

# The Enemy

By : Wylie Callum

Alexander Gray and Aeliyah Blue have been enemies since third grade, when Alexander, Alex, put red fingerpaint in Aeliyah's hair. Now, he's pulled his latest prank, one that makes Aeliyah hate him so much more than she did before. Now she decides to start pranking back, and Alex develops feelings for her. He tries to befriend her but she will have none of the sort, as he has nonstop tortured her for the past 8 years. Can Alex convince her that he's done pranking? Or will Aeliyah never forgive him and continue on with her hatred?

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# The Enemy

## The Enemy Chapter 23

## The Enemy : Chapter 1

I walk along the sidewalk, headed home after school, listening to my favorite song, Little Talks- Of Monsters and Men, when suddenly someone grabs me. I let out a small scream and look to see who it is, scowling when I notice it's my sworn enemy, Alexander Gray. He pulls the headphones out of my ears as I struggle to get away from him, which he only laughs at because he's practically twice my size, in weight and height, yet all muscle. " Alex, let go," I growl and he opens the passenger door of his dodge ram truck and sets me in. He runs around the front of the truck to get in and I try to push open my door but it's locked. Before I can fumble the lock and get it open, he's already in, pulling me to the middle seat and wrapping his arm around me tightly so I can't escape. " Alex, let me go, what's wrong with you?" I yell, pushing against his muscular forearm. " Well aren't you happy to see me?" he asks with a smirk and I roll my eyes. Finally, I give up trying to escape and he pulls into his driveway. Which, sadly, happens to be a few houses down from mine. He gets out and pulls me out and I make a mad dash for the street. He catches me around my waist and spins me back to him and I probably look like a deranged animal with my hair almost completely covering my face. He pushes it off of my face as he leads me inside, tsking. " Such a shame it'll be all gone soon." he sighs and I frown, trying to think of what he's talking about. He takes me down to his basement where his best friend Rhett is waiting, with duct tape in his hand and scissors in the other. Suddenly realizing what they're going to use the scissors for, I scream and push against Alex even harder than before. " No, no, no, not my hair, please, Alex, not my hair, please," I beg as he sits me in the chair and Rhett duct tapes my wrists and ankles to it and then hands Alex the scissors. " Please don't, Alex! Please!" I yell tears filling my eyes. This is the worst prank he's ever done to me. He grabs my long brown hair in his hand, and closes the scissors down on a chunk of it. I start to cry and with each chunk he cuts off, my hatred for him only grows worse. The next few minutes is blurry, through my tears, but I hear Rhett telling Alex that's enough. " Hey man, stop. She's crying. Come on," Rhett says and Alex cuts off one last piece and steps in front of me, holding a mirror up in front of my face. My used to be mid back-length hair is now up to my shoulders, jagged and unevenly cut. Rhett takes the duct tape off of me as I continue to cry and Alex frowns. " Hey, Aeliyah, I didn't mean to make you cry," he says softly, putting the mirror down. I stand up abruptly and glare at him, tears running down my cheeks and dripping off to the floor. " I hate you," I say, putting as much passion and fire into the small sentence that I can. I run past him, back up the stairs, and don't stop until I'm back at my house, sitting on the floor with my back against the door. Alex and I have been enemies since the third grade, when he poured red fingerprint in my hair that took a week to fully wash out. Now, we're both seventeen years old, in our junior year of highschool, and he still pranks me all the time. They were pranks I could tolerate, until now. If you're gonna mess with a girl's hair, especially cut it off, you're definitely going to regret it. And I have a whole year to make his life a living hell.

## Chapter 2

After planning for a while with my best friend Carrie, I think of the best prank ever and go to bed early, as this prank requires extra time to set up. When I wake up in the morning, I quickly take a shower and brush out my even shorter hair that had to be cut more to look decent, and blow dry it straight. Deciding that I hate the look of it, I toss it up into a ponytail and change into a white hoodie with Minnie mouse on it and a pair of dark skinny jeans. I get a text from Carrie saying she's outside my house and I quickly brush my teeth and pull on my black and white Allstar hightops. Snatching my bag full of prank supplies and my phone off of my desk, I race down the stairs to Carrie's shiny silver porsche and jump in. "Ready?" she asks with a grin and I nod. Alex is totally gonna get it. Alex's POV I go to my locker in the morning, feeling pretty bad about cutting Aeliyah's hair when I notice all my stuff is gone. All my books, folders, everything. I slam it shut, looking around for her, and spot her at the end of the hallway. "Aeliyah!" I shout and she grins and disappears around the corner. Everyone stares at me as I follow after her and finally she come to a stop just inside the boys locker room. No one is in there yet because the first bell hasn't rung, and she just looks at me with a grin on her face. "Where's my stuff?" I ask calmly. She shrugs and holds up one of my folders. "Gimme that," I say, stepping forward. My foot hits something and suddenly I'm doused in a bucket of ice. Aeliyah busts out laughing, the musical sound echoing off of the locker room walls. She runs out the door that leads into the gym and I go after her, soaked to the bone. A few guys from the football team trickle into the gym, ready for practice, and laugh as they see the school quarterback running after a girl. She keeps running, dodging around something on the floor, and before I can dodge too, my momentum sends me hurling through the puddle of water and landing on my ass. Damn this girl is good. I pull myself up and she runs to the football team, who have gathered to watch me fall. They move apart so she can get through and then stand shoulder to shoulder so I can't follow. "Guys come on," I say, trying to push back the linebackers. They don't budge and I roll my eyes. "Lets go team! Get changed!" coach yells and I begrudgingly head back to the locker room. I open my locker and pull out my basketball shorts and step into them. I pull my gray underarmour t shirt on too and hear snickering behind me. I turn around and then there's more laughing from behind me. "What the hell?" i ask. "Dude, look in the mirror," Brian says. I face my back to the mirror and crane my neck to look into it, rolling my eyes and groaning. The back of my shorts now have 'bootylicious' written across the butt. Seeing as I don't have an extra pair of shorts and no one wants to loan me a pair, I go out to practice. Today's gonna suck. After school... I walk out to my truck, covered in bright red paint and sigh as I see Aeliyah sitting on the tailgate, grinning at the artwork she drew all over my windows with window paint. "Alright, you got me. Nice touch, by the way. 'bootylicious'? A good one. The team loved it." I tell her and she laughs. "I thought of that one all by myself," she boasts, smiling. "Well I was wondering if I could have a hug, you know to congratulate you for all these awesome pranks?" I ask, moving toward her with my red arms outstretched. People are staring at us for sure, I mean, why wouldn't you look at a big guy covered in red paint? I glance around and notice everyone is watching and grin at Aeliyah. Her eyes widen and she gets off of the tailgate and backs away from me. "Wait, no don't," she says and starts running. I sprint after her, tackling her to the ground and covering her in red paint. "You forget, baby, that I'm the quarterback. I can outrun you," I remind her, smearing red paint all over her forehead and cheeks. She huffs and pushes me off of her and stands up. "See you tomorrow?" I ask and she rolls her eyes. "Youre gonna get it Gray!" she calls over her shoulder as I get up. "Can't wait, Blue!" I answer back and climb in my truck. Damn, this is gonna take a while to clean out.

## Chapter 3

" Hey man," my best buddy John says to me. " Hey," I reply, opening my locker. Magically, my stuff has returned, and I smile, shaking my head. " So I'm gonna just cut to the chase. I know you like Aeliyah." he says and I look sideways at him. " What?" I ask, staring at him. " Its not like you keep it a secret. It's pretty obvious. Yesterday the new chick asked me if you two were dating. Why don't you ask her out?" he explains and I shake my head and close my locker. " Trust me, I don't like her that way." I answer and he sighs, giving up. " See ya at practice," he says and goes back down the hallway. I've never thought of Aeliyah like that. She's just a girl to prank. I'm mean yeah, she's hot, anyone can see that, and she's short, which I like, and she's nice, you know, to other people, she's smart, and- okay, okay, that's enough. Sure she's got a lot of good qualities, but she's not girlfriend material. I just don't like her that way. My knees suddenly give out but I quickly recover and stand up, turning around to see Aeliyah walk down the hallway. " Hey Liyah," I call, liking the way her name rolls off my tongue. She looks back and grins over her shoulder and keeps walking. (Aeliyah's POV) I go to my locker and start to open it but a girl taller than me shoves her way in front of it. I back up and look at her like she's crazy and she puts her hands on her hips. " Uh... Hi?" I say. " Look, I know what you're trying to do with Alex. But he's mine. So back off. Or you're gonna regret it." she growls. " Um, Alex? I don't-" " I don't care, what you have to say. But you're gonna regret ever messing with him." she spits, flips her hair in my face and stalks off in the other direction. Well okay then. I wonder what that was about. I pull the hair out of my mouth, rolling my eyes, and get my things from my locker. Slowly, the day goes by without any pranks. Of course, the occasional tie-your-shoelaces-together prank occurs, but nothing big. I start on the sidewalk to my house because it was nice today and it's only a twenty minute walk, and it starts to sprinkle. I didn't bring a jacket because, once again, this morning it was warm and sunny, and I get goosebumps on my arms. I put my phone in my pocket so it doesn't get wet and soon it starts to pour. And I mean big rain drops, almost frozen, raining so hard you can barely see 5 feet in front of you. I keep walking, now only ten minutes away. I hear a truck drive beside me and a window rolls down. " Aeliyah? Is that you?" Alex asks. I keep walking and he pulls forward more. " Liyah! Get in! I'll take you home," he calls through the window. " No I'm fine! I'm almost home!" I answer, continuing to walk. I hear him sigh and then his door opens. He walks over to me and blinks the rain out of his eyes. " Liyah, just get in the truck. I can take you home. I'm on the way to my house anyways. It's not a big deal." he says and I shake my head, rubbing my arms and start walking again. He grabs my wrist and pulls me back and I look up at him. " Aeliyah, come on. It's pouring down rain, you're still a good fifteen minutes from your house on foot, and it's freezing out here. You're being unreasonable. You can still hate me after I take you home, but I'm not gonna let you walk alone in the freezing rain." he explains and I hesitate but nod. He leads me to his truck with his hand on the small of my back and it sends shivers up my spine. He opens the door and I climb into the nice heated truck and buckle up. He walks around the front of the truck and climbs in too, rubbing his hands together. " Jesus, how did you stay out there that long? It's frigid!" he says, turning the heat up higher. " T-thanks," I stutter. " No problem," he answers, taking my hands and rubbing them together. He blows on them and then grabs a jacket from the backseat and wraps it around me. He starts driving, putting his seatbelt on as he does. " I swear, you're the most stubborn girl," he mutters. I wrap the big jacket tighter around me and a few minutes later he pulls into my driveway. " Here you go," he says, rolling to a stop. " Thanks, Alex," i say, shrugging off the jacket. He puts his hand out to stop me and shakes his head. " Keep it. I don't use it anyways." he says. " Thanks," I repeat and he nods. I start to push open the door and he catches my arm. " Hey, if there's ever another day like this where you walk home and you need a ride, just give me a holler, okay?" he asks and I nod. I climb out and shut the door and he waits until I get inside to drive off. Wow. That's the nicest thing Alex has ever done for me. Maybe he's stopped his pranks now that he knows I can get back at him. Maybe.

## Chapter 4

I walk inside the door, spotting my mom and dad sitting together on the couch. " Hey mom, hey dad," i say starting to go up the stairs. " Hi honey. Could you come here a sec?" my dad asks. I go back to the side of the couch and they both look up at me. " We're having the Gray's over for dinner tomorrow night." my mom says. " You mean the Gray's that live down the street?Why?" I ask. Although Alex was nice to me a few minutes ago, I still hate him for all the pranks he's done to me. Especially when he cut my hair. " Because Elaine Gray is one of my old friends from highschool. We were talking at the grocery store and she remembered me. They're coming tomorrow night at seven. Your father and I will be back at five o clock and I need you to be here. Okay?" she explains and I sigh. " Fine." I reply and give them each a hug. My dad kisses my forehead and I go back up the stairs. " Goodnight," I call. " Goodnight," they echo eachother. I go to my room, brush my teeth and change and then plop down on my soft bed. After a few minutes I fall asleep, only to be rudely awakened by my loud alarm clock. I slap my hand on it to shut it up and then go take a quick shower. I blowdry my hair and change into a pair of Jean shorts and a Van Morrison t-shirt. I put on a little mascara and grab my bag and stuff and jog downstairs. I grab a piece of toast on the way out the door and lightly jog to school, running a little late. As I walk up the front steps of the school, breathing hard, Alex comes out and stops me. " Hey, wanna go get some icecream or something? Let's go," he says, turning me back toward his truck. " What are you doing? I have to get to class," I roll my eyes and keep walking. " No, really, you don't want to go in there, let's just go somewhere else, c'mon," he says but I push him off and open the door. " Why are you acting so weird?" I ask. The whole school stares at me as I walk to my locker, waving flyers in my face. " Hey, I didn't know you were into that," the same girl from yesterday says as a bunch of guys whistle at me and look me up and down. She hands me a flyer and I look at it. It's a picture of me, photoshopped to look like I'm in a tiny string bikini with no top and my hands covering my breasts. The title says 'Wanted: Future Pornstar' and at the bottom is: Written by- Alex Gray. Tears fill my eyes and I turn around to face him. " Liyah," he says softly, sadness in his eyes. " The pranks are bad enough, Alex. But this? I can't believe you!" I cry and run past him. I run out the door and back down the sidewalk and I can hear his shoes pounding the pavement behind me. " Liyah, stop. Let me explain!" he yells but I pick up the speed, covering my ears. I finally lose him, running all the way to my house. My parents have already left for work, thankfully, and I collapse just inside the doorway, bawling my eyes out. How could I ever think that he would be nice to me and stop the pranks? I'm so stupid! Of course he wouldn't! We're enemies. Not friends. I pull myself together and close the door, numbly dragging myself to my room. I lay on my bed, clutching a pillow to my chest and sniffing. Now I have to deal with Alex and his family coming over for dinner? Great. I put my headphones in my ears and blast music, hoping to block out everything. Eventually my eyes close and I drift off to sleep.

