

Night's Embrace

Chapter 1 - August

Hell stormed into Robin's dorm room.

A flurry of activity and energy that instantly smothered her, made it difficult for her to breathe.

She unconsciously backed herself into a corner, mind at war with itself. Every natural instinct she had flared all at once. Not the 'fight or flight' of a *normal* person. No, she was *far* too much of a freak for that. *Her* instincts were 'run and hide' or 'curl into a ball and cry'. And both screamed at her, demanded she listen and comply.

The only thing keeping her on her feet was the suffocating anxiety, the deep well of dread that was always there beneath the surface, freezing her in place.

Her thoughts – the ones that weren't actively screeching at her to flee or crumple – were dulled. Slowed and stunted. Useless.

The father grinned, nodded a wordless greeting as he placed down a big cardboard box. The mother introduced herself, a welcoming smile curling her lips, said something that Robin's muddled brain barely registered as words.

An automatic smile stamped itself onto Robin's face. Words leaving her mouth, returning the greeting and introduction.

As soon as the panic-inducing 'niceties' were over, she turned her head to a random blank wall. Examining it as if it weren't completely empty. Looking anywhere but at the four intruders.

Looking at someone invited them to interact with her. Looking away – at anything *but* them – kept them from noticing her and talking to her.

The bathroom, her brain pleaded. *Hide in the bathroom*.

Her eyes flicked to the bathroom door, on the other side of the dorm room.

But no, she couldn't.

Or, she *could*, but it wouldn't help anything. Hiding in that tiny bathroom until everyone left... It wasn't an option.

Because one of the four *wouldn't* leave.

The mother and father and brother, *they'd* go.

But not the girl. She'd stay. Robin's new roommate. There was no escaping from *her*.

Besides, she'd have to walk *past* them all in order to get to the bathroom – drawing their attention to her. And what would they think of her then? Going to the bathroom, staying in there for so long...

Shame. Embarrassment. Humiliation.

Those friendly, happy smiles would morph into mocking smirks. Laughing at the weird girl who'd locked herself in the bathroom.

No, she told herself, forcing her eyes back to the blank wall. *You're being stupid. They won't laugh at you like that.*

If only the unbearable tightness in her chest would believe it.

All she could do was stand there. Pretending like the wall was infinitely more interesting than it was, like she was lost in important uninterruptable thoughts. Hoping and praying that the interlopers would sense the invisible do-not-disturb sign Robin imagined on her back.

Maybe I should get a jacket with that written on it.

The thought was followed instantly by a tsunami of 'hell no'. Something like that would draw *way* too much attention to her.

I'll stick to the sweaters.

Oversized, long-sleeved, turtleneck sweaters in drab dark greys. And baggy hoodies, the hood always raised – for whenever she dared brave the outside world. Safe

clothes. Uninteresting. Her own brand of social camouflage.

Eventually, she heard 'goodbyes'.

The parents and brother leaving, after several hugs and well-wishes and some light joking and laughter and smiling.

Until, at last, the door to the dorm room closed shut.

Leaving just two occupants.

Robin and... what had her mother called her?

The amnesic fog that always clouded Robin's brain when other people were too near – strangers especially – made it difficult for her to think, recall specifics.

The girl's father had used some overly sweet nickname. Pumpkin or cupcake or princess or the like. And her brother hadn't used her name... had he?

Robin wracked her brain, tried to force herself to remember.

Lucy? Elaina? Arianne?

Slowly, skittishly, Robin turned. Maybe looking at the girl would spark something... Help her remember...

Head lowered, she glanced over at her new roommate. Only to find the girl staring right back at her.

Their eyes met.

Robin froze. Her mind went blank.

"Hi," the girl smiled. "I'm Lia!"

Lianne. *That's* what her mother had called her.

For an agonising few moments, that was the only thought in Robin's head. The only thing she could think.

"Robin," she managed to croak out. "I'm... Robin."

