to do right now was get to her dorm room, hop in the shower, and wait for Lia to be done with her last lecture.

Everything beyond that could wait.

A question. One more difficult and perilous than any others Robin had been forced to consider recently.

Get dressed, or greet Lia home wearing only a towel?

The latter was a thrilling prospect. And a terrifying one.

They hadn't done anything *intimate* in a while. Between school and studying and sleeping, not to mention the questions of exactly what kind of a relationship they had, there'd been no time to really explore that kind of stuff.

Which Robin was simultaneously content with and frustrated by.

How her mind could be torn in two radically different directions, wanting both at the same time, she didn't know. But it was a pain in the ass.

Neither of them ever talked about it. They hadn't had a conversation to lay out the boundaries of what they were. Not even a *label*. Were they friends that slept in the same bed for comfort, or were they best friends who'd gotten carried away with touching one time, or were they actually in a relationship? Robin didn't have the faintest idea! And it was making her lose her damned mind.

She *wanted* to wear the towel. Nothing but the towel. And lay herself down on Lia's bed seductively. Let her body and eyes say the things her mouth refused to.

Hell, she wanted to do that but *without* the towel.

But...

What if Lia didn't feel the same way?

What if those intimate moments they'd shared were just Lia exploring her sexuality, as people did in college. And what if Lia had decided she wasn't into girls that way? Or maybe she just wasn't into *Robin* that way...

The longer Robin stood there, clad in only a towel, the more doubts crept in. Her mind summoning up reasons to delay 'the talk'. Fears over how that discussion might go.

Lia... She was beautiful. Amazing. Wonderful.

Why would she ever settle for the walking mass of anxiety and awkwardness that was Robin? A girl as pretty as Lia could have anyone she wanted. Why settle for someone as plain and unremarkable as Robin?

Her heart thundered, and the indecision grew like a weight in Robin's chest until she *had* to be free of it.

She tossed off the towel, scolding herself for her silly fantasies of romance and affection. Quickly as she could, she changed into clean, comfortable, form-concealing clothes. Baggy sweatpants and a long-sleeve top that was so big on her it felt more like a mobile blanket than actual clothing.

By the time the door opened and a tired, smiling Lia bounced into the room, Robin was curled up on her bed with her face in a book.

"Hey!" Lia beamed, tossing her bag aside and hopping onto Robin's bed. "What'cha reading?"

Robin blushed, snapped the book shut. "It's, uh," *a steamy lesbian romance*. "A fantasy mystery thing..."

"Oh?" Lia leaned closer, curious. As her eyes scanned the book's cover, Robin swiftly set it aside.

"So!" Robin, face hot, thought fast. "How was your last lecture?"

"Boring!" Lia sighed dramatically, flopping backwards. The wide smile never left her face. "I was barely paying attention. Kept looking at the time, wishing it was over already. I swear, time moves slower when you're bored. What's the deal with that?"

Robin shrugged.

"I mean, come on!" Lia flailed limply. "Why does time move faster when you're having a good time, but go so slow when you're bored? It should be the other way around!"

Let's make time move fast together. Gods help her, she nearly uttered the words aloud.

Robin cleared her throat to banish the thought.

"Well, it's over now!" She said, trying to mirror Lia's usual enthusiasm. It sounded forced and awkward to her own ears. "You can put your feet up and relax!"

"Very true!" Lia stopped flailing, smiled at Robin.

That smile sent warm tingles running along Robin's spine.

"So, now that we've got two weeks off, what do you wanna do? Besides resting, of course."

Robin bit her lip. The question was a difficult one to answer for *multiple* reasons, not least of which being that Robin didn't have *any* plans. More though, was the uncertainty of what *exactly* Lia meant. Was she asking Robin what Robin wanted to do – as in alone. Or did that 'you' include Lia herself? As of yet, Lia hadn't said if she'd be going home for Spring Break or if she'd be staying in the dorms again. And Robin hadn't had the courage to ask.

All she could do, then, was shrug. "I dunno..."

"I was thinking," Lia said, a faint, adorable pinkness colouring her cheeks. "How would you like to go somewhere? There's a zoo not too far from here. Or, well, it's more like an animal reserve. We could go there! Or, if that's not your thing, there's a museum..."

White noise drowned out the rest of what Lia said. The thundering of Robin's heart in her ears, the sudden rush of glee and excitement.

We.

We.

Lia *was* staying at the dorms for Spring Break!

"Sure!" Robin said, interrupting Lia mid-sentence, letting her joy lead the way before any doubts could fester and grow. "That sounds great!"

"The animal reserve?" Lia asked, a smile quickly spreading across her face.

"Yeah," Robin nodded her head, committing before her brain could stop her. "Let's do it."

"Great! Okay!" Lia clapped her hands together. "How does Tuesday sound?"

From a purely objective standpoint, the animal reserve wasn't all too interesting. Basically, she and Lia had been loaded into a small van with a handful of other people, had sat down together, and were being driven from one enclosure to the next while a bored-sounding man commentated about the animals.

The animals themselves were apathetic to the presence of the van, barely sparing it a glance as they sat, lounged, or slept.

It would've been an incredibly underwhelming experience, if not for one wonderous

fact.

She was with *Lia*.

"Look, look!" The girl said, as excited as any child would've been in her seat. "Over there!"

Robin followed Lia's finger, gazed at the tree Lia was pointing at. It took a few moments of searching, wondering what was so special about the tree, before Robin spotted a monkey. What *kind* of monkey, Robin wasn't certain of. It didn't have hair on its ass, and it seemed to be playing with a rock and a stick. Beyond that, Robin couldn't make out anything special or interesting about it.

And yet, Lia's childlike joy was infectious.

"Yeah," Robin said, voice echoing Lia's happiness. "I see it!"

