

# *love's sake*

MARYAM



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*For the hearts that loved beyond reason,*

*For the one who stays*

*Even when it's ruined them*

*This is for you*

# PROLOGUE

Liam

I wasn't the kind of guy who believed in love. Not anymore. Not after learning the hard way that love wasn't always enough. That sometimes, no matter how much you gave, no matter how much you tried, it still wasn't enough to make someone stay. I had loved once. Or at least, I thought I did. And it had wrecked me. Turned me into the kind of guy who kept his walls high, who didn't let people in, who didn't waste time on things that would only end in disappointment. I told myself I was better off that way. That being alone was easier. That love was for fools who hadn't learned their lesson yet. And for a long time, that worked. I went through life not getting attached, not letting people see past the surface, keeping everything locked down so tight that nothing and no one could touch me.

I had rules—simple ones.

Don't get involved. Don't care too much. Don't let anyone close enough to hurt you.

And I followed them.

Until her.

Until Emily.

But the thing is—she didn't suddenly walk into my life and flip everything upside down like some stupid romantic cliché. No. She was always there. Always close enough to notice but never close enough to matter. And maybe that was my mistake. Maybe I was the one who had been too blind, too stubborn, too caught up in my own damn head to see her. Because when I finally did—when I really saw her—I couldn't unsee her. I noticed the way she walked through life like she had nothing to lose, the way she spoke with a sharp tongue and an even sharper mind, the way she carried something heavy behind her eyes but refused to let

it slow her down. I noticed the way she felt everything, even when she pretended she didn't. The way she threw herself into the world like it couldn't touch her, even though I knew it already had.

Emily was chaos wrapped in skin. A hurricane disguised as a girl. And I—

I had spent so long running from things that could destroy me. But when it came to her, I didn't run. I couldn't. Even when I wanted to. Even when I should have.

Because by the time I realized what was happening—

It was already too late.





# CHAPTER 1

Liam

The alarm blares at 6:00 AM, a sound so violent it could wake the dead. Unfortunately, I'm very much alive and painfully aware of it. My hand shoots out, smacking the snooze button with more aggression than necessary. Silence returns, but it does nothing to ease the weight in my chest. I stare at the ceiling, willing my body to move. It doesn't. The bed is warm, the world outside is cold, and I'm not particularly excited about another day of existing. But time doesn't wait for people like me, so with a deep sigh, I force myself up. The floor is freezing. Fantastic. Just another reminder that life enjoys making things difficult. The shower is scalding, but it does its job, shocking me awake. Water drips down my face, and for a second, I close my eyes, wishing I could stay here forever. Maybe if I stand here long enough, I'll dissolve into nothing. But my luck isn't that good.

By 7:30 AM, I'm dressed, caffeinated, and out the door. The city is already buzzing—people moving with purpose, like they actually know what they're doing with their lives. Must be nice. I blend into the background, just another suit in a sea of ambition. The office is its usual mess of ringing phones, printers screaming for attention, and the faint smell of burnt coffee. Jason, my coworker and self-appointed life coach, leans against my desk with his usual knowing smirk.

"Let me guess, skipped breakfast again?" he asks.

"No, I had a well-balanced meal of coffee and regret," I say, flipping through emails.

Jason sighs like an exhausted parent. "Dude, you need to get out more."

"I go out every day. That's how jobs work."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

I do. But I pretend I don't. Lunch rolls around, and despite Jason's desperate attempts to drag me somewhere "fun," I find myself at the same café I always end up at. The barista doesn't even ask for my order anymore—just slides me a black coffee with a look that says, "Please get a hobby."

Eventually, I end up at the same café I always go. I tell myself it's out of habit, but deep down, I know better. The scent of roasted coffee beans fills the air, mingling with the soft murmur of conversation. I take my usual seat by the window, order the same black coffee, and watch as the world outside moves on without me.

And then, she appears.

Emily.

Emily walks in like she owns the place, which, knowing her, she probably thinks she does. She's wearing a navy-blue blazer over a white top, paired with those high-waisted pants that scream, I have my life together, and you don't. Her dark brown hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail, not a strand out of place, because of course it isn't. She probably has a whole morning routine that involves yoga, journaling, and whatever rich-people nonsense she does before work. Her eyes scan the café, sharp and calculating, and the moment she spots me, I swear I see a flicker of amusement before it disappears behind her usual mask of mild disdain.

"Oh, fantastic," she says, striding over. "I was hoping my morning would include a run-in with my favorite person."

I take a sip of my coffee, unbothered. "Wow, Emily. Didn't know you were capable of compliments."



She drops into the chair across from me, setting down her overpriced oat milk latte. “It wasn’t a compliment. You just happen to be my favorite person to argue with.”

“Ah, so the highlight of your day is annoying me. Good to know.”

She smirks. “I take my victories where I can get them.”

We’ve been like this since college—friends, rivals, whatever this is. Back then, it was competing over grades, internships, who could get away with skipping the most morning lectures without failing. Now, it’s jabs over work, life choices, and the fact that she still somehow manages to look effortlessly put together while I look like I lost a battle with my alarm clock.

“You’re in my café,” I say, pretending to inspect my coffee like it’s suddenly more interesting than this conversation. “Why?”

Emily leans back, crossing her arms. “Your café? Wow, look at you. One overpriced coffee a day and you think you own the place.”

I set my cup down with an exaggerated sigh. “You’re avoiding the question.”

She tilts her head, eyes narrowing just slightly. “And you’re avoiding life. So I guess we’re both predictable.”

I hate how well she knows me. I hate how she can just waltz in here after weeks of silence and immediately see through me like I’m some open book she’s already read cover to cover.

“Seriously though,” she continues, waving the barista over and ordering a caramel latte (because of course she drinks something obnoxiously sweet). “How have you been? And don’t give me that ‘living the dream’ sarcasm you use on everyone else.”

I rub my temple, half tempted to make something up, but I know she’ll see through it. She always does.

“I’ve been...” I pause, searching for the right word. “Functional.”

Emily hums, stirring her latte when it arrives. “That’s just a fancy way of saying miserable.”

“And yet, still better than your presence in my life.”

She gasps dramatically, clutching her chest. “Wow. Is this how you greet an old friend? I come here, out of the goodness of my heart, to check on you, and this is the thanks I get?”

“You came here to bother me.”

“Same thing.” She grins, sipping her drink.

For a second, just a second, I let myself enjoy this. The banter, the familiarity, the way she can break through the monotony of my day with nothing but a sarcastic comment and an eye roll. It’s infuriating. But maybe, just maybe, it’s also a little nice.

“You could at least pretend you’re happy to see me,” she says, watching me over the rim of her cup.

I shake my head. “You’d see through it.”

Her grin softens just a little. “Yeah. I would.”

And just like that, I know she’s not just here to annoy me. She’s here because she knows. Because she always knows.

Emily sets her cup down and leans forward, her expression shifting into something more serious. “Listen, I know you. You’re doing that thing where you shut the world out because it’s easier than dealing with whatever’s eating at you.”

I open my mouth to argue, but she holds up a hand. “Don’t. Just hear me out.”

I exhale, resting my elbows on the table. “Fine. Talk.”

She watches me carefully before speaking. “You can’t keep living like this. Just because you lost something—or someone—doesn’t mean you have to carry it with you forever. It’s okay to move on, to live your life. You don’t owe your grief eternal space in your heart.”

I look down at my coffee, tracing the rim of the cup with my finger. "Easier said than done."

"I know." Her voice is softer now, the sharp edges dulled. "But you're letting it define you. And that's not who you are."

I let her words sink in, swirling around in the quiet space between us. Maybe she's right. Maybe I have been holding onto things for too long.

Emily leans back, giving me a small smile. "At least think about it, okay?"

I meet her gaze, and for the first time in a long while, I nod. "Okay."

She's not wrong. Emily has always been... efficient. She was the girl in college who managed to ace every exam without looking like she tried, while I was the guy who pulled all-nighters and still barely scraped by. Naturally, I hated her. She was insufferable, always correcting my answers in class, always proving me wrong, always there.

Our first real interaction outside of our usual academic warfare happened over coffee. More specifically, the coffee I accidentally made her spill. It had been an innocent mistake. I was exiting the café; she was entering. I pushed the door open, and the next thing I knew, she was standing there, coffee-stained and furious. And just like that, a horrible, grudging friendship was born. We argued all the time. About books, movies, whether or not pineapple belonged on pizza (it doesn't, and she's still wrong). But somewhere along the way, the fighting had stopped being serious. I don't know when exactly it happened, but I woke up one day and realized that Emily wasn't just my academic rival or my favorite person to bicker with. She was someone I need. And now here we are, years later, sitting across from each other in the same café where our ridiculous rivalry started.

Hours later, I step into my apartment, the silence pressing in immediately. The warmth of the café, of Emily's presence, is gone. The weight creeps back in, settling into the empty spaces she filled.

I toss my keys onto the counter, the sound too loud in the stillness. My jacket lands on the couch.

The apartment is the same as it was this morning, but it feels different now. Or maybe I do. I glance at the coffee table. The old notebook sits there, half-buried beneath unopened mail. I pick it up without thinking, flipping through worn pages. My handwriting stares back at me, some words scratched out in frustration.

"March 14. She laughed today. Not at a joke, just... out of nowhere, like the world wasn't weighing her down. I wish I could keep that sound. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so—"

The rest is crossed out. I remember what it said. I don't need to read it. I lean back against the couch, rubbing a hand over my face. I don't know why I even picked it up. It's not like anything in that notebook will change. The past is still the past, and I'm still stuck in it. Just Then, I heard knock at the door. I frown. It's late. Too late for anyone to be dropping by. Pushing off the couch, I pad to the door, peering through the peephole.

Emily.

A sigh escapes me before I even open the door. She leans against the frame, arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

"You didn't text back," she says, stepping inside before I can invite her in. She does that. Always has.

"Didn't feel like talking."

"Shock. You never do."

"Tempting idea."

She rolls her eyes. "Jason's worried about you."

"Jason needs a hobby."

"And you need a life. But here we are."

I move past her to the kitchen, grabbing a glass and filling it with water. I slide it across the counter toward her.

She doesn't touch it. Instead, she lifts a paper bag and waves it in front of my face. "You didn't eat, did you?"

I blink at her. "What, you psychic now?"

"No, you're just pathetically predictable."

I sigh, rubbing my temples. "You really came all this way just to insult me?"

"No, I also came to ruin your solitude and make sure you don't starve to death. Multitasking."

Despite myself, I huff a small laugh. She grins, and heads straight for the kitchen, pulling out takeout containers like she lives here.

"You just happened to have food with you?" I ask, crossing my arms.

Emily smirks. "I may have planned ahead. You're a lost cause, but even lost causes need sustenance."

We eat in comfortable silence, save for the occasional clink of forks against plastic. She's the one who breaks it first.

"Are you still writing?"

I freeze for a second before setting my fork down. "Not really."

Emily tilts her head, watching me carefully. "Why not?"

I shrug. "No point."

"There was a point before."

"Things were different before."

She exhales through her nose, shaking her head. "You know, you act like life ended back then. Like nothing else is worth trying for."

I knew where this was going, "Emily, drop it."

"No," she says, leaning forward. "You need to hear this. You keep carrying the past like it's the only thing that defines you. But it's not. It shouldn't be."

"You don't get it." My voice is sharper than I intend, but I don't stop. "You don't know what it's like to lose something and feel like you'll never get it back."

She stiffens. The air shifts. "You think I don't know loss?"

I look at her then, really look at her, and something in her expression makes my stomach twist. But the words are already out, cutting deep before I can stop them.

"Not like I do."

Her jaw tightens, and she lets out a quiet laugh—one that holds no humor. "Wow. You really think you're the only person who's ever been hurt, huh? The only one allowed to grieve?" She shakes her head, pushing her chair back. "You know what, Liam? I thought maybe you just needed time. That eventually, you'd stop acting like the world exists just to make you miserable. But clearly, I was wrong."

She stands, grabbing her bag. "You keep saying nothing changes, but that's because you don't let it. You don't even try."

She pauses with her hand on the knob, turning slightly. There's something almost hesitant in her expression, something like—

No. I must be imagining it.

"Just because you lost something doesn't mean you have to keep carrying it forever. At some point, you either let it go, or it drags you down with it."

With that saying, she's gone.

The apartment feels emptier than ever.

~

I don't sleep well that night. Shocking. Truly. It's not that I don't spend most nights tossing and turning anyway, staring at the ceiling, overthinking my entire existence. But tonight? Tonight feels worse.

The apartment is too quiet after she leaves, like the silence itself has taken offense at me and decided to suffocate me as punishment. I try to write, but the words won't come. I try to read, but my eyes keep drifting to the empty spot on the couch where she was sitting just hours ago. Emily.

I exhale sharply, rubbing a hand over my face before shutting my notebook with a little too much force.

This is ridiculous. I should just go to bed. I should sleep and wake up and go about my life like a normal person who doesn't overanalyze every conversation they've ever had. So, I do exactly that. And proceed to lie awake for the next five hours. Every time I close my eyes, I hear her voice.

"You keep saying nothing changes, but that's because you don't let it. You don't even try."

What the hell is that even supposed to mean? Damn it.

---

Morning comes far too quickly, and I roll out of bed. To make things even better, it starts raining right before I step out of the building. Heavy, loud, miserable rain, because of course it does. I pause under the awning, staring at the downpour like it personally betrayed me. I didn't bring an umbrella. Because I'm an idiot who doesn't check the weather. I sigh, yank my hood up, and step into the cold, trying not to look as miserable as I feel. Spoiler: I fail. By the time I get to the train station, my shoes are soaked, my fingers are frozen, and my mood is six feet under.

"Rough night?"

I glance over to see Mason grinning at me, looking way too awake for someone who just got drenched in the rain. He's got that annoying "I got a full eight hours of sleep" energy, and I immediately hate him for it.

"Just tired," I grumble.

"When are you not?" He chuckles, adjusting his bag over his shoulder.  
"You heading straight to the office?"

"Yeah."

"You should come by later. A few of us are meeting up."

I shake my head. "Got work."

"You always have work."

"Yeah, well, someone's gotta be responsible," I mutter, stepping onto the train.

Mason scoffs. "You? Responsible?"

I ignore him.

~

Work is just as thrilling as ever. Phones ringing. Keyboards clacking. Coworkers chatting about things I couldn't care less about. I push past a few people, nodding at the ones who bother to acknowledge me, and collapse into my chair. The stack of unfinished drafts on my desk stares at me. I stare back. Maybe if I look at it hard enough, it'll write itself. It doesn't.

"Morning, Liam," a voice chirps from behind me.

I glance up. Sarah. Always too cheerful for this early in the day.

"Morning," I mumble.

"You look like you need coffee," she says, sliding a cup onto my desk.

I blink at it. "I didn't—"

"You always forget to get one when it rains," she interrupts with a knowing smile. "Consider it a favor."

I stare at the cup, then at her, then back at the cup.

She grins. "Just observant."

I take a sip, letting the warmth seep into my frozen fingers. "Thanks."



Sarah hums in response before heading back to her desk. I have no idea why she's nice to me, but I'm too tired to question it. With a deep sigh, I turn back to my laptop, fully prepared to bury myself in work and pretend the last twenty-four hours didn't happen.

---

I last about an hour before my phone buzzes. For a second—just one stupid, fleeting second—I think it might be Emily. Maybe a message to clear up whatever the hell last night was. I unlock my phone.

It's a spam message.

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'VE WON A 50% DISCOUNT ON HAIR GROWTH PRODUCTS!

I blink.

...Is my phone trying to tell me something?

I close the message and toss my phone onto the desk, exhaling through my nose. Maybe she hasn't reached out because she's still thinking about what happened. Or maybe she's not thinking about it at all, and I'm the only idiot obsessing over it. God, that would be embarrassing. I rub a hand over my face. This is ridiculous. Why am I acting like some lovesick fool? I don't do this. I don't get stuck on people.

And yet, here I am. Somewhere between my email drafts and an article I'm supposed to be finishing, I find myself mentally composing texts I'll never send.

"Hey, hope you're okay." No. Too serious.

"What, no insults today? You're slacking." No. Too obvious.

"Do you think the government controls the weather? Because it definitely started raining the moment I stepped outside, and I feel personally attacked." No. Too... insane.

I drop my head onto my desk with a quiet groan. This is officially pathetic. I need to get a grip.

Forcing myself to focus, I type away with all the enthusiasm of a cat being forced to take a bath. Every so often, my mind drifts back to that night—Emily’s careful eyes, the way she hesitated, the way it felt like she saw through me. And then, of course, the silence that followed. God, I should’ve said something.

Anything. Between emails and reports, I find myself replaying the moment over and over, cringing at my own inaction. Maybe I should text her. Maybe I should just suck it up and be an adult. Maybe I should—

Another spam message pops up.

GET YOUR DREAM BODY IN JUST TWO WEEKS!

I stare at it. And then I burst out laughing. Because of course. Of course, while I’m having an existential crisis over a girl, my phone decides now is the perfect time to remind me that I could also be insecure about my physique. The universe is really out here trying to humble me. I shake my head, chuckling to myself. Maybe I’ll text her tomorrow. Maybe I won’t. For now, I’ll just keep working, one half-assed email at a time, hoping that somewhere in between all this nonsense, I’ll figure out what the hell I’m supposed to do. And if not? At least I’ve got a great excuse for being the worst overthinker on the planet.



## CHAPTER 2

Liam

I stood in a field of gold. The grass wasn't really grass—it shimmered, swaying like it was woven from sunlight. The air was warm, but not hot, carrying the kind of breeze that felt like a soft whisper against the skin. Everything around me glowed, as if the whole world had been dipped in honey, golden and endless. Laughter rang through the air, bright and carefree. Children ran past me, their small feet barely making a sound against the earth, their joy so pure it felt like music. They chased each other, their voices melting into the wind, and in the middle of it all—there she was. At first, I couldn't see her clearly. She was just a blur, like a painting before the details come into focus. But even then, something about her felt familiar, like I'd known her my whole life. She wore a light blue dress, the fabric flowing around her as if it belonged to the wind itself. She moved with a quiet grace, her presence soft yet impossible to ignore. She knelt beside one of the children, brushing a strand of hair from their face, and the way she smiled... it did something to me. It was the kind of smile that made the world feel warmer, made time slow down. There was something about her—something that made me want to hold onto this moment forever.

And then she turned.

The blur disappeared, and suddenly, I saw her clearly—Emily.

My breath caught. She was beautiful, more than I had ever remembered. Her eyes, deep and warm, held something unspoken, something that made my heart stutter. It wasn't just her face—it was the way she looked at me, like she knew every messy thought, every stupid mistake, every buried feeling inside me. I wanted to move, to reach out, to ask her what this place was. But I couldn't. I was frozen in the golden field, trapped in that strange, aching moment.

And then—I woke up.

My heart was racing. My room was dark, the air still and quiet, but I could still hear the laughter, still feel the sun on my skin. My pulse thudded like I'd run a marathon. What the hell was that? One minute, I was in some dreamland where Emily looked like an angel among children, all soft smiles and glowing warmth. And the next, I was sitting here, tangled in my sheets, feeling like I'd just run ten miles—emotionally, at least. Rubbing my face, I groaned. This wasn't normal. I don't dream about Emily. I mean, sure, we have history—the kind that involves a lot of arguing and eye-rolling—but this? This was new. With a sigh, I dragged myself out of bed and into the kitchen. Coffee. That was the answer to everything. Well, almost everything. I poured myself a cup and leaned against the counter, staring at the swirling black liquid like it held all the answers to life. But instead of calming down, my brain decided to make things worse.

Emily. The dream. The way she looked at me.

I groaned again, this time loud enough that my neighbor probably heard. No. Nope. Not happening. I refuse to be the guy who overanalyzes a dream about a girl I barely tolerated once upon a time. ..Or at least, that's what I told myself. But then my brain, being the absolute traitor that it was, decided to take a nice little trip down memory lane. If someone had told me back then that Emily and I would become...whatever this is, I would have laughed in their face. Because our first meeting? Yeah, it wasn't exactly fate's way of writing a love story. It was a disaster. A rainy morning, a crowded coffee shop, and me—already in a terrible mood because I'd just spilled coffee all over my

laptop. (May it rest in peace.) Then enters Emily. Dripping rainwater onto the floor, wrapped in this sleek black coat with a red scarf that made her look like she had just walked out of a movie. Not the romantic kind, though. More like the kind where the heroine shows up, ruins the villain's plans, and then walks away with an explosion behind her. And on that particular day, I was the villain. Because just as I was mourning the death of my laptop, she walked up to the counter at the exact same time as me. One of those awkward moments where you both reach for something and suddenly it's a standoff. I wasn't in the mood for human interaction, let alone whatever this was.

"Watch it," she said, barely glancing at me as she reached for the sugar.

I scoffed. "Maybe if you looked where you were going, we wouldn't have this problem."

She finally turned her head, raising an eyebrow. And let me tell you, it was the most judgmental eyebrow raise I'd ever seen in my life. It could've sent a grown man straight into an existential crisis.

"Oh, please," she said, rolling her eyes. "Try not to spill any more coffee on expensive things."

"Try not to act like you own the place," I shot back, because apparently, I had a death wish.

Her lips twitched like she was holding back a laugh, but her eyes stayed sharp. "Confidence. Ever heard of it?"

"Yeah, and I've also heard of arrogance."

"Oh, I don't suffer fools gladly."

"Good thing I don't suffer arrogance gladly either."

We stood there, locked in some kind of weird, silent battle. Meanwhile the poor barista just wanted to hand us our drinks and go on with his day. Emily let out a small huff, shaking her head, but there was something in her expression—just the tiniest flicker—that made me

pause. A hesitation. Like she was thinking about whether she wanted to keep arguing or let the moment settle into something else.

The barista cleared his throat, pushing our drinks toward us. "Here you go. Try not to kill each other."

Emily snorted, grabbing her cup, and for the first time, I saw it—the amusement hidden beneath all that sharpness. She wasn't just picking a fight for the sake of it. She was enjoying this, pushing back because she could, because maybe, just maybe, she liked the challenge.

And for some stupid reason, that made me smile. She noticed. Her eyes flicked to my face, and something shifted between us. It was quick, barely there, but I felt it. I reached for my drink at the same time she did, and our fingers brushed against each other. It was nothing, really. Just a light touch, the kind you don't usually think twice about. But for some reason, it felt... noticeable. Like the moment had stretched just a little longer than it should have.

Emily pulled her hand back first, curling it around her cup. Her confidence wavered for half a second, then she smirked. "Well, at least you have decent taste in coffee."

I raised an eyebrow. "You don't even know what I ordered."

"I have a sixth sense for these things. You strike me as a straight black coffee kind of guy."

I took a slow sip, not breaking eye contact. "Lucky guess."

She took a sip of her own drink, then gave me a knowing look over the rim. "Not really. You seem like the type who doesn't like distractions. Gets straight to the point. Focused. A little impatient, maybe."

I tilted my head, studying her. "And you? What's your order say about you?"

She tapped the side of her cup. "A vanilla latte with an extra shot of espresso. Which means I appreciate sweetness, but I know when I need a little kick."

I exhaled a quiet laugh. "So you like balance."

"Exactly."

It was strange—how quickly the air between us had changed. Five minutes ago, I was convinced she was the most irritating person in this café. Now, I wasn't so sure.

Emily glanced toward the door, then back at me. "Well, I should go before you find another reason to argue with me."

"Oh, I'd win," I said, smirking.

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling now. A real one, not the sharp, teasing kind. "We'll see about that."

And just like that, she walked away, disappearing into the rain, leaving behind the scent of coffee and something else—something warm, something I couldn't quite name. I stood there for a moment longer than I should have, sipping my coffee and thinking about the girl who had just turned a terrible morning into something... interesting.



## CHAPTER 3

Emily

I had barely settled into my workday when my phone started buzzing, the screen lighting up with my mom's name. I sighed, already knowing how this was going to go. It was either another lecture about my life choices, an emotional guilt trip, or a deep-dive into how her friends' kids were all thriving in ways I apparently wasn't. I braced myself and picked up.

"Hey, Mom."

"Emily, sweetheart! How are you?" Her voice was warm, loving—but I could hear the usual concern creeping in, like she had been waiting all morning for this call.

"I'm fine, Mom. Working."

She barely acknowledged that before diving into what she really wanted to talk about. "I was just speaking with Aunt Marlene, and you know, she was asking about you. And, well... honey, are you still single? I mean, I just worry that—"

"Mom." I groaned, "Seriously? You called me in the middle of work to ask if I'm single?"

There was a pause on the other end before she replied, "It's not that I'm nosy, Emily. I'm your mother. You know I don't want you to suffer like



I did. I worry about you being alone, about you not having someone to lean on.”

“Mom, I wouldn’t—You know that, right? I’m working, I’m living alone, and I’m managing just fine.”

Her sigh came through softly. “I know, dear, but sometimes I feel like you’re too caught up in your work and your own world. I remember how hard it was for me, how lonely I felt. I just... I don’t want you to end up feeling that way.”

I paused, taking a deep breath. “Mom, I appreciate your concern, I really do. But I’m not lonely. I’ve got my friends, my work, and—yeah, I’m single, but that doesn’t mean I’m suffering.”

“But sweetheart,” she pressed, her tone earnest yet gentle, “being single isn’t the same as being happy. I worry that you might be shutting out the chance for something wonderful because you’re so wrapped up in your routines.”

I could hear her concern, that tender worry I’d known since I was a little girl. “Mom, I’m fine. I know what I want, and I’m not in any rush. I’m doing what I need to do. I promise, I’m not shutting you out or anything.”

Her voice softened further. “I just miss you, Emily. I want you to know I’m always here, and I just want to see you happy.”

I let out a quiet chuckle, even though my heart was still tugged by the mix of affection and concern in her voice. “I know, Mom. I do appreciate that. I really do. It’s just... sometimes I need to figure things out on my own.”

“Figure things out, yes, but don’t close yourself off completely,” she urged. “I’m not asking you to drop everything and find a partner right away. I’m just saying, keep your heart open. You deserve someone who loves you the way you deserve to be loved.”

I paused, letting her words settle.

“Alright, Mom. I hear you. I’ll try to... not be so stubborn. But please, can we maybe talk about something else now?”

“Of course, darling. I won’t keep you,” her tone softened into something playful, but then she added, “Just one more thing—your father’s been really sick. I think he wants you to visit him, maybe it could be his last wish. He’s really in a bad condition.”

I felt my blood boil, and I couldn’t hold back, “Don’t talk about that man to me, Mom!”

There was a pause—a brief silence where I could almost hear the hurt behind her words. Then her voice came back, gentle but insistent. “Emily, I know you’ve made your choices. I know you don’t want anything to do with him. But he’s your father—even if he’s been nothing but toxic all these years, I worry about him and I worry about you too”

“Mom, you know I’m done with him. I don’t want to see him, and I’m not going to be his caretaker. I’m working, living alone, and honestly, I’m managing just fine without his poison in my life.”

Her tone grew soft, laced with a sadness that always broke through her stern words. “I understand, sweetheart. I really do. But sometimes, when a person is suffering—even if they’ve hurt you more than anyone else—there’s a part of you that wishes you could at least consider a visit. Not to forgive him, just to... say goodbye properly. I don’t want you to regret not being there if he doesn’t have much time left.”

Another pause.

I could almost picture her sitting on the other end, probably clutching her phone with that same worried expression she always wore when I was younger—when she tried to shield me from all the screaming, all the chaos.

“I just don’t want you to have regrets, Emily.” Her voice was soft now. Almost pleading.

“Mom, why do you always drag me back into his mess? I’ve built my life without him. Even thought of him just makes me angry. I’m not his

savior, and I'm certainly not going to sacrifice my own peace just because you feel guilty."

"Emily, I'm sorry if it hurts you. I'm not asking you to fix him—I know you've done that for too long already. I just... I miss you, and I want you to know that I'm here, and I worry about you. I want you to be happy, and I want you to have some closure, if that's what you need."

I took a deep breath, my voice softening despite the lingering anger. "I appreciate that, Mom, I really do. But I have my own way of finding closure. I'm not going to go back into that toxic orbit. I need to look after myself. I'm happy enough on my own."

Her voice trembled just a little as she said, "Alright, darling. I promise I won't push it. I just... I worry about you so much, and I miss our talks about everything—even the messy stuff."

I let out a quiet sigh, feeling the familiar tug of both frustration and love. "I know, Mom. I know you only want what's best for me. And I'm grateful for that. Really, I am. But please, let's not talk about Dad right now. I have a meeting in five minutes, and I need to focus."

Her tone shifted to something lighter, though still laced with care. "Of course, sweetheart. Just remember, I love you, and I'm always here for you."

"Love you too, Mom," I replied, and after a brief goodbye, I ended the call.

I stared at my desk, at my untouched work, but all I could think about was the past. The nights I spent curled up in bed, clutching a pillow to drown out the sound of slamming doors and shouting voices. The way Mom always tried to smile through it all, telling me everything was fine when we both knew it wasn't. The way I used to wish—desperately, foolishly—that maybe one day, he'd change. A tear slipped down my cheek as I thought of all the lonely nights, all the times I wished I could forget the hurt. Yet, in that quiet moment, I also felt a small spark of hope. I remembered how Mom's voice always made me feel safe, like a

soft blanket on a cold night. Even though I am still angry about Dad and all the pain he brought into our lives, I also knew that Mom's care was something I could hold on to.

I promised myself that later I would call her back—not to argue, but just to say that I loved her and that I was trying my best to be okay. I wanted to let her know that even though I might be stubborn and hurt, her love made all the difference. I knew I couldn't forget the past, but I could try to move forward, holding on to the good memories and letting the pain fade bit by bit. After my meeting ended, I barely had time to catch my breath before my phone started ringing again. I assumed it was Mom—she never seemed to let up when it came to asking about Dad.

Without checking the caller ID, I snapped, "Mom, I told you a million times—I can't meet him, no matter how many times you try to convince me!"

A pause.

Then, an amused voice, definitely not my mother's. "Wow. And here I thought I was the dramatic one."

I froze. My stomach dropped.

"Well, as flattering as it is that you answer my calls with such enthusiasm, I regret to inform you that I am not, in fact, your mother."

Oh. No.

"Shit, shit, shit—it's Liam," I muttered under my breath. My face burned with embarrassment as I scrambled to recover.

"Liam," I groaned, pressing a hand to my forehead. "You should really announce yourself before calling."

"Oh, my bad. Next time I'll start with 'Hey, Emily, it's your favorite person in the world,' so you don't go mistaking me for your mom."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Don't flatter yourself. What do you want?"

"Ouch," he said, feigning offense. "Maybe I just called to check on you. Ever think about that?"

I blinked at my screen. "No. Because that's not a thing you do."

Liam chuckled. "True, true. But here I am, defying expectations. Look at me, growing as a person."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Consider me checked on. Anything else?"

Liam's chuckle faded into something softer. "Hey... are you okay, hurricane?"

I stilled. The nickname—usually meant to poke fun at my chaotic energy—felt different this time. Less teasing, more... concerned.

I hesitated before answering, my voice quieter. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you just answered the phone like you were ready to fight someone," he said, and for once, there was no sarcasm, no playful jab. Just Liam, sounding like he actually cared. "And I don't know... you just sound off."

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. "It's nothing. Just—family stuff."

Liam was silent for a second, then said, "You wanna talk about it, or should I start listing all the dumb things I did this week to distract you?"

"What do you want, Liam"? I asked

His tone shifted slightly, the teasing edge softening. "Actually... I wanted to say I'm sorry. About the other night."

For a split second, the phone call felt like one of those rare, fragile moments when everything was stripped down to honesty. I could almost hear my heart skip a beat. In my head, I silently marveled—of all the times I'd typed out hundreds of words and then deleted them in frustration, here was Liam, managing to say it in just a few clumsy words.

There was a brief silence on the line, punctuated only by the quiet hum of distant traffic. "I—I mean, I didn't intend to hurt you," he stammered, his tone both apologetic and endearingly clumsy. It was in that vulnerable moment that something unexpected stirred within me—a soft, almost imperceptible flutter of something like hope. Perhaps,

beneath all the harsh words and our usual bickering, there was something real. Something I'd never quite admitted to myself.

I let out a small, genuine laugh. "Liam, you always manage to say the funniest things at the worst possible time. I was busy, you know—lost in work and my own thoughts—so I didn't even remember the details until now." I paused, and I could hear a slight chuckle on his end, like he was both relieved and amused by my casual tone.

Unbelievable," he said softly, "that I'm here apologizing for a moment that you probably barely noticed." His voice wavered between irony and sincerity, and I couldn't help but smile at the mix of awkwardness and care.

"Maybe," I replied, "but sometimes those moments mean more than you think." I could almost picture him blushing over the phone, maybe I'm imagining it, but I like to think that way.

"Uhhh, I should probably go—I have a submission due," I said, my voice trailing off as I glanced at the clock.

Liam let out a soft chuckle. "Oh yes, yes—I know the feeling. Deadlines can be the worst."

I smiled, the tension easing further. "I really should get back to it. Work won't finish itself, unfortunately."

"Alright, Em," he replied gently. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Yep,"

"Good luck with your submission. I'll talk to you later."

"Talk soon," I replied, and we exchanged our awkward, heartfelt goodbyes before ending the call.

I hung up the phone and just... stared at it. What. The. Hell. Was. That? I blinked. Then blinked again.

Liam had just apologized to me. Sincerely. Like, with actual depth. Just—genuine, human emotions. Unbelievable. I looked around as if someone would magically appear and confirm that I hadn't just hallucinated the

whole thing. Nope. No one. Just me, sitting here, experiencing whatever parallel universe I had apparently fallen into. I replayed the conversation in my head. Liam had sounded... different. Soft. Almost hesitant. Like he actually cared if he had hurt my feelings. Liam never cared about things like that. He teased, he bickered, he threw in a snide remark and moved on with his day. But today? Today he was acting like some weird, almost nice version of himself.

I shook my head, trying to dismiss the flutter of excitement as just another trick of my overworked brain. "Am I imagining things?" I muttered quietly to myself, half laughing, half sighing. I scribbled a quick note in my journal during a spare minute:

That idiot called me today. And the worst part? It made me feel something I don't know how to name.

I should be angry. I should brush it off like I always do. But I can't. Because this time, he didn't sound like the Liam I know—the one who always has a sharp remark ready, the one who never lets his guard down.

Today, his voice was different. Careful. Almost hesitant. Like he actually meant what he said. Like my feelings mattered. I don't know what to do with that. It would've been easier if he had just laughed it off, if he had found some way to twist it into another joke. That, at least, I would've understood. But sincerity? From him? It caught me off guard in a way I wasn't prepared for. And now, hours later, I'm still thinking about it. I hate that. I hate that a simple phone call could stir up something deep enough to linger. I hate that his voice is still echoing in my head.

But most of all, I hate that a part of me didn't mind.

"The heart never listens to logic. It just beats, and we follow."

I had been waiting for this night all week—a chance to escape from constant phone calls, family problems, and that heavy feeling of loneliness that just wouldn't go away. The moment I stepped into Ruby's apartment, the noise, the colors, and the warmth made me forget all my stress instantly.

Ruby flung the door open dramatically. “Oh God, look who finally showed up!”

Her eyes sparkled as she pulled me into a tight hug. “You’re alive!” added Dave, the tall guy with a never-ending grin and a talent for teasing.

“Okay, stop it, guys. I was busy!” I tried to sound annoyed, but the smile on my face gave me away.

Ruby’s apartment was a cozy mess—random furniture, fairy lights hanging all over the ceiling, and an ~

inviting chaos that felt perfect in her presence. The air smelled like popcorn and something sweet—probably another one of her last-minute baking experiments.

“You’re lucky you came,” Ruby said, dragging me inside. “We were about to send a search party.”

“Or at least start betting on whether you’d ghost us,” Dave added, dropping onto the couch.

“Please, I would never miss this,” I said, kicking off my shoes and sinking into an old armchair.

Soft indie rock and old pop songs played in the background as conversations flowed around me. It was the usual group—Ruby, Dave, Sam curled up in the corner with her book, and Nate, who was struggling with a wine bottle, failing miserably.

Ruby plopped down beside me, resting her chin on my shoulder. “Okay, spill. What’s up? You’ve been missing all week.”

I hesitated, leaning my head back. “Nothing much. Just... life.”

Ruby gave me a knowing look. “Ah, life. That annoying thing that never gives us a break.”

“Exactly.”

Dave nudged my foot. “Well, tonight, you’re officially banned from worrying. House rules.”



“Agreed,” Ruby declared. “Tonight is about fun, distractions, and whatever Nate is doing over there.”

Nate, who had managed to get the cork stuck halfway, shot us a sheepish smile. “I have it under control.”

The cork snapped in half.

“God, just give up,” I told him.

“Never,” he declared, tugging at the cork like it had personally offended him.

Dave grabbed the bottle and popped it open in two seconds. “Pathetic.”

“Okay, first of all, that was sabotage,” Nate argued.

I laughed, sinking deeper into my chair. “So, what did I miss this week?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Ruby said, smirking. “Just that someone has been getting rides home from someone else every day.”

My eyes darted to Sam, who had been quiet all night, buried in her book. Beside her, Nate suddenly became very focused on his drink.

“Wait.” I gasped. “Sam, are you finally acknowledging that Nate exists?”

“I—what?” She shut her book. “Shut up.”

Dave cackled. “Ooooh, that’s not a denial.”

Nate looked at the ceiling. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh my God, the mutual awkwardness,” Ruby groaned. “It’s been painful to watch. Just kiss already.”

Both of them made strangled noises. Sam kicked Ruby. Nate almost spilled his drink.

Nate and Sam were a comedy show that refused to admit it was on stage.

Nate, with his easygoing nature and permanent I’m too cool to care attitude, was the last person you’d expect to get flustered. But the second Sam was involved? He turned into a full-blown idiot. Dropped things.

Tripped over air. Became suddenly fascinated with whatever was in his hands—his drink, his phone, a nonexistent speck of dust.

Sam, on the other hand, acted like Nate was an annoying background noise she had learned to tolerate. She'd roll her eyes, scoff at his jokes, and keep her nose buried in a book like she wasn't hyper-aware of his every move. But I saw the way she stiffened when he got too close, the way her fingers tapped against her knee when he laughed.

They were ridiculous. And Ruby and I lived for it.

"Honestly, it's exhausting," Ruby muttered beside me, watching them like a scientist observing a failed experiment.

I nodded solemnly. "I think they'd rather die than admit they like each other."

"I don't like him," Sam snapped, overhearing us. "At all."

"Oh no, of course not," I said. "That's why you let him drive you home every day instead of calling an Uber."

Sam opened her mouth. Closed it. Glared. "It's convenient."

"And I definitely didn't catch Nate staring at you five seconds ago," Ruby added.

Nate choked on his drink. "I was not staring."

Dave, grinned. "Dude. You so were."

"I wasn't."

Sam's ears were pink. Nate's fingers drummed against his glass. The tension between them was practically a living, breathing thing.

Ruby shot me a look. Painful.

I bit back a smile. Absolutely excruciating.

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in days. But then—

My phone buzzed.

Liam: Goodnight.

Two simple words. Nothing extraordinary. Nothing that should've made my chest feel tight or my stomach twist in that quiet, aching way. But they did. My fingers hovered over the screen, my heart thudding with something I didn't want to name. I could still hear the chatter around me—Ruby laughing, Dave making some sarcastic remark, Nate and Sam caught in their usual mess of unspoken things. The room was alive, full of warmth, but I felt like I was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere where he existed. I swallowed hard, my grip tightening around my phone. He didn't have to text me. He didn't owe me anything. But he did it anyway. And not in the usual, annoying Liam way. No stupid jokes, no unnecessary jabs, just... goodnight. Like he wanted me to hear it. Like he cared if I did. Why did that make my throat feel heavy? Why did it make my fingers tremble just a little? I typed a response. Deleted it. Typed again.

Ruby, sharp as ever, caught it instantly. "Look who's blushing."

"I. Am. Not."

Dave leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "Don't tell me you're meeting someone new."

"No, no," I said quickly. "It's.."

Ruby's smirk deepened. "It's what, exactly?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Because what was I supposed to say? That Liam Carter had texted me goodnight and somehow it felt like a punch to the ribs and a breath of fresh air at the same time? That I'd been staring at my phone like an idiot, feeling things I should not be feeling? Yeah, no. Not happening.

"It's nothing," I muttered instead, locking my phone and shoving it into my pocket.

Ruby and Dave exchanged a glance—one of those silent conversations that best friends have, the kind that made me want to groan.

"Ohhh, this is suspicious." Dave wagged his eyebrows. "Emily Foster, all flustered and dodging questions? Very suspicious."

"I am not flustered." I crossed my arms. "I just don't want to waste my time entertaining your nonsense."

"That's exactly what a flustered person would say," Ruby pointed out.

"Shut up."

Sam, who had been minding her business until now, peered over her book. "You know we're not going to let this go, right?"

"Of course you're not." I sighed. "Because God forbid I receive a normal text without the entire room making a big deal out of it."

"Normal text," Ruby echoed. "Okay, then prove it. Who was it from?"

I hesitated. A fraction of a second too long. And that was my mistake.

Dave gasped. "OH MY GOD. IT'S A GUY."

"Shut up," I hissed, but it was too late. Ruby's eyes widened with wicked delight, and Nate—who had been completely uninterested up until now—actually turned his head.

"Wait. You're texting a guy?" Nate said, setting down his drink.

I groaned. "Oh, come on."

Ruby grabbed my shoulders dramatically. "Who is he? Is he hot? Does he have a car? Do we approve?"

"No one," I said, exasperated. "It's literally not a big deal."

Dave narrowed his eyes. "Wait. Hold on. I feel like we're missing something important." His gaze dropped to my pocket. "Why do I have a weird feeling this isn't just some random guy?"

Oh no. Oh no.

Ruby's lips parted. Realization dawned in her eyes. "Wait. Don't tell me—"

I didn't. I didn't have to.

The silence that stretched between us said enough.

Dave sucked in a breath. "Liam."

My face burned. "I hate all of you."

Ruby screamed. Like, full-on, high-pitched, horror-movie-level screamed.

"Oh. My. God." She grabbed my arm and shook me like a madwoman.

"LIAM?! LIAM CARTER?!"

"Shh! Shut up!" I hissed, slapping a hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

Dave had launched himself backward onto the couch like he'd just witnessed a supernatural event. "Liam Carter texted you goodnight?"

"And she blushed!" Ruby shrieked into my palm.

"I did not—"

"You so did," Dave cut in, pointing at me like I was some kind of phenomenon that needed to be studied.

I let out a groan, feeling every single stare in the room drilling into me. Sam had even lowered her book completely, which was saying a lot. Nate was watching too, arms crossed, head tilted slightly in what I could only describe as pure suspicion.

"I can't believe this," Ruby went on, still half-screaming. "You and Liam Carter? Since when? How? Why?"

"There is no 'me and Liam Carter,'" I snapped, crossing my arms.

I exhaled. I know there is no escape, So I told them "Yeah... He kinda... We talked today. Well, he called. And I messed up." Ruby gasped so loudly that Sam jumped. "Liam. Called you. Oh my God."

Dave clutched his chest. "Oh, please tell me I'm not dying. Am I hallucinating? Liam made the first move?"

"He actually used his phone for something other than ignoring you?" Ruby added, eyes wide with pure, unfiltered drama.

I groaned, pressing the phone to my forehead. "Guys—"

"No, no, no. Start from the beginning," Ruby demanded, leaning in. "What did he say? What did you say? Did you embarrass yourself?"

Of course she did," Dave muttered. "It's Em."

I threw a pillow at him. He caught it easily, grinning.

I sighed, sinking into the couch. "Okay, well... he called me. Just out of nowhere. And I—" I swallowed.

Okay so here we go I said and started to explain.

I was at work, drowning in deadlines, brain fried, patience nonexistent. And then my phone started ringing. Nonstop. I picked up, and—of course—it was my mom. The conversation started fine (as fine as it ever gets), but then she started on her favorite topic: my tragic, lonely, single existence. And I—being the totally level-headed, composed person that I am—snapped. I said something along the lines of, "Oh my God, Mom, being single is not the end of the world. Please, for once, let me breathe." Did that stop her? Absolutely not. Because then she brought up him. My dad. Meet him. Just once. He wants to talk.

I saw red. I am not meeting that man. The fight escalated. I got mad, she got exasperated, and after an emotionally draining ten minutes, she finally hung up. I was exhausted, my hands were shaking, my head was pounding—classic family drama aftermath. And then, because life hates me, my phone rang again. I didn't even check the caller ID. I just groaned and picked up, fully assuming it was my mom coming in for round two.

So I answered with: "Mom, I told you a million times—I CAN'T MEET HIM!"

And then...

Silence.

Not the huffy, "Are you done?" silence I expected from my mom. No. This was worse. This was confused, awkward, I-called-the-wrong-person silence.

Then, finally—

"Well, as flattering as it is that you answer my calls with such enthusiasm, I regret to inform you that I am not, in fact, your mother."

I nearly dropped the phone. It was Liam. Liam. Who never calls. Liam. Who probably thought I was in some dramatic, scandalous love triangle instead of just screaming about my father. Liam. Who now had front-row seats to my meltdown.

I wanted to die. Right then and there.

Ruby, by this point, had her hands clamped over her mouth, vibrating with excitement. Dave was in physical pain from laughing too hard. Sam just whispered, "Oh no," like she was mourning my dignity.

"Oh my God," Ruby finally breathed. "What did you say after that?"

I groaned, throwing my head back. "I blacked out. I panicked so hard, I think I left my body."

Dave was wiping tears from his eyes. "Please tell me you hung up on him."

"Worse." I covered my face. "I just went, 'Haha. Hey.'"

Ruby shrieked.

Sam put her face in her hands. "You did not."

"I did!" I wailed.

I sighed dramatically, looking at the expectant faces around me.

"So?" Ruby demanded. "What exactly did he say?"

I groaned, dropping my head into my hands. "It was so awkward—"

"—so romantic," she corrected, kicking my foot.

"—so normal," I insisted, glaring at her.

"He just—ugh, okay, fine. He called, and I immediately embarrassed myself because I thought it was my mom, and I yelled something insane, and there was a full five seconds of dead silence."

Dave let out an exaggerated wheeze and clutched his stomach. “Oh my God, I love this.

“And then?” Nate prompted, finally breaking his silence.

I peeked at him through my fingers. He was watching me with way too much amusement.

“Then,” I continued, dragging out the word, “he laughed—like, this soft, kind of too amused laugh—and asked if I was okay.”

Ruby grabbed my wrist. “I knew it. He’s into you. You don’t ask if someone’s okay like that unless you care.”

“I don’t think that’s how human decency works, Ruby.”

“No, shut up, she’s right,” Dave chimed in. “That’s some serious concern Like, ‘I want to be your safe place’ concern.”

I rolled my eyes. “Or, and hear me out, it’s just regular concern because I screamed into the phone.”

Ruby waved me off. “Whatever, continue.”

I sighed, twirling a loose thread on my sweater. “So, I told him it was just family drama, and he was actually... nice about it? Like, really nice. And then, out of nowhere, he just—he apologized.”

Sam blinked. “For what?”

I took a slow breath, feeling my fingers tighten around the fabric of my sleeve. “For the other night. For... what he said to me.”

Ruby and Sam exchanged glances, the kind that made me feel like they were having a whole conversation telepathically.

Ruby leaned forward. “Okay, but what exactly did he say?”

I hesitated, the memory settling heavy in my chest. “We were talking the other night and—things got heated. He was being difficult, as usual, and I told him he acts like life just stopped moving forward. Like he’s stuck in the past, refusing to let anything change.” I let out a small, humorless



laugh. "And then he said I wouldn't get it. That I don't know what it's like to lose something and feel like I'll never get it back."

Sam sucked in a breath. "Oof."

"Yeah." I picked at a loose thread on my sweater, forcing myself to keep my voice even. "I told him he wasn't the only person who had ever been hurt. That just because something bad happened to him, it doesn't mean he gets to sit in it forever. And then I left."

Ruby stared at me for a second. "Damn."

Sam tilted her head. "So he apologized for that? Like, for real?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And I could tell he actually meant it."

For a second, none of them spoke. Then Ruby crossed her arms. "Okay, but, like, why?"

I blinked. "What do you mean why?"

"I mean, this is Liam we're talking about. He doesn't just apologize. What changed?"

That was the part I still didn't understand. The part that kept looping in my head, over and over, like a puzzle I couldn't quite solve.

"I don't know," I admitted quietly.

I looked up, expecting teasing, but the way Ruby was grinning like she'd just won the lottery had me groaning.

"Ruby, don't—"

"You like him."

"I do not."

"YOU. LIKE. HIM."

Dave whistled low. "Damn. Never thought I'd see the day."

Sam shook her head, lips pressed together in an almost-smirk.

"Well. This is a development."

Nate just raised an eyebrow at me, looking way too entertained.

I crossed my arms. “Okay, can everyone relax? It was just a conversation. He was nice. That doesn’t mean anything.”

Ruby smirked. “Suuure. That’s why you’re blushing.”

“I AM NOT—”

“Oh, you so are,” Dave cut in, grinning. “Like, full-body blush. I’d say your ears are probably on fire.”

I grabbed again a pillow and launched it at him. He dodged effortlessly.

Ruby nudged me again, her voice softer this time. “Em. It’s okay if you like him.”

I exhaled, looking down at my hands. Maybe I did. Maybe I always had. But admitting that?

That was terrifying.

So instead, I rolled my eyes, snatched a handful of popcorn from the bowl on the table, and shoved it into my mouth.

“You guys are reading way too much into this.”

Ruby just smirked knowingly.

And Nate?

He met my gaze, eyes glinting with something unreadable.

“You sure about that?” he asked, tilting his head slightly.

I swallowed the popcorn.

No.

No, I was not



## CHAPTER 4

Emily

I wasn't supposed to be here. I told myself that the second I stepped inside the hospital. The air was too clean, the lights too harsh, the smell—antiseptic, sickness, something sterile that made my stomach turn. I gripped my sleeves, my fingers twisting the fabric. I wasn't supposed to be here.

But I was. Because my father was sick. That's what my mother had said over the phone this morning, her voice tight and unreadable. "He asked for you, Em. Just once. Just come."

I had said no. At first. I told her I didn't care, that he wasn't my father anymore. That he lost the right to ask for me when he walked away and never looked back.

But then—

"He doesn't have much time."

And I hated myself for it—hated myself for still being that girl who wondered, what if? So here I was.

The nurse at the front desk gave me directions, and I followed them like a ghost, barely registering my own movements. Fifth floor. Room 507. The walk down the hallway stretched endlessly, my breath thinning with every step. I thought I was ready. I wasn't. When I stepped inside, it hit me all at once.

The sight of him—older, thinner, but still him.

My father.

The man who was supposed to protect me. The man who chose silence instead.

He looked... hollow. His skin was sallow, stretched too thin over sharp bones. His cheeks were sunken, his hair thinner than before, streaked with more gray than I remembered. He used to be tall, broad-shouldered, someone who took up space in a room without effort. Now, he looked small. Like the bed was swallowing him whole. His breathing was uneven, the kind that made my stomach churn—the kind that sounded like it hurt. A small plastic tube fed oxygen into his nose, but it wasn't enough to steady his breaths. His fingers, once strong, trembled slightly when he lifted them.

This wasn't the man from my childhood memories.

This was someone barely holding on.

And the worst part is It still wasn't enough for me to forgive him. I felt... nothing. No grief. No sadness. Just an empty kind of exhaustion. I stood frozen in the doorway, my fingers curled into fists.

"Emily," he said.

His voice was rough, like sandpaper, like someone had stolen the strength from it long ago. It used to be a voice that commanded attention, one that filled rooms, that left no room for argument. Now, it was just tired. I swallowed. Forced my legs to move forward.

"Mom said you asked for me," I said, my voice flatter than I intended.

His gaze flickered, unreadable. "I did."

And that was it. No how have you been. No I missed you. Just those two words, like a statement. Like an observation.

I almost laughed.

"Well. I'm here."

A long silence stretched between us. I could hear the beeping of machines, the soft murmur of voices in the hallway. But in here, it was just me and him. And the years we had lost.

"I know you hate me," he said finally.

I clenched my jaw. Turned my head away. "I don't hate you."

A tired exhale. "Then what?"

I swallowed. "I just don't know you anymore."

His fingers drummed weakly against the blanket. "That's fair."

Fair. Fair? Years of silence. Years of watching my mother cry herself to sleep. Years of pretending I was okay with being forgotten. And he thought this was fair?

I looked at him, really looked at him, and suddenly, it was too much. I stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. "I shouldn't have come."

But before I could move—

"I need to tell you something."

Something in his voice made me pause.

I turned slowly. "What?"

His eyes settled on me. And then, with the kind of quiet that only meant trouble, he said—

"You need to be careful."

A sharp chill crawled up my spine.

"What are you talking about?"

"There are people watching."

Cold fear tightened in my chest.

"Watching what?"

"You."

I stared at him. My pulse pounded in my ears.

"This isn't a joke," he continued. "I made mistakes, Emily. I got involved with the wrong people. And now... they're paying attention to you."

I took a step back. "No. No, you don't get to do this. You don't get to come back into my life and warn me about some invisible threat like that makes up for anything."

"I'm serious."

"Well, I don't care." I shook my head. "I don't care what you did. I don't care who's watching. I don't care about you."

And with that, I turned. And I walked away.

—

The elevator doors shut behind me, and I let out a shaky breath, pressing the button for the ground floor. My hands were still trembling. My heart was still a wreck. Why did I go? Why did I let myself believe—for even a second—that there was something left to salvage?

A lump rose in my throat. I gritted my teeth, staring at the floor, but it was no use. The memories were clawing their way back.

Me, ten years old, staring out the window, hoping, waiting. He never came.

Me, sixteen, watching my mother break down at the kitchen table, whispering, "He was supposed to love me."

Me, now, standing in a hospital hallway, still that same little girl hoping for answers that would never come.

I pressed my fingers to my temple, breathing hard. This was a mistake. I should have never come.

A voice.

"...Emily?"

I lifted my head.

Liam. Standing in the corner of the elevator, looking just as startled as I felt.

I blinked. "You?"

His brows furrowed. "You?"

"What—what are you even doing here?"

He shifted, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "My mom works here."

Oh. I suddenly felt too aware of how wrecked I must look. My face, my posture, the way my breath was still uneven.

Liam's gaze flicked over me. "You okay?"

I opened my mouth to lie. And then— A loud screech. The elevator jolted. Then, with a shudder, it stopped moving. A small silence.

Then—

"You've got to be kidding me," Liam muttered.

I pressed the button. Nothing. Pressed it again. Nothing.

Liam sighed. "Stuck."

I stared at the doors, my pulse spiking. "No. Nope. That's not happening."

"Emily—"

"No, because this is not the day I get stuck in an elevator with you of all people, right after I just had the worst conversation of my life."

His head tilted slightly. "Worst conversation?"

I exhaled sharply, turning away. "Doesn't matter."

A pause.

Then, softly—"Your dad?"

I stiffened. Liam was too sharp. Too observant. And right now, I hated that about him. I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing my back against the wall. My breathing hitched. My chest tightened.

No. No, no, no. I couldn't do this. I couldn't be here.

Liam's voice came, softer this time. "Emily."

I shook my head. My breath came out sharp, ragged. My hands curled into fists at my sides. Not here. Not now. The walls of the elevator felt too close, like they were pressing in, like they knew I was about to shatter.

I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I didn't ask you to."

I looked at him sharply. "Then stop looking at me like that."

His brow furrowed. "Like what?"

"Like you actually care."

His lips parted slightly, like he was about to argue, but then he just... sighed. "Well, tough luck. I do."

I let out a bitter laugh, swiping at my eyes. "Right. Sure."

And then—

Liam ran a hand through his hair, exhaling. "Emily—"

"No, Liam. You don't get it," I snapped, voice shaking. "You don't know what it's like to see someone who was supposed to love you just... wither away right in front of you. You don't know what it's like to want to hate them but still feel—" My throat closed up. "Something."

Liam was quiet. I wasn't sure why I was telling him this. Maybe because he was the only one here. Maybe because I was desperate for someone to understand. Or maybe because, deep down, I knew he wouldn't use this against me.

Liam stepped closer. Not too close, but enough that I could feel the warmth of his presence. "You think that makes you weak?"

I let out a breath. "It makes me stupid."



Liam scoffed. "Yeah, okay. Because having emotions makes you an idiot now."

I glared at him. "Shut up."

He smirked, but it was softer, like he was trying to pull me out of my own head. "Make me."

Despite everything, I almost laughed. Almost.

Instead, I shook my head, my voice quieter now. "I thought I'd feel nothing seeing him like that. But I didn't. I felt—" My breath hitched. "I felt like a stupid little girl again. The same girl who sat by the window and waited for him to come back. And he never did."

Liam's jaw tensed. His hands curled into his hoodie sleeves.

He exhaled sharply, stepping even closer. "You weren't weak, Emily."

I blinked.

"You were a kid."

My throat tightened.

Liam looked down at his hands. "Kids believe in their parents. They're supposed to. That's not weakness."

I swallowed hard, staring at him. Liam wasn't good at being soft. He wasn't good at handling people with care. But this—this moment—felt gentle in a way I wasn't used to. I hated it. And I needed it.

I turned back to the doors. "It doesn't matter now."

Liam was quiet for a second before he said, "You still went."

I flinched. Liam wasn't asking. He was stating it. Like he knew there was a reason, even if I didn't want to admit it.

I swallowed. "Yeah."

"Why?"

I closed my eyes, the image of my father flashing behind my eyelids. The frail, hollow version of him. Skin too pale, lips cracked, the scent of

antiseptic and something sour filling the room. He had looked at me, and for the first time in years, I saw it—I hated him. I hated him. But for a second, I pitied him, too.

I opened my eyes, blinking fast. "Because I wanted to see if I could feel nothing."

Liam exhaled slowly. "And did it work?"

I swallowed. My silence was answer enough. The elevator jolted.

A voice crackled through the speaker: "Miss, sir, are you alright?"

Liam pressed the button. "Yeah. Just get us out of here."

A few more minutes. A few more uneasy glances between us.

Then, with a shudder, The doors finally slid open.

Fresh air rushed in, and I almost sprinted out of there.

Liam followed, slower, watching me carefully.

I felt exposed. Like I had let him see too much. Like I had let something break open between us. I hated that, too. But I didn't say anything. I just walked away. And Liam let me. For now.



## CHAPTER 5

Liam

After sitting with Emily in silence, after hearing her voice crack in a way that didn't suit her at all—I should have just stood up, walked away, and never looked back. But I didn't. Instead, I stayed.

Instead, I sat there, staring at the pavement, listening to the uneven rhythm of her breathing.

And the worst part is I wanted to stay. Which was a problem. A big one.

Because I didn't get involved. I didn't sit with people and let their emotions bleed into mine. I didn't let myself care too much. I knew what happened when you cared too much. You ended up carrying things that weren't yours to carry. You ended up stuck. And I had spent so long trying to get unstuck. Yet here I was. Sitting next to Emily, watching her fingers dig into her sleeves, watching the way her shoulders trembled even though she was trying to hold herself together. And I hated the way it made my chest tighten. Like I felt something. Like I cared. Fuck.

I sighed, leaning back on my hands, staring at the dark sky. "You should go home."

Emily didn't move. Didn't even look at me.

Then, after a long pause—

"I don't want to."

Her voice was barely above a whisper. I closed my eyes, exhaling through my nose.

Of course. Of course, she didn't. I knew that feeling too. That feeling of not wanting to be alone with your thoughts, of not wanting to step back into a quiet space where everything would hit harder.

But I didn't know what to do with that. Didn't know how to fix whatever was breaking inside her.

So I just said—

“Then don't.”

She finally turned her head, frowning at me. “What?”

I sighed again. “I don't know. Just—stay out a little longer. Walk around. Do something.” I shrugged, forcing my tone to be casual, like I wasn't trying to figure out why I was still here. “Just don't sit in a hospital parking lot all night.”

She studied me for a long moment, eyes flickering with something unreadable. Then, to my absolute shock—

“Come with me.”

I blinked. “What?”

Emily stood up, brushing off her jeans. “I don't want to be alone.”

I stared at her, trying to figure out if she was serious.

She just raised an eyebrow. “What, you suddenly have plans?”

I huffed out a breath, shaking my head. “No.”

She nodded, like she already knew that. “Then come on.”

And I—

I went.

~

We didn't go far. Just walked aimlessly down quiet streets, streetlights casting long shadows on the pavement. Neither of us said much at first. But after a while, Emily started talking. Not about her father. Not about whatever hell she had just walked through tonight. No, she talked about other things—random, pointless things.

Emily kicked another rock ahead of us, her hands shoved deep in her pockets. "You ever think about faking your own death?"

I snorted. "What?"

"You know, like disappearing, starting over with a new identity." She shrugged. "Maybe become a baker in some tiny village where no one asks questions."

I raised an eyebrow. "A baker?"

"Yeah. What, you don't think I could do it?"

I smirked. "I think you'd burn the whole shop down on your first day."

She gasped, shoving my arm. "Rude. I'll have you know, I once made a decent batch of cookies."

I grinned. "Define 'decent.'"

She hesitated. "Okay, so they were kind of hard. Like, maybe rock solid. But that's beside the point."

I laughed under my breath. "Right. So, fake death, new life as a baker. Got it."

She nodded. "Exactly. What about you?"

"What about me?"

She nudged me. "What's your fake identity?"

I thought about it, then shrugged. "Something boring. Maybe I'll be an accountant."

Emily burst out laughing. "You? An accountant? Oh my god."

I grinned. "What's so funny about that?"

"I just—" She wiped at her eyes. "I can't picture it. You, sitting in an office, filing taxes, wearing, like, beige sweaters."

I groaned. "Okay, yeah, I take it back."

She shook her head, still grinning. Then, after a moment—

"I had a fake name when I was little."

I glanced at her. "Yeah?"

She nodded. "When I was, like, eight, I decided my real name was boring. So, for an entire summer, I told everyone my name was Sophia."

I chuckled. "Why Sophia?"

"I have no idea. I think I heard it in a movie and thought it sounded elegant or something."

I smirked. "You? Elegant?"

She glared. "Okay, wow. You're so fun to talk to."

I held up my hands. "Hey, I'm just saying. You're more of a... I don't know. A hurricane."

Her eyes narrowed. "And you're a brick wall."

I huffed. "Sounds about right."

We walked in silence for a while, the air cool, the streets mostly empty. Then—

"You wanna know something stupid?" she muttered.

I glanced at her. "Always."

She hesitated, then said, "I almost didn't come tonight."

I frowned. "To the hospital?"

She nodded. "When I got the call, I just... I don't know. I stood in my kitchen for, like, an hour, just staring at the floor. Trying to convince myself it wasn't worth it."

I didn't say anything. Because I knew that feeling. Too well.

“But then I thought... what if I regret it?” She exhaled, kicking another rock. “What if I wake up one day and wish I had gone?”

I swallowed. “And now that you have?”

She let out a bitter laugh. “I don’t know. I feel... sick. Like I let myself walk back into something I should’ve left buried.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Didn’t know how to tell her that I got it. That I knew what it was like to try to outrun your past, only to have it grab you by the throat.

So I just said—

“You survived it, though.”

Emily looked at me then, eyes searching mine like she was trying to figure out if I was lying.

After a long moment, she sighed. “I guess.”

We walked a little further, our steps slow, measured. Then, suddenly, she turned to me.

“Why do you act like nothing touches you?”

I stiffened. “What?”

She tilted her head, studying me. “Like, everything just rolls off you. Like you don’t feel anything.”

I exhaled. “Maybe I don’t.”

She scoffed. “Bullshit.”

I smirked. “Language, Sophia.”

She groaned. “Shut up.”

I chuckled, but she was still watching me, still waiting.

So I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s easier, I guess.”

“Easier than what?”

I hesitated.

Then muttered, “Than feeling everything.”

Emily was quiet for a long time.

Then, finally—

“That sounds exhausting.”

I smirked, but it didn’t quite reach my eyes. “You get used to it.”

She shook her head. “No, you don’t.”

I didn’t respond. Because she was right.

~

At some point, we ended up at an all-night diner. The place was empty except for a tired-looking waitress and some old guy reading a newspaper in the corner. Emily slid into a booth, and I sat across from her.

She grabbed a menu, eyes skimming over it. “I’m starving.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You said you weren’t hungry.”

She scowled. “That was before we walked halfway across the city.”

I smirked, shaking my head.

We ordered. Pancakes for her. Black coffee for me.

And when the food came, Emily just stared at her plate for a long moment, like she wasn’t sure if she actually wanted it.

I frowned. “You good?”

She blinked, then forced a small smile. “Yeah.”

And maybe if I hadn’t seen her in that elevator earlier—if I hadn’t seen the way she broke—I would have believed her. But I had. And I didn’t.

So I just said—

“Eat.”

Emily looked up at me, something flickering in her gaze. Then, after a moment, she picked up her fork.



And for some reason, that made my shoulders relax. Like I had done something right. Even if I didn't know why I cared so much in the first place.

///

The night stretched on. We didn't talk about anything serious. But at some point, Emily looked up from her plate and said—

“You never talk about yourself.”

I stilled.

She tilted her head, eyes scanning my face. “You always deflect. Always make me talk. But you never say anything about you.”

I shrugged, forcing a smirk. “Maybe I'm just boring.”

Emily snorted. “Yeah, right.”

I took a sip of my coffee, not meeting her gaze.

She watched me for a long moment, then sighed, leaning back in her seat.

“I get it,” she murmured.

I frowned. “Get what?”

She glanced out the window, fingers tracing the rim of her mug.

“The whole... shutting people out thing.”

My jaw tightened. Emily let out a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “I mean, look at me. I just spent the last hour talking about faking death instead of dealing with my actual problems.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, well. Faking deaths are easier.”

She huffed. “No kidding.”

I looked at her.

And she looked—

Beautiful.

Not in the obvious way. Not in the way people usually meant when they said that. Not in the way she'd roll her eyes at if I ever told her. No, she looked beautiful In the way she was. Tired and messy and stubborn and real. Her hair was falling out of whatever attempt at a ponytail she'd made earlier, wisps of it curling around her face. Her eyes were a little red, a little unfocused, like she'd been carrying the weight of something too heavy for too long. There was syrup on the edge of her lip from where she'd been eating, and she didn't even notice. And for some reason, I wanted to reach over and wipe it away.

I didn't. Obviously. Instead, I just leaned back in my seat, tapping my fingers against the table.

"You got something on your face, Sophia."

She frowned. "Huh?"

I smirked, nodding toward her mouth. "Syrup."

She groaned, grabbing a napkin and rubbing at her face. "Gone?"

I shook my head. She tried again.

"Now?"

I grinned. "Nope."

Emily scowled. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"A little."

She rolled her eyes, mumbling something under her breath before wiping once more.

I sighed. "Jesus, just—"

Before I could stop myself, I reached across the table, thumb brushing against the corner of her lip.

Her breath hitched.

And suddenly— The air shifted. The diner was still the same. The lights still hummed faintly overhead. The old man in the corner still flipped

through his newspaper. But something between us—something I couldn't name—changed. I felt it in the way Emily froze. Felt it in the way her eyes flickered to mine, wide and startled and bare. And I felt it in the way my hand lingered just a second too long before I pulled away.

Silence.

Then—

Emily cleared her throat, breaking whatever had just happened.

I leaned back in my seat, forcing a smirk. "You're welcome."

She scowled, looking anywhere but at me. "Asshole."

I just chuckled, sipping my coffee like my heartbeat wasn't pounding in my ears. Like I wasn't suddenly thinking about the way her lips had parted just slightly when I touched her. Like I wasn't already doomed. Because if I wasn't careful, If I let this thing between us keep growing—I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop.



## CHAPTER 6

Emily

I am here, having dinner, stirring the last of my syrup into a mess of leftover pancake crumbs, pretending like my heart hadn't just tripped over itself when he touched me. Which was stupid. Because it was nothing. A half-second. A fleeting moment. Yet here I was, feeling something—something unfamiliar and dangerous—curl in my chest like it belonged there. And I didn't know what to do with it. So I ignored it. I shoved it down, buried it beneath every other mess in my head, and focused on the fact that it was late. The kind of late that made the world feel unreal, like everything outside these diner walls didn't exist anymore.

I exhaled, dropping my fork onto my plate. "I should probably get going."

Liam looked up from his coffee, expression unreadable. "Yeah?"

I nodded, stretching my arms over my head. "Yeah. I have work—" I checked my phone. "Oh, great. Four hours."

Liam smirked. "So, basically, you're not sleeping."

I groaned. "Looks like it."

He shook his head. "You're gonna be a disaster tomorrow."

"I'm already a disaster."

Liam snorted, but his smirk faded slightly as he leaned back, tapping his fingers against his mug. "I'll walk you."

I frowned. "What?"

"Home," he said simply, like it wasn't a big deal. Like it didn't mean anything.

"It's late."

I should've told him no. Should've said I was fine.

But the truth was— I wasn't sure I wanted to be alone just yet.

So I just nodded, sliding out of the booth. "Alright, brick wall. Let's go."

---

The walk back was quieter than before. Not tense—just different. Like something between us had shifted, but neither of us wanted to acknowledge it. The night air was colder now, the kind that seeped through your sleeves and made you shiver. I crossed my arms, trying to trap some warmth.

Liam noticed. Of course, he did.

Without a word, he shrugged off his jacket and draped it over my shoulders. I froze. It was warm.

Not just from the fabric, but from him. The scent of coffee and something sharp, something Liam, surrounded me, sinking into my skin.

I blinked up at him. "What are you—"

"Just wear it." His tone was gruff, like he didn't want to talk about it.

I hesitated. "But aren't you—"

"Emily."

My stomach flipped. It was the way he said it. Firm, but quiet. Unassuming. Like my name meant something in his mouth. Like I meant something. And that was a dangerous thought. So I just

swallowed and pulled the jacket tighter around me, pretending I didn't notice the way it felt like a second skin

We walked in silence for a while.

Then, quietly—

“Do you think you'll regret it?”

I glanced at him. “Regret what?”

“Coming tonight.”

I hesitated, thinking about that moment in my kitchen—the hesitation, the fear, the overwhelming weight of it all.

And now, here. This. Him.

I exhaled. “No.”

Liam didn't say anything. But his jaw twitched, and his hands curled into fists in his pockets like my answer did something to him.

I almost asked why. But then— We reached my building. And suddenly, I had no idea how to end this night. Because I should just say thanks and go inside. I should turn around, close the door, and pretend like tonight hadn't changed something between us.

But instead—

I just stood there. And so did he.

The air between us felt charged, like something was waiting to happen, but neither of us knew what.

Liam shifted on his feet, glancing at the ground. “Well.”

I bit my lip. “Yeah.”

A beat of silence. Then—

“You gonna be okay?”

It was such a simple question. But something about the way he asked it—soft, careful, like he actually wanted to know—made my chest ache.

I forced a smirk. “Please. I’m a hurricane, remember?”

He huffed out a quiet laugh, but there was something else in his expression—something almost... fond.

And it was dangerous. Because I could handle Liam when he was sarcastic, when he was distant and unreadable and impossible to pin down. But this? This quiet, almost gentle version of him? That was dangerous. So, before I could do something stupid— Before I could let this feeling get any worse—

I stepped back, gripping the edges of his jacket. “I’ll, uh—I’ll give this back later.”

Liam just nodded. “Yeah.”

Another pause. Then, finally, I forced myself to turn away, walking toward my door.

But before I could reach it—

“Emily.”

I stopped. Didn’t turn around. Just waited.

Liam exhaled. “Get some sleep.”

I swallowed. “Yeah.”

And then I stepped inside. Closed the door behind me. And leaned against it, heart pounding like I had just made a mistake. Because suddenly— I wasn’t sure I wanted to stay unstuck from him. I didn’t move. Not right away. I just stood there, back pressed against the door, my fingers curled into the fabric of Liam’s jacket like it was the only thing keeping me upright. Like it was the only thing real in this moment. Because my mind—my stupid, reckless, traitorous mind—was still outside with him. Still standing in that quiet space between us. Still caught in the way he had looked at me—like I was something to figure out, something worth seeing. And I hated it. I hated that he made me feel this way. Because Liam wasn’t supposed to matter. Not to me. Not like this. He was supposed to be the same arrogant, untouchable guy I had

spent so long rolling my eyes at. The same guy who never let anything get too close, too deep.

But tonight—

Tonight had shattered all of that. Tonight, he had stayed. And worse?

So had I. I swallowed hard, shoving the jacket off my shoulders and tossing it onto the nearest chair like that would somehow get rid of him. Like it would stop the way my skin still burned where he had touched me. His thumb against my lip. The way my breath had caught. The way everything between us had gone still.

God.

I pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes, exhaling sharply. This wasn't supposed to happen.

I wasn't supposed to be sitting in a diner at 3 a.m., laughing with Liam. I wasn't supposed to be standing in my apartment, heart racing over something as small as a stupid jacket and a careful question. And I definitely, definitely wasn't supposed to be thinking about what would've happened if I hadn't walked away.

If I had just—

Stayed outside a little longer. Looked at him a little longer. Let whatever had been hanging between us settle, let it become something. I clenched my jaw, shaking my head. No. I couldn't do this. Not with him. Because I knew how this went. I knew what happened when you let people in. You let them see you. Let them know you. And then, eventually, they left. And I had spent too long learning how to survive being left.

So I wasn't going to let myself want Liam.

I wasn't going to let myself need him.

No matter how much tonight made me feel like I already did.





## CHAPTER 7

Liam

I told myself I wouldn't think about her. Told myself I'd go home, crash for a few hours, and wake up like tonight hadn't happened. Like I hadn't spent half the night walking beside her, listening to her ramble about fake identities and burning down bakeries. Like I hadn't reached across the table and wiped syrup off her lip, feeling the way she went still beneath my touch. Like I hadn't stood outside her building for way too long afterward, staring up at her window like a complete idiot.

Yeah. I told myself I wouldn't think about her.

But what am I doing? I found myself still standing outside Emily's building. Still looking up at the window I knew was hers. And I hated that. Hated that I wasn't the kind of guy who did things like this—who stood under streetlights like some lovesick idiot, thinking about a girl who was probably already trying to forget I was ever there. Because that's what Emily would do. She'd wake up tomorrow and pretend tonight didn't mean anything.

And I—

I should do the same.

Except, when she had turned to leave earlier—when she had stood in front of her door, hesitating just long enough to make me think she wanted to say something else—something had twisted in my chest.

Something sharp. Something that made me want to stop her. To tell her—

What?

That I didn't want this to be the last time we sat in a shitty diner at three in the morning? That I didn't want her to look at me like she was afraid of wanting to stay? That I was already past the point of stopping this thing between us, whatever the hell it was? I exhaled, running a hand through my hair.

Jesus.

I needed to get my shit together. With one last glance at her window, I turned, stuffing my hands into my pockets as I walked away. I kept walking, but my mind was already somewhere else. Somewhere further back. Somewhere I had no business going. Because as much as I wanted to pretend tonight was the first time Emily had gotten under my skin—It wasn't. And I hated that. Because she had always been there, hadn't she? Since college. Since the first time she had looked at me with that sharp, knowing gaze, like she could see straight through my bullshit. I could still remember it.

Three years ago.

It was late—too late to be in the library, too late to be anywhere except asleep. But there I was, slouched in a chair, skimming through notes I wasn't really reading. And then—

A chair scraped against the floor across from me. I looked up. And there she was. Emily Carter, dropping her bag onto the table, flipping open a book like she hadn't just invaded my space. I raised an eyebrow. "There are literally a dozen other tables."

She didn't even glance up. "Yeah, but this one has the best light."

Bullshit. But I didn't call her on it.

Instead, I leaned back, crossing my arms. "What, you following me now?"

She snorted. “Right. Because that’s exactly how I want to spend my Friday night.”

I smirked. “You sure? Maybe you’ve got a thing for me.”

That made her look up. And when she did, her eyes were sharp. Amused.

“If by ‘thing,’ you mean an undying urge to shove you off a cliff, then yeah. Maybe.”

I chuckled under my breath, shaking my head. That was the thing about Emily. She never backed down.

Most people avoided me. Thought I was too closed off, too uninterested, too much trouble. But not her.

She had this way of shoving herself into my space, of making herself seen. And no matter how much pretended not to care— I noticed her. Always. Even back then.

“You gonna keep staring, or are you actually gonna study?” she had asked, eyebrow raised.

I had smirked. “Why? Am I distracting you?”

Emily had just rolled her eyes, muttering something under her breath as she went back to her book. And me? I had watched her for just a second too long before forcing myself to look away. Just like I was doing now. Standing in the middle of an empty street, shaking my head at myself, because Jesus.

I should’ve known even then. I should’ve known she was always going to be a problem.



## CHAPTER 8

Emily

I woke up way later than I should have. Sunlight streamed through my window, too bright, too intrusive, like it knew I had been out late doing something I probably shouldn't have. Or, more accurately—

Walking around the city with Liam at an ungodly hour for no reason at all. I groaned, rolling onto my stomach, burying my face in my pillow. What the hell was that last night? Because it wasn't normal.

It wasn't just two people who happened to run into each other and decided to kill time. It wasn't casual. It was something. Something I didn't have the energy to define right now. I reached blindly for my phone, cracking one eye open to check the time.

11:27 AM.

Shit. I had a day to start. Responsibilities. A whole list of things that had absolutely nothing to do with Liam or his annoyingly familiar smirk or the way his voice sounded at two in the morning when the world was quiet and it was just the two of us.

Get it together, Emily.

With a deep breath, I forced myself up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes as I scrolled through my notifications. A few missed messages. Some emails. A reminder about a deadline I was definitely ignoring. And then—

One new text. From him.

Liam: Still alive?

