

Morning Embrace

Chapter 6

Robin stared out of her bedroom window.

Or, really, she was staring *at* it. At the raindrops sliding down the glass, following invisible paths, smaller droplets merging and growing and falling faster.

Wind whistled as the rain fell, though the sound couldn't mask the sound of a baby's screeching.

The neighbours, whom Robin had never met, had a baby.

An obnoxiously loud, annoying baby.

Every screen was like nails on a chalkboard, scratching away at her sanity. And it was *constant*. Not every second of the day; no, Robin might've gotten used to *that*. It came and went at random, lasting minutes at a time before going silent and returning again minutes or hours later. An angry, sharp sound that made Robin want to cover her ears and scream and shout herself.

The wind whistled, the rain pattered against the window, and a baby screamed through the wall.

It's only for a few weeks.

End of the school year, a few weeks at home before she could go back to that cosy dorm room...

She could handle a few weeks of *this*.

Right?

The brat let out an extra-loud screech and Robin had to inhale a breath through gritted teeth, closing her eyes to block out the frustration and calm herself.

Just a few weeks, and she could leave this place.

'Home'. What a joke.

When she opened her eyes again, stared at the window, the raindrops, Robin felt something inside her contort. The tension of something close to snapping.

She'd been back here for all of three days, and she was already close to losing it.

How the fuck did she ever manage before?

Before she'd gone off to college, she'd lived here. Every day of her life, pretty much, had been spent here. In this house. This room. So why did it feel so terrible *now*?

"I hate it," she whispered, just to hear the words aloud.

It wasn't just the screaming brat, or the shitty weather. It was everything. The walls, how tight and suffocating they felt. It was the people; her family, so happy and eager to talk that first day, but who'd fallen back into casual indifference. It was *everything*.

The light in the bedroom – she couldn't think of it as *her* bedroom anymore – was broken. Had been way back when she'd headed off to college, and long before then. And yet, the fact that it didn't work needled at her now. A tiny, inconsequential thing. A slight inconvenience at worst, yet it was so *frustrating* whenever Robin had to remind herself that it was dead, to use the bedside lamp instead.

There were so many things – little things that didn't matter. All eroding away at her, grinding away her sanity.

It was like... the longer she spent in this room, the more she remembered what it felt like living here.

What it felt like being back in highschool, being bullied and ostracised. What it felt like not having friends. Sad and lonely and powerless to change anything.

Lia.

Her chest ached, thinking of Lia.

A pretty, bright smile. Musical, carefree laughter. The warmth of her touch, the gentleness of it.

Robin turned away from the window, stood up, began pacing in the cramped space.

Stepping lightly – she didn't want her parents to hear her stomping around and come to investigate. She didn't want to talk to them, see them, explain anything. She didn't want to see the judgement in their eyes.

She didn't want to be *here*.

A wave of emotions rose, clutching Robin's chest, making it difficult to breathe. She fought them down, body reacting on pure instinct as it started throwing on clothes.

She *couldn't* be here.

Not in this room. Not in this house. Not right now.

Thoughts swam around Robin's head, demanding attention. Just like the tightness in her chest, the suffocating feeling, she pushed them all down. Smothered them as she tossed on her jacket, slipped her shoes on, snatched up her phone, rushed out of her bedroom.

Her only thought as she left the house was a silent hope that no-one would see her go, ask her what she was doing or where she was going.

Thankfully, no questions came.

She reached the front door without encounter, opened it and slid out, closing the door quietly behind herself.

With any luck, no-one would notice she was gone.

No questions now. No questions later.

Robin stepped into the rain, the sharp air. Cool and crisp and plentiful. She inhaled a deep breath, basking in the sensations. Then she started walking.

No destination in mind. Just... anywhere but *here*.

She pulled up her jacket hood, zipped herself up, put her hands in her pockets, and walked.

Robin hated this place.

Maybe 'hate' wasn't the right word. She didn't *detest* it. But she didn't want to *be* here.

Walking familiar streets, carved into her mind from having walked them countless times before, she wished for nothing more so than to be back at college. On the campus, the dorms, even the little towns around the college that she and Lia had visited on occasion.

This place, her hometown, just reminded her of who she didn't want to be.

The streets were mostly empty, thanks to the rain. Those few people she did encounter were either rushing to wherever they were going with heads lowered like her, or they had umbrellas and a leisurely strut. Cars drove by, under streetlights that illuminated the rain in glowing cones.

Shops on either side of the street – mostly local fast food places and tech repair stores – shone like beacons under a grey, overcast sky.

There.

When she'd graduated from highschool, a bunch of the school cliques had gone to that Chinese restaurant, had an impromptu celebration there. Robin remembered walking past, seeing them all smiling and laughing through the windows, on her way home.

She hadn't been invited, of course. Not that she'd have gone if one of them *had* invited her.

And over there.

The phone repair shop that Robin had taken her waterlogged phone after Mindy had 'accidentally' dropped it in a toilet at school.

The guys working in the shop hadn't been able to save the phone. It'd been too damaged. Though they had offered to buy the ruined phone from her; an offer that she'd declined. She still had that phone, back in her parents' house – odd how she didn't think of it as *her* house – in a desk drawer, surrounded by a bunch of other useless junk.

