

Higher Education

By : Think Pink

Laila and Sterling have started their first year at Yale. With new roommates and new friends, new challenges come their way and they quickly realize that life outside of Harper's Prep isn't everything they expected it to be. I'll be posting a new chapter at least twice a week so if you would like to be updated, just drop me a message :)



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Higher Education : Chapter 1

The warm afternoon sun was beaming down on her face as Laila wandered through the campus. The air smelled of fresh cut grass and, as if sensing that the moment hadn't been ideal enough, the birds were chirping in the trees, welcoming her to Yale.

"Can you believe this?" Laila whispered to her boyfriend as they walked through the perfectly manicured lawns of their new home.

"Can I believe how heavy your luggage is or can I believe we're actually here?" Sterling teased her, seeing the twinkle in her eye as she looked around her new surroundings.

Laila laughed but ignored his joke, still completely in awe of her university. They had spent the morning unpacking Sterling's belongings and setting up his apartment, the apartment his parents had owned back in the 80s when they had attended Yale, the apartment he was supposed to be sharing with his twin brother. Mr. Pierce had considered it a good investment and a philanthropic gesture to keep the apartment and rent it to poor college students at less than market price with the idea that one day he would get to see his two boys living there. However, as fate would decide, only one Pierce twin would be occupying the place - the other, Alistair, the more rebellious of the two, would be living hours away in Boston.

"Are you nervous?" Sterling asked quietly as he carried Laila's things. She had only packed a suitcase, an old wooden trunk and a few boxes for her move to Yale but was convinced it was still too much.

"Incredibly," she confessed quickly. "What if I have horrible roommates who hate me?"

Sterling laughed and stole a sideways glance at his girlfriend. She was beautiful. Her long, strawberry blonde hair waving down her back, her violet eyes blinking nervously as she bit her bottom lip. "No one could hate you. If anything, they'll be jealous you have such a hot boyfriend."

Laila laughed and was about to respond when Alistair came bounding down the sidewalk with the rest of her boxes. "Yes, little brother, but luckily for all of Laila's single roommates, there are two of us, and I am decidedly the more handsome."

Sterling rolled his eyes but Alistair grinned, his deep dimples lighting up his entire face. Laila had seen more and more of those dimples as their summer had passed and by the time Alistair was ready to move to Harvard, they were on nearly permanent display. The events that had caused them to temporarily disappear were still in the back of their minds, never to be forgotten, but Laila and Alistair had overcome their mourning and learned from their experience.

"Okay, I think this is it," Laila said, turning a corner and scanning the doors for the right number. A key was pulled out of her pocket and the petite blonde stood up straight, maximizing her short height as she led the party into the dormitory.

"Holy shit!" Alistair exclaimed, pushing past her and dropping her boxes on the floor. "This is your dorm room?"

Laila nodded slowly and looked around. The common area was spacious and already contained the typical dorm room furniture of inflatable plastic loveseats and butterfly chairs. Four bedrooms made up the outer perimeter and Laila headed toward the one door that had been left open.

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"I guess this is it," she said, stepping into her room. She frowned, the walls were bare and the bed was naked. But the desk was newly refinished and the window opened onto the lawn. She could hear the twins moving her things in behind her and choked back some tears, the reality of her new life at Yale was as exciting as it was terrifying.

"You can always come live with me," she heard Sterling whisper in her ear as his strong arms wrapped around her from behind.

Laila smiled and leaned into him. He knew her so well. "I think this place has potential," she finally smiled.

"We can break it in tonight, if you like," Sterling said, nibbling on her ear.

Laila laughed and turned around, kissing him quickly on the lips. "That might be nice."

"You know, I'm only here for the weekend so if you two could hold off on the mushy stuff until tomorrow, that would be great."

Laila glanced at Alistair who was dropping the rest of her boxes next to the dresser. He was smiling at the couple with a devilish look in his eye which quickly faded into confusion and then complete awe as something near the door caught his eye.

"Um, hey." Laila heard a voice from behind Sterling. She looked around her boyfriend's massive frame and saw who she assumed to be one of her roommates standing just outside her room.

"Hi," said as she wiggled out of Sterling's arms. "I'm Laila. It looks like I'm the last one to get here."

The pretty brunette nodded and smiled. "I'm Piper. I moved in a couple weeks ago."

Laila smiled at the girl. Her face was warm and genuine and full of confidence.

"This is my boyfriend Sterling and his brother Alistair," Laila waved to the boys standing behind her.

Piper nodded at each and then turned back to Laila. "Do you need help unpacking? I've just been sitting around all day and am desperately bored."

Laila laughed and then glanced at Alistair when she heard him laugh as well. His eyes were still on Piper, a stupid grin on his face, a small box still tightly held in his hands.

"That would be great, although I'm afraid there is not much to unpack."

"Anything to pass the time," Piper said with a smile.

Laila smiled back and gestured for new roommate to come inside. Sterling had set her suitcase on the bed and was sitting next to it, smiling at Alistair as if his brother was a prize fool. Laila gently kissed him on the cheek and was instantly relieved when he stood up.

"So, we'll come back and get you for dinner," Sterling said, intuitively knowing that his girlfriend wanted time to get to know her new roommate.

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Laila nodded and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. Sterling loved it when she did that. She looked so adorable trying to reach him from so far below. But he knew he had to help so he scooped her into his arms and kissed her warmly on the lips. Even after all this time, she still tasted so good and felt so perfect pressed so closely against him.

"Love you," he heard her whisper against his lips.

"Love you, too." He smiled and set her down, grinning at her flushed face. He walked to his brother who was still staring at Laila's new roommate with a goofy smile and took the box from his hands, setting it quickly on the dresser and pushing Alistair out the door.

"Nice to meet you, Piper," Sterling said over his shoulder.

"You too," Piper smiled at the twins.

"Um," the two girls could hear Alistair mumbling something from the common room. "...really pretty. I mean, I really hope to see you pretty soon."

Piper gave Laila a slightly confused look and Laila could only smile. She had never seen Alistair act that way in front of a girl before. He was usually had such a smooth demeanor and was the epitome of confidence. Not that he had been around many girls lately, but Laila didn't want to explain all of that to Piper at the moment.

"So, you've been here for a few weeks already?"

Piper nodded as she ripped open a box. "I row with the crew team. Practice started before classes so I've had this whole place to myself for the last two and a half weeks."

"Have you met the other girls yet?"

Piper laughed. "Yeah. They seem pretty chill. Different, but...whatever."

Pretty chill? Laila liked the sound of that. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

"No," Piper laughed. "Seattle. You?"

"San Francisco," Laila smiled at her.

"California? Oh, hell yes! Finally, someone not from the East Coast! I swear, every single person I have met has been from New York or Pennsylvania or Maine. I knew at least one of my roommates had to be from somewhere cool."

Laila laughed. She already liked this girl. "Well, I spent my senior year at a boarding school in Massachusetts so I know all about adjusting to this...environment, for lack of a better word."

Piper laughed again. "Why would you go to a boarding school your senior year?"

"To get into Yale," Laila said proudly.

"Looks like it worked." Piper grinned at her.

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"I met my boyfriend there, too."

"Your boyfriend seemed really sweet," Piper said, a genuine affection in her eyes though Laila could tell it was mixed with a certain sadness.½

"He's the best.½I'm really lucky."

Piper smiled and then turned her attention back to the box in front of her.½Laila wondered if she had said something to upset her but quickly discovered it was just a sensitive topic.

"I broke up with my boyfriend just a week before I moved here," Piper said quickly.½

"I'm sorry," Laila tried to sound sympathetic but was slightly shocked at Piper's honesty.½But she had brought it up so she probably wanted to talk about it.½"What happened?"

"He told me that he wanted to take a break," Piper explained, her voice mimicking her disgust at her ex.½He said that he didn't know if he wanted to sustain a relationship from opposites sides of the country since he was about to be exposed to so many new opportunities."

"Ouch."

Piper laughed and helped Laila fit the sheets over her bed.½"I know.½I think he must have rehearsed it about a thousand times because I've never heard him use that many big words in one sentence."

"So you just ended things?"

"Fuck yeah, I did.½I mean, yes.½Sorry.½I'm trying not to swear because my coach says it's distracting."

Laila laughed.½"I don't mind."

Piper laughed again.½"Well, anyway, I told him that if he didn't know if he wanted to be with me, I wasn't going to wait around for him to figure it out."

Laila nodded in approval.½"Sounds like a good choice."

Piper nodded as well, clearly done with that part of the conversation, and then looked around the room.½"You weren't kidding when you said there wasn't much to unpack."

Laila smiled and took note of the empty boxes and suitcase.½"Thanks for your help."

"Anytime."

"Would you," Laila paused to consider the question she was about to ask but then decided it couldn't hurt to ask.½"Would you like to go to dinner with me and the twins?½Alistair leaves tomorrow for Harvard but it's not going to be anything formal.½Just a thanks-for-helping-us-move sort of thing."

"Why not?½It'll be nice to spend the evening with someone other than my TV set."

"Great," Laila smiled.½

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"Before you two go anywhere we need to have a house meeting." Laila heard a drawling southern accent coming from behind her and turned her head to look.

There, in the doorway, stood a short girl, not much taller than Laila, with teased auburn hair and a bright yellow sundress fitted a little too snugly over her pudgy figure. The girl's lips were pulled into a thin line and she was staring down her nose at Laila and Piper.

"Hey, Luanne, this is Laila," Piper made the introductions.

Laila smiled and walked over to extend her hand to her second roommate. "Nice to meet you."

"Yes," Luanne said curtly and squeezed Laila's hand tightly for a second then dropped it just as fast. "I expect you two to be in the common room at a quarter to five." With that she turned sharply on her heels and walked away.

Laila waited until she heard a door close before turning back to Piper. But Piper was smiling, nearly laughing at Laila's reaction.

"Now you can understand why I'm so happy you're here."

Laila smiled, not wanting to jump to conclusions about Luanne, but secretly counting her blessings she had Piper as a roommate as well.

"What's the fourth girl like?"

Piper laughed and shook her head. "Looks like you'll find out at a quarter to five! Come on, Cali. Let's go to the store and stock up my mini-fridge."

Nodding eagerly, Laila grabbed her purse and followed her new friend out the door. She knew this was going to be a year to remember.

Chapter 2: House Meeting

Laila was waiting in the common room with Luanne and Piper. She stared at her two roommates as she shifted awkwardly on the plastic couch, causing the entire piece to groan and crinkle under the slight weight. Piper smiled and tried to suppress a giggle. Luanne rolled her eyes and checked her watch.

"This is so disrespectful," Laila heard Luanne say to herself, her accent getting thicker as her annoyance mounted.

"Maybe she forgot," Piper offered, trying to be helpful.

"I told her about the meeting two hours ago. People don't forget that quickly unless they want to forget," Luanne said quickly.

Piper sighed and glanced at Laila who was staring at Luanne with an irritated expression. Piper had to hold back another giggle. The curious blonde with the violet eyes was going to be a great friend and an ideal roommate. On the surface and to the core, she could tell Laila was nothing but kindness and generosity. But she could also tell Laila was eager to break out of her shell. The likes of Luanne and her imposed dorm room dominance probably had her agitated and she certainly didn't have a very good poker face.

Piper rested her head against the back of her chair and counted the seconds in her head. Luckily, she only made it to 39 when she heard the door open and heavy footsteps walking into the room.

"Roommates!" Nikki's voice was powerful yet lighthearted and instantly made Piper smile. She looked up and saw her fourth roommate standing before them, her short black hair chopped unevenly at her shoulders, her bangs covering one eye. Piper was tall by all considerations for a girl. At 5 foot 9, she towered over Laila and Luanne, but Nikki gave her a run for her money. Her tall stature and her overwhelming confidence gave her an imposing demeanor which she relished.

"You must be the fourth roommate," Nikki's wide smile flashed itself as she looked at Laila. Finally, Laila smiled again and stood up to shake her hand.

"I'm Laila."

"Nikki," the tall girl took her hand. "Wow. You've got purple eyes."

Laila blushed and nodded, grinning slightly.

"Those contacts?"

"No," Laila smiled at Nikki's inquiring face.

"That's kinda hot." Nikki smiled again and then sat down dramatically beside her. "So, house meeting. You called it, you start it," she directed her command at Luanne who was glaring at her with contempt.

Quickly, Luanne pulled herself together, trying to move past her annoyance. She sat up straight and put her hands on the manila folder in her lap. "First, I would like to thank everyone for coming and extend my appreciation for those who showed up on time."

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Nikki snorted a laugh but Luanne continued. "There are now four of us living here and I know we all come from different backgrounds and have different expectations of this school. To maximize our potential, I thought we should come to an agreement on how we are going to share this space so we all benefit from it. But first, we should get to know each other." The girl smiled at her three roommates who were all staring at her like she was crazy.

"I'll go first," she offered. "I'm Luanne Clark and I'm from Birmingham, Alabama. I'm majoring in Political Science and Journalism and will one day be a political correspondent for the New York Times."

She smiled proudly and watched the faces of her roommates go blank. "Piper, why don't you go next," she suggested.

"Right. I'm Piper Collins from Seattle. I row with the crew team."

"What are you majoring in?"

"Undecided," Piper answered quickly then turned to Laila who was looking nervous.

"Hi. I'm Laila Roberts from San Francisco. Um, I'm also undecided."

"Then tell us something interesting about yourself," Luanne persisted.

"I have asthma."

Nikki and Piper burst into laughter but Luanne looked horrified. "You poor thing."

Laila smiled and shrugged, elbowing Nikki who was still laughing beside her.

"Right, my turn. I'm Nikki Peterson and grew up in Manhattan. That's in New York City. I am majoring in Drama and I hate politics," she said with a grin at Luanne.

Her upper lip grew stiff as she tried to ignore the jab from her most volatile roommate. In Luanne's mind, sitting in this room with these three girls, was an unpleasant necessity. She had known them for all of 8 hours and was already anticipating the confrontations. Nikki, who clearly needed psychiatric help, wasn't worth her time or energy. The girl wouldn't listen to a thing she had to say during this meeting and most likely do everything in her power to break all the rules they would lay out. Laila was too quiet for Luanne's liking. Her shy expression and her small features made her look mischievous, like she was always hiding something. Piper was the only one Luanne could relate to. Though she didn't seem very motivated, she did have obligations with the crew team which at least made her responsible.

Luanne took a deep breath. "Okay, I now have a few rules I would like to propose. First, a cleaning wheel."

"A what?" Nikki's voice was abrasive.

"A cleaning wheel," Luanne repeated herself and pulled a paper collage out of her folder. "An organized way of keeping track of what chores need to be done. We can put it on the wall by the door so we are all reminded of our duties before we leave every morning."

Luanne watched as Laila blinked and Nikki rolled her eyes.

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"There's something for three of us to do every week. Cleaning the bathroom, vacuuming the common room, and collecting the mail. Any objections?"

Piper shook her head and Laila followed suit. Nikki rolled her eyes again but didn't object.

"Great," Luanne considered it a small victory. She pulled out another collage from her folder. "Next, I have a code of conduct that I think we should follow at all times. Really, there are just a few items I'd like to highlight. One, no smoking or drinking anywhere in the dorm rooms. Two, clean up after yourself. Three, be respectful of your roommates. This includes the quiet hours from 10 pm to 7 am and handling all disagreements in a peaceful and honorable manner." She paused to check for understanding. Laila was staring at her in disbelief. Piper was staring at her feet. Nikki was staring at the ceiling.

"The last thing I want to discuss, and this is something I feel very strongly about, is visitors in the dorm room. I personally don't mind if you have friends over, as long as you and your guests are following the aforementioned code of conduct, but I do mind if you let boys spend the night. I really don't care what you do on your own time, if you have questionable morals or if you respect yourself, however, I do not believe in pre-marital intercourse of any kind and won't tolerate it in my dorm room."

"Luanne, I think that's a little extreme," Piper was the first to speak. "I mean, we all have our own rooms."

"Yes," Luanne nodded. "And the walls are very thin."

Laila spoke next. "Just because my boyfriend spends the night, doesn't mean we are going toâ!"

"I'm sorry, but this is the one thing I won't negotiate on," Luanne interrupted her.

Laila glanced at Piper for support but her roommate's look of defeat matched her own. "Whatever. Sterling has his own place. I doubt he'd want to stay here anyway."

"Well, I have no problem with it," Nikki chimed in. All three heads turned toward her in disbelief. Of anyone, Luanne thought, Nikki would have argued the most with her last rule. "No boys spending the night. I can live with that."

"Great," Luanne clapped cheerfully. "Does anyone have anything else to say?"

"I think you've done a great job here, Luanne," Nikki said, standing up and walking toward the door, a smile on her face. "See you girls later!"

Laila kept quiet until Nikki had left and then slowly turned back to Luanne and gave a weak smile. "So, I guess that's it."

"Thank you girls so much for being so being here. I really feel confident the four of us will have a great year together."

"Right," Piper said quietly, standing up and moving toward the bathroom. "Well, I'm going to get ready for dinner."

She walked out of the room, leaving Laila and Luanne to contemplate each other. Laila stared curiously at the southern belle who was carefully organizing her notes and charts in the manila folder. She had never encountered someone so uptight. The way her neck and mouth tensed as she spoke, the way Luanne clamped her knees together when she felt threatened, the way her jaw clenched when she said something she knew to

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be unpleasant - it was amazing she attempted any human interaction at all.

"So, you have asthma?" Laila heard her ask.

"It hasn't been that bad lately," she answered honestly.

"I have high blood pressure."

"That must be difficult."

"It's been getting worse lately," Luanne admitted and Laila wasn't surprised.

All Laila could do was nod sympathetically. She really had nothing to say to this girl. After an awkward silence, Luanne stood up and glanced down at Laila.

"You do have purple eyes, don't you?"

"They're violet, really."

"That's kind of weird," Luanne said and then quickly walked away.

Laila sighed and stood up, the plastic seat beneath her sticking to the back of her legs. She was reprimanding herself for not standing up to Luanne, but knew that arguing with the girl was pointless. Hopefully Luanne would relax after a few weeks with the other girls and, if she was unrelenting, at least Nikki was there to entertain them all.

Chapter 3: Not Like Other Girls

Alistair walked nervously beside Sterling as they made their way through campus to Laila's dorm. Normally, he enjoyed being out in public with his brother, knowing exactly the types of looks they attracted from girls. And Sterling would never reciprocate the attention, leaving it up to Alistair to wink and smile at all the gawking young women. But tonight was different. Tonight, he didn't even notice if girls were staring at them. His mind was on Laila's roommate with the long legs and pretty smile.

The second he had seen Piper, it was as if his entire body went numb. He couldn't feel anything except for his heart beating out of control as he took in her beauty. And then he had heard her speak and his entire world was turned upside down. He had barely said two words to his brother the entire afternoon because images of Piper kept running through his head and he was too distracted by them to think straight.

Alistair stood behind Sterling as he knocked on the door and felt his anxiety rising to an entirely new level. What if Piper answered the door? What if she saw him and smiled? Would he be able to react? Maybe it was best if he waited by the car.

"Hey, I'm going to waitâ" he started to tell his brother but stopped as the door opened and Laila's bright face answered from the other side.

"We're all ready to go," she said, standing on her tip toes and kissing Sterling on the cheek. "Piper's just grabbing her purse."

"I'm sorry, what?" Alistair asked before he could stop himself.

"We're ready to go," Laila repeated, smiling at him. "We're just waiting for Piper to get her purse."

"You invited her?" He asked, more forcefully than he intended.

Laila looked hurt by Alistair's outburst. "I didn't think it would be a big deal."

"That's great, Laila. Just great." Alistair's palms became sweaty and his head started spinning with confusion.

"What's great?" Piper's voice sounded just as he remembered. But of course it would. He had just seen her five hours ago.

"That you're coming with us," Sterling answered for him.

"Oh," Piper responded with a smile. "Yeah, this should be fun."

Alistair was mesmerized by her smile; the way her nose crinkled the slightest bit, the way her green eyes sparkled. "I'm really looking forward to it," he offered.

Piper glanced at him and gave a slight nod, her smile turning more brilliant than before. Laila was staring at him like he was crazy and Sterling was rolling his eyes. Alistair turned around quickly and started walking to the car, reprimanding himself for being such an idiot. He could hear his three companions behind him, talking and laughing all the way to the parking lot. Piper's laugh sounded like heaven.

"Shit," he swore to himself as he reached into his pocket to retrieve the car keys. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be falling for some girl he barely knew. It must be lust, not love. "Fuck!" He swore as his keys

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slipped from between his fingers and bounced on the pavement.

"You all right?" He heard her soft voice behind him as he felt a warm hand on his arm. Oh God, she was touching him.

Alistair quickly pulled away causing Piper's hand to quickly fly up in an apologetic gesture. He bent down to pick up his keys, cursing himself again, and then stood up straight. He glanced at her once, noting how tall she was. Had she been this tall earlier in the day? He couldn't think of the answer as he looked down her body, searching for the insanely high heels she must be wearing. But her feet were casually sporting a pair of simple flip flops, her perfect toes painted with a bright orange polish.

Alistair quickly looked away. "Girls in the back, guys in the front," he said decidedly, glancing at his brother who was ready to climb into the back seat with Laila. But Alistair shook his head, catching his brother's attention. Sterling sighed deeply and held the door open for Piper who was still smiling as she disappeared behind the tinted glass of the window.

"Sterling," Alistair whispered as his brother moved for the front passenger side door.

"What?"

Alistair walked around the car so he could lower his voice even more and his brother met him half way. "I don't think I want her here."

"Who? Piper?" Sterling asked, not even attempting to be discreet.

"Shhh. Yes, Piper," Alistair whispered again.

"It's a little late for that now. She's already in the car."

"I know. I just—" Alistair glanced through the windshield at the two girls in the backseat. They were both looking at the two brothers with curiosity but burst into a fit of giggles when they were caught staring. Alistair blushed and turned back to Sterling. "How am I supposed to put up with that all night? She's just so—I don't know—not like other girls."

"I don't really know what to say, Al. She seems pretty normal to me."

"She is not normal!" Alistair whispered vehemently. "She is so not normal!"

"You don't even know her—"

"I don't have to know her."

"Then what is your problem?" Sterling asked, frustrated his brother couldn't give him a straight answer for his adamant objection to Laila's roommate.

"My problem is her stupid laugh and her abnormally long legs and her weird moss colored eyes."

Sterling broke a smile, finally understanding why his brother had been acting so strangely. "You like this girl, don't you?"

"I don't."

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"You do."

"You're an asshole."

"Look," Sterling started, "just relax and be yourself." Sterling knew his brother hadn't been with a girl since Rebecca. He hadn't even shown interest in one so this unwanted attraction was probably doing a number of confusing things to his head and heart. Sterling and Laila both knew Alistair was still working through his grief but he had shown signs of improvement. His smile had returned and he had started making jokes and smart comments about girls he found attractive, much like he used to do in the days before he realized he had fallen in love.

"I can't be myself. That's the problem," Alistair answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't pictured her naked yet."

Sterling laughed out loud. "Excuse me?"

"I thought, maybe what I'm feeling is just overwhelming lust, but then I realized I hadn't pictured her naked, which is usually the first thing I do when I see a girl."

Sterling nodded. He knew that much to be true.

Alistair continued, clearly agitated and clearly considering this to be a serious conversation. "So I don't know what I'm feeling now and I don't think I can spend an entire evening with her."

"Al, listen to me. You'll be fine. She's just a girl. You don't have to talk to her if you don't want to. Don't even look at her if that makes you feel better."

"I can do this," Alistair agreed. Sterling had made it sound so easy. "I'll be fine."

"See," Sterling smiled at his brother. "Nothing to it."

Sterling walked back to the passenger side, an amused smile on his face because he knew his brother was in for a long, torturous night. If Piper was in the same vicinity as his brother, Alistair wouldn't be able to stop looking at her or thinking about her. Sterling now understood his brother had been thinking about the girl all afternoon but didn't want to mention it, hence his unbelievable silence. He hoped Alistair wouldn't shut down completely, his new feelings too scary for him to deal with. But when Laila had announced Piper would be joining them, Sterling had been amused by his brother, not realizing why he was reacting in such a bizarre display of emotions. Acting like a fool in a desperate attempt to conceal his emotions, was better, Sterling supposed, than running away or attaching himself to her hip.

Alistair jumped into the driver's seat of his Lexus, completely distraught but trying to find some courage to make it through the night. He waited until his brother had closed the door and then started the engine, checking his side and rear view mirrors before pulling out into traffic. But Piper's profile was all he could focus on in the reflection. She was turned toward Laila, saying something in a low voice, and smiling.

"Shit," Alistair swore to himself and tilted the mirror away from her.

Chapter 4: Get to Start Over

The ride to the restaurant had been torturous for Alistair. Piper's voice was all he could hear and when she wasn't speaking, he was annoyed at whoever else was talking. He could see her face in his mind every time she laughed, which seemed to be quite often, and finally decided that he had gone insane. A girl had made him go completely insane.

When he had finally parked the car and the group had clamored out, he took a deep breath and accepted his fate as he walked behind her. The navy blue dress she wore was simple and form fitting, hugging her in all the right areas which seemed to be every part of her body. Her light brown hair was hanging down her back and bounced softly with each step she took. Everything about her was beautiful, but her legs were Alistair's favorite part. They were long and lean, her perfectly toned muscles showing themselves gracefully as she walked into the restaurant.

"Do you like Italian food?" Alistair heard Laila ask her roommate as they stepped inside.

"I fucking love Italian!" Piper exclaimed animatedly but instantly recognized her mistake.

Laila laughed and Sterling smiled at her but Alistair's jaw nearly dropped to the floor at her unexpected use of profanity. Perfect. She was fucking perfect and suddenly didn't seem so intimidating.

"I mean, yes, it's my favorite," Piper laughed and blushed. "Sorry."

The hostess showed them to their table and Alistair followed behind Piper with a boyish grin on his face. He acted quickly, pulling out her chair for her and smiling as she thanked him. With his confidence slightly boosted, Alistair sat down next to her, glancing to his side to see if she was watching him. But she had already turned her attention to the other side of the table where Laila and Sterling were sitting. Frustrated but not defeated, Alistair reached for his napkin and with one dramatic movement, pulled it from the table causing all his silverware to bounce onto the floor.

"Shit," Alistair swore under his breath as he bent down to collect his utensils.

Piper glanced eagerly across the table at Laila who was returning the same look. Earlier, while they were waiting in the car for the twins to finish their discussion, the two girls had arrived at very different conclusions regarding Alistair's behavior. Piper was convinced the boy hated her and was merely trying to be nice for Laila's sake. Laila, on the other hand, admitted she had a different theory which was quite the opposite, but she wouldn't say anything more. They both agreed, however, that his behavior was comically entertaining, regardless of his motives.

"So," Sterling started once they were all situated. "How are the other roommates?"

Laila and Piper glance at each other again and burst into laughter.

"We had a house meeting today, before you two came over," Laila explained. "I think the rules of my dorm room and worse than those at Harper's."

"What happened?" Sterling laughed, not really believing his girlfriend.

"It's really just our one roommate," Piper said. "Luanne doesn't want any distractions. Which means no smoking or drinking, no noise after 10 pm, and no boys spending the night."

Higher Education

"What?" Both Pierce twins asked at the same time.

"She doesn't believe in pre-marital sex," Laila said, blushing a deep shade of red and glancing at Sterling. Sterling loved that his girlfriend was still modest after all this time. His brother was well aware of the fact Laila and Sterling were having sex, and her roommate didn't really seem like the type of girl who would judge. Yet Sterling knew that she wanted to keep their private life just that: private. He preferred it that way too for it made them a stronger couple. He put a loving hand on Laila's knee and was rewarded with a quick smile.

"Does that mean you'll be staying with me most nights?" Sterling leaned down and whispered to Laila.

She blushed again and nodded, kissing him quickly on the lips and returning her attention to the conversation.

"So you all agreed to these rules?" Alistair asked, a bit perplexed seeing as they all had their own room and only shared the common area.

"Most weren't unreasonable," Piper responded. "Although I doubt Nikki will follow any of them."

Alistair didn't know or care who Nikki was. But the Luanne girl was clearly looking out for his best interests. The fewer boys Piper saw on a daily basis, the better his chances would be.

"I think they are all great rules," he announced.

"You do?" His brother looked at him from across the table with a disbelieving eye.

"Well, sure. I mean, come on, smoking and drinking? That's so bad for your health." He turned to Piper and gave her an encouraging look. She nodded in agreement though couldn't hide the smile on her lips. "And everyone should be entitled to a good night's sleep. And really, I think you girls will all find that you can be more productive with a little less male interaction."

What the hell did he just say? Alistair cursed himself again and again as he took in the bewildered looks of his brother and his brother's girlfriend. But Piper was still smiling, obviously entertained by his ramblings.

"So, does it work the same for guys? Do you plan on being more productive with a little less female interaction?"

"Absolutely," Alistair vowed.

"You don't think the girls at Harvard are going to distract you? You think you'll be able to stay away?"

"I can say, with 100% certainty, that no girl at Harvard can distract me."

Sterling shook his head but Laila picked up on Alistair's meaning and flashed him a quick smile. From the looks of things, no girl at Harvard would be distracting Alistair Pierce because there was one girl, in particular, at Yale who had already commanded every last bit of his attention. She looked at her roommate and tried to decipher the girl's expression. It seemed to be one of friendly competition rather than one of affection, but then again, Laila didn't know her that well.

"So you'll stay abstinent?" Piper was asking Alistair and the conversation suddenly became more interesting.

"Why not?" Alistair laughed. "I vow not to sleep with any girls at Harvard for an entire year."

Higher Education

"Okay," Piper laughed with him. "You're on the honor code with this one. If you break your promise, you'll have to be honest and tell me."

"Fair enough," Alistair smiled at her. Piper could feel her heart skip a beat whenever he smiled at her. Something about this boy had her hooked. Maybe it was his dimples or maybe it was his completely bizarre behavior which was so obviously unintentional. She smiled back, excited they were able to converse so easily. Perhaps she had been wrong. It was possible he didn't hate her at all.

"But you have to promise the same thing," she heard Alistair say.

Piper laughed again. "Sure. I promise not to sleep with any girl at Harvard for an entire year."

Sterling and Laila both laughed from the other side of the table.

"Nice try," Alistair laughed as well. "But, no. You have to swear, on this breadstick, that you won't sleep with any boys at Yale." He reached for the basket at the middle of the table and held out a piece of bread for Piper to swear on.

She laughed out loud and looked deep in Alistair's eyes. Their bright blue color was hiding some kind of pain, but the twinkle in the corner let her know he was having fun with this game. Why not, she thought to herself. Abstaining from sex would probably be good for her, considering how badly she had been used by her ex.

"All right," she agreed. "I swear on this breadstick that I won't sleep with any boys at Yale for an entire year." She clamped her hand down on top of Alistair's, smashing the breadstick between their palms. Alistair smiled and winked at her and released her hand after a few seconds only to hold the damaged bread across the table to Laila and Sterling.

"You guys want in on this too?"

"Absolutely not," Sterling quickly said, crossing his arms at his chest.

Laila just laughed and shook her head.

"Hmm," Alistair mused, biting off an end of the bread and smiling at Piper. "Guess it's just you and me."

Piper laughed and reached for the other half of the bread in Alistair's hand. His heart and head nearly did a somersault as she touched him, seeming to be completely at ease. He felt more and more at ease himself as the dinner progressed and was even bold enough to insist on paying for her dinner. Well, in all honesty, he made Sterling pay because he had helped them move, after all. He was even comfortable enough to let her sit in the front seat with him on the drive back, allowing Laila and Sterling to occupy the back. He knew his brother hated not being close to his girlfriend and when Alistair adjusted the rearview mirror, he wasn't at all surprised to see Sterling reaching for her hand.

Alistair started the car and turned on the radio, forgetting his CD was already set to play.

"Forgot that was in there," he muttered mostly to himself as he reached for the eject button.

"Turn that up," Piper said, simultaneously reaching for the volume knob. Their hands collided and she felt a sense of warmth spread up her arms from her fingers.

"Sorry," Alistair smiled, retracting his hand. "I didn't think anyone outside of 1993 still liked Nirvana."

Higher Education

"Are you kidding me? I love them!" Piper skipped the CD a few songs and then just sat back in her chair and listened. A comfortable silence passed between the two people in the front of the car as the song played its course.

"I swear, that song changed my life this summer," Piper laughed as she turned the volume down.

"'Drain You' changed your life?" Alistair asked with a curious grin.

"I know, it sounds ridiculous, and I've listened to it so many times before. But those lyrics really hit home earlier this year. 'I'm lucky to have met you, I don't care what you think, Unless it is about me, It is now my duty to completely drain you.'" Piper laughed at herself. "That probably sounds so fucked up, doesn't it?"

Alistair laughed with her. "Kind of."

Piper laughed again, not offended in the slightest. "At least we all get to start over, you know?"

Alistair glanced at her and nodded. Her head was resting against the seat but turned toward him, a slight smile still lingering on her lips. He smiled back and then returned his attention to the road, an image of Rebecca suddenly coming to his mind. For the first time since her death, he finally felt as if he was ready to start over.

Chapter 5: High Fives and Memories

Laila was sitting on the couch with Sterling when Alistair came bursting through the door.

"I totally fucked that up!" Alistair moaned as he threw himself on the couch next to the couple.

Laila discretely pushed Sterling's hand out from under her dress where it had been slowly making its way up her thigh. Sterling gave her a wicked grin and placed his hand on her knee, squeezing lightly.

"I thought it went okay," Laila said with a hopeful smile.

"I acted like such an idiot!" Alistair whined and put his head in his hands.

"No you didn't," Laila insisted.

"Yeah, you did," Sterling laughed.

"What happened when you walked her home?" Laila elbowed her boyfriend in the ribs and he smiled at her, clearly unaffected.

"It was a disaster," Alistair said slowly. "Things were going fine. I asked for her number, saying I would need to call her for support if I was thinking about sleeping with a girl, and she gave it to me."

"See, that's good," Laila smiled.

"But then I tried to hug her goodnight, but she went in for a handshake and I got flustered and ended up giving her a high five. It was so awkward."

Sterling burst into laughter but Laila appeared to be more concerned. "That doesn't mean it was a disaster. Just send her a text or something saying you had fun tonight and don't let her think it bothered you."

"That won't freak her out?"

"Probably," Sterling teased his brother.

"No, it won't." Laila promised him and shot her boyfriend a glare.

"All right," Alistair said, ignoring his brother. He pulled out his phone and composed a quick message, taking a deep breath before sending it.

The three waited in silence for a few seconds and Laila watched as Alistair's face sank and then lit up as his phone chimed. "What do I do?"

"See what it says!" Laila told him, almost as excited as Alistair was.

"It says 'Me too. Talk to you soon.'" Alistair looked up at Laila with a giddy smile.

"See? Not bad at all!"

"I guess not." Alistair closed his phone and stood up, still smiling uncontrollably. "I'm going to bed."

Higher Education

"Have a good night." Laila smiled at him and waited until he had left the room before turning to her boyfriend. She punched him lightly in the stomach, not surprised at all when he caught her hand and pulled her toward him.

"What?" He smiled at her playfully.

"You shouldn't have made fun of him."

"Come on, Laila," he said, tucking some hair behind her ear. "He knows I'm only teasing."

"It's just, Piper is the first girl he's liked since Rebecca so I think we should be supportive."

Sterling smiled. He knew Laila was right but he also knew that he and Alistair had each other's backs, no questions asked, an unconditional rule. "I will be. I promise."

Laila smiled at him and held his gaze.

"Hey," Sterling said quietly, still holding Laila close to him. "I love you."

"I love you too," she said, shivering as his hand started creeping back up her thigh. Sterling leaned in and kissed her, his other hand running around her hip and gripping the fabric of her dress. Laila kissed him back and ran her hands across his stomach causing Sterling to groan against her lips. With one quick movement, Sterling had Laila in his arms and stood up from the couch, walking her quickly to his bedroom.

He had her on the bed in mere seconds, pushing her dress around her waist and running his hands up and down her legs. He kissed her stomach and her thighs before pulling her dress off completely. Sterling's lips found hers and he kissed her again and again. He could feel the heat rising between her legs as he pressed against her, making him want her even more.

They had spent an amazing summer together in Europe, and although Alistair had been with them, Laila and Sterling had managed to get some alone time. One night in particular still had Sterling's blood racing. They had been in Rome, their hotel facing the abandoned ancient ruins, and Sterling had been sitting on balcony, watching the stray cats meander through the fallen city. He thought Laila had already fallen asleep and was surprised to see her walking gracefully across the balcony to sit with him.

Her nightgown was thin and Sterling had been able to see almost all of her through the flimsy material. He had motioned for her to sit on his lap which she had done eagerly, running her fingers through his hair and kissing him deeply. Not one word passed between them as Laila repositioned herself above him, straddling his hips with her legs. Sterling's hands crept up her legs and his eyes had gone wide with surprise when he felt she wasn't wearing anything beneath her nightgown. Laila smiled and kissed him again, reaching for his boxers and gently tugging them down.

They made love right there on the balcony of the hotel that night, a slow and silent dance which left both breathless and exhausted. Neither spoke a word nor had they mentioned it since. That memory had gotten Sterling through the three weeks of lonely nights when Laila returned to California before their move to Yale. But now they were back and Sterling could see her as much as he liked. They would be celebrating their one year anniversary soon and Sterling already had the perfect evening planned. He had the flowers ordered, the dinner reservations made, the promise ring he was going to give her was being safely kept at the jewelers.

He smiled as Laila started unbuttoning his jeans, knowing he would always be happy when she was near.

Higher Education

Piper waited for her phone to vibrate again. Alistair had sent her a text message a few minutes earlier saying that what a good time he had that evening. She couldn't help but smile. Even though he figured out how to relax, he had been so nervous to say goodbye. She thought she was doing him a favor by offering to shake his hand, thus avoiding the awkward moment when you didn't know if you should hug someone or simply walk away. But he had already started moving in for a hug by the time she realized her mistake. The poor guy had been so embarrassed, he had simply held up his hand and given her a high five.

Piper laughed to herself again at the silliness of it all. At least he hadn't tried to kiss her. That would have made things almost unbearably uncomfortable. Not that she ruled out that possibility for future encounters with Alistair. He did seem to like her, much like Laila had insinuated, and she could easily see herself falling for him and his goofy yet confident ways. It helped, of course, that he was gorgeous with his ashy blonde hair and his dimples. When he had asked for her number, she had practically thrown herself at him because those dimples were just so damn irresistible.

But it was now obvious that Alistair wasn't going to text her back that evening. She had left things open, texting that she would talk to him soon, but by that she had meant immediately. Once he had sent her that initial message, she wanted nothing more than to see him again, maybe spend the rest of the evening listening to music or watching a movie. Nothing formal, because Alistair didn't seem like that type of a guy, and that was fine with Piper. She preferred it that way and remembered all those times her ex had taken her out to fancy dinners just to show her off. She had hated it. But, of course, looking back on that relationship, she now hated everything about him. Her fingers ran through her hair, stopping only briefly at the scar which was hidden just above her left ear. But those days were over, she told herself. She had something new to live for, something - and definitely someone - new to look forward to.