The girl – Lia – was beautiful.

Bright blonde hair and even brighter blue eyes, pink lips split into a welcoming smile. Wearing a tight t-shirt and a pair of skinny jeans, a polar opposite to Robin's attire. More than that, it was the way Lia stood – confident and tall, practically glowing with bubbly excitement. Sunlight personified.

The type of girl who'd probably been cheer captain, class president, prom queen. The type of girl who everyone loved and fawned over.

The type of girl who'd made Robin's life hell.

"Nice to meet'cha," Lia beamed, slapping her hands to her hips and glancing around the small dorm room. "So... which bed is yours?"

Lia lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

Moonlight streamed in through half-opened curtains, illuminating the room enough for her to see rough outlines and shapes. A stack of boxes beside her bed, the empty desk by the window, the open doorway to their bathroom at the foot of Robin's bed. The shifting and slow turning shape on that bed.

Was her roommate having as much trouble getting to sleep as Lia was? Should she say something?

But no. Robin was murmuring. Mumbling incoherently.

She was asleep. Just dreaming.

Returning her attention to the ceiling, Lia let out a quiet sigh. Closed her eyes. Forced her brain to be quiet.

Which lasted for all of ten seconds.

Why am I so... so... awake?!

It was infuriating! Every time she'd tried staying up late into the night to study, it'd been a monumental task. Not even several mugs of coffee or cans of energy drinks had been able to conquer the sleepiness. Yet, whenever she actually *wanted* to sleep, that same fatigue was nowhere to be found.

Where had this this wakefulness been a few months ago, when she'd needed to study for her exams?!

Her eyes snapped open, staring up at a blank ceiling.

Well, if her body was this determined to be a giant butt, she might as well take advantage of it.

She rolled over on her bed, patted blindly for her phone.

As soon as she found it, she turned the screen on and opened a reading app. Continued where she'd left off on the long car ride here. A romance novel that was just reaching the boring part.

Love triangles. Bleh.

Just the thought of it – the melodrama and angst of choosing between the 'good guy' or the 'bad boy' – drained all her enthusiasm to read the rest of the book.

So she didn't. Picked something else to read instead.

Unfortunately, she didn't get to read for long.

While her mind was fully awake and alert, her eyes hadn't gotten the same 'screw with Lia's body clock' memo. They ached and complained as she gazed at the screen, as tired as the rest of her body *should* have been.

Within minutes, she had to put her phone down.

Across the small room, Robin started to writhe.

Rolling under her blanket, limbs thrashing about, incoherent whines and cries spilling from her lips.

Lia looked over at her, lips pursed.

A nightmare?

Should she wake her?

"No," the sleeping girl pleaded, the word slurred. "Please."

The terror and anguish in Robin's voice stunned Lia.

Robin thrashed harder, shaking and trembling so much that the bedsprings creaked and groaned along with her. She whimpered, jerked, fought against her blanket until it was rolled up around her waist.

In the darkness, Lia couldn't make out much. The vague outline of Robin's bulky pyjamas, a wild halo of shoulder-length hair. The hint of sweat-drenched skin under moonlight.

She wanted to speak, but found her throat tight, her lips clamped shut.

"Sorry," Robin sobbed, her body going still.

The sound of heavy panting filled the room.

"I'm not..." The girl breathed, voice choked, "I don't..."

Then Robin curled into a ball, whispered a final apology to her demons, and... quiet.

Utter stillness and silence. Save for Robin's laboured breathing. And the sound of Lia's own pounding heart in her ears.

When she stepped out of the shower, Robin shuddered.

Memories of last night's dreams flashed in her mind, jolting her and setting her heart racing.

Mindy. Pretty, cruel Mindy. And all her cronies.

She forced herself to reach for the towel, start drying her body. The sooner she was dry, the sooner she could get dressed. And the sooner she was dressed, the sooner she'd be able to sneak out of the dorm room and go find somewhere quiet to study.