I stared at it for a second longer than necessary, my brain trying to decide how much effort I wanted to put into pretending I wasn't affected.

Then, finally—

Me: Barely. You ruin people's sleep schedules, you know that?

His reply was instant.

Liam: Not my fault you stayed out with me.

I rolled my eyes, but my lips twitched.

Me: Right. I forgot you have mind control powers and forced me to walk with you.

Liam: Exactly.

I bit my lip, exhaling through my nose. This was easy. Too easy. Like last night hadn't been anything unusual. Like we hadn't stood too close, hadn't walked for hours just talking about nothing and everything. Like I hadn't felt something whenever our hands almost brushed. Like I wasn't thinking. about it now. I shook my head, forcing myself out of bed. I needed coffee. A shower. A reset.

But as I stood in front of my mirror, brushing my teeth, my phone buzzed again.

I reached for it, half expecting another sarcastic remark.

But instead—

Liam: Wanna get coffee?

I froze.

Coffee. With him. In broad daylight. Where we'd have to actually see each other without the safety of shadows and 3 AM distractions.

I hesitated.

And then, before I could think myself out of it—

Me: What, right now?

Liam: Unless you're too scared.

I narrowed my eyes at the screen.

Me: I hate you.

Liam: I'll meet you in 20.

I groaned, tossing my phone onto my bed. This was a bad idea. But apparently, I was doing it anyway.

I stared at my closet like it personally offended me. Because, really—what the hell was I supposed to wear for this? It wasn't a date. Obviously. It was just coffee. With Liam. Who I definitely wasn't overthinking. At all. I crossed my arms, shifting my weight from foot to foot. I could wear something casual. Effortless. Like I hadn't spent the last ten minutes staring into the abyss of my wardrobe.

Jeans? A sweater? No. Too safe.

A dress? Absolutely not.

A hoodie? Too lazy.

I groaned, running a hand through my hair. Why was this so difficult? It was Liam. The same Liam who used to roll his eyes at me in college, who made it his life's mission to get under my skin. The same Liam who smirked like he knew exactly what I was thinking—

And okay. Maybe that was the problem. Because if I showed up looking like a disaster, he'd definitely comment on it. And if I looked too put together, he'd notice that too.

God.

I grabbed a plain white top, a pair of jeans, and a jacket, throwing them on before I could change my mind. Simple. Normal. Something I'd wear any other day. I glanced in the mirror. Not bad. Not obvious. I took one last look in the mirror, adjusted my jacket, and snapped a quick selfie.

Nothing too obvious—just a casual , Hey, look, I exist and I'm leaving the house kind of picture.

Then I opened the group chat.

Emily: Going for coffee with Mr. Liam himself. Pray for me. ☕

I hit send.

Immediately, the chat blew up.

Ruby: EXCUSE ME??

Dave: Mr. Liam? Since when does he get a title?

Nate: You're willingly hanging out with Liam? Are you okay? Blink twice if he's holding you hostage.

Sam: I knew this day would come. I just thought there'd be more explosions involved.

I rolled my eyes, shoving my phone into my bag as I grabbed my keys. This is why I shouldn't tell them things. But before I could leave, my phone buzzed again.

Ruby: Wait. Outfit check. Send another selfie.

I hesitated. Because if I sent another one, she'd know I put effort into this.

I ignored the message. Big mistake.

Ruby: EMILY.

Ruby: Picture. Now.

Dave: She's stalling. That means she looks good.

Nate: Oh no. She cares.

Sam: Rest in peace, Emily. It was nice knowing you.

I groaned and snapped another selfie—this time a reluctant, please shut up kind of selfie—before sending it. Ruby's response was immediate.

Ruby: Oh, you're SCREWED.

Dave: Oh yeah. She's screwed.

Nate: Godspeed, soldier.

Sam: Tell Liam we said hi. And also that if he breaks your heart, we break his kneecaps.

I sighed, shaking my head as I stepped outside. Because they were wrong. I wasn't screwed.

This wasn't a thing.

~

I wasn't screwed. At least, that's what I kept telling myself as I locked my door behind me and headed down the stairs. It was just coffee. I repeated that like a mantra in my head. Just. Coffee. As I walked, the streets were bustling with the usual morning chaos, but my mind couldn't seem to settle. The thought of seeing Liam outside the blur of nighttime—of having an actual, daylight conversation with him—felt different. More... exposed. I was starting to wonder if I had made a mistake when my phone buzzed.

Liam: Where you at?

I glanced at the message, then sighed, resisting the urge to overthink the simple text.

Me: On my way. Don't get too comfortable.

Liam: I'm always comfortable. But okay, I'll wait for you.

Me: You better. I'm not responsible for your lack of patience.

When I walked in, Liam was standing by the window, his figure outlined against the soft light filtering through. He was leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed, looking entirely too comfortable in that effortlessly cool way. There was something magnetic about him, something that made you look twice, and it wasn't just because of the



way his jawline caught the sunlight or how the sleeves of his jacket were rolled up just enough to reveal the tattoos on his forearms. No, it was the way he carried himself. The kind of confidence that made you wonder what kind of stories he kept hidden behind those eyes. He had this quiet energy, like he didn't need to say much to have people notice him. And it didn't hurt that other girls in the coffee shop were definitely noticing him. I could see the way a couple of them glanced his way as I walked in, their eyes flicking from him to their coffee cups and back, maybe wondering if they were imagining that he looked just a little too perfect.

I could feel the heat creeping up my neck, like I was suddenly aware of everything around me. I tried not to stare as I walked past him, but I could still feel his eyes on me, even when I pretended to focus on ordering my coffee. I wasn't one to get flustered—really, I wasn't—but Liam had this annoying way of making me feel like I was always a little off balance, like I never quite knew where I stood.

I shifted my weight, unsure how to act, and pushed through the awkwardness.

"Late as usual," he teased, his voice low, like he was trying not to draw too much attention.

I rolled my eyes, even though I couldn't keep the smile off my face. "It's not like you're early," I shot back.

Liam let out a quiet laugh, leaning forward slightly, his eyes sparkling with that familiar smirk. It was one of those moments where the tension between us felt tangible, thick enough to cut through. My heart was doing this weird little flip in my chest, but I refused to acknowledge it.

"Touché," he said, raising an eyebrow. "But I was getting used to your punctuality."

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to mask the way my skin felt too warm in the air-conditioned café. "Don't flatter yourself," I replied, shifting in my seat. But as I sat down, I realized our legs were touching—just barely.

A quiet jolt ran through me, but I quickly leaned back in my chair, trying to act like it didn't matter. It wasn't like we were really touching, anyway. Just... a tiny little brush. I tried to ignore the way my pulse had quickened, focusing instead on the menu in front of me as if deciding between a latte or a cappuccino would somehow distract me from the mess of thoughts swirling in my head. But of course, it didn't work. It never worked when I was with him. Every time he glanced at me, the weight of it felt like an undercurrent, pulling at me without me even realizing it. His gaze wasn't just the usual Liam stare—it was something more... searching. Like he was trying to figure something out, maybe something about me. And I hated how I could feel him so deeply, how I could sense every shift in his body language. Like he was trying to hide something, or worse, like he didn't even realize he was doing it. Liam was still watching me, his smirk never fully disappearing, and I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking.

I cleared my throat, trying to pretend none of this was affecting me. "So," I said, forcing myself to meet his eyes, "what's the plan for today, Mr. I-Just-Woke-Up-And-Texted-Me?" I raised an eyebrow in mock challenge, knowing full well that no matter how much I tried to hide it, the thought of him texting me had already made my heart race for reasons I didn't want to admit.

Liam leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the coffee cup, eyes still fixed on me with that slightly amused look he always seemed to wear.

"Well, Miss I-Wake-Up-Late," he said, a playful edge to his voice. "I was thinking we could start with figuring out how someone can stay up all night with me and still show up looking like they've been awake for hours."

I shot him a look, raising an eyebrow. "I have my secrets," I replied, feigning innocence. "Like how I was awake way earlier than you. Just, you know, choosing to ignore my phone and not drag myself out of bed like some people."

"Must be nice to have the luxury of ignoring texts," he teased, leaning in just slightly, as if he couldn't help himself.

Liam leaned forward a little more, his expression softening slightly, as if the usual teasing edge had been replaced by something more genuine, more concerned. His gaze held mine, and for a moment, I forgot to breathe.

"Okay, serious talk," he said, his voice taking on a different tone, quieter now. "How have you been holding up?" He paused, his eyes searching my face. "Did you get enough sleep? I mean, after... after the night? After your father's—" He hesitated, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his face. "I just wanted to check up on you. That's why... I asked you to come."

I blinked, the weight of his words hitting me harder than I expected. The question, so simple, so direct, had a depth I wasn't prepared for. I hadn't expected him to be the one to bring it up—especially not here, not now, in the middle of this weird, complicated... whatever this was between us.

"You don't have to worry about me," I said, but even to my own ears, the words didn't sound convincing. I cleared my throat, forcing my voice to sound steady. "I'm fine, really. It's not the first time. I'm used to it."

Liam didn't look convinced. His gaze didn't waver, and there was a softness in his eyes that made my chest tighten. "Emily," he said, his voice quieter now, almost a whisper. "You don't have to pretend with me."

I tried to push that feeling away, to convince myself it wasn't a big deal. He was just being Liam, the guy who was always on my case, always poking fun at me. But this? It made my chest tighten in a way I wasn't prepared for. I looked up, meeting his eyes again. There was no teasing in them, no smirk. Just... understanding. It was like he was asking for something more—something I wasn't sure I was ready to give.

But, somehow, I found myself saying it anyway. "I didn't get much sleep. Last night was... a lot." I hesitated, unsure if I should continue, but the

words were already slipping out before I could stop them. "It's been hard to sleep, honestly. Ever since my dad..." My voice trailed off, the words lingering in the air, thick and heavy.

Liam didn't look away, his eyes softening even more as he absorbed my words. There was an almost imperceptible pause before he shifted in his seat, a small sigh escaping him as if he'd been holding something back.

"You know," he started, his voice quieter now, like he was carefully choosing each word, "I get it. I really do." He rubbed the back of his neck, avoiding my gaze for a moment before looking back up at me. "I haven't been the best at... opening up. But sometimes, it's easier to keep things locked inside than to let anyone see what's really going on."

I furrowed my brow, intrigued despite myself. Liam, always the confident, charming guy, had never struck me as someone who had to deal with much beyond his usual playfulness. But here, in the middle of this strange conversation, something felt different. His walls were coming down, little by little, and I didn't know if I should be nervous or relieved.

"I get caught up in stuff, too," he continued, his voice low, like he was trying to figure out how to make sense of his own thoughts. "Like, I'll just push everything down until I can't anymore. Work, family stuff, life... all of it. And then it all piles up, and before I know it, I can't breathe." He paused, as if he was measuring his next words carefully. "But I keep going. You just keep going. Because, well, what else is there to do?"

I sat there, letting his words sink in. There was a rawness to them, an honesty that I didn't expect from him. I hadn't known what to expect from Liam—annoying, cocky, always on the edge of making a sarcastic remark. But this? This was different. This was a side of him I hadn't seen before.

"How do you even deal with it?" I asked quietly, leaning in slightly, not sure if I should even be asking. "All of that... on top of everything else?"

Liam gave a short, dry laugh, but there was no humor in it. "I don't know if I do," he said, running a hand through his hair. "I guess... you just kind of numb it. Or distract yourself. Pretend like it's not a big deal. But it always is. It's just... easier to let it build up than to admit it's really affecting you."

I nodded slowly, feeling a strange sense of connection in his vulnerability. The walls between us had come down, and though it felt fragile, it was somehow comforting to hear that we both had our own struggles, even if we hadn't talked about them until now.

"I don't really let people in, you know? I keep my distance, and I think that's why I don't have to deal with much of this stuff. But then, it gets harder to be around anyone, and you're left... alone with your own thoughts. And that sucks, honestly."

There was so much more beneath the surface, and I could feel myself starting to understand him in a way I hadn't before.

"I'm not good at this, by the way," he said, his voice self-deprecating now, his usual cocky tone replaced by something a little more uncertain. "The talking about feelings thing. I'm not sure how this is supposed to work." He gave me a small, almost sheepish smile, his eyes flicking toward mine. "But I guess... if you ever need someone who gets it, I'm here, Sophia."

"Oh God, don't embarrass me by calling me that," I muttered, trying to hide behind my mug like it could shield me from the sudden rush of warmth flooding my face.

Liam's grin only widened. "That's cute. You're blushing," he said, his voice dropping to that soft, teasing tone.

I blinked at him, my heart suddenly doing gymnastics in my chest. "What? No, I'm not!" I practically choked on my coffee. "You must be dreaming, Sir."

Liam smirked, resting his chin on his hand as he watched me with blatant amusement. "Right, my mistake. It must be the lighting."

I scowled at him, mostly to cover up the way my entire body felt like it was heating up from the inside out. "You're impossible."

"And yet, here you are, having coffee with me in broad daylight. Almost like you enjoy my company."

I scoffed, stirring my coffee even though it didn't need stirring. "Don't flatter yourself, Mr. Mind-Control-Powers."

Liam chuckled, tapping his fingers against his cup in an easy rhythm. "You know," he mused, "I think this might be the first time we've done something normal together."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." He tilted his head slightly, as if studying me. "We met under... less-than-friendly circumstances. Then there was college, where we made it our mission to annoy the hell out of each other. And now—" He gestured between us. "This. Sitting in a café. Talking like we're... I don't know."

Something about the way he said the word made my stomach twist. I wasn't sure if it was because it sounded wrong or because it sounded too right.

"like we're?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Liam opened his mouth like he was about to say something—something important, maybe. Something life-changing, groundbreaking, earth-shattering—

And then she appears.

A woman walked up, all confidence and bright red lipstick, her heels clicking against the floor like they had their own theme song. She was tall, with sleek black hair that curled at the ends, and she wore a dress so fitted I was convinced she had been sewn into it. Her nails were perfectly manicured, painted the same shade as her lips, and the way she smiled at Liam? Yeah, I wanted to shove her into the nearest trash can.

“Oh, hi,” she said, drawing out the word as she rested a hand on Liam’s arm like he was a goddamn museum exhibit. “I couldn’t help but notice you from across the room.”

Liam blinked, looking mildly confused, then glanced at me like did you notice me from across the room? I did. I just wasn’t about to say it.

He cleared his throat. “Uh, thanks?”

Red Lipstick Lady giggled—actually giggled. Like a whole Barbie doll come to life. “You just look so familiar. Have we met before?”

I rolled my eyes so hard I saw my past mistakes. Classic move. Oh, have we met before? Oh, you just seem so familiar! Girl, please. Try harder.

“I don’t think so,” Liam said, shifting slightly, but she was still holding onto his arm.

“Really?” She tilted her head, biting her lip. “You sure? Because I swear I’d remember a face like yours.”

Oh, for the love of—

I coughed, loudly. She didn’t even glance at me. Alright. That’s how we’re playing this. Liam hesitated, clearly unsure of how to respond, and in that tiny, minuscule pause—where he should’ve been shoving her hand off his arm and reminding her that I was right here—she tightened her grip.

Like she had any right.

Like she belonged there.

My fingers curled around my drink, knuckles white. I could hear my own heartbeat pounding in my ears, drowning out whatever sugary-sweet nonsense she was spewing.

“Oh, you’re so charming,” she purred, leaning in closer. Too close. “I just love a guy with a little mystery.”

Liam let out an awkward chuckle, glancing at me again.

Liam chuckled—chuckled—like this whole situation was just so amusing for him. I hated that expression.

Because it meant he wasn't immediately shutting her down. It meant he was considering this. And that? That was unacceptable. I took a slow, deliberate sip of my drink before setting it down with just enough force to make a sharp clack against the table. Finally, I spoke, voice sickly sweet.

"I love your lipstick."

Red Lipstick Lady blinked, finally acknowledging my existence. "Oh! Thank you!" She beamed, probably assuming I was admiring her.

I tilted my head, offering her my best fake smile. "It must be so nice to have a signature look. You know, something consistent. Because some of us actually enjoy standing out instead of looking like every other desperate woman in a five-mile radius."

Liam choked on his drink.

Her smile faltered. "Excuse me?"

"Oh," I gasped, pressing a hand to my chest like I had just realized what I'd said. "Did that sound rude? My bad. It's just—you must hear the same compliments all the time, right? I mean, the hair, the dress, the whole... thing. It's so... predictable."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and I almost laughed at the way her grip on Liam finally loosened. He cleared his throat, looking like he wanted to intervene before I could commit a full-scale homicide, but I wasn't done.

I leaned forward slightly, resting my chin on my hand, my gaze locking onto hers.

"It's just... I get it. Really. You see a guy like this"—I motioned toward Liam lazily, ignoring his raised eyebrow—"and you think, Wow, I should shoot my shot. But sweetheart... you missed."

She definitely didn't like that. Liam was staring at me now, his smirk twitching at the edges, like he was enjoying this. Of course he was.



Red Lipstick Lady's smile turned brittle.

"Well. I should go."

"Oh, don't rush off on my account," I said, still grinning. "It was so nice watching you try."

She let out a sharp little huff, muttered something under her breath, and turned on her heel, striding away with all the grace of a woman who definitely wasn't fuming inside. I watched her go, feeling immensely satisfied. Then, slowly, I turned back to Liam—who was full-on grinning now.

Liam was full-on grinning now, the kind of grin that made me want to simultaneously slap it off his face and—well, other things that I was too proud to admit. He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, eyes glittering with way too much amusement. "That," he said, voice thick with laughter, "was incredible."

I picked up my drink again, taking a casual sip. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Liam let out a low chuckle, shaking his head. "Oh, no. Don't play innocent now. You were practically growling at her."

I scoffed. "I was not."

"You so were." He leaned forward again, resting his elbows on the table. "I've never seen someone verbally rip another person apart with so much grace. It was kinda hot, actually."

I nearly choked on my drink. "You're insufferable."

"And you," he drawled, "are jealous."

I gave him a deadpan look. "Oh, please."

"Emily." He dragged out my name, his smirk widening. "You insulted her entire existence. You called her predictable. You mocked her lipstick. You basically told her to pack it up and go home before she embarrasses herself any further."

I shrugged, feigning boredom. "I was just being honest."

"Uh-huh." He tapped a finger against his chin, eyes never leaving mine. "You know, if you wanted to claim me, you could've just said so."

I blinked. "Claim you?"

"Yeah." He gave me a slow, teasing once-over, like he was enjoying my flustered state way too much. "I mean, that's what it looked like. All that glaring? The snarky little digs? The way you were this close to baring your teeth at her?" He let out a soft whistle. "Possessive much?"

I clenched my jaw. "I was not being possessive."

He arched an eyebrow. "You wanted to throw her into a trash can."

"Because she was annoying."

He tilted his head, a knowing look in his eyes. "Or because she was flirting with me."

I exhaled sharply, gripping my glass tighter. "You liked that, didn't you?"

His smirk was instant. "Immensely."

I huffed, leaning back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. "I don't care if some random woman flirts with you."

"Sure," he said, completely unconvinced.

"I don't."

"Mhm."

"I don't."

His smirk widened. "Then why are your cheeks red?"

I froze. Damn it.

Liam laughed, low and smug, and I hated how much I liked the sound of it. "You know," he mused, leaning in, his voice dropping just slightly, "if you wanted my attention, you already had it."

My breath hitched. He grinned. He knew what he was doing. I rolled my eyes, shoving back the heat creeping up my neck. "You're the worst."

He placed a hand over his chest, feigning hurt. "And yet, here you are, still sitting with me."

I narrowed my eyes. "Give me a reason not to leave."

Liam leaned even closer, his voice dipping into something lower, something dangerous.

"I like when you get jealous."

I sucked in a breath. I hated him. I also definitely wanted to kiss him.

But he didn't need to know that.



## CHAPTER 9

Liam

The guy across from me had been talking for the past ten minutes about something—business, stocks, some big opportunity that was apparently life-changing—but my brain had latched onto something far more interesting. Or rather, someone far more interesting. She wasn't even here. And that was the problem. I exhaled, halflistening as I swirled the drink in my hand, watching the ice melt in the dim light. My body was here, in this over-crowded bar with half-drunk businessmen, but my mind? It was still stuck on her. Emily. Her sharp tongue, her fiery eyes, the way she'd glared at me the last time we were here—like she wanted to kill me and kiss me in the same breath. The way her hand had gripped my arm, as if she had any right to be possessive over me. As if she wasn't herself—the most infuriating, stubborn woman I'd ever met.

And yet, here I was. Thinking about her.

"Liam?"

I blinked. The guy—Derek? David?—was staring at me expectantly.

"Huh?"

He sighed. "Dude, are you even listening?"

I glanced at my watch, my patience thinning. "Not really."

He huffed, muttered something about wasted time, and got up to leave.

Good. I had better things to do. I tossed some cash onto the table and got up, ignoring the way the bartender raised an eyebrow at my abrupt exit. The cold night air hit me as I stepped outside, but it wasn't enough to clear my head. Nothing was.

I checked my phone. No texts from her. Not that I expected one. Fine. I was up for the challenge.

It wasn't even late yet—not really—but she wasn't expecting me. I smirked to myself as I walked down the street, already picturing the look on her face when she opened the door. Annoyed. Maybe a little exasperated. But she wouldn't shut the door in my face. No, she'd let me in, even if it was just to argue, even if it was just to glare at me from across the room. And that was enough. By the time I reached her apartment building, I was impatient, my fingers tapping against my thigh as I waited for the elevator. I knew she was home. Lights on, curtains slightly parted. I could picture her inside—curled up with a book, maybe, or pacing the living room with that frustrated expression she always had when she was thinking too much. The elevator doors slid open, and I stepped inside, pressing the button for her floor.

Would she be surprised?

Would she roll her eyes and tell me to go home?

I hoped so.

I liked it when she pushed back. It made it more fun when she inevitably caved. When I reached her door, I knocked twice and leaned against the frame, waiting. Emily wasn't the type to make things easy. If she was thinking about me, she sure as hell wouldn't admit it. If she missed me, I'd have to drag that confession out of her. I knocked once. Then again. A second later, I heard muffled cursing before the door flew open.

And I lost it.

I actually doubled over, laughter spilling out before I could stop it.

Because Emily—sharp-tongued, fire-eyed, always put together Emily—was standing there in the most ridiculous pajamas I had ever seen. Bright

pink. With tiny, angry cartoon cats all over them. And to make it even better, her hair was an absolute mess, sticking up in places like she had just rolled out of bed, and her socks? Mismatched. One was blue, the other had tiny dinosaurs on it.

She blinked at me, clearly not expecting me, of all people, to be standing at her door in the middle of the night. And then, of course, her expression darkened.

“What,” she deadpanned.

I smirked, still grinning. “Nice outfit, sweetheart.”

Her jaw tightened. “I swear to God, if you say one more word—”

“Oh, no. Please. Continue.” I gestured to her pajamas. “I just—I have so many questions. Did you buy these? Were they a gift? Do you always dress like an angry kindergarten student before bed?”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “Liam.”

That was usually my cue to stop.

So, naturally, I didn’t.

“I mean, the cat print is a choice, but the dinosaurs? Now that’s an interesting touch.” I leaned against the doorframe, smirking. “Should I expect you to start roaring at me next?”

She exhaled sharply, gripping the edge of the door like she was genuinely debating whether or not to slam it in my face. I grinned wider.

She let out a slow, controlled breath, tilting her head. “Are you done?”

I pretended to think about it. “Not even close.”

Her fingers twitched like she wanted to strangle me. I found it adorable.

“Why are you here, Liam?” she finally asked, voice flat, as if I had personally ruined her entire night just by existing.

I shrugged. “Felt like seeing you.”

She blinked, thrown for half a second before regaining her glare. "No, you felt like annoying me. Big difference."

I smirked. "Is that what you think?"

"I know it," she snapped, but her arms were still crossed, her weight shifting slightly like she was debating whether to let me in or not.

That was my opening. I took a step forward, into her space, just enough that she had to tilt her chin to hold my gaze. She didn't step back. Didn't move away. Interesting.

"You gonna invite me in, sweetheart?" I murmured, watching her expression closely.

Her eyes flickered, lips pressing together. She hated when I called her that. Or maybe she just hated that she liked it. After a long pause, she exhaled through her nose, then—without a word—turned and walked inside, leaving the door open behind her. I grinned. Victory. Stepping inside, I shut the door behind me, taking my time as I looked around. Same apartment as always, same books, same slightly messy couch. Except for one thing. There was a blanket on the floor, next to an open book, and a half-eaten bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

I turned to her, raising an eyebrow. "Movie night?"

She scoffed, plopping onto the couch. "No. I was just reading. Not all of us spend our nights getting distracted by people who aren't even there."

I smirked, dropping onto the couch beside her. "Who said I was distracted?"

She shot me a look. "You showed up at my apartment unannounced. Clearly, something was on your mind."

I leaned back, resting my arm over the back of the couch. "Maybe I just wanted to see how much you'd missed me."

She let out an actual laugh. Sharp. Disbelieving. "Oh, please."

I tilted my head. "You sure about that?"

She rolled her eyes. "More than sure."

I hummed, dragging my gaze over her, from the ridiculous pajamas to the way she kept her arms stubbornly crossed.

"You could just admit it, you know," I murmured. "That you like having me around."

She scoffed. "I tolerate you at best."

I grinned, leaning in slightly, dropping my voice just enough. "Then why'd you let me in?"

She stilled.

For a split second—just a second—her breath hitched, so soft I might've imagined it. But I didn't. Because I saw it—the way her fingers curled slightly against the fabric of her pajama pants, the way her lips parted just a fraction too long before she shut them again, like she'd almost let something slip.

And then, just as quickly, she covered it up, masking the moment with a scoff so sharp it could cut glass. "Because if I didn't let you in, you'd just keep knocking and annoying my neighbors."

I chuckled, low and deliberate, watching her. "Mm-hm."

Her eyes flicked to the side, like she was this close to throwing me out. Instead, she picked up her book, flipping it open with a dramatic rustle of pages. "You can sit here and entertain yourself, or you can leave. Your choice."

I watched her, utterly amused, because God, she was fun. The way she tried so hard to act unaffected. The way she straightened her back and crossed her legs, like that would somehow make me forget that she was just pressed up against me at the door, heat still lingering between us.

It was adorable, really. I stretched out on her couch like I owned the place, watching as she flipped through her book with forced focus. She was pretending to read, but I knew better. Knew that she was painfully



aware of me sitting there, of my presence filling her space like I belonged in it. And I did.

Her eyes darted to the side, just for a second, before snapping back to the page like she hadn't just checked to see if I was still watching her. I smirked. Busted.

"You know," I drawled, stretching my arms behind my head, "I could eat."

Her fingers twitched on the book spine. "Then go home and eat."

I grinned. "Or... you could cook for me."

She let out an actual laugh—dry, unimpressed. "Yeah. That's not happening."

I made a show of sighing dramatically. "Wow. And here I thought we were friends."

She snapped the book shut, finally looking at me. "We're not."

I smirked. "Roommates, then?"

"Not even close."

"Acquaintances?"

"Try nemeses."

I laughed, because God, she was ridiculous. "Fine, nemesis, how about you cook me something before I wither away on your couch?"

She rolled her eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck, but after a beat of silence, she stood up with an exaggerated huff. "Fine. But only so you'll shut up."

"Aw, sweetheart, you do care."

She turned and pointed a finger at me, eyes sharp. "One more word, Liam, and I'm feeding you instant noodles with extra salt just to watch you suffer."

I held my hands up in mock surrender. "Noted."

Still grumbling under her breath, she stomped into the kitchen. I, of course, followed. Because if she was going to make me dinner, I was going to enjoy the show. Emily in the kitchen was... something else.

She moved like she had a personal vendetta against the ingredients, chopping vegetables like they'd personally wronged her, slamming pots onto the stove with just a little too much force. And somehow, she still made it look good.

I leaned against the counter, watching her. "So, what's on the menu, chef?"

She threw me a glare over her shoulder. "Poison, if you keep talking."

I grinned. "Bold of you to assume that'd stop me."

She muttered something about regretting all her life choices, but she didn't kick me out, so I knew she didn't really mind me being there. Minutes passed, filled with the sound of sizzling and the faint clatter of dishes. I watched her stir something in a pan, her brow furrowed, her lips slightly pursed in concentration. It was unfair how good she looked doing something so normal.

"You're staring," she said without turning around.

I smirked. "You're making me food. I'm allowed."

She let out a breath, shaking her head, but I didn't miss the way her fingers hesitated for just a second before she went back to stirring. Interesting.

A few more minutes passed before she finally turned and placed a plate in front of me.

"There," she said, crossing her arms. "Eat. Choke. I don't care."

I looked down at the food—pasta, steaming and perfectly made.

"Wow," I mused, twirling a forkful. "For someone who claims to hate me, you sure put in effort."

"Shut up and eat, Liam."

I did. And it was good. Too good.

I glanced up at her, suspicious. "Okay, why is this actually amazing?"

She rolled her eyes, picking up her own plate. "Because unlike you, I have skills."

I grinned. "Oh, I have skills, sweetheart. Just not the kind you've seen yet."

She choked on her bite, coughing violently as she grabbed her water. I smirked. Perfect.

After a long minute of her glaring at me between sips, she finally muttered, "I hate you."

I leaned in slightly, resting my chin on my palm.

"You really don't."

She huffed, stabbing at her food like it had personally offended her. But she didn't argue. And that? That was definitely a win. We ate in relative silence after that. Well, she did. I spent most of the time smirking at her, thoroughly enjoying the way she avoided looking at me like doing so would somehow make me disappear. It was cute. The way she tried so hard to act like my presence wasn't getting to her. Like she wasn't hyperaware of me sitting across from her, watching her every little move—the way her fingers curled around the fork, the way she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She was pretending I wasn't there. Which was hilarious. Because she had never been more aware of me in her life. When she finally set her fork down and stood, taking her plate to the sink, I followed. She stilled, her back straightening as she heard me step closer. Not touching. Not yet. Just there. Right behind her, close enough that the warmth of her skin reached me, even with the small space left between us.

"You're standing too close," she muttered, rinsing her plate.

I smirked, letting my breath fan against the side of her neck. "Am I?"

Her fingers twitched on the dish. I leaned in just a fraction more, letting the heat between us settle, simmer, waiting for her to break first.

She let out a slow, careful breath. "What do you want, Liam?"

You.

But I didn't say that.

Instead, I tilted my head slightly, watching the way she was gripping the edge of the sink like it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

"What if I just like being around you?" I murmured.

She scoffed, but it was weaker than usual, her voice betraying her. "Liar."

I smirked. "You always assume the worst of me."

"You give me the worst of you."

I hummed, considering that. "Not always."

She exhaled sharply. "Liam—"

But she didn't move. Didn't take a step away, didn't turn to shove me off.

She stayed. And I knew, right then, that she wanted this just as much as I did.

I reached forward, slowly, my fingers brushing over hers where they rested on the counter. She froze.

I felt it—the sharp inhale, the way her breath caught in her throat like she hadn't expected me to actually do it. And then, as if against her own will, her fingers curled, her pinky brushing against mine.

The softest touch. Barely there. But enough. Enough to set my whole damn body on fire. I let my hand linger, let my fingers trace lightly over the back of hers, testing, waiting—

And then she moved. Not away. But toward me. Just slightly. Just enough. Her shoulder barely grazing my chest, her head tilting just

enough for her breath to ghost over my collarbone. And I lost everything.

"Emily," I murmured, my voice lower, rougher.

She turned, finally looking up at me. And God—The way she was looking at me. Wide eyes, parted lips, like she had just realized something, like she had just now figured out the very thing I had known for months. That we had always been headed here. That this was always inevitable.

"Liam," she whispered, barely audible.

That was it. That was all I needed.

I reached up, fingers brushing over her cheek, barely there, a test—

She didn't pull away. Didn't stop me. Didn't move.

And then, slowly—so slowly I could feel every single second stretch between us—She was close enough to shove me. Close enough that if she swung, she'd probably land a decent hit. Not that she would. She wasn't that brave. Or maybe she just knew I'd enjoy it too much. Instead, she just exhaled sharply, like she was regretting every life decision that had led her to this moment. Like it physically pained her to exist in the same space as me.

Then, finally, she said, "Go home."

I grinned, leaning back against the counter. "You gonna make me?"

Her jaw clenched. "Don't tempt me."

I chuckled, grabbing my coat. "Alright, alright. I'll go."

She crossed her arms, watching me carefully, like she didn't trust that I actually would. Smart girl.

I strolled to the door, taking my time, because I knew she was still watching. And just before I stepped out, I glanced over my shoulder, smirking.

"Sweet dreams, sweetheart. Try not to dream about me too much."

Her response was immediate. A scowl. A glare. And a slipper, thrown directly at my head.

I dodged it with a laugh, slipping out the door before she could find something heavier to throw.

Yeah, I was definitely coming back.



## CHAPTER 10

Emily

I almost didn't notice it at first. The letter sat there on my kitchen counter, looking so out of place among the clutter of unopened bills, coffee-stained receipts, and half-eaten takeout containers that my brain refused to register it as something important. It wasn't in an envelope, no neat stamp or crisp edges to soften the blow. Just a single, creased sheet of paper, folded carefully in half, its presence eerily deliberate. And my name was scrawled across the front in bold, slashing letters. The sight of it sent a slow prickle down my spine. I wasn't sure why, but something about the handwriting—the way the letters curved slightly at the ends, as if the writer had been in a hurry yet still wanted to make a statement—made my stomach twist uncomfortably. My fingers hesitated before reaching for it. The paper felt oddly heavy in my hands, like it had soaked up the weight of the words written inside, words that were never meant to be taken lightly.

I unfolded it carefully, the creases smooth under my touch, and read the message.

\_You think you're safe. You're not. Walk carefully, little girl. Some debts don't stay buried forever.\_

I read it once. Twice. Again, as if my mind refused to accept the reality of those inked words staring back at me, so sharp they might as well have been carved into my skin.

What. The. Hell.

My pulse pounded in my ears, loud enough to drown out the distant hum of the fridge, the ticking of the old clock on the wall, the subtle creak of the apartment settling around me. I struggled to process the implications, my brain scrambling for an explanation, something logical to ground me in reality. Had someone broken in? No. The door had been locked when I got home, just like I'd left it. No signs of forced entry, no overturned furniture or shattered glass, no missing valuables. Nothing disturbed—except for the letter. Which left only one horrifying possibility.

Someone had been in my apartment before I locked up.

The thought settled in my stomach like a lead weight, cold and unrelenting. I swallowed hard, fingers trembling slightly as I forced myself to think. Who? Who would do this? Names flickered through my mind, but none fit. I didn't have enemies. Not real ones, at least. Sure, I had people who disliked me—Liam, before he decided to make my life even more complicated with his annoying flirtation routine, would have gladly tripped me in the hallway—but not like this. Not the kind of hatred that came wrapped in ominous threats and left its mark like a ghost lurking in the shadows.

And yet... there was one name. One person who had always warned me that safety was an illusion. That debts—especially the kind tied to blood—never really disappeared.

My father.

The last conversation I'd had with him clawed its way back from the depths of my memory, his voice sharp, cutting, even through the haze of time.

"You think you can run from this? From me? You're still my daughter, Emily. And one day, you'll realize what that means."

I shut my eyes, inhaling deeply, as if I could exhale the lingering shadows along with my breath. No. He was sick. He couldn't—But he didn't have



to. Not when he had people. Connections. My father's influence had always stretched beyond his physical limits, and if there was one thing he excelled at, it was making sure his presence was felt, even when his body could barely function without an oxygen mask.

I shook my head sharply, forcing the panic down, forcing my thoughts into order. There had to be another explanation. Someone else who had a grudge. Someone I hadn't considered yet. But no names came to mind. My stomach churned as I stared at the letter again, as if expecting the words to rearrange themselves into something less terrifying. They didn't. The warning stood unchanged, unwavering, like a dark promise etched in ink. I needed to act. To do something. But what?

Go to the police? Tell them someone left a slightly threatening note in my completely unbroken-into apartment? They'd probably shrug, pat me on the head, and tell me it was just a prank. That I was overreacting.

Call Liam?

The thought was almost laughable. What would he do? Make a sarcastic remark? Smirk his way through some half-baked promise to 'protect' me? No, thank you. I could handle this. I had to. But as I stood there, staring at those words, I couldn't shake the overwhelming sensation that I was being watched. That someone, somewhere, was waiting for my next move. I just wished I knew who. The letter felt heavier than paper should as I folded it back up, my fingers tightening around its edges. I forced myself to act, to move instead of standing there like a deer frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car.

First, I grabbed my phone and snapped a picture of the note. Evidence. Just in case. Then, I scanned my apartment, my eyes raking over every surface, every object, looking for anything—anything—out of place. But the more I looked, the more the walls seemed to press in on me, suffocating with the weight of unseen eyes. Nothing was missing. No open drawers. No muddy footprints. No shattered glass.

And yet, someone had been here.

A shiver crawled its way down my spine.

I moved to the window, yanking the curtains shut in one swift motion. The street outside was dark, only a few flickering streetlights illuminating the pavement below. I couldn't see anyone. No shadowy figures lingering beneath the glow of the lamps. But that didn't mean no one was there. I turned away, pressing my fingers to my temples. Think, Emily. Think. There was no way I was sleeping here tonight. Not with the words of that letter still clawing at my brain, making my skin prickle with unease.

But where could I go?

Liam's name flickered through my mind again, uninvited. I shoved it down just as fast. No way. Not unless I wanted to spend the night drowning in his cocky smirks and barely concealed concern. But that left me with limited options.

A hotel? Maybe. But paranoia would follow me no matter where I went.

Ruby? My best friend would let me crash, no questions asked. But explaining meant admitting I was scared, and I wasn't sure I was ready to do that.

I settled for the only thing that seemed reasonable—I grabbed my keys, threw on my jacket, and walked out, double-checking the lock behind me. The cold air outside bit at my skin, but it helped clear my mind. I slid into the driver's seat, locking the doors immediately, my hands clenching the steering wheel.

Where to? I hesitated.

Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled up a number I shouldn't have even considered calling.

It rang twice before he answered, his voice rough with sleep. "Didn't expect to hear from you at this hour."

I exhaled sharply. "Yeah, well. Something came up."

A pause. Then, his tone shifted, like he could sense something was off. “Emily?”

I stared at the letter crumpled in my hand, inked words burning into my skin.

“Liam... I need your help.”

Liam’s voice sharpened instantly. “Where are you?”

I swallowed, gripping the phone tighter. “In my car. Outside my apartment.”

“Stay there. I’m coming.”

The line went dead before I could protest. Typical Liam—direct, commanding, never leaving room for argument. I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse.

I sat in my car, my fingers drumming nervously against the steering wheel. The street was quiet, but I kept glancing at the rearview mirror, half-expecting to see a shadow move or headlights flare up behind me. Every small noise made my skin prickle with unease. The wind rustling through the trees. A distant siren wailing through the city. The faint hum of a car engine in the distance. Fifteen minutes later, a sleek black car pulled up beside mine. Liam stepped out, wearing a hoodie and joggers, his hair slightly tousled from sleep. Even in the dim light, his eyes locked onto mine with laser focus, scanning me from head to toe, as if searching for any signs of harm.

“What happened?” he asked, opening my door before I even had the chance to unbuckle my seatbelt.

I hesitated, then handed him the crumpled letter. He scanned it quickly, his jaw tightening. His fingers curled around the paper like he wanted to crush it into dust. When he looked back at me, his expression was unreadable, but I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Inside your apartment?”

I nodded. "Yeah. No sign of forced entry. Nothing missing. Just... this."

Liam exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. "This isn't some prank, Emily."

"You think I don't know that?" My voice wavered slightly, and I hated it.

He didn't say anything for a moment, just looked at me like he was calculating his next move. Then, with no warning, he reached over and pulled me into a brief, firm hug. It was unexpected, but I let myself lean into it, just for a second, allowing his warmth to seep through the chill that had settled into my bones.

Then he pulled back, his hands resting on my shoulders. "You're not staying there tonight."

I blinked. "Where am I supposed to go?"

"My place."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off with a look. "Emily, someone broke into your home and left you a threat. You're not spending the night alone."

I wanted to protest, to tell him I could handle myself, but the truth was, I wasn't sure I could. Not this time. The thought of going back into that apartment, alone, with the possibility of someone having been there—someone still watching—made my stomach turn.

"Fine," I muttered. "But only for tonight."

Liam smirked, but his eyes were still serious. "We'll see."

He opened the passenger door for me, waiting as I hesitated for a fraction of a second before slipping inside his car. It smelled like him—something clean and warm, with a hint of coffee and a scent I couldn't quite place but had come to associate with Liam. Safe. As he slid into the driver's seat and started the engine, I let out a slow breath, my body finally registering how exhausted I was. The weight of the night pressed down on me, but for the first time since finding that letter, I didn't feel

entirely alone. Liam drove in silence for a while, his grip on the wheel tight, his eyes flicking between the road and me every few minutes. I could feel his frustration simmering just beneath the surface, but he held it back, his concern outweighing his temper.

Finally, he spoke. "You're going to tell me everything. Every detail. No more holding back."

I nodded, staring out at the passing city lights. "I know."

The drive to Liam's apartment felt like it stretched on forever. The silence between us was thick, charged, but not uncomfortable. Every now and then, he glanced at me, his expression unreadable. He was thinking, processing, trying to piece everything together. I knew that look well. When we finally arrived, he parked in his usual spot and got out without a word. I followed him up the stairs to his unit, the familiar scent of his place wrapping around me as we stepped inside. It was neat, minimal, everything in its place—except for a pile of books on the coffee table and a half-finished cup of coffee in the sink.

Liam locked the door behind us and turned to face me. "Sit."

I raised an eyebrow. "You always this bossy?"

His lips twitched. "Only when necessary."

With a sigh, I sank onto his couch, rubbing my arms against the sudden chill. Liam disappeared into the kitchen and returned moments later with a blanket and a steaming cup of tea. He handed them both to me without a word, then sat across from me, his elbows on his knees, watching me closely.

"Talk," he said simply.

I took a slow sip of tea, gathering my thoughts. "I don't know where to start."

Liam leaned back, arms crossed. "Start with what you're not telling me."

My fingers tightened around the cup. “I don’t know who left that note. I don’t know what they mean by ‘debts.’ But... I think it might have something to do with my father.”

His jaw clenched. “Go on.”

I inhaled deeply. “My dad... he wasn’t exactly a good man. He had connections. Deals. Enemies. When I left, I thought I was leaving all of that behind. But what if I didn’t?”

Liam was quiet for a long moment. Then, finally, he exhaled. “Then we figure it out. Together.”

Something inside me shifted at his words. Relief. Fear. A strange kind of warmth.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “You don’t have to—”

“I know,” he interrupted. “But I’m going to.”

I stared at him, searching for some sign that he was joking, but there was only certainty in his gaze. Solid, unwavering certainty.

The weight on my chest loosened, just a little.

“Okay,” I whispered.

Liam nodded, running a hand through his hair. “First, we need to figure out how they got into your apartment. If someone left that letter inside, they had access to your place before you even locked up. You’re sure nothing else was touched?”

“Positive.”

He frowned. “That’s unsettling.”

“Tell me about it.”

Liam stood, pacing. “We need to assume they know your schedule. Maybe even know you personally.”

A shiver ran down my spine. “That’s not exactly comforting.”

"It's not supposed to be," he said grimly. "It means you need to stay somewhere else for a while."

I hesitated. "I—"

"No arguments," Liam cut in. "You're not staying alone. You can crash here."

I blinked. "You're serious?"

He gave me a look. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

I glanced around his apartment, at the neatness, the stark contrast to my own cluttered space. Staying here meant accepting help. Meant trusting him. But as I sat there, wrapped in his blanket, warmed by the tea he had made, I realized something.

I already did.

I cleared my throat. "Liam, are you sure? I don't want to impose. I mean, you've got your own life, your own space..."

He rolled his eyes, leaning back against the couch. "Yeah, and right now, my life includes making sure you don't get murdered in your sleep. So, forgive me if I'm not too concerned about my 'space.'"

I gave him a look. "Murdered in my sleep? Really?"

"What? You said it yourself—someone got into your apartment without breaking in. Left a creepy-ass note. Clearly, they're trying to scare you. And if they can get in once, they can get in again." His expression hardened. "I'm not taking chances."

I swallowed. He was right. As much as I hated feeling like some damsel in distress, I couldn't deny the fear curling in my gut.

Liam studied me for a moment, then sighed. "Look, I know this is a lot. But you're not dealing with it alone, okay?"

Something in my chest tightened. "Okay."

He nodded, satisfied. "Good. Now, let's figure out what the hell is going on. Who do you think would actually go through the trouble of sneaking into your place just to leave a note?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. Like I said, my dad had a lot of enemies, and I guess that means I might have inherited some by default. But if someone wanted to hurt me, wouldn't they have done more than just leave a warning?"

Liam tapped his fingers against his knee. "Maybe they want you scared first. Maybe they're waiting to see what you do."

"That's not exactly reassuring."

"Wasn't trying to be. I'm trying to be realistic. If this is about your father, then someone wants you to know they haven't forgotten."

I exhaled slowly, my mind racing. "Then what do we do?"

Liam smirked, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Simple. We don't play their game. We figure out who they are first. Before they make their next move."

I bit my lip, nerves twisting in my stomach. "And if they already have?"

Liam's gaze darkened. "Then we make sure they regret it."

~

The nightmare came out of nowhere. One moment, I was drifting in the warmth of sleep, and the next, I was trapped in the dark. It was endless, swallowing everything, pressing against my chest like a weight I couldn't lift. Then the whispers started.

A voice I didn't recognize, but somehow, deep down, I knew it was meant for me.

"You can't run forever."

Cold fingers brushed against my arm, and I jerked back, but there was nowhere to go. Shadows stretched, creeping toward me, reaching, grabbing. My breath came too fast, too uneven, my chest tightening like



I was being crushed from the inside. I wanted to scream, but my voice was gone. I was stuck. Helpless.

Then—

A loud noise. A shift. A hand shaking my shoulder. I gasped as my eyes flew open, my body jerking upright. My skin was damp with sweat, my heartbeat loud in my ears. It took me a second to remember where I was. Liam's apartment. The nightmare wasn't real. But my body didn't seem to care. I was still shaking when I felt warmth next to me. Strong arms wrapping around me, steady and sure. Liam.

"It's okay," he said, "You're okay."

I gripped his shirt without thinking, clinging to him like he was the only solid thing in the world. My breath was uneven, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to make it slow down. The fear was still inside me, wrapped around my ribs, making it hard to breathe. Liam didn't let go. He just held me, one hand on my back, the other resting lightly on the back of my head, his fingers threading into my hair. He didn't rush me, didn't tell me to calm down. He just stayed there, solid and real, while I tried to pull myself out of the lingering fear.

After a while, my breathing slowed. The shaking lessened. But I still couldn't bring myself to let go. I pressed my face against his chest, the steady sound of his heartbeat grounding me.

"You're safe," he murmured. "I promise."

I closed my eyes, focusing on his voice. It was warm, steady, something to hold onto. Liam's eyes were soft, searching mine as if looking for signs of the nightmare still lingering in my gaze. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch was gentle, almost hesitant.

After a few minutes, Liam shifted, pulling back just enough to look at me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I hesitated. "It was just... a nightmare."

His gaze softened. "Didn't feel like just a nightmare."

I swallowed. He was right. It felt real. Too real. The fear still clung to me, heavy and suffocating.

Liam didn't push. He just nodded, as if he understood.

"You wanna sit up for a bit?" he asked. "Maybe get some air?"

I shook my head. "Can we just... stay like this for a little longer?"

His lips twitched, just a little. "Yeah," he said. "Of course."

I expected him to shift away, to make a joke, to brush it off. But he didn't. He just sat there, letting me hold onto him, like it was the most natural thing in the world. And for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel alone.

Eventually, my body relaxed. The fear faded, pushed back by the steady warmth of Liam's presence. I let out a slow breath, my fingers loosening slightly on his shirt.

"Feeling better?" he asked quietly.

I nodded. "Yeah."

He hesitated. "You sure?"

A small smile tugged at my lips. "Yeah, I think you make a pretty good human shield."

Liam huffed a laugh. "Good to know."

I sighed, finally pulling back a little. "Sorry for waking you."

"You didn't."

I raised an eyebrow. "Liar."

He smirked. "Okay, maybe a little. But I don't mind."

I glanced down at my hands, still loosely gripping his shirt. I felt raw, vulnerable, like the nightmare had taken something from me that I hadn't even realized I had. But Liam didn't look at me like I was weak. He just looked... there. Present.

"Thanks," I murmured.

He shrugged like it was nothing, but I caught the way his fingers brushed against my arm before he pulled back. His touch lingered for a second before he cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair.

“You’re welcome,” he said, his voice still low but lighter now. “But I’ll admit, I didn’t exactly sign up for the whole ‘nightmare defense’ role.”

I snorted despite myself. “Well, I didn’t exactly sign up for nightmares, so we’re even.”

Liam chuckled, his hand finding its way back to my arm, but this time it stayed there. He met my gaze, the teasing smile still playing on his lips but his eyes softening, like he was searching for something in me.

“You sure you’re alright?” he asked again, his tone almost too serious for the light moment we were having.

I nodded, even though I wasn’t sure. “Yeah, just a little shaken.”

Liam’s expression didn’t change, but I could see the concern in his eyes. He shifted slightly, his hand never leaving my arm, and for a moment, I felt like we were the only two people in the world.

“You know,” he said, his voice quiet, “it’s okay to not be okay sometimes.”

I looked up at him, surprised by the sincerity in his tone. “Yeah? I thought I was supposed to have it all together.”

He let out a soft laugh, though there was a trace of something else in it, something deeper. “Well, I hate to break it to you, but no one has it all together. Not even me.”

I raised an eyebrow, skeptical. “You? Seriously?”

He nodded, that same teasing smile making a quick comeback. “Yeah, I’m a disaster, actually. Just hiding it really well.”

I smirked. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

I think he didn’t want to talk about it, he changed the subject.

He stretched, standing up. “Pancakes. Or eggs. Or something. You need a distraction, and I need an excuse to eat at three in the morning.”

I gave him a look. “Seriously”

“Yep.”

I rolled my eyes, a grin tugging at my lips. “At three in the morning? You’re gonna make breakfast just to distract me from my nightmare?”

“Exactly,” Liam said, his grin widening as he moved toward the kitchen. “And if you’re lucky, I might even make it edible.”

“You’re confident for someone who can’t cook,” I shot back, but the teasing tone in my voice didn’t match the tight feeling in my chest. There was something calming about this—his easy confidence, the way he could make everything feel normal even when it wasn’t.

He shrugged, pulling out a pan from the cupboard. “Confidence is half the battle, Em. The other half is pretending like you know what you’re doing.”

I couldn’t believe how easy it was to be with him, how naturally he fell into this role of someone who would just be there. I froze for a moment, my breath catching in my throat. Liam didn’t seem to notice—or maybe he did—but the next thing I knew, he had pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it onto the couch, his bare chest gleaming under the soft light of the kitchen.

My heart skipped, and I had to force my gaze away from him. “Uh, what are you doing?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady, even though I could feel the heat creeping up my neck.

He shot me a smirk, clearly enjoying my reaction. “Getting into character,” he said, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. “You can’t make pancakes in a shirt like that. It’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” I raised an eyebrow, my mind racing. “What are you planning to do? Burn the house down?”

He didn't answer at first, just grabbed a kitchen apron from the hook on the wall and tied it around his waist. As he did, he shot me a look over his shoulder, his grin turning more mischievous. "You underestimate me, Em. I can be very dangerous in the kitchen."

I snorted, trying to cover up the way my pulse quickened at the sight of him standing there in nothing but an apron, looking way too good for this moment. "I'm not sure that's the kind of danger I was hoping for."

He chuckled, finally turning back to the stove. "Hey, I don't make the rules. But if you're offering..."

I immediately regretted the words I had just said. "I didn't—wait, no! That's not what I meant!"

"Sure it wasn't," he teased, his tone dripping with amusement. He was definitely enjoying this, watching me squirm as he moved around the kitchen, completely unaware—or maybe perfectly aware—of how much his casual confidence was throwing me off balance. I could feel the heat rising in my face, but I refused to look at him, staring instead at the eggs he was cracking into a bowl, trying my best to ignore how distracting it was that he was standing there, practically bare, looking way too comfortable for my own good. My heart was still doing that weird skipping thing, like it couldn't decide if it wanted to race or slow down completely.

"I didn't mean it like that," I said, my voice a little too high-pitched for my liking. "I was just... I didn't—"

Liam, of course, heard all of it. He was grinning now, the kind of grin that always seemed to mean he was either about to make things worse or way more fun than I could handle.

He looked over his shoulder, catching me with a playful glint in his eyes. "Sure you didn't. But it's cool, Em, I'm not judging you."

I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. "You are judging me. I can feel it."

Liam hummed, turning back to the stove, casually stirring the eggs. “Nope. Just observing. Very closely.”

I scowled. “That’s worse.”

He chuckled, and I could hear the smugness in it. “You’re fun when you’re flustered.”

I grabbed the nearest object—a wooden spoon—and pointed it at him. “You wish I was flustered.”

Liam turned, leaning against the counter with that damn smirk, arms crossed over his very distracting bare chest. “Oh? So you’re not flustered?”

I tightened my grip on the spoon.

“Nope.”

“So if I were to—” He stepped closer, slow and deliberate, his smirk widening as he invaded my space.

I immediately backpedaled. “Nope. No. Don’t even try it.”

Liam stopped, tilting his head. “Try what?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Whatever you’re planning.”

He grinned. “So you are flustered.”

I groaned again, ready to throw the spoon at him. “Do you ever stop being insufferable?”

“Not when I’m having this much fun.”

Liam took another step forward, closing the space between us inch by inch. My back hit the counter, trapping me, and he definitely knew what he was doing because that smirk of his only deepened.

I tightened my grip on the wooden spoon, like it was some kind of pathetic shield against whatever this was.

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?” I muttered.

Liam tilted his head slightly, considering. “Mmm. Maybe a little.”

His voice was lower now, quieter, like he was testing just how much he could get away with.

My heart was pounding.

“You should probably back up,” I said, trying—and failing—to sound unaffected.

His eyes flicked down to my lips for half a second, and I swear my brain short-circuited.

“Should I?” he murmured.

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

He didn’t move. I could feel the warmth radiating from his bare skin, the scent of him—something clean and familiar, like soap and the faintest trace of cologne. His arms caged me in without even touching me, and I hated that my body noticed. I also hated that I wasn’t moving away. Liam let the moment stretch, like he was waiting for me to call his bluff. Like he wanted me to. But I didn’t. I couldn’t.

Something flickered in his expression—something unreadable. And then, just as quickly, he stepped back, as if nothing had happened at all. I sucked in a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Liam turned back to the stove, completely unfazed. “Eggs are burning.”

I blinked, still trying to get my brain to work properly.

What the hell was that?

I watched as he casually flipped the eggs, like he hadn’t just almost ruined my sanity.

I glared at his back. “You did that on purpose.”

He shot me a sideways glance, eyes twinkling. “Did what?”

Oh, he was so smug.

I picked up a stray grape from the fruit bowl and chucked it at him. It bounced off his shoulder.

Liam turned, feigning offense. “Did you just throw food at me?”

“You deserved it.”

He grabbed a grape of his own, weighing it in his hand. “You sure you wanna start this war?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Try me.”

The next second, a grape whizzed past my ear.

“Oh, it’s on,” I declared.

Liam ducked as I threw a handful of flour at him, but I still caught the edge of his shoulder. He looked down at the white powder smeared across his skin, then back up at me, slow and deadly, like a predator who just decided to play with his food.

“Oh, you’re dead,” he said.

I shrieked and bolted to the other side of the kitchen, grabbing the first thing I could reach—a bag of sugar. Probably not the best weapon, but at this point, I was running on pure survival instinct.

Liam lunged for the bag, and I yanked it away just in time, laughing breathlessly. “Don’t even think about it.”

His smirk was full of challenge. “What’s stopping me?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I will dump this entire bag over your stupid head.”

He took another step forward. “You wouldn’t dare.”

I grinned. Wrong answer.

Without hesitation, I ripped open the bag and launched a handful of sugar at him. It hit his chest like a snowstorm, sticking to the flour already smeared across his skin. For a second, Liam just stared at himself, as if processing the betrayal. Then his gaze snapped back to me, dark with pure revenge.

“Oh, you are so dead.”



I turned to run, but before I could take a full step, strong arms wrapped around my waist, yanking me back.

"Liam!" I shrieked, kicking wildly.

"Too late," he growled into my ear.

Then I was spun around—fast—until my back hit the counter. Before I could react, his hands shot out, smearing a fistful of flour across my cheek.

I gasped. "You absolute—"

But I never finished, because the next thing I knew, we were both fighting dirty. I grabbed another handful of sugar and tried to shove it down his apron, but Liam caught my wrist, flipping me around in the process. Now he was behind me, arms locked around mine, effectively pinning me in place.

My pulse skyrocketed.

"Not so tough now, huh?" he murmured against my ear, voice full of amusement.

I struggled, but he did not budge.

"You're cheating," I accused, breathless.

"Am I?"

I could feel his breath on my neck. His chest against my back. The way his grip tightened—just slightly—like he was suddenly very aware of how close we were. For a moment, neither of us moved. The playful energy between us shifted, something heavier taking its place. I swallowed, suddenly hyper-aware of everything—the warmth of his hands, the way his fingers flexed against my skin, the steady rise and fall of his breathing. Then, as if realizing it at the same time, Liam let go. I turned to face him, my heart still pounding. His eyes met mine, searching. Neither of us spoke.

The air was thick with something unspoken, something crackling between us like a live wire.

Then—

Liam scooped up a handful of flour and smashed it against the top of my head.

I gasped, snapping out of whatever moment we'd just fallen into.

His smirk was pure evil. "Truce?"

I wiped flour from my face, glaring. "Oh, you wish."

Then I lunged, and the war wasn't over—not even close.



## CHAPTER 11

Liam

Last night was a mess. A beautiful mess. And I could still see it—all over my damn kitchen. Flour on the floor, sugar dusted over the counter, a half-burnt pancake abandoned on the stove. I ran a hand through my hair, sighing as I stepped over the battlefield, heading straight for the coffee machine because, God, I needed caffeine to process whatever the hell last night was. It wasn't just the flour war, or the fact that Emily had somehow turned into an unstoppable force of destruction in my kitchen.

It was the way she looked at me. The way her breath hitched when I got too close. The way she didn't push me away. And now, that little devil was sleeping peacefully, completely unaware of the absolute chaos she left in her wake—both in my kitchen and in my head.

I was playing the game too. Not just the stupid flour war, not just the whole who-can-annoy-the-other-more competition we had going on since the day we met. No, this was a different game. The resisting game. The don't touch her game. The don't notice how soft she looked curled up in my blanket game.

The don't think about how easy it would be to lean down, brush her hair back, maybe even—

I swore under my breath, dragging a hand down my face. This was ridiculous. I turned back to my coffee, hoping caffeine would burn the thoughts out of my system. But it didn't. It never did. The truth was,

I was losing this game. Badly. Because last night, when she was standing in my kitchen, covered in flour, breathless from laughing, eyes bright with that I'm winning look of hers—something cracked.

And it hadn't gone back to normal. Because now, standing here, sipping my coffee, watching her sleep like she hadn't just turned my entire world upside down—I knew. I was done for. Emily looked peaceful, curled up in my blanket, her hair a mess, her breathing slow and even. Like she belonged there. Like she fit there. Like she hadn't spent last night waging war in my kitchen, throwing flour in my face, laughing like she had all the time in the world. And God help me, I wanted to keep that look on her face. Always.

Whoever wanted to mess with her—whoever thought they could make her feel anything less than what she was—I wasn't gonna let them. Not a chance. Not when she was mine to protect. I exhaled slowly, running a hand through my hair, trying to talk myself down from whatever the hell this feeling was.

"Don't stare at me," she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

I smirked, taking another sip of my coffee. "Oh, morning, trouble."

Emily groaned, burying her face deeper into the blanket like she could escape reality if she just ignored me hard enough. "Go away."

"Not a chance." I leaned against the counter, watching her with far too much amusement for this early in the morning.

"You made a mess of my kitchen. Least you could do is wake up and deal with it."

She peeked out from under the blanket, her eyes still heavy with sleep, her hair a complete disaster. "You started it," she muttered.

I raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You threw the first handful of flour."

I crossed my arms, fighting a grin. "And you escalated it to full-on war."

She sat up slightly, blinking at me like she was still processing being awake.

Then, as if the memory hit all at once, she groaned again and flopped back against the cushions. "I regret nothing."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Of course you don't."

She cracked one eye open. "You're annoying."

"You're a menace."

Her lips twitched like she was trying not to smile. "And yet, here we are."

"Here we are," I echoed, my voice softer than I meant it to be.

Her gaze flickered to me then, something unreadable passing through it. I could see it—the remnants of last night lingering between us, the way the air felt heavier now, charged with something neither of us wanted to name.

She must have felt it too because she suddenly sat up fully, rubbing a hand over her face. "Okay. Coffee. I need coffee before I even think about cleaning."

I huffed a laugh, pushing off the counter. "Lucky for you, I already made some."

She stretched, looking way too comfortable in my blanket, before fixing me with a suspicious look. "Did you poison it?"

I scoffed. "Tempting, but no."

She held out a hand. "Then hand it over, chef."

I rolled my eyes but grabbed a mug, pouring her a cup before walking over and handing it to her. She took it with a sleepy nod of approval, her fingers brushing against mine for half a second. Her fingers were warm against mine, just for a second. A second too long.

Emily didn't seem to react, just brought the cup to her lips, sighing like it was the best thing she'd ever tasted. "Okay, you're forgiven."

I scoffed. "Forgiven for what?"

She cracked an eye open. "For existing. For breathing the same air as me. For being you."

I smirked, leaning against the counter, watching her take another sip. "That's a lot to forgive."

"You're a lot," she muttered, pulling the blanket tighter around her.

I narrowed my eyes. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It is a bad thing," she said, waving a hand vaguely in my direction. "You're... too much. Too smug. Too annoying. Too—"

"Too charming?" I offered.

She made a face. "I was going to say infuriating."

"Same thing."

She snorted, shaking her head as she took another sip of coffee. "God, it's too early for this."

I smirked. "You're the one who woke up complaining."

"You're the one who woke up existing."

Emily narrowed her eyes at me over the rim of her coffee mug. "You're going to work?"

"Nah, not today," I said, stretching lazily. "We have some things to do."

Her brows furrowed. "Sorry? We?"

I leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "Yeah. We."

She set her coffee down with a slow, exaggerated motion, like she was processing my words carefully. "Liam. Please tell me you're not about to drag me into something stupid."

"Well," I said, smirking, "we're going to find out who sent that so-called threatening letter."

She blinked. Once. Twice. Then sighed, rubbing her temples like she was already exhausted. "Nope. Not happening. I am not playing Sherlock with you today."

I raised an eyebrow. "So, you're fine with someone threatening you?"

"Liam," she said, voice softer this time, like she was trying to reason with me. "People do stupid things all the time. I don't have the energy to react to every single one."

I stared at her, waiting for her to take it back, to admit that it wasn't nothing. But she just sighed, shaking her head like I was being ridiculous.

I clenched my jaw. "It wasn't just 'stupid things,' Emily. It was a letter. A written threat. That's different."

She groaned. "It wasn't a threat! It was probably just some idiot messing with me. People talk crap all the time."

She waved a hand, brushing it off like it was an overdue bill instead of something that had set my teeth on edge since the moment I saw it. "Yeah? Well, I'm still alive, aren't I? No one's slashed my tires, no one's jumped out of an alleyway to murder me in cold blood—"

"That's not funny." My voice came out sharper than I intended, but I didn't care.

Emily blinked at me, surprised by the sudden edge in my tone.

I exhaled, forcing myself to calm down. "I don't care if you think it's nothing," I said, quieter now. "Because it's not nothing to me."

Emily hesitated, her fingers tightening around the coffee mug. Her gaze flickered to mine, something unreadable passing through it before she exhaled slowly.

"Actually..." She set her mug down, rubbing a hand over her face. "I was thinking about going back home."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I stared at her, my jaw tightening. Home. She was just going to pack up and leave like it was nothing. Like it wasn't something that was twisting a knife deep into my chest.

I scoffed, shaking my head as frustration bubbled up. "You're kidding me."

Emily frowned. "Liam—"

"No." I pushed off the counter, pacing because if I didn't move, I was going to explode. "Someone threatened you. Sent a letter—a damn letter, Emily! And you just find it in your kitchen like some horror movie setup, and then you have that stupid nightmare, and now your brilliant solution is to go back home?"

She exhaled, like I was the problem here. Like I was the one being difficult. "It's not—"

"Not what?" I snapped, whirling to face her. "Not a big deal? Not something to worry about? Not something worth telling me before you just up and decided to leave?"

She flinched slightly, but her expression hardened. "Liam, I don't need you to freak out over this, okay?"

I laughed—short, sharp, angry. "Oh, I'm freaking out? That's rich, coming from the girl who almost tore my arm off last night because she thought I was some stranger trying to kill her."

She went silent.

Good. Let her sit with that. Let her think about it.

I took a step closer, my voice lower now, but no less sharp. "You know this isn't just some prank. You know something's wrong. And instead of letting me help you, instead of staying where I can actually keep an eye on you, you're just gonna run off and pretend it's all fine?"



Her fingers curled around the blanket like it was some kind of shield. "It's not about pretending. I just— I don't want to drag you into this, okay?"

"Too late." My voice was flat. Cold. "You think I'm gonna just let you go when someone out there clearly has a problem with you?"

She looked away. "It's my problem, Liam."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Not anymore, it's not."

Silence stretched between us, thick and heavy. Her lips pressed into a thin line, her fingers tightening around the fabric in her lap.

Then she sighed, shaking her head. "You're impossible."

"And you're reckless," I shot back.

She looked at me then, eyes searching mine, like she was trying to figure out how serious I was.

I was dead serious.

She exhaled slowly. "So what? You're just gonna... what? Play bodyguard?"

"If that's what it takes," I said, voice even.

She blinked, caught off guard by how fast I answered.

I didn't care. I meant it.

"Emily," I said, softer this time. "You can be as stubborn as you want, but I'm not letting this go. Someone out there thinks they can mess with you, and I'm not just standing by and letting that happen."

She swallowed, looking away again. I knew I was getting to her.

I stepped back, crossing my arms. "So, what's it gonna be? You wanna keep arguing, or are we gonna figure out who the hell is behind this?"

For a long moment, she didn't say anything. Just stared down at her coffee, lips pressed together.

Then, finally, she sighed.

"Fine," she muttered. "But if we're doing this, we do it my way."

I smirked, leaning against the counter. "We'll see about that."

Emily was quiet as we walked down the street, her hands stuffed deep into her hoodie pockets. I could tell she was still thinking about our argument—about the letter, about home, about whatever the hell she wasn't telling me. But she hadn't left. That was something.

"You have a plan, or are we just aimlessly walking around hoping the culprit falls into our laps?" I asked, side-eyeing her.

She shot me a glare. "I do have a plan, thank you very much."

"Yeah?" I raised an eyebrow. "Let's hear it, then, Sherlock."

She sighed, her breath visible in the chilly morning air. "I want to check the mailroom at my building. See if anyone was hanging around when the letter showed up."

I frowned. "You think someone dropped it off personally?"

Emily hesitated, then shrugged. "I don't know. But if it was mailed, there's a chance we can see where it came from. If it wasn't... that means whoever did it had to be close enough to deliver it themselves."

I didn't like that thought. Someone close enough to slip a threatening letter right into her apartment? That meant they knew where she lived. Maybe even watched her.

I clenched my jaw. "Fine. We start there."

Emily nodded, but I noticed the way her fingers curled tighter into her sleeves. We walked in silence for a while, the early morning city around us just starting to wake up. Cars hummed past, shopkeepers flipped their Open signs, the usual rush of people heading to work filling the sidewalks. But my mind was stuck on her. The way she hadn't looked me in the eye since we left my apartment. The way she kept pressing her lips together like she wanted to say something but wouldn't let herself.

I sighed. "Spit it out, Em."

She blinked, glancing at me. "What?"

"You're thinking something. And it's annoying me. So spill."

She scoffed. "God, you're so—" She cut herself off with another sigh. Then, after a moment, she muttered, "I just... I don't want this to be real, okay?"

I slowed my steps, looking at her fully now. "What do you mean?"

She kicked at a crack in the pavement. "I mean, yeah, the letter was creepy. Yeah, the nightmare freaked me out. But I don't want this to be some big, dramatic thing. I don't want to look over my shoulder all the time. I don't want to—" She hesitated, then shook her head. "I don't want to need your help."

I exhaled, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets. "I get that."

She glanced up at me, skeptical.

"I do," I said. "I get it. You don't want to feel like a victim. You don't want this to be some situation where you have to rely on anyone. Especially not me."

She frowned. "Why especially not you?"

I smirked. "Because you hate admitting I'm right."

She rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched like she was trying not to smile.

"But Em," I continued, "like it or not, this is real. And until we figure out who's behind it, you do need help. And you've got it. So deal with it."

She sighed again, but this time, it felt more resigned than annoyed.

"Fine," she muttered.

I grinned. "There's my girl."

She shoved me. "I am not your girl."

I laughed, but before I could argue, we reached her building.

The second we stepped into the building, something felt wrong. It wasn't anything obvious—no broken doors, no eerie flickering lights, no dramatic signs of danger. But the air was off. Stale, too quiet, like the whole place was holding its breath. Emily must've felt it too because she slowed down, her shoulders tensing under her hoodie. Her fingers curled deeper into her sleeves, but she didn't say anything, just kept walking like she hadn't just hesitated.

I watched her carefully, every part of me on high alert.

The lobby was mostly empty. Just the usual morning stragglers—an older guy with a newspaper tucked under his arm, a woman balancing a to-go coffee and a bag of groceries, a teenager tapping away at their phone near the elevators. Normal, ordinary. And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Emily veered toward the mailroom at the end of the hall, her steps a little quicker now, like she wanted to get this over with as fast as possible. I followed, staying half a step behind her.

The mailroom was small, tucked into the corner of the building, just past the security desk. Rows of metal mailboxes lined the walls, each one labeled with numbers that had long since started peeling at the edges. A single fluorescent light flickered overhead, buzzing faintly.

Empty.

I exhaled slowly, but the tension in my chest didn't ease.

Emily hesitated just outside the door, glancing around like she expected someone to be lurking in the shadows. When she found nothing, she took a slow breath and stepped inside. I followed, keeping close.

She walked to her mailbox, running her fingers over the small metal door before pulling it open. Her movements were careful, precise—like she was bracing for something, even though we both knew it wouldn't be there. Nothing. Just a couple of flyers, a bill, a grocery store coupon. No letter. No message.

I watched her expression closely as she stared at the contents of her mailbox. She was stiff, her jaw tight, but she didn't say anything for a long moment.

Then, with a small exhale, she muttered,

"Told you it was probably nothing."

I crossed my arms, leaning against the opposite wall. "Uh-huh."

She shot me a look. "Oh, come on, what?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You really think this proves anything?"

She let out a breath, shutting the mailbox with a soft click. "It proves that I'm not being stalked by some psycho sending me creepy letters."

"Does it?" I pushed off the wall, stepping closer. "Or does it just mean they're being careful?"

Emily sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Liam, I swear to God—"

"Look around, Em." I gestured toward the room. "No cameras. No witnesses. If someone wanted to leave you another letter, they could've done it easily. But they didn't."

She hesitated, just for a second, before shaking her head. "Maybe because they were never going to. Maybe because it was just a dumb prank and not some big, dramatic mystery you're making it out to be."

I stared at her. "And you believe that?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it again.

Her fingers twitched slightly, like she wanted to cross her arms but was trying not to seem defensive. Yeah. That's what I thought. She wanted to believe it was nothing. Wanted to pretend last night was just paranoia mixed with bad dreams. But deep down, she knew it wasn't that simple. I could see it in the way her shoulders stayed tense, in the way she kept glancing over her shoulder even though there was nothing there. She wasn't scared. Not exactly. But she was uncertain. And that was enough.

I exhaled, rubbing a hand over my jaw.

“Okay.”

She blinked. “Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Emily narrowed her eyes. “What does that mean?”

I shrugged, stepping back. “It means, if you’re so sure this is nothing, then I’ll drop it.”

For now.

She studied me, clearly suspicious. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

She crossed her arms. “And you’re not gonna do anything stupid?”

“Define stupid.”

“Liam.”

I smirked, holding up my hands. “Fine.

No stupid things. I’ll behave.”

Mostly.

Emily narrowed her eyes at me for another long moment, like she was debating whether or not to believe me. But eventually, she sighed, running a hand through her hair.

“Good,” she muttered. “Because I really, really don’t have the energy for whatever chaos you were about to drag me into.”

I chuckled, shoving my hands into my pockets. “You wound me, Em.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. I let the silence stretch between us for a few seconds, letting her think she had the upper hand. Letting her settle, even if I wasn’t actually planning on letting this go.

Then, casually, I asked, “So, what did your landlord say about the letter?”

Emily froze. It was subtle—just a tiny shift in her stance, a fraction of a second where her fingers twitched, her weight shifted. But I caught it. She hadn't told him. And she hadn't expected me to ask.

I tilted my head, waiting.

Emily exhaled, rubbing a hand over her face. "I haven't... talked to him yet."

I let out a slow, deliberate breath. "Em."

"I will," she said quickly, holding up a hand before I could start. "I planned to, okay? I just..." She trailed off, biting the inside of her cheek.

She just didn't want to make a big deal out of it. Didn't want to admit that it was already a big deal.

I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling. "You realize this doesn't exactly help your case, right?"

She groaned, turning to face me fully. "Look, I get it. You want me to be more careful. You want me to take this seriously. I am."

I raised an eyebrow.

She huffed. "Mostly."

I just kept staring.

Emily groaned again, dragging a hand down her face. "Fine. I'll talk to the landlord. Happy?"

"Ecstatic."

She rolled her eyes. But she didn't argue. And I counted that as a win. For now.



## CHAPTER 12

Emily

Liam was watching me. Again. I could feel it, even as I tried to ignore the weight of his gaze burning into the back of my head. We had just left the mailroom, his footsteps falling into an easy rhythm beside mine, hands shoved deep in his pockets like he had nothing better to do. Like he wasn't analyzing my every move. I sighed, pushing open the stairwell door instead of heading to the elevator. I didn't need to take the stairs, but right now, I needed space. I needed to move. Of course, Liam followed.

I barely made it to the second step before I shot him a look. "Are you seriously taking the stairs with me?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I just felt like getting my steps in."

"Uh-huh. Right."

He smirked. "Maybe I just don't trust you not to pass out halfway up."

I scoffed. "Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime, Em."

I rolled my eyes, picking up my pace. The quicker I got to my floor, the quicker I could shut my door in his face and stop feeling like he was watching me so damn closely. We climbed in silence for a moment, the



only sound being our footsteps echoing in the stairwell. But, of course, Liam couldn't leave it alone.

"So," he started casually, as if this wasn't his tenth attempt to bring it up, "you gonna tell me if you actually called your landlord?"

I didn't look at him. "You already know the answer to that."

"Yeah," he said. "Just wanted to hear you admit it."

I exhaled sharply, gripping the strap of my bag. "Liam—"

"Why not?" he pressed. "You said it freaked you out, right?"

"It was one letter."

"A letter someone put in your mailbox without a stamp," he countered. "Which means it wasn't mailed. It was hand-delivered. Probably from inside the building."

I gritted my teeth. "Thanks for that reminder, Detective."

"You're welcome."

I stopped at the landing, spinning to face him. "Look, I appreciate your concern—"

"Do you?"

I narrowed my eyes. "—but I don't need you hovering over me like I'm incapable of handling myself."

Liam tilted his head, gaze scanning my face. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"What else would you be doing?"

His lips twitched. "I don't know. Maybe I just like pissing you off."

"Oh, great, so now it's a hobby?"

He smirked. "One of my favorites."

I let out an exasperated groan, turning on my heel and taking the stairs two at a time. I was done with this conversation. But Liam wasn't.

"You could just humor me and say you'll be careful," he called after me.

"I am careful," I shot back.

I took the next set of stairs faster, half hoping he'd give up and let me go. But, of course, Liam never knew when to quit.

"Would it kill you to just take this seriously?" he said behind me.

I gritted my teeth. "I am taking it seriously."

"Oh, yeah?" His voice was getting closer. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're avoiding the problem."

I reached my floor and yanked open the door, stepping into the hallway without looking back. "I don't need you breathing down my neck about it, Liam."

"That's funny," he muttered, following me. "Because if I wasn't breathing down your neck, you'd probably pretend nothing's wrong."

I let out a sharp exhale, marching down the hall toward my apartment. "You don't know that."

"Don't I?"

God, he was so annoying. I whirled around just as I reached my door. "Okay, fine! Yes, I got the letter. Yes, it was creepy. And no, I didn't call my landlord."

His expression didn't change, but his eyes flickered with something unreadable. "Why not?"

I hesitated.

I could've just said, Because it's probably nothing. Or Because I don't want to make a big deal out of it.

But neither of those were the truth. The truth was—I didn't want to hear someone tell me they couldn't do anything about it. That it was just a letter. That I was overreacting. That I'd have to deal with it myself.

Liam must've caught on to my silence, because his voice was quieter when he spoke again. "Emily."

I swallowed, gripping my keys a little too tightly.

"I'll talk to him," he said.

I blinked. "What?"

"Your landlord," Liam clarified, like it was obvious. "I'll ask if he can check the security cameras."

I frowned. "Liam, that's not—"

"It is necessary," he interrupted. "And before you say you don't need me to do it, I know you don't. But I'm still gonna do it."