Piper got ready for bed and set her phone on the nightstand, hoping he would send something so she wouldn't have to fall asleep just yet. But eventually her eyes closed, and she fell asleep thinking of his smile and how things would be the next time they saw each other.

Alistair was sitting in bed, clutching his phone in his fist. He had turned it on and off so many times, debating whether or not to carry on the conversation with Piper. He hadn't expected her to respond so quickly - if at all - and now he was left with an unfinished feeling. Would Piper forget about him if he didn't reply? After their completely awkward farewell, he didn't think that was possible. Piper and Laila would most likely be laughing about it tomorrow. Maybe if he called her next week, the excitement of her classes would have time to overshadow his stupidity.

Sighing deeply, Alistair set his phone on his nightstand and turned off the lights. He rested his head on the pillow and stared at the ceiling, his hands tucked behind his neck. He wanted nothing more than to see Piper again, with her long legs and gorgeous green eyes. The thought of starting school wasn't nearly as excited as the idea of seeing her again. But quickly his thoughts turned to Rebecca. His heart still ached for her and he could still feel his fingers running through her soft hair. He missed the way she used to smile at him, the look she would get in her eyes when she was pleased with something he said, the way she felt in his arms when he woke up in the morning.

Nights were always the hardest for him. At night, there was nothing to distract him from thinking about her. He thought about climbing out of bed and searching for Laila, suddenly needing her comforting reassurance that everything was going to okay. But he had seen the look in Sterling's eyes as he had left the room, a look Alistair used to know all too well, and he knew speaking to Laila was out of the question.

Higher Education

Alistair closed his eyes and did his best to picture a scenario in which Piper and Rebecca would meet. Would Rebecca approve, knowing that if it were up to him, he would still have her by his side and in his arms? He knew she wouldn't want him to be miserable, she wouldn't want him to grieve for the rest of his life. But how would she feel about Piper? No answer instantly came to his mind and he fell asleep debating the possibilities.

Chapter 6: Brittany's First Day

Brittany Alexander walked hesitantly into the performing arts building. Her drama class was her last of the day and if it went anything like her Calculus and Psychology classes, she was going to be in trouble. She looked nervously from side to side as she kept her head down, swerving around the other students in the building. In high school, her walk to the auditorium had been one of juxtaposing excitement and comfort. She never knew what was going to happen, but it always felt like home. Here, everything was new and, even though she knew she was supposed to be thriving on the challenge, her nerves had gotten the best of her.

The doors of the classroom seemed heavy as she pushed her way through, her bag catching on the handle causing her to stumble. She glanced around, hoping no one saw her embarrassing clumsiness. All of the other students were minding their own business, most staring at their desks, some talking to their neighbors. Brittany was almost ready to sigh in relief when her eyes landed on a girl in the front row. This girl, with her short black hair and her dark eyes, was smiling at her. Not necessarily a sympathetic smile, but one of amusement, as if she was watching a cartoon.

Brittany blushed a deep shade of red and smiled back, trying to laugh off her unease. The girl's smile widened into a sincere look of understanding and curiosity and Brittany swore she felt her heart jump in her chest. She quickly looked down and took her seat a few rows back, making sure she could see the professor and the entire front row.

Class proceeded much as Brittany hoped it would. The professor was passionate about his craft, she would have been scared if any drama teacher wasn't, and he clearly outlined his expectations and the curriculum. She was trying to pay the professor her complete attention, but every time the girl in the front row moved her head or adjusted her weight in her seat, Brittany felt her gaze shifting. At one point she realized she had been staring at the back of the girl's neck for nearly five minutes. But something about her was intriguing. Maybe it was the dark freckles just between her shoulder blades that looked exactly like Brittany's favorite constellation. Or maybe it was the way the girl ran her hand through her short black hair. Maybe it was the way she stood up so gracefully from her chair. Shit! It must be time to leave.

Brittany glanced around and saw the other students were packing their books in their bags and walking out the door. Had she missed something? She must have if she hadn't even realized the professor had excused them. She stood up warily, wondering if she should ask the professor to repeat the homework or if she should ask another student. Either way, she would look like a fool, but that wasn't a new phenomenon.

Opening up her bag, she shoved her books inside and threw the strap over her shoulder as she stood up.

"Excuse me," she heard a voice and looked up, surprised to see the black haired girl standing in front of her. "Do you have any idea where Green Hall is?"

If Brittany had known the answer, she doubted she would be able to give it to the girl. Something about her was so incredibly intimidating though what it was, Brittany didn't know. Was it her height? She must be nearly 6 feet tall. Maybe it was her bold features, all of which struck Brittany as beautiful. One or the other or all of the above, Brittany couldn't move as the girl took a step toward her.

"Hey, I'm Nikki," she said, extending her hand.

Brittany could only nod as she started to walk around the girl toward the door.

"Wait up!"

Higher Education

Dear God, no, Brittany thought to herself as she heard Nikki following behind her. But sure enough, she felt Nikki's hand on her arm as she pushed through the door of the classroom and out into the hallway. Brittany stopped just outside the door and jerked her arm away, uncomfortable and confused with the warm feeling of Nikki's touch.

"Look, I'm sorry. I don't know where Green Hall is," Brittany said quickly, turning to face Nikki and seeing the girl's face sink at her defensive gesture.

"Okay. I just," Nikki paused and then shook her head. "I was just trying to start a friendly conversation."

"Does it look like I need a friend?" Brittany shot her a glare which only made Nikki smile again.

"Actually, yes. It does." Nikki stared at the scared girl for a moment. She had seen her at the beginning of class, her curly blonde hair and her pink cheeks gave her a cherubic look but her dark brown eyes offset that image completely.

But the girl didn't say anything and all Nikki could do was shrug her shoulders and turn around to leave. So much for making new friends. Not that Nikki needed any. A few kids from her high school were here and she had already befriended half of the drama department with her eagerness to participate in the Fall production. She was only trying to be nice because clearly the girl needed help. She had looked a complete mess on her way into class, tangling herself between her book bag and the door. And by the time class had ended, the blonde look practically terrified. Oh well, she thought. At least she tried.

"I'm sorry," she heard a small voice from behind her. Nikki smiled and slowed her step.

"I'm sorry," the girl repeated. "The first day off class has me kind of nervous. I'm Brittany."

Nikki looked down at the girl who was now beside her. "Hey, Brittany. I'm Nikki." She put out her hand and this time the girl took it.

Nikki's handshake was strong and comforting but Brittany didn't want to linger in the moment. She hadn't meant to offend Nikki by her behavior, but she was scared. Scared because she was feeling something she knew was wrong, scared because she was feeling something she knew wouldn't be reciprocated. But as she watched Nikki walk away from her, Brittany knew she would be miserable if she didn't at least talk to the girl.

"Are you a freshman as well?" Brittany asked, eager to learn more about her.

"Yup," Nikki said with enthusiasm but didn't elaborate.

"Where are you from?"

"New York City. You?"

"Just outside Chicago."

"The Windy City! I saw *The Color Purple* at the Cadillac Palace a few years ago."

"Are you kidding?" Brittany beamed. "I interned with the Stage Manager for that run."

"Really? That's awesome."

Higher Education

"By intern, I mean running to Starbucks every two hours and getting coffee, most of which I managed to order incorrectly, but at least I didn't get fired before the show started."

Nikki laughed. She liked Brittany and her unfortunate clumsiness. "Are you doing anything with the Fall production here?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Brittany answered honestly. "I was worried that I wouldn't be able to focus on all my classes, much less a production."

"You should check it out," Nikki encouraged. "They don't need any major rolls filled or anything like that. Mostly just prop and set work."

"I guess a few hours of painting backdrops wouldn't hurt," Brittany said with a smile as Nikki held the door open for her. The afternoon sun was still high in the sky and Brittany realized that no bells were going to ring signaling for her to find her locker and collect her things to go home. No parents would be waiting in cars to drive their kids home from school and nobody could stop her if she wanted to start her homework someplace other than her room or the library.

"I guess I'll see you in class, then."

Brittany returned her attention to her new friend and smiled. "I'll see you then."

"Maybe next time you'll sit by me so I won't look like the only loser in the front of the classroom," Nikki teased.

"Maybe," Brittany laughed. "Speaking of next class, did he assign any homework?"

Nikki laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," Brittany admitted. "I told you, I was really nervousâ"

But Nikki was shaking her head and laughing again. "Come prepared with a five to seven minute monologue from a 20th century playwright. You're allowed one prop."

"Wow," Brittany laughed at herself. "I completely missed that one. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Nikki said with a smile. "See, looks like you really did need me."

Brittany smiled and waved goodbye as Nikki took off across the campus. From the looks of things, Brittany needed Nikki like she needed a hole in her head. The girl was going to be a distraction, but most likely one she couldn't stay away from.

Chapter 7: You're Fast

Laila couldn't help comparing her first day at Yale to her first day at Harper's. She remembered being so nervous and taking a seat in nearly the last row of her English class. But then she had seen Sterling. He had walked up to her and asked if he could sit next to her, kissing her lightly on the cheek as he sat down, saying how cute she looked in her uniform. Laila smiled at the memory, her heart nearly overflowing as she thought about Sterling.

She knew, of course, that he wouldn't come to her rescue today. He had Chemistry this hour and was on the opposite side of campus. Not that she needed him to save her today. She would be fine on her own, knowing that she could see him in just a little over an hour when their classes were finally finished. She searched the large hall for an empty seat and sighed when she realized the only available chairs left were in the first two rows. Reluctantly, she set her books down and pulled out a notebook, ready for anything the teacher might lecture on.

Much to her surprise and delight, Laila found the professor to be incredibly entertaining. His choice of literature already had her pleased and his exuberance on the subject couldn't be contained. It wasn't until the end of class that she was even slightly disappointed.

"As you can see," the professor was saying, "there are more than 200 of you in this classroom. Far too many to carry on a structured conversation or debate. That is why I am assigning each of you to a smaller group consisting of 30 to 40 students each. You will meet every Friday, in lieu of my lectures, with a Student Teacher, each of whom has my complete and utmost respect for their knowledge of English Literature. In these groups, you will discuss, analyze and critique the assigned readings, thus formulating the thesis for your bi-weekly writing assignments."

Laila heard some of the students in the class groan but she had to smile. She always preferred a written assignment to a quiz or test.

The professor gestured for a group people to stand up and Laila glanced over each of them. They were clearly older than the freshman who made up the majority of the classroom, each of them had a serious manner about them as they stared back at the group. But there was one boy in this group of student teachers who appeared to be more relaxed than the rest. His mop of curly blonde hair was carelessly brushed from his face and, while his companions wore slacks and dress shirts, he was casually dressed in khaki shorts and a blue polo.

Soon she heard her group called, last names starting with the letters O - S, and quickly jotted down where they were assigned to meet every Friday. She glanced up at the front of the classroom at the row of student teachers, hoping to discover which one she and the rest of her group had been assigned to. But not one of them had spoken, gestured, or even moved from what she could tell. Yet as her eyes scanned the upperclassmen, she noticed one of them was looking at her. The boy with the curly hair, well she supposed he was a man at this age, was grinning at her and winked when she caught his eye. Laila quickly looked away and started packing her books into her bag.

Within a few short minutes, the professor had excused them for the day and Laila quickly picked up her things and started for the door. She couldn't wait to see Sterling, to fall into his arms and tell him all about her day. Not that anything exciting had happened to her, but his day could be a completely different story. Maybe he had some crazy professor or maybe something in his chemistry class had exploded. Or maybe nothing had happened and they could finish their homework quickly and spend the rest of the evening in bed. That thought was worth getting excited over and Laila picked up her step as soon as she was outside the building.

Higher Education

She was surprised when she heard a voice beside her. "You're fast."

"Excuse me?" She said, looking up and seeing that the curly haired boy who had winked at her was walking quickly at her side.

"You walk fast for such a short girl."

"Oh," Laila said, not sure if she should be offended or amused. "I'm in a hurry, I guess."

"Don't tell me you have another class today." The guy smiled down at her.

"No. I'm meeting someone," Laila responded, slowing her step as she felt herself about to cough.

"Hi. I'm Will."

"Oh. Hi. I'm Laila."

Will was still smiling at her as he spoke. "I think you're in my study group for Professor White's Lit class."

"O through S?"

"The very one."

Laila nodded and looked ahead of her, wondering if Sterling was going to be waiting at her dorm room or if she should go straight to his apartment.

"I'm glad you're in my group," she heard Will saying.

"And why is that?"

"I can see that you really like literature."

"How do you know?" Laila asked, slightly annoyed Will was still walking with her.

But he smiled at her question, clearly not picking up on her annoyance. "I can tell by the way you were paying attention to Professor White - like you were completely enthralled with everything he had to say."

"He's a really good lecturer," Laila answered shortly.

Will laughed. "And luckily, you've been assigned to a really good student teacher."

"Well, that's great, Will," Laila finally looked at him again. His curly hair was thick and his dark brown eyes seemed to always be smiling. He appeared to be genuine in every respect and Laila couldn't help but smile back.

"What other classes are you taking this semester?" Will looked down at the adorable blonde beside him. He had seen her in class when she had walked in and had been watching her nearly the entire hour. The smile on her lips as Professor White spoke about Tolstoy and Bronte had been one of pure bliss and Will felt as though his prayers had been answered when he realized they would be working together in study group.

"Um, I'm taking A History of Ancient Civilizations, Physics and French."

Higher Education

"Ooh," Will mused over her class selection. "Who do you have for French?"

"Madame Fausse."

"Watch out for her. She's the reason I now speak Spanish."

Laila laughed. "Thanks for the heads up."

"Anytime," Will answered, wanting nothing more than to put his hand on the small of her back or run his fingers through her hair - anything to just touch her.

They walked in silence for a few steps, Will completely mesmerized by Laila's movements. Her walk, her posture, the adorable way she stared curiously in front of her. But all too soon she ended his bliss.

"Well, it was really nice meeting you. I'll see you in class," he heard her say as she skipped off toward one of the buildings. Will had hardly taken the time to look around but quickly realized they were outside of a dormitory and Laila was running quickly into the arms of a tall blonde jock-looking type. Will paused and watched them embrace, Laila's small body being nearly engulfed by this meat-head's large arms. That couldn't be the type of guy she liked. He looked like he had no brains at all, just pure muscle and testosterone. But he saw the look on Laila's face as she looked up at him. It was one of joy, pure happiness and love, and Will's heart twisted slightly inside his chest.

The two shared a quick kiss before Laila smiled at him and allowed him to take her book bag from her. She moved quickly to the door, sliding her key inside and disappearing from sight. Her boyfriend paused before entering the room, glancing over his shoulder and catching Will's eye with a cautionary glare. Could he feel threatened, Will wondered as he smiled to himself and walked slowly home.

"What are you smiling about?" Gavin asked as Will walked in the front door.

Will looked at his roommate. He hadn't realized he was still smiling but didn't doubt that he was. "Is a guy not allowed to smile?"

Gavin cracked a grin. "I guess I should rephrase my question. What are you smirking about?"

Will laughed. "Just thinking about something."

"Thinking or plotting?"

Will laughed again. "Why is it you always assume I am up to no good?"

"Because you usually are," Gavin said quickly before turning back to his book.

"So true," Will agreed as he sat down on the couch and turned on the TV.

"Well, what is it this time?" Gavin couldn't count the times he had tried to talk Will out of some seemingly ridiculous plan or scheme. He could always tell when one was brewing inside his head. His friend's face would be set into a permanent grin, his brow creased with pensive lines. But eventually he had given up, realizing that Will would never listen to him. Normally, he tried not to pay attention to what Will did. More often than not, his plans were devious and deceptive, yet always seemed to work out in his favor - a pattern that irritated Gavin to no end. Deep down, he wanted to believe that Will was a good person, but lately he wasn't so sure.

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"More like who is it this time?"

Gavin raised an eyebrow at him and set his book down. The way Will had managed to secure the position as Editor in Chief of the Yale Daily News was still a sore point for many of the people working at the newspaper. Will had gone behind the backs of many of them, using one and their entire year's worth of research to benefit only one person: Will. Gavin knew him to be determined, but what he had done could only be described as vicious.

Will hadn't spoken, using the pause for dramatic effect and hoping Gavin would ask him to clarify his statement. But Gavin wasn't speaking. "Her name is Laila and I just met her in White's English Lit class."

"And?"

"And it looks like she has a boyfriend."

From that moment on, Gavin didn't want to know what Will had in mind, but knew his roommate would inform him anyway. "Maybe you should let this one go, then. Don't you have enough to occupy your time this year?"

Will laughed quietly to himself. "Probably. But there is something about this girl, man. I can't quite put my finger on it yet. But I feel like I just have to have her, you know?"

Gavin shook his head. "No, I don't. And I think you should leave this one alone. She has a boyfriend."

"Maybe they aren't serious," Will replied, his attention starting to focus on the television rather than his roommate.

"Let it go, Will."

"We'll see," Will said quietly. But both men knew he had no intention of letting it go. The idea of Laila had been permanently cemented into his mind and, like he was with all his ideas, he wouldn't let this one go until she was his.

Chapter 8: Don't Recall Her Name

Luanne woke up early on Saturday morning. It was a beautiful day out and she had no intention of wasting it. Running the brush through her auburn hair, she already started planning what she was going to say to the Editor in Chief of the Yale Daily News. She had picked up a good tip from her Lit professor that the editor always liked to get an early start on Monday's edition by putting in extra time in the early Saturday hours.

Donning a smart cardigan and simple black pencil skirt, Luanne collected her portfolio and quietly locked the door behind her as she rushed across campus to York Street. A smile stretched slowly across Luanne's face as she finally saw the stone and brick façade of Briton Hadden Memorial building. She pushed confidently through the door, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply. This place would be like a home away from home for her. By her senior year, she would be Editor in Chief with multiple offers to work as a political correspondent for various reputable newspapers and other media outlets.

Luanne had a skip in her step as she roamed the halls, searching for the Chief's office. Without too much time spent, she found it and stuck her head in the door as if she had been expected. But upon seeing the man sitting behind the desk, Luanne frowned and retracted her head from his office. He wasn't anything like what she had expected. This man was clearly unkempt, his curly hair a complete mess, his dingy t-shirt probably pulled from under his bed just earlier this morning.

"Can I help you?" She heard him ask, unaware she had been detected.

Luanne pulled herself together and stood up straight, a confident smile on her face as she opened the door. "Good morning. I'm Luanne Clark and I'm hereâ"

"I'm not interested," the man said, not even looking up from his work.

"But you haven't even heard why I'm here," Luanne said with a smile.

"Let me guess. You fancy yourself a writer and have brought me a portfolio of mediocre work your high school guidance counselor said was literary gold."

Luanne frowned again and moved her portfolio behind her back. He clearly understood she was here in the hopes of obtaining a position with the newspaper so there was no point in hiding it. "I don't mind working my way up from the bottom. I'll do whatever it takes. Get you coffee for an entire year, run the paper route every morningâ"

Suddenly the editor looked up at her and smiled. "Let me see it then," he said, gesturing for her portfolio. "Let's see if your enthusiasm has any potential."

Luanne smiled and took a few steps toward his desk, handing him her portfolio and finally seeing the name plate next to his laptop. *William Alexander*. Even if he didn't look it, this guy had a strong name, she thought to herself as he chewed on the bottom of his red pen, flipping through her work.

"Oh. A book review," he said with feigned excitement. "On *Pride and Prejudice*. Haven't seen that done before."

"I think you'll find that the points I make areâ"

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"Don't talk."

Luanne shut her mouth and craned her neck, trying to see what he was reading next.

"A political analysis of George W. Bush's farewell address to the nation." He paused and tapped the pen against his lips, finally smiling and then laughing out loud. "Was this meant to be comical?"

"No," Luanne answered, trying not to sound offended.

William Alexander raised his eyebrows at the chubby girl standing in front of him. She was clearly determined but he was in no mood to entertain an overly confident freshman this early in the morning. His Friday night had been spent mulling over Laila and their current situation. After their class on Friday afternoon, Will had offered to walk her back to her dorm room but was quickly interrupted by the girl's obnoxious boyfriend. The muscular blonde had been waiting for her outside and quickly swept her away as soon as class let out. Will could only watch as Laila squealed in delight and kissed her boyfriend on the lips. She hadn't even given Will a second glance as she walked off hand in hand with the asshole.

"Hmmm," Will grunted a response to the girl and returned his eyes to her portfolio. Her work wasn't bad. In fact, it was quite good. But he wasn't in a good mood and if he was suffering, someone else had to suffer too.

"Here's a winner!" He said as he reached the last paper in her folder. "School Lunches, Where Do They Come From and Where Do They Go? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I happened to do a lot of research for that article. The entire cafeteria program was reviewed and revised after that was published."

"I don't give a shit. Look, Luanne, is it? You're aiming too high. Maybe you could try blogging for a while, that way only people who want to read this crap will be subjected to it. My readers have standards." With that he closed her portfolio and pushed it across his desk, lowering his head and continuing his work.

"So that's it?"

"That's it," he confirmed.

He could see she was still standing there, most likely staring at him with tears in her eyes, but he really didn't care. He liked being alone on Saturday mornings. He liked that he had made someone else just as miserable as he was at the moment. Finally, the girl stepped forward and took her binder from his desk, quickly walking out the door and closing it quietly behind her. He had half expected her to slam it.

Luanne walked quickly back to her dorm room, tears prickling her eyes as she passed the morning joggers and cyclists. She didn't understand what had gone wrong. There was nothing about her portfolio that wasn't impressive, nothing that hadn't been carefully researched and honestly written. Maybe she had just caught him on a bad day. Maybe he was testing her strength, seeing if she were willing to accept harsh criticism. Determined and not quite defeated, Luanne opened the door to her dorm room, wincing as she heard the soft voices of her roommates.

"Hey, Luanne. We thought you were still asleep," Piper smiled as Luanne shut the door behind her.

She shook her head and glanced around the room. Things had stayed pretty tidy during their first week. Laila had vacuumed just yesterday and Piper had spent nearly an hour scrubbing the bathroom. But now there were cereal boxes on the floor, empty bowls and random banana peels on the table in front of the two girls. It was

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obvious they had just finished breakfast but Luanne didn't care.

"Are you two going to clean up after yourselves?"

Laila gave her a strange look. "Of course. We just finishedâ!"

"Whatever," Luanne interrupted. "I just don't want you two thinking this kind of mess is okay. I know back home your mothers probably cleaned up after you, but I'm not your mom and I won't do it."

"We're not asking or expecting you to," Laila answered.

Luanne sighed, knowing she was being irrational but too frustrated to stop. "Just try to show a little respect. I mean, we established the house rules for a reason."

Laila shook her head and looked away. Piper tried to look sympathetic but didn't pull it off very convincingly. Luanne knew she should apologize, she knew her roommates had done nothing wrong. Closing her eyes and trying to find her composure, she was about to ask their forgiveness when she heard Nikki laughing in her room. The door suddenly opened with a loud crash and their fourth roommate came stumbling out, arm in arm with another girl.

Luanne watched as the two walked past her to the front door, laughing and tripping over their own feet. She checked her watch almost instinctively, making sure it wasn't before 7 in the morning.

"I'll see you later," she heard Nikki saying as she opened the door for her friend.

"Thanks for letting me crash."

Nikki laughed. "You're welcome. Any time."

Her friend laughed as well and Nikki took a step forward, wrapping her arms around the girl's waist. Before Luanne had time to realize what was happening, Nikki's lips were all over her friend's, their bodies crushed together. The kiss was long and sensual and as soon as Luanne realized she should be offended, she also realized that no one had ever kissed her like that. She glanced at Piper and Laila on the couch. Laila was in an amused state of shock, her mouth dropped and her eyes wide. Piper was trying to suppress a laugh, clearly unaffected by the display in front of her.

"See you later," Nikki said again as her kiss ended, watching the girl's hips as they swayed out of the room.

Smiling her wide smile, Nikki turned around as the door closed. "Morning, roomies!"

"Who the hell was that?" Luanne demanded.

Nikki suddenly looked pensive, scratching her head and glancing at the ceiling. But all too soon, her smile came back. "That wasâ lum, that wasâ ! Hmmm. Can't quite recall her name."

They both heard Piper start to laugh and Luanne shot her a glare.

"What? We agreed on no boys, right?" Nikki was still smiling at Luanne. "Like I said, I have no problem with that."

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By now Piper was in full hysterics on the couch, Laila laughing alongside her. Luanne knew she was outnumbered.

"Well, I didn't sleep much last night," Nikki said, clearly proud of herself as she stretched her arms above her head. "I'm going back to bed." With that, Nikki skipped off to her room and closing the door quietly behind her.

"Thanks for your support," Luanne said, turning back to her roommates.

"Oh, come on, Luanne. Don't be like that," Piper pleaded.

"No," Luanne stood her ground. "You all are just so disrespectful!" She turned around quickly and stormed off to her room, slamming the door behind her. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and listened to her roommates burst into another fit of laughter, this time definitely at her expense.

Chapter 9: Releasing Stress

A/N: This chapter has some adult content...okay, you've been warned :)

Laila glanced up from her book to stare at her boyfriend. He was sitting at his computer, his glasses high on his nose, his lips curled in concentration as he hunched over the keyboard.

"Stop staring," he said, surprising her then flashing a quick smile.

"I can't help it," Laila said with a grin. "You look so handsome in your glasses."

Sterling smiled again and pushed his chair away from his desk. "What are you reading now?"

Laila sighed and set her book down, examining the cover with a certain disdain. "The Professor by Charlotte Bronte."

"Not your favorite?" Sterling pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, sick from the glow of his computer screen.

"Hardly," he heard Laila say as she stood up and walked across the room to him. He kept his eyes closed, reprimanding himself for not taking a break earlier, and soon felt Laila's soft lips kissing his lids.

"You look tired," she said quietly as she situated herself on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Sterling pulled her close and sighed as he felt her head relax against his shoulder. "This first month has been a lot harder than I thought it was going to be."

He felt Laila nod her head but he knew she didn't understand his full meaning. For nearly four weeks now, Sterling had been fighting against his head, a never ending battle of pride and better judgment. It had started after the first day of school when he had met Laila outside of her dorm room. She had been walking with an older guy, clearly uninterested in whatever he was saying to her. Sterling wouldn't have given it a second thought had he not seen the look on the man's face as Laila walked away.

Sterling was hoping, after that first day, it was just a random encounter, that this person was just someone Laila had bumped into on the walk back to her dorm. But a few days later, there he was once more. Laila was showing no interest again, but this man had been vehemently trying to hold her attention, touching her elbow, gesturing fanatically in front of her. Sterling hadn't felt threatened at that point, merely annoyed. He knew Laila would never cheat on him, knew she would always be his. But he also knew she was still innocent, unable to read or pick up the signals she was giving or receiving.

By the end of the second week, Sterling had noticed a clear pattern developing. This man, Will was his name according to Laila, would wait with her outside of class or walk her back to her dorm room, staying close by her side, even after she had already seen Sterling in the distance. But he always backed away once Sterling was near, never approached if Laila ran to his arms. The more Sterling saw of this person, the more he detested him. His eyes were always on her with a strange look of possessiveness that had, on more than one occasion, nearly pushed Sterling over the edge.

He had asked about him only once, merely inquiring who he was. Laila had shrugged her shoulders, informing him that Will was her student teacher and more passionate about literature than anyone she had ever met. She hadn't seem impressed which made Sterling smile. But even though he was sure of Laila's loyalty, he didn't

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trust Will. However, mentioning this to Laila was out of the question. His jealousy and insecurity had come between them once and he would never let that happen again.

Sterling smiled as he felt Laila's lips on his neck then lightly nibbling his earlobe. "Do you want to take a break?"

Sterling could only moan in response as Laila shifted in his lap and rubbed herself against him. She laughed softly and kissed him on the lips. Sterling hadn't quite been himself lately. She knew he was worried about something, though what it was, she couldn't quite figure out. He had been almost possessive of her lately, always asking where she was going, who she was with, what she was doing. His texts and calls were almost nonstop during the days they didn't spend together. But when they were together, things were the same as they had always been. He was kind and gentle with her, quick to make her laugh and always eager to please her. Laila assumed he was simply adjusting to college life, nervous about making new friends, nervous about their relationship changing, drifting apart.

That would never happen, Laila knew. She couldn't, she wouldn't lose Sterling for anything and as their kiss intensified, she knew he felt the same way. His hand moved from her hip up to her rib and his fingers dug into her back as he pulled her closer. Laila smiled against his lips, she could always tell how badly he wanted her. But tonight seemed different. Sterling's kiss had a certain ferocity to it that Laila wasn't accustomed to. His touch was demanding. She felt his fingers climbing up her back and then roughly pulling her hair as his lips tried to gain access to her neck.

"Ouch," Laila tried to laugh it off as she took her hands away from Sterling's face and pushed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and out of his grasp.

But Sterling wasn't laughing with her. His face was serious. "You love me, don't you?"

"Sterling, of course I do," Laila answered, wondering what had inspired that question.

"And you'll never leave me?"

"Where are these questions coming from?"

"Just answer me, please?"

"I will never leave you," Laila promised. "But you already knew that."

Finally Sterling smiled. "I did. I just wanted to hear you say it."

Laila shook her head and smiled at him. She was about to tell him how ridiculous he was being but he kissed her again before he had the chance. None too carefully, he lifted her from the chair and walked her back to the couch, holding her tightly as he fell on top of her.

Sterling believed Laila when she had told him she would never leave him. But he couldn't push from his mind the image of Will's face as he looked at Laila. His Laila. She would always be his and he would make sure of it. Quickly, Sterling pulled his t-shirt over his head and returned his lips to hers, kissing her with as much passion as he could find. Laila kissed him back and he could feel her hands slowly running through his hair and down his back. Soon his hands were roaming up her legs, finding her panties beneath her skirt and pulling them down.

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"Sterling," he heard her mumble against his lips. He knew she wanted him to slow down but something had taken control of him and he couldn't stop himself. His jeans and boxers were around his ankles seconds later and he was pulling her knees apart so he could position himself between her legs. He could feel her moan against his lips as he pressed against her, her body finally granting him access.

Their position on the couch was awkward, Laila's back was on the arm rest, one leg dangling off the side, the other smashed between her boyfriend and the cushions. He had never taken her like this before, so forcefully and suddenly. But he was acting as if he needed it, as if he was an addict craving a fix. She held on to him as he moved above her, afraid she might fly off the couch if she didn't. Sterling's rough and erratic movements weren't pleasurable at all for Laila as he gripped her hip and her shoulder, slamming himself against her. Then suddenly he hit something inside of her that caused her to gasp from the pain.

"Sterling, stop," she pleaded. "You're hurting me."

Her words hit him like a freight train. Immediately Sterling's body froze above Laila's, neither moving as he watched her eyes open and her face relax. But then she smiled as if it had only been a small inconvenience.

"Just let me get repositioned," she started to say as she tried to push them down the couch so she could lie down underneath him. Sterling watched as his girlfriend wiggled against him, her tank top riding up her stomach, her skirt pushed around her thighs. It shouldn't be like this.

"Shit, Laila, I'm so sorry."

She looked at him with confusion in her eyes. "What? What are you sorry for?"

"It shouldn't be like this," he said, lowering his head and kissing her lips as he pulled out of her.

"No, it's fine," she insisted, holding his body close to hers to keep him from pulling away.

But Sterling shook his head and broke free of her arms, pushing away and sitting on the couch by her feet. He watched as her toes curled away from him, afraid to touch his skin. A pang of regret hit his stomach and he didn't know what to say.

"Is it me?" Her voice was shaking and he could tell she was scared.

"No," he said quickly as he reached for her, catching her by the knee and swinging her legs into his lap. "It's not you. I just got carried away and I didn't mean to hurt you."

"If it's not me then whyâ"

Sterling smiled at his girlfriend. "Do you remember when I told you that we would only make love?"

Laila nodded, her face staying solemn.

"That's not what we were doing. You weren't going to enjoy it and I started it for all the wrong reasons."

"Why did you start it?"

Sterling ran his fingers through his hair. How could he explain it to her without completely freaking her out? How could he explain that he had started making love to her just to prove that she belonged to him? She wouldn't understand. She would be hurt that he felt the need to prove anything.

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"I don't know. I'm sorry," he said again. "I know I'm not making any sense. I'm just stressed out I guess."

Laila must have believed his answer because she smiled and sat up so she could kiss him. "There's nothing wrong with releasing a little stress."

Sterling smiled against her lips and then trembled as he felt her hand moving across his still naked leg. Slowly, her fingers wrapped around him and he had to close his eyes. He could feel Laila kissing his neck and his chest, making her way south as she moved to the floor and positioned herself between his legs.

"Beautiful, you don't have toâ"

"Shhh," Laila looked up at him with a coy smile. "I'm just helping you relax."

Sterling only felt guilty for the two seconds it took for Laila's gorgeous mouth to surround him. She rarely did this, having admitted to Sterling she was afraid she lacked the necessary skills to perform the job to his satisfaction. But that wasn't true. She knew Sterling so well, maybe instinctively, maybe subconsciously, but she always left him trembling and nearly forgetting his own name.

Sterling ran his fingers through her hair, loving the way she looked when she was doing this. He smiled down and then trembled as she worked her magic. He didn't have anything to worry about. Laila loved him, she would do anything for him and he felt the exact same way.

Chapter 10: Loophole

Piper's phone vibrated on her night stand. She had been asleep, well almost asleep, having woken up early for practice and then spending a full day at school only to come home and have Luanne remind her of her vacuuming duties. A quick afternoon nap before the weekend officially started was exactly what Piper had been looking forward to. Frowning, she reached for her phone but instantly smiled when she saw a message from Alistair.

It's Friday! What are you doing this weekend?

Piper and Alistair had been texting and talking on the phone for over a month. Their conversations had become more and more flirtatious as the weeks went on and she would have been the first to admit she had legitimate feelings for him. Grinning, she composed her text.

Nothing too exciting. You?

She waited only a few seconds before his reply came through.

Actually, I need your help.

Piper didn't like the sound of that. They hadn't mentioned their promise to each other, their breadstick vows, since the night it happened. She knew she would be upset if he had met someone at Harvard. But it wasn't entirely shocking. He was gorgeous and probably had girls throwing themselves at him everywhere he went.

What seems to be the problem?

I've become distracted. I'm thinking about going to see this girl I've been talking to.

Piper frowned and opened her phone to call him. "Don't do it!" She said when he picked up.

Alistair laughed on the other end of the line. "But what if I can't stop myself? What if this was meant to be?"

Piper rolled her eyes at his sarcasm. "It's not, believe me."

"How do you know?"

"Because," she started without actually having a real answer. *Because you should be with me.* But she didn't say it out loud. "Because you're the one who came up with this idea. You should see it through."

"A year is such a long time to wait."

"It's not that bad," she sighed, sitting up in bed and swinging her legs onto the floor. "We've lasted a month already. Who is this girl, anyway?"

"Well," Alistair said, his voice becoming excited. "She's tall and absolutely gorgeous. She flirts with me all the time and has the most contagious laugh I've ever heard."

"Sounds like a fucking bitch to me," Piper said with a smile as she held the phone against her ear, slipping into her jeans as she spoke.

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Alistair laughed. "She's not that bad."

"I'm just trying to help," Piper pointed out. "You sound like you're walking somewhere. Please don't tell me you're going to see her right now."

"Hmmm, yep. I've made up my mind."

"You are such a disappointment."

Alistair laughed again and Piper heard a knock on her door.

"Hold on. Don't do anything yet," she instructed him. "Someone's at my door." She held her phone down at her side as she left her room and walked quickly through the common area. Luanne's door was closed but she knew the girl was inside. Apparently she assumed nobody would be coming to see her.

The person on the other side of the door knocked again, louder this time, as Piper neared. It was probably someone for Nikki, she thought to herself as she opened it, but her mouth dropped and then was pulled into a girlish smile when she saw Alistair standing outside her room, a single champagne colored rose in his hand. He was even better looking than she had remembered. His eyes were the deepest color of blue and his ashy hair was fixed into a messy part. And then there was his smile. Piper nearly swooned when she saw his dimples, his full lips pulled into a devilish smirk.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, unable to wipe the smile from her face.

"My last class was cancelled today and I wanted to see you again," Alistair answered quickly. He had wanted to say something clever but nothing witty came to mind as he looked at Piper. Her long hair was tangled and her clothes were wrinkled, she looked like she had just woken up. But her eyes were shining like emeralds and her cheeks were a delicate shade of pink. She was gorgeous.

"I'm glad you're here," she said with a smile and opened the door a little wider so Alistair could step inside. "Do Sterling and Laila know you drove down?"

Alistair shook his head, still looking at Piper. "No."

"Oh." Piper blushed, realizing he had driven all this way just to see her. Suddenly she felt her phone in her hand and realized she still had it opened. Clumsily, she shut it and glanced at Alistair from behind her eyelashes. He was still smiling at her and her heart fluttered in her chest.

"I was hoping we could go out. Just the two of us."

"I'd like that," Piper answered with a shy grin, remembering everything Alistair had just said about her on the phone: gorgeous, a contagious laugh, and flirts with him all the time. She knew the last part to be shamelessly true.

There was an awkward pause where they both just stared at each other with smiles on their faces, waiting for the other to speak. After a short moment, they both started laughing and Alistair handed Piper the rose he had brought for her.

"Thanks," she smiled and took it from him. "I guess I should go change."

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Alistair nodded and watched as Piper practically skipped away toward her bedroom. He stole a glance inside as she was closing the door. He could see magazines on her nightstand, clothes on her floor and an unmade bed. It looked nearly identical to his dorm room.

Piper was in a daze as she picked through the clean clothes still in her basket from last night's run to the Laundromat. Alistair was wearing jeans and a t-shirt so she could only assume she should dress casually as well. Casual but hot. She needed to look hot. Quickly, she exchanged her sports bra for a satiny pink pushup one that made her cleavage look its best. She threw on a low cut sweater and slipped her feet into her favorite pair of flip flops. Her hair was pulled into a messy ponytail and she applied a clear gloss to her lips before digging her purse out from under her school books.

"You look great," Alistair said as she entered the common room.

Piper blushed and smiled. Things had become so easy for them while they were texting and speaking on the phone that she was surprised to find how awkward their interactions were now they were face to face.

"So where are we going?" She asked as they walked out into the cool afternoon air. She locked her door behind her and turned to find Alistair standing unbearable close to her. She longed to touch him, to hold his hand, to hug him. But she didn't know how he would react. She didn't know what their relationship was or where it was going.

"Roller skating."

"Roller skating?" Piper laughed as they started to walk to his car.

Alistair knew it sounded ridiculous. He knew it was childish and probably the worst date idea ever. But dinner seemed to cliché and he wouldn't be able to talk to her at the movies. So roller skating was the next best idea that popped into his mind as he drove down from Boston.