## Chapter 5

(Alex's POV) I sit through class, gritting my teeth to keep from busting every guy's lip that talks about Aeliyah. "Dude she is so hot. I'd definitely watch her porn videos. All day." one guy says and I stand up in the middle of last hour, tipping my chair over in the process. "What did you just say?" I growl at him, my hand closing into a fist. "Mr. Gray, is there something wrong?" the teacher asks as the fucker smirks. "I said I'd fuck-" I cut him off, slamming my fist into his nose and hear a loud crack. "Mr. Gray!" Mrs. Chancellor shrieks as idiot holds his bloody, broken nose in pain. I Grab my bag and walk past her. "You better be headed to the principal's office!" she shouts after me. I march outside to my truck and throw my bag in, backing out and driving straight to Aeliyah's house. I park the truck and knock on the door loudly. She doesn't answer and I lean my head against it and get my phone out. I call Carrie, her best friend, and she picks up on the third ring. "What? You'd better be headed to Aeliyah's house to apologize after that stunt you pulled." she growls into the phone. "Look, Carrie, I just need Aeliyah's phone number. Please. I'm trying to apologize to her. I'm at her front door but she won't open the door. Please," I explain quickly and finally she gives it to me. I dial the number and push call and hold it to my ear. "C'mon... Pick up, pick up, pick up," I mumble. "...Hello?" her soft voice asks on the other end and I hear her snuffle. "Aeliyah, don't hang up! Please!" I yell before she ends the call. "I don't want to talk to you," She says loudly. "Please open the door. Please. I can explain. Just open the door." I tell her and hear her getting up. "Alex this is honestly the worst thing you've ever done to me. Why would I still want to talk to you? She asks. "Because I didn't do it. I'll prove it to you. Just open the door." I answer and she hangs up. I stare at the door for a few minutes and finally it opens a crack. I stick my foot in the door so she can't slam it shut on me if she changes her mind and I look down at her. "Can I come in?" I ask and she opens the door fully and let's me in. I step inside and she shuts the door behind me. "Explain." she says, wiping her eyes and crossing her arms. "It was Danielle. The one that handed you the flyer? She's my ex. She was always that girl who never let's her ex boyfriend go and threatens to fight any girl who talks to him. Anyways, I have proof that it was her." I tell her and pull out my phone. I show her the text from Danielle asking me if I wanted in on the prank and me telling her no. "See? I guess she wrote my name on it to make it seem believable because I always play pranks on you." I explain and a tear slides down her cheek. More follow it and soon she's turned away from me, wiping desperately at her eyes. I turn her around and wrap my arms around her and she hesitates but then starts to cry harder. I hold her tight to me and she cries into my jacket. Once she calms down I loosen my grip on her and wipe her cheeks with my hoodie sleeve. I lead her to the stairs and sit down with her and she takes deep breaths to calm down. She looks over at me, eyes red. "Do you think I'm a slut? Tell me the truth." she says quietly. "Absolutely not, Aeliyah. You are not a slut in any way. Do you hear me? Don't even think about that," I scold, staring at her. She pulls her knees to her chest and and plays with a loose thread on the carpeted stairs. "When do your parents get home?" I ask. "Five," she replies softly. A few minutes later her phone rings, breaking the silence, and she jumps at the sudden noise. She fumbles for her phone and holds it to her ear. "Hello?" she asks. "Hi Carrie. ...Yeah. He's here. ...Yes, he apologized. ...Yep. ...I guess. ...He did? Okay. Bye," she tells Carrie and then looks at me with an amused expression. "You punched a guy?" she asks and I shrug and flex my hand which, now that I think about it, kind of hurts. "Why?" she asks. "He was talking about you. And I had been hearing it all day so I was tired of it. And I'm pretty sure I broke his nose." I tell her and she rolls her eyes. "Do you happen to be in a fightclub?" she asks. "Hey, rule number one of fight club: don't talk about fight club." I answer and she laughs. "There you go, feel better now?" I ask, nudging her shoulder and she smiles and nods. I pull her up and she goes to the tv and pulls a movie case out from the entertainment center. I laugh as I read the title. Fight Club. I nod and she puts it in and sits beside me. We spend the next few hours watching fight club and her parents walk in just as it's over. "Hey honey, we're home, oh, who's your friend?" my mom asks and we stand up. "Um, mom, dad, this is my-...Alex. This is Alex Gray. Alex this is my mom Lacey and my dad Nick." she introduces, unable to bring herself to say friend. If I were her I wouldn't say friend either. "So you're Alex! Where are your parents? You're a little early, but that's alright," her mom says but I shake my head. "Actually, Mrs. Blue, I was just keeping Liyah company while you guys were gone. I'll be back in a little bit with my parents. Sorry," I tell them and Lacey shakes her head. "Well, alright. But call



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me Lacey. Please," she answers and I nod. " And call me Mr. Blue," her dad says, looking at me skeptically. " Dad," Liah whines. " Nice meeting you Lacey. Mr. Blue," he nods in acknowledgement and I turn back to look at Liah so her parents can't see my eyes and wink at her. She smiles and I head out and take my truck back to my place. I just kind of hang out for a while at my house and end up changing into a dark gray button up shirt. I fix the collar and spray some cologne and wait for my parents to get ready. Finally my mom comes down the stairs and my dad nudges me. " Women. They take forever." he chuckles and takes my mom's hand as we walk to Aeliah's house. I knock on the door and Lacey greets us and lets us inside. " Its so great to see you again. Phil, it's nice to meet you," I hear Lacey say and look around. Mr. Blue seems to notice what I'm searching for and nods at the stairs. " Still getting ready." he says and I nod. " Aeliah! Come down here! The Gray's are here!" Lacey calls up the stairs and then busies herself in small talk with my parents. Mr. Blue goes to check on the burgers on the grill and Liah comes down the stairs. Her hair is down and curly and she's wearing a vintage-looking, strapless dress with flowers on it. She sees me and blushes and makes it to the bottom of the stairs. She smiles at her mom and it fades as soon as she looks away. " I hate wearing dresses." she mumbles, crossing her arms. " If it means anything, I think you look cute," I say in her ear and her blush reddens. Its almost more fun making her blush than it is pranking her. Mr. Blue announces the burgers are done and sets them on the table. We say grace and begin the small talk, but Aeliah doesn't say much. Just kind of picks at her food. I eat my burger into the shape of a crescent and hold it up to my mouth and show her. She smiles faintly, but it's not like before. I can tell she's thinking about what happened at school and I sigh. " So, how is school Alex?" Lacey asks me. " Its fine. I mean my grades are still up but it's as good as highschool can ever be." I explain and she nods. " How about you Aeliah?" my mom asks. She sets her fork down and looks at her mom. " Can I be excused?" she asks. Seeing the frown on her face, her mom agrees and Liah stands up from the table and leaves, heading outside. " May I be excused?" I ask my mom and she nods too. I push my chair back and follow Aeliah and find her sitting on a bench by the pond they have in their backyard. I sit beside her and she swings her feet back and forth. " Are you okay?" I ask and she shrugs. A cool breeze picks up and I put my arm around her shoulders to keep her warm. " Im sorry about cutting your hair the other day." I tell her. " Its okay. I feel better now that I got you back. I kind of like it short." she says. " Really?" I ask. " No, I miss my long hair," she laughs. " Me too. I liked your long hair better. Sorry." I say. She watches the sky, looking at the stars, and I point to Orion's belt. " There's the big dipper," she points out. I nod and find the little dipper and we just look for shapes in the stars. We shift to the ground so we can see better and I feel Aeliah turn to look at me. I turn too, and we're so close our noses are almost touching. She starts to blush again and I smile. " If there was a career in blushing, you'd make millions." I tell her and, involuntarily, her blush deepens to a crimson red. My hand subconsciously goes up to cup her face and she stares at me. " But I have to admit, it's cute." I whisper and lean forward to press my lips to hers.

## Chapter 6

She stops me just before my lips reach hers and sits up quickly. "Sorry," I mutter after a few seconds. She looks away, picking absently at the grass, and then abruptly looks back at me. "I don't want to do this." she says softly, almost apologetic. "Do what?" I ask, sitting up too. "I don't want to be that girl that falls for her enemy and it ends up happy ever after. It's cliché. It shouldn't happen. We're not dating, we're actually not even friends. Sorry, but we're not. I know you helped me and stood up for me, and I'm grateful for that, but we should go back to our relationship before. I don't want this." she tells me and I stare at her. Ouch. "Why can't we be friends? I'm sorry I tried to kiss you, but that doesn't mean we still have to hate each other. Just give it a shot." I say. "No, Alex. You don't understand how all of the things you've done to me have affected me. In a way, you've helped me. Now, I have all these walls built up so no one can hurt me. And I'm not good with trusting people anyways. But all of the things you've done to me in the past eight years made me hate you. And I don't mean to sound rude, but I still do. I can't get over it. The pranks were mean and immature and I just can't risk becoming friends with you and then you turning around and pranking me again, even worse than before, just to get a good laugh." she explains. "Liyah, I wouldn't do that to you. I'm done with the pranks. I swear," I assure her. She waits a few minutes, looking across the water thoughtfully. Finally she turns to me, her beautiful blue eyes pooled with tears. "How am I supposed to believe you?" she breathes, swiping at her eyes and looking away. I watch her, practically feeling the hurt spread across my face. "Aeliya-" "Alex! Honey, it's time to go home!" my mom cuts me off. I watch her for another moment and drag myself to my feet. Then I take my jacket and wrap it around her bare shoulders. My fingers lightly brush her collarbone and she tenses up just as I feel almost an electrical shock run through my fingers all the way up my arm. Her head wheels around to look at me, her eyes wide. She must have felt it too. I pull back and slowly head back to the house, with my hands in my pockets. I don't talk the whole way home and just as I head up to my room, my mom stops me. "Alex? Is there something wrong?" she asks. "No, why would you think that?" I ask, faking a smile, and she frowns. "Goodnight, sweetie," she says softly, drifting down the hallway to her room. I step inside mine and shut the door, resisting the urge to break something or punch something. Of course she wouldn't forgive me! I wouldn't forgive myself either. I've been an ass to her for eight years. How could I ever think that she would even consider becoming friends with me? God I'm so stupid. I guess I'll just have to prove it to her that I can change. Aeliyah's POV That was almost a disaster. I almost let him kiss me. That would have ruined everything. We're not friends. We're not dating. We're not meant to have a relationship at all. We're enemies, for lack of a better word. But when his fingers touched my neck, I felt this weird attraction to him that I couldn't explain. A sense of longing. A feeling of wanting to throw my arms around him and apologize for everything I said and kiss him. But that would be crazy. And weird. I've never thought of him like that. I can still smell his axe cologne on his jacket, wrapped around me to protect me from the chilly night air. I force myself to stand, suddenly feeling weak and tired. I slowly make my way back into the house where my parents stare questioningly at me but don't make a sound. I just continue up the stairs to my room and change as fast as I can. I brush my teeth and crawl into my bed, enveloping myself in the warm comforter. Just as I close my eyes, my alarm goes off. My eyes snap open again, widening as I look at the clock. How is it already seven o'clock? I just fell asleep! I push the off button and head to my bathroom, hoping a shower will help wake me up. I blowdry my hair and leave it down, making it look somewhat decent. I decide against makeup besides a little mascara and change into dark jeans, a white north face hoodie and a pair of ugg boots. I put my headphones in my ears and listen to my song, blasting as loud as it will go. I don't say anything to my mom as I go downstairs, just automatically go out the door and down the sidewalk. I stuff my hands in my pockets and suddenly think about those flyers from yesterday. What will people think about me? Pushing the thought out of my mind, I march to school and head straight for my locker. I feel eyes boring into my back as I walk and once I take my headphones out and put them away, the odd sound of silence. Not completely silent, a few whispers here and there, people filling in the ones who were absent on what happened. And then starts the laughter, and suddenly the hallway is filled with talk about me. "...she's really a pornstar? Dude..." "...I believe it. She's a slut..." "...you didn't hear? Look at this flyer..." I hear a voice defending me, trying desperately to stop the rumors. Stop trying, it's not going to work, Alex, I think bitterly. Gossip will be gossip,

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and it spreads like fire. If someone didn't know about it, you'd better guess they'll know in the next five minutes. Quickly grabbing my textbook from my locker, I speed walk to science and sit all the way in the back. The teacher looks at me sympathetically, obviously knowing what happened. I look down, almost unaware of someone sitting beside me and pulling their chair close to mine. Without looking up, I know who it is. "Dont listen to them, Aeliyah. They're immature," Alex whispers in my ear and I feel oddly comforted. I know I told him to stay away, but in the back of my mind I want him to defend me and comfort me and tell me that everythings going to be fine. Soon class starts and I feel myself drifting off to sleep. Alex nudges me the first few times to keep me awake, but eventually let's me fall into a peaceful sleep with my head on his shoulder. When I wake, he's pushing the hair out of my eyes and telling me that we have to get to class. I nod and stand up, gathering my stuff in my arms. "There's a test tomorrow. Homework is to study." he tells me and I nod. All throughout the day, he walks me to my classes and glares at anyone who says something bad about me. At lunch, he abandons his popular table to sit with me and Carrie and later at home, she accuses us of dating. "What?" I practically scream when she asks if we're together. "Well, I was just wondering. I mean, we haven't had girl talk in a while and he's been spending a lot of time with you. And he sat at our table instead of the popular table. If that's not love I don't know what love is," she laughs and I punch her arm. "We're not dating. We agreed to stay the way we are. Not even friends." I tell her and she looks at me with a 'oh really?' face. "He walked you to every class, broke a guys nose for you, glared at anyone who looked at you funny, hasn't played a prank on you in two days, and sat with you every chance he got, and you're gonna tell me that you guys are still enemies?C'mon. You're just lying to yourself now." she explains and I sigh. "Okay. So we're kind of friends. But that's it. It would be too weird to be anything else." I tell her and she sighs. She opens her mouth to say something but she's cut off by my phone ringing. I pick it up and hold it to my ear, not even bothering to check who it is. "Hello?" I ask. "Hey, it's Alex," he says and I look up at Carrie. She makes a swooning gesture and laughs silently as I smack her knee. "Hi," I answer into the phone, hugging my knees to my chest. "Actually, I don't really know why I called," he breathes, adding on a nervous laugh. This makes me smile, looking dazedly at the carpet of my room. "Are you okay? Th kids at school were really rude today." he says finally. "Yeah. Thanks, By the way. For everything." I tell him. "No problem. This will all blow over before you know it. Soon they'll be talking about how John Etire broke his leg in a skiing accident and who's going to homecoming with who." he assures me. "Yeah." I answer faintly. "Listen, Liyah, I know you said you don't want to be anything different than what we were a week ago, but I'm tired of doing that. I don't want to prank you anymore. I just want to be friends. So would you go out to the movies with me? Just as friends? Tomorrow night?" he asks hopefully. "Um..." I trail off, my heart suddenly beating unnaturally fast as I think about it. He has been so nice to me lately. And I honestly think he's done with the pranking. What could it hurt? "Okay, sure." I agree. "Really? Great. I'll pick you up at seven." he says. "Sounds good," I reply. "Well, okay then. I'll see you tomorrow at school." he says. "See you," I answer and we hang up the phone. Carrie let's out a squeak as she looks at me. "You like him," she says. A statement, not a question. And I don't deny it.

