

# Foreign Affairs

By : **Think Pink**

Laila, Sterling, Alistair, Piper, and Luanne are all back in this third and final book in my Harperâ€™s Education series. I swear to all of you that Laila and Sterling will not break up in this one! :) And, wait for it, no one tries to come between them either. Shocking, I know. I donâ€™t want to give too much away because you are all too good at guessing but there are new roommates, annoying host families, and cute boys with British accents. Enough said. Please enjoy Foreign Affairs. Much Love, Pink



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## Foreign Affairs : Chapter 1

Laila stared at the screen on the back of the seat in front of her. The red blinking dot told her they were somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean and the only thing she would be able to see out her window were the stars. Sterling was by her side, his hand resting on her leg, his thoughts deep in whatever book he was reading. She turned and smiled at him. He was wearing his glasses and looked absolutely gorgeous. She sighed and closed her eyes, her head leaning back against the seat.

This semester was going to be amazing. She, along with Piper, would be studying in Paris, five months abroad without restrictions and with the leniency of teachers who knew the students were there to learn more than what was taught in the classrooms. Sterling would be in London, what was only a short train ride away, and she could see him almost as often as she liked. Not that it wouldn't be difficult to be away from him during the week, but they had made the decision together knowing that their interests lay in separate cities.

"What are you smiling about?" She heard Sterling whisper as he placed a kiss just below her ear.

"Just excited, that's all," she answered, opening her eyes.

"Why don't you try and sleep? We've got a long ways to go still."

"I'm surprised anyone on this plane can sleep with your brother's snoring."

Sterling snorted a laugh. Even over the loud hum of the engine, he could hear Alistair from four rows back and could only imagine how Piper was feeling right now. "It's only this bad when he's trying to sleep sitting up," Sterling defended his brother.

"I don't know how Piper deals with it at all."

Sterling grinned at his girlfriend. "Will you still love me when I'm old and fat and snore throughout the night?"

Laila raised her eyebrows and pretended to think about her answer. "Hmmm, definitely not. I'll leave you and take all your money for child support."

Sterling laughed at her sarcasm but felt that warm sensation inside whenever Laila spoke about their future. Child support? He couldn't wait to have children with her. A baby, his baby to be specific, would look so perfect in her arms. She was going to make a great mother one day and a wonderful wife.

But it wasn't time for children yet. That was still many years away. He eyed Laila with a slight hunger as he thought about what they would have to do in order to conceive a child. No, it was a bad idea for Laila to get pregnant, but he was always in the mood for a little practice. His hand slid from Laila's knee up to her thigh and he gave her a rough but loving squeeze. She smiled back, probably thinking he was just being affectionate, and Sterling winked at her.

"No," Laila said almost immediately as she picked up on Sterling's hint.

"What?" He smiled at her suggestively.

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"Don't look at me like that!" She blushed a deep shade of red and diverted her eyes downward.

Sterling's hand crept higher up her leg and he leaned in to kiss her neck, knowing that he was just going to embarrass her even more. "Beautiful, don't you love me?"

"Don't you dare try to guilt trip me into having sex with you right now!" she whispered, trying to act insulted but failing miserably.

Sterling feigned offense. "I would never! But you can't tell me you aren't thinking about it." His hand slid past her hip and moved quickly up to her breast.

"Stop!" Laila laughed, pushing his hand away and glancing around to see if any other passengers had been witness to Sterling's offensive behavior.

"All right," Sterling conceded with a devilish grin. "I'm just going to get up and go to that first bathroom up there. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"No you won't!" Laila said, pushing him as he stood up to leave.

She laughed again as Sterling looked at his watch and tapped the face. "Two minutes," he mouthed to her before turning and walking slowly up the aisle. She watched him until he had reached the lavatory door and then grinned as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure she was still looking. With another quick and knowing wink, he disappeared into the cramped restroom and Laila sat back in her chair, smiling to herself.

He had to know she wasn't going to follow him in there. She just wasn't the type of girl to do that sort of thing, no matter how gorgeous her boyfriend looked or how turned on she was. It would be indecent, inconsiderate to the other passengers, not to mention uncomfortable. She almost laughed out loud as she imagined the position Sterling would try to get her in. But even the ridiculousness of the imagined act made her blush.

She glanced around the plane at the sleeping faces of the other passengers, some with their heads resting at uncomfortable angles on their neighbor's shoulder, others with their mouths open as they dreamt. Very few overhead lights were on and no one was even standing up to stretch their legs. She craned her neck and looked toward the front of the aisle where the flight attendant was dozing, her head leaning back against the wall, her arms crossed at her chest and her eyes closed. No one would even notice if she got up and joined Sterling, would they?

Making her decision against her better judgment, Laila quickly unbuckled her seatbelt and slid out of her chair. She walked quickly up to the lavatory but was stopped by a familiar voice.

"Whatcha doing?"

Laila turned to see Piper smiling up at her, Alistair's head on her shoulder, a book open in her lap. "Couldn't sleep. I guess I drank too much water."

Piper raised her eyebrows and shook her head at her roommate. "How incredibly inconvenient."

"Isn't it?" Laila laughed and blushed. "Looks like you're having some trouble sleeping yourself."

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Piper rolled her eyes and nudged her boyfriend who groaned a little but kept on snoring. "He's out cold. I don't get how he doesn't wake himself up with all that noise."

Laila laughed again and then looked toward the bathroom. "Good luck with that. I'll see you two when we land."

"Enjoy the in-flight entertainment," Piper called after her as she walked the rest of the way to meet Sterling. Piper smiled, slightly amused that Laila would try something like this, slightly shocked that Sterling had been able to convince her to do it. She knew Laila hadn't come up with the idea on her own.

Piper turned her head so she could look at Alistair. Between the two brothers, he was decidedly the one more likely to try and join the mile high club, but was now clearly feeling the effects of his Nyquil. He had been so sick that Piper almost begged him to cancel his flight, knowing he would be miserable the entire way. But Alistair had insisted, saying that if he was going to lose her for an entire semester, he was going to at least make the most of it and fly to Paris so they could spend the last few days together before school started.

Piper didn't know what she was going to do without him for five months. Of course, going to different schools, they didn't see each other every day or even every weekend. It was how their relationship started, and even though neither party was happy about it, it worked for them. But being across the ocean from him was going to be insanely difficult. She wouldn't be able to drive up to Harvard on a whim. They would have to schedule times to call each other. She had asked Alistair to come with her, at least join a program in England or Germany, but he had declined, announcing he was going to overload on classes so he could finish school in three years and move to Connecticut to be with her. Piper loved that idea.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, Alistair's loud snoring keeping a small smile on her face. She would have a great time this semester and she knew Alistair would come to visit as often as he could. In less than a year he would graduate, they could move in together, and never have to spend another day apart.

## Chapter 2: I'm So Glad You Are Here!

"This can't be it," Laila said quietly as she stared at the courtyard in front of her.

"If it isn't, I'm moving in anyway," Piper announced. The building was old and gorgeous. The courtyard was lined with flowers and wrought iron chairs and tables. An old man wearing a beret with a cigarette dangling from his mouth was sweeping the stairs. Classic.

Laila adjusted her bag on her shoulder and wandered over to the stairs, inquiring in perfect French where their apartment was. Piper watched as the old man smiled at her and pointed up the stairs. Laila smiled back and gestured for the group to join. Three stories later and what seemed like hundreds of stairs, the four were standing outside a whitewashed door, knocking expectantly.

A loud squeal could be heard into the hallway as the door was thrown open. "You're here! I've been waiting for days and days and days but you're finally here!"

Laila was pulled into a tight hug before she got a good look at the girl. But soon she was pushed away as the attention was turned to Piper. This ball of energy had dark red hair and her ivory skin was covered in freckles.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" the girl exclaimed, taking a step back and pushing her hair out of her eyes. "I just get so excited! I'm Tamlyn. I'm your third roommate!"

"Oh my God, it's Luanne on crack," Laila heard Alistair whisper to Sterling and she shot him a warning glare.

"Hi, I'm Laila. This is Piper."

"Hi!" Tamlyn was practically bouncing up and down.

"This is Sterling and Alistair!"

But Tamlyn was already reaching for the girl's hands and pulling them inside. "Come on! Let me show you where we're going to be staying!"

Laila and Piper glanced at each other as they were forced inside the apartment. Tamlyn was already rambling about how old the building was and how much work had been done to the place to make sure it could support all the modern day plumbing and electricity. Piper glanced over her shoulder as the twins attempted to collect all of the luggage in their arms and drag it after them.

"And here are our host fathers! Pierre and Luc. Isn't that just adorable?" Tamlyn smiled expectantly at her two new roommates.

Piper looked in front of her again and grinned as she saw the two men standing in the kitchen. They looked like an older version of the odd couple, one tall and handsome with salt and pepper hair, a business suit and tanned skin. The other was short and plump, wearing a dingy t-shirt which was covered in paint.

"Enchanté," Laila said with a shy grin. "My name is Laila."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the taller one said in a thick accent, stepping forward and kissing both of her cheeks. "And you must be Piper."

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"Hey," Piper said, surprised to find that she was a little shy herself as the incredibly good looking man kissed her as well. But she heard Alistair clear his throat and she was quickly pulled from her daze. "This is Alistair and Sterling. They're helping us move in."

"Pierre Gaspard," the man made his introduction again with a warm smile. "And this is my partner, Luc. Unfortunately, his English is nearly non-existent."

Alistair breathed a sigh of relief. He could see the way all three girls were eyeing Pierre, and hadn't been eager for Piper to spend an entire semester with him, even if he was thirty years her senior. But his relief was only temporary as he heard another ear piercing squeal coming from Tamlyn. She pushed past the crowd and Alistair looked behind him to see what could have possibly caught her attention. There, standing at the back of the room, having apparently snuck in completely unnoticed, was a third man. Younger. Much younger. A frown formed on his face and he glanced at his brother who was also eyeing this newcomer with uncertainty.

"And this is SÃ©bastien, their son!" Tamlyn grabbed the guy by the arm and started to pull him across the room, laughing as he shook her off of him. "He doesn't like me at all!"

Alistair cracked a smile as SÃ©bastien rolled his eyes. He would have a hard time living with that girl as well. SÃ©bastien said a quiet hello to the group and then leaned casually against the wall, clearly annoyed by the entire situation.

"SÃ©bastien graduated from University last spring. He's been running Luc's store for us and saving money so he can travel," Pierre said, a rather proud smile on his face.

"What kind of store do you have?" Laila asked Luc, knowing her French wouldn't be understood by the twins or Piper.

"Un fromagerie, ma chÃ©rie," Luc said with a grin, laughing at his rhyme.

"He sells cheese! Isn't that just so French?" Tamlyn said with a smile, skipping over and linking arms with Luc. "He's also a brilliant painter!"

Luc smiled back, even though it was clear he didn't understand a word she had said, as if he were quite fond of the redhead. The group stood around in an awkward silence, the twins shuffling the bags under their arms, SÃ©bastien glaring at Tamlyn, and the three girls smiling at each other with a suppressed excitement over their forthcoming Parisian adventure.

"I imagined you will want to get settled," Pierre finally said. "I am to go to the office but Luc and SÃ©bastien will be here if you need anything. Please, make yourselves comfortable."

"Merci," Piper muttered, still unsure of what limited French she knew. "Thank you."

Pierre smiled, kissed Luc goodbye and gave SÃ©bastien a warning glance as he left the room. Piper watched as his son glared back and then quickly left the room after he heard the front door close.

"Come on," Tamlyn said, significantly calmer but her voice still had a soft ring to it. "I'll show you our room."

The redhead led the way through the apartment, pointing out bathrooms and linen closets along the way. "Luc's mother left him this place when she died but it's way too big for just the three of them so they rent half of it out to students during the year and tourists during the summer months. We're really lucky the school placed us here. It's so close to campus!"



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She opened the last door at the end of the long hallway, a warm light emanating from the room. The walls were painted a soft yellow and a fireplace stood at the far corner. Three small beds were pushed against the walls of the enormous room, all clad in white linen and lace duvets. The window opened up into the courtyard below.

"This is our room?" Piper asked, stepping in right behind Tamlyn.

"Can you believe it?" Tamlyn asked. "It's bigger than my entire apartment back in DC."

Piper was about to ask if DC was where Tamlyn was originally from but the girl just kept on talking.

"There are some drawers over here for your clothes, and another closet right across the hall for your jackets and stuff like that. I've claimed this bed," she said, pointing to the side of the room that had clearly already been lived in. There were clothes draped over the bed frame and shoes sticking out from under the bed itself. "Hope you don't mind."

Tamlyn glanced down at her watch and a smile spread across her face. "Okay, so, I am so glad you are here! I have to go because I have a date with this really, really cute Italian soccer player who lives a few floors above us, but I'll be back later tonight! Oh! And SÃ©bastien has your keys to the apartmentâ forgot to get those. Sorry. Don't mind his moodiness - he just doesn't like Americans. Maybe you could pretend to be from Canada or something. But I doubt he knows the difference. He's kinda really hot, though, isn't he? Anyway, I have to go. But I'm so glad you are here!"

Tamlyn hugged each of the girls again and smiled at the twins before disappearing down the hall.

"What the fuck was that?" Alistair asked, dropping all of the bags in his arms onto the floor.

Laila shrugged and smiled, walking in a slow circle around the room. It was beautiful and it was going to be her home for the next five months. Living with Tamlyn wouldn't be the easiest thing, but this place would certainly make it more agreeable.

She could hear Piper and Alistair laughing about something in the background as she walked to the window and opened it. The sounds of the busy Parisian street just on the other side of the courtyard were calming for some reason, and the fall air blew them through the room with a refreshing breeze. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, not startled at all when she felt Sterling's arms wrap around her from behind.

"Are you ever going to leave this place to come visit me?" He teased as he nibbled playfully on her ear.

"After the novelty wears off," she said with a smile.

Sterling pushed her hair to the side so he could kiss her slender neck. "SÃ©bastien's not really that hot, is he?"

Laila laughed out loud and turned to face her boyfriend. She smiled up at him, knowing he was still trying to tease her but maybe hiding a little concern as well. SÃ©bastien was cute, she would agree with Tamlyn on that. He had long dark hair which hung just above his grey eyes, his face was angular yet somehow soft, at least when it wasn't pulled into a frown. But what could possibly be so offensive about three American girls that the guy felt the need to wear such a scowl?

"He's nothing compared to you," Laila decided, standing on her toes and kissing Sterling on the lips. "Plus, he's French," she added with a whisper.

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Sterling laughed and kissed her back, pulling her into a tight hug and lifting her off the ground.

"Let's get out of here," Sterling whispered. "I'll help you unpack later."

Laila nodded her agreement and kissed his cheek as he set her back on her feet. Sterling took her hand and then turned toward his brother and Piper.

"We're going to head out for a while. Will you two be here to let us back in?"

Alistair nodded and let out a small cough, still not completely over his cold. He actually had no desire to leave the apartment, now or ever. He wanted to stay in the room with Piper until she was ready to come back home to him. He certainly didn't want to share her with all of Paris, even if he was by her side.

Sterling gave his brother an encouraging smile, knowing Alistair was nearly heartbroken that he would have to leave Piper for so many months. But he knew his twin wouldn't be able to stay away for too long. He would be back in Europe before the month was through, sweeping Piper away for a long weekend so they could be together.

Of course, he would miss his brother as well but he knew that his decision to stay and finish school early was for the best. Piper and Alistair were made for each other and they were both starting to feel the distance between them, now more than ever. It would be good for them to live in the same city, to really start their lives together.

Sterling felt Laila pull on his hand as she started walking out of the room. Hmm, starting their lives together. He couldn't wait to live the rest of his life with Laila by his side. He swooped down and lifted Laila into his arms, smiling as he heard her surprised laugh, and carried her out the door.

**A/N: I know some of you have been waiting for it, so I am happy to announce that I will be posting my Kill Will, Volume 2 chapter tomorrow :) Thanks to everyone for all their suggestions and a huge thank you to MyPrintingPress for hosting the competition. Much Love, Pink**

## Chapter 3: Thinking Ahead

**A/N: Adult material in this chapter. Just an FYI :) Also, if you haven't checked it out, I've posted the Kill Will chapter. Hope you all enjoy! Much Love, Pink**

"Finally!" Alistair sighed as he pulled Piper into his arms and kissed her. He had been waiting to get her alone, the excitement of the day finally getting to him. He felt her lips smile as she kissed him back, her arms wrapping around his neck. He loved that she never pulled away from him. She would let him hold her for hours and hours, even if they were in public, and never shrug him off or leave him without a kiss on the cheek or a short glance which let him know she would be right back. Never before had he been so uninhibited when it came to public displays of affection. Sure, when he used to drink in high school, he never minded the entire room seeing him with his tongue down a girl's throat, his hands groping wherever he felt necessary. But he had never held a girl's hand as they walked down the street, kissed her on the lips as they waited in line for the movies, wrapped his arm around her waist as they chatted with friends. What the hell had happened to him? He was turning into such a sap! But he didn't mind. Piper had brought out a new side of him, and he was acting this way, not because she wanted or expected him to, but because it felt good.

Not that he had thrown all of his old habits out the door. Smiling to himself, he reached for the button on her jeans and quickly pulled them open before she had time to protest.

"Alistair!" She gasped in a hushed voice, stepping away and blushing.

"Oh, sorry," he said with a grin. "I'll shut the door."

He nudged the door shut with his foot and then quickly pulled his shirt over his head, kicking off his shoes in the process.

Piper smiled and shook her head. "Not right now. We can wait until we get back to your hotel room."

"But why?" That just sounded like a ridiculous idea. "And where do you think Laila and Sterling are headed right now?"

"I don't know," Piper said with a shrug. "But I'm guessing they had enough excitement on the airplane to last them through the afternoon."

Alistair gave her a strange look but didn't really want to ask for clarification. He had better things to do at the moment: Piper, if he wanted to get specific about it. The smile returned to his face as he started walking slowly toward his girlfriend. She knew better than to try and run away from him, he was faster and stronger than she was and he was more than willing to tackle her to a bed, even if it wasn't her own.

Piper grinned as Alistair approached. His nose was still red from his cold, his hair was a mess and his paisley boxers clashed horribly with his plaid shorts. But she didn't care. She loved him more than anything.

"I thought you were still sick," she reminded him as he took her in his arms.

"It's amazing what getting you alone can do for my health," he replied and bent his head to kiss her.

She could tell by his kiss that he wasn't just teasing her, that he really wanted her. His kiss always turned her on but this one more than the others. She knew that the sex wasn't going to be conventional when he kissed her like this. She knew he wasn't going to stop until they were both completely satisfied. But as much as she

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wanted it, she knew they couldn't. They didn't have one very important thing.

"Alistair, I don't have any protection," she whispered in defeat, her eyes still closed as he kissed her neck.

Alistair chuckled to himself and released her from his arms. She opened her eyes to see him digging into his pocket, a devious look on his face. What he pulled out didn't really surprise her as much as it amused her. There, in his hand, covered in French words neither of them could understand, was a single condom.

"I got it at the airport. The attendant in the bathroom had a jar of them on the counter."

Piper laughed out loud but quickly covered her mouth, afraid her host father and brother would hear. "Look at you, thinking ahead," she teased him.

"I know! I had to tip the guy a whole Euro. You're getting rather expensive."

Piper laughed again and rolled her eyes.

"But you're worth it," Alistair assured her with a wink, reaching for her and kissing her again. He felt her arms link together behind his neck, one of her legs sliding around his calf, turning him on more than he thought possible.

"Okay," Piper said, pulling away slightly so she could look him in the eyes. "But we have to be quiet. I don't want Luc or SÃ©bastien to hear."

"Of course," Alistair grinned at her, picking her up and carrying her to the bed. She wound her legs around his waist and kissed his jaw, nibbling gently on his earlobe. Alistair was eager to get her undressed and screaming his name, her new host family be damned, but as he knelt on the bed, a loud moan distracted his attention.

The couple looked at each other for a short moment before bursting into laughter.

"You've got to be kidding me," Alistair laughed as he gently set Piper on the bed, her weight making it sound as if a pickup truck had been dropped onto the springs.

Piper giggled as she bounced on the bed a few times, the creaking and moaning becoming louder and louder as she moved. "This isn't going to work," she decided, looking up at Alistair who had started to undo his pants.

"Sure it will," he said, an unconvincing look on his face.

"Alistair, we make one move on this bed and they can hear it at the Louvre. Imagine how obvious it's going to be if we start having sex."

"I don't think it's that bad," he lied, pulling Piper's tank top off as he spoke. "You're usually louder!"

But he started laughing before he could finish. Piper playfully slapped him on the stomach and attempted to crawl out from underneath him, the bed groaning as if it were in pain. Alistair pinned her down and kissed her again before agreeing, both of them laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

Alistair stood up and held out his hands so Piper could stand with him, their bodies pressing together when they finally met. Piper smiled playfully before kissing him, biting gently on his lower lip as she ran her fingers down his stomach to his boxers. He quickly unclasped her bra and pushed her jeans down her hips, both of

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them now standing in the middle of the room in nothing but their underwear.

Piper knew what she was doing as she kissed her boyfriend. Her breasts were pressing against his chest, enough room for her to move and tease him, but close enough so he couldn't take one in his hand. Her bare thighs were rubbing against his and she could feel his erection growing against her abdomen. Alistair always pretended as if he didn't like being teased, but she knew different. He was well aware that she would always let him have her in the end.

Soon she felt him getting impatient and she slipped her hands beneath the elastic of his boxers and helped them to the floor. Her panties quickly followed and she realized just how desperate she was for this as well. As Alistair reached between them to touch her, she knew she had to have him right then and there.

"Where are we going to do this?" She asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

"The desk," Alistair answered, too busy kissing her neck and chest to think about it.

An image of the furniture collapsing under their naked bodies popped into Piper's head as she gasped in pleasure, Alistair's fingers pushing deep inside of her.

"No," she panted. "The floor,"

"It's wood," Alistair tapped his foot. "That's going to hurt."

"No it won't," she insisted. "I'll be on top."

"Yeah?" Alistair raised an eyebrow at her and she blushed a deep red.

They pulled apart and scrambled to get ready, Piper throwing the blanket at the foot of her bed onto the floor and Alistair ripping open the condom and rolling it on. Before any time had passed, Alistair was on his back and Piper was straddling him, slowly lowering herself into place. She started with a slow and steady tempo, rocking her body back and forth. Alistair loved to watch her while they were making love. Her face was always showing him exactly what she was feeling or what she wanted. Her hair was now hanging down her shoulders and covering her breasts which were now bouncing slightly as she picked up her pace. Her flat stomach was flexing and her hands were on his chest, helping her as she moved above him.

Alistair smiled as his hands moved to her hips, guiding her up and down so she wouldn't hurt her knees on the hard floor. It wasn't long before he felt her muscles start to tighten around him as she climaxed, pulling him with her. His gorgeous girlfriend collapsed onto his chest, both of them completely spent.

"I love you," Piper whispered as she kissed him, her hand running through his hair.

"Come back home with me," Alistair said softly.

"No." Piper sat up and smiled at him. "But I'll miss you more than anything."

Alistair groaned and sat up with her, helping Piper off of his lap. They sat on the ground next to each other, completely naked, just staring into each other's eyes. Soon Alistair reached for her leg and ran his hand along her inner thigh, completely entranced by her soft skin.

"It's going to be so hard without you there," he said, looking down at her long legs.

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Piper reached for his face and felt his stubble. God, how she would miss his scratchy kiss. "You can take an extra class or two. You'll be too busy to miss me."

"You know that's not true."

"I know," Piper forced a laugh. "But think about how great it will be when we can live together next year."

Finally Alistair smiled. "I can't wait for that."

"Come on," Piper said, kissing him quickly on the lips. "Let's get dressed. I'm hungry."

"For me?" Alistair winked at her and stood up.

Piper laughed out loud. "No, not anymore."

"Well, you better go get the keys from SÃ©bastien, then."

Piper grabbed her clothes from the floor and rolled her eyes. "I'm not asking him for the keys. You do it."

Alistair laughed as he pulled his shorts on. "No way! He's your host brother now. You have to do it."

"Fuck it. He can't be that mean, right?" Piper asked in a hopeful voice as she finished getting dressed.

"No. He probably is."

"Whatever. You're coming with me," Piper decided as she opened the door and grabbed her boyfriend's hand, pulling him out of the room with her.

## Chapter 4: We Could Do It

"Laila! Use your inhaler if you need it!" Sterling reprimanded her as he helped her up the last steps of the Eiffel Tower.

"Not till we get to the top," his girlfriend said, her voice as shallow as her breaths.

"No. Now." Sterling turned around and blocked her way, smiling down at her.

"Fine," Laila said with a smile. She pulled out her inhaler from her purse and held it to her lips.

Sterling waited until he heard her breathing return to normal until he allowed her to pass him and skip up the remaining stairs. He knew Laila had always wanted to climb the Eiffel Tower, but the last time they had been there she had forgotten her inhaler at the hotel and Alistair had deemed it too touristy. He was glad they had done it now. Laila's face was a delicate shade of pink, her eyes bright and animated as she ran to the edge and looked down.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Laila whispered, feeling Sterling wrap his arm around her shoulder as he joined her by the railing.

"Amazing," he replied, his voice not as excited as hers had been.

But nothing could put a damper on Laila's mood. Her eyes were wide as she took in her surroundings. The sky was a crystal blue, the people below looked like tiny figurines, the city looked tranquil, almost serene. Glancing around at the other tourists flocking to the iconic landmark, her eyes fell on a bride and groom. The photographer was snapping candid shots as the newlyweds smiled at each other and stared with starry eyes out over all of Paris.

"We could do it, you know?" Sterling whispered in her ear, kissing her neck.

"What's up with you and wanting to have sex in high places?" Laila asked, turning to face her boyfriend.

Sterling laughed out loud and pulled her into tight hug. "I meant we could get married," he clarified, kissing the top of her head. He felt Laila nuzzling into his chest, most likely blushing bright red. He ran his fingers through her hair for a few moments, letting her contemplate what he had just said.

"You want to announce our engagement?" Laila asked in a shy voice, craning her neck to look up Sterling.

Sterling smiled down at her. She looked so beautiful and felt so amazing pressed so close to him. "We can announce it, or we could just get married."

Laila laughed. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," Sterling confirmed. "We could do it before I leave for London next week."

Laila laughed again, thinking he was teasing her. "I don't think any judge in Paris is going to marry two kids from America."

"I'm sure we could find someone to do it," Sterling insisted, kissing her on the lips.

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Sterling dipped Laila into his arms as he kissed her. It wasn't indecent, but Laila could feel the passion behind his kiss. "Oh my God. You're being serious," Laila exclaimed, pulling away from him and looking at him in disbelief.

"Don't you want to marry me?" Sterling asked, a mischievous look in his eye.

"Of course I want to marry you." Laila blushed just at the thought. "But not right now. Not in Paris."

"Why not?" He asked, half teasing her, half believing they should really get married. "It would be romantic."

"Because we should wait so we can plan a big wedding so all of our friends can be there."

But Sterling shook his head, still smiling at her. "I don't want a big wedding. I just want you."

Laila giggled at his persistence. "Well there are other people we need to think about."

"Like who? It's our wedding."

"I can't believe we are even talking about this," she said in giddy disbelief. "For one, there are our parents, who will kill us both if we just go off and elope. My dad would be absolutely heartbroken if he didn't get to walk me down the aisle."

"He'd get over it."

"There's Tate and Tennille. She'll hate me forever if she doesn't get to be a bridesmaid."

"That wouldn't be the end of the world." Sterling leaned down to kiss her again but Laila dodged his lips.

"Sterling, please be serious. I reallyâ"

"Laila, I am being serious," he insisted. Sure, he had been teasing at first, but having Laila as his wife was an idea that was quickly growing on him. An overwhelming impatience had entered his conscious mind whenever he thought about the two of them together and he hadn't been able to shake it. "I want to marry you. Not tonight, but soon. I don't see the point in waiting in longer."

Laila opened her mouth and blinked her eyes, shocked by Sterling's determination. "The point is we are only 20 years old and I want my family and friends at my wedding."

"Our wedding."

Laila smiled. "Our wedding," she agreed.

"You really want to wait?" Sterling asked, not ready to admit defeat but willing to concede this battle.

"Yes," she answered softly, resting her hands on his chest as he held her. "We can announce our engagement over New Year's when you come to California. Then we can start planning a wedding for the summer after we graduate." Just that thought was making her pulse race with excitement. Marrying Sterling would be a dream come true.

"Next summer," Sterling insisted with a smile. "If we are going to get married, you are going to have to learn to compromise."



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Laila laughed. "How is that compromising?"

"Well, I want to get married now and you, for whatever reason, want to wait another 20 months."

Laila laughed. "We'd be married for our last year of college," she pointed out.

"So?" Sterling laughed at her logic. "You'll be living with me anyway."

"Who says?"

"I do."

Laila laughed again.

"What?" Sterling asked defensively. "Piper and Alistair are going to move in together next year. I know you don't want to live with Luanne again and if you lived by yourself you know you would get bored and be at my place all the time anyway."

Laila blinked. She knew he was right. "Just because there is a possibility of us living together, and there is a huge emphasis on the possible part, doesn't mean that we should just get married."

"You're right," Sterling agreed. "We should get married because we know it's the right thing to do."

"It will be the right thing to do after we graduate."

Sterling just shook his head and smiled at her stubbornness. He knew she was right. They were still young and there were a million other reasons why they should wait. But he didn't care. He wanted her as his wife, not in 20 months, not even in 20 days. The sooner he could call her Mrs. Sterling Pierce, the better.

"We'll see," was all he offered in response. Laila looked up at him with a challenging glint in her eye. He knew she would marry him - eventually.

"Let's walk around," Laila suggested, wiggling out of his arms and taking his hand. She could feel the ring she wore pressing against her skin as Sterling's fingers interlaced with hers. It was easy to imagine being Sterling's wife. Ever since he had given her the ring almost two years ago, she had been daydreaming about their wedding. She imagined herself in a white gown with tons of fabric, Sterling looking completely sexy in his black tux, all their friends and family gathered to see them. They would honeymoon somewhere exotic, somewhere they could be alone and secluded, enjoying their first weeks of marriage. And then they would settle down into a little house just outside of Boston or along the northern California coast, and live happily ever after. Sure, it sounded a little too perfect, even for Laila, but it was only a daydream.

She looked up at Sterling. His lips were smiling but she could tell from his eyes that his mind was still preoccupied. Did he really want to marry her that badly? He had made a valid argument, they should get married because it was the right thing to do. But getting married to Sterling wasn't going to be a spontaneous decision and therefore shouldn't be a spontaneous event. She could wait, they could wait until after graduation. She squeezed his hand a little tighter, knowing that in less than two years she would be taking his last name. Laila Pierce. That sounded wonderful.

## Chapter 5: Stop Singing

SÃ©bastien rolled his eyes as he heard Tamlyn's voice coming from bathroom. She was singing again. If he wanted to be absolutely honest, he really didn't mind her singing. Her voice was soft and velvety, her pitch was perfect. If she would only open her mouth to sing, he knew they would get along just fine. However, Tamlyn only sang while she was in the shower so he had to put up with her annoying speaking voice the rest of the time she was around him. Her high pitched squeals, her exaggerated exclamations, almost every noise she made infuriated him.

Just earlier that day she had almost pushed him to the edge, yet the reason now seemed rather irrelevant. He had finally decided that just her mere presence was enough to drive him completely insane. They were in the kitchen and she had insisted on making breakfast for him and Luc. She had thrown open the fridge, dug through the contents and announced she was going to make omelets. Soon there were eggs and cheese and vegetables covering the kitchen counter and floor and Tamlyn seemed completely oblivious to the mess she was making. She was chattering about the cooking classes she had taken back home, telling Luc in near perfect French about how she had picked up a French cookbook before she came over and made every single recipe for her brother and sister, when SÃ©bastien had finally realized he had been glaring at her. Her dark red hair had been pulled into a high pony tail and he couldn't help but notice her long and slender neck. The apron she had borrowed was tied around her thin waist and her jeans were perfectly snug. Why did this girl have to be so damn irritating?

SÃ©bastien had stormed out of the kitchen then and there, an act which produced a disapproving glance from his father and a laugh from Tamlyn followed by a comment about his rude behavior. He had marched to his room and slammed the door, a blatant yet childish show of his utter abhorrence for the girl. All of the other exchange students the three men had housed over the years had been a pleasant surprise for him. They would normally keep to themselves, occasionally inviting SÃ©bastien to the movies or out to dinner. They were respectful and courteous - everything Tamlyn was not.

The first time he had seen her, he knew she was going to be different. She arrived at their apartment dressed in tight jeans and a white tank top, a bright pink bra practically glowing beneath the thin fabric. Her sandals were impractical and made a terrible noise as she walked around the apartment. Her toes and finger nails were painted an electric blue. The girl also seemed to lack any regard for personal space. She was constantly touching his dads, linking arms with them, hugging them for absolutely no reason. Tamlyn would try and pull the same act with him as well, but SÃ©bastien wouldn't have it. He was always pushing her away or shrugging her arms off his shoulders.

And he hated that she was always at the apartment. He hated that he had to live with her for the next 10 months. Why couldn't she be staying for only one semester like the other two Americans? Why was it necessary for her to stay the entire school year? Maybe she would decide she was miserable in Paris and skip out early. But that didn't seem very likely. Tamlyn claimed to love it here, and Luc was completely besotted with her, always willing to listen to her stories and eat her cooking, showing her what SÃ©bastien considered to be unnecessary encouragement.

SÃ©bastien tried to push the redhead from his mind as he concentrated on his book. There was no reason this American should ruin what remained of his summer. Soon he would have to go back to work in the shop. At least while at work he would be away from her and her damn voice. But soon her singing grew louder, or perhaps he just couldn't stop focusing on it. Growling in annoyance, SÃ©bastien stood up from his desk and stomped out of his room, heading straight for the girls' bathroom.

"Tamlyn?" He called as he knocked on the door.

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She stopped singing but didn't answer.

"Stop singing," he told her in English.

He heard her laugh and his spine stiffened.

"Why? Don't you like it?"

"No. And you are disturbing the neighbors."

She laughed again. "I happen to know that your neighbors love my singing. They told me so themselves."

"Well, I don't like it."

"What if I sing in French?"

SÃ©bastien sighed and didn't answer.

"Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime, mais si je t'aime, prends garde toiâ!" She started the aria from Carmen and SÃ©bastien felt the goose bumps climb his skin. Her voice soared from the tiled bathroom and filled the entire hallway. But he wasn't in the mood to be distracted all afternoon.

He pounded on the door again. "Tamlyn! Stop!"

He heard the water turn off but the song continued and SÃ©bastien pounded on the door for a third time, completely frustrated that she was able to get a rise out of him. His fist was still banging on the door when it flew open and he saw Tamlyn standing on the other side, a towel wrapped around her body and her wet hair hanging over her shoulders.

"What is your problem?" She asked, putting her hands on her hips and accentuating her curves.

SÃ©bastien swallowed and forced his eyes to look at her face. "Stop singing," he said again, making sure to add a little venom this time.

"I've stopped."

"I don't want to hear it all the time. There are other people in this house apart from you."

"I know!" Tamlyn answered in French. "And your dads love my singing as much as your neighbors."

"But I don't like it and I live here as well."

"Believe me, I know you live here as well. You never leave this place!" She adjusted her towel and SÃ©bastien's eyes fell to her cleavage as she wrapped the terrycloth tightly around her. Her skin was still damp and her face was slightly pink from the heat of the water. But he shook his head and remembered the task at hand.

"It's my house, I can do as I please."

"Don't you have friends? Aren't you supposed to be on holiday? Go to Ibiza or wherever it is you Europeans go." She pulled her hair to one side and SÃ©bastien glanced down at the perfect curve of her neck and

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shoulder. What was wrong with him? No girl had ever enticed him or aggravated him this much.

"What I do is none of your business. But you are staying in my house and should be respectful."

SÃ©bastien watched as a little of the courage fell from Tamlyn's face. "Okay," she said slowly. "If my singing bothers you that much then I'll stop."

A guilty pang hit SÃ©bastien right in the stomach though he couldn't figure out why. It must have been something about the girl's expression, the way her eyes betrayed an emotion which he hadn't seen in her before, a sort of sadness if he had to put a name to it. He wanted to take it back, wanted to tell her that he didn't actually mind her singing at all, but he couldn't. If he gave her an inch, she would take a mile and so he turned around and walked away. He was halfway to his room before he heard the bathroom door close.

Tamlyn had been right. He needed to get out more. But all of his friends now had jobs, legitimate jobs, whereas SÃ©bastien was still trying to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. University had been a waste of time. He had no desire to use his law degree and wasn't eager to pursue any other studies. Coming home after graduation had been a major blow to his confidence. Agreeing to run Luc's shop had been even worse. But he didn't have any other options. His savings were growing, slowly but surely, and he estimated that by the following summer, he would have enough for at least two years of travel, two and a half if he really stretched it. He wanted to believe that his future lay somewhere outside of Paris, he just needed to go and find it. So while his friends were busy working or vacationing, he would choose to remain at home, saving every Euro that he earned until he could afford to leave for good.

