

HONESTLY, ALI!



By
Christine
Marciniak

“I DIDN’T CHEAT.”

“That wasn’t what I asked you.” His voice was hard.

I looked into his face for some clue that we were in this together. Why did it seem like he had turned on me? My voice caught when I answered.

“Because he handed it to me, that’s why. And because he said he had a way to study that would make things easier.”

“I told you not to trust him.” Liam spat the words out.

I took a step back from him. This wasn’t all on me.

“You could have been more specific and told me why.”

He turned his back on me and started to walk away.

“I didn’t use the information.” I said, eager to have him understand that I really didn’t do anything wrong here. I was not the bad guy in this scenario. I didn’t deserve to be treated like I was.

He glanced over his shoulder but didn’t slow down.

“But you looked at it. You considered it.”

I hurried to catch up with him and grabbed his arm.

“Yes, I thought about it, damn it. It was tempting. But I didn’t use it.”

“You’ll never convince them.” He jerked a thumb toward the administration building.

“We’ll convince them together.”

He shook his head.

“Not together.”

“What?” I was afraid I understood what he was saying, but I didn’t want to be right.

“Being involved with you got me into this mess. It’s not worth it anymore. I’m done.”

**HONESTLY,
ALI!**

CHRISTINE MARCINIAK

ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

2014

AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the authors imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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To Adrian
BECAUSE HE MAKES ALL
THIS POSSIBLE

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CHAPTER 1

Headmaster Heartstone placed his elbows on his desk, his fingers forming a steeple, and stared at me from behind his tortoise-shell glasses. The knot in my stomach got tighter as I waited for him to speak. He cleared his throat but still said nothing.

I jiggled my knee and threaded my fingers together. I pretty much knew what he wanted to see me about. I wished he would get it over with so I could get to auditions for the spring musical. Heather and I had plans. We were going to start out in the chorus and work our way up to starring roles. I might not want my life recorded for TV cameras anymore, but I still wanted to act.

The mahogany desk, the hanging plants, the shelves full of books and knickknacks were all supposed to make a student feel at home. It wasn't working. I stared at his diplomas on the wall. Columbia and Yale. He became a boarding school headmaster? Seems he could have done something much more significant with that education.

He picked up a sheet of paper from the desk. My grades.

"I realize that last semester was a difficult one for you, Ali," he said.

Difficult like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro is a bit of an exertion.

"And perhaps your mind wasn't on your studies the way it should have been."

Having a stalker try to kill me and having my little brother kidnapped did kind of take my mind off studying. Strange how that happens. Geometry was not my top priority this year.

"However," he continued, and the knot in my stomach grew and tightened. "There are standards we expect of Bryant Academy students."

"I know." I sat up straighter to show I took this seriously. "Obviously, those grades don't reflect my true potential." I'd already heard all

about that from my father when he saw my report card. In grade school, if I'd brought home something as low as a B it had been cause for concern. Not a single happy B even graced this set of grades. I think the only thing that had kept some of my grades from being Fs was the pity of a few teachers who understood this had been an unusual semester for me.

"That's true," Mr. Heartstone said; he looked at the paper and frowned before putting it down. "I know you are a bright student, Ali. Some might even say gifted, but we don't like to use that term here."

Which is why he just did. Gotta love the hypocrisy of administrators.

"Because we know all our students are special."

I nodded. If the knot in my stomach had been a bit smaller, maybe I would have thought of some snarky observation, but my heart wasn't in it. I glanced at the clock on the wall. Pretty soon I'd be officially late for auditions. Heather was going to wonder what happened to me. *Can't he simply tell me that I need to be sure to improve my grades this semester and let me get on my way?*

"However," he said again. This conversation had a few too many "however's" in it for my liking. "I'm going to have to put you on academic probation for this semester."

Wait! What? Not really! Not after everything I'd been through.

My older brother Mark had said they would do this, but I didn't believe him. Academic probation was for kids who couldn't handle the school. That wasn't me. I just couldn't handle last semester. Shouldn't there be some provision for that?

The knot in my stomach turned into a lead ball. Water. I needed water. Why didn't I have a water bottle with me? He should have met with me in the conference room. There's always a water pitcher in there.

"What, exactly, does that mean?" I managed to squeak out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Don't throw up. Don't cry. Breathe in again. Out again.

Mr. Heartstone played with a pen, the point in and out. In and out. I resisted the urge to grab the pen and throw it across the room.

"Ali, we know you're a good student."

"What does it mean?" I asked again, my voice rising as I gripped the curved armrests on the chair.

"That if you don't get your average up by the end of the year, you will have to find a new school for next year." He looked at me with pity.

I didn't want people to pity me. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from tearing up. I needed to make him understand I didn't need to be on probation.

"Last semester..." I started, but my voice caught and I couldn't continue.

"I know." His voice was soothing. "It was...unusual. I understand.

That's why I have complete faith that you will be able to bring your grades up to where they need to be by the end of the year."

I leaned forward. There was a chance I could get him to change his mind.

"Then why even put me on probation? Why make it official?" He was the headmaster. He was in charge. He could bend rules and let me off with a stern warning.

"We can't make exceptions for you."

I didn't see why not. Everything about last semester was out of the an exception to pretty much every rule, why shouldn't that continue now as I tried to get back to normal.

"Grades like this mean probation," Mr. Heartstone finished, clicking the pen again.

I slumped back in the chair. He wasn't going to change his mind. I needed to get out of here before I couldn't hold the tears back anymore. I didn't want him to see me cry.

"It also means you will have a study hall instead of any extracurricular activity this semester."

"I know how to study," I said through clenched teeth. "I thought you wanted well-rounded students, that's why we needed an extracurricular." I wished they'd make up their mind. They force an extracurricular on me then tell me I can't take it.

After the first-semester fiasco that was field hockey, I'd started taking tae kwon do classes. I liked it. Plus, if someone tried to come at me with a knife again I could maybe do something about it. I wasn't sure I wanted to give that up.