I opened my mouth, but he raised a brow, daring me to argue. I didn't. Instead, I let out a slow breath and unlocked my door. "Fine. Do whatever you want."

His lips twitched. "I usually do."

I exhaled sharply as we reached my floor, stepping into the hallway. The fluorescent lights buzzed faintly overhead, casting a cool, sterile glow against the off-white walls.

Normal.

Everything looked normal. So why was my stomach twisting itself into knots? Liam was still watching me. I ignored him, heading straight for my apartment door. I reached for my keys, but my hand hesitated for just a second. A second too long. Liam noticed.

His gaze flicked to my hand, then back to my face. His voice was quieter this time, but no less firm. "You gonna check first, or should I?"

I swallowed, fingers tightening around my keys. I didn't want to check. I wanted to walk in like everything was fine. Like nothing had changed. Like I wasn't questioning whether the safety of my own apartment was just an illusion. But if I hesitated any longer, Liam would take that as

proof that I was scared. And I wasn't. Not really. I exhaled sharply and turned the handle, pushing the door open.

The apartment looked exactly how I left it. No overturned furniture. No broken locks. No ominous writing on the walls. Just my slightly messy living room, the scent of stale coffee lingering in the air, and a pile of laundry I had been meaning to fold but kept ignoring.

See? Normal.

I stepped inside, flicking on the light. Liam lingered in the doorway, his sharp gaze sweeping the room like he was waiting for something to jump out at me.

I sighed, turning to face him. "See?

Nothing. Happy?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, watching me for a beat too long before nodding once. That was it?

I blinked at him. "Wait... that's all?"

Liam shrugged. "You said you're fine. You proved you're fine. Who am I to argue?"

I narrowed my eyes. "That sounds suspiciously like reverse psychology."

He smirked. "Maybe."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't deny that some of the tension in my chest eased. Maybe I was overthinking. Maybe I just needed to let it go.

Liam took a step back, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I'll see you tomorrow, Em."

I nodded. "Yeah. See you."

He hesitated for half a second—just long enough for me to notice—then turned and walked away.

I stood in the doorway for a moment, watching him disappear down the hall. Then I let out a breath, stepped back inside, and shut the door.

Silence.

I pressed my forehead against the wood for a second before locking it. It was fine. Everything was fine. I turned, setting my bag down as I stepped toward the kitchen. I just needed coffee. Or sleep. Or both. And then I saw it. A single envelope. Sitting on my kitchen counter. Right where I knew I hadn't left it.

The air in the apartment shifted. I could feel my heartbeat in my throat, pulsing in my fingertips as I stared at it. The envelope was plain, just like the last one. Unassuming. And yet, it felt like it was watching me back. I forced myself to move, step by slow step, until I was standing directly in front of it. My fingers hovered over the edge, hesitating. I didn't want to open it. I didn't want to see what was inside. But I already knew I would. Because some sick, twisted part of me needed to know. With a sharp inhale, I reached down, picked up the envelope, and flipped it open.

A single sheet of paper slid out. One line. Scrawled in ink that looked just a little too rushed.

You left your window unlocked.

My breath hitched. I whipped around, my gaze snapping toward the window by the living room. It was shut. Locked. But I knew—I knew—I hadn't left it that way. The room suddenly felt too small. The walls, too close. The air, too thick to breathe. My fingers clenched around the paper, crumpling it slightly at the edges, but I couldn't make myself let go. I couldn't do anything except stand there and stare at the window. Shut. Locked. Sealed like it had never been touched. But it had been. Someone had been here.

The thought clawed its way up my throat, squeezing, making my pulse pound so violently that I could hear it, like a drumbeat inside my skull.

I felt sick.

No. No. This wasn't happening. This wasn't real. I had locked my door. I always locked my door. And yet. I squeezed my eyes shut, inhaling

shakily through my nose. I needed to think. I needed to do something. But my body wouldn't move, wouldn't listen, wouldn't function beyond the sheer panic swelling in my chest. My mind raced through possibilities—logical ones, rational ones, anything that didn't mean what it obviously meant. Maybe I had locked my window, and they were lying. Maybe it was some sick joke. Maybe this was just a really bad, really stupid prank. But then how did the letter get inside? My stomach twisted, nausea creeping up my spine. I needed to sit down. No. I needed to get out.

Before I could do anything—before I could breathe, move, think—

A knock. Sharp. Solid.

It echoed through the silence like a gunshot, making my pulse lurch painfully in my throat. I froze.

Another knock. I couldn't move. The paper was still clenched in my fist, crumpled at the edges, my nails digging into it like it was the only thing keeping me grounded. The knock came again. Louder this time.

I swallowed hard, forcing my legs to move. Slowly, carefully, I stepped toward the door. My heartbeat was a deafening roar in my ears, drowning out every rational thought.

My hand hovered over the doorknob.

Then—

Liam. Of course.

I exhaled, unlocking the door and pulling it open. "Seriously?"

He raised a brow. "That was fast."

"Because I knew it was you."

Uh-huh," he said, leaning against the doorframe. "Well, I just realized something on my way down."

I crossed my arms. "What?"

His eyes flickered past me, like he was looking for something. Then he met my gaze again. “I never actually asked—what did the letter say?”

I hesitated. Liam noticed. His expression darkened.

“Emily,” he said, low and steady. “What did it say?”

I swallowed. For some reason, saying it out loud felt worse than reading it. But I did. And when I did, something in Liam’s jaw tightened. He didn’t smirk. He didn’t tease.

Instead, he did something that made my stomach flip in a way I didn’t quite understand.

He stepped inside, shut the door behind him, and locked it.



## CHAPTER 13

Liam

I wasn't an angry person. At least, not the kind who yelled or threw punches when something pissed me off. My anger was quieter, sharper. The kind that curled in my gut and sank deep into my bones, waiting. Right now, it was waiting. Because when Emily had finally told me what that letter said—something inside me snapped. Not in an explosive way. Not in a way that would scare her. But in a way that made my jaw lock and my fists curl, my mind racing with every possible scenario. Someone had been watching her. Stalking her. And she hadn't told anyone. I didn't think I could get this angry at her. But here I was, fists clenched, jaw so tight it ached, my voice coming out sharper than I meant, but damn it, she needed to hear this.

"Are you serious right now, Emily?"

She flinched. Just barely. But I saw it. Still, she didn't look at me.

"You got a letter that someone slipped into your mailbox—without a stamp, which means they had to be inside the building—and your genius plan was to ignore it?" I let out a bitter laugh, raking my fingers through my hair. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Her arms wrapped around herself, nails digging into the sleeves of her hoodie. "I wasn't," she whispered.



"No shit," I snapped. "You weren't. Because if you were, you would've told someone. You would've told me!"

Emily's head jerked up at that, and suddenly, she wasn't just standing there taking it anymore.

"And then what, Liam?" she shot back, voice cracking. "What would you have done? Marched to my landlord's office and demanded to see the security footage? Yelled at the mailman? Stalked the entire building looking for the culprit? Because let's be real, that's exactly what you would have done!"

"Damn right, I would've!" I snapped. "Because at least then, you wouldn't be standing here pretending this wasn't a big deal!"

Her chest rose and fell unevenly, her hands trembling at her sides. "I don't need you to fight my battles, Liam!"

I took a step closer, voice dangerously low. "This isn't just your battle, Emily. It became mine the second someone decided to mess with you."

Her bottom lip trembled, her breath hitching. "Why do you even care so much?"

I froze.

The words shouldn't have stung. Shouldn't have made my heart slam against my ribs like she had just taken a swing at me. But they did. I exhaled sharply, tilting my head back like that would somehow stop the frustration from bubbling over.

"Because it's you," I muttered.

That was it. That was the breaking point. Her lips parted, her eyes wide, and before I could take it back—before I could soften the words, make them less harsh, less real—her entire body went stiff. I saw it happen. Saw the moment her walls crumbled, saw the way she took the hit like she'd been expecting it.

Then—just like that—she shattered.

Her shoulders shook first, a sharp inhale cutting through the silence. I barely had time to react before she covered her face with her hands, a choked sob slipping through her fingers.

Fuck.

"Emily—"

"I know," she whispered, voice barely there. "Okay? I know I should've told someone. I know I should've been careful. I know, Liam. I know."

Her hands dropped from her face, and the sight of her damn near knocked the wind out of me. Tears streaked her cheeks, her eyes red and puffy, and for the first time since I'd known her, she looked small. Like she was barely holding herself together, like she was tired of pretending she wasn't scared out of her mind.

"But what if no one takes me seriously?" she whispered, voice breaking. "What if I tell someone, and they say it's nothing? What if they look at me and laugh and tell me I'm just being paranoid?" She let out a shaky breath, arms tightening around herself. "What if—what if they say there's nothing they can do?"

Her voice cracked on the last word, and I couldn't fucking take it.

"Emily," I said, stepping forward, "you're not helpless."

She let out a bitter laugh, swiping at her face. "Doesn't feel like it."

I exhaled, my fingers twitching at my sides. "Look at me."

She didn't.

"Emily."

She finally lifted her head. I didn't say anything for a second, just let her see the way my anger had drained out of me, replaced by something else entirely. Something raw. Something real.

"You're not alone in this," I said quietly. "You never were."

Her breath caught, another tear slipping down her cheek. And then, before I could think twice about it, I reached out, wrapping a hand

around her wrist. She stiffened. I loosened my grip instantly, giving her the chance to pull away. She didn't. Instead, with a shaky breath, she stepped forward—just slightly—until she was close enough that I could feel the way she was shaking. And I couldn't fucking stand it.

So, carefully—slowly—I pulled her against me. She let out a sharp inhale, hands gripping the front of my hoodie, her forehead pressing into my chest. I swallowed, my arms tightening around her.

"I've got you," I murmured, my chin resting lightly against the top of her head.

A small, broken sound escaped her.

And She let herself fall apart.

---

Emily had fallen asleep on my couch.

Her body was curled up under one of my hoodies, the fabric swallowing her frame. Her breathing had evened out, but her face was still damp, eyes puffy from crying. Seeing her like that... it did something to me. Made my chest feel tight in a way I wasn't used to. I had never seen her break like that before. Not Emily. Not the girl who shot back comebacks faster than I could throw them, who met every challenge with stubborn defiance. Last night, that Emily had crumbled in front of me. And I had no idea how to fix it. So I did the only thing I could do—I let her stay. Let her cry. Let her fall asleep in my apartment because the thought of her going back alone after the way she fell apart? Not happening. I sighed, running a hand over my face before looking back at the letter sitting on my coffee table.

A stupid piece of paper. Just words. And yet, it was enough to shake her. Enough to leave her clutching her arms like she was trying to hold herself together. I exhaled sharply and picked it up again, my eyes scanning the neat, deliberate handwriting.

> You think you're safe. You're not. Walk carefully, little girl.

Some debts don't stay buried forever.

> You left your window opened.

Whoever wrote this wasn't just trying to scare her. They were watching her. Tracking her. And the worst part? They weren't rushing. They were comfortable enough to take their time.

That meant one of two things:

1. They had been at this for a while.
2. They were close. Close enough that they didn't need to rush.

I gritted my teeth, gripping the letter tighter. I needed to find out who the hell sent this. I flipped the envelope over, running my thumb along the paper. It felt normal at first—cheap, generic stationery. But then I noticed something. A faint smudge at the bottom corner. I frowned, bringing it closer to the light. It wasn't a stamp. Not a fingerprint either. Ink. The kind that rubs off when something's been handled too much. I squinted, tilting the envelope, and there it was—so faint it was almost invisible. A circular logo. I grabbed my phone, took a picture, and adjusted the contrast.

The words “Blackwood Storage” appeared, printed along the edge of the circle.

A storage facility.

I stared at the name, something uneasy settling in my gut. What the hell did a storage place have to do with Emily? I glanced over at her sleeping form. Her brow twitched slightly, like even in sleep she couldn't shake whatever had been clawing at her last night. I had two options. Wake her up, tell her what I found, and risk sending her into another spiral. Or go check it out myself. The choice was obvious. I grabbed my jacket, shoving my phone in my pocket before taking one last look at her.

“Be back soon, Em,” I muttered under my breath, locking the door behind me.

~

The drive to Blackwood Storage was short, but it felt longer with my mind racing. The place was tucked on the edge of the city, one of those rundown, dimly lit storage facilities that looked like it hadn't been updated in a decade. Rows of metal roll-up doors stretched into the distance, illuminated by buzzing fluorescent lights. A bored-looking guy sat in the office behind bulletproof glass, scrolling through his phone.

I walked up, tapping on the glass. "Hey."

The guy barely glanced up. "We're closed."

I leaned in. "Not looking for a unit. Just need some information."

He sighed dramatically, like I had just ruined his whole night. "Yeah? About what?"

I pulled out my phone and flashed him the picture. "Recognize this?"

His brows pulled together. "That's our old logo."

Bingo.

"How old?" I pressed.

He scratched his chin. "Couple years, maybe three? We rebranded after we got new owners. Why?"

"Someone sent a letter with this on it. I need to know if they rented a unit here."

He scoffed. "Yeah, right. You think I'm just gonna give you that info?"

I pulled out my wallet and slid a crisp fifty through the opening. He stared at it, then at me.

Then, with a sigh, he pocketed the bill and turned to his computer.

"Alright, what name?"

I hesitated. "I don't have a name."

He gave me a look. "Dude."

I clenched my jaw, thinking fast.

If this person was careful, they wouldn't use their real name. But if they had used this storage place years ago...

"Check under Emily Carter."

He typed, the keyboard clacking under his fingers. A few seconds passed. Then he blinked.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered.

I tensed. "What?"

He turned the screen. "Emily Carter rented a unit here. But it's not old." He looked up. "It was rented two weeks ago."

My blood ran cold. Two weeks. That was after she moved into her apartment. And the kicker?

Emily didn't even know about it. Two weeks ago. Someone had rented a storage unit under Emily's name two damn weeks ago. I stared at the screen, my brain racing a mile a minute. That meant whoever this was... they weren't just watching her. They were planning something. But why a storage unit?

I forced my expression to stay neutral, even as every muscle in my body tensed. "You got any details on the rental?"

The guy tapped the keyboard again, squinting at the screen. "Paid in cash. Six-month lease. No contact number, just the name." He clicked his tongue. "Weird thing is, whoever signed for it didn't put an address either. Just an initial."

My fingers curled into my palms. "What initial?"

He leaned forward, reading from the screen. "Just the letter C."

C.

That told me nothing, but it was something. A thread.

I exhaled, keeping my voice even. "What about security footage?"

The guy snorted. “Man, you think we got high-tech cameras? This place barely has working lights.”

Figures.

I ran a hand through my hair, glancing over my shoulder at the rows of storage units stretching into the dimly lit lot.

“Which unit is it?”

The guy hesitated. “Look, I’m already pushing it, giving you this much—”

I slid another bill across the counter.

He sighed, taking it before clicking a few more times. “Unit 157.” He nodded toward the lot. “Third row, second to last on the left.”

I turned to leave, but his voice stopped me.

“Hey.”

I looked back.

“If you do find something in there,” he muttered, lowering his voice, “I don’t wanna know.”

Fair enough.

I stepped outside, the cold night air hitting me like a wall. My breath fogged as I made my way through the rows, counting the numbers on each rusted metal door.

151.

153.

155.

The lights above flickered. The further I went, the quieter it got, the hum of the city fading behind me.

I stopped in front of 157. The lock was still on it. Good. That meant whoever rented it hadn’t come back yet. Or maybe they had, and they were just careful. I crouched, inspecting the padlock. It wasn’t new—

scratched up, worn down like it had been used before. Not a fresh purchase. Whoever did this wasn't sloppy. I pulled out my phone and took a picture before stepping back, staring at the door.

I could break in. But that would be stupid.

And yet... Something about this wasn't adding up. If they were trying to scare Emily, why go through all this trouble? Why rent a whole damn unit under her name?

Unless... They weren't trying to scare her. They were waiting for something. I clenched my jaw, turning back toward my car. If I stayed here any longer, I'd do something reckless, and I couldn't risk that. Not until I had more information. I needed to talk to Emily.

~

Two weeks ago, someone had rented a storage unit under Emily's name. Two damn weeks.

That meant whoever this was... they weren't just watching her. They were planning something.

And I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The drive back to her apartment felt longer than usual, my grip tight on the wheel. The streetlights blurred past me, but all I could see was that stupid lease form. Emily's name. Someone else's handwriting. No address. Paid in cash. And an initial. C. That single letter sat in my mind like a stone in my gut. It told me nothing. It could be anyone. It could be nobody. But it wasn't nobody, was it?

I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. I needed to talk to Emily. Needed to tell her what I found. But more than that, I just—

I needed to see her.

I pulled into the parking lot, killing the engine. My fingers hovered over my phone, ready to call her, but I hesitated. My jaw clenched. If I told her now, she'd panic. She'd overthink it, try to rationalize it, try to convince herself it was nothing. And I couldn't let her do that. I got out,



shutting the door harder than I meant to. The air was cold, biting at my skin, but I barely noticed as I made my way inside, taking the stairs two at a time. The door was just ahead. Warm light spilled from underneath it. I knocked.

Once.

Twice.

No answer.

I frowned, knocking again. “Emily.”

Silence.

Something in my chest tightened. She always answered. Even if it was just to tell me to go away.

I reached for the doorknob. It turned easily under my grip. Unlocked. That wasn’t like her. I stepped inside, the apartment dimly lit. Nothing looked out of place, but the air felt off. Like the room had been sitting still for hours.

Then I heard it.

A faint rustling down the hall.

I moved quickly, barely making a sound as I reached my bedroom door. It was slightly open. I nudged it wider, my breath catching in my throat. Emily was curled up in bed, the blanket half on the floor. Her face was flushed, strands of hair sticking to her forehead.

I stepped closer. Her breathing was uneven, too shallow. I exhaled, tension easing just a little.

She was sick.

But then she shivered violently, a quiet sound escaping her lips. My stomach twisted. I crouched beside the bed, reaching out to brush her hair back. Her skin was too warm. She was burning up.

I swore under my breath, my fingers lingering against her cheek. “Emily.”

She didn't stir.

I sat back on my heels, running a hand over my face. She must've been like this all day. Feverish, exhausted, probably barely drinking any water. And, of course, she hadn't told me. Typical.

I glanced at her nightstand. Empty water bottle. Medicine bottle with the cap barely screwed on.

I sighed. "Jesus, Em."

I stood, heading for the kitchen. It took less than a minute to grab a fresh bottle of water and wet a washcloth. When I came back, she was still curled up, lost in whatever fever dream had her trapped.

I sat on the edge of the bed, nudging her shoulder gently. "Emily."

No response.

I tried again, firmer. "Come on, wake up."

She made a small noise, eyebrows pulling together.

"Emily," I said again. "Drink some water."

She stirred slightly, her lips parting as she let out a barely-there mumble.

"...Liam?"

Her voice was, cracked with exhaustion.

"Yeah," I murmured. "I'm here."

Her eyelids fluttered open, She stared at me for a moment, like she wasn't sure if I was real. Then, her brows furrowed.

"You left," she mumbled weakly.

I sighed. "Yeah, I did. And you didn't answer your phone."

Her eyes closed again. "Didn't hear it."

I shook my head, exasperated but not surprised.

"No kidding," I muttered, reaching out to press the back of my hand against her forehead again. She was even warmer now. Too damn warm.

She shivered slightly at the touch, but she didn't pull away.

I sighed, softer this time. "You should've told me."

She let out a weak scoff, barely there. "Didn't wanna... bother you."

I clenched my jaw, frustration bubbling up again.

"You never bother me," I said firmly.

She hummed, but it was faint.

I picked up the water bottle, unscrewing the cap. "Come on, Em. Just a little."

She shifted, trying to sit up but failing miserably.

I sighed, slipping an arm under her shoulders to help. She was lighter than usual, all dead weight and exhaustion. Her head lolled slightly, resting against my shoulder as I brought the bottle to her lips.

She sipped slowly, barely taking in enough before her body sagged against me.

"Good?" I asked quietly.

She let out a barely audible hum. I lowered her back onto the pillows, grabbing the washcloth. Gently, I pressed it to her forehead, brushing back the damp strands of hair. She let out a slow breath, sinking further into the sheets. I sat there for a moment, just watching her. She looked small like this. Not the Emily who shot back snarky remarks or rolled her eyes at me every chance she got. Not the Emily who pushed through everything on her own, refusing to ask for help. Just... vulnerable. And I hated it. I hated that she'd been here, sick, alone, probably too damn stubborn to call me. I let out a breath, rubbing a hand over my face.

I exhaled, resting my arms on my knees as I sat beside her.

I should have been thinking about the storage unit. About the letter. About who the hell "C" was.

But right now, all I cared about was making sure Emily was okay. The night stretched on in quiet, broken only by Emily's occasional shifting.

Her fever hadn't broken yet. She was still warm, still restless. Every few minutes, she'd mumble something—half-formed words, nonsense slipping between fever dreams.

I stayed where I was. Just watching. Just making sure. Outside, the city buzzed—cars passing, footsteps echoing faintly in the hall. But in here, it was different. Dim. Still. The soft hum of the heater filled the space, a low warmth settling over everything. I leaned back in the chair, rubbing a hand over my jaw. My eyes flickered to the clock. 3:12 a.m. Emily shifted again, a soft sigh slipping from her lips. I watched as she curled in on herself, brows pulling together like she was fighting something in her sleep. The blanket had slipped from her shoulders again. I reached over, pulling it back up. She stirred at the movement, her eyelashes fluttering slightly before her eyes cracked open. For a second, she just blinked at me, like she wasn't sure if I was real.

Then, in a slow, raspy voice, she asked, "...You're still here?"

I raised a brow. "Obviously."

She swallowed, her throat clearly dry. I reached for the glass of water on the nightstand, handing it to her without a word. She took it, her fingers brushing mine for half a second before she brought it to her lips.

After a few small sips, she set it back down and sank into the pillows with a heavy breath. "You should sleep," she murmured.

I huffed a laugh. "Yeah, not happening."

She didn't argue. She just lay there, staring at the ceiling, her expression unreadable.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "How're you feeling?"

She made a face. "Like I got hit by a truck."

"Well," I said, "you look like it too."

Her lips twitched, but she was too exhausted to properly glare at me. "Charming as ever."

I shrugged. "It's a gift."

Silence settled again, softer this time. Less tense.

I glanced at the untouched bowl of soup on her nightstand. “You should eat something.”

She made a quiet noise, not quite agreeing, but not refusing either.

After a few seconds, she spoke, her voice quieter. “My mom used to make soup like this... when I was sick.”

I stilled slightly, surprised by the sudden personal detail. Emily wasn’t exactly open about things like this.

I glanced at her. She wasn’t looking at me—her gaze was on the ceiling, her expression far away.

I hesitated, then asked, “Yeah?”

She nodded slightly. “It never tasted good, though. Too much ginger, not enough salt. But she always made me eat it anyway.” A small, tired smile pulled at her lips. “She’d sit on the edge of my bed and just... watch me, making sure I finished the whole thing.”

I studied her. There was something in her voice—something I couldn’t quite place.

“Sounds annoying,” I said lightly.

She let out a soft breath, almost a laugh. “It was.” A pause. “But... I don’t know. It made me feel safe.”

Something tightened in my chest.

I looked away, exhaling slowly. Emily never talked about her family. Not really. And yet, here she was, sick and half-delirious, letting a piece of herself slip out like it wasn’t a big deal. I leaned back, running a hand through my hair.

“...You want me to sit on the edge of the bed and force-feed you soup?” I asked eventually.

She let out a weak laugh, shaking her head. “God, no.”

I smirked. “Good. Because I wasn’t offering.”

This is stupid. I shouldn’t be standing here, at five in the damn morning, making soup in this stupid kitchen. And yet, here I was. The apartment was dimly lit, quiet except for the occasional clatter of utensils and the low simmer of broth in the pot. The whole thing felt... weird. Domestic. Like something

I shouldn’t be doing but was doing anyway. I stirred the soup absently, glancing toward the bedroom.

Emily was still out, curled under her blankets, her fever finally dropping. She’d been restless earlier, shifting, mumbling things in her sleep. But now, she was still.

Good.

She needed rest.

I exhaled and turned back to the soup, watching the lazy swirls of steam rise into the air. The scent of garlic and herbs filled the kitchen, warm and familiar—except I had no idea what the hell I was doing.

I wasn’t this guy. The guy who cared. The guy who worried. The guy who made soup at five in the damn morning like it was the most natural thing in the world. And yet, here I was. I hated how natural it felt. Hated how easy it was to care when it came to her. The wooden spoon scraped against the bottom of the pot as I stirred, watching the broth swirl. I wasn’t sure if it tasted right. Probably not. But it was warm, and it would be good enough. I turned off the stove, letting out a slow breath. The scent of garlic and herbs lingered in the air, warm and heavy. It reminded me of something—not my own childhood, not my own home, but hers. The way she had spoken about it, quiet and half-lost in fevered memories.

I wasn’t sure why that stuck with me. Shaking the thought away, I grabbed a bowl from the cabinet and poured the soup carefully, watching the steam rise.

My hands were steady, but my mind was restless.

C.

The letter sat in the back of my head, an itch I couldn't scratch. I needed answers. I needed to go back to that damn storage unit, turn the place inside out if I had to. But not now. I set the bowl down on the counter and ran a hand over my face. I was exhausted, my body running on fumes, but I wasn't leaving. Not yet. Not while she was still sick. Grabbing the bowl, I made my way back to the bedroom, careful not to make too much noise. The dim light cast soft shadows over the room. She was still curled up, half-buried in blankets, her breathing slow and steady. Better. I sat on the edge of the bed, balancing the bowl in one hand as I reached out with the other, brushing a few stray strands of hair from her face. She was cooler now, the fever breaking, but still pale. Still exhausted. Her eyelashes fluttered, and she let out a quiet sigh. Then, slowly, her eyes cracked open.

I raised an eyebrow. "Welcome back."

She blinked at me, groggy and unfocused. "Liam...?"

"Who else?" I smirked. "You expecting someone better?"

She made a weak attempt at rolling her eyes but was too tired to follow through. Instead, she just let her head sink further into the pillow. "What... time is it?"

"Early," I said. "Don't worry about it."

Her gaze flickered to the bowl in my hands, her brows drawing together slightly. "...Did you make that?"

"Don't sound so surprised."

She hummed, lips twitching faintly. "I should be worried, shouldn't I?"

I scoffed. "Just shut up and eat."

I helped her sit up, my arm slipping behind her back, careful not to jostle her too much. She was still weak, her body leaning into mine for a second before she steadied herself.

Taking the spoon, she brought it to her lips, blowing softly before taking a small sip.

I watched her carefully, waiting for her reaction.

She swallowed, then blinked. “Huh.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

She smirked—barely, but enough. “It’s... not terrible.”

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head.

“Unbelievable. You’re on your deathbed, and you’re still talking shit.”

She let out a quiet breath—almost a laugh, almost something real.

She took another slow sip of the soup, her hands trembling slightly around the spoon. I noticed, but I didn’t say anything. She hated being seen as weak. Even now, half-delirious and exhausted, she was still trying to hold herself together.

But then, she paused.

Her grip on the spoon loosened, her gaze dropping into the bowl like she was seeing something else entirely. Her expression shifted—something unreadable, something raw.

I frowned. “Emily?”

She swallowed, setting the spoon down carefully. Too carefully. “It tastes like hers.”

Her voice was quiet. Small. I knew what she meant. I didn’t say anything at first, just watching as she pressed her lips together, like she was trying to push down whatever was rising in her chest.

Then, barely above a whisper, she said, “I haven’t had this in years.”

She wasn’t looking at me. She was staring at the soup like it was something fragile, something that could disappear if she blinked.

I set the bowl down on the nightstand. “Emily.”

She let out a slow breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “It’s stupid.”



I tilted my head. “You always say that right before saying something that isn’t stupid.”

A faint, tired scoff left her lips. But when she spoke again, there was something heavier beneath it.

“I just... I don’t remember the last time someone did something like this for me.” Her fingers curled into the blanket. “Not because they had to. Not because they felt bad. Just because.”

My chest tightened. She wasn’t saying it outright, but I heard what she meant. I thought about how she never talked about her family. How she never asked for help, never let people take care of her. How she acted like needing anything from anyone was some kind of weakness. I thought about the way she’d smiled earlier—small, fleeting—when she’d talked about her mom sitting at her bedside, making her eat terrible soup just to make sure she was okay.

I exhaled, leaning back slightly. “It’s just soup, Em.”

She shook her head, a weak smile tugging at the corner of her lips, but her eyes were glassy now. “It’s not.”

I swallowed. Looked away. I didn’t know what to do with this. Emily—sarcastic, stubborn, impossible Emily—was looking at me like I was ...something steady. Something safe. And that scared the hell out of me. She never looked at anyone like that. Not on purpose. Not unless she was too tired, too sick to put up walls. And yet, here she was. Looking at me.

I forced out a breath, running a hand through my hair. “You’re gonna make this weird, aren’t you?”

Her lips quirked, but the shine in her eyes didn’t go away. “Probably.”

I smirked, shaking my head. “Figures.”

Silence stretched between us. Not heavy. Not uncomfortable. Just there.

Emily sniffed, wiping at her face again, but it was useless. Her eyes were still wet, her hands still trembling slightly.

I sighed. “Come here.”

She blinked at me. “What?”

I reached out, tugging her forward before she could argue. She didn’t resist. Not really. She was too tired, too drained to fight it. And maybe—just maybe—she didn’t want to fight it.

She pressed her forehead against my shoulder, letting out a slow breath. I felt it more than I heard it.

A quiet, shaky thing. I hesitated, then rested my chin lightly on top of her head.

“See?” I muttered. “Not weird at all.”

She let out a watery laugh, barely there.

“Liar.”

I smirked. “Yeah. But it made you laugh, so.”

She didn’t respond. Just sat there, leaning into me, her breathing slow, uneven.

I stayed still, letting her take whatever she needed from this. From me. Because for once, she wasn’t pushing me away. She pressed her forehead against my shoulder, her breath warm against my collarbone. She wasn’t crying, not really, but she was close.

The kind of close where you feel it in your throat, in your chest, in the way you breathe a little too carefully—like if you let go for even a second, you’ll break apart. I felt it in her, in the way her fingers curled against my shirt, not gripping, not clinging, just there. Like she wasn’t even aware she was touching me, like she just needed something solid to hold on to. I hesitated, then raised a hand, resting it lightly against her back. She tensed, just barely, like she was surprised. Like maybe she hadn’t expected me to stay.

But I did. I let my fingers press against the soft fabric of her hoodie, just enough to ground her, enough to say I’m here, even though I didn’t say it out loud.

Her breath hitched.

“I don’t know why this is getting to me,” she murmured, voice rough, quiet.

I swallowed. “Because you don’t let yourself have this.”

She let out a slow, shaky breath. “Have what?”

I hesitated. Then: “Moments like this.”

She didn’t answer. Didn’t argue. Because we both knew I was right. Emily never let herself lean on anyone. Never let anyone see her break. She was the kind of person who shoved down her feelings, turned them into sharp words and deflections. The kind who sat alone with the weight of the world on her shoulders and never once thought to ask for help. But right now—right now, she was letting herself be held.



## CHAPTER 14

Emily

I woke up feeling much better. The fever was gone, and the soft light of morning filled the room. I sat up slowly, noticing Liam in the kitchen making coffee. The smell of fresh coffee and the gentle clink of cups made the place feel homey. I smiled a little.

“Good morning,” I said, my voice still soft but warmer than before.

“Morning, Em,” Liam replied with a grin. “You slept too well to be sick, I hope.”

I laughed. “Maybe I just needed a good night’s sleep.” I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling lighter than I had in days.

Liam leaned against the counter, sipping his coffee with that annoyingly charming smirk of his. “Well, if sleep is your cure, I should’ve just knocked you out on day one and saved myself the trouble.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, sure. Because concussions are the new antibiotics.”

He grinned. “Hey, don’t knock it till you try it.”

I shook my head, standing up and stretching. “Honestly, I do feel a lot better. So, what’s the plan for today? You gonna boss me around, or do I get to pretend I have a say?”

I gasped, putting a hand to my chest. “How dare you.”

He chuckled, setting his cup down. "Alright, alright. I do have something to talk to you about, though."

I narrowed my eyes. "That sounds suspicious."

He ran a hand through his hair, looking uncharacteristically hesitant. "So... I went to check out that storage unit."

I stared at him, my fingers tightening around my coffee cup.

Storage unit?

The words didn't make sense. They floated around my head like puzzle pieces that didn't fit, clashing against everything I knew—everything I thought I knew. I blinked at Liam, trying to process what he'd just said, but my mind was sluggish, like it was wading through thick, murky water.

"What?" My voice came out softer than I intended, almost breathless.

Liam leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his expression unreadable. "I went to Blackwood Storage this morning."

My stomach dropped.

"What do you mean you went there?"

He hesitated. Just for a second. But it was enough. Enough for something cold and sharp to slither down my spine.

"I found the logo on the envelope," he admitted. "At the bottom corner. It was faint, but I adjusted the contrast on my phone, and there it was—Blackwood Storage."

I shook my head, as if that would somehow shake the words away. "Okay, but—"

"You have a storage unit there, Em." His voice was firm, like he needed me to hear it clearly. "Under your name. It was rented two weeks ago. Paid in cash."

I stopped breathing. Two weeks ago? That was after I moved into my apartment. After everything started settling down. After—

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry.

“No,” I said flatly. “That’s not possible.”

Liam didn’t say anything. He just held my gaze, steady and unwavering.

“No,” I repeated, shaking my head harder this time. “I never—I don’t have a storage unit. I’ve never even been to that place.”

“I know.”

His voice was calm, too calm, like he’d already accepted something I hadn’t.

Which meant... Which meant someone else had done it. Someone else had used my name. The realization slammed into me, knocking the air from my lungs. My chest tightened, my heartbeat a loud, frantic thud in my ears.

“No,” I whispered again, but it sounded weak now.

Liam sat back, watching me carefully, like I was a wounded animal that might bolt. “Em. Someone rented it under your name. That’s a fact.”

I could barely hear him over the blood rushing in my ears. My body felt hot, then cold, then hot again, like my brain couldn’t decide whether to panic or shut down entirely. And then—

And then the anger hit.

“You knew about this,” I snapped, my voice suddenly sharp, trembling. “You found out and didn’t tell me.”

Liam exhaled through his nose. “I was going to—”

“When?” I cut him off, my pulse spiking. “After you investigated more? After you decided I was ready to know?”

I stood up, gripping the edge of the table to keep myself steady. “Who the hell do you think you are, Liam?”

His jaw tightened. “I was trying to protect you.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Oh, that’s rich. Protect me? From what? The truth?”

His lips parted slightly, but he didn’t say anything. Because he knew. He knew I was right. I felt my throat tighten, my vision blurring for half a second. I forced myself to breathe through it, to stay standing, to not let him see how hard my hands were shaking.

“You should have told me,” I whispered.

Liam ran a hand through his hair, exhaling hard. “I didn’t want to freak you out before I had more answers.”

I stared at him. “And how did that work out for you?”

He didn’t have an answer for that. Silence stretched between us, thick and suffocating. I forced myself to take another breath. My thoughts were still tangled, messy, chaotic.

But then— A memory surfaced.

A small, seemingly unimportant detail from days ago.

“There was a key,” I murmured, barely even realizing I’d spoken out loud.

Liam straightened slightly. “What?”

My pulse throbbed in my throat. “A small key. I found it in my bag a few days ago.” I swallowed. “I didn’t recognize it. I thought—I thought maybe it was something I forgot about, or something from my old place, so I just...” I trailed off.

Liam’s expression darkened. “Where is it now?”

I clenched my hands into fists. “I don’t know.”

We stared at each other, the weight of everything settling in like a storm about to break.

Someone had rented a storage unit under my name. Someone had left me a key. And now, I had no idea where it was. Liam’s expression shifted

in an instant—his whole body tensing as frustration flickered across his face.

"You don't know?" His voice was sharper now, disbelief laced through every word. "Emily, are you serious?"

I clenched my jaw. "Yes, Liam, I'm serious. I don't know where the damn key is!"

His hands went to his hips as he let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "Unbelievable. You had the key to a storage unit that someone rented under your name, and you just—what? Tossed it aside?"

"Excuse me?" My blood boiled instantly. "I didn't know what it was! It was just a tiny key, Liam! You expect me to just assume it was some big, mysterious clue to my life?"

"Maybe not," he shot back, eyes blazing. "But you could've at least kept it!"

I threw my hands up. "Oh, I'm so sorry I didn't realize I was living in some goddamn mystery novel where every random object in my bag is a plot twist!"

Liam ran both hands through his hair, exhaling sharply. "Jesus, Em, this isn't a joke!"

"You think I don't know that?" I snapped. "You think I'm not freaking out right now?"

"Well, you sure as hell aren't acting like it!"

I let out a harsh laugh, stepping closer, fueled by pure frustration now. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I not reacting correctly for you, Liam? Do you want me to break down? Cry? Maybe faint dramatically into your arms?"

He scoffed. "Something would be nice! Instead of just standing here arguing with me when we should be figuring out how to fix this!"

"Oh, and you're handling it so well?" I gestured wildly at him. "You ran off to that place without even telling me! You kept it from me! You



decided for me what I needed to know—like I'm some fragile little idiot who can't handle the truth!"

Liam's jaw clenched, and for a second, he didn't say anything. Just stared at me, his chest rising and falling a little too fast.

Then—

"I didn't tell you because I knew you'd react like this!"

"Like what?"

"Like you're too stubborn to admit when something's wrong!" His voice was firm, cutting through the air like a knife. "Like you'd rather argue with me than face the fact that someone out there is messing with you!"

That hit something deep. Because he was right. And I hated that he was right. I swallowed, my hands shaking slightly, anger and fear tangled up inside me, clawing at my ribs.

Liam exhaled roughly, running a hand down his face. His voice was lower when he spoke again. "This isn't about me trying to control you, Em. This is about the fact that someone—and we don't know who—is using your name. And we just lost our one way into finding out why."

I turned away, pressing my hands to my temples, trying to think through the mess in my head.

The key. I had it. It was real. I saw it. So where the hell was it now?

I forced myself to take a breath. "Okay." My voice was quieter now, but still tight. "Maybe I—maybe I put it somewhere. I'll check my stuff."

Liam studied me for a moment, then nodded stiffly. "Good."

We didn't say anything else. The drive to my apartment was suffocating. Liam didn't say a word. Not one. And honestly? That terrified me almost as much as the thought of walking back into my place. Because if Liam wasn't talking, that meant he was thinking. And when Liam thought too much, he usually came to conclusions I wasn't ready for. I kept my arms crossed tightly over my chest, my nails digging into my sleeves. My mind was racing—flashing through every stupid possibility.

What if I'd thrown the key away?

What if I'd dropped it somewhere?

What if—goddamn it—what if another letter was waiting for me when I got back?

My stomach twisted violently at that thought. Another letter. Another cryptic message. Another goddamn mystery tied to my name—one I didn't remember signing up for.

I swallowed hard, staring out the window as the city blurred past. I hated this. Hated the not-knowing.

Hated the silence. And Liam. I glanced at him, gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white. His jaw was locked, his whole body tense.

And he still wasn't talking.

"Okay, you're being creepy," I muttered, breaking the silence.

Nothing. Not even a glance.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, I see. We're doing the whole brooding, I'm-so-mad-I-refuse-to-speak thing now?"

Still nothing.

I sighed, shifting in my seat. "You know, if you really want to punish me, you could at least put on some god-awful music to make me suffer."

Nothing.

Jesus Christ.

I groaned, rubbing my temples. "Liam, for the love of—"

"You lost the key, Em."

His voice was sharp. Low. Controlled. But I heard the frustration under it.

I clenched my teeth. "Yeah. I know that."

"Do you?"

I turned fully toward him, my anger flaring up again. "Yes, Liam, I do. I'm not thrilled about it either, in case you didn't notice."

His grip tightened on the wheel. "That key could've been the only way into that storage unit. And now it's gone."

I inhaled slowly, forcing my hands to relax, unclenching them from the fists they'd curled into. My pulse was still erratic, my mind a storm, but fighting with Liam wasn't going to get us anywhere.

I turned back to him, lowering my voice. "Look... I get that you're mad."

He scoffed. "Mad doesn't even cover it."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Okay. Frustrated. Pissed off. Ready to strangle me—whatever it is, I get it." I exhaled sharply. "But standing here, arguing about it isn't going to magically make the key appear."

Liam kept his gaze on the road, jaw tight. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to ground myself. "It has to be somewhere, Liam. I wouldn't have just thrown it away."

"Then where is it?" His voice was quieter now, but still tense, edged with impatience.

I bit my lip, thinking. I'd seen it—I knew I had. It was small, silver. I'd held it between my fingers. But where had I put it after that?

I closed my eyes for a second, trying to rewind my memory. "Okay... I remember finding it in my bag." I spoke slowly, carefully, as if that would make the memory clearer. "I took it out, looked at it, but I didn't recognize it. I—"

I frowned.

"What?" Liam asked sharply.

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze. "I think... I might've tossed it into my nightstand."

Liam blinked. “Your nightstand?”

I nodded quickly. “Yeah. You know how I just throw random stuff in there when I don’t know what to do with it?”

He exhaled, shaking his head, but the tension in his shoulders loosened a fraction. “Jesus, Em.”

I let out a breath. “It’s probably still there.”

“You better hope it is.”

“I do.” I reached out, hesitated for a second, then gently touched his arm. “Hey.”

He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t look at me either.

I squeezed lightly. “We’ll find it.”

He stayed silent for a beat, then finally, finally let out a slow breath. Some of the sharpness in his eyes softened, just a little.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “We better.”

And just like that, the tension between us shifted—not gone, but no longer suffocating. We drove the rest of the way in silence, but this time, it wasn’t the angry, biting kind. This time, it was hopeful.

Because if the key was still there—

Then maybe we weren’t completely lost after all.



## CHAPTER 15

Liam

I swear to God, Emily's going to be the death of me. Not even in the poetic, oh, I'd die for her kind of way. No. In the I'm-going-to-lose-my-mind-and-combust kind of way. Because who loses something like that? A random, mystery key that just appears in your bag? You don't just look at it and go, meh, probably nothing, and toss it in a drawer with old chapsticks and forgotten receipts.

And yet. Here we were. I stole a glance at Emily as I drove, her arms crossed, brows furrowed, chewing on her bottom lip like she was still replaying our argument in her head. Her dark hair was pulled over one shoulder, and she was tapping her fingers against her thigh—a nervous habit I'd noticed she did when she was thinking too hard. She looked guilty. Good. She should be. But she also looked stressed.

I sighed, dragging a hand through my hair. "You okay over there, Sherlock?"

She shot me a glare. "Sherlock wouldn't have lost the key."

I smirked. "Damn right, he wouldn't have."

She groaned, throwing her head back against the seat. "Liam."

"What?" I said innocently.

"You're so annoying."

“And you’re so bad at keeping track of important things. Look at that, we both have our flaws.”

She huffed, glaring out the window, but I caught the corner of her mouth twitching like she was fighting a smile. I grinned. There it is. God, she was so easy to mess with. Still, as much as I enjoyed getting under her skin, the situation was still a mess. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

“But seriously, Em. You really think it’s in your nightstand?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “I’m like... eighty percent sure.”

“That’s not as comforting as you think it is.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s better than nothing.”

“Debatable.”

“Liam.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Alright, alright. Let’s just get to your place, dig through your hoarder drawer, and find this damn key before I lose my last remaining brain cell.”

Emily huffed. “It’s not a hoarder drawer.”

“Em. I’ve seen it.”

She crossed her arms. “Name one thing in there that makes it a hoarder drawer.”

I didn’t even have to think. “The single sock.”

Her lips parted, then she shut them again.

I smirked. “Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

She turned away, mumbling, “It’s a sentimental sock.”

I nearly swerved off the road. “A sentimental sock?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I have to hear this.”

She lifted her chin. “It was my favorite pair, and I lost the other one. I keep it in case it ever comes back.”

I blinked at her. “In case it comes back?”

She nodded, completely serious.

I let out a slow breath. “I am so concerned for you.”

Emily smirked, but I saw the way her fingers tapped against her arm. She was still nervous.

And despite how much I loved teasing her, I hated seeing her worried.

So I sighed and softened my voice. “Hey.”

She glanced at me, and I nodded toward her apartment building as we pulled up.

“We’ll find it, okay?”

She held my gaze for a second, then nodded. “Okay.”

I parked, and we got out, heading up to her place. My muscles tensed as we stepped into her apartment, my eyes immediately scanning the place.

No new letters.

No weird messages waiting for us.

For now, at least.

Emily exhaled like she’d been holding her breath and marched straight to her bedroom. I followed, leaning against the doorframe as she yanked open her nightstand drawer and started rummaging.

She yanked open the drawer and started rummaging, her movements frantic. I leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching the chaos unfold. Papers, hair ties, some random receipts—

And then—

A bra.

A bright pink, lacy, scandalous piece of fabric.

I blinked. "Oh."

Emily froze. Then, with the slowest, most robotic movement I'd ever seen, she turned to me.

"Don't," she said, voice dangerously calm.

I bit my lip, but the smirk was already forming. "I mean, I knew you were hiding secrets, but—"

"Liam."

I raised my hands in surrender, but the grin wouldn't leave my face. "I just think it's interesting—"

"Liam."

She snatched the bra, shoved it back into the drawer, and slammed it shut like she could erase the past three seconds from existence. Her entire face was red. I lost it. A full-blown laugh tore out of me, and I had to grip the doorframe to steady myself. "That was so much better than I expected," I gasped.

Emily groaned, burying her face in her hands. "I hate you."

"I know." I wiped a fake tear. "But hey, at least I'll have something to remember if I ever need to blackmail you."

Emily let out an inhuman noise—somewhere between a growl and a whimper—and threw a hairbrush at me.

I dodged it effortlessly, still grinning. "Violence isn't the answer, Em."

"The answer is me kicking you out of my apartment," she muttered, rubbing her temples like she was reconsidering every life choice that led her to this moment.

I chuckled, stepping forward. "Alright, alright. No more jokes about your very interesting lingerie collection—"

She shot me a glare.

"—for now," I added quickly.



Emily exhaled through her nose, then turned back to the drawer. “We need to focus. The key. We’re here for the key.”

“Right.” I leaned over slightly. “Try under the chapstick graveyard.”

She tossed an empty lip balm tube at me without looking.

I caught it. “That was rude.”

“You deserve it.”

I smirked but didn’t argue. Instead, I crouched down next to her. “Move over. You clearly need professional help.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Professional help?”

“Yep.” I gestured at the mess. “This is an emergency situation. And you’ve proven to be wildly incompetent.”

Emily huffed but scooted aside, watching as I started shifting through the drawer with practiced efficiency. Hair ties. Receipts. Old pens. A lone earring. A broken phone charger. This drawer was a nightmare.

“Do you ever clean this thing out?” I asked.

“No,” she said simply.

“Of course not.” I dug deeper. “You know, I think there might be an entire ecosystem in here. We could be disrupting a thriving civilization.”

“Shut up and look for the key.”

I snorted, but then— Something cold. Metal. I closed my fingers around it, heartbeat kicking up.

“Bingo.”

Emily’s head snapped toward me as I pulled out the key, dangling it between us triumphantly.

She gasped. “Oh my God.”

I smirked. “You were eighty percent sure, huh?”

She ignored me, snatching it from my hand. “I knew it was here!”

I dusted off my hands, standing up. “Yeah, yeah. You’re a genius. Let’s go figure out what this thing opens before I die of old age.”

Emily clutched the key, staring at it like it was some ancient relic. “What if it’s nothing?”

I studied her. She looked excited, sure, but also nervous. Like part of her was scared of whatever answer we might find.

I nudged her shoulder. “Then we’ll laugh about it and go get ice cream.”

She exhaled, a small smile tugging at her lips.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

We didn’t waste any time. Emily grabbed her coat, shoved the key in her pocket like it was made of glass, and we were out the door. The drive to the storage facility was mostly quiet—Emily was chewing her lip again, her knee bouncing slightly. I could practically hear the gears in her head turning.

“You gonna stress over this the whole ride?” I asked, glancing at her.

She shot me a look. “No.”

“You sure? Because your leg is shaking like it’s trying to break free from your body.”

Emily immediately stopped bouncing her knee. “I’m fine.”

“Yeah, you sound fine,” I muttered.

She ignored me, staring out the window as buildings blurred past. I sighed and reached over, flicking the radio on. Music filled the silence. Some upbeat pop song.

Emily groaned. “Turn this off.”

I smirked. “Nope. You need the distraction.”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t need a distraction, I need answers.”

“Well, unless you’ve suddenly developed psychic abilities, we’re gonna have to wait for those answers.”

Emily huffed but didn't argue. Instead, she drummed her fingers against her leg, the rhythm perfectly in time with the song. I shook my head, hiding a smile. Ten minutes later, we pulled into the storage facility. It was the kind of place that looked like it belonged in a horror movie—long rows of metal doors, dim lighting, eerie quiet.

"Okay," I said, killing the engine. "This place is creepy as hell."

Emily shivered. "Why does every storage facility look like a crime scene?"

"Probably because crimes actually happen in them."

"Wow. Thanks. That's very comforting, Liam."

I grinned. "Hey, just saying. If some masked killer jumps out, I am throwing you at them and running."

Emily rolled her eyes. "You wish you could outrun me."

Fair point. She was terrifyingly fast when she wanted to be.

We climbed out of the car, and Emily pulled the key from her pocket, gripping it tightly.

"Do we even know what unit this goes to?" She asked.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through some messages. "Yeah. It's unit 157."

She glanced down the long corridor of identical metal doors. "Cool. That's not ominous at all."

I elbowed her "Come on."

We walked past rows of units, the air thick with dust and the weird scent of old cardboard.

"Oh my God." She dragged a hand down my face. "We're literally about to break into a random storage unit."

I glared. "We are not breaking in! We have the key!"

We have the key. That's what I told myself as we walked through the dimly lit corridor, the hum of distant street traffic barely reaching this eerie, in-between space. But the truth is, It felt like breaking in.

Emily's grip on the key was so tight her knuckles had gone white. "You sure it's 157?"

I checked my phone again, swallowing. "Yeah. That's what it said."

She exhaled sharply and picked up the pace. "Then let's get this over with."

The numbers on the storage units passed in a blur. 149... 150... 151...

And then—

157.

We both stopped.

The metal door looked like every other one in the facility—dull gray, a little dented, slightly rusted around the handle. Completely unremarkable. But something about it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Emily stared at the door. Then at the key in her hand.

I glanced at her. "You wanna—?"

She shoved the key at me. "You do it."

I blinked. "Oh. Wow. That's mature."

"Liam, just—" She gestured at the lock, exasperated.

I sighed and took the key, sliding it into the lock. It fit perfectly.

A twist. A soft click. The lock popped open.

I hesitated.

Emily shifted beside me. "Well?"

I took a breath and lifted the roll-up door. It rattled as it went up, dust shaking loose, the dim hallway light spilling in to reveal—

Boxes. Stacks of them. All the way to the back of the unit. Some neatly labeled. Some scribbled on. Some with nothing at all.

Emily let out a breath. “Okay. That’s... normal.”

I stepped in cautiously, eyes scanning. “I don’t know, Em. This feels too—”

My foot hit something. I looked down. A single, worn-out notebook sat in the center of the floor, like someone had placed it there on purpose. I crouched, heartbeat hammering. The cover was faded. Old. The kind of brown that paper turned after years of sitting untouched.

And when I flipped it open—

My stomach dropped. Because there, on the first page—

Emily.

In handwriting that wasn’t hers.



## CHAPTER 16

Emily's POV

I wasn't prepared for this. I wasn't prepared to see my name scrawled on a page that wasn't mine.

I wasn't prepared for the weight of it pressing down on my chest, stealing the breath right out of me.

"What is that?" Liam's voice was low, cautious. I could hear the shift in his tone, the way he was trying not to make this more unsettling than it already was.

I didn't answer. My eyes were glued to the notebook, to the page that looked like it had been waiting for me.

Liam's footsteps were tentative as he moved closer, his shadow falling over me. "Em, what the hell is that?"

I could barely breathe. I swallowed hard, trying to push the panic down, but it was like a fire that wouldn't go out. "I— I don't know."

I reached for the notebook, trembling fingers flipping through the pages. Each one was filled with writing. Notes. Scribbles. Phrases. All about me. All written in someone else's handwriting.

"You okay?" Liam asked, his voice soft now. I could tell he was watching me carefully, waiting for me to say something.

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't look at anything except the notebook. It was like a part of my life had been stolen and written down without me even knowing. I reached the last page, and there, in bold, urgent script, was the most recent entry: I felt the blood drain from my face as I read those words.

The words felt like they were burning into my skin.

"I know you. I see you. And I'm not going anywhere."

A shiver ran down my spine, a cold dread creeping up from my stomach. My fingers clutched the edges of the notebook as if it might slip away, like it was going to disappear into thin air and leave me with nothing but the hollow feeling in my chest. I couldn't even form a sentence. All I could do was stare at those words. Someone knew me. Knew more about me than they should. Someone had been watching. Tracking. Writing. I forced myself to look up, meeting Liam's eyes for the first time since I picked up the notebook. His expression was a mix of confusion and concern, but there was something else there too. Something... darker.

"What is this?" Liam asked again, his voice steady but edged with something I couldn't place.

"Who wrote this, Emily?"

"I don't know," I whispered, my throat tight. The words felt like a lie, but I couldn't help it. "I don't know."

He stepped forward, reaching for the notebook, but I flinched away, clutching it to my chest as though it was the only thing keeping me tethered to reality.

"Em," Liam said softly, his voice gentler now. "You need to tell me. This isn't something we can ignore."

I felt the pressure in my chest tighten again, that all-too-familiar anxiety gnawing at me. The thing that had been building up inside me for so long, since the moment I first saw those words. Someone knew things

about me that weren't just surface level. They knew me in ways I had never let anyone see.

"I swear," I said, my voice cracking, "I don't know who wrote it. I don't know how it got here. But it's real, Liam. Whoever did this, they're out there. Watching."

Liam's hand clenched into a fist, his knuckles white as he took in the words on the page. I could feel the temperature in the room shift, the air thickening with tension. His eyes burned with something fierce—anger, raw and protective.

"This is fucking sick, Emily," Liam growled, his voice low and controlled, but the fury simmering just beneath the surface was unmistakable. "Whoever did this, whoever thought they could invade your life like this..." He trailed off, shaking his head like he couldn't even put it into words. He looked at me, his gaze sharp, intense. "I'll fucking destroy them."

I couldn't bring myself to speak, not at first. My chest was still tight, my heart pounding against my ribs as if it was trying to break free. Liam was standing there, his shoulders tense, eyes burning with rage, and for a moment, I didn't know whether to be scared or relieved.

"I swear to God, Emily," he muttered, his voice thick with barely contained anger, "this is mine to protect. I'm not letting anyone hurt you. Not now, not ever."

I swallowed hard, my throat tight with emotion, and finally forced myself to meet his eyes. "I don't know what to do, Liam. It's like—like they're in my head, writing everything down like they know me better than I know myself. It's too much."

His jaw clenched, his expression hardening even more. "No one gets to do that. No one gets to violate you like this. You understand me?"

I nodded, tears stinging at the corners of my eyes. "I just—what if they're always watching? What if they—"



“They’re not going to get the chance to do anything else,” Liam interrupted, his voice now a dangerous calm. His eyes didn’t leave mine, and there was no doubt in my mind that whatever he had to do to make sure I was safe, he would do it. “I’ll handle it. I’ll make sure they understand what happens when they fuck with you.”

“Liam, you don’t have to—” I started, but he cut me off again, his tone firm.

“Yes, I do. I’m not letting you go through this alone. Whoever’s behind this, they’re going to regret it. I’m going to find them, and they won’t be able to hide.”

I could see the fire in his eyes, the unspoken promise that he wasn’t going to let this go. That it wasn’t just about protecting me physically; it was about protecting me in every way possible. The weight of that promise settled over me like a shield, and though the fear still gnawed at me, I found myself holding onto that anger, that fierce loyalty of his. Liam’s grip tightened around my hand, his thumb gently stroking the back of my fingers. It was like a silent promise, a vow that no matter what happened next, we’d face it together.

My mind was still spinning raced with questions. Who did this? What did they want from me?

And the most chilling question of all: How long had they been watching?



## CHAPTER 17

Liam's POV

Something was wrong with Emily. I knew it the second she stopped meeting my eyes. The way she pulled back, the way her fingers trembled slightly when I reached for her hand—it wasn't like her. Not with me. Not after everything. She was avoiding me. And it was driving me fucking insane. I watched her from across the room, my jaw tight, fingers curled into my palm as she sat on the couch, staring at nothing in particular. She hadn't said much since last night. Since the notebook. Since those goddamn words that made my blood boil.

I know you. I see you. And I'm not going anywhere.

The rage I'd felt reading that still burned through me, an unrelenting fire in my veins. I wasn't the kind of guy to let things go easily—especially not when it came to her. But Emily? She was shutting me out. And I wasn't about to fucking let her.

"Emily," I finally said, voice tight.

She stiffened slightly but didn't turn to look at me.

I pushed off the wall, moving closer, my steps slow, deliberate. "Talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about."

Bullshit. I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. “You think I don’t know when you’re lying?”

Her jaw clenched, but she still wouldn’t look at me. Something snapped in me. I crossed the space between us, dropping down onto the couch beside her, forcing her to acknowledge my presence.

She flinched, like she didn’t want me this close. That hurt. More than I’d ever admit.

“Why are you pushing me away?” I asked, my voice quieter this time.

She hesitated, her hands curling in her lap. “I’m not.”

“Emily.”

Finally, finally, she turned to look at me. And it was like a punch to the gut. Her eyes were guarded, filled with something I couldn’t place—fear, maybe. Uncertainty. A kind of exhaustion that made my chest tighten.

“Please,” I said, softer this time. “Tell me what’s going on in that head of yours.”

For a moment, I thought she might. Her lips parted, her shoulders tense. But then, just as quickly, she shook her head. “I just... I need time.”

Time for what? To figure this out alone? To deal with this shit without me? No fucking way.

I clenched my fists, trying to rein in my frustration. “You don’t have to go through this alone.”

She gave me a small, sad smile. “I know.”

“Then why won’t you let me help you?” My voice was rougher than I intended, but I couldn’t help it. She was right here, yet she felt so far away.

Emily looked down at her hands, twisting her fingers together. “Because I don’t want you to get hurt, Liam.”

I let out a sharp laugh, shaking my head. “That’s not your call to make.”

“It is if it means keeping you safe,” she shot back, finally looking at me again. “What if this person isn’t just watching? What if they do something? I can’t—I can’t let you get caught up in this.”

My hands curled into fists. “Emily, I’m already caught up in this. You think I’m just gonna walk away? That I’m gonna let some sick fuck scare you and do nothing about it?”

She blinked, startled by the intensity in my voice. “I didn’t mean—”

“No,” I cut her off, shaking my head. “I get it. You’re scared. But don’t push me away because of it. That’s not how this works.”

Her lips trembled for a second before she pressed them into a thin line. She didn’t argue. She just nodded, almost defeated. I wasn’t done. I wanted to get through to her. But before I could say anything else, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I almost ignored it, but something in my gut told me to check.

One new message.

Unknown Number: You’re looking in the wrong places.

My blood turned to ice.

I shot up from the couch, my heart hammering. “What the fuck?”

Emily’s eyes widened. “What is it?”

I turned my screen toward her, letting her see it for herself.

She paled. “Oh my God.”

I swallowed hard, my grip on the phone tightening. Someone was watching. They knew we were looking. And now they were playing games. I wasn’t about to let them win.

Emily sucked in a shaky breath. “Liam... what if—”

“No,” I cut her off, shaking my head. “We’re not running from this. We’re gonna figure out who this sick fuck is.”

Her hands curled into fists. “How?”

I exhaled sharply, my mind racing. "We go back to the notebook. There has to be something in there. A clue. A pattern. Anything."

Emily hesitated, but then nodded. "Okay."

For the first time in hours, I saw a spark in her eyes. Not fear. Not doubt. But determination.

And damn it, if I had to tear the whole world apart to keep her safe, I fucking would.

Emily's hands trembled slightly as she reached for the notebook. I could see it—the hesitation,

the fear creeping up her spine like a shadow she couldn't shake. But there was something else too. Determination.

I leaned in closer, my eyes locked on her. "We go through it. Every page. Every word. We don't stop until we find something."

She nodded, swallowing hard before flipping open the worn cover. The pages were filled with ink—some words rushed and frantic, others precise, deliberate. I clenched my jaw as my eyes skimmed over them, the words taunting me.

I see you. I know you.

It made my skin crawl. Whoever this person was, they weren't just watching from afar. They knew too much. They understood things about Emily—things she hadn't even shared with me yet. And that thought made my blood fucking boil.

Emily let out a shaky breath, flipping through the pages. "There has to be something we missed. Something obvious."

I nodded, focusing. "Dates. Names. Anything that repeats."

She turned another page, her fingers tightening slightly on the edges. "Here—this one. It's different from the rest."

I shifted closer, scanning the uneven scrawl. The handwriting seemed rushed, almost frantic, like whoever wrote it was barely holding themselves together.

It's not about looking. It's about seeing.

My jaw tightened. "What the hell does that mean?"

Emily shook her head. "I don't know. But look at the corner." She pointed to a smudge near the bottom of the page. "It looks like something was erased."

I reached for my phone and turned on the flashlight, angling it over the page. The faint outline of letters was still there, barely visible. My pulse kicked up. "We need a pencil."

Emily grabbed one from the table and shaded lightly over the spot, revealing the hidden text. A name.

Holloway.

Her breath caught. "Liam... that's—"

"Yeah," I cut in, my pulse hammering. "That's the street where—"

"Where I used to live," she finished, voice barely above a whisper.

A chill ran down my spine. This just got personal.

Emily turned to me, her eyes filled with something between fear and realization. "This isn't just some random stalker, is it?"

I shook my head, my grip tightening around the notebook. "No. This is someone who knows you."

Silence stretched between us, heavy and suffocating. My mind raced, trying to connect the dots. Someone from her past? Someone who had been watching for longer than we thought?

Emily's fingers curled into fists. "Then we find them."

I studied her, seeing the fire in her eyes. "Yeah. We do. And when we do, they're going to wish they never fucking started this."

Emily sucked in a breath, her fingers gripping the edges of the notebook like it was the only thing anchoring her to reality. I could see the war playing out in her head—fear, anger, the sheer exhaustion of constantly looking over her shoulder. But she wasn't breaking. Not this time.

I reached out, resting my hand lightly over hers. "We'll start with Holloway," I said, keeping my voice steady. "See who's still around. If someone from your past is behind this, they've been hiding in plain sight."

Emily nodded, her throat bobbing as she swallowed. "There's... there's a house at the end of the street," she murmured. "I never thought about it before, but there was always this feeling. Like someone was watching."

I didn't like that. Not one bit.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, though I kept my tone careful. I wasn't accusing her—I just needed to understand.

She bit her lip, looking away for a second. "Because it felt stupid. I was a kid. I thought maybe I was imagining it."

"You weren't," I said firmly. "Whoever this is, they've been waiting. Watching. But they made a mistake."

Emily blinked at me. "What mistake?"

I tapped the page, right where the name was scrawled. "They left a trail."

Her brows furrowed. "What if it's a trap? What if they want us to go there?"

"Then we'll be ready."

I could see the gears turning in her head, the way her breathing slowed as she thought through the possibilities. Fear was still there, lurking in the corners of her mind, but the determination I'd seen earlier wasn't fading. It was growing.

Emily set the notebook aside and met my gaze. "Then we go tonight."

I opened my mouth to argue—going in blind, at night, was reckless as hell—but the look in her eyes stopped me. She wasn't asking for permission. She was deciding.

"Fine," I said. "But we do this my way. No rushing in. No taking chances."

She exhaled, then nodded. "Agreed."

I grabbed my phone and scrolled through my contacts. If we were doing this, we needed backup. Someone who knew how to dig deeper, track down records, find the missing pieces we might be overlooking. I tapped on a name and hit call.

The line rang twice before a voice answered. "Didn't expect to hear from you, Carter."

I cut straight to the point. "I need a favor."

A chuckle. "That's new."

"I need everything you can find on an address: Holloway Street. Especially any past owners, renters, weird activity. Anything that stands out."

There was a pause. "That all?"

"For now."

Another chuckle. "Alright. Give me an hour."

The line went dead, and I tucked my phone away. Emily was watching me, her expression unreadable. "Who was that?"

"Someone who can help," I said simply.

She studied me for a moment before nodding. "Okay."

I glanced at the clock. An hour. That was all we had before we made our move.

Emily shifted closer, her voice quieter when she spoke again. "Liam?"

"Yeah?"



Her fingers curled into the fabric of her hoodie. "No matter what happens tonight... just don't—don't do anything stupid."

I let out a breath, reaching up to brush a stray piece of hair from her face. "That depends."

Her brows pulled together. "On what?"

I let my hand linger against her cheek, my voice dropping lower. "On what you consider stupid."

Emily rolled her eyes, but I caught the way her breath hitched, the way her cheeks warmed just slightly. "Liam," she muttered, narrowing her eyes. "You know exactly what I mean."

I smirked, tilting my head. "Do I?"

She huffed. "Yes. No running into danger. No pissing off a potential psycho just because you like the thrill of it. And definitely no acting like you're invincible, because you're not."

I let out a low chuckle. Got it."

Emily gave me a pointed look. "I mean it, Liam."

I held up my hands in surrender, but my smirk didn't budge. "Okay, no unnecessary heroics. Just the necessary ones."

She groaned, dragging a hand down her face. "Why do I even try?"

I leaned back, resting my arm along the couch behind her. "Because you care," I said, my voice dropping just enough to make her freeze. "And that scares you more than whoever the hell is watching."

Emily's lips parted slightly, and for a second, she looked like she wanted to argue. But she didn't. Instead, she grabbed a pillow and smacked me in the chest.

I let out a dramatic oof, catching it before it hit the floor. "See? This is why I can't promise not to do anything stupid. I have to be prepared for sudden attacks."

Her glare was instant. "Liam, I swear—"

"See, now who's, willingly about to break into a potentially haunted house with me? Makes me wonder who the real reckless one is."

She groaned again, but I caught the flicker of amusement in her eyes. "It's not haunted, Liam."

"Not yet," I said, wiggling my fingers dramatically. "But give it a few hours. Maybe we'll meet a ghost. Or, better yet, the psycho who's been scribbling creepy poetry about you."

Her expression flattened. "Wow. So reassuring."

Emily narrowed her eyes, but there was a twitch at the corner of her lips, like she was fighting the urge to smile. I, however, was fully committed to being insufferable.

"Oh, come on," I teased, bumping my knee against hers. "Admit it, there's a part of you that's at least a little excited about this. Breaking into a creepy house? Uncovering dark secrets? A touch of life-threatening danger?"

She deadpanned. "Wow. All my dream hobbies in one night."

I smirked. "I knew you were into the whole 'mysterious danger' aesthetic."

She groaned, tossing her head back. "Liam. Shut up."

Before I could respond, there was a loud, abrupt knock at the door.

Emily and I both froze.

The air in the room shifted—our easy banter evaporating as tension coiled tight between us. My pulse kicked up, instincts on high alert. Emily's breath hitched, and she looked at me, wide-eyed.

No one was supposed to be here.

Another knock. This one felt heavier. More deliberate.

My stomach clenched. Emily's hand darted out, gripping my wrist with ice-cold fingers.

I swallowed. “Did you—”

She shook her head frantically. “No one knows we’re here.”

The silence between knocks was suffocating. I glanced at my phone. No messages. My guy was still digging into Holloway, so this wasn’t him. And no way in hell was I about to open that door blindly.

Emily reached for the notebook like it was a weapon, and for a second, the only sound was both of us breathing, shallow and sharp.

Another knock. Louder.

I clenched my jaw, standing. “Stay here.”

“Nope.” She was already up, right behind me.

I didn’t argue—if there was someone on the other side, I wasn’t about to turn my back on them. I stepped forward, keeping my movements slow, controlled, like approaching a predator.

Then, finally, I yanked the door open.

Emily let out a tiny, barely audible gasp.

A shadow loomed in the doorway.

I tensed.

Then—

“Uh, hi?”

A very bored teenage pizza guy stood there, holding a box, staring at us like we were the weirdest customers of the night.

I blinked. Emily blinked. Neither of us spoke.

The guy sighed, popping his gum. “Pepperoni with extra cheese?”

I turned to Emily, my expression blank. “Are you serious?”

And then—then she laughed. Not just any laugh. No, she tilted her head back, parted her lips, and howled like a damn ghost from a horror

movie. It was unhinged. The kind of sound that would make a demon second-guess its life choices. The pizza guy flinched. I flinched.

And then, between laughs, she gasped out, “I—I ordered it like an hour ago and—oh my god—I forgot—”

I exhaled sharply, dragging a hand down my face as she cackled.

“Emily,” I deadpanned. “You nearly killed me.”

She wiped a tear from her eye, breathless. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic.”

The pizza guy, still visibly concerned for his well-being, slowly extended the box. “Uh. That’ll be twelve bucks.”

I shoved a twenty at him just to get him the hell away.

As soon as the door closed, I turned to Emily, arms crossed. “Explain yourself.”

She grinned, smug. “I was hungry.”

“You terrified me for a pepperoni pizza?”

“I forgot I ordered it!” She held up the box innocently. “Besides, the timing was just perfect.”

I sighed, shaking my head. “You are the worst.”

She winked. “But you love me.”

I paused. She must’ve realized what she just said, because her eyes widened slightly, and for the first time all night, she was the one looking flustered. I let the silence stretch just enough to watch her squirm. Then, finally, I smirked, reaching out to pluck a slice from the box.

“I’ll let you have this one,” I said casually. “Only because I do love pizza.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t correct herself. And for some reason, that made my chest feel a little too tight. I tried to focus on the pizza. On the fact that I’d just spent the last two minutes believing we were about to get murdered, only to realize Emily had—because of course, of course she had—ordered food and then completely forgotten about it. On the way

she laughed, that eerie, over-the-top ghostly wail, arms lifted like some horror movie specter, just to mess with me. On the fact that, for a solid moment, I had been so wound up, so sure that something was lurking on the other side of that door, that my body had already been preparing for a fight.

But my brain refused to cooperate. Because she said it. You love me. She said it with a smirk. With that teasing, lopsided grin that she always got when she thought she had the upper hand. She said it like it was nothing. Like it was a joke, an offhand remark, something she could just toss out into the space between us without consequence.

But it wasn't nothing. Not for me. It was everything.

I didn't even know when it had happened. Maybe it was slow, creeping in over time, slipping through the cracks of our arguments, our rivalry, our stubborn refusal to back down from each other. Maybe it had been inevitable, something neither of us saw coming until it was too late. But I knew now. I felt it now. And the second those words left her mouth, everything inside me screamed to pay attention.

I stole a glance at her. She was still smirking, still acting like she hadn't just knocked the air out of my lungs. But there was something in the way she wasn't looking directly at me, in the way she suddenly seemed too invested in her pizza, her fingers idly tapping against the crust like she knew. Like she felt it too.

And that. That scared the hell out of me. Because she wasn't supposed to feel it. This wasn't supposed to happen. Emily was the girl I used to hate. The girl who used to get under my skin like no one else, who challenged me at every turn, who threw my own words back at me with a smirk that made my blood boil. But then, somewhere along the way, that hatred had blurred into something else. Something reckless and consuming, something that kept pulling me in even when I knew I should keep my distance.

She had become the girl who made my chest tighten when she smiled. The girl who could bring me back to reality with nothing but a touch, a

word, a look. The girl who, despite every single part of me that screamed this was dangerous, that I was in way too deep—was suddenly the most important thing in my world.

I wasn't supposed to love her. But I did. And it wasn't the easy, lighthearted kind of love she joked about. It was the kind that settled deep in my bones, that carved itself into my ribcage and made a home there. The kind that didn't ask permission, didn't give warnings, didn't come with an easy way out.

It was raw. Unforgiving. A wildfire I had no control over. And sitting there, watching her pretend that her words hadn't just cracked something open inside me, I realized—I didn't want control. I didn't want to shove this down, to ignore it, to act like I could just turn it off the way I did with everything else that tried to get too close.

Because it was her. Emily, with her sharp tongue and sharp mind, who could cut me down in seconds but also put me back together with a single touch. Emily, who argued with me just to see if she could win, who never let me get away with bullshit, who had spent so long challenging me that she'd somehow become the only person I wanted in my corner.

Emily, who was right here, teasing me like this wasn't something that could break me. Like it wasn't something that was already breaking me.

She laughed again, tossing her crust back into the box like she had just won something. "God, Liam, the way you jumped when he knocked? I should've recorded it." She pressed a hand to her chest, mimicking my reaction, her voice dropping into an exaggerated version of mine. "Emily, we're about to die. Grab a weapon. We fight tonight."

I rolled my eyes, leaning back against the couch, arms crossed. "That's not what I said."

"That is exactly what you said," she shot back, grinning. "I could feel your panic. It was delicious."

"You are actually evil."

Emily smirked, stretching out on the couch like a cat that had just won a fight it wasn't even supposed to be in. "Evil is a strong word, Liam. I prefer 'strategic.'"

I scoffed. "Strategic? You forgot you ordered pizza and let me go into full survival mode over a delivery guy."

She shrugged, completely unbothered. "Details."

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head, but I couldn't fight the way my lips twitched. Because this was Emily. Infuriating, impossible, reckless. The kind of person who could make my blood pressure spike and, in the same breath, make me want to laugh. But my pulse was still too fast. Not from the stupid pizza delivery. Not from the moment of pure, unfiltered adrenaline that had just left my nerves fried.

From her.

From what she'd said.

You love me.

She'd thrown it out there like it was a joke, but something about the way she was looking at me now made me wonder if she had been testing the waters—if she had been waiting to see if I'd flinch, if I'd deflect, if I'd throw it back like I always did. I didn't want to. Not this time.

I shifted, resting my elbows on my knees, my fingers laced together. I didn't break eye contact. Didn't let myself look away. "You really think it's funny?" I asked, voice quieter now.

Emily blinked. "What?"

I tilted my head slightly. "That I love you."

It was her turn to go still. She tried to play it off—her mouth opened like she was about to fire off another joke, another teasing remark to brush past the weight of what I'd just said. But then she hesitated. And that hesitation? That single moment of uncertainty? It told me everything. Her fingers curled into the hem of her hoodie, twisting the fabric

between them. She wet her lips, exhaled softly, and for once, she didn't have a comeback. Didn't have a way to dodge it. Because we both knew.

I had spent so long trying to fight this, trying to ignore it, trying to pretend like whatever existed between us was anything other than the terrifying, all-consuming thing it had grown into. But I was done pretending. And I needed to know if she was too.

"Emily," I said, voice low, steady. "If you don't want me to say it, tell me now."

She exhaled, shaking her head, like she was trying to clear it. Like she could still find a way to escape this moment if she just looked hard enough. "Liam, don't do that."

"Do what?" I challenged, my voice even, steady.

She scoffed, her fingers tightening around the hem of her hoodie. "Say it like that. Like it means something."

I let out a sharp breath. "And what if it does?"

She gave a short, humorless laugh. "Then you're an idiot."

"Yeah? And why's that?" I asked, standing up, because I couldn't just sit there anymore, couldn't just watch her try to run from this while pretending she wasn't.

Emily followed, arms crossed, her expression torn between frustration and something else. Something that made my chest tighten. "Because we don't do this," she said, motioning between us. "We fight, we argue, we—"

"We stand here pretending like neither of us knows exactly where this has been heading for months?" I cut in.

She sucked in a breath, eyes narrowing. "You are so full of yourself."

I stepped closer. "You keep saying that, Em. And yet you're the one who keeps showing up."

She tilted her chin, defiant. "So do you."



“Yeah. Because I want to.”

Silence. It stretched between us, thick and electric, the air shifting with something we were both trying—and failing—to ignore. Her hands were clenched at her sides, like she was fighting herself, like she wanted to throw another argument my way but couldn’t find the words.

I shook my head, letting out a short, humorless laugh. “You know what? Forget it.”

Her brow furrowed. “What?”

I shrugged, stepping back slightly. “It’s a joke, right? That’s what you meant? That’s what this is?”

Emily hesitated. Just for a second. But I saw it. And that second? It was enough.

I smirked, shaking my head. “Yeah. Just a joke.”

I could see the flicker in her expression, the shift in her stance. Like she wanted to argue. Like she wanted to say something else, something real, but didn’t know how. And maybe that should’ve been the end of it. Maybe I should’ve walked away, given her the space she clearly wanted.

But then—

We moved.

Maybe she stepped closer. Maybe I did. Maybe it didn’t matter, because suddenly we were right there, inches apart, barely a breath between us. Her eyes flickered to my mouth. I swallowed hard. And for the first time in my life, I felt completely, utterly still. Because if either of us moved just a little—

This joke? This fight? This impossible, frustrating thing between us? It would finally break. The air between us felt like a live wire, buzzing, crackling, holding us both in place. Emily’s breaths were uneven, her chest rising and falling in quick, shallow movements like she was trying to get enough air but couldn’t. Like I had taken it from her.

I should’ve stepped back. I didn’t.

Her gaze flickered up to mine, sharp and full of something she wasn't saying, something that made my pulse hammer against my ribs. But then her jaw clenched, her hands curled into fists, and she shoved me. It wasn't hard. Just enough to make a point.

"What the hell are we doing?" she snapped.

I didn't move. Didn't let her push me away.

"You tell me," I shot back, voice low. "You're the one who brought it up."

She let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh, throwing her hands in the air. "I brought it up? Oh, I'm sorry—you were the one who decided to take it seriously! You could've just let it go, Liam. You could've laughed it off like you always do."