## Chapter 6: Being Scarlet

Luanne looked around nervously as she entered her first class of the semester. Nothing was familiar and she searched the students already sitting down for anyone she knew or even recognized. A waving hand caught her attention and she smiled as she started walking toward Sterling. Laila's boyfriend smiled back at her but then his attention was diverted to the person sitting next to him. Luanne's mouth nearly fell to the ground as she looked at Sterling's new friend. His eyes were dark and his brow and jaw were strong. His lips were a perfect shade of pink and his hair was a dark mess of brown locks. Luanne was so busy staring at this gorgeous stranger that she didn't even pay attention to where she was walking and before she could catch herself, she had tripped over the foot of a desk, her books spilling from her arms as she fell.

Her face flushed bright red and she kept her head down as she collected her things, pretending not to hear the snickers and giggles of the other students.

"Did you hurt yourself?" She heard a seductive British voice ask her.

Luanne raised her head just slightly and her eyes locked with her mystery boy. "Umâ 'lâ 'uhâ 'no," she stuttered before finding her voice. "Just embarrassed myself."

The boy smiled and handed her the last book. "I'm Christian. You must be Luanne."

Luanne felt her pulse begin to race. He knew her name. "Hi, yeah, I'm Luanne."

Christian stood up and guided Luanne to her feet, his hand on her elbow. "Sterling and I have been saving you a seat. Would you care to join us?"

Luanne could only smile and nod as Christian led her to the desired row. Her chair was pulled out for her and she found herself feeling light as a feather as she took her seat. Christian was still smiling, a warm and friendly smile, as he took the chair next to her.

"Hey Luanne," she heard Sterling say, a certain taunt in his voice.

"Oh! Hi Sterling!" Luanne turned to her other side and blushed as she saw her friend grinning at her. "How are you?"

"Fine," he answered in a teasing tone. "How are you?"

"I'm good," she answered quickly, completely aware that Christian was leaning across her desk so he could hear their conversation. "How's Laila?"

"She's great."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I see you've met Christian," Sterling said, nodding toward his friend.

"Um, yesâ !" Luanne answered, her head turning toward the gorgeous boy to her left but then quickly sitting back in her chair when she realized how close his face was to hers. "How do you two know each other?"

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"Just met, actually. I saw Sterling's jumper and had to come make fun of him for supporting such a crap football team."

Luanne heard Sterling laugh but couldn't take her eyes off of Christian.

"First of all, they weren't crap. Second, my family is Dutch so I have a legitimate reason to support the team," Sterling defended himself.

"I'll have him wearing a Manchester United jersey by the time he goes back to the states," Christian said, winking at Luanne.

"It's so easy to like Manchester Unitedâ!" Sterling was saying but Luanne wasn't paying attention. She honestly had no idea what they were talking about but that didn't really matter. She was in heaven as long as Christian was speaking. She stared at his lips, willing him to say something, smiling when they finally moved and formed a beautiful sentence with his perfect accent. She sighed and waited for him to speak again but felt a quick jab to her side which brought her back to reality.

"What?" She turned around and glared at Sterling who was giving her an evil smile. He nodded toward Christian and Luanne realized his words must have been intended for her.

"Sterling said he was from the Boston area," Christian repeated himself, smiling as Luanne sat back in her chair and blushed. "Is that where you are from as well?"

"Um, no. I'm from Birmingham, Alabama."

"Alabama? I don't think I've ever met anyone from Alabama."

"I'm probably the only one worth knowing," she said with a smile. What was that? Did she just flirt? It sounded pretty lame, even in Luanne's opinion, but she had never flirted with someone before. This feeling was completely new for her and she had to admit that she liked it.

"Then I'll consider myself lucky to have the privilege of sitting next to you," Christian responded with a bright smile and a chuckle.

Oh, God. Was he flirting back? Luanne suddenly panicked, not knowing how to respond. She looked down at her books on the desk and started to fumble through her bag for a pencil. She could feel Christian's eyes on her, see him smiling in her periphery. To her other side, Sterling was shaking his head, no doubt amused by her flustered antics. Darn it. If Sterling could see her attraction for Christian, she knew he would tell Laila who would in turn tell Piper and Luanne would never hear the end of it.

But luckily class started and the attention of both boys turned toward the teacher. Luanne did her best to concentrate, she really did, but she found it an incredibly difficult task to accomplish with Christian sitting so close. He wasn't making things any easier for her either. He would tease her by pushing her hand away from her notes with his elbow, lean over her desk so he could pretend to read what she was writing, mimic the teacher with adorably irritating noises whenever he would clear his throat - a habit which would have annoyed Luanne to no end had Christian not made light of it.

Luanne sighed in relief as class ended. She started to collect her things, trying not to focus on the conversation Christian and Sterling were having about playing soccer that afternoon.

"Will you join us, Luanne?" Her name coming from Christian's lips returned her focus to the boys.

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"I don't think so," she said with a smile. "Thanks, though."

"Not much of a football player then?"

"Um, no," Luanne laughed. "Growing up it was strictly piano lessons and ballet classes for me."

Christian's face lit up at that statement. He clearly found something entertaining about it. "Were you a debutante, Luanne?"

She blushed bright red. She had hated the fact that her parents forced her through cotillions and pageants as a young girl. She was never one to rebel and had actually learned some very useful life skills from her debutante days, but the other girls had always been so mean to her that she had never taken any pleasure in the events.

"Not a very good one, I assure you."

Christian grinned, his eyes dancing over her face, and Luanne smiled back. She could feel it happening, the butterflies in her stomach, her heart pounding nearly out of control - she was falling for him. Was this what being in love felt like? Luanne always assumed that she would fall in love gradually, it wouldn't hit her like a freight train, completely knocking her off her feet. But this feeling inside was almost overwhelming. She barely knew this guy, but the emotions bubbling inside her head and her heart were stronger than anything she'd felt before.

"Luanne, where's your next class?" She heard Sterling behind her and was forced to break eye contact with Christian.

"It's just downstairs."

Sterling nodded and gave her a look which she didn't quite understand. It almost appeared encouraging. "Mine's a couple blocks away. I'll see you tomorrow?"

Luanne smiled at him. "Bye."

She watched as her best friend's boyfriend walked around the desk and joined the flow of students out in the hallway. "I'll see you later, Christian," Luanne said as she started to follow him, surprised at how soft her voice sounded.

"May I walk you to class?"

His request caught her off guard but was pleasantly accepted. "I'd like that."

Christian smiled again and Luanne wondered if he had ever frowned a moment in his life. She didn't like to think about Christian frowning. His smile was dazzling and she felt as if she could look at it forever.

"So tell me more about Alabama. What's it like down there?"

"There's really not that much to tell. Birmingham, at least where I lived, still feels like a small southern town. My grandma makes the best sweet tea, everyone sits on rocking chairs out on their porches during the summer, my grandpa and his friends get drunk off of moonshine and still talk about the Confederacy rising again. Stereotype the South and you pretty much have my life."

Christian laughed out loud and Luanne smiled at the sincerity of it, though she hadn't meant to be amusing. "I can just imagine you in a Scarlet O'Hara dress, teasing all the boys at the picnics."

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It was Luanne's turn to laugh now as they started walking down the stairs. She had never, ever, teased anyone at neighborhood picnics, much less in large gowns with yards and yards of fabric. But if Christian wanted to compare her to Scarlet O'Hara, who was she to ruin that image for him? She could be Scarlet - if Scarlet was what Christian wanted.

"Oh, Christian! You know a girl would hardly admit to doing such a thing," she giggled, batting her eyelashes at him. That sounded pretty good! She could get used to this whole idea of flirting.

Christian laughed again and the two slowed to a stop outside of Luanne's next class.

"Is this you?" Christian nodded toward the door.

"Yes. Political Science," she informed him.

He smiled at her and reached for her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing her lightly on the knuckles. Luanne felt her face flush and she lowered her eyes so he couldn't see her pleasure.

"Are you sure you won't come with us this afternoon?" Christian asked again. "You don't have to play. You can just cheer me on."

"I'll think about it," Luanne promised him, already knowing there was nothing that could keep her from that soccer pitch.

"I very much hope to see you there," Christian said slowly, waiting until Luanne's eyes had met his again and then holding her gaze for a moment before dropping her hand.

Luanne couldn't think of anything else witty to say so she remained quiet, hoping that her silence would add some mystery that Christian might find appealing. She smiled at him coyly and then turned toward the classroom door, pulling it open and then hurrying inside. The smile which she had given him remained on the corner of her lips for the rest of the day.



## Chapter 7: Just Go Without

Four heads were turning from side to side as they followed the Frisbee being thrown back and forth between the two shirtless boys on the beach.

"How did you meet this guy?" Piper asked her friend, unable to take her eyes off of him.

"Sterling met him the first day of class. They play soccer together."

"Thank God for that!" Tamlyn piped up and all four girls laughed.

"Does he always run around without a shirt on?" Laila asked.

"No, he's usually fully clothed," Luanne answered with a smile.

"I seriously don't understand why," Piper commented and the girls giggled again.

Piper and Laila had been surprised when Sterling and Luanne had shown up with Christian. Both girls knew that Luanne had developed feelings for someone (she couldn't stop talking about him) but neither expected him to be so good looking. The fact that he was charming and incredibly sweet had only added to his acceptance in the group. They had been abroad for a little over a month and had wanted to visit the south of France while they could still wear their bathing suits. Christian had offered his family's vacation home in Nice and a car ride down there in exchange for gas money and groceries. No one had objected.

"So, Luanne, how well do you two know each other?" Laila teased her friend and Luanne blushed.

"We've been out a couple of times."

"You didn't answer my question."

"He hasn't kissed me, if that's what you mean," Luanne answered, bringing out her sunscreen and spraying her legs again.

"Do you want him to?" Piper asked playfully.

"Will you two stop?" Luanne laughed. "Of course I want him to," she added quickly.

Everyone laughed again all eyes wandered back to Christian. Luanne knew her two old roommates were proud of her. They had tried multiple times to set her up with various boys back at Yale but she usually ended up walking out of the date or embarrassing herself. No guy had ever showed her as much attention as Christian had. Certainly no one had stuck around long enough to ask her out on a second date.

She stared at Christian as he ran down the beach, his long arms and legs perfectly toned, his stomach unbelievably chiseled. Glancing down at her own physique, she wasn't quite sure what he saw in her. She was the only girl in the group not in a bikini, her one piece bathing suit designed to hide all the flaws the other girls seemed to be without.

But Christian didn't seem to mind any of that. He often commented on how pretty she looked, on how adorable her accent was. To be honest, Luanne found it quite exhausting to be around Christian. She had built up a rather extreme southern belle persona in the attempts of winning his affection and it had now become

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almost natural for her. Natural but tiring. All the flirting and the mind games were starting to wear her down but she knew they were working. Christian had asked her out multiple times and it couldn't be long before they kissed and he asked her to be his girlfriend. Luanne had never had a boyfriend before and assumed that once they were in a relationship, all the games would become superfluous and she could start acting like herself again.

"Well, since I am the only one here without a boyfriend, I nominate Piper to come with me and find some hot Frenchmen to take me to dinner tonight," Tamlyn announced, standing up and brushing the sand off of her backside.

"Why me?" Piper asked.

"Because Alistair isn't here and you've got nothing better to do."

Piper couldn't disagree with her but wasn't really in the mood to walk around. The drive from Paris had been exceedingly uncomfortable for her. She had never experience motion sickness before but something about Christian's driving and the terrifying speeds on the freeway had her stomach turning in summersaults. She hadn't been able to eat anything that evening and went to bed almost as soon as they arrived at the house.

She was feeling mildly better the next morning and by the time they had made it to the beach she was almost functioning at 100 percent again. But the smells coming from a nearby market had started wafting their way around lunchtime and she had started feeling sick again. Piper really wasn't in the mood for a stomach flu. This was going to be the last time she could wear her bikini all year and she had wanted to enjoy it.

Willing away her nausea, Piper stood up, determined to convince her body that she wasn't sick. "You lead the way," she told Tamlyn. "But I'm only your wingman. I'm not letting any French guy take me to dinner."

Tamlyn laughed and linked arms with her, pulling her through the sand and toward a group of men.

Laila watched her friends leave. She had been surprised at how easy it was to live with Tamlyn. The girl who never stopped talking was actually turning out to be quite a good friend and an ideal roommate. She was always cooking something for the house and eager to entertain everyone with her wild stories - most of which didn't make any sense but to hear her tell them was amusement enough.

"Do you want to go swimming?" She turned her head, startled to hear Sterling's voice so close. Her boyfriend was smiling at her, sand covering his hands and arms, his skin glowing in the bright sun.

Laila smiled and nodded, standing up with the help of Sterling's hand and then walking with him down to the water.

"Christian seems nice," she commented, sticking her toes in the waves of the clear blue sea and then taking a step back, the water too cold for her liking.

"He must look nice too," Sterling teased. "Don't think I didn't notice all of you girls staring at him."

"No comment," Laila said with a laugh, watching as her boyfriend walked in up to his knees, the water rising and falling just below his green board shorts. Fully clothed, or in the darkness of the bedroom, it was easy for Laila to forget just how impressive Sterling looked without a shirt on. Sure, other girls would fall for a leaner physique like Christian's, but Laila much preferred the brawny muscles of her boyfriend. Not that his bulk was overwhelming, it suited him perfectly and Laila always felt safe and protected when he was around.

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"You coming?"

Laila shook her head. "Isn't it cold?"

"You'll get used to it," Sterling promised and stretched out his hand to her.

She took a deep breath and stepped in, the cold salt water covering her feet and sending goose bumps up to her shoulders.

"It's freezing!" She laughed, taking Sterling's hand and trying to pull him back to the dry beach.

But he was too strong for her. He had her in his arms in seconds, lifting her off her feet and carrying her deeper into the ocean. She squealed and clung to him, mostly for warmth, as the water came up her legs and hit her bathing suit.

"Ready?" Sterling asked once they were deep enough that she could no longer stand on her own.

"No."

"One. Two. Three."

Laila took a deep breath as he dipped them both under the water. They both came up laughing and Laila wrapped her legs around his waist, knowing she would have to tread water if wanted to stay near him. She opened her eyes and pushed the hair from her boyfriend's face, kissing him gently on the lips.

Sterling smiled and let his hands wander up her legs, knowing she was holding on to him tight enough that he could let go. "Have I told you how sexy you look in this bathing suit?"

Laila blushed and looked down at her bikini. She hadn't even thought about packing one to bring to Paris and had been forced to buy a new one at a local store that morning. Their selection had been extensive yet she hadn't found one with nearly enough fabric to please her. She ended up purchasing a black string bikini, knowing that no matter what her choice, she was going to be showing some skin.

"Luanne really likes Christian, you know?" She said, wanting to turn the conversation away from herself.

Sterling smiled at her, seeing right through her diversion. "I know. I think he likes her too."

"I hope so. She'll be heartbroken if he doesn't."

"A little heartbreak might be good for Luanne. Have you seen the way she acts around him?"

Laila laughed. She had noticed Luanne's change of behavior. "She's just trying to flirt. She doesn't know any better."

"You never tried any of that with me," Sterling said.

She laughed again as one of his hands crept up her back. "Well, for one, I didn't know how. Two, I knew you would have laughed at me."

"I still would have fallen for you," Sterling said, his fingers twirling the string of her bathing suit.

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"Good," Laila smiled and kissed him, not knowing what she would have ever done without him.

Sterling knew that Laila would be distracted by their kiss and used the opportunity for his advantage. He hadn't seen her in weeks and even though they had their own room at Christian's house, he still had to make up for lost time. With one quick pull, the strings of Laila's bikini top unknotted and he heard his girlfriend gasp as her hands flew to her back.

"Sterling!"

But he could only laugh as he quickly gathered her hands and held them tightly in his own. "What? This is France. Everyone goes topless."

"Everyone but me!" Laila protested, her face close to his as he held her hands down by her sides. The waves were hitting his shoulders as he protected her from the surf, the black triangles floating around her chest, still secured around her neck.

"Don't worry, no one's looking."

He smiled as she looked around them, her eyes nervous and her face trying to hide her embarrassment. There weren't many other swimmers in the water and the Sterling knew they were deep enough that no one on shore would be able to see them.

"Please tie it back," Laila said, glaring at him playfully.

"No," Sterling said bluntly, bringing her arms together between them so he could hold them with one hand.

Laila tried to resist, but even if she was putting up a real fight, Sterling knew it would be pointless. His free hand wrapped around her neck as he kissed her shoulder, the thin strings pulling easily apart. He grabbed her top before it could float away and smiled at her, releasing her hands.

"There. Not so bad, is it?"

"I am so going to get you back for this," Laila vowed, a wide grin on her innocent face. "I can't believe you would want anyone else to see me naked!"

Sterling laughed. "Believe me, no one else is going to see you. This is purely for my benefit."

"Yeah, well, enjoy it while you can because I am seriously considering cutting you off after this."

Sterling laughed again at Laila's determination and then looked down as his fingers started to slowly wander over her exposed skin. She was so perfect for him that he often had to remind himself that she was real.

"So I did some research," he said after a long, intimate moment, one hand cupping her breast, the other at the small of her back.

"About what?" Laila asked, her hands running through his wet hair. He loved that feeling.

"We can get married at the US Embassy in London."

Laila's eyes narrowed but then softened as she dropped her hands from Sterling's hair and sculled them nervously in the water. She bit her bottom lip and held his gaze, unsure of what to say.

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"What do you think?" He asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

"I think what I thought last time we talked about this. I want to wait until after we graduate."

"But why?" Sterling whined. "After we graduate, I'll be applying for Medical school and you'll find a job wherever I get decide to go. Nothing is going to change if we get married now or if we get married then."

"Do you want to wait until after you've graduated from Med school, then?" Laila teased him.

"No! I want to get married now. You know there's no point in waiting."

"Sterling, I love you more than anything," Laila began her explanation. "I know that I am going to spend the rest of my life with you and nothing is going to change that. We don't need to get married to prove anything to each other."

"I'm not trying to prove anything to you or myself," Sterling insisted as he pulled her closer and nuzzled his face against her neck. "I just want you as my wife. I like how that sounds. I like how that's going to feel."

Laila closed her eyes as Sterling kissed and nibbled on her neck. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and she pulled him closer, the waves still casually passing them by. The reasons not to marry Sterling were starting to diminish but she knew she should stay strong and insist that they wait. They could live together next year, something that would please Sterling but offend her conservative parents. But if they were engaged then it should help lessen the indecency.

"Please, Laila? Marry me."

Laila opened her eyes so she could find his lips. She kissed him softly and then pulled away. "I will. After we graduate."

Sterling pouted his lip. "What if I bought you a bigger diamond?"

Laila laughed at his question. "I don't want a bigger diamond. I love my ring."

"Then just tell me what I can do to change your mind and I'll do it," Sterling said desperately.

"You can start by giving me my bathing suit back."

The frown left Sterling's face and he glanced down at her breasts again, almost having forgotten they were uncovered. "Not until you agree to marry me."

"I have agreed!" Laila laughed, attempting to grab her bikini from his hand.

"Next week," Sterling stipulated.

"Fine," Laila said, unwrapping her legs from his waist and treading water. "I'll just go without. Like you said, this is France and I can go topless just as easily as the next girl."

Sterling smiled, knowing she would never get out of the water without her suit. But he did know that she would probably tread water until she became short of breath and he didn't want to risk her having an asthma attack. He reached for her gently and brought her back to him, kissing her deeply.

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"Just think about it," he requested, handing her back the nearly non-existent bikini top that looked so incredible on her.

Laila lowered her eyes and blushed. "I will, I promise."

Sterling smiled and helped her retie the strings then carried her back to shallower water. He didn't care that he was having to beg his girlfriend to marry him. Laila was right, he knew they would spend the rest of their lives together and he knew that she was looking forward to marriage. Her objection to an elopement wasn't unfounded but Sterling could tell that she was beginning to see things from his perspective. Good, he thought. She'd be his wife before the year was through.

A/N: Just to let you know, the character pictures have been updated with Tamlyn, Sebastien, and Christian :) Hope you like 'em!

## Chapter 8: The First Kiss

Christian turned his attention away from Luanne and stared at the couple in the water. Sterling was feeling up his girlfriend, having managed to remove her bikini, and Christian frowned, disappointed they weren't closer so he could get a better look. Laila was beautiful by many standards, though far too skinny for Christian's taste. He still wouldn't mind getting a peak at her topless. But he'd rather see her friend naked. Piper was gorgeous and Christian had wanted her from the very moment he laid eyes on her. He knew she was dating Sterling's brother and the idea of stealing her away from him hadn't even crossed his mind. He didn't want to date Piper - he just wanted to sleep with her. But he knew that if he wanted to keep Luanne, he would have to give up that option.

He turned back to the redhead sitting beside him. She was busy applying sunscreen to her arms, her complexion in no way suited for the sun. Christian smiled as he watched her. Luanne really had no idea what she was doing when it came to dating. She would say the most ridiculous things in an effort to amuse Christian and he could see right through all of her flirting. But he knew she was smart, really smart and had been raised well. A debutante from the southern states no doubt had tons of Daddy's money coming her way as well.

"Can I get your back for you?" Christian asked, holding out his hand for the bottle of lotion.

Luanne raised her eyes and batted her lashes. "Yes, thank you."

He winked at her, knowing she would like it, and then smiled as he was rewarded with a blush rising to her cheeks. She turned around and straightened her back, waiting for him to begin. Christian had been out with Luanne a few times, a few trial runs before he made up his mind. He knew that with his brother's upcoming nuptials, a marriage would be expected from him in the near future. His parents had already been throwing numerous girls in his path, all with the right upbringing of course, but they were all from London and would undoubtedly want to stay there to raise their family.

Christian wanted out of the city, out of the country. He was tired of London girls and longed for the excitement of a new adventure. Girls in America would no doubt fall for him as soon as he spoke to them, laying his accent on as thick as he could. But his parents would finance a move there without a valid reason. Finding a job in the States wasn't easy these days, but finding a wife could be. Luanne would no doubt be oblivious to his indiscretions. She was so head over heels for him already, he doubted he could do anything wrong in her eyes. And being attached to the girl wouldn't be a burden at all. She was nice to look at and certainly as pure as she could get, something his parents would no doubt pick up on and approve of.

Christian finished rubbing the lotion into Luanne's back and leaned into her, reaching around her shoulder to hand the bottle back, his lips close to her ear.

"You know, Luanne," he nearly whispered, watching as her body tensed from the close contact. "I'm glad we have a spare moment alone because there is something I have wanted to do for quite some time."

"There is?" She sounded scared and Christian smiled.

"There is," he confirmed and sat down next to her, his arm draping over her shoulder. "I think you know how I feel about you, how much I respect and admire you."

Luanne's eyes dropped and he saw a smile come to her lips. This was almost too easy.

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"I've grown quite fond of you, you do realize that?"

"Iâ I like you too, Christian," Luanne murmured, her confident act now completely shot to hell.

Christian took her face in his hand and lifted her chin, leaning in so she would be able to feel his breath on her skin. "I was hoping you would say that," he said, smiling at her.

She smiled back and then closed her eyes, puckering her lips ever so slightly. Christian had to hold back a laugh as he closed the distance between them. Life with Luanne would never be dull, of that he was certain. He kissed her lips lightly at first and waited for her to relax before opening her mouth with his. She wasn't an experienced kisser but he didn't mind. She would get better with practice and for the time being he wouldn't have to put much effort into impressing her. He could save it for someone else.

They pulled apart and Christian was pleased to see how flustered Luanne had become. She was blushing all over, her eyes refusing to meet his. He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips, allowing her a moment to compose herself but their silence was cruelly interrupted by a shrill voice.

"Oh. My. God! Did we just witness the first kiss?"

Christian looked up and saw Piper and Tamlyn smiling down at them. He couldn't stand Tamlyn and had very nearly kicked her out of the car on the drive down. Her voice and her endless chatter had driven him near insane and he couldn't figure out why the girl had even been invited. But he glared at her for only a second before turning his attention back to Luanne. She was blushing from head to toe and looking at Piper with a giddy sense of achievement.

"I thought you two were trying to find dates for tonight," Christian said, changing the subject for his and Luanne's benefit.

"Done and done!" Tamlyn announced. "It was way too easy. Piper is a great wingman."

The brunette only rolled her eyes and smiled, knowing very well that Tamlyn hadn't needed her to secure a date for the evening.

"Hey, guys," they all heard Laila's voice calling from a few feet away. "I'm starting to burn so I think I'm going to head back to the house. Are we all going to dinner tonight?"

"I'm not!" Tamlyn nearly screamed. "I have a date with CÃ©dric!"

"I'm taking Luanne out," Christian said softly, looking at Luanne's still reddened face. "Just the two of us."

Laila frowned. "Piper?"

Her friend shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not doing anything."

"Good! So I'll see you later then?"

"Actually, I think I'll walk back with you," Piper decided, hoping they could find a drug store along the way and she could buy something to calm her stomach.

"I'll go too," Luanne said, quickly standing up and joining her friends. "I guess I have to go get ready."



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Tamlyn let out an exaggerated sigh. "Well, I'm not staying here by myself."

"Can you girls find your way back?" Sterling asked, trusting Piper to know but doubting the other girls had paid attention.

"We'll be okay," Laila promised him, kissing him on the cheek and then wrapping her sarong around her torso.

Sterling waited until the girls had disappeared onto the streets of Nice and then sat down next to Christian who was pushing the rocky sand around with his feet. He had spent many afternoons with Christian, playing soccer, or football as he had been instructed to call it, and his new friend seemed like a genuinely nice guy. He had introduced Sterling to a few of his friends, though Christian had admitted that he no longer had much contact with any of the guys he grew up with. They were all too snobbish for Christian.

"You and Laila going to get married, then?" Christian asked, rather out of the blue.

Sterling smiled and picked up a handful of pebbles. "Someday."

"Have you asked her yet? She's got a ring on her finger, that's the only reason I'm curious."

"I've asked her. Many times."

Christian laughed. "She's keeping you in suspense, is she?"

"No, she'll marry me. She just wants to wait until we've graduated."

"And you don't? Isn't it usually the girl who's pushing to get married?"

Sterling laughed. "I guess. But we've been together for three years now and I'm just ready, you know?"

"Not really," Christian laughed.

Sterling laughed as well, knowing his reasoning was lost on Christian. "What about you and Luanne? Do you like her?"

Christian leaned back onto his elbows and stared out at the ocean. "Luanne's a great girl. She'sâ well, she's different, isn't she?"

"That's one way of putting it." Sterling watched as Christian's eyes followed a group of girls walking down the beach.

"Honestly, her innocence really intimidates me. I don't want to scare her off beforeâ well, before she really gets to know me."

"It takes a lot to deter Luanne."

Christian smiled. "That's good to hear. I think that Luanne is exactly what I need right now."

Sterling tried not to frown but couldn't help it. "Why is that?" Something about the way Christian was speaking about Luanne didn't sit right with him.

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"I've just been chasing after girls for far too long. Being in a relationship with someone like Luanne should help me move past all that nonsense. You know, help me settle down."

"Well you better figure out if you're ready for a relationship before you go stringing her along." Sterling hadn't meant to sound so rude, but Luanne was one of Laila's best friends and he felt protective over the girl.

But Christian didn't seem to take offense. "Don't worry," he laughed. "I have absolutely no intention of hurting her. I care about her too much."

"I'm glad to hear it," Sterling said, trying to keep his voice light.

"Way too much," Christian said slowly, his gaze following another group of girls, a hungry look in his eyes.

Sterling stared at his friend for a moment before returning his attention to the rocky beach. Christian's interest in Luanne seemed legitimate, his attraction toward her hadn't wavered since they were first introduced. But his intentions were still foggy and Sterling didn't want Luanne to rush into anything before she had a clear commitment from this guy. Sterling knew just how easy it was to use girls and then throw them aside as if nothing had happened. His brother had been guilty of it on too many occasions. Even Sterling had been guilty of it before meeting Laila. Luanne wouldn't understand that. She wouldn't be able to get over it as easily as most. But Christian had promised not to hurt her, not that Sterling could force him to live up to that promise, but why shouldn't he believe him?

Sterling lay back on his towel, balling up his t-shirt and putting it under his head. He knew he shouldn't worry about Luanne and Christian. The guy was his friend, after all, and he should trust him. He closed his eyes against the bright sun and tried to force the doubt from his mind. His thoughts returned to Laila and he smiled as he pictured how she and the girls would be interrogating Luanne on their walk back to the house.

## Chapter 9: A White Dress, Not A Wedding Dress

"Tell us everything!" Laila squealed and the two other girls stepped in closer so they could hear as well. They had just made it off the beach and were now climbing the hill back to the house.

"Well, heâ!" But Luanne started giggling before she could even start. She could still feel Christian's lips pressed against hers, his arm around her, his breath on her face.

"Luanne, come on!" Piper laughed with her. "Tell us!"

"I'm trying! You're making me nervous!"

"Is he a good kisser? He looks like he would be," Tamlyn hummed, her eyes clearly daydreaming.

"I have nothing to compare him to," Luanne admitted, knowing the girls wouldn't judge her.

"What?" All three of her friends cried at once causing a dozen or so fellow pedestrians to turn and stare. Okay, maybe she was wrong about the judgment part.

"Why does this surprise you?" She turned her full attention to Laila.

The blonde frowned and thought about the question. "I guess it doesn't. But, I don't know. You've seriously never kissed a guy before?"

Luanne shook her head slowly. "No. Does that make me some kind of freakish loser?"

"Not at all!" Laila insisted.

"My first kiss was with this guy named Jerome. He tasted like cheese and had acne," Piper said, trying to take the pressure from her friend. "If I had known my first kiss could have been with someone as hot as Christian, I would have waited too."

"Really?"

"Fuck yeah! I mean, you weren't missing anything by not kissing the losers."

"He is really cute, isn't he? And he likes me. I think he really likes me." Luanne blushed again, feeling a giddiness she never knew existed.

"Of course he does!" Laila encouraged. "Why wouldn't he?"

"I can think of a million reasons."

"Don't be stupid," Tamlyn scolded her. "I know I just met you like 48 hours ago, but you've got a lot going for you. You're smart, you're quirky, you're cute, and you have a ridiculously adorable southern accent. What guy wouldn't fall for all that?"

"But no guy has ever liked me before," Luanne insisted.

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"Maybe they have and you just didn't notice," Piper suggested. "You do tend to have tunnel vision when you start to focus on things."

Luanne smiled at her observation. The cobblestone of the street below her feet seemed miles away. It was as if she were floating above the buildings, her spirits were so high.

"Would you look at that dress?" Tamlyn's voice echoed off the ancient walls of the city street.

The four girls stopped outside of the shop window and stared up at the display.

"Nobody could look good in that color," Piper announced, scoffing at the bright pink fabric.

"Um, I could," Tamlyn said, convinced her friend wasn't seeing the same dress.

"Don't you think it's a little indecent?" Laila asked, observing the low neck and the high hem. Even on the mannequin it looked a little slutty.

"Of course it's indecent. That's the point," Tamlyn answered. "Come on. Let's go inside."

"I really need to get back and showerâ" Luanne started to insist but Tamlyn cut her off.

"I guarantee that I can find you the perfect outfit for this evening inside that store. Now let's go!" She grabbed Luanne's hand and pulled her in the door.

Laila rolled her eyes and started to follow them in, pausing once she realized Piper wasn't with her. "You coming?" She asked her friend over her shoulder.

"I'm just going to run to that drug store up the street. I'll be right back."

"Still not feeling well?" Laila frowned, concerned that Piper's stomach flu hadn't gone away.

Piper shook her head and shrugged.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No," Piper decided. "I think Pepto-Bismol looks the same in every country."

Laila smiled. "Probably."

"I'll see you in a few minutes," Piper said, waving Laila inside the store and then turning up the street. Laila watched her leave and then walked slowly through the door, already hearing Tamlyn's voice as it carried over the music playing overhead.

"Just try it on! Don't argue!" Tamlyn was pushing a floral print sundress into Luanne's arms.

"It's not my style," Luanne decreed and threw it back at Tamlyn.

"Honey, your style is boring. No offense, that's just how I feel. Now please, go try it on."

Laila left them to fight it out and wandered through the racks of clothes, touching some of the fabric that caught her eye. She had almost reached the back of the store when her gaze fell on an ivory dress, gold

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stitching embellishing the sleeves and hem. It was simple, nothing extravagant, a ruched skirt with lace accenting the neckline.

"Would you like to try it on?" A pleasant voice sounded behind her.

"No, I was just looking," Laila responded in French, unable to take her eyes off the dress.

"Oh, but why not?" The sales lady pushed and Laila finally looked up at her. She was an older woman, her grey hair falling in thick waves around her face. Her skin was tanned and wrinkled but she had a soft look to her. Laila smiled and shook her head.

"I have no place to wear a dress like this."

"With a dress like this, you'll find an occasion," the lady insisted and Laila grinned.

"All right. Why not?"

"Good!" The woman cheered and plucked the dress from the rack. She ushered Laila into a changing room and hung the garment inside, pulling the drapes closed behind her. Laila stared at the dress for a long moment before removing her sarong and bathing suit top. She lifted the fabric above her head and brought it down slowly, the cool silk feeling nice against her sun-kissed skin. Then, and without warning, the curtain was thrown open and Laila was presented with a full length mirror, the woman smiling proudly down at her from the other side.

"I knew it would be perfect on you!" She exclaimed in a hushed voice.

Laila could only stare at her reflection. The dress fell to just above her knee, the bodice fit her like a glove and the sleeves had a perfect cuff for her slender shoulders.

"I made that dress years ago and it's been sitting in the back of the store, just waiting for someone. You, as it would seem."

"You made this?" Laila asked, turning around and looking over her shoulder.

"Hmm," the woman confirmed with a slight sound of contentment. "It's one of a kind but seems to be too modest for the girls of this town."

Laila smiled, remembering the dress that had caught Tamlyn's attention. "It's beautiful," Laila smiled at the woman. "But I really can't think of anywhereâ€" " She stopped mid-sentence as she glanced over the woman's shoulder to a vase of flowers sitting on the window sill. Flowers and a white gown. She knew right then the perfect occasion to which she could wear it. She had always imagined her wedding dress to be long and princess cut, pearls embroidered through the train. But looking at herself now, she couldn't imagine walking down the aisle in anything but this.

"I'll take it," she quickly, making the decision before she had really thought about it.

"Good choice. I'm Colette, by the way."

"Hi Colette. I'm Laila."

"Well, Laila. I'm sure you'll find the perfect occasion for this dress," Colette said with a knowing smile.

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Laila looked up at her and nodded. This was a white dress, not a wedding dress. Just because the only place she could imagine wearing it was during a wedding, didn't mean that she was going to marry Sterling anytime soon. It could sit in her closet for a few years first. She looked at herself once more before Colette took the mirror away and closed the curtain so Laila could change. But seeing herself in the dress made a few years seem like a lifetime. A few months. It was really a matter of months, not years, before they would be married.

A wide smile spread over Laila's face as she tied her sarong and exited the changing room. Colette was already behind the counter, the dress in a garment bag. Laila glanced at her friends who were still on the other side of the store. Tamlyn was parading around in a skimpy skirt and Luanne was trying not to frown. Laila handed Colette her credit card and, as if sensing her urgency, Colette ran it without hesitation, sliding the receipt for Laila to sign.

"Will it wrinkle if I put it in my bag?" Laila asked, putting her canvas beach bag on the counter.

"Yes. But nothing a little steam wouldn't take out," Colette winked at her.

"Thank you," Laila gave her a grateful smile and gently placed the dress at the bottom of her bag, rearranging her towel to hide her purchase.

"Thank you, Laila. Enjoy the dress," Colette whispered.

Laila grinned at her one last time before throwing her bag over her shoulder and walking toward the door. "I'll wait outside," she hollered to Luanne and Tamlyn and quickly left the store.

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Piper roamed the rows and rows of familiar products with foreign words written all over them. She couldn't understand the signs above her head which would undoubtedly lead her to the right aisle, so she wandered with wide eyes, not wanting to miss the Pepto-Bismol. Turning the corner, her eyes skimmed past the feminine hygiene products, but she could look no further. Staring at a box of tampons, she froze. Her breathing stopped and pulse slowed to an uneasy pace. When was the last time she had to use one of those? Counting backwards in her head, she suddenly felt dizzy as she realized she hadn't gotten her period since before she left for France. It would have been nearly six weeks ago.

The screech of a PA system caused her to jump and look nervously around her. She took a large breath, the oxygen filling her lungs but doing nothing to calm her. She could hear her heart thumping in her chest, feel her hands shaking. She knew she was white as a ghost. With her mouth dry and her mind blank, she looked down the aisle past the tampons and maxi-pads until she saw the little boxes that she had passed over so many times before. Her legs carried her to them, almost involuntarily, and she studied her choices.

The box at eye level had a picture of a happy baby with an equally happy mother taunting her as they smiled. The next one had a pregnancy test with a little pink plus sign on it. Definitely not choosing that one. Piper reached for the one next to it, a blue box with nothing but some French words and picture of the pee stick. She turned it over and searched for any familiar words. Nothing. What if she took it and couldn't understand the results? But why was she even stressing about this? She couldn't be pregnant. There was no way. Alistair always wore a condom.

"This is so stupid," Piper said to herself, forcing a laugh. She put the blue box back on the shelf and grabbed the one with the pink plus on it. "So fucking stupid." She would take the test and ease her nerves. That was it. That was all she had to do. There really was nothing to worry about.