"Ali," Mr. Heartstone said, and there was sadness in his eyes behind his glasses as he spoke, "I have no doubt you know how to study, but you seem to have gotten out of the habit with all that has happened. This is all designed to help you, not to punish you."

Right, because probation made you think of help, not punishment. Not in this world.

"Do my parents know?" I asked.

"Yes, we are required to let them know about your academic progress."

Which probably meant that life as I knew it was officially over.

I started to push myself out of the chair. There was still time to get to auditions if I could just hold it together.

Then a horrible thought entered my mind.

"Is the school play considered an extracurricular?"

"I'm afraid you won't be able to participate this year," Mr. Heartstone said.

I sat back down again. The tears were not going to hold off much longer. This wasn't fair. It wasn't like any of this was my fault. Why should I be punished for it?

"It's just, you know, my head wasn't really in it last semester," I tried one last-ditch effort to make him understand. "You know, with all that was going on."

"Ali, I completely understand, but it doesn't change the fact that you aren't passing your classes right now. You have to remember that Bryant Academy is a rigorous school. If you can't handle it, you would be happier someplace else."

I bit the inside of my cheek again. I didn't want to be one of those people, the people who needed special help and tutoring. I wanted to be one of those people taking honors classes and AP courses. That's the kind of person I was. Not the mandatory study hall instead of extracurricular kind of person.

Mr. Heartstone stood, an indication our meeting was over.

"I'm sure this extra help will be all you need to begin working up to your full potential again soon."

"Yes, sir," I said, and forced myself to stand. "Thank you." I didn't need extra help. I needed a few months where traumatic things didn't happen to me. If I could get that, I'd be fine.

"I have complete confidence you will get those grades up and will be here next year as a sophomore."

He reached out a hand, and I shook it.

There was not enough air in this office; I couldn't breathe right. I hurried out, through the outer office past Mrs. King, who always had a smile for everyone and a big bowl of candy on her desk. I didn't even look at her. She would know why I was there. I didn't want sympathy or anything right now. I needed to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Of course I could get my grades up. It was totally unfair that they were punishing me because of all the bad things that had happened in the fall. I mean, how many people could expect to pull in great grades while going through all that? No one sane, that was for sure.

Once outside, I took a deep breath of the sharp February air. I wanted to be back at my grandmother's house in the Alps. Life was good there. Mark and I had skied and eaten gingerbread and generally had a very low-key, relaxing time. I wanted that again. Now.

I texted Liam to meet me in the student center. I needed something to get my mind off my troubles and nothing did that better than hanging out with my boyfriend.

By the time I got there, he had reserved a pool table and had two cups of hot chocolate and a plate of fries ready and waiting. He stood up

when he saw me. He was an inch or two taller than me now, which we both found rather satisfying. His dark hair still flopped in his eyes all the time.

He gave me a quick hug.

“Auditions over already?”

Auditions? I slipped out of my coat, and hung it over the back of a chair. Auditions weren’t even happening for me, but I didn’t feel like talking about any of that yet. I wanted to forget that awful meeting with the headmaster not rehash it.

I picked up a pool cue and pretended to be studying the tip.

“Yeah.” I muttered. Easier to lie than to tell the truth right now.

“So, how’d you do?”

I should tell him I didn’t go to auditions. I should tell him about my meeting with Heartstone. But I couldn’t. Not yet.

“I guess we’ll see when the cast list is posted.” I couldn’t believe I was lying to Liam. “The fries look delicious.” I forced a smile. Honestly, my stomach was in such knots I didn’t even want to look at food.

“I know what you like.” He grinned, and warmth coursed through me. He was trying so hard to be sweet and supportive, and he didn’t even know what had happened.

“Thanks, but let me pay you back,” I said. I had much more disposable income than he did; it wasn’t fair for him to buy all our snacks.

He waved the offer away.

“I’m fine. I like spending money on my girlfriend, so let me.”

It still gave me happy shivers when he called me his girlfriend.

“But you’ll go broke,” I said.

“I won’t,” he assured me. “Trust me, I’ve got it under control.”

Life wasn’t so bad after all. Having Liam for a boyfriend was the absolute best thing about high school so far. Luckily, academic probation or not, they couldn’t take that away from me.

“You want to break, or should I?” I asked, sipping some of my hot chocolate. It was delightfully soothing.

“You can,” Liam said.

He made sure the balls were all set up, and I lined up my shot and hit the cue ball. It rolled across the green felt and hit the first ball with a satisfying smack. The balls careened off in all directions, and I sank both the two and the nine.

“Good break,” Liam said, leaning on his cue and snacking on fries. “Do you want solids or stripes?”

There were at least two solids in good positions.

“Solids,” I said and lined up another shot.

I sank two more balls before I missed and it was Liam’s turn. At least

I hadn't lost my touch at pool. Maybe if I got kicked out of school, I could go around as a professional pool player. Dad probably wouldn't approve of that career choice.

"They're showing *Casablanca* in the student center Friday night," Liam said. "Want to go? We can pretend it's a real date. Maybe sit far away from everyone else." He winked at me.

"Totally!"

Liam and I had been officially dating since October, but we hardly ever got to spend time alone—boarding schools don't really encourage privacy. Our friends weren't too helpful in that regard, either. As if to prove that point, Lily and Sanjita joined us and helped themselves to our fries.

"I thought you were at auditions," Sanjita said. She dropped her gym bag to the floor and pushed her long black braid over her shoulder as she reached for a french fry. Since the field hockey season had ended and spring sports hadn't started yet, my roommate had been spending her free time in the weight room. The only part about that I found remotely interesting would be watching the guys lift weights. I certainly didn't intend to do any lifting myself.

I gave a noncommittal shrug.

"They're over," Liam answered for me. Which kept me from lying, but now I had him lying for me, and he didn't even know it. The dull ache in my stomach got bigger.

"Where's Heather?" Lily asked.

Fair question. She knew her sister and I had planned to go to auditions together. And naturally, even if I had finished first, I would have waited around for Heather.

"Actually, I changed my mind about trying out." I said, not looking up. I didn't want to meet Liam's eyes. He'd wonder why I had lied. "I've had enough of play-acting for this year."

