

Officially Dating

The restaurant is smaller and more intimate than I expected. We've only just arrived, but Tess quickly waves away the waiter, telling her we're still waiting for more people.

I try not to think about the last time I was at a restaurant - seven months ago. The most embarrassing, heartbreaking day of my life. Every time Tess tried to take me out after that, I shut her down immediately. She must've been suspicious, but she never pushed. That meant more than she probably realized.

"You could at least try not to look like you're about to shit yourself," Tess mutters before taking a sip of water.

She looks stunning, as always. My stomach twists the way it always does around her - envy curling tight in my gut - but I push it away.

"It's really just Liam," she says, her voice casual. "Like, of all people, he's the last one you should be nervous about. You should be more worried about him trying to get into your pants."

I snort, but the joke doesn't land right.

Because now my stomach is twisting for a different reason.


It's stupid. But maybe Zane's sudden marriage messed with my head, because the words slip out before I can stop them. "Should I be worried about him doing that with others as well?" Or you?

Like a hound on a scent, or maybe just someone who knows me more than I know myself, she hears the question I don't ask.

Tess stares at me for a second-then bursts out laughing.

She laughs and laughs and laughs until she's coughing, and I have to pat her back. When she finally stops, she takes one look at my face and apologizes, but the damage is done.

My cheeks burn with humiliation.

My God. 

I can't believe I've turned into this - this insecure mess.

Insecure about my own best friend.

What the hell, Emilia?

Her eyes are still bright with laughter as she pats my shoulder. "I said he was hot, babe. Not that I'd touch that with a ten-foot pole. He's all yours. Really."

I groan and bury my face in my hands. She laughs again, but this time, there's something softer about it.

I can't believe myself. All this over a guy I haven't even met? I usually keep the jealous, insecure part of me locked away, especially around Tess. She's always been the effortlessly perfect one, and I've always been... well, me. But lately, everything feels too much. Maybe I've been too sensitive.

Still. Damn, Emilia.

When I finally work up the courage to look at her again, she gives me a serious look.

"I'm sorry," I mumble. And I mean it.

But she just shrugs. "You don't need to apologise for anything."

Then her phone buzzes. She glances at the screen, and her grin spreads wide.

"They're here!"

They?

The restaurant door swings open, and I know - somehow, I just know - it's him.

Liam walks in like he owns the place. Not in an arrogant way, just... like he belongs everywhere.

Tall, broad-shouldered, and golden in that effortlessly charming, boy-next-door way. His blond hair is slightly tousled, like he just ran a hand through it before stepping inside, and when his light blue eyes land on me, his smile flickers - just for a second - revealing a pair of dimples that makes my heart skip a beat, before settling into something warm.

He's hot. He's really, really hot. And not in an arrogant or pretentious way like Zane, but more like a golden boy with all the charisma in the world at his finger tips.

His charm is obvious, making it difficult to look away from him. Or maybe it's just the way he carries himself.

Huh, I thought Tess was fucking with me when she said we went to college together. His aura is so blinding and familiar, I know she was telling the truth.

"Hey," he says, sliding into the seat across from me like we've done this a hundred times before. "Emilia, right?"

I nod, suddenly hyper-aware of the way I'm sitting, the way my hands rest on the table, the way he's looking at me.

Before I can say anything, his friend flops into the seat beside him with a dramatic sigh.

"Okay, wow," the guy says, blinking at me. "No one told me we were dining with a goddess tonight. I feel wildly underdressed."

Tess snorts. "Emilia, meet Cameron, NYC's semi-competent goalie. Cameron, this greek goddess next to me is my best friend, Emilia."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Tessie Bear," Tessa's eye twitches. Cam looks away from her and turns to face me. "It's just Cam," he corrects, flashing me a grin. "And let's just get this out of the way - I'm the funny one, Liam's the golden boy, and Tess, I assume, is the chaos."

"Obviously," Tess replies smoothly.


Liam shakes his head, but his focus is still on me. "Sorry about him," he says, voice lower, just for me. "He can't help himself."