## Chapter 7

" That movie was awesome." I tell Alex as we walk out of the Man of Steel theater. I clutch the popcorn container to my chest, reliving the last moments of the best movie I've ever seen in my life. Alex laughs at me as we make our way out to his truck again and climb inside. " So it wasn't a terrible time?" he asks with a lopsided grin as he glances sideways at me. My breath is suddenly knocked out of me as I realize how... Utterly and unbearably handsome he is. His dark hair falls in soft waves over his forehead, emerald green eyes sparkling with an amused twinkle. My eyes trace the sharp, angular curve of his jaw, the graceful arch of his eyebrow... He raises his eyebrow at me and I snap out of it. " No, no. It was great. Thanks." I tell him and he nods and starts the truck. " Anytime," he replies. He starts heading back to my place and I use this time to look at him. He really is handsome. Why haven't I noticed it before? He glances at me at a red light and suddenly we find ourselves locked in a comfortable gaze, just looking into each others eyes. He leans forward slightly, one hand slipping off of the wheel and coming up to touch my face. The simple touch sends shocks up my spine and leaves tingles all over my body. We can't do this! A voice screams in my head. But I can't make myself make him stop. Just as he's about to close the last small gap between us, a loud honk jolts us apart. I look up to see the light has turned green and Alex presses his foot on the gas, both hands tight on the wheel. I see him clench and unclench his jaw a few times, taking a deep breath and every once in a while glancing at me from the corner of his eye. Finally he slowly rolls to a stop in my driveway and stops the truck. He stares through the windshield for a few seconds and and I turn to him. " Thanks. I had an awesome time, Alex." I say and he nods, flashing me a smile. " Good. Can I safely say we're friends now?" he asks and I hesitate. Can I trust him not to hurt me? Most of me tells my brain that I can't, but there's this small, nagging voice in the back of my brain that says I can. 'You need him,' it tells me. 'You need him becuse you've known him basically all your life. Without him, you wouldn't have grown up strong. You would be a weak and vulnerable girl, not able to take anything. He's made you into what you are today. He's hardened your heart so you can take anything. You're ready to face anything that could possibly come at you.' I take a moment to consider this as I slip out of the truck and look back at him, making my final decision. " Yeah." I breathe. " You can." I smile back at him and go back inside my house, praying I didn't make a mistake.

## Chapter 8

I'll admit, it's a little weird, being friends with Alex. Whenever he smiles at me from across the hall, I have to quickly remind myself that it's a simple smile, not a sign of victory as he realizes I've stepped right into his trap. A real, genuine smile. With a certain twinkle that makes you feel hot and cold at the same time and sends your knees wobbling and your head reeling. Just now he flashes me a million dollar smile and I can't help but smile back. Alex's POV After school I go to hang out at Aeliyah's house. Her younger four year old sister, Sophie, runs away from her mom as soon as I walk through the door behind Aeliyah. When I came over with my parents the other day, she was out with her aunt who insisted on taking her to the carnival with her own daughter, Phoebe. " Alex!" she yells, launching herself into the air, arms outstretched. I catch her mid-jump and tickle her sides. She grins and I set her on my shoulders. " What am I, chopped liver?" Aeliyah rolls her eyes and sets her bag down. Lacey smiles and pushes a loose piece of hair out of her eyes. " Alex, Aeliyah, I really need to run to the store. You're father's on the way back from work. Would you mind watching Sophie for a minute until I get back?" she asks, grabbing her keys. " No problem," I answer and she smiles gratefully at us and rushes out the door. I race up the steps with Sophie on my shoulders and she giggles as I skid to a stop in Aeliyah's room and drop her on the bed. I grab her feet and hold her upside down and she laughs again, pigtails swinging. I flip her back up the right way and set her on her feet and she takes my hand and practically drags me to her room. She's stronger than she looks. On the way, I snatch Aeliyah from the hallway and pull her with us too. Finally in Sophie's bright pink room, she makes Liyah and I sit on the floor beside her plastic kitchen. She walks up to us, clasps her hands together and smiles. " What would you like to drink?" she asks brightly. " Well, I want a chocolate shake with bananas and whipped cream and a cherry and I want peanut butter in it too, and-" " We're out of all that, just water or soda." she interrupts me and I laugh. " I'll have a coke." I tell her and she looks at Liyah. " I'll have a coke too," she says and Sophie skips back to her kitchen, dark curls bouncing. " This is a terrible restaurant. They don't have chocolate shakes? Pitiful," I whisper to Aeliyah and she mock gasps. " You're the worst customer." she says just as Sophie comes back and hands us two little plastic cups. " Thanks Soph," I say with a grin, holding my pinkie out and pretending to drink from the empty cup. " Now what would you guys like to eat?" she asks. " Well-" I start. " How about you tell us what you have?" Aeliyah asks. " Oh, well we have pudding. We're out of everything else." she says and that makes me smile. " Can we have some pudding?" I ask and she nods and sprints out of the room. I scoot closer to Liyah and lean forward. " Jerk, I was going to ask for steak," I joke and she rolls her eyes. " Idiot, this is obviously a pudding restaurant. Just pudding." she says. " You should have come prepared." she adds with a smirk. " Im the idiot? Says the girl who busted her ass on nothing today at school," I tell her and her cheeks turn red. I get this familiar urge to touch her, and unconsciously my hand reaches toward hers. I feel that same electrical jolt that runs through my fingertips all throughout my body and this time I feel a pull toward her. " Says the guy who still has red tinted hair," she says, recalling the day she doused me in red paint as she touches the ends of my hair lightly. I stare into her eyes and she bites her bottom lip nervously. " Dont do that." I shake my head and use my thumb to pull her chin down so she stops and she raises her eyebrow. " Thats my job," I tell her and press my lips to hers. Electric. That's all I feel. It courses through me, pouring from her lips into my body. She falls against me and my arms instinctively go around her. I bite her bottom lip gently and she starts to pull back. I let out a noise between a growl and the word 'no' and pull her back. She kisses me back again, running her hands through my hair. I lean over her and she falls onto her back on the carpeted floor. I continue to kiss her until I hear a yell. My eyes snap open to meet hers for a split second before I jerk my head up. I pull back and sit down again and Liyah sits up too. Together we stare at the door where Sophie is looking at us in horror. " What did you do?" she asks loudly coming toward us. Liyah blushes once again but Sophie doesn't mean that. " The soda! How could you spill the soda? Oh my gosh," she exclaims, grabbing the cups and pretending to wipe the floor. " Oh I'm sorry, Soph. I don't know what came over Liyah. She just attacked me." I explain and Liyah glares at me as I wink at her. " I guess it's okay. I brought your pudding." she says, taking the cups and handing us each a bowl with a plastic spoon. " Attacked," I repeat at Liyah. " With your mouth," I add and she rolls her eyes. We finish our pudding and continue to play restaurant with Sophie until Lacey comes back and Mr. Blue shows up from work. He still

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eyes me funny when I touch Liyah in any way, but he likes me more now. Liyah and I go to her room to work on our project for science class and she looks up at me and laughs. " Care to share the joke?" I ask and she reaches her hand up and smoothed my hair down and she runs her hand through it a few times. " It was sticking up everywhere," she says. " Thats not my fault, you did it," I remind her and once again, the color creeps up to her cheeks. She looks so cute when she blushes. Damn, I'm really falling for her, huh?

## Chapter 9

After Liyah and I are finished making a model of the earth she walks me to the door. Her parents are in the kitchen talking and I pull her onto the porch with me and shut the door. "What are you-" I cut her off by kissing her, wrapping my arms around her waist tightly. She pulls away and looks into my eyes. "My parents could be watching," she breathes, glancing nervously at the door. "Liyah, will you go to homecoming with me?" I ask and she frowns. "What? No. Alex, I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I haven't decided if I can trust you yet. Because-" "Aeliyah, just say yes." I interrupt. "Yes." she says with a blush. "Yes what?" I question, pulling her closer to me. "Yes I'll go with you." she repeats. "Where?" I tease and she smacks my arm. "Yes I'll go to homecoming with you, Alexander Gray," she says and I grin and kiss her again slowly. I pull away unwillingly and wink before heading back to my truck. "Bye, Aeliyah Blue," I call over my shoulder and she waves at me and goes back inside. I drive back to my house and take a shower and brush my teeth and then head straight to bed. When I wake up its 3 o'clock on the morning and my phone is ringing right next to my ear. I pick up and hold it to my ear, hearing heavy breathing. "Hello?" I ask groggily. "Alex?" a scared voice asks. Aeliyah. "Aeliyah? What's wrong?" I ask immediately, dropping my bag. "Alex... I crashed.. I can't see anything, and..." she trails off and I run downstairs and grab my keys, already headed out the door. "Aeliyah! Stay where you are. Do you remember what road your on?" I ask frantically, getting in my truck and starting it. "Um.. I'm on Highway C. I just turned onto it and a car knocked me off the road." she answers slowly. "Okay, stay where you are, alright? I want you to call 911 and tell them where you are and then call me right back, okay?" I instruct her. "Okay," she says. I hear the click on my phone and pull it away from my ear, racing toward the highway. When I finally get there she's on the phone again and I pull over beside the busted guard rail. I look down and at the base of the steep hill is her car, upsidedown and smoking, completely totaled. "Aeliyah, I'm here, I'm here, I'll get you out," I say. "Alex, I'm really tired..." she says softly. I drop my phone and race to her car, where she's sitting upsidedown, squeezed between the seat and the steering wheel, a stream of blood running down the side of her face. "Liyah, don't move, just hang tight," I tell her and reach for her seatbelt. It won't release and I suddenly become aware that the car could bust any minute. If the engine went through enough damage... It's hot enough to blow the car. Especially with all the gasoline in it. I take my knife out of my pocket and cut her seatbelt and pull it off of her. She's already unconscious now and I grab her under her arms and pull her backwards out the window. The car starts to smoke even worse and suddenly the backseat window shatters. Shit, it's going to bust. I drag Liyah as far away as possible, hearing sirens in the distance, and drop over her to protect her as I hear a loud blast. I hear the rest of the windows shattering and the engine blowing, and feel pieces of glass hit my back and my arm and one on my cheek. I look back and the car is up in flames, rising higher every second. I pull Liyah further away and see an ambulance pull over at the road. A few police cars and a fire truck follow a few seconds after and two paramedics rush down to help Aeliyah into the ambulance. I run up too and they insist I get in the ambulance because I need medical attention for my cuts. You don't have to tell me twice. I'm going to stay with Aeliyah no matter what. I take her hand as they give her oxygen and clean up the cut on her head. Her breathing is uneven and ragged and I watch nervously as we arrive at the hospital. She still hasn't opened her eyes and they rush her into the E.R. As I try to get in the room, a doctor pushes me out and I'm forced to wait in the hallway. I immediately call her parents and then Carrie. They get there soon enough and I pace back and forth down the hallway. Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay... "Alex," Carrie says and hugs me. I hug her back and hear a scared, small voice. "Alex?" Sophie asks, looking up at me with her blue eyes wide as she clutches a Teddy bear to her chest. "Hey Soph," I answer, forcing a smile and picking her up. "Whats wrong with Aeliyah?" she asks softly. "Nothing, sweetie. She just has a cold and the doctor wanted her to come in so she can get medicine." I lie and she nods. "Okay." she says. I sit down in a chair with her and soon she falls asleep on my chest. Then I realize that it is super early and we're all pretty much in pajamas. I push the hair out of Sophie's eyes and lean my head back against the wall, wide awake. A few hours later the door opens and it takes all of my control not to leap up because Sophie is asleep in my arms. Lacey takes her from me and I go to the doctor. "Is she okay?" I ask quickly. "Aeliyah has suffered 3 broken ribs, a concussion, a broken collarbone, and a crushed lung. But, we were able to reinflate her lung. Other than

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those things, she just has some cuts and bruises and she'll be okay. She was hit from behind first and then her car rolled onto it's side and down the hill, so her lower body is fine. Her upper body was thrown around a bit." he explains to us and then eyes me. " You, sir, need to be checked out too. Jessica, could you check this young man? He has some pretty bad cuts," the doctor says to me and I shake my head. " No, no, I'll be fine, can I see Aeliyah now? Is she awake?" I ask, trying to look past him into the room. " Sir, get cleaned up first and I'll let you know." he answers and pushes me back. With a groan, I let the nurse lead me to another room and she gets some bandages, alcohol, and some guaze. I sit on the edge of the bed and nervously tap my foot while she cleans the wide cut on my cheek with alcohol. " Is she your girlfriend?" she asks softly. Not in a jealous or creepy way, just an innocent question. " Yeah," I tell her. " Shes going to be okay, you know," she adds and I sigh. " I know. It just looked really bad. I was the first one she called, and her voice, it terrified me. And when I got to her, she was covered in blood from her head and the car blew up," I explain. Why I'm explaining this all to her, I have no idea. She's just that type of person that you can't keep anything from, I guess. " Is that how you got these cuts?" she asks. " Yeah. I managed to get her out and I covered her and got most of the glass." i reply. " Brave," she says, moving to my back and taking the small pieces of glass out. She finally finishes and packs the things away. " Alright, you're free to go." she says. " Thanks," I answer and she nods. I rush back to Aeliyah's room and the doctor let's me go in. Her parents have already seen her, and they back out of the room to give me some privacy. The door shuts and I pull a chair up beside her and take her hand. " Aeliyah? I don't know if you can hear me..." I trail off and the heart monitor speeds up. I smile and lean forward to kiss her cheek. " Youre gonna be okay, Liyah. Don't worry, you'll be just fine," I say to her but I'm trying to convince myself more than her. I lay my head on the edge of the bed beside her and soon enough, I'm asleep. When I wake up, Liyah is messing with my hair, telling me it's still red. " Morning, beautiful," I mumble, my eyes drifting closed again. They snap open, realizing she's awake. " Liyah!" I shout, wrapping my arms around her tightly. " Ow, ow, broken ribs, broken ribs," she breathes and I gasp and pull away. " Sorry," I tell her and she takes my arms and puts them around her again with a faint smile. " Just kiss me, dummy," she says and I grin and lean forward. When we pull back she adjusts in the bed and I look to see what time it is. Nine o'clock. " Does anything hurt? Do you need medicine? I'll call the nurse," I tell her quickly, standing up. " No, I'm fine, Alex, really. Sit down," she says, catching my hand. " They said I can leave tomorrow." she says with a grin. " Good," I say. " Im sorry," she apologizes abruptly. " for what?" I ask. " For calling you. I don't really know why I did. I should have just called nine one one instead of bothering you," she says sheepishly. " Aeliyah, I'm glad you called me. You could be hurt way worse if I didn't come. They didn't show up until after the car blew. But I already got you out by then." I explain. " The car blew?" she asks, astonished. I nod with a grin and wrap my arms around her again. " Geez. I take it back. Thank you," she breathes and I kiss her. " Thank you for calling me."