"I completely support that decision," Lily said.

She would.

Heather and Lily might be able to pass for each other—and, in fact, had for ten years, as they grew up sharing the role of Hannah Flanagan on TV—but that was where the similarity ended. Heather wanted to keep acting, Lily was ready to move on.

I wasn't sure if I was ready to move on from acting or not. I'd barely had a chance to try it. It would have been nice if the decision not to try out had actually been my own.

I glanced at Liam; he had kind of a sad, betrayed look on his face. But it wasn't like I lied to him in order to hurt him or anything. Besides, I was still lying. I hadn't changed my mind.

Maybe that didn't make it better, but I hated that he looked betrayed. He didn't say anything, just got ready to take his shot, lining up to sink the thirteen-ball, which was precariously balanced near a pocket. An easy shot.

"That will give you time for a spring sport," Sanjita said, unaware I'd broken my boyfriend's heart. She stepped back as Liam took his shot, bumping the cue and making the cue ball wobble uselessly in the middle of the table.

"I'm so sorry!" she said. "I'm much less clumsy when playing field hockey, honest."

"Take the shot again," I said. It was the least I could do to salvage the afternoon.

"No," Liam said. "Fair is fair."

"No, really," I insisted. "That doesn't count."

"Everything counts," Liam said. "Otherwise, it would be like cheating, and I'd feel I hadn't won fair and square when I finally beat you."

"Have it your way." Why did he have to be so obstinate? It was only a game. Was he trying to prove he was honest after catching me in a lie?

I took my turn but purposely missed an easy shot. Fair is fair.

"You threw that shot," Liam said.

"Did not. I like to win too much to risk losing."

He didn't argue any further, but it didn't matter. I'd made it all even.

"Anyway," Sanjita said when I rejoined them by the fries, "I was thinking of trying out for softball. Want to join me?"

Sanjita would be happy if she could play field hockey all year long, but apparently any activity involving chasing after a ball worked for her.

"I'll think about it," I said and took a fry. Obviously I wasn't going to be trying out for softball, not that I wanted to.

From across the student center, two of the girls from our dorm spotted us and headed over. They were a study in contrasts, Becca tall and willowy with long blond hair and Nikki short and compact with her cropped dark hair cut in bangs that framed her round face.

"Hey, Liam, do you know where Jay is?" Becca asked.

"No idea," Liam said and made his shot, sinking that precarious thirteen.

"He's in the weight room," Sanjita answered.

Liam took another shot and missed.

"Do you know if he's going to be around later?" Nikki asked, turned her attention to Sanjita. "We need help with our geometry."

"I'm going to get more fries," Liam said, glancing at our depleted supply.

"Let me give you money for them," I said. It wasn't fair to let him pay

for all the snacks.

“No,” he said. “I told you, I can afford it, okay?” He headed back to the snack counter. Was he annoyed with me? I shouldn’t have lied to him about auditions.

Becca took one of the last remaining fries and continued talking about Jay.

“He promised to help us.”

“I’m meeting him in about half an hour in the library,” Sanjita said. “To study. We’ll be on the second floor at the carrels near the back.”

I leaned on my pool cue. Maybe I should join them. That’s what I needed to do to get off probation, right? Study more.

But while Sanjita was a serious student, Becca and Nikki always struck me as a bit flaky, and Jay never seemed like the sort who put grades above all else. I couldn’t really see that study session as being particularly helpful.

“We’ll see you there,” Becca and Nikki said, grabbing another fry each and heading out.

“They need to study with Jay?” Lily asked after they’d gone. “Why does that strike me as odd?”

Sanjita shrugged and maybe blushed a little.

“He’s actually a really good student. He just doesn’t go around acting like it and all.”

Ha, the opposite of me. I present myself as a good student but am really flunking out. Maybe no one is what they seem.

Liam came back with more french fries.

“Where’d Becca and Nikki go?” he asked.

“Probably to get ready to study with Jay,” I said.

He made some sort of affirmative grunt, and I took my turn, sinking the seven ball. I lined up my next shot, the cue ball hit the five-ball, and the five-ball neatly landed in the corner pocket, followed immediately by the cue ball. Scratch.

Mark showed up then, his face red from the wind. He unsnapped his jacket and snagged a fry.

“So, what did Heartstone have to say? Are you officially on probation?”

That’s what I get for confiding in my big brother.

I shot him a nasty look, but he seemed oblivious.

“Heartstone? Academic probation?” Liam repeated, as if the words didn’t make any sense to him.

“That really stinks,” Sanjita said.

“Is that why you didn’t go to auditions?” Lily asked.

I took a long slow sip of hot chocolate before answering. The pool

game didn't seem to matter so much now. One deep breath. Two. I was not going to let them see this bothered me.

"Yeah, well, it's not a big deal. It's a formality and all that. Last semester was rough. I just have to do better this time around."

"This is how you chose to deal with it, by playing pool? Honestly, Ali!" Mark said. "You better shape up. I don't want you at some other school."

"Some other school?" Liam repeated, eyes wide. "Why would you be at some other school?"

Mark was the one who answered, dipping a fry in ketchup.

"That's what happens after academic probation. You don't get the grades up, you're out."

"So, what's your plan?" Liam asked, leaning on his pool cue. "You always have a plan." He was trying to be lighthearted and fun about this. I wasn't in the mood.

"No plan," I said, biting off the words. I'd only found all this out a little while ago. There hadn't been time to make a plan. "Other than, obviously, get my grades up."

Sanjita put her hand on my arm.

"Don't worry, Ali. We're all here for you. We'll help you."

I shook her off.

"I don't need help. I just need no one to try to kill me or kidnap any of my siblings, and I should do fine. I mean, it's not like last semester was normal or anything."

"I know," Lily said. She kept her voice soft, but there was a bit of an edge to it. "We were there for it all, remember?"

"I know," I said. "I just..." The tears wouldn't be held back any longer. "I'm not the kind of person that ends up on academic probation." I said. "It's not who I am."