My fists clenched at my sides. "Yeah? And what if I don't want to?"

She froze for a fraction of a second, but then the anger came back, stronger this time. "You can't do this, Liam." Her voice wavered, but she powered through, stepping closer, her eyes flashing with something dangerous. "You can't just decide that we—" She gestured wildly between us. "—this is something real. That's not how this works."

I felt something snap inside me.

"You think I decided this?" I growled, stepping into her space, forcing her to tilt her head up to look at me. "You think I wanted this?"

She set her jaw. "Then tell me you hate me."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

I stared at her, my breath catching in my throat.

Her voice wavered, but her expression didn't. "Say it," she challenged, chin lifted, eyes burning with something between defiance and desperation. "Tell me you hate me, Liam."

I let out a shaky breath, shaking my head. "Don't do that."

"Why?" she snapped. "Because you can't?"

I clenched my teeth, my entire body taut with restraint. “Because it would be a lie.”

She inhaled sharply, and for a second, her expression cracked. Just for a second.

Then she shoved me again, harder this time. “Then why do you act like you do?”

“Why do you?” I shot back, stepping forward, closing the distance again. “Why do you look at me like you want to rip my throat out, but then you’re always here?”

Emily’s breathing hitched, her eyes flickering between mine. “Because you make me insane,” she said, her voice rough. “Because you push every single one of my buttons, because you get under my skin like no one else, because you never let me win—”

“You never let me win either!” I cut in. “You love fighting with me.”

“I hate fighting with you,” she snarled, her voice trembling.

“No, you don’t,” I snapped. “You love this. You love how we are. Admit it.”

She sucked in a breath, and I could see it—the war inside her, the way she wanted to throw another insult at me, wanted to shove me again, wanted to run. But she didn’t. Because she knew I was right.

I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling harshly. “God, Emily, do you have any idea how much you wreck me?”

Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came out. I let out a bitter laugh, shaking my head. “I wake up thinking about you. I go to sleep thinking about you. You’re in my goddamn bones, and it’s the most frustrating thing I’ve ever felt in my entire life.”

Her breath hitched.

I took another step forward, our bodies so close now that I could feel her warmth, could see the way her hands trembled just slightly.

“You want to know why I don’t say it’s a joke?” I asked, voice lower, rawer.

She swallowed, but didn’t answer.

I exhaled, shaking my head. “Because it’s not.”

A sound left her lips—something between a sharp breath and a broken laugh. “God, I hate you.”

“Good,” I murmured. “Because I hate you too.”

We were too close. My breath was uneven, my hands shaking with restraint, my entire body thrumming with something I couldn’t contain anymore. Her eyes flickered to my lips. I let out a slow breath, chest tight, fingers itching to grab her, to do something, to end this unbearable tension. Her hands curled into the fabric of my shirt, fisting it tightly.

“Then why are we standing like this?” she whispered.

I let out a soft, humorless chuckle, shaking my head. “Because we’re both liars.”

And then, finally, finally, I kissed her.



## CHAPTER 18

Emily

The moment Liam's lips crashed against mine, the entire world tilted. For a second—just a second—I forgot how to breathe. It wasn't soft. It wasn't careful. It was furious, heated, desperate. Like we had been holding back for too long, like every insult, every argument, every goddamn look had been leading to this—to the breaking point we had been too stubborn to admit was coming. I gasped against his mouth, and he used that moment to pull me in closer, his hands gripping my waist like he was afraid I'd pull away, like he needed to make sure I was here, that I wasn't going anywhere. Like he had been holding himself back for so long that now that he had me, he wasn't going to let go. And God help me, I didn't want him to. My hands were already fisted in his shirt, pulling him down, dragging him into me, because this—this tension that had burned between us for so long—had finally snapped. And it was devouring us whole.

His lips were rough against mine, like he was still mad, like this was just another fight, another battle neither of us wanted to lose. I could feel the anger in the way his fingers dug into my sides, in the way he tilted my head back, in the way he pressed against me so completely that there was no space left between us.

I felt dizzy. Like I was falling, fast and reckless, with nothing to catch me. His teeth grazed my lower lip, and a quiet, sharp noise slipped from my throat before I could stop it.

Liam froze. Just for a second. Just long enough for his hands to tighten, for his lips to still, for his breath to shudder against mine. Then, just as suddenly, he ripped himself away. I barely caught myself, swaying forward at the loss of him, my head spinning, my lips still tingling from the force of it.

I stared at him, chest rising and falling too fast, my entire body shaking. He looked just as wrecked.

His hair was a mess from where I had grabbed at it, his hands still half-raised like he wanted to pull me back in but knew he shouldn't. His lips were parted, breath uneven, eyes dark. And God, I could still feel him everywhere. Neither of us spoke.

For the first time since I had met Liam Carter, there were no snarky remarks, no sarcastic insults, no words to fill the air between us.

Because there was nothing left to say.

He had kissed me.

I had kissed him back.

And we both knew.

I swallowed hard, trying to get enough air into my lungs. "Say something," I finally whispered, my voice barely audible.

Liam exhaled, running a shaky hand through his hair, eyes still locked on mine. "If I do, I'll just make this worse."

I let out a sharp, breathless laugh, and it almost sounded hysterical. "Worse? Liam, we just—" I stopped, inhaled. "We just did that."

His jaw clenched, and he looked away for a split second before forcing his gaze back to mine. "Yeah," he admitted, voice rough. "We did."

I swallowed, my fingers twitching at my sides. I didn't know what I wanted to do with them—grab him again, shove him away, drag him closer.

Everything. Nothing.

“I hate you,” I whispered.

He huffed out something that was almost a laugh. “I hate you too.”

And then he kissed me again. And I let him.

Because the truth was— We could lie to ourselves all we wanted. We could pretend that we hated each other, that this was just another fight, that this didn't mean everything. But we both knew.

We had always known, This time, when Liam kissed me, it wasn't furious. It wasn't a battle. It was slow. Careful. Like he was memorizing it. Like he didn't want to mess it up. I felt his hesitation, the way his hands softened where they had once been gripping too hard, the way his lips pressed against mine with something that almost felt like uncertainty—like he wasn't sure if I'd pull away this time. I didn't.

I couldn't.

Because suddenly, this wasn't about fighting anymore. It wasn't about winning or losing or pretending like this was anything less than what it was. It was just us. Just Liam and Emily, two people who had spent too long pretending, who had wasted too much time pushing each other away when all they had ever wanted was to pull closer. I sighed against his mouth, my fingers curling in his shirt, and I felt the exact second he let go. The tension in his shoulders melted. His breath evened out. And when he tilted his head, deepening the kiss just slightly, it wasn't rushed or demanding. It was steady. Unhurried.

Like we had all the time in the world.

I felt warmth spread through my chest, creeping up my throat, making it impossible to breathe, impossible to think about anything except him.

Liam. The boy I used to argue with just to see him roll his eyes. The boy who made my blood boil and my heart race at the same time. The boy I had never meant to fall for. But now, standing in the middle of his living room, wrapped up in him, I realized I had never really stood a chance.

I smiled against his lips, and the second I did, he pulled back just slightly, his breath mingling with mine. “What?” he murmured, brows furrowing.

I shook my head, biting back a laugh, my hands still gripping his shirt. “Nothing.”

Liam narrowed his eyes, studying me for a moment before his lips quirked. “You’re laughing.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You are absolutely laughing right now.”

I pressed my lips together, trying so hard to keep a straight face, but then he smirked—his stupid smirk, the one I had spent years pretending didn’t make my stomach flip—and the laugh finally bubbled out of me. It was soft at first, just a quiet huff of amusement, but then Liam groaned, letting his forehead fall against mine, and I lost it completely.

Because God, this was ridiculous.

One minute, we had been yelling at each other. The next, we were kissing. And now?

Now we were laughing.

Like we hadn’t just ruined everything. Like we hadn’t just changed everything. Liam chuckled too, shaking his head, his hands still resting on my waist. “We’re idiots.”

“The biggest idiots,” I agreed, grinning up at him.

He exhaled, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “So... now what?”



I tilted my head, pretending to think. "I dunno. We could go back to arguing. Pretend this never happened."

Liam's grip on my waist tightened slightly, his voice dropping lower. "That what you want?"

I held his gaze. No. It wasn't.

And from the way he was looking at me, I knew it wasn't what he wanted either.

So I just shook my head. "No."

His smile softened, something warm flickering behind his eyes. "Goodgirl," he murmured.

I scoffed, tilting my chin up. "Oh, I am so not."

Liam's smirk widened, his grip on my waist tightening just slightly, like he could already tell exactly where this was going. "Is that so?"

I nodded, defiant. "That's exactly so."

His eyes darkened with amusement, head tilting as he studied me. "Because I'm pretty sure," he murmured, leaning in, "that was the most obedient little no I've ever heard."

I gaped at him, heat flooding my face. "Excuse me?"

He grinned. "I say something, you nod all sweetly and go along with it. That's kinda the definition of a good girl, isn't it?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Liam."

"Yes?"

"I hate you."

He had the audacity to look pleased. "Oh, I know you do."

"You are the most—"

But before I could finish, he leaned in, just enough to brush his nose against mine, his breath warm against my lips. "Go on," he murmured, voice low. "Tell me how much you hate me."

I swallowed hard, suddenly too aware of how close he was again, of how easy it would be to just close that tiny distance between us.

Liam smirked like he knew exactly what I was thinking. “You were saying?”

I sucked in a sharp breath, forcing myself to keep my voice steady. “That you’re insufferable.”

His fingers brushed up my sides, slow and teasing. “You sure about that?”

“Positive.”

“Uh-huh.” He leaned in even closer, lips nearly touching my ear. “Then why are you still holding onto me?”

I stiffened, my grip tightening in his shirt before I could stop myself. Damn it.

Liam pulled back just enough to meet my gaze again, his expression smug. “That’s what I thought.”

I glared at him, my heart hammering. “You are so—”

But I never finished, because he kissed me again, and this time, it was playful. Not slow like before, not furious like earlier—just teasing and warm and full of the kind of tension that had been building between us for years.

And I kissed him back, because God help me, I couldn’t not.

Because as much as I had spent so long fighting him, as much as I had pushed and argued and tried to convince myself that whatever existed between us wasn’t real—

It was. It so was.

~

I woke up to the smell of coffee and the distant sound of Liam swearing. For a moment, I forgot where I was. My brain was still foggy, my body

still tangled in the blanket I had somehow stolen during the night. But then it hit me. The couch. Liam's apartment. Last night.

The arguing. The kissing. The laughing.

My eyes snapped open, and I sat up so fast I nearly rolled off the couch. I managed to grab onto the armrest at the last second, heart hammering as I tried to gather my thoughts. Okay. Breathe. Be normal. This isn't a big deal. Except it was. Because Liam was still here. And I was still here. And there was coffee. And swearing. And I was pretty sure I had fallen asleep curled up against him at some point, which meant—

Oh God. I had drooled on him, hadn't I?

I groaned, scrubbing my hands over my face, before pushing myself to my feet and trudging toward the kitchen. "You sound way too angry for someone who's already had caffeine."

Liam, who was standing at the counter, scowled at me over his shoulder. "Oh, trust me. I haven't had caffeine yet."

I blinked, taking in the sight before me. Coffee pot? Check. Mug? Check. Coffee grounds? All over the counter, the floor, and somehow—somehow—in Liam's hair.

I pressed my lips together, trying so hard not to laugh. "So, uh. Rough morning?"

He exhaled through his nose, looking personally betrayed by the coffee machine. "I think this thing is possessed."

I walked over, nudging him aside to assess the damage. "It's literally a coffee maker, Liam."

"Yeah, well, explain how it exploded when I tried to use it."

I raised an eyebrow, pointing to the open lid. "You forgot to close it before turning it on."

He stared at me. Then at the coffee maker. Then back at me. "Oh."

I smiled sweetly. "Good job, genius."

“Shut up.” But his lips twitched like he was trying not to smile.

I turned away to pour myself a cup, still grinning, but the moment I lifted the mug to my lips, reality crashed back in. Last night. What we said. What we did.

Liam must have sensed my shift in mood because he leaned against the counter, watching me closely. “You okay?”

I cleared my throat, gripping the mug a little too tightly. “Yes. I am fine. Totally fine. Perfectly fine.”

Liam snorted. “That’s way too much fine for someone who’s actually fine.”

I shot him a look over the rim of my mug. “Maybe I just like the word. Fine is a very fine word.”

Okay, well, since we’re throwing around compliments,” he mused, crossing his arms, “I have to say, you looked very fine drooling on me last night.”

I choked on my coffee. “I did not—”

“Oh, you definitely did.” He smirked, leaning in slightly. “Right here.”

I slapped a hand over the spot on his shoulder like I could erase the evidence. “Liar.”

Liam’s smirk deepened. “Oh, sweetheart, you should know by now—I only lie when it benefits me.”

I scowled, ignoring the way my stomach flipped at the stupid nickname. “And what exactly do you gain from lying about this?”

“Watching you squirm.” His voice dipped just enough to make me shiver.

I opened my mouth for a sharp retort, but before I could, he moved. Not much, just a subtle shift, stepping in close enough that the air between us changed. Charged. My breath caught, my pulse hammering against my ribs as I suddenly became hyperaware of everything—his

warmth, his scent, the faint smirk still playing on his lips like he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

He tilted his head, gaze flicking down to my mouth before meeting my eyes again. "You know, if you wanted an excuse to be all over me, you could've just said so. No need to drench me in your sleep."

I stepped closer, slowly, deliberately, until I was right in front of him. Close enough that he held his breath. Close enough that I could see the teasing light in his eyes falter for just a second.

His jaw tightened as I tilted my head, looking up at him through my lashes. "Oh? You think I wanted to be all over you?" My voice was soft, lilting, dangerous.

Liam exhaled through his nose, his smirk flickering like he was fighting something—whether it was me or himself, I couldn't tell. "Didn't you?"

Instead of answering, I reached up slowly, like I was about to fix his collar, but my fingers barely skimmed his skin. Just enough to send a shiver down his spine. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, his hands twitching like he was resisting the urge to grab me.

For once, I had the upper hand.

I smiled sweetly. "Must've been your imagination."

Liam let out a sharp breath—half amusement, half something else entirely. Then, just as I thought I had him, he laughed.

Laughed.

I froze, blinking up at him. "What's so funny?"

He ran a hand through his already-messy hair, shaking his head, grin widening. "You. This little act." He leaned in, voice low, teasing. "You're trying so hard to seduce me right now, and it's adorable."

Heat flooded my face. "I am not—"

"Oh, you definitely are." He smirked, eyes glinting. "Not that I mind. It's cute watching you pretend like you don't want me to grab you and—"

I turned on my heel before he could finish, my entire body burning. "Asshole," I muttered under my breath.

Before I could take another step, I felt it—his hand wrapping around my wrist, firm, unyielding. In one smooth motion, he pulled me back, spinning me so fast I barely had time to breathe before I was pressed against him. My heart slammed into my ribs.

Liam's grip on my waist tightened, keeping me locked in place, his chest rising and falling a little too quickly. "You didn't let me finish," he murmured, voice low, teasing, but with something else curled beneath it—something warmer. Something dangerous.

I swallowed hard, refusing to meet his eyes. "I don't want to hear whatever bullshit you were about to say."

Liam chuckled, low and husky, his breath warm against my cheek. "Oh, but I think you do."

I scoffed, tilting my head just enough to glare up at him. "You think a lot of things."

He hummed, tilting his head like he was considering it. "That's true. Like right now, I'm thinking... you like this."

I blinked. "Like what?"

His fingers flexed against my waist, and suddenly, I was so aware of how close we were—how his body pressed against mine, how his grip was firm but not forceful, how his eyes held something smug and knowing.

"Being this close," he murmured, his lips twitching. "Me touching you. The way your breath just hitched."

I scowled. "That was from disgust."

Liam let out a dramatic sigh. "Disgust, huh?"

“Yes.”

He leaned in slightly, his nose just barely grazing mine. “Then why aren’t you pushing me away?”

I swallowed hard. My fingers twitched. I could push him. I should push him. But I didn’t. And he knew it.

Liam grinned, slow and devastating. “See? You do like this.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off, his voice dipping to a whisper.

“Admit it, sweetheart.” His breath ghosted over my lips. “You love this.”

Heat flared up my spine, and something between frustration and anticipation twisted in my chest. He was playing with me. Again.

Fine. Two could play that game.

I tilted my chin up, letting my fingers trace up the front of his shirt just enough to feel the way his muscles tensed beneath my touch. His smirk faltered for half a second, but I caught it—I felt the way he held his breath.

I smiled sweetly. “You wish I loved this.”

His grip on my waist tightened. Just slightly. Just enough.

Then, suddenly, he pulled back, laughing under his breath. “Cute.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Your little attempt at seduction.” His grin was absolutely infuriating. “It’s adorable, really.”

My face burned. “It wasn’t—”

“Oh, it was,” he interrupted, nodding mock-seriously. “I think my favorite part was the way you tried to touch me like that would throw me off.” He smirked. “Newsflash, sweetheart—it didn’t.”

I shoved at his chest, hard, breaking free from his hold. “You’re the worst.”

I clenched my jaw, fingers curling into fists at my sides. “You’re so damn full of yourself.”

Liam smirked, tilting his head like he was enjoying this way too much. “Am I? Or are you just mad that you lost?”

I scoffed. “Lost what? This wasn’t a game.”

His grin deepened. “Oh, but it was. And you tried so hard.” He leaned in just a fraction, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “The little breathy act, the way you ran your fingers down my shirt... I almost felt something.”

My eye twitched. “Almost?”

Liam chuckled. “You’ll get there one day.”

I was going to strangle him. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But one day.

I exhaled sharply, forcing myself to stay calm—even though every inch of me wanted to wipe that smug look off his face.

Instead, I narrowed my eyes, stepping forward until there was barely any space left between us. “You think you’re so untouchable, don’t you?”

Liam arched a brow, but something about his smirk felt just a little tighter now. “I know I am.”

I let my gaze flicker down, slow and deliberate, before dragging it back up to meet his eyes. He tensed.

Barely. Just a flicker of something in the way his jaw clenched, the way his fingers curled into his palms. But I caught it. And I smiled.

“Huh.”

Liam’s smirk twitched. “What?”

I tilted my head, voice all sweet curiosity. “Just wondering how confident you’d be if I really tried.”



Something in his expression shifted, so quickly I almost missed it. He chuckled, shaking his head, but there was something else underneath it now—something just a little less certain. “Sweetheart, if that was you trying, I hate to break it to you, but—”

I reached out. Not much. Just a small, featherlight touch at the hem of his shirt, barely there.

Liam jerked—a sharp inhale, the faintest hitch in his breath.

I felt his muscles tense beneath my fingers, the way his body betrayed him before his mind could catch up.

Gotcha.

I met his gaze, all innocence, letting my fingers trail just a little higher—enough to test him. His breath stuttered. Liam froze. For the first time, his usual easy confidence slipped.

I smiled sweetly. “Hmm?”

His jaw tightened, his grip flexing like he was either going to grab my wrist or stop himself from doing it. Then, finally, he exhaled a short, unsteady breath, stepping back like he needed to breathe.

I grinned. “What’s wrong?”

Liam’s expression darkened, but not in anger. No, this was something else. Something charged.

“You,” he muttered. His voice had lost its smug edge, turned quieter, rougher.

I tilted my head, feigning innocence. “Me?”

His hands twitched again. He was trying to hold onto that cocky composure, but I could see the cracks now, the way his pulse flickered in his throat, the way his smirk wasn’t quite as steady as before. I’d gotten to him. Liam exhaled sharply through his nose, running a hand through his hair like he needed a distraction. Then, after a second, his lips curled back into something almost like his usual grin—but there was something off about it, something forced.

“Cute,” he murmured, but it lacked his usual confidence.

I arched a brow. “That’s all you’ve got?”

He scoffed, shaking his head, but I saw the way he swallowed, the way he still wasn’t quite looking me in the eyes. I had him. And he knew it. Liam cleared his throat, rolling his shoulders like he could shake off whatever had just happened between us. His smirk was still there, but it wasn’t as sharp, not as easy.

I crossed my arms, tilting my head. “Huh.”

His gaze snapped to mine. “What?”

I shrugged, letting the silence stretch just enough to make him wait for my answer. Then, with the sweetest smile I could muster, I said, “Just... I thought you were untouchable.”

Liam’s jaw ticked. “I am.”

“Oh?” I let my fingers trail over my own arm, mimicking the same slow, featherlight touch I’d just used on him. “So that wasn’t you tensing up just now?”

His expression twitched.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I bit my lip, pretending to think. “Right. And that little breath hitch? The way you froze for just a second?” I grinned, leaning in just a little, just enough to watch his fingers twitch at his sides. “Totally imagined that too, huh?”

Liam’s lips parted like he was about to argue, but then he hesitated.

Hesitated.

Instead of answering, he exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair like he needed something to do. Then, finally, finally, he met my gaze head-on. And just like that, his confidence snapped back into place. Liam smirked, stepping closer, and I knew—I knew—he was about to turn the tables.

“I’ll give you credit,” he murmured, voice low, smooth. “You had me for half a second there.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Half a second?”

“Maybe a full second, if I’m being generous.” His smirk deepened. “But you made one mistake.”

I scoffed. “Yeah? What’s that?”

Liam leaned in, so close I could feel his breath ghost over my skin. My own breath caught, my pulse stuttering before I could stop it.

His gaze flickered—just for a fraction of a second, just enough for me to see that he noticed.

And then he grinned, slow and devastating.

“You gave me time to recover.”

Before I could react, before I could move, Liam’s hands shot out, gripping my waist in a way that sent a sharp jolt of heat straight up my spine.

My gasp betrayed me. His smirk deepened. I did hate it. I hated the way my body reacted to him, how my breath came too quick, how I felt like I was standing on the edge of something dangerously tempting. Liam’s fingers curled slightly against my waist, his touch sending a slow, simmering warmth through me. His smirk had faded now, replaced by something quieter, something more real. His gaze locked onto mine, and suddenly, it wasn’t a game anymore. I felt it in the way his breath deepened, in the way his grip, firm but gentle, remained even though he wasn’t teasing anymore. His eyes, usually filled with amusement and challenge, were different now—darker, softer.

Something twisted in my chest. He was looking at me. Not just seeing me, but really looking, like he was memorizing every detail, like he was trying to understand something even he couldn’t explain.

I swallowed hard. “What?”

Liam hesitated. Just for a second. Then he exhaled, his fingers shifting ever so slightly, like he was grounding himself. “I like this.”

His voice was quieter than before, missing its usual arrogance.

Something in my stomach flipped. “What?” I asked again, because I needed to be sure I wasn’t imagining it.

His thumb brushed against my side, the touch barely there, but enough to make my breath catch. “This,” he repeated, his voice rough, like he was forcing the words out before he could stop himself. “Us. The way we—” He let out a breath, shaking his head. “I don’t know. I just—”

“I like this,” he murmured, voice quieter than before. Rougher. “I like the way you look at me when you think I don’t notice. The way you challenge me, push me, make me want to be better just so I can keep up with you.”

I couldn’t move. His eyes darkened, something aching in them. “I like the way you argue with me like it’s the easiest thing in the world, but you never actually walk away. I like the way you pretend you don’t care, even when I can feel how much you do.”

My breath hitched.

Liam exhaled sharply, shaking his head, his jaw clenching like he hated how vulnerable he felt, like he hated that he had to say this but couldn’t stop himself.

“I don’t just like this,” he admitted, voice almost a whisper now. “I need this.” His fingers pressed into my waist just slightly, grounding himself, grounding me. “I need you.”

My heart was slamming against my ribs, my pulse a frantic, uneven rhythm.

He laughed, breathless, like he couldn’t believe himself. “You drive me insane, you know that?” His lips parted, like he was trying to find the right words, like nothing he could say would ever be enough. “But at the same time, you’re the only thing that makes sense.”

His hand lifted, tentative, his fingers grazing my cheek in the lightest, most careful touch. “I don’t know how to not want you.” His voice dropped lower, like he was afraid of the words now that they were out in the open. “I don’t know how to stop.”

I swallowed hard, my throat tight, my chest burning.

Liam’s gaze flickered down to my lips, then back up, his own breath coming uneven now. “And God, I’ve tried.” He let out a soft, almost desperate laugh. “I tried to ignore it. To pretend it was nothing. That you were just someone to argue with, to tease, to annoy.” His thumb brushed against my cheek, lingering. “But you’re not.”

I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“You’re everything.” His voice was barely above a whisper now, raw and unguarded. “And it scares the hell out of me.”

Something broke in my chest. Because this—this wasn’t the cocky, arrogant Liam I was used to. This wasn’t the boy who always had a smirk ready, who never let his guard down, who turned everything into a game.

This was him. Just him. And I didn’t know what to do with it.

He let out a slow breath, his forehead nearly brushing mine, his grip tightening like he needed to hold on to something. “Tell me I’m wrong.” His voice was hoarse, almost pleading. “Tell me you don’t feel it too, and I’ll walk away.”

The air between us was thick, heavy, charged with something I didn’t have a name for. I couldn’t look away. Couldn’t lie. Not this time. Silence stretched between us, thick and suffocating, my heart slamming against my ribs so hard it hurt. Tell him he’s wrong. Tell him I don’t feel it too. The words should’ve come easily. I’d spent so long denying it, pushing it away, pretending like this—he—didn’t affect me. That he was just a game, just a rivalry, just someone to push back against. But standing here, with his hands gripping my waist like I was something real, something fragile, something he was afraid to lose... I couldn’t lie. Not anymore.

I swallowed, forcing my lips to part, but nothing came out. My throat felt tight, my chest too full, too raw with everything I'd been holding back. Liam's expression flickered, something breaking behind his eyes, and for the first time, I saw it—fear.

Not of me. Of what I might say. Of the possibility that I would push him away, that I'd pretend this wasn't real. That I'd shatter whatever fragile thing had just begun to take shape between us. And I couldn't do that. Not when every single part of me was screaming, stay.

I exhaled shakily, reaching up before I could think twice. My fingers curled into the front of his shirt, gripping it tightly, anchoring myself.

"I hate you," I whispered.

I swallowed, forcing myself to keep going, to let the words out before I lost the courage to say them.

"I hate how much I think about you," I admitted, my voice thick with something I didn't have the strength to hide anymore. "I hate how you get under my skin, how you make me feel like I'm constantly standing on the edge of something dangerous." My fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt without me even realizing. "I hate that you make my heart race when you smirk at me, that I ache when you look at me like you're looking at me right now."

Liam's jaw clenched, his eyes darkening, but he didn't speak. Didn't interrupt. I wasn't sure I could stop now, anyway.

"And I hate that no matter how much I tried to push you away, I couldn't." My breath shuddered. "I hate that the more I fought it, the deeper it got. Like a fire I couldn't put out."

His thumb brushed against my cheek, and I felt it—the way he was holding his breath, the way his body was so still, like he was afraid that one wrong move would break whatever was happening between us.

I met his gaze, my chest tight.

“And the worst part?” My voice was barely above a whisper now. “I don’t really hate any of it.”

Liam exhaled sharply, his grip on me tightening like he was bracing himself. Like he knew what was coming but still wasn’t ready for it.

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding against my ribs. “I don’t like you, Liam.” My voice shook, but I didn’t let myself stop. Not now. Not when every part of me was thrumming with something too big, too raw, too real to contain any longer.

I let out a shaky breath. “I love you.”

Liam just stared at me. His hands were still on me, his fingers pressing into my waist like he wasn’t sure if he should pull me closer or let go. His lips parted slightly, but no words came out. The silence stretched. My stomach twisted. I had just said it. The words were out there, hanging between us like something fragile and dangerous at the same time. And Liam—Liam, who always had a comeback, who always had something to say—was just standing there.

I swallowed. “Say something.”

Liam blinked, like he was snapping out of whatever daze he’d been in. He let out a breath, dragging a hand through his hair. “I—” He stopped, shook his head slightly, then exhaled again, slower this time. “You just—” He huffed a short, breathless laugh, like he couldn’t believe what was happening. “You love me?”

Heat rushed to my face. “That is literally what I just said.”

A slow, almost dazed smile tugged at his lips, like he wasn’t sure if he should be smug or shocked. “You love me,” he repeated, softer this time.

I groaned, covering my face with my hands. “Oh my god, stop saying it like that.”

Liam laughed. Full-on, deep laughed. I peeked at him between my fingers, and the sight only made my face burn hotter.

His eyes were glowing, his smirk doing that thing—the one that made my heart do really inconvenient flips in my chest.

“This is hilarious,” he said, grinning.

I glared. “I hate you.”

“Mm, no, see, you just said—”

“Shut up.” I turned away, but he caught my wrist, still grinning like an idiot.

“You love me,” he said again, like he couldn’t get over it.

I groaned. “I take it back.”

Liam beamed. “Too late.”

He was still grinning, looking at me like I had just handed him the biggest win of his life. And it was infuriating. I tried pulling my wrist free, but he didn’t let go. Not tightly—just enough to keep me there. Just enough to make my pulse stutter all over again.

“God, you’re so annoying,” I muttered, refusing to meet his eyes.

Liam smirked. “And yet, you love me.”

I scowled. “If you say that one more time—”

“What? You’ll love me harder?” His voice was teasing, but there was something else beneath it. Something softer. Something dangerous.

I froze. And that was when I realized—he wasn’t just messing with me anymore. His smirk had softened at the edges, his grip on my wrist loosened slightly, but he didn’t let go. His free hand lifted—slowly, carefully—and then his fingers were brushing against my cheek, warm and steady.

I swallowed hard, my breath catching in my throat. “Liam...”

He let out a quiet laugh, but this one wasn’t smug. It wasn’t teasing. It was exhaled relief. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for you to say that.”



My chest tightened. Liam wanted this. He wanted me.

“You—you have?” I hated how unsure my voice sounded, how small.

Liam’s thumb traced lightly along my jaw, his gaze dropping to my lips before flicking back up to my eyes. His smirk was gone now—what was left in its place made my stomach flip.

“Of course, I have,” he murmured, his voice lower now, steadier. “You drive me insane, but I couldn’t stop wanting you if I tried.”

I exhaled shakily, my whole body thrumming with something I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt before.

Liam leaned in slightly, his forehead nearly brushing mine. “So...” His lips twitched. “Say it again.”

I rolled my eyes, even as my heart pounded. “You’re impossible.”

“Mm. And yet, you love me.”

I sighed. “You’re not gonna let this go, are you?”

His smirk returned, but it was softer now. “Not a chance.”

I swallowed, feeling the weight of everything in the space between us—the tension, the warmth, the undeniable pull. So I met his gaze, my fingers curling around the fabric of his shirt. And I said it again.

“I love you, Mr Liam Carte.” This time, he didn’t just grin. This time, he pulled me in.



## CHAPTER 19

Liam

Shit. Shit. Shit. I tore myself away from the moment, from the heat still lingering between us, from the way she had just looked at me—like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. My heart was still hammering against my ribs, my head still spinning with the weight of her words.

I love you, Liam.

But now wasn't the time to think about that, because something was buzzing, a persistent vibration in my pocket that I had been too wrapped up in her to notice. And then it hit me. Holloway Street.

My stomach dropped.

Emily's phone was lighting up, too, multiple notifications flooding her screen. Her expression shifted as she read them, the color draining from her face. She looked up at me, wide-eyed.

"We forgot," she whispered.

I ran a hand through my hair, stepping back, trying to clear the haze from my head. How the hell did I let this happen? Because I had been distracted. Because I had been too caught up in the way she looked at me, the way she felt pressed against me, the way my name sounded when she said it like that.

I sucked in a sharp breath, forcing myself to focus. “We need to go. Now.”

Emily nodded, already grabbing her bag, already moving. Her hands were shaking, but she was all business, her walls snapping back into place. The moment—the raw, terrifyingly real moment we’d just had—was shoved aside, replaced by something colder. Sharper. I should’ve done the same.

Should’ve buried it, locked it up somewhere deep inside me until we had time to deal with it. But the truth was? I didn’t want to. I stole one last glance at her as we stepped outside, the streetlights casting a glow over her face. She was biting her lip, eyes flicking to her phone, scanning the messages like they held the answer to all of this.

A part of me wanted to reach for her again. To remind her that we were still us, even in the middle of this chaos. And Whoever said love was blind was right. Because I sure as hell didn’t see this coming.

And now, we had to deal with the consequences.

The city was cold. The kind of cold that slithered into your bones and stayed there, settling beneath your skin like something unwelcome. I could feel it creeping up my spine as we moved, our steps too fast to be casual but not quite fast enough to be running. Emily was quiet beside me, too quiet. She always had a way of thinking so hard I could feel it, like the air around her got heavier the longer she kept her thoughts locked up. Right now, I could tell she was processing everything—sorting through the messages, trying to piece together how we ended up here, why we had forgotten.

How the hell did we forget?

We turned onto Holloway Street, and my stomach twisted.

Something was wrong. Not just the usual wrong, not just the shit-we-messed-up wrong. This was something deeper, something that made my gut clench before my brain even caught up. The street was mostly empty, the kind of empty that didn’t feel natural. The buildings loomed on

either side of us, dark windows reflecting the dull glow of streetlights. I kept scanning, looking for anything—anyone.

Then I saw it.

My feet stopped moving before my brain told them to. Emily stopped, too, but I barely noticed. My eyes were locked on the wall ahead, on the thing that had my heart slamming into my ribs.

A photo.

No, not just any photo.

It was Emily.

And it was wrong.

Someone had taken a picture of her—not posed, not one she had given, but a candid shot. A moment that had been stolen. It was taped to the brick wall, fluttering slightly in the cold night air. The second thing I noticed—the thing that had my pulse roaring in my ears—was the knife. It was lodged into the wall, piercing straight through the photo. Straight through her head. For a second, the world narrowed to just that. Just that single, awful image. The gleam of the blade. The way the paper crinkled where it had been stabbed.

Emily exhaled sharply beside me, and I could feel her tense, feel her piece it together. No words.

No sharp intake of breath. Just silence. I reached out without thinking, my fingers brushing against hers for just a second before she pulled away. And just like that, something inside me snapped back into place. I forced myself to move, to tear my gaze away from the wall, to turn and scan the street—someone had to be watching. Someone had to be here.

But there was nothing. Just the empty street. Just the cold. Just the sound of my pulse thundering in my ears. I looked at her then. Her face was blank, carefully controlled, but I could see it in her eyes. She was rattled. No—she was furious.

Emily didn't speak. Not at first. She just stood there, staring at the photo like she could burn a hole through it with her eyes alone. And for the first time since I met her, I realized something—I had never seen Emily furious. Not like this. Sure, I'd seen her annoyed. Sarcastic. Frustrated to the point where she'd roll her eyes so hard I thought they'd get stuck. But this? This was something else.

Her whole body was rigid, her fingers curled into fists at her sides. She wasn't shaking—not from fear, not from shock. No, she was calculating. Thinking.

And then, just like that, she moved. Before I could stop her, she strode forward and ripped the photo off the wall, crumpling it in her fist. The knife was still lodged there, steel glinting under the streetlights. She didn't hesitate. She reached out, grabbed the handle, and pulled.

The blade slid free with a sickening scrape of metal against brick. She held it up, turning it over in her hands, and I swear to God, she almost laughed. Not a happy laugh. Not even an amused one. It was the kind of laugh that had teeth.

"Seriously?" she muttered under her breath, tilting the knife slightly like she was inspecting it. "This is what they're going with?"

I should've stopped her. Should've told her to be careful, to think before she acted. But I didn't. Because I couldn't look away. The streetlight caught the sharp edge of the blade, reflecting a thin, silvery line onto her skin. And that's when she looked up at me. I had seen Emily angry before. But I had never seen her like this. Her eyes were burning. Not with fear. Not even with rage. With determination.

"Whoever did this," she said, voice steady, "thinks they're untouchable."  
I swallowed. "Em—"

She wasn't listening.

"They think they can mess with me." She turned the knife over in her hands again before she met my eyes, and fuck—I almost felt sorry for whoever was on the other end of this.

Because Emily wasn't running. She wasn't scared. She was ready to fight back.

"They have no idea what they just started," she said.

And I believed her. Emily was still gripping her phone so tightly I thought she might crack the screen. She was scrolling fast, searching for something. I watched her, still trying to shake off the image of that knife lodged in the wall, the way the photo had crinkled around the blade. I didn't know what she was looking for, but I knew better than to interrupt her when she was this locked in.

Then, she muttered, "Wait."

I straightened. "What?"

Emily didn't answer right away. She had gone unnervingly still, her thumb hovering over the screen.

She tilted the phone toward me, tapping the image.

"I need to check something," she said, mostly to herself. "The picture—the real one."

It took me a second to understand.

"The original photo?" I asked.

She nodded. "The one they used."

The realization sank in fast. I had barely noticed it before, but she was right. That picture—the one that had been stabbed to the wall—hadn't been just some random shot. It had been a real photo, taken by someone else.

Emily's gaze flickered up to me. "There's a shop that takes street photography. Sometimes they send out shots to people they capture, if you sign up for it."

I frowned. "And you—"

"Got an email a few days ago. I was in a rush, didn't even check the attachment." Her voice was clipped now, like she was pissed at herself

for not looking sooner. "If the picture was from that shop, then I have the unedited version."

That hit me like a truck. The photo on the wall had been cropped, printed, and used. But if Emily had the real one, the whole one, then—

She was already opening her email. Her breath was uneven as she scrolled, searching through unread messages until—

"There," she whispered.

A single email. Holloway Street Capture – StreetLens Photography

She clicked it. A high-quality image loaded onto the screen.

And then—

Emily froze.

I felt the shift in the air before I even saw what she was looking at. Her fingers trembled slightly as she zoomed in. Not on her. Not on the background. But on something near the edge of the frame.

A shadow. A figure.

Someone standing just beyond the frame, barely visible in the original shot—but there.

Watching.

Emily's pulse was visibly jumping at her throat, but her voice was eerily calm.

"This photo," she murmured. "It was taken before they printed it, before they used it. Which means..."

"Whoever did this was already there," I finished for her.

She nodded.

We stared at the image in silence, the shadowed figure just barely distinguishable.

I swallowed hard. "Can you sharpen it?"

Emily didn't hesitate. She opened an editing app, her fingers quick and precise as she adjusted the lighting, deepened the contrast—

And then—

A shape.

The outline of a person, standing just out of sight. Not enough to see their face. But enough to see something else. Their hair. Long. Dark. Familiar.

Emily's breath hitched.

I didn't move. Because suddenly, something was gnawing at the edges of my memory. Something I couldn't quite place but felt like I should remember.

Emily clenched her jaw.

"Who the hell are you?" she whispered, staring at the shadow.

I had a terrible feeling we were about to find out.

I don't know how long we sat there, staring at that damn shadow.

The air in the car felt different now, like it had thickened, like it was pressing down on both of us. Emily hadn't moved in minutes. Her eyes stayed glued to the screen, jaw clenched so tightly I thought she might break a tooth.

And me? I was stuck somewhere between what the fuck is happening and why does this feel like something I should remember? Because something about it—that shape, that figure—was gnawing at the back of my mind, scratching at memories I couldn't quite grab.

I ran a hand down my face, exhaling hard. "We need more."

Emily didn't look up. "I know."

Her voice was flat, empty. But I could tell her mind was racing. I could feel it. The way her fingers twitched against the phone, the way her leg bounced slightly.



Emily didn't panic. She planned. She analyzed. But this? This was something new.

I reached over, tapping the screen. "Maybe we can clean it up more—"

"I already tried."

Her voice was sharp. Short.

I pulled back, letting her have space. Seconds passed.

Then she took a breath, deep and slow, like she was forcing herself to stay calm.

"I have to think," she muttered, mostly to herself.

I nodded, even though she wasn't looking at me.

The street outside was empty, quiet, but it didn't feel like it. It felt like someone was watching. Like if I turned my head too fast, I'd catch a glimpse of that same shadow lingering somewhere in the dark.

I shook it off.

"Alright," I said. "Let's go over this again."

Emily finally looked up. Her expression was unreadable, but there was something behind it. Something tightly wound, barely being held together.

I kept my voice steady. "That picture was taken by a street photography shop. They emailed it to you, which means they captured it days ago." I leaned back against the seat, tapping my fingers against my thigh. "And whoever sent us that threat had access to it."

Emily nodded once. "Yeah."

"That means two things." I held up a finger. "One: They knew you were there that day. They were watching." A second finger. "Two: They got their hands on this photo before tonight."

Emily's jaw tightened. She glanced at the screen again, staring at the shadow.

She swallowed. "And they were close."

The words felt heavier than they should have. Because she was right. This wasn't just some distant stalker. Some stranger messing with her for fun. This was someone close enough to be in the background of that picture. That fact sat in my chest like a rock.

Emily clenched her fist around the phone. "We should go to the shop."

It took me a second to process. "What?"

"The shop," she repeated, more certain now. "The place that took this photo. They might have other pictures from that day."

Fuck. She was right.

Street photographers didn't just take one shot. They took dozens.

I started the car. "Let's go."

Emily nodded, but she still wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were locked on the screen, fingers gripping the phone like it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

I exhaled, trying to shake the unease crawling up my spine. "Alright, say they do have more photos. What exactly are we looking for?"

She blinked, like she hadn't considered that yet. Then she sat up straighter, finally turning to me. "Anything. A better angle, another shot where the figure isn't just a shadow. Hell, even something that proves this person was actually there and not just some trick of the light."

"Okay," I said, gripping the steering wheel. "And if we find them?"

Emily hesitated. "Then we'll know this isn't just some random threat."

I frowned. "Em—"

She cut me off. "Liam, don't. You know it isn't."

Yeah. Yeah, I did.

But hearing her say it out loud made my stomach tighten.

I turned onto the main road, my hands tightening around the wheel. "What if they don't have anything? Or worse, what if the shop doesn't even remember taking it?"

Emily glanced down at her phone again. "They'll remember. They document everything for copyright purposes. They have to keep a record of the original copies."

She was right. Again.

"Okay. So we go in, ask for the full set of photos, and then what?"

Emily's voice was sharp. "Then we find out who the hell has been watching us."

I glanced at her, trying to read the tension in her shoulders, the way she was gripping her phone like it might slip away. She was wound tight, too tight.

So, naturally, I did what I always did when things felt heavy.

I ran my mouth.

"I think someone likes you, Emily," I said, keeping my tone light. "And I'm scared."

She didn't react immediately. Just blinked, then turned to look at me, eyebrows pulling together. "What?"

I sighed dramatically, shaking my head. "I mean, just think about it. The way they admire your photos. The way they go out of their way to leave you little messages. Honestly, it's like poetry at this point."

Emily narrowed her eyes, but I caught the small twitch of her lips. "Liam."

I kept going. "I mean, they stabbed a picture of you into a wall. That's dedication. That's passion. Meanwhile, I'm over here, feeling completely overshadowed. It's humiliating, really."

She huffed out a laugh—short, sharp—but it was something. "Oh my God. Shut up."

I put a hand over my heart. "I'm seriously hurt, Emily. Jealous, even. I thought I was the one who admired you the most. But now? Now I have competition."

This time, she laughed for real. It was quick, barely there, but it was real. And the tension in her shoulders loosened, just a little.

She shook her head, rolling her eyes. "You're an idiot."

I smirked. "And yet, here you are, stuck with me."

Emily let out a small breath, shaking her head again. "Unfortunately."

I gasped, pressing a hand to my chest. "Wow. You could've lied and said, 'No, Liam, I love being around you. You're the highlight of my life.'"

She shot me a look. "That would've been too obvious."

"Ah, so you admit it then."

"I admit nothing."

I chuckled, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel. For a second, things felt normal. No shadows. No threats. Just us.

But then Emily sighed, her fingers tightening around her phone again, like reality was creeping back in.

Her voice was quieter when she spoke next. "I hate this."

I knew what she meant. The waiting. The unknown. The feeling of something just out of reach, something that could slip through our fingers before we even knew what we were chasing.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road. "We'll figure it out."

Emily didn't respond right away. But then, so softly I almost didn't hear it, she murmured, "I know."

The rest of the drive was quiet. Not uncomfortable, just... heavy. The kind of silence that sat between us, thick with everything we weren't saying.

Emily kept her phone in her lap, thumb hovering over the screen like she wanted to check the photo again but couldn't bring herself to. Her knee bounced slightly, restless energy she wasn't letting out.

I should've said something. Should've cracked another joke, tried to get another laugh out of her. But even I was struggling to ignore the weight pressing down on us now. Because the truth was, this wasn't funny. Someone had been there. Right there. Close enough to be caught in the background of a random street photo. Close enough to have watched her that day without either of us realizing. And now, they were making sure we knew it.

I gripped the wheel tighter. It was only a few more minutes before we pulled up in front of the shop. A small, hole-in-the-wall place wedged between a coffee shop and a bookstore, the kind of place you'd walk past a hundred times before really noticing.

The "OPEN" sign flickered behind the window, casting a faint glow onto the street.

I shut off the engine and glanced at Emily. "Ready?"

She took a breath, straightened her shoulders. "Yeah."

The bell above the door jingled as we stepped inside. The place smelled like old paper and faint chemicals—probably from the photo development process. The walls were lined with framed black-and-white shots, all perfectly captured moments frozen in time. A man stood behind the counter, middle-aged, glasses slipping down his nose as he flipped through a thick binder. He glanced up at us, offering a polite but tired smile.

"Can I help you?"

Emily stepped forward. "Yeah. A few days ago, you sent me a photo I had ordered online. A street shot taken near Holloway Street?" She pulled out her phone, tapping quickly before turning the screen toward him. "This one."

The man adjusted his glasses, leaning in slightly. His brows furrowed. "Ah, yes. I remember this one. Taken by one of our freelancers. You had requested a digital copy, right?"

"Yeah." Emily hesitated, then added, "I was wondering if you still had the other shots from that day. The ones taken right before or after this one."

The man tilted his head. "Why?"

I stepped in smoothly. "We just really liked the composition and were hoping to see if there were any others from that same moment."

He seemed to consider this for a second, then nodded. "Alright. Give me a second."

He disappeared through a door behind the counter.

Emily exhaled, rocking slightly on her heels.

I leaned in. "See? That wasn't so bad."

She shot me a look. "Don't jinx it."

Before I could respond, the man returned, holding a small stack of prints. "We don't usually print all the extras, but we do keep digital files for records." He set them down in front of us. "These are the ones taken within the same minute as yours."

Emily's fingers were already moving, flipping through them fast. One after another. The same street, slightly different angles, people walking by—

"Sorry, are you Mrs. Emily?"

The voice cut through the room like a blade.

Emily paused, glancing up. "Uh, just Emily."

The man behind the counter nodded. "Right. Well, I have something for you." He reached under the counter, pulling out a small, carefully wrapped package. "Your friend told me you'd come by. Said she had a gift waiting for you."

Emily blinked. "My... friend?"

He nodded, pushing the package toward her. I was still processing the words when Emily hesitantly reached for the package, unwrapping it slowly. And then I saw it. A necklace. A delicate silver chain with a small pendant at the center. I felt my stomach collapse. My chest caved in like something had punched through my ribs, sucked all the air from my lungs.

Because I knew that necklace.

I had seen it before.

I had held it before.

And I had buried it with her.

My hands clenched into fists at my sides, my nails digging into my palms. The room felt too bright, too sharp, every detail cutting into me like glass.

Emily was still staring at it, turning it between her fingers. "I don't understand," she murmured. "Who left this?"

The shopkeeper shook his head. "I don't know. She didn't give a name. Just left it with a note saying you'd be here soon."

She. The word rattled in my skull like a fucking bullet.

She.

Not someone. Not a person. She.

My stomach twisted, nausea curling up my throat. My pulse pounded so hard behind my ears that I barely heard Emily when she spoke.

"Liam?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. Because this wasn't real. It couldn't be real. But it was.

That necklace. That goddamn necklace.

It had belonged to her. To the girl I had once loved. The girl I had lost. The girl who was supposed to be dead. And suddenly, that shadow in the picture—the one we thought was just some distant watcher—felt hell of a lot closer.





## CHAPTER 20

Emily's POV

Liam was acting weird. And not his usual annoying but endearing weird. This was different.

This was off. It started when we left the photo shop. He got all tense, barely speaking, like he was trying to keep himself from blurting something out. Then he disappeared. Now, hours later, my phone buzzed, and I wasn't even surprised when his name flashed across the screen.

I answered immediately. "Liam?"

Silence.

Then—"Eeemilyyyy."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Are you drunk?"

"I am... something."

"Jesus Christ." I was already reaching for my keys. "Where are you?"

"Uhhh." Rustling noises. A distant thud. "Ow."

"Liam."

"I had to, Em," he slurred, like we were mid-conversation. "Had to. Had to call him and—"

"Call who?"

"That bastard. That guy. The—you know! The one who was friends with the—" He made a noise that sounded like frustration mixed with hiccups. "With her."

I stilled.

Her.

Another thud. "Ow, fuck."

"Liam," I repeated, more forcefully. "Where are you?"

"I dunnooooo," he drawled. "Somewhere. With alcohol. And ghosts."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

I grabbed my coat and drove to the only place I could think of—his usual bar.

I found Liam slumped over a sticky bar table, his face half-buried in his arms, the other half squinting at his empty glass like it had personally betrayed him.

The bartender gave me a look as I approached, one that said, Good luck with this one.

"Liam." I stopped next to him, arms crossed.

His head lifted slowly, bleary green eyes trying—and failing—to focus on me.

His face lit up.

"Emily!" He grinned, sloppy and stupid. "You're here. You're here."

"Yeah, no shit," I muttered, grabbing his arm. "Come on, we're leaving."

"Wait." He swayed dramatically, like he was about to deliver an important speech. "Wait, wait, wait. I gotta tell you something."

I sighed. "Liam—"

He pressed a finger to my lips. "Shhh."

I smacked his hand away. "Oh my God."

"Emily." His voice dropped, suddenly serious. His brows knitted together in what I think was supposed to be a deep, emotional expression but mostly just made him look like a confused golden retriever. "You... are so pretty."

I blinked. "What?"

"You—" He waved a hand wildly, nearly knocking over his empty glass. "You are so pretty. No—beautiful. No—fucking stunning."

Heat crept up my neck. "Liam—"

"No, no, listen." He sat up straighter, his hands gripping the edge of the table like it was the only thing keeping him from floating away. "You don't get it. You don't see it the way I do."

I stared at him, my heart doing something weird and stupid in my chest. His face was so open, so unguarded in a way he never let himself be. He pointed at me, his finger swaying slightly. "The way you scrunch your nose when you're mad? Beautiful. The way you talk with your hands when you're ranting? Beautiful. Your stupid, stubborn, don't-take-any-shit attitude? Fucking beautiful."

I swallowed, caught between amusement and something dangerously close to being affected by this. "You're drunk."

"And honest," he countered, nodding solemnly.

I shook my head. "Alright, lover boy. Let's get you home before you start professing your love to the bartender."

"Wait, wait, wait." His grip on my sleeve tightened. "One more thing."

I sighed. "What now?"

His face softened, and suddenly, he wasn't just rambling anymore.

"I'll protect you, Em," he said quietly. "I swear."

Something about the way he said it—his voice rough, certain, even in his drunken state—made my breath hitch.

"Liam..."

"I mean it." His fingers curled around my wrist, firm but not tight. "Nothing—nothing is going to happen to you. Not while I'm around."

For a second, just a second, I let myself believe him.

Then I pulled my hand away and rolled my eyes, forcing lightness back into my voice. "You can protect me after you sober up, dumbass. Now let's go."

Liam groaned, dragging a hand over his face. "Ugh. Fine. But I meant what I said."

I ignored the way my heart did another weird, stupid thing.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered. "Come on, knight in shining whiskey."

He let me drag him up, grumbling the whole way, but his hand never strayed far from mine. Getting Liam into my car was an ordeal. He nearly tripped over his own feet twice, then spent a full minute staring at the passenger seat like he'd forgotten what seats were for.

"Liam, sit."

"Emily, you don't get it." He placed both hands on my shoulders, his breath warm and heavy with whiskey. His green eyes were glassy, unfocused, but earnest. "You're my favorite person. Ever."

I sighed, prying his hands off me. "That's great, buddy. Now get in the damn car."

He finally obeyed, collapsing into the seat with a dramatic groan. I buckled him in, tightening the belt a little more than necessary as he blinked sluggishly at me.

"Eeemily..." he mumbled, his head rolling to the side. "You gotta be careful."

A chill prickled at the back of my neck.

I paused, fingers tightening on the seatbelt. "Careful of what?"

His brows furrowed, like he was trying to pull a memory from the thick fog of alcohol. "She—" He stopped abruptly, shaking his head. "Nothing. Forget it."

But I couldn't. That gut feeling—the one that had been gnawing at me ever since that damn necklace showed up—only grew stronger.

Liam was hiding something.

And it wasn't just drunken nonsense.

By the time I got him inside, he was half-asleep, mumbling incoherently against my shoulder. He was heavier than he looked, his weight pressing down on me like an anchor as I guided him toward the couch.

"Ugh. Why is the ceiling moving?" he groaned.

"It's not," I muttered, kicking the door shut behind me. "That's your brain trying to escape your skull after you poisoned it with alcohol."

"Sounds fake."

I rolled my eyes and pulled off his shoes. "Go to sleep, dumbass."

"Em." His voice was softer now, more lucid. His fingers curled slightly into the fabric of my sleeve. "Don't leave"

I hesitated. "Why?"

"Just... don't."

His breathing evened out before I could question him further. I let out a slow breath, rubbing my arms.

Something felt off. It wasn't just the eerie stillness of the apartment, the way the air hung too thick, too heavy. It was something deeper, something wrong pressing against my skin like invisible hands.

I scanned the room—the windows were locked, the door was shut. Nothing looked out of place.

But that feeling... That prickling at the base of my skull, like unseen eyes were drilling into my back.

I turned slowly, scanning the dark corners of the room. Nothing.

I exhaled, shaking my head. You're being paranoid, Emily.

Then I saw it.

Liam's journal. It was half-hidden between the couch cushions, the worn leather cover peeking out like it wanted to be found. My stomach twisted. I wasn't the type to go through people's things.

But something told me—urged me—that whatever was in that book would explain everything.

I picked it up carefully, the leather cool against my palm. It was well-used, the spine cracked from being opened too many times, the pages inside slightly yellowed. I flipped it open.

The Journal — Clara

I thought it was love. I was so sure of it. Even when she acted strangely. Even when she made me feel uneasy in ways I couldn't explain. Even when I caught her staring at me—not in adoration, not in affection, but in something deeper, something possessive. At first, I ignored it. Love was supposed to be consuming, right? It was supposed to feel like this—like being swallowed whole. That's what I told myself. That's what she told me.

"No one will ever love you like I do, Liam."

Her voice was always soft . When she said it. Gentle. Like a promise. Like a threat.

I turned the page, my own fingers leaving faint smudges on the ink.

I remember the first time I tried to say no to her. It was something small. Something stupid.

She wanted me to cancel plans with my friends. I told her I couldn't—I wouldn't.

Her expression didn't change, but something in her eyes shifted.

"Why would you do that to me?" she asked, her voice so quiet, so hurt.

And I—I fucking apologized. I don't even know why. It just happened. The words spilled out of me before I could think, before I could understand that I had done nothing wrong.

But she smiled then. She forgave me. I thought that was the end of it. The next morning, one of my friends called me. She had been in a car accident. Minor, thank God. Just a few bruises, a busted bumper. But she was shaken. She swore she saw someone standing outside her apartment the night before.

Watching. Waiting.

I asked Clara about it later. Jokingly. Playfully. Because that's what you do when your brain refuses to acknowledge the awful, quiet truth pressing against your skull.

She just smiled and kissed me.

"I told you," she murmured against my lips. "No one touches what's mine."

I tried to believe it was a coincidence. That my friend's accident had nothing to do with Clara. That her words were just words, her timing just unfortunate. But deep down, something inside me—something I had been pushing down for so long—began to whisper: She did this.

Still, I stayed. Because leaving wasn't an option.

Or maybe, by that point, I had convinced myself it wasn't.

---

The first time she got angry—really angry—I thought she was going to kill me. Not in a way I could explain. Not in a way that made sense. It wasn't that she raised her voice. She never needed to. It was the way she looked at me. Like I had become something less than human. Like I had become something hers. It started over nothing—something trivial, something ridiculous. I was supposed to meet her for dinner, but I got

caught up at work. Texted her that I'd be late. When I finally arrived, she was already there, sitting at the table, a single candle flickering between us.

She smiled.

"You're late."

"Yeah, I—"

"You didn't answer your phone."

"I was working, Clara, I—"

"Liam," she said softly, tilting her head. "You know how much I hate being ignored."

And then she reached across the table, covering my hand with hers. Her touch was warm. Soft. Gentle.

But her fingers tightened. Tighter. And tighter. Until I swore I could feel my bones grinding against each other. I pulled back. She didn't let go. Her nails dug into my skin, and she was still smiling.

"Say you're sorry," she whispered.

I don't know why I hesitated. Maybe because, for the first time, I saw her exactly as she was.

But my hesitation was a mistake.

Her grip tightened.

"Say it."

And I did. Of course I did. The pain vanished instantly.

She leaned forward, pressing a kiss to my knuckles like she hadn't just crushed them.

"See?" she murmured. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

And the worst part was No one around us noticed. To them, we were just another couple. Just another boyfriend and girlfriend, sitting at a dimly lit table, whispering softly.



Just another lie.

///

I turned another page.

The words here were frantic. Rushed.

I woke up last night, and she was sitting at the edge of the bed.

Not asleep. Not looking at me.

Just...

Waiting.

I didn't say anything. I just lay there, my breath locked in my throat, waiting for her to move. To blink. To do something.

Minutes passed.

An hour.

Maybe more.

And then she leaned down, brushed my hair back, and whispered—

"You love me, don't you?"

I couldn't answer.

She didn't wait for one.

She just smiled and kissed my forehead.

"Good," she said. "I was starting to worry."

///

I exhaled shakily, my hands clammy against the pages.

The apartment felt wrong. Like something was watching me. No—like something knew I was reading this. I forced myself to turn another page. The handwriting was worse now. Jagged. Uneven. Like he had written it in a hurry. Like he hadn't had time to finish.

///

She knows what I'm thinking before I do. I don't know how, I don't know how, but she does. I dream about her even when I don't want to. I wake up gasping, and she's already awake, watching me.

"Bad dream?" she asks, but she already knows the answer.

I think she's in my head. I think she's always been there. I don't think I'm going to make it out of this.

My throat closed up. The air in the apartment was different now. Colder. I suddenly became aware of my own breathing, the way it filled the space too loudly. My pulse hammered in my ears, my fingers frozen over the pages.

Then—

The curtains.

I turned my head sharply, my breath catching. They were swaying. Just slightly. Barely noticeable.

Like someone had just been standing there. Watching. I stumbled to my feet, my legs feeling unsteady as I approached the window. My fingers trembled as I yanked the curtain aside. The street outside was empty. No shadowy figure lurking. No movement in the darkness. But something wasn't right.

The breath I had been holding escaped in a sharp gasp as my gaze dropped to the windowpane.

There, smeared against the glass in something dark, was a single word.

"Mine."

I didn't move. I couldn't. Because the writing wasn't outside the window. It was inside. A sharp creak echoed through the apartment. Not from the window. From behind me. Near the bedroom. The hallway light flickered, casting long, shifting shadows along the walls. My skin went cold. My hands clenched into fists. The silence stretched. And then—

A whisper.

Low. Close.

"You shouldn't have read that."

I turned. But there was nothing there.

---

I didn't sleep. I tried. I really did. But every time I closed my eyes, I saw that word smeared on the glass.

"Mine."

It wasn't just the word itself that unnerved me—it was the way it had appeared, the eerie silence that followed, the sensation that someone, something, had been watching. It felt personal. Intimate.

I stayed curled up on Liam's couch all night, listening to the shifting sounds of the apartment, my nerves stretched so thin they hummed. Every creak of the wooden floor, every distant murmur of the wind outside, every flickering shadow from passing headlights—everything felt like a threat. At some point, exhaustion won. My body gave in, and I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes again, the dim light of early morning bled through the curtains. My neck ached from the awkward position I had slept in, my fingers stiff from how tightly I had been clutching the journal.

I turned my head. Liam was still asleep, his breathing deep and steady, oblivious to the storm churning inside me.

For a moment, I just sat there, staring at him. Liam, tangled in his sheets, one arm half-draped over the side of the bed, his face slack with sleep. The usual sharpness in his expression—his furrowed brows, the ever-present smirk, the guarded look in his eyes—was gone. In sleep, he looked... soft. Younger, almost. I felt something pull in my chest. Maybe it was guilt. I had dragged him into this—into her. Clara. Whatever nightmare I had stumbled into, Liam was caught in it now too. He had tried to help, tried to be the rational one, and yet here he was, exhausted and drained because of me. I swallowed. Reached out. My fingers brushed through his hair, just once. It was softer than I expected, a little

messy from sleep. I smoothed down a stray strand, a quiet, meaningless gesture, but something about it settled the anxious buzz under my skin.

He didn't stir. Just breathed. Peaceful. I wished I could stay in this moment, just for a little while longer. But I couldn't. I figured I'd start with the easiest thing: Clara's death. Except—there was nothing easy about it. I pulled out my laptop and started searching. Newspaper archives, obituaries, old articles—anything that mentioned Clara Hayes. I expected at least something. A tragic accident. A funeral announcement. A police report confirming her cause of death. But there was nothing. No obituaries. No news articles. No official statements. Just a single, lonely missing persons report buried in the depths of an old records database.

Clara Hayes. Age: 21. Last seen: [REDACTED]

I leaned in, my pulse ticking a little faster. The details were vague, almost carelessly written, as if whoever had filed it hadn't really expected anyone to care. There were no follow-ups. No updates. No closure. Just a report, as if she had simply vanished into thin air. Except, according to Liam, she hadn't just disappeared. She had died. So where was the proof?

I clicked on the file and scrolled down, my eyes scanning the attached details. There was a photo—grainy, low-resolution, but enough to see her.

Clara.

She had long, unnaturally straight black hair, the kind that didn't look like it ever tangled. It framed a sharp, angular face—cheekbones high, jawline defined. Her lips were slightly parted, but there was no hint of a smile. And then, her eyes. Dark. Unreadable. Not the kind of unreadable that came from shyness or insecurity. No, her gaze was deliberate. Calculated. Like she knew something you didn't. Like she was waiting for you to figure it out.

It made my stomach twist. Something about that stare felt... wrong. Not just unsettling. Wrong.

I pulled my eyes away from the image, trying to shake the creeping unease slithering up my spine.

Filed by: Mr. & Mrs. Hayes (Parents)

Date Reported: [REDACTED]

Case Status: Closed

Closed? I frowned. Scrolled further.

There was no explanation. No reasoning. No confirmation of a body, no report of foul play—nothing.

Just case closed. Like someone had decided to stop looking. Like someone wanted her to be forgotten.

I exhaled slowly, pressing my fingers to my temples. This wasn't normal. A missing girl whose case was closed without reason. A death that didn't officially exist. A word scrawled on the mirror in the middle of the night. I had too many questions and nowhere near enough answers. But I knew where to start.

Her parents.

If they had been the ones to file the report, maybe they knew something. Maybe they could tell me what really happened to Clara—how she died, why there was no record of it, why her name felt like it was being erased. I hesitated before clicking on the address listed in the file. It wasn't far. Two towns over. A couple of hours, if I drove. I could go there. Knock on their door, Ask questions. Maybe even get real answers. But as I sat there, gripping my phone, a cold, unwelcome thought slithered into my mind.

What if they don't want to talk?

Or worse—

What if they can't?

My grip tightened around the journal, my pulse a steady, nervous beat in my ears. I didn't know what I was walking into. But I was going to find out. Alone.



The longer I stared at Clara's picture, the harder it was to pull my eyes away. It wasn't just her expression that unsettled me—it was the feeling that she was looking back. Like she saw me.

Like she knew I was staring at her, searching for answers, prying into something I shouldn't. Her eyes were sharp, intense—dark brown, almost black. The kind of gaze that felt piercing, like she was dissecting whoever dared to look at her. Her face was framed by sleek, straight hair, the kind that fell effortlessly down her shoulders. She had a delicate bone structure, the kind people would call striking rather than conventionally pretty. But there was something off about the picture, something I couldn't put my finger on. Maybe it was the way her lips were set—neither smiling nor neutral. A slight press, like she was suppressing something. Maybe it was the lighting, how the shadows made it seem like there was something lurking behind her.

Or maybe—

Maybe it was just her.

I shook the thought off and stood, stretching out my stiff limbs. Liam was still asleep, his breathing steady. I hesitated for a moment, considering waking him. Telling him what I was about to do. Letting him stop me before I got in too deep. But I already knew the answer.

I was doing this alone.



The road stretched ahead in an endless ribbon of gray. I had never been to this town before. It wasn't far, but it felt like I was crossing some invisible line, leaving behind what was safe and stepping into the unknown. The deeper I drove, the quieter everything became. The houses thinned out, the streetlights grew sparse, and the trees lining the

road seemed taller, their branches intertwining like skeletal fingers against the dull, overcast sky. There was something about the air here—thicker, heavier, as if the past hadn't quite let go of this place. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. I thought about Liam.

Would he be awake by now? Would he notice I was gone? A part of me could already see it—the exact moment he woke up, stretching lazily, running a hand through his already-messy hair before his brows knitted together in confusion. The way he'd glance at the couch, expecting to see me curled up there, only to find it empty.

Then, the realization. The frustration. The inevitable string of curses under his breath as he grabbed his phone, checked the time, maybe even checked the door—gone. I reached for my phone impulsively, my fingers hovering over his contact.

I could just... tell him.

Let him know where I was going, what I was doing. Maybe he'd be annoyed, maybe even pissed, but at least he wouldn't wake up thinking the worst. But then I imagined his voice—low, rough from sleep, but sharp with irritation.

"Are you serious, Em? You went alone?"

The way he'd push his hair back, pacing, his jaw tightening because he knew—he knew—that once I got something in my head, I wouldn't stop. I exhaled, dropping my phone back onto the passenger seat.

No. I couldn't deal with that right now. If I told him, he'd try to stop me. If he couldn't, he'd come after me. Either way, I wouldn't be doing this alone, and I needed to. Because deep down, a part of me was afraid. Not just of what I might find.

But of what it meant if I wasn't the only one searching.

If Liam was right.

If Clara wasn't just gone

If she was still here.

I pushed the thought away, keeping my eyes on the road as the town's outskirts came into view.

The houses were old, spaced farther apart than I expected, each one carrying the weight of time in its peeling paint and sagging porches. Some had empty driveways, others had rusting cars that looked like they hadn't moved in years. A single gas station sat on the corner, its neon sign flickering weakly, the only sign of life in an otherwise forgotten place. I slowed down, checking the address again. This is it. The Hayes' house. The moment I pulled up, I felt it. That strange, almost suffocating feeling that settled in my chest. The house stood there, old and worn, its white paint peeling in long, jagged strips. The windows were dark, the curtains drawn, as if the house itself was trying to keep something inside. The yard was wild, untamed. Overgrown grass. Weeds twisting up the porch steps. A rusted wind chime hung from the awning, motionless despite the slight breeze. It didn't look abandoned. It looked forgotten. I killed the engine and sat there for a moment, fingers gripping the wheel, breath shallow. Something inside me screamed to turn back. To leave. But I forced myself out of the car, my boots crunching against the gravel. The porch creaked beneath my weight as I stepped up.

I hesitated, then raised my fist and knocked.

Once.

Twice.

Waited.

Nothing.

I knocked again, harder this time, my heartbeat kicking up a notch. The silence stretched on, pressing against my ears. Just as I was about to turn around—

The door creaked open.

Barely an inch.



A sliver of darkness.

Then—an eye.

A woman.

Older, her face pale and lined with exhaustion. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, was pulled back in a loose bun. Her eyes—deep, sunken—studied me with something unreadable. Something between fear and warning.

"You shouldn't be here."

Her voice was, like she hadn't spoken in days. I swallowed hard. "I just have a few questions about Clara—

The door slammed shut. The sound was sharp and final.

I stared at the chipped paint, my pulse hammering. I should leave. I knew that. But I wasn't leaving empty-handed. Not now. I hesitated, then leaned in closer, my voice softer, more insistent.

"I know she didn't just disappear," I said.

"I know she died."

Silence. Then, something shifted. Not inside the house—behind me. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. The air suddenly felt too thick, pressing down on me, making it hard to breathe.

I turned slowly. And for a split second, I swore I saw someone standing at the tree line.

Watching.

Still. Unmoving. A dark silhouette against the dull sky.

I blinked.

They were gone.

Just... gone.

A breath hitched in my throat. My entire body felt wired, every instinct screaming at me to leave.

Then—

The door creaked open again. Not all the way. Just enough for the woman's face to appear once more, her expression carved from something brittle and broken.

"You need to go," she whispered.

My mouth felt dry. I forced myself to step forward instead. "Please. I just need to know—"

"No."

Her voice was sharper this time, urgent. The kind of fear that made a person desperate.

I clenched my jaw, trying to keep my voice steady. "I think something is happening," I said. "Something that involves Clara. I need to know what happened to her."

A flicker of something crossed the woman's face.

Not anger.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

Her lips parted, but she hesitated—like she was fighting something inside herself. I pressed forward.

"Liam told me she died," I said carefully. "But I can't find anything. No reports, no obituaries—just a missing persons case that was closed without explanation. Why? What happened to her?"

The woman sucked in a sharp breath. "I can't help you."

"You're her mother, aren't you?"

Her expression twisted, pain flashing across her features. She looked away, gripping the edge of the door so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"Please," I whispered. "I just... I need to understand."

For a moment, I thought she would close the door again.

But then—

She exhaled shakily and stepped back.

Not an invitation. A warning.

"She's not gone."

I froze.

"...What?"

The woman's eyes flicked to the trees, scanning the yard like she expected to see something.

Then, barely loud enough to hear—

"She never left."

I swallowed. "What do you mean?"

The woman closed her eyes. "We tried. We tried to move on, to pretend, to let her rest, but she... she wouldn't. She's still here. Still watching. Still waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

The woman's lips trembled. She opened her mouth, then shut it. As if saying it out loud would make it real.

I clenched my fists. "Did she—did she die here?"

Silence.

Then, a whisper.

"Not the way you think."

A chill crawled up my spine.

"What does that mean?" I pressed.

The woman's breath came faster, her hands trembling at her sides. "You need to leave. Right now. Before—"

BANG.

A sharp, violent thud against the wall inside the house. I flinched. The woman went pale.

For a second, neither of us moved.

Then—another thud.

Louder. Closer.

Like something inside was waking up.

The woman's face twisted in panic. She shoved the door shut between us, locking it so fast I barely caught a glimpse of her terrified expression before the curtains were yanked closed.

I stumbled back, my chest tightening.

I didn't wait. Didn't look back at the house. Didn't look at the trees. Didn't stop until I was behind the wheel, my fingers tightening around it like an anchor. I inhaled sharply, trying to steady myself.

The missing persons report.

The word on the mirror.

The woman's last whisper.

"She never left."

I wasn't sure what I had just stepped into. But one thing was clear. Clara was still here.



## CHAPTER 21

Liam's POV

I woke up with a start. My body jerked upright, a cold sweat clinging to my skin, my breath coming in sharp, uneven gasps. Something felt wrong—so deeply, terribly wrong that it settled like a weight in my chest, making it hard to breathe. My mind scrambled, still sluggish from sleep, but I knew—I knew—before I even turned my head. The space beside me was empty. My stomach twisted. My fingers reached out instinctively, brushing over the cold sheets where Emily should have been. No warmth. No trace of her body. The blankets were shoved back like she had left in a hurry, like she had been here—but wasn't anymore.

A sick feeling curled in my gut.

She was gone.

I forced myself to breathe, to calm the rising panic clawing its way up my throat. Maybe she was in the bathroom. Maybe she had just gotten up for a glass of water.

Maybe—

The thought barely formed before I was moving. I threw the blankets off, my hands shaking as I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. The floor was cold beneath my feet, but I barely registered it. My heart was pounding, my pulse a frantic drumbeat in my ears.

“Emily?” My voice cracked, barely above a whisper. I cleared my throat and tried again, louder this time.

“Emily?”

Silence.

The sick feeling in my gut tightened, twisting like a knife. I shot to my feet, nearly stumbling in my rush to get to the door. The bedroom was dark, the air thick, too still. It felt wrong. All of it. Like the room itself knew something I didn’t. I reached for the bathroom door and shoved it open so hard it bounced off the wall. Nothing. No light, no sound of running water. Just an empty sink, an unused towel still hanging on the rack. My breathing was too loud in the silence, ragged and uneven, but I couldn’t stop.

She wasn’t here. Maybe the kitchen. Maybe she was just getting water. Maybe—

I was already moving before I could finish the thought. Bare feet on cold tile, my pulse hammering in my throat as I made my way through the hallway. The house was too dark, the shadows stretching long and unfamiliar. The air felt heavy, suffocating. I reached the kitchen and flicked on the light.

Empty. The glass she used the night before was still on the counter, untouched. No sign of movement. No sign of her.

I swallowed hard. My hands clenched into fists. “Emily?”

The name barely left my lips before I turned toward the front door. Unlocked. Wide open.

The sight of it sent a bolt of ice through my veins. My stomach lurched. The door swayed slightly in the air, a soft creak breaking the silence. The doormat was askew, as if someone had left in a hurry. As if someone had run. A cold sweat broke over my skin. I took a step forward, then another, my breath shallow, chest tight. I reached out, my fingers grazing the doorframe.

She wouldn't have just left. Not like this. Not without telling me. Something was wrong. Something was so, so wrong.

I turned back inside, grabbed my phone off the counter, my fingers fumbling as I unlocked it. I clicked on her contact, pressed call. Straight to voicemail.

I swore under my breath, My mind was racing, jumping to every worst-case scenario imaginable.

What if someone took her?

What if she was hurt?

What if she was out there, alone, and I wasn't there to help her?

I had to find her. I had to go. I spun around so fast I nearly lost my balance. My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. My head snapped toward the sound of footsteps—light, hurried, coming from outside. Then—

“Liam?”

Her voice. My breath hitched. My chest clenched so tight I thought I might choke on the air I was barely breathing. And then I saw her.

Emily stepped inside, her brows drawn together, her lips slightly parted like she had been about to say something else—but she didn't get the chance. Because the second I saw her, really saw her—her hair a little messy, her face flushed from the cold, her eyes wide with confusion—something inside me snapped.

I ran.

I didn't think. I didn't hesitate. I just moved, closing the space between us so fast that I barely registered the shocked look on her face before I grabbed her. My arms wrapped around her, crushing her against me, holding her so tight I could feel the frantic beat of her heart against my own. My fingers dug into her back like I was afraid she would disappear if I didn't hold on hard enough.

She gasped.

“Liam—?”

I couldn’t speak. Couldn’t do anything but bury my face in the crook of her neck and hold her like my life depended on it. My whole body was shaking. My breaths came out sharp, uneven, broken. And then—

Then the tears came. Hot, uncontrollable, falling before I could even try to stop them.

I didn’t even care. I didn’t care that I was shaking, that I was crying into her shoulder, that I probably looked completely insane. Because all I could think—all I could feel—was the terror that had clawed through me just moments ago. The gut-wrenching panic, the sheer helplessness of waking up and finding her gone.

“Where were you?” My voice cracked, rough, barely above a whisper. Then, louder. “Where the hell were you?”

Emily stiffened in my arms. “Liam, I—”

“Do you have any idea—” My voice broke, and I had to swallow down the lump in my throat before I could even finish. I pulled back just enough to see her face, but I didn’t let go. I couldn’t. My hands were still gripping her arms, my fingers shaking as I searched her face for any sign of hurt, any scratch, anything.

“Do you have any idea how scared I was?” My voice was thick with something desperate, something raw. “I woke up, and you weren’t there. The door was open. And you—” I sucked in a sharp breath, shaking my head. “You just—just left?”

Her lips parted, her eyes softening, but I wasn’t done.

“What were you thinking?” I burst out, my voice sharp, but the anger wasn’t real. It was panic. It was fear. It was the aftershock of almost losing her—of thinking I had.

“I just—I just went outside for a bit,” she said, her voice small. “I couldn’t sleep.”



I let out a harsh, shaky breath, squeezing my eyes shut for a second. I felt like I was going to explode. Like my chest couldn't hold everything I was feeling.

"You couldn't sleep," I repeated, voice low, unsteady. "So you just—what? Walked out? In the middle of the night? Without telling me?"

"I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't,"

Emily reached out, touching my arm, her fingers gentle. "Liam, I'm okay."

I turned back to her so fast it made my head spin.

"That's not the point," I said. "You were gone. And I didn't know where you were. I thought—" My throat closed up. I shook my head. "I thought something happened to you. And I—"

My voice broke again.

Emily's face softened, and before I could stop her, she pulled me back into her arms. And I let her.

I let her hold me because I needed it. Because the fear hadn't left my body yet. Because the thought of losing her—even for just a moment—was enough to destroy me.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against my hair. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I just held her tighter.

Like if I let go, she'd slip away. Like this was all a dream, and if I loosened my grip even a little, I'd wake up to that empty bed again.

"Liam," Emily murmured, her voice soft, careful.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. Because even though she was here, even though she was warm and solid in my arms, my mind was still stuck in that moment—the moment I reached out for her and found nothing but cold sheets. The moment I ran through the house, calling her name, finding nothing but silence.

The moment I thought I'd lost her. The kind of fear that leaves a scar.

"Hey," she whispered, pulling back just enough to look at me. Her hands came up to my face, her thumbs brushing against my cheekbones, wiping away the tears I didn't even realize were still falling.

"I'm here. I'm okay."