"I haven't been roller skating since my 9th birthday," Piper said thoughtfully. Their fingers brushed as they walked side by side and Alistair suddenly felt an overwhelming need to touch her. They had been texting and talking for so long, he felt as though he knew her so well. Never before had he known a girl emotionally without first knowing her physically. His relationship with Piper, however it would be defined as of this moment, hadn't started with a drunken kiss, a lustful night spent together. It had started with a crush, a conversation, a playful promise made between two people who barely knew each other. And now he was completely smitten. She was all he thought about. He would look forward to her calls every day, would wake up hoping to find a text message from her. Distracting didn't even begin to describe her effect on him.

"I've never been," Alistair admitted, hoping their hands would touch again.

"Never?" Piper exclaimed in disbelief. "How is that possible?"

Alistair grinned at her and shrugged. "I wasn't invited to those birthday parties."

Piper laughed and linked arms with him causing his pulse to start racing. "You can hold on to me until you get the hang of it," she promised.

They were already to his car but Alistair couldn't bear the thought of letting go of her arm. Holding her hand at the roller skating rink, touching the small of her back as he opened doors, it wasn't going to be enough for him and he knew the anticipation of kissing her would climb to an unbearable level before the night was through. So instead of unlocking his car and letting her climb in, he turned to face her, his nerves almost

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causing his hands to shake.

"Piper, Iâ!" But he couldn't finish his sentence. He didn't know where to start.

"What's up?" She asked casually, flashing her gorgeous smile at him.

Alistair took a deep breath. "There's something I need to do before we leave."

"Oh. Okay." She looked confused. "Do you want me to wait here?"

Now it was Alistair's turn to smile. He nodded his head as his hands reached for her face. "Just stand right there. Don't move."

Piper blushed but managed to smile back. She knew what was coming as Alistair's fingers gently brushed across her cheeks and he lowered his face to hers. Kissing Alistair had been the focal point of many daydreams over the past few weeks but never had she imagined herself being so nervous. She closed her eyes as his face drew near, their lips just barely touching as they tested the waters of their new intimacy. But they both smiled at the initial touch, the sensation as comfortable as it was exciting. Soon, Alistair's lips were completely pressed to hers, his hands moving from her face and to the back of her neck as he pulled her closer.

Alistair was amazed at how natural their kiss felt. He hadn't kissed a girl in months and that kiss had meant so little yet caused so much damage. He had struggled with his feelings for Piper, not knowing if he was ready to move on from Rebecca, not knowing if Rebecca would like the idea of Piper and Alistair together. But after weeks of debate, he had come to the conclusion that if Piper wasn't meant to be in his life, he would have forgotten about her by now. So he let his feelings solidify and promised himself to honor Rebecca's memory by treating Piper the way he should have treated every girl before her, the way he should have treated Rebecca.

The sensual way Piper's lips were moving against his was only justifying his decision. This felt right. It felt amazing and if he hadn't heard a car engine start from somewhere behind them, he may have forgotten they weren't alone. Smiling against her lips, he slowly pulled away and made sure to open his eyes before she did. She looked perfect, her lips slightly swollen from the kiss, the light blush on her cheeks, her long eye lashes fanning softly over her lids. Too soon, her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at him.

"Wow," she said quietly. "That was quite a first kiss."

Alistair grinned at her and winked. "That's just how I roll."

Piper laughed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, we'll see if you're still this smooth at the skating rink."

"I can tell you right now that I won't be," Alistair laughed with her and unlocked his car, holding the door for her as she gracefully slipped inside. She smiled up at him as the door closed, knowing things would no longer be awkward, knowing they were going to have a great evening and knowing they now had found a wonderful loophole to their vow of no distractions.

Chapter 11: Favorite Student

Will knew exactly what he was doing. It was his study group, he set the tempo of the conversation, he set the homework, and he dictated when they would retire for the evening. It had not escaped his attention that Laila's boyfriend was always waiting for her after their study group. It had not escaped his attention that the second the meat-head showed up, Laila's attention was instantly diverted and lost from whatever it was he was saying. It also had not escaped his attention that Laila found him intriguing. She listened to whatever Will had to say with an attentive eye, agreeing with a nod of her head, challenging his ideas with a confident roll of her eyes. By cutting their session short, nearly in half if he had been keeping track, he knew Laila's boyfriend wouldn't be outside thus allowing him to have her complete attention for at least half an hour.

He dismissed the class of freshman and waited by his desk for Laila to put her books into her bag and pull out her phone, no doubt texting her boyfriend to let him know she was done for the day. He slowly made his way to the door, making sure he would be walking out just ahead of her.

"Great discussion today," he heard her say to him as they walked into the crisp afternoon.

Will smiled to himself as he turned to look at her. She was so cute in her jeans and pink hooded sweatshirt, her blonde hair pulled into a high pony tail and her book bag slung over her shoulder.

"You didn't participate as much as you normally do," he commented, trying to sound like a concerned and observant student teacher.

Laila's face sank and she looked at the ground between them. "I know. I've had a lot on my mind lately."

"School work getting to you?"

Laila shrugged her shoulders but looked up at him. "Yeah, I guess."

Will smiled sympathetically and gestured toward the path that led to her dorm room. They walked side by side in silence for a few steps before he spoke again. "If you need help with anything, you can always come to me. I was a freshman not too long ago, you know."

Laila laughed. "What's it been? Eight years now?"

"Very funny," Will laughed with her. He liked that she was comfortable with him. He liked that she was able to flirt with him. "But seriously, if you need help, I'm always here."

"Thanks," she said lightly. "But I'm sure that you have enough to worry about right now, Mr. Editor in Chief."

Will smirked. He loved that title. He loved that Laila called him that but only wished it were in a more intimate, private setting.

"I always have time for my favorite student," he told her, his voice teasing but his words completely serious.

"Favorite?" She laughed out loud. "You aren't allowed to pick favorites!"

"I'm not allowed to show favoritism," he corrected her. "But picking a favorite always happens. It's a natural reaction to teaching."

Higher Education

Laila smiled but didn't question him further. She knew why she was his favorite, he had told her the first day they met. Her interest and fascination with English Literature made their student-teacher relationship effortless and had created a friendship as well. He was a great mentor, a wonderful resource for her to have if she ever needed it.

"Do you have any plans for this weekend?" She heard him asking.

"Not really. My boyfriend and I were planning on visiting his parents this Sunday."

Will sighed. Laila would casually mention her boyfriend every now and then as if she was trying to warn Will to stay away from her. He knew this wasn't the real reason, she was smart, brilliant actually, but didn't seem that perceptive. She had yet to realize Will's true motives behind all the extra attention he paid her and the walks they regularly took after class.

"How long have you been with your boyfriend?"

"Almost a year." She smiled blissfully while answering him.

"And you both got into Yale. How fortunate."

"We didn't plan our futures around each other, if that's what you're getting at," Laila explained. "I transferred schools my senior year so I would have a better chance of getting in here. His parent's are alumni and we both had every intention of going to Yale before we met."

"And what if he hadn't gotten in?"

Laila shrugged. "We could have gone to Stanford, I guess."

"You would have given up your dream of Yale for this guy?"

Laila laughed at this. "I don't know. It was never a question of him not getting in. His dad plays golf with the dean of admissions."

"Oh," Will answered, now understanding why someone as seemingly stupid as Laila's boyfriend had been accepted to one of the best schools in the country.

"But I think if it came down to it, he would have given it up for me."

"Really?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't have let him," Laila smiled up at Will. "He belongs here and would have been miserable in California."

"But you belong here as well," Will observed.

"I'd like to think I do," Laila laughed to herself.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Will said, almost under his breath but loud enough so Laila could hear him. He saw her blush and look down at her feet.

Higher Education

"Thanks for walking me back," she said, turning to him as they reached her door. "I'll see you on Monday, I guess."

Will nodded and looked down at the petite blonde in front of him. Her violet eyes were mesmerizing and he knew he wasn't ready to say goodbye to her for the weekend.

"Do you think I could come in and use your bathroom?"

"Oh," Laila looked surprised at the question and Will suddenly realized how unattractive his request had sounded. "Sure."

He cursed himself as she turned around and unlocked her door. The inside of her dorm was familiar to him. He had lived in one just down the hall his freshman year. He quickly looked around once he was inside, trying to determine which of the four room's was Laila's. He quickly recognized it with the lavender bedspread and the stack of books on the nightstand. The room screamed Laila's name and he quickly walked toward it with a huge smile on his face.

"This is your room, isn't it?" He asked with a grin.

"Yes," Laila answered quickly, stepping around him and closing the door. "The bathroom's over there." She nodded in the opposite direction.

"Come on," Will taunted. "Let me see it."

But Laila smiled and shook her head. "A girl's room is a private place."

Will knew this much to be true. In that room is where Laila slept, where she dressed, where she laughed on the phone with her friends, where she considered her most intimate thoughts. He wondered if she ever thought about him while she was in there. The thought of Laila daydreaming about him nearly set him on fire and he had to quickly think about something else to distract himself.

"It was my turn to clean the bathroom so I can assure you it's spotless."

Will raised one eyebrow at her but smiled and turned toward the bathroom. Laila waited until he had closed the door and then retrieved her phone from her bag. She had two missed text messages, one from Sterling saying he was on his way over and the second from Piper.

Alistair is taking me roller skatingâ random??? First kiss was amazing J

Laila smiled and was about to write her back when she heard a door open. Luanne appeared in the common room with a curious look on her face.

"Is someone here?"

"Uh, yeah. My friend Will is in the bathroom."

"Why?" Luanne's hands were on her hips.

"I guess he had to goâ!"

Higher Education

But just then Will stepped out of the bathroom and Laila watched as Luanne's face went from annoyance to pure hatred.

"You?" Luanne glared at Will. "What are you doing here?"

"Um, Iâ€¦" Will seemed to be at a loss for words and Luanne didn't give him time to think of an explanation.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Luanne practically screamed, pointing at Will but glaring at Laila.

"He had to use the bathroom," Laila said defensively, not understanding why Luanne was throwing such a fit.

"And you thought it would be okay to let him just come in here and do as he pleased?"

Laila stared at her in disbelief and complete embarrassment. Poor Will, he must be so confused. "Yes, I thought it would be okay if he came in, for two minutes, and used our bathroom. I'll clean it again if that is what you're so upset about."

"That is not what this is about!" Luanne could feel her face become red as her anger rose. She couldn't believe he was standing in her dorm room. That horrible man who had turned her away, humiliated her, and nearly crushed her dream of writing for the newspaper, was standing only feet away from her, smirking as if he found this situation amusing.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Laila was still baffled. "He was just using the bathroom and then he was going to leave."

"Does your boyfriend know you invite other men into your dorm room?" Luanne didn't even know where that question came from. If it had been any other male student, she wouldn't have given him a second thought. But the fact that William Alexander had invaded her private space had her almost hysterical.

Laila took a deep breath and looked away from her roommate. Will was glancing between the two girls, clearly amused at what was taking place. "Will, maybe you should go. I apologize for my roommate. She tends to overreact."

Luanne couldn't believe what she had just heard. Overreact? Laila didn't even know the meaning of the word and yet she was accusing her of it in front of the editor of the newspaper. She would never forgive Laila for this.

"No worries," Will said with a slight smile. "I'll see you Monday." He walked casually around the two girls and toward the door, seeming more amused at the situation than disturbed or offended by it.

Laila and Luanne were still glaring at each other long after the door had closed. Neither of them knew what to say to the other. Once Will had gone, Luanne knew she had acted poorly. She had lost her composure, something she hated doing. But Laila shouldn't have mocked her in front of him. She didn't deserve that.

"I'm not going to apologize," she told Laila.

"I wouldn't expect you to."

"You shouldn'tâ€¦"

"Just don't, Luanne. Don't lecture me because I really can't handle it right now."

Higher Education

"Laila?" Both heads turned toward the door as Sterling let himself in.

"Oh, great," Luanne said with a sarcastic undertone that made Laila cringe. "Another one."

Laila's eyes and fists were squeezed shut as she waited for her anger to subside. Never before had someone been able to get under her skin the way Luanne did. Everything about the girl was insulting, the way she stared at Laila with pity whenever she used her inhaler, the way she shook her head at Laila's choice of apparel or accessories, the way she could fly off the handlebars of sanity without any notice.

Laila opened her eyes as a thought crossed her mind. She smiled playfully at Sterling and motioned for him to follow her to her room. "I'm so glad you are here," she told him in a seductive voice. "See you later, Luanne." And with that, she closed the door to her room, completely prepared to break at least one of Luanne's rules.

Chapter 12: Sex. Right Now.

"Laila, is everythingâ" But Sterling couldn't finish his sentence. Laila had jumped into his arms and was kissing him with an incredible sense of urgency. Her legs wrapped around his waist as he held her and Sterling smiled under her lips. He could feel her pulling his shirt above his head and he was all too willing to oblige. Carefully, he set Laila on her bed and peeled his shirt off before returning to her. But Laila wasn't paying attention to him, she wasn't ready to kiss him again as he had hoped. No, Laila was busy undressing herself, clearly ready to get things started.

"Did you miss me that much?" Sterling asked, an amused smile on his face as he watched his girlfriend strip on her bed.

But Laila wasn't in the mood for small talk. "Sterling, I need you to have sex with me. Right now."

Sterling nearly laughed. She looked so serious when she told him this, as if she was expecting him to question her. But there was something in her urgency that didn't feel right. Sterling kept the smile on his face but took a step away from the bed, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"No. Tell me what's going on first."

Laila's mouth dropped. He had never turned her down before. Even last night, when he had stopped just after they had started, he had still wanted her. But Laila shook her head and reached for his belt, still determined to infuriate Luanne. "I'll tell you when we're done."

Sterling stood his ground as Laila tugged on his belt, trying her hardest to get him closer to her. It was an amusing sight, to say the least, and he knew once he gave in, she would be well worth the fight. Watching her struggle with his belt buckle was too much for him. Her beautiful face was pulled into a concerned look of concentration and Sterling became instantly aroused when she started biting her lower lip. He reached down to help her and was instantly rewarded with a smile.

"Thank you!" Laila whispered as she positioned herself on the bed, waiting for him to join her. Sterling smiled at her as his pants and boxers fell to the floor. He stepped out of them and climbed onto the bed with her, kissing her stomach and ribs. But he could feel Laila's hands on the back of his head, tugging at his hair so he would stop.

"We don't have time for that," she told him, spreading her legs and pulling his hips to hers.

"Laila, what's the rush?" Sterling asked, still amused yet completely confused by their current situation.

Laila ignored his question. "Just try to be as loud as possible, okay?"

"What?" Sterling had to laugh. Laila rarely let herself vocalize any pleasure she was feeling and was always nervous of being overheard by neighbors or roommates.

"Sterling, please?" He could feel her wiggling under him, tempting him to give in to her. He suddenly remembered the look on her face when he had walked in the door. She had been glaring at her roommate with a certain animosity that Sterling had never seen before. The smile spread on his face as he began to realize his girlfriend's motives.

"Why do I get the feeling you are using me?"

Higher Education

"What? No, no, no," Laila said quickly, though Sterling knew he had caught her. "I was just thinking about you all day in class and really, really wanted to see you andâ"

Sterling kissed her before she could say anything else. She had been talking a mile a minute and he knew it wasn't the truth. He felt Laila kissing him back, at first thinking that she had won, but soon realizing he wasn't going to give in. His lips massaged hers as his tongue forced entrance into her mouth. He knew how to distract her, even if she was being stubborn. Before long, he could feel her kissing him back with the same love and affection he was using. Her hands ran through his hair and one leg wrapped around his waist as their kiss continued.

She sighed as he pulled away from the kiss. "Now, tell me what really happened," he urged her.

Laila took a deep breath. "It was Luanne."

Sterling nodded and held her gaze. "She started yelling at me for no reason and I just lost it."

"So you pulled me in here and tried to take advantage of me?" Sterling teased her.

Laila laughed. "She just made me so angry. I wanted to upset her and once I saw you, spilling orange juice on the carpet didn't seem like as much fun."

Sterling laughed and kissed her again. "Don't let her get to you."

Laila smiled and rolled onto her side and Sterling relaxed on the bed next to her. "I don't care if she yells at me, I guess. I mean, I can live with it. But she started yelling at Will for absolutely no reasonâ"

"Wait," Sterling interrupted her. That name sent up a huge red flag. "Why was Will here?"

"He walked me home and asked to use the bathroom. Luanne saw him and completely flipped out."

Laila watched as Sterling's body went tense. "What did she say?"

"She asked what he was doing here and then asked if you knew I brought other men back to the dorm room." Laila tried to laugh off the last part but Sterling clearly wasn't amused.

"Why does she have a problem with him?"

"That's just it, I don't know. She saw him and just started yelling. No explanation. It was really embarrassing."

Sterling could barely look at Laila. He was furious at her naivetÃ©. What if Luanne hadn't been home? What if Will had tried something and Sterling hadn't arrived in time to stop it.

"Laila, I don't think you should have let him inside."

"What?" He could hear the shock and annoyance in her voice. It only made what he had to say that much harder.

"How much do you really know about this guy?" Sterling asked, letting a hand rest on her bare hip so she knew he was being sincere.

"I don't know, enough to let him use my bathroom if he asks. Why are you taking her side?"

Higher Education

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Sterling admitted quickly.

"The way he looks at me? Sterling, where is this coming from? Will and I are friends. We talk about literature. He doesn't look at me in any way other than an older brother, mentor type way." Laila slowed her speech as she began to think back over all the times Will had walked her home, the subtle ways he would try and touch her, the quiet compliments he would give her. She looked at Sterling who was staring at her with one eyebrow raised.

"No," she decided. "No. We're friends."

"Are you sure he feels the same way?"

"Yes, of course. He knows I have a boyfriend."

Sterling laughed at this. Of course Will knew she had a boyfriend, a boyfriend he wasn't willing to meet, a boyfriend who he stayed far, far away from.

"What is so funny?" Laila demanded, clearly upset with the way the conversation was going.

"Nothing," Sterling promised her. "I just wish you could see this situation from my perspective."

"And what perspective is that exactly?"

"Well," Sterling started. "This older guy walks you home from class nearly every day. He is constantly trying to flirt with you and get your attention. He stays clear of me, either not wanting to admit to himself that you actually have a boyfriend, or because he's scared of what he might say."

"Sterling." Laila tried to stop his ridiculous rant.

"But the way he looks at you, right before he glares at me, is what really gets me going," Sterling told her.

"He doesn't look at me in any way," Laila said again, clearly showing her frustration.

"You just can't see it." His all-knowing tone was driving Laila mad with anger. "He looks at you as if you are a prize to be won."

"Maybe the only reason you can see it is because you are so insecure."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sterling asked, surprised she threw such a hurtful accusation.

"It means that you are still scared I am going to cheat on you. You are still scared I am going to leave you for someone else. You're still scared that."

But Sterling stopped her with a kiss just before the tears started falling from her eyes. He hadn't meant to upset her. He hadn't meant for her to cry.

"No," he whispered to her, his eyes still closed and his face close to hers. "I know you won't do any of that. I just don't trust him. I don't like to think what he could do to you if he got you alone."

"How long have you felt this way?"

Higher Education

"Since the first day I saw him."

Laila shook her head in disbelief. "Sterling, I don't know what to say."

Sterling looked deep into her eyes. "I don't want you to think that I don't trust you. I love you more than anything and I know you love me too. Maybe it's in my nature not to trust things but it is certainly in yours to see the best in people. And I happen to believe you are wrong about Will. He's not a good guy."

"What if you met him?"

Sterling smiled. "I'm never going to like him."

Laila smiled back and nodded. "So, what do we do?"

"What can we do? He's your teacher so I can't ask you to stop seeing him. But could you promise me that you won't go anywhere alone with him?"

Laila thought about it for a while. She knew that Sterling was having a hard time with her friendship with Will but he was conceding so much by not asking her to stop seeing him. That was probably torturous for him to do and Laila couldn't see a reason not to compromise.

"I promise," she whispered, leaning in to kiss him again. She hated that they had fought, if what just happened could even be considered a fight.

Sterling kissed her back and rolled her underneath him. "Now, do you still want to make Luanne angry?"

Laila laughed and blushed, embarrassed by how she had acted. "Absolutely. You can take your time, though."

"Oh, I was planning on it." Sterling smiled at his girlfriend who looked so beautiful as she lay under him. Her blonde hair was fanned over her purple pillow and her cheeks were pink from all the excitement. She was smiling in anticipation and looking at him as if he meant the world to her. He slowly lowered his head to kiss her with the same loving affection he always showed her. He was glad their fight was over, relieved that Laila hadn't thrown him out of her room when he told her his apprehensions about Will. She had been as understanding about his concern as she always was and he made love to her that afternoon for hours, glad they could put her student teacher behind them.

Luanne had left her dorm room almost in tears. She knew exactly what Laila had been planning as she closed her bedroom door with her boyfriend safely inside. Luanne didn't know why the blonde hated her so much but it was as if the two couldn't agree on anything, as if they didn't have one thing in common. Laila seemed nice, she seemed smart and almost funny on occasion. Why wouldn't she like Luanne?

"So, Luanne, is it?" She heard a male voice behind her as she walked quickly away from her dorm. She didn't really know where she was going, but she wasn't in the mood for any distractions. Turning her head, she realized she definitely wasn't in the mood for this one.

"Leave me alone, William Alexander."

Will had to laugh. Only his mother and his sister used his full name and that was only when they were upset with him. "But I think we can help each other." He gave her an encouraging smile.

Higher Education

"I seriously doubt that," Luanne replied and turned around, continuing on her original path.

Will let her take a few steps before speaking again. "Do you still want to write for the paper?"

Luanne stopped but didn't turn around. She waited for Will to speak again.

"If you do," he continued, "then I think we can help each other."

"What kind of help do you need from me?" Luanne asked, quickly turning around and glaring at him with a hidden curiosity.

"Simple," Will smiled. "I need you to help me by giving me information about your roommate and her boyfriend."

"Laila? Are you serious? This is about Laila?"

Will nodded.

Luanne put her hands on her hips. "What do you want to know about her?"

"Just basic stuff, for now. What she likes, where she goes, what her and her boyfriend do together."

"Well, I can tell you what they are doing right nowâ!"

But Will held up his hand. "I don't want to know those details."

"Are you stalking her?"

Will had to laugh at the redhead in front of him. She was blunt and confident to a fault but she didn't know it. "No. I'm hoping to avoid that. That's where you come in."

Luanne didn't know what to say. She thought she would have done nearly anything to write for the paper but Will's conditions seemed rather shady. "I don't know. I don't really like the idea."

"It's not like I'm asking you to go through her things or hack into her email. Just keep me informed about what she's been up to, where she's going, that sort of thing."

"And if I do this for you, you'll let me write for the paper? I don't want to just be an unpaid intern or run errands for you all day. I want legitimate feedback on my work and I want guidance, a real chance to prove myself."

"I can agree to that," Will said, not really listening to what she was saying.

"Fine. I agree as well," Luanne decided.

"This does mean, you realize, that you'll have to be nice to her."

"The girl doesn't want to be my friendâ!"

But Will interrupted her. "This is a two way street, Luanne. The better information you give me, the more I help you. Understand?"

Higher Education

Luanne sighed. "Yes."

"Good. I'll see you Monday in my office. Let's say 5 o'clock?"

Luanne nodded but didn't speak. Will smiled at her and walked quickly past, leaving Luanne to contemplate how she was going to befriend Laila.

Chapter 13: To The Theatre

Laila and Piper were on their way out the door when Luanne stopped them.

"Where are you two going this evening?" The redhead asked with a cheerful smile.

Laila sighed. Luanne had been trying relentlessly to be friendly with her since their argument last weekend. She had even invited Laila to nail salon with her, claiming her mother had sent her a gift card because she was afraid Luanne would be neglecting her feet. Luckily, Laila had a legitimate excuse why she couldn't go and was able to refuse the invitation gracefully.

"We're about to go see Nikki's play," Piper told their roommate with a smile.

"A play? I love the theatre!" Luanne seemed obnoxiously zealous.

"Did you, um, want to go with us?" Piper asked, mostly convinced Luanne would refuse but extending the polite offer nonetheless.

"I would love to!"

Laila sighed again. The night was going to be a long one if she had to put up with Luanne. "Are you ready to go or do you need us to wait?" Laila asked, trying not to sound as impatient as she felt.

"No, I'm ready to go," Luanne smiled at her and Laila nodded toward the door.

The three girls walked in an uncomfortable silence for a few moments before Luanne spoke.

"So, what's this play about?"

"It's *The Taming of the Shrew*," Piper informed her.

"She's been talking about it for weeks now," Laila added her input.

"Of course she has." Luanne tried to pretend as if she knew all along. But the truth was, she hadn't paid one bit of attention to any of her roommates since the beginning of school. It wasn't until just this weekend that she even started to feign interest in Laila. "I was only joking."

Neither of her roommates laughed. Luanne wanted to know what role Nikki would be playing but decided it best to keep her mouth shut. They walked the rest of the way in silence but the awkward air surrounding them soon dissipated as the girls reached the theatre. People were everywhere and all three felt a swell of excitement as they purchased their tickets.

"I can't believe this many people are here," Laila stared in wonder. "I can't even begin to think how the actors are feeling right now."

"Do you get stage fright as well?" Luanne asked. "I can barely stand up in front of a class without sweating bullets."

Laila laughed at the first un-lady like comment she had ever heard Luanne say. "I can stomach giving a prepared speech but I can't stand debating."

Higher Education

Luanne laughed as well. "I'm the exact opposite. I could argue all day long if I knew what I was arguing about. But trying to memorize something just gives me anxiety."

Piper smiled at her two short roommates, relieved they were finally having a civil conversation. For her part, Piper didn't mind Luanne that much. Sure, she was bossy and completely lacked the social skills known as tact and compromise, but Piper could tell she was just nervous, scared she wouldn't fit in anywhere. Laila, on the other hand, could barely stand the girl which Piper found incredibly amusing. Laila seemed to like everyone, always quick to see the best in people, so her dislike of Luanne was as shocking as it was justified.

Piper had heard the story of last Friday from Laila once she had returned from her date with Alistair. Between the two of them, they still hadn't quite figured out why Luanne had reacted the way she did upon seeing Will. Piper had never met him, but from what Laila had told her, there wasn't much for Luanne to dislike. Will was the Editor of the paper, someone Luanne should be eager to befriend, and they probably had a lot in common. Leave it to Luanne to jump to conclusions and piss off the very person she should be trying to impress.

The three roommates quickly found their seats and made themselves comfortable, waiting for the show to start.

"I'm going to get something to drink," Luanne announced, standing up and moving to the aisle. "Do you two want anything?"

"I'm good, thanks," Laila smiled and Piper shook her head. Luanne smiled back but quickly turned to leave, digging her phone out of her pocket as she hurried out of the theatre. She stood at the end of the concessions line as she found the desired number in her phone.

"Hello?" Will sounded irritated when he answered.

"Will? It's Luanne." The Editor in Chief had given Luanne his number earlier in the week, claiming the mundane information she had been relaying about Laila wasn't good enough. He wanted her to call him if Laila went to the library or the cafeteria, anywhere alone.

"What do you want, Luanne?"

"Just to tell you that Laila and I are at Yale Repertory about to watch our roommate's play. Her boyfriend isn't here."

"What time does it start?"

"Seven thirty."

"I guess I'll see you soon then."

Luanne could hear his smile on the other end of the line and she grinned in return. On Monday, he had assigned her to write a book review, some overly dramatic novel written by a Yale Alumna, but she had yet to finish it, having rewritten and edited the column more times than she cared to count. But it needed to be perfect for him for he was clearly, up until this point, getting impatient with the way she was holding up her side of their agreement.

"Okay, we're sitting in row F."

Higher Education

Will disconnected the call without saying anything further and Luanne put her phone back into her pocket. Luanne had felt guilty, at first, spying on Laila and relaying all information back to Will. But she was surprised by how quickly the guilt had dissipated. The more Will ignored her at the newspaper, the more she craved his attention and approval, the easier it was to talk about Laila behind her back.

But as Luanne returned to her seat, she felt a pang of regret as Laila lifted her purse from the chair next to her. The girl really was nice and based on the few times she had actually met Sterling, she seemed to love her boyfriend very much. She could see why Will liked this girl and she could also see why Laila would never fall for him. Going on the mere hope that her roommate's relationship with her boyfriend was strong enough to survive Will's attempts, Luanne made up her mind to play both sides of the field, only giving Will half-hearted information.

As the lights dimmed, Luanne looked around, having yet to see Will. However, the seats around them were filled and he wouldn't be able to get close even if he wanted to. But by the end of the first half, Luanne had completely forgotten about Will and was laughing hysterically with her two roommates. It wasn't until they had all gotten up from their seats and were mingling in the lobby that she remembered she had even called him.

"Hey girls," Will's voice came from behind Luanne and she turned her head to see him.

"Oh! Hey, Will," Laila said quietly, glancing nervously between her friend and her roommate. "What are you doing here?"

"My sister painted some of the backdrops," Will said with a dismissive nod toward the stage. "She begged me to show up tonight."

"Our roommate is one of the makeup artists," Laila told him and Luanne finally realized why she hadn't seen Nikki on stage.

"Do you three have good seats? I got here too late and mine's all the way in the back row," Will smiled at Laila and then glanced at Luanne.

"They're all right," Luanne muttered, glancing at Laila to see how she was reacting. She watched as Piper stood awkwardly off to the side. Will must have noticed it as well.

"Hi. I don't think we've met. I'm William."

"Piper." She gave him a half wave and glanced at Laila who looked rather apologetic.

"So, what are you girls doing after the play?" Will broke the silence.

"We were just going to grab something to eat around the corner," Laila said, wondering if he was trying to garner an invitation.

There was an awkward silence which was suddenly broken by Luanne's squeal. "Ooh! You should go with us!" The girl was nodding eagerly at her roommates and her future editor.

"I don't want to impose," Will said with a smile.

But Laila, who was still surprised by Luanne's outburst, found a smile of her own coming to her lips. "Of course you should come with us."

Higher Education

"You really should," Luanne agreed, beaming enthusiastically at William.

He smiled back at Luanne and Laila saw something pass between them. She couldn't be sure what it was, but guessing from Luanne's invitation she was able to quickly reason that her roommate had a crush. Is that why Luanne had acted so strangely with William just the other day? It all started to make sense and a plan quickly formed inside her head and she grinned at the two people standing in front of her.

"We'll see you after the show then?" She asked as the lights started flashing a three minute warning.

"Sure," Will finally agreed with a nod in Laila's direction. She grinned as she noticed him glancing at Luanne one last time before leaving to take his seat.

But her smile quickly faded as she looked up at Piper. Her friend was looking at her apprehensively, as if she thought Laila had done something terrible.

"Well, this should be fun!" They both heard Luanne say as she linked arms with each of the girls and walked them both back to their seats. Laila knew what Piper must be thinking: why would she knowingly encourage the boy who caused a fight between her and Sterling to spend time with her? But Will was her friend, someone who, she was convinced, Sterling would one day grow to like. If he started dating Luanne, then her boyfriend would no longer see him as a threat to their relationship.

When the play ended, Laila allowed Luanne to pass her in the aisle on their way to meet Will. She knew Piper would want to talk.

"Laila, are you sure this is a good idea?"

Laila smiled at Piper's concern. "I'm absolutely sure. Did you see the way they were looking at each other?"

"No."

"Well, look closer next time!" Laila laughed. "It's completely obvious that Luanne has a crush on Will."

Piper stared down at her roommate. The blonde clearly believed what she had said and she could see the wheels of Laila's mind starting to turn. But Piper hadn't witnessed the same thing Laila had. What Piper had seen was closer to the story Sterling still held on to: that Will was after Laila. It was almost creepy the way he looked at her, as if he was always picturing her naked or as if he couldn't wait to get her alone.

"Look, I don't want to interfere, but if Sterling doesn't want you to hang out with him, I"

"Piper, I get it and I appreciate what you're saying. But Sterling won't care if you are there with me. Come on, just help me get Will to see what a great girl Luanne is."

Piper shot her an incredulous glance and both girls started laughing. "She has been trying awfully hard lately," Piper conceded.

"I know," Laila said, still laughing. "Do you think she's being nice just because I'm Will's friend?"

"Possibly." Piper thought about it for a minute. It did make sense, Luanne's sudden change of spirit coinciding with her run-in with Will. If she knew Will was Laila's friend, then perhaps she was using Laila to get to him. Either way, all of the roommates were benefiting from her change in attitude.

Higher Education

"You know what?Let's do this," Piper said, smiling down at her roommate."Let's get these two together.Maybe Luanne will be a little more interesting if she gets laid."

Laila burst into laughter again, thrilled that she had Piper on her team, excited that Will would soon no longer be a sore spot between her and Sterling.

Chapter 14: Not Feeling Well

Luanne quickly found Will in the lobby of the theatre after the play ended. He was waiting patiently as he watched all the students and patrons file out of the doors. He had a devious look in his eye, a look that made Luanne sick to her stomach with guilt.

"Where are the other two?" He asked as she neared.

"They're right behind me," she answered, slightly offended he didn't even bother to say hello.

"Good," he smiled at her. "Did you write that book review I asked for?"

Luanne smiled and nodded.

"Get me alone with Laila tonight and it will be published in Monday's paper."

Her face sank when she heard this. She had worked so hard on that review but she now believed that if she got Will what he wanted, he would publish that piece even if it was absolute garbage. She winced as she heard Laila's laugh coming from behind her. The girl was so naïve yet, Luanne had to admit, incredibly kind. Laila had been receptive to her attempts at reconciliation, something Luanne hadn't been expecting. Laila shouldn't want to talk to her or even look at her after the scene Luanne had caused. She felt almost friendly toward her roommate now, felt a certain bond. She knew they could be friends - something Luanne had forced at first but now deeply desired. She could see the connection between Laila and Piper and longed for the same thing.

In Birmingham, she had no friends. As a child she had been teased relentlessly about her weight and her appearance. She isolated herself from everyone, even after she transferred schools at the beginning of her freshman year. Her excuse was always her school work, her extra-curricular activities. She would lie to her parents, who were always worried about her, and say that she was going to a friend's house after school. Most days, she would spend time in the library or binging on coffee cake and mochas at Starbucks.

But now, she had an opportunity to start over, to form some real connections with people. She knew her overly-organized lifestyle wasn't the right way to attract friends, but she also knew no other way to live. She was completely torn between what she had been working towards and what she had always wanted.

She looked up at Will who was glaring at her, clearly waiting for an affirmative response. She nodded her head quickly and turned to greet her roommates.

"Are we ready?" She heard Will say.

Laila and Piper both smiled, clearly amused by something that had been said earlier. Laila glanced at Luanne and she forced her cheeks to raise into a smile. This would be fine, she thought to herself. There was nothing wrong with getting ahead in life.

Luanne tagged along behind the other three as they walked to the restaurant. She smiled politely when Laila and Piper tried to include her in their conversation, glared at Will when he ignored her. The knot in her stomach grew as they reached their destination. She knew enough about Will to guess that if she didn't deliver, he was capable of making her life a living hell. She almost felt sick to her stomach with the idea that Laila and Piper would find out what they had been up to.

"Hey?" She looked up and saw that Laila had been waiting for her at the door. "Are you okay?"

Higher Education

"I'm fine. Just not feeling that great," Luanne said honestly.

"Do you want to skip dinner? Piper and I can take you home," Laila offered, a concerned and disappointed look on her face.

"No, I'll be fine. Let's go inside." Luanne forced a smile and walked past her roommate who was holding the door for her. Just then she realized what she had to do and she let her smile fade as she reached the table, quickly taking a seat beside Piper. Laila sat down across from her, her eyes filled with worry for her roommate. Luanne picked up a menu to hide behind.

"So, Will," Piper said, nudging Luanne's leg under the table. "What do you do for fun, besides attending school plays?"

"I'm the editor of the Yale Daily News. That takes up a lot of time," Will smiled at her.

"Really?" Piper beamed at the information. "Luanne wants to be a writer."

Finally Luanne looked up and smiled at the group. Will was grinning at her. "I know," he said slowly. "She brought her portfolio by my office the other day and I was so impressed, I gave her an assignment."

"Really?" Laila practically squealed. "Luanne, why didn't you tell us?"

"It hasn't been published yet," she glanced sternly at Will who was still smiling.

"I'm sure it will be great," he said almost reassuringly.

"Is that how you two know each other then?"

Both Will and Luanne's head snapped towards Laila who was glancing between the two eagerly.

"Yes," Will finally answered.

Luanne nodded in agreement but was saved by the waitress from saying anything further on the topic. The four of them ordered and Luanne made sure to keep quiet. Piper and Laila kept trying to include her in the conversation, something which made Luanne's deception feel that much worse, and eventually she excused herself to the restroom.

"You can do this," she told her reflection as she stood at the vanity. "The newspaper is worth it." She dabbed her face with a wet paper towel and rubbed the thin skin under her eyes, reassuring herself again and again that she was making the right decision.

She walked slowly back to the table and made sure to trip over her own feet when she was within view.

"Luanne, are you sure you're feeling alright?" Laila gave her a concerned look as Luanne supported herself on the edge of the table.

"Actually, I think I need to go home."

"Well, we'll go with you." Laila started to stand up.

Higher Education

Luanne knew that was going to happen and she glanced at Will before speaking. "You've already ordered, I can make it home on my own."

"Don't be ridiculous," Piper chimed in. "We'll just tell them that we need to leave. I'm sure they haven't started making our food yet."

"I don't want to inconvenience anyone," Luanne said as pathetically as she could.

"I tell you what," Will spoke up. "Laila and I will stay here and ask for the food to go. Piper can take you home and you can have it in the morning."

"Is that okay?" Luanne asked hesitantly, looking at Piper.

"That's fine with me," Piper said, glancing at Laila.

Laila nodded and smiled at Luanne. "You should really get home and get some rest. We'll be right behind you."

Luanne gave Laila a small smile and waited for Piper to collect her things. She glanced back only once to see Will smiling at her blonde roommate and Laila gesturing for the waitress.

A/N: Okay, so I know this chapter is a little short and a little slow...so that's why I'm posting again on Friday :) Thank you all for reading! Much Love ~ Pink

Chapter 15: Be Carefull

A/N: Thanks to everyone who has been reading! I know people are getting frustrated with Laila's behavior so hopefully this chapter will offer some relief :) Much Love ~ Pink

Sterling was waiting patiently for Laila outside of her dorm room. They were celebrating their one year anniversary on Saturday evening but he was too impatient to wait until the weekend. It had been exactly 365 days since she had agreed to be his girlfriend and that year had been the best year of Sterling's life. The promise ring was safe inside his pocket and he couldn't wait to give it to her. He knew she would love it. It was understated and classic, it just screamed Laila's name.

