

## Morning Embrace

### Chapter 4

Lia went over the itinerary again, a quick quadruple-check to make sure everything was as it should be.

Leave the dorms at ten. Catch a bus at half-past. Arrive at their destination twenty minutes later or so. Breakfast at a highly reviewed food place at eleven. Museum at quarter to twelve. There for just over two hours. At two, they'd have lunch. Three was a little trip to an old, family-owned book shop – a surprise for Robin. And on it went. Up 'til seven, when they'd be catching a bus back to the dorms.

It'd be a packed day. But one that – hopefully – would be one to remember. A nice... outing? Date?

Was Robin her girlfriend?

Neither of them had expressed it verbally, but their relationship wasn't that of 'just friends'. Was it?

Lia shook her head.

Now wasn't the time to be worrying about that topic. She had an hour to get ready, make sure they had everything they'd need for their *outing* together.

As soon as Robin was done in the shower, Lia would hop in and do the same.

*It'd be more economical for us to shower together.*

A blush came with the thought.

*Right. Economical. That's why you want to shower with Robin.*

She couldn't lie to herself. The images her mind was conjuring were less than sanitary. Her and Robin, both naked, scrubbing each other with empty hands... Water raining down on them, sliding down Robin's petite, slender body. White steam surrounding them like a halo; the only concealment they'd have from each other.

Shaking her head, banishing the image, Lia forced herself to look back at her phone. The schedule. Her unread messages.

Anywhere but at the bathroom door.

She shuddered, pictured that very door swinging open, a wet and naked Robin strutting into the room, walking right for her with a sultry smile on her face.

*Focus!*

Lia stared at her phone screen. Refused to acknowledge anything beyond it.

She minimised her planning app, went to check her several dozen unread messages. And, just like that, her mood dropped. The warm, demanding tingle between her legs vanished.

Texts from her mother, father, brother.

All of them, in their own ways, asking if Lia was alright. If she was okay. If she'd been hit by a bus 'or something'.

There were other texts too. From friends Lia had made here at college, and from friends she'd had since long before. Some casual greetings, messages about their Spring Breaks, a few concerned about Lia 'locking herself away in her dorm room'. A party invite or three.

But it was the family ones that kept nagging at Lia.

She'd been neglectful. Not answering quickly enough, not messaging regularly enough. And now they were all worried about her. Concerned that she was overwhelmed by this or that, worried that she'd fallen in with a bad crowd. Or, as her brother had put it; 'Are you dead? Can I have your room?'

That was the first one Lia replied to.

Why in the world would he want her room? His was already bigger!

It took more mental effort than Lia'd assumed. Replying to one text after another. Each one a weight on her mood.

*They're just texts. Stop being dramatic.*

A dozen conversations, none of which Lia was particularly interested in. Concerns that needn't have existed. Party invites that kept resurfacing no matter how many times Lia politely declined. And, to top it all off, her father all but demanding she come home next time Lia had a break from college.

By the time she'd replied to the last one, Lia was exhausted.

And, as she was setting her phone down, ready to face-plant her bed, her phone went ahead and vibrated and buzzed. Letting her know another message had arrived.

Replies.

Lia groaned internally.

There was always more. Always something else.

Friends wouldn't take 'no' as an answer to a party invitation, no matter how politely or clearly Lia declined. Family wouldn't accept she'd rather be here than there. There was always another message, another reply, another responsibility.

The urge to throw her phone at a wall, watch it smash and break, was strong. A pull from somewhere deep inside Lia.

She let out a breath. Inhaled. Exhaled.

Then Lia lifted the phone, began replying to the replies.

They ended up skipping the breakfast stop.

While Lia was in the shower, Robin had thrown together some eggs on toast and coffee. They couldn't make much food in their little dorm room, but one lesson college had taught them both was that a toaster and a kettle could be *extremely* versatile cooking implements.

