

Night's Embrace

Chapter 2 - December

Lia swept the brush through Robin's silky, auburn hair. Gentle and slow, careful not to snag any knots. Not that there were many of those now. This little ritual they'd fallen into had done wonders for them both.

They were sitting on Robin's bed, Lia behind Robin. Some of Lia's upbeat pop music playing quietly in the background. Lia brushing Robin's wet hair. Robin hunched awkwardly, wrapped in a bulky, fluffy bathrobe. The sky outside slowly brightening from a deep, dark navy.

As soon as she was done brushing Robin's hair, Lia would take a shower herself. Then the roles would reverse.

Lia smiled, hummed along to her music as she lost herself in her task. Memories of that first time she'd done this playing in the back of her mind.

The first time she'd offered, poor Robin had looked like a deer in the headlights. Eyes wide, body frozen, not knowing how to respond. Lia had taken the initiative then, guiding her roomie to sit down – ignoring the girl's shy complaints – and committing herself to the duty.

"You have such nice hair," she told Robin as she brushed. "I'm jealous. It's so pretty!"

"Th-thanks," Robin murmured. And, though Lia couldn't see the girl's face, she could picture the blushing, rosy cheeks with ease.

Which made Lia smile.

Robin's blush was too adorable. Every time she saw it, Lia wanted to squeal with delight and hug the girl.

"You should grow it out," Lia said.

"I will," Robin whispered, curling in on herself.

What she always did when something was bothering her.

Lia pursed her lips, debated what to say. She didn't want to pry, but... But she wanted to help.

Every compliment she gave Robin was earnest and true, and every one made Robin blush. And yet... It was like there was a wall. A barrier of some kind. A weight on Robin that kept her down, kept her from really *accepting* those compliments. Like she was afraid of letting Lia too close.

"You used to keep your hair short?" Lia guessed.

Robin tensed, curled in on herself even more, nodded her head.

"How come?" Lia asked.

Robin was silent for a short while, shoulders hunched.

Lia was just about to change the subject, scolding herself for prying, when Robin spoke. Her voice barely a whisper.

"They made me."

They? "Your parents?"

Robin shook her head.

Lia wanted to ask. Wanted to know.

The more she knew, after all, the more she'd be able to help. If she just knew what was bothering Robin, what she'd been through, maybe she'd be able to take some of that pain away.

But she didn't.

Robin will tell me, she said to herself. *When she's ready.*

Instead, she set the hairbrush down – its work done – and leaned forward, wrapped her arms around Robin's tight shoulders. Gave her a comforting hug that, of course, Robin stiffened to. Her body going rigid under the unexpected embrace.

Lia held the hug for a few seconds, not speaking or moving. Hoping the hug would say everything she wanted to.

Then she withdrew, climbed off the bed.

"Time for my shower," she said, not looking at Robin.

Why was her heart beating so fast all of a sudden?

Robin dreamed of school corridors.

Some part of her knew it was a dream. She hadn't been inside this school in months. Besides, the layout was all wrong. The corridors were a maze that made no logical sense, doors and turns were in all the wrong places. And yet, despite the fact that a tiny part of her was aware none of this was real, the panic and dread she felt were very real.

She sprinted. Ran away from the memories chasing her.

Every door she passed, she recognised. That one, it was the door to a classroom that she'd hated – one she shared with Mindy and her cronies, where they'd tormented her endlessly while the teacher had turned a blind eye. And there – wide double doors to the school cafeteria – where, after her underwear had been stolen earlier that day, she'd been splashed with a bucket of water. Exposed for the whole school to see.

She ran past door after door, memory after memory.

There, the door to Mindy's bedroom. Another, a changing room curtain. The door of a school bus.

When she saw a bathroom door, Robin sprinted for it. Burst inside and slammed the door shut behind herself.

She backed away from that door, panting heavily. Heart thundering.

This bathroom. It was where she used to hide.

The only place at school she'd felt safe.

Until...

Hands grabbed her from behind, iron grips on her shoulder and wrists and arms. Dragging her backwards.

Laughter rang in Robin's ears.

"No!" She screeched, struggled. "Get off me!"

A pretty girl appeared in front of her.

Smiling – though not the kind, innocent smile she showed everyone else. A beautiful face warped by malice and glee.

"Mindy," Robin pleaded, fighting uselessly against the hands holding her. "Please! I'm sorry! I-"

"Silly," Mindy said, eyes twinkling, "don't you know dykes have short hair? It's how you tell if a girl's a carpet muncher."

"Don't!" Robin begged. "Please! I'll do-"

A hand covered her mouth, clamped it shut.

Mindy raised the object in her hand, turned it on. The shaver hummed to life, inches away from Robin's scalp.

"Hold her still," Mindy said with a grin.

A moment later, the world went black. But not before Robin heard the terrible sound of the shaver shearing hair. Felt the weight of it pressed to her head. Her hair dropping down over her face.

She woke in a sweat, her pyjamas clinging to her skin.

Breathing heavily, skin prickled, her heart pounding in her ears. Deafening her. The sound of the shaver echoing in her mind.

Robin shuddered, curled into a ball. Held herself.

It was several long moments of silent sobbing before she heard Lia's soft voice. Humming and cooing, singing a lullaby.

Robin tensed. But she was so tired, so exhausted, that tension faded quickly. Left her drained, laying on a wet pillow, staring at nothing. She inhaled a shallow breath, closed her eyes, listened to Lia's soft voice.

Unable to do anything else, Robin sighed. Felt herself drifting back to sleep.

Lia reread the texts. 'Merry Christmas' messages from family and friends. Everyone who'd been expecting to see her over the holidays, and who'd been disappointed when she'd let them know she'd be staying at college instead.