He smiled as he saw Piper and Luanne walking in the distance. Laila must be hidden behind her tall roommate. But as they approached, he realized she wasn't with them. Piper's face fell as she saw him and she quickened her step.

"Sterling, what are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for Laila. Isn't she with you?" Sterling asked, confused.

"She's right behind us. Luanne isn't feeling well so I took her home and Laila waited for our food."

"Oh," Sterling said, slightly relieved. "So she'll be along in a few minutes?"

"Should be. Yeah," Piper gave a guilty smile. "Do you want to wait inside?"

Sterling smiled and was about to accept her offer when he heard Laila's lilting laugh in the distance. He looked up and saw her walking with a taller figure. The blood in Sterling's veins started to boil as the pair passed under a street lamp and he recognized Laila's companion. Hadn't she promised him just days ago to avoid this exact situation? But now, here she was, walking toward her dorm room with none other than Will.

Laila's smile didn't falter as she saw her boyfriend standing outside her room. She waved and skipped ahead of her friend so she could greet him. But Sterling was in no mood for her kindness at the moment.

"Where have you been?"

"I told you," Laila said with a smile. "Piper and I went to see Nikki's play and Luanne tagged along, and, Oh! I need to tell you what I discoveredâ"

"Laila," Sterling interrupted. "What are you doing with him?" He didn't care that Will could hear him. He didn't care that he was about to start another fight. He was livid and Laila should know why.

Finally, the smile left Laila's face as she glanced behind her shoulder at her friend. A guilty knot started to form in her stomach as she realized how the situation must look to Sterling. She cursed herself for getting caught up in her endeavors to hook up Will and Luanne. But it wasn't anything she couldn't explain.

"He saw us at the play and we all went out for a quick biteâ"

"Then why is it that you are with him and your two roommates came home without you?"

Higher Education

"Can we talk about this inside?" Laila asked quickly, realizing she should have been the one to walk Luanne home instead of Piper. Or, better yet, she should have sent Will.

"No. We can talk about this here." Sterling's voice was low and rough. She knew he wasn't going to let this go until she explained her suspicions about Luanne and Will.

"Sterling, let's just go inside!" Laila started to say but her boyfriend cut her off.

"No! I want him to hear this so that he knows that you are mine." Sterling glared at Laila but could feel Will's eyes on him. That bastard needed to learn that Laila wasn't going to be anyone's but Sterling's.

"Of course I am yours," Laila said softly, her violet eyes pleading with him to calm down. "I love you and I know how this must look but if you just let me explain!"

"Tell him," Sterling demanded. "Tell him that you love me and only me and that you'll never leave me."

Laila clenched her jaw. This situation was quickly becoming humiliating. Sterling's demands felt possessive and her first reaction was to push him away. But she stopped herself from screaming at him, knowing that it would only make the situation worse. Slowly, she turned to face Will.

"Will, thank you for walking me home. I have some things I need to work out with my boyfriend so I'll see you in class on Friday."

Will's face looked as if he was trying to hide a smile, his worried expression mixed with an uncomfortable awkwardness. Laila was sure he was just waiting for an excuse to run away from her and her seemingly crazy boyfriend. But Will surprised her.

"Laila, I'm not leaving you with him."

"What?" Laila asked, her voice barely audible.

"Fuck off!" Sterling said at the same time. "What happens between me and my girlfriend doesn't concern you."

But Will was still looking at Laila. "You shouldn't be alone with him right now," he said calmly. "I'm afraid he might hurt you."

"Sterling would never!"

"That's it!" Sterling screamed. "I don't want you talking to her! I don't want you even looking at her!"

"I think she can make her own decisions," Will told Sterling with a confident grin.

"Will you two please stop?" Laila stepped in front of her boyfriend who was clenching his fists like he was about to throw a punch. "Sterling, let's go back to your apartment. Will, I'll see you in class."

"You stay the fuck away from her," Sterling warned as his hand rose quickly to Laila's shoulder, ready to guide her away from her student teacher. But the movement startled her and made her jump backwards, causing her to nearly crash into Will's chest. Sterling's heart sank and his body froze. Was she scared of him? He didn't have time to think about that as he watched Will's hands wrap tightly around Laila's arms to steady her.

Higher Education

"Be careful," he whispered in her ear as she regained her balance. But his eyes never left Sterling's. Will was smirking at him with a devilish smile and a plotting look behind his eye. His hands lingered on Laila's arms and Sterling cringed as he watched Will inhale the scent of her long strawberry blonde hair.

"Laila," Sterling said, reaching for her hand so he could pull her away from Will, his need to protect her nearly overwhelming.

Laila stepped away from Will but shook Sterling's hand from her wrist. Tears were starting to pour from her eyes as she stood between the two men. She looked at her boyfriend and barely recognized him. The anger and hate in his face was terrifying and she nearly broke down into sobs right then and there. She took a slow step in his direction, waiting for his face to change back to the one she loved so much. But even as she wrapped her arms around his waist, his expression remained icy as he glared at Will.

"Sterling, please?" She said, trying to refocus his attention. "Let's just go."

Sterling heard her plea and kissed the top of her head, his eyes never leaving Will's as the two stared each other down. He wanted to make Will suffer. He wanted to prove to him that Laila would never leave his side. "Promise me that you won't see him again," he said to his girlfriend, hoping she would answer loud enough for Will to hear.

But Laila remained silent, her face buried in Sterling's chest. "Laila? Promise me."

She whispered something neither boy could hear and Sterling watched as the smirk on Will's face turned to a triumphant smile.

Sterling's anger rose to a level which frightened even him. He wanted to yell and scream but his body wouldn't let him. "Laila," he said calmly, not really planning on giving her an ultimatum. But he didn't know what else to do. "It's me or him."

She pulled her face away from his chest and her gaze flew to meet his. "Are you serious?"

Sterling nodded. "I can't do this anymore. I can't watch you naively go on pretending that he just wants to be your friend. Look at what it's doing to me. Look at what it's doing to us."

"I can't believe you are asking me to choose." Didn't he know that she would always choose him? Didn't he know that he meant more to her than anything?

"I shouldn't even have to ask, Laila. You should have listened to me the first time."

"You don't even know him! Don't you thinkâ!"

"I don't have to know him! And don't talk to me about thinking because clearly you haven't been doing any of that!"

His words hurt and she pushed away from him. She'd had enough. She couldn't process everything that had happened, couldn't comprehend the events that had led to Sterling's ultimatum. She loved him more than anything but wasn't about to let that stand in the way of her independence. What he was doing wasn't like him. He had never tried to control her before and she couldn't understand why he was doing it now. But he wouldn't listen to her, wouldn't even give her a chance to explain herself.

"I'm going inside," she whispered. "I want you both to leave."

Higher Education

"Laila!" Sterling reached for her but she stepped away and opened her door.

"I don't want to see you right now," she said with such an absolute resound that neither man questioned her further. She closed her door and sank to the ground. She didn't listen for them to walk away, her tears and sobs were too distracting and soon she could feel Piper's arms wrapping around her shoulder as she joined her roommate on the floor of their apartment.

Chapter 16: The Truth About Last Summer

Will glanced at Laila as she stared blankly out the window. Her eyes were red and slightly swollen. Her hair was a mess and she was nearly drowning in the large sweatshirt she was wearing. It was probably *his* sweatshirt, Will thought to himself. But Laila hadn't spoken all day and Will knew she was still fighting with him. This gave him hope.

Will practically had to run after her on the way out of class. She was moving at an unbelievable speed but quickly stopped as she pushed through the doors. He paused behind her and watched her as she looked around. Her boyfriend was nowhere to be seen and Will's heart almost broke for her as she hung her head and started to cry. Almost, but not quite.

"Hey," he said softly as he approached her. "Are you okay?"

"No," she choked out, her fingers wiping away the tears.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He put a soft hand on her shoulder.

"Will, I really don't think I should be talking to you at all right now," she answered, not looking at him.

"Is this because of what happened the other night?"

"Of course it is," Laila said, her crying starting to ease up.

Will remained silent and let her compose herself. His hand stayed on her shoulder.

"Look," she finally said, glancing up at him. "I'm really sorry that it happened. I'm completely embarrassed and I wish I could explain it." She shook her head and didn't finish her sentence.

"Laila, I'm not judging you. Relationships have problems, people argue. You'll either move past it or you'll move on."

With that Laila started to cry again and Will used her vulnerable moment to pull her into his arms. "Come on," he said, lifting her bag from her shoulders so he could carry it. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee and you can get a guy's perspective on the situation."

"Thanks, but I really can't." Laila said, reaching for her bag. "You are the reason we are fighting and I don't want to make things worse. Sorry if that sounded too blunt."

Will smiled, thrilled that he was finally coming between Laila and her boyfriend. "Don't worry about it. Are you going to talk to him?"

Laila slung her bag over her shoulder again and managed to smile at Will. "I'm supposed to be going to this party with him tonight. His brother is driving down and Piper invited us, well, whatever." Laila quickly thought twice about telling Will where they were going. Although she still saw him as a friend, Sterling clearly picked up on something she didn't.

"Why does he hate me so much?" Will asked innocently.

Higher Education

Laila shook her head, not wanting to make excuses for Sterling. "It's complicated. I know it won't happen right away but I really am planning on explaining our relationship to him. You're a good friend and I want him to see that."

Will nodded and then took a chance and kissed her cheek. But Laila turned her head and took a step back, staring at him with sad eyes. "I really am sorry," she offered quietly.

"I know," Will said, slightly hurt. "I'll see you later."

Laila nodded and he watched as she walked away from him. He could still feel her soft cheek from when he had kissed her and ran his tongue across his lips so he could taste her. God, he wanted her so much it almost hurt him. The longing in his chest had only increased the closer he got to her and now that he could literally taste her, it felt as if his heart was about to explode. He knew he had to stop her from talking to her boyfriend that night. He glanced at his watch and took off in the direction of the freshmen dorms, pulling out his phone and texting Luanne.

Find out what party they are going to tonight.

He smiled as he sent it, knowing that Luanne was practically dying for his approval. Someone with her level of desperation was always easy to manipulate. He was still smiling as he knocked on his little sister's door.

"Will! What are you doing here?" Brittany smiled up at him with her large brown eyes. There was little in their physical appearances that could define them as siblings. Their curly hair and the color of their eyes were the only similarities and for that Will was grateful. His little sister had always looked up to him but he rarely saw her as anything but an annoyance. As a child, Will had constantly worked to prove himself to their parents. Nothing he did was ever good enough; even his Yale acceptance letter had been met with a sour face and hurtful words from his father: "Harvard or Oxford would have been better."

But Brittany had always been their golden child. They attended every school play, sent her to drama camp and bought her singing lessons. It had taken Will nearly 17 years to admit it, but he was jealous of his little sister, even to this day. If she had been horrible at drama, it would have been easier. But the truth was she was brilliant. He didn't understand it, though. In front of new people she was always nervous and awkward, never letting her emotions show. But in front of an audience, when her face was layered in makeup, her costume donned, she shined. And it angered him that she could do something so effortlessly, so flawlessly.

"Hey, Brit. How are things?" Will asked, stepping around her and walking into her room. Her shared dorm room was a mess with clothes, shoes and books. He had been introduced to her roommate a couple times but never bothered to remember her name. Luckily, the girl wasn't around.

"Things are good," Brittany said, sitting on her bed and running her hands through her hair. "How's the paper?"

Will shrugged. "Fine."

"Is everything okay?" He could hear the concern in her voice. No matter how cruel he was to her when they were kids, she was always on his side, always worried that he wasn't happy.

"Actually, I need your help with something," he said, smiling at her.

"Anything!" She appeared overjoyed that he was actually coming to her for help.

Higher Education

"There is this girl in my class," he began but was interrupted by his sister's squeals.

"Oooh! What's she like?"

Will knew she was only trying to tease him but he frowned at her in an attempt to shut her up.

"I really like her," he said honestly. "But she has this boyfriend."

"That's a problem."

Will finally laughed. "You're telling me."

"So, what's the deal? Does she like you?"

"I think she does. But she's been with this guy for a while now and I think she feels trapped or something." Trapped? That sounded like a reasonable excuse.

Brittany waited for her brother to say something more. He was clearly conflicted but she didn't know how or why he needed her help. He had never come to her for advice about girls before. Most of his girlfriends had lasted mere months before he threw them away and moved on to the next one. Girls loved Will and his unruly mop of hair. Her friends in high school had called him sexy and mysterious but Brittany had always kept her mouth shut. To be honest, she couldn't stand the way Will treated women. He used them and cheated on them, always claiming no girl was ever good enough for him.

"Anyway," Will continued, "I know they are fighting right now and I think I may have a chance with her if they break up. That's where you come in."

"No!" Brittany said, instantly knowing what her brother wanted from her. She knew him too well to even imagine his intentions for her were any good.

"You haven't even heard what I'm going to say."

"I don't want to hear it. Leave me out of this." She stood up and walked away from him.

A smile crept over Will's face as he stared at his sister's back. They both knew he held one of her darkest secrets and, with very little guilt, Will was going to use it against her. "Do you want me to tell Mom and Dad about last summer?"

Brittany's head fell and she started shaking. She knew this would come back to haunt her. She was ashamed of what she had done but also incredibly confused by it. Part of her wanted Will to tell her secret but the other part of her knew it would break her parents' hearts.

"No," she finally decided. "I don't want you to tell them. What do you want me to do?"

"Good," Will smiled at her, not a brotherly smile or one with any compassion at all. It was a demeaning smile, one she knew all too well. "I'm going to text you the address of a party later this afternoon and I want you to show up wearing something only slightly inappropriate."

Brittany felt her self esteem plummeting as he spoke.

"I'll point out who the boyfriend is and then you do whatever it is you girls do to make him kiss you."

Higher Education

Brittany's mouth dropped at his brazen demands. "I can't just walk up to someone and get them to kiss me. It doesn't work that way!"

"Why not?"

"I can't do it," Brittany avoided his question. "What if he doesn't like me? What if I don't like him?"

"You're an actress," Will insisted. "Act."

"Guys aren't that easy, Will."

Will laughed. "Yes, we are. This guy's heart is probably broken right now. He's an easy target."

"Please don't ask me to do this," Brittany begged. She hated deception and couldn't believe the position her brother was putting her in.

"It's up to you," Will said with a shrug. "Do it or I tell our parents."

Brittany just shook her head and opened her door for him to leave. "Get out."

Will stood up quickly and walked through the door, pausing just on the other side. "Think about it."

She slammed the door in his face and then threw herself onto her bed. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about that day which now caused her so much shame and confusion. It had been her graduation party and half of the senior class was gathered at her home. The Alexander's home was large and there were kids everywhere, running through the halls, swimming around the pool, hiding in spare bedrooms so they could hook up without the others seeing.

Brittany had been taking her job as hostess very seriously. She loved seeing all her friends together and having a good time. She sat by the pool in her black bikini and watched as they played Marco Polo and volleyball. A light tap on her shoulder had distracted her.

"Brittany? Do you know where I can find more bottled water?" She recognized the sweet voice. It belonged to Sarah Cohen, the girl who had transferred into their high school during the middle of their senior year. Sarah had been beautiful and easily fit in with the rest of the class. Although friendly, she remained a mystery to most of the seniors, never revealing too much of her past or why she had transferred. It didn't bother most people because her bubbly personality distracted them. But Brittany remained curious though had always been too shy to ask her any personal questions.

"Of course," Brittany had said, standing up from her chair. "They're just inside. I'll get them."

"I'll help you carry them, if you like?" Sarah had smiled and Brittany felt her heart flutter. She had tried to deny her attraction to Sarah for months now, convincing herself that she was just envious of the girl's dark red hair and her piercing grey eyes, her perfect hourglass figure. It felt wrong to be so intrigued by another female and Brittany had never shared her feelings with anyone. But as the two girls walked inside the house, she couldn't help but notice the sway of Sarah's hips, the way her breasts bounced slightly under her revealing bikini top.

Brittany led the way to the garage and felt the butterflies explode in her stomach as she heard the door closing behind them. She walked quickly to the old fridge which stored the extra beverages and threw open the door, the cold air hitting her skin and cooling her nerves.

Higher Education

"Jackpot!" She heard Sarah laugh as she stepped beside her. Her friend took a bottle of water from the door and opened it, gulping quickly and then holding it out for Brittany.

"Want some?"

"Thanks," Brittany had heard her voice shaking but had hoped Sarah didn't pick up on it. She quickly grabbed the bottle and took a sip. Sarah had watched her and smiled as the plastic bottle left Brittany's lips.

"It's so hot out today," the redhead had said slowly.

"No kidding," Brittany laughed awkwardly.

"It's really cool of your parents to let everyone come over."

Brittany nodded, noting that Sarah was inching closer to her, her warm skin divergent from the cold air of the fridge.

"It's a shame I've never been here before. I've heard such great things about your house and I now see that they were all true."

Brittany swallowed but tried to hold on to some of her confidence. "I would have invited you over sooner if I had known you wanted to come."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "That would have been nice." She had smiled so seductively that Brittany could no longer resist. She leaned over and kissed the girl on lips, quickly but surely. It felt right and wrong on so many levels and before she was ready, Brittany pulled herself away, instantly embarrassed and ashamed by her actions.

Brittany opened her eyes hesitantly, nearly positive Sarah was going to be appalled by what she had done. But her friend was smiling at her, a beautiful smile which left Brittany giddy with relief. "I've wanted that for a while," Sarah had whispered.

Brittany was finally able to smile back and gently reached for Sarah's hips as the redhead leaned in for another kiss. Brittany was swimming in the forbidden excitement of it all. Sarah's skin was so smooth and warm under her fingers. Her lips were soft as they kissed and she tasted of berry lip gloss. Brittany could feel Sarah's hands running through her hair and pulling her closer. Their bodies touched and Brittany had felt as if she was about to explode with anticipation.

That's when she heard someone clear their throat and she pulled away, startled by the noise. Both girls had seen William standing in the doorway at the same time. They jumped out of each other's arms and Sarah had left without saying a word. Will had watched as Brittany's friend walked by him and he smiled as if he knew something the girls didn't.

"What are you doing here?" Brittany had eventually asked.

"Your guests are asking for more beverages," he said smugly.

"Please don't tell Mom and Dad."

He only smiled at her.

Higher Education

"This is the first timeâ€" "

"Save it," Will interrupted her. "I won't tell them."

Brittany had believed him but she also knew that he would use it to his advantage if he ever had the chance. Clearly Will had been saving it for the right moment. She knew her brother too well to even hope he would have forgotten about the scene in the garage.

Brittany had reprimanded herself time and time again for what had happened. She knew her parents would be devastated if they ever found out. She knew in her head what she had done was wrong but couldn't deny that everything about it had felt so right. Sarah had called her nearly every day for about two weeks at the beginning of the summer but Brittany never answered. She left for Yale with the unresolved event nagging at her conscience, convincing herself that she would soon be too distracted to think about Sarah. And she had been distracted, she had become completely preoccupied with the girl in her class.

Brittany smiled as she thought about Nikki and her cropped black hair, her beautiful smile and her tall silhouette. The two had become close friends and working with her on the production had been as entertaining as it was rewarding. Nikki's sense of humor kept everyone laughing and Brittany was always pleased when she showed her more attention than the rest of the crew. Nikki had taken Brittany under her wing and introduced her to everyone as if they had been old friends. She was grateful for her friendship.

But Brittany knew that she couldn't make the same mistake with Nikki as she did with Sarah. She had been lucky with Sarah and wasn't going to take the chance and ruin her friendship with Nikki. Standing confidently, Brittany walked to her closet and began going through her clothes. What had her brother said? Something only slightly inappropriate?

Chapter 17: Don't Want to See Her

"I don't want to see her," Sterling lied as he finished his beer.

"Bullshit," his brother called his bluff and passed him another drink. "She is all you have thought about this entire afternoon so I don't want to hear it."

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do," Alistair laughed at his twin. Poor Sterling had looked completely miserable when he opened the door that afternoon, so much so that Alistair very nearly feared for his brother's life. Laila and Sterling hadn't spoken since Wednesday evening and he knew they were both going insane. Piper had texted him Thursday morning asking what she should do about Laila's crying. The girl hadn't stopped all night and was still at it the next morning. But Alistair didn't know what to suggest. Laila had always taken care of him, not the other way around, so he promised Piper that he would be there first thing Friday after classes let out. He had driven like a madman to see them but hadn't made it out of Sterling's apartment yet.

"She doesn't want to talk to me," Sterling said, hanging his head.

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"No. But why should I? She's the one who should be apologizing. I was just looking out for her!"

"She probably doesn't see it that way," Alistair pointed out.

"I know," Sterling sighed and took another gulp from his beer. "But I can't stand her being friends with that guy. It's not right."

"So you do want to break up with her?"

"No!" Sterling nearly screamed. "That's the last thing I want. He just needs to get out of her life and leave us be."

"You might have to compromise if you want to stay with her."

Sterling shook his head. He was already tipsy but didn't feel the need to stop drinking. If he was going to be forced to see Laila, he didn't want to feel anything. He was scared that he would beg her forgiveness - something he knew he shouldn't have to do.

He looked at his brother as he opened his phone to receive a text. Alistair smiled and quickly responded. Sterling wanted to be happy for Al because he knew that Piper was great for him, but his fight with Laila had him wishing everyone could be just half as miserable as he was.

"Look," Alistair stood up and grabbed the beer from Sterling's hand. "The girls are already at the party so I suggest that you get off your ass and get this over with. You're going to feel much better once you just talk to her."

"I hate you right now, you know that?"

"Absolutely."

Higher Education

Sterling groaned but stood up, swiping his beer back from his brother and finishing it in a matter of seconds. Alistair rolled his eyes but pushed his brother out the door and into the cold night air. They walked to the party quickly, one twin completely impatient to see his new girlfriend, the other just hoping to get his hands on another drink.

They walked through the door and Alistair instantly saw Piper standing in the corner with Laila and another girl. He smiled as Piper threw her head back and laughed at something that had been said. He loved that laugh and the very sight of her only added to his longing. It had been only a week since their first date, since their first kiss, but he had missed her so much. Surprisingly, however, he found it easier to concentrate on his schoolwork, knowing that Piper was thinking about him.

He walked quickly toward her but knew that there was someone else who needed his attention more than Piper. As he pushed past the crowd, he grinned at Laila who was standing against the wall, distracting her attention from her roommate.

"Alistair!" Laila practically jumped into his arms and hugged him close.

"How are you doing?" he whispered to her, not wanting the others to hear.

Laila shrugged as he put her down. "I'm glad you're here," was all she offered.

Alistair gave her a doubting smile then turned to Piper. She was beaming at him and he leaned in to kiss her cheek. She blushed slightly and took his hand.

"Alistair, this is Luanne, one of our roommates."

"Luanne!" Alistair said enthusiastically. He remembered the name well. "I have to say, I'm a big fan of your house rules!"

The redhead looked embarrassed as she shook his hand. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah!" Alistair laughed at glanced at Piper who was staring at him in disbelief. It wasn't until Laila started to giggle that the rest of them joined in. Luanne nudged Laila in feigned offense but couldn't help feeling grateful that she was finally able to laugh with her roommates.

"How are those rules holding up, by the way?" Alistair teased Piper but it was Luanne who answered.

"Nikki pretty much blew one out of the water the first week."

Laila laughed at the memory. "But the rest have held up quite well." She smiled at Luanne encouragingly. Luanne had been incredibly supportive of Laila the past two days whenever she would break down and cry. If Piper wasn't there, Luanne would listen to Laila's reasoning behind her actions and always take her side. She appreciated the effort her roommate was putting forth and wanted to reciprocate with some support of her own.

But thinking about how nice Luanne had been the past two days only made Laila remember the reason she needed so much comforting. Seeing Alistair was a blessing but it also meant that Sterling was close by. Or, if he wasn't, it meant that he hadn't wanted to see her and the thought nearly killed Laila. She stood on her tiptoes and looked around the party, instantly identifying Sterling's ashy blonde hair in the crowd. He was standing by the keg, gulping from a red plastic cup. Laila prayed he wasn't intoxicated though the way he held himself against a chair told her otherwise.

Higher Education

She also couldn't help but notice the cute blonde girl who had appeared by his side. Her curly hair was everywhere and her low-cut shirt revealed an enviable cleavage. Sterling was, to his credit, paying more attention to his drink than whatever it was she was saying to him, but Laila still felt a pang of jealousy.

Alistair hadn't failed to notice where Laila's attention had gone and he quickly let go of Piper's hand so he could have a moment alone with his brother's girlfriend.

"Now is probably not the best time to talk to him, Laila."

"I noticed," she said sourly.

"He is miserable, you know."

"Why hasn't he called?"

"Why haven't you?"

Laila was surprised by Alistair's blunt question but had to smile at the honesty of it. "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"That he doesn't want me anymore," she said quietly, her smile fading and tears springing to her lids.

"You know, he's probably scared of the same thing."

"I should talk to him."

Alistair smiled and nodded. "Not tonight. He's well on his way to being completely wasted so just leave him alone right now."

"It's hard to be this close to him and not talk to him," Laila said, watching as her boyfriend filled up his cup again.

"You could try to take him home and put him to bed. He'll probably need some taking care of later tonight and I'll be happy if I don't have to do it!"

Laila smiled at Alistair and nodded her head. She should just take her boyfriend home and let him sleep it off. They could talk in the morning and this way Sterling wouldn't be distracting Alistair from Piper. She straightened her skirt and ran her fingers through her hair as she started to approach him, suddenly wanting to look her best even though she knew he would be too drunk to tell the difference. Looking up, she saw Sterling staring blankly at the girl next to him. His eyes were nearly closed as he swayed to stay on his feet and Laila nearly ran to catch him before he fell. But she stopped dead in her tracks as she watched the girl's hand reach up and bring Sterling's face to hers. Their lips met and Laila felt her knees go weak.

Chapter 18: How Could He Do This?

A small gasp escaped Laila's lips as she watched her boyfriend kiss another girl. Sterling wasn't pulling away. Why wasn't he stopping? The blonde had her fingers in his hair, her body pressed against his and he wasn't pulling away. Tears flooded Laila's eyes and she turned to run out the door only to collide with a familiar face.

"Laila!" Will smiled down at her. "When you said you were going to a party, I didn't know you meant this one!"

"I have to leave," she managed to say and pushed passed him. She could feel her legs carrying her out the door but she wasn't sure how they were managing to move. Stumbling, she felt two strong hands wrap around her waist and help her find her bearings. She looked up at the man who was holding her, knowing the face didn't belong to the person she wanted to see.

"Come on," Will said softly. "I'll help you home."

But Laila broke down completely. "How could he do this to me?" She sobbed as she collapsed into his arms.

"Shhh, let's just get you out of here." Will slipped his arm around her waist and held her upright as he began to walk slowly down the street. With each step he could feel her struggling more and more and he wasn't at all opposed to the idea of Laila needing him. Her thin frame fit so perfectly against his that he couldn't help but pretend that they were walking back to her dorm room under different circumstances.

"Thank you," he heard her whisper, pulling him from his daydream.

"For what?"

"For taking me home."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" But Will, of course, already knew what had happened. He had been hiding in the corner with Brittany, careful not to let Laila see him, when Sterling and his brother walked in. Will had been surprised, to say the least, to see the twins and was worried he wouldn't be able to tell the two apart. But the boys instantly separated, one moving toward Laila and her roommates, the other making a beeline for the keg. Once one brother had kissed Piper on the cheek, Will directed Brittany toward the other and watched in amazement as she worked her magic.

"It's over," Laila said quietly.

"You and your boyfriend?"

"Yes. He doesn't want me anymore."

"Then he's a fool."

Laila didn't say anything, but stood up a little straighter and lifted some of her weight from Will's arm. They walked in silence the rest of the way to her dorm room and Will waited as she found her keys in her purse.

"Thank you again for walking me home. I'm sorry if I took you away from the party."

Higher Education

"Don't mention it," Will said, his hand reaching out to touch her cheek. Her eyes, although incredibly sad, were such a brilliant shade of violet that he was momentarily lost in them. "I hate to see you upset."

"I should be better on Monday," she promised him.

"Can I see you tomorrow? Just to make sure you're all right?"

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Laila looked away from him to the ground between their feet.

"You didn't do anything wrong, you know?" Will said, lifting her face by her chin.

"Yes I did," she whispered though her voice was completely certain.

Will smiled at her. "That feeling will pass."

Laila gave him a halfhearted smile but allowed his hand to stay on her face. Slowly, so as not to startle her, Will let his fingers stroke her jaw and meander down to her neck. His eyes focused on her lips as his head bent toward hers but she stopped him just seconds before he was able to kiss her.

"Will, don't." She pushed at his chest and turned around.

"I'm sorry," he was quick to apologize and put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. "You're upset and I shouldn't have done that."

Laila paused and then nodded her head, refusing to look at him. "Goodnight, Will." She pushed through her door and closed it quickly behind her. Sterling had been right all along. Will wanted her as more than a friend and everything, all of his past actions, all of their conversations, and especially his attraction suddenly became completely obvious. As her new reality set in, Laila's head was flooded with doubt and questions and she started shaking as the feelings overwhelmed her.

"Jesus!" She heard Nikki say from across the room. "Are you okay?"

"I need my inhaler," Laila whispered, her throat about to close completely.

She opened her eyes and watched as Nikki ran to her room and retrieved her inhaler from her nightstand. Laila pressed it to her lips and waited until she could breathe properly.

"Thank you," she smiled at her roommate.

Nikki was looking at her as if she were a ghost. "What happened?"

Laila glanced around her dorm room. So much had happened she didn't know where to start. Everything around her was familiar but she felt as if she didn't belong anywhere. She felt as if she needed to run away.

"Sterling and I are leaving," but she didn't know who to continue and she looked back at her roommate. Nikki was standing over her with a worried expression, a duffel bag slung over her shoulder. "Are you going somewhere?"

Nikki's dark eyes looked nearly black as she stared down at her. "I'm driving home for the weekend."

"To New York?"

Higher Education

"Yup. Are you sure you don't want to sit down?"

"Why so late?"

"My car was in the shop but I didn't want to wait 'till tomorrow. Why don't you drink some water or something?"

"Can I go with you?"

"To New York?"

Laila was nodding her head and smiling, clearly stuck with a brilliant idea.

"I guess," Nikki said with a shrug of her shoulders. She wanted to help Laila, because clearly the girl needed some help, but a ride to the city didn't seem like the best solution. Nevertheless, Laila appeared taken with the idea and skipped off to her room, her mood almost instantly changed. Nikki only had to wait a few confused moments before Laila reappeared, her bag packed and her clothes changed.

"I'm ready." Laila smiled and held up a box of thin mint cookies. "For the road," she explained and Nikki had to laugh.

"A girl after my own heart." She held the door for Laila and then locked it behind her. Whatever had Laila in such a mess just moments ago would most likely come up on their ride to New York and Nikki didn't want her roommate to be left alone when the feelings returned. Laila seemed so fragile in every way, it wasn't a mystery to Nikki why Sterling felt such a need to protect her. The poor girl was probably completely lost without him and looking to whomever was in sight for guidance. Thank God Nikki had been in the apartment instead of Luanne, she thought. She could have returned from New York to find even more motivational quotes taped to the mini fridge and two roommates who alphabetized the books and magazines in their room.

Chapter 19: I Threw Up On Her?

Sterling woke up feeling as though his head had been put in a vise. The sunlight from his open window burned his eyes and all of his limbs felt heavy as he tried to get out of bed. He managed to stand, after two or three attempts, and staggered off to the bathroom, his stomach already heaving. Vague and blurry memories of the night before came back to him as he held his head over the toilet and vomited.

How much beer had he consumed? He remembered the six-pack that Alistair had brought with him, the two cups he had finished at the party, the third he had been given by that blonde girl. His eyes opened as he remembered that blonde. Her curly hair had been funny to look at but her face had been kind. Then he remembered how soft her lips had been and he swore out loud as he felt the vomit rising in his throat again.

He had kissed her, he now remembered it clearly. She had been flirting with him as he stood next to the keg and then pulled his face down to hers. He hadn't stopped her, hadn't pushed her away. He didn't remember liking the kiss, only the feeling of her lips on his. He had known that girl wasn't Laila but that had been easy to forget once his eyes were closed and he had been too intoxicated to pull away. But even he knew that was a lame excuse.

Guilt overwhelmed him as he pushed himself off the floor and attempted to brush his teeth. He looked at himself only once in the mirror. Dark circles were under his eyes, his skin was a disgusting shade of green. He stumbled back to the living room and flopped down on the couch next to his brother.

"I feel like shit."

"You should," Alistair said coldly.

"What happened last night?" Sterling asked, knowing the punishment of the truth wouldn't be enough to make him feel any better.

Alistair stared at him without even a hint of sympathy. "Well, a lot happened last night. But I think the highlight of the evening was when you kissed another girl right in front of Laila."

Sterling ignored his brother's sarcasm. "She saw?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Fuck," Sterling swore under his breath and put his head between his knees to stop the room from spinning.

"What were you thinking?"

"Clearly I wasn't," he snapped at his brother. "What did she do?"

"She ran out of the house."

"Why didn't you go after her?"

Alistair tried not to laugh. "I was about to, believe me. But then I saw my twin brother puking all over the girl he just kissed and my priorities changed."

"I threw up on her?"

Higher Education

Alistair smiled. "Afraid so."

Sterling had to smile as well, only vaguely remembering the girl's shrill cry as he vomited all over her shoes. But he didn't want to think about that girl in any way. "I should go see Laila and explainâ"

"She's not there, man." Alistair shook his head. "She called Piper from the road to let her know she was going to New York with Nikki."

Sterling didn't know what to say. He had wanted Laila to be upset, wanted her to know that she had angered him as well, but he hadn't meant to ruin things with her completely. And now she was in New York and he couldn't even see her to offer an explanation.

"Give me your phone," he looked up and held out his hand to his brother.

"Don't even think about it," Alistair warned.

"Come on, Al. If she sees it's me calling, she's not going to answer."

"No. If she doesn't want to talk to you, then you shouldn't trick her into it."

"Why not? I need to explain what happened."

"You don't even know what happened!"

"I know that it was a mistake. I know that I never meant for it to happen. Fuck, I don't even know the girl's name!"

Alistair stared at his brother for a minute before conceding. "Fine. But if she asks, you stole it from me."

"Fine," Sterling agreed. He found Laila's number and hit send, the ringing on the other end entirely too loud for his liking.

"Alistair?" Laila answered after a few rings.

Sterling didn't know what to say. Her voice sounded so sad.

"Alistair, are you there?"

But he still couldn't speak.

"Look, I told Piper last night not to worry. I'll be back on Sunday."

"I'm sorry," Sterling said quickly and he heard Laila take a sharp breath.

The line was silent for a few seconds and then went dead. Sterling took the phone away from his ear and closed it.

"So? How did that go?" Alistair asked, a slight smile on his lips.

Sterling threw the phone at him. "Get Piper over here so I can call from her phone."

Higher Education

"No. You need to let her cool off."

"She's in New York, Alistair. Who knows what she's doing right now. I just need to speak to her!"

"She doesn't want to talk to you. I'm telling you, the girl was a mess last night. You need to give her some time."

"Did you talk to her?"

Alistair nodded. "Right before she saw you."

"What did she say?"

"She said that she was scared you didn't want her anymore. She said it was hard to be this close to you and not talk to you."

Sterling blinked, waiting for his brother to say more.

"I told her that she shouldn't talk to you when you were wasted. She was going to take you home when she saw you kissing that girl."

"Oh my God," Sterling started to feel sick again as he realized that Laila had been prepared to make things work between them. She had wanted to make up and move on.

"She was just as miserable as you were," Alistair added.

"I'll go see her then. If I go to New York, she has to talk to me."

"No." Alistair felt as if he was reprimanding a puppy. "Leave her alone for a few days."

"But maybe she thinks that I did it on purpose. Maybe she thinks I kissed that girl just to make her jealous."

"She won't. It's Laila and you know her heart is too broken for her to imagine things like that."

Sterling nodded his head slowly and Alistair felt as if he had been too harsh on his brother.

"She's with Tate and Tennille," Alistair said, trying to provide some comfort. He watched as his brother rubbed his hands over his face in the hopes of hiding his tears. "They'll take care of her."

"I can't believe I did this to her."

Alistair couldn't think of the right thing to say. He stared at his brother and, even though he was furious with him, he couldn't help but feel sorry for the guy. He knew Sterling didn't want to lose Laila. He knew that his brother felt horrible about last night and would probably do anything to take it back. How many times had Alistair done that same thing to a girl and not given it a second thought? That idea made him shiver with regret and he instantly picked up his phone and dialed Piper's number, walking out of the room and into the kitchen for some privacy.

"Hello?" She sounded as if she had just woken up.

"Hey. What are you doing today?"

Higher Education

"No plans. Maybe some homework later."

"I need to spend some time with my brother, but I want to see you."

"Yeah?" He could hear the smile in Piper's voice.

"Yeah. Can I pick you up at five?"

"I'll be ready."

"Okay," Alistair said with a smile. "I'll see you then."

"Bye."

He closed his phone and looked at the back of Sterling's head. He didn't know what he was going to do with him, what he could possibly say to make him feel better. But his brother needed him and he wasn't going to let him down. Alistair opened the fridge and reached for some orange juice. Next he found the frozen waffles and put four into the toaster oven. But by the time they had finished cooking and Alistair had managed to get three of them on the plate, the fourth having been taste tested for quality assurance, he could hear Sterling's snoring from across the apartment.

Sighing, Alistair sat down on the couch next to his twin and flipped on the TV. Sterling would wake up eventually and there were plenty of waffles and plenty of orange juice to last throughout the day.

Chapter 20: Pity Party is Over

Laila stared at her phone as it vibrated in her hand. This was the 17th time he had called that day and she was beginning to feel herself giving in.

"Don't answer it," she heard Tennille say.

"I won't," Laila said confidently and put her phone on the table beside her. She looked at her food and then back at her former roommate and her boyfriend. They hadn't changed much. Tennille was slimmer than she remembered, something she attributed to her new school and all the dance classes they offered. Tate's hair was longer but he was still as handsome as ever.

"Thanks for letting me crash here this weekend."

"Will you stop thanking us?" Tennille said with a roll of her eyes. "I haven't seen you in months and all you can say is 'thank you.'"

"Sorry," Laila smiled.

"Well, I'm not saying you're welcome until you tell us what's going on."

Laila had been avoiding the subject all day, claiming she wasn't ready to talk about it. Her two friends knew something was wrong and by dinner that evening, after they had watched Laila avoid Sterling's phone calls all day, they had both figured out something had happened between the happy couple.

So Laila took a deep breath and started her story. She retold the events leading up to the night of the party with as little bias as she could, Tennille and Tate nodding at her as they followed along. But then she arrived at the events of the previous night and she began to cry.

"I saw him kissing her and I just lost it. Will caught me outside and walked me home and then—" Laila sniffled. "And then he walked me home and tried to kiss me. It was horrible because it proved that Sterling had been right and I had driven him away because I was too stupid to see it."