I shook my head, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"No," I muttered. "You don't get it." My voice was raw, cracked. "I thought—" I broke off, sucking in a sharp breath. "I thought you were gone. I thought someone took you. Or that something happened, and I wasn't there. I—" My hands clenched into the fabric of her shirt. "I don't ever want to feel that again."

Her face softened, something breaking in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again, pressing her forehead against mine. "I didn't mean to scare you. I wasn't thinking. I just—" She hesitated, exhaling shakily. "I couldn't sleep. I needed air."

I let out a breath

"You should've woken me up," I whispered.

She nodded. "I should have."

We stood there like that, pressed together, breathing the same air.

"I'm sorry," she said again, softer this time. "I really didn't mean to scare you."

I let out a hollow laugh, shaking my head. "Well, you did."

She bit her lip, her fingers curling in the fabric of my shirt. "I just needed some air," she admitted.

"I wasn't thinking. I just—" She sighed. "I didn't expect you to wake up and freak out like this."

"I always wake up when you move," I murmured, my thumb brushing absently over her skin. "Even when I don't mean to."

She blinked, a small furrow appearing between her brows. “You do?”

I huffed out a breath, feeling my lips press into a thin line. “Yeah,” I muttered. “Because you’re here, Emily. And I know what it’s like when you’re not.”

Something in her expression cracked. She reached up, cupping my face gently, her fingers cool against my overheated skin.

“Liam...”

I closed my eyes for a second, leaning into her touch.

Then I whispered, “I was so scared.”

And that was the truth. The bare, awful truth. I was terrified.

Because she mattered more than anything. Because if something happened to her—if I lost her—I wouldn’t know how to exist in a world where she wasn’t.

“I know,” she whispered.

And somehow, that was enough. Even when I loosened my grip, even when my breathing evened out just enough to not sound so wrecked, she stayed close. Her arms stayed wrapped around me, her hands fisting the fabric of my shirt like she was afraid I might slip away too.

She was shaking. Not like I had been—mine was raw, panicked, frantic—but hers was different. Softer. More controlled. Like she was holding something back, like she wasn’t sure if she should let it spill out or swallow it down. I felt it in the way her fingers hesitated against my back, in the way she exhaled shakily near my ear, like she wanted to say something but couldn’t.

“Emily,” I murmured.

She didn’t answer right away. I pulled back slightly, just enough to see her face.

Her eyes were wide, her lips parted like she was struggling to breathe through whatever she was feeling. But it was her expression that got me—

That quiet guilt. That small, flickering hint of something fragile, something vulnerable, something scared. Not of me. Not of this. Of herself.

I swallowed hard, my hands moving from her arms to her face, cradling her gently. “Hey,” I said, softer this time. “Talk to me.”

Her throat bobbed. She looked at me, really looked at me, and I saw it all.

The weight in her eyes. The way she was barely holding it together.

“I didn’t think it would matter this much,” she finally whispered.

I felt my chest tighten. “What do you mean?”

She licked her lips, gaze darting away for a second before coming back. “I didn’t think you’d care this much.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

Something inside me twisted painfully.

“Emily,” I breathed.

She let out a weak laugh, shaking her head, but it wasn’t amused. It was sad. “I don’t—” Her voice wavered. “I don’t know how to matter like that to someone.”

My heart fucking broke.

I tightened my grip on her face, my thumbs brushing over her cheekbones, desperate to ground her. “You do,” I said firmly, my voice rough with emotion. “You matter to me. More than anything.”

She stared at me, like she wanted to believe it but didn’t know how. Like it was something too big, too overwhelming to accept. And it made my chest ache, because how could she not know? How could she not see that she had me completely? That I’d do anything, be anything, as long as it meant she was safe?

I shook my head, my hands sliding down to her shoulders, gripping her tightly. “I woke up, and you weren’t there,” I said, voice hoarse. “I don’t

think you get what that did to me. What it felt like.” I swallowed hard. “It felt like losing you.”

Her breath hitched. I saw it happen—the moment my words sank in. Her eyes glossed over, her fingers tightening against my chest, like she was clinging to me the same way I was clinging to her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again. “I—I wasn’t thinking. I just needed air, and I didn’t want to wake you.”

I let out a hollow laugh, shaking my head. “Wake me?” I repeated. “Emily, I would rather wake up a thousand times than ever go through that again.”

Emily let out a shaky breath, her fingers still curled into my shirt. I could feel the tension in her body, the way her weight leaned into me like she was trying to steady herself. Then, suddenly, she pulled back just enough to look at me. Her lips parted, hesitation flickering in her eyes—like she wanted to say something, but she wasn’t sure if she should.

Then, she bit her lip and murmured, “Well... I mean, if you’d rather wake up a thousand times, I could start setting alarms every hour. Just to keep you on edge.”

For a second, I just stared at her. Then, a sharp breath of disbelief left me, part frustration, part something dangerously close to fondness.

“Emily.”

Her lips twitched, like she was fighting a smile. “What? I’m just saying—next time, I’ll make sure you never get a full night’s sleep again. You know, just to be safe.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, but she kept looking at me like that—soft and teasing, like she was trying to pull me out of the storm I was drowning in. And damn it, it was working. I exhaled slowly, shaking my head, trying to ignore the way my chest tightened at the sight of her smiling at me like that—like I wasn’t still trying to recover from the sheer terror of waking up and finding her gone.

“You think this is funny?” I muttered, voice rougher than I intended.

Emily tilted her head, pretending to consider. “Not funny funny,” she said lightly, though there was something careful about the way she was watching me. “More like... endearing? Kind of sweet, actually.”

I blinked at her. “Sweet?”

She hummed, nodding. “You losing your mind over me?” She tapped a finger against her chin. “Yeah, I think I could get used to that.”

I let out a slow, incredulous breath, running a hand down my face. “Unbelievable.”

Emily grinned, stepping closer. “Admit it, I got you to stop panicking.”

I eyed her, still torn between frustration and something dangerously soft. “You should be apologizing, not making jokes.”

“I did apologize,” she pointed out. “And I meant it.” Her expression gentled, the teasing fading just slightly. “I’m really sorry, Liam. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

My jaw clenched. I wanted to hold on to the anger, to keep my frustration sharp enough that she understood—that she never did this again. But she was looking at me like that again. Soft. Honest. Real. And I was so damn weak when it came to her.

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “Yeah, well... just don’t do it again.”

Emily reached out, tugging lightly at the front of my shirt. “I won’t.”

I glanced down at her fingers curled in the fabric, then back up at her face.

“...Promise?” My voice was quieter than I meant it to be.

Her gaze softened even more, something warm flickering behind her eyes. She nodded. “Promise.”

Something inside me eased, just a little.

Emily, still holding onto my shirt, rocked up on her toes slightly. “So,” she murmured, her breath brushing against my chin. “Are you still mad at me?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Maybe.”

She huffed, poking my chest lightly. “Come on, I just promised.”

I shrugged, letting my hands settle on her waist. “Doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven you yet.”

Emily’s lips curled into something almost smug. “What if I say something cute? Would that help?”

I stared at her. “...That depends on what you say.”

She pursed her lips, thinking, then said, “Liam, you are the bravest, most incredible man I know.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?”

She grinned. “And also very handsome.”

I rolled my eyes. “Uh-huh.”

Emily laughed, stepping even closer, until there was barely any space left between us. She lifted a hand, her fingers brushing over the back of my neck, playing with the ends of my hair.

“I really am sorry,” she said again, quieter this time.

I studied her for a moment, then sighed, resting my forehead against hers.

“...Yeah,” I murmured. “I know.”

She smiled, closing her eyes briefly. “Good.”

I let out a breath, tightening my grip on her waist. “You still owe me for this.”

Emily pulled back just enough to look at me, her eyes twinkling. “I’ll make it up to you,” she promised.

I huffed. “Damn right you will.”

She just smiled and leaned in, pressing the softest, sweetest kiss to my cheek.

I just couldn't believe this girl.

The power she had over me. The way she could twist me into knots without even trying. The way she could drag me through hell—make my heart stop, my breath vanish, my mind spiral into the worst possible places—only to turn around and look at me with those eyes, that soft smile, and suddenly, none of it mattered anymore. The sheer length I would go for her. I would tear the world apart if I had to. I would burn it to ashes, leave nothing but smoke in my wake, if it meant keeping her safe. If it meant never having to feel that kind of fear again.

And yet—

Yet she was standing in the kitchen now, completely unbothered, humming under her breath as she made breakfast. Like she hadn't just shattered me a few minutes ago. Like she hadn't made my heart nearly beat itself to death with fear. I leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, watching her move around the kitchen like nothing had happened. She was still in her sleep shirt, her hair a little messy, sleeves pushed up as she flipped the egg in the pan. She looked... soft. Effortless. Like she belonged in this space, like she belonged here—with me. And it was infuriating. Because I was still recovering from what she had put me through, and here she was, humming.

And Why do I feel like everything is spinning. My head was aching. And then I remembered why.

I was drunk.

Fuck.

I groaned, pressing my palms against my eyes as if that would somehow erase the pounding inside my skull. Everything was too bright, too loud—even though the only sound in the room was my own miserable breathing and her humming.

"How drunk was I?" I muttered, already bracing myself.



Emily hummed, tapping a finger against her chin. "Well, let's see. for starters, you called me at some ungodly hour and proceeded to slur your way through a very cryptic, very dramatic conversation about ghosts and betrayal."

I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. "God."

"Oh, that's not even the best part." She leaned in, her voice dripping with faux concern. "Do you remember what else you said?"

I frowned, trying to force my sluggish brain into action.

Flashes of the night before came back in bits and pieces. The bar. The whiskey. Emily showing up, looking exasperated.

And then—

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

I stared at her. "I didn't—"

"You did." She nodded solemnly. "Liam, you spent a solid five minutes going on about how pretty I am."

Heat flooded my face. "I—"

She mimicked my voice, dropping it into a drunken slur. "Em, you don't get it. You don't see it the way I do." She clutched her chest dramatically.

"The way you scrunch your nose when you're mad? Beautiful. The way you rant? Beautiful. Your stupid, stubborn, don't-take-any-shit attitude?" She batted her lashes.

"Fucking beautiful."

I wanted to die. Right there. Right in that bed. Just cease to exist.

Emily cackled at my expression. "Oh my God, this is the best day of my life."

I groaned again, flopping back onto the pillow. "Kill me."

"Nope." She poked my forehead. "I need you alive so I can remind you of this every day for the rest of eternity."

I peeked at her through my fingers. "You're evil."

She beamed. "And your favorite person in the whole world."

I made a sound of protest, but she just smirked, leaning in close.

"Say it."

I glared at her.

She wiggled her brows. "Say it."

I grumbled something under my breath.

She cupped her ear. "What was that?"

I sighed, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes before mumbling, "You're my favorite person."

Emily gasped dramatically. "Oh my God." She clutched her chest. "Liam likes me."

"Take it back."

"Nope."

I let out a long, suffering sigh. "I hate you."

She patted my cheek. "Nah, you love me."

I did. And that was the problem.

I stiffened. "About your stalker—"

Emily's eyes narrowed, sharp and immediate. "Nope. Not happening. Not today."

I blinked. "What?"

She crossed her arms, already shutting it down. "Today is our day. No stalkers. No threatening letters. No cryptic bullshit. Just you, me, and the fact that you made a complete fool of yourself last night."

I opened my mouth, but she pointed a finger at me like she was about to sentence me to life in prison.

"Ah-ah! No distractions." She smirked, that kind of smug, dangerous smirk that made me immediately regret ever calling her last night. "You still have to face the consequences of your drunken confessions."

I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. "Emily—"

I barely saw it coming. WHACK. I got hit in the face with a pillow.

"Ow—what the hell?" I grumbled, rubbing my forehead.

Emily just stood there, victorious, pillow in hand. "No Emily. No stalker talk. Only fun. And also—you owe me breakfast for dragging your drunk ass home."

I blinked. "I owe you breakfast?"

"Yes. Emotional damage tax."

I scoffed. "Emotional damage?"

"Yeah." She nodded, completely serious. "Do you have any idea what it's like to sit in a bar, watching a fully grown man practically weep over how 'stunning' I am? I deserve compensation."

I groaned. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah, well, Jesus Christ didn't have to deal with a tipsy Liam clinging to my sleeve, professing his undying devotion."

"I did not cling."

She made a face. "You did, actually. You also tried to fight your seatbelt for a solid two minutes because you thought it was strangling you."

I opened my mouth, then promptly shut it.

Because. Well. That... sounded like something I might do.

Emily grinned like she could see my silent acceptance. "Anyway. Pay up. I want pancakes."

"Oh, you want pancakes, huh?" I muttered, flopping back against the pillows. "Bossy much?"

"Very." She smirked. "And you love it."

I rolled my eyes, pretending to think. "Hmm... Debatable."

She gasped, grabbing another pillow.

I dodged just in time. "Alright, alright! Breakfast it is!"

She smirked. "Damn right." Then she tossed me a hoodie. "Now hurry up, lover boy. Before I start reciting your love speech in public."

I shot her a glare. "You wouldn't."

Her smirk widened. "Oh, I absolutely would."

I picked up the pillow and threw it at her. She dodged, laughing, and just for a moment—just for one stupid, fleeting moment—it felt like everything was normal. Like there weren't any threats.

Like there weren't any stalkers. Like there wasn't something lurking just outside our reach, waiting to ruin everything.

But deep down, I knew the truth. Normal never lasted long for us.

I jingled my car keys in my hand, letting the familiar weight settle between my fingers. "Alright, let's go. I know a good place—"

"Nope."

Emily plucked the keys right out of my fingers. I blinked, looking down at my now-empty hand like it had personally betrayed me.

"What the hell?"

She twirled the keys around her index finger before stuffing them into her pocket with a self-satisfied smirk. "We're walking."

I raised a brow. "Since when do you make the rules?"

"Since you embarrassed yourself in public and lost all decision-making privileges." She grabbed my wrist, tugging me toward the door with surprising force. "Now, c'mon, darling. It's a nice day. Let's walk."

I groaned, dragging my feet in protest. "I don't remember agreeing to this dictatorship."

"You also don't remember half of last night, so I wouldn't trust your memory too much."

I shot her a look. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

She grinned. "Every second of it."

I muttered something about bossy women but let her drag me along anyway.

---

The morning air was crisp, the kind that made you take deeper breaths just because it felt good. The streets were quieter than usual, the world still waking up, stretching into the day. Sunlight spilled gold over the pavement, casting our shadows long against the sidewalk. It was the kind of morning that made you forget, just for a little while, that life could be anything but simple.

Emily walked beside me, hands stuffed into her jacket pockets, her hair catching the light like it had something to say. She glanced up at me, expectant.

I frowned. "What?"

She wiggled her fingers. "Hand."

I stared at her. "Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously." She didn't wait for me to decide—just reached over and took my hand like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And maybe it was.

Maybe it was supposed to be.

I curled my fingers around hers, giving a light squeeze. She squeezed back

---

We walked in comfortable silence for a while, the kind where words weren't necessary. But then, Emily hummed. "So... truth or dare?"

I snorted. "What are we, twelve?"

"Nope. Just bored." She swung our joined hands a little. "C'mon, play along."

I sighed dramatically. "Fine. Truth."

"Coward." She smirked before tapping her chin. "Alright—what was your biggest regret from last night?"

I gave her a deadpan look. "Calling you."

She gasped, smacking my arm. "Rude."

I grinned. "Alright, my turn. Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

I thought for a second before smirking. "Tell me the truth about something you've been hiding."

Her smirk faltered. "That's not how dares work."

"It is if I say it is." I watched her, searching. "Well?"

She hesitated, eyes flicking away. "Pass."

I squeezed her hand. "That's not an option, Em."

She sighed, kicking a rock with the tip of her shoe before glancing at me. "Fine. You wanna know something?"

I nodded.

She inhaled deeply, then turned to me with a smug grin. "You are so whipped for me, it's embarrassing."

I groaned. "Oh, for fu—"

"No take-backs!" She laughed, skipping ahead, swinging our hands like we were kids again.

I rolled my eyes but let her get away with it.

///

The restaurant was a small place on the corner, the kind that served all-day breakfast and had a chalkboard menu out front. It smelled like fresh coffee and something sweet, like cinnamon.

And the moment we walked in, I regretted everything.

Because the waiter? The young, attractive male waiter?

His eyes lit up when he saw Emily.

"Hey! You're back." He grinned, ignoring me entirely.

Emily smiled. "Hey, Marcus."

Marcus.

Marcus?

"You bringing your boyfriend this time?" Marcus asked, arching a brow.

I opened my mouth to say damn right she did, but Emily beat me to it.

"Nope." She smirked, tilting her head at me. "Just some guy I found drunk in a bar."

I glared at her. "Emily—"

Marcus chuckled. "Damn. Must've been a good night, then."

I resisted the urge to wipe that grin off his stupid face.

Emily, enjoying my misery, just patted my arm. "We'll take a booth, Marcus. Thanks."

I clenched my jaw but followed her, dropping into the seat across from her.

"What the hell was that?" I hissed the second Marcus left.

She blinked innocently. "What?"

"You just demoted me to some random drunk guy."

She shrugged, sipping her water. "Well, you were some random drunk guy last night."

I scowled. "Unbelievable."

She smirked, leaning forward. "Oh, come on, don't tell me you're jealous."

"I'm not jealous."

"Uh-huh." She raised a brow. "Then why are you glaring daggers at Marcus?"

I looked over. Okay. Maybe I was glaring.

"You're imagining things." I muttered, stabbing my straw into my drink.

"Mmhmm." She grinned, clearly enjoying herself.

I scowled. "Truth or dare, Emily."

She perked up. "Truth."

I smirked. "Do you think Marcus is attractive?"

Her smile froze.

I leaned back, victorious. "Go on. Be honest."

She squirmed. "I mean... objectively speaking—"

"Objectively?" I scoffed. "Just say yes or no, Em."

She huffed. "Fine. Yes. Whatever."

I felt irrationally annoyed. "Tch."

She burst into laughter. "Oh my God. You are jealous!"

"Shut up."

"You are!" She grinned, propping her chin on her hand. "What, you think I'm gonna run off with Marcus?"

I glared. "I don't trust guys who flirt with my—" I caught myself.

Her eyes gleamed. "Your what, Liam?"

I clenched my jaw. "Forget it."

She smirked. "That's what I thought."



She leaned back, tapping her fingers against the table. "Alright, one more round. Truth or dare?"

I exhaled sharply. "Not playing."

She pouted. "Come on, say it."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Truth."

She tilted her head, playful but curious. "What was she like? Your first love?"

My heart stopped for a moment. My fingers tightened around my drink, suddenly feeling too warm, too thick. I didn't know how to answer.

The silence between us thickened as Emily studied me, her gaze sharp, a little too perceptive.

She wasn't buying it.

"What?"

I looked up at her, trying to keep my face neutral. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." Her voice had softened, but there was an edge to it now. "What was she like, Liam? Your first love?"

I swallowed. The words came out slower than I meant. "I don't know. Just... you know... typical first love. Messy. Complicated. A lot of heartbeats and bad decisions."

"Hm." She leaned forward a little, eyes narrowing, like she could read every crack in my story. "And?"

I took a long drink, the cold liquid a sharp contrast to the heat rising in my chest. "It wasn't anything special, alright?"

But I could see it in her eyes. She didn't believe me.

"You're lying." Her voice was quiet, almost gentle, but there was no mistaking the accusation in it. "Why won't you tell me?"

I exhaled sharply, the words sitting heavy on my tongue. "It's not... I don't think it matters now. Not with everything else going on."

She didn't look away. "It matters to me. I think it matters more than you're letting on."

I didn't know how to respond. The truth? I wasn't ready to say it. Not yet. Not when it still felt too raw, too confusing. And definitely not with Emily looking at me like that, like she was seeing through every wall I'd built.

"You're not answering." Her voice was low now, more uncertain. "What are you hiding, Liam?"

I felt a flicker of panic, my mind scrambling for a way to change the subject. "It's not a big deal. It was just... something that happened. It doesn't mean anything anymore."

Emily wasn't buying it. "It means something to you. I can tell."

She leaned back, folding her arms across her chest. "What are you so afraid of?"

I couldn't answer that. Because I didn't know. Or maybe I did, but I didn't want to admit it. It was too messy, too tangled up in everything else I was trying to forget.

"It's complicated, Em." I finally muttered, barely audible. "I just... I can't talk about it right now."

She didn't press me further. Instead, she just looked at me with those big eyes, searching for something in my face. For a moment, I thought she might push again, ask the question that was hanging in the air, but then she looked away.

"Alright," she said, her tone softening. "But I'm not dropping it."

I wasn't sure if that comforted me or made me feel more exposed.

I shifted in my seat, trying to focus on anything but the tension thickening between us. "I don't like talking about it. Not yet, anyway."

She nodded slowly, her gaze lingering on me before she forced a light laugh. "Okay. I'll respect that."

But there was something different in her eyes now. A quiet suspicion that wasn't there before. It was like I'd cracked open a door, and she was standing just on the other side, waiting for me to push it open further.

The moment passed, but I knew I hadn't escaped it.

"So..."

I looked up at her, relieved at the change in subject. But Emily's eyes weren't sparkling anymore. They had clouded over, the playful energy from before gone. She folded her arms across her chest, her lips pressed into a thin line. The silence stretched between us, heavy and awkward.

"What's next?" Emily asked, her voice quieter than usual.

I tried to act normal, but I could feel the shift in her mood. "Next? I don't know. Breakfast?"

Her eyebrow arched, and for a second, I thought she was going to say something sarcastic, but instead, she just shook her head, a sigh escaping her lips. "This conversation is far from over, Liam."

My stomach sank. I groaned, rubbing my temples, trying to fight off the frustration bubbling in my chest. "Can we talk about something else?"

She didn't respond at first. Her gaze dropped to the table, her fingers tapping lightly on the edge, a nervous rhythm that I could feel in my bones. It was like she was waiting for me to make the first move, to say the words that would make everything feel normal again. But I was losing my grip on the situation.

"I'm not an idiot," she said quietly, her voice almost distant now. "I can tell when you're holding something back."

The words hit me harder than I expected. I could see the hurt in her eyes, and I felt like I was drowning in the tension between us.

"Emily, please," I said, trying to calm her, to bring her back. "It's not like that."

But she wasn't looking at me anymore. She was staring out the window, her face unreadable.

"Then what is it, Liam?"

I exhaled, feeling the weight of everything that had been building up for so long. She deserved more than this—more than half-truths and dodged questions. It wasn't fair to her. I couldn't keep hiding behind walls that I had built out of fear.

"It's complicated, okay?" I finally said, my voice lower than usual. "I... I was in love once. And I thought it was everything. I thought it was perfect."

Emily didn't say anything for a moment, but I could feel her attention shift back to me, the air between us crackling with the weight of my words. She wasn't looking at me like she had been before—playful, teasing, but with a sharper edge now, like she was trying to piece together something I wasn't giving her.

I swallowed hard, trying to gather the courage to keep going.

"I thought it was perfect, Em. Everything about it felt right. At first, it was like... like the kind of love you read about in books. The kind of love you dream about when you're younger and naive. You know what I mean? You think it's all fireworks and endless passion."

I paused, my hand running through my hair, trying to control the nerves building up in my chest. It felt like I was talking about something that was both too distant and too close to me at the same time.

"But it wasn't," I continued, my voice trembling slightly. "It wasn't what I thought it would be. I loved her, I did. I thought we were good for each other, you know? That we fit, that we had this... this connection that nobody could touch. I thought I was ready for it. But I wasn't."

Emily stayed silent, her eyes never leaving me, like she was waiting for me to say the next thing. I could feel her patience, but also this unspoken pressure to keep going, to explain. I wasn't sure if I was doing it right, but I couldn't stop now.

"It got... intense. Fast. And at first, I didn't mind. I thought, this is what it's supposed to be like. You give yourself to someone, they give

themselves back. You trust each other. But then... then it started to feel like too much. She needed me in ways I wasn't prepared for. I thought I could handle it, but I couldn't. She wanted me constantly—needed me constantly. And I kept giving, kept pretending that I was okay with it. But I wasn't, Em. It started to suffocate me."

I could see Emily's brow furrow, like she was piecing together the puzzle, trying to understand how this connected to me now. I let out a deep breath, the words heavy on my chest, but I knew I had to say them. I couldn't keep hiding it anymore.

"It wasn't just love. It became... possessive. Controlling, in a way. And I felt like I was losing myself. I started resenting it. And I started resenting her, even though I still loved her, you know? It was like I was drowning in her, in us. I couldn't breathe. And the harder I tried to fix it, to make it better, the worse it got. I didn't know how to make it stop without breaking everything. Without hurting her. Without... losing her completely."

I paused again, looking down at the table, not able to meet her eyes. "So I walked away. I ended it. And it was the hardest thing I've ever done. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't keep pretending that it was okay when it wasn't. And she was devastated. It was like I ripped her apart. And I knew I had to, but it didn't make it any easier. I thought I was doing the right thing, but now..."

I swallowed hard, the words stalling in my throat as I tried to make sense of them, to make them real. Emily sat quietly, her eyes soft and understanding, but the weight of what I was about to say pressed down on me

"But now... now she's gone," I muttered, barely above a whisper. "She's dead, Em. And I'm still here, trying to figure out if I did the right thing or if I just... I just ruined everything."

Her expression softened, She let me speak, and somehow, that was worse than any interruption. It was like she could feel the struggle inside me—

how much I wanted to be honest, but how much I was terrified of what honesty might do to the fragile connection we were building.

"I didn't find out until after. A few months later. She... she was gone, and it was sudden. No warning. One day she was there, and the next, she was just... gone." I let out a shaky breath, trying to hold back the wave of guilt that was creeping up on me. "And I couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't stop wondering if maybe, if I'd just held on a little longer, if I'd given her more of myself, maybe she wouldn't have... left. Maybe if I hadn't walked away, she'd still be here. But I couldn't change it. I couldn't go back."

I glanced up at Emily, my hands gripping the edge of the table as if I could anchor myself there, as if the ground beneath me might give way at any moment. "I don't know what's worse. The guilt of ending it, or the fact that now, I'll never know if I could've been the one to save her. It's... it's suffocating."

Her eyes narrowed as she took a sharp breath, her expression shifting from the soft understanding it had held moments ago to something more intense. Her fingers clenched into fists on the table, and she leaned in, her voice rising with a quiet fury that caught me off guard.

"No," she snapped, her eyes flashing with a mixture of anger and disbelief. "This is bullshit, Liam. You're not going to sit here and make yourself the villain of this story."

I blinked, my chest tightening as her words hit me harder than I expected. She was always so calm, so collected, and seeing her like this—the raw edge in her voice—left me speechless.

"You're not responsible for her death, okay?" Emily's voice was a low growl now, and she didn't wait for me to respond. "You walked away because it was unhealthy. It was suffocating you. And I'm sorry to break it to you, but that is not something you can carry on your shoulders forever."

"But—" I started, but she cut me off, her eyes blazing with the force of her frustration.

"No," she repeated, shaking her head sharply. "Don't do that. Don't twist it into something it's not. I get that you feel like you could've done more, but you couldn't, Liam. You can't fix someone who's already broken. You were drowning in a relationship that wasn't good for you, and you did the right thing by leaving. I don't care what you tell yourself, but it's not your fault. Stop blaming yourself for things that are out of your control."

Her words were like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, all I could do was sit there, stunned, staring at her

She leaned back in her chair, her expression softening just enough for me to see the sincerity in her eyes. "You did what you thought was best. You made the hardest decision of your life, and you did it because you couldn't keep living in something that wasn't healthy. She wasn't the only one in that relationship. You were too, and you have every right to protect yourself, even if it means walking away. What you're doing right now—this guilt you're carrying? It's a lie. A lie you're telling yourself to avoid facing the truth."

Her words left me frozen, the weight of them settling deep inside me. For the first time in a long while, I felt like someone saw me—really saw me—without judgment, without expectations. Emily wasn't just making me feel better out of pity. She was challenging me to let go of something that had been gnawing at me for far too long. I didn't know what to say at first. A part of me still wanted to hold onto that guilt, to believe it was all my fault. But Emily was right. Maybe it wasn't.

I smiled a little, the first real smile I'd had in what felt like forever. "I hate you, you know that, right?"

Emily blinked, surprised by the sudden shift in my tone. Then, she smirked. "I'm so heartbroken."

"Idiot," I muttered, rolling my eyes, but there was something lighter in my chest now, something that hadn't been there before. She was making me feel like I could breathe again.

She leaned forward, her gaze locking onto mine with a playfulness that had been missing for a while. "You know," she said, voice dropping to a teasing whisper, "you're not so bad when you're not drowning in guilt."

I raised an eyebrow, the teasing spark in her voice pulling me in. "Oh? So, I'm not a total disaster then?"

"Not today," she teased back, her lips curving into that knowing grin that made my heart skip a beat.

I couldn't hold back the grin that spread across my face. "Well, today is clearly a good day then."

She leaned in a little closer, her lips curling into a slow, teasing smile. "Oh, I'm glad to hear that," she murmured, her voice lower now, more velvety, like she knew exactly what she was doing. "But I'm still not convinced. You might be an alright guy today, but I'm sure you've got plenty of... flaws I need to uncover."

I leaned forward slightly, matching her playfulness with a challenging glint in my eyes. "Is that so? You think you can figure me out that easily?"

She tilted her head, her eyes flicking to my lips before meeting my gaze again. "Oh, I'm certain I could." Her words were almost a whisper, like she was daring me to take the bait.

I let out a low chuckle, feeling the heat between us rise just a little more. "I think you might be underestimating me." My voice dropped, matching the energy that had shifted between us.

Her grin widened, eyes darkening with amusement. "I don't know, Liam... I kind of like the idea of figuring you out."

I raised an eyebrow, the playful tension growing thicker. "You think you can handle it?"



"Oh, I can handle it," she said, her tone smooth and almost seductive, as she shifted closer, her voice barely above a breath. "But I'm going to need to see just how much you're willing to show me first."

I couldn't suppress the smile that tugged at the corner of my lips. "Guess you'll just have to stick around and find out, won't you?"

She met my gaze head-on, her lips just inches from mine. "Oh, I plan to."

We both held eye contact for a moment longer, the playful tension lingering in the air, before we burst into laughter, the moment dissolving into something lighter, more comfortable.

"Alright, alright," I said, shaking my head, trying to control my laughter. "You win. You're a dangerous woman, you know that?"

She shrugged, her grin never fading. "I try," she said with a mock humility that made me laugh even harder.

Just then, the waiter appeared, setting down our breakfast in front of us.

"Well, this is a nice change of pace," I said, glancing down at my plate and then back at Emily. "I usually don't have this much fun before 10 AM."

"I'm full of surprises," she teased, grabbing her fork and taking a bite. "Besides, we've still got time left to make this a memorable morning."

I smiled, shaking my head, feeling lighter than I had in a long time. "You're lucky I like you," I muttered, taking a bite of my own food.

"I know," she replied with a wink, her eyes glinting with mischief as she took another bite. "It's a privilege."

The rest of the day felt like something straight out of a lazy Sunday movie—the kind where nothing major happens, but you still feel warm inside watching it. After breakfast, we decided to take a walk through the park, because apparently, we were the kind of people who did that now. The sun was still stretching its way up into the sky, and everything around us was peaceful. Birds chirping, dogs running after sticks, old

couples sitting on benches like they had all the time in the world. It was nice. Emily, walking beside me, seemed to glow in a way that made it impossible not to notice her. God... she was everything I hadn't known I needed. Every time I looked at her, it was like the world paused for just a second, allowing me to drink in the beauty of her every little detail. And it wasn't just the obvious things—the way her hair fell in soft waves, or how her eyes could shift from the brightest green to this deep, stormy shade depending on her mood. It was everything about her, every movement, every word, every breath she took.

Emily stretched her arms out, letting out a dramatic sigh. "Okay, but if we're gonna do this whole morning walk thing, I at least deserve a reward. Like ice cream."

I raised an eyebrow. "You just had breakfast."

"Your point?"

I smirked. "None. I just admire your commitment to sugar."

She grinned, bumping my shoulder lightly with hers as we walked. It was so easy, just existing like this, with her.

We walked at a slow pace, like we had nowhere to be, and talked about everything under the sun. The latest gossip, how one of our friends was apparently in a "situationship" that everyone but them knew was a relationship, and how I was definitely going to let Emily choose dinner later because I was tired of being judged for my terrible food choices. (Who knew ordering pineapple on pizza once would haunt me forever?)

Between the jokes and the laughter, there were moments of quiet, too. But it wasn't an awkward kind of silence. It was the good kind, the kind where you don't feel like you have to fill it with words because just being there, walking side by side, was enough.

At some point, we found a small lake, and I, being the absolute genius that I am, tried to skip a rock across the water. It plopped in like a sad, defeated potato. Emily, of course, laughed so hard.

She snorted. "That was... tragic."

I placed a hand over my heart. “Wow. You could just say you’re impressed and move on.”

“Oh, I am impressed,” she said, eyes twinkling with amusement. “I didn’t know it was possible to fail that badly.”

“Unbelievable,” I muttered, but I was smiling, and she knew it.

We spent the afternoon exploring a tiny café we stumbled upon, the kind of place that looked like it belonged in an old novel. The lighting was soft, the air smelled like coffee and vanilla, and there were bookshelves lined with old, worn-out paperbacks. It felt cozy, like a hidden pocket of the world where time moved slower. We ordered a slice of chocolate cake to share, and I swear, the way Emily’s eyes lit up when she took the first bite made me question if I should be jealous about that cake.

“This,” she said, pointing her fork at me, “is life-changing.”

I laughed. “You say that about every dessert.”

“Because every dessert is life-changing in its own way,” she said, completely serious.

Oh, God.

I turned my head, and it was too late. The danger had already spotted me.

Ruby. Emily’s best friend. The human embodiment of a lie detector. The girl who could smell secrets from a mile away and had no issue calling people out in the most dramatic way possible.

And right now? She was standing at the entrance of the café, holding an iced coffee like it was a weapon, her eyes locked on me and Emily like she had just walked into the scandal of the year.

I froze. Emily hadn’t noticed her yet—she was too busy cutting another bite of cake, completely oblivious to the incoming doom. Maybe if I acted normal, if I didn’t move too suddenly, Ruby would just walk past us, pretend she didn’t see anything, and—

Nope. Not happening. She was already making her way toward us with purpose, her brows raised, lips slightly parted in the classic oh, this is interesting expression.

Emily finally caught on, following my gaze, and the second she saw Ruby, her whole body stiffened. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah,” I muttered under my breath.

Ruby stopped at our table, her eyes flicking between us, taking in the half-eaten cake, the cozy little corner we had chosen, the fact that Emily was leaning ever so slightly toward me, and oh—let’s not forget—the fact that my hand was resting way too close to hers on the table.

She took a slow sip of her iced coffee, watching us like a detective piecing together a case, before finally speaking.

“Well, well, well,” she drawled, a smirk creeping onto her face. “What do we have here?”

Emily coughed. “Ruby, hi.”

Ruby tilted her head, studying her best friend. “Hi? That’s all I get?” Her eyes flickered to me, sharp and amused. “And Liam? Since when do you two”—she gestured between us—“go on cute little café dates together?”

“It’s not a date,” Emily said too quickly.

Ruby didn’t even blink. “Uh-huh. And I’m not drinking iced coffee right now.” She took another sip, unimpressed.

I tried to play it cool. “We were just... hanging out.”

“Right,” Ruby said, dragging out the word like she didn’t believe a single syllable of it. “Just hanging out. Alone. In a tiny café. Sharing cake.” She gasped dramatically. “Oh my God. Are you guys in love?”

Emily groaned, pressing a hand to her face. “Ruby, I swear—”

Ruby grinned, clearly enjoying this way too much. “I knew something was up. You’ve been acting weird lately, Em. And now I find you here,

giggling over cake with him?" She pointed at me like I was some kind of rare specimen.

I cleared my throat. "I do have a name."

"Yeah, yeah, Liam, I know," she waved me off before turning back to Emily. "So, tell me. When were you gonna tell me?"

Emily sighed, defeated. "Tell you what?"

Ruby leaned in, her smirk widening. "That you're totally into him."

Emily choked on air. "I am not—"

"Oh, please," Ruby said, cutting her off. "I know that look. That twinkly look." She squinted at me. "And you. You're looking at her like she just personally invented happiness or something."

I opened my mouth to protest, but—damn it—Ruby wasn't wrong.

Emily let out a groan. "Ruby."

"Emily."

I could practically see Emily debating whether to throw her fork at her best friend's face. Instead, she just slumped back in her seat, looking like she'd rather disappear into the cake than have this conversation.

Ruby, meanwhile, looked pleased. Like she had just solved a crime and was now waiting for her reward.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Ruby, can you not?"

She blinked at me innocently. "Not what?"

"Not be you?"

"Impossible." She grinned. "But hey, don't mind me. You two go back to being casually not in love or whatever." She shot Emily a look. "We're so talking about this later."

With that, she strutted off, sipping her iced coffee like she hadn't just ruined any and all chances of us pretending nothing was going on.

I turned back to Emily.

She groaned again, dropping her head onto the table. "I hate her."

I chuckled. "You love her."

She peeked up at me, her lips twitching. "Yeah. Unfortunately."

I leaned back in my chair, arms crossed, smirking at Emily like I had just won some secret battle. "So," I drawled, "out of all the best friends in the world... you had to end up with her."

Emily groaned dramatically, still face-down on the table. "Don't remind me."

"Oh, I will," I said, grinning. "Because now I know your weakness."

She lifted her head just enough to glare at me. "I don't have a weakness."

I raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. So, if I hypothetically called Ruby right now and asked her to come back so we can fully discuss your twinkly eyes and the way you—"

She shot up so fast I almost flinched. "You wouldn't."

I pulled out my phone, holding it up like a threat. "Oh, but I would. Ruby and I? We're best friends now. She loves me."

Emily snorted. "Ruby doesn't love anyone more than she loves a good scandal."

"Exactly. And you just gave her one. On a silver platter. With cake on the side."

She narrowed her eyes, pointing her fork at me again. "Liam. If you text her, I will stab you."

I smirked, leaning in just a little. "With what? That tiny fork? Please. I'll survive."

She huffed, throwing it down dramatically. "Ugh. I hate you."

I tilted my head, grinning. "Oh? That's funny, because Ruby seems to think you—what was it again?—oh yeah. Totally into me."

Emily's cheeks went slightly pink, but she recovered fast. She crossed her arms, leaning forward with a sly smile. "You know, for someone who claims to not be in love with me, you sure do enjoy talking about it."

I blinked. Okay. That was a good comeback. She smirked harder, clearly proud of herself.

I sighed, shaking my head. "Great. So now both you and Ruby are ganging up on me. I should've seen this coming."

Emily laughed, finally relaxing again. "You brought this on yourself."

I looked at her for a second, at the way her eyes crinkled when she laughed, at how effortlessly she made everything feel lighter, even after all the heavy things we had talked about earlier. Maybe Ruby had a point. Maybe Emily was my weakness. But if she was, I wasn't sure I minded.

Emily tilted her head, studying me for a moment before asking, "You don't have a best friend?"

I shrugged, taking another bite of cake. "I mean... I'm literally eating cake with her right now."

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the flicker of something else in her expression. "Liam, I'm serious."

I put my fork down and looked at her with mock offense. "Do I look like I'm lying?"

She didn't laugh this time. Instead, she bit her lip, looking down at her hands, her fingers twisting together in that nervous way she did when she was thinking too hard about something.

I cleared my throat, leaning in slightly. "Hey," I said, nudging her foot under the table. "What's going on in that overthinking brain of yours?"

She huffed out a breath, shaking her head. "It's just—" She stopped, exhaling slowly before finally looking up at me. "I don't like the idea of you not having someone."

I blinked. “You do realize you’re literally sitting here being that someone right now, right?”

She scoffed. “Liam—”

“No, really.” I pointed at her dramatically. “You. Right now. Sitting across from me. Eating my cake. Asking deep, emotional questions.” I spread my arms. “Best friend behavior.”

She let out a small laugh, but I could see the way her eyes shone, the way she blinked just a little too quickly like she was fighting off actual tears. Oh, hell. She was really feeling this. My chest did this weird tightening thing, and suddenly, I wanted to fix it—to make sure she never had to feel like this about me again.

I reached for her hand without thinking, linking my pinky with hers. “Hey, I’m okay,” I said, softer this time. “I swear.”

She looked at our hands, then back up at me, her eyes searching mine. “You better be,” she muttered.

I grinned. “Are you threatening me right now?”

“Yes,” she said, straight-faced. “If you ever make me cry in a café again, I will throw cake at you.”

I smirked. “Jokes on you. I’d eat it.”

And just like that, she laughed, full and real, like she had never been sad to begin with. And if I had to be the idiot who made terrible jokes just to keep that smile on her face, then yeah—maybe I was a best friend kind of guy after all.





## CHAPTER 22

Emily

I never laughed this much in a single day. Ever. Not the polite, half-hearted laugh you give when someone says something mildly funny. Not even the amused chuckles I usually let slip when Ruby went on her rants about people she didn't like (which, honestly, was half the population). No, today was the kind of laughter that made my stomach ache, the kind that made my eyes water, the kind that felt like it could stitch together things inside me I hadn't even realized were broken.

And, of course, it was because of Liam.

By the time we got back, I was exhausted, but in the best way. My face hurt from smiling, and my ribs were sore from laughing, and honestly, if this was the price I had to pay to spend a day with him, I'd gladly suffer through it.

Liam, being Liam, immediately announced, "I'm taking a shower before I pass out."

"Noted," I said, flopping onto the couch, feeling the kind of tired that made it impossible to move. I figured I'd just scroll through my phone or, at worst, doze off while waiting for him.

But the moment he disappeared into the bathroom, my mind did the thing it always did when I finally had a quiet moment—it wandered. And of course, it went straight to him. Today had been... perfect. I didn't

even know days could feel like this, so light and easy, like nothing heavy was lurking in the background waiting to pull me under. I kept replaying the moments in my head—his teasing remarks, his ridiculous jokes, the way he looked at me when he thought I wasn't noticing. And then, the way he said it. Do I look like I'm lying?

I wasn't prepared for that. Not for the weight of his words, the way they settled into my chest like something permanent. I had spent so much time convincing myself I was just an option, that I could be easily replaced, that I wasn't someone who made a lasting impression on people. But Liam...

Liam looked at me like I was his favorite thing in the world, and I didn't know what to do with that.

I sighed, rubbing a hand over my face. And then, because my brain apparently hated me, I remembered how I'd lied earlier about where I'd gone. He had been scared—actually scared when he thought something had happened to me. And even though I had laughed it off, something about the way his voice had cracked when he demanded to know where I was still stuck with me. He cared. More than I had realized.

I was still lost in my thoughts when the bathroom door swung open, and then—

Oh. Oh.

Liam stepped out, towel slung low on his hips, his hair damp and messy, water still dripping from the ends onto his bare shoulders. And, okay, I had seen him shirtless before. It wasn't new. But right now, in the dim lighting, with the faint steam curling around him like some kind of cinematic entrance?

It hit differently. My brain, which had been doing an excellent job overanalyzing emotions just moments ago, promptly shut down.

"You good?" he asked, rubbing a towel over his hair, completely oblivious to the internal meltdown happening in my head.

I blinked. "Uh-huh."

Liam smirked. "You sure? You're looking at me like you forgot how to talk."

"I—" I cleared my throat, sitting up straighter. Focus, Emily. "I was just—thinking."

"Thinking," he repeated, amused. "About?"

Oh, you know. Just how today was the best day of my life, how I think I might be falling for you, and also how you really need to put on a shirt before my brain short-circuits.

Liam raised an eyebrow at me, clearly unconvinced. "Just stuff?" His voice held that teasing lilt, the one that usually made me roll my eyes. But right now, with him standing there looking like that—damp, flushed from the heat of the shower, looking entirely too comfortable with himself—I was fighting a battle I wasn't sure I'd win.

I swallowed hard, willing my brain to start functioning again. "Yes. Stuff. Important, deep, intellectual thoughts."

His smirk deepened. "Oh? And do these important, deep, intellectual thoughts involve staring at me like you've just forgotten how shirts work?"

I felt the heat crawl up my neck immediately. "I—I was not staring."

"Mmm." He took a slow step closer, his bare feet silent against the floor. "Sure about that?"

I should have moved. Should have thrown a pillow at his face and told him to get dressed like a normal human being. But I didn't. Instead, I stayed right where I was, my hands gripping the edge of the couch, heart pounding in a way that had nothing to do with nerves and everything to do with him. Liam watched me like he was figuring something out, and then—oh, hell—he ran a hand through his damp hair, the motion slow, effortless, like he wasn't even thinking about it. But I was thinking about it. A lot.

"You know," he mused, leaning against the arm of the couch, his voice dipping just enough to send a shiver down my spine. "If you wanted me to keep the shirt off, you could've just said so."

I scoffed, desperately trying to keep my composure. "Oh, please. Don't flatter yourself."

He grinned, that infuriatingly cocky, I know exactly what I'm doing to you grin. "Too late. You already did that for me."

I was going to die. That was it. Cause of death: Liam and his absolute audacity.

Before I could find a decent comeback, he moved again—this time, sitting down beside me on the couch, close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from his skin. The scent of soap and something distinctly him filled my senses, fresh and warm and stupidly intoxicating. I turned my head slightly, only to realize my mistake the second our eyes met. Because Liam was looking at me. Not just in that playful, teasing way he always did, but like he was actually seeing me. Like I was something worth studying, something worth remembering.

And just like that, the air between us shifted. Neither of us spoke. The teasing edge faded, replaced by something else—something heavier, warmer, crackling in the space between us like a slow-burning fire. My heart hammered against my ribs, and I knew, knew that if I didn't break the moment soon, I'd be lost in it completely. But then he reached out, fingers brushing against my cheek, just barely, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed to touch me yet. My breath caught, and I didn't move. I couldn't move.

"Emily," he murmured, and oh, that did something to me. My name, from his lips, soft and unsure and devastating all at once.

I exhaled shakily. "Yeah?"

His thumb traced along my jaw, slow, deliberate. "Tell me to stop."

I should have. Maybe. But I didn't want to. God, I didn't want to.

So instead, I did something completely reckless. I leaned in, closing the last bit of space between us, and kissed him. Liam stilled. Just for a second. Just long enough for the teasing glint in his eyes to flicker, darken into something else entirely. His gaze dropped to my mouth, and when he looked back up at me, the air between us was thick, charged. His hands slid to my waist, slow and deliberate, his fingers spreading wide as if he wanted to feel all of me beneath his touch. I sucked in a breath, my body already betraying me, already leaning into him, already aching.

“Emily,” he murmured, almost like a warning. Like he was giving me one last chance to back away. But we both knew I wasn’t going anywhere.

I slid my hands up his chest, feeling the heat of his skin under my palms, the steady rise and fall of his breath. His heart was hammering just as hard as mine. I tilted my head up, eyes locked on his, and whispered, “What are you waiting for?”

That was all it took.

Liam crushed his mouth to mine, a soft groan vibrating through him as his arms wrapped around me, pulling me against him like he was afraid I might disappear. There was nothing slow about it—he kissed me like he had been starving for this, like he had been holding back for too long and couldn’t take it anymore. I melted into him, fingers threading through his still-damp hair as his lips moved against mine, hot and insistent. He tasted like mint and something addictive, something uniquely Liam. I was dizzy, drunk on him, on the way his hands gripped my hips, on the way he pressed me closer, as if even that wasn’t enough.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark, heated. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he muttered, his voice rough like gravel. His fingers traced the hem of my shirt, skimming my bare skin, making me shiver. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

I barely had time to breathe before he kissed me again, deeper this time, slower, like he wanted to savor every second. I gasped into his mouth as

he lifted me effortlessly, carrying me toward his bedroom without breaking the kiss.

Now I understood.

Making love was never just about skin meeting skin.

It was in the way Liam touched me—not just with his hands, but with his eyes, his words, his breath. It was in the way he kissed me like he was memorizing the shape of my lips, like he wanted to taste every unspoken thought, every hidden feeling. It was in the way he held me, strong but careful, like I was something breakable and sacred at the same time. I had never felt so wanted. Not just as a body. Not just as something to be taken. But as me. Liam laid me down gently, his weight pressing into me just enough to make my pulse stutter. His fingers skimmed along my arms, my sides, leaving fire in their wake, but his touch wasn't hurried. He wasn't just taking—he was exploring. Mapping me out like I was something unknown, something worth learning piece by piece.

And God, I felt beautiful.

Not because of the words he whispered against my skin, though they sent heat curling through me. Not because of the way his breath hitched when I touched him back, or the way his body shuddered under my hands. But because of the way he looked at me. Like I was everything. His forehead rested against mine for a moment, our breaths mingling, and in that quiet space between us, I felt it. That ache in my chest. That something bigger than just want, something I wasn't ready to name, but it was there, pressing against my ribs, stealing my breath. He kissed me again, slower this time, reverent, like he was saying something without words. Like he was asking me to listen. And I did. I felt everything.

The heat, the hunger, the slow unraveling.

But more than anything, I felt him.

And as Liam held me, breathless and undone, I realized—

Love wasn't about losing yourself in someone else. It was about finding yourself in their arms and knowing you were finally home.



## CHAPTER 23

Liam

I woke up to warmth. A softness pressed against me, the scent of vanilla and something uniquely her filling my lungs. For a second, I didn't move, didn't even open my eyes, just lay there, letting the world exist in that quiet, hazy place between sleep and wakefulness.

Then, reality hit me.

Emily.

My arms were still wrapped around her, her head tucked into my chest, her breath warm against my skin. My heartbeat stuttered. She was here. In my bed. With me. And for the first time in a long, long time, I woke up feeling—God, I don't know. Whole?

I opened my eyes slowly, and there she was. Messy hair. Bare shoulders peeking from under the blanket. Lips slightly parted as she slept. She was so beautiful.

And then, right as I was having my cinematic moment of appreciation, she stirred.

A little sigh left her lips before her eyes fluttered open. Sleepy. Unfocused. And then, as she blinked up at me, realization dawned in them, followed by a slow, lazy smile.

"Morning," she mumbled, her voice still laced with sleep.

I grinned. "Morning, gorgeous."

She groaned. "No. No, we're not doing cringey morning-after compliments."

"We are," I said, fully committed. "Because you, Emily, are the sun, the moon, and every damn star in my universe—"

She slapped a hand over my mouth. "I will leave."

I licked her palm.

She shrieked, jerking her hand back. "You animal!"

I laughed, rolling onto my back as she buried her face in the pillow. But then, the world had to go and ruin the moment. Because just as I was about to pull her back into my arms, my gaze landed on the clock on my nightstand.

7:43 AM. I froze.

Emily must've felt my sudden panic because she peeked out from the pillow. "What?"

I pointed. "Work."

She turned her head toward the clock. Blinkered. And then—

"SHIT."

We exploded into motion. Clothes were snatched off the floor. Shoes were found under the bed. At one point, Emily tripped over my belt and landed face-first on the mattress, groaning, while I nearly died choking on a toothbrush. It was chaos. Fifteen minutes later, we were out the door.

"You owe me coffee," Emily huffed, fixing her blazer as we rushed down the street.

"I literally let you steal my hoodie," I shot back.

She looked down at the oversized gray hoodie drowning her and smirked. "Yeah. Because I look better in it."



Damn it. She was right.

We made a quick stop at a small coffee shop on the way, the kind that smelled like roasted beans and freshly baked pastries. The line was short, and as we waited, Emily leaned her head against my arm, yawning.

I felt a ridiculous urge to kiss the top of her head. Instead, I nudged her. "Regretting last night yet?"

She hummed. "Mmm. Just regretting waking up next to you."

I chuckled. "Ouch."

The barista called out our order, and I grabbed the cups. We stepped aside, sipping our coffee.

I took a sip of my coffee, letting the warmth settle in my chest, but something felt off. Not just a passing unease, not just the usual weight of exhaustion that came with too little sleep and too many thoughts. No, this was different. A wrongness that slithered into my bones, coiling at the base of my spine, setting every nerve on edge. The air had changed. A strange, almost imperceptible shift, like the room had been stretched, like reality had bent just slightly out of shape, leaving something unfamiliar in its place. I felt it before I saw it—Emily's reaction, the way her breath hitched, the way her fingers curled tighter around her cup, knuckles white with tension.

My own pulse stuttered. I turned my head.

And that's when I saw her.

Clara.

The moment my eyes landed on her, the world stopped.

Everything—the warmth of the coffee in my hands, the low hum of conversation around us, the weight of Emily's presence beside me—vanished. It was like reality had been stripped away, leaving only her standing there, a single, terrible focal point in a universe that suddenly felt too small, too suffocating.

My brain refused to process what I was seeing.

It wasn't possible.

It wasn't her.

It was someone else. It had to be someone else. Someone who just looked like her, someone with the same long, wavy hair, the same sharp cheekbones, the same delicate lips that curled into a slow, knowing smile—

But no. No, no, no.

That wasn't just resemblance. That wasn't a coincidence. That wasn't a trick of the mind grasping for familiarity in a stranger's face.

This was Clara.

She looked exactly as I remembered her. Exactly.

The same long, wavy hair, cascading down her shoulders in soft, effortless waves. The same sharp cheekbones, the same full lips curled into a slow, knowing smile. She even wore the same damn shade of burgundy lipstick she used to swear by, the one she said made her feel powerful.

But it wasn't her.

It couldn't be.

Clara was dead.

I had seen her casket, had stood over it, had thrown a handful of dirt onto the polished wood and whispered a goodbye I hadn't even meant.

And yet—

She was standing there.

My breath hitched, my body going rigid. The coffee cup in my hands suddenly felt too small, too fragile, like it could shatter under the sheer weight of the moment.

I blinked.

She was still there. No. No, this wasn't real. It wasn't possible. It was some kind of sick trick, some twisted hallucination born from exhaustion and buried guilt, a fragment of my past clawing its way back to the surface.

But then Emily spoke.

"Liam."

Her voice was barely a whisper, but I heard the fear in it, raw and trembling. Her fingers found my wrist under the table, gripping hard—too hard. Her nails dug into my skin, grounding me, tethering me to reality, to this moment.

"Please tell me you see that," she whispered.

My throat felt tight, dry, like I had swallowed dust.

"I see her."

The words barely made it past my lips. Emily sucked in a sharp breath. She saw it too. It wasn't just me. It wasn't just in my head. A cold, slow dread uncurled in my chest, spreading outward like ink in water, thick and suffocating. Clara hadn't moved. Her eyes flickering with something dark, something unreadable. The air in the coffee shop felt wrong—too thick, too heavy, pressing down on me, pressing down on everything. The quiet hum of conversation, the clinking of cups, the warmth of roasted beans—all of it dulled, as if the world had muted itself around her.

And then—

She stepped forward. A single step. It was subtle, slow. But the way she moved—

My stomach plummeted. It wasn't right. She didn't move like a person. She glided, her body too smooth, too precise, like she wasn't touching the ground at all. Like she was something else, something other, something that didn't quite belong in a place like this.

No one reacted.

Not a single head turned, not a single glance flickered in her direction. The barista at the counter kept taking orders, the old couple by the window kept sipping their tea, the group of college students in the corner kept laughing at whatever was on their phones. They didn't see her. They couldn't see her.

But Emily and I could.

Emily's breathing was uneven, sharp, almost ragged.

"Liam," she whispered again, her grip on my wrist like a vice.

Clara stopped just a few feet away. Close enough that I could see the way her lips curled, the way her eyes glimmered with something almost amused.

"Miss me?"

Her voice was soft. Gentle. But there was something underneath it—something wrong. Too smooth. Too perfect. Like it had been rehearsed. Like she had practiced saying those words over and over and over again, waiting for this moment.

Waiting for me.

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't move.

Emily's grip tightened. "Liam," she whispered, her voice cracking.

Clara tilted her head, studying us, her gaze flickering between us with something like curiosity.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she murmured.

The blood drained from my face. Because I had. She was dead. I had spent years convincing myself that whatever guilt, whatever nightmares, whatever haunting shadows I had left of her were just that—shadows. Echoes in my own mind.

But this—this wasn't a nightmare.

This was real.

She was standing right in front of me. And the worst part is She looked alive. But not in the way a person should. Her skin was too smooth, too flawless, like porcelain stretched over something that wasn't human. And her eyes—God, her eyes—they weren't right. They were dark, hollow in a way that made something deep in my gut twist.

She wasn't Clara. She was something wearing Clara.

I took a step back without thinking, my body reacting before my mind could catch up. Emily followed, her grip like an anchor.

Clara's smile widened.

"You're not happy to see me?"

Her voice was light, teasing, but there was something behind it. A weight. A whisper of something dangerous.

I shook my head, my mouth dry. "You're not real."

Clara took another step forward.

"Then why are you shaking?"

I was. I hadn't even noticed. Emily was staring at Clara like she was seeing something that shouldn't exist, like the world had cracked open and let something impossible slip through.

I swallowed hard. "What do you want?"

Clara's lips curled further, the edges of her smile sharpening, stretching just a little too wide, like it didn't belong on a human face.

"Oh," she murmured, her voice syrupy-sweet, almost mocking. "So you did expect me."

My stomach clenched.

No. No, I hadn't. Not like this. Not standing in front of me like a ghost made flesh, smiling like she knew every thought crawling through my head. Like she had been waiting for this moment, relishing it.

"I just wanted to see you, It's been so long, hasn't it?" she whispered

My skin prickled. Emily's breathing had gone shallow beside me, and I could feel her pulse racing beneath her grip on my wrist.

"This isn't possible," I said, my voice coming out lower, rougher than I intended. "You're dead."

Clara blinked slowly, lazily, as if I had said something amusing.

"Am I?"

I took a breath, steadying myself, forcing my mind to accept the impossible. If this was real—if she was real—then Clara wasn't dead. Or at least, not in the way I had thought.

I swallowed hard, my pulse hammering against my skin. I could feel Emily's grip tightening, her nails pressing into my wrist, but I barely registered it. Because all that existed in this moment was Clara.

Standing there. Smiling. Watching. Waiting.

I met her gaze, something heavy settling in my chest. And then, against all logic, against the cold grip of fear curling in my gut, I asked—

"Where were you?"

Emily sucked in a sharp breath beside me, like she couldn't believe what I had just said. Neither could I.

But Clara's smile didn't waver. If anything, it deepened, stretching just a little too wide, like she was pleased.

"Oh, Liam," she murmured, voice smooth, almost fond. "That's the first thing you ask me?"

My fingers twitched at my sides.

"Answer me."

Her eyes gleamed, dark and unreadable, something unsettling shifting just beneath the surface.

"Would you believe me if I told you?"

I forced myself to breathe. "Try me."

Clara let out a small hum, tilting her head.

Then—

She took a step closer. Emily tensed beside me, but I held my ground, my heart slamming against my ribs. Clara was close enough now that I could see the unnatural smoothness of her skin, the way the dim light of the café barely seemed to cling to her, like she wasn't really there.

Like she was just a shape, a shadow, wearing a face I used to know.

She leaned in, just slightly, and in a voice too soft, too knowing, she whispered—

“I was waiting.”

My breath caught. A cold shiver crawled down my spine.

Waiting. For what? For who?

Before I could ask, before I could move, her lips curved higher, and she added—

“For you.”



## CHAPTER 24

Emily's POV

I couldn't breathe. Not because I was scared. Not because I was in shock. But because I was furious.

The second I saw her—standing there, smiling like she hadn't been buried beneath six feet of earth—I felt something snap inside me. Something dark. Something raw. Something I didn't even know I was capable of feeling.

Clara. Fucking Clara.

Liam was frozen beside me, his breath coming in uneven, ragged pulls, his fingers twitching at his sides. He was shaken. I could feel it in the way his body stiffened, in the way his voice wavered when he spoke. And I hated that. I hated that she could still do this to him. I hated that she knew exactly what she was doing. I hated that she was enjoying it. Clara had always been a little too perfect. A little too effortless. She had that kind of presence that made people stop and stare, drawn to her like moths to a flame. But I had never trusted her. Not then. And definitely not now. Because she wasn't just here. She was playing a game.

I could see it in the way she smiled—slow, knowing, savoring the way Liam's world was shattering right in front of her. And the worst part is He was letting her. I clenched my jaw, rage twisting deep in my gut. She had been waiting for this. She had let us sit here, sip our coffee, exist in



a world where she was gone—and then she waltzed right in like nothing had changed. Like she could just take whatever space she wanted, whenever she wanted. Like she owned us. Liam asked her where she had been. And she had the audacity to say—

"Waiting."

"For you."

I nearly laughed. Oh, she was good. She knew exactly how to twist the knife, exactly what would make Liam's brain short-circuit. She wanted him to question everything, to fall back into whatever spell she had cast over him before. But not me. I wasn't going to fall for this. I had never fallen for it. Because unlike Liam, I had always seen Clara for what she was. Manipulative. Selfish. Cruel in the way only beautiful people could be—because they knew they could get away with it. She had played with him before, dangled him on strings, kept him close just enough to hurt him. And now, she was doing it again.

The rage in my chest burned hotter, spreading through my veins like wildfire. I tightened my grip on Liam's wrist, digging my nails into his skin until he flinched. Snap out of it. But he didn't move.

He was still staring at her, lost in some fucked-up daze, like he was caught between memory and reality. Like he wasn't sure which one was real.

That bitch.

I exhaled sharply, my hands trembling, my heart pounding furiously against my ribs. Enough.

Enough of this. Enough of her. I stood up. The chair scraped against the floor with a sharp, jarring noise, loud enough to break the fragile tension in the air.

Clara's eyes flickered to me, slow, deliberate, interested. I wanted to slap that fucking look right off her face.

"Cute trick," I said, my voice sharp, edged in something dangerous.

Liam stiffened beside me, but I ignored him. I was done letting Clara run this show.

She tilted her head, still smiling, her expression unreadable. "Trick?"

I took a step forward, my pulse hammering in my ears. She didn't move. Didn't flinch. Just stood there, letting me come closer, like she wanted this confrontation. I wanted to hurt her. I wanted her to feel even a fraction of the way she had made Liam feel. The way she was still making him feel.

"What the fuck is your problem?" My voice was low, controlled. Lethal.

Her smile didn't falter. But something in her eyes shifted.

"You're mad," she said, as if she had just realized it.

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Oh, you think?"

She sighed, shaking her head slightly, like I was being difficult. Like I was some unreasonable child throwing a tantrum. That only made me angrier.

"You're fucking dead, Clara," I snapped. "You don't get to show up and act like—like this is some kind of fucking reunion."

Her expression softened. Like she was amused. Like I was adorable to her. I wanted to claw that look right off her face.

"Oh, Emily," she murmured. "You're so—"

"Don't," I cut her off, my voice a sharp blade. "Don't Emily me. Don't say my fucking name like we were ever friends."

For the first time, something flickered across her expression. It was quick—just a flash. Annoyance.

Like she didn't like being interrupted. Like she didn't like losing control of the conversation. Good.

I stepped even closer, ignoring the way Liam grabbed my arm, his touch light, hesitant. He was still lost, still shaken, but I wasn't. I had never been the one Clara could control. And I never would be.

"You don't get to do this," I hissed, my voice shaking with fury. "You don't get to crawl out of whatever fucking hole you've been hiding in and mess with him again."

Clara blinked. Slow. Unbothered. But there was something else there now. Something darker.

Something colder. And when she spoke, her voice was different. Not sweet. Not teasing. Something else.

Something sharp. Clara's lips curved into something cruel. Her gaze flickered past me, landing on Liam like she was looking at an old possession, something worn down but still hers.

She tilted her head. "She's cute." A pause, then, softer, "That's why you fell in love, isn't it?"

Liam tensed beside me, his breath catching. His fingers twitched at his sides. And I saw it. That moment of hesitation. That flicker of something—something I didn't like. Something I wanted to rip out of him and crush beneath my heel.

Clara smiled wider. "You always liked fragile things, Liam. Things you could protect." Her voice dipped into something almost affectionate, like she knew she was right. "That's what makes you weak."

I moved. Hated how quickly he had turned on me. Hated how easy it was for him to listen to her over me. Clara sighed, tilting her head like this was all so predictable.

Liam exhaled sharply, his jaw tightening before he spoke. "Sit. We'll talk." His voice was steady, directed at Clara, but it didn't matter. It was enough to set me off.

I lost control.

"Talk?" My voice came out sharp, too sharp, the kind that cut skin. "You want to sit and talk to her?" I stepped forward, heart pounding, heat flooding my veins. "After everything, after all she's done, after—"

"Emily—"

"No!" My hands curled into fists. "You're listening to her! She says one thing, and suddenly, suddenly you're—" My breath hitched. "You hesitated."

Liam's gaze snapped to mine. His face was unreadable, but his fingers twitched again—just like before. Like I was right. Like he knew it. Clara only smiled, amused, pleased. I wanted to rip that expression off her face.

"I should've known," I spat, the words barely pushing past the lump in my throat. "I should've known you'd—"

"Shut up!" Liam's voice cut through me, through the air, through the space between us. Loud. Commanding. A force that slammed into my chest, knocking the breath from my lungs.

Silence. A horrible, thick silence. I swallowed, my ears ringing.

Liam ran a hand through his hair, exhaling hard. He wasn't looking at me anymore. He wasn't looking at anyone.

And that—somehow—hurt more.

"Don't be mad, Emily," she murmured, her voice sweet, dripping with fake sympathy. "It's not your fault."

I turned to her, rage burning beneath my skin. "Shut the fuck up."

She just laughed. Soft, knowing. Like she had already won. Then she leaned in, voice dropping just for me.

"It must be exhausting," she whispered. "Always trying so hard to be enough for him."

I felt it like a knife to my ribs. And the worst part is Liam didn't say a word. I stood there, heart pounding, feeling like the ground had been ripped out from under me. Clara's words echoed in my head, each one a dagger:

"It must be exhausting," she whispered. "Always trying so hard to be enough for him."

And Liam.. He just stood there, silent. Not a word. Not a single word to defend me, to refute her. His silence screamed louder than any shout. The café seemed to close in around me, the walls pressing tighter, the murmurs of other patrons a distant hum compared to the roar in my ears.

I felt exposed, laid bare under Clara's gaze, her smirk carving deeper wounds than her words ever could. I needed air. I needed to escape before the tears burning behind my eyes betrayed me. Without another glance at either of them, I turned on my heel and walked out, the bell above the door chiming mockingly as I fled. The cold air outside hit me like a slap, sharp and biting against my heated skin. I sucked in a shaky breath, my hands curled into fists at my sides. I wouldn't cry.

I refused to let her have that satisfaction. I forced my feet to move, one step after another,

until I reached my office building.

The glass doors slid open, and the warmth inside did nothing to thaw the ice spreading through my chest. I didn't know where else to go. I just knew I couldn't go home. Not to Liam's apartment, where every corner smelled like him, where his stupid coffee mugs were still sitting on the counter because he never cleaned up after himself. Not to my own apartment, where the silence would swallow me whole, where I'd be left alone with nothing but my thoughts—thoughts of him. No. I needed to be somewhere. I clenched my jaw, swallowing past the lump rising in my throat. I wasn't going to cry. Fuck that. Crying was for people who still had something left to lose. And me.. Well I had just lost everything. I reached my office building before I even realized where my feet had taken me. The glass doors slid open with a soft hiss, the warmth of the lobby wrapping around me, but it didn't soothe the coldness spreading in my chest.

Work. I needed work.

Something to focus on. Something to drown out the whirlwind of emotions clawing at my throat.

I walked in, ignoring the curious glances from the receptionist and a few coworkers still lingering around. My heels clicked against the polished floor, each step a determined beat against the chaos in my head.

But the second I turned the corner, I heard a voice.

"Emily."

I froze. My stomach sank.

Of course. Of fucking course. I turned slowly, already knowing who I'd see. Mr. Hale, my Head of Department, stood in the middle of the hall, arms crossed, his expression stony.

You want to tell me why you're two hours late?" His voice was sharp, clipped—laced with disappointment.

I swallowed. "I—"

"You were supposed to lead that meeting." He stepped closer, his gaze narrowing. "I vouched for you. I told them you were responsible. And then you don't show?"

I clenched my jaw, trying to hold it together.

"I forgot," I muttered. "It won't happen again."

His eyes flashed. "Forgot? That's the best you've got?"

I flinched. He scoffed, shaking his head.

"Jesus, Emily. You want to be taken seriously, but you don't even have the decency to send a message?"

My hands curled into fists. I wasn't going to cry. Not here. Not over this.

"I get it," I said, voice tight. "I messed up."

"No," he snapped. "Messing up is one thing. This—this is irresponsibility. You think your personal problems excuse you from your job?"

Something inside me snapped.

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Oh, fuck off, Hale."

The hallway went silent. His brows shot up. I barely recognized my own voice when I spoke again—low, rough, shaking with too much.

“I work my ass off for this company,” I said, my voice trembling. “I stay late. I do extra. I pick up the slack when you drop the ball. And one fucking mistake—one meeting—and suddenly I’m the problem?”

His expression darkened. “Watch your tone.”

Or what?” I let out a hollow laugh, my heart hammering against my ribs. “You’ll fire me? Go ahead.” I threw my arms up. “I dare you.”

His mouth pressed into a thin line, his jaw ticking like he was biting back a sharper retort. But he didn’t fire me. He just stared at me for a long moment before exhaling sharply, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on with you,” he muttered. “But if you want to keep this job, fix it.”

Then he turned and but before that he said

“That’s not the Emily I hired,” his voice edged with something dangerously close to disbelief.

I stayed silent, my pulse hammering in my ears. Because what could I say? That I had spent the morning watching my entire world shatter? That the man I—God help me—loved had just stood there while someone else crushed me under her perfectly polished heel? That my hands were still shaking from the weight of it all?

No. I wouldn’t say any of that. Because it didn’t matter. Because work was supposed to be the one place I could control. And now I had fucked that up too. I straightened my spine, schooling my face into something neutral, something competent. “It won’t happen again,” I repeated, my voice steady even as my insides crumbled.

He exhaled sharply, rubbing his “Emily...”

There was something almost sympathetic in his tone. But I didn’t want sympathy. I wanted this conversation to end.

“I’ll stay late,” I cut in, already stepping past him, already moving toward my office. “I’ll fix it.”

His silence followed me down the hall.

Then, finally, “Make sure you do.”

I nodded without looking back. I wouldn’t give him a reason to doubt me again. I pushed through my office door, closing it behind me with a soft click, and let out a shaky breath.

Silence.





## CHAPTER 25

Liam's POV

The moment Emily stormed out, the room felt quieter than it should have. Too quiet. Like she had taken all the oxygen with her. My hands clenched into fists against my jeans. I wanted to go after her. I should have gone after her. But I didn't move. Instead, I just sat there, staring at the empty space she left behind like an idiot. Because Clara was still here. Because some twisted part of me still didn't know how to feel about that.

The scrape of a chair pulled me out of my head. Clara sat down across from me, slow, deliberate, her movements as effortless as always. Like she had all the time in the world. Like she hadn't just detonated a fucking bomb in my life.

"Well," she sighed, propping her chin on her hand, eyes gleaming with something I couldn't quite place. "That was dramatic."

I exhaled sharply through my nose, rubbing a hand over my face. "Clara—"

"Liam," she mimicked, tilting her head, like the sound of my name in her mouth was amusing. "Still so easy to rile up, aren't you? And your new girlfriend—"

"She's not my—"

"Oh, come on," she interrupted smoothly, a smirk tugging at her lips. "Spare me the semantics. She's something, isn't she?"

I pressed my lips together, jaw tightening. "You don't get to talk about Emily."

"I don't?" Her eyebrows lifted in mock surprise. "Strange. She seemed pretty interested in talking about me."

"Clara—" I inhaled sharply, trying to ground myself. Trying to remind myself who I was dealing with. "Why are you here?"

She let out a small, amused hum, tapping her nails against the table. "I already told you."

"Waiting for me?" My voice came out harsher than I intended, edged with frustration. "What the hell does that even mean? You disappeared, Clara. You let everyone think you were dead. Do you have any idea—"

"How much you missed me?" she finished, her gaze steady. Almost challenging. "How much it hurt? How much you hated me for it?" She leaned forward slightly, her voice softening, like she was letting me in on some secret. "Tell me, Liam. Are you relieved that I'm here? Or do you wish I had just stayed dead?"

My stomach twisted. Because I didn't know the answer to that. And Clara knew it. She had always known exactly which strings to pull.

I swallowed hard, gripping the edge of the table. "I'm not playing this game with you."

"It's not a game, Liam." Her expression sobered, and for the first time, something like real emotion flickered across her face. "I came back for a reason. And whether you believe me or not, I came back for you."

I let out a sharp, humorless laugh. "Bullshit."

"Is it?" she mused, tilting her head. "You were the one person I knew would understand. The one person who always saw past the bullshit. And yet, here we are." She exhaled, tapping a slow rhythm against the tabletop. "You want to know where I've been? Fine. I'll tell you. But you

need to listen. And you need to stop looking at me like I'm some kind of ghost because I'm very much alive, Liam."

I didn't say anything. I didn't trust myself to. Clara studied me for a moment, her gaze sharp, calculating. Then, after what felt like an eternity, she leaned back in her chair and said,

"It started before I left. Before I even decided to leave. And if you really want to understand why—I need you to remember something first."

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. "Remember what?"

Her lips curved into something unreadable.

"The night before I disappeared. The last thing I ever said to you."

And just like that, my blood ran cold. Because I did remember. And I had spent the past year trying to forget. The room felt too small. Too suffocating. Like Clara's presence alone had stolen all the space, pressing against my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

I remembered. Of course, I remembered. The last thing she had said to me before she vanished.

"You'll understand one day, Liam.

It had haunted me, gnawed at me like a wound that refused to heal. And now, here she was, back from the dead, acting like she hadn't left my world in ruins. My chair scraped against the floor as I pushed back, standing abruptly. My pulse pounded in my ears. "Don't do this, Clara."

She blinked up at me, calm. Too calm. "Do what?"

"This." I gestured between us, my fingers tightening into fists at my sides. "Playing games. Keeping secrets. Pretending like you didn't leave me—leave everyone—thinking you were gone forever." My voice was sharp, slicing through the thick air between us. "You don't just get to walk back in here and act like it's nothing."

Her gaze flickered with something—something unreadable, something deep—but it was gone before I could name it. "I never said it was nothing."

My patience snapped. “Then say something that actually fucking means something, Clara! Tell me why you left, tell me what the hell you want from me now, because I can’t—” I exhaled harshly, dragging a hand through my hair. “I can’t do this with you.”

She tilted her head, watching me. Always watching. Then, as if I hadn’t just erupted, she asked, “Why do you think Emily got so mad?”

I stilled. My breath caught.

“What?”

Clara shrugged, her nails tapping lazily against the table. “She stormed out of here like she’d been burned. Like the mere sight of me was too much to handle. Why do you think that is?”

“Because you shouldn’t be here,” I shot back, heat flaring beneath my skin. “Because she cares about me and she thought—” I stopped, the words catching.

She thought I had been lying to her. Because I had been lying to her. I clenched my jaw, my pulse a hammering beat against my skull. Clara’s words slithered through my mind, latching onto the cracks I’d spent a year trying to seal. She knew. She always knew how to twist the knife, how to find the fault lines and press until everything inside me threatened to break.

“I didn’t lie to her.” My voice was low, sharp, but even I wasn’t sure if I believed it.

Clara hummed, tilting her head slightly, her eyes gleaming with something unreadable. “Didn’t you?”

A muscle ticked in my jaw. “I didn’t know where you were. I didn’t know if you were even alive.”

She arched a brow, unimpressed. “That’s not what I meant.”

My hands curled into fists. She was toying with me. Again. Like she always did. Like she had the night she disappeared, leaving behind only questions that never stopped clawing at the back of my mind.

I exhaled sharply, dragging a hand down my face. "Why are you doing this, Clara?"

"Doing what?"

"This!" My voice came out louder than I intended, but I didn't care. I was too frayed, too raw, the anger boiling beneath my skin threatening to spill over. "Coming back like this, acting like you didn't shatter everything when you left." I took a step closer, the air between us thick, heavy. "Like you didn't shatter me."

Clara's expression flickered for the briefest second—something vulnerable, something real—but it was gone before I could grasp it. She leaned back in her chair, crossing one leg over the other, and sighed. "I told you, Liam. I came back for a reason."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Yeah? And what the hell reason would be good enough to justify what you did?"

She tapped her fingers against the table, slow and deliberate. "Because I had to."

I stared at her, my breath shallow, my pulse thrumming under my skin like a war drum.

"Had to?" My voice was a low snarl, raw and uneven, barely containing the frustration clawing its way out of me. "That's all you've got? You had to? That's supposed to be enough after you let me think you were dead for a year? After you let everyone mourn you? After you let me—"

My throat closed up around the words. I clenched my jaw, forcing down the lump forming there.

Clara watched me, her expression unreadable, her fingers still tapping that slow, infuriating rhythm against the tabletop. It was the only sound in the room. Tick. Tick. Tick. Like a goddamn countdown.

"It was never about what I wanted, Liam." Her voice was quieter now, softer, but no less sharp. "You think I wanted to leave? You think I wanted to disappear?"

"I don't know what to think anymore, Clara." My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms. "Because everything I thought I knew about you was a lie. So tell me—what the hell was real? Was any of it real?"

Something flickered across her face then, something quick and hard to catch. Regret? Guilt? I wasn't sure. But it was gone before I could name it, replaced with the same careful, calculated expression she always wore when she didn't want me to see too much.

"You were real," she said after a beat, and for a second—just a second—I almost believed her.

I exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through my hair. "Then why?"

"Because it was the only way to keep you safe."

The words hung in the air between us, heavy and suffocating, wrapping around my ribs like a vice. I let out a short, humorless laugh, shaking my head. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't expect you to do anything," she said simply. "But you wanted answers, didn't you? You wanted something that meant something? Well, there you go. That's your answer."