If she was busy studying, she wouldn't have to think about... remember...

One task, then the next. No time to slow down or think.

Hopefully, her roommate – Lia – would still be deep asleep, and Robin would be free to sneak away without notice.

What if she isn't? What if I woke her up?

A dozen scenarios played out in her mind; none of them good. The girl showing her true colours – shouting at Robin for waking her so early, slapping her, mocking her, humiliating her. Everything Mindy would've done.

Just because she's pretty, doesn't mean...

She scrubbed her head with the towel until her hair was dry enough, then threw on the four layers of clothing she'd brought into the bathroom. Bra, long-sleeve undershirt, oversized sweater, baggy hoodie. A little overkill, perhaps. But the thought of wearing less, of showing more... No. This would do just fine.

Brushing the mist from the cramped bathroom's mirror, Robin looked at her reflection.

Dark hair, shoulder length – she was still getting used to that. Dark eyes with darker bags. No make-up.

The longer she stared at her reflection, the less she liked the thing looking back at her.

She threw up her hood, pulled it as low as it'd go. Turned away from her reflection and, shoulders hunched, opened the bathroom door – fully intending to sneak out of the dorm room, hoping her pretty dormmate was still asleep and (preferably) facing away from the bathroom.

What she *hadn't* been prepared for was to see Lia standing there topless, leaning over her suitcase. *Braless*. Pale, perky, round breasts with pretty, pink nipples poking out eagerly.

Robin gaped.

She stared at those cute, enticing breasts like an idiot. Too stunned and surprised to look away. Too slow to hide the sudden, hot flush in her cheeks.

Worse, when Lia straightened her back, perky breasts bouncing as she did, Robin's eyes followed the motion. Glued to the sight. Snared.

By the time she recovered the sense to *stop* staring, Robin's face was cherry red.

She let out an embarrassingly high-pitched *yeep*, slammed the bathroom door shut, dropped to her knees. As she hugged her knees, her body began to rock, heart thundering in her chest, face burning with shame and guilt.

Why? Why did her roommate have to be so pretty?

I'm so fucked.

"I'm starving," Lia said, tapping the bathroom door lightly. "You don't happen to know where the campus cafeteria is, do you?"

She also needed to pee. But that felt a lil' rude and insensitive to mention to the girl who'd locked herself in their bathroom.

"If not," Lia added enthusiastically, "we can look for it together. Beats getting lost exploring alone."

"I..." A soft whisper sounded on the other side of the door. "I know where it is..."

"Perfect!" Lia smiled wide.

Why Robin had locked herself in the bathroom, Lia couldn't figure out. Embarrassment at walking in on Lia changing? Perhaps. But it seemed like an extreme reaction. Had Robin never seen another girl naked before? It was possible, Lia supposed. Some people had sheltered upbringings. And who was Lia to judge?

When she heard movement behind the door, Lia took a step back.

And, as the door opened, she flashed her best 'everything's okay' smile. Hopefully, it'd be enough to ease Robin out of her shyness – let her know Lia didn't mind that she'd had seen her topless.

Robin met Lia's eyes for a fraction of a second before blushing and looking away. It was kind of adorable, actually.

Lia's smile widened.

"I don't know about you," she said, hoping to break the ice, ease the tension, help her new friend relax, "but I'd kill for some coffee right about now. Mom 'n' Dad packed everything from spare bedsheets to pepper spray, but neither of them thought I might need a kettle. We'll have to add it to the to-do list! Right after we make a to-do list!"

Robin gave a slight nod of her head.

"Mm'hm," she murmured, not looking up at Lia.

Lia wasn't deterred. She clapped her hands eagerly, noting the way Lia flinched at the sound.

No. It wasn't just shyness or embarrassment, was it?

"Why don't you look up kettles and coffee machines online while I get ready?" Lia said with a smile, slipping past Robin and stepping into the bathroom. "Then we explore!"