"So, why aren't you answering his calls?" Tate was the first to speak, confusion now written all over his face.

Tennille slapped his arm. "Because he kissed another girl!"

"But he was wasted and she clearly wants to forgive him."

Tennille's mouth dropped and she glared at her boyfriend before turning to Laila. "I'm sorry, don't listen to him."

"I don't know what to do," Laila admitted. "I'm so angry at him but I miss him so much."

"Don't do anything just now," Tennille advised and Tate agreed with a nod of his head. "Give it until tomorrow and see how you are feeling."

"I didn't know anything could hurt this much."

"It's going to be okay," Tate smiled at her.

Higher Education

"You two will either get back together and forget this ever happened or you'll move on and realize that you just weren't meant to be," Tennille added.

"I know," Laila said, her voice laced with misery. "But I don't know which one I want right now."

"Of course you are going to be confused. But you'll figure it out when you are ready."

Laila nodded but then jumped as her phone rang again. "Tate, will you please answer it?"

She pushed the phone across the table and Tate picked it up hesitantly. "Hello?"

There was a brief pause but eventually Sterling spoke. "Tate? Is she with you?"

"She's here."

"Can I talk to her?"

Tate glanced at Laila who shook her head. "No, she doesn'tâshe's not ready to talk."

"Well, is she okay?"

"Um, kind of."

"Tate, please? Let me talk to her." Sterling sounded absolutely desperate and Tate hated being put in this position.

"I can't. Or, she won't." He could hear his friend swearing on the other of the phone. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Sterling's words didn't hold much confidence. "Will you just tell her that I love her and that I'm sorry?"

"Yeah. I'll tell her."

"Thanks," Sterling whispered and then quickly disconnected the call.

Tate looked across the table at Laila who was staring at him expectantly. "He says he is sorry and he loves you."

"Asshole." Tennille spoke before her friend.

Laila gave her an appreciative smile.

"So, this Will guy," Tennille continued. "Tell me about him."

Laila sighed. "He's brilliant. He's the editor of the school newspaper, he's funny, and he's kind."

"But Sterling doesn't like him because he could tell this guy was crushing on you?"

Laila nodded. "I should have known. I mean, I guess part of me did know, I just didn't want to see it because I thought one day Sterling and Will could be friends."

Higher Education

Tate shifted in his chair, looking as if he wanted to say something but knew Tennille would yell at him.

"Tate? Just say it," Laila wanted nothing but the truth from her two friends.

He took a deep breath. "If Sterling told you about his apprehensions, why didn't you believe him?"

Laila shook her head. "I don't know."

"Did you not want to believe him?"

"That's not it," Laila said, choking up again, no longer able to hide the truth from herself or her best friends. "I didn't care that Will wanted to be more than my friend. I knew I would never cheat on Sterling, I knew that I would never let Will come between us. I justâno one like Will has ever paid attention to me before. I guess I liked it."

"Are you sure you don't like him? More than a friend?"

Laila tried to blink back her tears. "He's so different from Sterling. I appreciate so many things about Will, but there's no comparison. I love Sterling more than anything."

"Has Sterling not been there for you lately?" Tennille asked quietly.

"No, he has," Laila was crying again. "He's been so great and I'm just stupid and selfish. I don't deserve him."

Nobody spoke for a minute as Laila's crying eased.

"What are you going to do about Will now?"

"I don't know. Sterling and I aren't together but I don't think I would feel right seeing Will in any capacity."

Tate and Tennille were both looking at her with sad and understanding eyes. Laila wiped the tears from her face and smiled at her two friends. "Can we talk about something else?"

Tennille nodded but it was Tate who spoke up. "You'll never guess who we saw last weekend."

"Who?"

"Julian and Tasha."

Laila grinned. Harper's gossip was a welcome distraction. "How are they?"

"Still together," Tennille said with obvious disbelief. "They looked really good, actually."

"How do they like Columbia?"

"Loving it."

There was a short pause before Laila spoke again. "Did they say anything else?"

"Um, no," Tennille lied. They had asked about Laila and Sterling and she had told them that things between the couple were great.

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"Has anyone seen or spoken to Chase?"

"Julian didn't say anything about him. I heard he was in rehab somewhere in South America," Tate offered.

"South America? That's a random." Laila smiled and Tennille chuckled.

Tate smiled. "I guess."

"Thanks, you guys," Laila said quickly. "For everything."

"You're welcome," Tennille said quickly.

"We're just glad you finally made it up here," Tate added, trying to reinforce that he and Tennille were glad to see their friend.

"Even if I'm being completely lame and crying all over the food you cooked for me?" Laila laughed at herself.

"That's it!" Tennille stood up and grabbed her former roommate's hand, yanking her out of her chair. "This pity party is officially over. You're in New York, I don't care what brought you here and I'm done letting you feel sorry for yourself."

Laila and Tate's eyes went wide, both waited to see what Tennille would do next.

"Let's go climb the Empire State building or take a carriage ride around Central Park—something completely cheesy and touristy. Something that you can actually thank us for."

"Can we go to the Met?"

"You are such a nerd. But yes, we can."

"Thank you," Laila smiled up at Tennille innocently.

Finally Tennille laughed. "Just go get your coat."

Chapter 21: The Letter

Sterling closed his phone for what seemed like the hundredth time. Laila refused to talk to him and since she wasn't due back from New York until that evening, he did the last thing he could think of: sat down and started to compose a letter.

Dear Laila,

But that sounded too formal.

My dearest Laila,

Who was she? A long lost lover? He wasn't writing from some war overseas.

â ;

All right, so he would think of something later. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He didn't want to hold anything back. He didn't want to insinuate blame, he didn't want to try and justify what had happened with over analyzed excuses.

I don't know how to start this letter. I am so scared that I am going to lose you that nothing seems like the right thing to say. I know I have called too many times, but that smallest shred of hope that you may pick up and I can hear your voice is worth the pain of you not answering. But I promise to stop calling. After I mail this letter, I won't call you again. I know you need time and I suppose I do too. What I did was wrong and I am so sorry. You have to know that I would do anything to take back that night. It makes me sick to my stomach just thinking about it. Writing an apology for kissing another girl gives me physical pain so I can only imagine what it was like for you to actually see it happen. I never meant for it to happen. I never wanted it to happen. All I want is for you and me to be together and happy. I'll do anything to get us back to how we were.

But, Laila, I am still so angry with you. You did the very thing you promised me you wouldn't do. I felt like you had deceived me and I didn't understand why you wouldn't listen to me. I hope you know that I only wanted to protect you. I would never put my feelings before yours and your happiness means everything to me. But I don't trust him. I don't care that he is your friend and I don't care that you have a lot in common with the guy. The way he looks at you scares me but what terrifies me is the fact that you can't see it. Or maybe you do and you just don't care. I'm not sure anymore.

I know that giving you an ultimatum was wrong but there was nothing left for me to do. The thought of living without you is killing me but I know that I can't be with you if Will is still in your life. I want to make this work. You mean everything to me so please, please talk to me. I need to talk to you. I'm going crazy without you. Please, Laila.

No matter what happens, I want you to know that I love you now and I will love you forever.

Sterling

He scribbled her name on the envelope and sealed it inside. He threw on a sweatshirt and locked the door behind him. The Sunday afternoon air was cold and he could see his breath, frosty and white. He pulled his hood around his head and quickened his step as he walked across the campus to Laila's mailbox.

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But as he reached the mailroom, he paused. He stared at the hundreds of brass numbers and suddenly the letter in his hand felt as if it weighed 50 pounds. What if she didn't call? What if she didn't forgive him? He had poured his heart into that letter, put everything on the table. No, he couldn't think that way. She would forgive him. He would forgive her and everything would go back to the way it was.

He shoved the letter into her mailbox and turned around quickly so he couldn't try and dig it out. He was about to push through the doors into the cold, nearly winter air when he heard a confident voice next to him.

"Hey, Sterling!"

He turned to his right and saw a familiar yet unwelcome face. "Hi," he muttered.

Brittany could see the annoyance in his expression but smiled at him anyway. "How are you?"

"I've been betterâ"

"Brittany," she reminded him with a flutter of her eyelashes.

"Right. Brittany. I have to go."

"Where are you going?" She asked, trying not to act hurt that he was so clearly didn't want to see her.

"Home," was the only answer he gave as he turned to leave.

"Well, wait up. I'll walk with you."

"That's okay."

She let him walk a few steps before trying again. "Look, I know the other night wasâ weird. But it wasn't completely unpleasant, was it?"

"I puked on your shoes."

Brittany laughed. "I managed to dodge most of it."

She could see the pain in Sterling's face. Whatever had happened between him and his girlfriend couldn't have been good. She felt sick to her stomach about what she had done. Running into him like this hadn't been planned but Will had made it incredibly clear that if she messed things up for him and Laila, Brittany would be the one to pay for it. It disgusted her how easily she was able to fall into this act only to please her brother.

"Brittany, I can't do this," Sterling moved toward the door and pulled his phone out of his pocket, flipping it open and getting ready to dial.

"Okay," she stepped in front of him and smiled sweetly. "I won't bother you anymore."

"You aren't bothering me," Sterling said with unease. "I just have to leave."

Brittany gave him a crooked grin and reached for his phone. Quickly, she keyed in her number and pressed send, waiting until she felt her phone vibrating in her purse before she ended the call.

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"There," she said proudly, handing Sterling back his phone. "You've got my number and I have yours. Whenever you *can* do this, you give me a call. No strings need to be attached. Just a good time."

"Look," Sterling started. He had kissed her, he knew that much. And then he had thrown up all over her, the second act being disgusting enough to negate the first. So why was this girl pursuing him? He had been a drunken mess. Why would she find that desirable? "I don't remember a lot of what happened Friday night. And I'm sorry if you thought it meant something more than what it did, but I really can't do this."

But Brittany only laughed in his face, a pleasant, amused laugh. "Hey, no pressure. I'll see you around."

And with that she walked past him and into the mailroom. Sterling watched her, completely confused, as she pulled her key from her purse and turned the lock. Her hair was still as wild as he remembered, the blonde curls twisting in every direction. Her dark brown eyes looked exotic which had surprised him. He had remembered everything about her face as angelic, but looking at her just now, nothing about her seemed innocent. It was as if her eyes had been hiding something behind their confidence, a certain pain or anguish. Shaking his head in confusion, he turned around and walked out the door.

Chapter 22: Not Playing Around

Luanne gripped the Monday addition of the Daily securely in her fist as she walked out of her classroom. Will had promised her book review would be there. He had given his word, yet it was nowhere in the pages. Stomping into the mail room, Luanne pushed past the other students and found her key, forcing the lock to open. Only one letter had arrived over the weekend and Luanne rolled her eyes, cursing her time wasted.

The letter was pulled from the box and Luanne was about to throw it into her bag when the name on the front caught her eye. Laila's name was the only thing written, no address, no dorm room indicated. Flipping it over, Luanne frowned as she saw S. Pierce embossed with grey foil. Was Laila still not talking to her boyfriend? She had spent the entire weekend in New York and had come back in a seemingly determined mood. Maybe this letter was Sterling's last plea for forgiveness.

An evil idea suddenly dawned on her and she frowned as she slipped the letter into her back pocket and sulked off toward the newsroom. If Will was going to play her for a fool, she would just have to prove to him how far she was willing to go. Of course, she didn't plan on actually having to use the letter to her advantage. Maybe there was a legitimate reason Will didn't publish her article and she would be willing to hear him out.

His office door was open and she stepped confidently inside, keeping quiet as he finished his conversation with Gavin. Luanne knew Will's friend only by name, having never been introduced. Gavin was in charge of design and also worked closely with Will, editing some of the columns.

The two men looked up as she entered the room, Gavin giving her a quick smile and Will frowning as if he were annoyed.

"Can I help you?" The editor asked roughly.

"I want to know why my article wasn't published."

Will glanced at Gavin and gave him a smirk. "It wasn't published because it wasn't any good."

"I don't care if it wasn't any good. You are supposed to be helping me to make it better," Luanne reminded him.

"Gavin, could you excuse us for a minute?"

Gavin nodded and picked up some papers from the desk, walking past Luanne and closing the door behind him.

"You have got some nerve, you know that?" Luanne started. "You said that if I got you alone with her, you would publish my article in Monday's addition."

"Did I say that?" Will asked with a smile on his face. "I don't remember being that specific."

"Well I remember quite well. I also remember that conversation we had when you promised to help me if I helped you. I'm guessing Laila would love to hear about it."

She could tell from the expression on Will's face that she had angered him. He would lose all chance he had with her if she were to find out the game he had been playing. But the confidence quickly returned to his expression.

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"Yes. I have noticed that you and Laila have been closer lately. One could even say friendly."

Luanne shifted her weight. "She's a nice girl, I guess."

"And your other roommate, Piper, she's a nice girl too, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"How nice do you think they would be to you if they found out you deceived them? I'm guessing they would want nothing to do with you."

Luanne twisted her lips in defiance yet she knew Will was right. She could now call Laila and Piper her friends and was fairly certain they would do the same for her. The three of them did things together, they went out, they watched movies and laughed. She had never known anybody as understanding as Piper. She had never known anybody as nice as Laila. It felt good to have friends and she didn't want to lose them.

"Don't try and play me at this, Luanne," Will was saying. "You and I both know you will never say anything to Laila."

"Fine," Luanne agreed. "But I can stop helping you."

Will just laughed. "What would it matter now? Laila has broken up with her boyfriend and she's as good as mine."

"Are you sure? You haven't seen how much she cries over him, how she hasn't taken any of his pictures down from her room."

Will frowned. "She won't take him back after what he did."

"After he made a drunken mistake?" Luanne laughed. "She loves him enough to forgive him."

Will shook his head. "He doesn't want her back. He wasn't waiting for her after class today."

"That doesn't mean anything," Luanne argued and Will knew it to be true. "He's written her a letter."

"Excuse me?"

Luanne smiled and pulled a small white envelope from her back pocket. "I'm guessing it's a letter begging her forgiveness. Imagine how happy she'll be when she sees it."

"Where did you get that?"

"It's my turn to pick up the mail this week."

"Give it to me."

"No."

"Luanne, this isn't funny."

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"No, it's not funny," Luanne agreed with him. "I feel horrible doing this. I'm ashamed at my own desperation and I know that I should just go home and give it to her. I should be happy that my friend and her boyfriend, who she loves by the way, are getting back together. This isn't funny at all and I'm not playing around with this. You publish my article tomorrow or Laila gets her letter."

"You are heartless, you know that?" Will smiled at her.

"I just know what I want."

"If I publish your article, then you have to give me that letter."

"Fine."

"See you tomorrow, then," Will said and returned his attention to his work.

Luanne wanted to smile as she walked out the door, but she couldn't. If he published her article, she would be forced to give him Laila's letter and the guilt of keeping it from her roommate was already starting to consume her. But if he didn't, Luanne would know that he had given up on her, that he didn't feel as if he needed her anymore and her chances of writing for the paper that year would be ruined.

"Hey," she heard a voice in the quiet hallway. Turning around she saw Gavin leaning casually against the wall outside Will's door.

"Hi," Luanne answered timidly, afraid he had heard the entire conversation.

"You're that girl who wrote the book review, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Gavin smiled. "It was really good."

Luanne smiled at the praise. "Clearly not good enough to get published."

Gavin gave a small laugh. "It was good but a little harsh, don't you think?"

"He told me to be honest." Luanne had ultimately decided to submit a draft with her initial critiques thinking that Will would stay true to his word and publish it regardless of content.

"You were very honest and very justified. The book was crap."

Luanne smiled again.

"But keep in mind you are trying to write for the Yale Daily News. The author of that book you so severely tore apart used to write for the same paper and still holds quite a bit of not power over us."

"Oh," was all that Luanne could say. "I didn't realize."

"It's okay," Gavin laughed. "He should have told you."

Luanne nodded and then looked behind her at Will's office. Should she turn around and tell him she'd write a new version, one that wasn't as harsh?

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"If you want, I can help you get it ready," Gavin offered before she could make up her mind.

"You would help me?"

"Sure," he said with a smile. "You made some really good points, we just need to tone it down a bit."

Luanne smiled back. She liked Gavin. His light brown eyes were kind and his smile was sincere. "Thanks," she said, quietly accepting his offer.

"Come on," he gestured down the hall with a nod of his head. "I'll show you where the rest of us work."

Luanne giggled to herself and walked with him down the hall. Maybe things would be all right after all.

Chapter 23: A Boy Who's Your Friend?

"No, go back stage left," Nikki directed and Brittany rolled her eyes with a smile. The two were working late on their final project for drama class, a ten minute dramatic scene from one of the pieces they had studied. The small auditorium had become like a second home to the girls who found themselves spending more and more time there as the first semester neared its end.

"You do realize that only five minutes ago you wanted me stage right?"

"I do realize that," Nikki said with a smirk. "But if Peter makes his entrance from stage right then you two will need to take more steps to reach each other, thus making the scene more dramatic."

Brittany smiled. "Whatever you say, Director."

Nikki smiled back. She loved working with Brittany, the girl was absolutely amazing and she hardly realized it. Her acting was beautiful and graceful, completely effortless. Nikki hopped up from her seat and jumped onto the stage.

"Let's try it again."

"Nikki, I'm tired of practicing," Brittany whined. "Peter isn't even here to do the lines with me and you are well aware that I know them all."

Nikki smiled, amused at Brittany's pouted face and only slightly upset she wouldn't get to run the lines with her again. She took a step toward her. "What do you want to do then?"

Brittany sighed and shrugged. "I have a million other things to study for tonight. I should just get going."

"On a Friday?"

"Finals are less than two weeks away," she reminded her.

"So true! We could study in the library," Nikki suggested, leaping from the stage and running to grab her bag.

She heard her friend laugh and turned to see Brittany staring at her and smiling. "I don't understand how you have so much energy this late in the semester."

Nikki laughed. "Yeah, finals really get me going." She picked up her book bag from the first row and walked back to the stage, raising her hand to help Brittany off the high ledge. The blonde's fingers wrapped around Nikki's without hesitation, her skin warm and soft.

Nikki could feel the tension in their touch. It had been there since day one and had only grown more and more apparent as the months passed. Nikki knew that she wanted Brittany. She had never wanted anyone as much as she wanted this girl but she also knew Brittany wasn't ready. The girl was timid and shy, afraid of her own shadow. Still, Nikki's mind always wandered into inappropriate places once she was touching Brittany. She couldn't help it.

She watched as her friend jumped from the stage and landed softly to her side. The two smiled at each other for a short minute and Nikki swore she could see Brittany's eyes go dark with lust. But it was probably just her imagination. Brittany didn't seem like the kind of girl who would lust after anyone. But then why wasn't

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she releasing Nikki's hand?

Brittany had almost made up her mind to tell Nikki how she felt. She could tell by the way Nikki looked at her that she felt the same way, that she wanted the same thing. It had taken Brittany months to recognize it and it had happened very much by mistake. Only last week, the two girls had been out for coffee and Nikki had said something that had caused Brittany to double over with laughter. Once she had regained control, she sat back in her chair and tried to compose herself, still fighting off fits of giggles.

"I love it when you laugh," Nikki had said, her serious and gentle tone taking Brittany completely by surprise. Brittany had looked at her friend and had seen the attraction in her eyes. A warm and excited feeling had filled her heart and she had been on cloud nine ever since. Of course, Brittany had laughed it off at the time, saying something witty to turn the conversation less intimate. She now regretted that. She now wished she would have told Nikki everything right then and there. Told her about how she was all Brittany could think about, told her that she thought she was the most amazing person she had ever met. Didn't now seem like just as good of a time?

"Nikki," Brittany started to speak slowly. "I need to tell you something."

Nikki's face looked hopeful as the girls continued to hold hands. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to let you knowâ" But she didn't know where to begin. "Well, I think that you areâ I think that I am feelingâ"

A smile crept over Nikki's face as she realized what Brittany was trying to tell her. She looked so nervous, it was incredibly endearing. "It's okay, Brit. I get it."

And with that, she leaned down and kissed her friend on the lips. She could feel the surprise in Brittany's kiss but didn't pull away. Soon she could feel Brittany kissing her back and was about to pull the short blonde closer when she heard a phone ringing.

"Ugh," she heard Brittany moan as she broke the kiss to look for her phone. "Sorry."

But Nikki didn't mind. She looked down and tucked a strand of Brittany's wild curls behind her ear, smiling as Brittany blushed. But the blonde's face sank as she looked at the caller ID on her phone.

"Hello?" She answered timidly.

Nikki waited as Brittany looked up at her apologetically.

"Right now? I guess I could." Brittany's voice sounded flirtatious but her face didn't follow suit. Nikki could hear a male's voice but couldn't make out what he was saying.

"I'm on my way. I can't waitâ" But whoever it was on the other end of the line must have hung up on her because she closed her phone without finishing her sentence.

"I'm sorry. I have to go."

"Don't you think we should talk about this first?" Nikki asked, a bit surprised and hurt by Brittany's sudden urgency to leave.

"I can't. I have to go," Brittany repeated with a desperate plea behind her eyes.

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"Brit, who was that on the phone?" Nikki asked with a curious stare.

"It was no one." She lied and they both knew it.

"It was either someone very important or you are running away from what just happened."

Brittany sighed, knowing she would have to lie again. "It's my friend. He needs me."

Nikki laughed and took a step away from Brittany. "Your friend? A boy who's your friend or your boyfriend?"

"He'sâ lit's complicated," Brittany stammered.

Nikki scoffed. "Does he know?"

"Does he know what?"

Nikki laughed out loud. "Wow. I knew you had been lying to yourself but now you are lying to some guy as well?" She could tell that Brittany was scared of how she was feeling, scared of her attraction, but she hadn't guessed that the girl would carry on a relationship with some boy just for appearances sake.

"Nikki, what are you talking about?"

"Whatever," Nikki replied, turning around and starting to walk away from her. She felt bad for Brittany, she really did. But she was more embarrassed than anything. Embarrassed she had just kissed her friend, embarrassed this friend didn't want to return her affection.

"If he meant anything to me you know I would have told you about him by now," Brittany said in desperation.

Nikki paused and looked over her shoulder. "If he doesn't mean anything to you, then why are you leaving me for him?"

Brittany's face betrayed her conflict. "It's complicated," she repeated.

"Well, when you get it figured out, you know where to find me."

Brittany watched as Nikki walked up the aisle and out the door. She took a few deep breaths as she collected her things, trying to get into character. She didn't know why Sterling was so desperate to see her, but she had to try and forget about Nikki for the time being.

Chapter 24: Moving On

Four weeks. It had been four weeks since Sterling had kissed another girl and ruined everything with Laila. She hadn't responded to his letter. She hadn't returned any of his phone calls. He knew she had been angry and he had wanted to give her the space she needed. But now, after so much time had passed, he could only assume she didn't want to see him ever again.

He could hear laughter coming from inside his apartment as he walked home from school that afternoon. Alistair, he knew, had come to visit, claiming he was worried about his brother. But Sterling knew better. He knew Alistair wanted to see Piper as well. He smiled at the thought of his brother being so happy. He had never seen him like this before, had never expected him to give himself so completely to a girl. But Piper brought the best out of him, something Sterling was eternally grateful for.

He opened the door to see the couple in a semi-compromising position on the couch. Alistair jumped up immediately and grinned. Piper blushed and adjusted her sweater.

"Hey, you two," Sterling smiled.

"Hey, little brother," Alistair smiled back, slightly embarrassed.

"Hey, Sterling," Piper said after him, clearly less embarrassed than his brother. "How are you?"

"I'm doing all right."

Piper smiled and nodded, standing up and looking at Alistair. "I have to get changed. I'll see you in half an hour?"

"I'll pick you up then." Alistair beamed at his girlfriend and kissed her on the cheek.

Sterling waited, holding his tongue, as Piper put on her jacket and made her way for the door. But as she opened it to leave, he couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. "Piper?"

"Yeah?" She turned toward him expectantly.

"How is she?"

Piper gave him a sympathetic smile. "She's doing okay."

"Does she talk about me?"

"Sometimes."

"What does she say?"

Piper looked sad for him and shook her head. "I don't know, Sterling. It's not really my placeâ"

"Please? Please, I need to know."

Piper sighed and glanced at Alistair who nodded his head. His brother needed to know the truth as much as it may hurt him. "She misses you. She compares you to him."

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"Him? To Will?" Sterling could feel his heart breaking.

"I'm sorry."

"Are they together?" He felt as though he was about to cry.

"No. She's not ready for that, she doesn't want..."

"But she still sees him? He's still around?"

"He walks her home after class. They went out for dinner the other night," she said slowly.

Sterling nodded his head and turned away.

"I'm so sorry, Sterling," he heard her call from behind him. But he was already halfway to his room. He pulled his phone from his pocket and quickly found the number he wanted.

"Hello?" Brittany answered after only a few rings.

"Brittany? It's me, Sterling. Look, I, umâdo you want to come over?" He hadn't meant to be so blunt but couldn't think of any small talk.

"Right now?" She asked. "I guess I could." She sounded eager to see him again.

"Great," Sterling sighed and gave her his address.

"I'm on my way. I can'tâ!" But Sterling didn't wait to hear what else she wanted to say. He closed his phone with a guilty conscience, knowing that what he was doing was wrong. But if Laila was moving on, then so would he.

It wasn't the first time he had talked to Brittany since their kiss. He had seen her on campus quite a few times, sometimes between classes, sometimes in the cafeteria. After their first encounter in the mailroom, things hadn't been as awkward. They were able to engage in small talk, even flirt a little though Sterling always felt guilty after. And then last week they had actually carried on a real conversation while standing in line in the bookstore. As it turned out, Brittany was an actress. She adored the theatre above anything else and, for the first time since he had met her, Sterling saw a sparkle in her eye as she spoke about her passion.

Sterling knew that if he hadn't just had his heart broken, he would be attracted to this girl. Her blonde hair looked touchable, her brown eyes were playful and oftentimes seductive. But, as it was, Sterling didn't find any girl attractive. No one had her violet eyes that looked at him with so much emotion. No one had her soft skin which was so incredibly kissable. And no one had her lilting voice which he could still hear saying his name. He still missed her so much that it caused him physical pain to even think about her. But not thinking about her wasn't an option. He wanted to hold on to a small piece of her, even if it was now quickly turning into just a memory.

But who did she think she was? Not returning his calls, not even acknowledging his letter. He at least deserved a clean break. He at least deserved to hear her say that she didn't want to be with him anymore. But she had denied him that, started to move on without a word, causing Sterling to contemplate and question his actions which lead to her leaving.

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Impatiently, he threw his book bag on the floor and paced around his room. But as the minutes ticked slowly by, his anger started to get the better of him and he wandered back into the living room. Alistair was sitting on the couch, flipping through the channels, a wide grin on his face. He looked at Sterling as he sat down next to him and his smile only grew wider.

"What are you so happy about?"

"I think I'm going to tell her tonight."

"Tell her what?" Sterling rolled his eyes, now incredibly annoyed at Alistair's happiness.

"You know, tell her that I love her."

"Isn't it a little soon for that?"

Alistair frowned. "I thought you would be happy for me."

"I just think you should to make sure you really do love her before you go filling her head with such a complex emotion. Have you even told her about Rebecca?"

Alistair glared at his twin. He knew Sterling would be in a foul mood after he heard Laila had still been seeing Will, but he hadn't expected this.

"No, I haven't told her about Rebecca. But if I learned one thing from her, it's not to run away from what you're feeling. Rebecca would want me to tell Piper that I love her. She would want me to be honest."

"What makes you such an expert on the subject all of a sudden?" Sterling wasn't looking at his brother, just staring blankly at the television.

"The same thing that's making you such an asshole right now: experience. Only I'm using mine to feel good about something where as you are using yours to turn into a complete..."

"Fuck off, Al. You don't know how I'm feeling."

"I don't know how you're feeling? I don't know what it's like to lose someone I love because of something stupid that I did? I don't know what it's like to be so desperate to see them again I would do almost anything?"

Sterling hung his head. He knew Alistair was right.

"Laila's not dead, Sterling. She's alive and breathing and a ten minute walk away." He stood up and grabbed his coat. "I couldn't do anything when Rebecca died. I had to give up and move on. But you can still fight for her if you want her. You have a choice."

"Al, I'm sorryâ " But Sterling couldn't finish because both brothers heard a knock at the door. He jumped up and ran to open it, hoping to turn Brittany away before Alistair saw her. But his twin was right behind him as he answered the door to the girl's smiling face.

"Brittany, hi," Sterling said, unable to mask the regret in his voice.

Alistair pushed past them both but turned around to glare at his brother. "Pretending to move on doesn't help anything, Sterling. You don't want to bring her into your mess." And with that, he turned and left. Sterling

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clenched his jaw, more angry at himself than anything else, embarrassed that Brittany had to witness Alistair lecturing him.

There was a moment of silence as Sterling stood between Brittany and his apartment, unsure if he wanted to invite her in. He knew she would have questions but hoped to God she wouldn't ask them.

"That guy looked exactly like you," she said, breaking the silence.

Sterling frowned. "That was Alistair. My brother."

Brittany laughed. "No shit."

Finally, Sterling laughed as well, his mood lifting slightly at Brittany's humor. "Do you want to come in?"

Brittany's eyes narrowed seductively. "I'd love to."

Sterling stepped aside and held the door for Brittany. She took a deep breath and walked into the apartment. What was she doing here? She no longer knew why she was keeping up the charade yet couldn't bring herself to give it up. Will had been immensely pleased with her after that night when she kissed Sterling. Pleased, but not yet satisfied. Brittany knew her brother wouldn't let her give up the game until Laila was completely committed to him so she had played her part whenever Sterling was around, not actively seeking his attention but not turning him away either. To say she had been surprised at his phone call didn't even begin to describe it.

Sterling's apartment was much as she expected it to be: a large living room with an expensive television, minimal furniture and a clean but small kitchen. There were only a few pictures on the walls, most of him and his brother and who she assumed to be his parents. Had he taken all the pictures of his girlfriend down already? Sterling didn't seem like the type of guy to give up a fight but that is exactly what he had done with Laila. Brittany could tell it just from looking at him.

"So," she said, not wanting to contemplate the pain she was putting this guy through. "What did you want to do today?"

Sterling stared at the blonde who was now in his apartment. Why was it the blondes who always brought him so much trouble? First Kalyn, then Laila and now Brittany. In his next life, he decided, he needed to be attracted to brunettes.

"I hadn't really thought about it," he answered her honestly. Calling Brittany had been an impulsive decision, one he now regretted. He was trying desperately to make up some excuse to get her to leave but he missed his chance.

"Want to watch a movie?"

"Okay," he heard himself answering.

"I'll pick," Brittany winked at him and turned toward his DVD collection.

Sterling ran his fingers through his hair and waited uncomfortably in his own apartment for Brittany to make her decision. He watched as she bent over to examine his choice of movies. If Laila had pulled a move like that when they were together, he would have barely been able to keep his hands off of her. But, as it was, Sterling had no desire to touch Brittany, though there was nothing undesirable about this girl. So, in an effort

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to make the best of this situation, he tried to smile when she finally made her selection, but even that he found hard to do.

"Okay, don't laugh at me, but I've never seen this movie," Brittany giggled to herself as she presented her selection.

"You've never seen *Scream*?" Sterling did laugh at her.

Brittany shook her head and smiled at him.

"Wow," Sterling smiled back. "We better get that started, then."

Brittany handed him the case and he turned on the DVD player. Once he had the movie started, he couldn't help but notice that she had taken a seat in the very middle of the couch, leaving him no options but to sit close to her. Forcing another smile, Sterling sat down as Brittany curled her legs underneath her and leaned into him.

"Am I going to be scared?" She asked in a low voice.

"Um," Sterling hesitated at the intimacy in her voice. "Maybe."

She only smiled at him and then turned her attention to the television. But it wasn't any more than two minutes past the opening credits when Sterling felt her moving closer to him. He glanced at her from his periphery and saw her face twisted into fright.

"Get the knife!" Brittany suddenly squealed at Drew Barrymore and Sterling suppressed a laugh.

"Sorry," she said, not turning her attention away. "I get really in to scary movies."

Sterling only nodded and allowed her to scoot even closer to him. Two hours later and Sterling's arm was wrapped around Brittany's shoulder, willingly protecting her from the bad guys. Sterling couldn't remember the last time he laughed so much. Brittany yelled suggestions and accusations at the characters throughout the movie and then became defensive once Sterling started to laugh.

Brittany couldn't help but laugh as well. She knew what she was like during scary movies and her plan of embarrassing herself enough to get Sterling in a good mood had worked. What she hadn't planned on was having a good time herself. Sterling's laugh was contagious; his genuine smile was nearly electric. Brittany knew that he was the type of guy she should be falling for. She wanted to like him. Her life would be so much easier if she could like him. But the kiss she had just shared with Nikki was still on her mind. She could still taste Nikki's lips and smell her shampoo.

"Brittany, thank you for coming over." Sterling's voice drew her from her day dream. "This was exactly what I needed."

She didn't even waver, entirely forgetting she was supposed to be in character and speaking from her heart. "I had a great time as well. We should do it again sometime."

The smile stayed on Sterling's lips but his eyes glazed over with an undeniable sorrow. "That would be nice."

Brittany's heart nearly broke for him. Here they were, both trying to forget the people they had fallen for, both in need of some desperate release. Could she trick herself into liking this guy? Could he forget about his

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girlfriend? She doubted it, but it was becoming harder and harder to discern reality from the dangerous game she was playing.

She looked at Sterling's handsome face and slowly leaned toward him. Through open eyes, she could see his immediate hesitation, but his gaze flickered to her lips and then he closed the distance between them. His kiss was different this time, thank goodness. It wasn't sloppy or wet, just soft and kind. Brittany closed her eyes, pleased to discover he really did know how to kiss a girl. But the second her lids shut, all she could see was Nikki.

Sterling squeezed his eyes shut and didn't even try to pretend that he wasn't thinking about Laila. He wanted so much to replace the blonde in his arms for the blonde with the violet eyes. He remembered exactly how she felt, exactly how she tasted, the exact sounds she made when he kissed her. His hand left her shoulder and ran through her hair. But Laila's hair was never this curly. Hurriedly, he brought his hands to her back and pulled her tight against him. But Laila's body had never been this stiff and unbending in his arms. Something was wrong and his eyes immediately flew open.

"I can't do this," he said quickly, pushing Brittany away softly and standing up. "I'm sorry."

Brittany breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn't tell from Sterling's kiss if he had been ready to cry or carry her off to bed. "It's fine," she choked out.

"It's just, it's not fair to you. You're so pretty and so much fun, but I'm â"i" "

"In love with someone else?" Brittany smiled up at him.

Sterling nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she said, standing up. "You did nothing wrong."

"I shouldn't have called youâ"i" "

"Can I ask you a question," she interrupted him again.

"Sure," he said slowly.

"Are you trying to get over her or do you want her back?"

Sterling looked past her and shook his head. "She doesn't want to be with me. I should be trying to get over her."

"You just need a distraction?"

"You aren't a distraction," Sterling said but quickly clarified his statement. "You shouldn't be a distraction. You deserve better."

Brittany doubted she deserved anything from Sterling other than his absolute hatred. If he knew what she had done, he would be singing a completely different tune. "We'll take this slow. I can be a really distracting friend."

Sterling laughed.

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"Look, my drama class is putting on a production of sorts next week as part of our final. Why don't you come see it?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Brittany said honestly. "I would really like it if you came."

"Why not?" Sterling said with a smile.

"Good. And we can just pretend this kiss didn't happen."

"I'd rather forget about the first one," Sterling said with a slight frown.

Brittany giggled and nodded in agreement, a slightly uncomfortable silence filling the room. "Well I'm going to leave before this gets any more awkward."

Sterling laughed again and gestured to the front door. He walked her out and held the door for her, smiling as she blushed in delayed embarrassment. "See you soon," he said quietly as she walked past him.

"Bye."

Sterling waited until she had taken a few steps before closing the door. He didn't know if he wanted to break something or cry. But his body reacted before his mind could and he slumped to the floor and tried to stop his hands from shaking. Would the pain in his heart ever go away? He was 19 years old and crying like a toddler, wanting to throw a fit over something he had been denied. God, how he missed her. It shouldn't be like this. He shouldn't be thinking about her every second of every day, not after all this time. Maybe Brittany was right. Maybe he needed a friendly distraction, something to take his mind off of Laila. And at this point, he was willing to try almost anything.

A/N: So I've almost finished writing this story which means chapters will be posted more often :) The next chapter will be posted on Wednesday so if you'd like for me to update you, please let me know in your message. Much Love ~ Pink

Chapter 25: I Love You

Alistair knocked hard on Piper's door. He was fuming after his argument with Sterling. The brother's always bickered but they rarely fought and it made him angrier than anything. He had decided on his way to Piper's dorm room that he was going to cancel their date so he could go back to his brother's apartment and kick his ass. But as soon as she opened the door, his plan was forgotten. She was so beautiful and all his anger melted away just at the sight of her.

"Hey," she said with her sweet smile. "What kept you?"

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, not wanting to remember the argument. "You look gorgeous."

"Thank you," Piper said, blushing slightly and starting to close the door behind her.

"Do you mind if we stay here for a while?" Alistair asked. "I'm just a little out of it right now."

"Of course. Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," he promised, stepping inside and walking toward Piper's room. Why shouldn't he tell her that he loved her? He knew he did. He had never been as certain of anything before in his life. But what if Sterling was right? Alistair was no expert in the area of love. What if he ended up breaking her heart? He never wanted anything to happen to Piper, especially at his hand. Doubt started to swirl around his already clouded head and he barely heard her bedroom door close behind them.

"Alistair? What's going on?"

He turned to look at her. She was completely breathtaking, her brown hair hanging over her shoulders, her large green eyes looking at him as if he was the most important thing in the world.

"Come here," he said quietly, holding out his hand for her.

She quickly took it and he pulled her close, kissing her lips as she wrapped her arms around him. She felt warm and wonderful against him, as if she belonged there without a doubt. He pulled her closer, never wanting to let her go. Sterling could go to hell for all he cared at that moment. His hand roamed up her back and through her hair. He was about to pull away and confess his love for her when his fingers found something on her scalp. It felt like a deep scar that ran just above her ear.

"What is that?" He asked, breaking the kiss and lifting her hair.

But Piper stepped back and looked away from him. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Was that a scar?"

"Yes," Piper answered in a soft voice.

"How did you get it?"

"I don't remember."

Alistair smiled at her. "No, seriously, how did you get it?"

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"I don't remember," she said again.

"If you don't want to talk about itâ"

"I was high when it happened," she said quickly. "High enough to have blacked out almost the entire night."

"What?" Alistair didn't think he had heard her right.

Piper sat down on her bed and pushed her hair away from her face. "It happened almost a year ago. I woke up in the hospital and nobody could tell me what happened."

Alistair stared at her, waiting for her to continue.

"I might as well tell you everything," Piper looked at him, a regretful expression on her face.