Throw a raw egg in the kettle, let it boil for a little while, and the result was a soft-boiled egg. A few slices and some cheese added to a slice of toast, and that was breakfast sorted.

The only downside – coffee *sometimes* tasted a little eggy.

A fair trade-off, in Lia's eyes.

When they got off the bus, rather than going to grab the planned breakfast, the pair wandered the streets instead. Enjoying the spring air, the tranquillity, the golden light.

"We need to get a new grill thing," Lia said, making a mental note to do just that. Their old one – a cheap double grill Lia had bought second-hand – had conked out and died a few weeks back. Which, naturally, had resulted in the kettle-cooked egg discovery. "The egg coffee is..." She made a face.

Robin chuckled. "Sure. We can do that later. If there's room in your schedule."

"Yeah," Lia blushed. "I can make room..."

Again, Robin laughed.

It'd mean moving some things around, maybe cutting the book shop visit short – something Lia was loath to do. Maybe if they cut the time out of the museum visit...

"Relax," Robin said, stopping.

"Huh?"

"You're stressing too much," Robin said, the words soft and kind. "How much of today have you planned?"

"Uh..." Lia looked away. "Not much..."

"Uh-huh," Robin rolled her eyes. "The museum; is anything special happening there today? A one-time only exhibit or something like that?"

Lia blinked, thought for a moment, then slowly shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Then there's no rush to do it today!" Robin smiled warmly. "We can go there any time."

"But..."

"Come on," Robin held out her hand. "Let's explore."

Lia glanced from Robin to her hand, then back up to Robin's face. In those scant few moments, the smile on Robin's face wavered a bit. She looked down at her own extended hand, seemed to second-guess herself. The hand wobbled, began to withdraw.

Lia's hand snapped out, clutched Robin's.

They both stood frozen, looking at each other. Both surprised for different reasons.

Heat began to creep up Lia's neck, tickling her jaw and cheeks. A matching pinkness appeared on Robin's face. Feeling very suddenly awkward and shy, Lia looked away – saw Robin do the same. But neither one pulled their hand away from the other's.

When they began moving again, walking in a random direction, heat and joy bubbled inside Lia's chest. A thrill filled her that was exhilarating and confusing and too huge to contemplate.

"Don't suppose," Robin coughed, glancing at Lia and blushing brighter, "you've got the man of this place memorised?"

Lia smiled, shook her head.

The cool spring air tickled her warm, round cheeks.

It was oddly freeing, looking at the time and seeing that they'd missed their timeslot for the museum visit. As simple as that, two hours had opened up. No plan, no direction. They wandered the unfamiliar streets, poked their heads into shops and checked out market stalls.

Neither of them bought anything. Just walked, explored, talked.

Lia talked about family, about her friends – old and new – and her struggles to keep up with everything, maintain those connections. She was mid-way through complaining about her studies and the pressure of it all, the expectations everyone seemed to have for her, when she realised what she was doing.

"I'm sorry," Lia stammered, embarrassed. "I didn't mean to unload everything on you like that!"

"It's okay," Robin said. Her big, beautiful eyes met Lia's. "Keep going."

"No, I mean..." Her face radiated heat. But not the fun, tingling, excited kind. It was stifling, uncomfortable. An unpleasant *burn*. "I'm happy! With everything! I don't mind studying, and I knew keeping up with everything would be challenging. I'm not..." *Ungrateful*.

"School is hard," Robin shrugged. "People are harder."

"Y-yeah." Lia bit her lip, frowned. "I... I like having a lot of friends. How does the saying go? About friends and more being better or something?" She tried to remember, came up blank.

"I wouldn't know," Robin said, an emptiness in her words.

"You don't have many friends back home?"

"Any," Robin snorted.

Lia pursed her lips. Wanted to ask more. Or, more accurately, she wanted to *know* more. She *didn't* want to ask or poke or prod or pry.

"It's whatever," Robin shrugged. She gave Lia a forced smile. "I'm not much of a people person anyway. Having a lot of friends sounds exhausting."

