

Detachment

Pieces of Me

By

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&

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This was only easy because we have you.

One

Lyla

Wrapping my hand tightly around the bathroom door handle, I took one final glance around the room to make sure nothing of importance was left before I pulled it closed behind me. I didn't plan on coming back, so I'd have to make do without anything I'd forgotten.

The wheels of my heavy suitcase squeaked in time with the sound of my heels clicking across the pristine oak flooring as I made my way to the lift for the second time. A box containing jewellery and a few photo frames propped the doors open while I grabbed the case.

Almost silently, the lift doors closed, cutting off my view of the sparse master bedroom across the hall of the top floor. I refused to allow myself a moment to rehash any memories of living here. A soft ding signalled my arrival on the ground floor and pulled me from my dire thoughts. The familiar scent of bleach tickled my nose as I stepped into the sterile kitchen to grab my bag, which was loaded with an envelope of cash from the office safe, and keys to the Mercedes Francis had bought me. I debated leaving the car, but with my name as the owner, I decided it would be his parting gift to me.

The large engagement, wedding ring combo caught the light, drawing my attention. No longer wanting or needing them as a constant reminder of how disappointing my marriage had been, I pulled with a twist until they slid off my finger. Feeling freer than I had in a long time, I placed the rings on the counter and took a step back, only to stop when a hiss sounded behind me.

Damn, I had been hoping I could escape without needing to deal with Francis's cat. I never did like the damn thing, but he had some idea in his head that it would make a great companion for his son... the son I could never give him. Instead, the cat was an asshole and left without a playmate. I'd lost count of the amount of times the little beast would kick its litter out of the box as soon as I finished cleaning and I'd have to start over, and the mess would never be the cat's fault if Francis returned home to a less than perfect house. The cat was no longer my problem, though, I knew it wouldn't go hungry while Francis was at work because one of the neighbours enjoyed feeding it.

Shoving thoughts of the cat and how much I'd failed as a wife far from my mind, I exited the house and secured the door. In a struggle to detach the keys from my fluffy keychain, I'd almost broke several nails. Cursing, I shoved the keys through the letter box, not caring if they scratched the wood flooring as they dropped with a heavy thud. .

Almost four hours later and exhausted from the long drive, I finally pulled up to the curb of my childhood home. Turning the off car, I took a moment to view the house from the street, before climbing out and tiredly trudging up the driveway. Pushing the key into the lock, I took a deep breath. Somehow, I felt as though I was trespassing. I didn't know why, it was my house as much as it was his. My name was also on the deed and I was free to come and go as I liked. Lloyd, my twin brother, had sent me the obligatory text message informing me he was heading out on detachment in the asshole of nowhere.

However, I didn't know if he had a girlfriend—boyfriend? What if I was disturbing them? *Didn't matter*, I told myself. He wouldn't know I'd stayed here until I'd already left.

Stepping into the hall, I was surprised. It didn't look as I had expected it to. There was no mail on the floor, no dust on the table where he always kept his keys. Everything was perfect. He had someone living with him.

I closed my eyes and took a steadying breath, then went into the living room. A guitar stood on its stand over by the window—I thought he'd given up playing when he left school, but clearly not—the battered, old leather sofas were exactly the same as they'd been the last time I visited, and the bookcase was stuffed with films, games, and books, as expected. Yep, that was Lloyd all over.

I searched for signs of a girlfriend, but came up empty. It was the definition of a bachelor pad despite how tidy it was. The only other thing out of place from my memory of the lounge was a neatly folded blanket on one of the sofas. I picked it up and opened it before flopping down on the sofa and curling up. It was scented with aftershave. I hadn't smelled it since Christmas, which was the last time I saw him. I hated that we'd disagreed and had parted on bad terms, and smelling this now only served to remind me how much I missed

him. In the silence of the room, enveloped in the fluffy softness of the huge blanket, I finally let myself relax. I was in my safe place, my childhood home. He may have been away, but it was where my brother lived, and I knew I would always be welcome here.

It was weird how being back home made me feel instantly better. I hadn't visited in years, but it was still the only place I considered safe. With the front door closed, I was untouchable, and that's exactly what I needed. Lloyd being away was perfect. No awkward questions. No promises to handle it. No interference. Just me, sorting out my shit.

First step, a cup of tea.

