

Chapter One – No Letting Go

Prologue

Four months earlier...

Emma turned off the engine of her red coupe and sprinted toward her apartment. She couldn't wait to tell Damian the good news. Finally, she'd gotten the loan for the curio shop she planned to open. It'd been a dream of hers for the last year and a half, and she was anxious to share that dream with her boyfriend.

In the year and a half Emma had dated Damian, he'd shown her things she'd never known existed. But she'd always felt deep down that he was way out of her league. He had a great job at a law firm, and he was so worldly. She was a simple girl with insecurities and a crappy job at a busy restaurant. She'd never understood what Damian saw in her. But questioning it to death had gotten her exactly nowhere. Worse, things seemed to be deteriorating between them lately. This bit of good news might just put things back on track for them. At least that was her hope.

After she opened the door and put her purse on the small table nearby, Emma stopped dead. Her apartment was trashed. Books had been knocked off the corner shelf. The doors to her entertainment center were standing open, and DVDs littered the floor. And where was Damian's Playstation? Had she been burglarized? Oh God, Damian.

She pulled out her cell phone, ready to call 911, when Damian came out of the bedroom carrying a suitcase. Her stomach dropped. "What's going on?"

He stared at her as if she were a complete imbecile. "What does it look like?"

Emma couldn't move, could barely breathe. "It looks like you're moving out."

Damian let out a whistle. “Wow, you figured that out all by yourself.”

Maybe it was the mess he’d made of her home. Maybe it was the feeling of her heart breaking into a million pieces. Emma didn’t know what happened, but she snapped. “And you figured a great parting gift was destroying my things? What on earth has gotten into you?”

Damian rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

Emma was speechless. Damian moved around her as if she were no more significant than a fly. She followed him, watching in stunned silence as he placed the suitcase onto the end of the couch and turned toward her.

“This hasn’t been working out for a long time, and we both know it,” he explained. “It’s time we do something about it.”

Emma looked around her living room. Her bookshelf had been ransacked, books tossed everywhere, trinkets trashed, some broken. She went to the kitchen and found it in the same state. Cupboard doors stood open, pans and utensils strewn across the floor. She marched into the living room. The sanctimonious bastard just stood there, looking down his nose at her. Her anger shot through the roof. “What the hell is the matter with you? Are you mental?”

“I gathered up what’s mine, obviously,” he stated, too full of himself to understand just how badly he’d destroyed her things. “Look, I need my space, Emma. I need to find myself, and I can’t do that surrounded by you and your chaotic life.”

Emma couldn’t believe her ears. “Find yourself?”

Damian made a tsking sound. “I knew you’d be difficult about this. You never could be dignified about anything.” Then he retrieved his suitcase and started for the door. “Grab one of those three boxes for me. That way I won’t have to make a bunch of trips.”

He wanted help? He'd left her apartment a wreck, and he wanted help. Oh, she'd give him help, no problem there.

She crossed her arms over her chest and demanded, "First, I want my key back."

He seemed to hesitate, as if surprised she'd stood up for herself. When he shrugged and reached into his pocket. Emma was at a loss. She'd spent the past year and a half with a man who felt she was no more than a chaotic interference in his life. Wasn't love grand?

He pulled the key to her apartment off his key ring and dropped it onto the coffee table in front of the couch, but when he opened the door,

he paused and looked back at her. "Well? Are you going to help me or not?"

He couldn't really be that stupid. Then again...

Emma smiled and picked up the first box. He was so confident she would follow along behind him that he didn't notice her closing and locking the door once he reached the hallway. She moved toward the window and put the box down carefully, then unlocked and slid up the pane of glass. She picked the first box up again and waited. When Damian emerged from the apartment building, she called his name. He turned and looked up.

"Here you go, honey," she called out. Then Emma dropped the box. It fell two stories and hit the ground with a satisfying crash. She had no idea what was in that one, but poor Damian turned a few shades of green. Emma walked across her living room, grabbed another box and dropped it out the window next. It landed a few feet from the first one. The last and final box was heavy when she tried to pick it up. Curious, she opened it to find his laptop and some books. Emma was going to love tossing this one. She hated his damn laptop. Every night for the past several weeks, he'd stayed up late and surfed porn. She knew because she'd checked his history file. It pissed her off, not so much because of the porn itself, but because she'd tried so hard to get him to make love to her. Every time she tried to turn him on, he'd push her away as if she'd done something horribly obscene. Old insecurities had surfaced each time. Her overweight childhood. Her lack of

a college education. The fact she had such a small circle of friends, while he was always surrounded by people.

She hauled the box into her arms and went to the window one last time. He stood there looking like a child on the verge of a full-blown tantrum. He pleaded with her not to drop his laptop.

“I really hope you and your online whores live happily ever after, Damian.” She dropped the last box, then slammed the window shut on his furious shouts.

“Damn, that felt good.” Emma breathed deep, and for the first time in months, she felt truly free. Sad, confused as hell, but free. She went to the refrigerator and took out a longneck bottle of beer and popped the top. She took a long swallow, enjoying the cold amber liquid. It calmed her temper so that she was able to look at the mess Damian had made. She still couldn’t believe it.

“I wasted way too much time on a guy who cares more about his laptop than he does me.” Emma would have felt more depressed about it had she not just gotten the loan she’d been wishing for. She wouldn’t let Damian ruin her euphoria. Her heart should be ripping apart right now, though. And why wasn’t she crying? She was angry. Pissed, actually. But not ready to fling herself in front of a train or anything.

Then again, Damian wasn’t really the type of boyfriend to inspire those sorts of feelings. There had never been fireworks between them. No awe-inspiring moments. Just a casual, secure feeling. She’d enjoyed sharing expenses and having company to come home to after a hard day at the restaurant. But souls connecting and hearts soaring? Nada.

The phone rang, and she set her beer on the coffee table and looked at the caller ID. It was Damian on his cell phone. She let it ring. The machine picked up, and her now ex-boyfriend’s angry voice filled the room. She turned the volume down, then went back to her beer.

“What I need is a hot shower, then my comfy clothes. Maybe a tub of ice cream.” Afterward, she’d go about getting her apartment back in order. The great thing about being single again was that she could move the couch wherever the hell she damn well pleased.

“Maybe I’ll get a cat.” She sighed.

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