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Piper hurried to the cashier and handed him a credit card without looking him in the eye. A receipt was passed to her and she scribbled her name, her hands still shaking though she didn't know why. She wasn't pregnant, after all. She picked up the test and shoved it in her purse, practically running out the door and back to the dress shop.

## Chapter 10: Open Your Eyes

Piper waved goodbye to Sterling and Laila and waited until the front door had shut before running up the stairs and locking herself inside the bathroom. She tore into the box with an unparalleled sense of urgency and then held the stick in her hand. The box fell to the floor and Piper took a deep breath, removing the cap and unzipping her jeans. She sat down on the toilet and held the stick in place, willing herself to calm down so she could pee.

Piper set the stick on the counter and grabbed the box from the floor, her eyes scanning the back for a number, any number to indicate how long she had to wait. Cinq. What the fuck was that? She knew this one. Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq! Five. Thank God she had listened to at least one of Laila's French lessons.

Flushing the toilet, Piper sunk down to the floor, her back against the wall as she stared up at the stick which was teetering on the edge of the counter.

"This is so fucking stupid," she told herself again. But then why couldn't she calm down? She had been on edge all afternoon, jumping at every little noise she heard. Sterling and Laila had invited her to dinner, but she had refused, claiming that she was still not feeling well. Which she wasn't. She wasn't feeling well at all. Not only was her stomach nauseous, but now her head was aching with worry, her hands were shaking and she was having trouble breathing.

Piper checked her watch. Four minutes to go. She looked around the bathroom and frowned. Who the fuck would decorate a bathroom pink? The walls were an ugly shade of rose, the tiles of the shower alternating white and coral. The towels were a hideous magenta. Was this a sign? Was she having a baby girl? Was some teeny tiny little girl growing inside her belly at this very moment?

"Not a chance," she whispered, checking her watch again. Three minutes to go. But if it was a girl, who would she look like? Would she have Piper's green eyes, Alistair's blonde hair? Alistair. How was she going to tell her boyfriend that she was pregnant? He wouldn't take it well. He would be angry, frustrated that he hadn't been here with her to take the test and let her cry on his shoulder. But he'd be supportive. He loved her and would only want the best for her and the baby. But she didn't have to worry about telling him. She wasn't pregnant. She couldn't be.

Two more minutes. Options. She had options. There were plenty of families who were unable to conceive a child on their own. Surely someone would want her baby if she didn't, or if she couldn't. Her hands went to her stomach and she lifted her shirt. Her belly was still flat and toned. Could there be something growing in there? A swell of emotion filled her and tears started falling from her eyes as she held her stomach. Piper didn't know if she could part with something that had been living and growing inside of her for nine months. It would be far too much heartache to endure.

She looked at her watch again and her mind went blank. Thirty seconds. Twenty nine. Twenty eight. She watched as the little red hand ticked away and then she closed her eyes, choking back the tears, and reached for the stick. Her fingers found it and she clutched it in her hands, her lids still squeezed tight.

"Open your eyes, Piper. Open your fucking eyes."

Her breaths were shallow and jagged as she lifted her lids. And there it was, a little pink plus staring back at her.



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"Shit," she whispered, unable to look away. Why? Why was this happening to her? What had she done to deserve this? Tears were flowing from her eyes and as soon as her hands started shaking again, she threw the stick as hard as she could against the tiled shower. Piper hung her head between her shoulders and gripped fistfuls of her hair as she cried. She sobbed, knowing that no matter what she chose to do, her life would never be the same. She could get rid of it and live with the guilt. Or she could give it up for adoption and live with the knowledge that she had a child growing up in the world without her. Or she could keep it, drop out of school, find some hourly job just to pay the bills. A million scenarios raced through her head and she felt the vomit rising in her throat. She pulled herself onto her knees and raised the toilet seat, heaving into the bowl until her stomach and her head were empty, her body completely anesthetized.

What was she going to do? First, she was going to pull herself together and get out of this bathroom. With her mind still numb, she stood up and brushed her teeth, refusing to look at herself in the mirror. A hand against the wall supported her as she walked from the bathroom and down the hallway toward the stairs. She slowly climbed down each one, her body feeling as if she weighed five hundred pounds, her legs stiff and uncooperative.

Piper staggered into the kitchen and opened a cupboard, searching for a glass so she could pour herself some water. Dry goods. That wouldn't help her. She opened the next one. Canned food. No good either. Next. Booze. That certainly didn't help. She was about to move on to the next door when she stopped and stared at the opened bottles of liquor. Her hand reached for the first bottle and she felt the cool glass beneath her fingers. Ciroc vodka.

"Don't do it," she warned herself but felt her hand closing around the bottle, pulling it from the shelf. A sturdy sense of calm came over her as she set the bottle on the counter and stared at it. Her breathing had steadied, her heart was beating at a normal pace, but her head was cloudy. She could feel her mouth salivating as she considered the liquid inside the bottle now sitting in front of her. She could taste the liquor as it hit her tongue, feel the burn as it slid down her throat. Her skin was itching for it and she scratched at her arms as she tried to resist.

Piper picked up the bottle and turned around, setting it on the kitchen table and sitting down, her legs suddenly weak. She could drink it away. She could drink until she became violently ill and her body's defenses would take over and everything would take care of itself. No one would ever have to know.

She started to reach for the bottle but then jerked her hands back, sticking them under her legs and looking away. How many weeks along could she be? It was no more than four. She shouldn't feel attached to something that probably looked like a jelly bean. A jelly bean with her and Alistair's DNA.

The tears started to fall again as she looked down at her stomach and then back at the bottle. She made her choice and her fingers flew to the cap, twisting it off and slamming it on the tabletop. She pulled the bottle across the surface, hearing the glass scratch the wood as it neared. Then she brought it to her lips, the vapors stinging her nose as she inhaled.

"No!" Piper screamed and pushed the bottle away. "I can't do this. I can't do this." She hung her head, her hand still tightly clamped around the bottle.

"Just let it go," she whispered, feeling her hands cramping from the strength of her grip. "Let it go."

Reluctantly, her hand lifted the cap and she screwed it back into place. She pushed away from the table and walked back to the cupboard, returning the bottle to its rightful spot. Her arms hung at her side as she stumbled back to the bathroom. She didn't have to make any decisions that night. She should talk to Alistair. She should wait until her head was clear. As if in a daze, she picked up her pregnancy test, wrapping it in

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toilet paper and placing it back in the box. She carried it to her room as if it were a crystal figurine, setting it gently in her bag and covering it with a sweatshirt. Her clothes were then stripped from her body and she fell into bed with nothing but her underwear on. The covers were pulled around her and she curled her legs into her chest, holding herself as she cried.

Her eyes remained opened and her body remained still as she heard her friends return from dinner, their lives going on as normal, nothing to interfere with their happiness, nothing to jeopardize their futures. She knew she didn't have to go through this alone. She knew Laila and Luanne would comfort her if she confided in them. She knew Alistair would fly out to see her the minute she told him. But she wasn't ready to share this with anyone. She wasn't ready to accept the reality of her new life.

It was after 4 in the morning when Piper finally felt sleep pulling at her and she closed her eyes, knowing that she would wake up in the morning with a new purpose, a new outlook on everything. She fell into a dreamless sleep, her body as motionless as her mind, everything resting as she prepared herself for the months and decisions that lay ahead.

## Chapter 11: So, Boss...

"Luc," Tamlyn smiled at her host father from across the table. "Show me what you've painted today." She knew that SÃ©bastien didn't show much interest in his father's hobby but she happened to love Luc's work. Along with Laila, the two girls could spend hours staring at and praising his paintings.

"Nothing today, Tamlyn," Luc smiled back at her. She loved how he said her name. It rhymed with tambourine the way Luc and Pierre said it.

"Why not?" She frowned and pouted her lip, knowing it would make Luc laugh.

"SÃ©bastien needs help in the store," he said with a small giggle.

"But of course he does," Tamlyn said with a laugh. "This is France and people can never buy too much cheese."

"You know us so well," SÃ©bastien chimed in with a roll of his eyes.

"Well at least I'm trying," Tamlyn said over her shoulder. She had been sitting at the kitchen table with Luc enjoying a quiet meal and hadn't even heard SÃ©bastien enter the room. He was good at that, sneaking up on her. He would always catch her doing the most ridiculous things, dancing around the kitchen while cooking, counting backwards in French while she waited for her turn in the bathroom. He would always glare at her and walk away, never saying a word. She didn't mean to do these things to annoy him. But she couldn't help it, they were completely involuntary.

"Why aren't you out with the other girls?" Luc asked, bringing her attention away from SÃ©bastien.

Laila and Piper had gone to Versailles for the day and had invited Tamlyn to go with them. But she had refused. She smiled at Luc, trying to make light of her situation. "I had too much fun in Nice and spent all my money for the month. I'll have to stay in for the a couple weeks."

"Won't you get bored?" SÃ©bastien asked in English.

"No, I won't get bored," Tamlyn answered in French, wanting Luc to know exactly what his son had said. "I'll get ahead on my studies and I always have Luc and Pierre to keep me company."

"I'm not very good company, Tamlyn," Luc teased her.

"Sure you are. And if you are too busy then I'm sure one of your neighbors can keep me entertained."

"I'm sure they could," SÃ©bastien said with contempt. "You've dated half the building now, haven't you?"

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Tamlyn asked in English, turning around in her chair so she could glare at him.

"Nothing," SÃ©bastien said with a shrug of his shoulders and a shake of his head.

Luc grinned at the two kids in front of him. SÃ©bastien wasn't really a child anymore but that is how he would always think of him. He could tell that his son was frustrated and annoyed with their new exchange student and he also knew the reasons why. Tamlyn and her laissez-faire attitude stood for everything that

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SÃ©bastien seemed opposed to. She was loud and crass, never thinking before she spoke though she never meant to offend. She was completely carefree and always trying to encourage those around her to join cheery world.

But Luc knew that it would take a miracle for SÃ©bastien to ever see the world through Tamlyn's eyes. He was a cynic, careful and calculating to a fault and rarely let anyone inside his head or heart. Since he had returned from University, SÃ©bastien had kept very much to himself, rarely going out with friends, never confiding in Luc or Pierre. He had a goal to reach, some exorbitant amount of money which he felt was the necessary sum it would take for him to see the world. Luc would have been happy to help him pay for his travels, but SÃ©bastien refused his charity, claiming he wanted to do it on his own.

A sly smile stretched across Luc's face as he watched his favorite tenant argue with his only son. "Tamlyn, why don't you help out in the store today?"

Tamlyn turned around and smiled at him. "Really?"

"Dad, no!" SÃ©bastien walked toward the table but stopped short once he saw how close he was getting to the American.

"Why not?" Luc asked Tamlyn. "You need something to occupy your time and SÃ©bastien needs someone to run the cash register."

"I did work at Gap one summer," Tamlyn jumped into one of her stories which always made Luc laugh. "Well, it was really Baby Gap, but I had to sell all these adorable little clothes to fat pregnant women and grandmas shopping for all their grandbabies. I ran the cash register and took inventory and I even got to help with the window displays. Cheese can't be much different from baby clothes, right?"

"I'm sure you'll do just fine," Luc said with a smile and Tamlyn beamed at him.

"Dad, I don't need any help," SÃ©bastien protested.

"Yes you do," his father disagreed. "It's Saturday and you were in the weeds this morning, it will happen again after lunch."

"I'll be fine. Please, don't let her do this."

But Tamlyn didn't seem to take offense or even be listening to SÃ©bastien's argument. "What do I get to wear? Do you have an apron for me? Do I get to sample anything?"

"SÃ©bastien will show you everything you need to know," Luc promised and stood up to walk to his studio.

"No, I won't."

"You will if you want to continue working here. There are plenty of people looking for jobs who I could pay a lot less than I pay you."

"This is such bullshit!" SÃ©bastien cried but his father only smiled at him and turned to leave.

Tamlyn could only smile as Luc left the room. She turned to face SÃ©bastien and her grin only grew as she saw the look of disdain on his face. She normally didn't like causing people such aggravation but with her host brother, it had become some sort of game. Just when she thought they were starting to get along, he would say

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something to let her know just how much he hated her. Normally it wasn't unprovoked, as Tamlyn enjoyed testing her limits with everyone, but SÃ©bastien's insults cut a little deeper than most. And this she couldn't figure out.

Tamlyn was used to people not liking or not understanding her. Her view of the world was slightly skewed, she knew this, and her eccentric behavior was only one of her many defenses. She knew her stories and her long, exaggerated explanations were shocking at first but people's reaction to her always helped to weed out those who weren't worth her time or energy. Someone like SÃ©bastien should have been written off from day one but there was something about him that held Tamlyn's attention. Perhaps it was his smoky grey eyes and the way they darkened when she did something to irritate him. She had rarely seen any kindness behind his eyes, certainly none was ever directed at her, and she often wondered what it would be like to stare into them when they weren't so cold.

But looks of affection from SÃ©bastien were only a daydream, one which she had no hope of ever becoming a reality. At least he showed some emotion around her, even if it was the unpleasant kind. If he had been indifferent, she would have actually been offended.

"So, bossâ" she started but was quickly interrupted.

"Don't call me that."

"What am I supposed to call you then?"

"By my name," he said through clenched teeth.

Tamlyn laughed at him and stood up from the table. "Fine, SÃ©bastien. Can you please take me down to the store as soon as possible? I'm not a fast learner so you'll have to be patient with me."

SÃ©bastien knew that she was only teasing him. This girl loved to get a rise out of him and he hated the fact that she was able to accomplish this. "I'll teach you everything you need to know and then I only want you talking to customers, understand? Just stay out of my way."

"What if I have a question?" Tamlyn put her hands on her hips and challenged him.

"Save it for my father," he said and walked quickly out of the kitchen. He could hear Tamlyn behind him and cringed as her footsteps followed him down the stairs and out into the courtyard. But to his surprise, she didn't say a word on the way to the shop. She followed behind him at a close distance but kept her mouth shut. If she could only keep silent for the rest of the day, SÃ©bastien thought, things wouldn't be too bad.

A/N: Sorry this chapter is so short. I'm leaving for vacation next Friday so I'll post at least one more chapter before I leave. Much Love, Pink

## Chapter 12: Should I Be Worried?

Luanne smiled up at Christian as she wrapped her scarf a little tighter around her neck. He was talking about soccer again, something that even after weeks of dating she still had yet to develop an interest in. But she did have a strong interest in Christian, regardless of what he was talking about or doing. They had returned from Nice only a few weeks ago and things had been progressing rather well, at least in Luanne's mind. Christian would introduce her to people as 'my gorgeous Luanne,' or 'my wonderful Luanne.' She had never dreamed that someone as amazing as Christian would have ever fallen for her. She stared at him and wondered when he would tell her that he loved her. She hoped it would be soon because she was almost certain that she was in love with him.

Luanne reminded herself that she needed to focus on his story, not just stare at his face, so she wrapped her arm around his and struggled to listen, his voice sounding so seductive. She could get lost in his voice and had often been caught not actually listening to his words, just hearing his voice. Christian would always smile and laugh at her playfully, saying how silly she was for such a smart girl.

"Luanne?" A new voice entered her conscience and she stopped dead in her tracks as she tried to place it.

"Luanne, is that you?"

She dropped Christian's arm as she turned around, facing the cold wind that was blowing through the streets of London.

"Gavin?" She recognized his face instantly and smiled at her old friend. "Oh my God! What are you doing here?"

She took a few steps toward him but he was already on his way to wrap her in a warm hug. She buried her face in his jacket, appreciating the temporary protection from the cold.

"I should ask you the same thing," he said, pulling away so he could look at her but keeping his hands on her shoulders.

"I'm studying abroad for the year," Luanne said with a proud smile. "I've been here nearly two months already."

"Two months and you haven't called me?" Gavin teased.

"I didn't even know you were in London. How long have you been here?" She couldn't shake the smile from her face. Seeing Gavin was a surprise, to be sure, and she couldn't get over how much he had changed. His hair was shorter and he looked incredibly handsome and grown up in his business suit. A vast improvement from the cargo pants and t-shirts she had seen him wear during their days writing for the newspaper.

"I've been working for the US Ambassador's office."

"That's amazing! Congratulations."

Gavin smiled, always one to be modest. "It's nothing, really. Just writing press releases and running errands mostly."

"Still, that's a pretty big deal," Luanne insisted.

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"It's a change from the Yale Daily News, that's for sure," Gavin said with a wink.

Luanne smiled up at him, still amazed and shocked that he was actually standing in front of her. Gavin had been so amazing during those few months after Will had left the paper. Not only had he been her only friend who wasn't angry at her, he was also a great mentor, helping her write to the best of her ability. But he had graduated that year and the two had lost touch as her school work piled up and he started his career.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Oh, gosh! Sorry," Luanne said quickly, turning to see Christian giving Gavin a peculiar glare. "Gavin this is my boyfriend, Christian. Christian, this is my friend, Gavin. He was editor of the newspaper my freshman year."

"Hey, how's it going?" Gavin asked with a warm smile, extending his hand to Christian. He hadn't expected Luanne to use that term, boyfriend. A sharp and unexpected pang of jealousy shot through him but he recognized it and tried to move past it. Yet looking at Luanne, it wasn't that easy. She had grown into a woman since he last saw her, her bright red hair was now longer and framed her face beautifully as it hung straight below her shoulders. Her face was no longer as round, her cheekbones more defined but her eyes were still as eager and excited as ever.

"Fine, just fine. You?" Christian gave a short answer, reminding Gavin to stop staring at Luanne. His friend's boyfriend didn't look or seem all that pleased to be meeting him and released his hand quickly, looking at Luanne with an annoyed expression. But Gavin didn't mind, he wasn't interested in impressing the boyfriend because he knew Luanne's personality and was certain that she would make time for an old friend.

"Great now that Luanne is here." Gavin nudged his friend and she smiled back at him playfully.

"I'll just bet you are," Christian made the smug remark almost inaudibly and Luanne tried to cover it up as quickly as possible.

"Laila is in Paris," she told Gavin.

"Yeah?" He glanced at Christian who was starting to tap his foot impatiently. "Is she still with her boyfriend?"

"Sterling? Yeah, he's here in London with my program."

"He's actually the reason Luanne and I met," Christian stated and tugged at his girlfriend's arm.

"Right on," Gavin said and smiled as best he could at Christian. This was getting rather awkward and he knew that he wasn't helping anything by steeling so many glances at Luanne. But she had just taken him by surprise. He had never expected her to grow to be this beautiful.

Apparently Christian thought so as well. "Look, I hate to break up this reunion but Luanne and I have dinner reservations and we are going to be late if we don't get moving. Gavin, such a pleasure to meet you. Luanne, shall we?"

"Of course," Gavin said, still looking at Luanne. "It was so good to see you."

"You too," Luanne grinned and hugged him again. "Can I see you again? I want to hear all about your job and what you've been up to."

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"Yeah, I've still got the same email address. Just send me your number."

"Okay," Luanne said, a little sad she had to leave him. "I just can't believe this. It's so great that you are here."

"I'll see you later," Gavin promised with another wink and Luanne turned back to Christian who had already taken a few steps away from them. She reached for his arm and he pulled her to him, rushing her along the street and turning the corner before slowing down again.

"Who was that guy?" He asked, his voice no longer peaceful.

"I told you when I introduced you. He was the editor at the newspaper. We used to be good friends."

"Only friends?"

"Yes, only friends. Why would you question that?" There had been something in his voice which had struck Luanne as odd. Christian had rarely shown her any emotion other than carefree and happy. Concern, doubt, jealousy, she couldn't tell what she had just heard.

"It was just the way he was looking at you," Christian replied quickly, glancing over his shoulder.

"He was just happy to see me. It's been a while."

"Should I be worried?" Christian hated that he even needed to ask that question. This was Luanne and she had been practically obsessed with him since the first day they met. He had introduced her to countless numbers of his friends and she had practically ignored all of them, giving her full attention to Christian. But her friend, this Gavin person, Christian could tell that he was different. The two clearly had some sort of past together and from the looks he had been giving her, Gavin clearly imagined some kind of future. And the way Luanne had so casually asked if she could see him again - and right in front of Christian, the man she had just introduced as her boyfriend - it was enough to drive him nearly insane. But if Luanne truly did see Christian as her boyfriend then he knew he shouldn't be jealous. A smile and a kiss would be all she needed to quickly forget about her friend.

"Of course you shouldn't be worried," Luanne smiled at him. "But I'm flattered that you would think to ask."

Christian grinned and slowed his steps until they came to a stop. He softly took Luanne's face between his cold hands and gently kissed her lips. "I guess I'm just not used to the idea of someone like you actually wanting to spend time with someone like me."

Luanne blushed. Christian was always saying things like that and it hadn't gotten old. Though she didn't feel as if she deserved any of his praise, she still enjoyed the attention.

"You know that I really care about you, Christian," she said in a moment of honesty, forgoing her flirtatious act in the hopes of having a real moment with him. "I've never felt this way about anyone before."

Christian smiled at her and pressed his lips to her forehead. Luanne closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment until Christian pulled away, a proud smile on his face. "You're the best, Luanne. The absolute best."

Luanne smiled back and took his hand, urging him to keep walking to the restaurant so they could get out of the cold.



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**A/N: Another short chapter, I know :( I'll be in Europe for the next three weeks and I won't be able to update but I'll post again the second I get home! Thanks for all your comments :) Much Love, Pink**

## Chapter 13: Asparagus and Secrets

A piercing scream rang through the grocery store and Piper cringed at the sound. She looked up from the linoleum floors which had been holding her attention for the better part of an hour and glared at the mother and child down the aisle. The fat baby was sitting in the shopping cart, its face red and its fists clenched as it cried. The mother was ignoring it and debating between two boxes of cereal. Piper watched as the baby started kicking its pudgy little legs, the screaming and the crying getting worse and worse until the mother, without even looking at her child, pulled a pacifier out of her pocket and shoved it in the little terror's mouth.

Silence. How wonderful.

Piper's attention returned to the floor as she kept her hand on Pierre's cart, casually strolling along next to him. Alistair was coming to visit next weekend. She and Laila would be going up to London and staying with the twins for a few days, something which she had been excited about since arriving in Europe. But now she was dreading it. She knew, no matter how hard she tried to conceal it, Alistair would know something was wrong. She should just tell him. The second she saw him, she should just pull him aside and confess that she was carrying his baby. But it wouldn't be that easy, she knew this.

"Piper?" She heard her name but it didn't register in her mind that she was expected to respond.

"Piper? Milk." Milk? She looked down at her breasts which were already starting to grow. She would have to buy new bras soon.

"Piper!" Pierre's voice finally brought her back to the task at hand: grocery store. Groceries. Right.

"What?" She turned to him and tried to smile.

"Will you hand me some milk?" He asked, looking apprehensive.

"Oh. Yeah, of course." She turned around to the shelves and reached for the first carton her hand could find. She placed it gently in the cart and then looked back at the baby who was now fast asleep, his head resting on his shoulder, the pacifier dangling from his mouth.

"Are you feeling okay, Piper?" Pierre asked.

"I'm fine."

Pierre gave her a look which told her that he hadn't believed her and Piper immediately looked back down to the ground, following the wheels of the shopping cart as they moved on.

"Pierre?" Piper eventually asked as they rounded the corner to the next aisle. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"Is SÃ©bastien adopted or is he, you know, like your real kid? No, that's not what I meant. Shit! Sorry. I mean, is he biologically yours or Luc's?"

Pierre smiled, as amused by Piper's question as he was curious about it. "SÃ©bastien is technically my biological son. Luc's step sister is his biological mother."

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"Serious?" Piper twisted her lips. "Isn't that awkward?"

Pierre laughed. "Not at all. When Luc and I started talking about having a child, we asked Marie if she would want to donate her eggs. She was happy to do it."

"Does SÃ©bastien know?"

"Yes. We explained it to him when he was very young."

"And was he okay finding out?"

"I don't think he understood everything at the time we told him. But now he is very close with his aunt and all his cousins."

Piper nodded and looked back at the ground. Pierre could tell there was something on her mind and he wanted her to open up to him. She had seemed so lost for the last three weeks, so much so that Pierre and Luc were starting to worry. Until Piper had started this line of questioning, he would have guessed that the girl was just homesick but now he was worried it was something much more serious.

"Pierre, how did you and Luc know that you were ready to have a child?"

His heart broke for her and he studied the girl carefully before answering. She wasn't looking at him, she was staring at her stomach as if she expected it to say something to her. The poor girl was in serious trouble.

"Luc and I had been together for almost six years when we first started thinking about it. With Luc working at the store, we were in a position where it would be easy for him to take care of the child. It was just something we both wanted to do."

Piper nodded again and Pierre watched as her eyes filled with tears. "Were you scared?"

He laughed, trying to lighten her mood. "I was terrified. We went to all the doctor's appointments with the surrogate mother and by month eight I was so scared I could barely sleep at night. But Luc was better. He was calm and eager to have the child."

"What were you scared about?" She asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Everything. I was scared I wouldn't know what to do if the baby was sick. I was scared I wouldn't know how to hold him. I was scared he wouldn't like me."

"Were you scared of how much he would change your life?"

Pierre paused for a moment, stunned by her question. He and Luc had been expecting that change, they had been anticipating it. Nothing about that change had struck him as scary but had it been under different circumstances, had it not been planned, that would have been the most terrifying thing of his life. For a single mom, a young single mother, it very well could be devastating.

"No," he finally answered honestly. "Luc and I were prepared for that. It's just something you have to prepare yourself for."

"But what if," Piper paused and thought about her question. "What did you do to prepare yourself, mentally that is?"

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Pierre reached for some vegetables, careful not to push the cart too fast. Piper looked as if she was holding on to it for dear life. "There's no way to completely prepare yourself for a baby. It hits you like, what do you Americans say, a bag of bricks."

Finally Piper cracked a smile.

"But the second you see your child, the first time you hold him, your entire world changes from the inside out. It's amazing."

"Did you know that it was going to be a boy?" Piper finally looked up at him.

"Yes. That was one thing we argued about," Pierre grinned at the memory. "Luc didn't want to know but I insisted."

The smile lingered on Piper's face for a moment but she quickly returned to shuffling her feet and staring at the ground. She thought that if she decided to keep her child she would want to know the sex. But if she and Alistair made the choice to give it up for adoption, she wouldn't want to be told. She wouldn't want to look at it, she wouldn't want to hold it. She knew that would break her heart beyond repair. The unwanted tears started to pool in her lids and her lip started to quiver as she thought about her baby. It would be so tiny and innocent, so precious and needy.

"Is there something you want to talk about?" She heard Pierre ask in a low voice.

"No." She shook her head and refused to look at him.

"Is there something you should be telling your parents?"

Her parents. God, how was she going to tell them? Just the thought of that conversation caused her eyes to overflow and she stopped walking, still holding onto the side of the cart to steady herself. Within seconds she felt Pierre's arms wrap around her and she buried her face in his chest, unable to control her tears. Pierre whispered something to her in French, something she didn't understand, but his voice and embrace were calming.

"Thank you," Piper said after a moment. "I needed a hug."

Pierre took a small step back and smiled at her. "Do you need anything else?"

"Not right now," she said, smiling back. "I'll figure it out this weekend."

"All right. Just let me know if you want to talk."

"I will. Thanks."

Her host father gave her a warm, encouraging smile before returning to his grocery shopping. He picked up a bundle of asparagus and placed them in a plastic bag. "Luc hates asparagus," he told her, changing the subject. "At least he thinks he does. What I don't tell him is that it's the main ingredient in my vegetable soup. He loves it but then always wonders why his piss smells funny."

Piper laughed out loud, shocked to hear Pierre say something so blunt.

"You won't tell him, will you?"

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Piper shook her head, still smiling. "Your secret is safe with me."

Pierre smiled and nodded, an unstated agreement passing between them.

## Chapter 14: Go To Hell

"This is so boring!" Tamlyn whined from across the store. "Where are all the customers?" She was leaning on the counter, her foot tapping impatiently and her fingers drumming the granite.

"I don't know, Tamlyn," SÃ©bastien sighed and rolled his eyes. This was the second weekend she had worked with him and he was convinced she was the reason for the drop in sales. Well, not entirely convinced. The girl was actually quite a skilled sales person and learned quickly. She flirted innocently with the old men, talked about fashion with the women, was able to remember nearly everything he had told her about the products. He hated to admit it, but he had actually been slightly impressed.

"Well what are we supposed to be doing right now? I mean, isn't there something I can clean or some receipts to go through?"

SÃ©bastien smirked. "You can go home if you like."

"Ugh," Tamlyn moaned and stood up straight only to slouch over the counter again. "There's nothing to do at home besides study and I swear to God that my history teacher is trying to corrupt us or something. He tells all these crazy stories and I have no idea where he gets his information. Like, this one day, he came to class dressed in full on ninja robes and started telling us about..."

"Why do you think I care?"

Tamlyn frowned and then glared at him. "I don't. I was only trying to make conversation."

"Well, don't bother," SÃ©bastien snapped.

Tamlyn looked out the windows and kept her mouth shut. She hated that she couldn't get through to SÃ©bastien. She knew that he was miserable in Paris and most likely with his life in general. Maybe it wasn't just Paris, maybe it was the fact that he was a college graduate and still living with his parents. But Luc and Pierre allowed him all the freedom in the world as long as he ran the store. He could easily afford a place of his own so why hadn't he made the move? She was beyond curious to figure this guy out, to get him to open up to her. He showed more emotion toward her than anybody else, although this was always anger or frustration. At least it was a start.

She turned her head just slightly so she could look at him from the corner of her eye. He was sitting in a chair, a travel magazine in his lap, his brow creased but his eyes excited. She stood up from the counter and walked silently toward him, completely forgetting that he had snapped at her only seconds before.

"Are you planning a trip somewhere?" She asked, craning her neck so she could see the article he was so engrossed in.

"No," SÃ©bastien answered.

"What are you reading about?"

The magazine was slammed shut and her host brother glared at her from his chair. "Do you ever stop talking?"

"I'm sorry!" Tamlyn exclaimed, sitting down in the chair next to him and crossing her arms and legs. "I'm just so bored!"

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"Not my problem," SÃ©bastien said slowly, returning to his magazine.

"Why won't you talk to me?" Tamlyn demanded, not finding a reason for him to resist any longer. Now was as good a time as any to get his anger out in the open.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"But why not? Everyone has something to say! I swear, I can talk about anything you want to talk about. Travel? Let's talk about travel. Have you ever been to..."

"Tamlyn, just stop!" SÃ©bastien screamed, standing up and walking toward the storage room in the back. But he could hear her footsteps close behind him.

"No, you stop, SÃ©bastien! This is ridiculous. I'm going to be living with you for another eight months so the least you could do is give a little effort. I'm trying and trying here but you aren't giving me anything to work with!"

"I don't want you to try anymore!" SÃ©bastien said, turning around throwing up his arms in frustration. "You are talking or singing or making some kind of noise every waking hour! You are inconsiderate and completely oblivious to everything and everyone around you! You can never say or do the right thing so please stop trying to be my friend."

Tamlyn's mouth fell open as she put her hands on her hips. "You have got some nerve, SÃ©bastien! All right, maybe I'm not the most modest person, maybe I should think before I open my mouth, maybe I act out of line at times. But did you ever stop to think that I'm not talking to you for my benefit? Did you ever stop to think that I might be trying to help you?"

"Help me? Help me with what?" SÃ©bastien crossed his arms and took a step toward her, hatred pouring from his eyes directly into hers.

"Help you figure out why you are so angry all the time," Tamlyn said, not hesitating at all. "Help you figure out why you are so miserable here."

"You make me angry and miserable, Tamlyn!" SÃ©bastien yelled at her and watched as she jumped. Could she be scared of him? She wasn't running away or backing down. Her face was stern and her eyes were glued to his, her lips pursed in defiance.

"It's not me and you know it!" She screamed back at him. "You just found someone to blame all your problems on when I moved in."

SÃ©bastien knew she was right but was never going to admit it. The fire brewing inside of him was too strong and he knew couldn't back down. "The day you moved in was the worst day of my life!"

Tamlyn laughed in his face at his childish comeback. "If meeting me is the worst thing that has ever happened in your life then I do feel sorry for you. No wonder you don't have the strength to move out or get a real job."

This pushed him to the edge and he grabbed her arm in an attempt to emphasize his point. "You don't know a thing about my life," he said through clenched teeth. "You think that because you get to live in Paris, sleep with half the men in the building, go to the south of France with your friends that you are really experiencing life? Grow up, Tamlyn. None of this matters in the real world."

## Foreign Affairs

"Well at least I'm doing something," she said, glaring up at him. SÃ©bastien could see that he had hit a nerve and smirked at her expression. His hand remained on her arm, her skin soft and warm under his fingers. He knew he should let go, that touching her was only confusing him more, but he couldn't. "I worked hard to get here and I'm proud of what I've accomplished," Tamlyn continued. "That's probably more than you can say for yourself."

SÃ©bastien had never seen anyone so worked up. Tamlyn was never good at hiding emotions but he hadn't expected them to stretch so far. He could literally see the frustration and anger in every feature of her body. The way her nose crinkled when she yelled at him, the way she tried to keep her hands from clenching into fists, the way she stood on her toes when stressing a point. He knew he should just back off and let her win this fight, but he wasn't ready to give up. He wanted to push her a little further. "I wouldn't consider having Mum and Dad pay for a plane ticket an accomplishment. They probably sent you away seeing as you are impossible to live with."

Tamlyn's hand had raised and slapped him across the cheek before he even realized what she was doing. But SÃ©bastien reacted quickly and grabbed her wrist, pulling her to him unintentionally. Tamlyn stumbled forward and crashed into him, the impact of her perfect hourglass figure taking him by surprise. SÃ©bastien stared down at her as she struggled to regain her balance, looking completely helpless.

"What do you think you'reâ!"

But he couldn't let her finish her question. Without knowing why but without the reason to care, SÃ©bastien took Tamlyn's face between his hands and kissed her hard on the mouth. She shrieked in shock and pushed against his chest but he wouldn't release her. He couldn't let her go. Her lips, those lips from which had come hours and hours of mindless blabber, felt like pure bliss when pressed against his. And her body which had caused countless daydreams and endless confusion for him felt more amazing than he had ever imagined.

He held her face until she gave up her struggle and her hand fell from his chest. He slowly moved his mouth against hers, tasting her lips and then forcing them apart. A soft moan came from Tamlyn as their tongues met, SÃ©bastien gently teasing her. The room was silent and their bodies were still, never had he felt so at peace with Tamlyn - or any other person for that matter.

But soon SÃ©bastien could taste her salty tears and he pulled away quickly, stepping back and opening his eyes. Tamlyn was already staring at him, all of her emotion now pouring from her lids and streaking her face. He opened his mouth to speak, wanting to apologize and perhaps suggest they forget the entire afternoon had ever happened. But she beat him to it.

"Go to hell, SÃ©bastien."

She had turned around and fled the store before he could even think to chase after her. What had he just done? He swore out loud and slammed the door, squatting to the ground with his head in his hands, his confusion too much to handle. He knew he had to talk to her, figure out what he exactly he had said that had pushed her over the edge.

SÃ©bastien sprang back to his feet and threw open the door. The lights of the shop were turned off and the shutters closed. He locked the deadbolt behind him and walked quickly up the street. He couldn't see Tamlyn in front of him so he picked up his pace, jogging the next block and then sprinting the rest of the way home.



## Chapter 15: Did You Do It On the Bed?

Tamlyn burst through the front door of her apartment and ran down the hallway to the bathroom. She needed to cool off, she needed to be alone. What SÃ©bastien had said replayed in her mind over and over again and she needed it to stop. Out of breath and with tears still streaming down her face, she turned the handle on the door and pushed her way inside. The sight of Piper leaning over the toilet made her stop dead in her tracks.

"Oh my God! I'm sorry!" Tamlyn said, not knowing if she should turn around or go help her friend. "Are you okay?"

Piper's head rose from the bowl and she glanced at Tamlyn from behind the hair which had fallen in her eyes. "It's the smell of those fucking vegetables," Piper said and made a sour face. The second she and Pierre had returned from the grocery store, he had started sautÃ©ing vegetables for his soup. She had been able to put up with the smell for almost ten minutes before running to the bathroom and puking.

"What?" Tamlyn gave her a confused look.

"Can't you smell it?"

Tamlyn frowned and sniffed the air. She could detect a light aroma of browning butter but nothing more. "Barely."

"It's fucking disgusting," Piper said, heaving into the toilet once more as she remembered exactly how the butter and oil in the pan had smelled.

Tamlyn walked quickly to her and held her hair out of her face, gently stroking her back. "I thought you were over your stomach flu."

Piper gave a halfhearted laugh and flushed the toilet. "Not yet, it seems."

"Don't you think you should go to the doctor?" She knew Piper was strong willed but this had been going on for weeks now.

Piper glanced up at her as she sat down on the tiled floors. "Yes," she answered in a low sigh, her eyes instantly flooding with tears.

"Oh, sweetie," Tamlyn dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around Piper. "It'll be fine. Laila and I will go with you and translate so you'll have nothing to worry about."

But Piper started crying even harder and was holding on to Tamlyn like she might fall through the floor. Tamlyn tightened her hug as well, letting Piper cry onto her shoulder. She wondered if her roommate was homesick or if she just missed her boyfriend. They hadn't been talking as much, Tamlyn had sensed, as Piper had been pretty much keeping to herself the past couple of weeks. Maybe they were fighting, maybe they had broken up.

"I'm pregnant," Piper whispered.