I shook my head again, jaw tightening. "That's not an answer, Clara. That's another fucking riddle. And I'm done with your riddles. I'm done trying to solve you like some puzzle that will never have all the pieces."

She exhaled, and for the first time, she looked... tired. Not smug. Not unreadable. Just tired.

Clara let out a breath, slow and measured, like she was bracing herself. "So, that's it?" A humorless chuckle escaped her lips. "I see. Emily really did change you a lot."

I scoffed. "Oh, please—don't give her that much credit. You think she's the reason your words don't work on me anymore?" I let out a sharp laugh, shaking my head. "No, Clara. You did that. You and your endless

mind games. Your half-truths. Your riddles. You made sure that no matter what you say now, I'll never believe you again."

Her expression didn't waver. "I never wanted you to hate me, Liam."

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh, shaking my head so hard it almost made me dizzy.

"Oh, fuck off with that, Clara." The words came out sharper than I intended, but I didn't care. I wanted them to cut. "You never wanted me to hate you? Really?"

That's the card you're playing right now? You know what I think?" I took a step closer, heat boiling under my skin. "I think you wanted me to chase after you. I think you wanted me to need you.

To spend my days unraveling every little thing you ever said, picking apart the wreckage you left behind like some lovesick idiot who didn't know when to quit."

I let out a harsh breath, my hands clenching into fists. "And for a while? It worked. Congratulations. You had me. You were in my head, under my skin, in my goddamn bloodstream. I couldn't breathe without you poisoning the air. But now? Now, Clara, I see you for exactly what you are."

She didn't move. Didn't flinch. Just stood there, calm as ever. Like my anger meant nothing.

I let out another laugh, this one raw, broken. "Jesus Christ, you don't even care, do you?" I gestured between us, at the mess of emotions thick in the air. "All of this, all of me—it's just background noise to you, isn't it? You disappear for years, come back like a fucking ghost, and then have the audacity to act like I'm the one who changed? Like I should still be waiting for you?"

"And you know what, Clara?" I spat, eyes burning. "You'll pay for what you did to Emily."

For the first time, something flickered across her face. A crack in the mask. Good. Good. Let her feel it. Let her know.

"Your stupid threats," I hissed. "Your cryptic little love letters. You think I don't know it was you? That I wouldn't put it together eventually?" I let out another laugh, shaking my head. "Jesus, Clara, did you want me to find out? Or were you just arrogant enough to think I never would?"

Her mouth opened, but no words came. Nothing.

"Pathetic," I muttered, disgust curling in my stomach. "You really thought you could scare her off, didn't you? Thought you could make her run—make her leave me—so you could waltz back in and pick up where we left off?" I took a step closer, just enough to watch her breathe heavier. "Let me make something very fucking clear to you, Clara."

I leaned in, voice dropping to something cold. Final.

"You don't get to touch her. You don't get to breathe near her. You don't get to exist in her world. Because if you ever try to pull some shit like that again, I won't just be done with you." I tilted my head, a cruel smirk tugging at my lips. "I'll make sure you're done, too."

Silence.

She just stared at me, eyes flickering with something almost close to fear.





## CHAPTER 26

Emily

For the first time in hours, there was silence. No Clara. No Liam. No one looking at me like I was a problem to be solved. Just me. Just this small, dimly lit room where I could finally—

My phone buzzed. I stiffened. Liam. My stomach twisted painfully as I reached for it. My fingers hovered over the screen, hesitating. Don't. I should ignore it. I should. But my heart was a stupid, reckless thing, and my thumb was already moving before I could stop it.

Liam: Where are you?

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh. Now he wanted to talk? After everything? After her? I clenched my jaw, every part of me screaming to throw my phone across the room, to shut it all out, to let him sit in the mess he made.

Instead, I typed back two words.

ME: Don't bother.

And then, before I could second-guess myself, before I could let my stupid heart convince me otherwise— I turned my phone off. I sank into my chair, exhaling shakily, and pressed my hands against my temples.

This was fine. Work was good. Work was safe. Work didn't look at me like I was something to be pitied. It didn't stand there, silent, while someone else ripped me apart. I could do this.

I opened my laptop and started typing.

By the time I finished, the office was empty. The clock on the wall read 11:48 PM. The document was sent, the report attached, every detail accounted for. I had done what I needed to do. I had fixed it.

And yet, as I stared at the confirmation email on my screen, I felt nothing. The office was eerily quiet, the usual hum of conversation and ringing phones long gone. Most of my coworkers had left hours ago. Even Hale had eventually given up, muttering something about "get your shit together" before stalking off. Now, it was just me.

Me, the fluorescent lights buzzing softly overhead, and the sound of my own breathing.

I exhaled slowly, rubbing . My coffee had gone cold an hour ago, but I still reached for it, taking a sip out of pure habit. Bitter. Like everything else tonight. I should have left by now. Gone home, crawled into bed, let the exhaustion pull me under. But I knew the second I stepped outside, it would all come rushing back.

The weight of it.

The ache.

I didn't know why I did it. Maybe it was the silence—stretched too thin, pressing in from all sides, wrapping around my ribs like invisible hands, squeezing. Maybe it was the way my own reflection in the dark screen of my laptop looked back at me, hollow-eyed, unrecognizable, like a stranger had taken up residence inside my skin.

Or maybe I was just tired. Tired of holding it all in. Tired of pretending like it didn't get to me, like I wasn't suffocating under the weight of something I couldn't even name. Like I wasn't still carrying Clara's voice, her secrets, her shadow—a thing dark and heavy and clinging to me like an old bruise.

I didn't even realize my fingers were moving until I heard the first ring. Then the second. The third—

“Emily?”

Ruby's voice. Soft, groggy. Like I'd pulled her from sleep.

For a second, I froze. What was I even going to say? Hey, so I'm losing my mind in an empty office and I think Clara's still ruining my life even after death?

God, I was pathetic.

I should've hung up. I should've forced a laugh, muttered wrong number, and gone back to staring blankly at my screen, drowning in the too-quiet of the office. But Ruby knew me too well.

“Em?” Her voice sharpened. “Are you okay?”

The lie was right there, ready, perched on the tip of my tongue like muscle memory. Yeah, I'm fine. The automatic response. The easy way out. But when I opened my mouth, nothing came out. Because I wasn't fine. And somehow, in the empty stillness of this place, with only the hum of the fluorescent lights and the ghost of Clara's presence curling around my thoughts, lying felt... impossible.

“I don't know,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

A beat of silence.

Then the rustle of sheets, the creak of a bed shifting.

“Where are you?”

“Work.”

“At midnight?”

I huffed out something that was supposed to be a laugh but felt more like an exhale of exhaustion. “Yeah.”

Another pause. Then, in that steady, no-nonsense tone Ruby always used when she had made up her mind:

“Stay there. I’m coming.”

My breath caught. “Ruby, you don’t have to—”

But she had already hung up. I stared at my phone for a second, my pulse thudding in my ears.

The part of me that hated needing people wanted to call her back, tell her to forget it, that I’d be fine, that she should go back to sleep and pretend I’d never called. But another part—one I wasn’t sure I wanted to acknowledge—felt something almost like relief. I set my phone down and leaned back in my chair, exhaling slowly, watching my reflection in the black screen again. It still looked hollow.

Ruby arrived faster than I expected. I barely had time to glance at the door before it slammed open, rattling on its hinges. She burst in like a storm—hair still wild from sleep, pajama bottoms half-tucked into mismatched socks, an oversized hoodie slipping off one shoulder. Her eyes, frantic and sharp, found me instantly, and before I could say a single word, she crossed the room in two strides and crushed me into a hug so tight I felt my bones protest.

“Jesus Christ, Emily.” Her voice was barely more than a breath against my shoulder, shaking with adrenaline. Then she pulled back, hands gripping my arms so tightly it almost hurt. Her gaze raked over my face like she expected to find bruises, blood, something she could fight.

“What the fuck happened? Are you okay? Why are you even here? Did someone say something to you? Are you hurt? Have you eaten? Do I need to kill someone? I will fucking kill someone, Em.”

A thousand questions, each one sharper than the last, all tumbling out without pause. I barely had time to blink before she was grabbing my face, tilting it side to side, checking for wounds I didn’t have.

“Ruby—”

“Because you look like shit,” she cut me off, eyes narrowing. “Like, actual, unfiltered, grade-A hell. Don’t even try to lie to me, Emily. I know you. Something’s wrong.”

I swallowed. My throat felt like it was closing up. I wanted to tell her I was fine. I really did. But I wasn't.

And Ruby wasn't the kind of person who let you get away with weak reassurances. My fingers curled into fists on instinct, nails biting into my palms. I had no idea where to start. I had no idea how to make this sound real when it barely felt real to me.

So I just said it.

"It's Clara."

For a beat, Ruby just frowned. Then her expression twisted into something murderous.

"Who the hell is that?" she demanded. Then, as if a horror movie had just played out in her head, she gasped, eyes going wide. "Wait. Wait. Is Liam having an affair? That fucking—I will end his entire bloodline, I swear to God—"

"No—no," I cut in quickly, shaking my head before she could go full feral. "It's... his ex."

Ruby blinked. "What?"

I took a slow breath. "His ex is dead."

Her face twisted in confusion. "Yeah, I know that. Why are we—"

"She's back." My voice came out barely above a whisper.

Silence. A thick, leaden silence, stretching impossibly long.

Then Ruby let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "Emily. How drunk are you?"

"I'm not," I snapped. "I swear, Ruby. I'm not making this up."

She folded her arms, weight shifting onto one hip. "Right. So what, she just un-died? Popped out of her grave to be like, 'Hey, miss me?'"

I hesitated. Because, yeah. It sounded ridiculous. But I needed her to believe me. I needed her to hear me. To see what I saw, to understand

that this wasn't just paranoia eating me alive—it was real. It was happening. And if I didn't say it out loud, if I didn't spill every last terrifying detail, I was afraid I'd drown in it.

So I did.

I told her everything. Every message. Every chilling, taunting whisper that slithered its way into me, into my head. The threats that started as vague, unsettling warnings and morphed into something targeted, something intimate. Like whoever was sending them wasn't just watching me, but inside my head, peeling back my thoughts, I told her about the fear. About how I didn't feel safe in my own apartment anymore, how every shadow looked like a person, how every creak in the floorboards made my heart slam against my ribs like a caged animal. How I had no choice but to move into Liam's place—not because I wanted to, not because I thought it was a good idea, but because I had nowhere else to go. Because the walls of my home weren't walls anymore—they were paper-thin barriers between me and whoever wanted me afraid.

And then, the journal. I could barely get the words out, because just thinking about it made my stomach twist. Clara's obsession. It wasn't just love. It wasn't even infatuation. It was something worse. Something consuming. Something that felt alive.

And then, I told her about today. About her comeback. About Clara sitting there, so calm, so unbothered, like she hadn't faked her own death, like she hadn't turned my life into a slow-burning nightmare. How she had looked at me—through me—like I was nothing but a minor inconvenience in whatever twisted game she was playing.

And how I freaked out. How I panicked. How Liam had looked at me—cold, sharp—before telling me to shut up. The words stuck to my ribs like something heavy, something painful. I wasn't even sure why it hurt so much. Maybe because for a moment, I thought he'd stand up for me. Maybe because I thought—hoped—that he'd understand how terrifying

it was to have someone like her standing so close, smiling like she knew all my darkest thoughts. Maybe because I thought he'd choose me.

But he didn't. He chose her. Or at least, that's how it felt. Ruby stared at me like I had just told her the sky was green. Like the words leaving my mouth physically hurt her brain to process. She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, she dragged her hands down her face and exhaled.

"Emily," she said, voice eerily calm. "I love you. But if you don't start making sense—"

I slammed my hands on the table. "I am making sense!"

"No, you are not!" she shot back, eyes blazing. "Do you hear yourself? You're telling me that Clara—Clara—the dead ex-girlfriend of your asshole situationship—has risen from the fucking grave to haunt you like some kind of low-budget horror villain?! Do you know how insane that sounds?"

"I know how it sounds, Ruby! But it's real! I saw her! Liam saw her!"

Ruby made a sound so exasperated it bordered on an actual scream. "And what, Liam just—just stood there? Just watched?"

I hesitated. And that was all she needed. Her expression snapped.

"Oh, that motherfucker."

I barely had time to breathe before she was up, pacing the tiny space like she needed to physically walk off the sheer amount of rage crackling through her body.

"Okay," she said, flinging her arms out. "Okay. Just to clarify—not only did this bitch somehow un-die, not only is she apparently lurking around like a fucking nightmare demon, but Liam—" she spat his name like it physically disgusted her, "—decided to defend her? Over you?"

I swallowed, shifting uncomfortably. "He didn't exactly—"

Ruby whirled on me. "He told you to shut up, Emily."

I flinched.

Her face darkened, voice dropping into something lower, sharper. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

I couldn’t.

Ruby sucked in a breath. “That’s what I fucking thought.”

I looked away. “It’s not—”

“No, no, no, don’t do that,” she snapped, marching back toward me. “Don’t you dare defend him right now.”

“I’m not—”

“You are!” She jabbed a finger at me. “You are so fucking ready to twist this into something it’s not, to convince yourself it wasn’t that bad, to tell yourself that maybe—maybe—you’re just overreacting, but you’re not, Emily! You’re not!”

She exhaled sharply, shoving both hands into her hair, fingers gripping hard. “Jesus fucking Christ. You’re telling me he stood there, with his dead ex-girlfriend sitting in front of him, watching you panic, watching you freak the fuck out, and instead of comforting you, instead of doing literally anything, he just shut you down?”

I didn’t respond.

Ruby let out a humorless, disbelieving laugh. “Wow. Fucking wow.”

Her fingers flexed at her sides like she was physically restraining herself from punching something.

“And this Clara—” she spat the name like it tasted rotten, “—what, she just sat there? Like some smug, fucking—” She cut herself off, expression twisting with pure disgust. “Oh my God, I hate her already. I hate her so much and I haven’t even met her.”

I swallowed hard. “Ruby—”

“No.” She pointed at me. “You listen to me, Emily. This? This is not normal. This is not okay. Whatever the fuck is happening, whatever the



fuck this is—none of this should be happening. And you should not be dealing with it alone.”

I shook my head quickly. “I’m not—”

“Oh, really?” she cut in, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. “Because it sure as hell feels like you are. Because where is Liam? Hmm? Where is he right now?”

I had no answer.

Ruby scoffed. “Exactly.” She inhaled deeply, like she was trying—really trying—not to physically combust. Then she stepped closer, voice lowering.

“You listen to me,” she said, voice razor-sharp. “I don’t care what he does. I don’t care if he wants to play whatever sick, twisted game Clara’s trying to pull, I don’t care if he’s too much of a fucking idiot to see the giant flashing red signs in front of his face. But you?” She jabbed a finger at my chest. “You are not going to get caught in the middle of it.”

I swallowed, voice smaller than I wanted it to be. “And if I already am?”

Her expression hardened.

“Then we fix it.”

I stared at her. “How?”

Ruby’s lips curled, slow and dangerous.

“Oh, babe,” she said, eyes gleaming. “You have no idea how good I am at getting rid of a problem.”

I could hear my own heartbeat. Loud. Relentless. My fingers trembled as I scrolled down the article, devouring every word, but my brain struggled to process them fast enough.

“She went missing for three months?” My voice barely sounded like mine.

Ruby was still staring at the screen, expression dark. “And came back with no memory of it.”

That part sent a fresh wave of nausea rolling through me. People didn't just vanish for months and return like nothing happened. Unless... Unless they had help. Unless something was done to them.

I forced myself to focus, scanning the rest of the article.

Clara Hayes, 17, was reported missing in June after failing to return home from a friend's house. Despite an extensive search effort, no leads were found regarding her whereabouts. Three months later, in September, Clara was discovered wandering a rural road on the outskirts of town, disoriented and unable to recall where she had been. Authorities stated that no signs of trauma were present, and foul play was never confirmed. The case remains unsolved. Unsolved.

My mouth went dry. "No one knows where she was?"

Ruby scoffed. "Yeah, that's a load of bullshit." She crossed her arms. "She knew. She had to have known. People don't just forget three entire months of their life, Emily."

Something cold curled in my stomach. And now she was back. I clenched my jaw. This wasn't just about some unhinged ex who didn't know how to let go. Clara was something else. Something more. And I needed to know what. Ruby sighed and rubbed a hand down her face.

"Alright. We need a new angle. If she vanished for three months and still managed to fake her death later, that means she had help. There's a common denominator here, and I swear to God we're gonna find it."

I nodded, a fresh wave of determination washing over me. But before I could say anything—

My phone vibrated. The sharp buzz sliced through the tension like a knife. I grabbed it quickly, heart hammering, and flipped it over.

Unknown Number.

I froze.

Ruby immediately noticed. "Emily?"

I didn't answer. I just stared at the screen, a sick feeling curling in my gut. Slowly, with trembling fingers, I opened the message.

"You shouldn't be looking for things you don't understand."

My stomach dropped.

"Emily," Ruby repeated, sharper this time.

Wordlessly, I turned the screen toward her.

Her face darkened. "Oh, fuck no."

Before I could react, she snatched my phone and started typing furiously.

"Ruby—"

Who the fuck is this? she sent.

Seconds passed. The three little dots appeared. Then disappeared. Then appeared again. Then the reply came.

You'll see soon enough.

A chill slithered down my spine. Ruby practically threw my phone onto the bed. "Okay. That's it. I'm burning this bitch's entire existence to the ground."

I swallowed hard. My hands were cold, clammy. "She knows."

"Knows what?"

I looked at Ruby, my voice barely a whisper.

"That we're looking for her."

The silence between us was suffocating.

Then, Ruby straightened her shoulders, her jaw tight. "Good."

I blinked. "What?"

"Good." She grabbed my laptop, her eyes burning with something fierce, something dangerous. "Let her know. Let her watch." She met my gaze, steady and unyielding.

“Because the next time she sees us, it won’t be from the shadows.” She cracked her knuckles.

“It’ll be when we find her first.”

Ruby didn’t waste a second.

She flipped my laptop open and started typing like her life depended on it.

“Okay,” she muttered, her brows furrowed in concentration.

“We’ve got two things: One, Clara disappeared for three months and came back with ‘no memory.’ Two, years later, she fakes her death, and now she’s back. So the question is: Where did she go? And who the hell helped her?”

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my breathing. “And how does she know we’re looking?”

Ruby didn’t look up from the screen. “That’s the easiest part.” She tapped the keyboard aggressively.

“She’s watching us.”

That sent a cold shiver down my spine.

“But how?” My voice came out shakier than I wanted. “How does she know exactly when to send those messages? How does she—”

A thought struck me so hard it nearly knocked the breath from my lungs. My eyes darted around the room. My chest tightened.

Ruby immediately noticed. “Emily?”

I stood up so fast the chair scraped against the floor. My pulse roared in my ears. “What if—” I swallowed, feeling like an idiot for even saying it. “What if she can hear us?”

Ruby went completely still. For a moment, neither of us moved. The air between us grew heavy, suffocating. Then she grabbed my phone off the bed and launched it across the room.

I flinched as it crashed against the wall and clattered to the floor. “Ruby—”

“She’s listening,” Ruby hissed. Her eyes were blazing. “If she knows exactly what we’re doing, when we’re doing it, she either bugged your phone or has some creepy hacker shit going on.”

I could barely breathe. My eyes darted to my laptop, my tablet. The cameras. The microphone. My stomach twisted painfully. She wasn’t just watching us. She was with us. In this room. In the silence between our words. I grabbed my phone with trembling fingers and shut it off. Then I did the same with my laptop, my tablet, every device I owned. I even unplugged the damn TV.

Ruby stood in the middle of my room, fists clenched, jaw tight.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “If she knows we’re looking, that means she’s scared. That means we keep going.”

I stared at her. “Ruby, she knows where I am.”

Ruby’s lips curled into something sharp. “Then let’s make it worth her while.”

She grabbed my laptop again, ignoring my wide-eyed panic.

“If she thinks we’ll back down, she’s dead wrong.”

One hour later. We dug deeper. Much deeper. The missing persons report was a dead end, but Ruby found something else. Something worse. An old news article. Buried in the depths of the internet. The headline made my blood run cold. Local Teen Found After Months Missing – Family Refuses to Speak . I clicked on it so fast my fingers fumbled. The article was short, vague. But then we saw it. At the bottom, almost an afterthought.

A similar case occurred nearly a decade prior when another local girl disappeared for several months before returning with no memory of the event. Authorities stated the cases were unrelated.

I froze.

Ruby sucked in a sharp breath. “Emily.”

I clicked the link embedded in the article. My heart pounded. A name popped up.

Alicia Moore. A girl who had vanished. A girl who had come back. A girl who—

I scrolled further. My breath hitched. Died three years later in an apparent suicide. I turned to Ruby, my vision swimming.

“She didn’t just disappear.” My voice was barely above a whisper. “She wasn’t the first one.”

Ruby’s fingers dug into her sleeves.

“And something tells me,” she muttered, her voice low and dangerous, “she won’t be the last.”

A heavy silence settled between us. The glow of my laptop screen was the only light in the room, casting eerie shadows along the walls.

Ruby was the first to move. She grabbed my wrist, her grip ice-cold. “Emily. Think. Why these girls? Why disappear them?”

I shook my head. My mind was spinning, grasping for something—anything—that made sense. “There has to be a pattern. Maybe they knew something. Maybe—”

Then it hit me. My stomach dropped. I turned to Ruby, my voice barely a whisper.

“They all knew Liam.”

Ruby’s expression darkened. “What?”

I grabbed the laptop and scrolled frantically, clicking through every article, every buried forum post. I wasn’t imagining it. Alicia Moore was Liam’s childhood neighbor.

Sophia Lin, another missing girl, was in his biology class sophomore year.

Olivia Grant—his ex-girlfriend.

I forced myself to breathe. My fingers trembled over the keyboard. “Ruby. Every single one of them—” I swallowed, my throat dry. “They were connected to Liam.”

Ruby stared at the screen, the pieces falling into place behind her sharp eyes.

“This isn’t about just ruining you,” she murmured. “She’s trying to make you one of them.”

My blood turned to ice. Clara didn’t just fake her death. She wasn’t just haunting me.

She was finishing what she started. I could feel it now. The walls closing in. The weight of unseen eyes pressing down on me.

Ruby stood abruptly, pacing. “Okay. Okay, we need to be smart. We need proof. Something to show this isn’t just a coincidence.”

I barely heard her. My pulse thundered in my ears.

Alicia Moore. Olivia Grant. Sophia Lin.

And now me.

Then—

My phone buzzed. I froze. Slowly, my gaze drifted to where it lay face-down on my desk. Ruby and I exchanged a glance. I reached out, hands unsteady, and flipped it over.

One new message.

Unknown Number: You’re getting too close.

A cold sweat prickled my skin. My lungs felt too tight, like I couldn’t get enough air. Then—before I could react—another message. A picture. Of me and Ruby. Right now. Sitting in my room. I shot to my feet so fast the chair nearly tipped over. My breath came in shallow gasps.

Ruby grabbed my arm. “Emily. Look at me.”

I couldn't. I could barely think. Someone was watching. Right now. My gaze darted to the window. The blinds were shut. The door was locked. But that didn't matter. She was always a step ahead.

Ruby's grip tightened. "We need to get out of here."

She didn't wait for me to agree. She grabbed my jacket, shoved my laptop into my bag, and pulled me toward the door. I hesitated. For a split second, I felt it. The weight of Clara's presence.

Like if I turned around fast enough, I'd see her standing there. Smiling. Waiting. A chill crawled down my spine.

Ruby yanked the door open. "Move." I didn't need to be told twice. We ran.





## CHAPTER 27

Liam's POV

It was late. Too late. And I had no idea where Emily was. The quiet of the apartment felt suffocating, pressing against my skin like a weighted blanket, but instead of comfort, all I felt was unease. The dim glow of my phone screen was the only source of light in the darkened room, casting long shadows that flickered with every restless shift of my body. I sat at the edge of my couch, my grip on the phone so tight my knuckles ached. My eyes locked onto the screen like sheer willpower alone could make it light up with her name. My heart pounded in my chest, the rhythm uneven, too fast, too frantic. I had called her three times already. Each time, it rang until the voicemail picked up. Each time, the silence that followed twisted my stomach into knots.

A text. No reply.

A voicemail. Still nothing.

My breath came sharp as I ran a hand down my face, trying—failing—to steady myself. Something was wrong. I could feel it, a sickening weight in my gut, a crawling unease beneath my skin. Emily wasn't the type to just disappear. Not like this. Not without a word. My knee bounced restlessly, my free hand clenched into a fist as I dialed her number again, pressing the phone to my ear with a force that bordered on desperation.

It rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Then, voicemail. Again.

“Damn it,” I muttered, my voice raw, almost hoarse. I threw my phone onto the coffee table with more force than necessary, the sound sharp in the stillness. My hands found my hair, fingers threading through it as I dragged in a shaky breath, my chest tightening with each passing second.

Maybe she needed space. Maybe she was still upset about earlier. My jaw clenched. The memory burned fresh in my mind—Emily, standing there, eyes wild with something that looked too much like fear, voice shaking as she stared at Clara. At the girl she swore wasn’t supposed to be alive.

And me—standing there. Silent.

Because what the hell was I supposed to say? Emily had looked at me like I had betrayed her. Like choosing to believe what I saw—what made sense—meant choosing against her. But now, she was gone. And I hated it. I hated the gnawing, relentless dread that coiled in my stomach, tightening with every second that passed. I hated the way my chest ached, like something sharp had lodged itself between my ribs, digging deeper with each breath. I hated the restless, wrong sensation clawing at my insides, screaming that something was happening—something bigger than I understood.

And I wasn’t seeing it. A sudden, sharp knock at the door jolted me. Not a knock. A pounding.

Urgent. Desperate. My body moved before my mind could catch up, feet hitting the floor in a rush, heart hammering against my ribs as I crossed the room in three quick strides. Every nerve in my body was on edge, my pulse roaring in my ears.

The second I swung the door open, Emily stumbled inside. Or rather—Ruby pushed her past me.

The room seemed to shrink, the air thick with something unspoken. Emily's face was pale, her breath unsteady, her fingers trembling as they gripped the strap of her bag, knuckles white. Ruby's movements were quick, frantic—she shoved the door shut behind them, twisting the lock with a sharp click, as if she expected someone to be right outside.

I took a step closer, my voice barely above a whisper, rough with fear.

“What the hell happened?”

Emily lifted her eyes to meet mine. And what I saw there made my stomach drop. Terror. Absolute, bone-deep terror. Her lips parted, but for a moment, no words came out. She just stood there, chest rising and falling too fast, her whole body trembling like she had been running for her life. For a second, nothing existed but the sound of Emily's uneven breathing. Her lips parted again, but she still couldn't get the words out.

Ruby didn't wait.

She exploded.

“Oh, you wanna know what happened?” she snapped, stepping forward like she was ready to grab me by the collar. “I'll tell you what happened, Liam. Your psycho ex—who's supposed to be dead, by the way—has been stalking Emily, watching her, playing some sick, twisted game, and now she knows we're onto her.”

My stomach clenched. “What do you mean—”

Ruby cut me off, jabbing a finger toward Emily. “Tell him, Em. Tell him about the picture.”

Emily exhaled shakily, her voice barely above a whisper. “We got a text. A photo of us. In my room. Taken in real time.”

The floor tilted beneath me.

I blinked. “What?”

“She was outside,” Ruby hissed. “Watching us. Listening to us.” Her hands clenched into fists. “I swear to God, Liam, if you don't start

talking—if you don't start telling us what the hell is going on with Clara—so help me, I will—”

“I don't know!” I snapped, my voice sharp, raw. “I don't know what's going on, okay?”

Ruby scoffed. “Bullshit.”

My pulse pounded in my ears.

Emily finally spoke, her voice small but steady. “Liam.”

I turned to her, and my heart clenched at the look on her face. She wasn't just scared. She was breaking.

“I need you to believe me,” she whispered. “Please.”

I swallowed hard. “I do.”

“No, you don't.”

Emily's voice cracked, her breath unsteady.

“If you did, you wouldn't keep acting like this is impossible,” she said, her eyes shining with something I didn't want to name. “You wouldn't keep looking at me like I'm losing my mind.”

Guilt clawed at my chest. I had doubted her. I had made her feel crazy. And now, she was standing in front of me, terrified—and I had no idea how to fix it.

Ruby took a step closer, voice sharp. “Here's what we do know. Clara disappeared for three months when she was a teenager, then came back with no memory.” She scoffed. “Convenient, right?”

I swallowed, tension tightening around my ribs. “I remember that.”

“Yeah?” Ruby's eyes burned with anger. “Did you also remember that another girl—Alicia Moore—went missing the exact same way? And came back? And then died?”

My breath hitched. She kept going, relentless.

“And guess what, Liam?” Her lips curled into something bitter, angry. “Every single girl who’s disappeared like this had one thing in common.”

Her voice dropped, sharp as a blade.

“They all knew you.”

I felt like the air had been knocked from my lungs. I stared at her. I turned to Emily, desperate to see something—anything—on her face that told me she didn’t believe it. But she was looking at me the same way Ruby was. Like they both knew something I didn’t. Or worse—like they thought I knew something and wasn’t telling them. I took a step back, shaking my head, but it felt wrong. Like the ground had shifted beneath me, and I was tilting, off-balance, one wrong move away from losing everything.

“That doesn’t mean—”

Ruby’s voice sliced through the air, cold and merciless, a blade against my throat.

“Why did you help her?”

I stopped breathing.

“What?” The word barely left my lips, a whisper swallowed by the thick silence pressing in around us.

Ruby didn’t blink. Didn’t flinch. She just stood there, staring at me like she already knew every answer, like she had already ripped me apart and found the truth hiding in my bones.

“I asked,” she said, slow, deliberate, each syllable curling around my throat like a noose, “why did you help her disappear?”

The world tilted. My pulse faltered, stuttering in my chest before slamming back into motion, too fast, too loud, a deafening drumbeat against my ribs. My mouth felt dry. My body felt like it wasn’t mine, like I was standing outside of myself, watching everything unravel in slow motion. Emily sucked in a sharp breath beside me, a jagged, broken

sound that made my insides twist. I felt her go rigid, every muscle locked in place, her body wound so tight she might snap apart if she moved.

My heart—God, my heart—stopped.

I tried to speak. Tried to force something, anything, past the lump rising in my throat, but my tongue was thick, heavy, like it didn't belong to me anymore. Panic slithered up my spine, cold and relentless, wrapping itself around my lungs, my ribs, crushing me.

"Ruby, what the hell are you—"

Emily's voice cut through mine, trembling, disbelief cracking through every syllable.

"Ruby—what are you talking about?"

She turned to her, wide-eyed, desperate, like if she looked hard enough, she could will Ruby into making sense. But Ruby—Ruby didn't even glance at her. Her gaze never left mine. Sharp. Unyielding.

"You're so truthful, right?" she said, her voice laced with something venomous, mocking. "Her trustworthy, loving boyfriend."

The word curled with disdain, and I felt the moment it hit Emily. I saw it in the way her breath faltered. The way her fingers curled into the fabric of her sleeves like she was trying to hold herself together. The way her body, already tense, suddenly froze. Ruby stepped closer, closing the space between us, her eyes burning into me, stripping me bare.

"You'll tell her the truth, won't you?" she said, her voice like acid, seeping into every crack, every wound. Right, Liam?

The walls caved in around me. Emily turned to me. Her eyes—God, her eyes—wide, pleading, filled with something that made my stomach lurch violently. Something fragile. Something terrified. I could see it happening in real-time, the moment realization began to dawn, the moment everything we had started to turn to ash in her hands.

"No."

Just a whisper. Broken. Desperate. She searched my face like she was trying to find me, like she was clawing through the wreckage, begging for something to hold onto.

“No, no, no—” She shook her head, wild, frantic, her voice splintering with each word. “Tell me, Liam. Tell me Ruby is out of her mind.”

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out. Emily’s breath stuttered. She stepped back, just slightly, just enough for the distance between us to grow, and something inside me fractured.

“Liam,” she said again, her voice sharper this time, desperate in a way that made my stomach clench. “Tell me she’s wrong.”

My chest tightened, the weight of it unbearable, pressing, pressing, pressing—

My pulse roared in my ears.

I tried.

I tried.

But the words—I couldn’t force them past my lips. Emily’s face twisted, her expression contorting into something I couldn’t bear to look at.

Hurt.

Betrayal.

Something raw and wounded, something that sank its claws into my chest and ripped me apart from the inside out. She stumbled back, like she physically couldn’t stand to be near me. Her hands shook as she clutched them to her chest, fingers curled in tight, like she was holding herself together.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

And it wasn’t just shock. It was devastation. It was shattering. I took a step forward, my own hands reaching out, desperate to fix it, to stop it, to take it all back—

“Emily, I—”

She shook her head, her expression crumbling, her eyes wide, shining with something dangerously close to horror.

“No.”

One word. Final. Cold. Like the snap of a door slamming shut. Like the sound of a heart breaking.

Like she couldn’t even look at me. Like I wasn’t the person she thought I was anymore.

Maybe I wasn’t.

Emily was still looking at me like I was someone she didn’t know. Like I was a stranger in the skin of the person she trusted. And maybe I was. I ran a hand through my hair, my breath uneven, my whole body screaming with the need to fix this, to undo it, to say something—anything—that would make her look at me like she used to. But I couldn’t lie. Not anymore. I swallowed hard. My throat was dry, burning, like I was choking on the truth I had buried for so long.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” I finally said, my voice raw, uneven. “I never—I never meant for any of this.”

Emily flinched like the words physically hurt her. I took a shaky breath, the weight of everything pressing down on me, crushing, suffocating.

“It was a mistake,” I said, forcing the words out, trying to make sense of something that had spiraled so far out of my control. “I thought—I thought I was helping her.”

Silence. Thick. Heavy.

Emily didn’t move. Ruby’s expression didn’t change.

So I kept talking. Because I had to. Because there was no way out of this except through it.

“She came to me,” I said, voice hoarse. “One night. She was... scared. Paranoid. She kept saying she needed to get away, that she had to leave before it was too late.”



Emily's breath hitched. I looked at her, but she didn't look at me. Her eyes were glassy, distant, like she was barely holding herself together.

"I thought she was overreacting," I admitted, a bitter laugh slipping past my lips, sharp and humorless. "But she was terrified, Emily. She kept saying she was being watched, that someone was following her, that she needed to disappear before they—before they got her."

A tremor ran through me, my hands curling into fists.

"I asked her who," I continued, voice tight. "I kept asking, over and over. 'Clara, who? Who is after you? Who's watching you?'"

I exhaled shakily, my chest aching with the memory.

"She never answered," I whispered. "She'd just look at me. Like—like she wanted me to be scared for her. Like she needed me to believe her without question." I swallowed hard. "And I did."

Emily still hadn't moved. I could feel her breathing, shallow, unsteady.

"I didn't know what else to do," I went on, voice breaking. "She was crying, shaking—she told me she had no one else to trust. And I—I just wanted to help. So I did."

I took a shaky breath, my ribs aching from the weight of the confession.

"I helped her leave town," I said, the words tasting like ash. "I told her I knew a way. I—God, I even drove her halfway to the next state." I let out a breathless, disbelieving laugh. "She kept saying thank you, over and over, like I was saving her. Like I was doing the right thing."

I looked up, meeting Emily's gaze, and my stomach dropped.

Her expression—God, her expression—was unreadable. Wounded. Disbelieving.

I forced myself to keep going.

"I thought that was it," I whispered. "I thought she was safe. That she got what she wanted." My voice faltered. "But then—then she never came back."

The room felt too small. My chest felt too tight.

"She was supposed to check in," I said, shaking my head. "She promised she would. But then... nothing. She was gone. Like she never existed."

A shudder ran through me.

"And then the news broke," I choked out. "That she was dead."

Silence. It was unbearable.

I looked at Emily, my stomach twisting violently. Her hands were shaking. Her whole body was shaking.

"I didn't kill her," I said quickly, desperate, pleading. "I swear to God, Emily, I—I never wanted this. I thought I was helping."

Emily let out a breath, sharp, uneven. She still hadn't spoken. Still hadn't moved.

And for the first time since this all started— I realized. It didn't matter. Because this wasn't about what I had meant to do. It was about what I had done. And there was no taking it back.

Emily's lips parted, barely making a sound. Then, finally—

"Then how the hell is she standing here?"

The words slammed into me like a punch to the gut. I had no answer. Because I had been just as shocked. I felt my heart hammer against my ribs, the memory of that moment hitting me all over again—when Clara showed up. Alive. The way my blood had turned to ice. The way my stomach had dropped so violently I thought I'd pass out.

"I—" My voice broke. "I don't know."

Emily let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "You don't know?"

I met her eyes, and my voice came out ragged, wrecked.

"I thought she was dead," I admitted, my hands clenched into fists. "I thought—I thought I had gotten her killed. I spent months living with

that.” My voice cracked, and I forced the next words out. “And then she just—showed up.”

Emily’s jaw clenched, her hands still trembling.

“She used me,” I said, the words cutting through me like glass. “She played me. I didn’t see it then, but now—I should have known.”

My breath hitched.

“She was never scared,” I whispered. “She was never running. She wanted to disappear, but not because someone was after her. She just—she just wanted control. She wanted to see what would happen. And I—” I exhaled shakily, voice thick with regret. “I let her.”

Emily’s breath came out uneven, and she stared at me for a long, long moment.

And then—

She shook her head.

And stepped back.

Like she couldn’t even stand the sight of me anymore.

I reached for her instinctively, my voice breaking. “Emily, I—”

“No.”

Just one word. Final. Shattering.

And maybe that was the worst part. That no matter what I said now—

She was never going to look at me the same way again.

I deserved this. Every inch of it. Emily’s expression—God, it hurt. More than anything. More than Clara’s betrayal, more than my own guilt, more than the months of silence where I thought I had lost everything. Because I was losing her. Right in front of me. And there was nothing I could do.

I opened my mouth, desperate, pleading, but I didn’t even know what to say. What could I possibly say? That I was sorry? That I never meant

for this to happen? That I never, in my worst nightmares, thought I would be standing here, watching her look at me like I was someone she couldn't even recognize?

Her hands were still shaking. Her whole body was shaking. And she wouldn't even look at me.

I had done this. I had put that look in her eyes—the disbelief, the devastation, the sheer wreckage of whatever we were, whatever trust she had left in me.

And I—

God, I wanted to rip myself apart. I wanted to go back to that night and shake myself, force myself to stop, to think, to question the girl who had wrapped me around her finger like it was nothing.

Because it had been nothing to her. Every second of it. I had spent months hating myself. Drowning in guilt. Waking up in the middle of the night with the phantom weight of her last words ringing in my ears, her panic, her fear. I had blamed myself for everything—for helping her, for not helping her enough, for not seeing what was coming.

And the whole time—

She had been watching. Not dead. Not missing. Just watching. Like my suffering had been some sick, twisted game for her. Like I was nothing more than entertainment. My chest ached, raw and hollow, like something had cracked open inside me and was spilling out into the empty space Clara left behind.

I had been mourning a ghost. And she had been laughing. My fists clenched at my sides, shaking. I wanted to scream, to throw something, to let all the fury and betrayal and heartbreak rip through me until there was nothing left. Because I had trusted her. And she had destroyed me for fun.

I let out a breath that burned its way up my throat. My hands curled into fists so tight my nails dug into my skin. I couldn't fix this.

I couldn't take it back. And I couldn't stop the crushing, unbearable truth that had been staring me in the face this entire time— I had lost Emily. Not because of Clara. Not because of some cruel twist of fate. But because of me. Because I had been too blind, too stupid, to see what was right in front of me.

And now, watching her shake her head, watching her back away like the very sight of me hurt—

I knew. There was no coming back from this. And it fucking broke me.



## CHAPTER 28

Emily's POV

The walls felt like they were closing in, the air too thick, pressing down on me, suffocating. Liam was still standing there, his face pale, his hands trembling at his sides, but I couldn't look at him. I couldn't. Because the second I did, I saw everything I had loved about him—everything I had trusted—turn to ashes. I wanted him to say something. Anything. I wanted him to fight for this, to tell me Ruby was lying, that this was some kind of sick misunderstanding, that he hadn't—

That he hadn't done this. But he just stood there. Silent. Guilty. And the worst part?

I could see it. I could see it all. The night Clara ran to him, the way she must have looked at him with those wide, terrified eyes, spinning her story, making him believe she was in danger. I could see him believing her, helping her, leading her straight into the lie she wanted him to fall for.

And he had. He had played right into her hands. And I hadn't known. I had spent months mourning Clara, trying to understand what happened to her, putting the pieces together—only to realize he had them all along. That he had helped her disappear. That he had been lying to me this whole time.

A sharp, broken breath tore out of me.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

I took a step back, and he moved forward.

“Emily, I—”

“Don’t,” I snapped, my voice shaking. “Don’t you dare.”

He flinched. Good. Because I wanted him to hurt. I wanted him to feel even an inch of the devastation clawing at my chest, tearing me apart from the inside out.

“You knew,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “You knew what happened to her, and you said nothing.”

He ran a hand through his hair, his breathing ragged. “I thought she was dead,” he said, voice hoarse, wrecked. “I thought—Emily, I swear to God, I didn’t know she was still alive.”

I let out a hollow, bitter laugh.

“That’s not the point, Liam!” My voice cracked. “You—God, do you even hear yourself? You helped her disappear! You just—just let her go without even knowing the full story, and you didn’t tell me! Not once! Not even when—” My breath hitched. “Not even when I was falling apart trying to find the truth.”

His face crumpled. “I was scared,” he whispered. “I—Emily, I didn’t know what to do.”

“So you did nothing.”

The words burned, tearing straight through me, leaving me raw and bleeding. He had let me suffer.

Let me chase ghosts. Let me drown in the grief of losing someone who was never lost to begin with.

And the entire time—

He knew. I pressed a hand to my mouth, my fingers trembling. I felt sick.

Everything was spinning, warping, breaking apart at the seams, and Liam—Liam, the one person I thought I could trust—had been standing there, watching me shatter, knowing the truth, hiding it from me.

“I loved you,” I whispered. It came out so small. So broken.

And Liam—he broke at the sound of it. His entire body caved in like the words physically destroyed him.

“Emily—”

I shook my head. “I can’t do this.”

He stepped closer. Too close. I took another step back.

“Emily, please,” he choked out. “Just—just let me explain.”

I lifted my gaze to his, blinking back the burning in my eyes.

“There’s nothing left to explain,” I said softly.

Because what explanation could fix this? What words could undo the fact that he had been lying to me from the start? What excuse could change the fact that I didn’t know who he was anymore? The air between us was thick, heavy, unbearable.

And then—

I turned and walked away.

And this time, he didn’t stop me.

~

After 2 Months

Two months. Sixty-two days. One thousand four hundred and eighty-eight hours. That’s how long it had been since I turned my back on Liam and walked away. Since I left him standing there, shattered, pleading, drowning in a mess of his own making. I told myself I wouldn’t look back. That I wouldn’t break. That no matter how much it hurt, I would not be the girl who forgave so easily.

But God, I thought about him every day.



I tried everything—everything—to forget.

I buried myself in work. Took on extra projects, stayed late at the office when I didn't need to, kept myself so busy that I barely had time to think. But even then, even when I was neck-deep in emails and reports, my mind would betray me. I'd hear his voice in my head, the way he used to tease me when I got too serious. I'd remember the way he used to bring me coffee without me asking, how he'd roll his eyes at my stressed-out rambling but still listen to every word. I went out with friends. Let them drag me to new places, to loud, crowded clubs and quiet cafes, to shopping sprees and movie nights and weekend trips I didn't even really want to go on. I laughed when they laughed, smiled when they smiled, pretended I was fine. But at night, when I was alone, when there was no one to perform for, I would reach for my phone. Every. Single. Time. And I would see his name.

The missed calls. The unread messages. I never blocked him. I should have. But I didn't.

Because some part of me—some weak, pathetic, desperate part—wanted him to keep trying.

Wanted to believe he wouldn't give up on me. That maybe—just maybe—there was still something left to salvage. But I never answered. I never called him back. Because what would I even say?

That I missed him? That I hated how much I still wanted to hear his voice? That no matter how many times I reminded myself of what he did, of how he lied, I still ached for him?

I couldn't. So I kept running.

Then there was Clara. Or rather—there wasn't. She had disappeared as suddenly as she had returned. No messages, no cryptic notes, no eerie encounters in the places I least expected.

Nothing.

At first, I was ready for anything. For the mind games, the threats, the manipulation—because that’s what she did. That’s what she lived for. She liked watching people unravel, liked watching me unravel. But weeks passed, and... nothing. Maybe she was dead for real this time. Maybe she had just moved on, found some new game to play, someone else to torment.

Or maybe she was waiting. Lurking somewhere, watching, biding her time. I didn’t know.

And honestly? I didn’t care anymore. She wasn’t the ghost haunting me. Liam was.

I still saw him—everywhere. The coffee shop we used to go to. The park where he once grabbed my hand just to pull me back into an argument. The bookstore where we spent hours just existing together, sitting in silence, flipping through pages of novels we had no intention of buying. I saw him in the smallest things. Like the way someone would tilt their head when they were thinking—just like he did.

Or how a stranger’s laugh would sound almost like his, making my heart clench before my brain caught up to the reality. And then there were the days where I swore I saw him. Not just in memories. Not just in echoes.

But him.

Walking down the street. Standing at a distance. Never too close. Never approaching. But watching. I told myself I was imagining it. That I was losing my mind. Because what else could it be?

He wouldn’t follow me. Would he? Then came the flowers. A bouquet on my doorstep. White lilies.

My favorite. No note. No name. I didn’t need one. And the songs on the radio. The ones he used to play for me, suddenly showing up everywhere. A missed call at 2:00 AM. No voicemail. Just silence.

Was he trying to reach me? Or was I just reading into nothing because I wanted him to?

I didn't know anymore.

And then I started seeing him every single day. In the mornings, when I left for work, he was there—standing on the other side of the street, leaning against a lamp post, hands shoved in his pockets.

He never called out to me. Never crossed the road. But his eyes—God, his eyes—were pleading. At night, when I came home, he was waiting again. Sometimes across the street. Sometimes by a café nearby, pretending to drink coffee he barely touched. But always there. Watching. Waiting.

And it broke me. Every single day.

I told myself not to look at him, not to acknowledge him, but it felt impossible. My heart ached with every step I took away from him. I wanted to scream at him, to demand why he was doing this to me, why he wouldn't just let me go. But I also wanted to run to him, to throw away all my stubbornness and let myself collapse into his arms. I hated him for making me feel this way. For making me weak. For still loving me, even after everything. And I hated myself for still loving him back. Because no matter how much distance I tried to put between us, it wasn't enough.

I carried him with me. In my thoughts. In my dreams. In the spaces between my ribs where his absence carved its place. And I knew. I could run all I wanted. But I would never be free. Because I still belonged to him. Even when I didn't want to. Even when I told myself I never would again. I still loved him.



## CHAPTER 29

Liam's POV

I never thought I would be this desperate for anything in my life. Not for redemption.

Not for forgiveness. Not for another chance. But for her. Even if she hated me with every inch of her being, even if she never spoke my name again, I was happy just to breathe the same air as her.

Pathetic, right?

I knew that.

And yet, every time I saw her—every time I caught the briefest glimpse of her turning a corner, or sitting by the window in a café, or laughing at something someone else said—I felt like a drowning man getting the tiniest gasp of oxygen. It wasn't enough. But it was all I had. It had been two months since she walked away from me. Two months since I stood there, watching my world crack open at the seams, watching the only person who ever mattered look at me like I was a stranger wearing the skin of someone she used to love.

I lost her that day.

And I'd spent every day since trying to figure out how to live with it.

Spoiler: I couldn't.

I tried. I told myself to move on, to let her go, to stop hoping, to stop needing. I tried to convince myself that maybe—just maybe—she was better off without me. But my hands still shook when I saw her from across the street. My breath still caught when I heard her voice, even if it wasn't meant for me. And my heart—fuck, my heart—still beat for her like it didn't know any better. The world had kept moving. Days stretched into weeks, and weeks into months, but for me—time had stalled. I went through the motions, pretending I was fine, pretending I wasn't hollowed out from the inside. But I felt it in every moment of silence, in every second that passed without her voice, without her presence filling up the spaces she used to occupy. I told myself I would stop. That I would stop waiting for her texts, stop checking my phone for a missed call, stop hoping. But it was useless. Because she was everywhere.

Her laughter lingered in my mind at night.

Her voice echoed in my thoughts when I least expected it.

Her absence burned more than her presence ever had.

So, yeah.

I was desperate. Desperate enough to watch from a distance. To stand outside a bookstore just to see her sit inside, completely unaware of my existence. To linger in places I knew she might be, just to steal one more second of her before I faded back into the background of her life. The world blurred around me. People moved, cars passed, conversations hummed in the background—but none of it felt real.

I was standing at the edge of the sidewalk, staring at the road, but my mind was somewhere else. Somewhere far away, lost in the places where she still existed next to me. My fingers clenched at my sides, my body heavy, exhausted in ways sleep couldn't fix. Two months. Two whole months of this emptiness stretching inside me, tightening its grip like a vice.

And for once—just for a second—I didn't care.

I didn't care about the honking cars.

I didn't care about the rush of people pushing past.

I didn't care about anything.

My thoughts were drowning me, and I let them. I barely even noticed the headlights cutting through the dark. I barely even heard the blaring horn, the sound of tires screeching against the pavement.

And then—a force yanked me back. Arms wrapped around me, pulling me away just as a truck sped past, missing me by inches. The rush of air hit me like a slap, sharp, cold, real.

And suddenly—I was back. Back in my body. Back on the sidewalk. Back in the world that had almost swallowed me whole. And then I turned.

And saw her.

Emily.

She was standing there, holding onto me, her chest rising and falling in sharp, panicked breaths. Her grip was firm, her fingers curled into the fabric of my jacket like she wasn't sure if she wanted to shake me or shove me or just—just make sure I was still there. My heart stopped.

"Liam," she breathed, her voice cracking on my name. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I just stared at her. Because—God, she was here. She was here. And for the first time in months, I could breathe. But her eyes—her eyes—they weren't just angry. They were terrified.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I hadn't even realized what had happened. That I had almost—

Jesus.

Emily's breath hitched. Her grip on my jacket tightened for a split second—just before she shoved me.

"Are you insane?!" Her voice cracked at the edges, trembling with something dangerously close to tears.

I barely stumbled, but the impact of her hands against my chest felt like a punch, knocking the air right out of my lungs. She was shaking. Visibly shaking. Her fists clenched, her entire body rigid, her breaths coming out uneven and shallow.

And then—her eyes flickered up to meet mine.

And fuck—I wished they hadn't. Because I had seen Emily angry before. I had seen her glare at me, snap at me, roll her eyes, curse my existence like I was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. But I had never seen her like this. Like she was breaking. Like she was terrified. Like she was one second away from completely falling apart.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she demanded, voice quieter now, but no less sharp. No less desperate.

I swallowed hard, my throat raw, my mind still trying to catch up. I hadn't been thinking. I had just been—existing. Walking through the days like a ghost, not really here, not really anywhere. But that answer wouldn't fix anything.

That answer wouldn't stop the way her eyes shone under the streetlights, wouldn't stop the way her lip trembled, wouldn't stop the way she kept clenching and unclenching her hands like she was trying to keep herself together.

“Emily...” I tried, voice hoarse.

She shook her head, eyes squeezing shut. “No. No.” She took a shaky breath, and when she opened her eyes again, they were blazing. “You don't get to do this, Liam.”

Do what? Fall apart? Miss her? Want her so badly it physically hurt?

“Two months,” she whispered, and I barely heard it over the pounding in my chest. “Two fucking months, Liam. I—I let you go. I stayed away. I told myself you were fine.”

I almost laughed at that. Because fine? Fine had never been an option.

Emily sucked in a sharp breath, her hands clenching at her sides now, like she was forcing herself to stay still. “And then I see you standing in the middle of the damn road like you don’t even care if you get hit by a truck.” Her voice cracked again. “Like you—like you don’t even care if you...” She trailed off, shaking her head like she couldn’t say it.

Like the thought was too much. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. Because I knew that look on her face. I had seen it before—on my own. In my own reflection, in my own eyes, in the way I had fallen apart these past two months. And seeing it on her? Seeing it in Emily? It made my entire body ache.

She let out a shuddering breath, stepping back. “You don’t get to do this,” she repeated, quieter this time. “You don’t get to destroy yourself like this. I won’t—” She broke off, inhaling sharply, blinking rapidly, like she was trying to will the tears away. “I won’t watch it.”

Something inside me twisted.

I took a slow step toward her. “Emily—”

She backed away. Again. Like she couldn’t trust herself to be close to me. Like if she stayed any longer, she would break. And fuck, I wanted to reach for her. I wanted to beg her to stay. But I knew—

I knew—that whatever this was, whatever we were, she wasn’t ready. Not yet. She pressed a hand to her temple, exhaling unsteadily, before finally lifting her gaze to mine again.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on with you,” she murmured, voice barely above a whisper now. “But whatever it is—you fix it.”

Her throat bobbed, and I swore I saw something deeply, painfully real flicker across her face—something that made my chest feel like it was caving in.

And then—

She left.



Of all the ways I thought this day would go, nearly dying in the middle of the road wasn't one of them. I mean, seriously? Out of all the possible disasters I could have imagined—getting fired, getting punched, accidentally liking one of her old photos from three years ago—this wasn't even on the list. Yet, here I was, standing on the side of the road, my heart slamming against my ribs, my breath coming in sharp, uneven bursts. I should have been thinking about the fact that I had almost become roadkill. I should have been replaying the blaring horn, the screech of tires, the way my entire body had locked up in the middle of the street like some glitching video game character.

But all I could think about was her.

Because she ran to me.

Not away.

To me.

'And that changed everything.

Maybe she was furious. Maybe she wanted to rip my head off. Maybe she was so angry that she could barely stand the sight of me. Maybe every memory of me felt like a fresh wound that hadn't stopped bleeding since the moment everything between us shattered. Maybe she wished she could erase me from her past, her mind, her heart. But she ran to me. That had to mean something, right? I had been drowning for months—months—but the second I saw her again, it was like I had finally broken through the surface, gasping, desperate, alive. Not just breathing. Not just existing.

Alive.

And then she grabbed me. Her hands dug into my arms like she was making sure I was real, like she was afraid that if she let go, I'd dissolve into thin air. And in that moment, I knew.

She still cared.

She might never admit it. She might push me away until her dying breath. She might curse herself for whatever invisible thread still tied her to me, for the way she had reacted without thinking, without hesitation. But she cared. It was in the way her voice shook when she yelled at me. It was in the way her chest rose and fell too fast, like she had been the one standing in the middle of the road, frozen, staring death in the face. It was in the way her fingers curled into my shirt, trembling, refusing to let go. She cared. And fuck, if there was even the smallest, tiniest chance that I could fix this, that I could make her see I wasn't giving up on us, that I would never stop fighting for her—for us—then I was taking it.

I wasn't going to let her slip away again. Not without a fight. Not when she was the only thing in my life that had ever mattered. Not when she was the only thing that had ever made me feel like I was more than just some idiot with bad timing and a questionable ability to look both ways before crossing the street. Not when, for the first time in months, she had made me feel alive.

...Even if that aliveness came with a side of mild public humiliation and the realization that, yeah, maybe I needed to rethink my life choices.

I did what I should. I picked myself up, dusted off the mess of emotions weighing me down, and made a decision. If there was even the smallest chance that I could fix this, that I could remind her why she once wanted me—then I wasn't about to sit around like some tragic main character, wallowing in self-pity. No. I started to be a lover boy again. The second I made that choice, I felt it. The shift. The purpose. Like the universe had just given me a slow clap and a nod of approval.

I walked home with a hum under my breath, like some guy in a rom-com montage, smiling like an idiot at absolutely nothing. The old lady walking her dog across the street gave me a weird look, probably because I looked like I had just fallen in love with the air around me. Or maybe because I tripped over my own feet when I turned too fast. But it didn't matter. I was happy. Hope had a way of doing that to a man. I got home, tossed my keys onto the table, stretched my arms above my head like

some victorious warrior returning from battle—and then I saw myself in the mirror.

And God.

I was pathetic. The humming stopped. The smile disappeared. I stepped closer, tilting my head, squinting at my own reflection like it had personally betrayed me.

Who let me walk around like this?

The unshaved stubble, the dark circles under my eyes, the way my hair looked like I had just lost a fight with a tornado—this was the face I had shown her? The face of a man trying to win back the love of his life? No wonder she looked like she wanted to throw me in front of another truck. I groaned, running a hand down my face. This wouldn't do. This wouldn't do at all. I marched straight to the bathroom, flipped on the light, and grabbed my razor like it was a sword and I was about to go into battle.

"Alright, buddy," I muttered to my own reflection. "Let's fix whatever the hell this is."

And with that, I clean-shaved.

With every stroke, it was like I was peeling away months of misery, of regret, of bad decisions. I was shedding the version of myself that had given up. The version that had stared too long at his phone, waiting for messages that never came. The version that had eaten cereal straight from the box at three in the morning because "what's the point of dirtying a bowl?"

This was a reset.

By the time I finished, I looked at myself again, expecting some miraculous transformation. Maybe I'd suddenly have the jawline of a Greek god. Maybe the bags under my eyes would magically disappear. Maybe I'd finally look like the kind of man she couldn't resist. Instead, I nicked my jaw, cursed loudly, and nearly dropped the razor in the sink.

So much for my grand moment. I grabbed a tissue, pressed it against the cut, and sighed dramatically at my own reflection.

"Close enough," I muttered.

I wasn't perfect. But I was trying. And if she thought for one second that I was going to give up on her—on us—then she didn't know me at all. Because I wasn't done yet. Not even close.

I wasn't done yet. Not even close. I cleaned up the sink, wiping away the evidence of my dramatic transformation, and took one last look at myself in the mirror. The cut on my jaw had stopped bleeding, but I still looked like an idiot with a tiny piece of tissue stuck to my face. Whatever. Battle scars. I stepped back, rolling my shoulders, and took a deep breath. This was it. The new and improved me. Ready to fight for what mattered. Ready to prove that I wasn't just some lost cause, that I wasn't the same mess she had walked away from.

I felt good. Hopeful. Like the weight I had been carrying around for months had finally started to lift.

And then—

My stomach growled. Loudly.

I froze.

So much for my dramatic moment.

With a sigh, I turned and headed for the kitchen, because apparently, my grand plan to win her back would have to wait until after I stopped starving to death. I pulled open the fridge, already knowing it was a lost cause, but hoping—praying—that maybe, miraculously, something edible had appeared since the last time I checked. It had not. A half-empty bottle of orange juice, a sad-looking slice of leftover pizza, and an expired yogurt that I was pretty sure was plotting its own escape. That was it.

Jesus. No wonder I looked like a wreck. I had been living like a raccoon.

I grabbed the pizza, sniffed it (as if that would somehow make it less questionable), and took a bite. It tasted like regret. But food was food,

and I needed something to keep me from passing out mid-grand gesture. I chewed slowly, leaning against the counter, my mind already shifting back to her.

What next?

I couldn't just show up at her door out of nowhere. That would be weird. Creepy. No, I had to be strategic. Smooth. Give her space, but just enough to remind her I existed. I pulled out my phone, my thumb hovering over her contact. Texting her was tempting. Too tempting. But what would I even say?

"Hey, I almost died today, but your concern gave me hope, so now I'm eating questionable pizza and planning my next move."

Yeah. No. That wouldn't go well. I exhaled sharply, tossing my phone onto the counter and rubbing my hands over my face. Think. What would the old me do? And then it hit me. I needed to look good. Feel good. Act like I was already winning, like I wasn't a man on the verge of spiraling into another pit of regret. If I was going to remind her why she once liked me, I needed to remind myself first. I marched to my closet, yanking it open like it held all the answers to my problems. It did not.

It mostly held bad fashion choices and T-shirts that should have been burned years ago. But I dug deep. Eventually, I pulled out a crisp button-up, something that actually made me look put together. I ran a hand over the fabric, feeling the weight of it in my hands. It was the kind of shirt I used to wear when I knew I looked good. When confidence had come naturally, when I hadn't felt like I was losing all the time. I buttoned it up slowly, straightening my posture as I did. There. Better. Now I didn't just feel like I had a plan—I looked like it too. Maybe I'd go out. Get some fresh air. See people. Pretend I wasn't thinking about her every five seconds. Maybe I'd run into her.

Totally by accident, of course. Not that I was planning anything. I checked myself in the mirror one last time. It was time to start acting like a man who had his shit together. Even if I absolutely did not. I

grabbed my keys, ran a hand through my hair, and stepped outside with purpose.

The sun was already dipping lower in the sky, casting a golden glow over the quiet street. The air smelled like someone nearby was making dinner—something warm, real food, the kind that didn't come in a box or have an expiration date from last week. My stomach growled in protest at the sad slice of pizza I had consumed earlier, but I ignored it. I had more important things to focus on. Like reclaiming my dignity. Or, at the very least, reminding the world that I wasn't some hermit who had spent the past few months existing off caffeine and regret. I took a deep breath, straightened my shirt, and started walking. I didn't even make it to the end of my driveway before I heard it.

"Took you long enough, you miserable excuse for a man!"

I barely had time to react before something whizzed past my head.

What the—

I turned just in time to see Mrs. Kowalski, my next-door neighbor, standing on her porch, arms crossed, a small, suspiciously potato-shaped object lying on the ground near my feet. She had thrown something at me. Again.

"Jesus, Mrs. K!" I yelped, taking a step back in case she decided to chuck another one. "Was that a damn potato?"

"Damn right it was, you good-for-nothing brat!" she snapped, her thick accent making it even more terrifying. "Where the hell have you been? You look like you crawled out of a damn grave! You haven't taken out the trash in a week! Your lawn looks like a jungle! Do you think this neighborhood is a goddamn zoo?!"

I blinked. I hadn't missed her. At all.

"Good to see you too, Mrs. K," I muttered, bending down to pick up the potato. It had a dent in it, which only made me more concerned about her arm strength. "Is this... is this for me?"

She scoffed. "I was aiming for your head."

"Right. Of course, you were."

I sighed, tossing the potato in my hand like it was a stress ball. "Listen, I've been... busy."

"Busy doing what? Moping? Being a disappointment?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. I had no argument. Mrs. Kowalski had lived next to me since before I could legally drink, and she had made it her mission to keep me in check. I was her problem. Her very loud, occasionally pathetic, extremely messy problem. And apparently, I had failed to meet even her very low expectations.

"Look, I get it," I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I'll take care of the lawn. And the trash. And maybe even my life, who knows? Big things are happening, Mrs. K. You might just witness my grand comeback."

She snorted. "Comeback, my ass."

Before I could say anything else, she turned and disappeared back into her house, mumbling something about "kids these days" and "no damn sense of responsibility."

Well.

At least someone had missed me.

///

I finally made it to the coffee shop a few blocks down, pushing the door open and stepping inside. The smell of roasted coffee beans and fresh pastries hit me instantly, so much better than my half-rotten fridge.

And then—

"Holy shit, you're alive."

I groaned before even turning around.

Jason.

My coworker. My very annoying, way too observant, pain-in-the-ass coworker. He was standing behind the counter, staring at me like I was a damn ghost. His apron was half-tied, his hair messy like he had just rolled out of bed, and he had that usual smug grin on his face that made me want to punch him at least twice a week.

"Nice to see you too, Jason," I muttered, stepping up to the counter.

"Dude. You vanished." He squinted at me, leaning forward. "Are you... are you wearing an actual button-up? What happened? Did someone die?"

"No one died," I sighed. "Unless you count my self-respect. Or my will to live."

"Ah," Jason nodded. "So, Emily."

I glared at him. Jason just grinned wider.

"Shut up and get me a coffee," I grumbled, pulling out my wallet.

"Sure, sure," he said, punching something into the register. "One 'I'm trying to fix my pathetic excuse of a love life' special, coming right up."

I flipped him off. He laughed. It took five minutes for Jason to finally hand me my drink, and by the time I grabbed it, I was so close to throwing it at his face.

"You know," he said casually, leaning against the counter. "If you're trying to win her back, maybe start with, like, actual effort. You can't just show up looking like a slightly less depressed version of yourself and expect miracles."

"Wow," I deadpanned. "Thanks for the groundbreaking advice, Dr. Phil."

"Just saying, man." He shrugged. "Women like effort. And food. And guys who don't look like they live in a basement."

I took a sip of my coffee. "So, you're saying I have a chance."

Jason snorted. "Barely."



I had planned to call it a day.

I really did. I had done my part—I had left my house, gotten yelled at, endured Jason's bullshit, and, most importantly, not completely fallen apart in public. That was enough social interaction for one day. I was going to go home, take care of my apparently offensive lawn, maybe cook something that wasn't instant noodles, and then pretend to be a functioning human being for the rest of the night.

But then, of course—Trouble happened. And by trouble, I mean Ruby. I had just stepped outside the coffee shop when I saw her. And by the time I saw her, it was already too late to run. She spotted me instantly, her eyes widening in surprise before narrowing into something far more dangerous—recognition. Interest. Mischief.

"Liam?" she called out, because apparently, the universe was out to get me today.

I sighed, bracing myself as I turned toward her. "Ruby."

She smirked, tilting her head as she took me in. Slowly. Like she was examining something. Like she was assessing damage.

"Wow," she said finally. "You actually look... alive. That's new."

I forced a smile. "Yeah, it's this cool new thing I'm trying out. It's called 'not completely giving up on life.'"

"Huh," she mused. "Must be exhausting."

"Oh, incredibly."

Ruby crossed her arms, eyeing me like she was debating how much chaos she wanted to cause. And knowing her, the answer was always a lot.

"So," she said, dragging out the word. "You've been missing for weeks. The last time I saw you, you were—how do I put this nicely?—a complete wreck. And now here you are, all cleaned up, looking like you're about to audition for a men's cologne commercial. What's the occasion?"

I hesitated. Because I could lie. I could say I was just getting my life together, turning over a new leaf, being a responsible adult for once. But

Ruby? Ruby wasn't stupid. And I wasn't a good liar—at least, not with her.

So instead, I just sighed and said, "I'm trying."

Her smirk softened into something less sharp, something closer to understanding. "Trying?"

I nodded. "To fix things."

She watched me for a beat. Then another. And just when I thought maybe—maybe—she was about to say something encouraging—

"Oh my god," she gasped, eyes lighting up. "Are you trying to win back Emily?"

I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. "Don't."

But it was too late. Ruby was thriving on this.

"Holy shit, you are!" She grinned, practically bouncing in place. "Liam, this is the most entertaining thing you've done in years."

"Glad I could provide you with some amusement," I muttered. "But seriously. Don't start."

She ignored me completely. "So what's the plan? Grand romantic gesture? Apology speech? Crying in the rain? Oh, please tell me it's crying in the rain—"

"Ruby."

"—because that would be—"

"Ruby."

She finally shut up, though she still looked like she was one second away from bursting with secondhand excitement.

I sighed. "I just... I wanted to ask about her. That's all."

That wiped the grin off her face real quick.

Her expression turned unreadable. "What about her?"

I hesitated. "Is she... okay?"

Ruby exhaled, tilting her head like she was debating how much to say. And that? That wasn't a good sign.

"She's—" she started, then stopped. Shifted on her feet.

Something was off.

"What?" I pressed. "Is she seeing someone? Is she pissed at me? Is she—"

"She's fine, Liam," Ruby cut in, voice a little too firm. "She's fine. She's just... doing her own thing."

My stomach twisted. Because that? That was worse than anger. Worse than her moving on completely. That meant I didn't matter anymore. Ruby must've noticed something in my face, because her expression softened.

"Look," she said, a little gentler this time. "I'm not gonna lie to you. She's doing... better than you. But that doesn't mean she doesn't care. It just means she's protecting herself."

I swallowed. "From me."

Ruby didn't answer. Which was an answer in itself.

I nodded slowly. "Got it."

For once, Ruby didn't joke. Didn't tease. Just watched me, her usual sharpness dulled by something close to pity. I hated it.

"Anyway," I muttered, stepping back. "I should go."

Ruby studied me for a second longer before sighing. "Alright, Lover Boy. But hey—"

I looked up.

She hesitated, like she was debating whether to say it or not. Then she exhaled, crossing her arms. "She didn't throw out your stuff."

I blinked. "What?"

Ruby shrugged. "Your hoodie. Your books. The dumb little notes you left everywhere. She still has them. Even though she could've trashed it all, she didn't."

My chest tightened. "Why are you telling me this?"

Ruby rolled her eyes. "Because despite my best efforts, I guess I have a soft spot for tragic idiots like you."

I let out a short breath, barely a laugh. "That makes one of us."

"Don't get cocky," she warned, but there was something lighter in her voice now. "Just... don't mess this up again, alright?"

I stared at her, then gave a small nod. "Alright."

And for the first time in a long time, I felt something dangerous. Something reckless.

Hope.

I left the conversation with my mind buzzing, my chest tight with something I wasn't ready to name. Ruby's words lingered, circling my thoughts like a damn vulture, refusing to leave me alone. She still had my stuff. It was a stupid thing to latch onto. Just a couple of old things. A hoodie she probably forgot existed. A few notes I had written in passing—nothing important.

And yet...

I couldn't shake the feeling that it meant something. The walk back to my apartment felt like I was moving through a dream, my body going through the motions while my mind ran a marathon of every single memory of Emily. Her laugh. The way she used to roll her eyes at me. The way she used to say my name like it was home.

God. I was so screwed.

By the time I reached my door, my head was a mess. I pushed inside, let the door swing shut behind me, and tossed my keys onto the counter. And then I just... stood there. The silence of my apartment pressed down on me. Heavy. Suffocating. I ran a hand down my face, exhaling hard. I

needed to stop thinking. Needed to stop overanalyzing every damn word, every glance, every possible meaning hidden beneath the surface. But I couldn't. Because, for the first time in months, I wasn't just existing. I wasn't just breathing. I was feeling something again.

And I wasn't sure if that was a good thing—or the worst thing that could possibly happen to me.



## CHAPTER 30

Emily

I have no other option. I woke up, stared at the ceiling for a full minute, and made my decision.

Yes. I am doing this. I am going on a date. I threw off the covers, sat up, and ignored the tiny, nagging voice in my head that kept whispering all the reasons this was a terrible idea. I needed this.

I needed to try. To prove something—to myself, to the universe, to the part of me that still ached in ways I refused to name. Dragging myself to the bathroom, I splashed cold water on my face and stared at my reflection. My hair was a mess, my eyes looked tired, and my skin had that telltale dullness that came with overthinking and too many nights spent drowning in memories I should’ve let go of long ago.

I sighed. “You need this,” I told my reflection, watching my lips form the words. “You are going to go out, have a nice time, and not think about him.”

I didn’t say his name. I refused to let it stain the air, to let it settle into my thoughts, twisting and tightening around my resolve. Shower. Skincare. Hair. Makeup. The routine was automatic, a script I knew by heart, but every step felt heavier than it should have. Like I was forcing myself into a version of me that didn’t quite fit anymore. I added a little

extra blush, a little more mascara, something to make me look alive, even if I felt like a contradiction inside—half hopeful, half hollow.

By the time I was dressed, I almost felt normal. Almost.

I checked my phone. The time ticked closer. My date—Ryan—had texted earlier to confirm. He was nice. Safe. Predictable. The kind of person who wouldn't leave me staring at my ceiling at 2 a.m., dissecting every interaction, wondering what I did wrong, if I had been enough, if I had ever truly been wanted. That should have been enough. I grabbed my bag and headed for the door, but as I stepped outside, a thought whispered its way through my resolve, unwelcome and insistent:

Would he ever make me feel the way Liam did?

I shoved the thought away. That wasn't the point. The point was moving on. The point was proving to myself that I could. That I wasn't stuck in some endless loop of what-ifs and almosts and things I had no power to change. The restaurant was cozy, softly lit, with the faint hum of music threading through the air. I arrived first, settling into my seat by the window, my fingers tracing idle patterns on the napkin as I waited. I kept my gaze down, focusing on my breathing.

I wasn't nervous. Okay, maybe a little.

The chair across from me slid back, and someone sat down. "Sorry I'm late. Traffic was hell."

I almost smiled at that, ready to look up and offer some polite response.

But then—

Something felt off. I knew that voice. My whole body knew that voice. A sharp inhale. My stomach twisted. My fingers curled around the napkin, the fabric crumpling in my grip.

No. No. It couldn't be.

"You're awfully quiet, sweetheart," the voice teased, low and familiar in a way that sent shivers down my spine. "Not even gonna look at me? That hurts."

I swallowed. I had two choices: run or face it. Slowly, cautiously, I lifted my gaze.

Liam.

Sitting there like he belonged, like he had every right to be here, like he hadn't left me raw and restless in ways I still couldn't explain. One arm draped lazily over the back of his chair, that same infuriating smirk playing at his lips. He was dressed well, better than usual—no haphazard buttons or careless indifference. His clean-shaven face made him look sharper, more put together. But his eyes—those damn blue eyes—held the same trouble they always did.

My breath caught.

"You seem surprised," he said, tilting his head. "Was expecting someone else?"

I finally found my voice. "You—you're not Ryan."

He chuckled, the sound warm and edged with amusement. "Very observant of you."

I clenched my jaw. "Where is he?"

"Oh, him?" Liam leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Had a little chat with him earlier. Told him I'd be taking his place."

My mouth fell open. "You what?"

"Relax, sweetheart. I didn't threaten him. Much." He grinned, and it was the kind of grin that had always made my stomach flip, the kind that hinted at secrets and mischief and things I should have been smarter about. Then, softer, just enough to make my skin tingle, "Told him I'd be a much better date."

My hands curled into fists in my lap, anger and something else—something dangerous—rising in my chest. "You had no right—"

"Oh, I know," he cut in smoothly. "But tell me this." He leaned back, letting his gaze sweep over me in that slow, deliberate way that made my pulse stutter. "Would he have made your heart race like this?"



Damn him. I hated that he was right. I hated that, despite everything, my heart was racing. That I could feel the heat creeping up my neck, the way my body betrayed me with its reckless, foolish yearning. And Liam? He knew it too. Because he sat there, smug as hell, watching me unravel without even touching me. Like he had all the time in the world.

“Go on, then,” he murmured, voice low and taunting. “Tell me to leave. Say the word, and I’m gone.”

I opened my mouth—

“I said go,” I snapped, forcing the words out, though they burned like acid on my tongue.

“Oh no, darling,” Liam tsked, shaking his head slightly. “You shouldn’t say that.”

I exhaled sharply. “Why? Because you won’t listen?”

He leaned in, resting his chin on his hand, blue eyes gleaming. “Because we both know you don’t want me to.”

My fingers clenched around the edge of the table. “You don’t get to decide what I want.”

“Maybe not.” He shrugged. “But I can see it, plain as day.”

My grip tightened around the edge of the table, nails digging into the wood. Every muscle in my body was screaming at me to stand up, to walk away, to do something other than sit here and listen to him talk like he knew me better than I knew myself.

I hated that he still had this effect on me. Hated that even now, after everything, he could still get under my skin like a bad habit I couldn’t shake.

I glared at him. “You don’t know shit about what I want.”

Liam tilted his head, a slow, knowing smirk pulling at his lips. “Don’t I?”

I wanted to slap that look right off his face. Or—God forbid—kiss it off. My breath hitched, and I forced the thought away, shoving it down so deep it couldn't see the light of day.

"You are insufferable," I hissed.

"And you," he murmured, eyes locked onto mine, "are adorable when you're mad."

I nearly launched myself across the table.

"Liam—"

He laughed, low and easy, like he wasn't sitting across from someone who was this close to throwing hands.

"God, I missed this," he said, shaking his head. "You, sitting there, all fire and fury, pretending you don't—"

"Don't." I cut him off, voice sharp.

His eyes darkened slightly, amusement flickering into something else. Something unreadable. For a second, neither of us spoke. The air between us was charged, buzzing, like the moment before a storm. I hated him. I hated him, and I wanted him, and I wanted to slap him, and I wanted him to shut up, and I wanted him to never stop talking, and I wanted to be anywhere else, and I wanted to be right here.

Liam leaned forward, voice dropping. "Admit it."

I swallowed hard. "Admit what?"

"That you don't want me to go."

I forced out a laugh, sharp and bitter. "God, your ego is astounding."

"You love it."

"I loathe it."

His smirk deepened. "Is that what you tell yourself?"

I exhaled through my nose, trying to steady my breathing. "You're impossible."

“And you’re irresistible.”

“Liam.”

“Emily.”

His voice wrapped around my name like a secret, like a promise, like something that shouldn’t have made my stomach flip the way it did.

I clenched my jaw, gripping my drink like it was the only thing keeping me tethered to reality. “You don’t get to do this.”

“Do what?” His brows lifted in mock innocence.

“Act like nothing happened. Act like you can just—just sit here and flirt with me like we’re still us.”

He was quiet for a moment, and something flickered in his expression, something quick, something real—but then it was gone, and the smirk was back in place.

“I never stopped being yours, sweetheart,” he murmured. “The real question is... did you ever stop being mine?”

My pulse skipped.

I stood up so fast my chair scraped against the floor. “Go to hell.”

Liam chuckled, leaning back in his seat like he had all the time in the world. “I’ll see you there, darling.”

I hated him. I hated him. I hated the way he smirked like he knew something I didn’t. The way his voice curled around my name like it had a right to. The way he sat there, looking at me like I was still his, like he could just waltz back into my life and undo all the pain with a few well-placed words and a stupid, infuriating smirk. I hated that my heart didn’t get the memo. That it still jumped when he leaned in too close. That my breath still hitched when he spoke too softly. That some desperate, deluded part of me still wanted to believe in him. I wanted to smash that part of myself into dust.