"You don't have to. Not until you're ready."

"I don't want to hide anything from you," she said before starting her story, the weight of that sentence startling Alistair into an uncertain reality. "I had this boyfriend, Craig, who I met when I was 15. He was older and I thought he was absolutely perfect." Piper smiled and Alistair sat down beside her on the bed. She looked at him with confident eyes and continued. "It wasn't until we had been dating for a few months when he started bringing me to his college parties. He would get me and my girlfriends liquor and let me smoke weed with him. But then he dropped out of the University and weed turned into 'shrooms and ecstasy and then cocaine when he could afford it. Meth was the cheapest and really easy to find. I resisted most of it at first, but he told me he loved me and I wanted to make him happy. I couldn't even tell you when I first figured out I was addicted. I never thought it would happen, because who really plans on becoming a fucking drug addict, you know? I thought I had everything under control, my boyfriend, school, crew teamâbut obviously I didn't.

"So it was the first weekend of winter break during my senior year and Craig was throwing a party. I drank about a fifth of vodka and then took a few lines of what I thought was coke but actually turned out to be low-grade heroin. And the next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital."

"Who took you there?"

"No one. Someone found me lying almost dead in the street, covered in blood, and called an ambulance. Craig didn't even know I had left his house."

Alistair shook his head in disbelief. "Why didn't I know any of this?"

Piper took his hand and brought it softly to her lips. "Because I'm not that person anymore. I didn't want you to feel sorry for me or judge me."

Piper kissed his hand but didn't let it go. Alistair stared at her, wanting to ask a million questions but not knowing where to start. "I'm glad you told me," he said slowly.

Piper smiled at him. "I've been sober for 349 days. Once I got out of the hospital, I confessed everything to my parents and they sent me to detox over Christmas and New Years. It gets easier each day. The days when I get to see you are the best."

Alistair smiled. "What happened to Craig?"

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"He promised he would stop using but he never did. I was focused on getting my life back together and my trying not to lose my scholarship and he didn't deal well with my sobriety. We fought all the time and I'm pretty sure he was cheating on me but I kept giving him second chances, like the stupid girl I was. He told me last summer that he wanted to see other people while I was at college so I finally broke it off."

"Wow. Piper, I don't know what to say."

"It's a lot to take in, I know," she smiled at him.

"Are you okay? You seem so okay with everything. I would be freaking outâ"

Piper laughed. "I'm not embarrassed by it. I mean, I can't change what happened and I know I'm so lucky because I could have fucked up my entire life." But she dropped her gaze to the bed. "I just hope this doesn't change anything between us."

Alistair dropped her hand and lifted her chin with his fingers. "This changes nothing. We've all done stuff in our past that we aren't proud of. But that doesn't change how I feel about you now."

Piper smiled at him and leaned over to kiss him. Alistair let her kiss him though his thoughts were elsewhere at the moment. When Piper said she had been found in the street near death, the first image that came to his mind was that of Rebecca lying dead in the shower.

Piper pulled away and saw that familiar look in Alistair's eyes. She was always curious as to what, or more likely who he could be thinking about during those moments when his blue eyes would glaze over and his mind would travel to an entirely different world. She kissed him again and watched as he tried to smile.

"Since we're on the subject of our past, do you want to tell me who she is?"

"What?" Alistair instantly came back to the conversation at hand.

"I can tell by the way you look at me sometimes. It's like you're searching for someone else. It's a girl, isn't it?"

Alistair sighed, he hadn't wanted any of his time with Piper to be affected by his grief. "Yes. But it's probably not what you think."

"Hey," Piper said with a smile. "I'm the last person who is going to judge you."

Alistair smiled back and tried to think of where to start. The entire story could take hours to tell and he didn't want to subject Piper to all the painful details. "Her name was Rebecca. We started hooking up freshman year of high school and I always knew she wanted more but I just didn't like the idea of having a girlfriend."

Piper raised an eyebrow and Alistair shot her a guilty look.

"So, our senior year, she started dating someone else and I guess I realized what I had only after I had lost it. So I told her that I loved her and that I was ready to commit but she turned me down. I was completely heartbroken and desperate. And so I agreed to go out with one of her friends because I thought she would be jealous enough to come running back to me." Alistair paused, not sure if he wanted to continue.

"What happened?"

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"She killed herself," Alistair said before he could give it a second thought. "She slit her wrist in the shower. Laila and I found her."

"Oh my God," Piper said in voice that was just above a whisper.

"I thought that I wanted to die too, you know?" Alistair couldn't stop now that he had started. "Rebecca's friend came to see me about a week after she died and Rebecca's boyfriend came to find us. He had a gun and meant to hit me but ended up killing Kalyn instead. He shot himself without even realizing he had missed me."

"You can't be serious."

Alistair could only look at her. "I wish I wasn't. For about three months, I would only speak to Sterling and Laila. She literally kept me sane and functioning. I would have been so lost without her. I loved Rebecca and it's weird to think of what life would be like if she were still here. But she's not and I've learned to live with it."

Piper shook her head and looked around her room. "And I thought I had a fucked up senior year."

Alistair smiled and waited until she had looked at him again before speaking. He knew this was the right time. It wasn't ideal, but it was right. "I wanted to be romantic about this, because I figured that's what a good boyfriend would do, but I love you, Piper. I love you so much regardless of what either of us has done in the past."

A wide grin spread over Piper's face and all the sorrow of their conversation melted away as a new emotion took over. "I love you too," she whispered.

"I'm not good at this whole relationship thing, but you took me completely by surprise and I want to do everything I can to make this work."

"You're doing a great job so far."

"Well, it sounds like your expectations weren't too high after your last boyfriend," Alistair teased her.

Piper laughed and leaned over to kiss him. "You are never what I expect, Alistair Pierce. But I love that about you. I love that you don't know what you're doing. I love that you gave me a high five after our first dinner together. I love that you kissed me at the beginning of our first date. And I love that no matter how much time we spend together, you always surprise me."

Alistair kissed her again but pulled away before he let himself get carried away. He wanted, almost more than anything, to make love to Piper but he knew it wasn't the right time for that. He stood up and reached for her hand. "Are you ready to get out of here?"

"Yes," Piper said, smiling up at him. She knew she had unloaded a lot of baggage on Alistair that afternoon and she had been prepared to fight for their relationship. Yet Alistair had surprised her again. She suspected there was more to his story but she knew he would tell her when he was ready. Alistair wasn't going to run away from her, he wasn't worried about her past - just focused on their future.

She still had those days when the homework was piling up, when her mother and her coach were reprimanding her for one thing or another, and all she wanted to do was drink away her problems. Alistair had been the first person outside of Seattle who she had confided in and it felt good to have someone so close on

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her side, someone besides her sponsor who could talk her through those rough nights.

They both smiled uncontrollably that evening, always holding hands or needing to touch each other. She realized, as Alistair kissed her goodnight and asked her if he could see her the next morning, that she had officially found her new addiction. And he had the sexiest dimples she had ever seen.

Chapter 26: We're Friends

"So, what are you doing this evening?"

Laila sighed and tried not to look at Will. He had found her after class - a class she didn't have with him - and offered to walk her home. Maybe it was everything that had happened with Sterling that had tainted her vision of him. Or maybe she was just opening her eyes. Maybe he had changed. Whatever the reason, she could barely stand to be around him now. Of course, that feeling was rather new, so she didn't dwell too much on the rationale. "I'm going to see Nikki's final for her drama class."

"Oh." Will made a face and looked rather annoyed. "What are you doing after?"

"I don't know. Maybe studying. Finals are next week."

"Are you nervous?" He gave her a playful nudge and Laila forced a smile, moving her book bag to her other shoulder so something would be in between them.

"Not really. Tests don't bother me too much."

After Laila had come back from New York, she had kept Will at a distance. Sterling had abruptly stopped calling the Sunday she returned, leaving her to believe he just needed some time to think things through, as did she, but she still felt guilty every time she spoke to Will. She had to see him in class, that was a given, but for nearly two weeks she had turned down his request to walk her home. Finally, after too many afternoons of leaving class only to be disappointed by Sterling's absence, she gave in and allowed Will to accompany her back to her dorm room. She made a point never to let him inside and had, until very recently, refused his offer of dinner.

But finally she caved. Sterling wasn't calling and she couldn't bring herself to dial his number. What could she say to him at this point? Would he listen if she told him she was sorry, that she thought about him constantly? He wouldn't want to hear that, not after so much time had passed. So she gave in to Will, who, in his ever persistent attempts, could raise her mood even if it was just the slightest bit.

But dinner had been a mistake. A huge mistake. Will had, even after Laila had assured him numerous times they were going as friends, started to talk about their future. What they would be doing after he graduated, how they would stay together when he moved to New York. And despite Laila's best efforts to kindly let him down, she ended up bluntly stating that a relationship was out of the question.

But Will hadn't been thwarted. He had promised her he would wait until she was ready, that he wouldn't even see other girls just to prove to her that he really did care. Laila wished he had been seeing other girls. Another girl may have been able to put up with his mindless chatter and his endless questions.

"Are you doing anything this weekend? I thought maybe we could take a trip to Boston."

"Just studying and spending time with my roommates," Laila answered quickly. She actually had plans to attend a party with Piper and Alistair, but she wasn't about to tell Will that.

"Maybe some other time then."

"I don't think so, Will," she said softly and looked straight ahead of her.

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Will didn't understand what was wrong with this girl. He had been showing her every attention since she had broken up with her boyfriend. He had been her shoulder to cry on, someone who could make her laugh even when she was at her worst. He could distract her with books and talks about fictional characters. But ever since their date things had gone downhill.

She had finally accepted his invitation to dinner and he had taken her out to his favorite restaurant. She had looked absolutely stunning in her black dress with leggings and a sweater. Her violet eyes hadn't look half as sad as they normally did but something in her seemed to turn off right after their appetizers. Hadn't he been charming and complimented her? Didn't girls like to hear men talk about their future together, to see a show of commitment? Laila seemed to reject all of that and by the time he dropped her off that night, he wasn't even sure he wanted to attempt a goodnight kiss. He did, of course, and was casually dismissed by a turn of her head, a claim that she wasn't ready and that she only wanted to be friends. Friends. What a fucking tease, Will thought to himself. And now she wouldn't even look at him.

Luanne wasn't doing anything to help his situation either. Since Laila's ex was no longer calling her or writing her pathetic letters, there wasn't much the chubby redhead could do, only talk him up whenever Laila would bother to listen. And she had befriended Gavin, someone who was stupid enough to actually help her in her attempts to write for the paper. It killed William to admit that she was actually good. Her first article caused quite a buzz around campus and he was nearly forced by the advisor to let her write another.

"Thanks for walking me home," Laila started to say as they neared her dorm room but was cut off by a loud voice.

"Laila!"

Both heads turned and Will saw a tall girl walking toward them.

"Hey, Nikki," Laila said with a smile. So this must be the fourth roommate, Will thought, annoyed that they had been interrupted. "Nik, this is my friend, Will."

"We're dating, actually," Will said to the roommate, extending his hand.

"We're friends," Laila clarified quickly and Will shot her a glare which wasn't noticed.

"Right," Nikki said awkwardly, quickly shaking Will's hand. "Laila, I need your advice about something. Will, you don't mind if I steal her away, do you?"

"Of course he doesn't," Laila answered for him, linking her arm with Nikki's and leading her toward their dorm. "I'll see you tomorrow in class," she called over her shoulder

"I'm looking forward to it," he said with a smile that hid his disappointment. Truth be told, Will was livid. He couldn't understand what he had done wrong and what he could do to fix it. Fuming with frustration, Will stomped home, throwing open his door and startling his roommate.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Gavin asked, what now seemed like a common greeting between the two.

"She's such a fucking cock tease," Will hissed at him.

Gavin laughed at his so-called friend. "Why? Because she won't go out with you?"

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"Yes. That is exactly why! I had her, right before her boyfriend broke up with her, I could tell that she wanted me. And now, after she's used me to make her feel better, she's barely speaking to me."

"Do you feel used?"

"Yes," Will mumbled.

Gavin laughed again. "Good. Because that is exactly how you make everyone else feel. What did you do to that poor girl to get her boyfriend to break up with her anyway? Think about how bad she must feel."

"It doesn't matter what I did. It was for the best."

"It's clearly worked out in your favor."

Gavin's sarcasm was tugging on Will's last nerve. "Whatever. There are other ways to get what I want."

The apartment fell silent as both men contemplated what had just been said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Will rolled his eyes. He didn't even know what it meant. All he knew was that he hated to lose and he felt as if he was losing Laila.

"Don't do anything stupid, Will."

"When is the last time I have been anything but clever?" Will finally smiled but Gavin's face remained serious.

"When's the last time you have been this desperate?"

"Fuck you. I'm not desperate."

"You're not desperate?" Gavin rolled his eyes. "You have desperation written all over your face! You are so crazy for this girl, it has made you blind to your own ambition. Do you even remember why you started pursuing her in the first place?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

"Why, then? What were the reasons?"

"She was smart and gorgeous. There was just that look to her."

"That's great. But don't you think there are plenty of other smart and pretty girls here at Yale?"

"Not like her," Will disagreed with him.

"Bullshit. You need to wise up and realize that you were in it for the chase. She had a boyfriend and was a challenge and you couldn't help yourself."

Will smiled to himself. "Maybe."

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"Please listen to me," Gavin pleaded. "You've lost. She broke up with her boyfriend but she still doesn't want you. Give it up."

"No."

"You'll end up doing something you regret."

The smile left Will's face and was replaced by a frown. "You don't know that."

"Desperate people always do stupid shit," Gavin said with absolute certainty. If he had to hear Will complain about Laila once more, he believed he may explode. His roommate had a one track mind, it was as if he was completely incapable of thinking about anything else. If he wasn't with her, he was plotting ways to get near her, walking by her apartment time and time again, hoping to catch her on her way to class or the cafeteria. It was sick.

"I'm not desperate," Will insisted and walked out of the room, always having to give the last word. Gavin rolled his eyes and returned to his book.

Laila closed the door behind her and a shiver ran down her spine. She knew she would eventually have to tell Will she didn't want to see him anymore, on friendly terms or any other. He couldn't seem to get the hint, no matter how obvious she was making it.

"So that's Will?" Nikki asked, throwing her bag on the couch and flopping down next to it.

"That's Will," Laila confirmed.

"And tell me again why you are friends with him?"

"He used to be nice and funny and smart. But now he's justâ I don't knowâ!"

"Creepy?"

"Yes! Exactly. Annoying and creepy and he can't take a hint."

"That's what all guys are: annoying and creepy," Nikki informed her. "You should really look into dating girls."

Laila laughed and sat down across from her. "I'm seriously starting to consider it."

"Don't get my hopes up!" Nikki laughed at her own joke.

Laila blushed and quickly changed the subject. "Aren't you supposed to be getting ready for tonight?"

"Ugh. Yes." Nikki's face was suddenly distorted into disgust.

"What's that face for?"

"Girl trouble."

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"Oh," Laila said, unsure of what to say next. "Is that what you needed my advice on or were you just trying to get me away from him?"

"I was, actually, just trying to get you away from him." Nikki could tell from nearly a block away how uncomfortable Laila had been with him. "But, since you offered, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Laila answered, not really sure she could give good advice.

"So, let's say that you liked this girl and you knew she liked you back but she didn't want to admit it, what would you do?"

"Um, I guess I would try to talk to her about it."

"What if she didn't want to talk?" Nikki asked quickly, almost as if she were waiting for it.

"Maybe she just needs time to figure stuff out."

"So, you wouldn't just walk up to her and kiss her in front of a big group of people so that she has to admit her feelings?"

"No. I wouldn't do that." Laila shook her head, unable to imagine herself kissing another girl in private or in public.

"But that could be kind of romantic, right? I mean, some chicks would dig that?" Nikki seemed determined to get the answer she wanted.

"I suppose it depends on what kind of girl she is."

Finally Nikki smiled and crossed her arms over her chest proudly. "I think she's the type of girl who would like it."

"You've got it bad, don't you?" Laila teased her roommate.

But Nikki didn't even try to deny it. "So bad. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Laila smiled and stood up. "Well, I'm going to get ready. Piper and Luanne should be back any second so do you want to get something to eat before the show?"

"More like something to drink. I'm so nervous."

"Nervous for the show or nervous to see the girl?"

Nikki's face twisted again but this time in frustration. "This is why I never talk to straight girls about my problems. You make such a big deal out of everything!"

Laila laughed and Nikki had to smile. "But you're in love!" She made kissing sounds and then ran away as Nikki started to glare.

"You'll break my heart if you fall for someone else, Nik," Laila called over her shoulder as she disappeared into her room.

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Nikki finally laughed. "You couldn't handle a girl like me, Laila!"

She heard Laila laughing from inside her room and grinned to herself. Laila had come a long way in the few short weeks she had been without Sterling. At first, none of the roommates knew if she was going to survive. She barely ate, she barely spoke to any of them though she was quite determined not to let her sorrow show. She held her head high and covered her red eyes and cheeks with makeup and sunglasses.

But now she was finally able to smile again, finally able to laugh at herself. Nikki knew her tiny roommate still had some recovering to do, but she had faith in her. Laila was stronger than she looked.

A/N: Okay, so some people have been asking for character pics :) I honestly haven't even looked for any so if you have any suggestions, please let me know! I'd love to post some for you :) The next chapter will be up on Sunday! Laila and Sterling, together, in the same chapter...

Chapter 27

Sterling watched with a smile on his face as the show ended. Brittany had been amazing and he was completely surprised to see her turn into an entirely different person right before his eyes. Her dramatic scene had been the best, by far, out of any of the other performances. As the lights came up, he stood up and looked around, slightly embarrassed he had shown up at all. When he first read Brittany's text, he immediately tried to come up with an excuse as to why he couldn't go. But no excuse was going to make him feel any better and so he wrote back, promising to be there and telling her to look for him after the show.

He was actually looking forward to praising Brittany for her performance when he heard a familiar laugh. His eyes immediately scanned the rest of the crowd and came to rest on who he still considered to be the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She hadn't changed much. Her hair was long and waving down her back. Her skin was pale but tinted with a slight blush as she laughed with her roommates. But she looked so thin and breakable. Was it possible she had lost weight? She had always been thin but now she looked as if a small gust of wind might blow her over. He stared, worried for the girl he still loved, not being able to force his gaze from her, and then, as if she could sense him watching her, she looked over her shoulder and their eyes met. Sterling couldn't breathe, he couldn't react, he could only watch as Laila's face fell into immediate confusion and she looked away quickly.

"Shit," he swore to himself as he started walking towards her. He had to talk to her. He had to be near her, even if it was just long enough for her to tell him to back off. He could see Laila's body was tense as he came up the isle to where she had been standing. Piper was glancing nervously between her roommate and her boyfriend's brother as if she was waiting for something terrible to happen. Luanne pretended not to notice anything and tried to distract Laila with a story.

"Hi," Sterling said, completely nervous as he stood behind Laila.

She looked at the ground and reached for Piper who offered her arm for support.

"Hey, Sterling," Piper said softly. "How are you?"

"I'm all right," he lied. At the moment he was terrified, excited and practically sick to his stomach. "How are you girls doing?"

"Fine," Piper answered for the entire group and looked quickly down at Laila who had lifted her head and was nervously pushing her hair behind her ears. She didn't do that when she was angry, only when she was nervous. This gave Sterling hope.

"Laila, can I please talk to you?"

He watched as she looked up at Piper who gave her that look that said 'only if you really want to,' and then as she slowly nodded her head.

"We'll wait for you outside," Luanne said slowly, checking to see if Laila understood and then walking with Piper toward the door.

Laila took a step back but turned around, her eyes seeming to take an eternity to meet his. She looked so scared, so fragile that it nearly broke Sterling's heart as he realized he was mostly to blame for her current state of misery. She looked up at him with her sad eyes, waiting for him to speak.

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"How have you been?" He asked, not knowing where else to start.

"I've been okay," she said, her voice soft and scared. "You?"

"I've been okay," he concurred. "I've missed you."

"Sterling, please don't," she pleaded, looking at the ground between their feet. She wasn't ready for this. She doubted she would ever be ready for this conversation.

"Don't what, Laila? I've been miserable without you."

"I can't do this," Laila whispered and started to turn away from him.

But Sterling was too quick for her and caught her by the arm. "Please talk to me. Look, I'm sorry to just drop all this on you, but I need to hear it from you, I need to know why this ended." His fingers wrapped all the way around her arm, even over the thick fabric of her sweater. Why hadn't she been taking care of herself? Was this a guilty reaction or a defense mechanism to distract herself from the pain of breaking up?

"Do you know how hard this is for me?" Laila asked, taking him completely by surprise. "I wasn't expecting to see you and now you're here and you're touching me and I just can't handle it."

Sterling dropped his hand. "Do you know how hard it is for me, standing here and not being able to touch you?"

Laila's violet eyes flickered to his and they stared at each other for a long moment. She hadn't forgotten how striking his eyes were, his dark blue one and the light green one baring into hers as if she was all he could see. It wasn't going to get any easier for her if she left now. This encounter could haunt her and she knew she had to at least make an effort.

"Okay," she finally said. "Let's talk."

Sterling cracked a small smile and she could see his chest rise and fall in a heavy sigh of relief. "I don't even know where to start now."

Laila smiled as well. "How are classes going?" She offered the question as a distraction more than actual curiosity. She could barely form a coherent sentence, much less a rational thought.

"Fine. My chemistry final is going to be horrible. You?"

Laila shrugged. "I'm feeling pretty good about my history class."

"You liked that one," Sterling observed and Laila nodded, suddenly struck with a sickening thought.

"What are you doing here? I mean, why are you here tonight?" Laila had seen the blonde with the curly hair from the party and instantly recognized her. She had been in Nikki's group and had been one of the best ones up on stage.

Sterling shuffled his feet awkwardly. "I was invited."

"Oh," Laila looked at the ground and tried not to let him see the tears fill her eyes. There was, of course, no reason that Sterling shouldn't have moved on. It had been long enough, she supposed, and even though it was

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heartbreaking, she knew she had no right to expect him to still be in love with her.

Sterling could see Laila putting the pieces together and he cringed as he realized what she must be thinking. The tears in her eyes she was trying so hard to hide were upsetting, to say the least, but who was she to be upset about another girl? Hadn't she been the one who moved on to Will only weeks after they had broken up?

"We aren't together or anything," Sterling stumbled over his words. "Where's Will?" He watched as Laila flinched at the name and his lips twitched into a small smile.

"I don't know." Laila looked up at him with a serious look on her face. "You were right about him."

Sterling's brow creased and he reached for her again, his hand softer on her arm this time. "He hasn't tried anything, has he?"

Laila shook her head and a sly smile came to her lips. Her arm relaxed under Sterling's touch and she took a slight step toward him. "He's just so annoying. He asks so many questions and can't take a hint. I don't know how many times I have told himâ well, it doesn't matter."

Sterling smiled down at her. "What are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know," Laila laughed. "I don't know how else to explain it to him that it's just never going to happen."

"I could kick his ass if you wanted me to," Sterling teased her. It felt strange, speaking to Laila about things he wasn't involved in. He had been part of every aspect of her life and it was uncomfortable thinking about all the things he had missed during their time apart.

Laila laughed. "I'll think about it."

Sterling stared down at her, wanting more than anything to pull her into his arms and feel her soft body against his chest. But he resisted, knowing he needed to take things slow if he wanted to ever see her again. They were skating on thin ice and he didn't want to risk breaking it.

"Are you going to that party with Piper tomorrow?" He asked hopefully.

"I was planning on it."

"Alistair told me about it. That's the only reason I knewâ"

"You should come," Laila said quickly. Sterling had said he wasn't with the girl from the party but she couldn't imagine they were just friends. Probably just as Sterling couldn't imagine Laila and Will being just friends. But still, his statement had given her hope and as she looked up at him, she felt the same butterflies she had felt the first time they had danced together. His hand was still on her arm, gently holding her and it was quickly causing her to forget why she was supposed to be angry at him, why he was supposed to be angry at her.

"Are you sure? I don't want to ruin your night."

"I'm sure. There's a lot more to talk about."

Sterling nodded in agreement and squeezed her arm. "I'll see you there?"

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"I'll see you tomorrow," Laila confirmed and smiled at him, her confidence starting to show, her eyes soft and loving as they had always been.

"Bye," he nearly whispered, struggling against an urge to kiss her.

"Bye," she said and turned around.

Sterling watched her leave, a giddiness filling his stomach as he thought about tomorrow. He stood there, hopeful for the first time in over a month, until the doors had closed behind her. It wasn't until then that he heard a voice from behind him.

"Hey," Brittany said, a knowing smile in her voice and eyes.

"Hey, yourself," Sterling smiled at her. "You were great up there."

"Thanks," she blushed but held his gaze.

"Thanks for inviting me, Brittany. This was exactly what I needed," Sterling said, hoping she hadn't witnessed what had happened between him and his ex-girlfriend.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," she answered, her smile growing. "Thank you for showing up."

"No problem."

"So, I guess a few of us are going to go celebrate. It's nothing big, mostly just the students from the class, but you are more than welcome to join us," Brittany offered, hoping Sterling would turn her down.

"I think I'm going to pass tonight. I appreciate the invite, though."

Brittany shrugged but smiled at him. "I'll call you later?"

"Sure," Sterling smiled back at her. "Have fun tonight. You deserve it."

"Bye," Brittany said with a smile and a wave.

Sterling watched as the other blonde in his life walked away. He knew that he would undoubtedly run into Brittany around campus and at parties, that was to be expected. But he couldn't help but feel as if this were the last time he would really talk to her, the last time they would pretend to want something they both knew wouldn't work. He had seen the relief in her eyes when he turned down her offer, as much as she had tried to hide it. Was she simply being a good friend, taking care of him in his miserable state? He could never be certain of her motives, the girl was a complete enigma to him. But he smiled as he walked home that night. If it hadn't been for Brittany and her invitation, he may have never been close enough to Laila to talk to her.

A/N: Check out the character pics if you have time :)

Chapter 28: You More Than Anything

Nikki took another drink from her bottle. The party was small and intimate, no more than twenty kids and everyone seemed to be having a good time. Everyone but Nikki who was currently sitting in the corner, sulking and drinking by herself. But when had she ever sulked? Normally she was the life of the party but tonight she couldn't shake her emotions. She hadn't spoken more than three words to Brittany since their kiss. She knew her blonde friend wanted to talk, she could see it in the way her big brown eyes danced around Nikki's face whenever she caught her staring. But Nikki knew there was no point in talking to Brittany until she had admitted to herself that she did in fact have feelings for her.

But as Nikki watched her from the corner of the room, she couldn't help but get impatient. Brittany's blonde hair was gathered into a messy ponytail, her bright smile seemed to be permanently plastered on her angelic face, and she was flirting with a group of guys from their class.

"Fucking hell," Nikki swore to herself as she watched the group. Brittany didn't want any of those guys, but no one apart Nikki would know that just from looking at them. Her friend's hands were on her hips, feigning offense at something one of the boys said. But that didn't last long, Brittany's laugh could be heard from across the room as she playfully shoved the boy in the arm.

That was about as much as Nikki could handle. She stood up quickly, her chair toppling over behind her, and stumbled toward Brittany. The sound of her chair falling must have caught Brittany's attention because their eyes locked and Nikki could see the confliction in her stare. But she could only smile. Tough love, she thought to herself, tough love. If Brittany refused to admit her feelings, than Nikki would just have to force them on her - or at least get the rest of their class on her side.

Nikki pushed past the boys and stood in front of Brittany. The short blonde looked up her with timid eyes and opened her mouth to speak but before any words passed her lips, Nikki was kissing her. She could hear the gasps and giggles from the other students, quickly followed by cheers of approval from the boys Brittany had been flirting with. But Nikki barely registered any of this, all she could focus on was the girl in her arms. Brittany hadn't even tried to pull away but was kissing her back with what felt like relief.

As soon as Nikki felt their kiss turning indecent, she pulled away. Brittany's face was flushed pink, her lips slightly swollen, and she was unsteady on her feet. Nikki smiled down at her as Brittany opened her eyes. The entire room had gone silent, most realizing their kiss had been more than a drunken party stunt intended to grab the attention of the male population. But Brittany didn't seem embarrassed or angry. She smiled back at Nikki as if she had just won some great prize.

"Let's get out here," Brittany whispered, taking Nikki's hand and leading her toward the door. The blonde didn't even look around to gauge the reactions of her classmates. She knew they had seen it, seen the undeniable connection between the two girls. And, for the first time, she no longer cared what they thought.

She had seen the way Sterling had been staring at the girl she assumed to be his ex earlier that evening, the love and the longing he felt for her. And she had seen the way Laila had responded, as if she wanted nothing more than to jump into his arms and stay there forever. It was the exact thing that Brittany felt every time Nikki was around. But Brittany was exhausted. She was tired of running from her feelings, tired of pretending to be something she wasn't.

When Nikki had kissed her, Brittany knew she had been defeated. She knew she had given up the game and was no longer living a lie. She didn't mind, though. As hard as the next few months, maybe years would be, at least she was being honest. She didn't know how her parents would take the news, she didn't know how her

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friends back home would react. But at least she would have Nikki.

The two girls held hands as they walked out of the party and into the cold winter night. The snow had started to fall and there was already a light dusting on the sidewalks and streets.

"Thank you," Brittany said, glancing up at Nikki who was smiling triumphantly.

"For what?"

"For not giving up on me."

Nikki didn't speak for a moment, the snow crunching under their feet and the slight wind shaking the trees were the only sounds they could hear. She didn't want to ruin the moment but there were things that needed to be said. "It's not going to be as difficult as you think. I know you're scared, but you don't need to be."

"You obviously haven't met my parents or my older brother," Brittany said with a forced laugh.

"They'll get over it," Nikki promised.

"How did you tell your parents?"

Nikki laughed at that. "I didn't need to tell them anything. They had it figured out by my 12th birthday."

"Were they upset?"

"Not at all. I mean, they love me, they know I'm happy."

Brittany nodded and then fell silent. Holding Nikki's hand as they walked through campus, although terrifying and incredibly liberating all at the same time, was making her unbelievably happy. Did her parents know, could they sense that she had been hiding something, holding a part of herself back? But what they believed, what they had always known, was about to be shattered. They would be blindsided, confused and upset.

"You don't have to tell them right away, you know?" She heard Nikki saying as she led Brittany to one of the dormitories. "I mean, you can tell them whenever you're ready."

"My brother will tell them before I do if he finds out."

"How would he know?"

"You'd be surprised!" Brittany started to say but then quickly changed her mind. "I guess he hasn't been around that much lately. I have some time."

Nikki paused in front of a door and turned to face Brittany. She had snow in her hair which looked like glitter under the light of the street lamps, her cheeks were still pink and her eyes, although clearly nervous, no longer held that confliction which Nikki had grown so accustomed to seeing.

"Come inside. We can talk about it some more."

Brittany smiled and nodded, no hesitation visible in her pretty face. The girls walked into the dorm room and Brittany looked around. There was a large common area with four adjacent bedrooms, all of the doors closed.

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"We have to be quiet. My roommate doesn't like visitors after ten o'clock," Nikki whispered, walking toward one of the closed doors. She opened it quietly and Brittany slipped inside. Nikki's room made her smile. There were pictures all over the walls, some snapshots and some charcoal drawings of New York City.

"Can I ask you a question?" Nikki asked.

"Of course," Brittany was still looking over everything in the room.

"How long have you known?"

Brittany smiled and looked over her shoulder at Nikki. "How long have I known that I like girls? A little over a year I guess. Why?"

"Just curious," Nikki answered quickly.

"Her name was Sarah," Brittany offered. "And I thought something was wrong with me when I first realized I was attracted to her. But I pretended it didn't mean anything until I figured out she liked me too."

"How'd that happen?"

"She kissed me," Brittany said with a laugh.

"That would do it." Nikki laughed as well. "So what happened after that?"

"My brother caught us and I begged him not to tell our parents. I didn't answer her calls and then I moved here and met you."

Nikki's eyes went wide. She had liked other girls before, other girls had liked her, but this was different. This wasn't some sexual experiment, some form of rebellion against overbearing parents. This felt real.

"Nik, I know that I'm stupid and shy about all this, but I want you to know that I don't care what happens from this point on as long as I'm with you. You're exactly what I need and, even though I am absolutely terrified, I still want you more than anything."

Nikki felt her emotions getting the better of her and she closed the space between them with two large steps, kissing Brittany before she could see the tears start falling. Never had a kiss meant this much to Nikki, never had she been so ready to give herself completely to another girl. Their lips moved against each other and their tongues danced as the two girls held each other in a tight embrace.

"You'll have to go slow with me," Brittany said as Nikki started to kiss her neck. "I'm new at all this."

"I know you are," Nikki pulled back and smiled. "We can go as slow as you want."

With that, Brittany smiled and pulled Nikki's face back to hers. No longer did kissing a girl feel forbidden. The rush that Brittany felt wasn't from the act of doing something illicit, but rather from the act of doing something that felt right. Nikki felt right and the two girls fell asleep that night each prepared to face a new reality in the morning.

Chapter 29: I Want You

A/N: Adult material in this chapter! So you've been warned :)

Piper couldn't help but notice the huge smile on Laila's face as they walked home that night. Luanne was chattering about something, her southern drawl much more pronounced whenever she was excited, but Laila didn't appear to be listening. She hadn't said a word after her encounter with Sterling, something that had scared Piper at first but now only left her curious as to what had been said.

"What is he doing here?" Piper heard Luanne say and she followed her roommate's gaze toward their front door. Alistair was standing there, wrapped up in a thick jacket, trying to look as if he wasn't shivering.

"Alistair!" Laila squealed and ran to hug him. Piper smiled as her roommate bounced across the freshly fallen snow and wrapped her arms around him.

"You look happy," Alistair accused Laila, his eyes teasing her. "Did you just watch my brother get run over by a car or something?"

"No," Laila answered with a laugh but quickly changed the subject. "What are you doing here?"

"I came down to surprise my girlfriend and ended up freezing half to death since no one was here to let me in." Alistair winked at Piper and she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek as Laila followed Luanne inside.

"I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow," she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I couldn't wait another night," Alistair admitted in a hushed voice. "I had to see you." His lips were kissing her neck and his arms were pulling her close. Piper sighed and closed her eyes. Everything about him felt amazing as she pressed her body against his and ran her fingers through his hair. They stood like that for a long minute, the snow falling around them, wrapped up in a world of their own.

"Okay, bye," Piper heard from behind her. She opened her eyes and turned her head to see Laila and Luanne with their backpacks, both with knowing smiles on their faces. "We're going to the library to study."

"This late?" Piper asked, not yet realizing why the two were leaving.

"Yup!" Laila said quickly and grabbed Luanne's hand, spinning her around and walking away.

"Let's go inside," Piper heard Alistair whisper to her, his breath warm on her jaw. She smiled again and took his hand, leading him inside with an eager feeling at the pit of her stomach. Ever since last weekend when Alistair had confessed his love, she had been dying to see him again.

"I'm glad you're here," she smiled at her boyfriend once they were in her room.

Alistair smiled back and shed his jacket. "Where were you tonight?"

"Watching one of Nikki's shows."

Alistair nodded his head and sat down on the bed.

"Sterling was there."

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"What?" He looked surprised.

"Laila talked to him for about ten minutes."

"What happened?"

Piper smiled. "I don't know. She didn't say anything about it."

"But she didn't look upset," Alistair observed. "Maybe they are both finally coming to their senses."

"I hope so," Piper said, pulling off her sweater and sitting down next to him.

Alistair's eyes wandered over her body. Her legs were wrapped in snug denim and her blue t-shirt clung to her in all the right areas. Her hair was slightly damp from the snow outside and her cheeks and nose were pink from the cold. God, how he wanted her. He was proud of himself for exercising so much self restraint when it came to their physical relationship, but after last weekend he found it almost unbearable to be away from her. He wanted to see her and touch her all the time and by that Thursday afternoon, the longing had become too great. He had packed a bag and driven to see her, not caring that he was missing his last class before finals.

He glanced up and found she was already looking at him and he had been caught staring. He smiled playfully, only slightly embarrassed she had seen him checking her out, and reached for her. His hand found her thigh and he fanned his fingers over her leg, moving his grasp to her hip so he could pull her closer.

"I love you," he said as she reached for him in return.

"I love you," she answered gently, the look in her eyes more powerful than the words themselves.

They didn't have to say another word, didn't have to make small talk about the four days that had passed since they last saw each other. They both knew what the other wanted and their lips met without hesitation. Piper still tasted and felt like nothing Alistair had ever experienced before. He was intoxicated by her and, for the first time since they had been together, he chose not to show any restraint.

His hands brushed through her hair and gripped her cotton t-shirt. He pressed himself against her and felt her pressing back. Soon his hands were roaming her back, pushing up her shirt and feeling her bare skin.

"Your hands are freezing," Piper said with a shiver.

"Sorry," Alistair said with a smile, removing his hands from her back so he could pull her shirt off completely.

Piper helped him and then worked quickly to unzip his hoodie, her fingers running over his stomach as he threw his own shirt on the floor. He kissed her again and again, loving the way her skin felt against his. Soon, they were lying on the bed, their hands still roaming everywhere, familiarizing themselves with every muscle and curve. Alistair felt Piper's hand move from his back and across his abs before coming to rest at the button of his jeans.

"Alistair?" Her voice was just barely audible. "I want you."

A jolt of pleasure surged through his groin and he moaned as he rolled on top of her. He sat up on his knees and reached between them so he could unzip her pants and pull them down. Piper was busy with his button and zipper as well but was able to raise her hips to help him with her tight jeans, giggling at their urgency.

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Alistair stared down at her as he kicked his jeans onto the floor. She was smiling up at him, a lustful look in her eyes. She didn't appear to be shy about anything, not rushing to turn off the lights now that she was mostly naked and lying underneath him. He loved that about her. His hands reached for her hips and meandered slowly up to her ribs. With one quick movement, he had unclasped her bra and was lowering the straps from her shoulders. Piper pulled it off the rest of the way, watching Alistair's content face the entire time.

"You are so beautiful," he said with a husky voice as he leaned down to kiss her. Her long legs wrapped around him as his hand found her breast. She was so soft, so perfect, he never wanted to stop touching her.

Piper moaned against Alistair's lips as his hand roamed her body. He wasn't just touching her, he was handling her gently as if she was a priceless statue. It made her feel beautiful. It made her ache with desire. She could feel herself responding to him and soon her hands had made their way down to his hips and were slowly pushing down his boxers. Alistair reached down to help her, his lips now replacing his hand on her breast. His tongue was warm as it tasted her skin but she still felt goose bumps rise all over her body.

"Don't move," she heard Alistair whisper to her as he pushed away from her. She opened her eyes and saw him reaching for his pants, digging in the pockets until he found what he was looking for. She smiled at him as he set the condom on her night stand. A loving look passed between them as he reached for her again, her hands roaming his chest and the muscles on his shoulders as he slowly lowered her panties.