"What?" Tamlyn exclaimed, pushing away and staring at her friend. Maybe she had been wrong about everything.

## Foreign Affairs

"I'm pregnant," Piper repeated. "I found out in Nice. It's not the stomach flu, it's morning sickness."

"Oh my God," was all Tamlyn could say. "Pregnant?"

Piper nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. It was a small relief to say it out loud to another human being.

"Have you told anyone?" Tamlyn asked.

"You're the first. But I'm pretty sure Pierre figured it out earlier today."

"Oh my God." Tamlyn shook her head in disbelief. "What are you going to do?"

Piper stared at her, wishing she could give her an answer. But her mind was blank and would remain so until she saw Alistair. "I don't know. Alistair will be in London this weekend so I'll tell him then."

Tamlyn stared back into Piper's green eyes, wishing she had some sort of advice for the girl. "I'm sure that you two will come to the right decision. And I'll be here to help you with whatever you need. We can go shopping for baby clothes! You'll get back home and have the only baby with good French style."

Piper laughed out loud and smiled at her friend. Tamlyn wasn't exactly the first person she wanted to share her secret with, but at least the girl could always make her smile.

"Do you want me to go get Laila?"

"Please?" Piper knew she had to tell her best friend. "And then maybe the three of us could go do something, anything to get my mind off of it."

"Anything you want," Tamlyn answered with a smile. She stood up and then extended her hand for Piper. "Why don't you wash your face and brush your teeth. You'll feel better."

"Thank you, Tamlyn," Piper said, smiling as best she could and then walking to the sink.

Tamlyn waited until Piper had turned the water on and then walked out of the bathroom to find their third roommate. She had just turned the corner when she ran straight into SÃ©bastien. Her eyes went wide at the sight of him, all the anger she had felt only moments before rushing back to her. But she didn't dare speak to him because she knew Piper would hear her and worry that SÃ©bastien had heard everything.

Silently, she nodded her head toward her room and started to walk down the hallway. SÃ©bastien followed and Tamlyn knocked on the door of the bedroom, waiting for Laila to answer before barging in.

"Hey, Tamlyn! How was the store?"

"Depressing. Piper needs you in the bathroom."

Laila's face became worried and she stood up from her bed, glancing at SÃ©bastien who was still standing in the doorway. "Is she okay?"

"Not really. You go, I'll be in there in a second," Tamlyn instructed and watched as Laila flew from her bed and out the door.

## Foreign Affairs

She waited until she heard the bathroom door close before laying into SÃ©bastien. "How much did you hear?"

"Everything," he answered quickly.

"Why were you listening?" She put her hands on her hips as he crossed his arms.

"I was looking for you and I justâ I shouldn't have been listening. I'm sorry."

Tamlyn nodded. "Are you going to tell your dads?"

SÃ©bastien shook his head and took a few steps toward her. "No."

"Good. Thank you," she said, walking around him toward the door. But SÃ©bastien caught her by the arm and she turned her head to glare at him.

"We need to talk about what happened," he said very matter-of-factly.

"No we don't." For the first time in a long time, perhaps for the first time in her life, Tamlyn didn't feel like talking.

"Yes, we do," he insisted, his eyes pleading with her. "We can't just notâ!"

"In case you have forgotten, my friend is currently in the bathroom, scared out of her mind because she's just found out she's pregnant. I have bigger things to worry about right now, SÃ©bastien."

He stared at her, happy to find that he was shocked by her selfless behavior. "Can we talk later?"

"No," she said, shaking her arm from his hand. "I'm going to stay out of your way from now on. I won't be at the store, I'll spend as little time as I can in the apartment. You won't have to put up with me anymore." Her mind was on Piper right now, not on what SÃ©bastien had said, not on the kiss he had forced upon her. Giving SÃ©bastien what he wanted was a small price to pay for helping her friend who needed her at the moment.

"That's not what I want," SÃ©bastien said, surprising her.

"You don't know what you want," Tamlyn said quickly, knowing he was simply confused by everything, as was she. "But it's what you are going to have to live with."

She didn't look back as she left the room but instantly regretted what she had said. She knew she should talk to SÃ©bastien, she knew that he had no way of knowing exactly how badly his words had hurt her. She owed him an explanation but right now she needed to focus on Piper. She needed to keep calm and didn't want her anger flaring up again by talking to stupid, self-absorbed, unbelievably rude, insanely handsome host brother. She rounded the corner to the bathroom and stepped inside, finding Laila and Piper embracing in a tight hug.

"It will be fine," Laila was promising and Piper nodded her head though it didn't look as if she believed her.

"Do you know when it happened?" Tamlyn asked, closing the door behind her. Her two roommates broke apart and Piper smiled at her as Laila walked over to take her hand. The three of them sat down in the middle of the bathroom floor in a small circle, their heads together as if they were plotting something mischievous.

## Foreign Affairs

"I'm pretty sure it happened the first day we got here," Piper told the girls, smiling slightly at the memory. "You had that date with the Italian guy and Laila had left with Sterling."

"Did you do it on the bed?" Tamlyn asked, without thinking about the inappropriateness of her question. "They're awfully noisy."

Piper laughed out loud and Laila and Tamlyn both sighed in relief as her spirits seemed to lift. "No, we figured that out pretty quickly. We did it on the floor, in case you were wondering."

Laila wrinkled her nose but Tamlyn smiled. "Good choice."

"Alistair had picked up this condom from the bathroom at the airport andâ I don't know. It obviously didn't work or it broke or something."

"Could it have happened before we got here?" Laila asked.

"Possibly. But only right before. My period ended less than two weeks before we arrived."

"I just," Laila started and then shook her head. "I can't believe this happened. I mean, you were careful. You used protection."

"I know. Fucking French condom."

Tamlyn and Piper burst into laughter and even Laila cracked a grin.

"How are you going to tell Alistair?" Tamlyn asked eventually.

"I'm really not sure. I'm going to do it this weekend when I see him. If I told him over the phone, he'd just worry about me."

Both Tamlyn and Laila nodded in agreement.

"It's going to be hard, you know? But we'll figure it out," Piper tried to convince her friends that she believed every word she was saying.

"We're here for you, no matter what," Laila promised.

The three sat in silence, Piper staring blankly at the floor while her two friends wore worried expressions on their faces. She had to shake it off, she knew it. She had support now. She wasn't in it alone.

"Does anyone have anything else to say?" Piper asked, looking up at Laila and Tamlyn who were shaking their heads. "Good. Can we get out of here, then? I'm starving."

"Of course," Laila said supportively.

"Yes, please!" Tamlyn stood up, seeming to be the most excited about the idea.

Piper smiled at her two friends and breathed a sigh of relief. She would tell Alistair in a few days, they would figure everything out and things would turn out okay. Her life would never be the same. But things would be okay again, one day.

## Chapter 16: French Condoms

Alistair was holding her close, squeezing her as if he would never let her go. They were in a dark corner of the club and he had her pressed against a wall, his lips on hers, occasionally wandering down her neck, his hands already in finding their way up her shirt. Fuck, her boobs hurt. Normally, Piper would have loved this, but tonight, all she could think about was if he would crush the baby if he squeezed too tight in the wrong place. He hadn't left her side all afternoon or evening. She had cried when she and Laila had exited the train and she had seen him waiting for her. She had run into his arms and held him for almost five minutes, neither of them saying a word. Alistair assumed that she had just missed him because she had yet to find the courage to tell him they were going to have a baby.

"Do you want to dance?" his seductive voice whispered in her ear.

Piper glanced at the dance floor and her eyes fell on Laila and Sterling. They had been dancing almost all night and were still going strong. They looked so in love. Her eyes came back to Alistair and she nearly screamed her secret right in his face, the desire to tell him was so strong yet still so terrifying. But she took a deep breath and shook her head.

"No thanks," she said, kissing him again.

But Alistair pulled away. His bright blue eyes knew something was wrong, she could see it in the way he looked at her. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want his mind to start imagining things, possible scenarios of what could be wrong.

"Do you want to get out of here?" He asked, serious at first then winking at her with a boyish grin, his dimples causing her to smile back. God, how she had missed those dimples.

"Not yet," she answered. Being alone with Alistair would only give her that much more reason to tell him.

"We just got here and you haven't seen your brotherâ!"

"Sterling?" Alistair looked over his shoulder at his twin who was in a tight lip lock with his girlfriend. "You're right. My brother looks so eager to see me right now."

"Just a few more minutes?" Piper pleaded. "I need some water and you can go ask Luanne to dance. It looks like Christian is refusing." Maybe a moment away from him would allow her to find the courage she needed.

"Are you sure?" he gave her a skeptical look.

Piper nodded and gave him an encouraging smile though Alistair could tell that there was something she wasn't telling him. He knew she would confess it eventually, but he hated to see her this uncomfortable. It was as if whatever she was hiding was eating her from the inside out. Her expressions, her mannerisms, the way she seemed to shy away from him whenever he got close, it just wasn't like her.

But Alistair turned his head to look at Luanne and her new boyfriend. They were both sitting down but Luanne looked as if she was about to jump out of her seat and do a jig, she was so antsy. Christian just looked drunk and annoyed. He could tell Piper wanted to be alone so he turned back to her and kissed her cheek.

"See you soon," he said, quickly running to Luanne and grabbing her hand, surprising the poor redhead half to death as he dragged her to the dance floor.

## Foreign Affairs

Piper smiled and turned toward the bar, pushing her way through the crowds of people. The club was packed, the music loud and smoke filled the air. This couldn't be good, she thought as she snagged a seat at the bar. She ordered her soda water with a splash of cranberry juice and a lime (just for appearances sake) and turned around in her chair to watch the dancers. Luanne was a horrible dancer and Alistair was having a terrible time trying to keep up with her radical movements. That's when she saw Christian stumbling toward her, his empty glass in his hand. After their trip to Nice, she had been convinced that Luanne had found someone great. But now she wasn't so sure. Christian had been on edge all night, acting bored out of his mind or flirting with other girls right in front of Luanne. Her friend hadn't appeared to notice any of it.

"Hi, Piper," Christian greeted her and glanced down at her cleavage. Piper pulled her shirt up and glared at him.

"Hey, Christian."

"Having a fun night?"

"Yah, this is great," Piper smiled at him and he smiled back.

"You look amazing."

Piper blinked and felt chill bumps crawl up her spine. "Thank you. Your girlfriend gave me this shirt for Christmas last year."

"Luanne's a lovely girl," Christian said reaching for the hem of Piper's shirt and rolling the fabric between his fingers. But Piper slapped his hand away. Her heart broke for Luanne in that second when she realized that the look in Christian's eye was more than just drunken lust. He knew what he was doing and what he wanted. It disgusted her.

"I should go find Alistair," she said, standing up from her chair.

"Wait!" Christian pleaded. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Oh, come on. Just have one drink with me." His hand snaked around her waist, his dark eyes were trying to entice her and she knew that look at worked on numerous women before. It was practiced and perfected and nearly flawless.

Piper glared at him and his persistence. "I don't drink, Christian."

He laughed out loud and Piper tried to push him away but his arm only strengthened around her. "Everyone drinks."

"Not me," Piper responded shortly. She wasn't scared of him, merely disappointed and upset. She craned her neck and looked over his shoulder, hoping to get Alistair's attention.

Christian laughed again. "Oh, relax. It's not like you're driving tonight. Or pregnant."

Piper's eyes went wide and her gaze snapped to his. Tears stung her lids as she stood there staring at him. His dark features studied her face carefully and then fell as he realized the truth behind what he had meant to be a joke. His hand dropped from her side and he took two steps back.

## Foreign Affairs

"Shit," was all he said as Piper set her drink on the counter and turned to flee the building. The cold London air chilled her instantly and she shivered as she jogged down the street, coming to a stop on the corner under an old lamppost. She closed her eyes and cursed under her breath.

"Piper? What the fuck?" She heard her boyfriend close behind her and she opened her eyes and turned to face him.

"What did he say to you?" Alistair frowned.

All Piper could do was shake her head and cry. Alistair opened his arms and she fell into them, allowing him to comfort her for a reason that was completely unknown to him. He slowly stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. He had never seen Piper just break down like this. There were weeks when she would be flustered, overworked with school and closed off from everyone around her as she fought her cravings, but she always stayed strong. Had she broken her sobriety? He couldn't think of another reason for her to act this way.

"It's okay," he whispered to her. "Whatever it is, it will be okay."

He heard her sobs break and she pushed away from him. "I'm pregnant."

Alistair stared at her and blinked. Pregnant. Piper was pregnant. That's what she had said but he didn't completely understand the word as it came from her mouth. His lips wanted to speak. His head wanted to accept. But all he could do was stand there and stare at her.

Piper stared back, looking as if she had nothing left to say, waiting for him to react. Tears were still streaming down her face, her arms were rigid by her sides, her bottom lip was trembling possibly from the cold, possibly from fear. Once he recognized how scared she was, a million things raced through Alistair's mind. Pregnant? As in a baby? As in diapers and bottles and picture books? How could this happen? How were they going to deal with a baby? Why?

"Pregnant?" He attempted to ask though his voice was barely heard by him or his girlfriend.

Piper bit her lip to stop the trembling. "Pregnant."

It was official. That word no longer meant what it had meant before. Before, Alistair had connected it with large bellies and married mothers who all went shopping for baby clothes together. Now, well, it shouldn't be happening to him. Piper being pregnant meant that he was responsible for something and would be responsible for it for the next 18 years. 18 years? He had just been 18.

"How long have you known?" He eventually asked.

"About four weeks."

Four weeks? Alistair tried to remember what he was doing four weeks ago but everything was fuzzy. He hadn't even seen Piper in over 7 weeks. "When could this have happened? We've always been so careful."

He could tell that she was waiting for the reality of it to sink in. Her answers were honest and quick. She wanted to see him do something. "I think it happened that day on the floor of my bedroom."

That had been some of the most amazing sex Alistair had ever had. No way could something like this have happened then. And that was all it took. His fists clenched and he blamed the first thing he could think of. "Fucking French condom! If anyone could get it right, you would think it would be the French!"

## Foreign Affairs

Piper had to smile. Those had been her words exactly. But the grin quickly faded from her face as Alistair started pacing back and forth on the sidewalk, his steps heavy and deliberate, his arms unmoving as his hands clamped and released the air.

"Shit, Piper! Why didn't you tell me?" He wasn't angry at her but had nowhere else to release his frustration and confusion.

"I don't know," she whispered and looked at the ground. "I was so scared and I didn't want to believe that it was really happening."

"Does anyone else know?"

She raised her head and looked him dead in the eye. "I told Laila and Tamlyn just a few days ago."

"Before you told me? You fucking told your friends before you told me?"

"I'm sorry! Tamlyn walked in on me throwing up and I had been lying about my morning sickness for so long...I just blurted it out without thinking."

"You should have told me," Alistair scolded her, more concerned with her morning sickness than the fact she hadn't told him.

"I know. But I didn't want to tell you over the phone because I knew you would worry about me. I wanted to tell you in person so that you could see that I'm okay."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm coping," she admitted and Alistair took a deep breath. She still looked so scared. He regretted yelling but knew that Piper wouldn't hold it against him. He couldn't be angry with her when she looked so scared and so beautiful.

"Do you know for sure," he asked, stopping in front of her and reaching for her hands.

Piper looked up at him, hopeful for the first time that night. "I took a test and it came back positive. I haven't gone to a doctor but I'm tired and sick almost all the time and my boobs are fucking huge."

Alistair cracked a smile and Piper had to grin back. "I'm taking you to a doctor tomorrow," he announced, a sudden sense of responsibility washing over him, and glanced down at her chest. He had noticed her amazing cleavage earlier in the evening but had just assumed she was wearing a push up bra which he would get to remove later. His eyes wandered further down her body and stopped at her still flat stomach. He dropped one of her hands and reached for her shirt, lifting it just enough so that his fingers could touch the warm skin of her belly. His child was in there, his son or daughter, a baby that he and Piper had created together. They weren't ready for this, it was the wrong time entirely, but a paternal affection for his unborn child was now racing through Alistair's veins and he dropped to his knees, resting the side of his face against his girlfriend's stomach. He could feel Piper's fingers in his hair, her loving touch as he held onto her and the baby inside for dear life.

After a long moment, Alistair stood up and without saying a word, kissed Piper hard on the mouth. "I love you so much," he told her as they broke the kiss. "We'll do this together."

Piper nodded and looked as if she was trying not to cry.



## Foreign Affairs

"Hey," Alistair smiled at her. "It's kind of exciting, don't you think? I mean, we're going to be parents and that baby is going to be perfect."

Piper smiled but shook her head. "It's terrifying, actually."

Alistair laughed. "That too."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she said softly. "I justâyou're so far away and I wanted so badly to believe that it would just go away and things couldâ"

But Alistair kissed her again. Things would never be the same, he knew that and he would learn to accept it. Fighting against this would only make it worse. He could lose the baby. He could lose Piper. They were in it together now, whether they liked it or not, whether they were ready or not. Piper had stuck with him for two years, put up with all his bullshit and all his nonsense ideas about relationships because he just didn't know any better. Somehow they had made it work. And now neither of them knew a thing about being parents but they would find a way to make that work as well.

"I love you," he reminded her. "And I'm glad you finally told me."

Piper tried to smile at him. "Can we get out of here? Go back to your hotel?"

"Of course." Alistair reached for her hand and turned to flag down a taxi. He knew they had a lot to talk about. He knew that he should be worried about his future, his education, Piper's education. But he couldn't think about any of that. He was going to be a dad, a proud father. Everything else, apart from Piper and the baby, no longer mattered.

**A/N: I'm sorry I haven't been updating this story like I should. I'm having a horrible case of writer's block and I just can't seem to move past it. I'm going to finish it, I promise, but it may just take a while. Much Love, Pink**

## Chapter 17: Serious About Him

Laila smiled at the two people sitting across from her. They had planned on going to dinner with Luanne and Christian but something had come up at the last minute and Luanne's new boyfriend couldn't make it. Her old friend, Gavin, had been invited in his place. It had been over a year since Laila had seen Gavin, well over a year since she had seen how Luanne and her editor friend interacted with each other. Their conversation was effortless and upbeat, they would debate and argue with smiles on their faces, a seamless flow of ideas between them.

"What are you smiling about?" Sterling whispered to her.

She turned to him and grinned. "Do you see how happy Luanne is right now?"

Sterling glanced across the table and had to agree. Luanne was a completely different person when Gavin was around. Her guard was down, she was personable, she was actually likeable. Christian didn't bring out this side of her, he wasn't exactly sure who Luanne was around Christian, but it certainly wasn't this bubbly person sitting across from him.

"I like her better this way," Sterling whispered to his girlfriend and she released a small giggle.

"Me too," she whispered back.

The couple stared at each other for a moment and didn't say anything. They both had the same thing on their mind but had yet to talk about it. Sterling was going to be an uncle. Laila was nervous for her friend but she knew that, out of anyone, Piper could handle the stress of a baby. Sterling didn't quite know how to feel about it. His brother had never been in a situation quite this extreme before. Before Piper came along he hadn't been a big fan of commitment and now he was being thrown into a lifetime commitment whether he liked it or not.

"Are you thinking about the baby?" Laila asked him in a hushed voice, the two on the other side of the table not paying them any attention as they chatted about Gavin's job.

Sterling nodded.

"Is Alistair okay?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "He didn't want to talk about it much this morning."

"Piper won't stop talking about it now," Laila said. "It's like she needs to talk about it or she doesn't believe that it's really happening."

"Is she going to keep it, do you think?"

Laila shook her head. "I don't know. She's not going to get an abortion but she's debating giving it up for adoption."

"Shit," Sterling swore, not sure if he and Laila would be ready to make a decision like that. "You're taking your birth control, right?"

Laila shot him a cautioning look. "Of course."

## Foreign Affairs

"I'm sorry, this is just so crazy."

"I know," she said with calming eyes. "But you're going to make a really great uncle."

"That sounds weird."

"It does, doesn't it?" Laila laughed.

"You know," Sterling gave her a guilty look, "if you marry me, you could be an aunt."

Laila smiled but shot him down. "Don't start that tonight."

"That's all I'm going to say about it," Sterling raised his hands in surrender. "Are you ready to go back to my place?"

"Sure," Laila said, setting her napkin on the table then leaning over to kiss him.

"We're going to head out, you two," Sterling said to Luanne and Gavin who were still deep in conversation.

"Already?" Luanne looked up from Gavin as Laila and Sterling stood to leave. They had been sitting in the restaurant for over three hours.

"I'll call you next week," Laila smiled and walked around to hug her friend goodbye. "Gavin, it was really great to see you again."

"You too, Laila," Gavin said, then stood up to shake hands with Sterling.

Luanne watched as her best friend took her boyfriend's hand and walked to the door. Sterling helped her with her coat and wrapped her scarf around her neck. Christian would do those things for her as well, the only difference was that Sterling looked like he enjoyed the task. Luanne's boyfriend just seemed to go through the motions.

"You ready to go or you want another drink?" She heard Gavin ask.

Luanne turned and smiled at him. "I could go for another drink. But let's go somewhere else. I feel like we've been at this table for too long."

"I know just the place," Gavin said and stood up, offering his hand to Luanne. She smiled and took it as she stood, her touch lingering a moment before leaving to find her coat.

The air outside was frigid, the clouds low and a light mist of rain had started falling. But Luanne didn't mind. She had grown used to the London weather faster than she had anticipated. Scarves, hats, and wool jackets seemed to suit her quite well.

"So, I've been avoiding this question all night, but I have to ask," Gavin said once they had reached the sidewalk. "What's really going on between you and Christian?"

Luanne glanced at him. His hands were shoved deep in the pockets of his coat, his grey scarf was covering his entire neck and his nose was already slightly red from the cold. But his eyes were inquisitive, their brown depths searching for an answer.

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"What do you mean?" She wanted to give him the right answer, an honest answer.

"Are you serious about him?"

"Very," Luanne answered without having to think about it.

"How long have you known him?"

"I met him the first day of school," she told him. "So about two months I guess."

Gavin nodded but didn't ask any further questions.

"What about you?" Luanne broke the silence. "Have you found anyone?"

"No one serious," Gavin said after a short pause, his voice betraying a slight loneliness. "Or, at least no one who wanted to be serious about me."

"It's weird how it happens sometimes," Luanne wanted to comfort her friend. "Christian is my first boyfriend, my first kiss, my first everything. And my feelings for him happened so fast and I never dreamed he would ever like me back. It all just seems a little too perfect."

"Maybe that's how it's supposed to feel," Gavin looked at her. Luanne was beaming as she talked about her boyfriend. He wanted to tell her that she was too good for the guy, he wanted to tell her that she could do so much better. But he didn't know that. He had met Christian only once and knew that his negative feelings toward the guy were a direct result of his affection for Luanne. But he couldn't help it. Luanne had always held a special place in his heart and now that she was grown up his feelings for her were starting overwhelm him. He knew he needed to keep them in check, he knew that he shouldn't interfere with her relationship. But a few more questions wouldn't hurt anybody.

"Does he know that you asked me out tonight?" Gavin teased her.

"No!" Luanne answered with a laugh. "He's not your biggest fan."

"Really? Why not?" Gavin laughed along with her, knowing that Christian must have seen his attraction for his girlfriend.

"I don't know," Luanne said, looking at the ground.

"Oh, come on. You can tell me," Gavin pushed. "If you are hiding our date from him, it must be something pretty significant."

"This isn't a date," Luanne sounded defensive. "And the reason I didn't tell him is because he thinks that you have feelings for me. Or, at least he had a suspicion."

Gavin smiled but didn't deny what Luanne had said. The girl should know that she has options or at least start to think that she has some options. They walked in silence, the redhead next to him clearly deep in thought, until Gavin changed the subject to give her mind a break.

"Are you going home for the holidays?"

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"Not for Thanksgiving," Luanne said quietly. "But I'll go home for Christmas and maybe stay through New Year's."

"Would you like to spend Thanksgiving with me, then? I don't think your Brit would be the most appropriate company on that day."

Luanne laughed, much to Gavin's relief. "That would be great. Can you cook?"

"Not at all. You?"

"Nope."

Gavin gasped. "And here I thought you could do anything and everything."

Luanne laughed again. "I have a very wide skill set but cooking is not included. I'm always willing to learn and experiment, though."

"We'll make a day of it then. You and me, Thanksgiving, experimental cooking."

"I'm not responsible for any fires I start in your kitchen," Luanne said pointedly and Gavin laughed.

"Fair enough. And I'm not responsible for any case of food poisoning you may contact."

"Fair enough," Luanne answered and Gavin glanced down at her. She was smiling, not a wide, brilliant smile like the one he saw when she was talking about Christian, but a happy and content smile, like she was perfectly comfortable with him. It wasn't exactly what he wanted, but he would take it. He linked arms with her and smiled as she looked down, startled at his touch. She wouldn't meet his gaze, but didn't pull away. She leaned into him just slightly and sighed.

"I'm really glad I ran in to you, Gavin. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," he said softly and picked up the pace, ready to get his friend out of the cold London night.

**A/N: Sorry I'm taking so long between updates! I've been rather preoccupied lately but hopefully by the end of this week I can find some focus again :) Since I don't have inspiration to write at the moment, I've been posting chapters of a book I've already finished. It's called Not My Reality and is quite different from any of the Harper's series. Hope you can check it out :) Much love to all of you! ~ Pink**

## Chapter 18: Try It Right Now?

SÃ©bastien could hear Tamlyn's voice in the kitchen and he followed the lilting sound, wondering how only a few weeks earlier he had found the noise so revolting. But he rarely heard it now as Tamlyn had kept to her promise to leave him alone and spend more time out of the apartment.

"This is your third date with him this week, isn't it?" SÃ©bastien heard his father ask and he stopped in the doorway.

"It is," Tamlyn confirmed and giggled.

SÃ©bastien frowned. It was only Thursday. Why would Tamlyn be spending that much time with a guy?

"You like him then?" Pierre asked and SÃ©bastien watched as the American shrugged.

"I do like him. He's really sweet."

"He's a lucky guy," Pierre said, glancing up at SÃ©bastien and holding his gaze for a second too long. Tamlyn must have noticed because she turned around and looked over her shoulder and then immediately stood up from her chair.

"I have to finish getting ready. I'll see you tomorrow." She smiled sweetly at Pierre and then rushed past SÃ©bastien without a word.

SÃ©bastien watched her walk down the hallway and then turned to see that his father was glaring at him.

"Go after her," Pierre said in French.

"No. Why should I care if she's going out on a date?"

"I don't know why you should care, but you do," his dad responded quickly and SÃ©bastien rolled his eyes.

"I don't."

"Then you're more stupid than I thought," Pierre snapped at him. "Both of you have been walking on ice around each other ever since she stopped working in the store. What happened?"

SÃ©bastien opened his mouth to lie but Pierre beat him to it. "And don't talk to me about Piper because I know that's not the reason."

Feeling slightly defeated, SÃ©bastien hung his head. "I said something I shouldn't have and she wouldn't listen when I tried to apologize."

"What did you say?"

"That's just it. I don't know what I said but whatever it was, it was enough to make the girl slap me pretty hard across the face."

"She slapped you?" Pierre smiled and SÃ©bastien rubbed his cheek, remembering the sting.

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"And now she won't talk to me so I don't see the pointâ!"

"The point is that you care about her."

"I don't," SÃ©bastien argued.

"Bastien," Pierre used his childhood nickname, "this is the first conversation we have had over the past few months that doesn't involve football or the store financials so she means enough for you to want to talk about her. Now, I know that Tamlyn can be a lot to handle. I know that she can be annoying but there is something about her which gets to you. You've been struggling with your emotions around her since she showed up and it's time you did something about it."

"What am I supposed to do?" SÃ©bastien no longer saw the point in denying anything from Pierre. He wasn't like Luc, he wouldn't drop a subject until he had his way. "She will barely talk to me now."

"Just keep trying until she does. She's hurting too, you know?"

"Going on three dates in one week? That must be painful," SÃ©bastien said sarcastically and left the room before Pierre's knowing smile even had time to show itself.

SÃ©bastien tried to concentrate on his book that evening but his thoughts kept traveling back to Tamlyn. He could remember the feeling of her in his arms, the exact taste of her lips and the feeling of emptiness he had felt as he watched her run out of the store. He knew his father was right, that there was a reason SÃ©bastien couldn't get over what had happened. Weeks had gone by and he now felt stronger than ever about the silly American, however inexplicable those feelings were. Determined to speak to her, SÃ©bastien listened carefully for her to return, ready to jump out of his bed at a moment's notice and corner her in the hallway, forcing her to listen to his apology again and again until she accepted it.

The rain that started to fall around ten that evening drowned out any noises SÃ©bastien might have been able to hear from the entryway. He waited another half an hour, pacing back and forth in his room, trying to think of what to say to her, some valid excuse he should have to be waking her up at one o'clock in the morning which is when he figured he would have found the courage to do so. But he found neither courage nor excuse, only a headache caused by anxiety and too many visions of her gorgeous red hair.

Storming out of his room, SÃ©bastien made his way to the kitchen, cursing himself for being such an idiot and letting Tamlyn infect his brain with her singing and her stupid stories of nonsense. But his foul mood changed instantly when he rounded the corner and saw the very object of his frustration standing on her tip toes, reaching for something high on the top shelf. Her long, navy blue nightshirt was riding up her perfectly shaped leg, her thick socks were gathered around her calves and her hair was still damp from the rain. SÃ©bastien smiled as he watched her reach for a bowl, knowing she was never going to get to it without some help. Eventually she gave up and turned to find a chair to stand on but quickly blushed when she saw him standing there staring at her.

"I thought everyone was asleep," she said quickly, pulling her nightshirt down as far as it would go.

"No," SÃ©bastien said as evenly as he could. He couldn't stop looking at her, she had never looked so beautiful to him as she did now.

"I wasn't making too much noise was I?"

"No," he said again. "I came for a bottle of wine."

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"Rough night?" She asked and smiled at him.

"Something like that."

"Mine wasn't any better. I came for ice cream," she said, a slight giggle following.

SÃ©bastien grinned but didn't say anything. If her date had gone well, she wouldn't be seeking comfort in a bowl of ice cream.

"Well, I'll let you get your wine," Tamlyn said rather awkwardly. She didn't know why SÃ©bastien hadn't moved from the door, she didn't know why he was looking at her like he hadn't seen her in decades. "I really shouldn't be eating ice cream this late, it's not like I need it."

"And I shouldn't be drinking an entire bottle of wine by myself," SÃ©bastien said quickly and took a few steps toward her. "Stay, have a glass with me."

His request, or rather his command, caught Tamlyn completely off guard and she immediately shook her head. "I can't. I should go to bed."

"Please, Tamlyn? Please stay with me." The look in his eyes was desperate, something she had only seen once before.

"Why?" She asked softly.

"Because we need to talk."

"About what? I don't think there is anything to talk about."

"You know that's not true," SÃ©bastien said, shaking his head at her.

Tamlyn pushed a hand through her damp hair. "I don't see why you would want to discuss anything. We've been fine these last couple of weeks. I've been leaving you alone and staying out of the apartment. We've hardly said more than three words to each other."

"That is what bothers me."

"But it's what you wanted," Tamlyn reminded him and SÃ©bastien cringed.

"No," he said quickly. "You were right, Tamlyn. I didn't know what I wanted. I was blaming you for being unhappy but," he paused and took another step toward her. "but if I was unhappy before, I am miserable without you."

Tamlyn smiled and then bit her bottom lip.

"I've said something to please you," SÃ©bastien noted and gave her a small grin.

She nodded and then quickly removed the smile from her face. "Every girl likes to hear that she is right, SÃ©bastien. That's no secret. Hearing it from you just makes it that much sweeter."

Tamlyn had known all along that she had been right, but what she enjoyed hearing most was that SÃ©bastien had been miserable without her. She had been a complete mess without him. She thought about him day and



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night, knew that she had left him with no explanation and no reason for her behavior. What he had done, he hadn't done it out of spite or hatred, he simply hadn't known any better. She knew that he deserved to understand the truth, but once she was ready to explain it to him she felt as if too much time had passed.

She smiled again as SÃ©bastien walked past her and pulled out a chair at the kitchen table, gesturing for her to sit down. Slowly, she moved toward the chair and took her seat, straining to look at the table instead of over her shoulder as SÃ©bastien pulled a bottle of red wine from the cupboard and opened it. Two glasses were put in front of her and her host brother poured each of them a generous amount.

"To new beginnings," he said in French and held up his glass.

"To understandings," Tamlyn countered and they both drank, she more than he. She knew that this conversation was going to be difficult. She knew that SÃ©bastien probably wasn't expecting what she was about to tell him, but that didn't matter anymore. He claimed he wanted to talk, and talking she could do.

"All right," SÃ©bastien started and Tamlyn waited for the question she knew was coming. "What did I say to make you hit me that day in the store?"

"First of all," Tamlyn started, taking another sip of her wine, "I didn't hit you. I slapped you. There's a difference."

"Fine," SÃ©bastien conceded. "Why did you slap me?"

Tamlyn took a deep breath. "It was what you said about my parents."

"Remind me," SÃ©bastien requested and waited as Tamlyn composed her thoughts.

"You said that having my mom and dad pay for a plane ticket wasn't an accomplishment seeing as they probably sent me away because they couldn't live with me."

"I did say that, didn't I?" SÃ©bastien smirked and Tamlyn glared.

"You did." She took another sip of her wine and looked deep into SÃ©bastien's eyes. She hadn't told many people this story, even some of her closest friends were only given the short version, but SÃ©bastien was different. She knew he would take her story for everything that it was worth. "My mom left us when I was 14. She had just had my given birth to my younger sister, Celia, and married my step dad two weeks before she was born. I came home from school one day to find Celia by herself in her crib, screaming and crying. There was a note from my mom saying that she couldn't take it anymore. Two kids was enough to deal with but three was just too much. She promised to call us each Christmas but that never happened.

"My step-father was left with two children who weren't his and one infant who looked nothing like him. Jordan and I, we still don't know who our father is and we aren't entirely positive who Celia belongs to either. Still, he agreed to take care of us, which to him meant drinking and beating my older brother. He would never try anything with Celia and Jordan kept him away from me as much as possible. When Jordan turned 18, George kicked us out and it's been the three of us ever since."

SÃ©bastien stared at her in disbelief. "How old were you when he forced you out?"

"I turned 16 one month after we moved out," Tamlyn said as if it didn't bother her at all. SÃ©bastien stared at her, wondering how someone so oblivious could be so strong. "I found a part-time job at a restaurant, Jordan started working construction during the day and bartending during the evenings. Together we paid for daycare

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and hospital bills, groceries and rent. I wanted to get a fulltime job after I graduated but Jordan wouldn't let me. He said I needed to go to college so I took the scholarship in DC and kept my part-time job. With Celia starting school this year, Jordan's tips and salary are enough to pay for rent so I was able to come here. I've been saving for nearly two years for this trip."

SÃ©bastien didn't know what to say. If she had told him this story under different circumstances, he may not have believed her. But as it was, he couldn't see one hint of invention in her face. Every emotion had seemed legitimate, no detail seemed imagined.

"You implied that my parents didn't want me," Tamlyn told him, not sparing his feelings in the slightest. "You now see that you were in fact correct. My dad, if he even knows of my existence, never claimed me, and my mom left me with a man who knocked her up one night in New York, someone she had known for less than a year."

SÃ©bastien reached for her hand across the table but she pulled it away before he could touch her. He was hurt but knew that he deserved it. "I said it to make you angry," SÃ©bastien admitted. "But if I had knownâ please believe that I never would have mentioned your parents had I known."

Tamlyn stared at him and eventually nodded her head. "I believe you."

"I really am sorry. Truly sorry."

A smirk crossed Tamlyn's face. "It's your turn now, SÃ©bastien," she said, disregarding his apology. "I've told you why I was so upset, now you tell me why you are so angry all the time."

It was SÃ©bastien's turn to take a long sip from his glass. After everything Tamlyn had told him, he was afraid she would judge him once he told her what had been really bothering him. His problems seemed so minimal compared to hers. "I'm angry because I don't know what I want out of life."

Tamlyn raised her eyebrows and started to smile but quickly caught herself. "Go on," she prompted.

"Correction," SÃ©bastien smiled. "I didn't know what I wanted out of life. I have a degree which I don't want to use, I have money which I don't want to spend in Paris and I have a family who thinks I'm crazy for wanting anything other than those things which they have already handed to me on a silver spoon."

"What do you want to do then?"

"I still don't know," SÃ©bastien smiled at her and Tamlyn felt her heart flutter. She had never seen his genuine smile before and what she was witnessing now could light up all of Paris. His entire face was smiling with his lips and it was contagious. She felt herself grinning back at him although she didn't know why.

"I'm going to travel," SÃ©bastien told her. "I'm saving money so I can see the world but even that doesn't satisfy me. If I knew that I was going to find what I was looking for out there, then I might be content. But as it is, I don't really know why I'm going."

Tamlyn finished her glass of wine. "You don't always have to have a reason for doing things. Sometimes you should just do them for the sake of doing them, not for some ulterior reason."

"Have you ever done anything like that?" SÃ©bastien poured them more wine and Tamlyn laughed.

"I do things like that all the time. They clear my head, make me remember what is important."

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"Example," SÃ©bastien demanded and smiled at her again. He couldn't believe how easily they had fallen into this conversation. He felt as if he didn't want to hide anything from her now that he had finally opened up. Talking to Tamlyn was liberating and he felt as if he could tell her his deepest and darkest secrets and she wouldn't judge him.