"Of course it's not who you are," Mark said. "It's a status. A temporary status. And no one is going to think any less of you because of it."

No one but me.

CHAPTER 2

“It’s outrageous.”

Mom didn’t even bother with a “hello.”

“I know!” I flopped down on the colorful quilt on my bed, phone to my ear. Heather and Lily were expecting me to meet them for dinner in a few minutes. They’d have to wait.

“Academic probation because of a few bad grades after all you’ve been through?”

It was wonderful to have Mom completely understand what I was going through. This didn’t happen too often.

“They actually threatened that I would have to find a new school if I didn’t get my grades up.”

“Well, if that’s the case, you will move out here,” Mom said.

I stared at the poster of breaking waves that hung over my desk while sleet banged against the windows. There was a lot to be said for living in Malibu with my mom and her new family. Perfect weather nearly all the time. I could have a tan year-round. I’d even finally figured out how to surf.

But Bryant Academy had become a second home in the past few months, and the girls I had met here were like sisters. Not to mention, of course, that I had a boyfriend who I’d rather not be on opposite sides of the country from.

“I think that’s what you should do anyway,” Mom continued. “Boarding school is so impersonal, so institutional.”

Maybe she didn’t completely understand me after all.

Mom would love me to move out to Malibu, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to have her as a full-time mom just yet. Our relationship was the kind that improved with distance.

“Mark’s here,” I said. Better to say I wanted to stay with Mark than that I didn’t want to be with her. “I kind of like being with him.” True, he could be totally annoying, but I *did* like having him close by.

“He can always come here, too. He knows that.”

“He doesn’t want to.” I sat up and reached for my teddy bear. “He likes it here. And I pretty much do, too.”

But Mom wouldn’t be Mom if she took no for an answer.

“Mark is Mark, and you are you,” she said philosophically. “Maybe boarding school really isn’t a good fit for you, and you should come here. I’ll speak to your father about it.”

That was absolutely as far as that would go. If Dad thought I shouldn’t be at boarding school, he’d bring me home. Now that he was back from his extended stay in Japan, he would *not* agree to have me living across the country instead of with him.

I hugged my teddy bear, inhaling the comforting scent of its fur. It still carried the smell of my bedroom at home, even though neither the bear nor I had been there in months.

“How are Sophie, Phoebe and Brennan?” I asked in an attempt to change the subject. I’d had enough of talking about my academic prospects for right now.

“They miss you,” Mom said. “Especially Brennan. They want to know when you and Mark are coming back.”

“June isn’t that far away.” Although, really, it did seem like kind of a long time before I could see my half-siblings again. “And Brennan is okay?” I asked, just to make sure.

“He’s fine,” Mom assured me, her voice losing a lot of its bravado. “Really.”

“Good.” There was one thing I would never take for granted anymore, and that was the safety and well-being of the triplets. Not after Brennan got kidnapped while I was watching them. The school might be worried about my grades, but some things are way more important.

“Oh,” Mom said, ready to change the subject yet again. “We’ve been getting a lot of mail for you and Mark. People want to know more about you. Some even want there to be a TV show featuring the two of you.”

What did she have in mind? Another reality show? Or maybe we could do a talk show? Or how about a song-and-dance kind of thing? *The Mark and Ali Show*. The very idea sent shivers up and down my spine. I clutched my bear tighter.

“Not in a million years.”

“If you ever change your mind...” Mom let the thought kind of hang there.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said, because ultimately it was easier to more

or less agree with her than to fight her on anything. Some lessons I've learned.

"Now, don't you worry about anything they say to you there," Mom said, suddenly slipping back into perfect sitcom mom. This was a new role for her, and she tended to slip in and out of it. I didn't mind at all when she put this role on. "You are a beautiful, talented, very smart girl. You are not defined by one set of grades."

I needed to hear that. I was kind of surprised it was her saying it to me.

"Thanks," I said, tears pooling in my eyes.

Mom hung up then, her duty as parent done for the day. She was getting a bit better at it.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. I almost wanted to let myself cry about this, but if I started, I might never stop. Besides, there wasn't really anything to cry about. I knew my grades last semester were bad. That wasn't news. And I had to get them up. Okay, I could do that.

So, I couldn't do an extracurricular. I liked tae kwon do, it was true, but I didn't exactly live for it. Maybe I wouldn't have gotten into the play even if I *had* tried out. I hadn't really lost anything.

There is nothing to cry about. Of the bad things that have happened to me since September, this doesn't even rank in the top three.

Which goes to show what kind of year I've had.

My phone buzzed. I checked the text, half-expecting it to be Heather or Lily telling me to hurry to dinner, but it was my best friend from home.

OMG. ADAM BLAKELY SAYS HE HOPES I COME TO HIS PARTY
SATURDAY NIGHT!

Carly always held out for the unattainable. While I'd had a crush on *Danny* Blakely, who was in our grade, all throughout grade school, Carly had set her sights on his older brother, who was Mark's age. Naturally, Adam had never paid any attention to her. Until now, apparently. It was nice that someone had some good news.

AWESOMESAUCE. DON'T GET TOO WILD.

I missed my friends from Shippen Day. I guess if I get kicked out of Bryant, I could go back there, if they would take me.

The door swung open, and Heather burst into the room.

"I was all ready to be pissed at you for ditching me at auditions, but Lily just told me what happened." She rushed over and put her arms around me. "It is so unfair, but we'll get a study group together or something. We're not letting you go without a fight!"

I hugged her back then disentangled myself from her.

“Don’t worry,” I said with more confidence than I felt. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank goodness!”

“How did auditions go?”

“Pretty good. I must say, I know this school has rigorous academic standards, but they certainly don’t screen anyone based on their talent. I think I might even get a major part. You can see me as Marian the Librarian, right?”

My heart lurched a little. I really wanted to be happy for her, but if she was up for the female lead, that meant I might have been able to get a major part, too. I’d been in my eighth grade show and sung a duet with Carly. I know I at least could sing on-key, and I had been told I had decent stage presence.