Alistair's hands slowly crept back up her leg, his lips leading the way as they showered her skin with random kisses. She gasped slightly as his fingers touched between her legs, the tenderness of his caress more surprising than the sensation it created. Soon her breathing became heavy as Alistair carefully but expertly moved his fingers inside of her. Piper reached for his face and pulled his lips to hers as she climaxed, moaning against his kiss as her body trembled.

Alistair didn't break their kiss as his hand reached for the condom. Piper's face had been beautiful, her eyes closed in ecstasy, her lips parted just slightly as she tried to control her breathing. And the way she had felt, so hot and so soft, her body pulling his fingers inside, was almost more than he could handle. But it had been so long since he had been with a girl, he didn't know how long he would last and wanted to make sure Piper was satisfied.

He rested on his side as he ripped through the packaging and started to roll the condom on. Piper was kissing his jaw and neck and it took all of his concentration to put it on properly. But within seconds he was ready and gently nudging her legs apart with his knees.

"It's been a while," Piper admitted quietly, reminding him that he needed to take his time.

"I know," Alistair said slowly. "For me too."

His girlfriend smiled at him and reached for his hips, drawing them closer to her until he was pressing against her entrance. They both held their breath as he pushed inside of her, Piper waiting to feel the pain that would surely come after such a long stretch of abstinence, Alistair praying he wouldn't finish before he really got started.

But they were both surprised at how perfectly they fit together. Alistair smiled as he kissed her, his body slowly starting to move above hers. This was how it should be always, the emotional pleasure of knowing that he was actually in love with the girl he was making love to as great as the physical pleasure of the act. The combination was euphoric for him and he made love to Piper for hours that night, neither hearing or caring when or if her roommates came home.

Chapter 30: This Is So Fucked Up

Alistair woke up with a smile on his face. In his arms and pressed against his body was Piper, the girl he loved. He nuzzled his face against her hair and inhaled deeply, loving how her scent filled his nose. He could feel her stir against him and remembered that they were both still naked. Chuckling to himself, he kissed her shoulder and caressed her arm, not even trying to pretend he hadn't meant for the back of his hand to graze her breast.

"What time is it?" Piper murmured, still half asleep.

"It's early," Alistair answered, not wanting her to leave for class quite yet.

"Why are we awake?"

"Go back to sleep," he whispered to her. "I'll be right back."

Piper muttered something in response, rolling over and drawing the covers over her naked body. Alistair dressed in silence, his eyes on his sleeping girlfriend the entire time. He knew they were still in the honeymoon stage of their relationship, more so now than before, but he really didn't think he would ever get enough of her.

He slipped out of her room quietly, finding the key she hung on the back of her door and walking out of the dorm. The cold morning air cut into his skin but he barely noticed. All he could think about was the gorgeous brunette lying naked in bed and he quickened his step, practically running across campus to his destination.

Barely ten minutes later, and he was fumbling with the key as he juggled breakfast in his other hand. The door opened and Alistair stepped inside, his gaze instantly landing on the two girls standing on the other side of the room. His eyes went wide as he realized they were kissing, a stupid grin coming to his face. This day just kept getting better and better.

"Morning, ladies," he said with obvious flirtation in his voice.

Nikki turned around and smiled at him. "Alistair! I knew I heard some interesting noises coming from Piper's room last night."

"You liked it," he teased her.

Nikki laughed and nodded, not even trying to deny it. "Alistair, I'd like you to meet Brittany. Brittany, this is my roommate's boyfriend, Alistair."

Alistair looked at the petite blonde who had, up until this point, been hiding her face from him. "You?" Alistair's mouth dropped as she slowly raised her head. He recognized her, of course, the girl from Sterling's apartment the other week. She had been the girl who had kissed him at the party.

"What are you doing here?"

"Wait. Do you two know each other?" Nikki sounded and looked confused.

"I can explain," Brittany said quickly.

Higher Education

"Oh my God!" Alistair didn't even let her start. He looked between Nikki and Brittany trying to figure everything out. Hadn't the two girls just been kissing? Shit. It was way too early to process all this information. "Does Sterling know?"

"Does Sterling know what?" Nikki asked.

"No," Brittany answered. "He doesn't but please don't tell him."

Alistair laughed. "And why wouldn't I tell him?"

"Umâ Because I should be the one to do it?" Brittany didn't sound too sure of her answer.

"Can someone please tell me what is going on?" Nikki's voice was serious as she looked between Alistair and Brittany.

"Nothing," Brittany answered, giving her a pleading look.

"Nothing?" Alistair asked. "It may be nothing to you but you've been messing with my brother and it certainly doesn't mean nothing to him."

"What have you been doing?" Nikki asked her and suddenly Brittany felt as if she were two feet tall. Nikki was staring at her with questioning eyes and Alistair looked as if he wanted to ring her neck.

"I'll tell him everything, I promise," Brittany said to Alistair.

"You better because if you don'tâ I"

"I said I would tell him."

"You better do it soon. As in right now because he needs to know and I don't know how long I can keep this from him."

"Fine," Brittany said almost under her breath and watched as Alistair walked quickly toward Piper's room.

"This is so fucked up," both girls heard him say as he closed the door behind him.

Brittany looked sheepishly up at Nikki. "Care to tell me what that was all about?"

"Can we go back into your room?"

Nikki shrugged and opened the door. With heavy steps, Brittany walked inside and slumped down onto the unmade bed which only last night had brought her so much joy.

"So, spill it," Nikki said, her arms crossed in front of her chest as she leaned against the wall.

"I kissed Sterling earlier this yearâ and again last week," Brittany said quickly.

Nikki's eyes went wide, clearly Brittany's answer wasn't good enough for her.

"I knew he had a girlfriend but my brother was threatening all these terrible things and I didn't want him to tell my parents about me and so I kissed him."

Higher Education

"Why Sterling?"

Brittany's heart sank in her chest. She knew she would lose Nikki after she confessed. "My brother told me to kiss him because he was interested in his girlfriend. So I kissed him and then I let him believe that I actually wanted him and it has been absolutely killing me."

"Your brother was interested in Laila so you just thought it would be okay if you broke up a relationship?"

"No, I knew it wasn't okay. It's been killing me because I've seen how miserable he is."

"It's been killing you?" Nikki asked in a disbelieving tone. "I've had to watch what you've done as it has literally almost killed his girlfriend. Did you know that girl didn't eat for almost two weeks? Their breakup was horrible for her and you were only using him."

"Wait," Brittany stopped her. "How do you know her?"

"She's my roommate, Brit. How do you think Alistair and Piper met?"

Nausea rose in Brittany's stomach. She hadn't even stopped to consider what Sterling's brother was doing in Nikki's dorm, so much had just happened. But Laila was Nikki's roommate and the knowledge that she was still probably asleep just in the other room was almost terrifying to Brittany. "I know what I did was horrible. I was being completely selfish but you have to understand that I only did what I did because I was so scared. I'll go confess everything to both of them, explain everything that happened."

"Do you think that's going to help now? You've let this go on for way too long."

"I know," Brittany said. She could feel her heart breaking. "But the time I spent with him didn't mean anything to me. It doesn't change the way I feel about you."

Nikki's face was contorted with disgust. "Well this changes the way I feel about you. And this isn't about us right now. This is about Laila and Sterling and how much you fucked them over. Jesus, Brit, how could you do something like that?"

"I'm not sure. It wasn't me, I was just playing a part."

"Give it a rest," Nikki said, shaking her head. "That's not an excuse."

"It's not, I know that. But I don't have an excuse for what I did. It's done and I regret it and I'm willing to do everything I can to make amends."

Nikki shook her head again. "Do you actually understand what you've done? You broke them up and you didn't even want him. She's been miserable, thinking that he's moved on while you are here in my bed. Alistair was right, this is so fucked up!"

Tears had started pouring from Brittany's eyes. "I don't know what else to say."

"I think you should leave," Nikki said quickly.

"Nik, please don't."

Higher Education

"No, you don't. You don't get to ask me for anything. Laila means more to me than you ever could be. Please leave."

Brittany nodded and stood up, her cheeks wet with tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered before walking out the door.

But Nikki didn't answer and Brittany rushed out into the winter morning. The snow was thick now, nearly a foot covered the ground and before she had walked half a block her pants were already soaked up to the knee. Part of her wanted to go home and fall asleep, part of her wanted to run to the train station and flee the country. But she had been running from herself for too long. Quick, like a band-aid, she thought. So, determined to set things right, she hurried her steps to Sterling's apartment and knocked on the door.

She had to knock three times before a shirtless and tired Sterling answered.

"Brittany," he said with a yawn. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to tell you something." Even her voice sounded frantic and she could only guess how she looked at the moment.

Sterling rubbed his eyes. "Do you want to come in?"

"No. This won't take long."

"Okay," he said, crossing his arms in front of his chest to keep the cold out.

"You know the other day when I asked if you were still in love with your girlfriend?"

Sterling nodded.

"I could tell you were because I feel the same way about someone."

Sterling's face fell and he started to open his mouth to speak.

"It's not you. Don't worry," Brittany said quickly when she realized what he must be thinking. "I'm in love with someone and I've been using you because I've been too scared to admit it."

"Brittany, it's really early for thisâ!"

"Please, just listen to me. I'm in love with a girl and I've been using you to try and pretend that I'm not feeling what I'm feeling and so my brother wouldn't tell my parents and I'm so sorry!" She took a deep breath, relief filling her lungs and her veins. "I'm in love with a girl," she repeated, a smile on her face.

"Wow. Okay." Sterling ran a hand through his hair and blinked in confusion. "Thanks for telling me, I guess."

"Look, I know that you still love your girlfriend and I know I am to blame for your break up because I kissed you even though I knew you were taken. But from what I could see last night, she still loves you as well. So, I know you probably hate me right now, but if there is anything I can do to help, just ask. I'll do anything. Iâ!"

But Sterling raised his hand for her to stop talking and laughed. "I think you've done enough for now."

"You aren't mad at me?"

Higher Education

"I don't know yet. Ask me when I'm fully awake."

Brittany laughed as well. "I am sorry."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I'm glad you told me."

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm pretty sure the girl I'm in love with never wants to speak to me again."

Sterling shook his head. He knew he should be furious with her but at this point it didn't even matter. He was going to see Laila tonight and things were going to be better. He was tired of being angry, tired of thinking about the past. "No, you should be happy, Brittany. You've clearly been through a lot this morning."

"You have no idea!"

Sterling laughed and smiled at her. "I'm going to go back to bed now."

"Right," Brittany said, still clearly frazzled. "Sleep well and I'll see you later."

Sterling nodded. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Brittany said with a smile. "Bye."

Sterling nodded again and then closed the door leaving Brittany to ponder what had just happened. Nikki, who had absolutely nothing to do with Brittany's deception, was angry beyond belief and Sterling, the guy whose life she had almost ruined, wasn't pissed at all. Brittany shook her head to try to rid her mind of the confusion but it didn't work.

"This is so fucked up," she said to herself as she walked slowly back to her dorm room.

Chapter 31: Drink This

It was as if Will was possessed. He no longer knew why he was doing these things, just responded to the unrelenting desire in his heart and mind. He craved Laila. He needed Laila. And, the way he saw it, he deserved to have her. So, without any regret, he dug into his pocket to make sure the drugs hadn't slipped out. But they were there, still safe inside his jeans. He wasn't quite sure how many he would need, so he had brought them all. Gavin had been right when he had called William desperate. He hated this feeling almost more than the feeling of not having Laila by his side. This was one of his last options, he thought. He would have her.

From his hiding place on the stairs, Will could hear Laila's door open and a group of girls exiting the room. He knew Laila was with them, he could hear her laughing as they slipped on the frozen ground. He waited in the dark until he could barely hear their footsteps and then he started to follow, praising himself for his skill, keeping a safe distance but following the tracks they left in the snow. He needed to make this look like a coincidence, him showing up at the same party as Laila and her friends. The poor girl was so gullible, she'd believe almost anything. So he followed them, creeping along behind, straining to listen to what they were saying. Thankfully, it was dark and misty outside, and even if one of the girls had turned around, Will was fairly certain they wouldn't be able to see him.

He smiled as he realized how vulnerable these three girls were, laughing and skipping through the snow without a care in the world, not even stopping to think about who could be lurking behind corners or watching from a distance. He hadn't realized how easy this would be, how easily he could just snatch one of them away had they been on their own. And this knowledge made him feel powerful.

He stopped as the four girls turned the corner and entered the first house on the right. He wasn't familiar with it so most likely wouldn't be recognized by anyone inside either. That was probably for the best. They would all just assume he came with someone else and would leave him alone.

Will walked around the entire house, glancing through windows at the party inside. The small place looked crowded, he couldn't see Laila or Luanne anywhere. He quickly made his way to the back door as a group of students who had been smoking by the fence started to return to the party. He blended in and grabbed two beers from the cooler, his eyes dancing over the already inebriated kids until he saw her. She was standing in the corner with Luanne, Nikki and Piper, at least three of them had been nearly inseparable for weeks now. Laila was laughing and sipping from her purple plastic Nalgene bottle, constantly looking toward the front door. He wondered what was in that bottle tonight. Rum? Vodka? It really didn't matter as long as it impaired her judgment.

Will watched her from across the room, trying to figure out how he was going to get her alone. She looked beautiful, her black sweater fitting snugly against her tiny torso, her dark jeans riding low on her hips. He licked his lips, the idea of tasting her beautifully formed mouth against his almost too much to bear. And then, as if she knew he wanted to get her alone, she excused herself from her friends and started walking down the hallway. Will swore under his breath as he took off after her. Who had she seen? Where was she going? He slipped past Luanne and the other two undetected and watched as Laila disappeared behind a door. Will edged closer, debating whether he should knock or just enter. But as he turned the handle, he discovered it was locked and Laila's voice sounded from the other side.

"I'll be right out."

Will smiled and leaned against the wall opposite the door, waiting for her to reappear. He could hear the faucet being turned on and Laila washing her hands quickly before the lock turned and the door opened.

Higher Education

"Will?" Laila looked surprised to see him. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you kidding me? I always come to these parties," Will said, trying to play it cool. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here with my friends," Laila looked at him as if she didn't believe a word he said.

"Oh, hey, do you want a beer? I grabbed two, not knowing if there would be any left later on."

"Um, no thanks. I'm not drinking tonight."

"That's probably a good idea," Will smiled at her. "You aren't old enough to drink anyway."

"Right," Laila forced a laugh. "Well, I'm going to get back to my friends. Bathroom's all yours now."

"Thanks," Will said, at a loss for what to do next. "I'll come find you later. You can tell me all about Nikki's play."

Laila blinked and moved away from the door so he could enter. He cursed himself as she started to walk away but then saw her drink sitting on the ledge of the sink. Glancing over his shoulder, he fumbled in his pocket and dropped three tablets into the liquid. Thank God the bottle was tinted.

"Oh, Laila," he called after her. "You forgot this." He lifted her bottle into the air and waved it around, swirling the liquid to dissolve the drugs.

Laila turned around and looked at him, seriously debating just telling him to throw it away. But she shouldn't let Will affect her like that. Plus, she loved that bottle, she had carried it around Europe with Sterling and Alistair. So she took a deep breath and walked slowly back to him, reaching for her drink. "Thanks," she said, not very enthusiastically.

Will smiled down at her and held it out, just beyond her reach. Laila sighed and took a small step forward. She couldn't believe that Will had shown up. It was beyond creepy that he always knew where she was and she wasn't even surprised to see him here. Finally, her hand made contact with the purple plastic and she pulled it away from his grasp.

"See you soon," he said in that disgusting voice that drove her near insane. What had she gotten herself into? She supposed she deserved some of it after what she had done to Sterling, but Will was certainly taking it to an entirely inappropriate level.

Laila walked away quickly, finding her roommates exactly where she had left them.

"What is wrong with you?" Luanne asked, attempting to annunciate each of her words but failing miserably.

Laila smiled at her friend. Luanne was celebrating because she had been given a permanent position at the newspaper but the girl was such a lightweight, it had only taken two shots and one beer to get her wasted.

"I just saw Will," Laila glanced up at Piper who had, as always, chosen to stay sober that night.

"He's here? Fuck, that guy gives me the creeps."

"He's in love with you, you know that, right?" Luanne informed her.

Higher Education

"I had that figured out, thanks," Laila smiled. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You have to tell him to leave you alone. You can't be nice to him anymore," Nikki said, equally if not more intoxicated than Luanne, of course for an entirely different reason.

Nikki had confessed to Laila, as soon as she had started drinking that afternoon, what her friend Brittany had done and the irony of it all had confused her so much she didn't know if she should laugh or cry. So the kiss between Sterling and Brittany hadn't been random at all. Laila knew she was now justified in completely disliking the girl but her anger toward Sterling had subsided tremendously since hearing the story.

"You want to know something funny?" Luanne asked randomly but her roommates ignored her.

"What should I say?" Laila looked at her two tall roommates. "Do I just tell him to leave me alone? I mean, he hasn't really done anythingâ"

"Laila, the guy is everywhere. He's practically stalking you," Piper didn't think she was exaggerating and neither did Laila. "Tell him to fuck off."

"I can't do that and you know it."

"I can do it for you then. Or Nikki can do it. You know she'd love to."

"I would." Nikki nodded in agreement and the girls all started laughing, Luanne following suit once she realized the others found something to be entertaining.

"Oh look!" Luanne said, her voice nearly at a scream. "It's the twins. How adorable."

Laila's heart started to pound as she looked at the front door. Her eyes skipped past Alistair and landed on Sterling. He looked so handsome in his green hoodie and his ashy hair perfectly messy. She couldn't help herself from smiling at him and he smiled back as he saw her. How she had missed that smile. It was the one that very few people saw, the one that she liked to believe he saved only for her.

"Are you gonna get back together with him?" Luanne asked, ending her question with a hiccup and forgetting all subtlety.

Laila blushed, afraid that Sterling was close enough to hear, and handed Luanne her water. "Sweetie, drink this."

"What is it?"

"Water. You'll thank me in the morning."

Luanne made a face but took the bottle and drained the liquid, another small hiccup escaping her lips. She watched as the twins approached, still confused as to which one was which. Luckily, they split apart and Alistair wrapped Piper in his arms and kissed her on the lips.

Luanne watched, for she didn't know how long, as her roommates conversed with the twins. Sterling and Laila had their heads close together, smiling at each other as they spoke quietly. Alistair was teasing Nikki about something and Piper was laughing. Luanne smiled as she saw how affectionate the new couple was. Piper's hand rested lightly on Alistair's arm as he spoke, his body turned slightly and leaned toward her.

Higher Education

"You two totally had sex last night, didn't you?"

Alistair turned and looked shocked but Piper started to laugh.

"It's okay, I'm not angry," Luanne promised them.

"She's wasted right now," she heard Laila whisper to Sterling but didn't care.

"I've never had sex," she said, her voice sounding as if she were in a long tunnel.

"Okay," Laila wrapped an arm around Luanne's shoulder. "I think I'm going to take her home."

"I'm fine," Luanne protested, though shaking Laila's arm away was unbelievably difficult. "I'm fine."

"Luanne, why don't you let us walk you home?" One of the twins asked, though she could no longer tell which one was speaking to her.

"I'm fine. I'm celebrating."

"We've done enough celebrating for tonight," someone told her and Luanne could feel her eyelids closing without her consent.

"I'm fineâ!"

Will watched in annoyance as the twins walked over to the group of girls. He had been waiting for Laila to finish her drink so he could offer to walk her home once she started to feel the effects. But then, to his horror, she handed the beverage to Luanne and the redhead finished it in one gulp.

Will cursed out loud, not knowing if he should run away or watch and see what would happen. Luanne was already drunk, that much he could tell. What the hell had happened to that prissy southern belle he had met earlier in the year? Now she was drinking the weekend before finals? Maybe they would just take her home and let her sleep it off. He decided to stay and he watched as Luanne's condition went from bad to worse and before he knew what was happening, she had collapsed and Laila had screamed.

It was as if the entire party had stopped. The twins were crouching over her, trying desperately to get her to wake up, but she wasn't moving. Everything from that point on happened in slow motion. One of the twins picked her up and carried her out the door, the rest of her friends following closely behind. William watched as the other partygoers made up their minds to continue drinking or call it a night. Most of them left, whispering all sorts of things about the girl who had fainted.

The walk back to his house was torturous. He had fallen short again and it was as if his failure heightened all his senses. The snow was freezing against his skin, the smell of it almost making him nauseous. The sounds of the studded tires rolling past him sounded like a semi truck in a gravel bed. All he wanted to do was think about Laila and what he was going to do next. But he couldn't. His head wouldn't let him and he fell into bed that night, his ears stuffed with cotton to keep the noises out.

Chapter 32: Can You Forgive Me?

"Rufilin? As in roofies?" Alistair's question hung in the air as the doctor stared at the group of kids waiting to hear about their friend's condition.

"That would be my guess, or something similar in nature. The level of alcohol in her system isn't high enough for me to believe this was completely alcohol related. From your story, and from my observations, she's showing all the symptoms of someone who has been slipped the drug."

"But she was with us the entire time," Piper said.

The doctor shook his head. "We won't know for sure until her blood work comes back."

"But she's going to be okay?"

He smiled and nodded at the petite blonde with the remarkable violet eyes. "She's just sleeping right now. We pumped her stomach so hopefully not all of it was absorbed into her system. All her vitals are fine."

"When is she going to wake up?" Sterling asked.

"Probably not until tomorrow. I can call you when she does."

"I don't want her to wake up here alone," Laila said quickly. "She's going to be so scared."

"You are more than welcome to wait for her here. There's a cafeteria downstairs and a few couches just down the hall in the waiting room."

"Thank you," Laila smiled back at the doctor then turned to her friends. "You guys can go. I'll wait here for her."

"Don't be ridiculous," Piper told her. "We'll wait with you."

"No, you guys should leave, take Nikki home. She's already passed out in the car. It's stupid for all of us to spend the night here."

"And it's stupid for you to spend the night here by yourself," her friend argued.

"I'll stay with her," Sterling offered and Laila looked up at him with wide eyes.

Piper and Alistair exchanged a quick glance but then both looked at Laila to see her reaction. "Thanks," she said quietly.

"Just call us in the morning," Piper told them. "We'll come back to pick you up."

Laila nodded and Sterling smiled at the couple. "See you then."

"Try to get some sleep," Alistair suggested but Laila was already looking at the ground, her eyes damp with tears.

Higher Education

Sterling motioned for his brother to take Piper home and he waited until they were halfway down the hall before pulling Laila into his chest. She fell against him and wrapped her arms around his waist, her quiet sobs muffled by his sweatshirt.

"She'll be fine," Sterling promised her as he stroked her hair. "She'll wake up in a few hours, you'll see."

But Laila shook her head. "I think I know who did it," she said softly.

"What?" Sterling lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. She looked terrified.

"Can we go sit down?"

He nodded and guided her down the hallway to the deserted waiting room. He must remember to thank the doctor for not making them sit in the emergency room waiting area. Laila sat down carefully on the edge of the cushion and took a deep breath before looking at him.

"I think it was Will."

"Will?" Sterling asked, wondering where she had possibly come up with that idea. "Why do you think it was him?"

"He was at the party. I saw him right before you showed up. I came out of the bathroom and he was there, waiting for me. I had left my water on the sink and he asked if it was mine. I took it back and then gave it to Luanne because she seemed like she needed it. That's when she you came and she started acting funny."

"Shit," Sterling looked at her and rubbed her arm, not knowing what else to do to get her to stop shaking.

"This is all my fault," Laila said and covered her face with her hands as she started to cry again.

"Don't say that," Sterling said, pulling her toward him and cradling her to his chest. He never would have wished anything like this on Luanne, but he was relieved it was her lying in the hospital bed instead of Laila. He didn't know what he would have done if it had been Laila who had collapsed. He may have lost it completely.

"I should have listened to you about him," Laila cried into his neck. "I'm so stupid, I couldn't even see what was so obviously right in front of me."

Sterling held her closer, unable to find the right words to say.

"And now Luanne's in the hospital and we aren't together and it's entirely my fault."

Sterling smiled and kissed her forehead. "Luanne being here is definitely not your fault. And us not being together is not entirely your fault. I played a small part in that as well."

Laila sniffled and lifted her head. "But I practically made you do it. You never would have let her kiss you if I hadn'tâ"

"No," Sterling interrupted her, not allowing her to take any more of the blame than she deserved. "I shouldn't have kissed her at all. Regardless of what you did or didn't do to me, I never should have kissed her. You don't know how much I regret it." He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

Higher Education

"I would do anything to change what I did," Laila said, looking as if she were completely broken. "I should have admitted that I knew Will had stronger feelings for me. I was just selfish and thought that if you guys became friends he would back off. I was so stupid."

"Was it something I was doing that made you turn to him?"

Laila shook her head as new tears started to roll down her cheeks. "No. You did nothing wrong. You were perfect, as always. It's just that Will was the only guy besides you that I've ever really connected with. I just didn't understand why I couldn't have you and keep him as a friend. But if I had known I was going to lose you then I never would have spoken to him. I guess I just never thought anything would ever come between us."

"I never imagined anything could come between us either," Sterling admitted, tears starting to pool in his lids as well.

They stared at each other for a long moment, both contemplating what had just been said, what had happened all those weeks ago. Sterling was aching for her, wanting to tell her how much he still loved her; how, if she would let him, he would spend the rest of his life with her, everything that happened would be forgiven. But there was still something he needed to know.

"Laila? Why didn't you answer my letter?"

She blinked and then gave him a confused look. "What letter?"

"The letter I sent you?"

"I never got a letter." She shook her head and looked at him expectantly.

"I wrote you a letter the day you got back from New Yorkâ"

"The day you stopped calling?"

Sterling nodded.

"What did it say?"

"I told you that I wasn't going to call you anymore so you could have the time you needed to think about everything. I told you that I was still angry with you, that I felt deceived. And then I told you, that despite everything that had happened, I would do whatever it took to get you back."

Laila shook her head and looked down at her lap, not wanting to believe that weeks of misery could have been avoided had his letter not gone missing.

"I said that I would always love you, regardless of how we ended up."

Laila inhaled deeply, her blood racing through her veins. "And how do you feel now?"

Sterling raised her chin so he could look deep into her eyes, wanting her to know that he meant every word he was about to say. "I am still completely in love with you."

Laila smiled through her tears. "I love you so much."

Higher Education

"Can you forgive me?" Sterling asked, scared and hopeful at the same time.

"If you can forgive me," Laila said, her hand finding his on the couch and squeezing it tight.

Sterling smiled and reached for her face, his fingers running over her cheek and jaw before tangling themselves in her long hair. He leaned in slowly, waiting to see how she would react, and then realizing he already knew. Their lips met and for the briefest second, time stood still, the world fell away, and it was just Laila and Sterling, exactly where they should be.

Her lips were exactly how he remembered, soft and delicate and responsive to his kiss. There was a slight desperation in this embrace, however, but Sterling didn't mind. He felt the same way. The familiar feeling of Laila's hands on the back of his neck and running through his hair made him moan against her mouth, his tongue tasting her lips and seeking access which was quickly granted. They kissed again and again, until they were both completely out of breath, and then finally pulled away.

"I've missed you so much," Sterling said, smiling at her flushed face.

"I know. I've been a complete mess."

"You've lost weight," he quietly stated and waited for Laila to make up an excuse.

"I know," she said again, unable to hide it. "It was pretty bad the first couple of weeks. I've been trying to gain it back."

"Good." Sterling ran his hand up and down her leg as she snuggled close to him on the couch.

"I'm glad you stayed with me," she whispered, tracing indiscernible patterns on his stomach as he held her close. Sterling closed his eyes, enjoying her touch.

"I'd do anything for you. You know that." He hadn't realized how tired he was.

"I love you," Laila yawned and he felt her kiss his neck.

"I will never let you go again."

Laila didn't respond, or at least, Sterling didn't hear her. They fell asleep on the couch, both clinging to each other like never before. It was the best sleep Sterling had had in over a month.

Chapter 33: Not Meant For Me

Luanne's eyes opened to a bright light flooding her room. She shifted in the stiff bed and tried to stretch her legs before they cramped. It was then that she realized she wasn't in her own room. Panic instantly set in and only became worse as she realized she was wearing a hospital gown and had a heart monitor attached to her finger. She heard the steady but fast beat of her pulse resonating from the machine above her head and quickly tore the device from her hand, a flatline alarm echoing in the room.

How did she end up here? She had no recollection of coming to the hospital, no memory of how she had gotten hurt. But was she hurt? The only pain was in her head and it felt like a headache, not a wound or injury. Her stomach was nauseous yet she assumed that was brought on by the panic. Luckily, a nurse appeared quickly followed by a doctor.

"Look who's awake!" The doctor said with a smile which Luanne didn't appreciate.

"What happened? Why am I here?"

"Your friends brought you in last night."

"Why?" Luanne found it annoying she had to repeat herself.

But the doctor smiled and reached for some paperwork which was hanging off the end of her bed. "Ms. Clark, your blood work shows a small amount of alcohol was in your system last night but quite a large amount of Rofinil was present as well."

"Excuse me?"

"Rofinil, commonly known as roofies, the date rape drug."

"I was drugged?" She shrieked.

"Yes, and with an incredibly heavy dose. You're quite lucky that your friends were with you instead of whoever slipped it in your drink."

Luanne was desperately trying to remember anything from the previous night but it was as if the entire evening had been wiped from her memory.

"Am I okay? Was I hurt? What was I doing? Oh my God! What did I say?"

The doctor shook his head and smiled. "You are fine. Your body defended itself rather well, actually. Most people still retain part or nearly all of their motor skills when using Rofinil. Most aren't taking the amount you consumed, however. But your body essentially just fell asleep, passed out cold is more like it. You couldn't walk on your own and the words you did say were rather incoherent."

"That's enough," Luanne interrupted him and hung her head, embarrassed beyond words.

"The drugs are working their way out of your system so you'll probably feel a little nauseous and tired for a couple days," the doctor continued.

"When can I go home?"

Higher Education

"Whenever you are ready," the doctor answered. "There's nothing we can give you at this point and you're not dehydrated so I don't see a reason to keep you here any longer. A nurse will bring over some discharge papers and we'll have you on your way."

"Thank you," Luanne said, tears starting to swell her lids.

"Your friends are here, Miss. Would you like me to send them in?"

"Iâlum, yeah. I guess." Luanne smoothed her hair with her fingers and stared at the doctor as he left. The nurse stayed behind and finished updating Luanne's chart before turning to leave as well. Sitting alone in the hospital bed, Luanne started to cry. Wasn't she always the responsible one? The one who was always so careful? Waking up in a hospital had been horrible, but waking up in some stranger's bed would have been a thousand times worse.

But soon she felt two skinny arms wrap around her shoulders and she cried into her roommate's embrace. She could feel Laila's tiny body on the bed next to her and couldn't believe that someone so small could offer so much comfort. Luanne held on to her roommate until her tears stopped and then pulled away to look at her. Laila's violet eyes were bright and shining, a calm sense of relief rested on her smile.

"How are you feeling?"

"Physically, I feel fine. Just really tired," Luanne said.

"Well, we can leave whenever you want to. Piper will come pick us up whenever you're ready."

"Did you really stay here all night?"

Laila nodded and then glanced toward the door. "Sterling stayed with me. I didn't want you to wake up here all by yourself."

Fresh tears came to Luanne's eyes. "Thank you," she whispered, the guilt she felt now overpowering how terrified she had been only seconds before.

"Hey, you would have done the same for me," Laila said with a smile, trying eagerly to cheer her up.

Luanne nodded. She probably would have done the same for Laila, but nothing about her past actions could prove that.

"The police want to talk to you," Sterling said after a long moment. "They've taken Laila's statement but need to talk to you as well, just in case you remember anything."

"I don't," Luanne said quietly.

"That's okay," Laila assured her. "It's just procedure."

"What did you tell them?" Luanne asked, afraid that Laila would tell her something horrible.

Laila frowned slightly and looked at Sterling. "Could you give us a minute?"

Sterling nodded and closed the door behind him leaving the two girls alone in the hospital room.

Higher Education

"Do you remember me telling you that I saw Will last night?"

Luanne shook her head. "I barely remember getting dressed to go out."

"That's okay," Laila smiled and took her hand. "Well, I saw Will while I was coming out of the bathroom. I had forgotten my water bottle on the sink and he called me back to give it to me. And then," Laila paused and looked down at their hands. "And then I came back to you and Piper and Nikki and you made some comment about me and Sterling getting back together and I could tell you were already drunk so I made you drink the water thinking it would help your hangover the next morning. And then a little while later you really started to slur your words and then you just collapsed."

Luanne swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to hold back more tears.

"I'm so sorry, Luanne! You have no idea how sorry I am."

"You didn't know," Luanne whispered. "It was clearly not meant for me."

"I knew Will was creepy but I never would have guessed he would do something this desperate and sick."

"I never would have guessed either," Luanne said slowly. At that moment, all of her issues were forgotten as she replayed in her mind how things could have happened. Laila could be the one lying in the hospital bed. Or worse, she could be the one waking up in Will's bed after he did God knows what to her. Luanne shivered at the thought and then looked at her roommate whose eyes now betrayed the guilt she was feeling. But Laila shouldn't be feeling any of that. All of this could have been avoided had Luanne's ambition not gotten in the way of her better judgment.

"Laila, I need to tell you something."

"Okay," Laila smiled at her.

"I've done something - something horrible," Luanne paused and took a deep breath. "I knew from almost the second week of school that Will liked you. He told me that if I helped him win you over, he would let me write for the paper."

Laila's eyes went wide and then looked away from Luanne, pain and confusion spreading across her entire face.

"I didn't mean for it to go this far. I didn't expect us to ever be friends but once that happened, I knew I couldn't tell you because you would hate me."

Laila dropped Luanne's hand and stood up from the bed.

"I was the one who called him and told him we were at Nikki's play that night. I pretended to be sick so Piper would take me home and he could be alone with you."

"Is there anything else?" Laila asked, her hands on her hips.

Luanne started to cry again, heavy sobs which nearly shook her bed. "When Will didn't publish my article like he promised, I offered him a letter Sterling had written to you as a bribe."

Laila released a small cry of disbelief. "I can't believe you would do that."

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"Neither can I."

"I mean, look at us, Luanne!" Laila's anger was finally starting to show. "You're in the hospital, Sterling and I have been broken up for over a month for reasons which were absolutely avoidable, and Will is running around somewhere with roofies! When was it going to be enough for you?"

"I thought that if I started writing for the paper, everything would just fall into place. I've never had any friends before you and Piper," she confessed and Laila's heart broke for her. "I didn't know how much you two would actually mean to me."

"You are really stupid, you know that?" Laila said walking back to the bed. "I mean, I'm ridiculously naïve for not seeing what was happening, but you are really stupid. And mean and selfish and I don't know what else!"

"I know," Luanne choked back a sob. "I'm so sorry."

Laila looked like she wanted to sit back down but she stayed standing as she glared at her roommate. Luanne looked up at her expectantly as she started to speak. "It's hard to believe that you didn't know any better. I think you knew what you were doing was wrong. But I can't blame you for being selfish. I've been guilty of that too."

Luanne blinked and looked at Laila through her blurry tears. "I don't blame you for hating me right now."

"I am so incredibly angry at you right now," Laila agreed. "But I don't hate you, even though I should."

"Why not?"

Laila sighed. "I'm too tired to hate you right now. So much has happened and I just can't process anymore information much less deal with any more emotions."

Luanne managed a small smile, knowing she still had a lot of work to do before she gained back Laila's trust.

"What are you doing to do now?" She heard Laila ask.

Luanne shrugged. "I think I'm going to go home for a few days."

"Back to Alabama? Finals start next week."

"I know. My first one isn't until Wednesday so I can spend a few nights there, just to get away from everything."

"I'll call Piper and have her pack you a bag. She can drop you at the airport."

"Thank you," Luanne said softly. "You really shouldn't be this nice to me right now."

Laila laughed. "I know. But you took my roofies. We'll call it even."

Luanne smiled and Laila started to walk to the door. "Are you going to be okay if Sterling and I get out of here?"

"I'll be fine."

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"Okay. We'll see you when you get back."

"Bye. And thanks for everything."

Laila smiled from the doorway and then vanished into the hall. Luanne could hear her whispering something to Sterling and then their footsteps faded into the background. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the tips of her fingers and stared at the ceiling. She knew she didn't deserve anyone's sympathy or anyone's friendship at the moment. Laila's kindness, though not entirely unexpected knowing the girl's nature, shed light on just how poorly Luanne had behaved. She didn't care what happened with the newspaper from this point on. She had her friends and had finally accepted that the value of friendship, no matter how intangible, was better than anything that could be written on paper.

Chapter 34: Mom, I Like Chicks

Brittany held her phone in her sweaty palm. She had never been this nervous before. It felt like the worst stage fright she had ever experienced - probably because she knew she wasn't putting on an act. She was telling the truth. She quickly hit the send button but then snapped her phone shut as soon as it started to ring.

"Not yet," she said to herself. "Just a few more minutes."

She stared down at her phone and debated throwing it across the room. But she knew she had to do it. She had to tell her parents. They deserved to hear it from her instead of Will or someone else. She was about to dial the number again when she heard a knock on her door. Slowly standing up from her bed, she walked to the door and opened it, her confusion only mounting as she saw Nikki standing outside.

"Hi," Brittany said, barely recognizing her own voice which was laced with hesitation. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to let you know that I think what you did was really fucking lame. But I can also imagine how scared you are right now and, even though I can barely stand to look at you, I don't want you to go through this by yourself."

"Thank you," Brittany said, glancing at the ground beneath her feet and opening the door a bit wider for Nikki to step through. "I was about to call my parents."

"Really?" Nikki sounded surprised and flopped down on Brittany's bed. "Guess I have good timing then."

"I have no idea what I am going to say to them," Brittany admitted, still unsure if Nikki being in her room was a curse or a blessing.

"You say: 'Mom, I like chicks.'"

"Thank you. That's so incredibly helpful," Brittany said with a small laugh.

"Look, they are going to be upset no matter how you break it to them. After you hang up, they'll sit around and think about it all day, so no matter what you say to them, they'll find their own conclusion."

Brittany frowned and stared at Nikki. The girl was probably right. Regardless of what she told them, she knew her mom would cry and her dad would over analyze everything she had done or said since the day she turned three. So she took a deep breath and sat on the bed next to Nikki, opening her phone and dialing the number.

"Hello?" Her mom's voice sounded cheerful and Brittany winced.

"Hi, Mom. It's me."

"Hey there, Britty. How are things?"

"Fine," Brittany murmured. Of course her mother would call her by her nickname, the one Will gave her when she was born because he couldn't pronounce her full name. "Is Dad there?"

"No, he's out getting new snow tires. I swear!" But Brittany wasn't listening. She shook her head at Nikki who was giving her a questioning look.

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"Just do it!" Nikki hissed at her, showing support but no sympathy.