## Chapter 10

Homecoming rolls around and soon enough I'm standing on the Blue's front porch, wearing a tux with a baby blue tie. I was instructed earlier this morning to wear a baby blue tie, and thankfully I found it in the back of my closet. I ring the doorbell and glance around the porch, listening to the wind chime and watching the porch swing sway back and forth slowly. The door swings open wide, revealing Lacey with a massive grin. " Alex! Come in, come in," she cheers, throwing her arms around me in a hug and then practically dragging me inside. " Shes upstairs getting ready," she explains and I nod. We wait for a few minutes, watching the stairs, and soon I hear a door open and Aeliyah begins the walk down the stairs. She glances up nervously and my jaw drops. She's wearing a baby blue, strapless dress that stops mid-thigh with beads at the top, a blue sash across the middle, and it puffs out slightly from there to the bottom. Around her midsection the dress is white and it fades into the same blue as my tie. Her shoulder length hair is curled in loose waves and she has dangly earrings hanging from her ears. Her makeup is light, just the way I like it, and my eyes travel down to her long tan legs. I spot something that makes me immediately grin: her signature black allstars. She glances at mine, the exact same, and then meets my eyes with a breathtaking smile as she finally reaches ground level. Lacey runs off to find her camera and I lean close to Aeliyah's ear. " You look beautiful," I whisper, kissing her cheek quickly before Mr. Blue has time to notice. Lacey comes back and he helps her turn it on and tells her what to push. " Okay, just a few I promise. Smile!" she says. I loop my arm around Aeliyah's waist, pull her close to my side, and flash my cheesiest smile at the camera. 50 pictures later... " Okay, mom, can we go now, please?" Liyah begs for the fifth time. I hear a familiar patter of feet coming down the hallway and Sophie's little face appears. " Where are they going?" she asks, rubbing her eyes. She must have been taking a nap. " We're going to a dance, Soph," I explain, crouching down to her height. She walks up to me and smiles. " I wanna go to a dance!" she exclaims. " Well, this dance is for people that are in highschool," I tell her gently and her smile fades. " Aww," she says softly. " But I'll tell you what, I promise sometime we can have our own dance here and you can wear a beautiful dress and I'll dance with you. Okay?" I offer and her pretty little smile returns. " Okay!" she says and throws her arms around me. I give her a little squeeze and let her go and she runs over to lacee to tell her the news. " Have her back by eleven," Mr. Blue says sternly to me but there's something softer in his tone. " Yes sir," I reply and take Liyah's hand. " Bye you two! Have fun!" Lacey calls as we go outside. She shuts the door for us and I put my arm around liyah's shoulders as we walk to my truck. She looks up at me admiringly and I raise my eyebrow. " What?" I ask. " You're so good with kids." she says in awe. " Not really. I mean normal people like kids. I'm a normal person. Sometimes." I tell her and she shakes her head. " No, anyone else would have told Sophie she's too young to go to dances. And that's it. They wouldn't have explained to her what it is and then offered to give her her own dance," she explains and I shrug as I help her into the truck. She pulls me towards her and kisses me softly before letting me go to walk around the truck and get in. I take her hand across the console and drive to the school. When we finally get there, I take her hand again and we walk inside together. Immediately Carrie finds us and she and Aeliyah gush over their dresses. " Im going to get some punch. Carrie, you want some?" I ask and she nods. " Ill be right back," I tell Aeliyah, kissing her temple and winding my way through the crowds to get to the punch table. Aeliyah's POV " Oh my god. Alex? Really? I thought you two hated each other! I mean i know you went out once as friends, but... What happened?" Carrie asks frantically. " Remember that day everyone put those flyers up about me and then Alex came to my house and apologized? Well he was really nice to me then and that same night his family came over for dinner and he tried to kiss me but i didn't let him. Then he convinced me to go out with him as friends and I realized he's not as mean as I thought he was. And then he came to my house to work on a project for school and we kissed and then when he left he kissed me and asked me to go to homecoming. And then I had the accident and I called him and he got me out before the car blew up and... Carrie, he saved my life. And besides he's different now." I explain and she sighs and hugs me. " You guys are so cute together. Remember, I always said that one day you guys were going to get together. I totally called it." she says and I laugh. Alex returns with our punch and hands us each a cup, looking nervously around the gym. " Whats wrong?" I ask. " Jessica was trying to talk to me but I came back before she could. She's looking for me," he says. Jessica is his ex girlfriend. They dated for almost a year when he broke up with her

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for cheating. " God dammit, she's like a bloodhound," he mumbles, staring at his punch. " I wish this was spiked." he says, taking a drink. I laugh and shake my head. " She can't be that bad," I tell him and he gives me a look that says 'just wait'. " Alex!" a shrill voice exclaims and I look up. Jessica is standing there with an extremely low cut and short skintight, black dress. She sidles up to Alex, completely ignoring the fact that I'm here. " Hey Alex," she purrs, running her hand along his arm. He glances at me with an ' I told you so' look and she grabs his arm. " We should dance," she says seductively. " Actually, I really don't feel like dancing right now. I mean, I'm here with Aeliyah-" " No, no, it's fine, Alex go ahead." I wave it off with a devilish grin. Jessica's grin widens as she drags him to the dance floor and he glares at me. I just laugh and begin small talk with Carrie. I explain in further detail about how Alex and I 'got together' and then I glance at the clock on the wall. " I swear this is the longest song ever. Why aren't they-" I stop mid-sentence as I glance at the dance floor. There, I see Jessica and Alex, practically eating each others lips off. I gasp and feel my cup slip from my fingers. Carrie jumps back from the puddle and people around us get silent and watch me to see why I'm acting like a deranged lunatic. Alex and Jessica pull apart to see what's going on and he looks my way but I'm already halfway out the door. " Aeliyah!" I hear his shouts behind me, progressively getting louder as he follows me outside into the quiet night. Tears spill down my cheeks and onto my dress and I run down the sidewalk, thankful I'm not wearing heels. " Aeliyah! Wait!" he shouts, gaining speed. I hear his shoes smack against the concrete right behind me. He catches my waist and spins me back to him and I push against his chest. " Get away from me!" I yell and he holds my arms down to my sides. " Aeliyah, I didn't kiss her if that's what you're thinking." he says. " Really? That's not what it looked like," I growl and he sighs. " Listen, I didn't. She was talking about how we were so good together and she came onto me. I didn't even kiss her back. I pushed her off and heard everyone go quiet and I looked up and you were halfway gone." he explains, staring into my eyes. " I didn't kiss her. You have to believe me. I've done some bad things in the past, but look at me. You know I wouldn't do something like that to you." he tells me and I sigh, defeated, as I sink to the curb. " I know. I'm sorry." I say and he wraps his arms around me and kisses me. " Are you hungry? Let's get out of here," he says and pulls me up. " Where are we going?" I ask and he shakes his head, taking my hand and pulling my to his truck. " You'll see."

## Chapter 11

A few minutes later we're sitting at a booth together in McDonalds, finishing our fries when Truly Madly Deeply comes on the radio in the restaurant. I realize that we're the only ones in the whole place besides the workers and Alex stands up. I look up at him and he holds his hand out to me. " We didn't get to dance at the actual dance." he says with a smirk and I take his hand. He spins me to the middle of the restaurant and puts one arm around my waist and the other takes my hand. I put my free arm on his shoulder and he sways us gently back and forth. He starts singing the chorus to me and I put both of my arms around his neck and lay my head on his chest. Suddenly the music gets louder like someone turned it up and when we are turned enough so that we can see the main counter, I see two girls in uniforms staring at us as if we're the most precious thing in the world. They slowly fade away, and then it's just me and Alex. Alex hums the song quietly in my ear and reaches his hand up to push a curl away from my face. I look up at him and he leans down and kisses me, pulling me tight against him. That familiar, yet always bright spark runs through me, leaving a tingling sensation in all of my bones. Our lips move in sync with each other and before I know it the song is over and we're still dancing. We reluctantly pull away, realizing it's 10:30 and head outside to his truck again. He takes me back to my house and parks his truck in the driveway. We still have five minutes until eleven o'clock. I move into the middle seat, putting my arms around Alex's neck and he kisses me. His arms go around my waist and i put my hands in his hair and tug gently. He groans and bites my bottom lip gently, breathing hard. And then we kiss like the world depends on it. I pull away, remembering I have to get inside, and it's 10:59. I look at Alex, both of us breathing heavily, and grin. " I have to get inside," I tell him, opening the door. " No," he says, pulling me back and burying his face in my hair. He plants a kiss on my neck and then trails kisses up my jaw to my lips. " I have to," I say, shuddering as his lips touch my neck again. " Fine." he says and I slip out of the seat. " Bye, Alex," I say. " Bye Liyah," he replies and I jog inside, opening the door just as the clock hits eleven. I wave at Alex as he drives off and I shut the door behind me. " How was the dance?" my mom asks with a grin, standing up from the couch. " Um.. Good. It was fun." I tell her and she nods and comes over to me. She puts her arms around me and leans close to my ear. " Fix your lipstick before your father sees," she says with a wink. I blush and fix it at the corners and above my lip. " Goodnight," she calls over her shoulder as she makes her way to her room. My dad comes over too and kisses my forehead. " Goodnight, sweetheart," he says. " Goodnight dad." I answer. " I love you." he says. " I love you too," I reply, backing into my room. Alex's POV I go inside my house and my 15 year old sister is sitting on the couch. " Hey, how was the dance?" she asks and I smile, remembering Aeliyah. " Good," I reply. " Whoa, what was that smile? And what's on your... Is that lip gloss?" she asks, coming closer, and I wipe my mouth, leaving little sparkles across my hand. Aeliyah. " Whos the girl?" she asks, sitting on the back of the couch. " None of your business," I reply. " Seriously? Come on. I know you just had a crazy makeout session. Her lipgloss is on your mouth. Just tell me. A name, at least." she says. " Aeliyah." I reply. " Ooh, that's a pretty name. What's she look like?" she asks. " Goodnight, Savannah," I answer, walking up the stairs. I hear her groan and mumble something about me being so secretive all the time and I just smile and make my way up to my room. I text Aeliyah goodnight and after she texts back the same, I go to bed, happy to finally be with the girl of my dreams.

## Chapter 12

A few minutes after pushing the snooze button 3 times, I climb out of bed to get ready. I go through the motions like a robot; brush my teeth, take a shower, fix my hair, get dressed, put on makeup, head out the door. This time, though, as I jog down the steps, pulling my hoodie sleeves down over my hands, I hear a honk outside. "Who's that?" my mom asks and I peek out the window as I yank my allstars onto my feet. "Uh.. Alex. I guess that's my ride. Bye mom," I say and jog out the door. I climb into his truck and he leans across the console and kisses me. "Whats this?" I ask and he flashes a lopsided grin at me that makes my heart melt. "What, I can't give my girl a ride to school?" he asks innocently, and I can't help the way my heart flutters when he calls me his girl. My hand automatically finds his and my fingers curl around his long, rough ones. He pulls my hand to his mouth and kisses the back of it, his eyes still on the road, and then he turns the radio up slightly. Don't Ya by Brett Eldredge is playing and immediately, we both begin singing to each other, laughing as we both get the words completely wrong. This is so...easy, I think in my head. Laughing, joking, singing with him. Why haven't I noticed it before? Even when we hated each other, we always had the occasional smack talk in the hallways. And I think I would have noticed how easy it is for me to talk when I'm around him. Easy for me to do whatever I want, and act as stupid as I want, knowing he won't judge me. I suddenly come to a realization, and it hits me like a ton of bricks. All of my inner walls I've built around my heart come crashing down like a firework exploding and I take in a deep breath, my heart thumping loudly in my ears. I feel the truck come to a stop on the side of the road and I finally meet Alex's eyes. He puts the truck in park and turns to me, capturing my face in his big hands. "Whats wrong? I've asked you the same thing four times." he says softly. I swallow hard, my throat suddenly very dry. I shake my head, trying to pull away, but he just holds me tighter. "Tell me," he pleads and I stare into his eyes. Full of concern and worry, and something else that I can't identify. "I can't," I finally croak, random tears springing to my eyes. "Why not? You were just fine a minute ago, talking and laughing and smiling. Did I upset you? Did I hurt you?" he asks, suddenly looking horrified at the thought. His hands loosen on me, afraid that his last question was true and I shake my head once again, a tear slipping down my cheek. "Then what is it?" he asks again, his expression pained. "Alex... What we've been doing is wrong. Us I mean. We're not meant to be together. We should have the same relationship we've always had, strictly enemies. That's all. If I told you, it would make everything worse." I explain to him and he stares at me with a slight smile. I frown, confused, and he let's out a small chuckle. "You don't get it, do you?" he asks and suddenly he becomes serious. "Aeliyah, I can't not be with you. You make m a better man, in every possible way. Even if I tried, I wouldn't be able to get away from you. I'm not capable of being a jackass to you again, and you and I both know it. We can't be enemies anymore. It's out of the question. Whatever it is that's upsetting you, you can tell me." he says and I close my eyes, trying to will the tears away. "We should get to school," I breathe, without opening my eyes. I know instantly that he wouldn't move this truck if his life depended on it, until I told him what the reason for my tears is. "Aeliyah." a simple, short word, yet filled with so much passion it could make a girl sob at just the sound of it. And that's exactly what happens. I break down in sobs, covering my face in my hands. Arms snake around me and Alex pulls me close, cradling my head against his chest. All I can do is repeat to my self: I can't. I can't do this. "You can't do what?" Alex asks softly, and I give in, all my strength gone. "I can't love you." I whisper, my tears slowly subsiding. I feel his body shaking, a deep rumbling noise coming out from his chest. Laughter. He's laughing at me. As if this isn't humiliating enough. Now he has to laugh at me while I sit, about to cry over rejection. My eyes involuntarily fill again and he struggles to stop laughing. "Please don't cry, baby, don't cry," he says, stopping. "Why are you laughing at me?" I ask, mortified. "Its just... That's what you couldn't tell me? That you love me? Why not? Why couldn't you tell me?" he asks. "Because. We're not supposed to be together." I answer, still confused as to why he was laughing. "Aeliyah, I love you, too. Who says we're not supposed to be together? Because they can come to me. I don't care what people think. All I know is that I can't keep myself away from you, no matter what, and I can't stop the way I feel about you. If we weren't meant to be together, we wouldn't be. But we are." he tells me wiping the tears from my cheeks. My heart jumps, skips, and swells to twice it's size all in a split second. "I love you," I repeat, putting my arms around his neck. "I love you," he says to me, kissing my lips softly. "Now we really do have

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to get to school," he adds, kissing the fresh tears off of my cheeks and starting the truck again. I move back into my seat and fix my makeup in the mirror, reaching for Alex's hand again. He meets me halfway, turning to look at me as he does. "If you're my enemy," he starts slowly as I face him. "Then you're the best enemy I've ever had." We finally arrive at school, walking in with our hands laced together. As usual, people pointedly stare and whisper to other people, and as much as I try to not let it affect me, it somehow always does. Alex and I go to our first class together, taking a seat in the very back. The whole class turns to look at us, amazed we can sit this close without exploding. "You know what we should do?" Alex asks me with a grin. I can't believe I agreed to this. I've been instructed to ignore Alex for most of the day until seventh hour. Just after sixth hour is over, I make my way to my locker, as instructed. Then I head down the main hall toward the gym and spot Alex coming the opposite way, without a glance in my direction. People around us are trying to see if we'll stop and talk to each other, as they've picked up on how we've been avoiding each other. I keep walking, slightly altering my walk so that I bump arms with him roughly as I pass, spinning up both backwards a little. We both stop, facing each other with convincing hateful looks thrown at each other. "Watch it!" he growls. "Well maybe if you weren't so stupid, you'd watch where you're going!" I shout back and he takes a step forward, looming over me. "Fuck off, Blue," he spits and I can hear the crowd gathering around us gasp and begin whispering to each other frantically. "Kiss. My. Ass," I answer, spacing the words out and throwing a glare at him. "I'd rather do this," he says, taking a step toward me. The crowd gasps again, thinking he's going to hit me, but he grabs my neck gently, his thumbs pressing into the skin just below my jaw, and kisses me. My eyelids flutter closed and the crowd awes and slowly disappates, disappointed we didn't have a real fight. I'm sure most of them had their phones out. When we pull away, Alex let's out a light chuckle and kisses my forehead. "There. Now that we're public, you don't have to worry about being secretive about us," he says. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you meant the things you said back there. The bad ones, I mean." I tell him and he looks at me, horrified. "Never."

