

Something Absolutely Insane

LIAM

"Aren't you supposed to be some kind of A-list celebrity?" Emilia asks, frowning. She shifts on her feet, trying to re-balance, and I can't help but grin.

I'm a full head taller than her, and every time I tilt my head to meet her eyes, she scowls. It makes me laugh every time.

"Only in hockey circles," I correct. "But we're probably being stalked by paparazzi right now."

It's not even a question—I know that's the case. I've been a hot topic for weeks, ever since the whole mess with Jessica. Even after she confirmed we were never dating, the damage was already done.

Now, I can't even walk down the street without being followed. My management won't get off my back, and Coach? He's ripped into me more times than I can count.

It's exhausting. All I want to do is play hockey. I never cared about the fame or having to explain myself to the media, especially now that I've been labeled the "bad boy of hockey" who can't keep it in his pants.

I don't do relationships. Call me whatever you want, but I've never lied about that.

Unlike me, Emilia clearly isn't expecting that response. I instantly feel bad when her face pales.

"Oh."

She shivers, and I don't think twice before shrugging off my jacket and

draping it over her shoulders. Her eyebrows shoot up, nearly disappearing into her hairline.

I chuckle. "We're supposed to be in love, remember?"

"Oh," she says again, a little softer this time.

It's painfully obvious how nervous she is - shifting, fidgeting, barely meeting my eyes. It's cute.

She's cute.

I thought so even back in college. Emilia's always had this quiet, effortless beauty - big, dark brown eyes, lips that naturally curve into a Cupid's bow, and warm brown skin that somehow glows more than I remember.

I remember everything about her, that's why I found it so weird when she pulled a "nice to meet you" like she couldn't tell she haunted my thoughts for years.

Maybe it's weird to notice so much about my old teammate's long-term girlfriend, but I could never help it. Even back then, I never understood what she saw in him.

Zane was a proud, pretentious asshole - not in the fun way like Lyle, but in the rip-your-hair-out way that he had somehow perfected. And he wasn't any better to Emilia.

I've seen plenty of guys who act like jerks in the locker room but turn into angels around their girl. Not Zane, though. He was an asshole, through and through.

A small, guilty knot forms in my stomach. I used to hope she and Zane would break up.

Now that they have, I know I should feel like shit for ever wishing it. But I'm not that good of a guy.

We're in the parking lot, waiting for Cam and Tessa to wrap up whatever the hell they're doing. It's late, the air crisp, and Emilia is standing in front of me, fidgeting like she's trying to keep herself busy.

She's still struggling with my jacket, her arms failing to find the sleeves, and I watch, amused, as she mutters under her breath in frustration. Her dress is gorgeous – sleek, elegant – but sleeveless, and the cold is clearly getting to her.

I sigh, pushing off my car – a black Porsche that I've lovingly dubbed Angel – and step toward her. "Here," I say, grabbing the collar of my jacket and guiding her arms into the sleeves. "It's not a puzzle, you know."

She huffs, her cheeks slightly pink, whether from embarrassment or the cold, I'm not sure. "It was folded weird," she argues.

"Sure," I drawl, fighting back a smirk as I adjust the jacket on her shoulders. It practically swallows her, the sleeves hanging past her fingertips, and for some reason, the sight makes something tighten in my chest.

She looks up at me then, lips slightly parted like she's about to say something. But before she can, a loud whistle cuts through the air.

"Damn, man, you work fast."

Cam. Of course.

Emilia practically jumps away from me, and I shake my head, turning to see him strolling toward us with Tessa beside him, both of them looking

way too entertained for my liking.

Cam smirks, crossing his arms. "So, what'd we miss?"

Emilia hurriedly mutters, "Nothing," at the same time I say, "Emilia and I were just making plans to go out."

Both Cam and Tessa raise their brows.

"We were?" Emilia asks, turning to me.

"You were?" Tessa echoes, arms crossed.

I bite back a smile at Emilia's confusion and nod toward Cam. "Get Tessa home safe."

Tessa frowns. "It's barely seven. Where are you taking her?"

"You're not my mum, Tess," Emilia cuts in, rolling her eyes. "And I don't have a curfew."

Cam whistles low under his breath. "Damn. Guess we'll mind our business, then."

Tessa sighs but doesn't push. Instead, she levels me with a look that clearly says, Don't be an idiot.

Noted.

Before Emilia and I get into the car, I shoot Tessa a dry look. "They could at least try to be subtle. They're acting like you personally tipped them off."

Behind one of the parked cars, a man raises his camera, taking a picture of Emilia getting in.

Tessa shrugs, completely unbothered. "Whatever. Just take her somewhere they can get really nice pictures."

I scoff. "You're a terrible person."

She smirks. "Right back at you, loser."

We say our goodbyes, and I start the car with no real destination in mind. Emilia makes herself comfortable in the passenger seat, adjusting the radio like she's been here a thousand times. She flips through stations before landing on a rap song, bobbing her head slightly.

I glance over, eyebrows raised. "You listen to Kendrick Lamar?"

She gives me a side-eye. "And you don't?"

Fair point. But I still wouldn't have guessed. Tessa, maybe. But Emilia? She just doesn't seem like the type.

I smirk and turn up the volume. "Didn't peg you for a rap girl."

She shrugs, eyes on the road ahead. "You can't judge a book by its cover, Liam."

Touché.

"So, where are we going?" she asks, a smile tugging at her lips. Maybe it's the music, but she actually seems excited. Her hands are clasped together, and when she looks at me with those gorgeous doe eyes, I almost forget to answer.

I shrug. "Somewhere we can talk without Cam's stupidity or Tessa's... well, Tessa."

"I can understand that." She shakes her head, amused, then fidgets with

her seatbelt. "I wasn't even going to agree to this, you know? It's stupid-pathetic, even—that I need a fake date just to go to my ex's wedding. But what's worse? I gave him ten years of my life, and somehow, he managed to find everything he wanted with someone he's barely dated for a year." 4

We pull out of the parking lot. I wasn't expecting her to open up so soon, but I guess she has to. We're about to spend an entire month on a cruise with the asshole, after all.

And hearing her say this out loud? It's uncomfortable. I knew she probably felt this way, but knowing isn't the same as hearing it straight from her.

"Do you still love him?" I ask before I can stop myself. Instantly, I regret it. Stupid question, Liam.

She looks just as surprised as I feel, but instead of flipping me off like I expect, she actually thinks about it.

"Yes and no," she finally says. "Do I love the way he loved me? Not at all. I've seen pictures of him and his fiancée, and he looks different—happier, lighter. When we were together, even when we were engaged, I had to beg him to actually consider marrying me."

She laughs, but it's bitter. And for some reason, that makes my chest ache.

"God, this is embarrassing," she mutters. "But for some reason, it's easier telling you all this humiliating shit than it is telling Tess."

"It's probably because I have no right to judge you," I say simply. "I was going to ask how you felt about the wedding anyway, so either way, this conversation was coming."

"Yeah." She exhales, turning to stare out the window. The excitement from before? Gone. And I don't like it.

Then my phone rings. I glance at the screen and catch the first two letters
-Je

-before I cut the call. And just like that, an idea hits me.

"Wanna do something absolutely insane?" I ask.

She raises an eyebrow. A small sign of life. A small win.

I grin. "I'll take that as a yes." Then, without another word, I turn the car around.