"I..." What was she supposed to say to that? How could she let Robin know she was here for her? "It can be."

"I don't know how you manage it," Robin sighed.

"Neither do I, honestly."

Even now, Lia knew there'd be a host of messages waiting for her. Replies and new texts and notifications for all. A bunch of people waiting on her, expecting her response.

"It can be tiring, but..." Lia thought of some upsides. Glass half full, bright sides, positivity. And she summoned up several. More friends meant less loneliness, more people to rely on, life was all about the connections formed, so on and so forth. Not one of those

sentiments rang true. "I don't know." She said honestly.

Robin squeezed her hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Lia nodded her head. Smiled.

And it was true. As much as all those people, their expectations, weight down on her – right there, in that moment, Lia was okay. Unburdened.

"Come on," she said, tugging Robin down a street she recognised, "there's a cute little shop down here..."

The waitress flashed wide smile as she set down their dinner.

If it could be called that.

Lia decided 'late breakfast' was a more fitting name, but was still plenty eager to indulge.

For Robin, a vanilla milkshake in a tall glass with a colourful straw. For Lia, a bright pink strawberry milkshake in a mirrored glass. And, between them, a mountain on pancakes topped with ice-cream which itself was topped with dripping sauces and nuts and fruity candy.

Definitely not the kind of 'dinner' her father would approve of. Not that Lia cared all that much.

It was a pretty sight, that mountain of pancakes. Though not nearly as pretty as the girl sitting behind it. Lia's mouth watered and, on impulse, she pulled out her phone to snap a photo.

Robin raised an eyebrow, and rolled her eyes when Lia told her to smile.

Somehow, that only served to make her look cuter.

The photo Lia captured was all Robin. The adorable girl framed by a mountain of pancakes on one side as a milkshake on the other, looking away mid-eyeroll.

It was perfect. The kind of moment Lia wanted to keep forever.

She considered posting it to her socials. Dismissed the thought immediately. This photo, it was for Lia's eyes only. But it was too amazing to just leave abandoned in some photo folder, lost until Lia stumbled across it weeks or months from now. So she set it as her phone's wallpaper.

That way, she'd be able to see Robin wherever she went.

"Let's eat!" Lia beamed, setting her phone down. Its myriad unread messages coming second to enjoying this moment. "Then we can... I don't know! Hang out, I guess."

"How about this," Robin said, reaching for a fork. "If you can go the rest of today without looking at your phone, I'll give you a reward."

"Reward?" Lia paused, blushed at the images her mind conjured up. "What reward?"

Robin shrugged, smirked. "No idea! I'll figure something out."

Lia pursed her lips.

"But you have to keep your phone in your pocket. Better yet, put it in airplane mode. No texts or schedules."

"Okay..." Her heart thumped. "But, if I do it, I get to choose my treat. That's fair, right?"

Robin raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. "Deal."

That made Lia's brain haywire. Fantasies of all the 'treats' she could ask for flooding her mind, driving all reason and rational thought far away. Lia business herself with sipping her strawberry milkshake, hoping it'd cool the sudden warmth she felt tingling inside her.

"It suits you," Robin said, pointing her fork and the chunk of pancake stabbed onto it at the milkshake.

"Strawberry?" Lia asked, confused.

Robin shook her head, sliding the fork into her mouth. "Pink," she said around the food. "It suits you."

"Really?" Lia looked down at the bright pink drink. "My bedroom back home is pink. From when I was younger, you know? It's a little faded now, but..." Why was she talking about her bedroom? "I dunno. Isn't pink a little..." Childish? "Immature?"

"Nah," Robin shook her head. "How can a colour be immature?"

"I don't know."

"It suits you," Robin said. She opened her mouth to say more, paused, blushed, then shut her mouth. Quickly, as if she didn't want to say more, Robin cut another, larger chunk of pancake from the pile and shovelled it into her mouth.

"Huh," Lia hummed.