The kitchen itself was exactly as it had been when I'd last visited around three years ago, except for a new dining table. Skirting around it, I stopped in front of the counter where the kettle was. I couldn't help but smile as I took it to the sink and filled it, while I glanced out at the garden. He'd done what he'd promised before we argued when he came for a weekend visit around Christmas, he'd stuck a filthy great hot tub out there and built a brick barbecue. Five months. I hadn't seen him for five months and now I was standing unannounced in his kitchen making myself tea.

I blew out my cheeks, flicked the switch on the kettle, and went to the mug cupboard. It had always been the mug cupboard, the only thing that changed was the mugs. All except two. He kept them on the top shelf, and I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach, but there was something reassuring about having my mug. I left his where it was. It felt weird only making one, but I supposed it was just being in the house on my own. I'd get used to it.

Tea made, I curled up on the sofa with my mug and pulled the blanket I'd found there over myself. Warm, comfortable, and safe, I stared at the black screen of the TV. God, I was a mess. He'd warned me. The last thing he said to me before he left at Christmas was that it would only get worse, but there was no way I'd take advice from my little brother. Who took advice from a younger sibling?

The phone rang from the glass side table next to the TV. I ignored it. I didn't care who it was. It wasn't likely to be for me and even if it was, I didn't want to confirm my whereabouts by answering the phone and then be followed. Not yet. I wasn't ready for that particular showdown.

But it was coming. There was no avoiding it, and when it came, I needed to make sure Lloyd wasn't around. I couldn't risk his career and I knew for a fact he'd throw punches first

and ask questions later. I felt bad for just turning up, but our childhood home was the only place I could go. He was the only family I had.

With my mug empty, I placed it on the floor with the intention of getting up and taking it to the kitchen, but for the first time in two days, I fell into a peaceful sleep. I was exhausted. The three-hour drive had almost killed me, but if I hadn't left when I did, I'd never have done it. I could fall asleep without worry, because I knew I had hours left before anyone came looking for me. And if they did, I didn't have to open the door. I was home. I was going to be okay.

I woke up starving. With a stretch, I kicked my feet off the sofa and knocked over the mug I'd forgotten to pick up. Thankfully it didn't break, but I chastised myself for not using the coffee table. Still groggy, I took myself straight to the fridge. I didn't know why I wasn't surprised to find it stocked with basics. Ham—still well within the expiration date. Cheese. Butter. Some salad stuff—should not be in date. There was a loaf of bread on the table too, which I hadn't noticed earlier. *Perhaps he has a roommate*, I mused as I made myself a sandwich and ate it over the sink to save dirtying a plate while the kettle boiled.

Francis would have a fit if I did this at home, and the small act of rebellion made the quick meal all the more satisfying.

Feeling a bit better, I made fresh tea, grabbed my mug, and went to get myself sorted. Next step, bath.

The bathroom was clean enough and fully stocked with toiletries. I managed to find a lemon body wash on the windowsill and got straight into the bath, leaving just the hot tap running. It was far too hot, but I didn't care. I needed to feel it cleansing my body, washing away the last seven years. Washing away the years of scorn, disdain, and heartbreak. I needed to purge it from my skin. I needed to feel clean.

The heat of the water pricked my scalp as I submerged my head and scrubbed at it with my fingernails. I knew my skin would be bright red. I knew I'd be marked for ages after, but that was better than feeling the weight of my own disappointment.

I stayed in long enough to scrub my whole body, then grabbed a towel from the back of the bathroom door. With it fastened around me, I stood on the landing and studied the three bedroom doors. I knew Lloyd had taken what was once Mum and Dad's room. I didn't want to go into what had been mine, it wasn't mine anymore. He redecorated the whole house when he moved back home from being on deployment, so there was nothing left of my room, and if he had a roommate, they might be in there. The third door used to be Lloyd's bedroom. It was probably his man cave now with nothing in there of use to me. I turned away, heading for his.

It was decorated in blue and white, with the bed neatly made and the blinds closed. There wasn't much in here to confirm the room belonged to him except for the collection of aftershaves on the shelf above the chest of drawers that displayed the last family photo we took before Dad left. We were fifteen. I had my own copy in a box at—I stopped myself. No, it wasn't home. I didn't have a home. I had what was now my brother's home and my own company, and that was better than where I'd come from.