A lot of them had been surprised. Lia'd been surprised herself.

But the thought of leaving Robin here alone, tormented by her nightly terrors with no-one there for her... It'd decided things. Lia would survive not seeing her family for a few months more. If anything, this was an opportunity for independence. A chance to relax. Rest. Maybe – hopefully – a chance to get closer to Robin, too. Break through some of those walls she'd built around herself.

Speaking of which...

Lia looked over at Robin's bed. At the bulge under the blankets. Robin. Not quite asleep yet, but getting there.

When she began shifting and turning, *that's* when Lia would know her roomie was sleeping. And that's when she'd start humming and singing.

It seemed to help, if only a little.

Robin would go to sleep, start having her nightmares, and Lia would try to soothe her. Sometimes, Robin would wake up from the nightmares, would go back to sleep – usually dreamlessly. And, other times, Robin wouldn't wake. Lia would hum and comfort until Robin's terrors came to an end and the girl stilled. Then, and only then, would Lia allow herself to sleep.

It meant less sleep for her, and a noticeably higher caffeine intake during the day. But, on the flip side, it gave her plenty of time to read.

She opened her phone's reading app, continued the romance novel she'd picked up a few days ago.

Probably, this one would be another 'did not finish' for her.

Another love triangle. What was it with love triangles? And why did the love interests always have to be either colossally boring or straight up toxic and unhealthy? Seriously, so many of these heroines she read about would've been better off with someone else.

She read the story, rolling her eyes here and there, until Robin began to writhe and thrash.

Lia set her phone down without a second thought. Began talking to her sleeping friend. Complaining about the book she'd been reading, then mentioning some stories she *did* like. And, when the talking didn't seem to work, she tried her usual lullabies and songs.

Only those didn't help either.

"Feels like I'm just repeating everything," she confessed with a sigh. "You can't even hear me, can you? None of this is really helping. I don't know what to do."

She knew what she *wanted* to do.

Go over there and hug Robin. Hold her tight. But what were the odds of that helping either?

If only she could crawl into Robin's mind with a baseball bat and beat those nightmares into submission. But alas, all she could do was lay there and watch. Listen as Robin struggled against her demons every night. Powerless.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I don't know how to help you."

And there it was again. The impulse to cross the room, climb onto Robin's bed, hug her tight.

It won't do any good.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Doing nothing won't help either.

Before she could overthink it, stop herself, Lia pushed herself out of bed. Her heart thrummed as she crept across the room, pulled Robin's blanket up.

The girl's thrashing slowed, her eyes flicking open. Half-way between sleep and wakefulness.

"It's okay," Lia cooed. "It's me."

Robin mumbled something incoherent, her eyes flicking shut.

Lia climbed onto the bed, wrapped her arms around Robin.

This time, her roomie's shifting stopped completely.

"Huh?" Robin murmured sleepily. "What's..."

"It's okay," Lia whispered, arms wrapping around Robin. "I'm here. Everything's okay. It's just me."

"Lia?"

"Mm'hm," Lia hummed, cheeks hot. "It's alright. You can go back to sleep..."

Again, Robin mumbled something Lia couldn't make out.

In a few moments, Robin was asleep.

Lia smiled, closed her eyes, ignored her racing heart.

She stayed awake a while longer. Waiting to see if Robin began to stir again.

Only when she was certain Robin was fast asleep, that no more nightmares would be terrorising her for the rest of the night, did Lia allow herself to drift off. Arms still snug around her roomie, warmth shared between them.

Robin stirred awake, feeling better than she had in a very long time. Gentle light trickled in through an open curtain. Somewhere nearby, some Christmas music was playing. A blissful warmth tickled her chest. It was a perfect, wonderful morning to wake up to.

Until she opened her eyes and saw Lia's face an inch away from hers.

Panic – a whole mess of conflicting feelings – slapped Robin in the face. Stunned her senseless, blasted every thought clear out of her head.

What was Lia doing in her bed?!

Vaguely, she remembered the moment last night.

But, that'd been a dream, hadn't it? Hadn't it?!

Apparently not.

Oh crap.

Lia was pretty, even in her sleep. *Especially* in her sleep.

An expression of utter peace and tranquillity on her face, plump lips parted as she inhaled slow breaths, tickling Robin's chin with each exhale. A few blonde hairs fell across Lia's face, fluttering a little with Robin's breaths.

She inhaled, tried to hold it.

Not exactly sure why she was doing it. Terrified of waking her roommate, perhaps. Or afraid of just how cute those few fluttering hairs were. How much it made Robin's chest ache to watch again.

She could only hold her breath for so long, however.

Eventually, she had to gasp and breath in again.

And, when she did, Lia stirred.

Beautiful blue eyes fluttered open, gazing right into Robin's soul – freezing her in place. A small smile pulling at pretty lips, glistening in the early light.

"Good morning," Lia said, voice dreamy.

That smile. So gentle and kind and beautiful.

Robin's body unfroze, acted before she could stop it. Doing what Robin wanted but knew she could never do.

She tilted her head forward and kissed those pretty lips.

It was a tiny thing. A single, simple peck.

But unmistakable.

As she leaned back, horrified at herself, she saw the surprise and confusion on Lia's face. Another girl's laughter echoed inside her skull.

Cold dread wrapped around Robin's heart.

"I'm sorry!" She said quickly. "I didn't meant to- I was-"

But there was nothing she could say. No fixing this.

It'd all start again. The mockery. The humiliation. The torment from a girl she should've never opened herself to.

A thousand horrors flashed in Robin's mind. Everything Mindy had done to her and more. Only, instead of Mindy, it was Lia. Kind, pretty, perfect Lia. Cackling as Robin suffered and sobbed and begged and-

Lia leaned in, kissed her back.