## Chapter 13

Carrie says we're most likely to get married. We've only been together now for six months, yet she tells everyone, even random strangers, about us. Today, we're stretched out by the pool, tanning. We're just a week away from no school for summer break. "Hey, is Alex coming over?" Carrie asks beside me. "Yeah. He should be here soon." I answer and she nods. A few minutes later we get up and climb into the pool to cool off. We start to swim back to the edge when a loud, big splash covers us in water. I turn around as Alex pops up from the water, shaking the hair out of his eyes. "Hey, babe," he says, kissing me. "You guys are so cute," Carrie exclaims, swimming over to a raft. I wrap my arms and legs around Alex and he treads water to keep up both up. "Where are your parents? And Sophie?" he asks. "My parents are at work, and Sophie wanted to go see Phoebe," I explain to him as we climb out of the pool. He nods and as me and Carrie make our way back to the chairs, he rummages through the box full of pool toys and stuff. "How long has it been since you've seen your brother?" Carrie asks me. "Um... About a year and a half." I answer. "That's a really long time. Sorry I asked, I just wondered because I was on the phone with him the other day." she explains and I glance over at her. "Why were you on the phone with him?" I ask, confused. "We were discussing when I was going to get back." a deep, familiar voice says behind me. My eyes widen and my head snaps around, recognizing the familiar, angular face in a military uniform. "Andrew!" I yell, darting up from my seat. I race over to him, throwing my arms around him with tears rolling down my cheeks. "Hey, Lee," he says with a grin, using my childhood nickname he had for me. He hugs me tight, squeezing his arms around my waist. A few minutes later when I finally let go, I swipe the tears off with the back of my hand and Alex appears at my side, putting his arm protectively around my waist. "Whos this?" he asks, with extra caution as they have a stare down. I roll my eyes and poke his side. "Alex, this is my brother Andrew. Andrew this is my boyfriend Alex." I introduce and Alex visibly relaxes. "Good. I thought I was going to have to fight you for her," Alex breathes with a happy grin returning to his face. "So when did you get back? Do mom and dad know you're here?" I ask frantically. "I got back early this morning. And I drove here from the airport. Well, I caught a cab. Mom and dad don't know yet. I planned on surprising them. Where's Soph?" he asks. "She's at Aunt Margie's with Phoebe. Mom and dad are at work." I explain and he nods. "So how long are you here for?" I ask. "3 weeks." he says with a grin and I hug him again. "Good. I missed you." I say in his ear. "I missed you too, Lee," he says back. Eventually we help him lug his stuff into his old room and we sit outside and catch up by the pool. Eventually, we all start to get tired and since it's a Sunday, we have school tomorrow. Alex stays the night and after we watch Andrew and my parents have a tearful reunion, we head off to bed. I change into a t-shirt and shorts and Alex climbs into the bed with me and wraps his arms around me. "I love you," he whispers, kissing my forehead. "I love you," I reply, slowly drifting off to sleep. When I wake up, Alex is still sleeping, and I slip out of the bed unnoticed. I go to the bathroom and take a quick shower and then leave my curly hair to air dry. I brush my teeth and add a tiny bit of makeup and then change into a pair of short Jean shorts, a baggy tank top with some tribal sign on it, and combat boots. I slip a few silver bracelets onto my wrists and finally the little silver infinity ring that Alex got me for our 6 month anniversary a few days ago. I make my way to the bed, pushing his dark hair out of his eyes. His eyes flutter open, bright blue, and I smile at him. "Wake up," I whisper and he grabs me and pulls me toward him, burying his face in my now mid-back length hair. "Goodmorning beautiful," he says. "Goodmorning handsome. Now go get ready before we're late for school." I tell him and he picks me up and gets to his feet, turning around and setting me in his place. He leans over me and kisses me and then head for the bathroom to take a shower. I skip down the stairs, feeling oddly happy today. I scroll through the latest news on facebook, frowning at a few of the statuses; Sometimes people can't help but spreading rumors. Anyone hear about the new school slut? Guess who! The comments never reveal who it is, and I just shrug it off. I slip my phone into my pocket and Andrew comes downstairs, hair all over the place. "Morning," he says, pressing a kiss to my forehead before opening the fridge. "Morning," I reply. A few minutes later Alex comes down too in a pair of cargo shorts and a gray AND1 shirt. When it's time to leave, we head out to his truck and on the way to school I show him the statuses on facebook. "Who knows? Probably just a stupid rumor," he says and Shrugs. I ignore it once again, and we head into the school. Everyone stares at us, and almost all of the guys whistle at me. Alex frowns and pulls me

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closer to him, glaring at anyone who whistles at me again. "Hey baby," one says, having the nerve to reach for my ass. He pulls back abruptly, probably seeing the glare on Alex's face. After that so many people try to talk to me. "Wow. You wanna go for a round?" another guy asks. "Hey babe, I got some money over here," another calls. Finally we find Carrie and she runs up to us. "Alex, Aeliyah, I tried to stop the rumors but I can't. Jessica started them again. She's saying that you two had sex and that Alex paid you for it and that you did anything for money. Now all the guys... You know." she says frantically and I feel Alex's arm tighten around me. "Let's get out of here. You shouldn't have to listen to this," Alex says, taking my hand and pulling me back outside to his truck. I try not to listen to anyone on the way out, but I can't help but hear and it upsets me. When we get to the truck I climb in, crying silently. Alex gets in and wraps his arms around me tightly, as if trying to block out everyone else. "I'm sorry, baby, don't cry, please. It's just a stupid rumor. We both know it's not true. Don't worry about it." he whispers to me and once he's able to calm me down, we head back to my house. As I walk in, I spot my mom and dad arguing. "Guys? What's wrong?" I ask, wiping any evidence of me crying off of my cheeks. "Aeliyah, you are not to see him anymore," my dad says pulling me away from Alex. "What?" we both ask at the same time. "Keith! This isn't fair to them!" my mom yells. "Yes it is! They deserve to be punished after what they did. Especially under this roof! She's not even 18!" he shouts back and I pull away from my dad, back to Alex. "What's happening? Why can't we be together?" I ask, frustrated no one will answer me. "Honey, a student's mom called and told us that there's a rumor going around that you and Alex slept together and he paid you for it. And that you slept with the other boys at your school as well. Your father thinks it's true." she explains and I stare at him, horrified. "You think I would do that?" I ask softly, in shock and disbelief. "Aeliyah, don't you try to make me feel guilty. Say goodbye to Alex. Alex, you'd better not come here again or I'll straighten you out myself." he growls. "Dad! Stop!" I cry, breaking out of his grip again and running into Alex's arms. "Tell him it's not true," I say and Alex shakes his head, looking down at me with sadness in his eyes. "I can't. He won't believe me. You should listen to him." he says softly, pushing me gently away. "No! It's not true! You know that! Why can't you tell him?" I ask, fat tears slipping down my cheeks as I let out a choking, sobbing sound. "Aeliyah, I love you," he says, backing up. My dad positions himself in front of me and Alex glances at me one last time before disappearing out the door. "Keith! That was not necessary! Look what you've done!" mom yells. Dad turns to me, grabbing my shoulders lightly. "Now, aeliyah, honey," he says softly. "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" I scream, yanking free of his grip and sprinting up the stairs. I immediately take my phone out and call Alex, but he doesn't pick up. I try a few times, only to hear his voicemail every time. I sink to the floor, crying my eyes out. Alex's POV I get back in my truck and drive back to my house as it starts to pour rain. I turn on my windshield wipers, noticing I can't see, and realize it's my tears blurring my vision. In a sudden moment of anger, I punch the steering wheel multiple times. I take my hat off and throw it at the windshield, almost wishing it would break. My phone rings and I know it's Aeliyah, but I turn it off. I'm not going to defy her dad. He already doesn't like me, and if there's even a small, tiny chance we could be together again, I'm not about to ruin it by talking to her when I'm not supposed to. It killed me seeing her cry when I left, but I can't do anything about it. I can only hope that her dad will find out the truth and change his mind. I pull over as I had started to swerve on the road, not able to think straight, and I lean my head back against the seat and take a deep breath. I stare back into the rear view mirror absently, watching the headlights go by. I watch another pair of headlights behind me, but they don't eventually drift back into the correct lane. I sit up straighter, watching back through the mirror. That car is definitely not slowing down or moving over. Shit. I scramble into the passenger seat, fumbling with the lock to get it open. I look back behind me frantically, and the bright lights fill my vision. I close my eyes as I feel the impact of the car, lurching mine forward and launching my body through the windshield. I feel the windshield shatter as my head makes contact, and suddenly I feel like I'm flying. My head is pulsing and throbbing from the pain, and I crash down hard on my right side. I gasp in pain, forcing myself to stay still. I see black spots before my eyes and then I black out.

## Chapter 14

Aeliyah's POV Apparently I had cried myself to sleep, because I jolt awake to the sound of my phone buzzing. I suddenly get an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach like something's wrong. I pick the phone up, gasping when I see the caller ID is Alex. Immediately I press accept, desperate to hear his voice. But it's not his voice that answers. " Hello? Is this... Aeliyah?" a deeper voice asks into the phone. Strictly business. Now I'm confused. This didn't sound like his dad, I've met him before. " Um.. Yes, is there something wrong?" I ask, my heart beat speeding up. " Actually, I don't mean to bother you, but yes. You know Alexander Gray, right? You were the last call he missed. I assume you are in some relation to him?" he says uncertainly. " Yes, yes he's my boyfriend. Why? Is he hurt?" I ask frantically. " Alexander was in a car accident. He was rear-ended, and his condition I pretty severe. I was informed to let anyone I could know about the accident." he explains and I suddenly feel light headed. " Which hospital?" I breathe into the phone. " St. Paul's," he answers and I hang up, racing to pull my shoes back on. I grab my purse and sprint down the stairs, where my mom and dad have been waiting for me to eventually come down. " Honey, what's wrong?" my mom asks and tears fill my eyes. " Alex," I say and her eyes widen. Without a single question, she takes her keys and tosses them to me, following me out to her car. My dad comes after us eventually, after calling Aunt Margie to come look after Sophie. She's asleep, and he waits by the door until Aunt Margie, who only lives two minutes away, pulls into the driveway. He climbs in the car at the last minute, confused that I'm driving. " Honey, are you sure- ahh!" he yells as I peel out of the driveway as fast as the car will let me. I floor it in the direction of the hospital, just twenty minutes away, yet feeling like twenty hours. Every turn I make is made without the use of brakes, not once, and there are more red lights run than stopped at. My head spins like crazy, naturally imagining the worst. " Aeliyah, you need to slow down a bit," my mom says and I look down, realizing I'm nearly 15 mph over the speed limit. I slow down immediately, thankful we didn't run into any cops. Finally I settle for a few miles over the speed limit, making us get to the hospital a few minutes earlier than we would have. We run inside, me in the lead as we sprint up to the counter. " Patient?" the girl behind the counter asks. " Alexander Gray," I reply and she nods and looks at her computer. " Room 304, just down that hall, should be on the right," she says and I mumble an incoherent thank you before taking off full speed again. I make it to the door and knock on it loudly. A nurse appears, coming out into the hallway and shutting the door. " Is he okay?" I ask immediately. " We're doing tests on him rght now. If you don't mind me asking, who are you?" she asks. I know how it works, if I don't say I'm immediate family, they won't ever let me in to see him. " His wife," I reply after a minute and my dad gasps. My mom, seeing the reason for my lie, turns him away and begins whispering to him. The nurse eyes me warily but nods and looks at her clip board. " Arlight well, as you've heard, I'm sure, he suffered a car accident. His car was parked when he was hit, so the damage could be worse, but he was in the passenger seat when he was hit and he was thrown through the windshield." she explains and I wince. " From what we've discovered so far in the tests is Traumatic Brain injury, a fractured skull, a broken shoulder, a strained spine, 2 broken ribs, whiplash, and some severe cuts and bruises to the entire right side of his body." she tells me and I cringe, a tear slipping down my cheek with each word she says. " Can I see him?" I ask desperately. " Not yet. He's still undergoing tests but you're welcome to wait. It should only take a few hours." she tells me and I gawk at her as she disappears inside the room again. A few hours? How am I supposed to wait that long? What if something happens to him before I can see him? What if something goes wrong? I sink to the floor right beside the door, sobbing. My dad comes over and sits next to me, easing an arm around my trembling shoulders. " Aeliyah," he starts softly. I jerk away from him, scooting a few feet away. " Dont touch me. This is your fault. If you hadn't told him to leave, we wouldn't be here. Alex wouldn't be here. If something happens to him, I'll never forgive you." I hiss and bury my face in my arms. I can feel his eyes, full of hurt, boring into my back as I turn away from him. I take my phone from my pocket and call Alex's dad Brian, Carrie, and then Rhett, Alex's best friend. Rhett is the first one to show up, marching down the hallway with worry clouding his eyes. When he spots me I jump up and he walks faster and wraps me tightly in his arms. I sob into his shoulder as he holds me, assuring me that Alex will be fine. He sits beside me and I nervously tap my foot. " Aeliyah, this guy has a harder head than anyone I know. He'll be fine, trust me," he says with a light chuckle, and then realizes this isn't the time. Alex's dad shows up next,