"Tonight is a great example," she said with another laugh. "I went out with Henri, this very cute guy I met at school. We've been dating for about two weeks now and he's been showing me all over Paris and we've been having a great time."

"But?" SÃ©bastien prompted.

"But I don't like Henri that much," Tamlyn sighed dramatically. "He's the sweetest guy ever, he never lets me pay for anything and always tells me how pretty I look and how cute my accent is. But that's about all there is to him. He's smart and all, but not very funny and lets me talk for far too long. Even I get tired of hearing my own voice when I'm around him."

SÃ©bastien laughed. "So why do you still see him?"

"Well that's just the thing," Tamlyn said, straightening her back. "I have no reason to keep seeing him but no reason to call things off. What else am I supposed to do? I've been working nearly 30 hours a week and taking care of a small child for the last five years of my life, not to mention going to school full time, and now I'm here and I can't afford to go out with the girls and I can't work in the cheese store, as dull as that sounds, and I can't hang out in the apartment for fear of running into my horrid host brother, so what else am I supposed to do?"

"Am I really horrid?" SÃ©bastien asked, fearing her answer.

"Yes," Tamlyn said. "You are terrible. And I know that I provoked you on so many occasions but you never gave me a chance."

"I'm sorry," he said with a small smile. "What you said about me blaming you for being miserable was absolutely correct. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

Tamlyn studied his face for a second before nodding her head. "Apology accepted. I'm sorry I knowingly irritated you."

"Apology accepted."

They stared at each other in a mutual understanding, both of them smiling at their small victories and conceded defeats.

"I guess living with each other should be a little easier now," Tamlyn smiled at him but SÃ©bastien frowned. No. Living with her would not be easier now. He longed to touch her again, feel her against him and hold her until all of her pain went away. He didn't know if she felt pain any longer. She was strong, but he wanted to show her that there were people in the world she could trust. People besides her brother she could count on to never leave her.

"So," she said, sipping her wine casually. "You said you didn't know what you wanted out of life, but you are going to travel even though you don't know if you'll find what you are looking for. What are you looking for then? What do you want?"

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SÃ©bastien smiled. He was glad she was asking questions, glad that she felt comfortable enough with him to push him for answers. And he knew this next answer would shock her beyond belief. "That's simple. I want you."

Tamlyn blinked and then laughed. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I want you," SÃ©bastien repeated, not stuttering or hesitating. "Ever since I kissed you, I knew that I had found that one certainty, that one thing I wanted." Admitting this out loud was actually quite terrifying for him. He had never admitted it to himself, even in those ideal daydream scenarios that ran through his head whenever he thought about Tamlyn and this conversation. But there was no doubt in his mind that Tamlyn was supposed to be in his life. No one had affected him like she had, nothing had moved him as much as her story had.

Tamlyn sat back in her chair and gave him a puzzled look, not exactly surprised at his statement, yet not fully believing it either. "About that kiss," she started. "Why did you do it?"

SÃ©bastien smiled again, his genuine smile that made Tamlyn's heart jump in her chest. "I wanted to do something to anger you. You had slapped me and I didn't want to physically hurt you but I knew I needed to do something. I didn't really think about it until it was too late."

Tamlyn nodded her head. "Right. That's the worst excuse for a kiss I've ever heard."

SÃ©bastien laughed. "But it's the truth. And now I can't stop thinking about how I'm going to get you to kiss me again."

Tamlyn laughed this time. "That is never going to happen."

"Why not?"

"To start, this is the longest conversation we've ever had and if you look at our history, we can barely go ten minutes without fighting. Then there is the fact that we live together and I can't have you just kissing me whenever you please. That would just be weird."

SÃ©bastien couldn't argue any of that with her. They did fight like crazy and he wasn't sure he would be able to stop himself from screaming at her if she started to annoy him. And she was living with him until the following June which would make things very awkward if they were to engage in anything more than a friendly relationship. But there was that part of him that wanted her more than anything, that part of him which yearned for her and needed her.

"I don't care," SÃ©bastien said. "I think that despite everything, you liked that kiss and wouldn't mind if I kissed you again."

Tamlyn blushed, partly embarrassed because he was right, partly turned on by his sudden confidence which so many French men possessed yet SÃ©bastien, up until now, seemed to channel into hatred for her.

"Maybe that's true. But it's still not a good idea."

"It's probably not," SÃ©bastien agreed and leaned toward her. "But sometimes you should do things just for the sake of doing them."

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Tamlyn smiled and then saw the urgency in SÃ©bastien's eyes. She couldn't deny that she had thought about that kiss, thought about how it would have been completely amazing had the circumstances been different. SÃ©bastien had felt so strong with his arms around her, so sure of himself as he forced her to kiss him. She wasn't used to surrendering control like that, but she had felt temporarily safe with him, even if it had only lasted for a matter of seconds.

She leaned closer to him and smiled. "Did you want to try it right now?"

"If you don't mind," SÃ©bastien said in a very laissez-faire manner which caused Tamlyn to giggle. "I promise, it will be nicer than the last time."

"Oh, really?" Tamlyn laughed as SÃ©bastien's hand reached for her face.

"Really," he said, his voice deep and rough. Tamlyn closed her eyes as his face neared hers. Her lips were tingling in anticipation and she nearly fainted when she finally felt his mouth touch hers. His hand reached for the back of her neck and held them together as he gently kissed her. She could taste the wine on his lips and then on his tongue as he softly deepened their embrace. Soon, Tamlyn felt herself reaching for him, wanting to feel more than just his lips. Her hand touched his face and she felt his scruffy chin and jaw, his smooth cheek bones and then his unruly dark hair. She heard SÃ©bastien's chair being shoved to the side and felt him stand up without breaking the kiss. She followed suit and they stumbled around the table in their rush to hold each other, both finally finding their footing and pressing against the other with an unparalleled sense of urgency.

SÃ©bastien had been right. This kiss was far and beyond the last one they had shared. It was better than any Tamlyn had ever experienced and she never wanted it to end. SÃ©bastien kissed her again and again, each time surprising her with how soft yet commanding he could be. She ran her hands up and down his spine, through his hair and over his shoulders, loving the feeling of his reciprocation as he grasped at her hips and lower back.

But she knew it had to stop when she felt herself reaching for the buttons on his shirt. She couldn't get carried away, not here in the kitchen, not after all the progress they had just made. She pushed lightly on his chest and took a step away.

"Enough," she said, regretting it instantly. Her eyes opened and she watched as Sebastian's face went from bliss to complete satisfaction in just a fraction of a second.

"For now," he stipulated and she laughed. She liked this new SÃ©bastien, the one who could joke with her and, dare she say it, flirt with her. He was still almost a complete mystery to her, but she knew that was the part that intrigued her, the part she liked the most.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?" She smiled at him.

"Yes," he answered. "A huge amount of trouble."

A simple nod of her head was enough for both of them as they were left with the understanding that they were absolutely crazy to hope for anything good to come of this. But that didn't matter to either of them. Whether this was something that would last or something that would leave them both with broken hearts, they both knew they needed to see it through. There was no denying it anymore, no point in trying to avoid it or hide behind empty insults and clever mocking. That kiss put them in it too deep and there was no backing out.

"Goodnight, SÃ©bastien," Tamlyn said, stepping around him as she smiled up into his grey eyes.

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"Goodnight, Tamlyn," he replied and watched her blush and walk away.

The half empty bottle of wine was forgotten, as were the glasses on the table and the turned over chair on the floor. S bastien went to bed that night with a clear head and a heart full of anticipation for the first meaningful thing he had set his mind to accomplish.

## Chapter 19: Herpes Is For Life

Laila swung her legs impatiently as she waited in the terminal for Sterling's flight to arrive. She had realized, half way to the airport this morning, that she had left her cell phone charging on her nightstand. She considered getting off the Metro and going back to get it but knew that she would miss her flight. No matter, she thought. The only people who really called her were her parents and Sterling. They had his number as well and could reach her if there was an emergency.

Looking around, she was slightly wary of her surroundings. What little Spanish she knew, was already proving to be quite useless here in Barcelona, and with her light skin and hair she was already standing out. Nevertheless, she was excited to see the city with Sterling. All the Gaudi architecture, the beach (even if it was cold outside), the food. There were endless things to discover in Europe and she never turned down a chance to explore.

She heard a rough voice announce something over the PA system and she looked at the arrivals board, smiling to herself as Sterling's flight landed. The runways at this airport were short and no large commercial flights came in. All of the planes looked like they had been built in someone's back yard and people had actually been allowed to smoke on her flight. Thank goodness she hadn't forgotten her inhaler. Not that she could reach it very easily. The man sitting next to her had easily weighed over 300 pounds and took up as much of her seat as he did of his. His leg had been blocking her way to the seat in front of her and her purse and as much tapping and elbowing as she did, he was fast asleep by the time they took off from Charles de Gaul. Luckily it hadn't been a long flight and the man's snoring had only been sporadic.

Laila stood up from her seat as people started to exit the plane. She craned her neck to find her boyfriend's blonde head in the crowd but was too short to see over the few dozen people already in front of him. But as the crowd dispersed, she started frowning. She waited another couple of minutes and then watched as the flight crew left, finally left standing there all by herself, wondering what the hell she was supposed to do.

She checked her purse to make sure she had written down the right flight number. She and Sterling had discussed this so many times that she was sure she hadn't made a mistake. He had been nervous for her to fly on her own to a country where she didn't speak the language, but she had laughed at him, asking what could possibly go wrong. Well, something had definitely gone wrong and she had just spent two hours waiting in an airport for a boyfriend who never showed up.

Frustrated and a little scared, Laila walked to a payphone and pulled out some coins. She dropped them in and waited until she heard an electronic voice telling her something in Spanish she didn't understand. She put in more coins, just to be sure, and then dialed Sterling's number. It rang once, twice, and then went to voicemail.

"Hey, this is Sterling. Leave a message."

Laila sighed. "Hey, it's me. I'm at the airport and...um, you're not here. Obviously. So I don't know if you caught a later flight or an earlier one but I don't have my cell phone with me. I left it in Paris."

She tried to think of what she was going to do but wasn't quite sure. If Sterling was here, or on his way, she shouldn't try to get back to Paris tonight. She didn't even think there would be any more flights out and a train would take nearly 12 hours to get her there.

"I'm just going to go to the hotel," she finally decided. "Hopefully you're there, or you will be soon. Call me there as soon as you get this, okay? All right. I love you."

## Foreign Affairs

She placed the phone on the receiver and heard the change clinking inside the machine. Nothing was returned to her and she reached down and collected her duffel bag. Looking at the signs over her head, she made her way toward the picture of the taxi and stood in line, pushing her bag along as she moved up in the cue.

When it was finally her turn, she threw her bag into the backseat and climbed in behind it. The driver said something to her she didn't understand and she handed him her hotel confirmation and pointed to the address on the top. He rambled something else in a completely foreign tongue and stared at Laila in his rear view mirror. She stared back, knowing she looked like a deer in headlights.

"Um. Lo siento? No hablo Español?"

The driver gave her a confused look and then raised his voice, talking a mile a minute. "Catalã ! Catalã !" He screamed at her.

"I'm sorry. I don't speak that language either." Laila was worried this guy was going to kick her out of his car but he only threw up his hands in frustration and turned the key in the ignition. The windows were open and the music was turned up as loud as it would go. The taxi driver flew down the street at formula 5 speeds, the wind freezing Laila's face and hands as it poured through the open windows. She fought back tears and stuck her hands under her legs to keep them warm.

She was pretty sure the driver was taking her in circles around the city to run up the meter, but eventually he stopped on a busy street and pointed to the amount on his screen. Laila handed him some bills and dragged herself out of the car. He was pulling away just as she slammed the door behind her.

"What the hell was that?" She asked herself and watched as he sped off. At least he had brought her to the right place. Looking up, she saw that she was standing directly below the marquis of her hotel. At least she could put her stuff away and use a clean bathroom. She threw her duffel over her shoulder and walked up the stairs into the reception area.

An older man with a friendly smile greeted her and she did her best to smile back.

"Hola," she said hesitantly. "Tengo una, um...reservaciona," she knew that wasn't a word. "Sterling Pierce?"

"Of course," the man said and Laila smiled, thrilled that he spoke English. "Could I just see your ID please?"

Laila dug through her purse and pulled out her passport. She heard the door open behind her and glanced over her shoulder eagerly, hoping it was her boyfriend walking in behind her. But it wasn't. A couple in their mid-thirties came barging in, speaking in loud English and glaring at each other.

"Did you need to tip him that much?" The lady berated her husband.

"Five Euros. Five Euros," the man said, holding up his hand and wiggling his five fingers.

"It's his job to drive a taxi. You don't tip the bank teller or the bus driver, do you?"

The man rolled his eyes and Laila turned back around. The receptionist was giving her a strange look. "I'm sorry miss, but your name isn't on the reservation."

"Oh, I know. It's under my boyfriend...my fiancã's name." Hell, fiancã sounded better than boyfriend at the moment. It was more serious, more permanent, and might win her some points.



## Foreign Affairs

"Is he with you?"

Laila shook her head. "No," she answered quietly. "I don't know where he is."

"Well, I can't let you into his room if your name isn't on the reservation."

Laila looked around and felt herself starting to cry again. "Can I get my own room, then?"

The man gave her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry miss, but we're sold out tonight. We're a small hotel and there is a festival in townâ"

"What am I supposed to do then?" She demanded, not wanting to sound rude, just wanting him to understand her desperation.

"There's a payphone just behind you. You can have him call me and approve you as a guest in the room."

Laila nodded but felt completely defeated. She kicked her duffel bag over to the pay phone and pulled out the last of her change, shoving it in and dialing Sterling's number. It went straight to voicemail this time.

"Shoot," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "Hey, it's me again. They won't let me into the hotel because my name isn't on the reservation. So you'll need to call, or just get here, so they know it's okay if I wait in the room. Where are you? Please call as soon as you can."

Laila hung up and kicked her bag back to the reception desk. The couple were now checking in, the woman asking her husband to make sure there was a window in their bedroom. Laila waited patiently behind them, staring at the ground, wondering what in the world she was going to do and seriously starting to worry about Sterling.

The man at the reception desk looked at her expectantly but she shook her head. "I can't reach him," she said and glanced at a small bench that was tucked into one corner of the lobby.

The woman looked back at her from the elevator and frowned, her husband tugging at her arm as he balanced all of their bags. Laila looked away.

"Do you mind if I just wait here and maybe he'll call?"

"Of course," the man smiled at her. "Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

Laila shook her head. "No. I'm fine."

"Let me know if you change your mind."

Feeling her hands shake, she nodded and slumped over to the bench. It wasn't comfortable. It was hard and felt as if it were about to break under her weight. But she sat down and propped her legs on top of her bag, pulling out her book which she had finished on the flight down. It hadn't been terrible. She could read it again.

Laila had read through the first chapter when she heard screaming coming from the elevator. She looked up, not at all surprised to find the couple from earlier nearly running each other down as they tried to exit the lift.

"You're still here?" The wife asked, looking at Laila with a certain amount of pity and confusion.

## Foreign Affairs

"Um, yeah."

The couple stared at Laila with wide eyes as if they expected her to do something. They were an odd pair, she thought. The wife had subtle blonde highlights in her dark brown hair and had stuffed herself into a purple track suit which looked to be about four sizes too small. Her accessories were expensive, from her diamond earrings to her Chanel bag. The rock on her finger could blind someone if caught in the right light and she would have looked quite put together had her clothes not been too small. But her husband was a different story. His black jeans were baggy and his brown loafers had seen much better days. His leather jacket had flannel patches on the elbows and the collar was popped around his double chin. His black hair was receding and there was a tan line on his face and scalp from his sunglasses.

"We couldn't help but overhear your conversation earlier," the woman admitted with a guilty smile. "Have you spoken to your fiancÃ©?"

Laila shook her head and tried not to feel sorry for herself.

"You want to join us for dinner?" The husband asked suddenly and the wife looked as if she was about to burst with joy.

"That's just what I was thinking! Please, you have to join us. You shouldn't just be sitting here all by yourself waiting for some guy to call."

"Thank you but I don't want to leave and then miss..."

"Nonsense!" The husband decreed. "You have to eat. So put your bags behind the front desk and come with us. We insist."

Laila felt her stomach rumble and couldn't deny that she was in fact starving. She certainly hadn't learned any Spanish or Catalan sitting on this bench but somehow got the feeling that an evening with these two wouldn't be as easy as finding a McDonalds and attempting to place an order. Then again, a good meal might make her feel better. This couple would certainly take her mind off things.

"Okay. Thanks," Laila said with a forced smile and glanced at the nice old man behind the front desk. He seemed like better company than this crazy couple but sitting on this uncomfortable bench was starting to take its toll on her backside and her nerves.

"Good!" the woman squealed and stuck her hand out for Laila. "I'm Danielle and this is my husband, Phil. We're from Boise."

It was awkward making this introduction, Laila thought. But, then again, anything with this couple as bound to be awkward. "I'm Laila. I'm from San Francisco."

The couple smiled down at her as she sat perfectly still on the bench. Finally, she willed herself to stand up and she smiled at them as she dragged her bag over to the front desk. The man was kind and promised to look after it for her and to let Sterling know she was okay if he called.

Laila walked behind Danielle and Phil from Boise as they marched off toward the restaurant. Phil was convinced he knew where it was. Danielle was certain he was taking them in the wrong direction. Laila would have settled for anything as long as it was hot and edible. After 20 minutes of walking in circles, Phil finally found the small cafe they had been searching for. He smiled triumphantly at his wife who didn't reward him with anything but a scowl and the silent treatment. Laila smiled politely at him.

## Foreign Affairs

Phil spoke to the hostess in broken Spanish, which she seemed to understand, and they were quickly shown a table and given English menus. Laila opened hers and started to read but all she could think about was Sterling. She didn't know why he hadn't called and had started to imagine horrible things. What if he had been hurt? In a car accident perhaps. What if his taxi had been hit by a truck on the way to the airport? What if he had taken the Underground and his train had derailed? What if he had been kidnapped and was being held ransom?

She blinked her eyes at her own ridiculous imagination and tried to focus.

"I want to leave," she heard Danielle say.

"Why? We just got here." Her husband replied and Laila looked up at them. The couple wasn't looking at each other, rather they both had their eyes focused on their menus.

"I don't see anything I like," Danielle answered.

"Keep reading."

"I don't see anything."

Their faces were straight, both concentrating on the menus in front of them. Laila continued to stare.

"You never see anything you like," Phil told his wife.

"It's not my fault you take me to places where you know I won't like the food."

"It's not my fault you don't like anything."

"You know, sometimes I think you do this just because you know it bothers me."

"That's exactly why I do it."

Their voices had no emotion at all, no influx to speak of. What the hell was going on? It was like Laila was watching some super awkward sitcom instead of actually sitting at a table with these two. Real people didn't act like this, did they?

"I remember when you used to care about me," Danielle said, her eyes not leaving the menu.

"I remember when we used to have sex."

Laila took a sharp breath and hid her face behind her menu. No. McDonalds definitely would have been better than this.

"Laila," she heard Danielle say her name and she shuttered. "Do you know what you're having?"

She had to think quickly so she scanned the appetizers and made her choice. "The tomatoes and mozzarella."

"And?" Danielle was looking at her, waiting for more.

"And a glass of wine?"

## Foreign Affairs

Her companion frowned but then looked down at her menu.

"I'm going to start with the cured meats, then have the Paella."

Laila nodded politely.

"I thought you didn't see anything you liked," Phil said, almost under his breath.

Danielle shot him a glare that could kill but then smiled at Laila. "Tell me about your fiancÃ©. How long have you two been together?"

"Me and Sterling?" Laila didn't know if talking about herself would be a good thing or a bad thing with these two. "I guess about three years."

"And where did you meet?"

"High school. Our senior year. I transferred to this school in Massachusetts."

"Phil and I were high school sweethearts," Danielle interrupted her and reached up to rub the back of her husband's neck. He grinned at her and Laila could see that at least a part of him still cared about her. Danielle smiled back and leaned over to kiss him quickly on the lips.

"Yeah, she joined the cheerleading squad my senior year and I was barely able to play football all season long," Phil reminisced.

"It was love at first sight," Danielle sighed and Laila smiled.

Phil nodded and then turned his attention to Laila. "So when is the wedding?"

"Oh, we haven't set a date yet."

They both gave her curious looks.

"Why not?" Danielle finally asked. "Don't you love him?"

Laila's eyes went wide. She was slightly offended. "Of course I love him. But we are waiting until after we graduate which won't be for another 18 months."

Danielle frowned and opened her mouth to say something but Phil beat her to it. "I think it's a great idea that you are waiting."

"Thank you," Laila said.

"What?" Danielle shrieked. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"When did you two get married?" Laila asked, hoping to prevent another argument.

Danielle seemed to take the bait. She smiled and reached for Phil's hand which was lying on the table. He let her hold it. "We got married my senior year of high school. Phil was a freshman in college."

"It's been 14 years," Phil picked up her hand and kissed it.

## Foreign Affairs

"Wow, that's great. Congratulations," Laila said, trying to imagine where she and Sterling would be 14 years from now.

"Well, I had to tie her down before she went off to college and met someone else. My girl was a bit of a flirt," Phil teased his wife.

"It's true," Danielle told Laila as if she had been proud of it. "But he made an honest woman out of me."

Laila didn't quite know what to say so she remained silent. It was Phil who ruined the peace.

"Who knows what she would have done living in the dorms her freshman year." It was evident to Laila that he was only teasing but his wife didn't appear to find any humor in it.

"What does that mean?"

Phil quickly saw the error of his ways but chose to roll his eyes at his wife. Laila wanted to hide under the table because by the look on Danielle's face, it was clear she had snapped. She looked like a deranged poodle and Phil was clearly either immune to it or found some sort of sick pleasure in raising his wife's blood pressure.

"It doesn't mean anything."

"What do you think I would have done? Cheated on you? Like you cheated on me with your lab partner from Chemistry?"

Phil threw up his hands in frustration and Laila frowned in frustration. She had seen couples throw around those empty threats and accusations before, just to get a rise out of each other, but she had assumed people would grow out of that once they reached the age of 25.

Phil, however, surprised her. "That was 12 years ago! Get over it."

Laila wrinkled her nose. Looking at him now, seeing how he was with his wife, she couldn't imagine anyone wanting to sleep with Phil.

"You're just lucky she didn't give you herpes," Danielle spat at him.

And with that, things reached an entirely new level and Laila looked around nervously for their server. Other tables were staring at them, giving them disapproving looks as Danielle's voice grew louder and louder.

"Because herpes would have made you leave me? Is that it?" Phil demanded.

"Herpes is for life!"

"Yeah, well so is marriage!"

"I would take herpes over you any day of the year!" Danielle screamed and stood up from her chair. She glared at her husband as she stormed off. Phil stared her down with the same hateful expression until they both scowled and looked away.

Laila looked out the window, trying to pretend nothing was happening.

## Foreign Affairs

"She'll calm down in a minute," Phil informed her and Laila glanced at him quickly with a small smile.

A minute turned into 30 and Laila watched in horror as Phil went to retrieve his wife from the bathroom only to start yelling at her when she refused to open the door. A line had formed outside yet she refused to come out until he had apologized. He refused to apologize until she came out. Laila eventually decided to ask for her food to-go and her waiter, who spoke beautiful English, was more than happy to oblige.

She practically ran back to the hotel, ready to beg and plead for a room. But the man at the front desk was already waiting for her with a key.

"He called?"

The man nodded and smiled. "He wants you to call him as soon as you get to your room."

She breathed a sigh of relief and collected her bag and keycard. "Thank you," she said to him. "And, if that couple asks about meâ"

"I haven't seen you since you left for dinner, miss." He promised with a grin.

"Thank you," Laila said again, and rushed up the stairs to her room. She didn't even bother to look around as she threw her things on the floor and dashed for the phone. She dialed Sterling's number and accepted the charges to the room.

"Hello? Laila?" Hearing his voice nearly made her cry again.

"Where are you?" She demanded. "Are you okay?"

"I'm still in London," she could hear the smile in Sterling's voice and knew that he must have been worried about her. "I just got home from the hospital."

"What happened?"

"I broke my wrist playing soccer. I called to let you know that I wouldn't be able to make my flight but you never answered."

"I know, I left my phone in Paris. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Sterling laughed. "I just feel ridiculous with this stupid cast on. What about you?"

"I'm good now that I know you're not dead or kidnapped."

Sterling laughed again and Laila smiled.

"I'm sorry I ruined our trip," her boyfriend said.

"Don't say that. I don't think I like Barcelona much anyway."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll be on the first flight to London tomorrow morning."

## Foreign Affairs

"You're the best."

"I love you, Sterling."

"I love you too. I'll see you tomorrow."

Laila said goodbye and then hung up the phone. She quickly undressed and then set the alarm for 4:00 in the morning. There should be a six or seven o'clock flight, she imagined, and she would rather wait at the airport all day then risk running into Danielle and Phil again somewhere in the lobby or on the streets of Barcelona.

## Chapter 20: Moment of Weakness

The rain was blurring his vision but Sterling hardly cared. They had been playing for almost an hour now and the game was close. Had it not been raining, the boys still would have been drenched with their own sweat. Christian was a good athlete, and Sterling was glad they were on the same team, not opposing ones, because he didn't want his friend to see the ugly side of his competitive nature.

Sterling watched as the ball was passed back and forth and then kicked down the pitch. It sailed above the heads of the players in front of him and he jumped high into the air to head the ball toward the goal. Yet as soon as he felt the top of his head make contact with the ball, he felt a hard body slamming into his side. He felt his legs fly into the air as his torso was forced parallel to the ground. Bracing himself for the hard turf of the soccer pitch, he prayed that the person who had hit him would break at least part of his fall.

No such luck.

He heard his body hit the ground before he heard the crack of his wrist. It was a horrible sound and made Sterling feel instantly nauseous. Lying on the wet grass, the rain pouring over him, he waited for the pain to come. Only, it didn't. He slowly opened his eyes, blinking through the drops of water on his eyelashes, and looked around. There were boys surrounding him, leaning over him, and staring.

"You okay, Sterling?" One of them in a funny accent asked and Sterling frowned in confusion.

Right. He was in London. "I think so." He tried to push himself into a sitting position but was instantly overcome with another strong wave of nausea.

"Look at his wrist!" He heard one whisper and Sterling's eyes scanned his body until he found his arm. It was horrible. His palm was up, the back of his hand resting flush against his forearm. He lifted his elbow and his hand fell limply, completely detached and useless.

"Doesn't it hurt?" He heard a familiar voice ask.

Sterling looked up and saw his friend Christian. Everything started to come back to him. He had been playing soccer. In the rain. But there was somewhere else he was supposed to be, or somewhere he was supposed to be going.

"I imagine it should," Sterling replied and swung his arm, his hand flapping grotesquely behind.

He heard one boy gag and a few took a step back. "Sorry," he apologized to the group. "Must be the adrenalin. I can't feel a thing."

No one said anything for a moment as the rain continued to pour. Finally, Christian knelt down and reached his arm under Sterling's good side. "Let's get you to the hospital."

In a daze, Sterling allowed himself to be helped to his feet and he walked with Christian off the pitch. His friend grabbed both of their bags from under the tarp and swung them over his shoulders. Sterling cradled his wrist in his hand, watching as it swelled, as Christian waved down a taxi and the two climbed inside.

It wasn't until they were sitting in the waiting room after his x-rays were finished, when Sterling remembered where he was supposed to be.



## Foreign Affairs

"Shit! Christian, I need to get to the airport!"

"Did you knock your head as well? We're at the hospital for a reason, you know?" He pointed to Sterling's wrist which had already turned a rather nasty shade of purple.

"But my flight for Barcelona leaves in an hour. Laila!"

"So call her. You'll have to catch another flight, won't you?"

"She's going to be so pissed at me," Sterling mused and reached across his lap to dig his phone out of his bag. But without the use of his other hand, unzipping his duffel proved difficult. He eventually threw it between his feet and held it secure while pulled at the zip.

He found Laila's number in his list of most recent calls and dialed. It rang and rang and eventually went to voicemail.

"Hi, you've reached Laila. Leave me a message and I'll call you back."

"Laila, it's me. Look, I'm going to be late to Barcelona today. I'm at the hospital and I don't know how long I'll be here. But I'll catch a later flight and get there as soon as I can. I love you. Call me when you get this."

Sterling set his phone in his lap and then closed his eyes, leaning his head against the wall. The pain was increasing at an unbelievable rate and his entire arm was starting to throb.

"Sterling Pierce," he heard a voice call and his eyes flew open.

"That's me!" He said quickly, standing up and searching for the nurse who had called for him.

Christian stood up as well and Sterling could see that he was smiling though he couldn't see why any of this was amusing. But then his eyes fell on the nurse and he quickly understood. She was waiting for him in the doorway, her blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, her bangs sweeping past her eyes. Sterling frowned. She looked more like an adult film star dressed up for Halloween rather than an actual caregiver. Cleavage like that shouldn't be allowed in a hospital. Her pink scrubs hugged each curve and she stared at the two boys expectantly.

"You lucky bastard," he heard Christian whisper.

A quick glare was all his friend received as Sterling started to walk toward her.

"I'm nurse Katherine," she introduced herself with a smile. "Looks like you've got a pretty nasty break there."

"It hurts," was all Sterling could say.

"Katherine?" He heard Christian's voice close behind him. "Or do you prefer Kate?"

The nurse only blinked but her indifference didn't seem to faze him.

"My name is Christian and, as you can see, Sterling here is a little shook up. I'm the one who brought him here and if it's all right with you, I'd like to stay with him while the doctor sets his wrist."

## Foreign Affairs

Nurse Katherine seemed to find his plea genuine because she smiled warmly at him. "You're a good friend, Christian. Now, if you'll both follow me." She turned around and Sterling watched as his friend's eyes fell to her bottom. Christian eventually met Sterling's gaze and winked, a wicked smile crossing his face.

He nodded for Sterling to follow and the two boys hurried to catch up to the nurse. She led them to a small room and instructed Sterling to sit on the examination table. Christian roamed the room, looking at the pictures on the walls and flipping through medical pamphlets as Nurse Katherine asked her series of questions and gently touched Sterling's wrist, checking for loss of feeling. He watched her intently as she jotted down notes on his file but remained silent until she had left the room, promising the doctor would be with them shortly.

"How are you feeling?" Christian asked his friend.

"Like shit, actually," Sterling answered honestly.

"Oh, come on. Nurse Kate doesn't make you feel just a little bit better?" Christian teased but Sterling didn't laugh.

"No."

Christian was about to argue his point when both boys heard Sterling's phone ring.

"That's Laila!" Sterling said, reaching for his phone. He was about to open it when a short man in doctor's scrubs appeared at the door.

"No phones in the ER, please," was all he said as he grabbed Sterling's mobile from his hand and flipped it off.

"Hey! I needed to answer that," Sterling said, shocked and frustrated.

"What you need is for me to set that wrist before it starts to heal and I need to break it all over again."

Both boys frowned and Sterling shot Christian a wary look. Maybe he did prefer Nurse Kate.

"Now, let's see to that wrist then, shall we?" The doctor was suddenly chipper as he set Sterling's phone down and lifted the injured arm.

Sterling cried out in pain and Christian winced, staring longingly at the door.

"Doctor, if we could make this quick, I need to be at the airport!"

But the short, rather plump doctor started laughing. "You won't be flying anywhere tonight."

"But my girlfriend!"

"I'm just here to do my job," the Doctor said in a rather warning tone. "I can do it now or after you've argued with me."

Sterling sighed and looked away from him. Christian was frowning at him and offering no support.

## Foreign Affairs

"Right, well, I'll probably just be in your way," his friend said once he saw Sterling's disappointment. "I'll just wait outside."

Sterling rolled his eyes but asked a favor as Christian abandoned him. "Will you please call Laila for me?"

"Will do," Christian said rather as he ran out the door.

Sterling frowned again as the door swung shut. He glanced only briefly at the doctor and then looked away, willing this entire process to be over.

One hour and one incredibly constricting and ugly cast later, and Sterling was pronounced fit to leave. He signed all papers that need to be signed and went searching for Christian. His phone was turned on and he looked for missed calls. There were two messages, both from Laila asking where he was, saying she had left her phone in Paris, claiming she couldn't check into the hotel because her name wasn't on the reservation. She sounded annoyed which made Sterling smile. He could imagine the look on her face and it made him miss her even more than before. Of course he didn't like knowing that she was upset, but she always looked so adorable when she was flustered or worried about something.

He was about to dial her number when he heard Christian's laugh resonating from around the corner. He quickened his steps and saw his friend's dark head of hair hovering dangerously close to Nurse Kate. She was smiling up at him, batting her overly painted eyelashes. Sterling watched in partial disgust, partial amazement as Christian reached for the nurse's face, her cheek blushing a deep shade of red. He started to lean in closer and Nurse Kate closed her eyes, preparing for his kiss.

Sterling instantly thought of Luanne. "Christian!" He called out. Two sets of eyes flew open to stare at him. His friend glared. Nurse Kate looked mortified. "I'm ready to go now. Are you coming?"

Christian sighed but could see right through Sterling's distraction. He knew that his friend was a better person than he was. Sterling was loyal to a fault and expected everyone else to behave the same way. But where was the fun in that? He knew that Sterling would view his indiscretions much like Luanne would, as a betrayal. And that was partially his fault. He had led everyone to believe that he was in a committed relationship with Luanne. She wouldn't have agreed to anything that wasn't completely conventional. But again, where was the fun in that?

Christian stared at Sterling, knowing he was going to have to make up some excuse, and then hung his head as if he was ashamed by his actions. He gave Nurse Kate one last squeeze and let his hand fall to her hip, out of view so Sterling couldn't see. He heard her near silent gasp when he patted her backside and then he turned to leave, trying desperately to conceal his smile.

Sterling turned quickly and walked ahead of him, out of the hospital and into the cold evening. It had stopped raining but everything outside was still wet and slick. The two boys waited in silence until a cab pulled up, then both climbed into the backseat.

"Thank you for coming with me," Sterling eventually said, his voice as stiff as his body.

"You'd do the same for me," Christian said, trying to sound cheerful.

Sterling didn't look at him and was no longer sure he would return the favor to his so called friend. Had he seriously misjudged Christian? If he had, how was he ever going to tell Luanne? It would break her heart.

"Look," he heard Christian saying. "About what you saw. I think I should explain."

## Foreign Affairs

Sterling waited, turning his head only slightly toward the other man in the backseat of the taxi.

"You know that I love Luanne, just like you love Laila."

With that Sterling turned to face him. Christian could never love Luanne like he loved Laila. Not after what he had seen. What Sterling and Laila shared was ten thousand times deeper and purer than anything Christian could share with any woman.

"But the thing is," Christian continued, "she wants to wait for marriage, you see. You know, wait to have sex?"

"I know what you mean," Sterling snapped.

"Well what you saw back there was a moment of weakness. I want to wait for Luanne, I really do. It's just, I'm not used to abstinence. It's wearing me down and nearly driving me insane."

Christian stared at Sterling as if he expected that was a sufficient explanation.

"What does Luanne think about this?" Sterling asked after a brief pause.

"I can't talk to her about it. She would only feel guilty."

Sterling nodded in agreement. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I don't want to lose her. But even if I asked her to marry me this second, she would still want to wait a year or so before we actually went through with it."

Went through with it. Sterling didn't like that phrase when referring to marriage. "I think you should tell her."

"If I don't, will you?" Christian asked, a slight challenge in his voice.

"No," Sterling decided. "I won't tell her. But she's a smart girl, Christian. She'll find out eventually."

"Let's hope that I can keep it in my pants then, eh?"

Sterling turned his head and stared back out the window. "Let's hope."

The rest of the ride back to the city was spent in silence, apart from the call Sterling made to the hotel to include Laila's name on the reservation. Sterling paid for the taxi and left before Christian could say goodbye. His phone was clutched tightly in his hand as his anger at his friend rose. He needed to talk to Laila. Laila would calm him down.

He had just sat down on the couch, having struggled to change out of his wet clothes and into clean ones, when his phone rang. He had to give up on his shirt and slumped into the cushions in only his sweatpants. He quickly sat up and ran for his phone, nearly throwing it on the floor as he hastily opened it with his one good hand.

"Hello? Laila?" He longed to hear her voice.

"Where are you?" She asked him without even saying hello. He smiled as her voice softened. "Are you okay?"

## Foreign Affairs

"I'm still in London," Sterling told her, suddenly desperate to see her. "I just got home from the hospital."

"What happened?" It now sounded as if she was crying.

"I broke my wrist playing soccer. I called to let you know that I wouldn't be able to make my flight but you never answered."

"I know," she already sounded better. "I left my phone in Paris. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Sterling laughed and glanced down at his bound wrist. "I just feel ridiculous with this stupid cast on. What about you?"

"I'm good now that I know you're not dead or kidnapped," she nearly snapped at him and he could only imagine the crazy stories she had come up with.

"I'm sorry I ruined our trip."

"Don't say that," Laila sighed. "I don't think I like Barcelona much anyway."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He could tell there must be some sort of story behind it. "I'll be on the first flight to London tomorrow morning."

"You're the best," he told her and felt a sudden surge of love for his girlfriend. Perhaps it was because he knew he would be seeing her soon. Perhaps it was because he knew that he was incredibly lucky to have her.