For those wonderful minutes, the rest of the world ceased to exist. The van, the other people inside it, they didn't matter. Not one bit. Robin didn't care what they were thinking, if they were looking at and judging her. The only thing that mattered was Lia. Her excitement and joy.

When they reached the end of the bald-ass monkey enclosure, Lia took hold of Robin's hand and gasped, pointing excitedly at the sign to the next enclosure.

The wooden sign was in the shape of a large rock, an outline of a lion depicted on it in faded black paint.

Sure enough, the guide started mentioning felid this and leo that, droning in a monotone about the natural habitats of lions and blah, blah, blah. Robin zoned him out, had ears only for Lia. She looked down at her hand, the one Lia had grabbed in excitement.

She could *feel* the warmth. The pressure, light though it was.

Heat radiated from within Robin. A tingling glow.

Such a small gesture, no-doubt meaningless to Lia – who probably hadn't even realised she was holding Robin's hand. And yet Robin's heart fluttered. The warm glow casting every dour thought aside.

Even the drab lion enclosure wasn't enough to sour Robin's smile.

If anything, the lions made Robin smile even more.

Lia giggled, pointed at what should've been a majestic beast with a wide, magnificent mane. The king of the jungle and an apex predator...

...Which, at that exact moment, was squatting over a bored-looking lioness and humping lamely.

"Oh my," Lia covered her mouth as she laughed. "We probably shouldn't watch, huh? Give 'em a little privacy..."

Lia's head turned away from the scene, and she gazed into Robin's eyes. And, just like that, the world stopped turning. Stopped existing. It was just them in a frozen, perfect moment. Lia grinning wide, Robin smiling back. The hand holding Robin's squeezed lightly, thumb brushing over soft skin.

Robin's lips parted. A thousand things she wanted to say, none of which were as important as the desire to lean forward and kiss Lia right there and then.

Not that she did. As much as she wanted to.

"Conservation efforts are, as you'll see if you look out the windows on your right, an ongoing effort." The voice of the guide, for the first time, showing emotion.

Of all the times for him to have a personality, Robin huffed mentally.

The moment was over. She shut her mouth, blushed and looked away. Lia, smiling, looked back out the window.

Robin shot a glare at the guide, standing at the front of the van. But it was an empty glare, with no real anger or annoyance behind it. Robin was too happy for that. Too content. Lia's hand was still wrapped around hers. And there were still plenty more enclosures to go.

Plenty more time to enjoy Lia's smiles and giggles and joy.

"Here," Robin held out the small, paper bag.

Lia raised an eyebrow, and Robin was forced to look away. Heat crept into her cheeks and her heart spasmed.

"I got it for you."

"Oh?!" Robin could all but feel Lia's body as she stepped closer, peered into the gift bag. "What is it?"

"Yours," Robin mumbled. "Nothing." The heat spread down Robin's neck. "Take it!"

Lia lifted a hand and Robin shoved the bag into it.

As soon as Lia had it, Robin backed away. Slid her hands into pockets, looked anywhere but at Lia and the small lion plushie she was pulling out of the bag. A little reminder of today.

"Oh wow!" Lia hopped on the spot, brandishing the plushie with a grin on her face and a twinkle in her eye. "It's perfect! Wait here, I've gotta get you something now too!"

"No," Robin tried to say, but Lia was already moving off in the direction of the gift shop. "You don't have to..."

But Lia was gone. Skipping into the shop, out of earshot.

Robin watched her go, torn between chasing after her and insisting that Lia didn't need to buy her anything, and staring at Lia's cute butt as she went. As soon as Lia was out of sight, Robin gave herself a light slap to the nose, scolded herself for her wandering eyes.

Cheeks flushed, she debated following Lia into the gift shop and talking her down. But she had a feeling that wouldn't work.

Should've waited 'til we were outta here first.

Something to know for next time.

Next time...

Robin beamed.

She stared at the pair of plushies for as long as she could.

Eyelids drooping, Lia's arms around her, every tired part of her urging Robin to sleep.

But she didn't want to. Not yet.

What if she closed her eyes, woke up, realised this had all been a dream? What if she already was asleep, and this whole day had just been a fantasy?

So she stared at the two plushies. The lion plush toy that she'd bought for Lia, and the lioness plush toy it was mounted atop – the one Lia had bought for her.

A matching pair.

The day's events played over in Robin's mind. From waking up and hesitating, regretting agreeing to come along. Enduring her brain's endless barrage of doubts and fears, its manufactured excuses to tell Lia about why Robin couldn't go after all. Then forcing herself out of bed, putting clothes on, going along with Lia fully expecting the worst.

And none of it'd happened.

She hadn't made a fool of herself. Hadn't embarrassed Lia, or scared her away. She hadn't been laughed at or mocked or anything of the sort.

And she definitely hadn't been eaten by a captive bear.

Admittedly, that last one was on the lesser end of the spectrum of Robin's anxieties and fears.

But still! The day hadn't gone badly.

It'd gone amazingly.

A day out with Lia, without getting stressed out or losing her cool, making a fool of herself. There'd been a few moments her anxiety had spiked, for sure. In that van, mostly.

At the beginning. The cramped space, all those strangers...

But she'd endured it. And it'd been worth it.

After the animal reserve, they'd gone to a nearby pizza place. Had shared a nice meal. Chatted about the animals.

Made more plans.

Those, Robin set aside. Shoved right out of sight.

She could worry about museums and go-karting and all that other stuff another time. Preferably right before it happened, when it'd be too late to stop herself. The less she worried about all *that*, the better.

For now, today was enough.

This moment was enough.

Finally, Robin lost the battle. Her eyelids drooped shut and memories of the day morphed into dreams – weird and bizarre, none she'd remember come morning.