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hugging me tightly like Rhett did and then taking a seat on my other side. Finally Carrie shows up, explaining she was in class. Oh yeah. I forgot. Rhett was too. He must have already been ditching anyways. We all sit together, silently praying that he'll be fine. After what seems like years, the door finally opens. "Mrs. Gray?" the same nurse asks. Brian's mouth opens to explain to her that his wife is gone, but I stand up. He closes his mouth as I walk to the nurse and answer to Mrs. Gray. "Okay, your husband is coming along well. No other injuries appeared, besides the ones I already told you. He should be waking up any minute now, the morphine is going to wear off. You'll be able to see him for a few minutes before we shift him back to a recovery room where he'll need rest before anyone sees him." I nod, showing I understand, and she glances at the crowd waiting for Alex. "Just the... Significant other right now." she explains and they all nod. I slip inside the room and hear the nurse shut it behind me, giving us privacy. What I see lying on the bed makes me gasp and cover my mouth. Alex's eyes are half open, watching me and my eyes flicker to the deep gash over his right eyebrow, the cuts on his face, and the cut that runs straight through the side of his lip. His face is pale, his hair a tangled mess on his head. "Do I look that bad?" he croaks as tears fill my eyes. I run to his side, suddenly overcome by tears, and throw my arms around him. I'm careful to not be rough, burying my face in the crook of his neck. He puts his left arm around me, sighing into my hair. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I called you and made you distracted..." I trail off when he pushes me back so I can look at him. "You didn't distract me. I pulled over because I couldn't see anything. It was raining, and to be honest, I was a little more than upset. I saw headlights in the rear view mirror and they were coming straight for me. I tried to get in the passenger seat, to get to the door and get out, but it was too late. None of it was your fault." he says to me. "But my dad... I might have been able to convince him. Or if I went after you or something. I could have stopped it. If my dad didn't say those things," I explain to him and he shakes his head, wincing at the pain. "No. It's nobody's fault. Not your dad's, not yours, not anyone's. So don't even think about it. You couldn't have stopped it even if you wanted to. Everything happens for a reason. Alright? You shouldn't be mad at your dad. He's only protecting you because you're his daughter. He's just protecting you. Trust me." Although he's only a few months older than me, he suddenly seems a thousand years wiser. "I just... I'm so sorry, Alex." I cry, clinging to him again. "Hey, hey, hey, baby please don't cry. I'm fine. See? I'll be okay. I'm fine." he assures me and I kiss him softly. "I love you," I say against his lips. "I love you," he replies, kissing my forehead. I lay my head on his chest, listening to his breathing. "I had to tell them I was your wife to get them to let me in," I say, taking his hand and putting my face in the crook between his neck and shoulder. "I could get used to that." he says with a smile, tightening his arm around me. He plays with the fingers on my left hand, running his thumb across the infinity sign on my first finger. "To infinity," he says softly. "And beyond," I whisper, smiling. Too soon for my liking, the nurse comes back in and tells me it's time to go. I kiss Alex again, telling him that I love him and slowly backing out of the room. "To infinity!" he calls as I put my hand on the door knob. "And beyond," I reply and I see the nurse smile at us as she readies his hospital bed to move. I slip out of the room quietly. Immediately everyone jumps up and I explain to them what's happening, how he's doing, and what his injuries are. We watch them wheel him out of the room and he winks at me. I wave and he looks pointedly at my dad before they turn him around a corner. I turn to my dad and he obviously saw our wordless exchange. I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him and he slowly puts his arms around me too. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said. I was just upset." I explain and it's true. I didn't mean what I said. He's my dad and I'll love him no matter what. "It's alright sweetheart, but you have nothing to be sorry for. I should be the one apologizing. I knew I couldn't keep you two apart and I'm sorry I tried. It's obvious to me now that nothing can keep you two from each other." he says and I nod. We all make our way up to the new room Alex is in and the nurse explains we can go see him because he insisted they only give him a small dose of morphine so he can talk to his 'visitors'. I let everyone else visit before me, and then go in last. "There's my girl," Alex says with a smile as I walk in. I go to his bedside again and take his hand and he stares at me. "You look tired. You should get some sleep. And something to eat." he says and I shake my head. "Not until you're better," I say and he rolls his eyes. "Aeliyah, you're not gonna starve yourself, or deprive yourself of sleep because of me. Please." he says. "I'm not hungry," I tell him honestly. "Then at least go home and get some rest." he says. "No. I'm not leaving you." I object, tightening my grip on his hand. "You're too stubborn. Fine, sit in this uncomfortable chair and sleep here. Just get some sleep, will you?" he asks and I look up at him. "That's why I have you. You're like a big warm travel pillow." I tell him and he puts

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his arm around me. "...Thanks?" he questions and I laugh, laying my head on his good shoulder, suddenly overcome with sleepiness. "Alex?" I ask, planning to ask if he needed anything. " Shh, go to sleep, baby, shh," he stops me, stroking my hair. My question forgotten, my eyes drift closed and I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 15

It's now two months later and Alex is finally back to normal. All the cuts and bruises on his side have healed, his ribs and skull are healed, and he just recently finished his last session of physical therapy to restore his arm. Good thing it wasn't football season. We found out that the one who spread the rumor about us was Jessica and her friends again, trying to break us up. Now, our relationship is stronger than ever, going on eight months. Who knew this could all start with a simple ride home? " Alex, are you staying for dinner?" my mom calls up the stairs. " I'd love too, Lacey," he replies. " Good, we're making lasagna," she says and he grins down at her. " Sounds great," he replies and she returns the smile and goes back to the kitchen. " Hey, Alex," my dad says. " Keith," Alex greets. I'm so happy they're on first name basis now. My dad really opened his mind up to hearing what I had to say a few months ago when he tried to break Alex and I up. Now, he's slowly, yet steadily making more progress with him. " Aeliyah," Alex says slowly but I don't look up from my computer. " Hmm?" I ask and I feel him walk up behind me. He puts his hands on my shoulders and then on the sides of my face. " Aeliyah," he repeats and I tilt my head back to look at him. His lips meet mine immediately and I smile. I kiss him back and my phone buzzes. I ignore it, probably just a text, and turn around to face Alex. He lifts me up and sets me on the tall desk, standing between my legs with his hands on the desk on each side of me. My hands tangle into his soft dark hair absently and I comb my fingers through it. He cups my face in his hands and my phone buzzes a few more times. I groan and pull back, receiving a growl from Alex. I reach over and grab it from the other side of the desk, realizing it's a facebook notification; Carrie Marciago posted a picture of you, it says. Underneath it, it says 22 comments. I raise my eyebrow and click on the picture, grinning when I see it's my favorite picture of Alex and I. We're in the school parking lot and I'm sitting on the back of Alex's tailgate with my sunglasses on. Alex, standing directly in front of me with his hands on each side of my face, is wearing the same pair of sunglasses only a different color and kissing my forehead. Carrie had altered it so that the background was blurry and in black and white and Alex and I are the only things in color. She labeled the picture Perfect. I show Alex with a grin and he smiles. We sit on the bed together as I scroll through the comments. " So perfect... I wish I had a boyfriend like that... They're so cute together... I love them... They're so cute... Such a cute picture..." I read aloud and smile at Alex. He grins back at me and I post the same picture to my wall, making it my profile picture as well and labeling it 'To infinity and beyond'. I toss my phone to the other side of the bed and Alex pulls me close, putting one arm beneath my head and the other slung across my waist. We have a month left until our senior year begins. " Whats wrong?" Alex asks, brushing the hair from my face. " We only have a month left," I tell him and he shrugs. " But then we only have one more year of school besides college," he explains. " But what about after highschool? What if we don't go to the same college? What if we're thousands of miles away? I don't think I'll be able to do it." I tell him and he covers my mouth with his hand. "Stop. Don't worry about that now. We still have a whole year before we have to worry about that. Am I clear? You can't talk like that," he scolds me and I smile at him faintly. " Crystal," I answer and he presses his lips to mine. We sit together like that until dinner's ready and finally Sophie wakes up from her nap. She stumbles out of her room, rubbing her eyes and holds her arms out to Alex. He picks her up and she clings to him like a tree frog and lays her head on his shoulder. He squats down and picks me up with his other arm, as if I was a sack of flour. He carries us down the stairs and sets us down in a seat and then takes the spot between us. We dig into dinner after grace and my dad and mom ask us what college we plan on going to. I tell her Mizzou, and Alex is undecided. He's hoping to get a football scholarship, but he's going to look for a plan B college too. When dinner is over Alex and I do the dishes, me washing, him drying. Of course he can't resist smacking the wet towel on my butt either. I grab another towel and roll it up, smacking his side with it. Then of course it turns into a bubble fight as soon as Alex realizes the dish soap, if squeezed, squirts out bubbles. I shriek as he splashes water at me and then grab a handful of the soap suds from the sink and throw them in his face. He tackles me and wraps his arms around me, knocking me into the counter behind us. He kisses me, probably getting soap suds in my hair, but I could care less. I kiss him back, wrapping my arms around him tightly. I hear a loud, nervous cough and we pull away. My dad glances at us nervously and then blushes Scarlett red and turns, backing out of the kitchen. I look at Alex and we both start laughing and I hop off the counter. We

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finish the dishes and go outside to sit on the bench by our pond together.

## Chapter 16

"No you don't, I love her more," Alex argues with Carrie as I sit down next to them in the cafeteria. "Whatever. I do," Carrie insists. "Who loves who more than who?" I ask. "I love you more than Carrie does," Alex explains with a goofy grin. I roll my eyes at them and he puts his arm around my shoulders and kisses my temple. I steal a fry from Alex's tray and a cute guy sits beside Carrie. "Hey," he says to her. "Um.. Hi?" she says glancing at me for help. I shrug and he completely ignores us. "So I was sitting over there, and I couldn't help but notice you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Would you like to go out with me?" he asks and she blushes bright red. "Well... Yeah, sure. I guess," she stutters and he flashes her a bright grin. "Can I have your number?" he asks and she takes her phone out. They exchange numbers and then he tells her he'll text her later, taps the table as he gets up, and goes back to his seat. "What was that?" I ask and Carrie looks as confused as me. "I don't even know him," she says and I laugh. "Hey, you got a date, though," I tell her and she does a quick little happy dance. We laugh and finish our lunch and then head out to the parking lot. It's a half day today because there's a meeting going on for the teachers during school hours. Alex and I head back to his place and his dad is already gone for work. He sits on the stool in front of the piano and pushes the cover up. I sit beside him and he starts to play, a soft, beautiful tune. I listen to it for awhile, finally realizing it's A Drop In the Ocean by Ron Pope. I tap my fingers on my leg to the beat and then time it right and begin singing. "Just a drop in the ocean, a change in the weather," I sing and Alex adds in too. "I was praying that you and me might end up together. It's like wishing for rain as I stand in the desert, but I'm holding you closer than most, cause you are my heaven," we sing. We actually sound pretty good together. He trails off on the piano and then grabs my face in his hands and kisses me. I lean into him, kissing him back, and his elbow accidentally hits one of the keys. We both jump at the sudden noise and then laugh. I rest my fingers over the keys, playing the same song, humming quietly to myself. "You're a really good singer," Alex tells me and I grin. "You're not too bad either," I answer and he takes one of my hands. He uses his other hand to help me finish the song and then we sit on the couch and watch Hey Arnold for the next few hours. Eventually we both fall asleep and wake up early in the morning, still on the couch. I open my eyes and Alex is watching me. "You're so beautiful when you sleep," he says. I smile and he kisses my lips and stands up from the couch. He stretches his arms and then pulls me up too. I pop my back and his arms go around my back tightly, keeping it straight. "I think you broke your back," he says frantically and I laugh. I tilt my head to the left and it pops loudly and he puts his hand on my face to keep it there. "Why are you trying to kill yourself? First your spine and now your neck?" he asks with a grin. "It's a good thing I'm a vampire, I can just turn you into one and you'll heal," he says, pretending to bite my neck. I laugh and pretend to faint, falling back onto the couch and he catches me and leans over me. "You can't kill yourself. I can't live without you," he says softly and I open my eyes. "I love you," I tell him. "I love you," he replies. "What do you want to do today?" he asks. "Can we go to the zoo?" I ask. "Do you want to?" he asks. I nod and stick my bottom lip out. "Please?" I ask and he bites my lip and pulls it with his teeth. I grin and he kisses me again. "Of course, babe," he replies. "Ooh! And Carrie and her new date can come," I say with a grin. "Sure," he says and pulls me up. "I gotta take a shower," he says. "Me too," I say and he smirks. He picks me up, throwing me over his shoulder and runs upstairs to the bathroom. When we're done taking a shower, we go to his room and get changed. I find a pair of high waisted shorts and a white lace shirt. I let my hair dry natural and then pull on my white flip flops. "Alex! You take longer to get ready than I do!" I call into the bathroom, falling backwards onto the bed. "Hey, you can't rush beauty," he answers, coming out of the bathroom as I call Carrie. He sits beside me on the bed and I comb my fingers through his hair to fix it. He twirls one of my curls around his finger and finally Carrie picks up. "Hey Carrie," I say when she says hello. "Wanna go to the zoo with me and Alex?" I ask. "I'm not tagging along as the third wheel," she replies. "No, I mean you can bring that cute guy that asked you out." I tell her. "Oh, well sure. Let me see if he's up for it. I'll text you," she says. "Okay bye," I say and hang up. I roll over onto my stomach on Alex and poke his nose. "She's gonna text me if that guy can make it with her." I explain and he nods. He takes my hand and laces our fingers together, twisting the promise ring around my finger. "We should get married on a Saturday," he tells me. "Yeah?" I ask, laying my head on his chest. "Yeah. It's the best party day. Everybody is free on Saturday," he adds and I

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nod. " You know where we should get married? Busch Stadium. How cool would that be? Like on the field? That would be so awesome!" I exclaim. Although Alex plays football, we both watch cardinals baseball religiously. I have so many cardinals jerseys in my closet it's not even funny. " Yeah, that would be really cool. So it's a date, then?" he asks and I nod and smile. " Its a date."

