

1 Week Later

Liam in his bedroom. The pressure from Chloe had been relentless—every day, the same question: Did you find a job yet? His excuses were wearing thin, and he knew it.

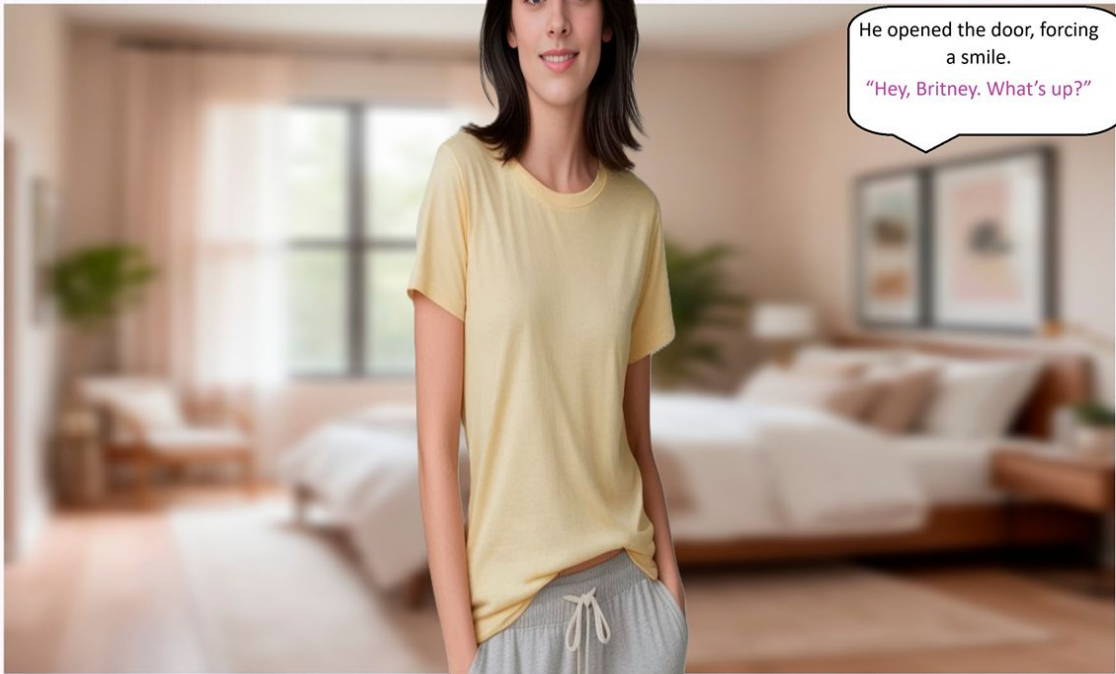


A sudden knock on the door jolted him upright.
His heart raced. *Chloe?*
His breath catching when he saw Britney standing there, her signature smirk already in place.

Great. Just what I need.

Liam darted to his room, fumbling for the breast inserts he'd stashed in his drawer. He adjusted them hastily, tugging at the straps of his bra to make sure they sat right.

Why does she always show up unannounced?




He opened the door, forcing
a smile.
"Hey, Britney. What's up?"

Britney breezed past him, holding a small box. "I brought some treats from work. Thought you could use a pick-me-up."



Liam eyed the box warily as she set it on the table. "Uh, thanks. That's... really nice of you."



"Go on, try one.
They're fresh."

Liam hesitated, then picked up a flaky
croissant. He took a bite, the buttery
sweetness melting on his tongue. For the
first time while talking to Britney, he felt a
flicker of relief.

Britney watched him, her
smirk softening into a genuine
smile.
"You looked flustered when I
came in. Everything okay?"



She nodded, leaning against the table.
"I get it. Finding a job isn't easy. Trust me, I've been there."

Liam shrugged, avoiding her gaze.
"Just... a lot on my mind."

He glanced at her, surprised by the empathy in her voice.
"Yeah, it's... tough."



Britney's eyes sparkled as she leaned closer.
"Hey, why don't you come to my café for a few days? Free food, my treat."


She chuckled,
"Sweetie, I wouldn't offer if I didn't mean it. And if you like the place, maybe you can work there. Decent salary, too."

Liam's eyes widened.
"Free food? Really?"



Liam hesitated, his mind racing.
A job? As Lila?
The idea made his skin crawl, but
the thought of free meals was
undeniably tempting.

"How much?"
he asked, trying to
sound casual.



"Let's not talk about money yet.
Just come, eat, and see how you feel."

Liam swallowed, the pastry suddenly feeling heavy in his stomach.
"I'll... think about it."



Britney's smile widened.
"Good. Let me know soon, okay?
I'd love to have you around."

As she left,
Free food. A job.
But as Lila...

A few minutes later...

Chloe walked in, dropping her bag on the chair with a sigh.



"So? Any progress?" she asked, her tone sharp with expectation.



Chloe's eyes lit up.
"Wait, seriously?"

"Yeah, actually. I got a job offer."

He smirked, though it didn't reach his eyes.
"No, just joking. Britney offered me free food at her café. But you know that if I work there, I have to go as Lila."



Her expression shifted.
"And? What's stopping
you?"

Chloe's gaze hardening.
"Liam, you've been living
as Lila for weeks. What's
the difference?"


Liam blinked, caught
off guard.
"You're not serious."



Her voice rose, sharp and impatient.
"And what's your plan then? Keep sitting here, waiting for a miracle?"

"The difference is, I don't want to do this anymore!"

Liam looked away, his jaw tightening.
"I don't know, okay? I just... I can't keep pretending to be someone I'm not."



Chloe sighed, her voice gentler now.
“Liam, the sooner you start earning,
the sooner we can get out of here. I
need you by my side—not just
emotionally, but financially too. You
know that I have a business plan, but
I can’t do it alone. I need your
support.”

Liam stared at her, the weight of her
words settling over him.

*Moving out? A fresh start? The idea
was tempting...*



She stepped closer, her voice gentle but firm.
"It's just temporary, Liam. Once we're on our feet, you can stop. But right now, we need this."

"I don't know, Chloe," he said quietly.
"This feels... wrong."



He swallowed hard, the conflict raging inside him. *Temporary. Just temporary.*
Chloe's words echoed in his mind, a relentless mantra. *If you start earning, we can move out.*
The thought of escaping this suffocating situation was almost too good. But the cost... stepping further into this role... it gnawed at him.



"So?"
she asked, breaking the
silence.

Chloe leaned forward,
her eyes searching his.
"And after that?"

Liam hesitated, his fingers
tightening around the mug.
"One week. I'll try it for one
week."



A small smile played on her lips.
"Good."

He swallowed hard, the words sticking in his throat (forcing a smile).
"We'll see."

Liam exhaled, feeling like he'd just agreed to something he could never take back.



As he stood to leave the room, Chloe's voice stopped him.
"Liam, "Thank you," she said softly. "This means a lot."

He nodded, though the weight of her gratitude only made the knot in his stomach tighten.