I wanted to take this feeling—this unbearable ache in my chest—and rip it out. But instead, I stood there, fists clenched, drowning in him. Liam tilted his head, watching me like he could hear every thought screaming in my head. Like he could see the way my hands trembled, the way my breath came a little too fast, a little too uneven.

“Say it again,” he murmured.

My jaw clenched. “Say what?”

“That you hate me.”

I exhaled sharply. “Oh my God, Liam—”

“Say it,” he pushed, voice calm, eyes too steady.

“I. Hate. You.”

He nodded, slow, considering. “Good. Again.”

My fingers dug into my palms. “I hate you.”

His lips twitched. “Louder.”

“I hate you!”

“Louder, Em.”

I slammed my hands onto the table, knocking over my drink. “I HATE YOU!”

Silence. The entire café stilled. People turned, watching, but I didn’t care. My chest was heaving, my nails digging into the table, my entire body shaking with the force of it.

Liam just sat there. Watching. Breathing. Holding it. And then—he smiled. Something slow. Something dangerous. Something heartbreaking.

“No, you don’t,” he whispered.

And fuck him— Because he was right. That day itself, I did whatever I could to pretend I wasn’t thinking about him. That shameless, infuriating, insufferable idiot. I went out with friends. Ordered food I

didn't even feel like eating. Walked through every store in the mall like I had some grand purpose, like I was on a mission to fill my mind with anything but the sound of his voice. I even bought things I didn't need. A new perfume, some earrings, a book I'd probably never read—anything to prove to myself that I had moved on. That Liam no longer occupied space in my mind.

But God, my mind was a traitor. Because no matter how hard I tried, he was there. He was there when I saw a leather jacket in the men's section and thought, Liam would look good in that.

He was there when I saw a stupid joke printed on a mug and thought, Liam would've laughed at that.

He was there when I caught my reflection in a store window and—God help me—thought about how he had looked at me today.

And then it happened.

The betrayal. The ultimate act of treason. I caught myself smiling. Not just any smile. Not a polite, absentminded one. Not the kind you give when you remember something mildly amusing.

A real one. A genuine, hopeless, doomed kind of smile.

And all because—

Because—

I swallowed hard, my face heating. Because I was thinking about him. About Liam.

About how he shaved and dressed well, wearing that crisp white shirt he always looked unfairly good in, with his sleeves rolled up just enough to be distracting. I hated how good he looked today.

I hated that my brain had catalogued it, had stored away every little detail like I would ever need it.

The sharp line of his jaw. The way his hair was styled, neatly pushed back but still a little messy, like he had run his hands through it too

many times. The way his stupid blue eyes had locked onto mine, so steady, so unapologetically Liam.

And worst of all—

The way he had smiled when I screamed at him. Like I hadn't just cursed him to hell.

Like he had won. My grip on my shopping bag tightened.

"No," I muttered under my breath, walking faster, gritting my teeth.

I wasn't smiling. I wasn't. I was angry. Furious. Absolutely done with him. And if I felt anything else—if something warm had curled in my chest at the memory of him—

Well.

That was nobody's business but mine.



## CHAPTER 31

Liam

If someone had told me a year ago that I'd be sitting across from a woman I had no interest in, nodding along to a conversation I wasn't even hearing, all while thinking about another woman who probably wanted to set me on fire—I would've laughed. And yet, here I was. Trapped. In the worst kind of hell. A date. A date I had no idea how I ended up in.

“—so I told him, ‘Please, as if I would ever wear something off the rack.’”

I blinked. “Uh-huh.” The woman—Madison? Morgan? Mia?—laughed like I'd said something brilliant. She tossed her perfectly styled hair over her shoulder, flashing me a flirtatious smile that would've probably worked on any other guy. But I wasn't any other guy. I was a man whose thoughts were currently elsewhere.

Or more specifically—on someone else. Emily.

God, Emily. I had spent the whole day convincing myself that I wasn't going to chase her. That I wasn't going to do anything desperate just because she had touched me today, had looked at me like she still cared—like I still mattered. And yet, the universe had a sick sense of humor. Because here I was, sitting across from a woman who was very much not Emily, while my brain kept replaying every second of our last conversation. The way her eyes had darkened when I flirted. The way

her lips had parted—like she wanted to yell at me or kiss me. The way she had stormed off, furious, frustrated—beautiful.

“Liam?”

I blinked. Shit. She was still talking.

“Sorry,” I muttered, forcing a polite smile. “What were you saying?”

She pouted a little, like she was trying to be cute. “You’re totally distracted.”

Yeah. No shit. I didn’t even want to be here. It had started with a favor. A huge fucking misunderstanding. Nate, my so-called best friend, had been begging me for weeks to go on a double date with him and his girlfriend’s friend. Some socialite, someone who “totally had a thing” for me. I had told him, repeatedly, that I wasn’t interested. But somehow, he had manipulated me into showing up under the false pretense of helping him pick out a watch for his anniversary.

And now I was here.

With a woman who wouldn’t stop talking about herself.

“Anyway,” she said, flipping her hair again, “I was thinking, after dinner, we could get drinks somewhere quieter? Just the two of us?”

I exhaled slowly. God. I should’ve shut this down earlier. I should’ve made it clear that I wasn’t interested. But my patience was already hanging by a thread, and I had zero energy to play along. So, I gave her my best charming-but-not-interested smile.

“I actually have an early morning tomorrow.”

She pouted. “Boo. You’re no fun.”

I was already halfway through planning my escape. A polite excuse. A quick getaway. Something that would get me out of this nightmare before I lost the last shred of my patience.

And then—

“The girl over there is staring at me.”



At first, I barely registered the words. Too busy calculating the fastest way to leave without being a total asshole.

But then she touched her lips, tilting her head slightly. “Is my lipstick okay?”

Something in my brain clicked. I stilled. Because—wait. I glanced up. And there she was. Emily. Standing a few feet away, holding a shopping bag in one hand, a coffee in the other, looking like she was either about to throw the drink at me or turn and walk away like she had never seen me in her life. My stomach dropped.

God, she looked—

I clenched my jaw.

Fucking furious.

Her eyes were sharp, locked onto me like she was mentally stabbing me in the throat. But underneath all that—underneath the tightly crossed arms and the perfectly blank expression she was forcing—was something else. Something sharp. Something dangerous.

Jealousy.

And maybe—just maybe—that should not have made me feel as ridiculously smug as it did. But it did.

“Oh my God, do I have something on my face?” The woman across from me—Madison, Mia, whatever—giggled, brushing her fingers over her cheek.

I barely even looked at her. Because I was too busy watching Emily. Too busy watching the way her nails tapped once against her coffee cup before she turned on her heel—like she had seen enough. Like she was going to leave.

And that—

That was not happening.

Before I could even think, I moved. Before I could stop myself, I reached out—

And tucked a strand of Madison's hair behind her ear. Slowly. Intentionally.

The way I knew would drive Emily crazy.

And oh—

Oh, it worked. Because she froze. Because her grip tightened on her coffee. Because her lips parted, and for a second—just a split second—I saw it. The way her expression cracked. The way her chest rose sharply, like she had just sucked in a breath she didn't even realize she needed. The way she looked at me like she wanted to kill me and kiss me and scream at me all at once. It was perfect.

So I leaned in just a little, letting my fingers linger against Madison's hair. "It's fine," I murmured. "You look perfect."

Madison giggled again, eating it up. But I wasn't paying attention to her anymore. I was looking at Emily. At the way her jaw clenched. At the way her gaze burned. At the way she spun around so fast and walked off like she had somewhere important to be. I smirked. God, she was so easy. And I was going to regret this later, I really was—

But for now? For now, watching Emily fume as she walked away? Absolutely worth it. And for a second, I thought that was it. That I had pushed just enough to get under her skin, but not enough to make her turn back.

But then— She did.

She came back. Storming straight toward me like a goddamn hurricane, her coffee cup forgotten, her shopping bag swinging at her side. And I barely had time to brace myself before she stopped right in front of me, eyes blazing.

"You know what, Liam?" she said, voice dangerously even.

I arched a brow, tilting my head. "What, sweetheart?"

Her nostrils flared. “You are the most insufferable, arrogant, infuriating—”

Madison made a small, confused sound from across the table. “Uh—”

Neither of us acknowledged her. Because Emily was too busy glaring daggers at me. And I was too busy enjoying every second of it.

“Go on,” I said smoothly. “Don’t stop now. I was really enjoying that list.”

Her jaw ticked. God, she was pissed. Good. She should be. Because if I had to sit through a pointless date, then she was going to suffer with me.

“You think this is funny?” she snapped.

I let my lips curve up into a slow, lazy smirk. “A little.”

Her fingers curled into fists at her sides, like she was seconds away from launching that coffee at my face. And I—

I would’ve let her. Would’ve let her ruin my shirt, my hair, my entire night—just to watch that frustration spill out of her. Because at least that would mean she cared.

Fuck.

This woman was going to be the death of me. And I was going to love every second of it.

Emily’s breathing was sharp, uneven, like she was trying to hold something back—rage, maybe. Or something else entirely.

“Act like an adult,” she snapped, her voice tight.

I tilted my head. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

Her eyes flashed.

“I thought—” She stopped, inhaling sharply, as if she couldn’t believe she was even having this conversation. “I thought you changed.”

I swallowed, forcing a smirk. “You think about me that much, huh?”

She let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “I should’ve known,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I should’ve known you’d still be the same arrogant, self-obsessed asshole.”

I shrugged, but my grip on the table tightened. “Well, sweetheart, you always say I’m predictable.”

“Predictable?” She scoffed. “You’re pathetic, Liam.”

Ouch. That one actually stung. I opened my mouth to throw something back at her—something sharp, something harmless—but before I could, she turned her glare onto Madison.

Oh. Shit.

Madison—who had been sitting there the whole time, completely frozen, her gaze bouncing between us like she had just stepped into a war zone. Her eyes darted toward me, like I was supposed to step in and explain whatever the hell was happening. I didn’t. Because there was no way in hell I was stopping this.

Emily took a step closer, her fingers twitching like she was barely resisting the urge to grab me—or drag me out of here by the collar.

Madison finally found her voice. “I—uh, I don’t—”

“Who the hell are you?” Emily cut in, her voice dangerously even.

Madison blinked. “I—what?”

Emily huffed out a humorless laugh. “Are you deaf? I asked, who the hell are you?”

Madison’s brows furrowed, her confusion slowly shifting into something annoyed. “I’m Madison,” she said, like it was obvious. “And you are—?”

Emily’s jaw tightened. “Not someone you need to worry about.”

Silence. Heavy. Suffocating.

Madison’s mouth parted slightly, her eyes snapping to mine. “What?”

I didn’t answer. Because what the fuck was I supposed to say?

Emily exhaled sharply, and then—before I could even process what was happening—she turned to me, grabbed my face with both hands, and kissed me.

And holy shit—

It wasn't just a kiss. It was a statement. It was hard, demanding, desperate—like she was trying to prove something, to herself, to Madison, to me.

And I— I let her. I let her take whatever the hell she needed from me, let her pour all that frustration, all that jealousy, all that undeniable want into me. When she pulled back, her breathing was uneven, her eyes burning into mine like she was daring me to call her bluff. Then she turned to Madison, smoothing her shirt like she hadn't just kissed me like she wanted to devour me whole, and said, clear as fucking day—

"I'm his girlfriend."

Silence.

Madison's mouth fell open, her expression flickering between shock and indignation. "Excuse me?"

I blinked. "Yeah, excuse me?"

Emily shot me a sharp look, her grip on my collar tightening like she might actually strangle me right here in the middle of the restaurant. "Shut up, Liam."

God, I liked her so much.

Madison let out a disbelieving laugh, eyes darting between us like she was trying to solve some kind of complicated equation. "You're his girlfriend? Since when?"

Emily squared her shoulders, lifting her chin like a queen preparing to issue a royal decree. "Since always."

My lips twitched. Oh, this was going to be fun.

"Since always?" I repeated slowly, letting the words roll off my tongue like I was savoring them. "That's interesting, because I could've sworn you called me pathetic about thirty seconds ago."

Emily's nails dug into my arm. "Shut. Up."

I grinned. Madison was still staring at her, probably calculating the likelihood of Emily being completely insane. To be fair, it was a reasonable reaction.

"You never mentioned a girlfriend," Madison pointed out, crossing her arms.

I hummed. "Didn't I? Must've slipped my mind."

Emily turned her glare on me. "Unbelievable."

I smirked down at her, letting my fingers trail lightly along her wrist. "What? You're the one who just made a very public declaration of love. I'm just trying to keep up."

She looked like she wanted to throw me into oncoming traffic.

Madison made a disgusted noise. "This is ridiculous. If you had a girlfriend, why the hell would you agree to a date with me?"

That was actually a valid question, but before I could answer, Emily did it for me.

"Oh, please," she scoffed. "He was just being nice. It's not his fault you couldn't take a hint."

Madison gasped. "Excuse me?"

I barely suppressed my laugh. God, this was amazing.

Emily turned back to me, lifting a brow in challenge. "Are we leaving or what?"

I should've teased her. Should've made her sweat a little more. But honestly? She had just kissed me senseless, declared herself my girlfriend, and effectively ruined Madison's night all in the span of two minutes.

She had earned this win. So, instead, I shrugged and reached for my wallet, throwing a few bills onto the table. "Yeah, sweetheart. Let's go."

Emily didn't even wait for me to stand. She just grabbed my wrist and dragged me away like I was her personal property. And I, I let her. With a huge smile on my face. Emily yanked her hand out of mine so fast, I barely had time to react before she shoved me—hard.

"Don't you dare look at me like that!" she snapped, her voice shaking, her eyes burning.

"Like what?" I asked, more amused than I should be.

"Like you—like you actually care!" she hissed, pointing an accusing finger at me. "I hate you, Liam. You—You bloody idiot, you miserable excuse of a man, you pathetic, insufferable, arrogant, smirking piece of—"

I blinked. "Ouch."

She let out a growl, actually growled, before shoving me again. "Don't touch me! Don't even come near me, you bloody—" she cut off, searching for a word vicious enough before settling on, "—you cocky bastard! You heartless, brainless, soulless, good-for-nothing, lying son of a—"

"Alright, alright," I laughed, putting my hands up in surrender. "I get it, you hate me."

"You don't get anything!" she shouted, her voice cracking. "I cried for you, Liam! Do you hear me? Two months! Two goddamn months, wondering what the hell I did wrong, wondering why you just—just disappeared like I didn't even matter!"

My smile faded. Her chest was heaving, her fists trembling. She was furious. Beyond furious. But underneath it all—

She had been hurt. Badly. I swallowed, watching her, my heart twisting in a way I wasn't prepared for.

"Emily," I started.

"Don't," she snapped, stepping back. "Don't you dare say my name like that. You don't get to—You don't get to act like you care now."

I clenched my jaw. "I do care."

Her laugh was sharp and bitter. "Oh, yeah? Funny way of showing it, asshole."

I exhaled slowly, running a hand through my hair. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Well, you did." Her voice broke on the last word, and she immediately turned away, swiping at her face like she could erase the tears before I saw them.

I took a step forward.

"Em—"

"Don't," she snapped, voice raw, shaky. "You don't get to call me that."

I stopped. She stood there, breathing hard, hands clenched into fists at her sides. I could see it—the way her shoulders trembled, the way her lips pressed together like she was trying to hold everything in, but it was spilling out anyway.

"You don't just get to show up after two months and act like—like nothing happened," she said, her voice cracking, anger and heartbreak bleeding together. "Like you didn't leave me. Like you didn't break me."

Something in my chest tightened. "Emily, I—"

"Shut up!" she yelled. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" She shoved me again, harder this time, her nails digging into my shirt like she wanted to claw the words right off my skin. "You don't get to explain! You don't get to stand there and look at me like—like I'm the one being unreasonable!"

I let her push me. Let her scream, because I deserved it.

"I hated you," she choked out. "Every single day, I told myself I hated you. I wanted to hate you. But I couldn't. And that—that was the worst part."

My throat felt tight.



"I missed you, Liam," she whispered, shaking her head. "God, I missed you so much it physically hurt."

My hands twitched at my sides. I wanted to touch her. Pull her in. Tell her everything I should've said before. But she wasn't done.

"But I hate you," she spat. "For making me feel like this. For making me care even when I don't want to."

I swallowed. "Emily—"

"Don't." Her voice was thick with unshed tears. "Don't try to fix this with your stupid smirk and your cocky little comments and your stupid charm. It won't work this time."

I stayed silent. She took a shaky breath. Then another. And then, just when I thought she might leave—

She took a step closer.

"You want to make it up to me?" she whispered, eyes locking onto mine, fury and pain flickering beneath them. "Then prove it."

I stared at her. She didn't blink. Didn't move.

And just like that, I realized—this wasn't just anger. This wasn't just a fight. This was a test.

A challenge. A demand. I had left. I had hurt her. And now? Now, she wanted to see if I was going to stay.

So, I did something stupid. Reckless, idiotic, completely unnecessary—and yet, somehow, the only thing that made sense in that moment. I climbed up onto the nearest parked vehicle—some random truck in the middle of the street—and stood there, towering over everything like I was about to deliver the most important speech in history.

Emily froze. "Liam," she said slowly, voice laced with pure horror. "What the hell are you doing?"

I spread my arms wide. "To the world!" I shouted, loud enough that people on the street turned to stare. "I, Liam Carter, am an absolute idiot!"

Emily's jaw dropped. "Oh my god—"

"And I am in love with Emily Parker!" I continued, ignoring the fact that a passing couple actually clapped. "I am in love with her! And I am so sorry for being the biggest dumbass to ever walk this planet!"

Emily's face turned as red as a tomato, and she looked like she might either melt into the ground or throw a punch at me. Honestly, I couldn't decide which.

"Seriously, Liam?" she snapped, hands on her hips. "This is your grand gesture? Climbing onto random trucks and screaming like you're auditioning for a reality TV show?"

But I wasn't done. Oh no, I was on a roll now.

"And," I added dramatically, "I've been a jerk. A complete jerk. But no more! From now on, I'm gonna be the kind of guy who shows up when he's supposed to, doesn't act like a total idiot, and doesn't keep secrets. Also, I'm really bad at keeping secrets. So, yeah, let's just put it all out there. Emily, I'm sorry for every stupid thing I've done to you. You're not just some girl—I mean, you're the girl, okay? So... deal with it."

I struck a pose, like I'd just delivered the world's greatest speech. A car honked behind me, pulling me back to reality. I quickly scrambled off the truck, nearly tripping on the way down. I dusted myself off like I had meant to do that.

Emily's expression was a mix of disbelief and confusion. "Liam, you are the biggest idiot I've ever met."

I grinned. "Yeah, but you're still gonna kiss me, right?"

She paused, giving me a deadpan stare. "After that performance? You've earned a kiss—but I'm not sure it's the one you want."

I waited, heart racing like I was in some cheesy romance movie. She stepped forward, put a hand on my shoulder, and pulled me into a quick, absolutely unromantic headlock.

"That," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "was the most embarrassing thing I've ever witnessed. I'm actually questioning your intelligence right now."

She took a step closer, her lips curling into a teasing smile. "Oh, you want a kiss, huh?" she said, her voice low, deliberately drawing out the words.

My heart skipped a beat, but I kept up the act, trying to sound confident despite the sudden shift in the air. "Yeah, that's the least you could do after I humiliated myself for you. But I guess, if you're too shy, I can always—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Emily leaned in, her nose brushing against mine as she hovered just close enough to drive me crazy. I could feel the warmth of her breath on my lips, and for a split second, I thought she might actually do it. But then, with the kind of mischievous glint in her eyes that made me wonder if she was truly evil, she pulled back just enough to leave me hanging.

"You really think I'd make it that easy for you?" she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

I froze, unable to find the words. "Wait, are you...?"

Her grin grew wider, and she crossed her arms over her chest, eyes dancing with amusement. "You want a kiss? You're gonna have to work for it, Liam."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're cruel."

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the moment I realized that sometimes, being a complete moron wasn't a disaster. It was the perfect way to start something new. Even if that something was a totally weird, completely unpredictable, and slightly embarrassing romance.

The worst thing about happiness is that it makes you forget to be careful. I should've known better. Should've remembered that nothing good ever lasts, not really. But for the first time in what felt like forever, life was normal again.

I was happy. Stupidly, blissfully happy. The kind of happy that sneaks up on you, that settles into your bones so naturally you forget what it was like to live without it. The kind of happy that makes everything seem lighter, makes the world look softer, like maybe—just maybe—things were finally falling into place.

Emily and I had somehow, miraculously, figured things out. No more screaming at each other like lunatics (okay, maybe a little screaming, but the fun kind, the kind that ended in laughter or stolen kisses). No more cold shoulders or carefully chosen words meant to hurt. No more walls between us, no more pretending we didn't care when we both knew damn well that we did. She still called me an idiot every day, but now she kissed me afterward, so I figured we were making progress. And God, I was in deep. I hadn't even realized how much I wanted this, her, until I had her. Until I woke up and she was still there, curled up in my t-shirt, stealing my pillows, looking at me like maybe she felt it too.

It was terrifying in the best way.

Loving Emily wasn't soft or easy. It was chaos, loud and messy and too much, but I loved her in a way that made me want to be better. I loved her in a way that made me forget every single reason I shouldn't. Maybe that's why I didn't see it coming. Maybe that's why I ignored the warning signs, the nagging feeling in the back of my mind that something was off. Because for once, I didn't want to question it. I didn't want to be suspicious or guarded or waiting for the inevitable fallout.

I just wanted to be. With her. But happiness makes you reckless. It makes you believe you're untouchable, that the universe isn't just waiting for the perfect moment to remind you that good things don't come without a price. And I was about to learn that the hard way.

It started with a box. A completely ordinary, boring, nothing-to-see-here box. Except—it wasn't.

Because it had my name on it. Liam Carter.

I blinked. Then blinked again.

I was alone in Emily's apartment, because at this point, I basically lived there. She'd gone out to get coffee, which meant I had at least twenty minutes—maybe more if she decided to fight the barista about caramel drizzle distribution again. So I was lounging on her couch, considering a quick nap, when I saw it. A small, taped-up cardboard box shoved into the corner of her bookshelf, covered in dust like it had been sitting there for years.

I shouldn't have cared. I should've looked away. But my name. My name. On a dusty old box. In Emily's apartment. And look—I'm not a snooper. I respect boundaries. But there's a huge, massive, screaming difference between invading someone's privacy and investigating something that literally has your own damn name on it.

So yeah. I grabbed it. Peeled the tape off.

Inside were papers. Old, slightly crumpled documents, a few pictures, and... a notebook.

A very used notebook.

The pages were messy, filled with rushed scribbles, things crossed out and rewritten. Some of it looked like it had been written in a frenzy, like someone had stayed up all night, gripping the pen too hard, writing and rewriting and—

My name.

I froze.

There it was, scrawled over the pages. Again and again.

Liam

Liam Carter, October 3rd—left gym at 6:42 PM. Went to Murphy's Diner. Ordered usual (burger, no pickles). Alone. Stayed till 7:20 PM.

Wait. What? I kept flipping, my pulse speeding up. More notes. More details about me.

Things I barely remembered doing—but they were right.

November 15th—woke up late. Didn't make bed (as usual). Breakfast: coffee, toast (burnt, because he sucks at toasters). Left apartment at 9:37 AM.

Okay, hold on. How the hell did she—? I turned the pages faster now, my breath uneven. My stomach felt weird, like I'd swallowed something cold and sharp.

More notes. More little observations.

Liam doesn't like his food touching. Makes a face when people chew too loud. Hates mustard. Always forgets his umbrella.

And then—

The pictures. Not normal pictures. Pictures of me. Some were old—stuff from my social media.

But others? Others were recent. Too recent. A shot of me grabbing coffee last week. Alone.

A picture of me at the gym, where I knew for a fact Emily had never gone with me. One of me in my car, taken from... somewhere.

And then—

I stopped breathing.

Because the last one—

The last one was of me sleeping.

What the actual—

I dropped the notebook like it had burned me. My hands were shaking. My brain refused to process.

No. No, no, no. This—this wasn't—

Emily wouldn't—

Would she?

I stared at the mess in front of me, my entire world tilting sideways. There had to be a reason.

A logical, sane, non-serial-killer reason for this. Maybe it wasn't even hers. Maybe she was keeping it for someone else—no, that's worse.

Maybe it was—

Then I saw the last page. One sentence. Simple. Casual.

"Does he suspect anything yet?"

I forgot how to exist. I forgot how air worked. I just stood there, my body ice-cold, my mind screaming. Does he suspect anything yet? Oh, I don't know, Emily. I don't know. Maybe he fucking does now. I backed away. My legs felt weak. My skin crawled like something invisible had slithered over it. This wasn't a joke. This wasn't a prank. This was real. And Emily—Emily, who kissed me slow, who stole my fries, who fought baristas over caramel drizzle—

Emily had been watching me. Before I even knew her. The doorknob turned. I snapped my head up, my heart punching my ribs. The door swung open. Emily stepped inside, two coffee cups in hand, her face brightening when she saw me.

"Hey, you won't believe the fight I had to—"

She stopped. Her eyes flicked to the open box. To the notebook. To me. And for a fraction of a second—just a flicker, just a breath—I saw it. A shift in her face. A tiny, careful calculation. Like she knew. Like she understood exactly what I had just found. Like she was already thinking about what to do next. And in that moment, with my pulse thundering in my ears and my whole body screaming at me to run, I realized something that made my stomach drop straight to hell. I was in love with a girl who had been watching me long before I ever saw her.

The room felt smaller. Too small. Like the walls had moved an inch closer, like the air had thickened just enough to make breathing feel like work. My chest felt tight, my pulse a frantic, uneven drumbeat in my ears. And Emily—Emily was still standing there, framed by the doorway, holding two coffee cups like nothing had changed. Like I hadn't just stumbled upon something that made my skin crawl. Like she wasn't watching me. She looked... normal. The same Emily I knew. The same furrow in her brow, the same questioning tilt of her head, the same soft, patient confusion like she was trying to piece together why I looked like I'd just seen a ghost.

Except now—now I knew the truth.

Emily wasn't normal. Emily had a box with my name on it. Emily had pictures of me. Emily had been watching me, writing about me, following me long before I ever knew she existed. And now—now she knew I knew.

"Uh... Liam?" Her voice was light, even. Like she didn't notice the way my hands were trembling, the way my grip on the edge of the couch was the only thing keeping me from tipping over.

I couldn't answer. I couldn't move. My whole body had locked up, my brain screaming for me to do something—run, fight, speak, anything—but all I could do was stand there, feeling the slow, creeping realization settle deep in my bones.

I had two options.

1. Pretend. Act normal. Act like I hadn't just uncovered some nightmare-level shit and wait for the right moment to leave.

2. Panic.

Guess which one I chose.

"You know what's crazy?" I blurted, my voice too loud, too high, too wrong. "Boxes. Yeah. Just—wow. Boxes, man. You ever think about how much stuff people put in them?"



What the fuck was I saying.

Emily blinked. "...Are you okay?"

I laughed. Too fast. Too sharp. "Me? Yeah! Totally! Just, uh—" I gestured at the mess of photos and papers scattered across the floor. My face. My handwriting. My life. "Wow, you're so... organized. Keeping, uh... notes. Love that. Normal girlfriend things. Haha."

She didn't move. Didn't blink. Her head tilted slightly. And that's when I realized—she was watching me. Not just looking at me. Studying me. Like she was waiting. Measuring. Calculating. Waiting to see what I'd do. Something cold slithered down my spine. I needed to get the fuck out. Now.

I forced another laugh. "Actually, you know what? I forgot—I, uh, left my oven on. At home. In my apartment. That I totally live in."

Emily's eyes flickered. "You don't own an oven."

I froze.

FUCK.

"Right, right. Haha. I meant—uh. My stove."

"You order takeout."

OH MY GOD.

"Yeah, but, uh, one time, I tried to cook! And I left it on! Gotta go fix that! Bye!"

I took a step forward. Emily took a step sideways. Blocking the door. My stomach plummeted.

"Wait," she said.

My pulse skipped. "What?"

She glanced at the open box. Her expression was unreadable. Careful.

"Did you open that?"

I swallowed. My throat was dry. My tongue felt heavy.

Lied through my fucking teeth. "Nope!"

Her eyes didn't leave mine.

"Then why do you look like you just saw a ghost?"

I let out a wild, broken laugh. "Ghost? Haha! That's crazy."

Emily didn't smile. She stepped closer. Too close. Too calm. And that's when I realized—she wasn't surprised. She wasn't scrambling for excuses. She wasn't scared that I'd found it. Because she had never planned on hiding it from me forever. She had been waiting for this moment. Waiting for me to find out. Waiting to see what I'd do. I took a step back, knocking into the couch. My heart slammed against my ribs, hard enough that I was sure she could hear it. Emily tilted her head, her eyes shining with something I couldn't name. And then she smiled. Slow. Knowing. Like she had already seen this moment play out a thousand times. Like she already knew exactly how it would end. And in the softest, sweetest voice, she said—

"I was hoping you'd find it."

The air felt thicker—heavy in my lungs, pressing against my ribs. Emily was still standing there, still watching me, still blocking the only way out. Her words rang in my ears. No. No. No fucking way. This wasn't happening. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. Emily was my annoying, stubborn, sarcastic girlfriend who stole my fries and made fun of my music taste and argued with baristas over caramel drizzle. Not... this. Not someone who had a box full of my life. Not someone who had been watching me before she even knew me. My mouth was dry. My hands were shaking. My brain was still trying to rationalize this, to tell me there was some kind of explanation. Because there had to be. Right?

"You're joking." My voice was unsteady, and I hated it. I cleared my throat, forcing out a laugh. "This is some—some weird joke, right? You—" I gestured at the fucking nightmare in a box. "You're messing with me."

Emily didn't answer. She just smiled. That slow, calm, terrifying smile. And suddenly, the room felt even smaller. I took a step back. She didn't

move, but I could feel her watching every single inch of my body. Calculating. Measuring. Something was wrong. Deeply, horribly wrong.

"You're freaking me out," I admitted, because my heart was hammering, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep standing here pretending I wasn't about to pass out. "Seriously. Just tell me this is a joke, Emily. Because this—" I pointed at the pictures, the notebook filled with my name, the photo of me sleeping—

Jesus Christ.

"You're overreacting," she said.

I almost laughed. "Overreacting? Oh, I'm sorry, do most people have a fucking stalker scrapbook in their living room?"

Emily's expression didn't change. She just tilted her head again, like she was studying me.

"You're not scared of me, are you?" she asked softly.

That voice. It was sweet. Too sweet. Like she was coaxing me into saying what she wanted to hear.

Like she already knew the answer. I swallowed hard. Do not panic.

"You know what? I just—I just need air," I said, forcing another laugh. "This is—look, I get it, you're weird, I'm weird, maybe this is just a—thing, but I just need to step out for a second."

I tried to move toward the door. Emily shifted with me. I froze. She wasn't smiling anymore.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

My pulse skyrocketed. I nodded. "Yeah. Just for a sec. Just to, you know. Breathe."

"You can breathe here."

Oh. Oh, fuck. This wasn't real. This wasn't Emily. This was someone else. Someone I didn't know.

Someone who had been watching me for a long time. I could still see the notebook, open on the couch. My name. Over and over. Dates. Notes. Details I had never told her.

Emily didn't just know me. She had been studying me. And she didn't want me to leave.

I took another step back. Slowly. Carefully. Her fingers tightened around the coffee cups.

"Liam," she said, too soft. "Why are you acting like this?"

Her voice—her tone—it was so normal. Like I was the crazy one. Like she wasn't the one with proof that she'd been following me for God knows how long. I needed to get out. Now.

I forced a smile. "I just—I just need a second, Em. I just need to wrap my head around this. That's all. Not mad. Not scared. Just... need a second."

I was lying. We both knew it. She tilted her head again. And then, slowly, she reached into her pocket. I didn't wait to see what she was pulling out. I ran. I ran like my fucking life depended on it.

I ran. I didn't think. I didn't breathe. I just ran. Out the door, down the hallway, nearly tripping over my own feet. I didn't even know where I was going, just that I needed to get out. My heart was slamming against my ribs, my pulse roaring in my ears. My brain was short-circuiting, malfunctioning, fucking collapsing in on itself because WHAT. THE. FUCK.

Emily was—Emily was not Emily. She had a box. With my name on it. With photos of me. With notes. With dates. With a fucking notebook full of me.

And she had said—

"I was hoping you'd find it."

WHAT THE FUCK DOES THAT EVEN MEAN.

I hit the stairwell, taking the steps three at a time, lungs burning. My hands were shaking so bad I could barely keep my grip on the railing. I needed to think. I couldn't think.

I needed to call someone. The police? My best friend? A therapist? A fucking exorcist?

Who the hell do you call when your girlfriend of six months turns out to be your stalker?

I hit the ground floor, pushed through the doors, and stumbled into the street. Night air. Space. Freedom. I bent over, hands on my knees, trying to breathe, trying to make my brain work.

Okay. Okay. Let's process this.

1. Emily has been watching me for a long time.
2. Before we even met.
3. She has pictures of me. Not normal ones. Creepy ones.
4. She has a notebook about me. With dates and details I don't even remember about myself.
5. She knew I'd find it. She was waiting for me to find it.
6. She blocked the door when I tried to leave.
7. I ran like my soul was on fucking fire.

Conclusion: I am so deeply, unimaginably, brain-breakingly fucked.

I straightened, dragging a hand down my face, heart still trying to punch its way out of my chest.

I needed to go home. Lock my doors. Change my fucking name. I started walking, fast, trying to pull my phone out of my pocket with hands that wouldn't stop trembling. That's when I felt it. That creeping, unshakable feeling. Like I was being watched. I froze. Slowly, slowly, I turned my head.

And there—across the street, in the shadows of the building—

Was Emily. Standing. Still. Watching me. Not chasing. Not calling after me. Just standing there. Like she knew exactly where I was going. Like she was letting me run. Like this was all part of the plan.

I turned. I sprinted. I didn't stop. I didn't look back. And for the first time in my entire fucking life—

I knew true fear.



## CHAPTER 32

Emily

Love. It's what Liam is to me. And when you love someone—truly, deeply, completely—you're ready to go as far as it takes. Even when they don't understand. Even when they run. Even when they look at you like you are something terrible. Because love is patience. Love is devotion. Love is knowing someone better than they know themselves.

And Liam?

He's mine.

He has always been mine. Even before he knew it.

I watch him now. The way he trembles. The way his back is pressed against the cold brick wall of his apartment complex, chest rising and falling with frantic, shallow breaths. His eyes are wild, darting between me and the dark, empty street, like he's calculating if he can make a run for it.

Oh, Liam. Sweet, sweet Liam. There's nowhere left to run. His hands are clenched into fists, white-knuckled, like he's bracing for something. For me. I don't like that. I don't like that he looks at me like this, like I'm a danger, like I'm something to escape from. I'm the safest place he could ever be. But he doesn't understand that. Not yet.

"You don't have to be afraid," I say softly, taking a step forward.

He flinches. That hurts, but I smile anyway.

"You think I'm afraid?" His voice is shaking. Raw.

I tilt my head. Of course he is. He just doesn't understand yet.

"You ran from me," I say, my voice steady, gentle. "Like I'm some stranger. Like we aren't—" I place a hand on my chest, pressing down, feeling my own heartbeat. Feeling the truth inside me. "—meant for each other."

His jaw tightens. His breathing is uneven, ragged, like he doesn't know if he should scream or bolt. Poor thing.

"I don't—" He stops, swallows hard, struggling to find the words. "Emily, what the hell is wrong with you?"

I laugh. Soft. Sweet. Because that's funny, isn't it? What's wrong with me?

"Liam," I whisper, stepping closer. Too close. His back presses harder into the wall, his body going rigid. Nowhere left to go.

"Don't you get it?" My voice is gentle, like I'm explaining something simple to a child. "There's nothing wrong with me. I just love you. That's all."

His face twists. Disgust? Horror? Oh, love. You'll see.

"I—" He shakes his head, like he's trying to clear it. Like this is something he can just snap out of.

"You had a box. Of me," he says, voice strangled. "You—you wrote about me before we even met. You followed me. Took pictures."

I sigh. "Of course I did."

His breath stutters. Like that wasn't the answer he wanted. I smile. Soft. Understanding.

"Liam, you know how people say, 'Love at first sight?'"

His fists tighten.



"I didn't have that," I continue, voice gentle. "Because I didn't see you first."

I take another step. He doesn't move. He's frozen now, staring at me like a deer caught in headlights.

"I knew you first," I say, letting the words sink in. Letting him feel them, taste them, let them settle under his skin. "I knew you before we even spoke. Before you ever said my name. And when I saw you—when I finally saw you—"

I inhale. Let the feeling wash over me.

"It was like breathing for the first time."

Liam shakes his head. His throat bobs like he wants to say something, but he doesn't. He can't.

Because he's starting to understand. Because part of him—a small, hidden, terrified part—knows I'm telling the truth.

He tries anyway. "Emily—" His voice cracks.

I step closer. His whole body tenses. Ready to run. But he won't. Not now. Not anymore.

"You're scared," I say gently. "I get it. It's a lot to process. But love—real love—" I press my hand to my heart, eyes locked onto his. "It doesn't come easy. It takes work. Effort. And I've put in the work, Liam. I've been there for you before you even knew I existed."

He shudders. "That's not—" He shakes his head, voice breaking. "That's not love, Emily. That's—obsession."

I tilt my head. I let the word sit between us. Let him hear it. I can feel his fear. Thick in the air. Tangible. Delicious. But fear is just the first step, isn't it? Fear turns into understanding. And understanding turns into acceptance. Slowly, I smile.

"Then I guess," I whisper, leaning in just enough that he can feel the warmth of my breath, "you belong to my obsession."

His breathing stops. He's shaking. So, so beautifully shaking. He looks at me like he doesn't know if I'm going to kiss him or kill him. And isn't that just the best kind of love?

His whole body pressed against the cold wall, like he can force himself through it, disappear into the bricks, escape me. I watch him. Study the way his throat moves when he swallows, the way his fingers twitch at his sides, the way his breath stutters, uneven and harsh. Poor thing.

I sigh, tilting my head. "You don't see it yet, do you?"

His eyes flicker—something wild, desperate. "See what?" His voice is hoarse. Tired. Like he's been running for miles, only to realize there's nowhere left to go.

I step forward. Just a little. He tenses. I want to reach out. I want to touch him, soothe him, help him understand. But not yet.

"I'm not your enemy, Liam," I whisper. "I never was. I'm the only person who's ever truly loved you."

His laugh is sharp, broken. "This isn't love, Emily."

I sigh again, softly, almost pitying. "You're upset. I get that. It's overwhelming, isn't it? Realizing someone has been watching over you, protecting you, guiding you, without you even knowing?"

His jaw tightens. "That's not what you were doing."

I smile. "Isn't it?"

His breath shudders.

"You think you met me by accident, Liam?" I take another step. His back presses harder against the bricks. He's cornered, and he knows it.

I drop my voice lower. Gentle. Reassuring.

"You didn't," I say. "It was never an accident. I made sure of it."

His eyes widen. Fear. Horror. A slow, creeping realization. Good.

"Do you remember your old apartment?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. But the flicker of something in his expression tells me enough.

"Apartment 3B," I say, voice soft. "You moved in two years ago. Alone. Fresh start. That's what you told people, right?"

His fists clench at his sides. He's barely breathing.

"You always forgot to lock your windows," I continue. "Always left your blinds just a little open. You were so careless, Liam."

His mouth parts. He's trying to find something to say, something to throw back at me, to deny it.

I don't let him.

"I used to sit outside your building," I confess. "Not in a creepy way! Just—just watching. Making sure you were okay. Making sure you got home safe. I mean, how could I not?"

His entire body is locked in place, like he's afraid if he moves, I'll pounce.

"Sometimes, you left your door unlocked." I sigh, smiling at the memory. "That was stupid, Liam. So stupid. Anyone could have walked in."

"You—" His voice is so raw it scrapes. "You were inside my apartment?"

I nod. "Not for long, though! Just... little visits. Little moments."

I watch him, gauging his reaction. The way his face drains of color. I wonder if he's remembering.

The misplaced objects. The subtle shifts in his things. How sometimes, his coffee tasted just a little different. I wonder if he ever woke up in the middle of the night and felt me there. I step closer. Close enough to touch.

"You were lonely," I whisper. "I could tell. And it broke my heart. Because I knew—I knew I could be everything you needed."

His breathing is ragged. Panicked.

I smile, my chest swelling with warmth, with love. "So I waited. I was patient. I watched. I learned you. And then... I made my move."

I smile, my chest swelling with warmth, with love.

"So I waited. I was patient. I watched. I learned you. And then... I made my move."

"Because I knew your weakness. You weren't easy to make fall. You were stubborn, closed off, always keeping people at arm's length. And I understood that. I admired it. It made you a challenge, something worth chasing. But I also knew why. You were grieving her. Oh, Clara. The ghost that lived in your head, the wound that never quite closed. You thought you loved her. You thought she was your forever. But I was your forever. She was just in the way. So I made sure she stayed away.

Not just her. Every girl who came close to you. They were careless, all of them. Clueless. They didn't see what I saw. They didn't understand that you weren't theirs to have".

"So I played. I removed each and every one of them from your life. The girls who went missing?

The ones whose names barely made the news? The ones you forgot even existed?

They didn't know. They didn't know they were trespassing. They didn't know they were stepping into something that wasn't meant for them. So I took care of it. And I made sure you never, ever suspected me. I let you believe you were in control. I let you think you were the one making choices, pulling away from them on your own. But no, love. It was always me."

"And when I saw you alone—truly alone, starting to notice me, only me—I knew it was working.

But I had to be careful. I had to make sure you didn't just like me. I needed you to need me.

So I created a problem only you could solve. I wrote letters to myself. Horrible, ugly things. Ugly enough to make you care. Ugly enough to make you worry. I left them in my apartment, in places I knew you'd find them. Stained them with tears—real ones, because I meant every word”

And it worked, didn't it? You started to look at me differently. Like I was fragile. Like I needed you.

Even though we fought—oh, how we fought—you still watched over me. I could feel it, the shift. The way your guard lowered, the way your concern slipped through. And that wasn't enough.

“So I did it again. More letters. More threats. I made it worse, worse enough that you had no choice.

You had to protect me. You had to let me in. And you did. Oh, Liam. You did. Everything you loved, I learned. Everything you needed, I became. I molded myself for you.”

His hands are shaking. His breath is short. "Jesus Christ."

I frown. "Why do you look so scared? You should be grateful. Do you know how rare this is? How rare it is to find someone who loves you enough to do all this? Who cares enough to make sure you're never alone?"

He doesn't respond. His throat works, but no sound comes out. I take another step. Almost touching.

"You might not understand now," I whisper. "But you will. Love takes time. And I have all the time in the world for you."

His hands twitch. Like he's about to push me away. Run. I can't have that. I reach out before he can, my fingers brushing his jaw, tilting his face toward me. He flinches under my touch, but I don't pull away. He has to feel it.

"One day," I whisper, soft, soothing, "you'll look back on this and wonder why you were ever afraid."

His breathing stutters. I stroke my thumb across his cheek, tender. "One day, Liam, you'll thank me."

I smile. And then I lean in, pressing my lips to his ear, breathing him in.

And in the softest, sweetest voice, I whisper—

"I was always meant to find you."



## CHAPTER 33

Liam

Oh.

Oh, what the fuck.

I stare at her. At Emily. At the girl I thought was just my annoying, chaotic, infuriating maybe-girlfriend. Turns out, she's also my personal psycho. My heart is slamming against my ribs. My mouth is dry as hell. My brain? Fully shutting down.

Because WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK DID SHE JUST SAY?

She's smiling at me like she just confessed something cute. Like she just admitted she steals my hoodies when I'm not looking, not that she's been single-handedly orchestrating the most terrifying shitshow of my life.

"You—" My voice cracks. "You—you wrote the threats."

Emily nods. Like this is a normal conversation. Like we're discussing fucking dinner plans.

"Mhmm. And I did a really good job, didn't I? You were so worried." She sighs, pressing a hand to her heart. "I could tell you cared, Liam. Even when you pretended not to."

I blink. I stare. I physically malfunction.

"Emily," I say, very, very carefully. "You—" I point at her. Then at myself. Then at nothing, because none of this makes sense. "You made up a whole-ass psycho stalker... so that I'd feel bad for you?"

Her smile widens. "Not just feel bad. Protect me. Want me. Need me."

Oh. OH. This is it. This is where I die. Not from a serial killer. Not from a tragic accident. From sheer, mind-shattering, aneurysm-inducing insanity. I scrub a hand over my face, trying to breathe. Trying to process the fact that every girl who ever liked me is either dead or missing. That my biggest fucking enemy has been my own girlfriend. That Emily—the person I trusted, the person I kissed, the person I let into my fucking apartment—has been ruining my life like it's a fun little project.

I start laughing. Because what the hell else do I do? It's not even a good laugh. It's hysterical, broken.

"Oh my god," I wheeze. "You're insane. You're—holy shit."

Emily giggles. GIGGLES.

"Liam, don't be dramatic." She tilts her head, like I'm the one being unreasonable. "It's just love."

Oh. Oh, great. She's insane and delusional. Perfect.

I take a deep breath. Okay. Okay, Liam. Think. Think.

"You know," I say, forcing a smile, "most girls just—I don't know—flirt? Maybe buy me coffee? But no, no, not you. You go full kidnapper documentary. That's... different."

Emily pouts. Actually pouts.

"Well, flirting wasn't working," she says. "You're so stubborn. You don't make it easy."

"OH, I'M SORRY," I say, losing my goddamn mind. "DID YOU EXPECT ME TO JUST—JUST FALL INTO YOUR ARMS AFTER YOU ERASED EVERY OTHER WOMAN FROM MY LIFE?"

Emily shrugs. "I mean... yeah. Eventually."



I'm going to pass out. I press my back harder against the wall, looking for an escape route. Any escape route. Maybe if I run fast enough, I can jump out the window. Would it be worth the broken bones?

...Yes. Yes, it would.

Emily steps closer. Her eyes are soft. Loving. Terrifying.

"You don't have to be scared," she murmurs. "I'd never hurt you."

I snort. Unhinged. Maniacally. "Oh, right. Just everyone else?"

She sighs, rolling her eyes. "Liam, you're being dramatic again."

"Dramatic? Dramatic?" I gesture wildly. "I—Emily, you have a BOX. OF ME. WITH MY NAME ON IT. WHAT PART OF THIS ISN'T DRAMATIC?"

Emily crosses her arms, fully unimpressed.

"You know, I expected a little more gratitude," she huffs.

Gratitude. GRATITUDE.

"Emily," I say, blinking at her like she's grown seven heads, "you are quite literally my worst fucking nightmare."

She laughs. ACTUALLY LAUGHS.

"Oh, Liam," she sighs dreamily, stepping closer. "You always know just what to say."

I am so, so unbelievably fucked. I started to think. Not something smart. Not something useful. No, my brain—my poor, traumatized, short-circuiting brain—latched onto the stupidest possible thought at the worst possible moment.

Emily's kinda pretty.

FUCK.

No. NO. Bad brain. Bad. This is not the time for that. This is the time for survival. The time for escape. The time to run as fast and as far as possible from the certifiably insane woman who has, apparently, been

ruining my life in the name of love. And yet. Yet. I watch her. Watch the way her face softens, the way she looks at me with something terrifyingly close to adoration. Watch the way she tilts her head, like I'm her favorite thing in the world.

And I realize—

She really, truly believes this. She believes she's the hero in this story. She believes she's doing this for me. And that? That's somehow more terrifying than if she were just evil.

"You're thinking something," Emily hums, studying me. Too closely. "Your face does that thing when you think."

I blink. "What thing?"

She grins. "That dumb little furrow between your brows."

I reach up, scowling. "I do not have a dumb little furrow."

"You do. And it's cute."

I drop my hand. This is not happening. I take a breath. Try to refocus.

"Emily," I say, voice shaking, "you need help."

She giggles. I blink. What the hell kind of response is that?

"Aw, Liam," she sighs. "You always were so funny."

I stare. "I'm not joking."

"Neither am I." She takes a step closer. I freeze. "I mean, look at us. We fight, we banter, we drive each other insane—but it's fun, isn't it?"

No. NO, IT'S REALLY, REALLY NOT.

Emily sighs, shaking her head fondly. "I always knew you'd be difficult," she muses. "You're too smart, too stubborn. You don't fall easily. And you were grieving her—"

Clara.

Oh, fuck.

I don't want to ask. I really, really don't. But the words slip out before I can stop them.

"What did you do to her?"

Emily tilts her head. Casual. Innocent. A lie.

"I made sure she stayed away."

I swallow. My throat feels like sandpaper. "And... the others?"

Emily sighs, like this is all so exhausting for her. Like I'm the one being difficult.

"They didn't know you were mine." She shrugs. "So I played."

Played.

Played. That's... that's a hell of a word choice. Like this was fun for her. Like she was winning some twisted game. Like the bodies of missing women are just pawns on her creepy little love chessboard.

I stare at her. She stares right back, so utterly, blissfully unbothered. I blink. Slowly.

"Played," I repeat, just to make sure my brain isn't actively hallucinating.

"You're saying that you—"

I pause, swallowing down the absolute panic attack brewing in my soul.

"You got rid of anyone who got close to me... for fun?"

Emily sighs. Actually sighs. Like this conversation is so, so draining for her.

"Not for fun," she corrects, like that's the issue here. "For love. There's a difference, Liam."

I.

I think I might actually die.

"Emily," I start, very, very carefully, "how, exactly, did you 'get rid' of them?"

She hums, tilting her head. "Do you really want to know?"

NO. GOD, NO. And yet—I have to. I have to know how deep this goes.

I nod, throat tight. "Yes."

Emily watches me for a moment, then smiles.

Soft. Sweet. Absolutely batshit terrifying.

"Well," she starts, tapping her chin, like she's reminiscing about an old vacation, "Some were easy."

A little nudge, a little push in the right direction. Some anonymous messages, some inconvenient accidents. One got a sudden job opportunity out of the country. Another had her car break down in the wrong place at the wrong time. A few, well..." She giggles. "A few took more effort."

I stop breathing.

"Effort," I echo, because that's all my brain can muster.

Emily nods. "Mmm. I had to be creative. But you never noticed, Liam." She grins. "I was so good, wasn't I?"

My stomach turns. My hands shake. I was living with my own personal horror movie villain. I was sleeping next to someone who has literally committed crimes for me. And worse? I never even noticed.

"I—" My voice cracks. I have no idea what I was even gonna say. I rub a hand down my face. "Emily, do you—do you even understand how fucking insane this is?"

She blinks at me. Then laughs.

"Liam," she says, like I'm the one being unreasonable, "it's just love."

My eye twitches. It's just love. I cannot deal with this right now. I take a step back. She takes one forward.

"Hey, hey—okay, let's—let's not do that," I say, hands raised. "Let's just—let's stay still, yeah?"

Emily pouts. "Why are you scared of me?"

WHY AM I SCARED OF HER? OH, I DUNNO, MAYBE BECAUSE SHE JUST CASUALLY CONFESSED TO BEING A LIFETIME MOVIE VILLAIN?

"Scared?" I laugh. It's completely unhinged. "No, no, Emily, scared isn't the word. I am—" I gesture wildly. "I am deeply, profoundly, and fundamentally fucked up over this."

Emily rolls her eyes.

"Oh, please," she scoffs. "You're being dramatic."

"Dramatic? Dramatic?! Emily, people are missing."

She shrugs. "And now, nobody else can take you away from me."

I.

I think I need therapy.

I take a deep breath, trying to think. Trying to find a way out of this without dying.

"Okay," I say, very, very slowly. "So. Let's say, hypothetically, that I... don't want you to do that anymore."

Emily narrows her eyes.

"Hypothetically?"

I swallow.

"Yes."

She tilts her head, considering. "Why?"

WHY?

"Emily, do you really need me to answer that?"

She sighs, then smiles. "Fine. I won't."

I blink. "Wait. Really?"

She nods. "Mhmm. Because now..." She steps closer, trapping me against the wall. Her voice drops to a whisper. "Now, I have you."

Oh.



## CHAPTER 34

Emily

Liam looks at me like I've just killed his puppy. Like I'm some horrific nightmare. Like I'm not the best thing that's ever happened to him. It's... frustrating. I thought he'd get it. I thought he'd see. How much I love him. How much I've done for him. How much I've sacrificed just to make sure he'd never have to doubt—never have to feel alone.

Because he was alone, wasn't he? Clara left him. They all left him. But not me. Never me.

I studied him. I learned him. I became everything he needed. And now that he knows, he should be relieved. He should be mine. But instead, he's shaking. His hands are curled into fists, his whole body pressed against the wall like I might eat him alive. I take a step forward. He tenses.

I smile.

"Oh, Liam," I sigh, touching his cheek. He flinches. My heart squeezes.

"I would never hurt you," I whisper.

His throat bobs. "You already have."

My fingers still. For a moment—just a moment—something inside me cracks. Because he doesn't understand. He doesn't see it yet. I did this for him. I did this because I love him. I breathe in.

I shove the hurt away. I will make him see.

"You need time," I murmur, brushing his hair back. "That's okay. I can wait. I've always waited, haven't I?"

Liam swallows. He looks like he wants to bolt. It's cute.

I smile, leaning closer. "You're mine, Liam. And I'm yours. No one will take you from me."

His breath shudders. I tilt my head.

"Say it," I whisper.

He hesitates. Just for a second. Just long enough for his instinct for survival to kick in.

"...I'm yours."

A slow, delighted shiver crawls down my spine. There it is. The beginning.

I smile. Oh, Liam. So smart. So stubborn. So mine.

I let my fingers trail down his jaw, feeling the tension in them, the way he's holding himself together with shaking hands and shallow breaths. He's afraid. And he should be. But not of me.

No. Never me. I press my lips to his cheek, soft. Loving. A promise.

"You'll see," I whisper.

Liam doesn't move. Doesn't breathe. He's so still, so stiff, like if he stays perfectly frozen, maybe this will all just go away. But it won't. Because I'm not going anywhere. I step back, just a little. Enough to give him space. He needs that right now. Needs time to process, to understand. But I see it already. The shift. The way his brain is working. Calculating.

Liam is trapped. And he knows it. He thinks he's still playing this game with me. That if he says the right things, acts the right way, he can get out of this.

He can't. But I'll let him try. It's cute.



"You should sleep," I murmur, running a hand through his hair. He flinches again. Breaks my heart, really. But that's okay. We'll fix that in time.

Liam doesn't respond. So I tilt his chin up. Make him look at me. My sweet, beautiful, terrified boy.

"You trust me, don't you?" I whisper.

His lips part. For a second, I think he might say something stupid. Something that will force me to do things the hard way.

But Liam's smart. So, so smart.

He nods. "I trust you."

Oh. My heart does this little, fluttery thing. Because he said it. And even if it's a lie, it's a start.

"Good boy," I murmur.

His jaw clenches. He looks like he wants to throw up. I giggle.

"Come on," I say, taking his hand. "Let's go to bed."

Liam doesn't resist. He lets me lead him. Lets me have him.

Because for now—

He knows there's no other choice. Liam walks beside me, stiff as a board, like he's trying not to breathe too loudly. Like I might snap if he does. How funny. He's always been the loud one. The one who grumbles, bickers, throws sarcasm like a dagger. But now? Now he's quiet. Now he's thinking.

I love when he does that. I squeeze his hand as we step into the bedroom. He doesn't squeeze back, but that's okay. He will. Eventually. I guide him to the bed, sitting him down. He doesn't move. Just sits there, staring at nothing, his fists clenched in his lap like he's keeping himself from doing something reckless. I reach out, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead. He flinches again, just a little. Patience, Emily.

I give him a soft smile. "You're tired."

No response.

I hum, pressing my palm against his cheek. "You need sleep, Liam."

He finally looks at me then. Eyes flicking to mine, searching, hesitating.

I tilt my head. "You trust me, right?"

A flicker of something in his gaze. Something sharp.

But then—

"Yeah," he mutters. A lie.

I grin anyway. Because even lies can turn true.

"Good." I press a kiss to his forehead before standing up. "Get some rest."

He doesn't move.

I sigh, stepping back. "Fine. Stay up all night if you want. Just know I'll be right here."

I move to my side of the bed, lying down, watching him. I can tell he wants to run. To fight.

But he won't. Not yet. Not until he thinks he has a plan. That's what I love about him.

He's always thinking. Always planning. Always trying to win. I close my eyes, smiling to myself.

That's okay. Let him think he can. Because in the end— He was mine before he ever knew it.

His whole body tenses, like he's trying to fight it—fight me. But he won't. Because deep down, he knows. I've already won. Liam's hands clench into fists, his jaw tightening, his breathing uneven.

His whole body is screaming at him to run, to push me away, to hate me.

But he doesn't move. Because he can't.

I press my forehead against his, whispering, "Tell me you don't love me, Liam. Say it, and I'll let you go."

His breath is ragged. His hands tremble.

"I—" He stops, swallows hard, tries again.

"You ruined my life," he whispers instead.

I smile. "I made it better."

He laughs. A sharp, broken sound.

"Better?" His voice cracks. "Emily, people are dead. I—I thought someone was trying to kill you. I—I almost lost my mind."

I run my fingers through his hair, soothing. Loving.

"You cared," I murmur. "You wanted me safe. You let me into your life, your home—your heart."

He jerks back, eyes wild. "Because I was manipulated! You—" His voice breaks, and he shakes his head violently, like he's trying to wake up from a nightmare.

"You made me think I was protecting you," he whispers. "You—you let me believe you were in danger, and the whole time..." His breath stutters.

"You were the danger."

I grin. God, he's so close to understanding.

I tilt my head, watching the chaos in his eyes. The fear, the anger, the grief—all tangled up with love.

Yes. Yes, my love, feel it.

"I was never the danger, Liam," I whisper, leaning in. "I was just keeping you safe. Safe from them. Safe from making a mistake. Safe from anyone who wasn't... me."

His whole body shudders, and for a second—just a second—he closes his eyes. And I know.

I still have him. Maybe he'll fight it. Maybe he'll hate me. Maybe he'll curse my name for the rest of his life. But he's mine. He always will be. I reach for his hand again, threading our fingers together, feeling his pulse hammering beneath his skin.

"Tell me to leave," I whisper. "Tell me you want me gone."

His fingers twitch. He doesn't pull away.

"You don't get to do this to me," he breathes, voice so raw it hurts.

I smile, tilting my head. "But I already did."

His throat works. His lips part. And he doesn't say it. Because he can't. Because he still wants me.

And that? That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.



## CHAPTER 35

Liam

I need to get out of here. I need to survive. But Emily is Emily. She doesn't let go of what's hers. And, apparently, I'm hers. So... if I can't run, I have to play along. I force my body to relax, even as my skin crawls. I make my breath even, controlled. I meet her eyes, ignoring how they burn with something unhinged, something terrifyingly soft.

"So," I say, voice steady, casual. "Why?"

Emily tilts her head. "Why what?"

"Why did you do all this?" I gesture vaguely. To the madness. To the obsession. To the complete and utter derailing of my life. "Why go this far?"

She smiles. Not a smirk. Not a mischievous grin. A real, soft, dreamy smile.

"Because I love you."

Oh. Oh, fuck. My stomach drops. My fingers twitch, but I keep them still.

"Love," I repeat slowly, like the word itself is foreign.

Emily nods. "Yes, Liam. Love. Real love. The kind that doesn't go away." She takes a step closer.

I don't move. "The kind that stays, no matter what."

I swallow. My throat is so goddamn dry.

"And you... think I'm worth that?" My voice is lighter now. Curious. Like I'm just so confused and in awe.

(Like I'm not on the verge of a full-blown breakdown.)

Emily smiles brighter. "Of course."

"Why?" I ask. And this time, I make sure my voice is soft. Almost vulnerable. "What is there to love?"

It's bait. She's supposed to say something ridiculous. Something insane. Something I can laugh at in my head, no matter how fucked this is. But she doesn't. She looks at me. Really, truly looks at me.

And then she destroys me.

"Because you think you're impossible to love."

My breath stops. Emily takes another step, slowly, like she knows I won't move away this time.

"You pretend like you don't care. Like nothing gets to you. But you feel everything, don't you?"

I say nothing. She doesn't need me to.

"You hate being seen. But you want someone to see you anyway." Her voice is gentle. Certain. "You push people away, but you hope they come back. You pretend to be fine, but you're always waiting—waiting for someone to notice that you're not."

I blink. Hard.

"Emily—"

"And I did."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

No. No. She doesn't get to do this. She doesn't get to say things like that. She doesn't get to look at me like she knows me better than I know myself. She doesn't get to be right.

I force a laugh. "Wow," I say, shaking my head. "That's deep. You been reading poetry again?"

Emily giggles. Like I didn't just almost fall apart in front of her.

"I know you, Liam," she says, tilting her head. "Better than anyone ever has. Better than anyone ever will."

That's the problem, isn't it? She's right. She's always fucking right. That's always been the problem.

Because Emily—insane, terrifying, unhinged Emily—sees me. Really sees me. And I don't know how to fight that. I don't know how to fight someone who knows every part of me I've spent years trying to hide. But I do know how to pretend. I take a breath, force myself to relax. Smile, just a little.

"You always were too observant."

Emily grins. "It's because I pay attention. To you. To everything about you."

I need to be careful. If I push too hard, she'll know. If I act too soft, she'll believe it. I need balance. Just enough to keep her comfortable. Just enough to stay alive. So I take a step forward. Slow. Just enough to let her think she's winning.

"You think you love me," I say, voice light, teasing. "But love isn't... this, Emily."

Emily frowns. "Says who?"

I blink. "Uh, literally everyone?"

She sighs, shaking her head. Like I'm the one being ridiculous. "People say love is patient, love is kind. Love is understanding, love is selfless." She tilts her head. "But love is also selfish, Liam. It's obsessive. It's

desperate. It's cruel, sometimes. Because real love—real love—doesn't let go."

I stare at her. Because what the fuck do I even say to that? She steps closer, close enough that I can smell her—familiar, warm, intoxicating in a way that makes my stomach twist.

"You get it," she murmurs.

I keep my face blank. "Get what?"

"How love can ruin you." Her eyes gleam. "You've loved like that before, haven't you?"

Something inside me stills.

I force a laugh. "What, Clara?" I shake my head. "That wasn't love."

Emily smiles. But it's not a happy smile. It's something darker. Sharper. Something knowing.

"That's what you tell yourself," she muses. "But I see it, Liam." She leans in slightly. "I see you."

My pulse jumps. Because—fuck. She's too close. Not just physically. She's too close to the truth.

And the truth is? I'm not sure what I feel anymore. I don't know if it's anger or fear or something much, much worse. I don't know if I hate her or if I hate how much she gets inside my head.

But I do know this—

I need to get out. And fast. So I do the only thing I can. I play the game. I look at her. Let my expression soften. Let my shoulders drop, let my breathing slow. Let her believe she's winning.

"Maybe you're right," I murmur.

Emily blinks. She wasn't expecting that. Good.

"Maybe," I continue, tilting my head, watching her closely, "I've been fighting something I don't understand."



Emily stays silent. But her lips part slightly, like she's holding her breath. Like she's waiting for me to say it. So I do. I take her hand, gentle. Careful.

And I say, "Teach me, then."

Emily exhales, slow. Like she's just been handed the one thing she's always wanted. She smiles.

And I know—I'm not free yet. But I'm closer. Her hand is small in mine. Warm. Soft. Too trusting.

She stares at me, searching. Looking for any sign that I'm lying. I don't give her one. Because I'm good at this. I've spent years perfecting the art of pretending. Pretending I'm fine, pretending I don't care, pretending that my life isn't a complete mess. So I look at her the way she wants me to. I let my gaze soften, let my fingers tighten slightly around hers. Like I'm surrendering. Like I want this.

Like I want her.

"Teach me, then," I say again, quieter this time.

Emily's lips part. Her grip tightens. And then—

She smiles. It's not the usual kind. Not the teasing, smug Emily-smirk I'm used to. It's softer. Almost shy. And that—that somehow scares me more. She brings our joined hands up to her chest, pressing them over her heart. Letting me feel it race.

"You really mean it?" she whispers.

I nod. Lie through my teeth. "I do."

Emily exhales, shaky. "I knew you would," she murmurs.

I almost relax. Almost. But then—her expression shifts. Something flickers in her eyes. Something darker, sharper. Something dangerous. And before I can process, before I can brace myself—

She lets go of my hand. Takes a step back. And laughs. Not a soft laugh. Not the sweet, relieved kind. A laugh that sends ice through my veins. I freeze.

Emily shakes her head, crossing her arms. Studying me.

"Liam," she sighs, and it's almost fond. "Do you really think I don't know when you're lying?"

My heart slams.

Fuck.

Fuck.

She tilts her head, smiling.

"You're good," she admits. "Really good. Almost had me, for a second."

I force a smirk, like I'm not about to panic. "Well, you did say I was stubborn."

Emily hums. "I did."

She takes another step back. Slow, measured. Like she's thinking. Like she's deciding what to do with me. I need to act. Now. So I drop the act completely.

I let my expression twist, let my voice shake. "Emily," I say, "don't do this."

She watches me. Doesn't blink.

"Do what?"

I swallow. "Whatever you're thinking. Just... stop. Please."

Emily sighs. And for a second, just a second, something in her flickers. Something real. Something like regret.

"I don't want to hurt you," she murmurs.

I nod. "Then don't."

She exhales. "But you hurt me first, Liam."

I freeze. Emily's voice is softer now. Raw. Real. And for the first time, I realize—

She's not just talking about now. She's talking about every time I ignored her. Every time I rolled my eyes, every time I looked through her instead of at her. Every time I pretended she didn't matter.

To me, it was nothing. To her? It was everything.

"That's not—" I stop myself. Take a slow breath. Choose my words carefully. "That's not the same, Emily."

She shrugs. "It is to me."

I don't know what to say to that. Because how do you reason with someone who believes that love means ruining you? How do you convince someone that you do care—just not the way they want?

I can't. So I try something else. I step forward. Close the space between us. Let her feel my warmth, let her think I'm still trying.

"Okay," I murmur. "Then tell me what you want."

Emily blinks. I can tell she wasn't expecting that. But then—her fingers curl into my shirt. She tugs me closer. Too close.

And she whispers—

"I just want you to love me."

My stomach drops. Because the way she says it—it's not a demand. Not an order. It's a plea.

A broken, desperate, aching plea. And that—that's the moment I realize. She never had a chance.

Emily isn't just obsessed. She's lost. And I don't know if she'll ever find her way back.

I felt almost sorry for her. Almost. Because for the first time, I really looked at Emily. Not as the girl who drove me insane, not as the one who tangled herself in my life like she belonged there, and definitely not

as the psychopath who decided I was hers before I even knew what was happening.

I looked at her as... a person. A broken, desperate, terrifying person. And I pitied her.

Because this isn't how love is supposed to be. Love isn't obsession. It isn't control. It isn't ruining someone's life just to make sure you're the only one left standing beside them. It isn't... this.

But in Emily's world, it is. She never had a chance. Maybe no one ever taught her what love was supposed to feel like. Maybe she's always been like this—chasing something so violently that she can't see she's crushing it in her hands. Or maybe, just maybe... I made her this way. And that thought almost wrecks me. I swallow, my throat tight.

"Emily," I murmur.

She tilts her head, waiting. Hopeful. Like she still thinks I'll say the words she wants to hear. That I'll love her. That I'll choose her. And the worst part? I almost wish I could. Because what happens to her if I don't? Where does she go? Who does she become when there's no one left to chase?

I inhale, slow. Careful. Then I cup her face. Feel her breath stutter. See the way her eyes widen, the way she leans into my touch like I'm the only thing keeping her standing. It's so, so painfully human.

I hate that it almost breaks me.

"You don't need to do this," I say, voice quiet. "You don't have to fight so hard to make people stay."

Emily's eyes flicker. "I do."

"You don't."

She shakes her head. "You don't get it, Liam. I can't just... stop. If I stop, then—then what was it all for?"

I exhale. And that's the moment I understand. She's not afraid of losing me. She's afraid that without me, she's nothing. That if I walk away,

then she did all of this for nothing. And that's why she'll never stop. Because stopping means facing the truth—that she's been wrong this whole time. I close my eyes. Breathe. Then I pull her in. Let her press her forehead against mine, let her think—for just one moment—that I'm hers.

And I whisper, so, so softly—

"You were never nothing, Emily."

She stills. Her breath catches. And just for a second—I feel her break. I don't know what I felt for a second. It wasn't anger. Not anymore. It wasn't just fear, either, though my heart was still hammering like a war drum inside my chest. For a moment—just a moment—I forgot about the lies, the threats, the missing girls, the wreckage she had left in my life. I forgot about the fact that Emily had destroyed me piece by piece just to make sure she was the only one left to pick them up.

And all I saw was a girl. A girl who had built her entire world around me. A girl who had clawed and fought and burned everything down just to keep me standing beside her. A girl who looked at me like I was the only thing keeping her from shattering into dust. I felt everything and nothing at once. And that terrified me more than anything. Because what does that mean? What does it mean when the person who's ruined you is also the person you almost feel sorry for? What does it mean when you can't tell the difference between fear and guilt and pity and something else entirely? Emily's breath was shaky against my lips, her body warm beneath my touch. And for the first time, I felt the weight of what she had done. Not just the damage she had caused—but the weight she carried every day. Because that's the thing, isn't it?

Emily wasn't just cruel. She wasn't just obsessive. She wasn't just the monster of my nightmares.

She was a girl who was drowning. Drowning in her own mind, in her own desperate need to be loved. Drowning in the fear that if she didn't force me to stay, then I never would. And maybe she was right. Because I wouldn't have. Not like this. Not if I had a choice. But the worst part?

I didn't hate her. Not in the way I should. I should hate her with everything in me. I should rage and scream and fight and never, ever let myself feel anything but disgust.

But instead... I pitied her. And that pity felt like a leash around my throat. Because what do you do when your monster is just as broken as you are? What do you do when you realize that, maybe, she never had a choice either? I swallowed hard, my fingers twitching against her skin. Emily's eyes were glassy, her lips parted, her whole body trembling in my hands. And I thought—what now?

What the hell do I do now?

I had two choices.

One: I could push her away. I could break the illusion, break her, and watch her fall apart right in front of me.

Or two: I could play along.

I could give her what she wanted. I could pretend. I could be the thing she needed me to be... long enough to get out of this alive. And maybe it should have been a harder choice. Maybe I should have hesitated, should have weighed the morality of it. But I didn't. Because deep down, I knew—

Emily had already taken away my choices a long time ago. So I did the only thing I could.

I exhaled, soft and slow. And I looked her in the eyes.

"Emily," I murmured.

Her breath hitched.

"I—" I forced the words out, forced my lips to curl into something that looked real. "I understand now."

Her fingers clenched around my shirt.

"You do?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"Yeah," I breathed. "I do."

And for the first time in my life, I prayed I was a good enough liar. Emily's eyes lit up. I had seen her smile before—smug, teasing, victorious. But this? This was different. This was pure, devastating relief. Like she had been waiting her whole life to hear me say that. Like she could finally, finally breathe.

"I knew it," she whispered, her grip on my shirt tightening. "I knew you'd understand. You just—needed time."

I forced a smile. "Yeah. Time."

Time to figure out how the hell I was getting out of this. Time to untangle myself from the mess she had made. Because fuck, she actually believed me. Her whole body was trembling—whether from excitement, or fear, or the sheer intensity of her own emotions, I didn't know. But I knew one thing.

I had her trust now. And that was the most dangerous thing of all. I swallowed hard, trying not to flinch as she leaned in.

"You love me, don't you?" she breathed.

Oh, Jesus.

I forced myself to look at her, to not let anything slip. If I said no, she'd break. And I had seen what Emily did when she broke. So I did the only thing I could.

I played along.

"I think..." I exhaled shakily. "I think I was just scared."

Emily nodded quickly, desperately. "I know. You don't have to be scared anymore."

Her hands cupped my face, her touch gentle in a way that made my stomach twist. I had never wanted her hands on me less. But I let her. Because I had to. Because this was the only way.

"You're mine," she murmured, almost to herself. "Finally. Finally."

And fuck, fuck, fuck, I thought I was going to be sick. But I couldn't slip. Not yet. Not until I knew exactly how to get out of this without setting her off. So I did the worst thing I have ever done. I leaned into her touch.

And I whispered:

"Yeah, Em. I'm yours."

She let out a shaky breath. And then she kissed me. And I let her.

Her breath catches. And just for a second—just the briefest, most fragile second—I think I've reached her. Her hands tremble against my chest. Her lashes flutter. Her breath is warm, uneven, desperate against my skin. I think she might break apart right here in my arms, shatter into something vulnerable, something salvageable—

But then she laughs. A small, shaking, breathy sound.

And I know.

I fucking know. I didn't reach her. I only reminded her why she can't let go.

Emily pulls back just enough to look at me. Her eyes shine, bright and wet, and for the first time, I see it—the depth of it. The absolute, unwavering certainty. She doesn't just think she loves me.

She knows she does. And that—that is so much worse.

"You don't get it, Liam," she whispers, and her hands slide up, press against my jaw, thumb grazing my cheek. "You think you're telling me something I don't already know?"

I don't move. I can't.

She smiles, soft. Tender.

"You were never nothing," she repeats, voice barely above a breath. "That's why I chose you."

Her fingers tighten—just for a moment—before they slide back down, tracing the collar of my shirt, lingering.



"You're not like the others," she murmurs. "You're mine, Liam. You always were. And you know it, don't you?"

My throat is so fucking tight. Because I do. Not in the way she means it. Not in the way she wants me to mean it. But I know that this—whatever this is—was never a coincidence.

She chose me. And I—somehow, some way—let her.

Maybe it was the teasing at first, the rivalry, the way we always had to one-up each other. Maybe it was the way I never took her seriously—never even considered that she could be dangerous. Maybe it was my own fucking blindness. But the point is—she's right. And that realization is the scariest thing of all. Because if I'm hers—if I always was—then what does that make me?

I inhale, slow. Careful. Controlled. I let my hands settle on her waist, just enough to make her feel secure. Just enough to make her think—maybe, just maybe—I'm falling.

"Then show me," I whisper.

Emily's breath hitches. Her fingers curl into my shirt. Her pupils blow wide.

"You mean it?" she breathes.

I nod. Let my lips just barely graze her temple. Lie through my fucking teeth.

"I do."

Emily exhales. Shaky. Disbelieving.

Then—

She laughs. And it's not the cold, knowing laugh from before. It's soft. Delighted. Giddy.

Like she's finally, finally won. She presses closer, buries her face against my neck, breathes me in like she's memorizing me.

And I let her.

Because if I stop pretending now—

I won't make it out alive. Emily melts into me, her arms winding around my neck, her breath hot against my skin. She believes me. And that's exactly what I need. If she thinks she has me, if she thinks I've finally given in, then maybe—just maybe—I can figure out how to get out of this.

I let my hands glide along her back, slow, steady. Like I mean it. Like I want this just as much as she does. Because if I slip—if she catches even a flicker of hesitation—it's over.

Her fingers tighten in my hair. "I knew it," she murmurs, voice laced with something like relief.

"I knew you'd come around."

I don't trust myself to speak. I just pull her in, let her feel my heartbeat against hers, let her think I'm giving her exactly what she wants. And it works. She sighs, sinking into me, her body going slack with satisfaction.

That's when I realize—

She's tired. For all her control, for all the ways she's always been one step ahead, Emily is exhausted. Like she's been fighting for so long, waiting for this moment, believing in it with everything she has.

And now that she thinks she has me, she's finally allowing herself to breathe. I swallow hard, my grip on her tightening for just a second. Because for all the fear, all the realization that I need to get out of this, that I need to be smarter, a part of me aches at the thought. At the thought of what she'll look like when she realizes I don't love her back. At the thought of what happens when her dream—the thing she's been building and fighting for—shatters. And that, more than anything, scares the hell out of me. Because what does Emily do when she has nothing left to lose?

She shifts in my arms, pulling back just enough to look at me, her fingers trailing down my jaw.

"You won't regret this, Liam," she whispers. Promise threaded into every word.

I hold her gaze. I let my lips curl into a small, easy smile.

And I do the one thing I know will keep me safe.

I lie. "I know."

I hold her gaze, and I do the one thing I know will keep me safe. And wow, that was a damn good performance if I do say so myself. Meryl Streep, move aside. Oscars? Where's mine? Emily sighs dreamily, clearly eating it up, and I force myself to look at her like she's my whole world. Which, technically, she is—but more in a "this woman might kill me in my sleep" kind of way.

But then, she smiles. That stupid, radiant, evil genius smile. And something in my deeply confused, emotionally unstable heart twists.

Because another part of me—the dumb, lovesick idiot part—still loves her. Like, why? Why is my brain like this? She's been lowkey stalking me, making my life hell, possibly threatening my safety—and yet, Another part of me loved her still.

The part that enjoyed suffering. The part that saw her setting my kitchen on fire and thought, "Wow, she's really passionate." The part that watched her threaten a waiter for getting my order wrong and thought, "She's so protective." The part that heard her mumble my name in her sleep and thought, "That's cute," instead of "That's concerning, considering she wasn't even asleep."

Yeah. That part of me? That part was a moron.

Emily shifts in my arms again, resting her head against my chest like we're some kind of normal couple and not the embodiment of a psychological thriller waiting to happen.

"You're mine now," she murmurs, voice soft, almost reverent.

Ah. See, that's not entirely comforting.

I clear my throat, carefully schooling my expression into one of adoration instead of abject terror. “Of course, sweetheart.”

She hums in satisfaction, snuggling closer. This is fine. Everything’s fine. I’m not internally screaming.

Not at all. My eyes flick to the door, calculating how quickly I could bolt without setting off whatever tripwire of insanity Emily has going on in that head of hers. The problem? She’s really good at reading me. It’s actually kind of terrifying.