"I love you, Sterling."

"I love you too. I'll see you tomorrow."

## Chapter 21: Consider Marrying Me

Alistair watched as Piper separated the food on her plate. The vegetables were pushed to one corner, the potatoes to another, her salmon sat alone in the center.

"Is there something wrong?"

"What?" Piper suddenly looked up as if he had startled her.

"I've never seen you do that with your food," Alistair said with a smile and his girlfriend smiled back.

"I just don't want anything touching because they shouldn't be mixing right now. I don't think I want potatoes at all. That sounds horrible at the moment."

Alistair smiled and reached across the table for her hand. "I love you."

Piper smiled and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I love you too."

Alistair felt as if he couldn't say those three words enough these days. He had left Piper less than two weeks ago, after their first doctor's appointment, only to return 10 days later. He couldn't stay away. He never wanted to be away from her. But he could tell their relationship was strained and he had a pretty good idea why. It wasn't that he blamed the baby, but in a way, he knew that Piper was scared out of her mind for that very reason. Something about it made her not want to open up to him, made her not want to confide in him. He knew she talked about it all the time with Laila. Sterling would offer more updates than Piper.

Truthfully, he was worried that Piper didn't trust him, didn't trust him not to run when things got difficult. Maybe that's why she was pushing him away, she was preparing herself for when he left her. But he knew that was never going to happen. He knew what could happen if he pretended that a problem didn't exist and that was not an outcome he ever wanted to experience again.

"How are you feeling tonight?" He asked softly.

"I'm great," she answered as if the question had meant nothing at all.

He dropped her hand and she picked up her fork and started to eat. He watched her for a second before turning to his own food. They ate in silence for a while but Alistair was aching to talk about that what was going to happen in less than 6 months. They had to talk about it. She had to get past whatever insecurities she was feeling because that baby was coming no matter what.

"So I was thinking about next year," he started slowly.

Piper placed her fork next to her plate and looked at him. "Yeah?"

He nodded. "I was thinking that you will probably want to take next semester off."

"Obviously," she interrupted him. "I don't want to risk going in to labor right in the middle of Latin now do I?"

She was trying to make a joke but Alistair really didn't find it funny. He wanted to have a serious conversation with her. He wanted her to make some decisions, include him in this part of her life. The baby was his, after

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all.

"So," he continued, "I was thinking you could come live with me just until I graduate."

"Well, my parents certainly aren't going to want me back in Seattle."

Alistair stared at her for a second. She wasn't making this easy. "Have you thought about when you are going to tell them?"

"I was thinking on her first birthday," Piper smiled and Alistair suddenly smiled back.

"Do you think it's going to be a girl?"

Piper shrugged. "Maybe. It just doesn't really feel like there's a little boy in there, you know?"

Alistair laughed. "Not really."

"It's just a hunch."

Alistair beamed at his girlfriend from across the table. It was the first time she had ever shown any interest in the baby at all, at least towards him.

"And then after I graduate, we'll move back to New Haven and you can finish school. I'll get a job and thenâ!"

"Do we have to talk about this now?" She didn't look annoyed, just tired.

He paused and sighed. He didn't want to upset her. "Piper, we have to talk about it sometime. That baby is on its way and we can't put it off much longer."

She looked down at the table and Alistair was scared he had angered her.

"I'm just so scared," she said quietly. Piper knew she had been a lousy girlfriend lately. She would cut short their phone conversations, change the subject whenever he brought up the baby or their future. It didn't make that much sense to her, her recent behavior. She knew that Alistair would never let her raise the baby on her own. She knew that he was excited about being a father but she didn't want him to throw away his life because of it. Hers was going to change no matter what. But his didn't need to.

"Hey," Alistair reached for her hand again. "I'm scared too. But we can do this together."

But Piper shook her head. She hated that this mistake was going to alter their lives completely. She hated that she couldn't do this by herself no matter how much she wanted to, that she had to depend on Alistair for everything, ruin his life along with hers.

"So you're going to get a job in New Haven? What are you going to do there? What about Law School? Alistair this baby is going to change everything. You shouldn't have to put off your entire life just becauseâ!"

"Stop, Piper!" Alistair didn't know how to make himself any clearer. "I'm going to be a part of that baby's life whether you want me there or not. I'm not going to throw my responsibilities aside just because this baby has the worst timing in the world."

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"Of course I want you there," Piper said, her voice cracking as she started to cry. "But you'll be giving up so much and I don't want you to end up resenting me or the baby because of it."

"I won't be giving up anything," Alistair told her. "And neither will you. It will just take longer to get what we want. That's all."

"And how are we supposed to live when you're finishing up at Harvard and I'm stuck at home with a newborn?" Piper was skeptical about everything these days but if Alistair had a plan then he was already at least one step ahead of her.

"My trust fund," Alistair said plainly and Piper's eyebrows rose.

"Your trust fund?"

"Sure. The baby will be born in early June and I'll only have a few more weeks of school left. We can easily survive off my trust fund until I find a job."

"In New Haven?"

Alistair nodded and Piper smiled. "In New Haven," he confirmed. "There's a day care on campus so you can go back to school. I'll watch her in the evenings while you study. You'll only graduate one semester later than planned."

"You're making this all sound so easy."

Alistair laughed. "I know it won't be easy. We're going to be exhausted and frustrated and no fun at all."

Piper laughed as well. "How is it that you are so calm about everything? I feel like I should be the one convincing you not to run away from everything, not the other way around."

Alistair shrugged and winked at her. "Paternal instinct, I guess."

Piper laughed again. "Right." She was grateful that at least one of them had their head on straight, at least one of them was reasonable enough to know that this wasn't going to be the end of the world.

"Feel better?" Alistair asked.

"A little," Piper admitted. "Thank you for being so great about all this. I don't know what I would do without you."

"You'll never have to find out," Alistair promised and reached for her hand again.

His girlfriend smiled and looked at him as if he meant the world to her. Her green eyes had so much longing in them, her smile looked reassured and loving. He knew that she meant everything to him, baby or no baby, and it was probably that look which gave him the courage to do what he did next.

"So now that we are finally talking about our future," he started, teasing her and smiling as she laughed, "I was wondering if you would consider marrying me."

Her laughter was replaced by a confused stare once she realized he was no longer joking. She tried to pull her hand away but he wouldn't let her. "Alistair, now is really not the timeâ!"



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"Why not?" He interrupted her. "Now is just as good of a time as any."

"I don't expect you to marry me just because you got me pregnant," Piper clarified.

But Alistair wasn't listening. He dug into his pocket and produced a small silver pouch. He quickly opened it and clutched the ring in his hand. "Piper, I have loved you since nearly the first moment I saw you. I've known that I have wanted to spend the rest of my life with you since our first kiss. I was planning on proposing right after you graduated next year but this just gives me an excuse to do it earlier."

Piper was staring at him, confusion and uncertainty all over her expression. "Alistair, I love you so much butâ"

"I want you to know that no matter what happens, I'll be there for you," he said, reaching for her left hand.

Piper's mouth went dry. Her boyfriend looked so excited, so eager for her to believe him, to accept what he was proposing. "I know that youâ"

"This baby is going to be so loved, Piper."

"I know. But, Alistair, this is completely unexpectedâ"

"It's unexpected for me too," Alistair interrupted her again and Piper tried to pull her hand away. She needed him to understand that she loved him and that she didn't want to lose him, but marriage was too large of a step. "But I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. Don't you want the same thing?"

Piper paused and stared at her boyfriend. "Of course I do." She did. She really did. Spending the rest of her life with Alistair would be perfect. It was exactly what she wanted. But making the decision to spend the rest of their lives together didn't necessarily mean making the decision to get married, did it?

"Okay, great!" Alistair was beaming as he slipped the ring onto her finger. Piper felt the cool band against her warm skin and her breath caught in her throat. She watched, nearly paralyzed, as Alistair smiled. Certainly he would understand that just because he had given her a ring, it didn't mean that they were going to be getting married anytime soon. This wasn't an engagement, per say. More like a promise.

But then her eyes fell to her hand. "Oh my God!" It was definitely an engagement ring. And it was gorgeous. A large canary yellow diamond sat on a silver band, surrounded by smaller white diamonds.

"Do you like it?" Alistair asked eagerly. "I picked it out yesterday and knew that you would."

"It's gorgeous," was all she could say as she stared at her hand. Even in the dim light of the restaurant, the rock was sparkling.

"I love you," Alistair told her for the millionth time that evening.

"I love you too," Piper said, finally looking up at him. He looked so proud, so sure of himself. Her heart twisted as she realized that his would break if she told him she wasn't ready to get married.

"I'm going to get the check. You ready to get out of here?"

All Piper could do was nod as Alistair leaned across the table and kissed her before walking off to find the waiter. Her eyes dropped back to her hand and the seconds seemed to tick by slow as hours as she waited for

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her boyfriend to return.

"You ready?" She heard him standing over her and was snapped back to reality.

"Sure," she said quietly and stood up. Alistair helped her with her coat and she walked out of the restaurant as if in a daze. As soon as she stepped out into the cold Paris night, she realized what had happened. She was engaged. She had, almost by default, accepted Alistair's proposal. But she hadn't meant to. She didn't want this. Not yet anyway.

But what was she supposed to do now? She couldn't take it back, not after seeing the look on Alistair's face. He was so excited, beyond thrilled. She couldn't let him down, she couldn't break his heart. But surely he would understand. Surely he wouldn't stay angry at her for long. She was carrying his baby, after all.

She was about to say something to him, something along the lines of how they should wait until they were both ready, when they stopped outside her door. How had they gotten home so quickly?

"Do you want to pack a bag for tonight? Stay at my hotel?" Alistair asked, still glowing.

Piper was about to turn him down, say that she was too tired, but she couldn't leave things like this. She had to talk to him. "Sure."

She opened the door to the courtyard and Alistair put his hand on the small of her back as they walked up the stairs. Why did he have to be so good to her? This would be so much easier if he weren't so amazing.

"I'll be right back," she told him, trying to smile, as she pointed toward the chairs at the kitchen table where he could wait for her.

Her boyfriend smiled back and she turned down the hall to her room. The door was closed and she pushed it open. It felt like it weighed a million pounds. But what she saw in her room temporarily flooded her head with a new confusion. There was Tamlyn, sitting on her bed, leaning her head close to none other than SÃ©bastien. They were both smiling but both quickly snapped out of it as they heard her come into the room.

"SÃ©bastien! How dare you!" Tamlyn suddenly shrieked and pushed her host brother hard enough to make him fall off the edge of the bed.

The room fell silent until they heard SÃ©bastien hit the hardwood floors. Tamlyn was glaring at him. Piper was staring at the two of them with her mouth open, unsure of what to say, unsure of what she just witnessed. SÃ©bastien was swearing in French.

"Get out!" Tamlyn screamed at him. "You have no right to be in our room!"

SÃ©bastien rubbed his shoulder and gave her an angered look before stomping past Piper and out into the hallway.

"What the fuck was that?" Piper asked as soon as the door was closed again.

Tamlyn just shook her head. "I don't know. I was in here, minding my own business, and he just came storming in here, yelling at me about not cleaning up the kitchen. I mean, come on. I'm the only one who actually does clean up that kitchen."

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Piper stared at her in confusion. Nothing about her story seemed to be out of the ordinary, but she knew it was a lie. No matter. She had bigger things to worry about. Specifically, how to tell her fiancé that she still wanted him to be just her boyfriend.

"Boys," Tamlyn was still talking. "I swear. I mean, it's just like they don't get it. Oh, but I'm sure Alistair is different. He seems more perceptive than most, doesn't he?"

"You'd be surprised," Piper said almost under her breath as she started to pack some clothes into a small duffel bag.

Tamlyn was quiet for a few seconds, something which Piper wasn't used to, and she turned around to see what the redhead had found to occupy her thoughts. But Tamlyn was still looking at Piper, or rather, she was looking at Piper's left hand.

"Is that a ring?" Tamlyn started but Piper quickly stopped her.

"An overnight bag? Yes. I'm staying with Alistair for the rest of the weekend."

"Okay," Tamlyn said quickly and looked up at Piper's face. "Have fun."

Piper tried to smile but failed miserably as she swung her bag over her shoulder. She left without saying goodbye and dragged her feet down the hallway and back to her waiting fiancé. She wasn't getting used to that word. Alistair stood up as she came into the room, took her bag from her, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Have I told you that you look beautiful tonight?" He asked her and she blushed.

Looking down at her hand as her fingers laced with his, she realized that she wouldn't be able to do this tonight. She couldn't break his heart. Not tonight. Not after everything that he had said about wanting to be there for her and the baby.

She smiled up at him and knew that she was lucky. She had a wonderful man who wanted to marry her, who wanted to take care of her, who wanted to help her succeed. Why wouldn't any girl want that? Why should she be scared or doubt that he knew exactly what he was doing? Maybe she could get used to the idea of getting married. A baby was a better reason to get married than some people had.

## Chapter 22: Figure This Out Soon

Tamlyn was sitting on her bed, reading a new book her brother had sent her, when she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in!" She said, setting her book aside and waiting to see who it could be.

She smiled as she saw SÃ©bastien carefully open the door and look around for her other roommates.

"They're out for the night, don't worry."

SÃ©bastien smiled at her and walked across the room to set on the bed with her.

"How was school today?" He asked, looking at Tamlyn's lips instead of her eyes.

"Informative," she replied coyly.

SÃ©bastien smiled and her heart melted. It had been almost a week since their first kiss. Or rather, their second first kiss. Neither one of them had mentioned it, but the quality of life inside the apartment had certainly improved. They were able to have pleasant conversations, however strained by their desire to kiss one another, and they were able to move around the apartment without worrying about running into one another.

"So I've been thinking," SÃ©bastien said. "About you."

"Yeah?" Tamlyn blushed.

"I have," he nodded. "And I really want this to work between us."

"I do too."

"But I'm worried about my dads and what they will say when they find out."

Tamlyn nodded. "I've been worried about that too. What do you think they'll do?"

"They won't be happy, that's for sure. I mean, they'll be happy for us, but they'll think it's irresponsible of me considering you are a student and a guest in this house."

"Do you think they'll ask me to leave?"

"No. No, definitely not. They're more likely to ask me to leave."

Tamlyn laughed and SÃ©bastien smiled.

"But I do want to keep it a secret, just for a little while. Until I figure out how to best tell them."

Tamlyn couldn't agree more. The last thing she wanted was for SÃ©bastien to get in trouble with his dads. "You know them best. I'll just keep my mouth shut and my hands to myself until you let me know."

"You don't have to keep your hands entirely to yourself," SÃ©bastien teased her.

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"No?" She laughed.

SÃ©bastien smiled and shook his head, leaning toward her and letting his eyes wander down to her lips again. Tamlyn grinned at him and waited for his kiss. But something startled her and she looked toward the door as Piper walked in. She knew how she and SÃ©bastien must look in their current position and panic at getting caught suddenly set in so she did the first thing that she could think of. As hard as she could, though not knowing it would cause much damage, she pushed SÃ©bastien and screamed at him.

"SÃ©bastien! How dare you!"

His legs flew over his head as he toppled from the bed and Tamlyn watched in horror, helpless to stop him. The room went silent and then he landed with a thud. She wanted to start apologizing right then and there but knew that Piper would never buy her story. So instead she glared, waiting to see what SÃ©bastien would do. Luckily, in typical SÃ©bastien fashion, he stood up quickly and glared back.

"Get out! You have no right to be in our room!" Tamlyn shrieked. SÃ©bastien gave her one last look before storming out of the room and leaving Tamlyn alone with her roommate.

"What the fuck was that?" Piper asked her as soon their host brother had left.

Tamlyn shook her head, trying to think of a lie. "I don't know. I was in here, minding my own business, and he just came storming in here, yelling at me about not cleaning up the kitchen. I mean, come on. I'm the only one who actually does clean up that kitchen."

Piper looked confused but appeared to believe her.

"Boys," Tamlyn continued, trying to get Piper's mind off what she had just seen. "I swear. I mean, it's just like they don't get it. Oh, but I'm sure Alistair is different. He seems more perceptive than most, doesn't he?"

"You'd be surprised," Piper said and sounded almost bitter about it. Tamlyn watched as she reached for a duffel bag when something bright and shiny caught her eye. Her mouth dropped as she saw an enormous yellow diamond sitting very comfortably on Piper's left hand.

"Is thatâ?" Tamlyn started to ask about the ring but Piper interrupted her.

"An overnight bag? Yes. I'm staying with Alistair for the rest of the weekend."

"Okay," Tamlyn said quickly and looked up at Piper's face which was begging her not to question her further. "Have fun."

Piper gave Tamlyn a pathetic smile and quickly ran from the room as Tamlyn stared after her in confusion. But she waited all of two seconds before Piper had closed the door before grabbing her phone from her night stand and calling Laila. Of course, it went straight to voicemail. She knew that her third roommate was in Barcelona with Sterling but she had to talk to someone about this. Piper was definitely sporting a huge ring on the fourth finger of her left hand. Yet she didn't look excited about it. She hadn't even mentioned it.

"Laila!" Tamlyn squealed into her voicemail. "Did Alistair propose to Piper? Why didn't anyone tell me? Call me the second you get this!"

She shut her phone and then looked around her room knowing there was someone she needed to go see. She felt the butterflies in her stomach start flying around uncontrollably as she tiptoed out of her room and down

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the hall to SÃ©bastien's wing of the apartment. She had only seen his room once and had never been inside but tapped quietly on the door, hoping to get an answer.

After only a few seconds, SÃ©bastien arrived at the door, opening it wide and giving Tamlyn a skeptical look.

"I'm sorry!" She cried, a smile on her face.

SÃ©bastien tried to stay stern but failed and eventually cracked a smile himself. "Come in."

Tamlyn grinned brilliantly and stepped inside of his room, looking around at her new surroundings. His walls were covered in posters of far away cities: Tokyo, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles. His bed was made with a dark green comforter and his walls were painted soft blue.

"I like your room," Tamlyn said, spinning around facing him. He was smiling at her but didn't speak as he took two large steps toward her. His hands reached for her and he drew her toward him, kissing her fiercely and walking her backwards to his bed.

"SÃ©bastien!" She squealed as she felt the mattress against the back of her legs.

"Hmm?" He kissed her again.

She giggled as he pressed against her and she sat down on the mattress, pulling him with her. SÃ©bastien moaned as he felt her curves under his weight. They both scrambled to the top of the bed and he relaxed between her legs, kissing her again as his hands roamed her sides. Tamlyn's hands were sliding up and down his back and getting tangled in his hair. Each kiss was better than the last and SÃ©bastien felt himself starting to stir as she rubbed her hips against him.

He pulled away slightly so he could lift her shirt above her head. She was all too willing and lifted her arms to help him. His lips immediately fell to her chest and he kissed each breast, eager to have them completely free. His hands struggled with her bra and she arched her back so he could get around to the hook. The garment was thrown to the side and Tamlyn immediately reached for SÃ©bastien's shirt. He pulled it off with ease and smiled down at her as he reached for the zipper on her jeans.

"SÃ©bastien, wait," she said suddenly. He instantly stopped and reached for her ribs, waiting to see what she had to say.

"It's just been a while," Tamlyn said, an embarrassed look on her face.

"Has it?" He ran his fingers up her sides and watched as goose bumps rose on her skin.

"Yeah," she blushed. "Like, close to two years."

"I didn't realize," he smiled down at her. She never stopped surprising him.

"I'm really glad we are doing this," she told him, reaching for the belt on his pants. "I'm just nervous."

"Don't worry," he told her, kissing her again. "I was planning on taking my timeâonce I got you naked."

Tamlyn felt herself smiling in excitement as she slid SÃ©bastien's belt through the loops of his jeans. It had been a while since this had happened for Tamlyn and she usually didn't rush into anything. Her last boyfriend

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had been with her for over a year before she slept with him. But she knew SÃ©bastien was different. She knew he wouldn't take this decision lightly.

Tamlyn watched as he kicked his jeans off and then returned his attention to hers. She lifted her hips and worked helped SÃ©bastien pull them over her thighs. She inhaled sharply as she felt him relax between her legs, his erection pressed stiffly against her inner thigh.

SÃ©bastien couldn't believe this was about to happen. He had thought about it for so long but never dreamed that it would actually come true. Slowly, he started to kiss down her neck and across her chest, loving the sound of her breath catching in her throat as he nipped gently at her breasts.

He moved lower down her body, his tongue tasting her skin as he kissed down to her panties. Her breath was jagged as he slipped his fingers under the elastic band but then she fell silent as he started to slip them down over her hips. But he hadn't gotten very far when he heard the door knob turn and Luc's voice resonating through the room.

"SÃ©bastien? I need your help movingâ€"!" His eyes flew to the door as he saw his father standing just outside, a look of shock on his face.

"SÃ©bastien! How dare you!" Tamlyn shrieked, startling him and causing him to look up at the naked girl in his bed. But he didn't have to look for long. Tamlyn kicked her leg at him and hit him square in the chest, causing him to slide off the edge of the mattress and land on his knees just beyond the foot of the bed.

SÃ©bastien groaned in pain as Tamlyn struggled to cover herself with his comforter.

"I'll just come back later," Luc said, glancing at his son and keeping his eyes off the American.

"Great idea," SÃ©bastien said sharply as he stood up and watched as his father tried to hide a smile while closing the door.

"I'm sorry!" Tamlyn whispered once the door had shut. "I did it again, didn't I?"

SÃ©bastien looked down at her, not at all surprised to find his anger melting away as he saw her trying desperately to cover her breasts with her hands. He smiled and climbed onto the bed next to her, relaxing next to her on his side.

"Are you all right?" Tamlyn asked and reached for SÃ©bastien's face.

"I'm fine," he smiled at her and kissed her gently on the lips. "But this probably isn't going to happen tonight."

"No kidding!" Tamlyn laughed and rolled onto her side as well. "I guess this saves you from having to tell your dads about us."

SÃ©bastien sighed and then let his eyes fall down to her cleavage. Nothing could cause him anxiety at this moment. Not when Tamlyn was so close and so naked. He reached for her and pulled her close, crushing her chest against his.

"Luc won't say anything if I ask him not to. It's Pierre I'm worried about."

"Well please figure it out soon," Tamlyn requested with a smile. "After tonight, I don't know how much longer I can't wait for you."

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SÃ©bastien laughed at her teasing and kissed her forehead. "You and me alike."

Tamlyn sighed and looked into his grey eyes. They didn't look regretful but certainly didn't appear lustful anymore. They looked almost loving as he stared back at her and ran his fingertips over her hip. She smiled up at him and kissed his chin, pushing away from him and searching for her bra.

"I should get going, I guess."

"You don't have to," she heard him say.

"No. I think I should." She laughed at their situation and slipped her bra on.

"I'll figure this out soon. I promise."

Tamlyn looked over her shoulder and saw SÃ©bastien staring at her. "I know you will. But don't worry. I'm not going anywhere."

SÃ©bastien nodded and then relaxed onto his back. Tamlyn found the rest of her clothes and dressed quickly, leaning over the bed and kissing SÃ©bastien once more before leaving him for the night.

"Goodnight," she whispered against his lips.

"Please stay," he requested, opening his eyes and seeing her smiling face above his. "I won't try anything. You can just sleep."

But she laughed and shook her head. "No. With our luck, Pierre will come in early tomorrow morning and want you to help him with breakfast."

SÃ©bastien knew she was probably right. Already the odds were not in their favor and they had just been caught red handed by one of his dads.

"You go talk to Luc. I'll go lock myself in my room."

SÃ©bastien laughed and sat up so he could kiss her one last time. "Goodnight."

Tamlyn smiled at him and left without saying another word. SÃ©bastien stayed on his bed for a few minutes before getting up and pulling on some pants. He knew Luc would understand. He thought Luc might even be happy for them. Nothing was working out as he had planned yet he had never planned on falling for Tamlyn in the first place. It made sense that nothing would work in their favor. But he didn't mind. Even the thought of being able to publically show his affection for her was enough to make him smile.



## Chapter 23: I'm The Best Man

A/N: So I've been getting some requests for more Laila and Sterling action. Hope this chapter is enough for you, at least for a while :) Much Love, Pink

"Sterling?" Laila opened the door to his apartment and let herself in. "Sterling?"

"Laila?" She heard his sleepy voice from his bedroom.

"Hey," she said, shedding her jacket and her boots before wandering into his bedroom.

He met her just outside the door, wearing only his blue striped pajama pants. They reminded Laila of hospital scrubs which made her think about how sexy he was going to look coming home from work after he graduated from Med School.

"It's still so early," her boyfriend said, rubbing his eyes.

"I got the 5:30 flight out of Barcelona," she said, wrapping her arms around his torso and pressing her face against his chest.

She heard Sterling moan and realized her face must be freezing. But she didn't have time to pull away. He held her close and stroked her hair. She could feel his cast on the small of her back. "You feel nice," he said, his voice still sleepy.

"Did you want to go back to sleep?"

"Only if you come to bed with me."

"I'd love to," Laila smiled and dropped her arms from around him. Sterling looked down at her, his eyes barely open and Laila had to smile, realizing he was still probably on a few pain meds.

Her boyfriend nodded his head toward the bedroom and Laila stepped around him, pulling her sweater over her head as she walked into the room. A familiar bed did sound nice at the moment and she could feel herself getting drowsy as well.

"So what happened in Barcelona? You sounded so upset on the phone yesterday," Sterling said, sitting on his bed and watching his gorgeous fiancée undress.

Laila laughed as she started to pull down her leggings. "It was just this couple that I met. Danielle and Phil. They were horrible and I ended up going out to dinner with them and they caused such a scene and you weren't there and I just had a horrible time."

Sterling smiled at her as she stood in his bedroom in only her underwear and flimsy t-shirt. "What was wrong with them?"

Laila shook her head and climbed onto the bed. "Everything. You know those couples that fight all the time over stupid things and push each other's buttons just the hell of it?"

Sterling nodded.

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"That was them. Only they were the worst. And they seemed to be completely oblivious to the fact that they were making everyone around them uncomfortable. I don't know how they survived each other for as long as they did. They were high school sweethearts, you know?"

"Really?" Sterling raised his eyebrows, wishing he had been there because he knew Laila would take this couple's annoying and seemingly rude behavior as a sign they should wait to get married.

"I just want to forget about it, really," Laila smiled at him, moving so she could sit on his lap. "How are you feeling?"

"Kind of out of it, to be honest," Sterling said, grinning at her.

Laila grinned back because she could already tell that. "How out of it are you?" She asked him, kissing his neck and collar bone.

"Not completely incoherent," he decided, closing his eyes and reaching for Laila's face with his hands.

"Ouch!" He heard her cry and instantly opened his eyes. "My hair! It's stuck in the plaster!" She started laughing and Sterling frowned as he started to pull his wounded wrist back.

"No! Don't pull it away," Laila laughed again. "Let me untangle myself first."

The frown stayed on Sterling's face as he watched Laila carefully untangle her long blonde hair from his cast. She was done in no time and smiled as she looked back up at him.

"Sorry," he said quietly and then leaned in to kiss her, resting his hand on her thigh instead. But he couldn't feel her smooth skin. He couldn't feel the goose bumps he knew would be there if he hadn't had this stupid cast on. No matter, he still had the use of one hand. He reached behind Laila's back and pulled her as close as she would go. His hand stroked her back as they kissed over and over again, Laila's small breasts lightly brushing against his chest. Groaning again as he forgot himself, Sterling brought his wounded hand from his leg up to her ribs, wanting to squeeze her sides before flipping her on her back and making love to her.

But Laila winced and reached for his hand, gently guiding it back down to her leg. Sterling sat back, frustrated and looked away from his girlfriend.

"Hey," he heard her soft voice. "What's wrong?"

He took a deep breath, his head still a little fuzzy from the drugs the doctor had given him. "I just hate that I can't touch you like I used to. I hate that I can't even feel you right now."

"Hmmm," Laila pondered what he had said and then carefully reached for his hand, holding the plaster lightly in hers as she brought it up to her face. "Can you feel this?" She asked, running only the tips of his fingers lightly along her cheek.

"Yes," Sterling said with a lusty smile.

Laila kissed the tip of one finger, her tongue lightly tasting his skin. "Can you feel that?"

"Definitely."

"Not so bad, then?" Laila asked him, her eyes wide and expecting.

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"I'll survive," he conceded and smiled as she leaned in to kiss him. He felt Laila shift on his lap so she could straddle his legs and he sighed, partly out of relief, partly because she felt so good. Before long, and without too much trouble, all of their clothes were on the floor and Laila was moving above him in a slow but steady motion.

Sterling smiled as he watched her face. She looked beautiful, slightly vulnerable, and very erotic. He reached for her hips and tried to guide her movements, but he didn't want his cast to hurt her again and with only the use of one hand, he knew he wouldn't be much help. He knew he would have to be patient and couldn't deny that Laila was putting on quite the show for him.

He smiled as he felt her clench around him, her mouth opening slightly, and her back arching. So without warning, he reached around her waist and flipped her onto her back, laughing as she squealed. His one good hand supported his weight above her as his other arm hooked her leg close to his hip. His bed was lightly pounding against the wall and Laila was releasing small cries as they made love.

A few hours later and they still hadn't left the bed. Between making love, napping, and making love again, they were both exhausted. Sterling could have stayed in bed with Laila all day, but his wrist was starting to hurt again and he knew they would eventually need to venture out, at least into the rest of his apartment.

"We should get up," Laila said, smiling down at her boyfriend, clearly thinking the same thing he was.

"That might be a possibility for you," Sterling grinned at her with tired eyes. "But you have completely worn me out. You shouldn't take advantage of a guy with a broken wrist, Laila. You know he can't defend himself."

Laila blushed and bent down to kiss him. "You can't play the invalid card after sex!" She told him, kissing his neck. "You have to save it for something you really need."

Sterling's hand lifted from the mattress and caressed his girlfriend's naked back as she kissed him. "Since you mentioned it, I am hungry. I couldn't possibly cook anything with only one hand."

Laila laughed and kissed his mouth once more. She still loved his kisses. They were always so telling of how he was feeling, of what he wanted. Right now, they were sweet and loving, a little tired but still amazing. She pulled away and stared down into his eyes, the contrasting colors still visible in the dim light of his bedroom.

"What do you want, then?"

"Hmmm," Sterling mused, closing his eyes and running his one good hand up and down Laila's thigh as she still straddled his waist. "A sandwich."

Laila laughed and slid off of him, hearing him groan as she did so. "Surprise, surprise."

"You're the best!" Sterling said, his eyes barely opening so he could watch her pull on her panties and one of his shirts.

"Only because I love you," she told him, smiling brilliantly at him, the glow of sex still on her skin. "Can I check my messages from your phone?"

"Of course," Sterling said.

Laila smiled, enjoying this short time she had to take care of her boyfriend. It was usually the other way around and she never minded. But today, and for the rest of the weekend, Sterling was going to at least

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pretend that he needed her to cook his food and help him change his clothes.

She wandered out in the living room and found his phone connected to his charger. She flipped it open and saw that he had missed four calls from Alistair.

"Your brother called," she told him.

"When?" A sleepy voice came from the bedroom.

"Yesterday around 11 and three times this morning."

"I'll call him back later. After my sandwich."

Laila laughed to herself and dialed her number, punching in her pass-code as she reached her voicemail.

She listened to the messages from Sterling and smiled, remembering how just ten hours ago she had been so miserable without him.

"Laila!" Tamlyn's voice surprised her. "Did Alistair propose to Piper? Why didn't anyone tell me? Call me the second you get this!"

Laila had to listen to the message again. Why would she think that Alistair had proposed? She checked to see if she had any other messages but there were none and she closed the phone, completely confused.

"Sterling? Will you please check your messages from Alistair?"

"Why?"

"Tamlyn seems to think that Alistair proposed to Piper last night," she told him as she walked his phone into his bedroom.

Sterling let out a short laugh. "I think I would know if Alistair was going to propose," he said, sitting up in bed and reaching for the phone.

Laila didn't answer as it clearly hadn't occurred to him that they had been hiding their engagement from everyone for a number of months now.

Sterling listened to the first message. "Hey, little brother." He could hear the excitement in Alistair's voice. "Call me when you get this, okay?" That one had come in last night, sometime after Sterling had taken his pain medication and passed out on the couch.

The next one sounded just as excited and had arrived after one of his calls this morning. "Bro! Call me! I'm in Paris so you need to call me."

Sterling gave Laila a look which she clearly couldn't decipher. "Well?" She asked.

"I don't know. He only left two messages asking me to call him."

"Are you going to call him back now?"

Sterling nodded. "What did Tamlyn say?"

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"She just asked if I knew he had proposed and why no one had told her."

He gave her another look, a skeptical one this time and dialed his brother's number. It only rang once before Alistair answered.

"Sterling! You'll never believe what happened last night."

"What?" Sterling asked, rather scared for the answer.

"I asked Piper to marry me and she said yes."

Laila was clearly about to jump out of her skin, she was so eager to hear what Sterling's twin had to say. Her boyfriend nodded at her slowly and Laila's eyes grew wide with shock. She started shaking her head, wondering why Piper hadn't called her with the news.

"That's great, Alistair. I'm really excited for you."

"I know! Can you believe it?" Sterling could see the look on Alistair's face. He could hear the genuine excitement in his voice.

"I really can't. When did you decideâ!"

"I bought the ring last week and flew over on Friday."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Sterling asked, slightly hurt that his brother hadn't confided in him. This was, after all, a really important decision.

"Can't a guy have secrets?" His brother laughed. "Plus, I didn't want you to know until after she agreed, just in case she said no."

Sterling tried to laugh. "Well, I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks, little brother. And you know you have to be my best man."

"Right. Of course, of course I will be," Sterling answered, slightly flustered and entirely confused.

"Okay, well I have to go because Piper's waiting for me. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye, Al."

The line went dead and Sterling closed his phone, setting it on the bed and turning to look at his girlfriend.

"Well?" She asked.

"I'm the best man."

Laila couldn't decide if she wanted to smile or cry. "Whyâ!" she started but couldn't quite comprehend what was happening. "Why wouldn't Piper call me?"

"Maybe she knows you left your phone in Paris," Sterling said, standing up and reaching for his boxers. He pulled them on along with some track pants and pushed past her and into the living room.

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"Well, what did Alistair say?"

"Nothing," Sterling answered, walking into the kitchen and opening the fridge. He'd make his own sandwich if Laila wasn't going to do it.

"He said something," she insisted.

"No, Laila. All he said was that he bought the ring last weekend and he flew over on Friday."

Laila stared at her boyfriend. He was clearly upset and she had a good idea why. "Do you want to talk about this?"

"No."

Laila stared at him and he finally looked up, knowing she didn't believe him.

"No!" He repeated. "I don't want to talk about the fact that my brother is getting married. I don't want to talk about the fact that he proposed to his girlfriend on a whim, she said yes, and they are now letting the world know that they are getting married."

Laila took a deep breath as she watched him slam some sliced turkey onto the bread. "You can't compare their relationship to ours."

"Why not? They're in love, we are in love. I don't understand why it's an easy decision for Piper to make but you are holding me in suspense."

"Sterling, I already told you. I'm going to marry you. There is no doubt in my mind that we are going to get married. I just want to wait." She was getting tired of this argument.

Sterling just shook his head.

"Just until graduation," Laila reminded him. "And you don't know that this was an easy decision for Piper to make. There are a lot of things that they have to consider right now."

"Yet she's still able to make her decision," Sterling said with an unnecessary amount of venom in his voice.

"Hey," Laila said, walking so she could stand beside him. "I have made my decision. My decision is to be with you, the man I love, and to wait until we are ready for marriage, not to rush into anything because you are getting bored or anxious or whatever it is you are feeling to make you pressure me into this all the time."

"I am not bored or anxious!" Sterling said, throwing his sandwich on a plate. "I'm impatient!"

"Well you better learn some patience because if you keep acting like this, I'll push the wedding back until after med school!" Laila warned him, glaring at him as he walked past her and into the living room.

"Fine," Sterling said, slumping down onto the sofa. "What's another four years of waiting?"

He took a bite of his sandwich and hung his head. Laila took a deep breath and went to sit down beside him. She knew they were both just throwing empty threats around the room.

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"Look," she said, resting a small hand on his broad shoulder. "I know that you are impatient and that you're reasons for wanting to marry me are actually quite reasonable, if not a little fanciful."

Sterling glanced at her and cracked a small smile.

"I justâ I really appreciate you understanding why I want to wait."

Sterling nodded. "Remind me, once more, of why that is?"

Laila smiled. "Because," she started to say but then completely forgot her list of reasons. Looking at Sterling, the amount of love he felt for her even after such a heated and irrational conversation, it tugged at her heart and she had to remind herself to speak. "Because I want all of our friends and family to be there. I want it to be a big deal. I want people to talk about it years after it happened and remember what a great time it was."

Sterling nodded again and smiled at her. He could tell that she had hesitated. He could tell she was holding something back. "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you just now," he told her, knowing he owed her an apology. "I guess I'm just a little jealous and still in shock about it all."

"I know," Laila told him. "I'm sorry too. I won't make you wait until after med school."

Sterling laughed. "Better not."

"But really," Laila sat back on the couch and tucked her legs under her. "I think we would be just fine if we decided to be one of those couples who never got married. You know, who just stayed together forever in unwedded bliss." Images of Danielle and Phil popped into her head and even though she knew she and Sterling would never be like them, the thought still scared her.