“Absolutely,” I said, pasting my biggest smile on my face. “Do you really think you’ll get the lead?”

“Probably not—I *am* only a freshman, after all.”

“Next year,” I promised her as much as myself, “we’ll be in the show together.”

“I’m counting on it.” She draped an arm over my shoulder. “Let’s go eat.”

I grabbed my coat, and we headed out to dinner.

#

We stepped through the glass doors to the dining hall and were met with aromatic warmth; apparently, some kind of pasta with tomato sauce and garlic bread was the main dish for tonight. It was the perfect meal for such a nasty, sleety evening. I grabbed a tray and loaded up on the ziti and salad and garlic bread. Heather took a salad.

“You don’t want the ziti?”

“Pasta does nasty things to my figure,” she said.

I looked at her. She was a size two, at the most.

“What nasty things could it possibly do?”

“I saw a clip of my part in *Cool School*. The one I filmed with Chet over Thanksgiving? And I look totally fat in it.”

I glanced at Lily, who sighed.

“The camera adds ten pounds. You know that,” she said to her sister.

“Right. So, I should lose at least ten,” Heather says. “That is, if I want to get anything besides bit parts in other people’s shows.”

I opened my mouth to tell her she was crazy and that she looked fine the way she was, but a look from Lily stopped me. There was a time and a place for this conversation, and maybe now wasn’t it.

Liam was sitting with a couple of other freshman guys, and we headed to his table. I put my tray down next to his, hung my coat over the back of the chair and sat down.

“This is the perfect kind of food for tonight,” I said, picking up my fork. “I can’t believe Jay and Sanjita walked into town for pizza in this weather. Totally not worth it.”

“For a little privacy?” Liam countered. “I don’t blame them at all.”

He must have noticed the same thing I did—our roommates were the newest freshman couple at Bryant Academy.

And why didn’t he and I walk through nasty, sleety weather for pizza in privacy instead of eating with everyone else? Answer: because my father still hadn’t lifted the restriction he’d placed on me that I can’t go off-campus without my brother in attendance. I was going to have to talk to him about that. The stalker danger was over, and I had enough restrictions on me now.

“I’m trying to get my dad to lift the ban,” I said, although right now was probably not the best time to approach him about that.

“We’ve always managed before,” Liam said, giving me a quick grin.

This is why I am delighted that Liam is my boyfriend. He doesn’t seem too bothered by the fact I’m not allowed off-campus.

“Want to play some pool tonight,” I suggested. It wasn’t town for pizza, but it was better than nothing.

“I was thinking, under the circumstances,” Liam said, and my mood plummeted because I knew what those circumstances were and I’d been trying not to think about them, “that we should reserve a study room. We can do homework together.”

“Ooh,” said Quinn, the guy sitting on the other side of Liam. “Romantic.”

Heather gave him a death glare.

“It’s sweet of him,” she said.

Sweet, maybe, but there really was nothing romantic about the study rooms. Small rooms with a large window looking out into the student center. They were quiet, but hardly private.

“Well, she’s on academic probation,” Liam explained. “She needs to study more than play pool.”

Quinn’s eyebrows shot up. “You?”

“Liam!” I protested. Did he have to announce it to the world?

“She doesn’t want everyone knowing,” Lily told him. It was nice to be understood by someone.

Liam stared at his plate.

“All work and no play makes Jill a dull girl,” Quinn said, pointing his fork at Liam as if he had said something very profound.

“I think studying makes more sense than playing pool,” Liam said, his fingers tightening around the fork. “You know, under the circumstances.”

I put my hand over his. The last thing I wanted was for him to feel guilty for trying to do something nice.

“It does,” I assured him. “I like that you have my best interest at heart. I appreciate it.”

His fingers relaxed, and he looked at me and smiled. Things were okay again.

Quinn shoved a forkful of food in his mouth and didn’t finish swallowing before saying, “You should talk to Jay.”

“Why?” I asked.

“No,” Liam said quickly, glaring at him, “she shouldn’t.”

Quinn shrugged. “If she’s desperate, it works, man.”

I was intrigued.

“What does?”

“Jay’s way of studying,” Quinn answered.

Lily laughed. “Why does everyone seem to think that studying with Jay will help them?”

“What’s so special about the way Jay studies?” I asked.

Liam was staring at his plate again, but Quinn answered.

“He’s got...” He paused, possibly searching for the right word. “...a system.” He shoved some bread in his mouth.

“What kind of system?” Was there some magic method of studying that would make my life easier? And did Jay know what it was?

“Mnemonics,” Liam said quickly. “That’s all. Nothing fancy.”

“Memory tricks?” Heather asked. “Those were helpful when we had to remember the names of guest stars and stuff.” She pointed a celery stick at her sister. “Remember when we called Justin Timberlake the Forest Man to his face by mistake?”

Lily’s cheeks turned bright red. “That was really embarrassing.”

I dipped my bread in tomato sauce.

“I watched this video once that showed how to memorize the Greek alphabet in ten minutes by telling a story using the letters. I still have it memorized.”

“You have the Greek alphabet memorized?” Quinn asked, and the question was echoed in Heather’s and Lily’s eyes.

“Sure. Doesn’t everyone?”

Liam’s eyebrows shot up. “Not exactly. I think it starts with alpha.”

“You’re off to a good start.” I knew most people didn’t have it memorized. It was something Mark and I did one summer, because we could.

“If you can do that, you shouldn’t have any problem getting your

grades back up.”

“Seriously,” Heather said. “I don’t even know how you got bad grades to start with.”

“Extenuating circumstances,” I said and concentrated on my ziti, not that I had much appetite anymore. I’d like to stop talking about my grades all the time.

“So, we’ll go to the student center after dinner?” Liam asked before taking another bite.

“Sure,” I said. He was trying to be nice. I had to give him credit for that. It wasn’t my idea of a fun evening, but then again, maybe that’s why my grades were in the basement. “And, maybe, if I get my homework done, we can still play a game of pool.” I fluttered my eyelashes in a pathetic attempt to be flirtatious.

