

Lali,

~~I miss you~~

I get that you hate me right now. Honestly, I hate myself for what I did, too. Looking back, I can't believe I ever thought lying to you was the best option. I guess that's why they say hindsight is 20/20.

But that's why I'm writing you this letter. I want you to know everything that happened— all of it, from beginning to end. Maybe then you'll see why I felt I had to do what I did. I know that doesn't change the outcome, but at least you'll understand my intentions. In my twisted brain, lying was my way of protecting you, or trying to anyway. I didn't know what else to do, how else to deal with the damage I'd already done. I swear I never wanted to hurt you, but the whole situation was so messed up that I had already started hurting you before we even met...



# 1 ABDUCTION

**S**HIT. I MOUTHED THE WORD AS I SQUINTED AT my target through the slatted closet door. She stood at her bathroom mirror, oblivious, and taking her sweet time smothering herself with every kind of lotion known to man while some pasty green mask dried over her face. At this rate, she was never going to sleep. I, on the other hand, was about to keel over. My legs threatened to give out after what felt like an eternity crouching between the plastic covers of dry-cleaned slacks and dresses, and I was slowly suffocating in mothball funk. Because, of course, she'd chosen to go through an elaborate beauty ritual tonight of all nights—right when I planned to strike.

The sad part was, I really had planned it. Obviously not well, but then, I'd never kidnapped anyone before. And it wasn't like

there was a semmie handbook for those pesky times when you needed to snatch an ex-Astralis out of her home with your warped astral projection ability.

Trust me, I looked.

It was tempting to shoot out of the closet and run at her. She had left the bathroom door wide open, and her husband was snoring in their oversized bed. I only needed two seconds to get across the darkened room and grab her. We'd be gone an instant later. The problem was that she would see me coming, which meant she would have time to get out at least one good scream. After the hours I'd wasted to avoid involving her family, I wasn't about to have her wake them up now.

The hiss of running water made me perk up. Finally, she was rinsing off the Yoda facial. I shook the dark wisps of hair out of my eyes and shifted, ready to spring as soon as she got into bed. The closet was just a few feet from where an upturned comforter invited her to climb between the flannel sheets. But instead of stepping out of the bathroom after she dried her face, she opened the drawer beside the sink and pulled out yet another bottle of moisturizer.

I wanted to punch the wall. There was no way her skin could absorb anything else. How was it *that* dry in the first place? This wasn't the Sahara, for Christ's sake.

Desperate to ease the burden on my legs, I pressed my hands against the door frame in front of me. The molding creaked loudly in response.

I froze. *Way to go, dumbass.* After all my preparation for this moment, I was going to screw it up by leaning on a rickety piece of wood.

## NEMESIS

Perfect.

“Yoseph?” The Lotion Queen poked her head out of the bathroom, the edges of her gold nightgown glowing in the light behind her. She looked toward her still-snoring husband like she wanted to wake him, and a string of profanities chomped in my mind. So much for keeping her family out of it.

*You should have listened to Cade.* I pressed my lips together to keep from exhaling my frustration. My Uncle Cade wanted me to snatch her from the dinner table last night and be done with it. We already had a makeshift cell inside an abandoned shipping container ready to hold her until she gave us the information we needed.

But I couldn't do it, not with her kids right there. Instead, I'd squandered most of the day memorizing the layout of this house so I could nab her when everyone was asleep.

Watching her step into the bedroom, I heard Cade's voice ring out in my head: *Compassion is only going to get in the way of finding your sister.* He was right—trying to keep her family out of this was a waste of time. So what if her children heard her scream and didn't know where she was for a few days? Both of my parents had been dead for nearly fourteen years. Her kids could suck it up. I had to do this.

Now.

I stood so fast my shoulders bumped the hangers above me. My target's head whipped in my direction, freeing a strand of short brown hair from her frilly pink headband. Frowning, she stepped around the bed and inched toward my hiding place like a lamb approaching a lion.

My breathing sped up. If I waited until she was a lunge away,

maybe she wouldn't have time to make a fuss. Even if she did, I was sure I could muffle her scream. Then I wouldn't lose sleep tonight from knowing I traumatized her kids the way the Eyes and Ears had traumatized me.

Her silhouette crept closer, and I turned my palm outward, holding my hand at the same level as her mouth. She reached to open the closet, and I smelled a mix of jasmine and mint through the gaps in the door.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins. My pulse pounded until I couldn't hear anything else.

*Come on. Open it.*

She hesitated at the last moment, glancing back at her husband, but I couldn't wait any longer.

I burst out of my hiding place. Terror ripped through her features as I looped my arm around her shoulders and smashed my fingers over her mouth. Squeezing my eyes shut, I pictured the inside of the shipping container just as she inhaled to scream.

We were gone before the sound came out.

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