"Nice try, Laila," her boyfriend said, his mouth full of food.

She smiled at him and then looked down at her ring. She twirled it around her finger and then held her hand out, imagining what it would look like with a wedding band next to it. It would look quite nice, she decided and felt her smile growing larger. From the corner of her eye, she saw Sterling staring at her and she quickly put her hand back in her lap, blushing as she looked at him from under her eyelashes. But her boyfriend didn't say a word, just winked at her as if he knew something she didn't, and continued eating. Laila looked away and thought of the white dress that was hanging in her closet back in Paris and realized she had a sudden urge to try it on. No. It could wait 18 months. It would still look amazing in 18 months.

## Chapter 24: Empty Calories

**A/N: I am so sorry for the delay in updating! I had planned on posting this chapter before I went on vacation but then my dog ate a piece of bath towel and we had to take him to the ICU and didn't get home until 4:30 in the morning. Then we ended up leaving the computer all the way across the country and had to have it shipped back to us (and I swear it went all the way around the world before making it back home to me.) Anyway, I know some of you were getting impatient and I promise that I wasn't neglecting the story on purpose. I'm doing my best to finish this before the end of the year :)**

"I had a really great time tonight, Christian," Luanne told her boyfriend as he walked her up the stairs to her flat.

"I did too. I always do when I'm with you," he added, smiling at her but quickly looking down at his wrist to check his watch. He had been doing that all night and Luanne had started to get annoyed about half an hour into their date.

"Do you want to come in for a minute?" She asked hopefully.

The look on her boyfriend's face shot her down before he even opened her mouth. "I really would love to, but I have to meet my mum. You know, talk about the wedding and all that boring stuff."

"Right. The wedding." Christian's brother was getting married in two months and he had been spending an incredible amount of time finishing details and coordinating the caterers. "I could go with you, if you like," she suggested.

"Oh," Christian said, looking regretful. "You know I would love that but it's really just a family thing. You'd be bored out of your mind, really."

Luanne nodded, not truly convinced of anything. "All right. I'll see you tomorrow, then?" She asked, reaching for Christian's scarf and pulling his face close to hers so she could kiss him.

"Hmmm," Christian smiled as she kissed him. "Of course."

Luanne smiled back, her face still only centimeters away from him, and kissed him again. She opened her mouth only slightly, wanting Christian to take some initiative and really kiss her. But he didn't. His lips remained closed and their kiss remained quite chaste. Frustrated, Luanne snaked a hand around his back, pulling him close, wanting him to feel her body pressed against his. Maybe that would give him some ideas. But it didn't. Her boyfriend pulled away slowly and smiled down at her.

"You're the best, Luanne. I'll call you later tonight."

All she could do was smile as she nodded her head and watched him walk away. She would never understand men. There she was, asking him to come inside, practically throwing herself at him and he was acting as if he wasn't interested at all. Frustrated, in more ways than one, Luanne let herself into her flat and immediately went to her freezer, pulled out a carton of ice cream and sat down on the couch. She flipped through the television channels until she found something sappy enough to sate her emotions and pulled a blanket over her, preparing for a long night of doing absolutely nothing.

She had just set down her half empty carton when she heard a knock on the door. Jumping off the couch, she wiped her face, knowing she probably had remnants of her frozen emotional vice all over her face. She ran to



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the door, hoping Christian had changed his mind, and threw it open.

"Oh," she frowned. "Hi, Gavin."

Her friend laughed but held up a paper bag. "Good to see you too. I brought take-out."

Luanne groaned. "I've already had dinner."

"More for me then," Gavin smiled. "Can I come in?"

Luanne nodded and held the door open for him. Gavin walked in and instantly made himself at home, opening cupboards to find plates and glasses, searching through drawers to find utensils. Luanne could have helped, but found it amusing that he would feel so comfortable in her flat. She liked that. She wondered if Christian would feel the same way.

"So what's up?" Gavin said, twirling some pad thai around his fork.

"Nothing," she said, knowing she was still moping and sat back down on the couch. Gavin followed bringing his food and drink.

"Please tell me you had more than ice cream for dinner tonight," he said, gesturing toward her melting carton.

"Christian took me out to dinner."

"Already?" Gavin asked, his mouth full of food. "It's only 6:30."

"He had some family thing to do tonight."

Gavin nodded, noting the look on Luanne's face. She was clearly upset and he was curious to know the reason. "Guess I lucked out then."

"Why's that?" Luanne asked, not looking at him.

"Because now I get to spend the rest of the evening with you."

Finally she smiled and glanced at him. He could tell she was angry or frustrated. The girl could never hide her emotions and was a terrible actress. But, knowing Luanne, she would tell him the truth eventually. All he had to do was wait until it became too much for her to stand.

"Can I ask you a question?" She blurted out almost instantly.

Gavin smiled. "Of course."

"Okay," Luanne started, clearly thinking about how she was going to ask this. "Let's say that you are dating this guy and you've been seeing each other for a while."

Gavin looked at her skeptically but she continued. "And, let's say that you know he really likes you but all he's done is kissed you."

"What do you mean 'all he's done?'"

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Luanne blushed. "I mean, you've kissed before but he isn't picking up on your signals that you want to do more."

Gavin shifted uncomfortably. Part of him was glad that Luanne hadn't done anything more than kiss Christian. The other part was upset that she felt she could confide in him about her woes. This felt like a conversation she should be having with a girlfriend, not him.

"Let's drop the hypothetical shall we?"

Luanne opened her mouth to protest but realized it was pointless. She twisted her lips and nodded in agreement.

"You've been dating Christian for how long now?"

"About three months I guess."

"And has he's kissed you but nothing more?"

Luanne nodded and Gavin smiled. Maybe this Christian guy wasn't as bad as he thought.

"Has he ever tried anything else?"

"No!" Luanne threw up her arms in frustration. "I just don't get it!"

"Have you talked about it?"

"How am I supposed to start a conversation like that?"

Gavin smiled because his friend looked legitimately conflicted. "I don't know," he said honestly. "And I wouldn't expect you to start that conversation. You're tooâpure."

Luanne moaned. "I think that's the problem. I think that Christian doesn't want to corrupt me or something. Maybe he thinks that if he tries anything, I'll freak out and dump him."

Even though Gavin had only met the guy once, he didn't think Christian was worried about that. He didn't think that someone like Christian worried about corrupting girls like Luanne. He must have some other motives.

"Have you hinted or done anything to let him think that you don't want him toâyou know?"

"Well, he knows I want to wait to, you know, have sex until marriage." Luanne blushed and looked down at her lap. "But I don't want to wait until marriage for everything. I mean, I've got needs too, you know?"

Gavin laughed. He knew exactly what she meant. "Have you tried instigating anything?"

"Sort of."

"What does that mean?"

Luanne blushed again. "Today I asked him if he wanted to come in after our date. I tried to kiss him in a way that let him know I wanted toâI don't know. This is so embarrassing."

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Gavin laughed again. "We can stop talking about it, if you want."

Luanne considered this for a second and realized that Gavin was probably her best resource. "Well, what would you do if you were in my situation?"

"There's kind of a double standard when it comes to these things, isn't there? If I wanted to get more physical with a girl I was seeing, I guess I would try to be romantic about it. Bring her dinner, light some candles, that sort of thing. But it's different for guys. We have to watch for your signals and back off when we can sense you aren't comfortable with things."

Luanne nodded in understanding. What Gavin said made sense, but why hadn't Christian done any of those things?

"But with girls," Gavin continued, looking rather devilish, "you in particular, I don't think any guy would get offended if you tried to take advantage of them."

Luanne laughed and blushed. "So you think he just doesn't get it?"

"I think there is something seriously lacking in that boyfriend of yours," Gavin said honestly.

Luanne laughed again and shoved him in the shoulder. "Stop," she told him playfully.

"If I were your boyfriend, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off of you."

Luanne was giggling almost out of control but managed to nudge him again. "Stop it, Gavin! You're making me blush!"

He grinned back and reached for her hand. "I'll stop," he promised her, playing with her fingers and admiring her soft skin.

Luanne smiled at her friend who was looking down at their hands. She didn't mind the physical contact. She actually quite enjoyed it. She was comfortable with it. She was happy with it. And from the look on Gavin's face, he felt the same way. She wondered if this was what a relationship was supposed to feel like, comfortable and happy. She didn't feel sparks when she thought about Gavin, she didn't get giddy when she knew she was going to see him. But she did feel something else, a certain stability, a strong sense of calm and comfortableness that lasted long after they had said their goodbyes.

With Christian, things were exactly the opposite. She longed for him and wanted to make him happy. She was nervous and excited around him, everything she had expected from her first love. But those feelings weren't going away. They weren't subsiding and her nerves were starting to get the better of her. Her imagination was running wild, coming up with things she didn't want to believe were possible. These early dates that Christian would take her on, they seemed rushed and he was always checking his watch as if he had somewhere else to be. She had begun to worry that there was someone else, someone he could physically be with since she wasn't willing to sleep with him until they were married. She wanted to believe that this was all just her imagination, but lately she hadn't been able to shake the feeling.

She sighed and Gavin finally looked up at her. He gave her an encouraging smile and released her hand. "You'll figure it out, Luanne," he told her. "You always do."

She smiled back because she knew he was right. "Thanks, Gavin."

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And with that, she stood up and put her ice cream away. She didn't need it anymore. Gavin was a better solution than empty calories and he wouldn't melt all over her coffee table.

## Chapter 25: A Wife

A/N: So it's been a really long time since I've posted anything. I had wanted to finish this by the end of the year but obviously it didn't happen. Two days before Christmas, my husband and I learned that his sister had been killed in a car accident and I haven't felt much like writing since then. Yesterday was the first day I picked up my computer to do anything other than check facebook. I really am going to finish this story, but its most likely going to be a half assed effort because my mind is somewhere else right now. The new story I'm working on is offering quite a bit of release so I'll be focusing on that for a while. Thank you all for reading!  
Much Love, Pink

Piper looked up from the books on her bed to see Laila walk into the room.

"Welcome back," she said as cheerfully as she could. "How was Barcelona?"

Laila put her bag down next to her bed and shook her head. "I only stayed one night. I flew to London to be with Sterling because he broke his wrist playing soccer."

"Is he okay?" Piper asked, frowning. Alistair hadn't said anything about that.

"He'll be fine," Laila answered, noticing as Piper tucked her left hand under her leg. "How was your weekend?"

"Fine."

Laila raised her eyebrows and Piper knew that she was going to have to talk. She slowly extended her hand toward her best friend and watched as Laila's eyes went wide.

"Oh my God," Laila whispered, walking toward Piper's bed and reaching for her hand. The ring was beautiful and practically screamed Piper's name. Laila had to smile because Alistair had picked this out on his own, without her help. He loved her best friend so much.

"I know," Piper said slowly.

Laila looked up and could see confliction all over Piper's face. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I don't know. It's all happening so fast. I really haven't told anyone."

Laila studied Piper's expression and waited for her to say something else. But she was staring at the ring as if it scared her. She was staring at it as if couldn't figure out what to do with it.

"Piper, what's wrong?"

Finally her friend looked up and tears started pouring from her eyes without warning. "I'm so fucked up, Laila," she sobbed as she threw her arms around her neck.

"No, no," Laila assured her. "You're not. Just talk to me about it. We'll figure it out."

"What's wrong with me? Alistair is amazing, perfect, and he's so excited about the baby and now about getting married. And I don't want any of it. I just want our lives to go back to how they were before I ever came to Paris."

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Laila held on to her friend and thought carefully about what to say. "I know you're scared," she started. "And I'm sure Alistair is scared too. He's just doing what he thinks is right."

"I know he is. That's why I can't break his heart." Piper held Laila with all her strength, feeling as if she was her last hope.

"So you don't want to get married?"

"No," Piper shook her head. "Not right now. Not while everything is so confusing, not because of the baby."

"You have to tell him, then. He'll understand. He loves you."

Piper didn't say anything, but she slowly released Laila from her arms and sat back on her bed. Her best friend was watching her with curious eyes, waiting to see what she would do or say next. Eventually, Piper shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Alistair makes everything sound so easy, you know? Right before he proposed, he told me about how he was going to come live with me next year so I could go to school and he could look after the baby. We're going to live off his trust fund. Can you imagine Alistair as a stay-at-home dad?"

Laila smiled and shook her head. "Not really. But he'll be happy to do it."

"I know he will. And he really makes me believe that we could survive, just the two of us and the baby."

"Of course you can. But it won't be just the two of you. You'll have me and Sterling and Luanne. Although, I wouldn't trust her to babysit."

Piper smiled. "I know I should have told him when he gave me the ring, but there's just something about him that makes me never want to tell him no."

Laila grinned. "Well, the twins are like that. And, believe me, they don't like hearing that word either."

Piper laughed. "Spoiled?"

"Like you wouldn't believe!" Laila laughed with her. "Luckily their parents raised them to appreciate everything they had." Laila caught herself thinking about Sterling and how much he trusted her and loved her, how he was waiting to marry her because it was what she wanted. Spoiled was a good word to describe her fiancé at times. But he wasn't selfish.

"I hardly think Alistair appreciates his trust fund considering we'll be living off it next year," she heard Piper say.

Laila smiled. Clearly Piper and Alistair hadn't discussed his trust fund before. "Has Alistair ever told you where his trust fund comes from?"

Piper shook her head.

"Their grandfather started a small bank in New York city right after the Great Depression. Now there are over 1,000 branches and a portion of the profits go into the twin's trust funds every year."

Piper gave Laila a skeptical look. "How large a portion?"

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"Everything considered, it's relatively small. But you two could easily live off that money for the rest of your lives."

Piper shook her head and looked down at her lap. Laila worried that she had told her something that upset her.

"There is still so much that I don't know about him," her friend said quietly. "I know that I love him and that I want to be with him. I couldn't possibly raise this baby without him. But marriage? That's such a big step and I just don't think I can do it right now."

Laila took her hand, wanting to let her know that she understood.

"I mean, when I think about it," Piper continued, "it does make sense. We have to consider the baby and what's best for it. And the list of reason to get married really do outweigh the list of reasons not to."

Laila nodded. This all sounded so familiar.

"But I just feel like I should be ready for something like this. I shouldn't be getting married because it's the convenient thing to do or because my parents would kill me for having a child out of wedlock. I should be ready to spend the rest of my life with him as his wife. Fuck, that title holds so many connotations and responsibilities and I just can't do it right now"

Laila blinked. A wife. She had thought about a wedding so many times but never actually imagined what it would be like to be a wife. She thought about what it would mean, living up to the vows they would recite at their wedding, having Sterling as her husband. A jolt of excitement and understanding rushed through her as she realized she was ready for those things, looking forward to living with all those connotations and responsibilities.

"You should talk to him," Laila said, before Piper could figure out what she was thinking.

"I know I should," her friend conceded. "He won't hate me, will he?"

Laila shook her head. "Nothing could make him hate you."

Piper nodded and smiled, resting her hand on her stomach.

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Sterling opened his eyes from a deep sleep and looked down at his phone on his night stand. Alistair's name was clearly illuminated on the screen but he was unsure if he wanted to open it or not. He hadn't talked to his brother since yesterday morning when he told him of his engagement to Piper. He knew that his mixed feelings over this wedding were due to his own frustrations with Laila, but still, he wasn't sure he could be entirely supportive of his brother.

"Hey, Al."

"Hi," Alistair said from the other end of the line, sounding tired.

"Where are you?"

"I just landed in Boston," Alistair sighed.

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"Okay," Sterling said, wondering why his brother had called. "So what's up?"

"Nothing."

Sterling paused, unsure of what to say next. "How was your flight?"

"Fine."

"Look, Al, it's really late here, can I just call youâ"

But Alistair interrupted him. "Do you remember that time when we were 10 and Mom and Dad took us that cabin up in Ontario?"

Sterling sat up and prepared for a long conversation. "Yeah, I remember."

"And you remember when we found that frozen lake and I tried to convince you that we should walk across it so we could find a place to go ice fishing?"

Sterling smiled. "I remember."

"You wanted to push some rocks into the center to see if it would hold our weight but I was impatient and didn't listen."

"You ran across and fell through the ice," Sterling said as he opened his eyes. Seeing his brother disappear into the freezing water had been terrifying for him. The image was still crystal clear in his mind.

"I've always rushed into things, never thought anything through."

"You think you've rushed into something again?"

Alistair sighed again. "I know I have."

Sterling remained silent, knowing very well that this conversation was difficult for his brother.

"I'm not talking about the baby," Alistair continued. "I know that even though it was a mistake, there is no way I would ever take it back, even if I could."

"You're talking about proposing to Piper?"

"Yeah."

Neither twin spoke as they both thought about what could be done.

"Why did you do it?" Sterling asked eventually.

"I don't know. She just seemed so scared and she was pushing me away, not talking to me about the baby, barely talking to me at all. I thought she was scared I would leave her and I just wanted to prove that I would be there for her no matter what. Proposing seemed like a good idea but now she's wearing this ring and probably looking through bridal magazines and expecting me to find a tux and I'm terrified. Absolutely terrified."



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Sterling could only wish that Laila would start looking through those magazines and bugging him to pick out a tuxedo. But it wasn't about him at the moment. His brother needed his help. "Maybe you could just suggest postponing the wedding until after the baby is born," he suggested.

"I've thought about that," Alistair said, his voice nearly cracking.

"And?"

"And she would see right through it."

"Then tell her the truth," Sterling said, knowing Alistair had probably run through all possible scenarios in his head.

"It'll break her heart," his brother said, clearly defeated.

"It might. But you'll just have to prove to her some other way that you won't leave her. She'll understand eventually."

"How do I even start a conversation like that?" Alistair asked, knowing that Sterling was just showing him some tough love. "Sorry, Piper, but you know that ring I gave you? I'm not so sure I actually want you to have it right now."

Sterling chuckled. "I would start by asking her how she feels about the wedding. Maybe you two can come to some kind of understanding before you have to result to something so drastic."

"I guess I can do that," Alistair said, slightly more confident now that he had spoken with Sterling. His brother always had a way of encouraging him and helping him clear his head.

"When are you coming back to Paris to see her again?"

"I don't know. Sometime before she comes back home but that's less than two months away."

"That's not too long to wait, then," his brother told him. "Just think about it for a little while and you'll sort it out."

"Why is it that you got all the good sense and I just ended up with all the good looks?" Alistair asked, laughing at his own joke.

"Good night, Al," Sterling said and Alistair could practically see him rolling his eyes.

"Good night, little brother. And thanks."

"Anytime, you know that."

"I know it," Alistair said, realizing how much he missed his brother at that moment. "Bye, Sterling."

"Bye."

## Chapter 26: Scarelett O'Hara Be Damned

Luanne hadn't seen Christian since he left her frustrated and confused on her doorstep the other night. She had spoken to him on the phone and he had promised that he was thinking about her, wishing he could spend more time with her, but claiming that his brother's wedding needed to be his main priority at the moment. Luanne wanted to believe this. She wanted to believe that her boyfriend was being honest for he had never given her reason to doubt him. But that gnawing doubt in the pit of her stomach just wasn't going away and she was feeling herself getting desperate. Not necessarily desperate for Christian, but desperate for the truth.

With her head down, bracing herself against the bitter cold, she exited store where she was picking up the last of her Christmas presents for her friends back home and in Paris. Wishing she could use her hands to shield her face, she turned her head just slightly as a biting gust blew through the street. She caught her reflection in the window of a restaurant and had to smile. Her blue gloves holding her bags, her black double breasted jacket which hugged her in all the right places, her boots which she could barely walk in when she first purchased them but now strode down the sidewalk like a she was wearing a pair of sneakers, it all came together in a pleasing image which would have horrified her mother.

Luanne smiled at herself but then a familiar face on the other side of the glass caught her eye. She squinted and her gaze came to focus on Christian, his face smiling as he leaned close to whomever he was sitting with. Whoever she was, she was blonde and clearly seemed to be holding her boyfriend's attention. There was a bottle of wine placed between them, empty dinner plates were pushed to the side.

Luanne was no longer cold. She stood there, in the middle of the sidewalk, like a child looking at a Christmas window display, her hands pressed against the glass, her breath fogging her view. She watched as her boyfriend smiled and then reached for the blonde's face. He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and then leaned in closer, lightly grazing his lips against hers.

"Son of a bitch!" She found herself nearly screaming as she stormed into the restaurant. Like a woman possessed, she brushed past the hostess, ignoring her request to please wait to be seated, and stomped off to Christian's table. His kiss with the blonde had ended but he had nearly pulled her into his lap as he whispered something in her ear.

Luanne stood by the table for only a few seconds before throwing her bags on the ground and putting her hand on her hips. Her foot started tapping and she looked at Christian expectantly as he raised his head from the blonde's neck.

"Luanne!" Christian said with a start, throwing his date back to her seat and standing up. But his chair was pushed too close to the table and he stumbled as he tried to jump to his feet.

"Christian. Haven't seen you in a while," Luanne said, surprised at the calmness of her voice, though her Alabama accent was thicker than it had been in years.

"I've um, I've been busy. With the wedding," he added quickly and Luanne stared at him, waiting for more.

Christian looked desperately between the blonde who was now staring at Luanne, and the redhead who was still glaring at him. He knew he had been caught but wasn't about to give up.

"Luanne, this is Kate. She'sâ" '!"

"The wedding planner?" Luanne offered and Christian could hear the distain in her voice.

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"No," he mumbled. "She's the nurse who took care of Sterling when he broke his wrist."

Luanne's expression didn't change with that bit of knowledge.

"I was just talking to her about his physical therapy."

Kate made a small disbelieving gasp and her head whipped around to Luanne. The two girls stared at each other, quickly taking the other in as Christian bumbled his way through his excuses.

"Christian?" Kate asked eventually. "Who is this?"

"Right," Christian stammered. "This is Luanne. My friend from school."

Now it was Luanne's turn to gasp. "I'm Luanne. Christian's girlfriend."

"Luanne," Christian said in a pleading tone, "We never actually put a title to anything... You just assumedâ !" But he didn't finish his sentence. He let it hang in the air as more than a few tables around them had started to stare in wonder at the restaurant's main event.

Luanne was fuming but she wasn't about to let Christian get the better of her. Part of her was glad that the truth was finally coming out, the truth that she had known for some weeks now but refused to admit. She smiled as sweetly as she could at the boy who she used to believe was her boyfriend and then returned her attention to Kate.

"I'm sorry. Let me rephrase. I'm Luanne. The girl who Christian was allowing to believe was his girlfriend for the last four and a half months."

"Is this true?" Kate turned to Christian with a confused look on her face.

"We never said we couldn't date other people," he defended himself with an unconvincing voice.

"Is this what you've been doing all those times you said you were helping with your brother's wedding?"

"No, this is the first timeâ !" Christian started but was quickly interrupted.

"This is our third date!" Kate said quickly, clearly having chosen not to take Christian's side.

Luanne only nodded in understanding, her eyes still focused on Christian. "So all those times I introduced you as my boyfriend, all those times you said that we were perfect for each other, all those times we talked about the future, you didn't think to mention that you were dating other women?"

"It's not a conversation I wanted to have Luanne!" Christian was suddenly defensive. "I want this to work between us but you are so damn innocent. I can't live my life like a monk, you see?"

"So what does that make me?" Kate suddenly asked. "A casual shag just to get you through the next couple of weeks because she has enough sense not to let you into her bed?"

"No," Christian pleaded with Kate but she clearly didn't believe him.

"I practically threw myself at you the other night, Christian!" Luanne was saying and his head started spinning. This was just too much. Juggling more than one woman at one time was trouble enough but having

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them in the same room together was going to be the end of him.

"I'm not going to corrupt you," he directed at Luanne and then glanced at Kate, hoping to win some points for his valiancy but the blonde nurse wasn't impressed.

"Damn right you're not! You'll never lay a hand on me again."

"That goes for me too," Kate announced, standing up and grabbing her purse. She gave Luanne a grateful yet pitiful glance as she passed and slipped out of the restaurant, one that didn't go unnoticed by Christian. He would deal with her later. Or he would find someone else. Right now, he had to focus on Luanne, get her to see reason, get her to forgive him.

"Luanne, why don't you sit down? We can talk about this?"

Luanne glared at the man she used to think so much of. He was no better than the rest, she thought. He was scum. "No. I don't think I will."

"Look," Christian said, walking around the table so he could take her hand. "You know how I feel about you and I'm sorry if I allowed you to believe something that wasn't true. But really, Luanne. You are so fanciful and there was no reason for you to believeâ!"

"Oh, don't piss on my leg and tell me it's raining, Christian!"

He gave her a confused look but she continued, allowing her true southern roots to shine through. Scarlett O'Hara be damned.

"You knew all along how I was feeling and you could have, at any time, set me straight. You're a selfish bastard and you don't deserve me."

"I know I don't. But I love you, Luanne. You have to know that."

"You don't know the meaning of the word!" She said, picking up her bags and wrenching her arm from his grasp as he tried to stop her. "And maybe I don't either. But I know that this is not love. This is just a hot mess and I'm not going to waste any more of my time on it."

"Luanneâ!"

"No. Goodbye, Christian."

She started to leave but then realized she had one last question for him. She turned around and saw Christian giving her a hopeful look.

"Why did you do it?"

The look fell from his face. "What?"

"Why did you do it? Why did you even bother with me?"

"Luanne, you knowâ!"

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"I don't know anything, Christian! What I thought I knew has now been proven false so be a man and give me an honest answer. For once, give me an honest answer!"

She saw something break inside of him and he gave her a defeated look. He glanced around at the faces of the other people in the restaurant, all giving him looks of disgust. She was right. She deserved an honest answer so he opened his heart for maybe the first time in his life and told her the truth. "I fell in love with the idea of you. The idea that I could find a life outside of London with a woman who thought the world of me, one who didn't understand my games, one who would do nearly anything I wanted."

Luanne felt a lump in her throat and she looked away from him as he continued his confession. He had been using her from the beginning, playing her for a fool in some twisted game only he knew the rules to.

"I wanted to be honest. I really did. I wanted this to work and I wanted to change. You're brilliant, Luanne. You really are. And I was stupid to think I wouldn't get caught. I was stupid to think that you would stay with me. I know it doesn't matter now, but I am sorry. I am so sorry because you deserve someone who is going to respect you and love you for what really matters, not what they can gain from being with you."

The two stared at each other for a long time and Luanne felt the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I don't know what else to say," Christian broke the silence eventually and Luanne found her confidence again.

"I doubt there is anything more to say. I suppose every girl needs her heart broken at least once. I'm just sorry mine had to break over such an undeserving cowardly arrogant asshole."

She waited only a second but the look on Christian's face told her he was too shocked to respond. Luanne walked confidently to the door and nodded to the hostess who held it open for her. She kept her tears at bay until she had reached her flat and locked herself inside. But there she crumpled to the floor, her shopping bags surrounding her as she cried. Why had she been so stupid? Was she doomed to always allow men to use her, men like Will and men like Christian? She didn't want to believe that it was something inside of her which drew that kind of deception her way, but at the moment there were no other reasonable explanations.

She cried on the floor of her apartment until she found the strength to stand. She stumbled into the kitchen and opened the freezer door, pulling out the tub of ice cream and grabbing a spoon on her way back to the tiled ground. Empty calories were at least better than cheating boyfriends.

## Chapter 27: I Like That Plan

SÃ©bastien glanced around the table. It was nearly the end of the semester for the girls and they were talking excitedly in English about their finals and the last trips they had planned for their vacations. Piper and Laila had already started packing some of their things and Tamlyn had assured them multiple times that no matter who came to stay, no roommates would ever be as much fun.

At the other end of the table, his parents were talking about work. Luc had paint smeared all over his face and was clearly oblivious to it. Pierre was trying to tell him about his day at the office but could hardly keep a straight face, much less look him in the eye. The meal before them was prepared by the girls who had wanted to show his dads what a true, American meal would look and taste like. However, they had argued over what to make and ended up preparing Mexican food. Luc liked the margaritas.

SÃ©bastien glanced back toward Tamlyn and resisted an urge to smile. She had been playing her part well and, after a lengthy conversation with Luc, SÃ©bastien was convinced that no one else would have to know until they were ready to tell them. His father had promised him that Pierre wouldn't be upset, and if he was, he would soon get over it. And he was now beginning to believe him. In fact, the anticipation of telling his father was growing and growing and SÃ©bastien figured he was either going to explode or go completely insane.

"Will you come visit me in DC next year?" Tamlyn was asking the girls.

Laila nodded her head quickly. "Of course! I've always wanted to go there!"

"I'm going to work two jobs this summer so I don't have to work during school next year," Tamlyn told them and SÃ©bastien frowned. "I think I have a pretty good shot at an internship but I'll have my weekends free if you come for a visit."

"You shouldn't work too hard this summer," SÃ©bastien said before he could stop himself. "You need to make some time for yourself. For your friends and â"

But Tamlyn was quick to shut him down. "Some of us don't mind working hard, SÃ©bastien," she said quickly but her eyes betrayed how much it hurt her to say it.

"All I'm saying is, you should think about having a little fun this summer. It's your last summer break before you have to start seriously working."

"That is unless I choose to be like you, of course," Tamlyn said with a roll of her eyes and turned back to her friends. Laila gave him an apologetic glance and Piper simply looked down at her growing belly, most likely hoping her child wouldn't turn out like either Tamlyn or SÃ©bastien.

But SÃ©bastien wasn't going to let Tamlyn ruin his day. He smiled at her from across the table and then turned to his parents. "I bought my ticket today," he said in loud enough French that the entire table could hear him.

Pierre and Luc both looked at him and he heard a fork drop from somewhere across the table. He hoped it was Tamlyn's.

"When do you leave?" Luc asked, clearing his throat.

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SÃ©bastien chanced a quick glance at Tamlyn. She was staring at him with wide, expecting eyes. It looked as if she was about to burst into tears. "Not until June," he said and watched from the corner of his eye as Tamlyn relaxed. She would have killed him if he left any earlier.

"And where are you going first," Pierre asked. SÃ©bastien knew that his father didn't exactly approve of him spending all his money on a trip around the world, but they had agreed to disagree on this topic and he was glad some interest was being shown.

"I'm flying into Washington, DC."

There was silence and SÃ©bastien turned his head so he could face Tamlyn.

"I think it will be nice to start my trip in a place where I have someone who can show me around."

"Well I certainly hope you aren't thinking I am going to do it," Tamlyn snapped at him. "I've had to spend enough time with you here andâ!"

"And then I thought it would be nice if we could rent a car and travel around the States for the summer. Maybe see parts of Mexico and Canada."

Tamlyn blinked at him but held his gaze. "Now I know you aren't talking about me because there is no possible way thatâ!"

"I am talking about you, Tamlyn," SÃ©bastien interrupted her again and she snapped her mouth shut. "I have another six months of putting up with your annoying voice and your mediocre cooking and your infuriating habits, but that's not enough for me. I want more time."

SÃ©bastien didn't know what had gotten into him. And apparently neither did anyone else because the entire table was silent but he could see Piper was furiously elbowing Laila, trying desperately to get her to translate.

But what was the point of stopping now? "I want more time with you because I love you."

Tamlyn opened her mouth to speak and for maybe the first time in her life, she could find no words. She could understand what SÃ©bastien was saying but she was finding it very hard to believe. She struggled to focus on him as he continued to speak.

"So I'm going to fly into the DC and we can spend the summer doing whatever you want to do. I'll sit on your couch and watch TV all day if you want to work, or we can run away together. Temporarily, of course. But until you physically force me to leave, I'm going to be where you are."

SÃ©bastien turned toward Pierre with a brave face. His father was looking at him with a proud expression, something which surprised him.

"I'm sorry we've been keeping this a secret. I asked Tamlyn not to say anything because I didn't want you to think that I was taking advantage of this situation or that I was doing something unethical. She is still a guest here, after all."

Pierre's eyes were soft as he spoke. "I'm glad you are telling me now. And, I'm happy for you, for finally making a solid and wise decision."

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SÃ©bastien grinned and then turned back to Tamlyn who was still staring at him, still putting together everything that had happened. But her head suddenly snapped to Luc and Pierre.

"May I be excuse?" She asked, pushing her chair away from the table and standing up.

Luc nodded slowly, glancing between her and his son. Tamlyn ran from the room and the five remaining people at the table heard the front door slam behind her as she flew from the apartment. SÃ©bastien glanced at the girls, not quite sure if he wanted to give Tamlyn her space or go running after her. Piper had a goofy grin on her face and had possibly discerned what was happening at the dinner table. Laila was staring at him as if he was the dumbest person alive.

"Go find her!" The petite blonde scolded him as soon as their eyes met. He gave her a thankful smile and jumped from his chair without a second thought.

"Tamlyn!" He screamed down the stairs as he raced out the front door. He could hear her footsteps on the marble and knew she hadn't gotten far. But she didn't stop and SÃ©bastien knew he was going to have to run her down. Three stairs at a time, he bounded after her, chasing the girl he loved out into the cold winter rain.

"Tamlyn, wait!" He called to her in English just as she crossed the courtyard. She looked back but shook her head and slowly started to round the corner out into the street. He finally caught up to her in the middle of the street, her hair already soaked and her sweater clinging to her body.

"Tamlyn, come back inside," he said as he reached for her elbow, pulling her back toward the house.

"No," she said decidedly, brushing him off and continuing on her way.

SÃ©bastien knew that he had embarrassed her and knew that she wasn't going to give into him that easily. He sighed and looked toward the sky, the clouds showing no sign of ceasing their downpour. He took two large steps and caught up with her, draping his arm around her shoulder to keep her as warm as he could. She didn't push him away and he remained silent until he heard her teeth begin to chatter.

"You're cold," he said in a soft voice.

She didn't answer, just stopped walking and turned toward him, an unyielding look on her face. "Why did you do it?"

"Let's go back home. We can talkâ"

"No," she said again, shaking her head and walking away from him. She was furious beyond comprehension yet flattered and about to burst with excitement. She couldn't go back to the house where she knew that the girls would want answers, answers which she couldn't give, and SÃ©bastien's dads would be spying on them at every conceivable moment.

"Then let's go somewhere else," she heard him beg her. "Please, Tamlyn. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She stopped in her tracks and felt him run into her back. His hands went to her shoulders to steady them both and she turned around quickly, staring into his grey eyes. His dark hair was sticking to his face and the rain was dripping from his nose and chin.

"You didn't hurt me SÃ©bastien. You surprised me and you should have known better. How could you do that?"



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SÃ©bastien smiled and reached for her again, letting his hands find her arms and pulling her close. "I don't know. It just seemed like a good time to say it."

"In front of everyone? We could have told Pierre about us first, we could have gone on a legitimate date, you've done this all wrong."

"Because everything about us has gone right so far?"

Tamlyn frowned and looked down, nuzzling into his chest and shivering. He did have a point, but there was rarely a moment in Tamlyn's life where she wasn't in control. She felt the exact opposite at the moment, as if she was spinning out of control with no way of stopping herself. But she was growing to like the feeling, trusting that SÃ©bastien wouldn't let her down.

"I'm not taking it back," she heard him whisper. "I meant every word I said and I didn't want to hide it from anyone."

She looked up at him and leaned back against his arms, the rain no longer freezing her skin, the wind no longer biting at her cheeks.

"I love you," he told her, reaching a soft hand to her cheek.

With all the confidence in the world, he leaned down and kissed her. Tamlyn could feel a change in his kiss. It was no longer desperate or secretive. He kissed her as if he wanted to world to see. It was bold and he seemed to know how much she wanted him.

"I love you too," she said against his lips and felt him smile. "I was so worried you were going to leave sometime soon and I would never see you again."

SÃ©bastien looked down at her and pushed some hair from her face. "You won't mind me coming to visit you, then?"

"Of course not."

"I'll leave, once you start school," SÃ©bastien started to say and saw Tamlyn's eyes immediately fill with tears. "But I'll be back in time for your graduation. I'll write you as often as I canâ!"

"Then what?" She asked, a pleased look now on her face.

SÃ©bastien smiled at her. "Then we'll figure it out. We can come back here, we can stay in DC. Whatever we want to do."

Tamlyn smiled in return but started shivering again. SÃ©bastien could see her lips turning a dark shade of purple. "I like that plan," she said as she pressed even closer to him.

"Let's go home," SÃ©bastien urged but he felt Tamlyn shake her head against his chest.

"You might be ready to share me with the world but I'm not."

"I've got keys to the store," SÃ©bastien suggested with a sly smile. "It's warm and dry. There's a couch in the back," he added, kissing her neck.

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Tamlyn giggled and nodded her head. "No one will disturb us?"

"Not a chance," he promised her and took her hand.

Her green eyes danced with his and she grinned from ear to ear. "Okay," she whispered, blushing and trying to hide her excitement.

SÃ©bastien didn't tease her even though he wanted to. Instead he lead her quickly through the streets, a new sense of purpose urging him on. No longer would he be tortured by what he should be versus what he wanted to be. He would find his way with Tamlyn at his side, the one thing he knew he could truly feel, the one thing he knew he truly wanted.

## Chapter 28: The Right Thing

Alistair twirled his room key through his fingers as he walked down the hallway with Piper. She had met him at the airport and they had spent an incredibly awkward and an incredibly silent cab ride into the city. They still hadn't said more than three words to each other by the time he opened his hotel room door and set his bags at the foot of the bed.