Liam grinned. “Could be,” he said in the tone of a parent promising an ice cream cone if a child agrees to be good.

I guess that was as close to a real date as I was going to get. No trips into town for pizza with my boyfriend, like Sanjita and Jay were able to do. I’d have to see what Sanjita knew about Jay’s memory tricks. Maybe whatever methods he used *could* help me get my grades up faster, and I could have dates that didn’t revolve around studying.

After dinner I went back upstairs with Heather and Lily.

“Enjoy your study date,” Heather said as I collected my books from my room.

“Aren’t study dates supposed to be euphemisms for make-out sessions or something fun like that?” I asked as I shoved notebooks into my bookbag.

“Not with those study rooms,” she said and laughed.

“Just my luck,” I said. “My boyfriend wants to get together to study, and that’s what we’re going to actually have to do.”

“At least your boyfriend wants to study with you,” Heather said, her voice quiet.

“Chet would study with you,” I assured her. “You know, if he were at this school, or this side of the country.”

“Or even still in high school,” Heather finished. “He finished in June. Maybe he’s too old for me.”

I know my mother thought he was too old for me, but he had just turned nineteen; he wasn’t that old.

“You guys are meant for each other,” I assured her.

She grinned.

“We are, aren’t we?”

“Definitely,” I told her and headed out into the cold to meet Liam at the student center. I was lucky that my boyfriend was here and wanted to

make sure we stayed together.

Liam was already there, opening a bag of M&Ms.

“Incentive,” he said.

I liked the way his mind worked.

I slipped out of my coat and rubbed my hands together. Winter weather never bothered me half so much when I was skiing as it did when walking across campus. Funny how that works.

I opened my math notebook and started in on my geometry proofs. Liam sat next to me, feeding me M&Ms at regular intervals. I was half-way through my second proof when my father called.

“Sorry,” I said to Liam and answered the phone. “Hi, Dad.” I tried to sound cheery and chipper and without a care in the world.

“I spoke to your headmaster today,” he said.

“Yes.” So much for not having a care in the world. “So did I.”

“Then you know you have to get your grades up.”

Liam handed me another M&M. That made me smile even though I didn’t feel particularly cheery. I popped it in my mouth before answering Dad.

“Dad, you know those grades aren’t normal for me.”

“Of course I know that. If they were, you never would have been admitted to Bryant Academy in the first place.”

That put things in perspective.

“I want to make sure that you stay there.”

“So do I, Dad,” I said. This was a switch from a few months ago, when he was ready to send me to school in Switzerland.

“To that end, I’ll be sending the car for you every Friday afternoon. You can spend the weekends studying. That should help get your grades up.”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Every weekend?” I choked out the words. “But, Dad, there are dances and games and all kind of fun stuff on weekends. I’d miss it all.”

“If you don’t get your grades up, you’ll miss everything in any case, because you won’t be there anymore.”

Nothing like a Dad to get right to the heart of the matter.

“How about every other weekend?” I asked, knowing even as I said it that bargaining with him was completely pointless.

“We’ll see how this quarter goes, and then we’ll reassess,” he said in his no-nonsense way.

Maybe, if I could prove myself by then, I’d be able to have the second half of the semester free and clear. I could go to dances and be in a club and maybe actually have some fun at school. Wasn’t that what high school was supposed to be all about—the total experience, not just

classes and grades?

Yeah, right. We see which side everyone comes down on when grades drop.

“Ron will be there with the car Friday at four. We’ll go out to dinner. How does that sound?”

“But I have a date Friday night. I’m going to the movies with Liam,” I protested.

Liam looked up from his book and frowned, giving me puppy-dog eyes.

“And that is why you have low grades. You’re going out and not studying.”

“But what difference does it make if I go out with Liam or out to dinner with you? Either way, I’m not studying.”

“Ron will be there at four. Be sure to be ready.”

He hung up.

“I’m not going to be able to go to the movies with you on Friday,” I told Liam.

“We’ll go the next week,” he promised. “There’s lots of weekends. No worries.”

“Worries,” I said. “I have to go home every weekend. My father wants to make sure I’m studying.” I slammed my geometry book shut. “It was so much easier when he was in Japan.”

“You missed him when he was in Japan,” Liam pointed out.

“Maybe,” I acknowledged, reluctantly. I had missed him, but I’d also been left alone. Wasn’t that what boarding school was all about, to teach us responsibility without a parent hovering over us every second? How was I going to get the full experience if I had to go home every weekend. It wasn’t fair.

Liam scooted his chair closer and put his hand over mine. We couldn’t get too cuddly with the study rooms like giant fish bowls.

“We’ll do something on Thursday.”

I leaned my head on his shoulder.

“It feels like my life is falling apart,” I said.

He gave my hand a squeeze.

“No, that was last semester. This semester, it’s all coming back together again.”

If only I could believe him.

He opened my geometry book back up.

“Come on, we’ll get this done and play some pool.”

Now, that was the kind of incentive that would make me get my work done.

CHAPTER 3

I beat Liam in two out of three games, and then he walked me back to the dorm, my gloved hand securely in his. Before we got to the door, he stopped and pulled me into the shadows of a large pine tree at the corner of the building, and he kissed me.

It was a quick, almost shy kiss.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all night,” he said.

I grinned.

“Really?”

Liam and I may have been dating since last October, but we hadn’t had very much time alone, much less time to make out.

“Do you mind?”

“That you want to kiss me? No, not really.” I moved a little closer to him. “In fact, I don’t think I’d object at all if you kissed me again.”

So, he did.

We wrapped our arms around each other and kissed. It was lovely. And freezing. We may have been generating a certain amount of heat, but it wasn’t enough to counter the biting February wind and sleet that started to fall.

“I better go,” Liam said finally. “It’s almost curfew.”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks,” I added and then mentally kicked myself. It was probably pretty stupid to thank him for kissing me.

Liam smiled. “See you tomorrow,” he said and took off at a jog to the boys dorm.

I floated toward the door, feeling like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* when she sings “I Could have Danced All Night,” except in my case, it’s that I could have kissed all night.