So I take the safe route: distraction.

“You must be exhausted,” I say, brushing a hand through her hair. “Why don’t you get some rest?” Preferably before she starts plotting a wedding or—I don’t know—a double suicide.

Her smile is soft. Too soft. “I can sleep when we’re safe.”

Great. So, never.

I force a chuckle. “Safe from what exactly?”

Emily pulls back just enough to meet my gaze. Her fingers trace my jaw, her eyes gleaming with something concerning.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” she whispers. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Okay. See. That is the kind of statement that should come with a court order. I swallow hard, every survival instinct telling me to run but my morbid curiosity—and, let’s be honest, my still very stupid heart—keeping me right where I am. Because part of me wants to ask.

Part of me wants to know just how deep Emily’s delusion runs. But the smarter part of me? The part that doesn’t have a death wish? Yeah, that part just nods. “I know you will.”

She beams at me like I just handed her the keys to my soul. Which, technically, she already stole.

“Liam?” she asks sweetly.

I brace myself. “Yeah?”

Her smile widens. Oh, no.

“I think we should move to a cabin in the woods.”

Yep. There it is.

I cough. “That’s...sudden.”

She tilts her head. “Not really. I’ve been planning it for a while.”

I blink. “You have?”

She nods, completely unfazed. “Oh, yeah. I have a whole folder. Blueprints. Potential locations. Emergency protocols.”

Ah. Yes. Of course. Emergency protocols. Totally normal. Totally sane. Totally not a sign that I should start sleeping with one eye open.

I run a hand through my hair, offering her a very calm and totally not panicked smile. “You’re so thorough, babe.”

She grins. “I know.”

And just like that, I realize—

I might never escape.

Or worse...

I might not want to.

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## Day 2: The Act of Pretending

The morning sun creeps through the curtains, painting long golden streaks across the floor. It would be peaceful if I weren’t currently contemplating my odds of survival. Emily is still asleep, curled into my side like we didn’t spend last night playing a very high-stakes game of psychological chess. Her hand rests against my chest, her breathing slow and steady. For someone who terrifies the absolute hell out of me, she sure looks angelic in her sleep.

That is, if angels could also double as certified stalkers with a talent for emotional manipulation.

I carefully, very carefully, shift her arm off me and slide out of bed. She stirs slightly, but I hold my breath, staying completely still. When she doesn't wake up, I let out a slow exhale and take my first real breath in hours.

Now. Escape. Or at least, reconnaissance. I move through the apartment, mind racing. My phone? Gone. Of course it is. My keys? Nowhere in sight. The door? Deadbolted—twice. Okay. It's fine.

I didn't expect to waltz out the front door anyway.

I head toward the kitchen, hoping to find something—anything—that could work in my favor. What I find instead makes my stomach drop.

A laptop. Sitting open on the counter. And on the screen? Surveillance footage. Of me.

My heart stops. Multiple tabs are open, each containing a different view—outside my office, my usual coffee shop, my apartment before Emily and I started living together. I swallow hard, clicking through the files, my pulse pounding in my ears. There are timestamps. Dates. Months worth of tracking. How long has she been watching me?

Then, the worst part. A folder labeled 'Plans'.

I click it open, my breath catching at the sheer amount of detailed scenarios inside.

- How to make him fall in love with me.
- How to isolate him from everyone.
- How to ensure he never leaves.

Jesus Christ.

And that's when I hear it. The soft creak of a floorboard behind me. I freeze. Slowly, I turn.

Emily stands in the doorway, watching me. And she's smiling.

“Find anything interesting?”

Her voice is as light as ever, like I didn’t just uncover enough evidence to warrant a restraining order and maybe a whole Netflix documentary.

I open my mouth, then close it, my mind racing for a response that won’t end with me getting murdered.

“Uh,” I manage. Brilliant.

Her smile widens, and she steps closer, bare feet silent against the floor. “I was hoping you’d find that.”

I stare. “You wanted me to see this?”

She tilts her head, watching me like I’m a particularly interesting science experiment. “Of course. You were always going to find out eventually.”

Fantastic. That makes me feel so much better.

I glance at the laptop screen, then back at her. “And what, exactly, was supposed to happen after I found out?”

Emily hums, tapping a finger against her chin like she’s thinking. “Well,” she says, “if things went according to plan, you’d realize how much I love you, how much effort I’ve put into this, and you’d appreciate it.”

Right. Because nothing says true love like months of surveillance and an isolation strategy.

I force a laugh. “That’s... incredibly dedicated of you.”

Her eyes light up, and for a second, I almost feel... Almost.

Then I remember the multiple levels of insanity I just scrolled through, and yeah. No. I need to get out of here. She takes another step forward. I resist the urge to step back.

“You’re not scared, are you?”

I blink. “Me? Scared? No. Never.”

“Good.” She beams, reaching out to brush a hand down my arm. “Because there’s nothing to be afraid of, Liam. I’d never hurt you.”

See, it’s funny how people say things like that right before they absolutely plan on hurting you.

I nod slowly, my pulse hammering. “Of course not.”

Her fingers tighten around my wrist, just slightly. “You love me, don’t you?”

Ah. The test. My survival instincts kick in.

I soften my expression, letting my body relax just enough to be convincing. Then, with every ounce of acting ability I possess, I lift her hand to my lips, pressing a slow, deliberate kiss to her knuckles.

“Of course I do,” I murmur.

She exhales, looking genuinely relieved. And for a split second, I think maybe—maybe—I’ve passed.

Then she tilts her head, watching me closely. Too closely.

“You’re lying.”

Oh, hell.

Her grip tightens, and this time, I do step back, my body going rigid as she takes another step forward, her eyes dark and unreadable.

“You are lying, aren’t you?” she says again, voice eerily calm. “Why would you lie to me, Liam?”

I try to laugh, but it comes out pathetic. “I’m not—”

“You hesitated.”

I open my mouth—

“And you always blink when you lie.”

Well. Shit. I swallow hard, my mind racing through all possible escape routes. “Emily—”



She moves fast. Before I can even think, she grabs the laptop and hurls it across the room. It crashes against the wall with a sickening crunch, the screen shattering on impact.

I flinch. Because Jesus Christ. When I look back at her, her chest is rising and falling fast, her eyes wild, her hands clenched into fists. She looks... wrecked. Like I just tore her world apart. And somehow, somehow, that is more terrifying than anything else.

"You don't get it," she whispers, shaking her head. "You don't get what I've done for you."

I inhale sharply. "Emily—"

"I fixed everything," she continues, stepping closer, her voice cracking. "I made sure no one could take you from me. I made us perfect."

I exhale slowly, forcing my body to stay calm. "Okay. Okay, let's—let's talk about this."

She lets out a broken laugh. "Talk about it?"

"Yes," I say carefully. "Just—just sit down with me, okay?"

Her eyes flick over my face, scanning, assessing. Then, in an instant, the storm vanishes.

She straightens, smoothing a hand down her shirt like she didn't just slam a laptop into a wall. Then, she smiles. And my blood runs cold.

"Okay," she says sweetly. "Let's talk."

I swallow hard. I might not survive this. I force my body to move, reaching out slowly—deliberately—until my fingers brush over hers. She doesn't pull away, but there's a stiffness in her posture, a sharp kind of tension that coils beneath her skin. Still, she lets me take her hand. I guide her to the couch, my own heartbeat deafening in my ears as we sit. I don't let go. Not yet. Her fingers are cold, her grip just a little too tight, like she's waiting for something—waiting for me to run, to pull away, to confirm every fear she's buried beneath her obsession. I don't.

Instead, I look at her—really look at her. At the dark circles under her eyes, at the exhaustion settling into the lines of her face. At the way her lips tremble, just slightly, like she’s barely holding it together. Like she’s been fighting for too long. And suddenly, I don’t see the Emily who’s been watching me, tracking me, planning my entire existence.

I see the Emily I once knew. The one who laughed too loud at her own jokes. The one who stole my hoodies because she claimed they smelled like me. The one who looked at me like I was the only thing in the world that made sense.

I take a slow breath, squeezing her hand. “Emily.”

She swallows, her gaze flickering over my face. “What?”

I hesitate. Then, carefully, “I love you.”

She blinks. Her fingers twitch in my grasp. “You—”

“But not this you,” I whisper. “Not like this.”

Her breath catches, and for the first time since this nightmare began, I see something real crack through the surface. Something raw and vulnerable and terrified.

I keep going, my voice steady, even as my chest tightens. “I loved the Emily who used to fall asleep on my shoulder. The one who made me playlists with songs that reminded her of me. The one who trusted me enough to be honest.”

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. “No, Liam, you don’t—”

“I miss her,” I say, cutting through her denial. “I miss you.”

Something inside her breaks.

And suddenly, so do I. Because the words are still spilling out, faster than I can stop them, rawer than I ever meant to let them be.

“I hate this,” I whisper. “I hate waking up every day wondering if I’m the fool for believing in you. I hate the way my mind is constantly screaming

at me to leave, but my heart—" My voice cracks. "My heart still aches for you."

Emily flinches, but I keep going, unable to stop. "You used to be my safe place. And now? Now I don't know what's real anymore. I don't know if I'm just another piece in your game or if some part of you—some small part—still loves me the way I love you."

She stares at me, her expression unreadable, her lips parting like she wants to say something—needs to say something. But no words come.

"I love you, Emily," I breathe. "And God help me, but I don't know how to stop."

She sucks in a sharp breath, her eyes shining, her hands trembling in mine.

And then, she finally speaks. "Liam..."

But whatever she was about to say vanishes as her face crumples, as the mask she's been wearing for so long shatters completely. And before I can think, before I can second-guess myself, I pull her into my arms. She lets out a broken sob against my chest, gripping me like she's afraid I'll disappear, like she's terrified of the truth in my words. And maybe, for the first time, she's realizing the real weight of what she's done. Of what she's lost. Of what she might still lose.

I hold her, my own heart pounding, my throat burning with emotions I don't even know how to name. And in that moment, I don't think about the plans or the tracking or the fear that still lingers in my bones.

I think about her. I think about the girl I loved. And the part of me that still, somehow, does.

And I saw it, There it is. She believed me. For just a second, I see it in her eyes—the hesitation,

the crack in her armor, the part of her that wants so desperately to hold onto this. To hold onto me.

Her fingers tighten around mine, just barely, like she's testing if I'm still real. Like she's trying to convince herself that this isn't all slipping through her grasp. And maybe that's the worst part.

Because despite everything—despite the tracking, the manipulation, the sheer terror of realizing how deep this goes—I still know her. I know the way her mind works. I know she's spiraling, her world closing in, and I know that right now, she wants to believe me. But I also know the moment that belief shatters, she's going to break.

"I would've done anything for you," she whispers, her voice cracking, like she's revealing some great, painful truth. "I did everything for you."

I swallow hard, keeping my grip steady. "Emily—"

Her breath comes uneven now, her nails digging into my skin. "Do you think I wanted it to be like this?" she asks, something frantic bubbling beneath her words. "Do you think I wanted to be this way? That I woke up one day and decided to—" She cuts off, shaking her head violently. "I had to, Liam. I had to, because if I didn't, I would've lost you."

She searches my face, her entire body trembling. "And I couldn't lose you."

Something sharp twists in my chest. I could say a hundred things. I could tell her this isn't love. I could tell her that I was never hers to keep. I could tell her that she's the reason I am leaving, that every desperate attempt to hold me tighter has only pushed me further away.

But none of that will reach her.

So instead, I do the one thing that might.

I pull her closer—just enough for our foreheads to touch. Just enough for her to feel that I'm here.

And then, quietly, honestly, I say—

"I was never leaving."

A choked sound escapes her throat. For a second, she stills. And then, she breaks. Her breath stutters, her entire body trembling against mine.

Her fingers clutch at my shirt like I might disappear if she lets go, like she's still trying to hold me in place. I feel it the second her walls collapse—the weight of all the desperation, the fear, the unbearable loneliness she's been carrying. It crashes over her, and for the first time, I don't see the calculated girl who's always been two steps ahead. I see someone lost, drowning in the chaos she built around herself, clinging to me like I'm the last steady thing in her world. Her shoulders shake. She makes a small, broken sound—one that she bites down so fast, like she's afraid to let herself feel it. And it kills me. Because despite everything—despite how wrong this is, despite how much I should be running—I still feel it. That pull toward her, that instinct to wrap my arms around her, to fix what's shattered inside her. But I can't. Not this time.

"Emily," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper.

She exhales shakily, pressing her forehead harder against mine, like she's trying to memorize this moment, to believe in it.

"I just wanted you to stay," she whispers.

I close my eyes. God.

"I know."

"I tried so hard," she breathes, her voice raw. "I did everything right. I—I made sure you'd see me, that you'd love me, that we'd be together, and still—" Her breath hitches. "Still, you don't."

My chest tightens painfully. I don't answer. Because she's right. She could've done everything, she could've played every game perfectly, manipulated every move—and still. Still, love doesn't work like that. And maybe, deep down, she knows.

Her fingers press against my chest, over my heart. "I just wanted us to be happy."

Something thick lodges in my throat. "Emily," I say again, softer this time.

She pulls back just enough to look at me. Her eyes search mine, wild and shining, like she's begging me to give her something to hold onto. But I can't lie anymore. Not about this. So I give her the truth.

"I loved you." The words feel heavier than anything I've ever said. "I did. I loved you so much."

Her breath catches, and for a second, I swear she stops breathing.

"But not like this."

She shatters. Her grip loosens. The fight, the control, the desperation—it all seeps out of her like air leaving a balloon. She blinks, swaying slightly, like she doesn't even know what to do with herself now that she's lost.

Lost me.

She doesn't move for a long time. Just stands there, her fingers still pressed over my heart, as if she's trying to feel something—maybe trying to convince herself that I'm real, that this moment is real. Then, she looks up at me. And when she does, I wish she hadn't. Because her eyes—God, her eyes—are wrecked. Hollowed out by something deeper than heartbreak, something raw and bleeding and terrifyingly quiet.

My throat tightens. "Emily—"

"No," she cuts me off, shaking her head. "I spent years trying to be enough. I learned everything you liked, everything you hated. I let you fight me, hate me, push me away, and I still—" Her breath catches. "I still loved you."

She blinks rapidly, like she's trying to hold back tears, like she refuses to let them fall.

"I loved you when you didn't deserve it. When you ignored me. When you looked at her like she was your whole world. I loved you even when you only saw me as a game, as a challenge, as something to tolerate instead of someone who—" She swallows hard. "Someone who would've burned the whole damn world down just to make you happy."

Something splinters inside me.

She exhales, unsteady. “Do you have any idea what that does to a person? To love someone so much it ruins you?”

I can’t breathe.

She lets out a shaky, broken laugh, running a trembling hand through her hair. “I did everything right,” she murmurs, mostly to herself. “I made sure you’d see me, that you’d want me, that we’d be together, and still—” Her voice cracks. “Still, I wasn’t enough.”

I feel like I’m drowning. She looks at me then, and it’s worse than anything she’s ever said—because I see it. The moment she realizes. The moment it hits her. It doesn’t matter how much she loves me.

I will never love her the way she wants. Her breath shudders. Her fingers press harder against my chest, like she’s still holding on, still hoping—

“Tell me,” she whispers, voice raw. “Tell me that, at least once, you looked at me the way I looked at you.”

My chest aches. “Emily—”

“Tell me,” she pleads. “Lie to me if you have to.”

I can’t. I can’t give her that.

The silence stretches. It tells her everything she already knew. Something in her breaks.

Her grip loosens. The fight, the control, the desperation—it all slips away, leaving her standing there, empty. She nods slowly, eyes glassy, lips parted like she wants to say something but no longer knows how. Then, she laughs. Soft. Detached. Not happy. Not even close. She tilts her head, studying me, and for the first time since this started, I realize—

I have no idea what she’s thinking anymore. A chill slides down my spine. Emily reaches up, brushes trembling fingers along my jaw—one last touch, one last moment—before she lets her hand fall away.

Then, she steps back. And when she does, it feels final. Like something has ended.

She exhales. Smiles. And turns away. I should stop her. I should say something.

But I don't. And I think that might be my biggest mistake. She walks to the door, her steps eerily calm. Too calm. And for the first time, I feel it—that sharp, twisting wrongness curling in my gut.

This isn't right. She's not crying. She's not yelling. She's not even trying to fight for me anymore.

She just... lets go. Her hand hovers over the doorknob, but she doesn't turn it yet. Instead, she speaks, her voice quiet.

"I used to dream about this, you know."

I swallow, my throat dry. "What?"

She tilts her head slightly, not looking back. "You." A soft, humorless laugh escapes her lips. "Us. I used to picture the moment you'd finally see me—not as some rival, not as someone who annoyed you, but as someone you loved. And I thought... I really thought if I tried hard enough, if I just gave you everything, then maybe—" Her breath hitches. "Maybe you'd love me back."

My chest feels like it's caving in. She finally turns to look at me, and there's something devastating in her eyes. "But love doesn't work like that, does it?"

I exhale shakily. "Emily..."

Her fingers curl into a fist at her side. "You know what hurts the most?" Her voice is barely above a whisper. "It's not that you don't love me. It's that you could have."

My stomach twists painfully.

"You let me fall," she continues, her voice soft, distant. "You let me hope. You never stopped me, never told me to walk away—even when you knew this would destroy me."



I open my mouth, but I have no words. Because she's right. She's always been right. Emily looks at me for a long time—studying me, memorizing me. Then, something shifts in her expression. Something unreadable.

She exhales. Smiles. “Goodbye love” and turns away.

This time, she doesn't hesitate. She opens the door. Steps out. And just like that—

She's gone. The second the door clicks shut behind her, something in my chest fractures. I press a hand over my face, my pulse roaring in my ears. The room feels too empty, too quiet. And I hate it.

I hate that I don't know where she's going. I hate that I don't know what she's thinking. But most of all, I hate the terrible, gut-wrenching feeling that I've just lost something I will never get back.

I should be relieved.

Fuck.

She's gone. She walked away, just like she said she would. No more games. No more manipulation. No more Emily clawing her way into my life, pulling me into her orbit like she always did. So why the hell do I feel like I can't breathe? I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, trying to shove down the tightness in my chest, the pressure building in my throat. My heart is still pounding, my body too tense, like I'm waiting for something—waiting for her to come back, waiting for her to say she didn't mean it.

But she won't. Not this time. I exhale sharply, but it doesn't help. Nothing does. The silence is too fucking loud, swallowing me whole. I tell myself this is what I wanted. That this is right. That whatever was between us—whatever this was—needed to end before we destroyed each other completely.

So why do I feel like I just shattered?

I drag a shaky hand through my hair, staring at the door like I can still see her standing there. Her voice echoes in my head, over and over. I

just wanted you to stay. I did everything right. Still, you don't. I squeeze my eyes shut. I wasn't ready to let her go. I told myself I didn't love her like she wanted, and maybe that's true. Maybe I never could. But God—God, that doesn't mean I didn't care. That doesn't mean I didn't feel something when she looked at me with those wild, desperate eyes, begging me to just give her something—anything—to hold onto.

I should've stopped her. I should've said something. But I didn't. And now she's gone, and I—

I don't know what to do with that. I don't know what to do with this ache in my chest, this suffocating wrongness curling around me, this feeling that something just ended that I wasn't ready to lose. I wipe at my face, and that's when I realize—

Fuck.

I have tears in my eyes. I don't cry. I don't fucking cry. Not for people. Not for things I can't fix.

But I'm crying now. Because I might not have loved her the way she wanted. But I loved her.

And now, I don't know if I'll ever see her again. I don't know how long I stood there, staring at it, waiting—like some part of me thought she might turn back, walk through it again, look at me with that fire in her eyes, that desperation in her voice, telling me this wasn't over.

But she didn't. She wasn't coming back.

And I—

I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't ready for the silence she left behind, for the way my apartment suddenly felt too big, too empty, too cold. I wasn't ready for the weight in my chest, pressing down so hard I couldn't fucking breathe.

I should be relieved. This was what needed to happen. She walked away, I let her go. This was right.

So why did it feel so fucking wrong?

## Day One

I didn't sleep. I lay there, staring at the ceiling, feeling the hours drag by, each one heavier than the last. My body was exhausted, my mind drained, but every time I closed my eyes, she was there. That broken whisper—I just wanted you to stay.

The way her fingers curled into my shirt, desperate, begging. That last, unreadable smile. I shoved the covers off at dawn, got up before the sun even rose. My chest felt tight, like something inside me had been wound too tightly and now it wouldn't loosen, wouldn't let go.

Coffee. A shower. A run. Distractions. I needed distractions.

But nothing worked.

I went to the same coffee shop I always did, ordered my usual. It tasted bitter, even more than usual. My stomach twisted when I saw the table near the window—the one she always claimed first, the one she used to sit at, smirking as she made me try her drink just to watch me hate it. I walked out before I finished my cup. The city was loud, people moving past me in every direction, life continuing like nothing had happened. Like she hadn't walked away, like my entire world hadn't shifted. I should feel normal. I should be fine. Instead, every corner, every street, every fucking thing reminded me of her. I saw her in the park—the one where she sat next to me once, arms crossed, telling me all the reasons I was wrong about some book she loved. I heard her in my head—her voice teasing, sharp, pushing me just enough to piss me off, just enough to make me react.

I felt her absence everywhere.

And it was unbearable.

I spent the rest of the day pretending I wasn't waiting for something. A message. A call. Anything.

But my phone stayed silent. And I hated it.

## Day Two

It hit harder today. Yesterday, I could still pretend. Pretend she might reach out, that maybe she'd send some sarcastic text, show up at my door, say something just to get under my skin.

But she didn't. She was gone. And today, I felt it. There was no pretending now. I told myself this was good. She needed to move on. I needed to move on. But my body refused to believe it.

I tried to work. Stared at my laptop, read the same emails over and over. None of the words stuck. My mind wasn't here, no matter how much I tried to force it. I tried to eat. Took two bites of something before pushing it away, my appetite gone. Tried to sleep again. Lay in bed for hours,

my body heavy with exhaustion but my mind running in circles. It was fucking miserable. And the worst part? The worst part was the realization creeping into my chest, slow and insidious. The realization that maybe, just maybe, I had loved her more than I let myself believe.

That maybe I had been lying to myself all along. Because if I didn't love her—if I never had—then why the fuck did it feel like I had just lost something I could never get back?

I must have fallen asleep at some point. Not because I wanted to. Not because I could. But because exhaustion had finally dragged me under, like a heavy wave pulling me down until I couldn't fight it anymore. And for the first time in two days, my mind shut off. No thoughts. No Emily. Just silence.

Then my phone rang. Loud. Sharp. Ripping me out of sleep so violently that my heart slammed against my ribs. I jolted up, disoriented, my pulse pounding in my ears. My hand fumbled for the phone, fingers shaking as I grabbed it off the couch. The screen was blurry from sleep, but the name—Ruby—stood out like a siren in my head.

Something was wrong.

I knew it before I even answered.

My stomach twisted, the kind of deep, gut-wrenching feeling that claws at you before your brain even catches up. Still, I forced my voice to work.

"Ruby?"

She was crying. Not the quiet, muffled kind. The broken kind. The kind that made my chest go tight, made my entire body go still.

"Liam—" A sharp inhale. Shaky. Like she could barely get the words out. "It's Emily."

Everything inside me stopped. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

"She—she got into an accident."

No.

No, no, no.

The words didn't register. They refused to register. It didn't make sense. It couldn't be real.

But Ruby's voice kept coming, cracking, breaking apart.

"It was bad. Liam, she's at the hospital—"

I didn't hear the rest. I was already moving.

---

I don't remember getting to my car. Don't remember grabbing my keys, shoving on my shoes, nearly tripping as I ran out the door. All I knew was that my hands were shaking as I gripped the wheel. That my breathing was uneven, erratic. That my heart was pounding so fucking hard it felt like it might explode. I drove like a maniac. Speed limits didn't exist. Red lights didn't exist.

Nothing existed except getting to her.

My brain wasn't working. All I could see was her face—how she had looked at me before she walked away, how she had smiled that unreadable smile, how I hadn't stopped her. I should have stopped her.

I should have done something. The guilt hit like a freight train. I let her leave. I let her walk away, alone, hurting, after everything we had been through. And now—now she was in a hospital, broken, and I—

I might lose her.

The thought made something snap inside me.

I clenched my jaw, my fingers tightening on the wheel until my knuckles turned white. Not again.

I wasn't losing her. I refused to.

~

The hospital was chaos. I didn't remember parking. Didn't remember getting out of the car.

One second, I was running through the entrance, and the next, I was grabbing the front desk counter so hard my nails dug into the wood.

"Emily," I barked. "Where is she?"

The nurse blinked up at me, startled. "Sir—"

"Emily," I gritted out, my voice raw, my body trembling. "She was in an accident—where the fuck is she?"

"Liam."

I turned so fast it made my head spin.

Ruby.

She looked wrecked. Tear-streaked, pale, barely holding it together. Something in me went colder.

I swallowed hard. "Where is she?"

Her lip trembled. "ICU."

The room tilted. My chest felt like it was caving in.

ICU.

That wasn't good. That wasn't fucking okay. I was already moving, already shoving past people, ignoring whatever Ruby was saying behind me. I had to see her. I had to know she was still here.

---

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight of her. Emily—so full of life, so sharp, so her—was lying in a hospital bed, looking so fucking small. Too pale. Too still. Wires and monitors surrounded her, the soft beeping the only sound in the sterile white room. There was blood—dried on her forehead, staining the bandages on her arm. A deep, ugly bruise stretched across her cheek.

And for the first time since I met her, she looked fragile.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and stepped closer. My legs felt unsteady, my hands curling into fists at my sides. She wasn't supposed to look like this. She was supposed to be smirking, teasing me, pushing my buttons just to get a reaction.

Not—not like this.

Something broke inside me. I sank into the chair beside her bed, my breath shaking. My fingers hovered over hers, hesitating—before I finally, finally wrapped them around her hand.

Her skin was cold.

"Emily," I whispered.

No response. No flicker of her eyes, no stubborn tilt of her mouth. Nothing. I squeezed my eyes shut, inhaling sharply. This was my fault. I should have been there. I should have stopped her.

I let her leave. And now she might never come back. The thought sent a sharp, unbearable ache through my chest. I gritted my teeth, gripping her hand tighter.

"I'm here," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "I'm right here, okay?"

She didn't move. Didn't react. I clenched my jaw, forcing back the burning in my eyes.

"I should have stopped you," I admitted, my voice cracking. "I should have told you the truth.

That I—"

I exhaled shakily, pressing my lips together. The words wouldn't come. Not now. Not like this.

So instead, I did the only thing I could.

I stayed.

I sat there, holding onto her, hoping—praying—that she would come back to me. Because I wasn't ready to let her go. And I never would be.

I don't know how long I sat there. Minutes. Hours. Time didn't feel real anymore. It was just me and Emily, and the cold, suffocating weight of what if?

What if she never woke up? What if the last words I ever said to her were not like this? What if I had broken her so badly that she didn't care anymore, that she gave up? The thought made something ugly rise in my throat. I pressed my fingers against my eyes, exhaling shakily. I wasn't the type to cry. I hadn't cried in years. But sitting there, staring at her lifeless form, my chest felt tight, my throat raw, my vision blurred. I didn't deserve to grieve. Not when I was the reason she was here.

The guilt hit me so hard I nearly doubled over. I let her walk away. I let her believe she wasn't enough. I let her break—and now, she was lying in a hospital bed, bruised and battered, while I sat here, realizing too fucking late that I had been wrong.

So fucking wrong. Because I did love her. I always had. And it was like this. It was messy, complicated, painful—full of sharp edges and missteps and things I should've said but never did.

But it was still love. And I might never get the chance to tell her.

A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it. I swiped at it angrily, my jaw clenched, my nails digging into my palms. I hated myself. I hated that I had pushed her away when all she ever wanted was to be



seen. I hated that I had let my own fear, my own stubbornness, blind me to what was right in front of me.

And now—now—it might be too late. I swallowed hard, squeezing her hand.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I didn't know if she could hear me. If the words would ever reach her. But I said them anyway.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Emily."

I dropped my forehead against her hand, breathing her in, praying to a God I wasn't even sure I believed in.

Please.

Please wake up.

Please give me one more chance.

I exhaled shakily, gripping her hand like it was the only thing tethering me to this world. She was still. Too still. The Emily I knew was never still. She was fire. Chaos. The kind of person who never let a room forget she was there. Who smiled like she had a secret, like she knew something no one else did. Who made me want to strangle her and kiss her in the same goddamn breath.

And now—this?

This silence? This emptiness?

It was unbearable.

I clenched my jaw, my throat thick with emotions I didn't know how to swallow.

"I don't care," I muttered, my voice low, raw, barely more than a whisper.

I swallowed, shaking my head, forcing the words out.

"Stalk me." My voice wavered, and I squeezed her hand tighter. "Obsess over me. Make me your goddamn world, Emily—I don't fucking care."

I let out a breath that felt like it was ripping me apart.

"I never cared."

I closed my eyes, shaking my head, everything inside me twisting into knots.

"You could've spent every second watching me, following me, making sure I never looked at anyone else—I wouldn't have given a damn."

My fingers curled around hers, desperation clawing its way up my chest.

"Because I was already yours." My voice cracked. "I was always yours."

I dragged in a sharp, unsteady breath.

"I was just too much of a coward to say it."

The admission felt like a wound splitting open. Like something raw and bloody spilling out of me, too big to shove back inside. I leaned forward, pressing my forehead against her hand, my shoulders shaking.

"Emily," I whispered. "I should've said it before. Should've told you that you never had to try so damn hard. That I saw you—really saw you—before you even thought I did."

My throat burned, and my fingers trembled against her cold skin.

"I should've told you that you didn't have to make me love you."

I swallowed, forcing down the lump in my throat.

"Because I already did."

Silence. The steady beeping of the machines. Her breath, too slow, too shallow.

I let out a shaky laugh, my chest aching.

"You're probably laughing at me right now, huh?" I muttered. "Thinking about how pathetic I sound. How I had to almost lose you to figure out the one thing you knew all along."

I exhaled, tilting my head up, my eyes burning as I looked at her.

"But you're wrong," I said quietly. "I always knew, Emily."

I let the words settle between us, hoping—praying—that somewhere, somehow, she could hear me.

"Just wake up." My voice cracked, barely audible. "Please."

I let out a slow, shuddering breath.

"Wake up, and I'll prove it."

The room was suffocating. The beeping of the machines, the sterile scent of antiseptic, the quiet hum of the fluorescent lights overhead—I hated all of it. I hated the way she looked in this bed. Small. Fragile. Wrong. Emily was never meant to be fragile. She was supposed to be sharp edges and reckless choices, a wildfire burning too bright for anyone to touch. She was supposed to be standing in front of me, arms crossed, smirking like she had already won. Not like this. Never like this.

I clenched my jaw, running a hand over my face, then through my hair, gripping at the strands like it could keep me from coming undone.

"I know you can hear me," I muttered, my voice low, rough. "So listen."

I exhaled sharply, my fingers curling into fists.

"You win, okay? You win."

I let out a bitter, broken laugh, shaking my head.

"You wanted me to see you? To chase you? To never be able to get you out of my goddamn head?" My throat tightened. "Well, congratulations, Emily, because I can't. I can't stop thinking about you. I never could."

My voice cracked, and I hated it, but I kept going.

"You wanted me to love you? I did." I swallowed hard. "I do."

The words felt like they were being ripped out of me, like they had been buried so deep for so long that dragging them out left me raw and bleeding.

"You wanted me to revolve around you?" I exhaled, shaking my head. "I already do, Emily. I already fucking do."

I laughed, but it came out wrong—choked, hollow.

"You were always two steps ahead, weren't you?" I murmured. "Knew I was yours before I did. Knew I'd fall before I even realized I was slipping."

I blinked rapidly, looking away, because if I kept staring at her like this—so still, so silent—I might lose it completely.

"You were right about everything," I admitted, my voice quiet, strained. "Except one thing."

I turned back to her, my chest tightening so much it hurt.

"You thought you had to fight for me. That you had to make me love you." I let out a slow, unsteady breath. "But you never had to, Em."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, my fingers tightening around hers.

"I was already yours."

Silence. The beeping of the monitors. Her breath—too soft, too slow. I let out a shaky exhale, pressing my forehead against her hand.

"You just have to wake up," I whispered. "Please."

The words felt too small for what I needed them to be. Too fragile.

But they were all I had left.

The world blurred around me. I didn't know how long I sat there, my fingers wrapped around hers, my body heavy with exhaustion. Time had lost all meaning—seconds, minutes, hours all folding into each other like they didn't matter. Because they didn't. Not when she was still lying there, unmoving. I'd never been good at waiting. Emily knew that. She knew how restless I got, how much I hated sitting still, how I always needed to be doing something, fixing something.

But this—I couldn't fix this.

I could only sit here, useless, drowning in every regret, every word I should have said sooner, every moment I had wasted being too stubborn, too blind, too afraid. I leaned back in the chair, rubbing my hands over my face. My throat was dry, my limbs aching from staying in the same position for too long, but I couldn't leave. I wouldn't.

Not until she woke up. Not until she looked at me with that infuriatingly knowing smirk and said, Took you long enough to figure it out, idiot.

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening. God. What if she never did? The thought was a cold knife to my ribs. I exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through my hair, then let my head drop back against the chair.

And I waited.

And waited.

And then—

A small, almost imperceptible movement.

My eyes snapped open, my breath catching in my throat.

Her fingers.

Just the faintest twitch. A barely-there shift beneath my grip.

"Emily?" My voice came out hoarse, uneven. I leaned forward so fast I nearly knocked over the chair, my pulse hammering in my ears.

Nothing. I held my breath, waiting, praying.

And then, slowly—painfully, like she was fighting her way back to me—her fingers twitched again.

My stomach twisted, hope slamming into me so hard I almost couldn't breathe.

"Emily." I whispered her name again, desperate, urgent. My hands tightened around hers, my fingers brushing against her knuckles.

She didn't open her eyes. Didn't speak. But her lips parted just slightly, a shallow breath escaping.

And I swore, in that moment, I'd never felt something more fragile and terrifyingly precious in my entire life. I bent forward, resting my forehead against the edge of the bed, my grip on her hand never loosening.

"You hear me, Em?" My voice was barely above a whisper. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

No response. But I felt it again—the faintest pressure against my fingers.

My throat burned. The second her fingers twitched again, something inside me snapped back into place—hope, panic, desperation all tangling together so tight I could barely breathe.

I shot up from the chair, gripping her hand like it was the only thing tethering me to this moment. "Emily?" My voice cracked, rough and unsteady.

Nothing.

But she had moved. I wasn't losing my mind—I had felt it.

I turned toward the door and practically ripped it open. "Doctor!" My voice came out sharper than I intended, my pulse hammering. "Somebody get the damn doctor!"

A nurse looked up from the station, startled, but I didn't care. She rushed off, and within seconds, footsteps pounded down the hall. The doctor arrived, clipboard in hand, too calm, too composed, while my entire world felt like it was barely hanging by a thread.

"She moved," I blurted out before he could even ask. "Her fingers—she—she reacted."

He nodded, immediately stepping toward her bed, checking the monitors, lifting her eyelids to shine a small light over them. The beeping of the machines felt deafening now, my own heartbeat drowning out every other sound. I stood there, useless, watching every small movement, trying to read every unreadable expression on his face.

"She's showing signs of responsiveness," the doctor finally said, his voice measured, calm.

"That's good. It means she's fighting her way back."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, but it did nothing to ease the tension gripping my chest.

"When will she wake up?" My voice was raw, barely above a whisper.

The doctor sighed, glancing at me. "It's hard to say. But the fact that she's reacting is promising. Keep talking to her. Let her know you're here."

I swallowed hard, nodding. He said a few more things—something about monitoring her, checking her progress—but my brain barely registered any of it. All I could do was stare at her, willing her to wake up. The doctor left, but I didn't move.

I sank back into the chair, my hands trembling slightly as I reached for hers again.

"You heard that, didn't you?" My voice was low, rough. "You're fighting your way back."

Silence.

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head. "Of course you are. You've never been the type to give up."

I let out a breathless, bitter laugh. "You're too damn stubborn for that."

I stared at her, the girl who had driven me insane, who had turned my world upside down, who had made me feel things I wasn't ready to feel.

And now, I was begging her to stay.

I squeezed her hand. "I'm not going anywhere, Em." My voice wavered. "So you better wake up."

I swallowed hard, pressing my forehead against her hand.

And I waited.

The days blurred together. Minutes, hours—I didn’t know the difference anymore. Time stretched and twisted in ways that made no sense, looping back on itself until all I knew was this room, this chair, the rhythmic beeping of the monitors, and the unbearable silence from her. I was losing my mind. The first night, I barely moved. I sat by her bed, gripping her hand like if I let go, she’d slip away for good. I didn’t sleep. I didn’t eat. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her in that damn hospital gown, her body still, her face pale, the Emily I knew gone.

So I stayed awake. And when the exhaustion became too much and my body finally gave in, I jolted awake minutes later, heart racing, panic clawing up my throat like I had missed something.

She didn’t wake up.

Not that night.

Not the next.

By the third day, I was unraveling.

I snapped at the doctors, at the nurses, at anyone who walked into this room and didn’t have answers.

“When is she waking up?” I demanded for the hundredth time, my voice hoarse, rough from lack of sleep and too much shouting.

The doctor sighed. “Liam, I told you—”

“Then tell me again!” I slammed my hands against the wall, frustration burning under my skin like fire. “You keep saying she’s ‘responsive’—what the hell does that mean? She moved her fingers days ago. Why isn’t she awake?”

The nurse flinched at my outburst, but I didn’t care.

I was losing her. And there was nothing I could do about it.

“Her body is still healing,” the doctor said patiently, like he hadn’t said it a million times before. “It’s a process, Liam. She’s not in a coma. She’s just—”



I turned away before he could finish. I didn't care about the medical explanations, the reassurances that meant nothing when she was still lying there, silent, distant, slipping further from me every second.

So I did the only thing I could do.

I stayed. I sat beside her, talking, whispering, pleading. Some nights, I laughed bitterly, shaking my head, calling her an idiot for getting herself into this mess. Other nights, I broke down completely, my forehead pressed against her arm, my voice cracking as I told her things I should have said a long time ago. I was reckless. Restless. One night, I stormed out of the hospital at 2 a.m., my head spinning, my body shaking. I got in my car, drove too fast down empty streets, windows down, the cold air biting at my skin, but nothing nothing could clear the weight pressing on my chest.

I ended up in front of her apartment.

Her fucking apartment.

I don't even remember getting out of the car, but suddenly I was inside, standing in the middle of her living room, surrounded by everything that was hers. Her books, her scattered notes, the stupid coffee mug she always left half-empty on the counter, the jacket she never wore hanging by the door—everything. I couldn't breathe. I stood there, frozen. The room smelled like her. Something faint—coffee, old books, the scent of her shampoo. It clung to the air, to the furniture, to me.

My eyes landed on the desk. Messy, unorganized, exactly like her. Papers scattered everywhere, notebooks stacked on top of each other, some open, some closed. And then—

A journal.

Leather-bound, the edges worn like she'd flipped through it a hundred times. It sat there, half-buried under a pile of notes, like it was waiting for me.

I hesitated. I shouldn't. It was hers—her thoughts, her secrets. The one thing she hadn't handed over to me, hadn't thrown at my feet, begging me to understand.

And yet—

My hands moved on their own, fingers trembling as I pulled it free. I sank onto the couch, heart pounding, my breathing uneven as I flipped to the first page. Her handwriting. Small, rushed, a little messy but still so her. And then I read.

Liam.

The man who never truly belonged to me, yet I built my world around him. The man who looked at me but never saw me. The man I would have given everything to, if only he had asked—if only he had wanted it. I spent days, months, years orbiting him, waiting for him to turn, waiting for him to realize. But he never did. Or maybe he did, and it just didn't matter.

I drowned in him willingly, let him pull me under, let the weight of wanting him settle in my bones until I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

But Liam was never meant to stay.

And I—

I was never meant to let go.

My stomach twisted.

I turned the page.

He was in everything. In the silence between my breaths, in the spaces between my thoughts, in the places I could never escape. I traced the shape of him in every moment, in every dream, in every version of a future that would never exist. He was the hunger I could never satisfy, the shadow I could never step out of, the storm I walked into knowing it would tear me apart.

And still, I stayed. Still, I let him ruin me. Because even in the wreckage,

he was all I ever wanted to find.

Flip.

He was mine. In ways he never realized, in ways I could never say out loud. I would burn for him. Break for him. Tear myself apart just to fit into the spaces he left behind. Even when it hurt. Even when it turned me into something reckless, something hollow, something consumed by the thought of him. He was the pulse under my skin, the weight in my chest, the ache I never wanted to be free from. And even if he never reached for me—

I would always reach for him.

Flip.

I would love him

My hands clenched around the journal

A thousand times, a thousand lifetimes. Even if it meant breaking myself to fit into the spaces he left empty. Even if it meant waiting in shadows he'd never turn to. Even if it meant loving him was a slow kind of drowning. Because he was never just a choice. He was the storm and the calm after it. The ache and the cure all at once. The only thing I could never walk away from, even when I should have.

The words blurred.

I turned the page with trembling fingers, my breath caught somewhere between a sob and silence. The ink was smudged in places, like she had traced the words again and again, as if trying to etch them deeper, as if trying to convince herself. And when I read them, I shattered.

---

I would choose him. Over and over again. Even knowing how it ends. Even knowing it would ruin me. Even if I had to scrape the love from my ribs just to make room for the pain, I would still choose him. Because loving him was never a choice. It was just a fact. Like gravity. Like

breathing. Like the way the ocean always finds its way back to the shore, no matter how many times it is pulled away.

I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my vision, but it was no use.

My throat burned as I flipped to the last entry, dated just days before the accident.

I told myself I'd stop. I told myself I'd let him go. But I never did. Because the truth was—I'd rather die a thousand times than live a single day where he was nothing to me. I'd rather tear myself apart than forget the way his voice felt like gravity, pulling me back even when I swore I'd walk away.

I'd rather burn alive than watch him slip through my fingers and pretend it didn't ruin me. Because even if he never looked back—

I never stopped looking at him.

My hands shook.

I slammed the journal shut, pressing my palms against my face, my chest heaving.

"Fuck," I choked out, my voice barely a whisper.

Tears slipped down my face before I could stop them. Hot, relentless, fucking painful. I had broken her. And I didn't even realize it. I had torn her apart piece by piece, and she had let me, smiling through the cracks, pretending it didn't hurt. I squeezed my eyes shut, but all I saw was her.

Emily.

My Emily.

Lying in that hospital bed, unmoving.

And me—so blind, so fucking stupid—too late to fix any of it.

I gritted my teeth, gripping the journal so tightly my knuckles turned white.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. But she wasn't here to hear it.

A week passed. Some days, I cried. Some days, I sat in silence, staring at her, waiting for the smallest twitch, the tiniest flutter of her eyelids—something to tell me she was still here. Some days,

I cleaned her, wiping her face gently with a damp cloth, brushing her hair back, whispering things

I never had the guts to say when she was awake. "You drive me crazy, you know that?" I'd mutter, running my thumb over her knuckles. "You always have." Some days, I did nothing at all.

And today, I was reading.

I exhaled, glancing at the book in my hands. *Gone With the Wind*.

"This is a ridiculous choice, Emily," I muttered, shifting in the chair beside her hospital bed. "Out of all the books, this is your favorite?" I flipped through the worn pages, shaking my head. "God, you're such a cliché sometimes."

She didn't answer. Didn't move. The steady beeping of the monitors filled the silence, and I clenched my jaw, gripping the book tighter.

I cleared my throat and forced myself to read. "You should be kissed, and often, and by someone who knows how."

I paused, glancing at her still face. "I bet you swooned over that line."

Nothing.

I let out a rough breath, tapping my fingers against the book. "If you don't wake up soon, Em, I swear I'll read the entire thing and ruin it for you. I'll give you spoilers. I'll make fun of the main guy, mock every dramatic scene—hell, I'll even start calling you 'Scarlett' just to piss you off."

Silence.

My throat tightened. I dropped the book onto my lap, staring at her pale face.

"Come on, Em," I whispered. "Enough of this. Wake up and yell at me. Call me an asshole, throw something—something." My voice cracked. "Just... wake up."

Nothing.

A soft knock at the door pulled me out of it. I turned just as Ruby walked in, two cups of coffee in her hands. She looked exhausted. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles, her usual sharp attitude dulled by worry.

"She's still..." she started, then trailed off, shaking her head.

I took the coffee from her with a quiet nod. "Yeah."

She sat down across from me, rubbing her hands together. "Her mom's coming soon. I told her you'd be here."

I scoffed. "Like I'd be anywhere else."

Ruby hesitated, her gaze flickering over me. "You look like shit, Liam."

I let out a humorless laugh, taking a sip of coffee. "Thanks. That's exactly what I needed to hear."

She sighed. "I mean it. When's the last time you actually slept?"

I ignored the question. "You don't have to stay, Ruby."

She shot me a look. "And you do?"

"Yes."

She exhaled, shaking her head. "You're going to lose it."

I stared at Emily. "Already have."

Ruby didn't argue. Maybe because she knew it was true.

~

People came and went. Her mom sat beside her every day, smoothing her hair, whispering to her in a soft, broken voice. Her friends visited, talking to her like she was still part of the conversation, updating her on their lives, telling her how things were dull without her. The office staff even showed up one afternoon, standing awkwardly in the doorway.

James, the guy she used to joke around with at work, scratched the back of his neck. "She still owes me twenty bucks. Tell her I'm collecting when she wakes up."

I forced out a chuckle. "Oh, I will. She's not getting out of that."

They left, and the room was quiet again. Always quiet.

---

Some nights, I did stupid things just to wake her up.

"Hey, Emily," I muttered one evening, stretching my legs out on the chair. "Remember that time you threatened to kill me if I ever messed with your coffee order again?"

Silence.

I leaned closer. "Well, guess what? I did."

I held up a cup. "Double shot espresso. No sugar. Black." I made a face. "It's awful. I don't know how you drink this crap. But I drank the whole thing, and if you don't wake up soon, I'll do it again."

Nothing.

I groaned, rubbing my hands over my face. "God, Em. I don't know what you want me to do." My voice wavered. "Do I beg? Do I yell? Do I promise you things? What do you need?"

I swallowed hard, my throat thick. "You always had a plan. You always knew what to do. So tell me. Tell me what I'm supposed to do."

No answer.

No movement.

Just the damn sound of the monitors.

I clenched my fists. "Fine. Be like that." I pulled the chair closer, resting my arms on the bed, my forehead against them. "I'll wait."

I always would.

I lifted my head, my tired eyes locking onto her face.

And just then, I realized—

There were tears rolling down her cheek.

My heart stopped. I stared, not breathing, not moving, terrified that if I blinked, if I so much as existed too loudly, I'd scare this moment away.

But it was real.

A single tear slipped down her skin, glistening under the dim hospital lights, proof that she was still here. That somewhere, in whatever quiet, unreachable place she had been trapped in, she had heard me.

"Emily?" My voice came out broken, rough from too many sleepless nights.

No answer.

No movement.

But the tears kept coming.

I shot up so fast my chair scraped against the floor. "Emily?" I grabbed her hand, squeezing it, desperate. "Hey. Hey. You're crying. That means you can hear me, right? You have to hear me."

Her fingers twitched. It was so small, so faint, that if I hadn't been watching her every second, I might have missed it. But I didn't. I saw it. Felt it. Something inside my chest cracked wide open.

I reached up, brushing her tears away with shaking fingers. "You're fighting, aren't you?" My throat burned. "You always do. You never let anything stop you. Not me, not your fears, not anything."

I swallowed, gripping her hand tighter. "Come back, Emily. Please. You can be mad at me, you can scream at me, you can tell me I'm the worst person you've ever met—I don't care. Just—" My voice broke. "Just don't leave me like this."

I thought my heart couldn't take anything more. That the worst part of this week had already happened. That I had already hit my limit.

But then, in the faintest, softest whisper—



She breathed my name.

"Liam..."

A sound ripped from my throat, something between a laugh and a sob. I stumbled forward, my forehead pressing against her hand, gripping onto her like she was the only real thing in the world.

"You scared the shit out of me," I choked out. "You hear me, Emily? You scared the absolute shit out of me."

Her fingers twitched again, weak but there, like she was trying to hold on. I squeezed my eyes shut, letting out a shaky breath.

She was coming back to me. I jolted up so fast my chair nearly toppled over, my heart hammering in my chest like it was trying to break free. My hands were shaking, my breath uneven, my entire body buzzing with something too big to contain.

She spoke.

"Emily?" My voice cracked, raw and desperate.

Nothing.

Just the quiet hum of machines, the slow, steady rise and fall of her chest. But I didn't imagine it.

I couldn't have imagined it.

I fumbled for my phone, my fingers barely working as I dialed. It rang once—twice—

"Liam?" Ruby's voice was groggy, laced with confusion.

"She talked," I blurted out, my words tumbling over each other. "Ruby, she fucking talked. She said my name. I—" I ran a hand through my hair, pacing the small space beside her bed, my heart beating too fast. "I don't know if she's awake, but she said my name. I need—fuck, I need the doctor. I need someone—"

"Oh my God," Ruby whispered, and I could hear the sheets rustling like she had sat up. "Are you sure? Liam—"

"I heard her, Ruby," I snapped, not because I was mad, but because I was terrified. What if it was nothing? What if it was some random involuntary reaction and she wasn't actually—

No. I wouldn't think like that.

I turned back to Emily, gripping her hand, my thumb brushing over her knuckles. "Em, if you can hear me, I need you to do something, okay?" My voice softened, desperate. "Squeeze my hand. Just a little."

Silence.

The longest, most agonizing few seconds of my life.

Then—

A faint pressure.

So light I almost doubted it. But it was there. She was there.

"Holy shit." My breath left me in a rush, my head spinning. "You did it," I whispered. "You—" I let out a shaky laugh, gripping her hand like she might slip away again if I let go. "Okay, okay. I'm getting the doctor. Just—stay with me, alright?"

I slammed the emergency button like a madman.

The door burst open moments later, a nurse rushing in. "What happened?"

"She spoke," I choked out. "She—she said my name. And she just squeezed my hand. She's waking up."

The nurse's expression shifted from professional concern to something softer, something almost hopeful. "Alright, let's check her vitals. I'll page the doctor."

I barely heard her.

My entire focus was on Emily.

I crouched down beside her, still gripping her hand, my heart pounding. "You scared the hell out of me, you know that?" I whispered. "I've been

sitting here for a week talking to your unconscious ass, and now you decide to wake up when I'm barely holding it together?"

Nothing.

But her fingers twitched again, like she was trying to answer.

And I swear to God, I felt my heart fucking break. The next few minutes were a blur of rushing footsteps, beeping monitors, and the doctor's voice cutting through the noise.

"Emily?" The doctor's voice was calm but firm as he checked her vitals. "Can you hear me?"

I held my breath, gripping her hand so tightly I was probably cutting off circulation.

Silence.

Then—

A soft, barely audible whisper. "Mm..."

My chest tightened.

The doctor nodded, glancing at the nurse. "She's responding."

No shit. I felt like I was going to collapse, the weight of an entire week crashing over me all at once.

The doctor ran more tests, checking her pupils, adjusting her IV. I barely heard anything he said, too focused on her. She wasn't fully awake. Not yet. But she was trying. She was here.

"Liam," Ruby's voice suddenly cut through my haze, and I turned to see her standing in the doorway, her face pale, eyes wide with barely contained emotion. "She—" She let out a shaky breath. "She really talked?"

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak. That was all it took. Ruby rushed to the other side of the bed, grabbing Emily's other hand, her fingers trembling.

“Em?” she whispered. “It’s me. It’s Ruby.”

Emily didn’t react. Not yet. But her fingers twitched slightly, her eyelids fluttering. And that was enough.

The doctor finally turned to me. “She’s coming out of it,” he said, like I hadn’t already figured that out. “It might take time for her to be fully conscious, but this is a good sign. Keep talking to her, keep holding her hand. She’s aware of you.”

I swallowed hard. “She better be.”

He gave me a knowing look but didn’t say anything. Instead, he nodded at the nurse, and they stepped back, giving us space. I let out a breath, dragging a hand down my face, my body still shaking from adrenaline. Then I turned back to Emily. And I lost it.

“Do you have any fucking idea what you just put me through?” My voice came out rough, wrecked, something between anger and unbearable relief. “I have spent a goddamn week talking to you while you just laid there doing nothing. I yelled, I begged, I even read your favorite book out loud like a lunatic—” I exhaled sharply. “And now, now, you decide to show signs of life?”

Nothing.

Just that soft, steady sound of her breathing.

I scoffed. “Typical. So fucking typical.” My grip on her hand tightened as I leaned closer, my voice dropping to something raw. “You wanna stalk me? Obsess over me? Revolve your whole goddamn world around me? Fine. I don’t care. Do it. Just—” I sucked in a sharp breath. “Just don’t you dare leave me like that again.”

Silence.

Then—

A barely-there whisper.

“Kay...”

It was so soft I almost thought I imagined it. But I didn't.

My breath caught. I looked down at her face, and this time, when her eyelids fluttered—

They opened.

I was losing my goddamn mind.

One second, she was unconscious, breaking me piece by piece with every passing hour of silence. The next, she was awake, looking at me like I was the only thing in the room that made sense.

And I—I didn't know what to do with myself. Emily fucking woke up. After a week. And what did she do? She blinked at me like she was waking up from a damn nap. Like she hadn't just put me through the worst hell of my life. Like I hadn't spent days losing sleep, losing sanity, losing my goddamn soul just waiting for her to open her eyes. And now, she was staring at me with those hazy, confused eyes, whispering my name like I was some mirage she wasn't sure was real.

I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply.

"Emily," I said, voice thick, heavy.

She blinked again, sluggish, like she was still processing everything. Her lips parted, her voice barely above a whisper.

"...Liam?"

I let out a breathless laugh. "Yeah, me. The guy you've been tormenting since the day we met.

The guy who has lost actual years off his life because of you."

Her brows furrowed slightly, like she didn't understand.

I scoffed. Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

"You don't get it, do you?" I leaned closer, gripping the edge of the hospital bed, my heart hammering inside my chest. "You—you almost fucking died, Emily."

She flinched slightly at my tone, her fingers twitching against the blanket.

I dragged a hand down my face, shaking my head. “Jesus, I—I lost my goddamn mind, Em. Do you have any idea what you put me through?”

She just stared at me, lips slightly parted, as if she wasn’t quite sure what to say. I laughed, humorless, rubbing the back of my neck. “I did crazy shit, Emily. I barely slept, I barely ate, I—

I fucking yelled at doctors, I made a scene in this hospital more times than I can count. Hell, I nearly got kicked out—twice.”

Her lips twitched, like she wanted to smile.

Oh, hell no.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Don’t—don’t you dare find this funny.”

She didn’t say anything, but her lips pressed together like she was trying so hard not to laugh.

I pointed a finger at her. “You better not laugh, I swear to God, Emily.”

Her chest shook. A small, weak sound escaped her lips—half a laugh, half a breath—and that was it.

I groaned, throwing my head back. “Unbelievable!”

Her laughter was soft, barely there, but it still did something to me. Like maybe—just maybe—

the world wasn’t completely falling apart. I exhaled, pressing my fingers against my temples.

“I should be mad. I am mad. I’m furious. I should be yelling at you about all the shit you pulled, about how obsessed you were, about all the insane things you did.”

Her lips parted slightly. A flicker of something—worry, hesitation—crossed her face.

I shook my head. “But you know what? I don’t care.”

I leaned closer, my voice raw. “I don’t care if you’re obsessed with me. I don’t care if you ruin me. Just don’t—”

Her breath caught, her lips parting like she wanted to say something, but no words came.

I laughed, hollow and shaking. “Do you even understand what you put me through?” My hands gripped the rail of the bed so tightly my knuckles turned white. “I lost my goddamn mind, Emily.

I barely recognized myself.”

She swallowed, her fingers twitching against the sheets. “Liam—”

“No.” I cut her off, shaking my head. “You don’t get to talk yet.” My throat tightened. “Do you know how many times I thought I lost you?” My voice cracked, but I didn’t care anymore. “How many times I sat here, begging you to just wake up?”

She blinked, her lashes wet. I let out a breath, shaking my head. “I talked to you every damn day. I told you everything. Every stupid thing I could think of. I even read you that dumb book you love.” I scoffed, rubbing my face. “I sang, Emily. Sang. You don’t even want to know how bad it was.”

Her lips twitched again, but this time, she wasn’t smiling.

She was crying. Silent, slow tears slipping down her cheeks. And fuck, I hated it.

I hated seeing her like this. I hated knowing she had been lying here, helpless, while I sat there completely useless, unable to do a damn thing. I hated that I still wanted to be mad at her—but I couldn’t. Because she was here. She was alive. That was all that mattered.

I exhaled sharply and reached out, my fingers brushing away her tears. “God, Emily.” My voice dropped, rough, tired. “Don’t ever do this again. I don’t care what you feel, what you think, how you convince yourself that I don’t—” I broke off, shaking my head. “I do. I do care.”

Her breath hitched, and for the first time, she looked scared. Not of me. Not of this moment.

But of what I was saying. What it meant.

I let out a short laugh, shaking my head. “You spent all this time convinced you needed to control everything. That you needed to be the one in charge, the one pulling the strings.” I leaned closer, my voice dropping. “But you never had to.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide, searching mine.

I swallowed hard. “Because I would’ve chosen you anyway.”

A strangled noise left her throat, and then—

She broke.

Her face crumpled, her hands gripping the blanket as a sob tore through her, and I—I couldn’t take it. I climbed onto the bed, carefully, ignoring the wires and IVs, and pulled her into me.

She didn’t resist. She collapsed against my chest, her fingers weakly clutching my shirt, her body trembling as she cried.

And I just held her. My hand cradled the back of her head, my other arm wrapped tightly around her, and I just—breathed her in. Her fingers gripped weakly at my shirt, and I felt it—the trembling, the hesitation, the way her breath hitched like she was afraid to speak.

I loosened my grip just enough to pull back and look at her. Her lips parted, her throat working like she was trying to say something, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Emily,” I whispered, my voice softer now. “It’s okay. Just breathe.”

Her lashes fluttered, her lips barely moving. A faint, broken whisper slipped past.

“...you... s—sang?”

I blinked. Out of everything, that’s what she managed to say?



I let out a short, breathless laugh, rubbing a hand down my face. “That’s what you’re focusing on? That?”

A weak, barely-there sound left her—something between a huff and a sigh. Her lips twitched, just a little, but her face was still damp with tears. I shook my head, exhaling. “

Yeah, I sang. It was awful.” I reached for the cup of water on the table, bringing the straw to her lips.

“Here. Drink first. You sound like a dying frog.”

She let out another faint, breathy sound—maybe a laugh, maybe a cough—but she let me help her sip. She only took a little before sinking back against the pillow, exhausted from just that. My throat tightened again. She was so weak. It hurt to see her like this.

Her lashes fluttered. “H-how... l-long...”

I swallowed. “A week.” My voice came out rough. “You were out for a whole goddamn week, Emily.”

Her brows knitted together slightly, like she was trying to process that. Her fingers twitched, like she wanted to move them, like she wanted to do something, but she couldn’t. And fuck, I saw the frustration in her eyes.

I grabbed her hand before she could even think about pushing herself. “Stop.” My voice was firm. “You just woke up. Don’t even think about doing anything stupid.”

She barely had the energy to glare at me, but she still tried. God, this girl. Even at her weakest, she was still Emily. Still the same stubborn, impossible, reckless girl who had somehow become my entire goddamn world.

She licked her lips, her voice hoarse. “You... l-lost... your mind?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Completely.”

Her gaze softened, something unreadable passing through it. Her fingers, still so weak, curled slightly against mine. I felt it. That small,

shaky squeeze. Like she was telling me, I'm here. Like she was telling me, I stayed. My chest ached. I pressed my lips together, looking away for a second, because if I didn't, I'd break all over again.

When I finally looked back at her, her eyes were already closing, her body sinking into the bed.

Exhausted.

Barely awake, barely here.

But still, her lips moved, just before sleep pulled her under again.

"Liam..."

My breath caught. "Yeah?"

A pause. Then—so soft, so faint, I almost thought I imagined it—

"...stay."

I exhaled sharply, my fingers tightening around hers. I leaned closer, my voice quiet, steady.

"I'm not going anywhere."

I slept without even realizing, I was slumped in the chair, half-asleep, looking like a complete mess.

My head jerked up at the sound of movement, and for a split second, I thought I was hallucinating again. I'd had plenty of those moments this past week—thinking she was awake when she wasn't, hearing her voice when it was just the machines.

But this time, it was real. Emily was staring at me.

Barely awake, barely focused, but definitely awake.

I blinked. "You're up again."

She blinked back, slow, dazed. Silence stretched between us.

Then—

Her lips parted, and I immediately leaned forward, ready for some grand, emotional moment.

But all she did was croak out—

“...w-water.”

I stared. That was it? That was the first thing she said? Not Liam, I missed you. Not Liam, I saw my life flash before my eyes and realized I love you more than anything in the world.

No.

Just water.

Unbelievable.

I grabbed the cup from the table, bringing the straw to her lips. “Here, Your Highness. Anything else? Would you like a five-star meal? Maybe a personal massage?”

She tried to roll her eyes, but it was so weak it just looked like a slow-motion blink.

I scoffed, shaking my head. “Unbelievable. You’ve been unconscious for a week, Emily. A week. And your first word to me is water?”

Her lips twitched like she wanted to smirk. Oh, she knew what she was doing.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t you dare laugh.”

Her body shook just a little, a weak attempt at laughter, but I saw it.

I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. “You’re actually impossible.”

She finished sipping and let out a soft breath. Her fingers twitched against the blanket, like she wanted to move more but couldn’t.

I noticed immediately.

My humor faded just a little.

“You okay?” My voice was softer now.

She swallowed, and when she spoke, it was still hoarse, still weak.

“...hurts.”

I exhaled slowly. “Yeah, I figured.”

She blinked again, sluggish, then barely lifted her hand like she wanted to motion something.

But she didn’t have the energy, so she just flopped it down.

I raised a brow. “What was that?”

She tried again. Another weak flop.

I frowned. “Are you—are you trying to fight me right now?”

Her lips parted. A tiny, tiny whisper escaped.

“...y-you...talk... too much.”

My jaw dropped.

She was mocking me? In this state?

I let out a disbelieving laugh. “You little—you can barely breathe, and you still find a way to insult me?”

She made a small sound—half a breath, half a laugh—but it drained whatever energy she had left.

Her eyelids fluttered, her body sinking back into sleep.

I sighed, shaking my head.

“Fine, whatever. Sleep, Your Highness.” I adjusted the blanket over her, making sure she was comfortable. “I’ll be here. Not that you care.”

She didn’t respond, already slipping under.

But right before she was completely gone, I swore I saw the tiniest, faintest smirk on her lips.

I stayed.

I watched her sleep again, her face finally peaceful, not as pale as before. She looked more like her—like the Emily I knew. The stubborn,

infuriating, impossible Emily who had somehow carved her way so deep into my life that I couldn't imagine a world without her in it.

I didn't want to.

I sighed, rubbing a hand down my face, exhaustion pressing against my skull. I should sleep. I should eat. I should do something other than sit here and act like I wasn't completely losing myself over this girl. But I didn't move. Because what if she woke up again?

What if she opened her eyes, and I wasn't here? No. Not happening.

So I leaned back in the chair, crossed my arms, and let my mind spiral all over again.

---

The next time she woke up, I wasn't prepared. I had dozed off for what felt like two seconds, and suddenly, I felt movement. A shift.

I snapped awake so fast my neck cracked. "Emily?"

She stirred, her brows scrunching, her lips parting slightly.

And then—

A quiet, groggy voice. "...you're still here?"

I blinked. Did she seriously just ask that?

I scoffed, sitting up straight. "Of course, I'm still here! Where the hell else would I be?"

She blinked slowly, still waking up, her lips dry.

I huffed. "You think I'd just leave after all the crap you put me through?" I gestured dramatically. "I've lived in this hospital for a week, Emily. I've had conversations with the doctors, the nurses, the janitors—hell, I even know which vending machine gives out free snacks when you punch it in the right spot."

Her lips twitched. I knew she wanted to smile.

I pointed at her. “Don’t. Don’t you dare act like this isn’t the most devoted thing anyone has ever done for you.”

Her voice was hoarse, weak. “...you talked to janitors?”

I groaned. “That’s what you got from everything I just said?”

She made a small sound—a breath of laughter—but it drained her. I saw it in the way her body sagged against the pillow, her energy fading fast.

My humor faded, too.

I leaned in, softer now. “You okay?”

She swallowed, nodding slightly, but her eyelids were already heavy again.

I sighed. “You need more rest.”

She blinked at me—slow, tired. “You... need rest, too.”

I smirked. “Please. I thrive on chaos.”

Her lips twitched again. “Liar.”

My chest tightened. She was awake. She was talking. She was here. And suddenly, I could breathe again. I reached forward, carefully brushing a strand of hair from her forehead, my fingers lingering just slightly.

“Sleep, Em.” My voice was quieter now. “I’ll be here.”

She stared at me, like she wanted to say something else, but sleep pulled her under before she could. I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

The first 24 hours after she woke up had been overwhelming—chaos, emotions, panic, relief, everything hitting me like a goddamn hurricane. But the week that followed? That was its own brand of madness.

Emily being awake didn’t mean things got easier. It meant things got insanely more complicated.

At first, she could barely talk, barely move. The doctors said it was normal—that her body was still weak, that she needed time—but I wasn't patient. Not after everything.

So, naturally, I hovered. And, naturally, she hated it.

---

Day 1

She could barely get out more than a few words before her voice gave out, but that didn't stop her from insulting me.

"Liam," she croaked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I shot out of my chair, heart slamming against my ribs. "What? What do you need? Water? The nurse? Do you want me to call your mom? Do you need me to—"

Her fingers twitched weakly as she tried to reach for me. For a second, I thought she wanted comfort, something deep and meaningful. I leaned in.

And then, barely audible, she whispered, "Shut. Up."

I froze. Stared. She was still half-dead, couldn't even talk properly, and she was already telling me to shut up?

I exhaled, rubbing my temples. "Wow. You're already annoying again. That's a good sign."

She blinked, sluggish, but somehow I could tell she was trying to roll her eyes.

I grinned. "See? You're making progress."

She didn't say anything, but I knew if she had the energy, she would've smacked me.

---

Day 3

Emily's body was still weak. Her hands trembled when she tried to hold things, and she couldn't even sit up without help.

Of course, that didn't stop her from trying.

"Emily, stop—" I lunged forward as she tried to push herself up, immediately swaying like a newborn deer.

She gritted her teeth. "I got it."

I crossed my arms. "Oh yeah? And what's your plan when you pass out and break your skull open?"

She scowled. "Then I win."

I groaned, pressing my fingers against my temples. "Jesus Christ."

I grabbed her arms, carefully easing her up into a sitting position before she did something really stupid. Even that tiny effort had her looking exhausted.

I smirked. "Wow. That was the most impressive struggle I've ever seen."

She weakly lifted a trembling hand to swat at me. Missed.

"I hate you," she muttered.

"I kept you alive," I reminded her smugly. "You should be worshiping me."

She gave me a tired, deadpan stare. "Throw yourself out the window."

I snickered. Yeah, she was definitely getting better.

~

Day 5

Visitors flooded in that day. Ruby had already come several times, crying dramatically, scolding Emily for "almost giving me a heart attack, you absolute idiot!" between sniffles. Emily had just weakly patted her arm and muttered, "You're being embarrassing."



Her mom was there every single day, hovering more than me, fussing and worrying and occasionally giving me those soft, grateful looks that made Emily gag.

Even her boss showed up.

“Emily,” he said kindly, standing at her bedside, “we all miss you at the office. But take your time. No rush to come back.”

Emily, still struggling to even hold a spoon properly: I’ll come back next week.

I nearly fell out of my chair.

“Like hell you are,” I snapped.

She pouted. Actually pouted. “I need to work.”

I deadpanned. “Emily, you can’t even sit up without looking like you fought death itself.”

“Unfair.”

Her boss just chuckled, gave me an approving look—what the hell?—and left.

---

Day 7

“I refuse to stay here another second,” Emily declared dramatically.

I sighed. “Emily, you literally still need assistance to walk.”

She waved a hand. “Minor issue.”

“Minor—” I clenched my jaw. “Em, if you try to walk out of this hospital and face-plant in the hallway, I will not be responsible for my actions.”

She gave me the most unbothered look I had ever seen. “Liam, I have suffered enough. Let me go.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “You’re ridiculous.”

She grinned. “I thrive on suffering.”

I knew she was going to regret saying that the moment she tried to move. And sure enough—she stretched her arms, trying to scoot up, and immediately winced.

I smirked. “Oh, yeah. Thriving.”

She glared. “Shut up, Liam.”

I grinned. She was healing. Slowly, frustratingly—but healing.

Emily was awake. She was talking. She was complaining. She was insulting me. So why the hell did I still feel like I was barely holding it together? I should’ve been relieved. Should’ve been happy. And I was. I really, really was. But the second I let myself relax, the second I let my guard down, my mind kept replaying the worst parts. Her lying there, unmoving. The machines beeping. The doctors saying, “She might not wake up.” The feeling of absolute, gut-wrenching panic, of not knowing if she’d ever open her eyes again.

And now that she had, now that she was awake and rolling her eyes at me like I hadn’t been through hell for her, I didn’t know what to do with myself.

I was losing my goddamn mind. And, of course, Emily was making it worse.

~

I was a mess. Sleep-deprived. Emotionally wrecked. A shadow of my former self.

And what did Emily do when she finally had enough energy to function?

She laughed at me. Like actually laughed. The second she caught a glimpse of my reflection in the hospital window, she lost it.

“Liam,” she wheezed, clutching her stomach, voice still weak but full of amusement.

“What happened to you?”

I scowled. “I devoted my life to keeping you alive, that’s what happened!”

She tried to cover her grin, but I saw it. I saw all of it.

I groaned. “Oh, so you almost die, I lose years off my lifespan, and I’m the joke?”

She blinked innocently. “Well, when you put it like that...”

I threw my hands in the air. “Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable. I have sacrificed everything, and you’re over here mocking me.”

She smirked. “I didn’t ask you to.”

I gasped. “You didn’t ask? Oh, I’m sorry, next time you’re unconscious in a hospital bed, I’ll just go home and take a damn nap.”

Her lips twitched. “I mean, yeah, that sounds healthier.”

I glared. “I hate you.”

She grinned. “No, you don’t.”

I groaned again, dragging a hand down my face. God I wanted to strangle her and hug her at the same time.

My emotions were all over the place. One second, I was so happy I could cry. The next, I wanted to shake her because she didn’t get it. She didn’t get how close I was to losing her. She didn’t get how

I had spent every single second of the past week completely falling apart. She didn’t get how much space she took up in my head, how much my entire goddamn world had revolved around whether or not she would wake up.

She didn’t get how much she meant to me. And the worst part? I couldn’t even tell her. Not properly. Not in a way that made sense. So instead, I just kept hovering. Kept cracking jokes. Kept arguing with her over the stupidest things, because that was easier than admitting that I had never, ever been more terrified of losing someone in my life.

---

I did a lot of stupid shit that week.

Like sneaking her extra pudding from the cafeteria.

Like threatening the nurse when they tried to stop me from staying overnight.

Like making up fake medical terms just to mess with her.

“Oh, yeah,” I told her one night, leaning back in the uncomfortable hospital chair. “Doctor said you have a severe case of Chronic Dumbass Syndrome.”

She gave me a flat look. “That’s not a thing.”

I nodded seriously. “Oh, it’s a thing. The symptoms include poor life choices, reckless behavior, and nearly dying for no goddamn reason.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I hate you.”

I smirked. “Side effects may also include excessive sarcasm and an unhealthy obsession with me.”

She groaned, throwing her arm over her face. “Someone please put me back in a coma.”

I laughed. She was getting better. And maybe, just maybe, I was, too.

After a month

A month ago, I thought my life was over. Now? Now, Emily was alive, breathing, and sitting across from me, eating fries like she hadn’t just put me through the worst hell of my existence.

Life was good. No—life was great.

I leaned back in my chair, arms crossed, watching her shove another fry into her mouth. “You know, considering you almost died, you could at least eat something a little healthier.”

She gave me a deadpan look, chewing slowly just to spite me. “Liam, I was in a hospital for weeks.

I had to eat hospital food. Do you know the trauma I endured? The suffering?”

I snorted. "Yeah, yeah. Almost dying was nothing compared to eating bland mashed potatoes, huh?"

"Exactly." She stole one of my fries.

I scowled. "You have your own."

She shrugged. "Yours taste better."

I rolled my eyes but didn't stop her.

A month ago, I was losing my goddamn mind, drowning in fear and guilt and every single emotion

I didn't know how to deal with. Now, she was here. She was okay. She was annoying me as usual, and I had never been more grateful for it.

She stared at me, lips slightly parted, eyes flickering with something hesitant, something unsure.

"You keep staring," she murmured, tilting her head.

I smirked. "Can you blame me?"

Her brows arched. "Starting to feel like I should start charging you."

"Oh?" I leaned in, my voice dropping just enough to make her breath hitch. "And how much would it cost to keep looking?"

She exhaled a laugh, shaking her head, but her fingers twitched against the table, betraying her.

"Depends," she mused, tapping a fry against her lips. "Are we talking about the staring? Or something else?"

My gaze dipped to her mouth—just briefly, just enough to make her notice. "That depends," I echoed. "What else is on the table?"

Her lips quirked, and for a second, she looked like she had a snarky reply, something playful, something teasing. But then I reached out, brushing my fingers against hers, and her breath caught.

I grinned. "Oh? What happened to all that confidence, Em?"

She scowled, pulling her hand back, but the pink dusting her cheeks told me everything I needed to know.

“You’re ridiculous,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“And you’re blushing.”

“I am not—”

I leaned in a little closer, my voice barely above a whisper. “Liar.”

She let out an exasperated sigh, but it wasn’t real. I could see the way her fingers curled into her lap, like she didn’t trust herself not to reach for me again.

For once, I let her squirm, let the silence stretch, let the tension coil tighter between us.

Then, just as she opened her mouth—to argue, to deflect, to something—I moved.

Not fast. Not desperate. Just close enough that our noses brushed, just enough that she had nowhere to look but at me.

Her breath hitched.

I smirked. “Still want to charge me?”

She swallowed hard, her bravado cracking. “...I’ll make an exception.”

And that was all I needed. I kissed her—soft at first, teasing, just to hear the little sound she made when I pulled back too soon. Then I kissed her again, deeper, longer—until her fingers found my wrist, until she sighed against my lips, until every sarcastic remark and witty retort melted away.

And damn—

Best fries I ever had.

And just like that, we never talked about her obsession over me. Not once. Not in the days that followed, when she slipped back into my life like she had never left, stealing my food, rolling her eyes at my bad jokes,

arguing with me just for the fun of it. Not in the weeks that passed, when I caught her staring too long, when her fingers lingered just a second too much, when she smiled in that way that made my chest feel too tight. Not even in the months that followed, when I started waking up to her curled up against me, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

We never talked about it. Because maybe—just maybe—I didn't want to know.

Maybe I liked the way she looked at me, like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. Maybe I liked the way her hands gripped me a little too tight, like she was afraid to let go. Maybe I liked that, when I wasn't looking, she was always watching. And maybe, deep down, a part of me had always known.

The signs had been there. The way she always found an excuse to be near me, the way she memorized the little things, the way she knew me—better than anyone ever had. The way her name had been the one on every single anonymous note I had once believed came from someone else.

The way she had been the one pulling the strings, guiding me toward her, step by step, choice by choice, until I had no other option but to love her.

And I did. God help me, I did.

I loved her for sake of love

## EPILOGUE

Emily

I did what I should. I made my own accident. A beautiful, reckless, inevitable accident.

Loving him was never a choice. It was a force, a ruinous pull, a gravity that I could never escape.

I wanted him in ways I couldn't explain, in ways that tore me apart, reassembled me, and then shattered me all over again. I wanted him the

way wildfires wanted forests—to consume, to scorch, to turn everything into something unrecognizable, something beautiful in its destruction. I wanted to exist inside him, to carve myself into his bones, to become something he could never remove, never forget, never escape. I wanted to be his birth and his death, his beginning and his end. But he never saw it. Never saw the way I shaped myself around him, the way I bled for him, the way I was him in every way that mattered. He loved me. I know he did. But never in the way I loved him.

Never in the way that left him gasping for air, clawing at his skin just to feel me underneath. Never in the way that turned his stomach to knots, that made his hands shake when he touched me, that made him ache in the marrow of his bones. Never in the way I needed him to.

So I did what I should.

I made my own accident. I created a world where he was mine. A world where he didn't get a choice. A world where he stayed, where he had to stay, where the thought of leaving me never crossed his mind—because I had made it impossible. He never asked about the notes, the whispers in the dark, the shadows that moved in his periphery. He never questioned the way his world always seemed to turn back to me, the way I was always there, waiting, waiting, waiting.

Maybe he knew. Maybe he didn't want to know.

And it didn't matter. Because in the end, I had him. In the end, he kissed me like he meant it, touched me like he needed it, whispered my name like it was a prayer he couldn't stop saying.

And that was enough. For now.

I reach out, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead as he sleeps, his breath slow, steady. Peaceful.

So trusting. A slow smile curves my lips as I trail my fingers down his throat, feeling the soft, rhythmic pulse beneath his skin.

I press a kiss there. Gentle. Loving.



Then I whisper, "You'll never leave me, will you?"

He shifts in his sleep but doesn't wake.

I hum, watching him.

And if he ever does try?

Well.

Accidents happen all the time.