He sighed as he turned around to face his fiancée. Fiancée. That word didn't even sound right in his head. Piper was looking at the ground, biting her top lip and rocking back and forth on her toes. She looked nervous. Maybe she could sense what was about to happen. The thought broke Alistair's heart and he walked to her quickly, wrapping her in his arms and hugging her close.

"How have you been?" He asked in a whisper.

"I've been fine," she answered robotically, as if she had said those words too many times before.

"How's the baby?"

Piper pushed him away slightly and looked down at her belly, a slight smile on her face. "Dr. Benoit said I would be ready for my second ultrasound early next month. We can find out if it's a boy or a girl."

She looked up at him with hopeful eyes and he smiled down at her. "Do you really want to know?"

"I don't know," she smiled and shook her head. "What do you think?"

"It's going to be a surprise either way," he said, debating his choices in his head.

"If we found out, we could plan for his or her nursery. We could buy the right clothes."

"Whatever you want is fine with me."

Piper nodded and then looked back down at the floor. Alistair knew he was going to have to do this soon. But how does one start a conversation like that? How does one tell the woman he loves, the woman who is carrying his baby that he doesn't want to marry her? At least not right now.

"Speaking of planning," Alistair started slowly, "have you thought at all about the wedding?"

Piper bit her lip again and he saw her reach for her left hand, twisting her ring absentmindedly around her finger. "Some," was all she said.

"What have you been thinking?" He asked softly and Piper couldn't hold back her tears. She could tell he was hesitant about this topic. She could tell that he didn't want to really discuss it. Perhaps he could sense that she was having second thoughts. Or that her first thought, the one where she thought they shouldn't rush into things, was still overpowering her.

"Alistair, Iâ" but she was crying too hard to finish her sentence. She reached for his shirt and pulled him close, burying her face in his chest.

"Hey," Alistair said soothingly, his hand stroking her hair. "I don't want to stress you out about this. We can take our timeâ" !"

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But she only started crying harder and Alistair clenched his teeth. He had to do it, no matter how much it hurt her. He just couldn't let her leave this hotel room until she understood that breaking the engagement didn't mean they were breaking up.

"Look, Piper, I know that I rushed us into this and I want you to know that I love you more than anythingâ!"

"Alistair, don't. I can't talk about this right now." Piper pushed him away and started walking toward the bed. He watched as she sat down and tried to control her tears.

"We have so much to think about already," she added. "Let's just not discuss this right now."

"We'll have to talk about it eventually," he pointed out and sat on the opposite side of the bed, his back to her. He stared at the patterned carpet and tried to unclench his fists. He could hear Piper's quiet sobs and he longed to hold her. But this would be easier if he didn't.

"I know that it seems like you are doing the right thing," Piper choked out and Alistair could feel his own tears starting to form in his eyes. "But I can't pretend that it's what I want as well."

Alistair hung his head. He wondered how long she had known. He hated to think that she had been dreading this conversation, knowing what was going to happen when he arrived this weekend. "You know that I still love you. You know that I'm only doing this because I think it's what is right for us and the baby."

"The baby shouldn't be an excuse for anything, Alistair."

"I know that. But it is a consideration, one that carries a lot of weight right now."

"Alistair," she was crying even harder now, "I just can't do this. I love you and I don't want this to come between us. I don't want this to tear us apart."

Alistair turned around and slid across the bed, wrapping his arms around Piper and feeling her rest her weight into his chest. "That's the last thing I want as well."

Piper relaxed into his arms and tried to calm down. She hated what she was about to do but she believed that Alistair loved her enough to listen to reason. This wasn't a one person decision. They both had to be on board and Alistair's enthusiasm wasn't enough to carry her to the altar.

She took a deep breath and turned toward him, adjusting her weight to support her growing belly. "I want you to know that I do want to marry you," she started and watched as a pained look crossed Alistair's face.

"Piper, you don'tâ!"

"Please let me finish. I need to say this."

Her boyfriend nodded and she looked into his eyes. "I do want to marry you. One day. I just, I can't do it now."

Alistair's mouth dropped and he started to speak but was having a hard time figuring out what had just happened. Piper didn't want to get married? Not right now?

"You can have your ring back, if you want it," she continued and reached for the canary diamond on her left hand, sliding it off her finger and holding it out to him.

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Alistair took it without speaking. He looked at it as it lay in his palm. "When did you decide this?"

"About three minutes after I agreed to marry you," Piper said and Alistair raised his eyebrows at her honesty.

"Then, whyâ?"

"You seemed so excited about it. I knew that you would take care of me and you seemed to have everything all planned out. I just thought that the idea would grow on me but it hasn't and I'm so sorryâ!" Piper began her apology but was interrupted by Alistair's lips on hers. He kissed her fiercely, a long and hard kiss. Relief washed over both of them and they clung to each other like they would never let the other go.

"Do you still love me?" Piper finally managed to ask.

"Now more than ever," Alistair smiled at her and wiped some tears from her cheek.

Piper smiled at him. "You don't hate me?"

"No," he laughed. "This entire time I thought you were trying to avoid the topic of our wedding because you knew I didn't want to go through with it."

His girlfriend gave him a disbelieving look. "You were trying to call it off?"

"Not call it off," he stipulated. "Just postpone it for three or four years."

Piper smiled at him and looked almost as if she was about to laugh. "And when did you realize this?"

"The second I got on the airplane to fly home. I knew I had jumped the gun but I thought you were scared that I would leave you and the baby and I wanted you to know that I was always, that I am always going to be there for you. By your side, forever."

"I know I've been acting crazy lately," Piper admitted. "But I just didn't want this baby to ruin our lives. I thought that if we weren't together you could accomplish everything you have been dreaming about and I didn't want to hold you back. But then I realized that I couldn't do this without you. That I wouldn't want to do it without you, even if it meant dragging you down with me."

"Being with you, seeing you happy, and raising this child together are the only things that I'm dreaming about now," Alistair assured her. "Our lives are going to be changed forever but it's not going to be a bad thing. This baby is going to be great. She will be so loved and we will be the happiest parents in the world."

"She?" Piper asked, relieved that they had sorted everything out, feeling slightly ridiculous that they had both wanted the same thing but it had taken weeks and too many tears to figure that out.

"You think it's a girl, don't you?"

She nodded her head. "I do."

Alistair smiled and held out his hand. "I want you to keep this."

"Alistair, it must have cost a fortune and Iâ!" Piper started to protest but he refused to listen to it.

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"You don't have to wear it. And, if you want, I'll buy you another one when we are actually ready to get married. But I want you to keep it so whenever you start to worry, you'll know that I'll never leave you. No matter what."

Piper choked back some more tears but nodded her head again and took the ring from his hand. She reached behind her and unclasped her necklace, sliding the ring onto the thin silver chain. Alistair smiled as she placed it back around her neck and tucked it into her sweater.

"I love you," she told him, holding out her arms and beckoning him to come closer.

"I love you so much. And I'm glad we talked about this."

Piper sighed and kissed his neck. "I am too."

They didn't stray from Alistair's hotel room that night, opting to order room service and stay in bed rather than battle against the frigid Paris winter. Alistair couldn't remember ever feeling happier than he did in those hours he spent in his room with Piper. She was laughing again, confiding in him about her worries, joking about what her parents were going to want them to call the baby. She listened to his stories of school, his demanding schedule and his crazy chemistry professor, giving him all of her attention, her mind no longer wondering into the dark depths which he never wanted her to visit again.

He watched as she fell asleep that night, softly snoring next to him, lying on her side with a pillow between her legs for comfort, her small bump stretching her t-shirt. God, she was so beautiful. His heart swelled as he realized that soon, after he graduated next semester, he would never have to spend another day without her.

## Chapter 29: Trouble In Paradise?

Luanne had just packed the last of her books into a box marked for New Haven when she heard a knock on her door. She sighed and glanced at herself in the mirror before walking out of her bedroom. Her face was pale and her eyes were still puffy from all the crying she had done. The thought of losing Christian was, surprisingly, a distant second to her inability to realize the truth. Luanne had always prided herself on her good grades, her ability to work hard and achieve her goals. But she had learned a hard lesson here in London: book smarts would only get her so far. She was going to need something more if she actually wanted to survive in the world because people like Christian and people like Will weren't anomalies of the human population. There were those out there who would play against her innocence and take advantage of her. And as much as she hated to have that kind of guard up, she now thought it was necessary.

"Who is it?" She asked, leaning against the door, half hoping it was Christian coming to apologize yet chastising herself for feeling that way.

"It's Gavin. Where have you been?"

"Busy," Luanne answered, closing her eyes in dread as she thought about the upcoming conversation. She wondered how long she could carry on this way before a neighbor complained about the random man standing in the hallway talking to a door.

"Can I come in?"

"No."

There was a long pause and Luanne waited to hear his footsteps retreating down the stairs. But she didn't and she knew he was still right outside.

"You haven't been answering any of my calls," Gavin pointed out and Luanne sighed.

"I don't want to see anybody right now, Gavin. Please, go away. I'll call you later."

"Um, no," Gavin answered. "That's not going to work for me."

Luanne had to smile. "Please? I'm really not in the mood."

"And I'm not in the mood to be ignored any longer. Open the door."

Luanne cursed under her breath, something she had been doing a lot of lately, and cracked the door. "The doctors say I have tuberculosis. You shouldn't come in." She coughed, just for effect.

"Bull shit!" Gavin laughed and nudged his foot so she couldn't close the door in his face. He could tell that she was upset about something. She looked as though she had been crying and he could see that she was wearing an oversized Yale t-shirt and leggings, something she probably had been in since the day before judging from all the wrinkles.

"Gavin, please just go."

"Not until you give me a good reason," he argued and she clenched her jaw in frustration. He had seen her do this while writing and it had always amused him. Her entire face would become distorted into an aggravated

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discomfort and, even though he had first thought it a rather unattractive expression, he now found it unbelievably adorable.

"Because I hate all men at the moment and I'm not responsible for what happens to you if you walk through that door."

"Ahhh," he tried not to smile. "Trouble in paradise?"

"I hate you," Luanne snapped and turned to walk away. But Gavin was too quick for her and he pushed the door open, closing it behind him before she had time to throw him out.

"Tell me what happened," he insisted.

"What's the point? You probably already know why."

"Did he cheat on you?"

"Yes!" Luanne nearly screamed, unable to decide how she felt about Gavin being able to figure it out so quickly. "I caught him with another girl in a restaurant. He tried to tell me that we had never decided to only date each other and that I had only assumed andâ " "

She broke down before she could finish the rest and Gavin wrapped his arms around her. "Hey, he's not worth all this and you know it."

"I know," Luanne said, her face still against his chest. "And I'm not upset about losing him as much as I am about how much he used me."

"What do you mean?"

"I should have seen it coming. You clearly did. Was I so naive that I couldn't see through all his crap and smooth lines? I mean, I just let myself get carried away with all of that stupid flirting and I feel so helpless now and so, soâ lso incredibly stupid."

"Luanne, you are one of the smartest girls I know."

"Yet I just let myself get used by guys."

"Has this happened before?" Gavin asked, rubbing her back. He hated seeing her like this. As glad as he was that Christian was gone, he couldn't stand the thought of Luanne being so upset. She looked miserable. She sounded miserable. And someone with all her personality should never feel that way.

Luanne sighed and stepped away from him without looking him in the eye. He followed her to the couch and sat down next to her, placing a protective hand on her knee.

"You saw it happen before. With Will."

Gavin immediately started to shake his head. "No. You cannot compare what happened with Will to this asshole."

"And why not? I walked right into their trap, both times. Both times I thought I was getting something great out of it and I only ended up hurting myself. And others," she added quietly. "Now I'm just convinced that all



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menâ 'l"

"First, Will is crazy," Gavin interrupted her before she could continue. "As in certifiably insane. Mix that with how smart he is and you have an instant disaster on your hands. He used a lot of people, Luanne, and long before you came along. You were just the unfortunate one who crashed with him when he fell."

Luanne blinked at him. He clearly hadn't made her feel any better.

"And Christian has most likely been doing this to girls all his life," he continued. "They had both perfected their games and you can't think that all men are going to hurt you like that. And you certainly can't blame yourself for falling for someone."

"Maybe it's my innocence that attracts these guys?" Luanne asked, hoping they could reach some sort of explanation for all of this.

"I wouldn't call you innocent. You may not have the experience that some other people your age have, but you've got a pretty clear view of the world."

"I used to think so," Luanne said dejectedly.

Gavin smiled. "You've just made some unlucky choices, that's all. There's going to be someone out there who will turn everything around for you. You'll see."

"At this rate, I won't find him until I'm 50."

Gavin laughed and shook his head. "He might be closer than he seems. Now, care to explain the boxes stacked in your living room?"

Luanne shook her head. "I'm done with London. I'm going back to New Haven."

"I was afraid of that," he said and sighed. He stood up and walked over to one of the larger boxes. Without hesitation, he ripped through the tape and opened the top.

"What are you doing?" Luanne demanded, jumping up and running over to him.

"Saving you from making another bad decision."

"Gavin, you aren't going to change my mind about this. Everywhere I go, I'll be reminded of Christian and I just don't think I can get over that. It's not worth it to stay here and be miserable."

"Look, Luanne, I can see why you ran away from Will and what happened with him. You needed to be with your family. But running away from Christian? I thought you were stronger than that."

"It's not like I'm running away from everything. I'm going back to Yale."

Gavin stared at her and wondered if he should save his lecture and just let her leave or if he should fight for her. She wouldn't like listening to him and she may not actually believe that he was on her side, but few people had stood with Luanne in her corner before and Gavin wasn't in the mood to have his heart broken if she left. "I'm not going to lie to you, it's probably going to hurt a lot more if you stay in London. But once you truly get over him, you can have some amazing times here. You came here to experience new things. And, yes, one of those things ended up hurting. But you shouldn't run away from everything else, all the other

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possibilities."

Luanne put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Why do you have to be so sensible all the time?"

Gavin laughed, relieved that she was seeing some reason. "One of us should be, don't you think?"

She finally grinned at him. "I suppose so."

"So can I help you unpack?"

"No," she answered quickly. "I haven't made up my mind yet."

"Can I temp you with some pizza? We can have it delivered. Just stay in and watch a movie."

"I could go for that," she said with a smile.

Gavin smiled back and then nodded before walking over to her phone and finding the number for pizza delivery. He placed his order and then joined Luanne in the kitchen where she was opening a bottle of wine. He watched as she struggled with the cork and then finally reached over to help her.

"I don't deserve you, you know?" She asked, relinquishing the bottle.

"Yes you do," Gavin answered quickly, not even needing to think about it.

"You've been such a good friend all year and," she hesitated, "well, thank you. For everything."

"You're welcome. And I know it may seem like some tough love from me right now, but I really do hate to see you hurt. It's a little heartbreaking, actually."

He poured the wine and then handed her a glass before looking at her. She was staring at him with a curious expression.

"I guess I would feel the same way if I saw you hurt," she finally agreed.

"Would you?"

"Well, sure. You're probably the best friend I have in this city."

Gavin nodded and took a sip of his wine. "You are the best thing I have going in this city, Luanne. Probably the best thing in my life."

"Me?" She laughed in disbelief. "You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not."

"But, why?" She was staring at him, her glass in her hand. He couldn't read her expression but looked deep into her eyes.

"Like I said, you can't blame yourself for falling for someone. I knew that you had a boyfriend but I fell for you anyway and, rather quickly, you became the highlight of my day, the thing I looked forward to the most."

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Luanne was shocked. She set her glass on the counter for fear of dropping it and looked at Gavin's honest face. His brown eyes were telling the truth yet he wasn't looking at her any different than he had been for the last four months. Had she missed this too?

"Well, that's just great," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "Something else I missed while I was busy playing make-believe with Christian."

Gavin smiled. "I was wondering why you hadn't caught on."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It wasn't my place. You were head over heels for that guy and I didn't want to make things awkward between us."

"But now that I'm single you don't mind the awkwardness?"

Gavin laughed again. "Not as much. I mean, who else are you going to hang out with? I'm now officially the best friend you have in this city, remember?"

Luanne made a face at him but couldn't hide her smile. He smiled back and winked at her, causing her to blush bright red.

"Don't, Gavin."

"Don't what?" He asked, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

"That! Don't do that. I'm not in the mood."

"Then why are you smiling?"

Luanne giggled and pushed at his arm. "I'm not," she insisted.

"You are," he argued and reached for her waist, gently pulling himself closer to her. Her eyes lowered and Gavin had to smile. She was nervous but so was he. It had been a while since he had kissed a girl yet the desire to do so had never been this strong. He carefully tilted her chin upward and forced her to meet his gaze.

"I have completely fallen for you, Luanne. And I don't want anything more from you than for you to love me in return. I know that's not going to happen tonight, but I hope that it will one day. So we'll take it slow and you will see that I am not psychotic and that I am 100 percent faithful."

Luanne grinned up at him but didn't say a word. She couldn't think of anything witty to say, anything that she thought would please him. It all seemed so irrelevant when it came to Gavin. She knew he wouldn't want her to do anything than what was absolutely natural.

Gavin smiled back and then lowered his face to hers. Their lips met and he kissed her softly, rejoicing when she didn't pull away. With every second that passed, his confidence grew and before he knew it, her arms were around his neck, her hands tangled in his hair. They kissed and kissed, for how long he didn't know, but he made sure not to let his hands move from her back, not to let his body crush against hers. He just enjoyed her lips against his and their breaths mingling.

A knock at the door interrupted them and both pulled apart unwillingly.

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"Pizza is here," Luanne said awkwardly and Gavin smiled.

"That was the best first kiss I have ever had," he told her, not letting the moment go by unacknowledged.

Luanne smiled brilliantly at him and blushed from head to toe. "Me too," she whispered and then looked at the ground, not knowing what else to do. The butterflies she had felt when she was with Christian were returning, only they didn't flutter in relationship to the proximity of Gavin, the idea that someone like him could care about her. They fluttered for a different reason now. A reason that she had not felt with Christian.

Luanne watched as Gavin walked to the door and paid for the pizzas. He seemed so at ease, even after his confession, that she couldn't help feeling comfortable as well. Maybe, she thought to herself, this is what love is actually supposed to feel like. But could it be possible that she had fallen for her best friend without realizing it? She wouldn't put it past herself. After all, she didn't have the best track record when it came to figuring out men or her feelings about them. But it looked like this time her lack of perception wasn't going to spit in her face.

## Chapter 30: Whatever You Say

Sterling stared down at the girl next to him. Her hair was worn in long, cascading waves which splashed over her shoulders and back. The only make-up she was wearing was a thin layer of mascara on her lashes which framed her strange yet beautiful violet eyes. Her lips were smiling as she listened to what the man in front of them was saying. And that dress. Sterling had nearly cried when their names had been called and she shrugged off her winter coat revealing what was quite possibly the perfect dress for her. It was a delicate cut, feminine and innocent but hugged her in all the right places.

"Where did you get that dress?" He whispered to her and touched the gold stitching on the sleeves.

But Laila didn't respond. Her eyes flickered to his and her smile widened before she returned her attention to the judge. Sterling smiled and did the same. He hadn't been paying much attention during all of this, his excitement was too great for him to rally much attention toward anything but his fiancée. But Laila had been composed and poised throughout the entire day, though the smile had not left her face once.

Familiar words grabbed Sterling's attention and he reached for Laila's hand.

"Do you, Sterling Pierce, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love and to cherish her, to live together in marriage until death do you part?" The judge's voice was rough and scratchy, having been speaking almost all afternoon at ceremonies identical to this one.

"I do," he said without hesitation and felt Laila squeeze his hand as she stared up into his eyes.

"And do you, Laila Roberts, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love and to cherish him, to live together in marriage until death do you part?"

"I do," she said clearly without a hint of uncertainty.

"By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Sterling did know if the judge had said anything after that. He pulled Laila into his arms and off her feet as he kissed her. A long, meaningful kiss, the first of many with his new bride. He could not tear his eyes from her as he set her down and took her hand, walking her back to the bench where they had left their coats.

Laila was still all smiles as she gathered her things and they proceeded into the next room. She could tell Sterling was staring at her but she knew that if she looked back she would either burst into tears of happiness or start laughing, perhaps uncontrollably, at what they had just done. It didn't seem real but she knew it was and she felt like the happiest woman in the world.

"Name?" The clerk asked them.

She waited for Sterling to say something but quickly realized he wasn't going to speak up.

"Laila Roberts and Sterling Pierce."

"Sign here, here and here, please. Do you have a witness?"

"No," Laila said, shaking her head though the thought didn't bother her one bit.

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The clerk gave an exasperated look at the couple and raised her hand, flagging someone over. Laila watched as an elderly man who looked as though he could have been someone's favorite grandfather, stood up from his chair and hobbled over to them.

"Congratulations, you two," the man told them with a genuine smile.

"Thank you," Laila responded, feeling as if she was still in some sort of dream.

She picked up a pen and signed her name, then handed it to Sterling who scribbled nearly illegibly on the papers. The old man was next and then the lady collected the papers and stamped them.

"These can be filed next door."

Laila smiled in appreciation and took the papers in her steady hand. She had half expected it to be shaking but was relieved to find that she was relatively calm about the entire process. Calm but excited beyond belief. The thrill of having no regrets about doing something so permanent, so binding, it was by far the greatest high of her life.

They remained silent as they walked next door, Sterling's hand was still holding hers and his other was reached across his body, lightly stroking her arm.

"I love you," he said suddenly, just as they had entered the next room.

"I love you too," she said, smiling up at him. His blue and green eyes were shining, his face was beaming.

"I can't believe we did this," he said, the smile growing on his face.

"Well, believe it," she teased him. "We're filing these papers and it makes it official."

Sterling bent his head to kiss her, a softer kiss than the last one. Laila smiled against his lips and then broke away, taking a step toward the desk and handing in their papers.

"Thank you," Sterling whispered in her ear, wrapping his arms around her from behind and kissing her neck.

"Your marriage certificate will be mailed to you within six to eight weeks," they were told and Laila nodded in understanding. She took Sterling's hand and together they walked into the hallway which led to the main stairwell of the embassy.

"So," she said in a teasing voice. "Now that I am your wife, what are you going to do with me?"

"I honestly have no idea," Sterling said and Laila could tell that his head was still in the clouds. "Dinner? Are you hungry?"

Laila laughed. "Not really. I think I'm too excited."

"I'm too excited to do much of anything right now," Sterling admitted and Laila looked up at him as he held the door for her. There were snow flurries blowing around their heads as they walked outside.

"You can't think of anything you want to do to celebrate this?" She asked, smiling playfully.

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Sterling picked up on her hint and blushed. "We could go back to my place," he said quickly and stuck his hand out for a cab.

Laila smiled and then pressed her face against his chest to keep warm. She felt him kiss the top of her head and wrap his arm around her back to keep her close.

A taxi showed up in only a matter of seconds and Sterling helped his bride into the car. He gave his address to the driver and then sat down next to his wife. His wife. He couldn't believe it. He had known for some time that this day would come eventually but he had no idea that he would feel so entirely complete.

"What made you change your mind?" He asked, putting his cold hand up to her warm cheek and drawing her face close to his so he could kiss her.

"I just kind of realized that not only was I ready to spend the rest of my life with you, I was ready to be your wife. And it feels really, really good."

Sterling grinned and kissed her again. "It does, doesn't it? You have made me so happy today, Laila."

"Well, I guess you were right all along. I'm not saying that I was wrong, but you were definitely right about some things."

"I could lose every fight we have from this day on and still be the happiest man alive."

Laila laughed and sat up straight. "Good. Because you now get absolutely no say on anything that has to do with our fake wedding next year."

"I know," Sterling smiled. And he didn't care. It would be a formality and nothing more. They could please their parents or piss them off, have 25 guests or 250. None of that mattered to him, as long as Laila was happy.

"And if I want to dress you and all of your groomsmen in pink tuxedos, you are going to smile and like it," Laila warned him.

"Whatever you say," Sterling said, resting a hand on her knee and working his way up her leg.

"I would never do that," his wife admitted quickly and smiled at him.

"Why not? I think I would look great in a pink tuxedo."

"Your brother would kill me," Laila pointed out and rested a hand on his, letting him know he had gone far enough.

"I don't think I can wait until we get back to my place," Sterling whispered against her neck, kissing and nipping lightly.

"We're almost there," Laila giggled and pressed a hand to his chest. She crossed her legs as his hand started its journey again and Sterling groaned, adjusting his pants to relieve some of the discomfort.

He kissed his wife again though he knew it wouldn't help his current problem. And she kissed him back, careful not to let him linger for too long.

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"So this is going to be our secret, right?" She asked as he pulled away.

"Of course."

"We aren't going to tell anyone?"

Sterling shook his head. "It's just for you and me. Forever and ever and ever and ever," he teased her as his fingers tickled her sides.

Laila squealed and then laughed as she tried to push his hands away. Sterling looked at her and remembered the first time he had ever seen her. She had been in a darkened basement wearing a small black dress that she wasn't completely comfortable in. She had looked nervous, acted impulsively, and had completely stolen his heart.

"Laila? Tell me where you got the dress," he requested again and Laila blushed.

"I found it during the trip we took to Nice."

"The trip where you were so adamantly against the idea of us getting married?"

"Yes," Laila said. "That very one."

"Yet you picked out a wedding dress?"

Laila shook her head at her husband and rolled her eyes. "It wasn't a wedding dress. It was just a white dress which happened to look really good on me."

"It looks amazing. You look so beautiful," he told her as the cab driver stopped outside his building. Sterling paid the fare and then helped Laila out of the car. The two walked quickly inside and Sterling had already shed his coat and tie before they made it to the door of his apartment.

"Someone's impatient," Laila teased him as he reached for the buttons on her coat.

"Of course," Sterling answered. "I heard that married sex is 10 times better than regular sex."

"Oh, really?" Laila laughed.

"Really," he answered, pushing them both inside his flat. "Do you know why?"

Laila shook her head. "Because it's not a sin?"

Sterling laughed and closed the door behind them, happy to see Laila kicking off her shoes and throwing her coat on the ground.

"Because," he started, reaching for her dress and lifting it over her head. But he forgot what he was going to say as he stared down at her. She was wearing a white lace corset accompanied by some barely-there sheer panties.

In an instant his pants were around his ankles and he had picked her up, carrying her over to the couch as he tripped on his clothes.



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"Because why?" Laila asked, unbuttoning his shirt for him.

"I don't remember anymore," he admitted with a smile, lying her down on the sofa and running his hands over her torso and hips. He heard her sigh in anticipation and he tore his eyes from her body so he could look at her face.

"I love you, Sterling. I love you so much," she whispered and her hand reached for his face.

"I love you too," he said, pulling at the elastic of her panties. "And I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you, as your husband."

Laila smiled and blushed, reaching behind his head so she could pull herself up to kiss him. Sterling smiled against her kiss and tugged at her panties, finally getting them over her hips. His fingers trailed down her body and he pressed her legs open with his knees.

He didn't know if married sex was going to be better than regular sex, but he was positive that married life with Laila was going to be better than regular life. It would, of course, be a while before they could completely act like husband and wife, but seeing her face or hearing her voice everyday and knowing that they had made that commitment would fill him with enough joy to last until their fake wedding, as Laila had called it.

They made love for the rest of the afternoon and in nearly every single room of Sterling's apartment, neither one wanting to leave the other's side for just the amount of time it would take to get dressed.

"Do you think we'll be doing this when we're 70?" Laila asked, curling up to Sterling's side as he pulled the covers over both of them.

"Maybe not everything we just did. I doubt you'll be that flexible in 50 years."

He heard Laila giggle and felt a lazy arm drape across his chest. "Will you make sure I don't sleep for too long?"

"Of course," Sterling said, his eyes closing. Sleep was pulling at him but he could hardly wait to wake up next to his wife for the first time.

## Chapter 31: The End

"What is taking so long?" Sterling whined as his legs bounced nervously in the waiting room of the hospital.

"These things take a while," his mother replied, not looking up from the wedding magazine she and Laila had been devouring for the last two hours. "I was in labor for 18 hours with you and your brother."

"18 hours?"

"18 hours."

"What am I supposed to do for 18 hours?" He complained and saw his wife look up from her reading.

Laila could tell that Sterling was nervous for his brother. He had nearly thrown her into the car when they received the call saying that Piper's water had broke and had driven like a madman all the way from his apartment to the hospital in Boston.

"Why don't you go to the gift shop and find a book to read?" She suggested with a smile. His father was already asleep in the chair next to him and no one knew how long this process was going to take.

But Sterling shook his head and smiled at her. "How's the wedding planning coming along?"

"Fine," she answered him quickly and looked back down at the magazine. Mrs. Pierce had been well prepared and this was only the second of many bridal magazines they had to get through.

"It's our big day, you know? You don't want to make any hasty decisions."

Laila had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing. His mother, on the other hand, found nothing humorous about it.

"Maybe your fiancée would appreciate a little participation from the groom."

Sterling shook his head again and winked at Laila. "No. She's made it perfectly clear that I have no say in anything. But I trust her."

Laila cracked a smile and pointed to a rather exotic looking white flower. Mrs. Pierce sighed and Laila knew she was aggravating the poor woman. Nothing she picked was to her liking and she had nearly given her mother-in-law a heart attack when she announced the wedding would be held at a vineyard in Napa instead of on the East Coast.

"Let's forget about flowers for the moment, dear. Have you thought about bridesmaid's dresses? Or shoes? The shoes you wear have to be comfortable yet elegant."

"Oh," Laila hesitated knowing the look that was going to appear on Mrs. Pierce's face. "I think I'll just be wearing flip flops. White ones, I promise. But since the ceremony is going to be outside I don't want my heels sinking into the dirt."

"There is going to be dirt at your wedding?" Mrs. Pierce asked, clearly disgusted.

"Just a little outside," Laila admitted and picked up another magazine. "So, bridesmaid's dresses."

## Foreign Affairs

Sterling smiled as his mother grimaced and shook her head. He knew Laila wouldn't disappoint anyone but she was having fun with this. They had announced their engagement over the winter holiday and even though everyone had been excited, the news took no one by surprise. A date was set for the first weekend in July after they graduated which gave Laila and the two mothers over 18 months to plan. His wife had admitted to him, only once, that she was happy they were already married, that the stress of planning a fake wedding was nowhere near the stress of planning a real one. Sterling had laughed and kissed her, wishing her luck with his mom and her mom.

"Judging from the looks of you four, we haven't missed anything exciting."

Sterling looked up toward the familiar voice and Laila nearly jumped out of her seat.

"You made it!" She ran and threw her arms around Tennille's neck, hugging her old roommate tightly.

"There was no way we were going to miss this," Tate said, reaching out and shaking Sterling's hand. "Alistair, a dad. I still can't believe it."

Laila stood back and looked at her two friends. They hadn't changed much since high school, at least she didn't think so. Tennille was still gorgeous and had completely embraced the New York lifestyle which seemed so perfectly fit for her. Her hair was still long and she wore it in a messy ponytail. Her eyes were just as animated as ever, never stopping and always knowing. And Tate was still relaxed, keeping his girlfriend in check and effortlessly calming the entire room with just his presence.

Tate took a seat next to Sterling and Tennille joined Laila and Mrs. Pierce with the bridal magazines, giving her opinions openly and flat out refusing to wear a bridesmaid's dress that fell below the knee. The boys were just about to get up to find a vending machine when the double doors were thrown open and a breathless Alistair came running through.

"It's a girl!" He announced and Mrs. Pierce squealed with joy. "I mean, she's a girl. I have a daughter."

"Thank God for that," his father said, rubbing his eyes as he stood up to hug his son.

Alistair's eyes were bouncing from person to person, not resting on anyone or anything for too long. "She's so tiny and so perfect and Piper did such an amazing job."

"Can we see her?" Mrs. Pierce asked and Alistair nodded.

"Yeah, the nurses say you can go in two at a time. Are Mr. and Mrs. Collins here yet?"

Laila shook her head. "They called about an hour ago and said they were just getting on the plane in Seattle."

"Okay," he said, unable to wipe the smile off his face. "I'll let her know. Mom, Dad, do you want to meet your granddaughter?"

Mrs. Pierce immediately burst into tears and threw the magazine on the chair, stumbling toward her son so she could hug him. The proud father led his parents back into the delivery room and the four friends stood there slightly stunned.

"I don't think he even noticed we were here," Tate said, unsure if he wanted to laugh or be offended.

## Foreign Affairs

"I don't think he would have noticed if a giant purple elephant had been in the room either," Tennille grinned and sat down again, thumbing through a magazine.

Sterling followed her lead and sat down as well, though he could barely keep still in his chair. He was nervous for his brother, excited for him as well, and eager to meet his niece.

"So," he heard Tate say quietly as he sat down beside his friend. "You're actually going to get married?"

Sterling smiled. "Looks like it."

"Man, good for you. Laila's a great girl."

Sterling nodded his head and glanced at his wife. She was laughing with Tennille about something.

"Have you thought about asking Tennille?"

Tate's voice dropped even lower. "More and more these days. But she seems so happy with the way things are."

"You never know until you ask," Sterling pointed out.

"I guess you're right. And I suppose Laila was thrilled at the idea."

Sterling laughed. "Something like that."

What seemed like ten hours later, Sterling's parents came through the doors and told their son he could go in. Laila stood up to go with him and he took his wife's hand as he walked down the hallway to Piper's room. Laila knocked quietly at the door and Alistair was quick to open it.

"She's asleep right now," he announced, still as proud as he could be. "Come on in."

They pushed past the curtain and saw Piper lying on the hospital bed, her hair a mess but her face was shining with joy as she held her daughter.

"Oh my God!" Laila whispered, tears coming to her eyes as she saw the tiny little girl. "Piper, she's beautiful."

"Isn't she?" Her best friend asked with a smile.

Laila approached the bed slowly as Sterling put a hand on Alistair's shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" He asked his twin.

Alistair shook his head. "I can't even describe it, little brother. I thought I would be terrified but the second I saw her it was like I just fell in love. I want to protect her but I want to show her off to the world."

Sterling watched as Laila reached a small hand toward the baby's tiny face, lightly stroking her peach fuzz blonde hair.

"How's Piper doing?" Sterling asked.

## Foreign Affairs

"Amazing. I can't believe she did it. I mean, there is no way in hell I would have been able to do that, you know?"

Sterling laughed. "I know."

The twins walked toward the bed and Alistair kissed Piper on the cheek before kissing his daughter.

"Do you want to hold her?" Piper asked Laila.

"I'd love to," Laila agreed easily and Piper lifted the newborn toward her best friend. Laila took her carefully in her arms and gazed down at the tiny person sleeping so soundly. She had an adorable button nose and long eyelashes, perfect heart shaped lips squeezed between two pudgy cheeks.

"Have you decided on a name yet?" She asked, not looking away from the baby.

"Paisley Rebecca Pierce," she heard Alistair answer and her eyes instantly flew to his. She felt a lump rise in her throat as she smiled at him. Alistair smiled back at the girl who had very likely saved his life. Without Laila he would never have found the strength to fall for Piper, he may never have learned to live with the memory of Rebecca instead of dwelling in his love for her.

"That's a beautiful name, Alistair," Laila whispered, trying not to cry. "It's really beautiful."

Alistair choked back a tear of his own and felt Piper reach for his hand. He looked down at his girlfriend and smiled, still completely overwhelmed and grateful for the amazing gift she had given him. A daughter. A perfect daughter. He leaned down to kiss her and she raised her head to meet him half way.

"I love you," he whispered to her and she smiled.

"I love you too."

Laila looked over at the happy parents and then over at her husband who was staring at her with a curious expression.

"Did you want to hold your niece?" She asked him, smiling as a scared look crossed his face.

"Yes, but let me sit down first."

Laila nodded and waited for him to take a seat on the couch before handing Paisley to him. The little girl looked so small in his big arms and against his broad chest. A small whimper escaped her lips as she settled against him and Sterling's eyes shot to Laila as he wondered what he had done wrong. But his wife only smiled at him in encouragement. Sterling looked back down at the baby and relaxed when he saw that her eyes had not opened and she was still sleeping peacefully.

"She's so tiny," he said in awe.

"She'll grow," Laila laughed.

"I'm going to spoil her," Sterling announced and he heard his brother laugh at his statement.

"And I'll remember that when you two have children."

## Foreign Affairs

"We'll just babysit yours for the time being," Laila said quickly and gave Piper a warm smile.

Sterling waited until Alistair's attention had been diverted back to his girlfriend before whispering to Laila. "You know, a baby would be kind of nice."

"Yes, your brother's daughter is quite lovely."

"Our baby would be just as lovely," Sterling pointed out and Laila shook her head.

"Don't start, Sterling. I'm serious. Don't start."

Sterling laughed at his wife's determined face.

"I'm just sayingâ!"

"You aren't allowed to say anything, remember?" She smiled at him and reached for his face so she could kiss him.

"I won't say another word," he promised with a wink.

"Why do I not believe you?" Laila asked with a grin.

Sterling only grinned back and then looked down at his niece. He had made a promise to Laila and he intended on keeping it. He knew that after their first night of babysitting little Paisley he would be cured of his desire for a child of his own. He had everything that he wanted and everything that he needed wrapped up inside the woman sitting next to him. And nothing was going to change that.

THE END

**A/N: I really can't believe I just posted the last chapter of this series. It's really bittersweet for me but I want to thank everyone who has read and commented, especially those who have been with me since Harper's. Your support means the world to me and I definitely would not have made it past the second chapter of this novel without you guys. So thank you so much! Much love, Pink**

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