“Cutting it a little close, Ali,” the dorm mother said with a glance at

her slim silver watch.

“But I’m not late, right?” I wasn’t wearing a watch to check.

“You are not late,” she agreed. “Busy studying?” She asked it as if it were the most natural question in the world.

Studying? That’s right, I’d done that before the kissing began.

“Of course.” I turned so she could see my bookbag thrown over one shoulder. “Got all my homework done.”

I suppose it was better than people asking me if I’d seen the stalker anywhere, or how I felt about my little brother disappearing, but if this was going to be the question of the semester, it was going to get old very quickly.

“Good for you,” she said and gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Praise for doing the most basic thing expected of me at school—my work. Is this what things had come to? I trudged up the stairs, suddenly very tired.

In the lounge, Becca and Nikki were sprawled across the sofas watching some reality talent show.

“You just get in?” Nikki asked, barely looking up from the TV.

I looked at the sleet melting on the sleeves of my coat. There wasn’t even any point in making a snarky response.

“Yeah.”

I sat down in an easy chair and unbuttoned my coat.

“How did studying with Jay go this afternoon?” I asked.

They exchanged glances as if I’d caught them in a lie.

“It’s no big deal,” I said to assure them. If they hadn’t really studied, it was none of my business. “Quinn was telling me that Jay has some sort of a study trick. I was wondering what it was.”

A commercial came on, and Nikki muted the TV and sat up. Becca chewed her bottom lip, but they exchanged some sort of silent communication.

Finally, Becca said, “Go ahead, tell her.”

“It works. Definitely. But it’s kind of hard to explain,” Nikki said. “You pretty much have to talk to Jay about it.”

“If you do,” Becca added, “be sure to tell him we told you about it. Both of us.”

“Right,” Nikki agreed. “Both of us.”

I couldn’t see what difference that made, but I agreed. I pushed up out of the chair. Today had been very stressful, and stress, frankly, is exhausting. I told them goodnight and headed into my room.

“Did you get your homework done?” Sanjita asked when I walked through the door. I thought that perhaps the next person who asked me that was going to get hurt.

“Yes,” I said, as calmly as I could manage through my clenched jaw. “My geometry and biology are all done.”

“And the English essay?”

That knot that had been in my stomach when I was in Mr. Heartstone’s office came back.

“English essay?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t do it,” Sanjita said and shook her head sadly.

Oh, right. The teacher had said something about a persuasive essay about the drinking age or something else that an English class essay had no hope of changing. What was really the point? I had enough homework without silly extra busy work.

“It’s mostly done,” I lied. “I’ll just add some finishing touches.” English class was after lunch. If I hammered out a quick first draft now, I could give it a once over at lunch tomorrow and be fine. No worries.

“I would think you would want to give it a lot of attention, under the circumstances,” Sanjita said, brushing out her long black hair.

I was sick of hearing about my current circumstances. No one had needed to know I was on academic probation but me. Instead, I was surrounded by a bunch of nagging mother hens.

“I’m giving it plenty of attention.” I opened my laptop.

I finished a first draft of the essay after lights out, shut down the computer and went to brush my teeth. Last year, I could whip out a five-paragraph essay for my English teacher on the bus ride to school and get an A on it. I had nothing to worry about.

The next day at lunch when I read the essay over, I knew it wasn’t an A paper. Not even close. But really, all I had to do was get Cs or better. This paper should accomplish that. I made some minor corrections, printed it out and hoped for the best.

After classes, when everyone else headed to their choice of extracurricular activity, I headed to the mandatory study hall. I was in no rush. I stopped and looked at some of the artwork hanging on the walls in the hallway. I’d walked by them every day but never really looked at them.

Every painting or photo had been done by a student; some of them were from as long ago as the fifties. My favorite was of a boy and girl sitting in the gazebo. It had an old-fashioned Norman Rockwell kind of look about it. I wanted to live in that painting; the world seemed uncomplicated there.

The door to the study hall opened, and Mrs. Vandermeer, my biology teacher, stuck her head out.

“Come along Ali, you don’t want to be late.”

Who says I don’t? I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. There

was really no avoiding it.

I had half-expected some sort of 1980s John Hughes movie scene, full of misfits who didn't even really belong at Bryant trying to muddle through together. We'd all hate each other starting out but then realize we had more in common than we would have ever thought and end up being the best of unlikely friends.

What I didn't expect when I walked into the study hall room was to see James Reinhold sitting there.

I would love to be able to say that my first high school boyfriend was the sweet and wonderful Liam, but before I realized how great he was, I'd thought James was great. I was wrong. And here he was. Lucky me.

"Hey, Ali," he said and indicated the empty desk next to him. "Finally found an after-school activity that agrees with you?"

Okay, that was funny, because James knew what I'd gone through when I'd tried to play field hockey. I sat next to him.

"Yes, this is about my speed. No running, no hitting balls. No balls hitting me, and hopefully, no falling flat on my face."

"Didn't anyone tell you we take a dodge ball break every day?"

It took a second too long to realize he was joking.

"Very funny," I said. "So, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at soccer practice?"

"Largely because we tend to not play soccer in the snow." He shrugged. "I'm between sports seasons right now, so I figure this was a reasonable use of my time."

"You mean you're here by choice?"

"Aren't you?" he asked.

So not everyone knew I was on academic probation. Maybe I could keep it that way. I could simply say this was my chosen after-school activity. A weight lifted off my chest, and I grinned.

"Of course," I answered. "As you said, I finally found an activity that agrees with me."

Mrs. Vandermeer, in her flowing gown that looked like it would be more in style at a Renaissance faire, was apparently the teacher in charge.

"Welcome to study hall, Ali," she said. "Please take out your work. It's very important that studying and not socializing go on during the next two hours."

I turned on my computer, and Mrs. Vandermeer came over to my desk.

"Let me see your planner, Ali. I need to know what homework you have for tonight."

"I don't always write it in my planner," I said. "I'm pretty good at

remembering what's due." Which maybe wasn't entirely true, because I had forgotten about that English essay last night. But, generally speaking, I remembered my assignments.