Walking these streets was like wading through nostalgia. Only not a *good* kind of nostalgia. It was a feeling, more so than a wave of memories. A sensation of unpleasant recollection. Streets tainted by bad experiences where, even if she wasn't thinking about many of those experiences specifically, the weight of them all pressed at her all the same.

This was one of the common routes she'd taken home from school.

And, upon having that thought, Robin realised where her feet were taking her. Maybe some subconscious part of her was directing her towards the highschool, or perhaps her feet were so used to walking this way that they'd gone this way automatically. Either way, that was where she was heading.

Until she stopped herself, forced herself to head in a different, random direction.

No, Robin scolded herself. *The past doesn't define you.*

It could haunt and taunt her, but she would *not* let it trap her. Not now she'd experienced something *more*.

After a while, the rain let up. From heavy shower to light drizzle. She sat alone on a wet bench, phone in hand. Staring at her contacts, the one she wanted to message.

She held herself back.

What would Lia think if Robin was constantly messaging her?

That she was clingy. Desperate. That she was a loser with no-one else to talk to.

So many red flags.

Robin tapped on Lia's name, re-read the most recent messages for the thousandth time.

They were... awkward.

Stiff.

Simple greetings, small-talk, brief and stilted conversation. The most recent message was Lia telling Robin to 'sleep well'. Which had been sent last night.

Nothing today. Not a single word.

She's probably busy.

Unlike *Robin*, Lia actually had friends. A close-knit family. Plans. Things to fill her time with beyond chatting to Robin.

As much as Robin wanted to send a message, talk to Lia, she stopped herself. Resigned herself to rereading previous messages again. Gazing at Lia's profile picture; a pretty, smiling face.

No-doubt, Lia was smiling right then.

Probably surrounded by happiness and brightness and joy.

Robin lifted her eyes, took in her surroundings. The rain drizzle and darkening sky, the gloomy haze.

Oddly enough, that made her smile.

"What would you think if you could see me right now?"

Lia'd probably drag her to her feet, run with her to some proper shelter. Maybe a bakery full of sweet treats. Both of them drenched but laughing.

That thought, naturally, led Robin to thinking about Lia with soaked hair, damp skin sparkling, plump lips inviting.

Robin groaned, shook her head.

Only a few weeks.

Then she could be back with Lia in the dorms, sharing a room and a bed. Never cold and shivering. Not with Lia cuddling her under the sheets.

Until then, she'd survive.

Endure the tiny annoyances that added up to overwhelming discomfort. She'd keep going, wouldn't bother Lia with her petty troubles, counting the days until they were together again. So what if they weren't talking as much right now? Lia was busy and popular, full of life and energy – and had a bad habit of overfilling her time with activities

and plans. Robin could live with sitting on the sidelines for a few weeks. Just as long as Lia was happy.

She wouldn't intrude on her girlfriend's family time. Not if-

Robin's phone vibrated. A new message.

She had it open in the blink of an eye, reading Lia's simple greeting.

'Hi!' Was all the message said.

Robin smiled. Replied with her own little 'hello'.

There was a little pause after that. A minute or two later, Lia replied – asking how Robin was doing.

Robin let Lia know she was 'good'. Echoed the question back.

Why is this so awkward?!

Lia replied with the same; that everything was 'good' for her.

And then another pause.

Think of something interesting to say! Start a proper conversation.

Robin's brain, naturally, blanked.

She stared at her phone, unable to think of anything.

Her thumb twitched, part of her wanting to tell Lia how she was *actually* feeling. But Robin paused, pursed her lips, refused to go there. She would *not* drag Lia down with her issues. She would *not* be a *burden*.

When her brain finally came up with a conversation starter, Robin cringed. Couldn't come up with anything better and didn't want to leave the chat hanging for too long.

She started talking about the weather.

When she sent the message, complaining about the rain, Robin physically cringed.

But, on the bright side, that sparked more talking.

First about the rain, then about Lia's family, then about school stuff. Before she knew it, they were in a call, chatting animatedly. Robin grinning wide.

Usually, she loathed phone calls.

Especially ones in public.

But *this*?

It was nice. A warm blanket over her worries.

Hearing Lia's voice again, even if it'd only been days since they were last together, was everything.

Plans. They'd made *plans*.

In the moment, on the call, Robin hadn't considered all the angles. She hadn't had time to be a downer, let her anxiety whisper warnings and worries to her. They'd made plans, both eager, and all but set them in stone.

Lia had already checked train and bus schedules!

She was *visiting*.

Which both thrilled and terrified Robin.

More time with Lia? Amazing.

Introducing Lia to her parents? Horrifying.

What would they even *do*? There weren't many 'date' spots around that Robin knew about. Certainly, she'd never been to any of the local attractions, despite having lived in the area her whole life. There was a bowling alley, she was pretty sure. Maybe she could take Lia there? If it was still around...

And where would Lia *sleep*?!

Surely not in Robin's bed... Not with her parents around...

Heat spread across Robin's cheeks. So much so, that Robin half-expected the rain on her face to sizzle and evaporate away.

The quiet voice in her head told her to cancel things now, message Lia and call the visit off. Thing would be so much easier if she did. So much simpler. So much less scary.

But... Just because it was scary and new, that didn't make it bad.

No. She told the voice.

And, for once, it went quiet.

Smiling, blushing, Robin headed home to let her parents know she'd invited a guest over for a few days.