## Chapter 17

" Haha, you're funny. Funny lookin'!" Landon teases, tapping Carrie's nose and making her blush. He whispers something in her ear, making her red cheeks darken and Alex and I go dump the trash. We just finished having lunch, and so far we've already seen the penguins and the reptiles and the amphibians. Now we have to see the africa animals. I take Alex's hand as we head to the first exhibit, a lion. Alex swings our arms back and forth, all the while making noises at the lions to get their attention. The female and male that are sitting together on the highest rock look up lazily, watching us with bored eyes. Alex makes a loud, growl sound and I burst into a fit of giggles. He keeps doing it and I clutch my stomach, still laughing. He turns and flashes me a million-dollar smile, taking my hand again. " What are you laughing at?" he asks innocently. I push his arm lightly and we visit the tigers, the bears, the giraffes, and finally the elephants. Alex begins his elephant call and they respond with their own. I take my phone out and snap a picture of him, just catching a perfect smile as he looks back at me and points back at the elephants. Definitely frame worthy. " Can I keep him?" he asks and I smile. He picks me up and puts me on his shoulders so I can see over the tall wall. The elephants make weird noises at me and after a few minutes Alex sets me down. " They like you," he says and I raise my eyebrow. " Oh yeah? Do you speak elephant?" I ask. " Actually, it happens to be my native language. See that one, right there? His names Frederick. He's my 7th cousin, twice removed," he says and I laugh. " Okay." I reply. I walk over to Carrie and Landon, waving back at Alex. " Goodbye, babe, I'll miss you now that you're going to live with your elephant family." I call and he takes off in a dead sprint at me, catching me around my waist and spinning me around. " I guess I'll stay. We can have little half elephant babies together," he says and I kiss him. " I can get used to that." I answer, quoting him from the hospital. Carrie and Landon smile at us and we head to the main food court of the zoo. We get icecream cones and of course I can't resist putting over half of mine on alex's face. He catches my face in one hand and smears icecream all over my mouth and nose and then licks it off. I wipe my face on his shirt as we finish our icecream and decide to call it a day. Well, not a day, but you know what I mean. It's only three o'clock. Alex and I go to the park, strolling along the sidewalk with our arms swinging. I glance across the park, watching a young couple swing a little girl back and forth between them as she giggles breathlessly. I smile and the couple captures the girl in their arms and they each kiss one of her cheeks. I smile at them and Alex tightens his arm around my waist. We sit on the bench for a while, just enjoying each other's company and then head back to my house. My parents are cooking dinner and Sophie is walking around the house silently. " Whats wrong Soph?" Alex asks, kneeling to her height. " Nothing." she says. " Then why aren't you smiling? How come you're not playing with your toys?" he asks. " Because. Grown ups don't play with toys. I don't play with toys." she explains. " Ah," he realizes, standing up. He glances around and then looks down at her. " Race you to the treehouse?" he asks. " Youre on!" she yells instantly and they take off outside. I grin and go into the kitchen to help my mom peel potatoes. " Hun, could I talk to Aeliyah alone?" she asks my dad. " Sure, babe," he says, going back into the living room. I think it's so cute that he still calls her babe after all these years. " So you and Alex are getting pretty serious huh? That promise ring?" she asks as I wash my hands and watch through the kitchen window as Alex throws Sophie up in the air and catches her. " Yeah," I agree, drying my hands. " I just wanted to remind you that as long as you're happy, your father and I are happy." she says. " I know, mom, thanks," I tell her and hug her. " I love you, sweetie," she says. " I love you too," I tell her honestly and we return to the potatoes. When dinner is ready we call Alex and Sophie in and eat. The doorbell rings and I stand up. " I got it." I say and go to the door. I open it and two men in military uniforms are standing there with their hats under their arms. " Can I help you?" I frown. " Ma'am, Captain Andrew Blue was KIA, killed in action, during duty. I'm very sorry for you and your family's loss." the one on the left says to me. " What? There has to be a mistake," I mumble, my eyes filling. " Im sorry. There's no mistake. Could I speak to his parents?" he asks. " Mom? Dad? Come here for a minute," I call, my voice breaking. Alex, hearing my voice, gets up too and catches me as my knees buckle. He looks up at the men by the door, clenches his jaw, and wraps his arms around me tightly. He pulls me to the stairs and sits beside me and begins whispering things in my ear. I can't hear it though, because all I can think about is how he must have died. Definitely gone down fighting. He would never just give up or surrender. Maybe he suffered. What if they tortured him? I clap my hands over

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my ears as if to block it out and bury my face in Alex's jacket. I can feel myself trembling and Sophie gets down from the table and walks to me. " Whats wrong?" she asks and I grab her in my arms and bury my face in her hair. I hear my mom scream and my dad yelling that they made a mistake and it only makes me cry and tremble harder. My dad shuts the door and then helps my mom up to their bedroom. Sophie runs up to ask mom what happened and Alex strokes my hair softly. Eventually we go up to my room too and i stare at a picture with Andrew in it, wearing his uniform with a giant, bright smile. Now, tears slip silently down my cheeks and I lay my head on Alex's shoulder. " It'll be okay," he says softly, wiping the tears off of my cheeks.



## Chapter 18

"Do you wanna do something today?" Alex asks brightly, trying to cheer me up. It's only been about a month since we found out about Andrew. I hardly eat anything and I haven't gone anywhere, besides school, since that day. If it were up to me, I wouldn't still be going to school, but my mom says just because something brings you down in life doesn't mean I can stop doing things to help my future. "No thanks," I tell Alex, staring at the picture I have of Andrew beside my bed. "Aeliyah, I know it hurts. I lost my grandpa in the war, remember? But just because you get upset for awhile, doesn't mean the world stops to let you heal. People keep getting up in the morning to go to their jobs, they go to school-" "I go to school." I interrupt and he frowns at me and sits at the foot of the bed, resting his hand on my knee. "Aeliyah. You know what I mean. What I'm saying, is, the world's not going to stop for you. Eventually you'll have to move on." he finishes and I look up at him, clutching a pillow to my chest. I nod, realizing he's right. I can't sit around and mope all the time. It's not going to bring Andrew back no matter how hard I try. "Okay, let me get ready." I say and a big smile spreads across Alex's face. He leans over to kiss me and then let's me go to the bathroom and take a shower. Today is Friday, and after I got home from school I laid on my bed and did absolutely nothing until now. I take a hot shower and blowdry my hair straight, deciding against makeup and change into a pair of light wash skinny jeans with holes in them, black combat boots, and a black Nike hoodie that says Just Do It. I pull a dark gray beanie on too and walk into Alex's open arms. Even with me on my tip toes while wearing shoes, he still towers above me, and my short arms are barely long enough to reach around his neck. He bends down and kisses me and then takes my small hand and walks downstairs with me. When they think I'm not looking, my parents exchange grateful glances and my dad shoots a thumbs up at Alex. Alex and Sophie are the only ones I've let into my room because all my parents talk about is Andrew. I know they are worried about me, but I didn't want to talk about him. Alex always had funny stories to tell me to help cheer me up and Sophie, never really getting the chance to know Andrew, always brought in her stuffed animals for tea parties with me. "Ready?" Alex asks me and I nod. He gently pulls me to his truck, opening the door for me and then getting in himself and driving to where ever he plans. "Where are we going?" I ask, trying to be somewhat sociable for his sake. "It's a secret," he replies, glancing at me sideways. I nod and he turns the radio up, singing Miley Cyrus's new song We Cant Stop at the tops of his lungs and then after that, Cant Hold Us by Macklemore. I can't help but smile at him and he gives my hand a squeeze, glad he's able to cheer me up a little. We end up getting icecream-if you can tell I love it- and then heading to the park. Alex pushes me back and forth on the swings and then we have a contest to see who can hang from the monkey bars the longest. Finally collapsing on the ground in fits of giggles, Alex rolls onto his stomach and leans over me. "Feel better?" he asks. I nod with a smile and he kisses me softly and then rolls onto his back again. We look up at the stars and I lace my fingers through Alex's and point out Orion's belt. He points out the big and little dipper, and then we make random shapes and animals out of the stars. We watch them for awhile, eventually falling asleep in each other's arms and when I wake up Alex is still sleeping. "Alex, wake up," I whisper, touching his hair. His eyes flicker open and look around before finally resting on mine. "Morning, beautiful," he says. "Morning handsome," I reply. We get up and stretch, sore from sleeping on the ground all night, and go back to Alex's truck. He drives to McDonalds and gets us bacon and egg biscuits for breakfast and then we go back to my house. "Hey sweetie," my dad says. "Goodmorning, honey," my mom calls from the kitchen. "Do you guys not care that I was out all night long? What if I was kidnapped?" I joke, feeling much better than yesterday. "Well, you were with Alex. We knew he would protect you with his life, so we didn't worry." my mom explains and Alex flashes me a small, guilty smile. I kiss him and he pushes my hair off of my forehead. "I love you," I tell him. "I love you."

## Chapter 19

I promised I wouldn't cry, I think to myself frantically. I promised I wouldn't cry. I promised. Alex pressed a kiss to my forehead and steps back, his hand slowly slipping from mine. Tears pour freely down my cheeks and he takes a staggering step forward, as if he's going to hold me again, his mouth curving into a frown and his eyes filling with tears and sadness. He decides against it, taking a step back, and grabs his duffel bags and suitcase. He looks away and wipes his face and then let's out a cough to cover up the fact that he was about to cry. He slowly walks away, turning in his ticket to a girl waiting, and then goes through the door that leads to the plane. Carrie, who came with me for support and to say goodbye to Alex, wraps her arms around me, crying too. " Im sorry, Aeliyah. I'm so sorry. You guys were perfect." she sobs. She and I had discussed this before. Long distance relationships never work. Ever. So we might as well have just broken up. They always end up drifting apart and never seeing each other again. That's how it's going to be. Now matter how strong the couple is, it just never works out. Alex'll find a prettier girl in college and forget all about me. Carrie and I make our way back to the car and I stare at the small infinity sign tattoo on the inside of my wrist the whole way home. Alex and I decided to get the same tattoo a few months ago, and we didn't get our names on them because if something happened and we broke up, it would be weird to explain to people. So we just got infinity signs that say 'To Infinity and Beyond' inside them. " Aeliyah, you're home. Look, c'mon, snap out of it. Do you want me to stay?" Carrie asks, waving her hand in front of my face. I look up at her, almost positive my eyes are red and bloodshot. I slowly shake my head and climb out of the car. I see Carrie wave out of the corner of my eye but I'm suddenly too tired to wave back. I walk like a zombie to the house and go inside, kicking my shoes off and dropping my purse with a loud plop on the floor. My dad comes into view and when he sees me he opens his mouth to say something. " Daddy," I cry, cutting him off. I run into his arms and cry into his shirt and we somehow drift to the couch. I cry myself to sleep on his chest like I'm two years old again and when I wake up I'm back in my room. The curtains are drawn shut, keeping the sunlight from spilling in, and the comforter is pulled up to my shoulders. I rub my eyes and hear a knock at the door. " Honey? It's me, I brought you some pizza," my mom calls, opening the door. I can tell she's using her light, happy, cheerful voice to try and affect me, but this time it's not going to work. I just stare at her and she continues further into the room and sits at the edge of the bed with a plate of pizza in one hand and a cup of pepsi in the other. " See? Your favorites," she says, holding them out to me. I shale my head and look away and she sighs. She sets the plate and the cup on my bedside table beside me where it will stay for the next few days, untouched, until she takes it away finally. Now it's been a week, and I literally haven't gotten up. At all. Unless I had to pee, really, really bad, which was only like twice a day. But I haven't eaten anything. My stomach growls, but I'm so numb that I can't feel it. I can't hear the voice in my head screaming at me to eat or drink something before I die anymore. Maybe I'm slowly decaying from the inside out. My stomach is eating itself. I'm slowly caving in, I just can't tell. Like a bug inside of me, killing me slowly. I wish it would hurry up. I'm tired of being in so much emotional pain. After almost a month, I'm at my college dorm, where, thankfully, Carrie shares it with me. Now, I'm slowly unpacking my boxes of things, nearly bawling when I see a picture of Alex and me or a gift that he gave me. I finally reach the bottom of the box, and I stick my hand in all the way up to my elbow to get the last, rectangle shaped item. I grab it and pull it out, covering my mouth with my hand. It's that picture of Alex at the zoo, punting at the elephants with a beautiful smile on his face. " Hey, Aeliyah- hey what's wrong?" Carrie asks, walking in from the bathroom. I show her the picture and she frowns. " Oh." she takes it from my hand and studies it for a moment and then sets it on my bedside table. " C'mon, let's go explore the campus. Maybe there's some cute guys." she says excitedly. " For me," she adds as I shoot daggers at her with my eyes. I put on a pair of jeans and a Mizzou tshirt, taking my hair out of it's ponytail. I put some mascara on and then walk around with Carrie. We order hot chocolate at the campus coffee shop thingy and then make our way down the second floor. " Oh, look at this. This is really cool," Carrie points out a framed white board with signatures of all of the graduates from the past few years on it. " Yeah, that is-ah!" I bump into something hard and my hot cup goes flying as I fall on my ass. I look up and a tall, handsome guy with dark hair and green eyes looks down at me. I notice the wet, hot stain down the front of his white shirt and my empty cup on the ground. " I am so so sorry, that was totally my fault," I say

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immediately, standing up. He doesn't speak, just curls his lips up into a smile. "Dont worry about it. It's fine." he says, while twisting his hands and fingers around in odd shapes and formations. I frown as I watch his hands, trying to figure out what he's doing. Does he have a nervous fidget or something? "Im deaf." he explains and I look up, eyes wide with shock. "How is that possible? How do you know what I'm saying?" I ask, trying to explain with my hands too. He let's out a soft chuckle and picks up my cup from the ground, expertly tossing it into the trash can a few feet behind me. He must be here for the football. "I can read lips. I'm Derek, by the way." he says. "Oh. Cool. Well, I'm Aeliyah." I answer. "You're very pretty," he comments, smiling at me. Crinkles at the corners of his eyes from laughter start to show and I can't help but smile back. "Thanks," I blush, feeling heat creep up to my cheeks. "Hey, it was really great meeting you, but I have to get to my dorm. See you around?" he asks and I nod. "Yeah, for sure," I reply. Before I realize what's happening, he ducks in toward me, plants a soft kiss to my cheek, and then continues on his way down the hallway. "Wow," Carrie says when he's out of ear shot, all though he wouldn't be able to hear her anyways. "Hes amazing. God he's attractive. And he was so sweet! Mhmm, glad I got accepted here. But he was pretty interested in you. Didn't even look at me." "Yeah, well, you can have him. I'm taken."