"From now on, they all have to be written in your planner," she said. "Those are the rules of study hall."

"Right."

She went on to the other people to check their planners and see what everyone had to do. I'd tackle my geometry homework first. It was easiest to see when that was done. Either the problems were done or not, as opposed to an essay or even open-ended questions in history.

The room was quiet. Too quiet. I could hear the teacher creeping around in her soft-soled shoes, the scratch of pencils and pens, the rustle of paper, the clicking of computer keys. I couldn't concentrate when it was this quiet. Even in the library there was usually some conversation going on. I needed music. I reached for my phone, but the teacher stopped by my desk again.

"No, Ali," she whispered. "We are a distraction-free zone here. No phones, not even for music."

And I had to do this every day after school? Fun.

Fine. Geometry proofs. I pulled the book up on the computer and found the problems I needed to do. I'd started writing the first one out in my notebook when I saw the IM box on my computer blink at me. I clicked on it, making sure the teacher was busy with someone else first.

The message was from James.

JR: There are ways to deal. I'll teach you the ropes.

That was exactly what I needed.

AC: Yes, please.

JR: First, always look busy with your eyes on your computer or notebook. As long as she thinks you're working, you're golden.

AC: I can do that.

JR: And there's an RPG game we play—on silent. You just need to sign in. Keep the screen away from the old hag and enjoy.

I smiled to myself. Okay, so maybe this wouldn't all be so bad after all.

Mrs. Vandermeer looked my way, so I went back to my geometry homework. I finished one and a half problems before James messaged me again.

JR: What you doing afterwards?

AC: Meeting Liam

He didn't have a response to that. He was the one who'd broken up with me, so it's not like I should be sitting around waiting for him to change his mind. I didn't want him to change his mind anyway. Liam was

a way better boyfriend than James, even if James is a year older and taller and more athletic. None of that mattered. Liam is nice and stood by me whether my mother had TV cameras focused on me or not.

I needed to finish these geometry problems.

The second one wouldn't come out right, and I ended up redoing it three times before giving up. I think I was supposed to be able to ask the supervising teacher for help if I was stuck, but she was my biology teacher. She probably didn't know how to do this geometry problem any better than I did.

Finally, people started packing up their supplies. Time was up. I was free. I stuffed everything in my book bag and headed for the door. James was right by my side.

"I'll get you set up with the game before next session," he promised.

"Sounds good."

But I wondered if it was the best idea. Two hours, and I hadn't even finished my geometry; and I did have other homework. Maybe I really should use the time to do my work. If I spent my study time playing games with James, I wouldn't have time to spend with Liam later, at least, not if I wanted to finish my homework.

James walked me to the door of Remington Hall, and I went in and dumped my book bag and changed out of my uniform into jeans and a sweatshirt. I texted Liam and asked him to meet me at the student center then headed out before he even had a chance to answer.

Too many hours of schoolwork. It was time to play for a little while. I had the whole dark, boring evening to do homework. Plus all weekend.

Liam met me right inside the doors.

"Did you get all your homework done?" he asked.

"Most of it," I said. Not exactly a lie. I did have most of the geometry done, although I hadn't touched the rest of it.

"We still going to be able to do something tonight?" he asked, his eyes wide with worry.

Oh, right. I didn't have a whole empty evening in front of me to finish that work, did I?

"Absolutely." I could catch up on the homework. I was *not* missing a chance to hang out with Liam, especially since I would be going home for the weekend. Every weekend.

"I was thinking we should go into town and see a movie. You know, actually have a real date." The words came out before I even had a chance to decide if they made sense or not. "If that's okay with you?"

His whole face broke into a smile.

"You mean your dad lifted the restrictions? You can go into town without Mark?"

“Not exactly.” Or, more honestly, not at all. My mouth is going to have to learn to wait for my brain to catch up with it, but I couldn’t back out now, Liam looked too happy. “Mark will have to come along.”

“Seriously?” Liam asked, his shoulders sagging some.

“Yeah. But it’s not a bad thing,” I hastened to tell him. “First of all, Mark has a car, and it’s cold out. I wouldn’t mind the ride. Second of all, he and Lily are dating now. We can double, and he won’t be paying any attention to us.”

Liam thought that over, chewing on his lower lip.

“I suppose that’s true,” he said.

“I just need to convince him.”

“You’re good at getting Mark to do what you want.” His confidence in me was heartwarming but perhaps misplaced. Mark was, after all, my big brother; he didn’t go out of his way to make my life easy.

“Maybe I’ll go about it a different way, convince Lily.”

Liam grinned.

“You’re tricky.”

“I know how to outsmart Mark. I’ve had lots of practice.”

Liam and I played a game of pool, and then it was time to get ready for dinner. This mandatory study time was going to really cut into my free time in the afternoons.

Lily was in the lounge reading a magazine when I went upstairs.

“Just the person I wanted to see,” I said.

“Yeah?” She didn’t look particularly convinced. “Usually, it’s Heather you want.”

“Not this time.” I sat next to her on the sofa. “Liam and I are going to go see *No More Goddesses* after dinner. It’s supposed to be really funny. You and Mark should come with us.”

She looked at me, her green eyes narrowing.

“And you still need Mark to chaperon you if you go off campus, right?”

I sighed. Busted.

“I do think you’d like the movie,” I said.

“I’m sure I would,” Lily answered. She put one hand on mine. “I’ll take care of it. Mark will think it’s his idea before we get there.”

I grinned.

“You’re the best!”

“It’s about time you acknowledged that I am the superior twin.” Lily said.

Heather came in then.

“Who is the superior twin?” she asked, one eyebrow raised.

Lily smirked.

“You, O high and mighty exalted one.”

Heather laughed.

“Exactly. I’ve taught you well.” She went into their room, and Lily sighed.

“She’s so gullible.” She turned back to me. “Anyway, I’ll let you know after dinner what time Mark will be picking us up.”

I gave her a hug. I was going to have to get my grades up—I couldn’t imagine leaving the friends I’d made at this school.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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