Pink? It'd been Lia's favourite colour growing up. She wanted to think she'd grown out of it, and being 'girly' and childlike. But she still very much liked the colour. Even if she didn't wear it quite as much these days.

Maybe she'd have to change that...

They walked hand-in-hand to the bus stop. Much later in the day than Lia had originally planned. In their explorations, they'd found a cosy spot with a nice view over the town. Had stayed there as the sun set; watched the twinkling, flowing river sparkle under a blue to purple to deep navy sky.

Lia had lost track of time. And that, she decided, was a good thing. More than 'good', really. It was nice. Relaxing. Freeing.

She huddled closer to Robin as they walked, though it wasn't particularly cold.

"It's nice here," Robin said. "We should come here more often."

"Definitely," Lia nodded.

It was a town near the college campus. A little out of the way, so not somewhere they'd come every day. Prior to today, Lia hadn't been here more than once or twice – and had never explored the place. Today, despite being totally off-schedule. Or perhaps because of it, had been exactly what Lia needed. What she hadn't even realised she needed until right then.

A break.

They walked in silence for a bit. The only noise, their footfalls and the rustling of their bags. A book or two, a new dual grill for their room, a few bits and bobs they'd picked up along the way. There'd been a few sights Lia had wanted to capture with her phone but, true to her word, she'd kept it in her pocket all the while.

She was pulled in two directions then. Her urge to check it, read and answer messages, was strong – or, more so, the anxiety of leaving those messages unanswered was what sought to compel her. But then, the desire to relax and spent stress-free time with Robin was even stronger.

"Here we are," Robin said, nodding ahead.

The bus stop they'd arrived at that morning, a few streets down from the museum that they hadn't gone to. It wasn't anything special, a bench with a bit of shelter and a signpost. And no-one was there; it'd just be Lia and Robin.

"Any idea when the next bus will be?"

"No," Lia shook her head. She could check her phone, which was her first instinct. But that'd mean no treat. "It shouldn't be long, though. They come every half-hour or so."

The pair sat down. Lia shimmied close to Robin.

"Today was nice," she said, leaning back against the bus shelter. "Thank you."

Robin blushed. "Yeah," she muttered quietly.

"We should come here again soon. Maybe visit the museum next time," Lia grinned. "I think there's a monument nearby too. Some old general or something, I'm not sure."

"Sure..." Robin shifted a little. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "You really wanted to go to the museum today, huh?"

"No!" Lia said quickly. "I mean, I want to go. But there's no rush or anything. I don't

regret not going today. If anything..." Her tongue felt heavy then, struggling to find the right words. "I'm glad it turned out this way. If... If we'd gone with my schedule, we'd have been rushing all over the place."

Not *exactly* true. There'd been plenty of time in the itinerary between events. Lia had made sure there'd be more than enough time to get from one place to another, with wide margins for errors and delays. But the rest of it... that was true.

She'd planned today to make it as great as possible. And yet, if they'd followed the plan, the day wouldn't have been anywhere near as perfect as it'd ended up being.

"Besides," Lia smiled. "If we'd done it my way, we'd have never made that deal and you wouldn't owe me a treat!"

"Oh yeah!" Robin chuckled. "I'd forgotten about that."

"Well I didn't!" Lia beamed. "I haven't touched my phone since earlier. Now you owe me a reward of my choosing!"

"I guess so," Robin tilted her head. "What do you want?"

Lia's mind threw up a whole bunch of dirty, inappropriate suggestions. Things that immediately brought a flush to her cheeks. But, though all though things were overly forward, she *had* kept to her end of the deal. She *was* owed something nice...

She gulped, straightened her back, steeled herself.

"How about," she began, throat feeling tight, "a kiss?"

Robin's eyes widened in shock. A moment later, her face was as red as Lia's. She bit her lip, stared into Lia's eyes, and slowly nodded her head.

Lia's heart thundered in her ears so loud, she barely heard the word that came out of Robin's mouth.

"Okay..."