That was when I remembered I had a suitcase, and that suitcase was in my car parked on the street outside the house, along with a lone box of valuables. There was room to park on the drive, but something stopped me from pulling in—a niggling feeling I shouldn't be here.

This was the only place I had left. I had nowhere else to go, and if Lloyd knew he'd expect me to come here. I was his sister and he wouldn't leave me homeless. With that in mind, I opened his wardrobe and pulled out one of his t-shirts. Not bothering to dry my hair, I slipped my arms through the sleeves before climbing into his bed. I was still exhausted. After two days of hell followed by the drive here, the nap I had on the sofa wasn't nearly enough. No. I needed a solid sleep, then I could work out what the hell I was supposed to do next.

His bedding smelled of him, and I felt at ease, his presence reminding me of the times we'd fallen asleep watching films when we were younger. The times he'd leapt to my defence when boyfriends had gotten too heavy-handed, or when he'd come to visit me at university simply because I'd sounded sad during one of our monthly phone calls.

I fell asleep wishing he was home. Now, more than ever, I needed my brother.

Two

Lyla

With a stretch, I rolled and rubbed at my eyes which were blurred from sleep, and checked the time on the digital clock Lloyd kept on his nightstand. Why I was awake at such an ungodly hour, I didn't know. I had hoped to sleep late since there wouldn't be a five o'clock alarm or the demands of that awful cat to meet, but I supposed my body was used to the drudgery of routine.

Lloyd's bed was luxury. An overstatement? No. Why? Because I was alone and didn't have anyone demanding my attention.

Even with the window shut, I was able to hear the occasional greeting being called from Lloyd's neighbours and found it oddly reassuring. After a few minutes of simply lying there, unable to drift off to sleep, I got up. It was the first day of the rest of my life, and I didn't want to waste it in bed.

My first stop was the bathroom, but since my things were still in the car, it was a very brief visit before heading down to the kitchen.

The kettle was full and still warm, which was strange, but I thought nothing more of it as I flicked it on before grabbing my mug from the drainer. A floorboard creaked above as I dropped a tea bag into the mug, and a flutter of nerves blossomed in my stomach. I was hardly dressed for company. I hadn't even brushed my teeth, not to mention I was standing here in my brother's very snug fitting shorts and t-shirt—I definitely wasn't dressed to my old life's standards for meeting an unannounced guest in Lloyd's house.

Our house.

Not that whoever was here would care who I was when they discovered me helping myself to their tea. Regardless, I carried on making the drink, sans milk, and sat at the table as they made their way downstairs.

I was expecting a man. Probably tattooed, likely half naked, and ready to knock my head off the moment he saw me and realised there's a stranger in his home.

He was male, but none of the other things I'd conjured in my imagination.

“You must be Lyla,” he noted, as he breezed into the room and opened the fridge.

Speechless, I stared at the back of him and swallowed hard. I’d never seen a physique like his—toned, tanned, his military green shirt clinging to his back, leading to shorts that showed off his narrow hips and perfect rear.

All I could manage was, “Umm.”

“Hope we didn’t disturb you last night, we had a few after work and got in late,” he continued, as though I’d given a coherent response.

He turned around and placed a bowl on the table, followed by a bottle of water. I almost choked at his appearance. He smirked, and I had the feeling he was used to receiving that type of reaction. He was over six feet tall with cropped blond hair. I was caught by his eyes. They were the brightest blue, and they seemed to shimmer in the morning light filtering in through the window behind me. I blinked, averting my gaze, which was immediately caught by his smile.

I’d never seen lips quite like his—plump, pink, with a perfect cupid’s bow, they parted slightly to show a flash of white teeth. “Do you intend to stay until Lloyd comes back?”

His question snapped me out of it. The problem was, I didn’t have an answer. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I, um, I wouldn’t have thought so,” I answered quickly. “I’m just here for a few days until...” Until what? I had nowhere else to go. This was the only home I had left. I hadn’t planned on there being an Adonis like him wandering around the place. “I have a few things to sort out and then I’ll be out of your way.”

Reaching behind him, he opened a drawer and pulled out a spoon without bothering to look, then sat opposite me and removed the plastic wrap from the bowl. “Stay as long as you like,” he replied casually, digging his spoon into his breakfast. “Lloyd’s due back in two weeks, he’s on a training exercise, Sam’s with him...”

The full book is available for purchase.