"Mom," Brittany interrupted her mother. "I have something to tell you."

"What is it, sweetie?"

Brittany's throat and lips went dry, she felt as if she had swallowed a pitcher of sand. But she managed to choke out the words, "I've met someone."

"You have?" Her mom sounded thrilled. "What is he like?"

"It's um, he's notâ—" Brittany stumbled over her words but felt Nikki take her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. She looked up into her eyes and felt a surge of strength. "She's great, Mom. She's amazing." Nikki's eyes went wide and her mother didn't say a word.

"Please say something," Brittany said, staring at Nikki.

"So you've made a friend? Is she in one of your classes?" It was as if Brittany could hear the denial in her mother's voice.

"Yes, I met her in one of my classes. But she's not just a friend, Mom. She's something more because we share this unbelievable connection which I can't even start to describe. She means so much to me. Iâ—" I think I love her, Mom."

Nikki's mouth stretched into a smile and she brought Brittany's hand to her lips and gently kissed her knuckles. Did this mean that she would forgive her? Brittany could only hope but Nikki's anger seemed to have dissipated along with Brittany's anxiety. She wasn't in this alone.

"Sweetheart, I'm sure this is just a phaseâ—" her mother was saying and Brittany finally cracked a smile.

"It could be just a phase, Mom. But right now, it's my life."

Nikki raised one eyebrow and gave the phone a questioning glare.

"I'm justâ—" I'm trying to understand this, Britty. How long have you known this girl?"

"We met on the first day of school."

"And, is she the first girl you'veâ—" But her mother couldn't finish the sentence.

"No. There was one before her, but not like this. She didn't mean anything compared to Nikki."

"Nikki?" She heard her mom take a deep breath, as if hearing the name made it real.

"Mom, I know you are going to have questions for me, I know that you are going to be upset. But I wanted to tell you because I love you and I want you to be happy for me. You have no idea how hard this was for me. You have no idea what I have been through to try and convince myself that what I was feeling wasn't real. I've done horrible things to try and keep this a secret from you and Dad, to try and deny it myself. But I'm done with that. I'm done with pretending."

There was a long pause and Brittany held her breath. Nikki sat absolutely still by her side.

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"You know that I love you, Brittany. You know that I'm proud of you. I don't understand this yet, but that doesn't meanâ!" A sob broke her mother's words and Brittany could feel the tears trickling down her face. "It doesn't mean that I love you any less. And I do want you to be happy."

She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled through her tears. "Are you going to tell Dad?"

"I haven't decided yet," her mother said in a firm voice. "But if I don't, I'll be there with you when you tell him over Christmas break."

"What a lovely present that will be."

A small laugh could be heard coming from the other end of the line. "You should get some studying done," her mom reminded her. "You have a big week ahead of you."

"Finals will be easy compared to this," Brittany sighed, knowing she still had her father to contend with.

"I love you, Sweetheart."

"I love you too, Mom."

Nikki's lips were on Brittany's before the phone had even closed. She was reaching for her with passion and impatience but Brittany didn't mind. She felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off her shoulders, she felt almost invincible.

"This doesn't mean that I'm not still angry," she heard Nikki saying in between kisses.

"I know," Brittany answered, her breathing starting to accelerate. Nikki hadn't reciprocated her feelings although she now knew all of them. Yet Brittany didn't think she cared at the moment. Pulling away, she smiled at Nikki and held her at arm's length.

"I meant everything I said, you know?"

"I know," Nikki answered, not yet ready to commit to those exact words but was clearly well on her way. She smiled at the blonde and then stood up, too excited to sit still for any longer. "I seriously wish that finals weren't next week. We both have to study but all I want to do is stay here with you."

Brittany laughed. "We can go somewhere public, like the library or the computer lab and study."

"I don't think I'd be able to keep my hands off you, even in public," Nikki admitted and Brittany blushed. "I'm proud of you, Brit."

"Thanks."

Nikki smiled at her and then glanced at the stack of text books on the desk, a looming reminder they would have to part soon if they wanted to pass any of their exams. But a framed picture sitting indifferently on the corner caught her eye and she picked it up, examining what she had always known to be there, but had never taken the time to really notice.

"Who is this?" Nikki pointed at the photograph, her eyes darting between Brittany and the picture.

"That's me and my brother at his high school graduation."

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"The brother who wanted Laila?"

Brittany nodded, still ashamed of what she had done.

"What's his name?"

"Will, he's a senior."

"Holy shit!" Nikki swore and slammed the picture back on the desk.

"What?"

Nikki took a deep breath and looked around frantically. "I'm pretty sure he drugged my roommate last night."

Brittany laughed at Nikki's dramatics. "Will drugged Laila? I seriously doubt Will would."

"Not Laila. Luanne. But it was meant for Laila." Nikki started to pace the floor, everything falling into place. Brittany's kiss with Sterling, Will's obsession with Laila, the two finally connected. "When you said your brother made you kiss him, I didn't even think that Will could be."

"Oh my God, you're being serious. Look, Nikki, no offense, but you don't even know him. He's really not the type of guy who would drug someone."

Nikki shook her head. "We don't know who else it could have been."

"If you were at a party, it could have been anyone."

Nikki shook her head again and then stopped pacing. "Can you call him? See where he is?"

"You really think?"

"Brit, please! You owe me. You owe Laila."

"Fine," she conceded and opened her phone again. "What am I supposed to say to him?"

"Anything! Tell him that you told your mom and see what he does."

"It will make him rather angry," Brittany said in anticipated amusement.

Nikki rolled her eyes and started tapping her foot as Brittany dialed the number. They waited in silence for him to answer.

"What?" They heard Will hiss as Nikki reached for the cell and put it on speakerphone.

"Hey, Will," Brittany said in a cheery voice. "How's it going?"

"Fine." There was venom in his voice and neither girl believed him.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. What do you want?"

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"I told Mom."

There was a slight hesitation. "You told Mom what?"

"I told her everything. About Sarah and about Nikki."

"Well, congratulations. Why the fuck would I care?"

Brittany looked up at Nikki who was frowning at the phone. "You could be happy for me."

"Why the hell would I be happy for you? You've ruined everything! Laila is back with her boyfriend and you've fucked me over with this one, Brit."

"Laila and Sterling are back together?" Brittany felt a small amount of hope seep into her cluttered head. "How do you know?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Will, how do you know?"

There was a small, cackling laugh from the other end of the phone which made Brittany's skin crawl. She had never heard her brother sound so evil. "I just watched him leave her room a few minutes ago. I've gotta go."

"Will, what are you doing?" But the line went dead and Nikki and Brittany could only stare at each other.

"Brit?"

"I know," she interrupted Nikki. "Let's go."

Nikki didn't wait for Brittany to grab her coat. She was out the door and running down the hallway, Brittany only a few steps behind.

Chapter 35: Was It Will?

Gavin woke up to a loud knocking on his front door. Falling out of bed, he threw on the first sweatshirt he could find and walked out of his bedroom so he could curse at whoever had found it necessary to wake him up this early in the morning. But his tired eyes suddenly weren't so heavy as he opened the door to find two police officers standing on the other side.

"William Alexander?" The larger one asked.

"Um, no. I'm Gavin. His roommate."

"Is Mr. Alexander here?"

"I don't know," Gavin said honestly. "I'll check his room."

He left the door open as he walked across the living room and knocked on Will's door. There was no answer as he knocked again and called his name. What had he done, Gavin thought to himself. The police were looking through the open door with impatient eyes and when Will didn't answer again, Gavin opened his door and stuck his head in.

Will's room no longer looked like his. The bed was unmade, his books were thrown everywhere, clothes piled on the floor. His laptop was lying open on the desk, crumpled paper littered the ground around the trash bin. This wasn't like Will. Things were usually so perfect. The mess gave Gavin an eerie feeling in the pit of his stomach but he left Will's bedroom door open as he returned to the police officers, shaking his head.

"He's not here."

"When is the last time you saw him?"

Gavin thought about it. He had seen Will only briefly last night. "I saw him for a few minutes last night. He was about to leave for some party."

"Do you know where he was going?"

"No."

"Was he going with someone?"

"He didn't say. What is all this about?"

But the police officer ignored his question and handed him a card. "If he shows up, will you please call us?"

"Um, sure."

"Thank you." And with that, the two officers turned around and walked away, jotting notes on a pad of paper and exchanging a few words that Gavin couldn't discern. Scratching his head in confusion, Gavin closed the door and turned around. He stared at Will's room and his curiosity got the better of him. Quickly, he walked to the room and started combing through all of its contents. But there was nothing under the bed, nothing irregular on the desk besides the general mess, no incriminating books or magazines could be found. What was he doing? This was Will. Sure, he was a little crazy at times and wasn't afraid of stabbing people in the

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back when it would serve to benefit him, but he wasn't a criminal. Gavin didn't even know what he was searching for.

He was about to leave when he recognized a pair of pants on the floor. Will had been wearing them last night, Gavin remembered, having resisted the urge to tell him that khaki corduroy wasn't a good way to impress anyone. He slowly reached for them, not really wanting to do it. He knew it was wrong to go through Will's things but his roommate was clearly in some kind of trouble. Or, more likely, he had created some sort of trouble and Gavin was afraid his obsession with Laila had finally gotten the better of him. His hand slipped into the pocket, afraid of what he might find. Nothing. Gavin took a quick breath and reached into the other, his fingers landing on something small and chalky.

Pulling it out, Gavin didn't recognize the pill that was now in his hand. Anxiety medication perhaps. Will had been awfully anxious lately. But he knew that wasn't it. What Will had said earlier in the week was still toying with Gavin's conscious. There were other ways to get what he wanted. A shiver ran down his spine as he thought about what Will could possibly be using this for.

Running back to his room, he picked up his phone and dialed Luanne's number. He had stood by long enough and let Will's behavior become more and more out of control. He had to warn Luanne about Will but her phone went straight to voicemail. Gavin cursed and pulled his legs into a pair of jeans, shoving the pill inside his back pocket. He knew Luanne was probably still asleep but he had to see her before someone got hurt.

By the time he reached Luanne's dorm, he was out of breath, his lungs burning from the freezing morning air. He knocked furiously and was surprised when someone quickly answered from the other side.

"Who is it?"

"It's Gavin," he said to the still closed door. "Luanne's friend."

The door opened slowly and Gavin instantly recognized the girl on the other side. Laila's violet eyes looked up at him timidly as she peered out from her dorm room. Gavin smiled at her, glad to see she wasn't hurt.

"Hi," Gavin said, his voice rough after his run. "I'm Gavin. Is Luanne here?"

"Hi. I'm Laila. Luanne's told me a lot about you."

"Is she here?"

"No," Laila said with a frown. "She left for the airport a little while ago."

"The airport? Where is she going?"

"Why don't you come inside? It's cold." Laila held the door for him and stepped aside. Gavin could only stare at Laila as he walked inside her dorm. This was the girl that Will had been obsessing over the entire year. This was the girl who had caused his roommate to become absolutely desperate. Gavin had expected some sort of goddess, but Laila appeared completely normal. She was prettier than most girls, but there was nothing about her that would make Gavin want to do the things Will had done.

"So," Gavin started, unsure of what to do. He had been coming here to warn Luanne about what he feared Will would do to Laila, but now that she was standing in front of him, he didn't know where to start. "Why did Luanne go home?"

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"She spent last night in the hospital," Laila informed him with a low voice. "She needed to go home and sort some things out."

"Is she okay? What happened?"

"She was drugged."

With that, Gavin's heart sank into his stomach. "Drugged?"

"Rufilin."

"Shit," Gavin closed his eyes and felt the pill in his pocket weighing him down. "Do you know who did it?"

Laila shifted uncomfortably. She knew that Gavin was Will's roommate and friend. Luanne had spoken of him often and Laila knew him to be a genuinely good guy. "I think I know who did it."

"Was it Will?"

Gavin's question took Laila by surprise. Did he know? She slowly nodded her head and watched as Gavin's face twisted in anger. "It was meant for me," Laila said slowly.

"Is she okay? Are you okay?"

"She's fine. We're both a little shaken."

"I can imagine," Gavin tried to smile at her, mostly relieved Will's plan hadn't worked. "I take it you called the police."

Laila nodded again. "I don't know for sure he did it but it seems pretty likely."

Gavin looked at her. She still seemed scared and he didn't to tell her that Will was missing. Her imagination could run wild.

"Well, thank you for telling me about Luanne. Is there someone else here who can wait this thing out with you?"

"My roommate should be back from the airport in about an hour. And my boyâ I mean, someone else is going to get breakfast. He'll be right back."

"Okay good. Do you want me to stayâ?"

But Laila smiled at him and shook her head. "No, I'll be fine. Thank you, though." She liked Gavin. She could tell why Luanne had befriended him and appreciated his concern.

"All right. I'll see you later, I guess."

Laila smiled and opened the door for him. "If I talk to Luanne, I'll tell her you stopped by."

"Right," Gavin looked conflicted. "Thanks."

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He heard the door close behind him and the deadbolt lock as he stepped outside. Looking around nervously, he half expected to see Will hiding in the bushes or lurking around the corner. But no one was around and Gavin walked quickly back to his house, opening his phone and dialing the police on his way.

A/N: I know this isn't the chapter you were all expecting, but I promise to post again on Friday :)

Chapter 36: Are You Alone?

Laila could see the truth in Gavin's eyes as he left her dorm. She knew there was something that he wasn't telling her, something that led him to also believe that Will had been the one who had drugged Luanne. She locked the door behind him, just as Sterling had instructed her to do. He hadn't wanted to leave her alone, but she insisted on wanting to shower so he ran to get breakfast, most likely in an attempt to help Laila gain weight. She didn't mind though.

She quickly stripped out of her clothes and wrapped her bathrobe around her body. She was about to walk to the shower when she heard another knock on the door. She smiled and ran to open it, eager to see Sterling again. They hadn't talked about where they stood, but she knew that he wanted her back. He still loved her and she now loved him more than ever.

Laila threw open the door, ready to help Sterling with whatever he had brought them to eat, but gasped as she saw who was waiting for her on the other side. Will's didn't look like himself. He looked insane, his eyes were wild, his face was red, and his lips were smiling like a madman's.

Laila tried to close the door but Will was too quick. He stuck his foot in front of the frame and pushed with all his strength as the door came swinging toward him. The force of the push nearly sent Laila flying across the room and she staggered back, trying to catch her footing.

"Are you alone?" Will asked, never taking his eyes off of her.

"No," Laila lied. "Get out."

"Who's here?"

Laila opened her mouth to lie again but stumbled over her words. "My roommate." Why was he here? She could tell from his expression that his motives weren't good. Her mind raced as she tried to come up with a way to get him out of her dorm.

She started to panic as Will closed the door behind him and smiled. "It really is just you and me, isn't it?"

"Will, you need to leave," Laila warned him, her voice and body shaking.

"Laila, do you have any idea how long I have wanted to get you alone? I've wanted it all year, since the first day I saw you."

Laila was silent, her heart beating faster than she had ever felt it, her throat closing and her legs starting to go weak. It was already painful to breathe and she couldn't remember an asthma attack ever happening this quickly.

"Laila, you don't know how hard I've tried to get you to see things my way," Will said, walking toward her. "We could be great together."

"Don't come any closer!" Laila tried to scream but her voice was raspy and barely audible. She started backing her way toward her bedroom, keeping her eyes on Will as he approached.

"You shouldn't be scared of me, Laila. I would never hurt you." Will reached for her but Laila slapped his hand away as she started coughing and gasping for air. She knew her inhaler was just inside her room but the

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world around her had started to spin as her head became dizzy. She reached for the doorknob and struggled to open it, staggered inside the room and stumbled toward her night stand.

But Will was too fast for her. His hands wrapped around her waist and she fell to the floor, wheezing violently, unable to shake the panic. Laila knew she had to calm down if she wanted to ride out the asthma attack yet she could feel Will's hands on her legs, groping and petting, and she knew she was in trouble.

She tried to scream again as her body was being flipped over, her bathrobe pushed open. Her arms and legs were useless as she gasped for air, feeling as if she was getting nothing. Will's hands were everywhere on her, rough and cold, his nails scratching her skin. She could feel him grabbing for her breasts, his fingers running over her ribs as she squirmed. Her back was arching in spasms as she writhed on the floor in pain. Unable to fight him off, Laila closed her eyes, willing her body to slip into unconsciousness.

Will watched as Laila's eyes closed. Her face had turned completely white and he knew that he was hurting her. But he couldn't stop. She was his and she was gorgeous. Her naked body was more beautiful than he had imagined it to be and his eyes raked over her exposed flesh as his hands explored freely. He smiled to himself, knowing that she would now be his completely, in every sense of the word. His head bent toward hers, finally ready to feel her lips against his. But suddenly he felt two strong hands on his shoulders, throwing him from his beloved. One sharp and painful punch to the face, and Will knew his nose was broken. He heard another bone crack as the second one landed strong on his temple. His world faded to black as he felt his body fall to the floor.

Sterling held Laila close and pushed her inhaler to her lips. She was struggling against her own body, wheezing and coughing, scratching at her throat as if someone was choking her. It scared him to see her like this but not as much as it had scared him to see her lying on the ground with Will's hands all over her. He had been an easy target, though, and Sterling had been able to throw him off of her without much effort. Two quick punches to the head and Will's body went limp as his eyes closed and his nose started to bleed. Sterling would have liked to take out more aggression on the guy, but Laila was his only concern.

Sterling sighed with relief as Laila's breathing started to stabilize. Her face was wet with tears and her eyes were still closed. But after a few deep breaths, they fluttered open and she started to take in her surroundings.

"Hey," Sterling said, his hand cupping her face and trying to draw her attention away from the man lying unconscious on her floor. "You're okay now."

Laila took another deep breath and nodded in understanding. She wanted to speak, to tell him that she was frightened, but she couldn't. So she clung to him, resting her head against his chest and gripping his jacket in her fists. Everything about him was comforting, the way he smelled, the way he held her, the way he whispered in her ear that she didn't need to be scared.

"You're here," she finally managed to murmur.

Sterling pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. "I shouldn't have left you alone."

"But you're here now." She could feel her body starting to relax, the tight muscles releasing.

"Did he hurt you?"

"I don't think so."

"How did he get in here?"

Higher Education

Laila was about to answer him when they both heard the door swing open and footsteps running toward her room.

"Laila!" Nikki cried and came bursting into the room, stopping just short of the bed as she saw the state of her roommate. Sterling pulled Laila's bathrobe shut and covered her legs the best he could.

"What the hell happened?" Nikki asked, completely out of breath.

"She was having an asthma attack and couldn't defend herself," Sterling answered quietly, allowing Nikki's imagination to fill in the rest.

"Thank God you were here," Laila's roommate said quietly.

"Could you call the police?" Sterling asked, amazed that he had been able to stay so calm.

Nikki nodded solemnly and walked from the room, a frightened Brittany coming into view as she left.

"Brittany, whatâ!"

But she cut him off before he could finish. "He's my brother," she whispered as if she were ashamed. Sterling just looked at her as if nothing could surprise him.

Just then, Will began to moan and his hand slowly moved to hold his face where he had been hit. Sterling started to stand up so he could be prepared for another fight, but Laila gripped his jacket, unwilling to let him go. He gave in to her, of course, lifting her into his arms and walking her into the common room.

"Watch him," he told Brittany as he passed.

She nodded in compliance and went to stand over her brother. She barely recognized him anymore. His hair hadn't been cut, his face was bloody and his clothes were dirty. He looked as if he had aged ten years since she last saw him. She wanted to help him, she wanted to tell him that the pain would go away. But she knew that he wouldn't do the same for her. She knew that he didn't deserve any form of sympathy. So she hovered over him until she heard the knock on the door and the loud footsteps of the police officers coming to take her brother away.

She watched in silence as they walked into the room, William's current condition preventing them from having to use much force. He was in no condition to answer questions coherently, so he was read his rights and escorted out of the dorm. It all happened so fast that Brittany could barely react. She stood in the middle of Laila's room, completely frozen, until she heard the front door close, the sound snapping her back to reality.

Slowly, she walked into the common room, glancing at the couch where Sterling was still holding Laila, their voices hushed as they spoke to one another. Nikki was standing by the window, staring out into the snow but turned her head to Brittany when she saw her approaching. One arm was extended and Brittany tucked herself against Nikki's side as she was wrapped up in her embrace, the tears finally starting to fall.

Chapter 37: Turn Out Like This

Laila turned her back to Sterling as she pulled her sweater off and replaced it with one of his t-shirts. She felt modest around him now, even though she knew he wasn't after anything that evening. She turned around slowly, blushing as Sterling smiled at her. He had always claimed to like seeing her in his t-shirts, the hem reaching just at mid-thigh, the sleeves coming down to her elbows.

"Is my toothbrush still here?" She asked, breaking the silence.

Sterling frowned and shook his head. "No, I threw it away."

"Oh," Laila tried not to look hurt but knew that her face had deceived her.

"Not because I wasn't hoping you weren't going to need it again. I just got angry one day and threw it against the wall. It landed next to the toilet so I had to throw it away." Sterling looked embarrassed but Laila smiled at his confession.

"I packed yours though," he offered, a smile coming to his lips as well.

"Thanks," she said awkwardly and reached for the bag he had packed for her earlier in the day. Once the police had left, Sterling had helped Laila dress and quickly packed some of her things, insisting that she stay the night at his apartment. She hadn't put up a fight as being alone just hadn't seemed like an option.

She walked quickly past him, hurrying to the bathroom so she could get ready for bed. It was early still, but it had been a long day and neither had slept much the night before in the hospital. She tried not to think about Will as she turned on the shower and felt the warm water hit her tired body. But without Sterling in the room to distract her, she found that task rather difficult. She knew she was lucky. If Sterling hadn't come back when he did, Will could have easily waited until she had passed out and then had his way with her. She tried to shake that thought of out her head.

She had argued with Sterling for the better part of an hour over whether or not she should go to the hospital. Finally, he gave in, saying that he wasn't letting her out of his sights and would carry her there kicking and screaming if she showed any sign of pain. She agreed and the two of them walked through the snow to Sterling's apartment as soon as Piper and Alistair had returned from the airport and heard the story.

Laila showered quickly and dried off, slipping into a pair of underwear and Sterling's shirt before brushing her teeth. Looking in the mirror, she was startled by the girl staring back. Her eyes were red with dark circles underneath, her skin looked sickly pale and her wet hair hung in stringy clumps around her face. But she didn't care at the moment. All she wanted to do was sleep.

Sterling had changed and was waiting for her outside the bathroom when she opened the door. "Are you all right?"

Laila nodded and stared at him, wishing she could find the words to thank him enough for everything he had done for her.

"You can sleep in my room, if you want," Sterling was saying, "and I'll take the couch. Or I can make up the bed in the other room."

"Can you stay with me?" Laila heard herself asking before she had even thought about it.

Higher Education

"Of course," Sterling looked relieved. "I'll be right in."

Laila gave him a small smile and walked to his bedroom. Everything was just as she remembered. The pictures hadn't changed, the bed was still as comfortable as ever. She climbed under the covers, smelling Sterling on the sheets that were now wrapped around her. She lay with her eyes open, staring at the ceiling, until she heard him come in the door. He smiled at her timidly and then turned off the lights.

Grinning in the darkness, she listened to Sterling feel his way to the bed, swearing quietly as he stubbed his toe on something. She could feel him pulling back to the covers and climbing in next to her and she waited for him to reach for her, to pull her into his arms and kiss her. But it didn't happen and she started to worry something was wrong.

"Sterling?"

"Yes?" He sounded closer than he felt.

"I love you."

"I love you, too. So much."

Laila scooted closer to him and smiled as he finally reached for her, his hand lightly finding her cheek.

"I'm afraid to touch you," he admitted softly. "I don't know how you're feeling and I don't want to scare you."

"It's easier not to think about it when you are holding me," she told him and wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling herself into his chest.

Sterling reacted instantly, hugging her tight and kissing the top of her head. Her warm breath against his skin was calming his nerves, her hand on his back was relaxing. Sterling had been fighting against his anger all day. Once Laila was safe inside his apartment, it was as if his sense of calm had snapped and all he wanted to do was beat Will within seconds of his life. He was worried for Laila, scared that she would snap as well and fully realize what had happened to her, and that was the only thing that kept him from taking out his aggression on the inanimate objects of his apartment. He didn't think he would be able to get through the day if he thought she was afraid of anything and had prepared himself for a sleepless night of waiting for her cries.

But luckily she had asked him to stay with her. He hadn't wanted to suggest it himself, still unsure of where they stood, if they would be able to pick back up right where they left off or if Laila would need some time before things became intimate again. But now she was touching him like she always had, her soft hands warm on his skin.

"Do you remember the first night we met and I kicked you out of my bed?" Sterling heard her ask.

He smiled at the memory. "Of course I remember. I couldn't believe you wouldn't let me sleep with you."

Laila laughed softly and kissed his chest. "That seems like such a long time ago."

"It wasn't so long ago," Sterling mused and ran his hand down her back.

"Did you think back then that things would turn out like this?"

Higher Education

Sterling didn't know exactly what this was, but he didn't worry about it. "I knew that I had found something special. And I knew that I was falling for you."

"Not after the first night," Laila giggled in disbelief.

"Yes, after the first night," Sterling assured her.

"But it took you so long to ask me out," Laila yawned and kissed his chest again.

"You weren't like other girls. I knew I had to take it slow so I didn't scare you off."

Laila sighed, he knew her so well. "I've missed you so much, Sterling," she said, snuggling against him so she could feel as much of him as possible.

"I've missed you too. But that's all over now."

Laila smiled, sleep was pulling at her and she was about to give in. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Beautiful."

Will's eyes roamed his jail cell, a certain curiosity about his new surroundings had overcome him. He had refused his phone call earlier in the day, unsure of whom he would try to contact. His parents would certainly fly down to get him but he wasn't ready to face them. His sister, who had completely fucked him over, didn't have the money to bail him out and was therefore completely useless. His roommate fell into the same category, which left no one.

Part of him wanted to stay locked up. He remembered very little of that morning's events but those fuzzy memories were driving him over the edge. He could still feel Laila's skin on his hands, the way her breasts felt as he squeezed them. What he had done was wrong, completely wrong, but he still craved more. What had turned him this way, he didn't know. Nor did he care. He was mad, completely insane. He had hurt the girl he loved yet given the chance, he would certainly do it again. That's why these bars were a necessity, however uncomfortable and unwanted they might be. He didn't want to hurt her, he didn't want her to be afraid. But if he were free, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

He didn't know what was going to become of him. The police seemed to know everything and he hadn't denied any wrong doing. He was sure his lawyer, if he ever bothered to get one, would reprimand him for that. But maybe he would just defend himself, explain to the judge that he had been so in love it had driven him insane. He wondered if he would get to see Laila again. Would she take pity on him and show up to voice her support? He doubted it. But he could always dream. He might be crazy, but he knew that his dreams were the only thing he had left - the only thing that wouldn't be taken from him. Shame, guilt, judgment, all those things would be handed to him, replacing his freedom and his livelihood. Yes. He'd have to get used to these bars.

A/N: Only two more chapters after this one! I'll be posting them both tomorrow :) Thank you to everyone who has read and commented on this story! You are my inspiration to keep writing :) Much Love ~ Pink

Chapter 38: Until We're Ready

A/N: Adult material in this chapter! I've been told by multiple readers that because I was so mean and kept Laila and Sterling apart for so long, that I owed you all a steamy sex scene. So here it is :)

Laila woke up to a warm body pressed against her back. Sterling's arm was draped over her side, his hand resting lightly on her ribs. She smiled as she snuggled closer to him, weaving her legs between his to get as warm as possible. She could feel his arm strengthen around her, squeezing her tight and making her feel secure.

"How did you sleep?" She heard him murmur.

"I slept well. You?" She lifted his hand and kissed his fingers.

"Hmmâ !" "

Laila smiled and dropped his hand. "It's still early. You should go back to sleep."

"As long as you stay in bed with me," Sterling requested and pressed a kiss on the back of her neck.

"Of course," Laila said with a yawn and closed her eyes. They lay there perfectly still as their breathing synchronized, but soon Laila could feel Sterling's hand start to wander. His touch meandered slowly over her stomach then across her hip and down her leg. Her arm was next and his fingers ran up and down it smoothly, as if he remembered every part of her. She held her breath as his hand found its way under her shirt, her skin on fire as he touched her. Her pulse began to quicken as his hand roamed higher, gently passing her ribs and finding her breast. Sterling's lips were softly kissing her neck and jaw, his breath warm and seductive.

Sterling didn't want to pressure her into anything. She had been through a horrific event just the day before and he didn't know if his touch would trigger those unwanted memories. There were still scratches on her neck and he prayed they were made by Laila and not Will. But Laila wasn't shying away from him, her body wasn't tense as his hand gently explored her. He wanted her to know that he was there to protect her, to love her until the day they died, but also that she was now his, solely and completely. Nothing would ever come between the two again, no matter how the odds were stacked against them.

His hand left her breast and traveled down to her panties, the cotton soft as he fingered the material. He moved slowly, waiting to hear her soft plea for him to stop. But the only sound he could hear was her breathing, deep and rhythmic as he ran his fingers between her legs. Her hips were bucking ever so slightly, grinding against him as he pressed against her back. He could feel her trying to turn so she could face him, but he didn't allow it as his fingers found their way inside of her. Soon she was gripping the pillow, her eyes squeezing shut as her tiny body started to shake, a soft cry of pleasure escaping her lips.

Sterling gently pushed her hair from her face, knowing he would never see anything as beautiful as this girl in his bed. Her eyes were still closed as she relaxed onto her back, Sterling taking the opportunity to kiss her lips. He could feel her hands running through his hair, over his shoulders and down to his hips. He knew she wanted the same thing he did and was pleased to see the lustful look in her eyes when he pulled away.

"Are you still on the pill?" He asked in a whisper, kissing her neck.

"Yes," she answered in a breathy voice.

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"Thank God," Sterling said, kissing her again, rougher this time. He could feel Laila giggle under his kiss, her hands leaving his back so she could help him remove her shirt. Their sudden urgency made them both smile and soon all of their clothes were off, thrown carelessly about the bed and floor. Sterling positioned himself above her and kissed her again before slowly pushing inside. He could hear Laila moan softly as he began to move above her, but nothing he did brought him close enough to her. He wanted to feel all of her, be as deep inside her as possible. He sat up quickly, startling Laila as he brought her with him. She released a low whimper as she slid down to his lap, her legs wrapped around his hips to keep herself in place.

Sterling waited until her body had adjusted to the new position, holding her legs as she gripped his shoulders. "I love you," he whispered to her as she began to move her hips sensually above his, her breasts crushed to his chest, their stomachs pressed together.

"I love you, Sterling," she said as she kissed his neck and shoulders.

Sterling helped her as she moved slowly up and down, pulling him deep inside of her. She felt so amazing, so warm and soft, that it wasn't long before Sterling was moaning loudly and falling on top of her as they collapsed on the bed. They were both breathing heavily, damp with sweat, and at a complete loss for words.

After a long moment, Sterling kissed her neck and pulled out gently, rolling onto his back. Laila curled against him, her hand resting on his chest and her lips kissing his shoulder. "I guess this means I can call you my boyfriend again, doesn't it?" Laila asked, a smile in her voice.

Sterling chuckled to himself but something didn't sound right about that term. "That title sounds a little juvenile, don't you think?"

Laila laughed and lifted herself onto her elbow so she could kiss him. "Would gentleman caller sound better to you?"

Sterling laughed again and finally opened his eyes. Laila was smiling at him, her violet eyes brilliant and alert, her cheeks were full of color and her hair was cascading in messy waves around her face and shoulders. He felt as if he might explode, he was so thankful to have Laila back in his arms and back in his life.

"You are so much more to me than just my girlfriend, Laila. I hope you know that."

She blushed and looked down to her hand which was still resting on his chest. "I know. I don't deserve it, but I know it."

"You do, though," he said, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. "We both made mistakes but we found each other again. And I won't lose you a second time."

Laila nodded in understanding and Sterling raised his head so he could kiss her. His kiss was soft and gentle, exactly what she needed and she could feel the last bit of doubt flying out of the room as their lips parted.

"I have something for you," Sterling said with a smile, jumping out of bed and pulling on his boxers. Laila wrapped herself in the sheet and watched him as he walked to his dresser and opened a drawer. He pulled out a small box and squeezed it tightly in his hand as he made his way back to the bed. Sitting beside her, he looked deep into her eyes before speaking.

"I wanted to give this to you on our one year anniversary," he said, looking down so he could remove the ribbon and open the box. "It was meant to be a promise ring, but that's not good enough for me anymore."

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Laila held her breath and stared at her boyfriend. Her head was spinning as he held up the ring for her to see. It was beautiful, simple and elegant, a thin band with three diamonds set in the center. A wide smile spread over Laila's lips as she looked back at Sterling.

"I don't care what hand you wear it on, just as long as you wear it and know that it means I am going to spend the rest of my life with you. No matter what happens, no matter how much trouble we get into, I will always be yours and you will always be mine."

A single tear of joy ran down Laila's face as she struggled to find something to say. "I love you," was all she could come up with as she threw her arms around his neck and kissed his lips. They kissed for a long time, neither wanting to break away. But eventually it had to end and Laila sat back, a smile now permanently etched on her face.

"So," Sterling started. "Which hand will it be?" He looked at her with a mischievous grin which made Laila laugh with giddiness, feeling as if her skin was the only thing holding her together. She thought about it for a minute, knowing she was too happy to think a rational thought, and slowly extended her right hand. Sterling looked down and tilted his head curiously, not showing any disappointment. But Laila watched as his face lit up completely as she quickly withdrew her hand and extended the other.

Sterling felt proud as he slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of her left hand. They were young, probably too young he knew, but that didn't matter. He loved her more than words, and certainly more than a diamond ring could describe. Laila was smiling at him when he finally looked up again.

"We won't give this a title until we're ready," he promised her with a smile.

Laila agreed with a small nod of her head. "I'm so happy right now. We don't need to rush anything."

Sterling was beaming at his girlfriend. Strike that, she wasn't his girlfriend. Fiancée? They weren't quite there yet. He was beaming at the love of his life, the girl he would grow old with, the girl who loved him more than anything.

"Come here," he said softly, reaching for her and drawing her to him. He wrapped his arms around her and Laila melted into him. She could feel herself laughing and crying at the same time, too blissful to control her emotions. She held her hand up as Sterling kissed her neck and smiled at the ring which looked absolutely perfect on her finger.

Chapter 39: Declaring Myself

Declaring Myself, Not My Major

By Luanne Clark

Friend: a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard.

Deceive: to mislead by a false appearance or statement; delude; to be unfaithful to.

I made my first friend earlier this year. Not my first friend at college. My first friend ever. I've lived 18 years of my life without knowing what it is like to have a friend. The feeling was, needless to say, foreign to me at first. I didn't understand the connection I felt, I didn't appreciate the splendor and rareness of it all. It's difficult to admit, because my pride is still interfering with my heart, but I can tell you with all certainty that I didn't deserve this friendship.

Before I came to Yale, my entire life was planned out on a very strict timeline. I left no room for friends or family, thinking they would become superfluous once I achieved my goals. Writing for this paper was the first thing I had to check off my list and the events that unfolded in my quest for the Yale Daily News are shameful, to say the least.

My first attempt was rather pathetic. I walked into the Editor's office with my ego inflated by high school achievements and an unfounded sense of entitlement. I was eager to a fault, but was quickly turned down. Whether or not this rejection was based on my skills as a journalist or just a fanciful whim, we will now never know. But I went home that day not blaming myself, but blaming the Editor, who for the purpose of this article will remain nameless although I imagine you have all heard the gossip, seen the news, and read the paper within the last few days. I'll just let you draw your own conclusions.

It wasn't long after that humiliating day in his office, when the Editor discovered that I had something he wanted. It was nothing to do with me, but someone close to me, in proximity not personal relations. So I agreed to help him with the understanding that he would let me write for this paper - this paper which has been graced with so many talented writers before me, which has produced award winning literary scholars from her pages. I belonged here, I deserved a page with my name on it. So did I think twice about helping him? Not at first.

What he was after wasn't an object, though I now believe he saw her as just that. I should have stayed out of it, should have backed out as soon as I saw what it was doing to her. But I couldn't stop. It seemed so easy, such an obvious choice to make. The prize was within my grasp and the casualties weren't worth my time. But it turns out she was worth my time. In the process of throwing her in his path, I grew fond of her kind nature, the way she was able to laugh at herself, the way she never held a bad thought about anybody she met, me included.

She became my friend. My very first friend. It's embarrassing to admit, but there it is. She cared for me more than a roommate, more than an acquaintance, more than I deserved. She cried to me when she was sad, forgave me when I was out of line, laughed with me when we shared an inside joke. Yet I was still caught up in this dangerous game of deception. My original motives had disappeared, had been left beside the door of the Editor's office one afternoon when I was shown how decent human beings are supposed to behave. So why was I continuing to play her for a fool? I was scared of losing her friendship and being discovered for what I truly was. I felt as if I had sold my soul to the devil and there was no way out.

So there I was, writing for the paper I barely fought for at all, and enjoying the emotional benefits of having companions who cared about me. But, just as they should, my two lives collided in one horrible event that

Higher Education

could have been an absolute nightmare. I've never believed in Karma before that night. I won't share the details of what happened because I've learned not to throw people under the bus just for my own benefit, but I woke up the next morning in a hospital bed that wasn't meant for me. I feel lucky to have taken that from her. She didn't deserve what was intended for her but what fell on me. She didn't deserve any of it. I woke up that morning to find that she had been waiting for me all night, not wanting me to wake up alone and scared. The guilt I felt convinced me to confess everything to her just as her continuing friendship now convinces me to share my story with all of you.

My friend was angry and hurt, but she was tired of her life going wrong without rhyme or reason to it, glad to finally have an explanation. I fled for home that very morning, wanting to escape what I had done. I didn't expect to return to school and still be able to call her a friend. But she was waiting for me at the airport, her hands on her hips, a quick and venomous reprimand on her lips, and a hug for her friend who should have known better.

I have learned more about myself and about human emotions this semester than I had over the entire course of my life. A crash course, if you will, in friendship and deception. Did I pass? No. I completely failed. I've never failed at anything before this. But I've been given a second chance, one I think we can now all agree I don't deserve.

You are probably all rolling your eyes at this, thinking about how naïve I was, how the choice should have been easy, for I am assuming most of you haven't grown up a friendless outcast. I feel as if I can now see some clarity in the world, my career path isn't the only thing illuminated. Because what good is success if you have no one to share it with? What good is a lesson learned if others can't benefit from it as well? I hope that none of you take your loved ones for granted. You may not think you need them, but I can tell you that it is a lonely life with no one by your side. I cherish the friendships I have as I work to rebuild them, an honest and sincere struggle to mend the damage I have done.

A/N: Thank you all for reading! Foreign Affairs, the third in this little Harper's series, will be posted on Friday :)

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