## Chapter 20

Derek and Carrie and I definitely hit it off really well. Within a few weeks we're all really close and Derek hangs out in our dorm all the time. I found out that he's been deaf since birth, a defect, and he's virtually had no problems with it. I also found out that Derek has a fiancée, Natalie, who lives in Florida, and they have a long distance relationship. So I can vent about my relationship problems to him because he'll understand. You see, Alex hasn't been calling me back lately. At most, he calls me maybe once a week, and it's to apologize, saying he was 'too busy'. Which I understand. College is really stressful and tiring and all that, but I still manage to call him every night even though I'm exhausted. Even if it's just to say hi and I love you, I still call him. And I wish he would do the same. He's been making up excuses about being busy for two months. Maybe he's already forgotten about me. "What if he met another girl?" I ask Derek suddenly as we sit on his bed. I tap his arm and he looks up, so I repeat my question. He frowns and shakes his head. "From the videos and pictures of you guys I've seen and the stories I've heard, well... You know. Haha, no pun intended. Either way, anybody with eyes can tell that he loves you more than life itself. He didn't meet another girl. Trust me." he tells me, patting my knee. I nod and sigh. "Thanks, Derek," I say and he flashes me a smile. "No problem." he replies. He leaves to go video chat with Natalie and I sit on my bed, leaning against the headboard. If he hasn't met another girl, why hasn't he answered my calls? Carrie comes in, back from class, and throws her bag and books on her bed, flopping down beside me. "God, I'm so tired. Who knew college would be so hard. I knew it. I should just be a hot dog vendor." she says and I laugh. "Wanna help me with homework? I'll help you with yours," she offers and I nod. "Sure." We each get our books and crack down to business, not stopping until every last equation is done. Finally, we collapse on our beds, finished, and fall asleep as soon as our heads hit the pillows. For the next 12 months, we do the same thing everyday. Wake up, get ready, get hot chocolate/coffee, go to class, do shit loads of homework, try to get Alex to answer his phone, and crash, exhausted. One day, though, Carrie comes into the door with a giant smile. "Whats up with you?" I ask. "We have the weekend off. Classes start early on Monday so we can head out of town to go shopping. It'll be good to get out of here. I don't think there'll be enough time to go back home though." she adds gently and I nod. "Okay. We should go shopping." I agree. A few hours later we pack some stuff, planning on staying in a motel until we have to head back, and head out. By the time we get to the motel, it's really late and we go straight to sleep. The next morning, we wake up really early as Carrie has planned for us to go to this really awesome store that's a few hours away but it would be so worth it. I agree, and since she offers to drive the whole way, I snuggle into the passenger seat and sleep the whole way. When I wake up, Carrie is standing by the passenger side, blocking my view from seeing where we are. "Hey, can you put this over your eyes?" she asks, holding a bandana out to me. "What?" I ask. "Here, put this over your eyes. Just trust me. Nothing bad's going to happen. It's a surprise." she says. I look into her face and her eyes are pleading. I finally agree, wrapping the bandana tightly around my head and covering my eyes. "This better be good, Carrie," I say as she helps me out of the car. A soft breeze blows my hair around my face and she leads me forward. "Trust me, it is."

## Chapter 21

"Ow, Carrie!" I exclaim as I walk forward into a wall or post. "Sorry!" she yells back, guiding me forward. I hold my arms out, swinging them wildly to make sure I don't hit anything else. "Okay, stop right here. Don't take it off yet, hang on." she says. I hear something drop and her cuss to my right and I immediately flinch toward the noise. "Don't worry, just getting the camera ready." she says. "The camera? Carrie, what's going on, seriously?" I ask frantically. "Carrie, just take the blindfold off." a deep voice a ways in front of me yells up to us. Shivers run up and down my spine at the voice, immediately giving me goosebumps. I drop my wildly thrashing arms and point my head in the direction of the voice. "Okay, one, two three, open," Carrie says, slipping the blindfold off. I adjust my eyes to the light and finally recognize the man standing a few yards away. I gasp, covering my mouth with my hands while tears fill my eyes. "Hey, baby," he calls. He takes a few steps forward and I take a step or two, stopping when he holds his arms out to me. Suddenly I'm filled with blindingly White hot anger. "What the hell are you doing here?" I yell and he drops his arms, a frown replacing his smile. "Well, that wasn't what I was expecting," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "You didn't call or anything! I called you everyday!" I exclaim, jabbing a finger in his chest with every word. "What?" he asks, eyebrows furrowing with confusion. "Every single day! Ask Carrie! And you didn't answer for a whole year! So you think you can just waltz back-" "Shut up, Aeliyah," he says, pulling me to him by my belt loops on my jeans. He presses his lips to mine firmly and all my anger fades away. Somehow I just know he has a good excuse. My arms circle around his neck and he bends down, wrapping his arms around my waist and picking me up. He spins me around and then finally sets me back on my feet. We pull away, breathless, and I stare at him. "Why didn't you answer at all?" I ask softly. "Aeliyah, I called you every single day. and I emailed and texted and I almost even wrote you a letter. You were the one that didn't answer back." he replies. I shake my head, frowning. "Guys, I'm so sorry. It was me." Carrie cries and we both look over at her. "What?" we ask at the same time. "It was me. Alex, after you left I exchanged her phone for one exactly like it with a different number so you couldn't call or text. Aeliyah, I put Alex's number in the new phone but changed the last digit. You didn't notice because you have his number saved under Alex." she explains. "Why? What about the emails?" Alex asks. "That was easy. There was already a virus in Aeliyah's computer and she didn't know but it wouldn't send any of her emails or let her receive any. She just didn't notice. And I did it because, Aeliyah, I thought he was a bad guy. Remember before? He was mean and rude and a player and I thought all along that he was going to prank you and break your heart. I didn't want you to get hurt again, so I tried to stop you guys from seeing each other. But now, Alex called me and wanted to see you really bad and I felt so terrible about everything. Because now I realize you two were meant to be together and I'm sorry for trying to stop that." she explains through her tears and I gawk at her. "What about all those times you said we were the perfect couple and stuff?" I ask her. "Just a part of the plan," she says with a tearful, small smile. "Shit. I'm sorry that I accused you of that, Alex," I say and he shakes his head and wraps his arms around me again. "I'm so sorry, you guys. I just wanted to protect you." She says to me. "I know, Carrie. So since you were trying to protect me, I'm not mad. Well, I'm mad, but, I guess it's okay." I tell her and she smiles. "Really? Great. Thank you guys," she says, hugging us both. Then she takes her keys, muttering something about 'Going shopping to give us some privacy' and then dances off to her car. Alex buries his face in my long hair and I hold him as tight as possible. "I missed you so much," he whispers softly. "I missed you too," I tell him. He leans back and captures my lips with his own as my hands go to play with his hair at the base of his neck. He groans when I pull gently on his hair and bites my bottom lip, tugging with his teeth. He grabs my leg just under my butt and hoists me onto his hips and I wrap my legs around his waist. He stumbles in the back door and crashes into the dining table, making us both laugh breathlessly before continuing on the way to the bedroom. Alex sets me on the bed and moves to the hollow of my neck, gently kissing and sucking. My back arches as I moan and I feel him smile against my skin. Moments later our clothes are scattered in various positions all over the floor and Alex is nibbling my ear lobe. "Stop teasing," I breathe, clutching at his soft brown hair as he kisses down my bare chest. "Me? Never," he disagrees, kissing down my navel and then back up to my neck. "Alex," I say, scratching his back. "Yes?" he asks, his voice deep and husky and seductive. "Make love to me."

## Chapter 22

I open my eyes, searching the room only to find Alex gone. It takes me a few seconds to remember what took place last night, and the memory makes me smile. I climb out of bed and pull on Alex's t-shirt and my underwear and then head downstairs. I hear cursing from the kitchen and I pad in quietly, finding him attempting to make pancakes. "Dammit," he mumbles when he burns his finger. I slide silently up onto the counter, swinging my legs back and forth. I take in his shirtless form with a smile, eyeing his basketball shorts hanging dangerously low off of his hips. His back muscles ripple as he moves and he successfully makes four pancakes, completely oblivious to my presence. He puts two each on plates and then douses them with syrup. I slip off of the counter and take one of the plates from his hand, and his head snaps back in surprise. When he notices me he smiles and hands me a fork. "Thanks babe, they look delicious," I tell him. "No problem. And they're not the only thing that looks delicious. Mhmm," he says, wrapping his free arm around my waist and leaning in for a kiss. I turn my head to the side so he kisses my cheek and then dance out of his arms to the bar stool at the counter. "Tease," he mutters, grabbing his plate and sitting beside me. "So, I have a question for you," he says, taking a bite. I look at him and he glances up. "You know it's opening day, right?" he asks. "Of course. Who doesn't?" I reply. "Well... I happen to have... Tickets, to the game today. Behind homeplate, I might add. And I was wondering-" "Yes! Can we go? Really?" I exclaim excitedly. "Actually I was going to ask if you wanted to give them to Carrie and Landon. Nah, I'm just kidding. Of course we can go," he says with a grin. "In fact, we could leave soon if you want because it takes a while to get down there and if you go early you might get to talk to the players," he adds. At that, I finish my breakfast in the fastest time ever and then sprint upstairs to take a shower. After brushing my hair and teeth, I change into a pair of dark skinny jeans and one of Alex's David Freese jerseys. I put my already curling hair into a side ponytail and sprint back downstairs to shove my shoes on. Alex, taking his sweet time, is just now going up the stairs. "Alex, come on, hurry up," I say, pushing him up the stairs. He laughs and stumbles into the bathroom to take a shower and I lay back on his bed, sighing. A few minutes later he comes out butt naked, using his towel to dry his hair, and I laugh. "What? You know you like it," he says, striking a pose in front of his closet. I grin and he finally gets dressed in a pair of jeans and his other cardinal's jersey. "Now can we go? You're taking forever," I whine as he slips his keys into his pocket. "On more thing," he says. "You have to kiss me." He leans down and I peck his lips, too excited to really kiss him. "Nope, doesn't count. You have to really kiss me. Like you mean it," he tells me. I stand on my toes but he just glances down at me. "If you want me to kiss you, you'd better get a ladder, cause I'm too short." I remind him. "I guess I'll have to help then," he replies and meets my lips. His arms go around my waist, eventually trailing up my shirt to draw patterns on my skin with his fingers. He trails his fingers up my spine and I gasp, my head reeling and my knees wobbling. "Dont do that," I breathe and he grins. "What? This?" he asks, doing it again. My knees give and he catches me with his other arm. He smiles, going back to tracing patterns. "I think I just found your weak spot, babe," he says. I smirk and raise my eyebrow, putting my hand in his hair. I close my fist around a handful, not hard enough to hurt, and he moans and closes his eyes. I stop, putting my hands behind my back and grin as he opens his eyes. "You have your weaknesses, I have mine." I shoot back and he steps forward and muzzles my neck. "You're my weakness," he whispers in my ear. "Alright, we can go now." He takes my hand in his and we go outside to his truck. We chat about anything and everything under the sun on the way, and finally we're walking into the crowded Busch Stadium. ...Alex's POV... I watch with a smile from the side as Aeliyah gets to talk to her favorite baseball players, telling Molina about her favorite play. "...and then he just jumped up like a ninja and, it was so cool," she says and he smiles at her. He calls a few other players over and by the time the game starts she has autographs from all of the players and a baseball signed by the whole team including the managers. For the next few hours, we're jumping, screaming, clapping, cheering, and shouting like idiots at the field. When the fourth inning comes, I watch closely to wait for a big play. I spot David Freese leap over to the foul line, diving out and catching a foul ball for the last out, sliding halfway into the other team's dugout. On cue, the big screen tv shows Aeliyah and I, and I drop to one knee and turn to Aeliyah. "Hey! Alex we're on-" her eyes widen when she sees me, and she stands up. I hear almost the whole stadium 'aww' as they see the big screen, and I look up at her. "Aeliyah Nicole Blue, I know we're young and I can be stupid

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and ignorant at times, but I love you more than anything in the world. And we don't have to jump right in and get married tomorrow, I want to finish college first. But I'm sure I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?" I ask. Her eyes fill with tears and she nods vigorously. " Yes! A thousand times, yes!" she yells. I smile and take her hand, slipping on the ring, and then stand up to grab her in a hug. All I hear for the next few minutes is loud clapping and cheering for us, and I kiss the now crying Aeliyah. " Alex, I love you." she says, smiling through her happy tears. " I love you." I reply and we sit back down. People around us congratulate us and Aeliyah spends the rest of the inning staring at her ring in awe and thanking me. When we go back home, after getting icecream at Ted Drew's of course, Aeliyah and I lay down to go to sleep. " I can't wait to tell everybody," she says excitedly, climbing in the bed beside me. " I know," I say, smiling at her. I grab her waist and pull her to me, kissing her forehead. " I love you." " I love you. To infinity," she replies. " And Beyond."

## Chapter 23

-Epilogue- "Daddy!" two little girls scream. They run at Alex, jumping straight into his arms before he can shut the front door. He smiles and kicks it closed with his foot, kissing them each on the cheek and tickling them. I smile, grateful for a small break from them, and lean my hip against the counter. "The daddy monster's home! And he's coming to get you!" he yells as he sets them down. They shriek and run upstairs, stumbling over each other to go hide. Alex laughs and walks over to me, loosening his tie while holding something behind his back. He scoops me into his arms and kisses me sweetly on the lips, spinning me around the kitchen. "How was your day?" he asks. "Good, how was yours?" I ask back. "It was pretty good. For you, beautiful," he says, pulling a bouquet of roses out from behind his back. "Thank you, babe." I tell him and he kisses my nose. "No problem," he replies. He turns at the girls giggling from the stairs and then holds his hands up like he's going to tickle them. "Jane, Lacey, you'd better be in bed by the time I get up there!" he jokes in a loud voice, running up the stairs after them. I follow him into their room and he picks them both up by their waists and sets the twins down in their beds. "Story!" they say at the same time. He sighs. "Oh alright, but just one." he replies. "Do the one about the prince and the princess!" Jane says excitedly. He busies himself with tucking them in before sitting at the edge of their bed. "Okay. Once upon a time, there was a princess named Laura, and a prince named Theo. You see, Princess Laura and Prince Theo didn't like each other at all. One day Theo put red paint in Laura's hair while they were learning at the castle. And then a few years later, he cut all of her hair off!" he says and they gasp. "Then, Laura started pranking Theo too. She made him fall on a puddle of water, and put ice down his shirt, and even covered him in red paint..." I drift back down the hallway, down to the kitchen to clean up. I finish the rest of the dishes and put the girls' toys back in their place, and by the time I make my way back upstairs, they're asleep. Alex grins proudly back at me, kisses their foreheads, and backs up so I can do the same, resting a hand on the small of my back. I turn out their lamp and leave the night light on, and then Alex and I go to our room. We change and brush our teeth and then climb into the bed. Alex pulls me closer and rests his hand on my 5 month baby bump and kisses my forehead and then my belly. "Goodnight. To infinity and beyond, little buddy." he whispers and we drift off to sleep, one big happy family.



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