I glance at Cam, who is currently studying the menu like it personally offended him. "I'll manage," I say, surprising myself.

Liam's smile deepens, like he's pleased by that answer.

"And this is Liam, but I'm sure you guessed that," her smile tells me she hasn't forgotten our earlier conversation and I sink deeper into my seat.

"I did. It's nice meeting you," I look at Liam and say honestly. I'm proud of not losing myself in those eyes. Next to us, Cam and Tessa snort.

Liam looks at me like I said something odd, but brushes it off and shoots me a dazzling smile. My breath hitches, apparently I can't speak when those dimples are so close by. "Only terrible things, I assume." 

I'm about to deny his words - because it's not completely true - but Tessa

mutters underneath her breath. "Naturally." I raise an eyebrow at her, it's obvious she has a high opinion of him.

"So," Cam says, flipping the menu shut and leaning forward. "What's the deal? Are we sealing this fake relationship with a dramatic hand-hold? Maybe some light forehead kisses for practice?"

I cough. What?

Liam groans, rubbing a hand down his face. And I take it that this is normal for them. "For the love of- Cam, stop talking."

Cam ignores him. "I'm just saying, if we're committing to the bit, we should commit. Public displays of affection, pet names - oh! Liam's really good at the whole 'protective boyfriend' thing, you should let him do the arm-around-the-shoulders move -"

"I will throw you out of this restaurant," Liam threatens, but it's mostly exasperation, not actual malice.

Cam grins, clearly unfazed. "Pro tip: he's great at pretending. Absolutely top-tier boyfriend material. He'll even text you good morning like he means it." [1](#)

I tilt my head at him. "Should I take that as a warning? 'Most likely to make me fall and break my heart right after?'"

Liam says "No" at the same time Cam says "Definitely" and the look Liam shoots him is so intense, Cam raises his hands in surrender.

"Fine, fine, I'll behave. For now." Then he turns back to me, eyes twinkling. "So, Emilia, what do you get out of this? Because Liam's scoring major points by getting to be seen with you, and I just want to make sure this is a fair trade."

I blink. "Um..."

Tess, the traitor, just sips her water like this is the best entertainment she's had in weeks. 1

Liam, though, doesn't take his eyes off me. "We don't have to talk about it now," he says, quiet but firm. "No pressure."

And even though this whole thing is ridiculous, even though I barely know him, I feel myself exhale.

Because something about the way he says it makes me believe him.

But, of course, Tess pops the bubble.

"Actually, we're sealing the deal legally." She pulls out two stapled papers and slides them across the table. "I kept the contract as simple as possible, but I'll give you the highlights."

Liam and I exchange a glance before picking them up.

"Zane Whitmore's wedding and cruise is going to be an extremely high-profile event," Tess continues. She doesn't say your ex's wedding, and while I appreciate it, it doesn't really soften the blow. Liam was Zane's teammate—of course, he knows we dated. And from the way he looks at me, he knows exactly how it ended.

"PDA isn't required, but it's strongly encouraged. The more convincing, the better. There won't be any media on the cruise, but making sure everyone there believes you're head over heels? A major plus." She pauses. "The arrangement lasts one year, but it can end earlier if both of you get what you need. Liam attends the cruise with a gorgeous girlfriend..."

"Why, thank you," I mutter.

Tess smirks. "—and Emilia makes him look like a heartbroken heartbreaker. Just enough for public sympathy to be on his side."

I arch a brow at Liam. "A heartbroken heartbreaker, huh?"

He grins, effortlessly charming. "Tragic, isn't it?"

Tess claps her hands. "After the cruise, you're expected to keep up the happy couple act until the contract ends. You'll also be signing an NDA, meaning no spilling the details to anyone outside of the necessary logistics team. Any questions?"

We both shake our heads.

"Great!" She beams. "Give me the signed contract whenever, and I'll start working up your schedules."

Schedules?

Liam and I skim through the contract. It's short and to the point—no loopholes, no fine print. Just a fake relationship with an expiration date. We sign and hand them back to Tess.

She tucks them away, then grins. "Congratulations, lovebirds. You're officially dating!"

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